Blind Man's Bluff

by ladyredms

Summary

Rochelle, Ellis, Coach, and Nick arrive AFTER the Vannah Hotel burns, and without the helicopter and graffiti to guide them they take a much different path on their search for rescue. The apocalypse brought them together, and it may just tear them apart again... or, to pieces.

Character development and plot-heavy, Blind Man's Bluff has a primary focus on the Nick/Ellis pairing while spanning the full breadth of an alternate campaign route.

Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes
Nicolas had absolutely no idea what to think. For a man more than used to scheming his way out of bad spots, freezing up was definitely a new sensation.

*What. The. Fuck.*

He could hear the strange, animalistic growls and snarls just a few inches away, so loud and close even the wet undertone of gnashing teeth could be picked out. He'd seen the woman's face before diving behind the car he was currently plastered against, and the image was burned into the backs of his eyelids.

It wasn't so much the blood that soaked the lower half of her face, crusted on her lips and dribbling down toward her neck, that disturbed him. It was the glowing and beadlike yellow eyes stuck wide open in wild rage. She hadn't seen him, somehow, but she was sniffing wetly at the air as if she could *smell* him.

It was a nightmare come to life, and Nick was almost panicked as he tried to come to terms with what was going on. He'd heard something on his car's radio about some flu or illness, sure - some hyperactive reporter rambling on under a headache-inducing static. He'd turned it off too soon, uninterested, and now very much regretted not paying attention.

*What the fuck is this - rabies?*

Darting his gaze to the side, he glanced down the row of parking spaces in the convenience store lot, a few other cars scattered here and there. Poking out from behind a particularly dusty truck was the tail end of his dark silver Fiat Barchetta, pristine and silent where he'd left it.

This store had been the first thing he'd seen for miles. The highway was supremely quiet, something Nick had found incredibly relaxing. He'd rolled the top down, wind snapping at the few strands of hair that escaped his hair gel. Steering (not that the forest-entrenched road curved much) with his left hand while his right arm was tossed over the empty seat beside him, thumb rolling the singular ring on his middle finger… It had been perfect.

He groaned faintly under his breath, so quiet he thought it was imperceptible. *Why the hell did I stop…?*

Nick started to shift his hands to get himself into a running pose, intent on bolting for his car, when the sickly woman screamed a gargling howl at him from the other side of the car. Smell wasn't the only thing to give him away, and the scuff of his shoeheels alerted her.

With a grunt of slight surprise, he heard something crash into the car he was hidden behind - it even rocked a bit under the collision, jolting him forward before he'd planned. His dress shoes dug into the asphalt as he tried to catch his balance and steady his gait, twisting his head and glancing over his shoulder at the same time.

The woman was crawling over the car, head snapped up at a strange angle to stare directly at him with unnaturally lit eyes, teeth bared hungrily. She jerked her body up to try and get on top of the vehicle, legs kicking madly, and her knee crashed through the passenger window, spilling blood in immediate rivulets down her bare and dirty shin.
As far as Nick could tell, it didn't seem to be the pain that got her to react - it was the fact her leg got stuck, trapped there with glass impaled deep in her knee. She'd have to back off to pull her leg out, and her desperate, mad intent to get to Nick didn't allow her to do anything but try to go forward.

The woman slammed herself against the car, glass crunching loudly as it dug deep into her thigh. She was stuck, but wouldn't be for very long.

"Gun.. gun.. gun.. gun.." immediately became Nick's mantra, looking away from the gruesome sight, feeling a little rise of fear in his gut and forcing it into a blank sense of anger instead. He sprinted toward his Barchetta; a Magnum was just under his seat, hidden in an unassuming box with very blatant claims of containing condoms.

Magnum branded, to be precise.

It was much funnier to himself at less frantic moments.

He felt the uncomfortable screeching of his heels as he skidded to a stop, catching onto the side of his sports car with a slight grunt. He vaulted the back, wincing as he was forced to climb over the trunk, shoes definitely scuffing the metal.

(He couldn't help the thought from crossing his mind, even if he didn't let it slow him.)

Nick crammed himself between the leather seats, the shift pressing into his gut awkwardly, and shoved his head under the steering wheel. He swatted the box out into the floorboard and ripped the top open.

His Magnum came easily to the fingers of his right hand from where it lay inside, palm molding to the cool grip and thumb rolling to flick the safety off with a click. The gambler twisted around to sit up, aiming back over himself with a perfectly straight arm just as the woman came running at him.

She'd broken her knee, it seemed. Her gait was one-sided, blood covering her whole left leg, mixing in with the crusted dirt already caked onto oddly grey skin. She should have been crippled by the wound, but there was this feral determination in her attack that made her seem completely numb to any pain...

BANG.

His bullet hit her right in the neck, piercing through her spine with a bloody spray. The force of it on her unbalanced body sent her torso toppling backwards and her feet flinging up in front of her. He heard her land with a thud on the asphalt, and waited out the desperate gurgling and scratching, flopping smacks as she struggled.

Then, she fell silent. An acrid smell rose up, catching on the wind, harshly.

Nick realized he was panting then, chest heaving a little. His mouth was dry with cold adrenaline, pulse spiked to an uneasy pace. His anxiety irked him, and he swiped his gun-holding wrist over his mouth in a short motion to calm himself, other hand moving to open the car door beside him.

The gambler crawled out of the sports car, letting the Magnum drop to the seat as he did, getting up on his feet and smoothing palms over his crisp white suit and the blue shirt underneath. The act relaxed him a bit, although the fact that woman - thing was dead certainly helped on its own.

"Alright, bitch... if you so much as speckled blood on my Barchetta, I'll run you over so many
times you'll be rabies paste.” He grumbled, lowly - but despite the words, his car's sleek, silver haunch wasn't the first thing he looked at.

It was that damn corpse and those still-open, ravenous, almost glowing yellow eyes. His nostrils flared a bit, forced to take in the nauseating scent in the air radiating from her. It was almost like decomposition... (not that he'd explain how he knew that) but not quite. More like sour meat.

Slipping his ringed hands into the pockets of his suit, he walked over to stand just beside the sprawled, bloody corpse, staring hard down at it with a severe crinkle between his eyebrows. He'd never seen anything like it, and he didn't even want to think about the possibilities. There were a lot and he didn't like any of them.

Something was seriously wrong, and Nick was pretty sure it wasn't a case of rabies.

He'd dealt with his fair share of crazy women, sure. In fact, plenty of them had leapt at him with that level of hostility, if not even more. Though, *I usually solved the problem a little differently*. He tried to smirk at his own weak attempt at humor and failed, stepping back from the dead ... creature. He hesitated to call it a 'woman,' although what it was besides that was beyond Nick.

Suddenly, figuring out what the shit was going on seemed a little more important than his initial plans for his trip into Savannah. Gambling the pants off inept tourists could wait... if there was some kind of disease going around, he sure as Hell wanted to know what it was.

Maybe his road trip hadn't been such a brilliant idea after all.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 2

Nick strode back out of the convenience store with a pack of cigarettes between his fingers, in the act of popping it open and pulling one out. He forced out a sigh as he settled the stick between his lips, dangling it out one corner of his mouth.

He'd left money on the counter, despite the fact the store was oddly empty. He'd completely considered just taking the pack and running... but the security camera on the wall behind the register had a tiny red light that blinked with a rapid severity. He really couldn't afford getting caught robbing a store... so he left a few bucks by the register. No harm done, really.

Stepping around the corpse that still laid in an ever-growing puddle of dark blood on the asphalt, Nick walked over to get into his Barchetta's front seat. He sat a bit askew, legs spread, side relaxed against the arm of his seat. Pinching his fingertips over his cigarette, he keyed the car on and then used the car lighter to light his cigarette, closing eyes as he gave a muffled inhale and his car purred to a steady idle.

He could almost feel the nicotine creeping into his bloodstream, heart picking up just a little, a faint buzz entering his body that let him relax. It wasn't so much the actual act of killing the creature that had him unsettled, but more how it complicated his life. Suddenly he had to think about how he'd handle it: run away? Tell the truth? The convenience store may have had a camera on the parking lot, too, for all he knew, which would perfectly cement his story of self-defense... but the fact remained it was illegal for him to have a gun.

*Damnit.*

Just a few weeks ago, he'd been further west, trailing from casino to casino in a dizzy see-saw of wins and losses. It was a lazy business, really, though one that kept his wallet full enough to keep afloat. Over-confident and inexperienced marks lined up at the poker and blackjack tables, and he'd done fairly well for himself. It was in his blood, lining his veins with a sweet addiction.

Georgia had been his next stop, then down into Florida. Florida and its warm sunlight, the burning press of a beach chair against his back, the burn of liquor rattling past his teeth, the scantily clad women prancing around the sands... the chance to get one or two on his lap... Just thinking about it made him sigh, breath laced with smoke as his lips pulled into a small 'o.'

*I should've gone there first. Passed up goddamn Savannah, Georgia.*

Shaking his head quickly to disperse the self-chiding, the gambler let his lazed posture in his seat straighten up, catching his cigarette between the knuckles of his left hand and then punching the car radio on with his middle finger. If there was something on the news with any information about strangers going feral, or any indication of the supposed sickness going nuclear, he wanted to hear it.

He hadn't changed the channel; it'd likely be that same woman he'd heard earlier, chattering on incessantly. Her neurotic and over-excitable manner should've thoroughly turned him off.

*Of course, I'd probably still fuck h-*

Both his small, self-satisfied smirk and his train of thought broke off abruptly, staring at the radio with an expression of half-annoyance and half-confusion. It was silent, and that made no sense. Even if it wasn't the woman he'd heard before, or news at all, there should have been
commercials or music. A radio station didn't simply go silent. Testingly, he nibbled his cigarette back between his lips, freeing his hand to turn the volume dial a little.

Maybe he'd jostled the volume in his flurry to get his gun... but, as he spun the dial, there was nothing.

More...

Still nothing.

Little more -

He hit the end, a small click announcing the dial's refusal to go any farther. Forcing a sigh through his nostrils that sent acrid smoke blustering from them, Nick sat for a quiet moment, listening to the now-audible, constant wall of static facing him. *I must've gotten outta range.* he reasoned, easily, although the static set his teeth on edge.

"Fuck the South." he grumbled quietly, throwing blame in a frustrated gesture to relax his nerves - and then nonchalantly rolled his fingertip over to hit the "SCAN" button on the radio, tightening his lips slowly over his cigarette.

The signal garbled for a moment as it ran through stations, hunting for a clear signal.

Then:

"**-NSURE ALL OPENINGS HAVE BEEN SECURELY OBSTRUCTED.**"

Though the voice itself was monotone and calm, the radio screamed the words at him at him, so loud he nearly lost his cigarette in his lap trying to jolt and turn it off.

"**SECURE T HE-ROOM WITH PLASTIC SH-**"

He just barely managed to hit the off button on the radio with a strong smack of his palm against the controls, immediately going to rub at his ringing ears with the heel of his left hand. "Jesus Christ!" he complained in a groan, pawing the dial all the way down before he could make the same mistake again.

He hadn't really registered most of the words with how loud they were. It had sounded like some kind of public announcement, like weather and flood warnings... but this was different. He'd never heard the like before, and certainly not on a public radio station.

Moving to turn the radio back on after he felt his ears had been nursed enough, the gambler felt a little focused pinch start up between his brows, flicking the volume up just a few notches until the voice came back into focus. "... *If you think you're infected, remain calm.* Quaran--ti, *ne yourself from the uninfected population immediately.*" His dark brows went up a little, startled, but before the voice could go on, he turned it back off. That answered his question well enough, and he didn't want to hear another word.

"Oh great. There is something going around... damnit..."

He'd just reached over to pick his Magnum back up from the passenger seat, preparing to stow it away with a frustrated sigh, when he noticed something.

Over the purr of his car, and the repeated echo of the radio going on his head, he picked out a distinct sound coming from behind him. It was like the far-off din of a football stadium, incoherent
shouts drawn out into roars. He blinked, sharply, disoriented.

The gambler got his elbow braced on the back of his seat, pushing up on it so he could twist around and flicker his gaze over the pruned, road-side treeline the noises seemed to be coming from. They grew louder, fast, and his pulse rose as he noticed he could hear the crashing of something breaking its way through tree limbs and shrubs. A lot of something.

And then the horde broke through the treeline, scrambling in a screaming, blood-covered mass as they tripped over one another in their frantic fight to run at him. It was like floodgates had opened, and they came in a wave that tore through the forest. Their eyes bobbed in their loping, bright and blank yellow flashing in the sunlight, their skin greyed and washed out.

Nick panicked. He nearly bent his finger back in his desperate jerk to get the gearshift out of park. He barely even managed, finding his hands clumsy on the button - but his car rolled obediently into reverse, and he slammed his foot on the gas.

He turned too fast, hearing the tail-end of his Barchetta scrape the truck parked beside him, and it made the car wobble a bit before he could get it back under control. The gear shift fluidly rolled into drive under his palm. Green eyes moved frantically between the road ahead and the rear mirror, screeching out of the parking lot and making a dangerously skidding turn to get back on the highway.

There he floored it, the engine purring now that it was on the move. The gambler stared intently at the rear view mirror, knuckles going white on the steering wheel as he watched the crowd of what had to be twenty or thirty people, all covered in blood, leaves, and dirt, sprinting down the road after him.

What he didn't watch was the road.

He actually didn't see what did it. All he knew was something roared, this scream, that sounded both a little too human and a little too animalistic... and then his car was in the air, flipping to the side. Colors blurred in green and blue and grey, dizzying. Without a seatbelt, he felt his body start to lift, this surreal sensation of weightlessness.

Then the car hit the treeline and everything went black in a screaming chorus of bending metal and breaking glass.
Chapter 3

It took a long time before consciousness drifted in for more than a few seconds at a time.

Nick felt... movement. Heard things. Felt pain, cold, and warmth, in slow pulses. Half of it seemed a kind of dream-state, yet some too real to be imaginary - though it all blurred into one mess of memory and stimuli.

After some amount of time, he stirred - and when he did, he regretted it.

Pain was shooting up his neck in this constant pulse, and he tasted the metallic twang of blood in the back of his throat. Both worsened when he tried to move, and he was belatedly aware of the loud groan that escaped him.

The gambler laid still for a moment, eyes tightly shut, trying to get some grasp on how badly he'd hurt himself. The hurt seemed focused mostly on his head and neck - like he'd crashed it into something. Maybe his steering wheel.

As he slowly grew a little more aware of his surroundings and a little more used to the pain arching up his spine, he started to notice something ticklish plastered up against his chest, poking against his nose and twitching slightly with the breeze.

Forcing out a little breath, Nick peeled his eyes open with some hesitance. He realized it was grass. He was lying on his side just at the edge of the treeline. With slight bewilderment that he blamed on a clear head wound, the conman tried to work out how he wasn't in his car.. and more importantly, how the hell he wasn't dead.

What eventually hit him was that he hadn't had his seatbelt on. He must've been flung from the car, landing in the ditch and spared, at least, his car colliding with the-

with the...
colliding...
car with...
tree..

"Oh you have got-" he barely managed, coughing it out under his breath as little twangs of pain sparked over his body for the effort. "-to be goddamn kidding me.."

Grunting mightily as he did, the gambler forced himself to move, body protesting loudly. He got an elbow under himself, shoving his weight against the ground to steady his movements and wobbling up to a sitting position.

He let a hand lift up and carefully probe at his head, trying to find a wound, as faintly glazed emerald eyes roved up to search out the crash. As much as he wasn't looking forward to the sight, it wasn't something he could avoid, either. The car was doubtlessly done for.

And it didn't exactly take long to spot, either.

His lovely Fiat Barchetta was wrapped around a tree like a wet noodle just a few feet past where he'd landed. Glass had been scattered around on the ground from the impact, the bumper and a
sleek silver door both fallen off to lie in broken piles nearby. Grass and dirt splattered on the wreckage, scraped gouges in the earth from where the car had rebounded off it.

Nick stared at it helplessly, feeling a growing sense of useless anger and frustration overriding his pain. He'd crashed a car before - just as bad, but it had been on purpose and somebody else's car... His Barchetta was - well, it was just that. His.

Groaning again, this time in remorse, the man bent forward a bit, retracting his hand from the back of his head as he felt a sting of pain. Sure enough, his fingertips were red with a tacky layer of blood, although the flesh wound itself seemed pretty minor. He'd definitely had worse - it was the internal damage he was worried about.

Checking over his arms, torso, and then lower body, he was fairly confident that he'd escaped the crash the best he could have. There was a cut he belatedly noticed on his forehead, dribbling just a little bit, but it did little more than sting. His crisp suit now sported some dirt and grass-stains at its edges, a sight that made him wince, but there wasn't much he could do.

If he'd had time to seatbelt himself into the car, he'd be a pancake between his Barchetta and the tree trunk. He was generally pro-seatbelts, but this time, he was glad he'd forgone it… being flung from the car (and not through the windshield, either - he could've kissed the salesman who convinced him to upgrade to a convertible) was far preferable.

Replacing his hand on the wound at the back of his head, he pressed hard against it, letting his hand sit there as he shifted to stand up slowly.

One heavy-lidded eye shut, pain fluttering over his scalp and a slight sense of dizziness creeping over him, but he pushed through it, walking toward the wreckage as he glanced around him. He'd had head wounds before... better he keep moving than stay seated, as much as the ground called to him.

Far as he could tell, the roadway was silent and empty. In fact, staring around, Nick found himself wondering an instant if he hadn't imagined all the previous events.

Yet he could see the tiremarks on the road, clearly marking where he had, in fact, been run straight off the road sideways. They were almost perfectly parallel smears of black all the way to the edge of the asphalt.

He hadn't swerved… no, he'd been run off the road, like he'd been T-boned. There was no sign of another vehicle - it was like the hand of God himself had come down and bitch-slapped him off the road.

"Goddamnit, my car."

He settled his free hand on the Barchetta's ruined, twisted nose, the metal burning softly against his skin. The conman felt like taking a moment of silence for the thing sitting crippled on its side, an honest sensation of remorse twinging in his gut - but with a reluctant exhale, stepped back and squinted down the road.

He could see a sign, a few yards down the road, that had printed out in bold letters,

SAVANNAH - 3M

Alright. Not... that far. Sure, I'd rather drive it than walk it, but at least it's... doable. These shoes'll be hell by the time I get there, though... damnit. And what if I run into more... well.
He gave a minute shrug to himself in an attempt to dismiss the thought, deciding to avoid going anywhere near that line of thinking. The conman returned to the car's side, getting himself where he could reach into the interior of the totaled vehicle.

*Nothing else to do but head to town. Fuck.*

Feeling blindly under the driver's seat, he came up with his 'gun' box, it having been fortuitously protected by the seat that hid it. Balancing it against his hip so he could keep using one hand, he managed to open the box up and tug out the dark brown thigh-holster that he kept stowed in there as well.

He knew he'd need two hands to get it attached to him, but for the moment, he wanted to keep the pressure on his head wound a little longer. He felt it throbbing, although the pain was starting to lessen as he found other tasks to focus on.

Lifting the holster and letting the box just drop nonchalantly to the grass, Nick bit onto his holster's strap, holding it between bared teeth and growling irately to himself as he started to look around his plain brown wingtips.

*Where the fuck did my gun fly off to?* Hell if he was leaving his Magnum behind, particularly if there was some kind of madness going around. He tried very hard not to compare the eight - no, seven, counting the one he'd used at the gas station .. - bullets in the Magnum's chamber to how many of those *things* had come out of the trees.

Achingly getting down onto his knees, he reached to check the passenger side's floor with a pawing left hand, just in case it'd slipped down there.

Sure enough, he brushed his fingertips against cool steel, prying it free from where it'd gotten stuck under the seat's gears. "Gotcha!" he announced, muffled past the holster between his teeth. He checked it over momentarily, clicking the safety back on, then shoved it into the pocket of his plain brown wingtips.

The lessened traces of blood over his palm were comforting, glad to see it was clearly scabbing over quickly. Head wounds were notorious bleeders, and he didn't have any kind of time to deal with it.

He wiped what hadn't begun to dry off on the headrest of his ruined Barchetta's passenger seat and set to attaching his holster round his white-slacked thigh. Settling the Magnum comfortably into the sheath, the gambler took one last stock of himself.

He didn't have anything but his wallet, the pack of cigarettes he'd "purchased," and his Magnum. Sure, there was a small suitcase in his car's trunk, but firstly, he was moderately sure the trunk was crushed shut.. and secondly, he had enough winnings from his last stop left over in his wallet to make buying back what he needed in Savannah easier than carrying his luggage with him.

Sighing one final time, in this angered fashion, Nick tugged out his cigarette pack and slipped one out, nipping it between his lips. He set into a mildly paced stride, getting close to the side of the road to try and get off the grass, hoping to spare his suit any more trauma.

..and then he realized he didn't have a lighter.

"Tits!"
Chapter 4

It didn't take long for Nick to grow hot, and he found himself peeling off his suit jacket and
slinging it over his shoulder, free hand slipped into the pocket of his slacks. He kept his eyes half-
closed and his lips tightly sealed, following alongside the road with a determined pace.

*Long, hot shower.* he chanted to himself, like he had to convince himself not to give up walking.
Which, in fact, he did. *Tall drink. Long, hot shower... tall drink. Just at the end of this road. Hot..
hot.. burning hot shower.*

*Scalding hot shower.*

Curling his tongue against the roof of his mouth, the conman sighed wearily, looking down to
inspect the damages so far to his clothes. He'd found a few glass shards trapped in the fabric of his
suit when he'd taken it off, and watching them tinkle to the ground just made him mourn the loss of
his Barchetta all over again.

"Maybe it was a bull. There are farms here, right?"

It was a joke. Definitely. The more he thought about his crash the more it bothered him.
Something had swiped his car off the road like it weighed nothing, and he didn't understand that.

Even more than that, he was bothered by the fact that the crowd that had chased him down the
road had seemingly disappeared. If they were gone… great. If, however, they were somewhere
nearby, he wasn't sure he could outrun them on foot. Seven bullets was not enough.

And that brought up a whole new line of thought.

*Say it's rabies... Bitten by raccoons or something. Shooting a rabid animal - no one'd blame you
for that... but shooting a rabid person... even if there's a cure or something, that's still self-defense.
Right?* He couldn't afford police attention, particularly not on top of the fact he'd get jailed for
having a gun at all.

Shaking his head, even though it made him slightly dizzy, the conman forced that line of thinking
out of his mind. It wouldn't do any good until he got to town and found someone to explain the
situation to, anyway.

Of course, then he started to wonder if he should really be going towards civilization if there was
some kind of disease spreading...

He'd dump the gun and holster once he got to town, he decided, and avoid the police entirely. They
always enjoyed pulling up his records, (petty theft, arson that didn't stick, auto theft, manslaughter,
a wide array of arrests by various casinos.. a lot of which did stick), and while the most they could
do when he was behaving was wave it around and glare threateningly...

He certainly wasn't reporting the attacks on him today. He didn't need that kind of attention. The
gun hadn't been obtained legally, so it wasn't traceable to him, and he'd just have to hope everyone
was too distracted to worry about some random corpse at an abandoned gas station.

Maybe he'd just grab a hotel room and check the news stations... *Hope Georgia has something
more than 'Farmer falls in love with livestock' on their news channels.*

The thought made him outright smirk.
Those depthless green eyes opened with a blink, using his wrist to wipe over his forehead - cautiously avoiding the cut that had stung itself into silence by now - to dry some of the sweat he'd worked up, disliking the tacky, greasy sensation.

"Hot shower, hot shower, hot shower..." he reminded himself, this time aloud and with a vague sigh.

He'd just begun to slump uncomfortably, tipping up his stubble-dusted chin like he could hunt out a breeze to cool off, when something caught his ear from behind. The road had sloped to the right in a hard curve just a few minutes ago, and when he twisted around he could see nothing but trees and a few roadsigns... yet off in the distance, he heard the distinct, calm roar of a car engine.

Releasing a relieved sigh that just bordered on a moan, Nick halted where he stood, leaning to the side a bit and trying to get a look down the way. He pulled his coat from his shoulder with the other so he could drape it against his hip casually.

It dangled down perfectly to hide his strapped Magnum from sight, and with a subtle cock to his hip that exaggerated the exhaustion in his posture, he waited with what anyone else might have described as bated breath - but to him, was just the pooling and gathering of adrenaline.

Unnecessary, maybe... he had no intention of stealing the car. Hiding the gun was just to keep the driver from panicking. Still, under the current circumstances he was fairly nervous to come across other people, and adrenaline flooded his veins and made his pulse quicken.

The engine grew louder (a bit louder than he expected) and, sure enough, a musky red truck with monster wheels and an almost comically tiny, rust-splotched chassis came squealing around the turn. It was going far too fast even for the country highway, swerving a bit back and forth.

The sight immediately changed Nick's plans, and he reversed off the roadside at a quick backwards jog, not wanting anything to do with the rickety contraption or its pilot.

He noticed, with a prompt rise of agitation, that the driver apparently didn't even pay him any mind. There wasn't a pause or a jerk in the driving to give any indication he'd been so much as glanced at, the truck just blaring past him. He turned a bit to stare off after it, nostrils flaring, affronted.

Nick heard, in the moments after the truck passed, this obnoxious shout that set him to scowling. "HOOOOOOOOOOO-WHEE!"

It was the cherry-on-top of a shitty day. If it had been raining, he would've gotten splashed. He just knew it. Like a shitty Lifetime movie. The conman fumed in the instants after the truck had disappeared around a bend, unable to resist the urge to clench his fists a bit. "Asshole."

His rapt attention after the truck turned out to be well-timed. His eyes caught onto something, just a little bit of movement at the very tips of the road-side trees. Just beginning to poke up from the treeline, marring the rather gentle blue sky, was a few wisps of grey.

Nick found himself squinting slightly as it rose higher... and higher... and more started to join the first... and soon the horizon was speckled with columns of grey smoke, swirling with increasing enthusiasm as they started to turn black, rising up like the foaming head of a tidal wave.

Lifting his hand to the side of his head, he very slowly itched his pinky finger against his cheek.

There were fires in Savannah.
"At least I'll get a light." the conman managed under his breath, with absolutely not an inch of humor. Re-slinging his jacket over his shoulder, Nick moved into a half-jog, suddenly feeling a rather grim urgency as his free left hand settled just softly near the holster at his thigh.
The situation only got worse as he got closer.

Nick slowed his pace when he noticed a few dark shapes on the asphalt far ahead. They were bodies, sprawled this way and that on the roadway like macabre bowling pins. A strange, out of body sensation prickled his skin into goosebumps.

Damn. Did that truck just mow them down? He found himself wryly glad he'd moved well out of the way, but also a little sickened. It wasn't really squeamishness... he'd seen death, but not to this gruesome degree. He'd killed a man before, but it was mostly an accident and mostly clean.

This was... well, messy as hell.

As he came up on the corpses, he found himself hunting out their faces with his gaze, keeping his inhaled short to avoid smelling too much of the blood and... worse. He didn't want to think too hard about the various liquids coating them, and the asphalt.

Most of them were smashed to gruesome roadkill on the highway, but there were one or two whose heads he could still make out. Their mouths were still stuck in how they'd been upon death - bared teeth, wild snarls. Blood covered them from their deaths, sure, but there was a lot that was crusted on them, too... and then those eyes.

At least they're sick. Guess I can't blame the guy for running down these rabid freaks.

He fully blamed them for the loss of his car - and, even if it was some kind of illness, he didn't really feel that much sympathy. They're already dead either way... shit, and they're starting to smell, too.

Nick half-stepped on a thin metal pipe as he backed up, only sparing it a glance before he kicked it away. It was probably knocked off the truck.

He crinkled the bridge of his nose slightly, and, stepping deliberately around the whole mess, Nick made more than sure he didn't get anything on his shoes. He supposed, at least, the truck had cleared the way for him. He would barely have had enough bullets to defend himself against this group.

The city's gotta be safer than - .. and then the rising smoke regained his attention, and the thought withered. Maybe not. Pausing just an instant, it occurred to him.

Shit, what if there're even more down the road the truck missed? "If I run out of bullets, I'm fucked..." Turning his head slightly, tightening and easing his grip on his shoulder-slung jacket, the Northerner stared a moment in thought before he turned back entirely, striding to re-trace his steps.

He bent over, snatching up the pipe and weighing it in his hand, swinging the thing a few times. On the third test swing, he felt a stab of pain on the back of his head and grunted, reminding himself he was injured. The conman leaned a bit to one side, shoving the pipe under his belt. Fortunately, the tip was hooked, so it caught and stayed.

It wasn't really an optimal weapon, but it felt sturdy enough to do some damage to them.

Them?
What are 'they,' exactly? Sick? Sick people get better. That's not comforting.

Curling his tongue a bit, he found himself in a slightly more disturbed silence as he kept going, the pipe bouncing periodically against his thigh. Rabies was sounding more and more cheesy in his head. This was some grim shit for something contracted from a foaming raccoon...

Zombies? Aren't they supposed to rise from the grave, and shamble or some shit? That made him laugh, even if it came out as a little neurotic huff of air. He wanted to say it was ridiculous, but then again... 'ridiculous' was becoming a little meaningless.

Nick noticed a sign on the side of the road, half-hidden by branches. A few more strides, and he could read the whole thing. What made him uneasy wasn't the 'WELCOME TO SAVANNAH, THE HOSTESS CITY OF THE SOUTH' plastered gaily over the front... it was the hurried graffiti painted in the corner.

CED A EVAC IN THE VANNAH HOTEL!!

Evac?

Shifting his gaze further down the road and continuing on, he saw the road widen and the trees filter out. There were a few cars on either side of the road, a few of them crushed much like his had been, while others were just.. abandoned. There were more bodies here, some on the ground and some trapped in the cars.

There was a good number of them that weren't sick. He could tell instantly, as even dead their pallor was far pinker than the grey-white of the infected. Fortunately, none of them had been run over. They'd been mauled to death instead.

"That... actually isn't all that comforting." he noted to himself dryly in retrospect, suddenly pulling his Magnum from its holster and gripping it carefully, finger just brushing on the trigger. His stride turned into a slight strafe, one foot in front of the other, muscles tensing as adrenaline rose up to tighten his body.

The city started around him, buildings rising up on either side of the thinning road. Windows were broken and doors left hanging on their hinges, a few fires burning here and there, leaving the air around him with a heady weight. The cars were thicker here, though he noticed a path weaved through them, cars pushed to either side. There were even more corpses here, these all having those distinct yellow eyes Nick was really fast growing to hate.

That damn truck again... much as it pains me to say, thank God for it.

Reluctantly, he had to admit that really the smartest option would be to follow the thing's tracks - after all, it was the only sign of actual life he'd seen so far, and he had to admit the path the thing had woven for him was a bit impressive.

Then he heard a gunshot.

It was a heavy one, with a kickback to the sound that tipped him off it was probably a shotgun -and then it kept firing off, one after the other, a slight delay between each shot. On instinct, Nick dropped to a crouch beside a car, traversing forward through the trench almost made for him between the dead vehicles.

He subtly and slowly pulled his white suit jacket back on, not wanting to lose the thing if he had to run. His pulse was running like a motor, and his eyes darted around every few seconds.
Gunshots mean targets... and right now targets mean bloodthirsty freaks who could very well get me sick too. Greeeeeat. He hadn't considered that before then, and suddenly he wished he had a face mask. And some hand sanitizer...

The gunshots grew louder, and with them a voice - enthusiastic, loud, and so very Southern it hurt. It was so out of place for the situation Nick balked where he crouched.

"YEAH!" **bang** "Take that!" **bang** "WHOO!

"DIE DIE DIE!" **bang** "Hooo-wheee, that one lost his head! MAN I wish someone'd seen that!"

**Oh great. Georgia's prime gunslinger, here to save the day.** the conman mentally groused, leaning slightly to peek around the car he had his shoulder pressed to. *As if this couldn't get any worse...*

Nick saw the tail-end of the red truck he'd seen earlier right up against the side of a building - one side was crushed and a tire was gone, causing an almost comical height disparity that sagged it into a severe tilt. Glass, metal, and plastic was scattered around on the side street in its wake. Leaning slightly more, he finally caught sight of the aforementioned gunslinger.

The guy couldn't have been past his early 20s, balancing on the truckbed with his stance wide, hips planted against the back of the cab for support, and a heavy-looking shotgun cradled firmly in his arms. His yellow shirt was a little too tight, faded and dirty, both with blood and black grease Nick could only guess at. There was some kind of stamp on the front, but hell if Nick could make it out.

Blue overalls sagged on his legs, tied up goofily around his hips, the image was made worse by the thick steel-toed boots that kept him firmly planted on the ruined car. His sweat-drenched head was topped by a blue cap, pushed far to the back of his head and revealing all of his face, like he'd blindly swiped at his forehead and nearly knocked it off.

The Georgian was spinning this way and that at the waist, shooting off a blast to (and Nick only noticed this belatedly, rising up a few more inches) force off the yellow-eyed freaks that were trying their hardest to clamber up and get to him. They'd crawl up without the slightest hesitation, and just as they got themselves onto the truckbed rim, the kid would blast off a round right at them, pumping the gun to reload as fast as he could.

His hand darted furiously from the folds of his overalls to the ammo dock whenever there was a break, this constant flow of reloading suggesting both a familiarity with the weapon and that the man was well-stocked. Sparing a small glance to his Magnum and realizing he was goddamn lucky he hadn't used up his meager shots already, Nick forced a snort of derision under the continuing, though slowing, gunshots.

*Leave it to the rednecks to have ammo stashes in their pants.*

The conman shifted, trying to get both a little more comfortable in his crouch and a better view of the fight going on in front of him. It seemed the things couldn't get any ground on the guy, and they were weeding out fast, dead in piles around the truck. It was, he begrudgingly admitted again, an intimidating sight - maybe impressive, too, as Nick's view of the yellow-eyed freaks' death was starting to numb.

"Oh YEAH! You like that, yuh stupid zombies?! GET SOME!" The guy was absolutely hooting it, self-confident emphasis on all his vowels, breaking into a foot-to-foot victory dance as the count collapsed down to three.

Nick was just about to let his forehead fall onto the car in front of him, exasperated. He still couldn't really register what was happening.. like it was some joke, a twisted dream... when
hearing that word from somebody else struck him a bit. *Zombies?*

*No way. I was kidding-! Could they really be goddamn z-*

Something crashed into him from behind, just barely forewarned by an all-too-familiar scream, the very sound speckled with blood and gnashing on the air. It was all he could do to keep from shouting when he felt a hand try to get a grip on his neck, nails scrabbling when his shoulder shot up and half-blocked it.

With barely any thought, the Northerner twisted his arm around awkwardly, trying to shoot the thing. The gunshot was too near to his head, and his eardrums screamed at him in protest.

He missed, much to his panic, and the hand got a better grip as a foul, squirming body achieved enough leverage to batter at his back with what felt like knees. Nails dug into his throat, making him choke with pain and give a growl.

Pain sparked. The thing dug in with animalistic intent - most people held their punches, even in a fight. There was no hesitance there. The nails sunk straight through his skin and made furrows as they slid toward his collarbone.

A little deafened, he barely heard a startled "Hey!" from across the road, nor did he notice the shotgun give one last bang and then fall silent. The conman tried again, and this time he heard the bullet connect, his neck freed and the body Flopping away from him with a wet squelch as it collided with the pavement.

Panting, more than he should've been, Nick twisted around to get his back against the car, quickly standing up and taking a step away from the corpse. He reached up to check his neck, patting at the wound and grimacing heavily when his hand came away with blood and some congealed mess of dirt and .. something.. foul, rubbed off from his assailant's fingers and grinded into the gouges at the base of his neck.

"Well, look what we have here!" Nick heard the voice, and the slow footsteps as the Georgian walked up to the other side of the car that separated them. "Ain't no zombie, are you? I mean, shit, if they're usin' guns, I ain't sure if I'll hang 'round here too long, after all!"

Nick uttered a bare "No..." in response, eyeing the bloody muck on fingers that were suddenly unsteady. *If it's an illness, it's contagious... isn't it? Shit...* The thought came with a flicker of fear. The other man must've caught that something was wrong, because he started to shift from foot to foot like an antsy horse. He lifted a hand to pull off his cap, scratching his head with it dangling between his curled fingers.

He spoke up again, first syllable awkward and the rest of it jumping into this simplistic, almost obliviously cheerful tone. "Uh.. Yer the first person I've seen so far. Real glad! I was startin' to wonder if there is any folk who ain't zombified yet! Spread real quick-like -"

Nick spun around like a shot, glaring rudely at the Georgian even as his left hand surreptitiously popped the collar of his white jacket, feeling it sting as it laid against the wound but a little more concerned about hiding the injury. *Hell if some hick is going to shoot me because he thinks I'm going to turn into a zomb- Oh goddamnit, now I'm thinking it too!*

The youthful man across the car shrunk a bit, brows rising slightly as he pulled his cap back onto his head, uncertain at the glare. Even so, it didn't take but an instant for him to speak up again, tone somehow managing a layer of friendliness with this good-natured affront. "Well, yuh don't gotta get mad, I was just-"
"Look, would you shut up?" Nick couldn't stop the cascade from leaving him, tone as furious as it was chilly. "I just got here, I wrecked my car, I need a shower, I need a smoke, people are apparently going goddamn rabid - some inbred Georgia peach guffawing in my ear is not what I want right now!"

The kid blinked easy-going blue eyes in this little motion of shock, lifting his gun up to cross it over his chest and hold it there. He didn't seem completely sure of how to react, like the man rather coldly reaming him out was just so much more disarming than the horde of wild humans he'd just shot down.

Like he just couldn't help it, the capped Georgian said with a hapless tone, ".. I crashed muh car too."

Nick stared at him severely, fingering the trigger of his mournfully under-stocked Magnum, making the motion very visible to the other man. It seemed to work, the younger man falling silent.. though Nick paused, waiting a few extra beats to make sure the guy really understood.

"... good." Nick let out a sigh, lifting a hand to pass his palm over his gelled hair. "Now I'm not particularly interested in being around you or anyone for too goddamn long, but this - " he raised up the Magnum, noting with a smirk how fast the kid looked toward it. "- is fast running out of bullets, and from what I just saw, I'm going to need a lot. That and we're both out transportation. So, if you can possibly keep from talking... I'd appreciate it if we could just stick together long enough to get the hell out of here. Think you can manage that, Overalls?"

And oh, how snidely Nick said it. He had to, mostly to finish his explanation with something that didn't sound like a loosely worded 'I need an escort.'

The other man seemed to take a little offense at the tone, shifting a bit and using his free hand to self-consciously pull his tied overalls a bit higher on his hips. It was far more offense than he'd shown at any other time in Nick's monologue. Which, honestly, just spoke to the guy's priorities. Unflatteringly.

"Well yeah, I reckon that's smart... I mean, we'll have tuh get you a better gun, but there's some shops 'round here... I don't got any problems groupin' up, yuh don't gotta be all grumpy 'bout it."

He almost instantly, and much to Nick's dismay, brightened, throwing his shotgun's shoulder-strap on and vaulting up on the car. He clambered over it, forcing Nick to retreat as the Georgian hopped down next to him. The guy yanked off his cap politely and stuck out his free hand to offer the conman a shake.

"Name's Ellis! Me'n'muh buddy Keith work at an auto shop hereabouts - well, before the zombies took over. Don't anymore, I guess... Oh, 'n we play in a -""}

After very deliberately looking over the grease and blood-covered hand offered out to him, Nick simply glanced up at the kid's goofy smile and interrupted him cuttingly, a line twitching its way between his brows. "You know where the Vannah hotel is, then?"

Ellis' smile didn't fade so much as it stuttered a bit before returning to its former blaze, shaking out his hand in the air self-consciously before he set to replacing his cap on his head. "Well yeah, uh'course. I was headin' there for the evac when muh car crashed. I don't mind killin' zombies none, but I ain't gonna see Keith'n my mom anytime soon if I stay here."

Resisting the heavy urge to sigh at the unwanted elaboration, although fast getting the sense he was
going to have to survive that for a while yet, Nick gestured out his hands and turned slightly away from the kid. His shoulder raised up, feeling the sting of his clawed neck. His tone was a little too irked for the situation… at least in Ellis' opinion. "That's where we're headed, then."

The mechanic didn't move. Didn't even stop looking at him, under the bill of his cap, actually. Nick waited just a beat, then said rather coldly, "Do you need some motivation? I have bullets left in here." That, with an index finger tapped to his Magnum.

Ellis quickly lifted hands to wave off the conman, backing up a bit before he vaulted back over the car's nose. He did it even smoother than the first time, sliding over the hood and hopping to his feet on the other side. Nick took a more composed route, stepping down to the next car where there was an actual break between it and the next one he could slide through.

The mechanic waited for him obediently, saying pointedly once he'd stepped up, "Well, I ain't got yer name yet."

Ellis tried not to risk pissing the conman off again, and Nick couldn't help but feel a dry satisfaction as the other man quickly started off, leading the gambler down the road at a pace that was a touch faster than a walk but not quite a jog.

Knowing he couldn't really.. not give the kid something to call him, the conman simply shrugged his shoulder (but only his left one; he let the one on his injured right side stay still) and responded hollowly, "Nick."

The response was over-enthusiastic, like he'd been given one little foothold and had to pounce on it before he lost it: "Ohh, cool! That's a real smooth name! Slick." He misinterpreted Nick's silence, and clarified, "That's a good thing! You are kinda smooth-lookin' - like, that's a real fancy suit. Nobody wears nothin' like that down here outside of Sunday. Though you got some .. zombie on it… I mean, I bet it'll come out, ain't nothin', just.. sayin'. I heard, uh, white vinegar was good fer stains..."

He laughed, suddenly, and Nick could do little but stare forward in blank bewilderment as the kid just.. kept.. going. "I got a story 'bout that, check this out.. My buddy Keith got some ketchup on his shirt once, so he was gonna try that, 'cept he went into the wrong pantry 'n what he thought was white vinegar was actually -"

"I. Will. Shoot. You."
Chapter 6

The two men trudged down the street in spotty silence. Ellis was like a puppy who didn't understand that 'no' meant 'don't do that at all' - he just thought it meant 'don't do that right now.'

Every few minutes the mechanic would tense up, those youthfully brawny shoulders rising a bit as he shifted the shotgun in his hands. It usually started with a "Hey," or a "Y'know," and he didn't get much further before Nick interrupted him with a simple, flat "No." or a dark stare.

Ellis never seemed really upset at it. He just continued on with vague sighs and shakes of his head, a hand rising to adjust his cap like he was bemused by the other man. Nick was set closer and closer to the edge of either shooting the guy or just turning around and walking the other direction, hoping he didn't notice.

The only thing that kept him from tipping over was the fact that every few blocks, a zombie or two would come rushing out from an alleyway or around a car. Blood dribbled from their lips and eyes like an absolute nightmare, their limbs clawing at the air as they shrieked out strange snarls.

Sure enough, the mechanic would snap up his shotgun, blasting off a shot once the thing was close enough. Both he and the zombie jerked a bit with the strength of it, the latter falling to the ground with a splatter of blackened blood.

Ellis would look back over his shoulder, flashing a lopsided smile at Nick like he expected some kind of compliment.

Like hell.

A snidely lifted brow was more than enough to dissuade the younger man, although Nick could tell each time there was more and more confusion in his reaction. It was naive people like him that just got under the conman's skin - that countryside ideal that just being human made you friends.

He vastly preferred the city, where nobody so much as made eye contact with strangers.

Proving him right almost instantly, Ellis prompted up yet another conversation, tossing up a dirty, nicked hand in this vague gesture. "Hey, this once, -"

"You actually shut up?"

Nick was torn between smirking and actually cracking a laugh when Ellis finally turned around, stopping in the middle of the road to face him. His grease and dirt-smudged expression was drawn in this look of confusion, a little bit of a pout actually twitching at his mouth. His little break was borderline hilarious.

The gambler hadn't really been trying to get a rise from him, but it was a welcome pleasure.

"You don't like me much, do yuh? I dunno why, I ain't done nothin'!"

Nick crossed an arm over his chest, the other one still dangling at his side with his Magnum tight between fingers. He had settled for a smirk, and it stayed solidly at his lips even as he noticed another zombie bolting out into the street from a broken alleyway. He calmly raised up his pistol, the nozzle placed just before Ellis' shoulder. The Magnum went off with a heavy BANG, catching the zombie right in the chin and splitting his lower jaw with a gruesome pop.
The mechanic didn't even have time to react before the gun went off, just jumping in shock and clamping his wrist over his ringing ear after it had finished. "That shit was right in muh ear! That hurt!" he complained, twisting around at about the same time as he said it. Seeing the zombie Nick had shot at, the hick gave a little "Whoop!" noise, apparently completely forgetting his consternation in favor of running over and leaning to look at the zombie's blown head.

"Shiiiit, Nick! You got damn good aim! Say, you do a lot of shootin'?

Nick sighed just faintly, although he found the topic far more tolerable than anything else the other man had tried to talk about. The conman moved to catch up and then pass Ellis, absently smacking out the Magnum's magazine to morosely inspect the four bullets he had left.

Worth it.

"I don't go out every morning shooting ducks out of the sky and bottles off the fence, no, but I took something called lessons." Sending a small glance over his shoulder, expression fairly impassive, he made sure Ellis hadn't lagged behind too much and palmed the mag back into place.

The mechanic apparently didn't catch the two-pronged insult, because he jogged up beside Nick with a goofy grin spreading across his face. "How'sabout we start up a game?"

The conman narrowed eyes and twitched his brows as they hit an intersection (the lights of which were out, he noted) and Ellis gestured to the left road, getting a few steps ahead to lead the way. Nick rather dangerously prompted him with a "Game?", awaiting an explanation.

Ellis' grin stayed solidly on his face, gesturing with the nose of his shotgun. "Yeah! We can keep count'uh how many zombies we kill, see who's better!" He seemed to realize the flaw in his plan, tapping his thumb against his weapon. "Once we getchya more ammo, anyhow."

At the same instant Nick felt disbelief at the idea of Ellis actually making a game out of the situation, he felt the slightest inclination to... agree to it.

No reason not to make the guy look stupid.

The conman was just starting to mull over the pros and cons of humoring him, when both their heads snapped up to the sudden sound of gunfire in the distance. Nick's eyes widened just a bit, then narrowed, and he tugged the metal pipe free from the makeshift holster he'd made out of his belt. His Magnum was shoved back into its sheath at his thigh, aware of its encroaching uselessness. He needed to save the remaining bullets.

Swinging the pipe a little, Nick made certain of his grip, utterly ignoring the Georgian beside him. He was not looking forward to having to use the damn thing, but gunfire meant zombies... hopefully whoever was fighting them would keep them distracted enough for him and Ellis to slip past -

"Lordy, you think they're in trouble? Shit, man, we gotta find 'em!"

Cue the dumbass.

Ellis had this blatant look of concern on his face, smacking up a hand on top of his cap to screw it down a bit on his head, like he was preparing a charge. When he moved to bolt away, intent on chasing down the gunfire, Nick snapped after him, "Hey, Overalls! You want to go running around town, be my guest, but I'm not here to play Superman! There's an evac waiting for me, and I'll go without you if I -"
The kid wasn't paying him an ounce of attention, darting forward with his gun grasped tight against his chest, head swiveling to pin down the direction of the noise. Nick scowled a bit, taking a half-step forward and raising his voice.

"Hey, kid! I'm saying, I don't have time for this shit and I'm going to go with or without- " He realized quick his words weren't getting him anywhere. "Oh, goddamnit!"

Despite his claims to the contrary, he was noticeably not interested in losing his guide or the gun the Georgian was carrying. Whether he liked it or not, (mostly not), he was bound to the whims of his newfound acquaintance. Nick was forced to race after him, suit jacket flapping a bit at his sides with the wind.

Survival was a little more important than his pride.

A little.
Chapter 7

Nick struggled to keep up with the mechanic as they raced down the street, the fires and disorder on the sides of the road getting worse as they got deeper into town. It wasn't even that Ellis was fast - although he was, doggedly darting along the road and dodging cars like an expert, overalls bobbing at his waist and one hand keeping his cap tight to his head - but mostly that the kid was just sprinting through without a thought.

His flurry attracted more than a few zombies from the sidewalks and broken-down buildings. They raced out like mosquitoes on a hot day, snarling viciously after Ellis in a trickling group. They were so focused on the younger man Nick almost thought they wouldn't even turn to attack him, just running almost in front of him. Still, there wasn't exactly another option.

Without stopping, he hefted the pipe in his hands and aimed a hard swing right to one's head. Its skull cracked back with a loud gargle, the thing wobbling back and forth on shaky legs before collapsing, left behind on the street.

The conman gave a huffed 'heh', finding the sight more entertaining than he should have, and turning to the other side to do the same to the zombie on his left. The hooked end of his pipe connected with the thing's neck this time.

Even though he didn't feel he'd swung that hard, the creature's neck snapped back with enough force that he heard the crackle of its vertebrae dislocating from one another. He almost expected its head to come clear off.

That zombie gave a much louder gargle than the first, and apparently, Ellis finally took notice of the things behind him. Before Nick even registered the mechanic had spun around, he heard a hoot of, "Nick, duck!"

With the distinct knowledge that Ellis had a fairly large shotgun in his hands, and the feeling he understood what the kid was going to do, Nick wasn't inclined to take the time to argue. Quickly dropping to a low crouch, he jammed his wrists against his ears in preparation, scowling a bit.

Barely a breath later, three loud shots flew right over him in quick succession. The cha-chunk of his pump-action reloading was the only thing to separate each blast, and with each one, blood tinted black and dark green splattered onto the back of his jacket as Ellis shot down the zombies left between them.

"Damnit, you hick! I'm ruining this suit enough without you helping!" Nick snapped as he swiped something wet and chunky off the back of his neck. Ellis' boots trotted into his view, followed promptly by a hand, palm up, stretched down to him in offer.

Nick couldn't help but survey the calloused fingertips, the muck buried under the nails, the black practically ground into his skin in little splotches… and grimace.

"Come off yer high horse," was Ellis' response, this oddly cheerful brand of chastisement, almost playful. "Least it ain't your blood."

Nick lifted his head at that, giving Ellis a very distinct stare of annoyance before reaching up to roughly smack aside the proffered hand. The conman stood up on his own, shoving his pipe back into his belt. He grabbed the collar of his suit and shook it a bit, like he was covered in dust rather than blood. Ellis took a half-step back, swinging his shotgun up to balance on his shoulder and
eyeing Nick with a bemused look.

"Yeah, and if you'd aimed a few inches lower it could've been, you idiot. Try watching where you're going instead of running past them like a complete dumbass. How aren't you dead?"

Of course, he was actually thinking *How are you doing better than I am so far?*, but he didn't say that.

Ellis snorted a bit with a laugh, although it sounded distracted, pulling his shotgun back off his shoulder and smacking it a bit in his palm like that was a good enough answer. Nick didn't pay any mind to his sudden quiet and slightly focused attention on the conman, not until the kid spoke up.

"Got a nick there, Nick? Happen jus' now?"

Ellis was pointing, right at Nick's neck. The gambler had almost forgotten the wound he'd gotten on the crook of his shoulder, previously covered. He'd accidentally flashed it as he'd adjusted his suit.

Popping his collar up quickly but casually, he waved Ellis' hand away, responding with a cool and snide tone. "Real observant. Good job. One jumped me earlier, and I have you to thank for distracting me. You want to play Sherlock? How about you try noticing that our friend stopped shooting?"

Ellis propped his mouth open to respond, but Nick's snappy, sudden change of topics distracted him enough to succeed in shutting him up. Turning around with a slight pinch to his expression, Ellis listened a moment before nodding in rather serious agreement.

"Sure did... yuh think they're okay? Not shootin' means one of two things." The hick pulled his cap off, scratching his scalp with his wrist slowly. Nick heard it. Faint but not imperceptible, this fear… concern in the guy's voice. Ellis just looked around - roved his gaze over the street, perked onto the toes of those workboots like some over-attentive prairie dog.

It wasn't that Nick took pity on him. More, Nick merely recognized the fact that he wasn't going to drag the kid away without a fight. *The faster we check this out, the faster we get to the Vannah.* He sighed.

The conman's exhale snapped Ellis out of it, but before the younger man could really react he felt a hand shove his shoulder. It quite nearly knocked him over, stumbling to both catch his balance and keep from losing his grip on his hat.

"Move it, assclown." Nick said rather sardonically, pulling the pipe free from his belt and swinging it with a rolling wrist like it were a cane. "They'll either be well and dead or well and gone if you keep standing here."

Ellis turned to glance over his shoulder, flashing a lopsided grin as he snapped his mechanic's cap back onto his head. It was a look that gave Nick the distinct sense he was being made fun of - though why was beyond him.

Rather than interrogate him on the point, though, Nick simply followed after as the kid walked down the road at a quick pace. He noticed Ellis was paying much more attention to his surroundings now.

*So he does learn.*

They were coming up on a four way stoplight, bodies littering it heavily. It may have been the
most corpses Nick had seen in one place so far. The lights themselves had been dragged down when a car crashed into one of the poles - a car which was, in fact, still there, flipped and plastered onto the sidewalk. The vehicle was absolutely flattened, just a few pieces of chassis still struggling to hold up shape.

The two men slowed as they came into the middle of the intersection, Ellis looking down at the heavy piles of (thank God, zombified, although Nick found the curdled and ill smell plenty revolting) bodies and prodding them here and there with the muzzle of his shotgun.

"Bullets. Look kinda fresh, don't they?" Nick wasn't really listening, crossing the intersection with one hand slipped into his suit pocket. He eyed the crashed car - or what was left of it, smashed and wrapped in the sparking remnants of the stoplight wires. *This car is crushed to shit... like my Barchetta, I think, only... even worse.*

"They were here, fer sure... you think they're still close? Shit, there's a lotta these zombies. Wonder how many - I mean, guess there's however many folks lived here, at least… Some people had tuh survive, though, right?"

There was an arm sticking out from the window, twisted at such an angle it was obviously broken at the elbow - and wherever else. Nick's nose crinkled, just the bridge of it, and he refocused on the rest of the car.

"Kinda scary, though. Liked it better when I was thinkin' zombies were only already dead folks."

Nick screwed his brows up just a bit, reaching to touch a fingertip to the car's... hood, maybe. He couldn't tell up from down on the thing. *I know I didn't just flip off the road earlier - something... hit me off, knocked me off. Practically flew o"OWfuck!"

He snapped his finger back, grumbling very lowly under his breath and shaking his hand. His fingertips were practically singed by the metal.

"Had to be hot... of course."

Ellis suddenly just showed up at his elbow, standing there, shotgun sat across his shoulders and behind his neck like a barbell with wrists dangled over either end. "Only crashed a bit ago, then. Ain't like this whole zombie mess has been goin' on that long. 'Course, you didn't have tuh burn yer finger figurin' that out."

A few things went through the conman’s head. One: he hadn't heard a thing the kid had said before then. Two: he was very tempted to beat the shit out the kid. Three: there were very unsettling implications of what the mechanic said.

"Only a bit ago, you said?" Nick half-trailed, glancing focused, rather narrowed eyes at the car.

"Yeah, sure... engine's gotta cool off after the car turns off. Plus it's in the shade… but it ain't cooled off, so it must'uv been in the sun a real short time ago. Man, this one time, my buddy Keith sat on the hood of his car 'cause we didn't have chairs - campin', y'know, up in - wait, where're you goin'? Nick?"

But the conman was already on his feet and moving, pulse far faster than he would've preferred. He halted, just on the crosswalk to the leftmost road, dress shoes placed with subconscious caution to not brush against any of the bodies sprawled around... staring with growing discomfort down the street.

"Hey, dumbshit, you seeing this?" Nick muttered, lifting his hand up to gesture down the road.
Cars were tossed this way and that - flipped like vulnerable turtles, half-squashed and crushed in on themselves. When the conman let his green eyes trail up, he sucked in a short inhale, this little shocked noise.

Ellis saw it at the same instant, halting just beside Nick and leaning in to gawk.

"Oh…mah…gaawd, there's CARS in the BUILDIN'S!"

They were barely dangling from where they'd broken in, vehicles thrown into the faces of streetside buildings, jamming straight through brick and windows. There were holes and breaks in other places that suggested the cars lying broken on the street had been, at least, thrown in the same way, even if they rebounded and fell to the ground.

Nick's brows were screwed up into a tight knot, faint wrinkles around his eyes drawn a little deeper as he tried to work out what he was looking at. There was this ringing in his ears... a hum that wouldn't quit - and belatedly he realized it was the kid standing beside him, talking.

"...just like Godzilla or somethin'! Ohhh, MAN I wish Keith could see this! How'd they even get up there!? Jeeesus... I've seen twisters do shit like this! We get them here sometimes, y'know! ... I mean, this wasn't one.. ain't stormed. But-

_Goddamnit this kid cannot shut UP... five seconds, PLEASE..._ the gambler found himself rather desperately thinking, turning on his heel and taking a step forward to stare back across the intersection.

Whether Ellis did shut up or Nick just managed to drown him out could've gone either way - but for an instant, Nick just felt deaf. His heartbeat was thudding in his ears, skin prickling with sweat like he'd started a fever. He vaguely heard his name and ignored it. The whole other side of the road, it was all the same. Cars tossed like toys, odd breaks in the buildings - even in the asphalt. _Like... fuck if I want to quote, but.. like a tornado ran through, really is. What the hell did this?

Forcing his head to shake and lifting up a hand to wipe over his forehead, Nick muttered a quick, "Screw this..." and then raised his voice.

"Okay, Overalls, you're going to shut up and listen - you're finding me ammo, like you said, and then you're taking me to the Vannah Hotel. Like you said. I am done with this goose-chase and there's something running around tossing cars... Forgive me if I lack your stupid optimism, but we are going to die here - and I am NOT dying here - so we are leaving. Now. Got it, Farmer Joe?"

Silence. Not a peep. Not even a half-chuckled noise of vague confusion at Nick's irritation.

Twisting around, Nick realized he was utterly alone in the street.
Turning this way and that, hand shooting up to flatten onto his forehead, the conman hunted for any sign of where Ellis had gone.

"Overalls! You damn son of a bitch, where the hell did you go?" he hissed, fighting the urge to yell. He got both hands on the pipe in his fingers, squeezing at it in frustration. His gaze darted around the intersection, trying to spot the dirty yellows and blues of the hick's outfit. "W- I don't have goddamn time for this. What are you doing?"

Taking a step back, like it might give him a better view, Nick clamped clean, neat teeth onto his lower lip and held silent just an instant. Nothing... not a sound.. and then a loud, hacking cough and a short gurgle. He'd heard gurgles, from dying zombies shot in the neck, sure... but this one was different. It was a pained, struggling noise, that of a man being choked. And he swore it sounded like Ellis.

Snapping up his head toward the source of the noise, he noticed that the doorway to the building directly lined up with the crosswalk was wide open. Inside, it was almost pitch black, but he saw enough to see the butt of a shotgun lying in the threshold.

The weapon was just protruding into the light streaming in from the outdoors that made a severe square on the floor, but reflected no further. The windows were blocked with thick curtains, keeping any sunlight from entering the building. He couldn't see anything.

Hefting his pipe with a tightly set jaw, the conman darted toward it before he could think enough to reconsider, sprinting through the doorway. He skidded to a slight crouch, snatching up the shotgun and ditching his pipe in a quick switch.

There was a moment - just an instant there... where his hand clenched on the shotgun's grip and he shot the smallest look down. He could tell by the weight of it that it was fully loaded - Ellis had kept it like that, feeding it constantly. The forethought was impressive. It was probably an 8-shot capacity.

Four bullets in his Magnum, eight in the shotgun, and a pipe. Would that be enough? He could probably find his way to the gunstore… but what if he didn't?

He weighed his options. Leaving the kid crossed his mind. He wished he could say that guilt or morality played a big part in his decision. Maybe a better man wouldn't have even paused to begin with; Nick mainly decided that he didn't want to risk his neck alone with barely more bullets than he had fingers.

Then he was moving forward, blinking rapidly to try and acclimate to the darkness inside the building. The air was heavy and putrid, almost like cigarettes except... rotten. He stayed a little low, hunched, one hand out to feel for any furniture in his way while the other tucked itself tightly against the shotgun's trigger, bracing the butt against his shoulder to make up for the weight of the front.

Nick could hear this shuffling, struggling noise, punctuated by the desperate stamp of a boot against wood and another hacking cough. The cough didn't sound like Ellis, either. It was wet. Spongy almost, with a wheedling breath on either end. The darkness and emptiness - and the conman's beating heart - fuzzed its direction, disorienting his perception of the room.
His fingers brushed onto the fabric of a couch as he turned and started to drive in toward where he swore it came from, and he worked his way around it, hissing a short "Overalls! I can't see for shit, keep making noise! Come on you stupid hick, where are you?!"

But it wasn't more stamping that the kid managed; sudden light flashed on in an off-yellow funnel, spasming wildly and blinding Nick for an instant. The moment he got his bearings, he realized it was a flashlight.

Ellis managed to point the thing up, messily illuminating both himself and what had him. There was a thick, fleshy tendril wrapped around him from head to toe. It squirmed, constricting his mouth, throat, torso, knees... he'd just barely gotten enough of his forearm and hand free to get the flashlight on.

There was this obvious look of panic on his face, bright red and almost purpling, and his eyes were struggling not to roll up to the back of his head.

*Holy fucking shit.*

Nick had his shotgun up and aimed, ready to shoot even before he actually made to confirm what the corners of his eyes suggested - there was something tall just behind Ellis, and Nick saw the bubbling, contorted image of a face mutated into something unnatural, just before he jolted forward and pulled the trigger.

Something exploded, a sound rather like a burst balloon, and Nick had to shield his face against a heavy breeze of that same putrid air he'd smelled in the whole house. He'd practically lived in dive bars and gambling halls, yet he couldn't stop himself from breaking into thick coughs, hacking painfully and throwing his forearm against his mouth.

It reeked, and inhaling made his chest clench as if his lungs were trying to expel the gas on their own.

"M- Moron.." He broke off to cough again, spitting hard off to the side and dropping down as low as he could to try and get out of the smoke. It was just clear enough that he could open his eyes, and though the flashlight had fallen and was only barely pointing at him, Nick could tell Ellis had crumpled down to the floor and wasn't moving.

*Middle of being strangled and he had enough sense to remember he had a flashlight AND managed to get it out... okay, fine. Not the dumbest moron I've ever met... My luck, he's dead.*

Crawling forward on knees and elbows, the conman pulled up close to the Ellis' side, snatching up the flashlight and flickering it over the unconscious mechanic's form. He dropped the shotgun, freeing his hand so he could unwind the tendril still wrapped (though, he noticed, loosely) around Ellis’ head.

It was thick and fleshy, and as he pulled at it, it twitched and squirmed. He gagged and coughed in the same breath, and it was all he could do to keep himself from vomiting. That, and looking past Ellis to examine the strange, elongated body collapsed behind him.

*The fuck is this thing…?*

He passed a quick finger close to the Georgian's mouth, feeling the brush of hot breath from his nostrils, relieved to note he was alive. Alive but not awake, and they didn't have time to sit there and wait for him to drift back to consciousness...

Even less than he thought, in fact. Just as he'd dug fingers into Ellis' shirt and pulled him up just a
little, shaking him firmly in the hope of rousing him, he heard it from outside - screaming, although not of fear or pain. It was, very distinctly, the scream and shriek of zombies. And there was a lot of them.

Nick was getting too familiar with that noise.

He twisted around, shining the flashlight over the living room they were in. There was a door in the corner, squat and thin, just below a staircase in the corner that lead up to a top floor. *Looks like a storage closet.*

Nick set the flashlight down quickly, leaving the funnel of light pointed over at the door so he could see.

Grabbing hold of Ellis' wrists, he turned around and heaved hard, yanking the younger man onto his back like a heavy pack. He strained a little against the dead weight, pulling Ellis' arms tighter around his neck and struggling up to his feet.

He wasn't heavy, but he was completely dead weight and Nick wasn't feeling at the top of his game. He grunted loudly, fighting across the room. Ellis' elbow was digging into his neck, and the clawmarks on the conman's neck stung until his eyes screwed up. "Nearly.. dead.. and.. still.. causing.. me.. problems.. you.. dipshit.."

Tossing his weight into the wall just beside the door, Nick trapped Ellis' left half against it and let go of that wrist. He forced the door open and spun with a groan, dropping Ellis to the floor just inside. He collapsed into a pile on his rump, thudding against a cardboard box and nearly crushing it as his arms went akimbo and his head lolled back.

With the weight gone, Nick bolted back across the room, grabbing both the flashlight and shotgun with a slight stumble. He got back to the storage closet just as the first zombie flung itself through the doorway, screaming in heightened rage as it saw him. Nick shoved the flashlight onto a shelf just against the wall, pointing out into the main room.

The conman dropped to a knee, thrusting the shotgun up and downing the zombie with a strong hit to the chest. It fell - but there were more racing in behind it, and Nick heard breaking glass. Flashes of light shot into the room as zombies thrust themselves through the windows, too, fingers tearing at the curtains that had previously covered them.

Nick shot straight through the doorway, bullet spraying through a good number of zombies at once, then pumped the next round in and twisted to the side to do the same toward the group struggling through the curtains. He heard them shrieking and gurgling - in anger, not pain.

Tipping onto his rear and pushing back with the heels of his shoes, Nick felt himself bump against the mechanic. He fought a growl as he realized with a flicker of frustration that he'd pushed himself between the sprawled mechanic's thighs. However, as he tried to pull the pump and reload only to find it locked in place, indicating it was out of shells - he realized the position was actually fortuitous.

More zombies crawled over their fallen compatriots, and came running toward the closet. *Shit-!*

Nick shoved his foot up, catching the edge of the closet door and kicking hard to slam it shut. He left the flat of his shoe braced on the door, keeping it shut when bodies slammed against the other side. Panting in his hurry, Nick dropped the muzzle of the shotgun to rest on his knee and reached back a hand, digging into the folds and pockets of Ellis' overalls.
The door slammed against his foot, jolting a startled noise out of him before he bit it down with a
growl. The flashlight sent odd shadows scattering as a sliver of the door fell inward, grungy fingers
digging through the gap. Blood dribbled down from the tiny break, and the infected got louder.

Ellis' overalls were just baggy enough to frustrate Nick's attempts to find his pockets, grabbing at
the thick fabric until he found an opening. In a less desperate situation, he might've had some
concern for where his blind groping would put his hand.

*Come on, come ON, where the hell are they... I saw you grab them, they were... somewhere...*

Then - "Jackpot." His fingertips found the cool shapes of some shells, and Nick grabbed a handful
and dragged them out. He twisted the shotgun up and managed to load it in the dim lighting, each
shell clicking like a little chime of success.

He blinked past sweat, emerald eyes murky with a mist of something unreadable. It was definitely
not fear. The door - and, thus, his leg - was shivering with collisions, and when he glanced up the
hole broke open, splitting wood in a rain of splinters.

An arm came through, the owner snarling with its success. Before it could get a grip on anything,
Nick let off a shot, sacrificing a good bit of the door to force the zombies back. Not that it lasted, as
the next layer was immediately on the door, and they had more room to crawl into the closet that
time.

Nick had to pull his legs from the door to avoid getting clawed at, going almost crosslegged,
pumping the shotgun and shooting them back again.

He heard a faint groan from behind him as Ellis stirred, this bedraggled noise that he tuned out. Not
exactly his top priority - though Nick noticed the horde seemed a little thinner the next time they
flung themselves at the door.

Getting into a rhythm with the shotgun, he reminded himself to keep a count of his shells. He'd
only loaded 6 before the zombies broke in, which put him at 4 -

**BAM, cha-chunk**

*Okay, 3 -

**BAM, cha-chunk**

*Shit. 2.*

The zombies kept coming.

Nick darted back his hand to dig for more bullets. Realizing he was unable to shoot at all without a
free hand to pump the forend, all Nick could do was re-adjust and kick hard at the zombies just
reaching through the wide hole in the door. His heel smashed down on a forearm, the flesh giving
way underneath his force.

"Guhhh.. whut?.."

It took Nick just an instant to realize it was Ellis, his voice cracked and wheezing from his near-
strangulation, struggling toward consciousness. Not exactly wanting the kid to process that his
hand was burrowed into his pants pocket, Nick dug some shells free and just dropped them onto his
own lap, Nick quickly shot off one of the bullets he still had, earning a long enough reprieve to
load a few bullets in.
"...whus .. uhhg.. whus 'appen'n..?" the mechanic managed, wracked with a very audibly painful cough and trying to shift out of his uncomfortable sprawl, only to find his attempt at adjustment blocked by .. well, Nick. "Gr- ahgk.. grabbed me... thing grabbed me…"

"Shut it, and hold still!" the conman snapped, leaning in to aim a little more precisely, scanning cautiously to see - a smirk overtaking him at the knowledge - there was only a few zombies left.

And they, lining themselves up by running toward the single door, went down with one precise shot to their upper bodies... and then there was silence, just the faint little bubbles of half-gurgles as the zombies struggled and died, and heavy panting as Nick tried to cool down.

"Chrissakes, they're persistent bastards.." the gambler managed, wiping his wrist over his forehead and giving a short smirk of self-satisfaction.

Blowing out a long breath, Nick tossed the shotgun to the side and picked the unused bullets from his lap. He shifted forward onto his knees and turned around to offer them back, finally eyeing the mechanic in the light now streaming into the house from broken windows.

He'd gotten his elbows up, braced a little on the box he was leaned against, odd marks on the skin of his cheeks and neck where the tendrils had nearly squeezed the life out of him. Ellis' neck, particularly, was blemished with bruises and red marks, and his frame heaved a bit with the effort he put into breathing.

His cap was off, lost somewhere in the living room during the struggle, and his bright blue eyes were quite visible in their confusion, uncomprehendingly glancing from the offered fist to the rest of Nick, kneeling in the space between his sprawled legs.

He was confused, and the longer the silence lingered, the closer the atmosphere edged toward awkward.

Yeah, okay. This looks weird.

Nick twitched a brow once as he lifted his fisted hand and just opened it over the hick's head. "Get up, dumbshit. I just saved your ass." His handful of bullets rattled down over Ellis and startled him into yelping, the sound a bit pitiful with how fiercely it rattled.

"Whuh -" He coughed, lifting up a hand to both push a bullet off the top of his head and touch his neck. "Whuh's s'at for!" He honestly looked a little hurt, although with a second glance, Nick decided that might've been physical and not emotional.

Sighing in cool frustration and setting the shotgun against the wall, Nick forced himself to stand up, turning around and reaching down to get ahold of Ellis' sleeves and drag the mechanic to his feet. Nick talked - a low tone, though still snide somehow. "Come on, Overalls, we have to go. I'm getting the feeling there might be more on the way, and I do not like our odds... that, and we're sure as hell going to miss that goddamn evac at this rate."

The moment Nick let go, Ellis staggered - so, like he were helping a drunk man down the street, the gambler pulled one of the mechanic's arms over his shoulders and held onto his forearm. Ellis slumped, weakly dangling his body as Nick scooped up the shotgun and tucked it under his armpit.

"'M fine... jus'.. gotta.. catch muh.. breath." the hick protested, tone utterly unconvincing, shaking his head and seizing up a little like he might vomit.

Nick warned: "If you get sick, I will drop you."
But nothing came of it, just a little gasp and grunt, and Nick forced the mechanic into movement - though not before grabbing the flashlight he'd nearly left on the shelf, their footsteps out of sync and staggered. "Catch your breath on the move, Overalls, it's your fault we're here at all."

They stumbled suddenly when Ellis halted, digging in his heels, and Nick snapped, "C'mon, I'm not carrying you."

"M-muh hat! I ain't l-" Two coughs, slow, although softer than they'd been - and then he finished it, firmly. "I ain't leavin' it!"

Giving a frustrated noise, Nick tossed the kid right to the ground, ignoring his pained groan as he landed in a little mess on the floor, barely catching himself in time to avoid hitting his head. The mechanic glanced at him in a wounded fashion, only to see Nick stride over toward where Ellis had been choking.

He flickered the flashlight around to hunt out the cap. It gave him a chance to get a better look at the creature that had nearly strangled Ellis to death. It was human - mostly, limbs strangely long and its countenance bloated by what seemed like fleshy tumors.

The shotgun blast had split its head mostly apart, but one glassy yellow eye glinted in the flashlight's beam and seemed to glare at him. The tendril hung from the ruined maw where a mouth used to be, already going leathery and wrinkled after death.

Nick's anger may have been fueled by a desire to distract himself when he growled: "Just my luck, I get stuck with the single biggest idiot in Georgia. Because this shit wasn't bad enough to begin with."

He heard a faint cough, one that wheedled into a laugh, and then there was a very polite "Thank yuh." that didn't take Nick seriously in the slightest.
Nick noticed Ellis was oddly quiet as they stepped back out onto the street, the latter still leaning a good amount on the conman. His breathing was fast recovering, even the short break of Nick having to hunt his cap down doing the kid good... but Nick resigned to hold him up a little longer, gripping Ellis' shirt just at his waist while Ellis had him by the shoulder.

The Northerner gave in to an inexplicable urge to start up a conversation - *Oh God, he's contagious...* - as they crossed the intersection again, stepping lightly over the sparking streetlight wires.

"Lucky you didn't break a rib or two, Overalls. I'd have had to shoot'cha."

Maybe it was just the slight discomfort over their proximity that made him want to talk. He was honestly tempted to let Ellis hobble along on his own, but he'd already condemned himself to keeping the kid with him - and it was maybe, *possibly*, his fault for not getting to the guy sooner.

Not that he'd say that outright.

*In for a penny, in for a stupid Georgia redneck. Or something like that.*

Nick smirked a bit, just slightly, glancing up at the sight of movement down the road. He wrangled the shotgun into his grip without releasing Ellis, yanking it up a bit to get it braced on the crook of his shoulder, and gunning down a stray zombie who came snarling at them across the broken street.

The kickback of the shot sent little pangs through Nick's wounded neck, the scratches throbbing angrily at him. He ignored it, shuffling his hand down the barrel and bracing the gunstock against his hip to pump back the forend and keep the gun at the ready - snapping a short, grumbled curse when it came up empty again.

"That's horses, Nick.. I ain't a horse... 'n it's their legs, anyway." Ellis clumsily dug out a few shotgun shells from his overalls' pocket, offering them up to the conman. "Runnin' low..." When Nick gave only a faint eye-roll in response, releasing Ellis' shirt in favor of loading the shotgun up as they walked, the mechanic prodded him further.

"Yuh heard me say thanks earlier, right?"

Nick snorted, clicking in the last shell and stowing the others in his slacks pocket with a careful lick of his lips. "Yeah, which thing-I-saved-your-stupid-ass-from was that for, anyway? The tongue zombie or the horde of zombies?" Lifting his head, Nick squinted, halting a moment and feeling Ellis stop with him.

The mechanic lifted up his hand, pulling his cap lower on his head, the grungy bill shadowing the top of his face. "Both, man, fer real... I -"

Nick instantly waved him to silence, shrugging the younger man's arm off his shoulders. Ellis cooperated, and was only a little unsteady as he got his footing and stood on his own. Nick tipped a glance at him, slightly irritated, even though he'd been the one to start them talking again. "Thank me by shutting up... how far is the hotel?"

Ellis winced a bit as he patted at his neck and chest in self-sympathy, looking up toward the tops of the buildings around them, squinting past the morbid decorations of cars protruding from their
windows.

"Aaaahhh..."

The sound of blank thought was just about to earn Ellis a good punch. Nick was really not interested in getting lost - but the mechanic saved himself with a brightening of his expression and this lengthy pawing gesture of his hand off in the distance. "Couple'uv roads down from this shop here. Iffin we cut through them alleys we could get there real quick - whatcha think?"

Nick hesitated an instant, eyeing the shadowed spaces between the buildings in the direction Ellis pointed. They twisted off, shrouded by the roofs above.. he could pick out the vague shapes of trash cans, bins, piles of boxes...

Something flashed yellow, just a blink, like the momentary gaze of a bright eye, and Nick had Ellis by the elbow, tossing him a bit down the road. "Like hell. Muggers, sure. Murderers, sure. Zombies? Fuck no. That is one goddamn thing I am not going into a dark alleyway with."

The kid laughed, quiet under his breath. Nick let it slip, mostly because the noise was honest humor rather than mocking. Considering the alley set him far more on edge than he'd let on, the fact that Ellis took it as a joke was fine with him.

Picking up the pace and forcing Ellis to match him, the two men darted down the road, pausing only to shoot down stray zombies and reload the shotgun. The conman kept seeing it - flashes of yellow in the alleys they passed, little blinks. He kept quiet about it rather than alerting Ellis, just keeping an eye out... but within the next three alleys it stopped happening.

Nick could tell they were, in fact, getting tighter and tighter on ammo by the way Ellis was slower and slower to fish them out of his pocket.

They wheeled around a street corner at Ellis' command, forced to stop and press up against the wall when they quite nearly ran straight into a group of zombies. Nick noticed, with some discomfort, how they'd just been sitting there. They were leaned up against the nearby building and hunched over their knees, heads in their hands. For an instant he thought they were alive...

That moment of hesitance was more than enough for them to notice the two, and Ellis dragged him back just a step with a grip on his bicep so they didn't get too close before Nick got the gun up and aimed. The closeness let Nick's shotgun blasts go straight into their faces, and they exploded into so many chunks. The last thing he saw of their expressions was that rage.

Neither men were quick to start walking again after the zombies were downed, but neither spoke up either. Both of them were thinking about the same thing; how very lost and … human those zombies had seemed for a moment there.

The hick broke the spell with his usual chatty tone, though he seemed to have dropped telling his stories since that tongue zombie got him.

"Ey Nick, these here houses might have a gun or two in 'em. 'Specialy what with this bein' a zombie apocalypse 'n all that, ain't like anyone'd miss 'em - we could just take a look -" 

Just this once, the mechanic shut up on his own, perking up slightly as Nick did the same. They both heard it at the same time, interrupting the hick's thought. A heavy takka takka takka of gunfire sparked into life down the road, so close Nick reflexively half-ducked like it might be aimed at them.

"So he ain't dead!" Ellis hooted, missing Nick's reaction entirely and swiping his cap off to grin.
Sure enough, there were a small number of zombies peeling out from houses and alleys to sprint toward a side road in pursuit of the noise. "C'mon, Nick! I thought we lost 'em, but they're even closer now!"

Before the conman even got his mouth open to respond, the shotgun was suddenly gone from his hands and Ellis was off, running full-speed after the trickled flow of hunting zombies. Nick twitched his empty fingers just an instant, then bolted after him with a frustrated, "Don't wait or anything!"

The gambler grumbled sarcastically to himself as they skidded around a street corner, regretting leaving his pipe behind as he heard the gunfire stop - again. "And I thought nearly dying would've mellowed you out a little.. what are you, five? I wasn't prepared for goddamn babysitting."

Ellis didn't react.

Just a few blocks down the next road, the zombies had gathered around the front of a small bar. The windows were already broken in, but there seemed to have been a makeshift blockade made of furniture to seal them up. The door was mostly broken, ripped apart like Nick had seen happen before his very eyes, but something big had been shoved against that, too.

The zombies were beating at the blocking furniture, snarling wildly and cutting their own hands on the shattering wood. They weren't getting much done, but they'd get through eventually… if only by virtue of their persistence. Ellis was quick to start bolting toward them, intent on rushing the group thoughtlessly.

Nick snatched the back of Ellis' shirt, yanking him to a slightly yelped stop like a dog reaching the end of its leash. His collar slammed into the front of his bruised neck, the yelp turning pained. The mechanic instantly whipped his head around, shaking off the gambler's grip but looking at him expectantly.

And, honestly, not really as annoyed as Nick expected. It would apparently take much more effort to piss him off.

"I try not to run straight at buildings with armed people in them. Yeah?" Nick held out his hand, palm up, curling fingers in demand of the shotgun. The mechanic had a little bit of a dubious quirk to his brows, but he handed it over, glancing back at the shuttered bar.

"What for? They wouldn't shoot us - we ain't zombies."

Nick smirked a little, moving across the road to get on the same side as the bar. He dropped down to a kneeling position, though he didn't actually let his knee touch the ground, and set the shotgun tight to his shoulder. Gripping it tight and putting his slightly stubbled cheek as close as he could without touching it, the conman took careful aim at the zombies that still hadn't taken notice of them.

Ellis tagged along with him, obediently taking his flank and managing to actually be quiet.

Rewarding him for it, Nick gave an actually robust response out of the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, because people never betray each other during disasters... better safe than sorry, Overalls. Honestly, I'd probably crack someone over the head if they walked past with a gun I could use."

Nick didn't really notice the half-frown Ellis gave him after that. The lack of a response, sure, but he ignored that.

One blasting shot drew the zombies' attention, and the gambler managed to hit one of them even
from that far away, stumbling it to the side and drawing a snarl from the whole group. With that, they wheeled around, charging right down the sidewalk toward the two.

Nick aimed low, blowing their legs out from under them. His shots grew more accurate as they got closer, and the last one fell dead maybe a yard or two ahead. The conman got up with a slight grunt, turning his head to glance at Ellis, expecting the kid to compliment his shooting or otherwise make a comment.

Nope. He was standing there, hands in the pockets of his tied up overalls, jaw set a bit in this odd, almost upset kind of thought. Oh, Christ. Leave it to the good little Georgian boy to get his chaps in a twist over a stupid comment.

"I wasn't serious, assclown." Well, that wasn't entirely true, but Nick didn't see a real reason to say otherwise. Let alone mention the beat of time where he mulled over leaving the kid to die. "Take a joke."

Yeah. Let's leave that out.

Half-sighing, Nick just shook his head, turning back and stepping up close to the building beside them. "Just follow close, Overalls, if that isn't too hard. I'll handle it." He turned his back against the house's face, strafing carefully along the wall up toward the bar.

"Don't shoot nobody." was Ellis' response. It sounded, for a moment, like honest disdain - but just as Nick was about to turn round and give him a sound 'I can think of someone I'd like to shoot' as a response, he noted the goofy grin the mechanic had adopted.

Rolling his eyes dryly and growling quietly under his breath, the conman just turned back around. He dropped into a half-crouch as they got to the bar, dodging underneath the window and halting right beside the door, feeling Ellis settle beside him.

Nick used the butt of his shotgun to bang on the mostly broken door, three times, turning his head and calling out sharply, "Someone in there? We cleared the zombies out here for ya."

There was a few beats of silence, Nick straining carefully to listen - and when a response came, it was so close he flinched a bit. Just on the other side of the blockage, it sounded like. "They're sick, not zombies."

A woman, something that drew up one of the conman's brows. He felt Ellis start to stand up, mouth popping open to talk, and Nick jammed his elbow hard into his side, knocking the wind out of him and flopping him back into the wall.

'EY!' the mechanic mouthed, coughing with honest pain flickering over his face as he grabbed at his already-bruised ribs. Nick gave him a distinct 'I told you to shut up' look, his expression going blank when the woman spoke up again.

"Who's coughing? I heard that - if you're sick there is no way in hell I'm opening up. There are enough of you running around outside."

Nick growled slightly, narrowing his eyes at Ellis even though it had technically been his fault. At any other time, he'd have tried some charm, but he wasn't deluded enough to think he was in any shape to do so. I probably look awful at this point.

"He's not sick, he's stupid. Even if he did turn, I'd be the first to shoot him. So don't worry about it." Ellis was too busy still nursing his ribs to really react that time, nor to notice the pinch to Nick's expression as he made sure his suit collar was covering his neck wound. No sense in giving
anybody a reason to think he was ill, too.

The woman sounded immensely unamused, voice lowered and a little muffled through the door. "Oh, great, a possible infected and a jerk... today's just going great."

Then Nick heard a new voice, male that time and more muffled, a booming tone with a slightly tired gruff to it. "Girl, you quit that. The world ain't gone to such shit yet that we'll turn sour to our own. A'sides, with the street clear, we gotta get movin'."

The conman and mechanic shared a small glance, Nick mostly irritated and Ellis rather entertained. "Oh fine, fine, Coach." the girl conceded quietly, more respectfully than her word choice let on. "Help me get the shelves away from the door, then..."

Nick used his elbow against the wall to push up to stand, stepping over to stand in front of the doorway and glancing over at Ellis. The hick hopped up to join him, nudging him insistently with an elbow. "Heh... really needed yer people-skills, didn't we? Saved the day, there, Nick."

Oh, good. Sarcasm. From Ellis. Because that's what I need right now.

Nick snapped a short glare sideways, stepping away from the nudge. "Shut it, dumbshit. Notice how they're opening up?"

Ellis' goofy grin in response suggested he had half a mind to respond, but the sudden shifting of whatever was blocking the door distracted both of them. It rocked and shuddered, screeching a bit as it pulled away from the door. They could hear the faint grunts of the two inside, and within a few seconds it was clear.

The door swung open, revealing the panting face of a maybe-thirty woman, healthy chocolate skin dusted with sweat. Her jeans and pink shirt were fairly stained with what was becoming an expected mix of blood and dirt, though a good bit cleaner than Ellis' wear. She passed a dubious look over Nick, and he had the sense she was trying to read him.

She turned brown eyes to Ellis after an instant and flashed a smile on him. "Sweetie, you usually hang with shady characters like this?"

Ellis shuffled his feet together and offered that stupid grin of his, lifting his hand to grip onto the bill of his cap and tip it down in this gentlemanly motion. "He ain't so bad.. he's saved muh life once -"

Nick sighed quickly, tossing the shotgun to Ellis and forcing the hick to break his stance in order to fumble and catch it. "First of all it was twice, second of all, let's all start a general leaving movement... we've wasted enough time and I'm not real pleased with how today's gone so far."

Leaning out from behind the woman came the man purportedly named 'Coach,' his bulky shoulders crunched up as he got a backpack strapped onto them, the muzzle of a gun poking out from behind his hip. He drew his heavily stubbled chin up a bit, nodding toward the two men.

"Boy, you keep yo' suit on. Ain't like you're the only one hankering t'get outta here." There was a little taint of disdain in his breathless statement, and it was very shortly responded to with a snide quip, the conman's voice quirked with an unuttered laugh.

"Sooner we get started the better, it'll take a while to squeeze you through the doorway..."

Both Ellis and the woman shifted with clear intent to try and stop what was obviously sparking to
start a fight, but a sound from behind them made all four of them freeze up in utter silence - even Ellis, and somewhere Nick savoured the concept.

It was a growl. Sharp, yet quiet. Quiet, yet…

Hungry.
Chapter 10

That feral, malicious growl changed the whole flow of the moment. Everyone froze, Nick and Ellis instantly looking up toward the other two. Neither of them wanted to look back. Nick started to step forward, had just started to move, when the woman frozen in the doorway hissed quickly, "Hold- just hold on!"

Both men's eyes widened, though for slightly different reasons, blurring out in hissed whispers at the same time. Nick took advantage of the instant to steal the shotgun back from Ellis, yanking it away too quickly for the younger man to argue.

"Are you kidding me?! What sort of goddamn advice is that, 'hold on'-'"

"Whut is it?! It ain't a dog is it?! Oh mah gawd, they got the dogs - !"

It was Coach's time to shut them up, leaning in with a hard grip clasping onto the edge of the doorway and speaking with the softest voice his booming tone could manage. "Both o' you, shut up 'n calm the shit down..."

It wasn't quite soft enough - another growl echoed out, louder and longer, vibrating slickly through the air. Ellis couldn't take it, spinning around on the heels of his workboots and snapping his eyes up to try and find the source.

"Maaaannn..." the mechanic managed, tone awestruck. "That ain't right..." That decided it, and Nick spun, too, snapping the shotgun up to try and take aim... but stopped. It was too far away to hit with a shotgun.

Crouched just inside an alley on the other side of the street, curled down on all fours like a cat, sat a very attentive zombie. The torn and bloody hood that draped over its face let in just enough light to see a bared fence of wild fangs between peeled back lips.

Rochelle whispered a cautious command, silently drawing her pistol out of her back pocket and nervously stepping closer to the doorway. "Just come back, slowly... that thing jumps at you but we can kill it - if you shoot now, it'll just leap away.. we just have to time it."

Coach mimicked her, very slowly pulling out the submachine gun that was hanging from his back.

The conman slowly took a step back, shotgun still pointed up, uttering a faint "Ellis..." to catch the kid's attention and get him to do the same. Step by step, they backed up toward the door - only to have that crouching infected follow them, two steps for their one.

"Why ain't it.. pouncin'. whut's it waitin' for..." Ellis whispered, glancing from Nick to the zombie rapidly like he was just waiting for the gambler to shoot. There was severe focus on Nick's face, brows pinched.

"It's like it's..." the woman managed, lifting up the pistol and aiming out of the doorway, bracing the grip with her other hand. "...picking."

She'd barely gotten the words out when suddenly there was a scream, this high-pitched howl, and the thing was flying through the air, stretched out like a frog mid-jump. Wicked claws were poised to maul, fangs spread open...

Right at Nick. Without a doubt, straight at the conman, ravenously eager. His stomach lurched.
"MOVE!" Coach's voice was like an explosion, a barked command that was so fierce, Ellis didn't even think twice before obeying, leaping to the side with a half-shout and clamping his hands onto his cap. He landed on his side, rolling a bit on the concrete and curling slightly.

Only Nick didn't move - he stayed right there, locked against the wall, and three guns fired all at once. The snap of a pistol, the rapid rattling of a machine gun, and the single explosion of a shotgun.

When Ellis lifted his head, peeking out from under the bill of his cap, he watched Nick shove the now-dead zombie off himself. It'd landed on top of him, but flopped lifelessly like a dummy, the only damage it did make being fresh blood stained down the front of his blue dress shirt.

The conman peeled his jacket away slightly, surveying the damage with a small, inward sigh. Well, today is just wonderful. Lifting his head, Nick felt a surge of nausea he fought down. Just nerves, he was sure. He watched the two others finally step out of the bar completely, checking over their weapons just momentarily before they tucked them away.

Coach stepped to stand by Nick, looking the man over with obvious concern. There was something very solid about the man - weight puns aside. Judging almost, like the big man was standing there and sizing Nick up for something. There was age on that face, tension in the same places that there were laugh wrinkles. "He get you, boy?"

Nick wasn't a fan of being sized up.

He pawed his jacket back into place, reaching into a pocket and prying a cigarette free from the box inside. Nicotine would still his roiling guts, hopefully. "Dead before it landed." His lips, thin and going a little pale with dehydration, quirked in a snide smirk up at the older man, gesturing his pinky at him. "Consider us even for the zombies earlier, not that that'll last."

Turning on the heels of his dress shoes, the conman strode over to crouch by a ruined car. The crash had lit a good bit of the vehicle on fire, and there were still flames burning dully on the upholstery. Coach watched him light his cigarette on the thing with a slight "hmph," turning his head to see Rochelle offering a hand down to Ellis, bent in a bit.

What he didn't watch was Nick bending his head and covering his mouth with his wrist, eyes closed in a sick expression.


Ellis grinned a bit, sheepishly, taking her hand and hauling up to his feet in a clumsy little roll. He let go once he got up, raising his hands up to sweep off his cap again, holding it in front of his chest. "Oh yeah, miss. I'm alright, wasn't nothin' but a fall... All this -" He gestured to the bruises around his neck. "- happened a bit ago. Ran intuh this zombie with a big tongue... Anyway, I'm just fine, heh. I'm Ellis, real pleasure, 'n that over there's Nick. He really ain't that bad. Bet he's glad tuh meetcha, too."

She grinned back, settling her hands on her hips and leaning back slightly. She seemed half startled at his rapid-fire speech, and half tickled by the kind greeting. "Rochelle, and this is Coach." As if on cue, Coach walked up behind her, offering out a heavy hand to take Ellis into a handshake that the mechanic returned gladly. "We bumped into each other running from-"

"For fuck's sake, how about this." Nick spoke smoothly past the cigarette burning between his lips, striding back toward them... and past them, with the shotgun rested on his shoulder.
"You three can have your little hugs-and-kisses party while we walk. In case you don't know, there's an evacuation going on at a hotel near here and I really don't want to find out what happens if we miss it. I'm pissed enough Overall there made us detour to save your asses."

Coach crossed his arms over his chest, the sweat-stained fabric of his bi-colored shirt crinkling up with the motion. "You just hold on a minute, now. The conman stopped, though, turning back around and tapping his fingertip against the shotgun he held.

Rochelle interceded there, patting a hand onto Ellis' shoulder as she spoke, head shaking a bit and bangled earrings bobbing. "Look, ... Nick. We saw a few supplies in this bar. Just give us a few minutes and then we can go, alright?"

Ellis glanced just momentarily from Coach to Rochelle, then toward Nick, turning his hat slowly in his hands. He prompted, with an awful amount of plea in his tone, "Ain't gonna take long, Nick, 'n we're 'bout outta shots anyhow."

Nick gave the three a particularly scathing shrug of his shoulder after just a moment of eyeing them. "Five minutes, and then I'm going, you three or not." he said simply, with a sigh, pinching his cigarette between index and middle finger. The conman walked over to the wall of the bar, leaning his shoulder against it and crossing his legs, facing away from them.

A hand came down with a sturdy clap on Ellis' shoulder, and Coach nodded back to the bar.

"C'mon now, son." The big man retreated into the bar with little more than that, disappearing through the doorway.

Rochelle flashed the kid a smile, waving him on as she followed Coach. He scratched his scalp momentarily, shooting the smoking Nick a confused stare before giving in and tagging after the pink-shirted woman.

"Don't mind 'im none, I think he ain't much fer .. well, other people." he apologized, replacing his cap onto the top of his head and stepping around the pushed-back shelves. "But he's pretty nice otherwise."

The bar was a dingy little place, the smell of alcohol strong in the air. The tables had been pushed over and shoved against the windows, leaving most of the floor empty, and in the process of pushing the shelves against the door, bottles had tumbled from its innards and shattered all across the floor. Ellis' boots squeaked and crackled on liquid and glass.

"Awh, it's alright, Ellis." Rochelle stepped up to the bar, where a few guns and boxes of ammo were piled haphazardly. "None of us are really feeling our best. At least he's good with a gun." She picked up one of the boxes, turning it a little in her hand with a pinch to the edge of her mouth. Turning to Ellis, she offered it out.

"Aren't these right for the suit's shotgun?"

Ellis gave a goofy grin at that, taking the box and popping it open, pulling out a bullet and rolling it between his fingers in inspection. "Yeah - but it ain't his, it's mine... better get it back, too, though he ain't too shabby with it." He dumped the bullets into the billowing pocket of his tied-up overalls in a lackadaisical motion that made Rochelle stare, then break into laughter. The mechanic just grinned rather bashfully.

Coach suddenly straightened up from behind the bar, making both of them jump. They'd barely noticed him walk behind it and crouch down, though in retrospect missing the large man's passage
seemed unlikely. He was tucking something into the backpack he'd been shrugging on earlier, and when Ellis gave him a curious look, he noticed.

"Ain't nothin', son. Lotta places keep first aid kits lyin' 'round... just planning ahead. Got some other things in here. Prayin' we don't gotta use any of it, but I just grabbed it on the way outta my house."

The hick immediately brightened with interest. "Like a survival kit, yeah? Oh, man, I had onna those in muh truck, but... well.." His face fell slightly, tucking his cap back on and reaching to pick up the chrome shotgun lying on the bar. He fiddled with it, checking the ammo and aim. "I sorta crashed it... got crushed. I used tuh make kits like that with muh buddy Keith - he's the best, we run an autoshop and we got a band - uh, but we always ended up wastin' 'em 'cause all the stuff in 'em was cool, like gloves 'n bandaids 'n gauze 'n stuff, so -"

"Lordy, son... you talk like that all the time?" But the big man was smiling in a humoring motion, like he were listening to a child talking about his imaginary friend.

Rochelle smiled, too, almost laughing as she reached over the table to hold her hand out to Coach. Both of the two looked like they'd needed a laugh, and though Ellis felt his head bow a little in embarrassment under their obvious humor at his expense, he couldn't help enjoying the moment of normalcy.

Then, of course, he watched Coach unstrap and hand Rochelle the submachine gun that had been dangling from his bulky shoulder, and normalcy seemed a strange and tiny concept.

"Maybe the suit out there will like having this better..." she explained belatedly, though Coach hadn't argued or even really given a look. He'd understood what she'd been asking for and just did it. "Anyway, Ellis wanted his weapon back, and we have four guns between us."

Coach sighed a bit, rubbing his palm over his mouth and then the curve of his bald head. "Yeah, a'ight. Boy, toss me that.." He held the hand up, and Ellis tossed the gun over the bar, tipping his cap obligingly.

"C'mon, Nick'll be gettin' mad here in a few. Got whut we need, right?" The kid flashed both of them a smile, taking the machine gun from Rochelle's hand and stepping back toward the door, pushing his free hand into the empty pocket of his overalls.

"Sho, sho, son, we're comin'..." Coach assured him, starting around the bar to go after him, picking up the ammo left on the counter with Rochelle stepping up to help collect everything.

Ellis didn't wait, ducking out of the bar and quickly looking down the road. With a half-sigh of relief, he saw Nick was still there, a stream of cigarette smoke rising in a tiny column from him. "'Ey, Nick, trade ya..."

The conman barely turned his head, just enough for one dark green eye to narrow at the Ellis. Upon seeing the submachine gun the mechanic was lifting up in the air, there was a considerable rise in interest, Nick turning and stepping away from the wall.

"I thought I recognized that gunfire... do I even wanna know where they found a machine gun?" Then he smirked, faintly, correcting himself sarcastically; "Oh, right. We're in the South."

Ellis grinned at him, stopping a few steps from him and offering both the machine gun and an empty hand out. "I can tell'em you don't want it..."

Those green eyes narrowed a bit at him, Nick snatching the machine up and shoving Ellis'
shotgun at him in the same instant. As Coach and Rochelle walked out of the bar, he urged them on very simply, rolling his cigarette to the corner of his mouth and turning away to start walking down the road at a striding pace.

"Let's go."
'ey, Ro?"

Two blocks. Two GODDAMN blocks. We have not gotten two GODDAMN blocks from the bar, and he's already started.

It was all the conman could do not to claw his own ears off when Rochelle turned her head and humored him, sounding entirely too interested for her own good. While it would have been tremendously satisfying, he decided the inconvenience wasn't worth the dramatic effect.

*She'll learn. Sooner than later.*

"Yeah, sweetie?"

Nick sighed audibly past the cigarette in his lips, smoke roiling up along the features of his face. He got the joy of interrupting them for a few moments when a group of zombies came barreling around a corner. He shot from the hip, hands clamped tight on the gun to keep it steady with the heavy vibrations that shot up his arms from it, mowing them down easily with how they'd clumped together.

"That's more like it... I am definitely keeping this." the gambler said aloud, then raised his voice a bit more. "Bit sweaty, though - or maybe it's not sweat. You didn't try and eat this, did you, Coach?" Nick smirked and rolled the gun in his hands before continuing on unfazed.

"Boy, you better watch yo'self," Coach called after him, wiping his wrist over his forehead and giving a weary sigh that suggested he wasn't pleased at all with Nick's behaviour. "I should'a just kept that shit."

Rochelle bit her lip carefully to avoid cracking even the slightest smile, shaking her head just once and turning brown eyes back to the hick walking beside her. "Those two are never gonna get along, I can tell already... You were saying, Ellis?"

The hick rubbed his head through his hat, dirtied fingers gentle on the fabric. "... well uh, I was just wonderin'. Earlier, you said they was sick, not zombies. I mean, yeah, I heard that too, s'just that seems like a right weird thing tuh say all'uv'a sudden unless - no offense, yuh know.. - but unless you know somethin' about it."

Rochelle half-turned, blinking a bit at him in something a lot like confusion. She broke into laughter again and reached out to smack his shoulder. "Honey, you're quick! You hear that, Coach?"

"Yeah, I heard."

The short, clearly unfocused response from the big man earned him a small brow-raise from Rochelle. He was watching Nick and his practically swaggering stride, some mix of the machine gun and the cigarette pinned between his lips putting the gambler in an odd mood. He looked kind of criminal.

"Anyway, sweetie... I know.. some things. As much as we can, I guess. Probably the only reason Coach has stuck around me so far."

That knocked the older man out of it, his head twisting around to give her a grin. "Awh now, baby
girl, don't say that shit. I'm the one with the bum knee... you should be safe already."

She grinned back, fiddling with one of her bangled earrings just a little and tipping her head toward Ellis again. "I came to report on the infection from Ohio... Eyewitness 10 News, y'know them?"

The hick nodded emphatically, just about to open his mouth and respond when Rochelle glanced forward and kept going. "My cameraman got sick... from there it all went to shit, but I actually got some insight from CEDA before then."

Ellis saw the little twitches at the corners of her mouth, even as she flashed him a smile, and he realized she was more upset than she let on. He hitched his overalls up with his thumb in hesitant thought, looked up to make sure they were still on the right track toward the Vannah, then prompted her again.

"Whut kinda stuff? I heard a bit on the radio afore muh truck crashed, but it sounded kinda dodgy. Tapin' up windows..? That really work? I mean my buddy Keith 'n I had plans fer zombie apocalypses, 'n there wasn't no tape involved in that, lemme tell ya..."

Rochelle laughed gently, shaking her head and turning her eyes out toward the road, watching with a little bit of a squint as Nick and Coach shot down a few zombies on the way toward them. The two men were rather silent. All Ellis could do was listen to her, lips drawn in faintly.

"Maybe at the start, when they thought it was just some airborne sneeze-and-cough illness... the Green Flu. But it turned bad somewhere along the way, really bad... It made people deathly sick, sweetie. Fever, throwing up, losing their mind.. like their bodies were just falling apart. But they don't die."

Ellis gulped, and Rochelle may as well have been telling a ghost story for how raptly his head was bent, watching her face. She looked stoic, if a little sad. "They look like they will, but then they just go rabid... like animals. They aren't zombies; the dead don't rise, they don't eat brains or something... but.. I dunno, Something snaps, and they're just gone. Whoever they were, before, they -"

"Holy shit, what the FUCK are you talking about?!

Everyone jumped - even Coach. Nick had spun around on his heel, halting the lot of them, and the words were infused with a cold rage. Maybe the most frightening part of the whole thing was how composed his expression looked in the seconds afterward.

Coach was the first to try and talk, rolling his shoulders a little. "Boy, you-"

Nick didn't even interrupt him... he just smoothed over him, so cool and even it was like the big man hadn't even been talking.

"Nobody is interested in hearing that bullshit right now, unless you like thinking about how the things we've been killing were human once. The hotel is just around this corner and if I hear one word from any of you before we're on an evacuation truck or.. helicopter or whatever they're planning, I will smear zombie all over all of you and tell them you're all sick. 'Kay?"

Green eyes roved over the three of them, testingly... expectantly. His cigarette had dropped to the sidewalk in his rant, and smoke rose faintly up from it in dying, sputtering curls. He didn't even bother to stamp it out - what good was that?

Ellis started, finally creaking out of his startled posture, "... Nick, whut -"

"Zombie blood. Your face. Shut up." Nick elucidated very shortly, jabbing a finger at the Georgian.
The conman turned back after that, silently continuing on toward the upcoming streetcorner, replacing that finger onto the trigger of his gun to watch for infected. Coach glanced back at Ellis and Rochelle, just for a moment, and then very subtly nodded them to keep going.

Ellis bit his lower lip tightly, feeling Rochelle hook her arm in his and pull him into motion. He glanced at her under the bill of his cap, giving a slightly awkward shrug of his shoulder. His discomfort wasn't so much with her closeness as it was Nick's behaviour.

"Ellis…" she whispered sideways to him, voice a little strained with confusion. "... what's up with him?"

The kid shook his head once, using the butt of his shotgun to push his cap up a little. "I ain't real sure, ma'am... I mean -" Ellis cleared his throat, glancing down for a good beat of time, clearly uncertain of whether to speak or not. "... well, I dunno."

She didn't let it go, squeezing his muscled bicep a little and tilting her head. "What?"

Ellis still hesitated, jaw twitching and easing like he were actually chewing on the words before he spoke them, glancing up toward her and whispering back even quieter, "He got a zombie scratch earlier, on his neck... maybe he's scared."

A pinch of surprise touched Rochelle's face, but then faded. "Well… Everything I know says it's airborne. Even if he did get scratched, I don't think it works like that." There was a little too much emphasis on 'think,' and Ellis seemed about to protest when she clarified comfortingly, "If we were going to get sick, I think we would have already. I got this a while ago, see?"

Rochelle offered her wrist out, showing Ellis a thin set of gouges where a zombie had grabbed for her. It had already clotted over, and definitely looked older than the wound on Nick's neck. He peered at it, feeling a strong sense of relief.

"Oh… good." Ellis' face swapped between a few different expressions; he hadn't really considered the idea of them getting sick before. "Are we immune or somethin'?"

That left Rochelle at a loss. She shook her head, scratching at her earlobe. "I'm … not sure. From what I got, CEDA was still trying to figure everything out." When that didn't seem to comfort Ellis, she smiled and met his gaze strongly. "I just know we're not sick, okay?"

It worked, and he grinned a bit at her, bashfully. "I wasn't worried or nothin'. We're too badass tuh get sick."

They both looked up when Coach broke in, the big man sounding tense. "Got other worries. Just 'cause we're healthy don't mean we're outta the woods." He shook his head at their obvious attention behind him, not continuing, and it left the three in an awkward silence. Nick either didn't hear them or just ignored them.

The gambler had just reached that street corner, spun to the side with his gun lifted up to catch any zombies unawares... and then he froze up.

Of course, there were zombies around the street corner, and Nick's hesitance forced the other three to have to bolt up and quickly gun down the couple infected who'd been quite ready to kill him.

"Jesus, Nick!" Ellis chided as he tossed his gun back onto his shoulder, stepping up to the conman with a slightly meek look before he tried to give a grin, it coming off as goofily stupid as it always did. Nick didn't even look. "Whatcha tryin' tuh do, feed 'em? Y'know-"
"Ellis." It was Coach, but Ellis ignored the interruption for once, lifting up a hand to wave a bit in the air toward Nick's face. Coach and Rochelle had stepped past him, and out of the corner of his eye he saw them stop and stand there, just like Nick.

"- they ain't really the types tuh give a breather -"

"Ellis." This time Rochelle - but Ellis couldn't get his eyes to move, peering at the gambler's stoic, faintly stubbled face, paling lips pinched tight like they still had a cigarette to trap between them. Ellis was waiting for some snide comment, some sarcastic jab - anything to distract him.

But Nick said nothing.

He could just tell. Whatever it was everyone was staring at, he didn't want to see.

Yet…

He'd just been about to force himself to turn when Nick's hand suddenly reached up and grabbed the top of his shirt, yanking him like a dog by its collar, twisting him around. The gesture forced Ellis to face the Vannah Hotel looming up in all its whitewashed, window-pocked glory, alongside the cityscape just before them.

"There's no one here." the gambler uttered flatly.

The parking lot was empty - 'empty' having gained a new meaning for them, anyway. Just a few scattered, bloodied parked cars and zombies, wandering around - sitting and leaning against the cars and the walls of the hotel. Windows were broken in on all levels, the doors hanging off their hinges - and maybe worst of all, flames licked out of every exit and entrance.

At least half of the place was on fire, and it looked (just by eyeing the windows implanted in the walls every few feet) to be spreading fast. They could almost feel the heat from here.

"But..." Ellis started, a little chirp, squashed like a bug by Coach's booming gruff.

"Fuhget it, son. Hate to agree, but he's right." All Ellis could do was watch with slight shock as the big man bent his head a little, one hand coming off his shotgun to cross himself in silence.

Ellis then turned to Rochelle, nearly strangling himself as he'd forgotten Nick, expression turning severe as he stared down the hotel, still had him by the collar. Twisting out of the gambler's grip and looking hopefully to the woman, Ellis prompted again, "But.."

She smiled just faintly at him, a smile that was so hollow it barely avoided being a grimace, and reached out to touch his shoulder. "Honey... we'll be fine. I'm sure they're still hangin' around somewhere. We just missed 'em, okay?"

The younger man pulled his cap off, turning it in his hands slowly. Coach sighed, glancing at his watch and then clapping his hand down on Ellis' shoulder again, shaking him just enough to get his attention. "C'mon, you three. We ain't got long till it starts gettin' dark, an' none of us wanna be out here when that happens."

Ellis and Rochelle looked up at him, but Nick turned away, bending forward slightly to pull his jacket off, guarded green eyes inspecting the blood drying on his dress shirt while his mind visibly worked on overdrive. The wheels in his head turned so fast there might as well have been steam coming out of his ears.

"Whut should we do, guys?" Ellis managed after a few beats, lifting his cap up to screw it down on
his head and suddenly breaking into a grin that got him stares from both Coach and Rochelle. "We gonna set up camp?"

Neither could really believe his enthusiasm. It took them an instant to adjust, Rochelle quicker than Coach. She gestured around them at the street, responding, her voice starting slow and then picking up a little speed as she got comfortable with the concept. "There are houses all around us... I don't think anyone would really care if we borrowed one. Coach has a few flashlights but.. well... call me coward but I don't wanna be out in the dark."

The big man nodded, wiping his palm over his mouth again and then turning his head to glance at the yet-silent Nick, staring just a moment before speaking up. "Nick. You stayin' with us or goin' yo' own way?"

There was a moment of silence. A long, heavy moment of silence, and Rochelle's hand on his shoulder was the only thing that kept Ellis from speaking up and pleading with the conman not to go off on his own. It was too dangerous... and Nick was cool. Angry and snide.. but cool.

And, Ellis was almost sure, more scared than he let on.

That dark-haired head turned, and with a momentary glance-over by mistrustful green eyes, the conman acquiesced quietly.

"Yeah, sure. Why the fuck not."
Chapter 12

Nick sighed heavily as he stepped over a crack in the road, adjusting the suit jacket slung over his shoulder. After realizing the Vannah hotel was abandoned, suddenly everything seemed a little worse. He was sticky and sweaty; nausea kept clawing at his gut; there was a heavy blanket of burning rubber and rotting flesh in the air; his dress shirt was clinging to his chest like sandpaper because of the crusting blood that painted its front; his neck was aching like an overextended muscle…

Oh, and we're all going to die.

Coach, Rochelle, and Ellis were ahead of him a few paces, trying to hunt down a building both not on fire and close to the hotel to set up inside for the night. The three were clustered together, Rochelle between them like she was their charge, and Nick considered making a quip about feeling left out.

Fact was, he appreciated the isolation, particularly with how shit he was feeling. That, and he didn't have to do much shooting with them leading the way.

"Whut 'bout that one?" Ellis piped up, pointing just a block down the road at a squat little house plugged snugly into the city rows, brick and dark mortar. It seemed to have dodged the flames and damage a lot of the other buildings had taken, and the two tiny windows on either side of the door had survived unbroken - though the door itself was busted open.

Coach pointed out that very thing with a tone of faint humor, shrugging his backpack more onto his shoulder and taking advantage of the focus to stop for a moment. He shifted some weight onto his good leg, giving his bum knee a break. "Don't think we need a workin' door, son?"

The hick scratched his head just a little, digging fingertips under the edge of his cap, and thumbed over his shoulder toward Nick. "We seen 'em break through doors like nothin', won't matter either way... Y'all blocked up that bar door anyhow, figure we can do somethin' like that."

The big man nodded a bit in agreement, though slowly, patting up a hand on Rochelle's shoulder and leading the other two toward the building. "Let's get a look inside, then. Yo Nick," He turned his head a bit, eyeing the conman. "Mind watchin' the door?"

tch... Asshole.

Nick raised his gun to rest it against his shoulder, not even bothering with actually responding. He stepped up near the doorway as Ellis was carefully wrenching what remained of the door open. Whatever had busted it had done a number on the hinges, and the Georgian had to push and shove at the thing with his shoulder and a palm, gritting his teeth.

His biceps trembled just a little with the exertion, body curling to force more of his weight against it, and underneath the tight shirt he had on, his stomach clenched up. It sent taut lines across the fabric, tensing over the muscle it covered.

The gambler, before he could catch himself, found a particularly unwanted hum in the back of his head. Try as he might, Nick couldn't wrangle his gaze away from the show of force, nor shake his fascination with the younger man's frame.

Well, fuck.
Mercifully, the door shortly cracked with a loud noise, and Ellis stumbled right into the building along with it, landing with an audible clatter and yelp of surprise in a pile on the floor.

Snapping his eyes quickly out to the street, Nick set his jaw and huffed out a breath, folding his suit jacket over his gun-wielding forearm. "Nice going, Overalls." he called sarcastically over Coach and Rochelle breaking into laughter, the first words he'd spoken in a good while.

"... man, I busted somethin'!" the mechanic complained inside, voice muffled slightly. "Owwwhhh..."

The two others clambered in after him, Coach alert with his shotgun in hand, and Nick could hear Rochelle utter a sympathetic, "Are you okay?" and Ellis start up with "Yeeah.." before he focused his gaze down the road and tuned them out.

The conman raised his free hand to gently touch at the sore scratch on his neck, flinching as the touch brought little sparks of pain. He pulled the hand back, flexing his fingers testingly. He didn't even bother to check his clothing over, knowing full-well his suit was in bad shape.

*I'll steal whatever kind of tap we find in there and get it soaking... goddamnit, I can't believe I left all my clothes.*

Nick sighed, focusing his attention on that frustration for the time being. Raging inwardly at his ruined $3,000 suit was a lot more satisfying than thinking about his mental slip-up; the latter would just bring back bad memories and make him angrier than he already felt. He was running out of energy, fast. He just felt.. drained.

A flicker of laughter - from whom, he couldn't tell - inside drew his attention for a blink of time, before he just shook it off and grunted.

*Oh goody, they're bonding. Just what we need in the middle of the goddamn apocalypse.*

Those dark emerald eyes stood guarded under his brows, inspecting off in the distance. He could see little clouds of infected huddled against walls and wandering across the street, but they hadn't taken notice of the four. He just eyed them, expression flickering in and out of disgust as they'd bend over and vomit on the sidewalk, or claw at one another, or stumble to their knees and just... sit.

Without warning, Ellis' capped head popped around the doorway, grinning stupidly like he'd startled him and waving at the - expectedly - unfazed conman. "Nick, there ain't nothin' bad in here. Whoever lived here got out quick, 'n whatever broke the door ain't around no more. We gotta look at how we'll block up this door, but yuh wanna come in?"

Nick pushed off the wall, striding over to duck into the building as Ellis backed up to give him room. He'd committed to staying with the group, sure, but the sooner he could get some privacy, the better. *Today is fucking with me.*

It was a thin little house, the carpeted front room taken up mostly by a fat couch and coffee table. There had been a TV set up against the wall, but the boxy thing had been knocked over somehow and lay broken on the ground - fortunately glass side up, so it hadn't shattered, just cracked the back casing and tore its cord out of the wall.

There was a staircase on the far wall, leading up to a second floor, and just underneath it, an open door to a dark-looking tile kitchen. Rochelle was just stepping out of there, and she lifted a hand to wave at the two returning, Nick suddenly noticing the bangles she had on one arm.
He was pretty certain jewelry wasn't optimal zombie-fighting gear, but didn't comment. *Guess a suit isn't, either.* "Food?" he questioned, almost blandly, passing his tongue over dry lips and forcing a sigh.

"Mh-hmm. They must've just ... left." Her word choice was careful. "There's a bathroom upstairs, and it looks like the water's still runnin'. Thank God for city water." she informed them, lifting a hand to tiredly rub her forehead before flashing a strong smile. "Electricity's out, though. All the frenzy, and a lot of the power lines got knocked down, I think."

Nick gave a simple nod, stepping up to the coffee table and laying his gun down on top of it to join Coach's shotgun and Rochelle's pistol, already lying there. "Perfect. I'm sure we'll have just a grand time together. Who needs electricity when we have each other?"

Apparently his sarcasm was too light that time, because Ellis piped up with full enthusiasm, swinging his shotgun up onto his shoulder and hitching his overalls up his waist with a large grin. "Yeah! Man, it'll be like campin', 'cept with zombies 'n shit! I went campin' with muh buddy Keith once, down in Fort McAllister, 'n we didn't have nothin' and nothin' tuh do fer like a week 'cause all our stuff fell in this lake, so we were beggin' these other folks fer food'n shit - oh man, and then Keith -"

"Whatchyou on 'bout again, son?!"

Nick had never felt so glad to see the huge man as he did then. He actually uttered it, with a short, "Thank-you, Coach..." that it seemed nobody heard. Coach came down the stairs with a slightly staggered gait, the angle of descent sending discomfort through his old knee injury, backpack in one hand and banister in the other.

"Anything and everything.. but mostly Keith." Rochelle said rather sweetly, stepping around the couch so she could reach up and tip Ellis' capbill down over his face teasingly, flashing a smile to show she was joking.

The kid ended up embarrassed, lifting up his free hand (he hadn't relinquished his shotgun so quickly) and only barely raising the cap up to peek out from under it. He didn't quite blush, but there were hints of it beneath the shadows that masked his face.

Nick caught a glimpse of it, a little twitch narrowing his eyes and inspecting the tiny bit of heat gathering on the hick's face. He found himself musing on it, a little longer than he should've let himself. *If Ellis thinks he has a chance with her, I'll laugh.*

"I been dealin' with kids all my life, and you gotta be the biggest talker I've met, Ellis, shit..." Coach cracked, face breaking into a little grin as the big man used his grip on the banister to ease himself down to sit on the bottom of the staircase, grunting slightly as he settled.

*If anyone has a chance, it's me.*

"I got'uh lotta funny stories is all!" Ellis defended obliviously, pushing the cap back down to mask his eyes when Rochelle's smile turned into a grin, too... a little too large for Nick's comfort.

*... With Rochelle.*

The fact he had to clarify for himself was not comforting.

"He sounds sort of-"

"Overalls," Nick suddenly interrupted, flicking a hand to wave Rochelle off and then beckon the
mechanic as the older man slipped around to the other side of the coffee table. "Quit being an idiot and help me move this table against the door."

Rochelle looked a bit miffed at him, but just shook her head and walked over to lean against the banister next to Coach, arms crossed, sharing a very small look with him. Ellis, on the other hand, practically leapt on the chance to get out from under his embarrassment. He darted to the opposite side of the table and bent down to get a grip on a leg.

Nick mimicked him after he'd moved the weapons off it and onto the couch, and both were silent as they tilted it onto its side and carried it over to block the doorway. There was nothing really to be done about the small open space at the top of the doorway it couldn't quite reach. It was a thick enough table - thicker than a door anyway, and that would have to do.

"I'll move the TV, too... help keep it up." Ellis offered, moving to do so even before anyone had a chance to agree. He passed by Nick stepping over to it, and he whispered the tiniest of "Thank yuh"s as he did, drawing a quick, sharp little stare from the conman behind his back.

What- .. oh. He thinks I interrupted to save him, doesn't he? Oh, perfect.

Nick couldn't help but give him a little bit of a disdainful stare, watching the hick crouch down and get his hands on the TV to start pushing it over in front of the table. The gambler finally retreated with a little roll of his eyes. He needed to get some air, splash some cold water on his face.

"I'm grabbing the bathroom." he announced simply, walking over to the stairs to gesture Coach to let him pass. The big man was surprisingly unargumentative with him, tossing the backpack at him with a simple "Front pocket." before he moved to get half up, Nick catching it, nodding, and slipping past him.

As he went up the stairs, the light from the front of the house faded. He pulled Ellis' flashlight from his jacket pocket, flicking it on. The light was pale but white, sending a sudden and stark contrast scattering along the house that sucked the depth from everything.

The staircase took a sharp left turn, funneling into a small hallway. There were two doors, both open - bedroom on the left, bathroom on the right. Nick hesitated a moment, eyeing the bedroom through the doorway. He could see the dresser against the wall beside the tussled, unmade bed - light streaming in from a window sent a honey-gold halo that fuzzed them to silhouettes and blinded him to any details, but there were picture frames lined up there.

Something balked him from going in and looking. Maybe a little hint of squeamishness, or some kind of discomfort. It felt strange... he'd broken into a house before, actually. Several. Privacy wasn't an issue, but this was different. Creepy.

The homeowners were probably - definitely? - dead.

Shaking off the idea entirely, Nick pushed into the bathroom, relieved to see it was clean. There was even a shower, somebody's soap and shampoo left behind in bottles on a shelf inside. If Rochelle had been right about the water, they'd be able to clean up before they left in the morning.

The conman stepped up to the sink, tossing the backpack onto the floor by his foot and placing the flashlight on the countertop so it illuminated the room. Nick pulled his folded jacket off his arm and hung it up on the towel rack just by his shoulder, glancing just momentarily over it and noting dirt stains and suspicious blotches here and there, particularly along the sleeves.

Looking up at the mirror hanging above the sink, he was treated to a frontal view of just how badly
stained his shirt was. Red and odd tints of black soaked into the fabric like some morbid water balloon had broken on his chest.

_Ugh... this used to be a nice suit._

That, and how tired he was looking. But, he tried to glaze over that part.

Sighing with no small amount of disappointment, the gambler set to unbuttoning his dress shirt. Crusted blood came off on his fingertips from the buttons, making him curl his lips a little in dismay. As each button came undone and revealed more of his torso, he noticed the blood had soaked through and stained his chest an odd shade of blushed pink, dark hair a little matted.

Shaking his head and quickly steeling himself against the desire to shudder, the conman pulled the shirt off his arms, a slight chill brushing over the bare stretch of his back. Nick twisted the sink faucet toward the 'C' and let it spray a moment before pushing his shirt under the stream and carefully rubbing at the fabric, watching the water run red down into the drain as it worked at the top layers of the stain.

It was hard keeping focused on the work, even with his shirt's safety in the balance. The mindless scrubbing let his thoughts wander. Namely - wander toward the view he'd gotten of Ellis' muscles. It wasn't that he wanted to, but there the images were.

_Of course. World falls apart, and I get trapped with Georgia's finest hayseed._ Karma couldn't give him a buck-toothed yokel. It had to be sun-tanned muscle, lean torso, brawny shoulders -

Shaking his head furiously, he sighed. _Nick. Man. Get your shit together, goddamnit. You're just stressed - there's probably matches somewhere around here... get a good smoke in you and you'll feel better._

After a moment, he flicked off the faucet and grabbed the bar of soap sitting beside the sink. Scrubbing it into the stain till a soapy foam had collected over the whole of the mess, Nick rubbed it against itself for a moment and then pulled back, letting it sit and resting his palms against the edge of the sink.

He turned his chin a little, eyeing the scratch on his neck in the mirror. It was inflamed around the edges, an angry shade of red, and the scab that had started to form over the dual-lined clawmark was an ugly color. Nick closed his eyes, rolling his head forward with a slight sigh.

_Could at least TRY to look like a normal scratch... why do you have to look all fucking infected...?_

"Hey, suit..."

The voice came suddenly from the doorway, and with one guarded eye flashing open, Nick glanced at the mirror to inspect the reflection cast in the glass. He'd left the door open without really thinking.

Rochelle leaned in a bit, although it was apparent she hadn't been there very long - when her eyes set on his shirtless back and tensed up shoulders, she let out a startled "Whoops!" and took a step back.

It made him smirk, despite himself, and he turned his head to actually look over his shoulder at the door, leaning his weight a little bit to one side. Being covered in blood didn't put a dent in his ego. "Doesn't bother me, Ro'. I happen to be a very handsome bastard and you're welcome to enjoy it."

Plus, being around a woman made him feel a little better. Get his mind off things.
She did step back into the doorway after a second, giving him a distinctly unamused narrow of her eyes (even though her lips were twitching in and out of a distinctly amused lift) and raising a hand to set on her hip. "You're some kind of bastard, I'll say."

The woman waited just a beat to see his reaction, and when his smirk curled an extra snide centimeter or two, she continued with her hand raising to point at him. "I came up to see if you wanted a hand with that cut on your neck. It seemed kinda nasty, figured you might need some help."

That faded the smirk just a little, although he didn't necessarily scowl instead. The conman straightened up slightly, turning his shoulder and glancing himself over in the mirror. "I can handle myself. I've dealt with this shit before."

Rochelle flashed a simple roll of her eyes, noticing the lack of an explicit 'no', and stepped around him to pull Coach's backpack up onto the sink. "You're sketchy as shit, y'know that?"

Nick watched her sideways, not making any motion to move out of her way in the slightly enclosed space, nor respond. He watched her unzip the front pocket, digging through and pulling out a tiny bottle of antibiotic, a pack of gauze, and a small roll of tape, tightly tucked into the pack.

"I just meant claw-marks, doll. The ladies love me."

Rochelle took a half-step back, grabbing a hand-towel from the rack and folding it over her thumb. "Uh-huh. Could've fooled me, but I guess girls go for assholes." She stepped back and rested her hip against the sink counter, glancing up at him with this bemused look as she got the towel wet under the faucet, the momentary water flow disturbing some of his soaking shirt's suds.

Getting a better look at his neck wound, her lips twitched downward. "Bend down a little, honey." she ordered in a sympathetic tone as she reached up to daub a little at his scratch, so light and careful he barely felt it. It was, however, cold, and between the temperature and her attention, goosebumps snuck up his arms.

His smirk was definitely back now, bending down to settle his weight on his forearms, balanced on the edge of the counter. "I'm honey now?" he purred quietly, keeping his eyes focused at her and letting his lids sink just a little.

Rochelle jabbed the towel onto his sore wound so hard he cringed in on himself and hunched down, completely not expecting it and cursing a violent, "Fuck!" that was as much pain as it was surprise.

He squinted slightly at her in the instant afterward, rather irked to see a fairly large grin settled neatly on her features. He'd been joking! .. mostly. "What the fuck was that for!?"

She flashed him a wider grin and then moved to daub at the wound again, giving a little coo when he tried to dodge her. "Being a jerk. I'm trying to help, calm down and quit the ladykiller bullshit... I'll strangle you. If Coach doesn't first."

Nick scowled a bit, holding still after a moment and giving her a displeased glare... though something in the way she shook her head at him, bangled earrings swinging, made him crack another half-smirk.

"..fine, fine. Just don't... do that again. Crazy bitch..." Green eyes locked gazes with themselves as he glanced up at himself in the mirror, and spent just a moment focused on their reflection before turning to monitor Rochelle.
The jab had made it bleed, although in the end that would probably be more helpful than anything else, breaking the scab to let the antibiotics soak in quicker. She daubed and brushed at the two scratches, cleaning them up and soothing the agitation with the cold water, before tossing the towel to the countertop and picking up the antibiotic tube.

It was as she was gently laying a line of it along the two claw marks that she spoke up again, voice suddenly very soft as her free hand alighted onto his shoulder. "I was talking to Ellis, earlier. I'm sure all four of us have been exposed plenty... if you were going to get sick, it'd have already hap -"

Rochelle instantly regretted bringing it up, because the previously still conman suddenly straightened right up, forcing her to pull away and drawing a slight inhale from her. Nick didn't even look over, expression a mask of indifference, and he said coolly, "I can bandage it."

She barely had her mouth open to argue when he nearly pushed her out of the way, picking up the gauze and tape and turning toward the mirror, completely ignoring her while he leaned in to delicately lay the gauze strip over the wounds.

Rochelle shook her head just a little, downturnning her gaze and stepping around him. She wasn't stupid, she could tell she'd pushed it and couldn't turn it back. The woman lingered just a minute in the doorway like he might break and thank her, watching him tear off bits from the roll of tape with one hand and his teeth, but eventually gave up and disappeared down the hallway.

As Nick settled the bandage into place with a piece of tape to either side, staring at it for a moment before he bent in to turn on the faucet and scrub-and-rinse his shirt, he found himself glancing more than once at the door's reflection in the mirror.

He didn't want to think about the weird clammy sensation on his forehead, or the way his neck was throbbing. Or the nausea that was encroaching in random waves.

He definitely didn't want to think about that.
Chapter 13

Nick was still rearranging the soaked, black strands of his hair as he came downstairs, wearing nothing but the white slacks of his suit. He'd hung his shirt up to dry over the sink and left his jacket on the towel rack, shoes and socks set in a corner of the bathroom floor. Even though the shower had been cold, he felt rather crisp and clean, and the grin on his face earned him very focused looks from all three of the other survivors.

Not even the shivers and the goosebumps on his skin could shake his abruptly good mood. If anything, the cold shower had been clarifying. He even felt a little less feverish, and the shock had taken some of his nerves away.

"Bathroom's open." he announced unnecessarily, reaching the end of the staircase and lounging his elbow on the banister. Nick sent a fairly lecherous smile over toward Rochelle, perched on the arm of the couch. She just shook her head, eyes rolling, and turned around to call over toward Ellis, who'd gotten himself hunched down in front of one of the windows and was intently looking out over the road.

"Ellis, sweetie, you want the bathroom? I think you took your car shop with you when you left."

The hick twisted around, blinking like he'd been startled, and did a quick glance-over of himself. He seemed to just then notice the mess he was. A grin broke over his face, and he swiped his cap off to scratch at his sweat-mussed scalp. "Uh, yeah, guess I better."

With that he darted to the staircase, and as he stepped up to get past Nick, he landed a hand on the conman's shoulder. It was a familiar gesture, just a generally comforting pat with that calloused palm and fingertips... but against Nick's bare, post-shower sensitive skin, he couldn't fight the abrupt snap of his spine straight, something a lot like a grimace working into his features.

The rake of rough, completely oblivious fingers tingled.. sprouting this weighty block of heat that tensed up his shoulder and made him inhale a sharp breath, fingers curling into fists in a little snap.

Ellis noticed. Actually Ellis and Rochelle both did, with Coach only missing it because he'd turned his back to them from where he sat on the couch. The kid quickly recoiled and spun to face him on the steps, looking instantly chagrined.

"Oh shit, did I hurt yuh?!"

He must've thought he'd knocked the conman's wound... but correcting him and saying that it was quite the opposite wasn't high on Nick's list of reactions. He didn't really want to say 'yes,' but 'no' would've just created more questions.

Instead, the conman whipped his head around to glare venomously at the hick, choosing to not respond at all. Sinking his hands into the pockets of his slacks, Nick just retreated toward the kitchen, not seeing any other option in regards to getting out from under the group's attention.

"...awh man, I thought we was gettin' along..." he heard from Ellis behind him, sounding tremendously disappointed.

Nick stepped over to lean against the refrigerator, inspecting the quaint little setup of counters and cabinets with a harsh set to his jaw. Damnit... Shaking his head and feeling a loose strand of hair tickle at his forehead, the gambler turned to settle more of his bare back against the fridge, closing his eyes as the cool metal soaked into his skin, leeching that warm feeling out of him by force.
"Don't worry 'bout it none, son. Ain't yo' fault." Coach reassured him, drawing an inward grunt from Nick.

"...man, should I try 'n talk to 'im? I'm kinda the reason he got hurt at all..."

Nick tensed up slightly, ready to chase Ellis right back out, but Coach's voice redirected him with a weary tone, followed shortly by Rochelle's agreement. "Naw, let him be, son. Go wash up."

"Yeah, Ellis. It'll be fine."

After a beat, Nick could hear the kid's heavy workboots thudding up the staircase that seemed just above his head, and the conman closed his eyes and relaxed. Just a little.

Reaching down into his slacks' pocket, he pried up his pack of cigarettes, eyeing the sticks secreted inside. He was down to fifteen, and with the way things were going, he felt it wouldn't last him long. He wasn't even normally that heavy of a smoker... one somewhere during the day and maybe one at night, with exceptions of more or less depending on where he was.

Sure he was addicted, and he felt it even then, this little need ringing in the back of his head as he hesitated with the pack in hand. But it was a need that time, something he could actually tell he wouldn't be able to shrug off.

I feel like shit. Goddamnit, Nicolas, this is why you stick to women.

So he tugged out a cigarette and curled his lips around it, trapping it firmly and stepping away from the fridge. He dug through a few drawers, finding them mostly full of junk he didn't give a second glance to. One finally held a pack of matches stuffed in the back, and he stole it quickly, turning around to rest against the edge of the counter as he struck the match and bent in to light up.

His eyes closed as he sucked in a hard breath, drowning out his lungs for a moment with the charring nicotine before he exhaled through his nostrils.

A soft 'mm' of approval escaped him, and with the knowledge that Ellis was safely distanced, he dug through the cabinets to find a cup, filled it from the tap, then strode out into the front room.

He was just prying his cigarette from his lips to take a sip when Coach apparently smelled the smoke, giving an immediate protest and twisting his head to stare the conman down challengingly. "Boy, you take that shit outta here! Open a window 'n stick yo' head out or somethin'. You ain't smokin' up this place all night."

Nick didn't even bother getting irritated. He just shrugged a bare shoulder in dismissal, drinking a few swallows of water as he crossed the room to settle on the wall next to the door. He let his body lounge against the wall so the smoke from his breath trailed outside, and he could flick his ash through the open space with ease.

"You two think any about what we're going to do?" the conman asked casually, gaze firmly pointed out the space between the blockading table and the top of the door. He watched a pair of zombies fight in the street like drugged animals, stumbling and staggering against one another with none of the fierce speed he'd seen from them.

They were almost lazy - exhausted.

Rochelle, who'd ended up curled on the couch beside Coach and looked like she might settle into sleep against him, spoke up with an alert tone that went against her tired posture. "I've been thinking a little, yeah. Some of me wants to think if we stay close they'll send someone out to check
"Keep going." It wasn't an apology, really, but it was probably better than nothing.

Rochelle did pinch a brow just a little, slightly uncertain at the short nature of his command. Coach nudged the back of her head with his bicep in an urging motion, and she resigned to continuing.

"I did hear some things about the evac plans. From what I remember, there was talk of funneling into ports. I'm not sure what they mean to do there, and they weren't exactly reporter-friendly at the time, but... I think they're trying to get everyone out of the country. Trying to handle the zombies without us getting in the way, maybe."

The conman pried the cigarette from his lips and tapped the ash out the window, taking a swig of water. "So?"

Rochelle gave a small shrug, clasping her hands on her knees and rubbing at her jeans. "Maybe if we head to the coast, we can catch up to CEDA. It's better than sitting around here at least, right? Even if they're not there, we can steal a boat and sail down the shore until we find something. It'd at least get us away from the zombies."

Nick nipped his cig back between his lips and turned to fully face the doorway, leaning his head up to get a good look at the darkening sky. He could hear the water of Ellis' shower suddenly start running, and - after an initial yelp at the cold - muffled and strangled singing.

He half-sighed, scratching for a moment at the bare, crisply-haired expanse of his chest.

"It's a good plan, Nick." Coach finally spoke up, that gruff baritone, rubbing his free hand on the back of his bald head. "I'll check wit' Ellis to make sho', but I think there's a highway we can hook up to nearby. Leads to the coast outta Savannah."

"Yeah, it's a fine plan." Nick shot back with his cigarette rolled to the corner of his mouth, though his tone was even, his thoughts suddenly deliberate and sculpted compared to his dismissive near-silence previously. "That is, assuming they're even still waiting for us when we manage to get there. How far is that, huh? We can't walk that far and make any kind of time, not with zombies to fight along the way. And who's to say they'll happen to be watching the one piece of coast we stumble on to? You're betting on some low odds here, darling."

Rochelle narrowed her eyes slightly at the challenge, although as Nick returned her gaze firmly, he noticed she wasn't so much angry as confident. "My station sent me to Savannah because CEDA had a base here. Sure, it doesn't look like they're doing too well, but if there's any place they'll be keeping their eyes on, it'll be their base of operations. I'd say that's a pretty smart bet, actually."

They stared just an instant at each other after that, this silent tug-o-war with their gazes, the
showering Ellis suddenly belting out to the tune of "Iii fell in-to a burnin' ring of fiire.." before his voice muffled again... and then a smirk flashed over Nick's face, and he licked his lips around his cigarette, coolly leaning his head back toward the door to exhale through it. "Okay."

The woman didn't look completely sure of the word, glancing to a shrugging Coach before looking back with raised brows. "Okay?" she echoed.

So Nick repeated it. Slowly. Turning his head just enough to shoot a bland look at her from one half-lidded eye. "Ohh. Kuuh. Haay. Want me to spell it?" But he flickered into a grin and let his arm fold up onto the top edge of the table, massaging his free hand over the slope of his shoulder. "It makes sense. I was driving down here to hit the gambling cruise trail. That's the kind of port I'd want to be on if I were trying to get found; popular and busy."

"Gamblin', huh?" the big man piped up, leaning his elbow on the armrest and his head on his hand. "You do gamblin' then?"

Nick snorted in a humored tone, lifting up that hand to tap his index finger against his lips in a 'shh' motion. "Leave me outta you three and your little bonding parties... there's nothing you need to know about me to get us through this."

Coach relented, just shaking his head and closing his eyes.. but Rochelle wasn't so quick, pushing a little with her bare feet on the couch to straighten up in her curl and eye him across the room.

"Why are you so against talking to us? Ellis thinks you're pissed at him, but I think you just don't want to open up. Christ, Nick. Look around you. Maybe you can loosen up a little?"

Nick realized again how tired he was. His muscles groaned a little in protest as he straightened up, and, crossing his arms against his bare chest, the conman took a sip of water and then moved back across the room to the kitchen. Ellis' shower shut off as he set the glass in the sink, that muffled singing finally shutting up.

"I am pissed at him... and also, no, I don't want to open up. Funny, you seem to have all this figured out already. Guess we can stop talking now."

He could hear her frustrated sigh at his continuing evasion, but still, she didn't give up. "Listen, suit, Ellis is a sweet boy and I'm gonna start getting really irritated if you keep being such a bitch to him - and the rest of us. If you don't want to open up, fine, but quit being so hostile. We don't have to deal with you."

Nick laughed, a rather sharp and sudden noise that had very little humor in it. He snapped his cigarette from between his lips and held it between two fingers, striding back out to the front room and pausing behind the couch. "No, you don't." he agreed, tone flat, and continuing on to the stairs.

He took them at an unbothered pace, almost ignoring the gruff, "Boy, what'ch'you doin'?" from Coach.. but he ended up responding offhandedly.

"Taking the bedroom. You guys can have a sleep-over down here. There's even a linen closet in the kitchen for you."

He'd just hit the top stair when Ellis came out of the bathroom. The kid had his hat in his hands, dark hair mussed and wild with the toweling he'd given it. He'd completely redressed, unlike Nick, but his skin was spotless. His bare arms were chilled to a trembling flush and flexed with the tough muscles of his worked biceps, and he was just tucking his shirt back into place so the conman got flashed with a strip of the bare tummy he'd accidentally pictured earlier.
The only thing that saved Nick, really, was the deep sense of exhaustion and irritation the argument with Rochelle had left him with. Even if he'd had the energy to recognize surge of… well, *something*, that threatened to flood him at the sight, he was just too agitated to deal with it.

Ellis' voice shook, half with surprise and half with the cold.

"O-oh, hey, Nic-

"Shut up."

Ellis was left just looking after him, a little uncertainly, as the gambler breezed past him and entered the single bedroom, shutting the door without even glancing over his shoulder.
Chapter 14

Once he shut the door behind himself, there was no going back... and unfortunately, Nick's
trepidation to enter the bedroom earlier turned out to be well-founded. He felt uncomfortable and
alone.

He could see the pictures on the dresser now, the low-hanging sun having lost its glint and settled
into a dim orange. There were four of them, lined up in mismatched stand-up frames that went
from a pretty wooden border to some heavy cardboard flowers-and-butterflies monstrosity. A red-
haired woman in the snow - the same woman by some lake, posing in a one-piece bathing suit - her
and a man a few years younger than her, their cheeks smashed together and their arms stretched up
to hold the camera - and then a faded and cracked photo of a wedding, he could only guess her
parents'.

Pulling his cigarette gently from his lips and flaring his nostrils to exhale his current lungful of
smoke, the conman walked over toward them. For a moment he stood there, weight on his bare
heels, eyes glancing over the photographs.

Then the discomfort overtook him and he bent in, flipping each one onto its face.

He felt the same way he always did during his flings with whatever woman he picked up. Always
the same routine - back to her place, drinks on the couch, light petting, ... heavy petting... and then
she'd scamper to the bedroom, coyly say she needed to "freshen up," disappear into the bathroom,
and leave him to stand there in her bedroom for nigh-on an eternity.

Teasing her was one thing. Drawing out the foreplay till she was begging him was one thing.
Standing there in a quiet room, just... waiting... it'd always set him on edge. So he'd pace the room,
silently, and the signs of her well-worn existence in the room slowly became strange and jarring.

At least she usually came back out in some skimpy getup or - better yet - nothing at all.

This time, there was no woman a room away - she was probably dead. Maybe Nick had even killed
her. There was nothing to eventually deliver him from this state of alien insecurity. There wasn't
even anything going to happen that he could leave after it was done, no sleeping body to abandon.
He'd shut himself in and that was where he'd stay.

His lips parted to sink his cigarette back between them, sucking a long breath in and watching the
stub left spark up into an orange glow. He let his eyes half-close and quietly walked to the bed,
tossing aside the blue-quilted sheets to settle into a sitting position on the edge. His eyes closed
fully then, and he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, bare torso arched in a tired slump
and cigarette dangling from his lips.

Nick was pretty sure it had been an unforgivably asinine thing to do, taking the bedroom. Rochelle
should have gotten the isolated room, being the only woman.. Coach should've taken it, rather than
camping out on a couch or the floor with his apparently fucked knee. Ellis - well, no, he was the
only one of them who didn't need it, but still.

Ellis.

There was a problem.

It wasn't his first time seeing a man in a less-than-innocent light. There had been four incidents in
his lifetime, although only two of them had involved actual sex... only one of them had been
someone he'd actually known for more than a day or two previous... and most of them had involved anywhere from some to a lot of alcohol.

Most of them hadn't so much as heard from him afterward - though that was usually how he treated women, too.

He'd learned to avoid putting himself in a position to even risk it, which had left him with few close male acquaintances. (His 'gambling buddies' of the past were, after all, not in the slightest his friends. Gambling did that to people.) Although, to be fair, it was probably low on the list of reasons he didn't have many friends.

He blamed it on stress... stress and his addictive, generally selfish nature. One had been an accident a long time ago, one a drunken encounter in a bar, one a release of mind-numbing frustration when he'd nearly completely ruined himself in a bad gambling run, and the last a stupid mistake sprouting from the crash-and-burn ending of his first and only marriage.

He'd regretted all of them after the fact, even if he'd been unable to deny his hand in each. The slips frustrated him, he who felt so in control over his addictions. He gambled, smoked, drank, and chased skirts because he wanted to do those things. Addicted or not, he chose to fall prey to them. They only held sway over him because he let them.

Ellis, however, was creeping into his head and he couldn't stop him. All of those handful of men had, for one reason or another - sudden, burning urges that inexplicably refused to leave him alone. Indulging it had been the only way to shut it up, and being at the mercy of it like that drove Nick insane.

This time, he couldn't even let himself just go after the kid and then leave. He was stuck with Ellis, unless he decided to abandon the group entirely, and considering their current plan involved a good few days of travel...

He was getting the creeping feeling that he'd have been dead already without the troupe downstairs, much as it pained him to admit. Leaving them wasn't an option, not with weird creatures that could leap at you in a flash or grab you up and choke you out with a thick tentacle.

He'd just have to buck up. It was the least of the sacrifices to be made in an apocalypse, he hoped.

Sighing significantly when he was suddenly broken from his thoughts by a too-warm sensation on his lower lip, Nick finally straightened up from where he sat, feeling something pop at the bottom of his spine. His cigarette was burning down low and about to start burning him. Plucking it free with careful fingertips, he leaned over and mashed it out on the bedside table, just barely able to see its outline with how dark it had gotten.

Wiping his hand on his thigh, he shifted to pull his legs up onto the bed, dropping his head onto the pillow and letting his eyes drift half-shut without bothering to draw the sheets over himself. It was too hot already.

The smallest of grunts escaped him as he let his weight shift into a comfortable lounge, though not even that really helped - he could tell already his mind wasn't ready to settle down. It was like a buzzing in the back of his skull, this constant ringing, and he'd dealt with it enough to know it wasn't the innocent kind of restlessness.

Ah, tits. It was that moron coming out of the shower that did it...

He regretted the thought instantly - all it did was mire him in recalling the little flash granted to
him. The casual tan that suffused the hick with a tangible warmth... the shaped curves defining his... the swell of one hip protesting against his overalls... the line of dark hair that flecked its way down from his bellybutton...

A small puff of interest escaped his nostrils and his lips curled in a sullen moue, shifting to curl an arm under his head and nestle against his forearm, minding the bandage still taped to his neck. *Jacking off probably isn't going to help much.*

Logic didn't make much a difference to the buzzing at the back of his head. As pleasant a distraction it would be from the zombie apocalypse, that did bring up a concern... was he going to be able to rein it in, or would Ellis turn into some constant frustration eating away at him?

Stress was uniquely damaging to his self-control, and it wasn't like the stress was going to let up anytime soon.

Idly, the gambler drifted a hand down and stroked fingertips along his stomach, curling them to mock a faint scratch along the sensitive stretch of his abdomen. The pleasant tingling brought his eyes to a close, keeping the touch teasingly light.

Curling his tongue absently against the roof of his mouth, he made some kind of effort to keep his mind blank - but as he gave in to sinking his fingers underneath the pinch of his belted slacks, rubbing down the growing bulge in the confines of his boxers, he could do little to stem the flicker of thoughts spurring him on.

A soft huff parted his lips, expression growing serious to the whim of his mind's eye. Memories blurred with fantasy - he could imagine the kid's mouth, harsh stubble and damp lips. Could smell the dizzyingly harsh twang of male arousal as he was pinned to the edge of a table, both of them struggling for dominance. Feel the hard lust under the constriction of unwanted jeans. Hear the rough pant of a moan, unstifled and demanding, twisting into a faint growl.

It was always so angry... this fit of passion, this fight, fierce but mutual craving. It was that clash of testosterone that drew his frustrated desire, and just imagining Ellis' taut, strong frame wrestling against his was enough to drive him nuts.

The gambler arched his back just enough to shift his weight, pulling his hand free with a slight hum. After tugging the two rings on that hand off with his teeth and shoving them in a pocket, he unbuckled his belt, struggling both with a sense of impatience and the feat of getting it undone onehanded.

Nick didn't even bother opening his eyes, uninterested in breaking the almost tactile sense of his fantasizing. He just pulled himself free of slacks and boxers, barely lifting his hips to manage the motion, and found his breath shortened into pants as his fingers brushed against his erection.

Humming faintly as he gripped his other hand's fingers onto the back of his head, digging nails against the nape of his neck, the gambler coiled now wet fingers around his hard-on, squeezing up it with a small twist of his wrist in a mercilessly tight lubing motion. It made him squirm, though little more than a huff escaped him, and from there all pretense of teasing evaporated.

Slick with his own saliva, the conman pumped himself with quick and tight motions, muscles suddenly tensing up all over his abdomen and thighs as the action sent flutters of lust through his
limbs and brought sweat flecking up onto his skin.

"Ah, shit.." he managed just faintly, one eye twitching open and body suddenly shifting tensely, curled fingers burying deeper against his scalp with the rising tension. He let his fingers spread and tighten in their tugging motions, trying to urge his orgasm on.

A faint growl flickered past his lips, tipping his chin up at the sudden thought of those hard-working, calloused hands he'd felt on his shoulder going through the same motion as his own was.

That and a particularly merciless flick of his wrist tipped him over, and a harsh breath rolled over his tongue, so close to a moan it clenched at his throat. His hips bucked up in reflex to the abrupt wave of pleasure.

His palm quickly squeezed over the top of his erection, rocking his hips rather lazily into his own hand as he came, the clenching pressure of his orgasm making his whole body heavy. It ebbed slowly, blood pulsing along his skin, and with a rather indelicate motion that made him shudder, the gambler squeezed his cupped fingers to urge the last drops free and take the last few twinges of pleasure out of it.

A harsh breath peeled from his lips, shuddering faintly as he licked them, shifting his weight when he realized his sweat had caused his bare back stick to the sheets. His hand, sticky with semen, drifted up a bit and curled its fingers. He let his head tip to glance over it, and with a simple Ah, screw it. he tossed his arm to the side and unceremoniously wiped his hand clean on the side of the mattress.

Lazily rolling himself onto his side, the conman groaned slightly in self-protest. His body was over-sensitive and hot, and it was rather regretfully that he forced himself to lift up his hips and pull his boxers and slacks back into place. The brush of the fabric made him suck in a slight breath of discomfort, relaxing quickly after he'd managed it.

He took rebuckling his belt slowly, humming softly to himself in appreciation. The lazy afterglow made his thoughts come a little easier, stress eased all over and lust sated - for the moment.

Not used to doing that with a guy in my head... I should probably have more problems with this but - fuck it, that was good...

Nick let out another half-sigh of a noise, but for some reason found that one tilting into a laugh at the end. Not even the day he'd had could ruin his libido. He pulled his arm out from under his head, catching the pillow with a quick grip and dragging it down to his chest. His eyes shut as his arms wrapped around it, burying half of his face against the fabric and curling his legs up to settle down against the sheets.

He'd rarely had time to think before, not when it came to this. It had usually been far too sudden to even try putting reason to the situation - it hadn't even been his decision that two of his past forays had balked before actual fucking. Given the freedom, he probably wouldn't have stopped short.

It didn't matter, anyway. They were in the Deep South - if anything, his best call would probably be to outright confess to the kid. Scare him good, save us both the trouble. He chuckled a little, the thought somehow cathartic.

Maybe he just liked the idea of regaining control.
Nick awoke with a jolt, clutching instantly around the pillow he had embraced flat to his body. It was that startling sensation of falling and hitting the mattress, where no amount of focused reflection could determine if the dreamer had actually dropped a few inches onto the bed, or simply flopped up like a fish in protest of the abrupt break from sleep.

He quickly sat up, pillow folding under the pressure of his arms, disoriented in that instant of morning confusion. For just a moment, he'd completely forgotten everything. He looked around himself at the pink-and-orange sunlight washed - and utterly unfamiliar - bedroom, a sleepy mumble spilling from him. "Where the shit-"

And then the fog lifted, and with a small grumble protesting his consciousness in the obviously early hours of the morning, the conman leaned forward and rubbed slowly at his face with his palm, clearing the sleep from his eyes.

He'd had a dream... but now he couldn't remember it. Just a voice, faint and incoherent, and fading fast in his memory even though it felt like it had just happened.

"......Nick?" It was Ellis' drawl, coming from the other side of the closed door, the hesitant raising of his voice indicating to the gambler it wasn't the first time he'd called out for him.

"Or maybe not a dream.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm up." he shot back, sighing slightly as he pawed the pillow off his chest and curled his arms up behind his head to stretch, ribs clenching and stomach going tight as the motion sent waves of appreciative tension up his back. It sent pain through different parts of his body, sure, but he took the compromise.

"We gotta get goin' here soon, Nick. Coach 'n Ro' are wakin' up too. I found some cereal, 'cept the milk was all warm 'n' the fridge's probably been dead fer.. I dunno, awhile.. so... I thought you wouldn't want none of it. Keith drank reeeally sour milk once, 'n he got so sick the doctor said he coulda died. Well, he didn't, but man, he was ill just lookin' at cows fer like a year after... so yeah. Dry cereal."

Nick's mouth opened, then shut, and he found a sigh crossing over his lips, musing on how Ellis had been so utterly silent in his fantasies the night before. Settling down from his stretch and checking on the loosening bandage attached to his neck with gentle fingers, he spoke up to invite the kid in.

"Alright. C'mon in, then." He shouldn't have done it... it was a stupid thing, but he felt at ease after the night before and so convinced he'd found a way to beat that demon, that all he really cared about was getting some food.

He was starving.

His slacked legs pushed off the edge of the bed, sitting him comfortably at an angle and letting him lean back onto his palms lazily.

... at which point nothing happened. There was a somewhat awkward silence from the door, though Nick noticed with a lifting brow that he could see the shadows of the Georgian's boots through the bottom crack of the door, indicating he was still there.
There was a clinked thud like ceramic against wood, and after another moment of silence that Nick made no effort to break, Ellis finally spoke up again, audibly chagrined. "Well, Nick, I would, but I only got two hands 'n' I got two bowls, so, uhh..."

The conman couldn't help it. He cracked a smirk, the curl rather cruel with its humor, realizing Ellis' situation and also the implication of his having two bowls. "Coming. Don't over-work your little brain, Overalls, Nick's here to handle all those tough jobs. We wouldn't want you break a nail trying to get a door open." he quipped sarcastically, pushing up to his feet and padding over to the door. He reached one hand into his pocket, fingers catching onto the two rings he'd stuffed there last night to free his hand.

Nick pulled the door open with them in his palm, smirking with darkly narrowed eyes at the hick on the other side. He swore for an instant that, underneath the bill of his blue-and-white cap, those blue eyes twitched down to his bare upper body - but the utterly innocent way they promptly tipped up to evenly meet his made him regret even noticing it. The gambler's hands turned, and he wormed the rings back onto their appropriate fingers, flexing them against the familiar weight.

"Gosh, Nick. You woke up spittin' fire." He grinned, that stupid look he flashed so often, and the conman crossed his arms over his chest, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. Though the smirk had disappeared in a flash at the hick's words, Nick's expression settled into a smooth look rather than a scowl.

"I don't like mornings... so, what induced you to think I'd want to eat breakfast with you?"

The mechanic immediately sputtered, shooting an incredulous glance between the bowls of cereal he cradled in either hand, like he thought they'd tattled on him. "W-well..." But he'd been caught, so with a small, guilty sigh, he finished, "You been actin' all pissed at me since we met, so's I thought I'd try'n catch a word or two with yuh over breakfast, figure out what I done wrong.."

Nick's jaw tightened a bit, drawing this roll of the eyes from him.

If he wasn't so fuckin' naive I might be able to stand him better. Why is he so goddamn convinced we have to be friends? Without a word Nick snatched one bowl up from Ellis' hand, the kid gawking a bit as the gambler sent a fairly irritated look his way and turned about to saunter back to the bed, dropping down onto the edge.

He didn't look up when Ellis just stood there in the open doorway, totally unsure of what to do. Nick wasn't going to take pity on him and tell him to come sit; Ellis would just have to figure it out for himself. He just swirled up the spoon implanted in the bowl of crisp, sugary little flakes, and took the first crunching mouthful.

The sweet taste wasn't his favorite this early in the morning, but he was definitely hungry. He'd just swallowed and made for a second spoonful when Ellis cleared his throat a little, raising his free hand to clamp onto the top of his cap like he was just about to leap off a bridge, and scuttled into the room.

"I saw yer shirt while I was takin' muh shower last night... it looked real good... Figure you didn't use no vinegar but it worked anyhow. Ohh, 'n how's yer neck?" That grin flashed up, effortlessly amicable, and Nick glanced up with a raised brow as the younger man dropped down to sit crosslegged on the floor a few feet in front of him, pulling his bowl up by his mouth so he could use his spoon more like a shovel.

The conman stared just a little, startled more by his own overpowering interest than the actual image itself, at the unexpected sight of those a-little-too-plump lips taking in the width of the spoon's head -
"My neck is perfectly goddamn fine... and I have a very shitty feeling this suit won't last long... look at you, after all. You're a mess, and you've only barely been in more trouble than I have. The whole suit'll be ruined by tonight at that rate."

Ellis grinned after rather roughly swallowing a slightly-too-large mouthful of cereal, illustrating his words with waves of his spoon. "Shit, man, I ain't that bad... yer exaggeratin'..." He tossed his utensil into the bowl, using his freed hand to pull his shirt down a bit and get a better look at it, twisting his head slightly.

The conman smirked a bit more, leaning forward over the bowl in his lap to gesture with the end of his spoon over the worst of the weirdly tinted splotches that had long since dried into the fabric. "Yeah? So this kind of mess is just normal for you? What, do you sleep with the hogs?" He mocked a little southern twang there, ribbing on Ellis and entertaining himself a little more than he meant to. "And.. I dunno.. radioactive sewage?"

Ellis gave a laughing snort, smacking at his dirty 'Bullshifters' shirt with his palm and shaking his head in disagreement. "S'just a few li'l stains! Whut'ch'you expect, killin' zombies? That's messy shit, man!"

Nick's gaze focused more upwards, narrowing on the hick's turned away face in something a lot like curiosity. He dug up a spoonful of flakes, hovering it before his mouth a moment. He said rather evenly, "You're a weird-ass kid, Overalls.", before snapping teeth down on the utensil and scraping them back. He simply chewed a moment while Ellis seemed to try and understand what he meant without asking.

That peach-fuzzed face scrunched up a bit, nose crinkling, a motion that pinched at the wound across the bridge of it. The thought was so tangible, and the face so stupidly innocent, Nick cracked this stifled snort, lips curling as he swallowed.

It was pretty clear he was being made fun of, but Ellis either didn't notice or didn't care, as his voice was light and questioning when he gave up and chirped, "What's that s'posed to mean, Nick?"

The gambler released a sigh, swirling his spoon in the dry, rustling cereal as he rolled his tongue over his teeth. He must've been twenty three or even four, but he was so kiddish Nick would've thought him younger - if it hadn't've been for that body of his, anyway.

"You don't seem all that upset about the, y'know, rampaging sickness that's killed who-the-hell-knows how many people. In fact, I'm getting the feeling you're enjoying it. You might be an outright nutcase."
The mechanic scrunched up his face again, this time in protest, straightening up a bit to shake his head slowly with an overly solemn look. "Well, Nick, no offense, but them things out there ain't really people no more.. yuh heard Ro. A'sides, I've watched all them zombie movies. They're already dead, man, and every time you think they ain't 'n' try tuh reason with 'em, they bite yer arm off."

Sure enough, and to Nick's chagrin, that dumb grin came back promptly. Ellis popped a spoonful of cereal into his mouth like he was particularly proud of his speech, tacking on through his mouthful and behind a politely shielding forearm, "Ain't no sense gettin' upset 'bout it, we'll get out fine.. 'Sides, it's fuckin' cool! 'Zombies ain't real,' my ass."

Nick gave the slightest of sighs, twisting his spoon in his cereal and giving Ellis a focused stare that the kid didn't notice as he shoveled down more of his own, crunching audibly. It.. made sense, sort of. And something, though it was nothing Ellis said or any vibe he gave off, made Nick lose interest in breaking his neat, content bubble of logic.

He wasn't a nutcase; he was a kid, with his own reasons not to feel guilty - and self-comfort not to feel scared. As much as Nick delighted in torturing him, he just didn't see the appeal in arguing. So he moved the subject elsewhere, digging up a spoonful of cereal as he did so. He didn't really register at the time that he was encouraging conversation.

"Rochelle told me the plan. You think it'll work - heading to the coast? I'm not exactly happy to be stuck with you three for another few goddamn days, but I know shit-all about this stupid backwater edge of the country."

Ellis visibly brightened (not that he'd been particularly somber before) at the question, tossing up his spoon-wielding hand and spilling most of it off to the side without even noticing. "Hell yeah! We'll cruise there like pros, Nick, you'll see.. Ro's real smart 'n' she got the plan all figured out - Coach 'n I live here so we got the travelin' down. Plus, I love the beach! I mean I ain't really gone tuh the beach recently, but.. y'know. Keith'n'-"

It was hardly the first time he'd been interrupted, but it was the first time he was interrupted with an actual question. Nick was borderline scowling when he asked it, outright exasperated.

"Okay, once and for all, who the fuck is Keith?"

The immediate, beaming grin that burst across Ellis' face made the gambler groan softly under his breath, already regretting the question. He bent his head down and nibbled on another spoonful of cereal, practically feeling the buffeting of Ellis' emphatic response.

"Oh, man, he's like muh best buddy ever! Muh mama says we was babies together, 'cause we met when we was reeeeeally tiny - well, really our mamas met, but we played together 'n' shit cause of that, y'know - but I always thought that sounded weird - but anyway, he's the goddamn coolest. He does all this crazy awesome shit 'cause he ain't got no sense, like he jumped a fence when he was just a kid but got foot caught on the- ohoh, or when he tried tuh make a bandage outta leaves 'cause he cut his knee on this nail crawlin' on a roof, but he - wait, no, I gotta better one - he tried tuh SWALLOW a BATH PLUG 'cause he was tired of pissin' - well it didn't work, duh - well unless you count gettin' hooked up to onna those pissin' tubes 'cause he got put in the hospital fer like a week 'n his guts were all fucked up... man, that shit was sad. Guess he did pull it off fer a while... Oh, but when he got it OUT-"

It was like he'd broken a pipe on the inside, and out came the words, spilling in senseless streams in all directions. He couldn't control himself, quite nearly exploding with the apparent excitement
behind the subject, and Nick made a mental note.

*Never.. fucking.. ask him.. about Keith.. ever.*

All he could do was straighten up and half-shout over the hick's voice, shutting him up with the severity of his tone. "Jesus Christ, Overalls, okay! I get it! He's your maniac friend! Don't need the full encyclopedic version..."

Ellis seemed a little surprised by his interruption - although it was almost a surprise at his voice at all, like the Georgian had completely forgotten about Nick's existence in the room. He flustered slightly, lifting his spoon-wielding hand (he hadn't even noticed that he'd dumped his spoonful of cereal on the carpeting beside his crossed legs) and adjusting his cap with a knuckle.

The little fluster of color to his face settled on Nick's mind like water to a burning stovetop; with a tangible sizzle of interest, he felt his irritation steaming slowly off him until he settled into a one-sided smirk.

The conman pushed the bowl of cereal off his lap and onto the bed, prying his cigarette pack and matches from his slacks' pocket, ignoring Ellis as he tapped out a cigarette and slipped the filter between his lips. It was almost instinctual, as if nicotine could dull any other urges he was feeling.

He started to strike the match, pausing and twisting green eyes toward the open door when he heard Rochelle's voice suddenly rise up the stairs.

"Ellis, honey, is Nick yelling at you again?"

His gaze flicked to the mechanic, eyeing him impassively as his fingers moved again, striking the match and lifting the flame up to light the tip of his cigarette. All he did was arch a brow vaguely, and Ellis ducked his head to shadow his face under the bill of his cap, hiding his embarrassed expression from the gambler.

Seeing his silence as clear indication Ellis would've said 'yes' to that, Nick spoke up for him. His voice was coolly sarcastic, just loud enough to be heard downstairs while not sullying its faux-apathy with a shouting tone. "Yeah, doll. Mean ol' Nick is making the little Georgia peach cry."

Nick was just shaking the match to douse it and inhaling the first tickle of half-burning nicotine and tar when Ellis' head suddenly lifted, a rather thoughtful look scrunching up his nose again. The conman lifted his brows at the change, raising a hand to touch fingertips to his cigarette with an almost feathery touch, steadying it as he sighed out a calm breath of hot smoke.

"What, Overalls?" He said it as he stood up, stowing the rest of the cigarettes and matches back in his pocket and quirking a demanding look down at the mechanic sitting just a foot or two in front of him.

Ellis squinted up at him, then let his expression melt into a grin, packing down a final bite of cereal before he let his spoon clink down into the bowl and tossed the thing aside. He leaned in a bit, making Nick's fingers suddenly clamp onto his cigarette as it occurred to him he was far too perfectly aligned with the conman's crotch.

Ellis was looking straight up at him, eyes tipped up and focused. The fact that he was a bare few feet from Nick's pelvis didn't register in the slightest. *Of course he's goddamn oblivious...*

"Actually, Nick," the mechanic retorted in a low voice, something like a whisper but nowhere near as quiet. He looked like a guy who'd won something. "I'm thinkin' my plan worked. Yer bein' kinda nicer tuh me!"
The gambler, unable to relax his fingers with Ellis placed so suggestively in front of him, struggled not to glance at that full-lipped grin and have his mind go ... 'there.' He was just sure he'd lose it. He couldn't trust himself, that much was apparent.

And then they heard it: "Uh..."

Neither of them had suspected a thing. Not heard a sound or even felt the slightest sense of anyone approaching - but both of them whipped their heads around at that single, awkward syllable, and there was Rochelle in the doorway. She stood with one hand lifted to the frame, blinking brown eyes with obvious confusion at the scene.

Nick, shirtless and standing at a rigid attention... Ellis, propped forward in his sit on the ground - barely one shift of his position away from being on his knees in those stupid overalls...

Rochelle - not so oblivious.

It was some freak stroke of luck that she looked toward Ellis first. Nick was almost certain his face had some lusty expression plastered all over it that no sane person would miss - but when Rochelle saw the completely innocuous, happily triumphant grin Ellis gladly turned toward her, she relaxed.

"Hey sweetie, hey suit. Is he actually being mean, Ellis? I'll whoop him one, break him into shape."

Nick could've collapsed with relief at the bullet he'd dodged. He honestly didn't know how he would've reacted if she'd looked at him first. Balked, probably - and then Ellis would've been confused too... and shit if he wanted to be the focus of both of them.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Nick sidestepped to get some distance between Ellis and himself, snapping out a reflexive retort at Rochelle. "You lost your shot at that when you turned me down, doll."

It worked precisely how he liked, startling her just enough to force anything else out of her head without completely pissing her off. She got a hand to her hip, shaking her head at him in distaste and apparently deciding against gratifying him with a response.

He was okay with that. Ellis got the chance to actually answer her, widening his grin and scrambling up to his feet. "Naww, he just don't like wakin' up this early. Bet we'll be best buds later today!"

Turning half away from them and cupping his hand over his cigarette slightly, bending in toward it, he grumbled a short "Don't count on it, killer." and then absorbed himself in taking a slow, calming inhale off the thing.

Rochelle rolled her eyes at his bare, hunched back, beckoning Ellis as she took a slight step back. "It'll be later today pretty soon if we don't get going... come on, Ellis, we should help Coach try and pick what we can from the kitchen. Nick needs to get dressed."

"Awh, okay, Ro'. Sorry, I didn't mean tuh waste time, s'just we was talkin'."

He obediently trotted over to her, and Rochelle sent a small glance toward Nick, one slightly dubious, as her hand guided Ellis by the shoulder past her. Her head shook, letting off a helpless sigh and turning to catch back up with the younger man.

Nick could hear him start up talking, his voice buzzing as it echoed up the stairs, but the gambler didn't even try to pay attention. He rubbed his forehead with his wrist, forcing a rather frustrated
grind of his teeth and abruptly pulling his cigarette from his lips, mashing it out on the footboard of the bed. The smoke was just giving him a tight feeling in his abdomen as it licked at his throat, not quite nausea but close.

Okay... so no, last night didn't help. Well... tits. If I can't last ten minutes talking to him without nearly popping a vein trying not to grab the back of his head and - Jesus, Nicolas, just shut up!

Pushing his hands into the pockets of his slacks and quite nearly growling at himself, he left the room to duck toward the bathroom and grab his shirt and jacket, eager to get fully dressed and try to force his mind to focus on business.

Going through the monotonous and familiar routine of buttoning the blue dress shirt over his chest (leaving, out of habit, the top one undone), Nick found himself staring wearily at his own reflection in the mirror, shadowy in the bare illumination from borrowed light that touched the tiled room.

If I didn't think Coach would wring my neck I'd just stare at Ro's ass all day.

Nick wasn't sure why that sounded like a joke.
The hum of conversation downstairs sharpened into focus as Nick took the first few steps of the staircase, and he wasn't surprised in the least to find Ellis’ voice the only one doing any talking. "...he didn't even see that shit comin'! I mean, we thought the nest was abandoned! Keith'd JUST gotten up tuh the top of the tree 'n this fuckin' HAWK - oh, hey, Nick!"

The guy broke off instantly when he saw Nick stepping into the main room of the house, flashing him a grin from his place across the room. Rochelle and Coach were, at first glance, nowhere to be found, with Ellis knelt down and in the middle of folding up a pile of blankets.

From what Nick could tell, he was packing up the sleeping arrangements the three had managed the night before. The conman lifted a brow in a slightly scoffing motion as he noted that Ellis was actually taking focused care to line up all the edges with each halving fold, something entirely too... neat... for Nick to have believed had he not seen it.

He finally gave the mechanic a nod in response to the greeting, not yet calmed enough from earlier to convince himself to risk walking much closer than the couch. He worked one hand into his pocket, the other curling on the sofa and flexing its fingers as he settled down into a lounge against it.

Making me nervous now. Damnit.

Glancing around the room with a small amount of confusion, both at not seeing Coach or Rochelle and at Ellis' work, he rolled his shoulder in its socket till it popped and questioned, "Where'd they go?"

Ellis jabbed up a thumb at the mostly-closed kitchen door, explaining cheerily, "We found some canned shit in there, but Coach wanted me tuh clean up here afore we left. Least we can do! Fer... well, whoever lives here."

A sly grin rose up onto Nick's features, the humor relaxing a few muscles he hadn't noticed had been tense. Ellis was probably utterly oblivious to it, but Nick saw straight through the ruse -they'd been trying to get him to go do something else (useless, even, considering the owner of the house was likely dead) so they might dodge his constant chatter.

Hypocrites. Least I'm honest.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure she'll be really eager to thank us, right after she finishes tearing out our eyes and gnawing off our limbs. Yep. ... maybe honest to a fault. Nick smirked narrowly across the room at the kid, unfazed as he got a particularly crinkled look of distaste.

"That's nasty, Nick."

Ellis pawed off his hat and rubbed at his scalp after dropping the last blanket into the folded pile he'd made, grunting and hopping up to his feet. He stretched once there, flopping his forearm behind his neck and getting a good scratch between his shoulderblades. "Sides, what with all four of us lookin' out now, ain't no way none of those zombies are gettin' the best of us. We -"

The conman quickly interrupted him, lifting up a hand to wave him into silence with no small chastisement. "Christ, you dumbshit. Are you trying to jinx us? The minute you say that it'll all go wrong." He crossed his arms over his chest, settling his hip against the edge of the couch instead
and staring severely at the mechanic.

Ellis blinked a bit in surprise, his over-expressive face scrunching up while he tugged his cap back into place. "Yuh superstitious, Nick?" He gripped the knot of his overalls with both hands, leaning his weight back onto his heels and rocking idly - although he did look fairly chagrined, like he'd accidentally insulted the older man. "I wouldn'tuh pegged you fer that."

Nick half-sighed, relaxing some of his expression and giving a shrug. He glanced around the room to figure out where the three had stashed the weapons overnight, noticing them set up beside the coffee table that still blocked the door. He headed for them, noting Ellis trudging up to follow at his heels.

"You get pretty cautious of luck when you depend on it." was his vaguely-phrased response, drawing a hum of thought from the kid behind him. Nick dropped down to a crouch to pull his machine gun from the wall, checking it over cautiously.

"What'chya mean by that, Nick? I guess my buddy Keith is real lucky, what with how many times he coulda gone 'n killed himself doin' crazy shit, but yuh don't seem like.. uhh.. well, that probably ain't how yuh meant it."

Ellis stood just by his elbow, tagging close like an awestruck puppy. Nick was beginning to wish he'd been crueler that morning, though maybe he was screwed either way - if he chased him off, he'd just pull some more breakfast-in-bed bullshit.. if he gave up, he'd think they were buddies.

Of course, Nick also hadn't really tried to break him yet. He'd practically been nice to the hick from the start. It was a thought - but Nick put it off, aware the responding rage from Rochelle and Coach (who both seemed instantly fond of Ellis) would make the rest of their time together a living hell.

"You ever gamble, hayseed?" Nick tossed the shoulderstrap of his gun over his arm, noticing that his Magnum had actually been stuffed against the wall behind the butt of the machine gun, still in its sheath. He'd left it in the bathroom...

Goddamn thing is pretty much empty, but.. eh.

Ellis instantly brightened, much like his 'oh I just thought of a story' face, pouncing on the perceived chance to connect with the conman. "Oh, yeah, man!" Nick was a little intrigued, although held silent to see where he was going before making any assumptions, shifting in his crouch to pick up his Magnum and strap it back on to his thigh. "Me'n Keith would go tuh the gas station every Wednesday. Never really won nothin', but man, it was fun!"

Brows raised suspiciously, Nick withheld a sigh and pushed up to stand, rubbing a knuckle across the bridge of his nose. "Gas station?" he echoed, feeling his jaw twitch with an impending smirk. He already figured where this was going.

"Yeah! We bought a buncha those scratch lottery tickets, used our birthdays.. guess we didn't have all that lucky of births!" Nick smacked his forehead into his palm lightly - the kid laughed obliviously, grabbing hold of the bill of his cap and tipping it down to hide his eyes like his joke embarrassed him.

"You play Bingo on Fridays, too..?" the conman asked dryly, smirking with a mean edge to it. His jibe, however, went over Ellis' head, who scrunched his brow slightly in incomprehension and drawled;

"Bingo ain't really gamblin', Nick..."
Nick was about to outright laugh in the Georgian's face when the kitchen door swung open, Coach's heavy frame traipsing through with Rochelle behind him. Judging by the plump shape of the backpack Coach was carrying, they'd found food to take with them.

"He's bullyin' you, son." the big man informed him sympathetically, locking gazes with Nick for a moment in challenge. Not that, nor Rochelle's accompanying hands-on-the-hips, seemed to even make a dent in Nick's humor. He cuffed his knuckles on his chin in a threatening motion, smirking all the while.

"Awwh, naaw. We're just playin', Coach, I don't mind it none." The youth grinned bashfully at the big man, utterly missing the silent threats ping-ponging over his head. "Keith makes fun'a me all the time, too. H-

Nick smoothly overrode him at that first sign of an impending ramble, hooking an arm casually over one of the outstretched legs of their door-blocking table and letting his body settle into a lazy curl. "What, I don't get any of this mommy-and-daddy routine? I'm hurt, really. I'm delicate and vulnerable too, you know."

His tone was condescending and mocking, instantly getting a rise out of Rochelle. She cocked a hip, incredulously spouting back, "How's he supposed to know you're mocking him? You're just being cruel."

Ellis stood where he was a bit hesitantly, half-spinning back and forth to look at both of them, grabbing onto his cap with both hands. "Uh.. hey, guys.."

"Sure." Nick murmured as a response, easily ignoring the hick's attempt to cut in. His lounge slackened, and green eyes locked salaciously with Rochelle's, narrowing as he lent a light mocking sarcasm to his voice. "But I'm not the only one doing that, am I?"

The hick hadn't given up yet, raising hands as he turned directly to Nick. His tone was practically pleading. "Nick, just drop it, huh? We -"

Rather than vocally interrupt him, the conman just swiped a hand up to snatch his cap right off his head and chuck it coolly across the room. As expected, Ellis yipped a bit in protest and darted after it, unwilling to risk losing it.

With the distance between them now clear, the tension jumped a notch - though Nick's frame lounged as casually as if he'd been sprawled in a hot tub, his eyes and mean smirk holding his hostility instead.

"Nick," Coach started, his scruffy, round jawline taut as he adopted a harsh but diplomatic tone, wide frame shifting. "bein' at odds ain't gonna do nothin' but cause us trouble down the road. You need to quit this shit and move on. None of us need yo' shit."

"My shit?" the conman echoed mockingly, smirk thinning into a sly curl. He lowered his voice to a cold hum, Ellis too far to hear as he dusted off his cap affectionately across the room. "I like your bait-and-switch there, Coach. Very nice. You skipped the part where you sent him out to do laundry because you couldn't stand him."

Coach stiffened up there, a motion that made Nick instantly snort in derision, lazily tossing a limp wrist in his direction that dismissed the argument. He'd won, not that that stopped them from protesting.

"That isn't fair, Nick.." Rochelle muttered, crossing her arms over her chest and letting her draping
fingers pluck at the pink Depeche Mode shirt she wore. "We didn't insult him to his face and laugh because he's too sweet to realize it. We just -"

"Nope." Nick agreed, his tone uninterested and scathing as he pushed away from the table. His correction came with a heavy dose of distaste. "You did it behind his back."

It wasn't like Nick really cared. Mostly, he knew it was the easiest way to get under their skin. At least he could say he had been honest about how irritating the kid was. It wasn't his fault that Ellis didn't listen.

There was just enough of a beat of silence, both of the other two seeming frustrated but not retorting, to make Nick move on. He called over, bored, to Ellis, "Come on, Overalls, you're holding us up." and turned to get a grip on one of the table's legs.

The thing was heavy, but pushing it was easier than getting it set up, and he only gave a small grunt as he moved it away from the door. Coach made no motion that even suggested he might help, just eyeing the conman and eventually shaking his head.

There was a strange silence as Nick stepped out the door and looked around to get a quick grasp on the street and the zombie situation. There were a few too close for comfort, but he waited, just watching them while he waited impatiently beside the doorway for the other three to get out.

"Coach'n'I can probably get us outta town alright... I dunno, we might need a map or somethin' after that..."

Of course Ellis tried to prompt conversation, although it was at least on topic. Nick noticed that no one responded to him, and when the kid suddenly stepped through the doorway, tossing his shotgun onto his shoulder, the conman heard him sigh faintly.

It irritated him. The kid's head was down a little, and the guilty disappointment in his expression pissed Nick off. I wasn't even being that much of an asshole. If they'd just kept their noses out of it, it would've been fine, damnit.

That and it was a bit his fault, too. He could imagine a few scenarios where he pulled the argument off without involving Ellis at all. It was too late now, though, and Nick read Ellis like a book: he figured he was to blame for the friction.

Sulking Ellis would be no better than happy Ellis, Nick was pretty sure, so he threw him a bone. Reluctantly.

"Hey, stupid." Nick said sharply, watching the Georgian turn about to blink at him, eyes almost hidden underneath the bill of his cap. He had this leery, uncertain expression on, unsure of Nick's intentions, particularly considering his harsh tone.

"You're losing the contest."
Ellis bounced around like a brain-damaged chihuahua as the four survivors made their way down the street. He had his shotgun up and primed, taking absolutely every shot he could and giddily belting off his count - adding a rough estimate of what he figured he'd already gotten, which, although Nick found to be a bullshit high number, the conman didn't argue against. Particularly since he didn't care.

The friction, the guilt, the worry - it'd just popped like some fragile bubble on the wind, gone in an instant and with such a lack of fanfare that it was hard to even recall correctly. Had he really looked as upset as Nick's memory painted him? Even more importantly, did that mean Nick's attempt to push him out of it had been... unnecessary?

Considering it had bordered on self-sacrificial, giving the kid a reason to probably think them 'buddies,' the thought... pissed him off.

It didn't matter, though, and he told himself as much. At least the kid isn't whining anymore. he noted inwardly, sidling up to Rochelle and bending his head in toward her ear. She obviously hadn't expected it because she jumped at the first warm, tickling breath of his words on her ear, barely audible under the blasting of Ellis' shotgun.

"I don't see any sign of CEDA, do you?"

Recovering quickly, Rochelle avoided looking at his smug and vaguely suggestive smirk, focusing instead on inspecting the street and the sky, hoping for some sign of a flare or helicopter. There was nothing; just smoke from still-burning housefires. The Vannah hotel was visible down the street, and it had burned so fiercely all night that a good portion of the top had just collapsed into blackened wreckage that was still smoking.

She felt Coach's gaze on her and Nick, being a few feet away, but she passed him a smile to try and ease his obvious distrust. His scruffy, aged features didn't lose their judging edge, but he looked forward anyway.

"No, but let's do a circle around the hotel first... we have to at least try before we go off on our own."

The conman forced a sigh after he'd pulled his head back a little, rubbing a knuckle over the bridge of his nose and giving her a disparaging look that wiped away any hint of flirtation. "They've come through for us so much already, of course they'll just be right around the corner. Maybe with presents!"

Rochelle just shook her head at him, speeding up to walk next to Coach and get away from the gambler's insulting tone. With a smirk, Nick eased back, dropping one hand into his pocket and flexing his fingers on the still-cool metal of his machine gun's trigger.

The other three could've just stood there and traipsed on like they were taking a midday stroll with Ellis taking the zombies and them looking for any sign of their would-be rescuers. However, the moment Ellis realized Nick was relaxing into the concept of not doing anything, he loped back and, voice accusatorial, yelped: "Nick, you ain't even TRYIN'!"

Despite himself, the gambler bristled at the jeer, jabbing up his machine gun in a threatening manner, even if his finger was safely off the trigger.
"Hey, kiddo, I can shoot better than you in my sleep. I'm sure Pappy was proud when you finally got that beer-bottle on the farm fence, but us cityfolk have higher standards." His mocking Southern accent dripped off his words almost nasally, not mixing well with his sarcastic, clipped syntax.

It made Ellis break into laughter, clearly entertained and not taking Nick's insults seriously in the slightest. "C'mon, man, quit makin' excuses.. here, I'll make it easier on yuh... Fresh start, so's I ain't winnin' anymore." His grin widened, utterly amused.

Nick nearly blew a gasket at that. All Coach and Rochelle could do was stay back a few feet, watching with slightly uncertain attention.

"Fine, you sheep-humping redneck, you watch me kick your ass!" Jamming his machine gun into his shoulder and prying his previously pocketed hand up to steady it, he gave Ellis an absolutely venomous look - to which the Georgian whooped with glee. The kid turned back around and resumed his bouncing lope up the road, angling himself for a bunched up group of zombies that spun to attack him at the sound of his heavy footsteps.

He got one shot in, catching a zombie in the head just as they'd started to clamber over one of the parked cars that separated them... but right as he got his shotgun reloaded, Nick rammed his shoulder against Ellis'. He nearly bowled the slightly shorter man over, sending his aim wide and making him stumble.

"N-Nick!" he instantly complained, whipping around the moment he got his balance, watching with some disbelief as the conman pegged the other three with rapid spits of his machine gun.

"Three to one." Nick stated matter-of-factly, half-turning on his heel and giving Ellis an utterly deadpan brow-raise. He didn't look playful... not in the least. If anything, his expression was the seething surface of a pot of water just about to boil over.

"You fight dirty!" was the hick's response, still looking shocked, like he couldn't really believe what he'd seen. Nick simply narrowed his eyes at him, using the heel of one hand to wipe sweat off his brow.

"Yeah. Name's Nick. Nice to meet ya. Fight dirtier or go home."

The conman hadn't even had the chance to turn around and resume the path down the street before he felt Ellis whip past him, determined to get a head start. Unfortunately for him, Nick's reflexes were good, and he snapped out a foot to trip him.

As his workboot collided with Nick's heel and his momentum sent him tipping forward, Ellis managed to grip the conman's sleeve. With a growl of fury, Nick had to actually help him stop his fall and re-catch his balance just to avoid being dragged down himself. Ellis had just prepared a 'hah-hah' grin of triumph when his cap was smacked soundly from his head.

The kid had to scramble after it, and his distraction gave Nick the chance to take down the zombies they'd attracted in their scuffling. There were plenty crowding the hotel's surrounding roadway - the place must've been packed.

"Five to one. You're depressing me, Overalls!"

Rochelle found herself gawking as the two men practically wrestled their way down the street. Sure, Nick's expression was about two inches away from murderous - but they were fighting like schoolboys, tripping and shoving, only stopping to shoot down zombies as they reached them.
They kept up a surprising pace considering their constant struggling, darting across the street as they reached the corner of the Vannah.

Still not a sign of rescue... Aside from the hotel crumbling in on itself, so utterly ruined compared to the sparsely burning buildings that surrounded them, Rochelle couldn't help but wonder how it had started burning at all.

On purpose, maybe? Cutting their losses and trying to kill what zombies they could?

Ellis had just belted out a triumphant, "Eight tuh yer nine, I'm catchin' up!" when she felt Coach take her by the elbow with his large hand. She glanced up, smiling just a little. Ever since they'd crossed paths fleeing from the zombies, she'd seen more and more of her father in him, and she couldn't help but enjoy his presence. He didn't seem to mind.

"Nick was right, baby girl." he said to her in that gentle gruff he had, matter-of-fact and serious in its simplicity. He didn't need to say more; they'd both been stewing on the same thing.

"Yeah..." she agreed, eyes lighting up slightly as a heavy smattering of machine gun fire announced a hostile "Eight to my twelve, assclown." and frustrated "Hogwash!" from an Ellis who'd been completely prostrated by a particularly ruthless shove from the gambler.

A laugh escaped her as she watched Nick scoot quickly ahead while Ellis was still scrambling up from the asphalt, stifled by a tightened jaw, and she shook her head. "If I didn't know better, I'd almost say he was having fun... Ellis is really good with people, isn't he?"

"Ha! Thirteen, man!" "Fourteen, stupid." "GOSH DARNIT!"

Coach gave a small snort, squeezing her elbow before releasing it. "Anyone who can get through that Nick's thick head's got a real talent, fo' sho'." His eyes narrowed on a stray zombie - it had bolted out from an alley, but gotten up behind the other two and dodged their attention.

For whatever illness-twisted reason, it had instead wheeled about with a gargling snarl toward Coach and Rochelle.

The big man had his shotgun already primed, though, and the thing didn't get more than a few steps toward them before a blast to the abdomen sent it careening to the ground, cracking its head open and falling silent quickly, though it still twitched.

Hearing the shot, both Nick and Ellis twisted around to see, startled. Ellis had this concerned look, but Nick looked almost irritated. Both were panting heavily, exerted from their struggling, and in the moment of pause, Nick left himself think.

His adrenaline was too high, his pride too inflamed in the struggle to win the stupid contest he'd re-initiated. Nick hadn't meant to let the kid get him riled, but at least it was a distraction. And at least he was angry, instead of aroused. He turned to glance around them, getting his bearings.

Nick realized belatedly he hadn't kept track at all of where they'd been going. The idea that Ellis had been leading them... did not please him. Coach and Rochelle caught up to them, and the gambler noticed that both of them looked to have regained some humor. Coach caught his eye in that instant, and the big man gave him a curt nod.

It felt like an apology, or something, but Coach didn't look long enough to even give Nick the option of returning or not returning it. He looked away too fast. Nick just smirked.

"Sorry, we goin' too fast, guys? We kinda.. got intuh it." Ellis apologized, pawing off his cap to fan
Rolling his eyes slightly, Nick swiped his hand over his mouth and carefully forced his breath into a normal pace, lungs stinging slightly as he tried to look more composed than the younger man. "You wouldn't stop goddamn running. What was I supposed to do? Stand there with my thumb up my ass?"

"It's fine, boys," Rochelle interjected quickly, expression breaking into a grin despite herself. "It's fine. Let's just focus on looking around until we know for sure there's nobody nearby, though, okay? It's not looking promising so far but.. let's try. Who's winning?"

"Me." they both said in unison, instantly whipping around to eye each other - as was turning out to be usual for them, Nick with irritation and Ellis with a growing grin. Rochelle was already breaking down into laughter again before they even started.

"I got one more after my last call, that makes fifteen." Nick pointed out severely, shoulders raising like the hackles of a cat.. although something about the game he was participating in made it.. hard to take his hostility seriously.

Judging by the way he shot a glare at Rochelle - and then Coach, who was giving a gruff chuckle of his own - Nick didn't appreciate that concept.

"Yeah, I got two after that, so I'm at fifteen too. Look'it that!" Ellis outright laughed, smacking his thigh and then tipping his hat in appreciation. "We tied. How cool!"

He'd just gotten the words out when a high pitched squealing noise, like the gurgled scream of a baby, suddenly cut through the air. It was hair-raisingly uncomfortable to listen to, hitting just the right note to hurt the ear. All four of them shot straight where they stood, darting looks between the others.

Nick half-jokingly asserted, "That sure as fuck wasn't me." Ellis laughed rather nervously at the statement, tipping his cap back on his head to peer around the street and subconsciously sidestepping so he was back-to-back - a few feet between them - with the conman.

Rochelle bit her lower lip in thought, letting her head roll back and trying to think. "Uh... if.. it's making that kind of sound, I think.. I'm sorry, it's been like two days..

The conman's voice rose and got irritated, starting to ask it again, "Wh-", but another one of those squeals shut him up for a moment before he shifted into a growled, "...fucking creepy. Can we get off the shitting middle of the street?"

"Yeeah, uhh.." Ellis started... but he didn't finish his sentence before Rochelle blurted frantically, "Spitter! It's a spitter, they spew some kind of acid, and -"

As if on cue, something gave a throaty, snorting gurgle, like a sick person readying to hack up
phlegm. Something blindingly green flashed in a window of the building just beside them, making Ellis yipe as he was the first to see it. Coach, in that instinctive bark of decision that made his name appropriate, shouted, "GET OUT THE WAY!" and just dragged Rochelle toward the sidewalk under his arm like she were no heavier than a football.

Something flew out of the window, too fast to really track with his eyes, and Nick saw a sudden splash of this acridly bright green, watery substance hit the ground just a bare foot away. It splattered, spreading, popping and bubbling like some living creature, and a hissing sizzle struck the air.

"Jesus Christ!" Nick snarled in disbelief, darting backward to get away from the rapidly spreading liquid. A gunshot rang out, and though he didn't catch what it was aiming for or who it came from, an eerie shrieking gargle made him wonder if one of the others had caught the 'Spitter' with a shot.

Drops had hit him from the impact, and though it didn't seem to do much to his clothes, he felt an agonizing burn on his hands, making him drop his gun to the asphalt as the sensation made his muscles jerk. It was like splatter from cooking bacon - only far more painful.

He knocked into Ellis, utterly having forgotten he was at his back, and before he could tell up from down, the kid grabbed his shoulders from behind. He was shoved in a spin and then pushed forward, feeling Ellis moving to follow after him in the scramble to get away from the acid.

Nick stumbled, though, wheeling forward with a staggering slant to the side, till he smashed right into the door of one of the cars parked messily alongside the road. It completely knocked the wind out of him, his knees crumpling underneath him and making him slide slightly into a half-crouch of pain.

And then the car alarm shrieked into life, and Nick decided he was going to kill Ellis.
"WHAT THE SHIT DID YOU DO?" It was Coach who was shouting, and his commanding gruff had never sounded so frightening. Nick didn't even bother trying to respond, clenching his teeth against the ear-splitting sound of the car alarm going off just beside his ear, focusing on shoving himself away from it.

His ears were ringing so hard he could only hear the vague outlines of the other three's voices. His vision was even swimming as he forced his eyes open, pushing his hands against the asphalt to stand up with a stumble, shaking his head mightily and only managing to make himself dizzier.

Rochelle suddenly appearing in front of him, grabbing his face with either hand, made him snap to reality. He quickly shoved her hands away, forcing a growled "I'm fine" just before Ellis practically skated into them.

"Nick-" The hick's face scrunched up, looking less panicked and more breathlessly determined, groaning at the still-screaming alarm and suddenly shoving his shotgun into Nick's hands. "Take this - they're comin', I gotta shut it off..

Nick's first instinct was to grab it and smack Ellis across the face with the butt of his own shotgun, but the mechanic was unfortunately right - his dizzied senses were recovering enough to hear that familiar howling, shouting clamor racing toward them. *Goddamnit... goddamnit we're so fucked.*

Coach came up to his side, one of those brawny football-player shoulders shoving Nick harshly to get him to face the opposite direction. Rochelle slipped into place between them, forming a tight triangle, and without a word they hunched in to get ready. His hands stung as the burnt droplets of acid sizzled out, leaving faded splotches on his skin, but the pain kept on.

The first wave of zombies roared into shooting distance when he heard the shatter of breaking glass behind them. The scream of zombies and shriek of the alarm making it almost impossible to even think. Though he tried not to notice, Nick felt himself struggling against the shotgun's harsh recoil, reloading as quick as he could manage.

It was terrifying, that blood-stained tsunami of clawing infected. It was worse than either horde he'd seen before, at the gas station or in the closet - they must've drawn every zombie within blocks. A small glance confirmed that it was just as bad for the other two, though somehow they were managing to keep a distance between them and the horde.

When Ellis' shotgun came up empty, Nick cursed harshly, twisting his grip to hold it like a bat. *Fucking Christ, that idiot still has all the bullets, and I dropped my goddamn SMG!* He darted a look toward the car, seeing that Ellis had gotten the car unlocked and flung himself into the front seat, bent over it to shove his torso under the wheel. Whatever he was doing, he was doing it frantically, shoulders working madly.

Nick saw the driver side window was broken, and there was blood on the glass, but he didn't have time to think much on it before the zombies overcame him. He used the metal muzzle of the shotgun to the most effect he could, swinging hard at the snarling heads that so madly jerked at him. The occasional gunshot would take one out for him, but Coach and Rochelle could spare only small instants without losing ground themselves.

Fingers kept finding purchase in Nick's clothes, threatening to tear, before he'd smack them away with violent curses and growls, smashing whatever body part he could get at. A few got him,
feeling the splice of pain along his forearm as jagged nails dug straight through his clothes, and one leapt up and scored a claw at his cheek before Rochelle shot it down.

There wasn't any breath available to shout with, though he wanted nothing more than to do so. Not even the abrupt, pained chirrup and then complete silence from the car next to them gave Nick more than a small flicker of relief when compared to the zombies crawling over one another to get to him.

"This ain't no good!" Coach barked into the quieter air, drawing a livid NO SHIT! out of Nick's head. The conman scored a hard hit onto a zombie's outstretched neck, knocking the thing's head half-off its shoulders, and then he felt Ellis stumble next to him from the car.

"Bullets, dipshit!" Nick rasped demandingly, barely managing the words. The blood on the window was shortly explained; the kid had torn his elbow to shreds busting in the window, but even with the injury, he moved with immediate speed to pry up shotgun shells from his overalls' pocket.

Ellis fed them to the conman, darting in and out of the way when Nick was forced to shove back a zombie. They got just enough of a flow going to load the gun, though barely - and Nick nearly got a hard bite on his calf as a zombie slipped underneath his radar. Ellis caught it, however, and he kicked it roughly away with one of those heavy workboots he had on just as it had smashed up against Nick's leg and started to scrabble for purchase to sink its teeth in.

Rejuvenated with a new load of bullets, Nick aimed high, for necks and heads. The shots ripped through multiple zombies at once, sending these little crashing waves back in on the horde entity, and with Ellis kicking and shoving at any who got too close, they regained ground.

Only then, with the car alarm off, the zombies were ebbing. Almost instantly it had started to thin out, and Nick found himself starting to breathe easier. "You should know," he muttered sideways to the mechanic hovering at his elbow. "I'm going to kill you."

He heard Ellis cough slightly, but didn't get a chance to see the kid's expression as Rochelle suddenly fell hard against his shoulder. Shoving the shotgun back into Ellis' hands, the conman twisted around to grab hold of her elbow and hold her up, relaxing slightly when he realized that her side of the triangle was clear.

"They get you?" he questioned in a low growl, bending his head to get a look before she even answered. There was a claw mark on her arm and blood was seeping through a tear in her jeans, just on the side of her knee. It looked painful, but minor.

"Little.." she admitted, and Nick was impressed to watch her pull away and stand up on her own, though her weight was limped onto the other leg. Coach and Ellis gunned down what was left of the horde, the former moving over to lean hard against the car, huffing audibly. He'd avoided injury, it looked like, though the fight had clearly drained the anger from him.

"Think they're done..." Ellis pointed out a little breathlessly, piping up like he always did, stepping carefully over to check on Rochelle with a worried look.

It turned back around on him, though, a gasp leaving the woman as she grabbed onto his wrist and made him hold still to get a look at his bloody elbow. Nick heard the noise of surprise, but turned away rather than look. He was too goddamn pissed to feel any kind of pity. There was a hard knot in his stomach, and he knew himself well enough to hear the practically bomb-like ticking of that well of anger.
Ellis’ fingers twitched every few seconds, blood dripping down his forearm in rivulets. The adrenaline had stopped blocking the pain halfway through tearing out the car’s alarm. "I had tuh shut off the car, 'n it was locked.. ain't so bad, Ro', but yer leg don't look good." the kid explained defensively, dangling his gun at his thigh and trying to pull his arm free.

"Don't be silly, sweetie, we need to bandage this up.."

Nick didn't even bother checking himself over. He could feel where they'd clawed him through his sleeves, and the burn spots on his hands still stung. His whole spine felt like it was ready to lock up, his shoulder popping painfully when he shifted it. He must've made a noise or a face without realizing, because Coach's gruff voice suddenly spoke up.

"Seein' straight, boy?"

The conman actually smirked, though it was small, and he growled a low response, forcing himself to walk toward where he'd dropped his gun. "Just fine.. you?" The acid had stilled and darkened, a dank shade of green more like algae, but Nick was still leery to touch it. He used his heel to drag his machine gun toward him, losing his smirk and clenching his teeth as he was forced to drop to a crouch to get it, pain flashing up his spine.

He delicately touched it, ready to recoil if the liquid still lacing the machine gun's metal frame burned... but it didn't. It had a shelf life, apparently. Nick forced a sigh, picking it up by the muzzle and getting back to his feet, holding the gun between his fingers as lightly as he could and pausing a moment to try and stretch his spine, it crackling rather nastily. He growled faintly.

Coach huffed a tight chuckle and drew away from the car, pulling the backpack off his shoulder and reaching in to find the roll of gauze. He offered it to Rochelle, but Ellis snatched it out of the air and backed up slightly, giving them a quick smile and using his teeth to peel the strip up off the roll. He started to wrap it one-handed around his elbow, keeping his teeth clenched on the end to make it tight.

"Ah gawht eht." he assured them, carefully, hiding the little flinch that crossed the corners of his eyes as the gauze rubbed over the worst of the slices. Rochelle reluctantly backed off, sighing a bit as she placed a hand over the wound on her knee and looked up to glance over the bloody mess they'd made of the street.

"I guess it's pretty safe to say nobody's around... anyone looking would've come at that." she said softly, prompting Coach to settle his arm over her shoulders again. She glanced up at him, frowning subtly. "You come out of it okay, Coach?"

"Mmhm." he said very simply, looking around the zombie-scattered street and scrunching his nose slightly against the dull stench in the air. His frame twitched a bit with a sigh, scratching once at his belly and shaking his head. "Guess we better work on how we're gonna get our asses outta here."

Wiping his mouth carefully with his wrist, Nick trudged up to join them, expression unreadable as he hooked his arm into his machine gun's arm strap. There was a buzzing in his ear that blocked out any thought, this almost single-minded ferocity. Rochelle turned her head to glance at him, but he was staring Ellis down darkly, watching the hick tear his bandage free from the roll and then tuck it under itself to hold it on.

Handing it back to Rochelle with a quiet 'thanks,' Ellis noticed Nick and quickly turned to face him, holding his injured arm at a careful angle to his side. "Nick... man, I'm real sorry, I was tryin' tuh-"
Then it just... happened; the conman backhanded him hard, knocking Ellis a few steps back and making him stumble down to his ass on the asphalt. He caught himself on his palms, quickly raising his good arm to cup his cheek in his palm, this dumb look of surprise on his reddening face.

"Don't fucking do that again." Nick stated simply and venomously, pulling his hand back to curl his fingers. His expression was deadpanned, not giving a single hint at the thought that actually crossed his mind.

...fuck, I actually.. don't know why I did that.. I'm not - Am I that pissed at him?

They were all silent, no one entirely certain about breaking the silence, until Ellis gave a quiet 'heh' and one-sided grin. Carefully rolling his jaw to pop it, the hick glanced up at Nick under the bill of his cap, miraculously still on his head, not losing his quirked grin even when Nick didn't budge an inch.

"Fergive me now?" Ellis questioned, and for some mind-boggling reason he sounded calm when he said it, like he hadn't just gotten smacked to the floor. His lower lip started bleeding, just a little prickle of red down the slope of soft flesh. One of Nick's rings must've clipped his mouth.

I'm not stupid, he was trying to help... I was just going to yell at him.. fuck.

But all three of them were staring at him, and he was taking too long to respond. He just scowled hard at the kid and stepped forward, grabbing hold of his shirt collar and yanking him up to his feet.

"You're a goddamn idiot, Ellis." he growled at him in non-answer, shoving him a little just to make him stumble before the conman turned and shoved his hands into his slacks' pockets, biting his tongue against the sharp feeling of nausea that rose up his throat.

I'm agitated, that's it, and he deserved it. Nick glanced down at his clothes, finally letting himself catalogue the new damages to his once-pristine suit, mostly to distract himself. The buzzing sound was gone - but that clammy feeling was back. When did I get this hair-trigger?

He heard Ellis chuckling behind him, and his acceptance of the punishment boggled them all. Coach started to say something, but the hick simply shrugged his uninjured shoulder with an easy smile, prompting up with a, "So whut're we gonna do?"

Rochelle sighed slightly at that, reaching up to squeeze gently on Coach's forearm before she broke away from him and took a limped step to the side, rubbing gently at her temples with her fingertips.

"I guess we need to start heading out of town... maybe we can find a map, if we can get into a store nearby? I'd like to plan a little more, if.." Her lips downcurled a bit, giving a helpless gesture around them with her voice gaining a tautness to it. "we can't get a few blocks and not have that kind of shit happen."

Coach chuffed out a thoughtful noise, nodding. His head turned to eye Ellis, the kid perking up a little at the glance, keeping himself from hunching any over his injured arm. "C'mon, son, we gotta go find us a store.. Gonna hafta break in. Don't do it wit' yo' arm again - you're lucky you ain't hurt worse."

Ellis laughed, adjusting his grip on his shotgun and stepping up toward Coach, shaking his head dismissively like there wasn't drying blood dribbled down the whole length of his forearm. He found a story as the big man started to lead them toward the sidewalk, Nick reluctantly trailing after them though he had half a mind to just sit for a minute, feeling out of sorts and aching. "I ever tell you 'bout the time muh buddy Keith -"
Very quietly, Nick said "Don't start." His tone was so flat it made Rochelle glance over her shoulder at him, but the conman's face was covered with a simple scowl and she got nothing.

Ellis gawped forward for just a moment, then flashed to a grin without even looking behind himself and whispered so just Rochelle and Coach could hear him, gesturing to his roughly bandaged and bloody elbow with his shotgun; "...well, this ain't nothin' is all I'm sayin'."

Nick realized he'd have preferred it if the hick had started crying at the backhand, or punched him in return. At least then it would've been a reasonable reaction... as it was he just felt like a jackass, and coupled with the fact he hadn't actually meant to hit Ellis - that it rang like a 'mistake' - it all left him feeling very odd and tense.

Was he feverish again, or was it just his imagination? He felt like something was going on beyond his control, against his will, and it chafed him in all the wrong ways.

He dug for a cigarette and match.
They took the road more carefully now, walking in a loose line down the sidewalk.

With Nick deathly silent at the back and offering a fierce poker face while he smoked his cigarette down, puffing like a chimney, Ellis had pushed himself closer to Rochelle and Coach. The kid trotted along with his shotgun dangled in his right hand while his injured left arm was held gingerly at his side. Considering both Rochelle and Ellis were hurt, Coach kept in front, his bulky frame arranged like a shield to the two behind him.

Rochelle still couldn't pick out any kind of brooding on the kid's face, but it was hard to think he'd taken the conman's strike that well. Harder, even, to gauge her own feelings about it when the attacked party had so easily dismissed it.

*Boys. I'll never understand.*

Testingly, she lifted her head, flashing a smile and prompting, "That was pretty smooth, turning off that alarm.. you're not Nick's type. Guess it's that autoshop experience?"

She felt a little heat on the back of her skull and figured Nick had turned his currently lazered gaze onto her, but she kept focused on Ellis, watching him break into a bashful grin and try to adjust his cap with his thumb, fighting the weight of his shotgun.

"Awh, shucks.. just a little wire work, that's all.. The alarm system's right under the steerin' wheel. But, thanks Ro'. I looove cars.. always have. Can't say I took it up plannin' fer zombies, but, uhh.. I ain't complainin'. Been tinkerin' with 'em since I could work a jack."

Nick found himself tightening his lips on his cigarette, exhaling smoke through his nostrils. At the same time the hick's response brought back a vivid recollection of his totaled Barchetta, it struck him with the thought of Ellis - lean, flush body shirtless and toiling over the hood of a car...

Coach's shotgun blasting off as their presence attracted a group of zombies distracted him enough to dissipate the image, but he could feel it humming in the back of his head. Simmering together with his anger with Ellis and the fog over his brain, Nick's frustrated sex drive revved up to a dangerous level.

*Maybe scaring him off is the way to go, after all.*

The gambler lifted his machine gun and picked off a few zombies with short squeezes of his trigger, rolling his shoulder as he eyed the kid's back between shots. *Would get him to leave me the fuck alone at least... it's a thought. Bad one, maybe...*

"I guess the hat and jumpsuit should've tipped me off. Maybe when this is all over, you can tell me why my air conditioning is always rattling." She grinned at him, and though she noticed Coach shaking his head minutely and knew he had half a mind to chide her for pretending things would return to that kind of normality, the big man didn't actually vocalize it.

Ellis snorted a laugh, spinning his shotgun in half-circles with his hand and cocking his head. He adjusted his hurt arm slightly, the bandages itching and dried blood feeling tacky on his skin.

"Course! Hell, we get outta here, I'll get'ch'ya a whole new car."

Rochelle shook her head in amusement, resting her palm on her hip as she let her limp exaggerate.
slightly to take weight off her hurt leg. Ellis must've noticed, because he instantly trapped his shotgun gingerly under the armpit of his bandaged arm, stepping to the other side of Rochelle so he could offer his good arm for support. The gesture freshly charmed her, bringing a smile to her lips, but she rejected it with a gentle shake of her head.

He retreated easily, rubbing the back of his hand against his nose and risking a glance over his shoulder to check on Nick. He caught the gambler with a strange expression on his face, and he swore Nick had been staring at him, but it switched to a challenging scowl so fast he couldn't get a read on it.

Pulling in a breath, Ellis half-awkwardly turned back and scratched behind an ear as he considered trying to prompt a conversation with the lagging conman. He felt guilty about his screw-up earlier, regardless of the punishment Nick had meted out, and eagerly perked up when Rochelle nudged him. Her voice was thoughtfully and cautiously toned. "So, Ellis... this Keith.. why aren't you with him?"

Chuckling quietly and prying his shotgun from under his arm, Ellis swung it to his shoulder and gave a shrugging gesture with his head. "I was a ways outta town is all, when the evacs started. He rang me up though, just a'fore he got on one of them whirlybirds."

A loud, sarcastic snort from behind them made them jump a little, and Nick quietly muttered, "'Whirlybirds'..." with that mocking Southern twang that would've otherwise made Ellis laugh. This time, though, he didn't say anything at all, scratching his neck and forcing a blank look like he hadn't even heard it.

Maybe the mocking was a good sign... he could only hope the conman was getting over what happened, however slowly. Ellis decided he'd find another time to apologize again, relaxing with the idea of having a plan.

Rochelle cleared her throat slightly, reaching up a hand to tug on one of her hoop earrings and raising her voice in a dogged attempt to continue distracting Ellis - and, subtly, chide Nick for his snarking. "What, he just left? Didn't think he should wait for you?"

Ellis laughed at that, nudging his chin down to shade his eyes slightly under the bill of his cap. "Naw, nothin' like that... He didn't want tuh go on till I got there, but he was with our mamas. Told him to go with 'em. Anyway, looks like them CEDA folk weren't real keen on hangin' 'round any... don't reckon I blame 'em none, either."

"I do." Coach interjected easily, chuckling afterward and pulling them to a stop just before a zombie-clogged T-intersection. They were swarming sluggishly over the remnants of a bloody crash, clawing at the uninfected bodies crushed between the conjoined frames of cars.

He gauged their surroundings for a moment with a heavy sigh - up till then, the blocks had been either purely housing or businesses obviously destroyed beyond salvaging. He noticed a sign for a gas station down the street. "Gas station down the street." the big man answered simply, cracking his neck with an easy roll of
his bald head. He reloaded his shotgun quietly, speaking up again when Rochelle and Ellis stopped behind them. "Ro', Ellis - stick close. We gonna have to get through that shit. Nick an' I'll handle it, a'ight?"

For the first time since they'd met, Rochelle argued. She pulled her pistol free from her belt, shifting her weight slightly as she checked the clip defiantly. "We all have guns, Coach, we'll help.. don't be like that."

Ellis agreed quickly, flashing a lopsided grin as he lifted his shotgun up and forced his bandaged elbow into a twist so he could grip the reload pump. "I'm with Ro', Coach. Them zombies ain't got nothin' on us if we stick toghether, and anyways, I can only take so much hidin' at the back... got zombies tuh kill, man."

Coach eyed them carefully for an instant, giving in almost instantly with a nod. In retrospect, it was a respectable decision - he knew better than to fight them. The all-knowing leader type didn't sit well with Nick, but seeing he'd shut up when shutting up was appropriate lowered his distaste a few notches. "Yeah, sho'. Let's do this shit."

Nick found himself gritting his teeth in agitation as Ellis whooped "Yeah!" out loud without thinking, like the moment was too exciting for him to handle. The gleeful sound snapped heads toward them, and within an instant the zombies were throwing themselves away from the car in a mad dash toward them.

"Ellis..." Rochelle chided quickly, swinging herself to the side to get a good shot around Nick. She got the first shot in, the gambler following with Coach close behind, taking the infected down quickly with their firm front. Ellis hesitated, more embarrassed than anything else, but as the first few zombies went down to blaring, varied gunfire he couldn't stand back.

"Sorry!" he managed as he joined the impromptu line, quickly aiming for the closest infected. He heard Coach chuckle under the loud blast of the kid's shotgun. The reaction easily reassured him, a grin flashing over his face, goofy and unfading even when reloading made his arm twitch with pain - and when Nick snapped loudly over the gunfire.

"You couldn't cause more goddamn problems if you tried, Overalls."

Chuckling as one of his shots caught a zombie in the shoulder and spun it around in a bleeding circle, Ellis retorted - and he did it sweetly, voice devoid of sarcasm. "Well, Nick, at least you admit I ain't tryin'...

The oddly apt response made Nick grunt noncommittally, barely audible under the gunfire that announced the squalling deaths of the next couple zombies. One managed to dodge getting hit, scrambling into a leap to try and claw its way to Coach. Nick quickly shifted his fire, catching it in the side and blowing it open like a split pig, but the sudden twist of his waist made his frame seize up slightly and his cigarette got flung free from his lips in a small huff.

Fuck… Something was wrong. Maybe he'd bashed his head harder on the car than he thought - but as nausea flooded him, he wasn't so sure.

None of the others noticed it, it seemed. Coach nodded an acknowledgement and returned to shooting, the last few stragglers going down easy. Nick stepped back a bit from the other three to check his ammo and take a few breaths, tipping the gun to the side and snapping the clip out with a quick motion of his palm.

Replacing it after confirming that he was running low, Nick released a lengthy sigh. Licking his
lips in a regretful motion at the loss of his cigarette (even though it had almost been burnt to a stub anyway), the conman cleared his throat once, quietly, and tipped his head to look over his suit and wipe at a few of the worst spots with his knuckles.

Nobody was looking his way, and he took advantage of the moment to press a knuckle to his forehead.

He was scalding.

The realization made his heart skip a beat, a shallow clench of his chest. Why…?

"Hey, we made it out of that one alright.." Rochelle noted suddenly, discarding her empty pistol clip and prying a new one from the stash of a couple she'd tucked under her belt in a few places. She laughed slightly, turning her head to flash a smile at Ellis. He adjusted his cap with the wrist of his gun-holding hand, hiding a chagrined look.

"I'd'uv felt awful if someone'd gotten hurt... well, again.."

Coach reached out to pat him between the shoulderblades, glancing down the road to try and see the gas station they were hoping for. "Don't worry, son. Ain't the last time someone's gonna do somethin' stupid. No sense mopin.'" He squinted slightly, noting the broken shape of a dead gas sign sticking out over the sidewalk several blocks down.

Ellis nodded gratefully under the quiet, stifled sound of Nick coughing. He carefully reloaded his shotgun, cringing a little more visibly as he noticed he'd started to bleed through his elbow's bandages.

Rochelle noticed too, giving him a dubious look sideways. "Honey, you should've sat that one out. What'm I gonna do with you, huh?" But she smiled gently, offering her hand out to take a look at it as another unintelligibly muffled cough came from behind them.

Ellis shook his head with a grin, tucking his shotgun under his armpit and letting his bandaged arm dangle at his side. "Naw, Ro', we can deal with it at the gas station.. ain't nothin' what can't wait a few minutes. Keith tore his whole arm up once workin' on a car, 'cause the engine -"

When a third cough sounded faintly, Rochelle couldn't help but turn around, cocking her hip slightly, both in bewilderment and to keep her weight off her pained knee.

"Nick, hun, you alright?"

The conman lifted his head, lifting a brow in a motion that betrayed he hadn't been paying a speck of attention to them. His face was defensively blank, burying the worry etched into the downward curl of his mouth - but there was nothing breathless about him like someone would be fighting a cough. Even as he clearly registered her question, he didn't seem to understand the context.

"They didn't even come close. Worried about me, doll? I'm -" Her reaction shut him up, head tilting.

Lifting a hand quickly to her mouth, Rochelle drew her brows together and started to dart her gaze over their surroundings, clearly looking for something. "Oh, shit, that wasn't you…” When another cough sounded, it was closer but still muffled - and Nick heard it this time.

An acrid stench drifted over. The remnants of Nick's cigarette's smell masked it at first, but as it became stronger, it became… thicker. Harsher. And stank, more like decomposition than tobacco.
Ellis caught on first, jumping slightly and getting his shotgun up, swinging it as he followed Rochelle's lead. He took half-steps backward as he turned, ending up starting a small circle. He looked nervous - reasonably so, though there was also a tint of his unaunted excitement, like he were narrating a horror movie. "Oh gawd, it's that chokin' thing again!"

Nick and Coach just had the time to understand and start to lift their guns when the cough came out loud and clear, crying out in a hacking yell. Rochelle gave a sudden, pained "AH!", and the whoosh of air was almost audible as she was ripped off her feet by her knee. The tongue shot up her thigh in a curl, quick to get a better grip even before she started falling.

In a lucky grab, she flung out her hand and got Nick's sleeve - and he let his machine gun flap wildly from its shoulderstrap in favor of grabbing her elbow in return. He could hear Ellis and Coach shouting, but within an instant he was being yanked to the asphalt with Rochelle. They collided hard, rolling and skidding as the tongue dragged them easily toward an open doorway, even with Nick added on.

More reflex than conscious thought, the conman used his weight and his grip on Rochelle's arm to force her against his chest, wrapping around her as the tongue jerked them harshly. The world was just blurs, in the small blinks he managed to get, trying to keep his mind functioning.

"Help, assh-!" Nick got out right before they bounced up and then struck the sidewalk again, a cry harsh in his ear from the tangled woman, though it was more fear than pain as he took the brunt of it. The wind was knocked out of him.

They were yanked through the doorway, tumbling straight into what felt like a table. It crumpled beneath them with a loud breaking noise, but they were almost instantly pulled deeper. Nick felt them crash right into the zombie's waiting frame, and a clawed hand grabbed onto the side of his head, digging nails into his cheek and pulling his head back.

It was smart enough to know Nick wasn't nearly as immobilized as Rochelle was, so it grabbed for him, fingertips seeking purchase on his face to claw. He fought it, reaching up a hand to try and punch at where he swore the thing's head must have been.

He hit shoulder; he'd forgotten how unnaturally tall it was, and it earned him nothing but a stinging hand and pain as the hacking infected grabbed at him harder. It was just pissed, now.

He could hear Rochelle's voice suddenly turn frantic, and the tongue - now entirely coiled around her - flexed to start the same strangulation he'd seen Ellis fall prey to. The hunting tentacle had found Nick's other arm, trapping it against Rochelle's side, and he felt it tightening on his forearm with a crushing weight.

His SMG was trapped underneath. He was fucked.

Before he could prepare a better aimed punch, it struck him: he had another gun.

Curling his body as much as he could, fueled by Rochelle's desperate voice as it started to cut in and out as she lost her breath, Nick scrabbled for the holster on his thigh. By some miracle, he swore, his Magnum had actually stayed in, even as they'd been dragged across the road.

Yanking it free, Nick cocked it with his thumb and blindly rammed it up till the muzzle hit something above his head. He bit his tongue hard as he pulled the trigger - and with a relieving bang, it fired.

The zombie exploded with a raspy noise, smoke suddenly drowning the air. The blast was enough
to knock Nick to the floor, and Rochelle came with him in a tumbling motion.

They both broke into nearly death-rattle coughs, huddling down against the ground to try and get out of the smoke. Nick tried to hold his breath and tugged on his trapped arm, prying the tongue carefully away from Rochelle and then making to uncoil the rest of the now-limp (but still twitching) appendage from her frame.

"N-Nick.." she coughed into the darkness, making him halt. ".quit copsing a feel.."

He instantly smirked, losing it when his lungs quivered in protest of holding in that smoke-stained air, falling to coughs and muttering a sarcastic, "Your voice says no, but..." between them. The tongue slipped free from its last few coils, and he just rolled himself one time to the side, tossing an arm limply over his face, letting the coughs wrack him unabated.

He couldn't move. His brain was fuzzy from the lack of oxygen; who even knew what the sickly smoke was made up of.

As he expected, he heard the loud arrival of Coach and Ellis, crowding into the house and starting up coughs of their own. "Nicl! Ro'!" Ellis' voice chirruped urgently. Nick felt them stumble onto him and Rochelle, and somebody grabbed onto his suit to start dragging him out of the house. He didn't even bother trying to help, quickly registering that it was Ellis because there was only one hand pulling on him.

Oh, great. He can drag me with one hand.

he morosely noted, throwing his arm off his face and taking in a rattling breath as they cleared the door and got into fresh air. He tried to sit up there, but Ellis didn't let go - he was tugged to the wall of the building and Ellis crouched down close to him, trying to push him to lean against it.

His hands were touching the conman too much, expression nakedly concerned, and Nick felt a hot feeling start burning up his spine - not his fever, he was sure - with irritation coming second. He was completely confused on why Ellis was so damn interested in him.

"Nick.." the kid spoke up, unaware he was agitating the gambler. "You okay, man? That was real -"

Seeing Coach duck out of the doorway right afterward, carrying Rochelle in his arms, Nick growled and shoved Ellis' hands away, snapping out in an irritated rush, "Fuck off - can you -" There he coughed, but recovered. "- give me five goddamn inches of breathing space?"

Ellis blinked twice, scooting back in his crouch and stopping a few steps away. He rested his injured arm on his thigh and dropped his other hand to fiddle with the toe of his right boot, watching the conman. Nick breathed hard, scowling, trying to glare him into moving away.

After a few beats, Nick just gave up and let his chin drop slowly, replacing his Magnum into the holster at his thigh and checking himself over with probing fingertips.

"Coach… I'm okay, let me down."

Rochelle did look surprisingly well from her place in Coach's arms, limbs tucked into a curl and held easily by the big ex-football player. Her eyes were red from coughing and she was holding onto a spot on her side, but was otherwise okay. "You sho', baby girl?" he questioned anyway, dubiously, giving her a tired look that clearly expressed his concern.

She smiled gently, and that was apparently answer enough, because the big man tipped her down to the sidewalk carefully. She eased onto her feet, Ellis glancing up toward her from his squat and looking relieved to see her standing. "Yuh scared me, you two..." he muttered, fingers tugging at
the seam between the sole and nose of his dirty workboots.

He flashed a grin right after, stupidly pleased, even though Nick did little more than grunt.

"Awh, we're fine, sweetie.." Rochelle reassured him, limping to get next to the crouched hick and rub at the back of his neck comfortingly. Her gaze moved up to Nick, gently biting her lower lip. Her expression was almost surprised."..Thanks, Nick. That was .."

It was the same thing Ellis had been planning to say. 'That was really nice of you, Nick.' The conman could already hear it and it grated on his nerves like sandpaper - SHE grabbed ME. It's not like I jumped into a damn burning building for her.

Which, of course, wasn't entirely true. He could have shaken off her hand... but he didn't. He reached out to grab her back. That knowledge agitated him. He started to arrange his legs to get up, a hand bracing himself on the side of the building, shaking his head harshly.

"Thank me by getting a move-the-fuck on... I didn't donate a goddamn organ to you or something, just forget it. We are actually trying to get somewhere, right?"

Ellis jumped to his feet, grinning undaunted. "I told y'all we'd be fine iffin we worked as a team." he stated, offering a hand down to Nick to help him up. Nick all but slapped it away, giving him a dull stare before shoving himself up to his feet on his own.

The kid was unperturbed, simply stepping away from him and traipsing to the edge of the sidewalk to look down the road. Coach moved to join him, bending his head to say something to the younger Georgian.

Ellis seemed uncertain at it, expression scrunching up in that confused look he did best, a headtilt away from being puppylike. The big man didn't elaborate any, just turned away with a pat to Ellis' back.

Nick eyed them, then fussily straightened his clothing, brushed himself off, and put his hands into the pockets of his slacks. Rochelle was still looking at him, so he muttered at her, flexing fingers slowly. The expression he was being given made him uncomfortable. "Look, you're welcome. 'Kay?"

"Nice to know you're not a total asshole." She cracked a grin at him, carefully limping toward Coach and Ellis and gesturing down the sidewalk. "Looks pretty clear. Let's book it to the gas station while we can... I need to sit down pretty soon."

Nick gladly aimed to take up the rear, both to distance himself again and so he could let himself favor his weight as his abused body demanded. He expected Ellis to try to slow his steps and walk next to him - he didn't. The gambler found himself eyeing the mechanic's back, like he could read him, wondering what Coach had said to him.

Not knowing rapidly began to irk him.
"I don't think pulling harder is going to convince it to unlock, Coach."

The conman's mocking observation was mostly ignored. Coach tugged again on the handle of the gas station door, rewarded only with the same jarring jerk as it refused to open. The big man finally took a step back from the door and sighed, hitching his slacks up by the belt.

"Well, shit."

The small gas station was tightly locked up. Though there were big windows on either side of the door and the door itself was mostly glass, the whole expanse of it was barred up by subtle steel blinds. Someone before them had tried to break in, the glass just above the handle shattered, but the blinds were too close together. There was blood on the edges that betrayed the person's attempt to reach in and open the door, but all they'd done was cut their hand trying to worm it through the glass.

Inside was a tempting sight; more than enough light was filtering in through the windows to see that the aisles were stocked and the place was undisturbed. "Think there's another door?" Ellis piped up hopefully, rubbing at the back of his head and scratching fingertips up under his cap. "Don't much look like we're gettin' in through this, unless y'all wanna shoot in all this glass."

Rochelle sighed, limping forward to lean her hip against the ice vending machine that sat dead a few feet to the side of the door. Water was steadily spilling in rivulets out from the fridge-like door in the front, melted ice completely overflowing, but Rochelle was too busy eyeing the gas station over her shoulder to notice her boots getting a little wet.

Nick rolled light, masked green eyes subtly, releasing a sigh like his time was being wasted waiting in a line. He reached down into his pocket and pulled his cigarette pack out, tipping it back and forth in his fingers.

I still can't believe they thought I was that goddamn choker zombie... maybe you should cut back, Nicolas. You'll end up turning into one at this rate.

That thought wasn't pleasant. Especially not when his skin was crawling with a fever he couldn't quite explain.

He was sore and aching, like he'd gone on a drinking binge and then gotten his ass kicked in the same night. So, he weighed his over-consumption during the last day or two with the numbing influence.

... it wasn't a huge surprise when he popped a cigarette free and slipped it between his lips. "How about you two - " The conman nodded toward Coach and Ellis, without actually looking at either of them. " - go check on that like good little boyscouts? Ro' and I'll watch the road."

Nick ignored the slightly startled glance Rochelle gave him and switched the cigarette pack for his matches, boredly tearing one out to strike it against the book.

Ellis nudged his cap down a little, shading his eyes and clearing his throat. He adjusted his one-handed grip on his shotgun, having long since tucked his left hand into the knot of his overalls to rest his injured arm along the curve of his waist. "Uh, sure." He gave a quick grin and took a step back, glancing up at Coach.

The big man clapped a hand over the hick's shoulders, urging him to start to turn around. "C'mon, son. We get lucky, maybe we find a door out back 'n' get us somethin' sweet in there. I got a cravin'
That made Ellis laugh, quickening his pace with a ripening enthusiasm. "Hoh man, I'm totally addicted to them squiggly worm things... y'know, the gummy ones? Yeeeah, 'cept them sour ones. I mean I like 'em, but they make me scrunch up, y'know..?"

"Chocolate, son. Chocolate."

Their voices faded as they turned around the corner of the building, a few gunshots the evidence of their progress and apparent run-in with a few alleyway zombies. Nick was unconcerned as he lit his cigarette, taking in a breath and leaning his head back to exhale it straight upward.

Rochelle eyed him dubiously, chin lowered and thoughtful. In most circumstances, Nick would usually just ignore her until she broke down and prompted a conversation, but he didn't bother this time, appreciatively pulling his cigarette from his lips and glancing at her. "What?"

She shrugged her shoulders, reaching up to work her hoop earrings out of her ears. She hooked them together and then examined them, like she might just throw them away. "Don't have something on your mind?"

Nick smirked, quickly, replacing the cigarette and cocking his head. He dropped his voice to a taunting, elaborate tone. "That kinda question is generally better asked of the person asking it."

Rolling soft chocolate eyes at the salacious twirk to his brows, Rochelle straightened up and settled a hand on her hip. "Look, Nick. If you're being nice, then consider me the first to say thank God. But I'm just getting the feeling you're having... ideas, and you're a bit of a sleaze. I have a guy back in Ohio and-"

Even though Nick wasn't really surprised, he lifted up hands to interrupt her, shaking his head so she'd stop. Letting a smoky breath roil from his nostrils, he spoke up dryly; "Sorry, cupcake. You're a little too straight-edge for me. Try ten years younger and a third of the clothing and I might say different."

Her relief was quickly overshadowed by offense. *Damn women. Always wanting the answer that pisses them off.* "Excuse me? Too straight-edge? Not boozed up enough for you?"

The gambler laughed, watching her irked expression fade as he nonchalantly took a pull off his cigarette and shrugged a shoulder. "I said sorry. Can't help my tastes. I can always fake it if you'd feel better."

None of which, of course, was really true. He may have had a 'type,' but that was just a preference. His *standards*, on the other hand, were pretty much limited to whether or not the other party had a pulse.

That, and the likelihood of catching something.

Rochelle crossed her arms over her chest, returning to a lean against the ice machine and drawing her healthy, plump lips into almost a pout. He couldn't quite decide exactly how much was playful at that point, though her initial offense had certainly faded. "A little, yeah."

Nick snorted faintly, catching his cigarette between his teeth and holding it still. He talked past it easily, white teeth flashing between his lips. "Got any hairpins in?" He held his hand out, palm up.

She was reasonably confused at the abrupt question, both brows lifting and head tilting a little as she twirled her hoop earrings between her fingers. "Ehm.. what does that have to do with -?"
Rolling his eyes as a few more gunshots rang out behind the gas station, Nick moved his fingers to repeat his question silently. "We can keep fucking talking about that if you want, or we can get in the gas station."

Sighing faintly with a shake of her head, Rochelle bent her head to the side and lifted one hand to work the two black bobbypins that held a few stray braids and unkempt frizz into place behind her ear free. She dropped them into the conman's palm, expectantly watching him.

He shrugged his machine gun strap further onto his shoulder, plucking up the pins and starting to force them halfway unbent as he stepped over to the door. Rochelle realized his intentions about there, sounding exasperated and lifting her hand to set her chin on her palm, fingers working her earrings around them. "Oh hell, suit... are you serious?"

"You people keep acting like I ever pretended to be a goddamn saint." Nick grunted with a tint of humor, taking a pull of his cigarette as he dropped down into a crouch and nestled his hands around the lock. Working the pins inside, he coolly twisted and turned them bare centimeters at a time. Going by touch, his eyes wandered, and he inspected the rounded, red burn spots on his hands.

"What are you, then?"

Nick could hear the disapproval and noticed he genuinely didn't give a shit. He glanced at her, pausing a moment just as he felt his makeshift lockpick catch onto a tumbler and go slightly stiff. Giving her a scathing look, he glanced back and torqued the pins carefully. "Like I said.. you are just too straight-edge for me."

A loud click made him smirk, and Nick straightened up, pulling the handle. Sure enough, it swung open, a few shards of glass tumbling down from the broken spot. He set his foot just in front of the door, holding it open and gesturing his arm in a half-flourish in front of his chest.

He smirked easily into her small, only moderately serious glare as she straightened up and limped past him, glancing around the small store. She ran her hand over the shelves as she passed them, touching the strange normality of the neatly stocked aisles like it might crumble under her fingertips.

"You don't think anyone's here, do you? Did they lock it and leave, or lock it and hide?"

Nick pulled his gun off his shoulder, hooking the strap on the door handle and letting the door settle half-shut with the gun stuck in the doorway. He put his hands into his pockets, stowing the bobbypins away, and strolled toward the store counter. "Guess we'll find out." he responded nonchalantly, stepping around the counter and pulling open the drawer beneath the register.

"..Were you planning on letting the boys know we got in?" She didn't seem to see what he was doing, pulling a small can of chips off one of the shelves and popping the plastic top off. The paper seal underneath seemed to intimidate her, however, as she fiddled with the tab without opening it.

"Eh, they'll figure it out eventually." He wasn't really paying attention, plucking a key from the drawer and glancing it over in the dim light. Flicking his gaze up to the register, he found the lock on one corner and inserted it, turning it as he blew out a long stream of smoke.

"Much to his pleasure, the register popped open, a loud ching betraying him to the woman two chest-high aisles over. She glanced over at him, giving him a long, dry look. He didn't even bother looking up, opening his suit to reach into an inner breast pocket and pull out his wallet.

He was halfway through stowing the largest bills in his wallet when the door opened up, the
machine gun clattering a little as it swung. Coach, leading the way, pulled it free and glanced over at Nick. He didn't say a word; he merely held onto the gun for the moment and moved to join Rochelle.

"How the hell'd you two get in here, baby girl?"

Ellis trudged in after him, glancing curiously around the store and tipping his cap back on his head. He walked over to the counter, leaning his good elbow against it and hunching down. He didn't look at Nick, focusing toward the other two - and the conman gave him the same treatment, finally stowing his wallet back into his jacket. It sat a bit heavier on his chest, now.

"Nick picked the lock, the shady jerk... if I'd've known he was planning that I'd have stopped you, sorry." Rochelle popped the chip can open, finally, taking one and biting into it with a kind of finality.

Coach chuckled gruffly, shaking his head in a motion that clearly indicated it wasn't her fault. He tucked an arm over her shoulder after freeing himself from the burden of both his and Nick's guns, as well as his backpack, stowing it all on top of the shelf next to them. "C'mon, let's find us a map or an atlas in here.. gotta be makin' a few choices here."

Ellis shifted where he stood, seeming uncomfortable. The motion made Nick glance up, pulling his cigarette from his lips and rolling it slowly between his fingertips. It was bothering him even more now, how the kid was acting.

Eyeing his expression sideways, he almost looked guilty.

It had to have been what Coach said to him out of earshot, but for the life of him Nick couldn't decide what that could've been. Why do I even care? What, he has to leave me alone on my terms? Now I'm acting like Ro'.

Frustrated, Nick stepped back from the register and stalked out from behind the counter. He stepped around Ellis, ignoring the younger man's slight jump at the sudden movement, and made his way to the back of the store to find Coach and Rochelle.

They'd found a small book atlas among a rack of postcards against the far wall, and Rochelle was holding it up as they glanced over the road map inside. Coach prodded on the page, trailing his fingertip along the line of a highway. "What I was talkin' 'bout. Highway 80, straight on through... Get us right to the port."

Rochelle nodded slowly, not noticing Nick stop behind them and tip his head to eye the atlas over her shoulder. "Yeah, I see.. shit, if we could get a car somehow, we could drive right on." She popped another chip into her mouth from the can she had tucked between her elbow and her waist, chewing thoughtfully.

"Hope it's that easy, baby girl." Coach chuckled gruffly, setting a hand on the shelf next to him and resting his weight on it. He glanced at Nick, then past him at Ellis. "We get to the port, we take some R&R on the beach till CEDA notices us. Sounds good to me."

Nick smirked slightly, curling his lips around his cigarette and blowing smoke out of the corner of his mouth, directing it away from the two. "Oh yeah. Just like a vacation. Dream come true. Too bad all the hot beach babes are dead or dying."

Ellis' voice abruptly announced that he'd crept up behind the three of them, standing a little askew and not looking completely sure of himself. "Keith'n I used tuh go tuh the beach all the time, when
we was in high school. He tans like a baked 'tater. I do okay, but muh nose burns." He rubbed a
g fingertip against his rounded nose, both bashfully and to emphasize his point.

Rochelle turned around, blinking just an instant at the hick before suddenly half-shutting the atlas, handing it to Coach. "Oh, Ellis, I forgot your arm, sorry... mind handing me the pack, Coach? He bled through his bandages pretty bad."

The big man nodded obligingly, picking his backpack up and offering it to Rochelle. He pointed toward the restroom door tucked in the back of the gas station, gesturing Ellis on as Rochelle already started walking toward it. "Go on, Ellis. Don't pull that self-reliant shit 'gain, either."

The kid grinned slightly, dropping his chin to shade his eyes under the bill of his cap. "Naww.." He tagged after Rochelle, holding his injured arm up a little and looking at it sideways. As the two of them got out of earshot, Nick glanced at Coach, getting a slight jut to his jaw. He took advantage of the chance to get Coach alone.

"You mind telling me what you told Overalls earlier? He's been acting more... stupid than usual."

The ex-football player chuckled slightly, leaning against the shelf a little more. "Tryin' to save us all some pain, boy. Just pointed out he's makin' more trouble than he's fixin', tryin' to be yo' friend."

Nick grunted disinterestedly, grinding his cigarette out on the shelf beside him. "Ain't that the truth." It felt forced, and Nick couldn't determine exactly why. Ellis was making trouble, in ways far beyond the big man's understanding. So why did the words leave him irritated?

A shriek from across the gas station made both of them startle. Rochelle and Ellis stood in front of the just-opened restroom, the hick quickly grabbing hold of Rochelle and backing up just a step. Horror was clear in their postures, and Rochelle's outburst turned into a weirdly choked "Oh my God."

Nick quickly darted through the aisle, hearing Coach behind him as he ran to them. "What?!" he demanded, grabbing for his shoulder before he remembered he didn't have his SMG with him. He started to go for his Magnum instead.

In the end it wasn't necessary.

The dim restroom was lit up by a dying flashlight, left face-up in the sink. Slumped against the porcelain toilet just in front of them was the corpse of an elderly man, the shaft of a knife jutting out from the side of his throat. Blood drenched the whole of his neck and torso, dribbled down in a river from the wound. His right hand was collapsed onto his chest at such an angle, elbow twisted, as to make it painfully clear he'd inflicted it on himself.

Poor bastard... people just can't take disaster, can they?

There was writing on the sink-side mirror a few feet away, scrawled in black marker but not quite readable in the lacking light. Feeling his whole gut go to stone at the intense scent of copper, Nick silently stepped into the bathroom, skirting around the corpse. He heard scuffling behind him, aware of Coach coming up and pulling both Ellis and Rochelle against him protectively.

Grabbing hold of the flashlight set in the sink, Nick tightened his jaw and flicked it up to the mirror, shining what little light its dying batteries were still giving off carefully over the message written there.

'JAMES 1:2-3'
Nick dropped his chin slightly, slowly clicking the flashlight entirely off and replacing it in the sink. He didn't know what he'd expected to read, but somehow he just felt disappointed. He retraced his steps, reaching for the knob to shut the door again.

Rochelle suddenly spoke up, head turned away from Coach's chest, staring at Nick as he closed the door. "What're you doing?"

The conman looked back over his shoulder, expression hard and unmoving. His tone, though, had a defensive note to it. "Would you rather we left the goddamn door open? Or maybe dragged him out and found a nice piece of broken asphalt to bury him under?"

Her eyes dropped slightly, some sobriety creeping onto her expression. She shook her head just once, turning her hand to hold onto Coach's forearm for a moment. "...no. I'm sorry, Nick."

The gambler didn't respond to the apology.

Ellis wrangled himself out from under Coach's arm. He pulled his cap respectfully off his head, setting it against his chest solemnly and speaking up with a small frown. "There ain't nothin' we can do, Ro'..

Coach let Rochelle go, too, when she leaned away. The woman wrapped her arms around herself and took in a breath. "I know, honey... but why'd he - I mean, he could've lived for weeks in here."

Nick slipped past them as Coach responded to that, getting distance between him and the other three. He ran his hands through his hair, breathing slow. The adrenaline was still pumping, and the deadened mask on the old man's bloodless face had rattled him.

"Baby girl, listen... you already said you ain't a woman fo' the Bible, 'n that's a'right.. but that passage he wrote's about endurin' through trials. He couldn't, but we gotta take it like a last wish an' go on stronger. We gotta keep goin', Rochelle. S'the only way all this shit ain't in vain."

None of them spoke for a few moments. Nick felt a gaze on his back but kept himself turned the other way, leaning against a set of shelves, intent on un-involving himself even though he was unable to escape the situation entirely.

Quietly, Rochelle nodded her head, pushing a firm look onto her expression after a sharp intake of breath. "... Okay. Ellis?"

"Yeah?" The kid smiled gently at her, reassuringly, replacing his cap onto his head.

"Let's clean your arm.. and then you're finding us a car."
Chapter 21

The hard look on Nick's face solidly suggested Coach was insane. "No."

Coach sighed wearily, leaning back even more against the shelf he'd sat himself beside. He took a bite of the chocolate bar held protectively in one hand. "Boy, we ain't got time fo' this shit... we only got four people, a'ight? You're gonna have to work wit' that."

Their back-and-forth was in hushed tones even though Ellis and Rochelle were outside, taking advantage of the water-filled icebox to clean up the hick's arm. "For fuck's sake, Coach, why can't you or Rochelle babysit him?"

"She's still shaken up, Nick, 'n' no offense but you ain't the one I'd pick to stay wit' her." Peeling the wrapper down further and frowning for a moment, Coach shook his head. "Just keep him from gettin' killed while he hunts down a workin' car outside, that's all I'm askin'."

Frustrated, Nick crossed his arms tightly and bent his torso forward, digging his fingers into his biceps. Maybe you should've thought about that before you got involved instead of just letting me handle it. "Fine. But it's your goddamn fault if I end up shooting him." he muttered, turning around and walking away.

He stopped next to the store counter, where their guns had ended up - all except for his Magnum and Rochelle's Glock. Reaching up hands, the conman pulled his suit jacket off, stripping his torso down to the blue dress shirt underneath. He folded it up and set it next to the register.

"Jus' keep him from doin' somethin' stupid, boy." Coach grunted quietly, closing his eyes as he busied himself with his chocolate bar tiredly. "Hell if we're losin' one of our own, 'n' he's already hurt."

Snorting, Nick undid the cuffs of his shirt and rolled his sleeves up to the elbows. Once they were settled, he picked his machine gun up and worked the strap over his shoulder. "By his own stupidity."

It seemed like Coach might not respond, cleaning his fingertips of melted chocolate, but just as Nick reached the door, he prompted, "Nick." The conman barely turned around in time to catch what the big man threw at him; pulling his head back, he eyed the plastic package of gummy worms in his hand with some bewilderment.

"He did hurt himself savin' our asses, boy. Tell him it's from me if you don't want him thinkin' you're doin' him a favor."

"Don't touch my chocolate."

Nick broke into a smirk much despite himself, recalling Ellis' enthusiastic confession before they'd gotten inside, unable to resist it. It was almost ridiculous; break into a gas station, and the sweets were the first to go. "I guess candy is the new drug in the apocalypse."

...Yeah, 'cept whut Keith didn't know was that his pa had left his beer in the back, so when the
coppers pulled him over... I mean he hadn't drunk none, but dayum, they was pissed anyway.."

Unsurprised to hear another story spilling from the mechanic, Nick glanced to the side, arching a brow at the two sitting close together on the asphalt just to the left.

Rochelle was just pressing her fingertip along the last piece of medical tape to hold Ellis' new bandages down, eyes glancing up at his face and expression soft. She seemed fascinated with him, staring at his oblivious expression as he rambled and shook his head along with his story.

Nick could understand her enthrallment. *Like nothing even happened... can't tell if this kid is insane or just... blind. Damnit, Ellis... why couldn't you just be boring?*

"How's the village idiot doing, 'Chelle?" Nick interrupted, expression blank, tearing open the bag of gummy worms he still had a grip on. "If we can't save the arm, I say we just dump him."

Ellis twisted at the waist, blinking at Nick in momentary surprise. His hat was in his lap, leaving his face wide open and unshaded, and he couldn't even try to hide the way his eyes locked onto the bag of candy. He didn't even defend himself, hopefully eyeing the package.

This time, though, he didn't have that stupefied look of cautious guilt that had been plaguing him every time he'd looked at the conman.

"Hey, suit.. he's just fine. It stopped bleeding after he stopped being stupid and stressing it." She batt at Ellis' head gently, but when he flashed his bashful smile sideways, he didn't even rip his gaze away from the bag in Nick's hands.

... *Heh.*

Not that he showed an ounce of his sadistic amusement. Not even looking at Ellis, he twitched his wrist to shake the bag open slightly, then pulled out a worm and tossed it into his mouth. He swallowed it practically without chewing - especially considering he didn't actually like them all that much.

It was too sweet and too heavy, and his stomach roiled in protest. Not that it stopped him.

"Good. Coach wants me to follow him around to try and hook us up with a ride. You up for it, Overalls, or do I have to drag you?" Nick turned scathing green eyes on the kid, pulling out another worm with a little jerk and biting its head clean off. Ellis' riveted gaze on it as it reached his mouth sent an unwelcome thrill up Nick's spine, despite the knowledge it was the worm Ellis was watching.

"I'm fine, Nick, like Ro' told'ya... but, uh -" There it was again, a little hesitation, and he gently ghosted his hand over his bandaged elbow, glancing down toward it like he still had a cap-bill to hide underneath. " - Why'd yuh agree? I can go on my own or somethin', you don't -"

Nick rolled his eyes, ignoring Rochelle's slight frown in his direction and snapping dully at the mechanic. "No, hayseed, I'm not goddamn enthused. If I could stay here, I would. Unfortunately, we both know that's not an option. So you're going to find a car, you're going to fix it, I'm going to keep you from getting killed, and you're going to stay as silent as you can the whole time."

Rochelle didn't look pleased with him, but she just grabbed up the backpack beside her hip and carefully stood up, reaching down to tickle her knuckles against Ellis' cheek reassuringly. He smiled at her.

"Don't fight, boys..." she mumbled quietly, feeling it was futile. Nick flashed her a smirk as she
slipped by him, stepping into the gas station with a shake of her head.

Ellis blinked up at Nick for a few moments, slowly grabbing and replacing his cap on his head. Withholding a sigh, the mechanic tossed himself up to his feet with a sway of his weight, nodding quickly. "Alrighty, Nick. I'll leave yuh alone." He turned around, stepping off the small cement platform infront of the gas station door, trudging across the parking lot.

Smirking subtly as he did, Nick slipped a hand to get a hold on his gun's grip, finger settled on the trigger. He followed after Ellis, glancing around them as they got to the streetside. "What, no argument?"

The hick's shoulders shrugged, stepping off the sidewalk and onto the road, dodging a zombie corpse at the last minute with his boot. "I'm just troublin' you, right? You can say yeah."

Quickly moving to catch up with him, Nick pulled his gun up and leaned forward, gunning for a few zombies to the right. With the bullet spray, two of them survived at first, but they only made it a few snarling feet before a second squeeze of the trigger brought them down. He sighed just the tiniest bit, likely unnoticeable as he leaned back and let go of the gun to dangle at his hip.

"Yeah." he responded simply, plucking another worm from the bag in his free hand and snapping it down like a shark catching a fish. Ellis hesitated as he snuck another struggling glance at the candy bag, forcing himself to turn his head back around as Nick's answer registered.

He squinted blue eyes up and down the street. Most of the cars were crushed or collided into one another, bullets riddling vital areas; a first glance didn't bode well for finding an undamaged one. Reluctantly, Ellis scratched at the back of his neck, nodding once. "Might be tough findin' a workin' car. Zombies ain't been kind tuh 'em."

Nick eyed him sideways, inhaling carefully. What the hell do I care if he gets his feelings hurt? He tucked the candy bag into his slacks' pocket, gripping his gun with both hands. "So start looking."

The silence as Ellis trudged down the street was stifling, broken only by gunshots as Nick protected the unarmed mechanic from the zombies staggering around the street. Ellis would say a 'thanks' every few minutes, but Nick didn't respond, just leaning to get an eye on the next infected.

It didn't bother Nick as much as he could tell it did Ellis, the hick biting back a frown as he stopped next to a seemingly intact grey van half-parked on the sidewalk. The windows were unbroken, tinted to block any peek inside, and the only damage at first glance was a few bullets in the door and a long scrape along its side.

"This'un might work..." the hick muttered to himself, skittering around to the front to pop the hood up. He didn't even struggle to hold it up one handed, fingers spread carefully, leaning forward and glancing over the engine parts inside.

Nick walked up to settle his hip against the van's headlights, leaning forward slightly. The clank of the hood snapping open alerted a few zombies who came stumbling out of an alley off to the right, and the conman pulled his gun up to his shoulder to aim more carefully as he picked them off.

"Huuhh.." the mechanic uttered, bending in under the hood. He kept it up with his good arm, reaching in carefully with his other hand to touch onto a few pieces. "Bullet hole by this here oil pump... man, I think I see a leak."

Straightening slightly and letting his gun fall slack against his hip, Nick glanced at Ellis sideways without initially saying anything. He noticed quickly that his shirt was riding up as he stretched,
pulling away from the untanned curve of his lower back. No amount of annoyance or frustration could change Nick's - body's mind, anyway.

If anything, Ellis actually being quiet and focused made him miles more appealing.

"Do you?" the conman asked innocuously, clamping his teeth gently on his tongue to stifle his sigh as he shut one eye, watching Ellis' hips shift. He found his mouth screwing into a slight frown at how utterly entrapped he was, leaning a little back but unable to entirely tear his gaze away.

"Mm, yeah. Can't tell fer sure, hold on.." Ellis pulled back, letting the hood drop down once he was out from under it and giving it a pat with the heel of his hand. He stepped around Nick, dropping down to a crouch by the side of the van and curling down to peer underneath it.

Nick stayed where he was, just listening, scratching one of his bare, crisply haired forearms. Ellis hummed something incoherent, hunching under the car and reaching his good arm under it, feeling at something.

"Eehh.. Nick?" He sounded uncertain, and when the conman glanced down, Ellis half-crawled back a bit and held up his hand. His fingertips were gleaming lightly with tacky, rainbow-colored oil, but that wasn't it - he was pointing at the bottom seam of the car door.

There was something sludgy starting to leak out from the crack. It had dripped a little onto the back of Ellis' neck, which he was quickly wiping off with his wrist. It was green and thick. Chunky, even. When Nick screwed his brow up and shifted off the car, moving a little closer, the smell of vomit hit him.

Much like the tongue-zombie's cigarette smell was rotten and garish, somehow this smell was just wretched. Less like vomit and more like the contents of a year-old garbage bag.

Giving a disgusted, "Eugh..", the conman retreated a few steps and stared the van down suspiciously. His nose crinkled subconsciously, placing his wrist over his mouth. "You do notice the windows are blacked out, right?"

Ellis struggled to his feet, though he didn't back up, eyeing the car door curiously. "Yuh think there's somethin' in there?" He reached up and tapped the window with a knuckle, watching it intently.

"If there is, it's pretty quiet..." Noting the curious knock and Ellis' gaze flickering to the door handle, Nick warned harshly, "Hey, don't get any fuckin' ideas, assclown..."

Too late, though - Ellis gave a reassuring, "Just wanna..." that he didn't finish and suddenly opened the car door, leaning to the side to peek in. There was a huge shape just inside the van's back compartment, this bloated, garish bubble of skin only vaguely contained by what looked like the remnants of a shirt. The stench was enough to make anyone retch, but somehow Ellis was too fascinated to do much more than stare, mouth half-open.

The thing moved, squirming like some overgrown tick, and a bloated head twisted into view, yellow eyes locking onto the men. Its jaw went slack, the whole inside of its mouth a disturbing shade of green, and a loud hoarking noise emitted from it.

Ellis jumped right out of his skin when the door slammed shut in front of him, his view of the mutated thing switched with a view of a particularly frustrated-looking Nick kicking the door shut. For just a moment, the stifled sound of heavy splattering against the door was the only thing they could hear, followed by gut-turning retches and - slowly - a dribbling noise as it leaked through the
"...hoo-lee sheeit, Nick! That was -"

"Fucking moronic? Good job." The conman felt irked, although he told himself it was mostly because Ellis had made him act by standing there like an idiot. The hick's excitement just worsened it. He was fascinated, practically excited. His obliviousness was just ridiculous - like he didn't even realize that thing had been a split-second from getting him.

Not that that's - why I'm pissed. Fuck.

The hick huffed slightly in consternation, shaking his head and pointing enthusiastically at the car. The van was creaking back and forth slightly now, like they'd disturbed an animal. He looked practically overjoyed with disgust. "That was so gross, man! Did yuh see that thing?! It was like, pukin'. Why would it do that…?"

Snarling quietly with a short huff from his nostrils, Nick reached up and grabbed the back of Ellis' neck, dragging him from the door and giving him a shove down the street. Ellis stumbled a bit, but caught himself, looking slightly disappointed. He busied himself with eyeing the other cars nearby, quickly getting his attention caught by a small pickup truck.

He spoke a little quietly as he walked up to the truck, rubbing his capped head with a hand and starting to make a small circle around the car. "...Sorry, Nick. I just wanted tuh see what it was."

The conman tried to tune him out, focusing on not losing his temper completely. Raising his hands, he rubbed at his temples slowly, forcing a sigh. His skin was still hot; hotter than it should have been, even considering the warm Georgia mid-day.

The putrid smell in the air was grating at his nerves, and his own doubt about the root of his anger was just frustrating him more.

The kid's "Was kinda cool.." went utterly ignored.

Nick lifted his head just in time to notice an unpleasantly familiar noise rising subtly in the distance - a din of roars, shrill but guttural all at once. His lips parted, spinning slightly on his heels to try and listen closer, sure he was imagining it - but no.

Wait, what in the hell? We didn't - there's always been something to attract them! Car alarm, radio - We didn't fucking do anything!

Try as he might, nothing could argue with the rising cries. With his mouth turning to cotton with messily veiled panic, Nick very coolly demanded, "Get in the car."

He was not going to die like this.

Ellis lifted his head, blinking at the older man with no small confusion. He didn't have the chance to respond, however, because right as he did he noticed the sound... and Nick repeated himself harshly, leaving no room for argument. "Get in the fucking car."

He bolted around to the other side as Ellis darted to the passenger side door and clambered inside. He heard the hick muttering something to himself, but paid it no mind, throwing open the car door and hooking a knee on the floorboard, half in and half out.

Ducking under the steering wheel and tearing off the cover panel up underneath it, the conman got his hands on the coiled stretch of wires hidden above the pedals. He cursed sharply to himself,
having nothing sharp nearby, and shoved himself down further.

"Nick, I see 'em!" the hick warned, even though the conman could hear the shrieking getting louder and knew full-well they were on the way.

He tugged the pair of power wires free, biting hard on their ends and stripping the plastic off with his teeth. He twisted the underlying copper wire together with his fingernails, giving a slight start as Ellis whooped. "Lights on!"

Scowling just barely and spitting tiny chips of plastic out of the corner of his mouth, Nick grabbed the starter wire and made to strip it the same way. While he managed that without getting a shock from the live wire, the moment he went to grab hold of it and spark it against the other two, pain shot up his arm and he gave a hiss, startled.

Cringing through it, he tried again. The copper sparked with a flicker of flame, and with a triumphant rattle, the truck came alive. Nick didn't even register Ellis' cheering, dragging himself backwards and struggling up onto the seat.

The moment he got himself oriented, the conman grabbed hold of the steering wheel and cranked it violently. There was a snapping sound as the steering lock broke, and Nick floored it, tires squealing against the asphalt. The open driver's door slammed shut next to him with the jolt, barely a second from crushing his left leg as he tucked it in, and Ellis had to grab at the dashboard to keep seated.

The nose of the truck collided hard with the oncoming horde, only a few yards away by the time Nick had finished. He grabbed the steering wheel, right arm moving even though it felt a little numb from the shock, jerking it a little from side to side to mow through the flock with maximum impact.

Zombies were rolled over the car like bowling pins, leaving ugly smudges of red and black as they smashed against the metal. The car jolted and bumped both with the collisions and as it rolled over just as many.

Squinting through the blurry panic of the zombies obscuring his view, the gambler stomped on the brakes and cranked the wheel to spin them around, skidding on pulverized infected and sending the truck into a precarious rock. It managed, somehow, crashing back onto all four wheel and roaring over the massacre they'd made of the street.

"Whoo-lordy, Nick! You knocked the piss outta them! Lookit that! And yuh hotwired it, too... I ain't never seen someone do it that fast before!"

Nick didn't say a word. He was almost smirking, just barely, undeniably thrilled with the success, but Ellis' voice brought his anger back. Gripping the wheel hard, the conman steered around a crushed car in the center of the road and guided the truck into the gas station parking lot.

Pulling up next to one of the pumps, he threw it into park and turned on the Georgian. He just lost it, growling angrily, yanking the bag of gummy worms out of his pocket and throwing it at Ellis.

"You are an absolute idiot. Did you even fucking think before you did that? That it might be dangerous? That maybe you shouldn't open the GODDAMN DOOR? You wonder why you could possibly be causing me trouble. You act all fucking surprised. Slink around all victimized all goddamn day and drive me nuts. Now you know, kid. We can't go thirty minutes without you doing something stupid. You ARE nothing but trouble."
Ellis looked on, a slightly hurt but mostly confused frown starting on his features, as Nick shoved the door open and stormed to the gas station in a rage, fingers flexing needily as he grasped for a suit pocket that wasn't there.

"... we're never gonna get on." the kid mumbled to himself, hunching slowly down in his seat and plucking a gummy worm from the bag to nibble softly on. That wasn't a thought that sat very well with Ellis.

It occurred to him that he still had yet to really, thoroughly apologize to the older man.
Chapter 22

Tipping back his fifth bottle of beer with one hand while his other pulled his suit jacket tighter around his curled knees, Nick settled in cozily against the rooftop's few-feet-tall bordering wall. He'd eased into a comfortable drunkenness, mind a bit distanced from his body and cushioned by raw warmth.

None of them wanted to stay overnight in the gas station, the closed bathroom door enough to set anyone on edge. Unfortunately, it was instantly clear that the truck had suffered with Nick's rough handling and the collisions with the horde. Ellis was confident he could fix it with a few tools.

Nick was almost sure that the other three had slipped out at some point to track what he needed down in nearby buildings, but the conman honestly hadn't paid much attention to anything past the knowledge they'd be staying through the night.

He hadn't spent more than a few minutes lingering after his fit at Ellis before he'd grabbed his things, a six-pack of (lukewarm) beer from a dead refrigerator in the corner, and a can of microwaveable beef stew from one of the aisles.

A set of enclosed stairs in the back alley led up to the roof, and he'd retreated up there, leaving Rochelle and Coach with little more than a curt, "Later."

He figured a zombie wouldn't climb up the side of the building. Maybe a Hunter would, but at this point, Nick might just welcome a claw to the throat. If nothing else, he'd get some rest.

Nothing soothed a guilty conscience like alcohol in the bloodstream - and though he hated to admit it... the more time he had to hear his own words to Ellis reverberate back to himself in his head, the more he disliked how unreasonably he'd lost his temper.

He hadn't stuck around to see Ellis' reaction. He still didn't completely know how the kid had taken it. The idea of him being hurt seemed far-fetched, especially considering how he'd shrugged off an actual blow from Nick.

Nick tried to work out if he wanted Ellis to be okay, and that was when he'd broken out the beer.

Much to his relief, none of the others tried to bother him on the roof. He heard them talking now and then, but he'd ignored it, maintaining a steady, rhythmic sipping of beer. It should've taken him longer to get drunk, but an empty stomach combined with the fact the gas station booze wasn't nearly as watered down as he'd expected had him soused quick.

Nick tried to wipe sweat from his forehead with his wrist, only to realize his wrist was sweaty, too. His fever had spread to a full-body sensation, and the alcohol only seemed to worsen it, going flush and breath a little reedy. Damnit...

Was he sick? Surely not sick. Like Rochelle had said; if they were going to get infected, they would have already. He gave a musing squint downward where the bandage on his neck was still clinging on.

Nick tried to wipe sweat from his forehead with his wrist, only to realize his wrist was sweaty, too. His fever had spread to a full-body sensation, and the alcohol only seemed to worsen it, going flush and breath a little reedy. Damnit...

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Was he sick? Surely not sick. Like Rochelle had said; if they were going to get infected, they would have already. He gave a musing squint downward where the bandage on his neck was still clinging on.

The gambler ripped it off, and although he could only see some of the wound past his chin - it was better. Clean. Bruised around the edges, but not angry and swollen anymore.

You'd know if you were turning, Nick. soothed a remarkably sensible voice in the back of his head. Cool it. You're just hungry and worked up.
Stretching his legs out before him and slumping his lower back a bit more against the squat wall behind him, Nick tipped his head back and closed his eyes into the late evening breeze. It was foul, stained with smoke and something acrid, but the wind was pleasant against his face and the smell was no worse than the taste of the beer he'd been downing.

He half-dozed and half-relaxed. The mix of warm fever, warm buzz, and exhaustion overwhelmed him, and he swore he must've drifted to sleep for a bit.

That didn't last, an abrupt knocking from the closed stairwell door startling him to straighten him up. Blinking and passing his palm over his face shortly, the conman realized he was suddenly cold. There was still sweat at the shallows of his cheeks, but it was chill and tacky. He tugged his jacket off his lap to push his arms into the sleeves, shivering a little.

Glancing up at the sky without bothering to move, Nick reached his hand out to curl his fingers around the half-empty beer bottle he'd abandoned next to his hip, shaking it a bit before taking a sip. The (ghastly) flavor cleared just enough of his drowsiness to get his bearings.

The knocking sounded again, a little louder.

"What?" he finally half-shouted, raising a hand to scratch fingertips through his regrettably un-gelled hair and sighing. The gambler was hungry, but not enough to convince himself into drinking a can of cold stew, not even drunk.

"It alright if I talk with yuh, Nick?" Ellis' voice made Nick blink, stiffening up where he sat. That sane part of him was displeased; the drunk part of him, on the other hand…

Huh.. and I was wondering if he'd talk to me at all.. persistent, … annoying…

Admittedly, about twenty different words cropped up in his head to describe the mechanic. He judged and rejected all of them, settling for a defiant:

Dumbass.

He couldn't decide if he was irritated or not. His mind was so loose with the buzz of alcohol - and maybe fever - the gambler was finding it hard to notice too much of anything. He felt more curious than anything else; why did Ellis even want to talk to him? Was he really that difficult to warn off?

"Dunno. Do I care about what you're gonna say?" he retorted, a little plainly, though he didn't slur half as much as he expected. Setting the beer bottle in his hand down, the gambler rested his elbows back against the ledge behind him.

"… mind if I open the door, Nick?"

Nick laughed outright, abandoning his comfortable positioning to force himself to his feet with his elbows. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket, tucking it tight around himself to ward off the chill, and walked over to the door slowly. "You can talk through it fine." he challenged sarcastically, leaning his shoulder against the wall just beside the doorframe.

Close now, he heard the hick sigh through the thin door, though it sounded more readying than exasperated. After just a few moments, Nick waiting with an odd patience and a quickly-spreading smirk he didn't even completely understand himself, Ellis spoke up warily.

"I know what you said earlier, but I can't just say nothin', man! I like you, Nick! Yer a real neat guy, 'n anyway we've gotta work together if we're gonna make it through. I ain't tryin' tuh bother you none, but I don't want us tuh be fightin' fer no reason... I'm just lookin' tuh be friends with you,
Inhaling a bit and tipping his head on the doorframe, Nick let his eyes half-shut and retorted soon after. "And what makes you think I wanna be yours? You don't think I meant what I said?" His tone, for all the implications of his words, was oddly nonchalant there at the beginning.

Something about the conman's words made Ellis' voice abruptly firmer, confidently shooting back and unperturbed by the door between them. "Nuh-uh, I don't.. you've been nice tuh me - 'n I'm purty good with readin' folks."

Nick snorted slightly, dropping his chin and turning his slowly-stubbling cheek against his shoulder. The practically bristling irony didn't escape him. "Are you?" he prompted in a low murmur, something Ellis might almost have missed - but a response came a few beats after, tone forcedly firm like the hick knew he was treading treacherous territory.

"I bet'chya just don't know how tuh let yerself be friendly, so yer freakin' out instead. I don't mind, but I ain't backin' off neither."

That struck a flash of irritation through Nick's mind, focusing on the door and twitching a brow. He recognized a defensive curl to his own fingers, distantly examining the motion. There were too many tiny kernels of truth in everything Ellis said - and the hick was oblivious to the ones that mattered, it seemed. "'Freakin' out'? You're kidding, right?"

"I ain't! You can't tell me you weren't bein' nice when we ate breakfast this mornin'. Yuh just don't wanna admit it." Ellis sounded even more confident that time, and Nick felt a jab of discomfort, wondering if something in his pliable voice had made the hick think he was winning. He didn't usually get this readable, not even drunk -

It's him fucking with my head again... why did I get drunk?! The fuck was I thinking... Drinking in the goddamn apocalypse. Stupid. Stupid.

Nick pulled off the wall, crossing his arms tightly and gnawing on his lower lip in subconscious agitation, feeling dizzy as he struggled to hold onto it past a drunk sense of confliction. He didn't like this confrontation, not when he couldn't quite control his own voice. "Yeah, and then you nearly got me fuckin' killed twice.. look, I blew my top, sure.. but that was your fault, and I told you, kid. You're trouble, and not my kind."

Ellis' voice turned almost desperate, pleadingly apologetic. "And I wanna say sorry fer that! I didn't mean tuh upset you or get yuh hurt, it all just happened real fast. I'da done different if I could'uv."

"I ain't! You can't tell me you weren't bein' nice when we ate breakfast this mornin'. Yuh just don't wanna admit it." Ellis sounded even more confident that time, and Nick felt a jab of discomfort, wondering if something in his pliable voice had made the hick think he was winning. He didn't usually get this readable, not even drunk - It's him fucking with my head again... why did I get drunk?! The fuck was I thinking... Drinking in the goddamn apocalypse. Stupid. Stupid.

Nick rolled his eyes upward, fighting his tone as it threatened into and out of outright slurred, though coherent, hostility. "Upset me? I'm not upset and I'm not 'freaking out.' Stop makin' excuses, kid... Maybe I just don't like uppy little hicks... you thought about that? That you might just be better off givin' up? That I was being fuckin' serious when I said I didn't want to deal with you?"

Nick was quiet for just a beat, but he hadn't been defeated quite yet. There was a little tone of hurt to his voice when he finally retorted, "Yeah, that's whut Coach said.. 'n' I think it's bullshit. You ran right up here after yellin' at me and closed yerself off all evenin' tuh get drunk alone - you think 'bout that before yuh tell me you meant what you said!"

Nick didn't want to talk about this anymore, suddenly... he was too drunk for it, and the words were striking him strangely, pushing him into a corner. Exasperated, the conman shifted in front of the door and growled straight at it, "What the fuck, Ellis? Why are you talkin' to me right now?"

"We're a team, Nick." Ellis' voice fell suddenly gentle. Too gentle. "You're muh buddy now. I want
you to explain tuh me why I'm upsettin' you so much when I ain't meanin' to, so's I can fix it."

Nick froze up, jaw tensing as alcohol-soaked adrenaline abruptly swept through his muscles. He wasn't sure if it was the words or his inebriation or the pleading tone Ellis said it with - or the fact the kid was, literally, asking for it... but with a strong wobble as he uncrossed his arms, the gambler yanked the door open.

Ellis startled and tried to back up, but Nick grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him through the doorway onto the roof. The younger man didn't even resist, although his cap-shaded blue eyes revealed a shining surprise that might have just left him too caught off-guard to think to, stumbling the few steps forward with a worried "Nick?!" that got no answer.

The moment they cleared the threshold, the conman shoved the door shut again with one momentarily-straying hand and then thrust Ellis flat against it with his palms, knocking the wind out of him. Nick halted with just a foot of distance between them, both his hands retreating to plant themselves on the door on either side of Ellis' capped head and hold himself up.

He knew he was panting, subtly, but there was very little conscious thought lingering as Ellis caught his breath and cautiously blinked up at the taller man from under the bill of his cap.

"Nick?" the mechanic warily repeated, holding very still under the harsh surveying of those palely fascinating green eyes and the soft pulse of boozed breath settling against his face as the conman exhaled.

So Nick responded, teeth trapped in a grit as his whole frame tingled with a mindless exhilaration, a breathless feeling he couldn't begin to explain - like the dangerous thrill he felt at the sound of a whole stack of chips sliding across the green fabric of a card table.

But this time he was merely stroking their edges, pondering... somehow holding himself back, just barely, even though every instinct said otherwise.

"You don't even get half the trouble you're causing..."

Hesitantly, Ellis gave a very slow nod of his head, eyes riveted on the face before his.

Nick could tell - staring at that all-too-pretty face of Ellis' - he didn't understand... the kid was tensed and nervous, and it was written all over his expression that he thought he was going to be roughed up. He was waiting for a punch or a kick, body prepared to take the blow - a far too innocent kind of fear compared to the rising lust pulsing through the conman that only worsened as he stared him down.

God… you fucked up, Nick.

"It's all your goddamn fault... I told ya., over and over, leave me alone." There was no stopping it, and his slur was unrestrained as he growled lightly into the mechanic's face. His gaze flickered over Ellis' features, and he curled his fingers into fists on the door and leaned in an extra inch.

Ellis sunk slightly against the door to match him, fingers gripping on the draping folds of his coveralls. If Nick wasn't crazy, there was a flush of colour in his cheeks. That face looked guilty, a regretful frown trying to win over his expression.. and he tried to apologize, even as Nick was hovering over him dangerously.

"I'm sorry, N-"

"Shut it." It was a short sound, and coupled perfectly with one of Nick's hands shifting over in a
flash and clamping over the Georgian's mouth, forcing him into silence. "Has nothing to do with it. You're wastin' your goddamn breath."

His tone flickered in and out of humor, watching intently as Ellis listened oddly closely to him, utterly still. "You want to know so bad why you make me so upset - ask me one more fuckin' time. One more time, Ellis. Or get the fuck out."

The gambler's hand eased away slightly, lingering imperceptibly on the soft lips that had been pressed so innocently against his palm. Nick couldn't stop his gaze from flickering down to them, and with a strike of tension, their closeness became ever more apparent to him. His spine tingled violently when Ellis chose that moment to curl them inward and lick them indelicately, obviously preparing to speak.

Nick should've known Ellis wouldn't think twice, stupidly oblivious... or maybe he did know, and that was why he gave Ellis an option. Rigged dice - of course he'd ask.

"Why, Nick? I wanna know..."

There was just one beat of silence, one single, boozed breath panted against his face that was fit to make his eyes water, before Ellis got an answer. It was so harsh and strange at the same instant he almost thought he'd misheard, or Nick had misspoken -

because Nick growled,

"... I want you."

The last syllable hadn't left Nick's lips before his right hand suddenly darted down. It hooked under Ellis' closest knee, fingers getting a tight grip on the baggy fabric of his coveralls. The older man yanked his leg into a bend, thigh rubbing up to align with the conman's hip. Ellis froze up instantly, a ragged noise of shock leaving him as he was forced into a vulnerable one-legged collapse against the wall.

Nick's grip was uncompromising, pinning Ellis on one foot and holding his leg where it was with an almost-too-tight clench. The instant the shocked kid was in place, Nick used his leverage with the Georgian's knee to rock his hips into the spread niche of Ellis' crotch, thrusting him lightly against the door.

The harsh wave of lust that instantly shot through the conman nearly deafened him to Ellis ... and it took all his effort not to crumple at the friction and the incredible sensation of finally even the smallest feel of the kid's body...

...or, honestly, anyone's...

...but a horrified "Wh-wha-!" reached him just faintly, striking at the very small percentage of his attention that wasn't distracted.

That sensible part of him said, Stop.

He wanted it so very badly, whole body demanding it with almost painful clenches and waves as he pressed against the Georgian. He needed the lean body stretched and straining between him and the door, needed the heat and the friction... Drunk off beer and lust and drowning in both, he couldn't not say it to himself; I fuckin' need this...

His whole body was buzzing, pulse humming throughout him and mouth going dry as cotton. He refused to let his eyes shut even as they threatened to, twisting his head slightly to press his
forehead against the kid's shoulder. He was so real, so sturdy… unmoving.

Ellis wasn't saying anything. He wasn't trying to get away, or shake Nick off. Maybe Ellis wasn't against it.

Maybe -

But the voice was back. *Nick. Stop. That's enough. This isn't you.*

In defiance of it, Nick's head shifted - his mouth latched onto Ellis' neck, just under his jaw, with a sudden wetness. Ellis tasted heady... something smoky, maybe a little dirty. It tasted… masculine, and the alcohol that tingled on his skin as Nick's saliva brought it did nothing to dampen it.

Nick laved the flat of his tongue against the skin there, feeling the rushing pulse of the mechanic's jugular and shuddering once as the motion made Ellis' body jerk.

Driven by the feeling, the kid shook free of his shock. He released a strangled sound somewhere between a whimper and a yelp and shot up his arms, getting his forearms - even his bandaged one - up to shove at Nick's shoulders, trying to push him away.

Away. Ellis was trying to use what little leverage he had to get out from under Nick. He was fighting, and it wasn't a pleasant wrestle.

The kid was scared.

It was the realization of that panic that suddenly made Nick jerk his mouth away. He felt like he was going to catch fire as he let go of Ellis' knee and abruptly turned the knob of the stairwell door, pulling it open.

It only took a vague step to the side, and a hard shove, to get Ellis around the door and into the stairwell. He didn't watch as Ellis tumbled away from him, going down hard on the floor on the other side of the door. He definitely didn't look at the kid's face, or the stupid, reddened gawp on his face as his body crumpled there, unable to get his bearings.

Nick felt so ill and drunk and full of raging, uncontrollable desire that his features flung themselves into a burning scowl, his breathing ragged and quick. He didn't wait to see Ellis scramble up and flee down the staircase - he just shut the door, staggering backward several steps and then quickly retreating for the very corner of the rooftop.

He skidded down to the ground, curling up tight against the roof's bordering wall and crossing his forearms harshly over his crotch, folding in around his erection and huffing painfully like he'd taken a swift kick there. He closed his eyes tightly, trying not to think at all as he let himself slip down and burrow tightly into the corner and his jacket, pulling it tight around himself.

But the thoughts came anyway, fractured with his struggling to keep himself calmed as his drunkenness left him unable to cope. He felt like he was suffocating, and the mindless lust that pulsed in his every fiber was demanding release he just couldn't give it, pain settling in slowly.

He'd never meant to take it that far. It was the fever, or the beer; anything other than his free will. He didn't want this. "Fuck. Fuck!"

...you're fine, Nicolas. You're fine. Everything's fine.

It was a lie, and all the repetition of the thought did was lull him into such a silent, huffing, drunken froth that he slipped down a little where he was and passed out in the cold.
Chapter 23

A blistering headache greeted Nick the moment his eyes opened. His whole head felt like it might split, making him groan and roll blindly to try and bury his face in the pillow that should've been clutched tight to his body - of course, the only thing beneath him was the cement of the porch-like rooftop, and he got a rough scrape of his nose against it for his trouble.

Groggily recoiling from the hard surface, the conman pushed up to sit on his knees and bent forward to rub at his eyes with his wrists, squinting hard. His stomach revolted against the sudden shift of orientation, sending a shudder up his spine and a strong blanch over his face.

"Awgh.. fuck beer.." he complained throatily as he settled his palms flat over his eyes, mouth having the consistency of so much sand. He tried to draw up some kind of saliva to wet his lips, but he was so dehydrated, he thought he'd wither.

"...If you puke, I'm leaving."

The gambler would've jumped clear out of his skin if he hadn't been so focused on not moving. Rochelle's voice struck his brain a little too loudly, echoing, like his ears were waterlogged. Peeling his hands reluctantly from his eyes, Nick glanced sideways from his slumped kneeling position, eyeing the woman crouched just a few feet to his left.

She smiled at him rather unsympathetically, but with a slight shift of her weight to flatten her feet rather than balance up on her toes, she stuck out her right hand - offering him the capped end of a bottle of water. "Smooth move there, slick. What about 'zombie apocalypse' says 'get drunk' to you, anyway?"

Nick snorted only faintly, shifting his weight to drop down onto his rear and settle into a hunched sit up against the wall. He snatched the bottle from her, opening it up as he retorted dryly, "The 'zombie apocalypse' part..

Tossing the cap blindly over his shoulder, the conman shut his eyes and quickly chugged a few mouthfuls of water, letting it sit just a moment behind tightly pursed lips before he swallowed. The sudden influx agitated his stomach, but the wetting of his dry mouth was more than enough relief and he let himself sit for a moment and breathe deep before trying again.

He was slow, and tired, but not too slow or too tired to drum up some sarcasm. "Besides, what happened to miss 'They're just sick'? She didn't last long."

Rochelle laughed faintly under her breath, crossing her arms on top of her knees so she could toy with her bangles, dropping her chin to eye Nick cautiously, visibly unconvinced he wasn't going to retch. She looked surprisingly well-rested, wide awake even though the still-dim sky betrayed that it was early in the morning.

"If I had to choose between zombies, and killing a bunch of sick people, I guess I'd rather be fighting zombies. Conscience, you know? That and it gets pretty hard pretty fast to pretend they're not... well, monsters."

Nick took another sip of water, swirling it around like mouthwash before turning his head and spitting it out over the edge of the roof, glad to clear some of the stale beer taste from his tongue. Wiping his mouth with his wrist, he glanced back groggily to see Rochelle giving him a smile despite a fair crinkle of distaste to her nose.
It struck him, then, although his hungover brain was slow to process everything and seemed intent on working backwards. *She seems normal. Guess Overalls didn't say anything to anyone... huh.*

"Why did you sleep up here, anyway? You're lucky nothing got up here in the middle of the night - it's not like we were in a position to rush up here. We don't need to lose one of our guns." She was chiding him, almost instantly earning herself a backseat in his attention span. The gambler focused on taking a sip of water and trying to arrange his thoughts.

*Then again, isn't a real surprise, is it... probably scared the shit out of him.*

The thought, though, made him shift in sudden discomfort where he sat, tongue curling on the mouth of his water bottle. *Sure, I'd thought about it earlier... just giving up and telling him, scare him, make him back off - but... I don't know... That wasn't -*

Wasn't how he imagined it going? Wasn't what he wanted? Wasn't what he meant to do?

Wasn't like him?

"Better up here than bunking with you three idiots..." he muttered as he released his almost biting grip on the soft plastic bottle, drawing a laugh from Rochelle. He lifted a hand to massage his forehead and then tried to push his hair into its usual slicked back position, groaning near-silently at his headache.

"Jackass..." she told him simply, pushing on her thighs with her forearms to stand up. He glanced at her, but the sudden difference in their heights gave him a flutter of vertigo and he quickly closed his eyes. "Are you going to go and slink off to your own corner every time we find a place to sleep?"

"Probably... how did you three sleep?" Closing his eyes, the gambler smoothed his expression to an unreadable sort of half-smirk, a little mocking, just enough to imply he didn't care - and mostly he didn't.. but any hint of Ellis' behaviour before he actually ran into him was worth an inane question.

Rochelle gave a small shake of her head, wrapping her hand around her elbow and settling her weight onto her heels. "Coach planned to have us all - well, minus you, you jerk - take turns keeping watch, just in case something happened, but Ellis took first watch and then never traded. We're well-rested... Poor boy's sweet, but honestly. Saving us the trouble wasn't worth it. He's gonna be useless today."

Pressing his thumb into the side of the bottle so it crinkled inward slightly, Nick took a large gulp of water. *Up all night? Great..." Least you got your beauty sleep. Last thing we need is a woman in a bad mood." the conman muttered just under his breath, subtly shaking his head and shifting to force himself up to his feet. He noticed Rochelle had picked up his machine gun; it was slung over her back.

Giving him a slightly disapproving look, Rochelle reached down to get a grip on his sleeve and help him up. In any other situation, he'd have rejected it, but his head swam as he straightened up, and Nick didn't exactly trust the thigh-high wall that rimmed the rooftop to catch him if he fell.

"You're not exactly going to be a load of help, Mr. Morning After." she retorted, letting go of his sleeve once he'd proven himself sturdy enough to stand. "I don't know if I want you to have a gun."

"I'm perfectly fine." Nick snapped suddenly, jaw flexing into an irritated clench, losing his patience with the disapproval. "Ten minutes and I'll be good as new, alright? I know my goddamn limits." That was a blatant lie, naturally. All that really did was irk him a little more, slugging back a
mouthful of water and gesturing her toward the stairwell door with his elbow.

She rolled her eyes lightly, relenting with a sigh and turning to lead him to the door, hands tucking into her back pockets. "Course you do, honey." She felt his glare on her back, smiling faintly in self-amusement but dropping the subject as they ducked into the stairwell.

Nick agitatedly resigned to silence, trying to keep his vision from blurring and slowly moving after her. He wasn't looking forward to going down with the other two - booze-slurred recollections of the night before made him grit his teeth a little.

Half of him couldn't believe what had happened - and the other half just wanted to forget it had. No matter how it'd gone, the result would've been the same: tension and discomfort, and the previously emphatically-intent-on-befriending-him Ellis would likely be terrified of him.

But that hot friction... the way his neck had tasted... it made him shudder just to think about it. Conversely, the thought that Ellis had been unable to sleep because of it brought different memories trickling into the back of his mind.

He'd been tortuously unable to sleep the first time, too. Just a kid struggling with feelings he didn't understand. He wasn't sure how he felt about inflicting the same feelings on someone else, although if the small knot in his already queasy stomach said anything, it wasn't good.

Damnit.

He hated feeling guilty. Despised the sensation.

At least it had a sobering influence.

"We got the truck all ready, by the way." Rochelle spoke up as she nudged the exit at the base of the short staircase open and held the door for him. "Ransacked a garage across the road for tools... you know, when I agreed to do a firsthand account of the disaster, I didn't really think it'd involve looting. Or illegal weapons. Or... well... any of this."

Nick gave a noncommittal sound under his breath, downing the last chug of water and tossing the bottle away as he stepped into the alleyway, brow knotting painfully after the darkness of the stairwell. "Excuse me if I don't really give a shit about laws right now."

Aware that he'd have little luck eating with the lingering symptoms of his hangover, he was quick to dig a cigarette out of his pocket and work on lighting it. Nicotine tended to numb his appetite, and he had hopes the smoke would burn some of his nausea away.

That thought stopped him, and he took stock of himself a moment. He felt ill, sure, but that was the hangover. He raised a hand to touch his face, disguising the moment as a simple scratch with his pinky, only to realize there was no roasting heat or clammy chill to his skin.

The fever had passed.

Rochelle snorted slightly, prodding his shoulder with a fingertip as she got ahead of him again, circling the gas station with some amount of haste. "You saying you usually do..?"

The conman let his eyes slip half-closed, not bothering to even fake a smirk. He gave a shrug of a jacketed shoulder, bending forward to hunch over his cigarette and return to lighting it. He cupped his hands over it as its tip flickered to a soft orange, and took a puff. "Not all of us have the cushy lifestyle that they're built for, that's all."
Rochelle didn't respond, though her head dropped a bit like she might start laughing at him. Nick couldn't really tell how much of her behaviour was some kind of nonchalant passive-aggressive attempt to shame him - all it really did was give him a sense of boredom.

She didn't even know anything about him except for what she'd 'discerned,' and whatever he'd vaguely implied - and honestly, he was fine with it if her opinions didn't match the truth. Maybe he was worse. Maybe he was better.

It didn't matter to him.

"See?" Rochelle said instead.

He glanced up to see her gesturing as they rounded to the front of the gas station. The truck was parked up close to one of the gas pumps, grill plastered in dried blood and greenish-black muck. It was a chubby white Chevy, probably as old as Ellis himself, heavily treaded wheels a little too big for the rest of the car.

"Yeah, yeah. I remember what it looks like. We get to ride in typical Southern style." Nick scoffed quietly, barely even stopping on his way to the gas station door. He pulled his cigarette from his lips, tapping ash out on the sidewalk before he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He distinctly heard Rochelle laugh out a quiet, "Jerk..." behind him, ignoring it. Coach was pawing through the gas station aisles, looking all the stocked items over and seeming in deliberation about what they'd take with them. Nick felt his chest tighten a little with something a lot like anticipation, quickly setting a hard poker face over his expression and taking a pull from his cigarette.

He didn't see Ellis.

"Coach. You n-" His jaw clamped shut around his fairly loud voice when Coach twisted his head and gave him a fierce 'shush' motion. Brows lifted on the gambler's face, and he had to work to resist a rising agitation at the command. Inhaling a quick breath to calm himself, he merely cocked his head in question.

The big man turned back to pick up a few boxes from the shelf in front of him, wrapping one thick arm around them in a cradle and turning to walk over. He used his free hand to point at the store counter, pushing out the door without a word, though Nick stole a glance at his expression and saw nothing aggressive.

Somewhat bemused and noticing that Rochelle hadn't followed him inside, the gambler let his tongue curl against the filtered tip of his cigarette, slowly pushing his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket. He strode over quietly to the counter, bending in to crane his head over the edge and glance down at the stretch of tile floor behind the register.

Sprawled on his back with Coach's backpack tucked under his head and his arms crossed on his chest, cap sitting on top of his upturned face and shading it all the way to his chin, Ellis was dead asleep.

Someone (likely Rochelle) had untied his wound-up coveralls and pulled them up over his torso to act as a bit of a blanket, though he'd pushed them down a little in his sleep to get his arms free. The fingers of his right hand had curled a bit on the bandage that tightly looped around his left elbow, like it had been bothering him in his sleep.

There was a huge amount of little squares of paper littered around him like confetti. On further inspection they turned out to be lottery scratch cards Ellis must have broken out of the rack behind
the counter. Each one of them had one circle marked off, messy scratches peeling away the metallic layer - and just by his twisted elbow, there was a small and very neatly arranged pile of cards that'd revealed a 'Winner.'

Nick felt strange looking down on him. The scene prompted an all-too-vivid mental image of the kid sitting up alone all night, unable to sleep, quietly scratching off lottery cards like the repetitious motion might distract him. Now the mechanic was exhausted, though the cap covering his face made it hard to see how deep-set it was.

Why do I feel so goddamn guilty about this? It was his fault... and what, I'm supposed to just tiptoe around him when he can't do a single thing I ask? ...goddamnit!

"...you stupid hick. You had to make me do that..." Nick muttered quietly down at him, gritting his teeth against an urge to punch the counter. He felt irritated, shoulders tensing up and rising defensively, and he swiftly twisted around and walked away before he discovered any different urges rising up.

Like waking him up and apologizing.

Or maybe just leaving and never coming back.

It can't be that hard to survive solo in the apocalypse.

Storming quickly through the door, Nick nearly bowled over Rochelle as they both reached it at the same instant. He recoiled to do a short spin around her, dodging contact, and snapped an irate, "Watch it!" even as she narrowly kept her balance. She could do little but blink after him in confusion, patting her sides a little to calm the startle it'd given her.

She watched as he fumed off to lean against the far edge of the truck's bed, not saying a word to Coach who was up inside it, arranging what he was taking from the gas station into piles.

"...You're the one who needs beauty sleep... prick." she hummed just faintly under her breath, although even the insult held a fairly unaggressive kind of resignation. Rochelle was giving up trying to fight him, coming to terms with - well, him, and trying not to get riled up.

Noticing Coach send her a small shrug from the truck, apparently not having missed the little fit, Rochelle sighed and walked over to the car. She crossed her arms on the rump of the truckbed, cocking her hip and letting her boot scuffle at the asphalt in a loose swing. "How're we going to do this, you guys think? We could let Ellis sleep in the back - poor thing needs it."

Smoke rolled up from the conman's face as he exhaled a long breath, but he made no motion to contribute to the conversation - and after a beat of silence, Coach spoke up with a gruff rumble, turning around to carefully maneuver down from the truck, rocking it significantly. "Gotta have a gun guardin' him. Nick 'n me'll drive, you stick wit' Ellis." He said it matter-of-factly, obviously having thought it through before - and Nick instantly drew a brow into a slight twitch, turning his head.

"Are you really asking to be stuck in a car with me, Coach?" The choice of him over Rochelle reasonably confused the gambler - overlooking for a moment that the alternative was him guarding Ellis, considering Coach was the only one familiar enough with the city to trust to drive the car, maps or no. "You don't exactly like me."

Coach flickered a short, serious look at him, hitching his pants up with one hand and sighing. "Let's be adults, Nick. We ain't got time. We can get along fo' the time bein', if you ain't gonna be
stubborn."

Eyeing him for just a minute, pulling slowly on his cigarette, Nick begrudgingly decided not to make trouble. He'd skated by on dodging being in the same part of the car with Ellis... no sense endangering his chances. He nodded simply, looking away again and exhaling through his nostrils, smoke curling back up to brush warmly against his face.

The big man seemed content with that response, just turning and trudging back toward the gas station door, talking over his shoulder. He let a hand raise up and wipe his forehead. "We get lucky, we'll be on the road fo' a while today. Gotta make as much ground as we can. These pumps are dead an' we ain't got a full tank - didn't find no cans lyin' 'round, neither."

"At least we know where we're going." Rochelle pointed out easily, turning slightly and pushing off the truck to catch up with him, flexing her finger slightly at her sides and rolling her shoulder to adjust the machine gun sitting heavy on her back. She ducked into the gas station when Coach held the door for her, dropping her voice to keep from disturbing the out-cold hick behind the counter. "Straight shot for the beach you said, right? Down that highway."

Coach sighed slightly, touching her shoulder and pointing toward a pile of supplies stacked up in one of the aisles. It was small, the most pertinent and easily prepareable food and drink in the place - though she did notice a supply of sweets stowed away in a paper bag he'd gotten from beside the register, not that she blamed him. "Hope so, baby girl. Won't know till we get goin'."

He started to turn toward the counter, but she grabbed onto his sleeve at the last second and he glanced back, deep eyes a little morose as he looked expectantly at her, expression softened to that affectionate gruff he had with her. "...Why the move with Nick?" Rochelle's brows were pinched slightly, hand dropping with a soft jingle of her bangles.

Coach chuckled only barely, shaking his head and rubbing his bald head with his wrist. "Bein' honest? I got some questions on my mind, baby girl. Good time fo' askin' him... 'n anyway, ain't gettin' nobody nowhere if I'm stuck hatin' the guy. Gonna give him a chance." He gave her a reassuring nod, continuing on toward the counter the moment she'd given one back.

"As long as you aren't gonna kill him."

Coach smiled at that.

The big man rounded the store counter as cautiously as he could, stepping to Ellis' side and dropping slowly to a crouch, though his bad knee popped loudly in protest. Reaching down to lift the cap from the Ellis' face and reveal both his sleeping face and the tousled brown curls of his hair, he gently shook him by the shoulder.

"Son, we're movin'... you jus' get in the car an' you can go back to sleep." Coach tried, unwilling to be too rough. His tone was as gentle as his naturally gruff baritone could manage, though he was left sitting there when Ellis' only reaction was the smallest of mumbles and a twitch of his nose. Shaking him again, Coach chuckled sympathetically. "Ellis.. ain't no time fo' bein' a kid... c'mon now, boy." Waiting with a small countdown in the back of his mind, the ex-football player gave up. Resigned, he bent in and got thick arms around the lean mechanic's shoulder and under his arm, hoisting him up into an easy fireman's carry, Ellis buckled over his neck and supported by Coach's broad frame.

Straightening up with the smallest twinges of discomfort at the stress it put on his bad knee, Coach
turned to carry the hick back outside the gas station. Ellis barely even stirred, and the odd angle his body was at turned his breaths into hiccups snoring... not that it seemed to bother his deep sleep.

Judging by the freshly stamped-out cigarette and the half-open door, Nick had already retreated into the truck, though his haste went unnoticed. Coach was gently depositing Ellis in the truck bed, leaning in and arranging him to nestle into the rubber lining, when he noticed the very light scent of beer.

Cocking his head in slight confusion, Coach eyed the sleeping kid for just a moment before slowly settling his cap against his hands. Ellis' fingers instantly twitched to grab hold of it, nestling it close to his chin and then stilling again, curling just a little bit.

The big man, however, had only a very short period of time to wonder why the mechanic smelled like alcohol before Rochelle came out of the gas station, arms loaded with supplies. He backtracked to meet her halfway, taking some of it from her and carrying it back to load up the truck around the unconscious mechanic.

"Ain't had breakfast, but we can eat on the road." Coach commented in a grunt, offering a hand to hoist Rochelle up into the truck bed. She flashed him a short smile as she took his offer, hopping up and walking gingerly over the bed to settle down beside Ellis. She draped an affectionate hand over his back.

Coach eyed them for just a moment, then pulled back and gently shut the truck's tailgate. He stood there for a moment, taking a mental checklist, his fingers flexing - it felt like the morning had gone too fast, too smoothly. He had a bad feeling and it stuck to him like so much fog.

But everything was in order and they were loaded up. He reached over the tailgate to snatch his shotgun from where Rochelle had set it down, carrying it with him as he pulled away. With no small grunt, the big man circled the truck and tossed open the door, hauling himself up into the driver's seat. "You know how to turn this shit on, Nick?" he questioned as he settled his hands on the wheel, letting the door shut behind him.

Nick gave a small glance sideways at the prompt, sighing faintly and hooking one hand in his half-open door's handle. He shut it carefully, then bent over the truck's bulky gearshift to reach the wires underneath the wheel.

Glad to see the wires had been disconnected delicately, it was a simple matter of readjusting them and restarting the connection, and within a few breaths the truck sparked to life and Nick could recoil from the slightly odd posture he'd been forced into.

"There." he said very simply, leaning far back in his seat and coolly getting his feet up to nestle them on the dashboard, draping his head against the knuckles of an upraised hand. "We're just lucky it's an old truck. That shit doesn't work on most cars."

He could see Coach giving him a slightly dull sideways look, unimpressed with his sprawling, but the football coach didn't say anything, just reached to the control panel on the door. The truck was old enough to have window cranks, and Coach lowered the window with a few creaky rotations.

"Maybe this'll go smooth.." the big man gruffed quietly, adjusting the rear-view mirror and squinting out to the street. "Looks kinda calm."

The conman rolled his eyes subtly, leaning his head back and tensing his lips as his gaze flickered up toward the rear-view mirror. He squinted just slightly at what he could see of Rochelle's head just outside the back window. She had her head turned slightly, glancing down toward the
snoozing Ellis, and Nick found his gaze sliding to follow hers even though he couldn't actually see.

Agitation, real and harsh, flared in his voice as he muttered, "Say that and everything will go to shit."
Chapter 24

The truck maneuvered easily around the abandoned cars and broken street that mottled the Savannah blocks. Coach barely paid any attention to the zombies they drove by, focusing mainly on his driving - and on not getting the truck trapped on the clogged streets.

Nick's discomfort with his swerving and reactive driving was evident from the way his right hand had a knuckle-white grip on the armrest of his chair, even though his posture remained a lounging sprawl worthy of an uncaring teenager.

Hidden more effectively was the swaying nausea that struck him with every jerk of the wheel, minor but tangible. He struggled on and off with a slight twinge of a headache, each time making him regret his drinking a little bit more. Better in a few minutes. he thought, defensively.

One hand of Coach's was only half on the wheel, its thumb and forefinger pulled away to grip onto the plastic package of a roll of powdered donuts. Rochelle had passed them up through the side window, and Nick had one as well - though it was untouched, resting on the coiled dip of his stomach. He wasn't interested in eating, and even less in eating those.

Oddly, as Coach revved the engine to plow through a few infected who had brainlessly sprinted out into the street in an attempt to attack the vehicle, Nick was the first to prompt conversation. His tone was a little taut, expressing his displeasure easily. "I'll make the leap of logic that you'd bite my head off if I smoked."

Coach snorted, more a grunt than anything else, humored like Nick was making a joke. Deciding to just take that as a 'yes,' the conman gave a small sigh and rolled his head into his hand, scratching at his scalp in a slow motion.

"Ain't good fo' you, y'know." the big man commented suddenly, cranking the wheel to drive them halfway up onto the sidewalk to get around a clog of cars in the middle of the road.

Nick squinted slightly, leaning back reflexively as a zombie was crushed up against the nose of the truck and rolled up onto his door for a moment, but snarked off a short response. "Neither are the fucking zombies." Coach didn't immediately respond, so Nick shrugged a shoulder and tacked on with a slightly less hostile tone, "I don't usually hit it half this hard. You blame me?"

The big man chuckled, silently staring forward at the road as he took a turn around a corner. He pried the last doughnut of the roll free from its package, biting in clear in half with his first mouthful and chewing slowly, wrist wiping powder from his mouth. Nick bit his teeth together subtly, giving an annoyed roll of his eyes and turning his head to glance out the back window.

Judging by Rochelle's posture and how she was looking out from the truck bed, Ellis was still asleep - somehow. The fact they hadn't actually had to fire off any shots yet that morning gave him the excuse of at least not sleeping through gunfire, but Nick still felt himself scoffing in half-frustration.

He must've 'tch'ed softly under his breath, because Coach sent him a sideways look.

Shrugging it off, Nick glanced out through the windshield and watched with a slight blink as they suddenly bounced up over a pole lying across the road, hurrying through a turn immediately afterward.

"I can't tell what kinda guy you are, Nick."
The gambler curled his tongue and sighed, pulling his crossed legs down off the dashboard and sitting up in the car seat. He swiped the donuts off his lap with a soft brush of his knuckles, not bothering to see where they ended up. He retorted, of course, although his tone was still fairly cool. "This again, really? How many times are you and Rochelle going to bother me about this shi-"

"Now don't get yo' hackles up," Coach quickly interrupted, brows furrowing up warily and fingers flexing on the steering wheel as he guided the truck down the road. "You blame me fo' wantin' to know a little about someone I'll be trustin' my life with - sooner than later?"

Nick snorted quietly, settling back in the seat just a slight bit. He shrugged a shoulder, relenting only a little, even if he had no plans to really answer any questions. "What exactly are you expecting? Ten to one, you'd hate whatever I tell you."

The big man seemed to think, some of the tension leaving his brow. He leaned back in his seat, sliding his fingers down to grip the wheel at a more slack angle. He apparently threw caution to the wind and just asked it.

"You married?"

Nick felt himself blinking a bit, lifting a brow and a hand to cuff at his chin. He couldn't fight an inner sense of bewilderment, trying to figure out how they'd skipped the topics he'd braced for. Like, any other topic at all. "Where the hell did that come from?"

Coach chuckled slightly, shrugging his shoulder and focusing for a moment as the Chevy was forced to weave carefully through the wreckage of what looked to have once been a wire barricade between two buildings, now crushed under some kind of collision. It'd completely buckled inward... Coach seemed to give it a look, frowning vaguely, but said nothing about it.

The cityscape was starting to change - the blocks were more spacious, road a little wider...they were starting to pull away from the center of Savannah.

"Ro' noticed a tanline yesterday.. Figured you were missin' a weddin' ring, but it ain't like she'd ask."

Nick snorted instantly, crossing his arms loosely over his chest and curling his fingers in his sleeves. The smallest glance confirmed, though he already knew: his left ring finger was bare, unlike the three other rings that bedecked his knuckles on various fingers, and the last knuckle was encircled by a slightly pale circle.

It was only a shade or two... but it still hadn't been long enough since he'd shed the ring for it to catch up.

And she was acting like I was coming onto HER.. checking for tanlines? Really? "Funny how you're all up in arms about my secrets while I don't even know your fuckin' name. And it's happily divorced, thanks." he snapped defensively, inhaling a sharp breath and scratching his bicep in an agitated motion.

Coach lifted a few of his fingers from the steering wheel in a half-dismissive and half-calming motion, shaking his head slightly. "We got half that in common, ain't no reason to get mad." He took in a breath, then added, "An' if it bugs you that much, it's Samuel Garrett.. but keep wit' Coach. Simpler."

Curiously, Nick loosened his grip on his biceps. He eyed Coach - no, 'Samuel' wasn't going to stick anytime soon, that was for sure - sideways a little more, not looking up when the truck jolted
abruptly, running over something. *I didn't even read him as a married man... divorced, though?*

"Who left who?" he prompted rather callously, decidedly not commenting on the introduction, but Coach didn't seem offended. There was a slight downturn to the wrinkled edges of the man's deep-set eyes that betrayed his answer before he gave it, and Nick glanced away again once he spoke up.

"You tell me if I tell you, boy?" Coach joked rather seriously, pressing a little harder on the pedal to drive them well out of the clutches of a small milling cluster of zombies that lunged at the truck.

The conman smirked vaguely, resting his mouth against his knuckles and offering a, "Sure." Judging by Coach's sidelong glance, the big man didn't believe him in the slightest, but with a loud and breezy inhale, he responded anyway.

"She found someone else... happens, Nick. I ain't begrudgin' her happiness, even if it's wit' another man." He said it resignedly, the words pulsing with a long-since earned sense of justification. Nick read it gradually, tipping his head against his hand and musing as he listened. He was rather pleased he'd not only wormed out of talking, but gotten Coach to fall victim to his own trap.

"My coachin' at a high-school wasn't ever a real point of pride fo' her, anyway. Didn't make too much on it, either. Don't blame her fo' gettin' tired of it - I been doin' the same job since I got outta college." He let a calmed sigh pass through his wide nostrils, flaring them, and shook his head.

"Been years since she left, though. Old news... you?"

Nick didn't let him slip by, though - he felt like the older man was trying to pull something on him. There was an edge to his reaction that didn't match up - his words were honest, but there was something missing that echoed in the frown on his face and the odd weight in his eyes.

"What're you cutting out, Sam?" he challenged - but Coach didn't stand the callousness (nor the mocking use of his name) as well the second time around, drawing an obviously disapproving breath and raising a hand to scratch at the heavy scruff of his rounded cheek before he replaced his hand on the wheel.

"... You're cuttin' out everything. Don't pull that shit on me, boy."

"Lead by example, Coach. You should know that, of any of us." Nick smirked at him, holding utterly still as he waited in cool and rather smug expectation. He let his fingers adjust his suit over his frame, reaching up to straighten his collar against his neck. Belatedly and subconsciously, his fingertip brushed against the scab along his neck.

It had looked so infected that first day, but now it felt like nothing more than a cat scratch. Between that and his fever disappearing overnight, Nick felt… better. Good, even.

He felt confident, now, in saying it hadn't been signs of the Green Flu, but it wasn't like they had time to get sick otherwise - even regular sick.

Drawing his focus again, Coach sighed wearily. The older Georgian shook his head in disapproval before somewhat reluctantly lifting a bulky shoulder. His voice was uncertain of its phrasing for what had to have been the first time since Nick met him. ".It- .. she got our daughter, that's all."

"Momma with a step-dad was better fo' her than a single dad. I ain't spitin' or nothin' - it was all civil."
The conman barely gave a response, turning his head slightly and glancing out the window. He doubted both parts of that last statement, though he was well aware of his own cynicism. "Maybe you should." He said it with rare tact, hostility held behind pursed lips.

Coach laughed gruffly, shaking his head and rubbing at the wheel with his palms. "Nah.. ain't worth it, boy. If you're spitin' your ex still, you're wastin' yo' time.. we still get along. I see my li'l baby girl 'cause of it. Don't much like her new man, but it still ain't worth it. We're all adults."

Biting back a small laugh, Nick didn't miss the use of 'baby girl' and how the big man called Rochelle the same thing. It wasn't particularly new that Coach treated her a little paternally, though the new tidbits Nick was ascertaining seemed to solidify it to a more serious fact. He wondered if Rochelle knew, or if he was the first to be told.

"Women are greedy bitches." he muttered simply, the decision firm though he flashed a smirk like he was simply fishing for a reaction when Coach gave him a slightly wide look of distaste. "You'd be surprised what you end up learning about them, if you let yourself look."

Coach sighed just a little, apparently deciding to skim over the gambler's derisive phrasing rather than arguing. He let his shoulders roll back and pop, questioning, "Guess that means you gave her the boot?"

Nick was quiet, lips parted, just long enough to count as a hesitation. His fingers started to seek purchase in the fabric of his jacket, but before either of them could say anything, there was a rap on the back window.

The distraction was more than welcome.

Turning with a lifted brow, Nick found Rochelle crouching up where she was nestled against the back of the cab, a frown on her face. She was in the process of shaking Ellis awake. To Nick's displeasure, the kid was slowly starting to stir, sleepily rubbing at his face and leaning against her to fight the shift and shake of the moving truck.

Rochelle beckoned with her free hand, rubbing Ellis' shoulder with the other. She said something, but it was too muffled by the thick back window to hear. As they'd done to get breakfast up into the front, Nick reached to the small crank below the passenger-side window to roll it down, grunting a little as he twisted and slipped his head out of the car, scowling heavily.

"What?" he called back to Rochelle, lifting brows as she leaned over the side of the truck bed to meet his advance.

"I might be crazy, but I keep hearing something... can you get Coach to pull over?"

Sighing slightly but giving a confirming nod, Nick drew back all the way into the truck, gesturing with one hand toward the side of the road. He used the other to readjust his wind-blown hair, grumbling. "Stop the car."

He kept quiet as Coach obeyed after a moment, merely watching as the big man quickly tossed it into park and shoved the door open. Coach dragged up his shotgun from the floorboard, leaning out into the street and quickly scanning for infected.

There were still a few stragglers chasing after them up the road, but it was a simple matter of gunning them down from a distance. The shotgun blast may have been inaccurate, but it only took a few pellets straight to the face to down the infected. By the time Coach lowered the gun, Nick had gotten out to lean up against the side of the truck and focus on Rochelle, expectantly.
Ellis was sitting up on his own now against the back end of the truck bed, cap lowered to shade his eyes and most of his mouth - though not all of it. Were Nick to let himself look over, he'd have seen the smallest signs of a frown. It took effort not to glance, but the gambler wasn't interested in fighting that battle just then.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" Coach prompted as he rested an elbow on the edge of the truckbed, curiously inspecting the woman's slightly nervous grip on her pistol.

"I think it's that thing again, that chased us off-track from the hotel..." she responded, frowning and shaking her head a little. She crawled up to the side of the bed, carefully hitching up a leg to slip over it, Coach reaching up to help her down. "I could've been hearing things, but..."

"Whut thing?" It was Ellis who asked it, even though Nick was primed to, and the kid quietly raised up his chin to glance at Coach and Rochelle, turning his body away from the conman. Nick simmered silently with his weight shifting from foot to foot.

*The cold shoulder? Really?*

That was going to get insufferable, fast.

Rochelle sighed as she settled on the asphalt, taking a few steps away from the truck and lifting her chin to listen to a loud, heavy crashing noise some small distance away. "Big guy... really, really big. Really, really, *really* big and not at all what I want to meet again... CEDA calls them Tanks."

"It was flingin' cars like toys." the big man grunted in agreement, making Nick straighten with a bit of a blink. Two memories shot up to the forefront of his mind - the cars implanted in the sides of buildings like bugs squashed into the wall, and his own car, shoved off the highway going full speed.

But he didn't mention either.

"Whut, it's like the Hulk?" The hick lifted his hands to rub his head through his cap. It was a touch startling how unexcited he seemed with the concept. Ellis' voice was just… flat, relative to his normal chipper behaviour, although maybe it was exhaustion. He forced himself up, reaching down to pick up his shotgun from where it had been lodged against their cache of supplies.

Hooking it under his bandaged arm, he rolled himself over the truck's tailgate and stood up against the back bumper. Ellis stretched as much as he could with a heavy yawn, the action overtaking him the instant he was vertical.

"... or, the actual question of the moment," Nick muttered hostilely before he could stop himself, turning his head away and moving to reach into the truckbed and bend himself over the rim. He retrieved his machine gun - just in case. "How the hell do we kill it?"

Nick didn't miss the glance Ellis shot at him, nor the retreat he made for Coach's side. The kid was fingering the grip of his pump-shotgun. "Yuh wanna suggest somethin' helpful, N-" he shot back with an impulsive, discomfited tone, starting the conman's name before he was interrupted.

They were all silent a moment as the loud sound of crushing metal preceded a thunderous rumble. It was guttural, and *loud*, and couldn't have been further from human-sounding. Nick felt it against the flats of his dress shoes, making him knot his brow.

Maybe under different circumstances, more attention would have been paid to the kid's behaviour. Now, Coach just gripped Ellis’ shoulder reassuringly, and not much more was said.
"Who votes we get back in the goddamn car and keep driving?" he suggested coldly, shooting a glare at Ellis from across the truckbed. The kid didn't meet his gaze despite clearly noticing it, curling his free hand into a bit of a fist. If Nick wasn't seeing things, the bridge of his nose grew a slash of red as his face flushed.

Don't know if you wanna be pissed or scared, do ya, kiddo... Nick didn’t have time to feel guilty. Preferably, he'd avoid it entirely, if he could. He quickly shook the thoughts away and jammed a thumb at the truck. "Well?!

'I'm wit' Nick on this one. We ain't-'

But Coach didn't get to explain his agreement. Something - a very suddenly close, very suddenly loud something - roared out an aggressive call, echoing on the air, and a huge shape came thundering out onto their street from an intersection back behind them.

It must've been the size of a small elephant. Pure, raw muscle rippled on every inch of its deformed frame, skin stretched so tight over the unnatural bundles of muscle packed onto it that it almost seemed ready to split. Its arms were gigantic and meaty, and they dragged its whole torso down, putting its weight mostly on its knuckles as it lunged out from between two buildings. One hand landed on the rear end of a car, crushing the vehicle instantly into the ground in a shower of glass and bits of chassis.

Its head was sunken into the middle of bulging shoulders, seeming almost consumed by its own ballooning brawn, but there was no mistaking its focus on the survivors - and the enraged roar that sounded like half-formed words and growled gargles made it painfully clear they had no options.

Coach thundered back to the front seat, jumping in and slamming the door, and without a thought Nick vaulted up onto the trunkbed as Rochelle and Ellis did the same. He thrust himself up against the wall of it, jamming his body tightly and hooking an arm in a strap clearly meant for holding cargo. Grabbing hold of Rochelle's arm, Nick urged her over to hook elbows with him, bracing both of them down.

"Ellis." he demanded shortly, tone leaving absolutely no room for argument. There wasn't any, anyway, as the brawny monstrosity swung into a thundering run down the road toward them, cracking asphalt with every step.

With a visibly uneasy expression but little choice, the younger man scrambled over and got an arm around Rochelle, locking into the neat huddle they had down in the truckbed. The moment they were settled, Nick slammed the butt of his SMG against the truck, signaling Coach.

And Coach floored it. Tires squealed with burning rubber as the Chevy protested it, but even so it went, rollicking like a train gone wild and jolting its passengers like so much loose change.

Aiming was a pipe-dream, but Nick did his best to brace his gun against the side of the tailgate. The gambler fired in sporadic bursts - unfortunately realizing very quickly that the bullets weren't so much as giving the thing pause. The pure power behind its vaulting strides was letting it keep up with the truck a little too easily.

For just a split second, Nick thought he saw the thing start to stop - only to watch with some amount of disbelief as the thing scooped up a van crashed into a lightpole and heaved it over its head, roaring as it braced to throw the thing.

"TITS!" he shouted reflexively, trying to shoot more accurately and hit something vital to halt the thing's throw. Both Rochelle and Ellis tried to shoot, too, but Coach drove them squealing around a
corner and all three of them had to grab onto the truck and each other to keep from tumbling over.

There was an instant there where a weightless feeling enveloped Nick's gut, before the Chevy steadied its balance and peeled off down the new street.

"Jesus!" Rochelle gasped, very clearly shaken as the van they'd nearly had thrown at them went skidding across the asphalt behind them, rolling along with terrible noises of broken glass and metal.

That, however, was nothing compared to the enraged and guttural roaring that echoed soon after, and the tremendous noise of the Tank's revived chase despite the ground it'd lost. Nick couldn't deny it was terrifying as shit.

And the fact he could feel Ellis cringe away every single time their arms, both looped around Rochelle, touched, was just the cherry on top.
"Ain't givin' up!" Ellis' voice cracked down the middle as he shouted it, crouched body flinching back as the lumbering thing chasing them crashed sideways into the face of a building. Bits of house went flying in all directions, but the thing barely slowed, one meaty hand grabbing hold of a chunk of framework and chucking it toward them.

Coach swerved them to dodge it, rocking the truck violently, and clipped a parked car with the very nose of it. A shout was drawn from the big man as his mistake earned a long scrape along the side of their car, and Rochelle cursed sharply, clinging to the men on either side of her.

She grabbed hard at Nick's sleeve, balking his gunfire suddenly and crying out over the roar of the Tank and the truck's engine: "We have to kill it! Coach and I only escaped because it didn't actually spot us - we can't lose this thing!"

The gambler took one look at her frightened expression and leaned in to hiss at her, "You know things about these asshats, how do we kill it?!" When Rochelle hesitated, terror heightening in the taut distress of her pupils, he repeated it, furiously, "How?!"

She broke, shaking her head quickly and averting her gaze. "I-I don't know! They never-"

Nick silenced her with a growl, shaking her hand away and quickly getting his machine gun up again to try and aim for the monstrous thing's comparatively underdeveloped lower body. If they could cripple its legs, maybe they could do harm - as it was, bullets were definitely not doing much against the flexing mass of muscle that slathered its torso.

Ellis noticed Nick's switch of focus, but he hesitated on joining in, glancing sideways at the conman. A weighty tremble touched the mechanic's jaw as a fierce jolt of the truck made them all bounce. Struggling to find a way to whisper it to Rochelle while speaking over the ruckus all around them, the kid managed, "S'alright, Ro'..." and then straightened up in his crouch.

Ellis grabbed hold of the top of the tailgate with one hand, leaning back and trying to look around at the buildings speeding past them, squinting through his lashes as the wind made his eyes water.

Something must've clicked in his head, because suddenly he broke away from Rochelle and darted across the truck bed with his shotgun thrust under his arm, clamping hands on the back of the cab as he reached it. Ellis leaned over the side, dangerously thrusting his torso around the edge of the truckbed, and shouted into the window at Coach: "TURN LEFT, MAN!"

Sure enough, the big man obeyed without a question, and the truck veered suddenly off the main street and went barreling around a corner. Ellis lost his balance and flailed back to land sprawled in the truck bed, looking startled, but he quickly started picking himself back up.

"Are you okay, honey?" Rochelle immediately questioned, almost pulling away from Nick to crawl over to him - but the gambler interjected before she could, making her stop and glare back at him.

"What the fuck are you doing, Overalls?" Nick yelled back at him, lowering his gun as they separated from the Tank for just a few precious moments. The conman felt a pang in his gut immediately afterward, noticing how the kid shrunk away at the harsh wording before regaining his feet. Rochelle's glare burned a little more after that.

Ellis stubbornly darted back to thrust down to his knees at the tailgate, replacing his shotgun against his shoulder but turning his head back to squint ahead of them. He gestured with the tip of
his hat, screwed so tight onto his head the wind couldn't wrest it free. "Got an idea! Muh buddy Keith told me 'bout this once! They do it in all the movies. We jus' gotta lead him up here!"

Uncomprehending, Nick lifted his head and tried to look in the direction Ellis was - and, finding themselves drawn to the protruding sign for a gas station just a minute down the street, light-flecked green eyes blinked wider as he struck the same train of thought the kid had found.

"Holy shit, you're insane!" he blurted, and for just an instant, thought he saw a smile flicker over Ellis’ face, though it disappeared as the Tank came blundering around the corner and thrust itself with its knuckles into the street after them, roaring a thunderous noise upon spotting them. "We can't blow a fucking gas station!"

"A-Are you joking?!" Rochelle looked like she might be ill and outraged at the same instant. When Nick noticed she was staring at him, he quickly thrust his elbow at Ellis with a defensive expression, as if to shove the blame toward the younger man.

"Yuh got any better ideas?" Ellis challenged, although with a surprising lack of confidence and a visible downturn to his chin. There was, however, a spark of something in the clear blues of his eyes that Nick hadn't seen yet: a certain gleeful excitement.

Neither of them did, or at least couldn't scrabble for a response fast enough, and with a short roll of his shoulder, Ellis dug in deep where he kneeled. He aimed his shotgun at the side of the road where the gas station would flash into existence as they passed it.

Snarling a relenting, "Tits...", Nick pushed Rochelle gently to switch places with him, doing an awkward spin in his crouch. She fumbled a bit as he did, seeming flustered, but he did little but give her a severe look. Dropping to his knees next to Ellis, Nick made a concerted effort not to notice when the hick tensed up and gripped his shotgun a little harder.

"I hope you two know what you're doing!" Rochelle gasped warily, wrapping her arms around the truck's rim and ducking her head down slightly, covering her face with a forearm.

Not a fuckin' chance...

Nick pulled up his machinegun to mirror Ellis, close enough that their elbows touched - up till Ellis shuffled over an inch, that was. That snapped Nick's attempt to ignore it, and with a very tight jaw, he uttered, "Hate me later.. shoot now."

Nick noticed Ellis glance at him, a weird flicker of something hesitant darting over his expression. It almost looked like surprise, and a slight flush followed suit across the bridge of his nose. Before Nick could really think on it much, the truck roared past the gas station.

Both of them aimed sharply at the gas pumps rising up in gaudy red pillars, the noses of their guns snapping up.. They ticked along to try and follow as they got further away - and it was Ellis who blurted, "NOW!" when the Tank flung itself out onto the stretch of road just in front of the building.

The blast of their guns was, for just a beat of time, fruitless. Bullets visibly flashed on the asphalt around the pumps still rapidly moving away from them. Rochelle joined in from nowhere, Glock snarling in her hands - and then they struck home. A soft flame thrust up in the wake of the copper shell, lone and dim for just a split second... and as gas leaked from the pump, it all caught fire.

The chain reaction happened all in a blink, as the first pump went up in flames and exploded, so went the other three lined up. Red-hot fire burst like so much pouring water from the mouth of a
hose, crawling along with the liquid gasoline.

It didn't explode so much as it *burst*, and the wave of fire engulfed the monstrous Tank and sent it staggering sideways into a building on the other side of the street. The noise was deafening and the sight blinding, though somewhere Nick was aware of a scream from his left and a shout from his right, and the truck swerving violently as Coach sent them into a violent skid, brakes squealing.

Nick found himself quickly falling back onto the bottom of the truck bed, struggling to find purchase in something. The rubber padding spared him any pain, though his head spun and his eyes were stinging. The heat had reached them, like a flat wall of heavy, burning air.

"-OO-LEE SHEEE-IT WE DID IT!" Ellis' voice buzzed into his consciousness a little delayed and half-echoed. The conman blinked his eyes open, lifting his head and trying to get his elbows underneath him, feeling the truck stabilizing and starting to slow underneath him. "HOLY SHIT WE KILLED IT!"

Dragging up to a sitting position, Nick quickly noticed Rochelle staring gape-mouthed down the street. He followed her gaze, ignoring Ellis and his arms-in-the-air hooting for just a moment, and surveyed the destruction they'd caused.

"OH MAH GAWD WE DID IT! WHOOOOO! THAT WAS SO COOL! DID YUH SEE THAT?!"

Flames were chewing on every inch they could reach, spread across the street and up the faces of the buildings on each side of the ruined gas station. Through the growing haze of heat and smoke Nick could see the immobile form of the Tank. The smoke was turning black as it ate away at the now-dead monstrosity, and the mix of burning gasoline and burning flesh was cloying.

They'd attracted some attention with that, but none of the zombies seemed smart enough to avoid the fire. They ran straight into it, gasoline fire catching on their legs and sending them staggering, stumbling, and screaming to the ground.

"No, I fucking didn't." Nick muttered sarcastically, abandoning his gun beside himself and raising both hands to rake through his hair in a rather stressed motion. "Better do that again."

"Oh mah sweet Lord!" The hick was absolutely beside himself, cheeks flushed and eyes wide, clapping on the top of his cap with his free palm and standing up as the truck rolled to a stop. "Man I ain't never SEEN nothin' like that! Slap a saddle on me 'n call me a horse! I can't wait tuh see the look on Keith's face when I tell'im - oh mah GAWD!"

"I-I can't.. I can't believe we actually did that.." Rochelle muttered under her breath, setting a hand on her forehead and turning her gaze toward Nick, completely frazzled. "I can't believe that actually happened. Aren't they supposed to have... safety features.. or - or something?!"

For some reason, the conman drugged up a smirk to give her, watching her sense wilt a little further at the expression. "Sorry. Let's remember to call OSHA when we get out of here." She rubbed her face outright with her palm, sighing heavily, and Nick offered quietly, "... Killed it, didn't we?"

The truck door swung open, and with a slight shift of the vehicle's weight, Coach clambered out. He didn't go far, just standing there in the open space between the door and the cabin, slowly lifting a hand to rub at his head.

With a slow, relenting sigh, he gruffed, "... Ellis, son... yo' head ain't on right. What if we'da gotten hit by that?" The big man's tone was noticeably un-chastising, and he eyed the mess behind them
with an air of resignation.

Ellis seemed to lose just a little bit of his high, gritting out a slightly grimaced smile in an attempt to look abashed when he really couldn't pull it off. "Didn't have no other choice, Coach. I had tuh think quick!"

Coach sighed indelicately, leaning his head around the truck to eye Nick and Rochelle. "You two a'ight? Nobody hurt?"

"All good..." Nick uttered with prompt sarcasm, starting to shift to his feet so he could stand on the truckbed and crack his knuckles, pressing them into the opposite palm. "I think Ro' might have grown a few grey hairs in the middle of all that, though."

She couldn't even muster up a response beyond a short 'hrmpfh,' leaning heavily against the truck's tailgate and turning her head to give the burning scene behind them another disbelieving once-over.

"She ain't the only one." Coach grunted for just a moment, then set his hand against the side of the truck and let his shoulders drop a little. "Bit risky, but good thinkin', son. Can't complain much, since that shit's dead."

Ellis flushed slightly, jabbing a thumb urgently over his shoulder. With Coach seemingly on his side, he tried to push it: "Yuh gotta admit, that shit.. was.. cooool.."

..but got nowhere, getting a small taut-jawed look of warning from the ex-football player. He shut up obediently, lifting a hand to scratch at the back of his head through his cap and glance down at his feet.

Rochelle recovered enough to speak up, reaching out to gesture back down the street with a sigh. "I.. I gotta say, it's nice to see that thing dead. I'd take a horde over that thing chasing after us..." A thought seemed to strike her mid-sentence, and with a wary pause, she prompted, "You guys don't think there's more of them, do you?"

Nobody spoke for just a breath - nobody knew, in the end, though even Ellis had a slightly drawn lower lip that suggested he hoped not. The question was an uncomfortable one, hanging heavy.

"Least we know how tuh kill it." the kid pointed out rather optimistically, gripping both hands onto his shotgun and twisting it a little. Rochelle promptly laughed, dubiously inspecting him from where she sat.

"What, blow up another fueling station..? There's gotta be something else... it's just CEDA barely even mentioned them at all. Honestly I thought they might be a rumor, until... we saw the first one."

Coach shrugged heavily, rubbing his rounded and stubbled chin with his wrist. "Rather go off the 'ssumption we ain't gonna meet another one of those motherfuckers."

Nick prompted to change the subject before they continued, grabbing hold of the tailgate to hoist up to his feet and wipe the front of his jacket slightly. It was a mindless self-soothing gesture. "Fighting it made a lot of fucking noise, and I'm coming to understand that's not a goddamn good thing. We should probably get out of here before we get jumped by something. We can mope about our impending doom when we get someplace safe again."

Coach nodded where he stood, exhaling a heavy grunt and turning back to get into the car. "We ain't much off track. Should be on the highway in half an hour.. maybe an hour." he assured them.
over his shoulder, sounding rather weary. "Nick... you stayin' up here wit' me?"

The conman quickly confirmed that with a short "Yeah.", noting instantly Ellis had started to glance toward him. Nick found himself gritting his teeth to see that edgy discomfort start to creep back into Ellis, who had been previously distracted by the explosion.

Aware Rochelle was watching, Nick felt like he was toeing a very thin line. At the same time he struggled to stand what he'd burdened the Georgian with, he struggled to discern why not giving a shit was so difficult for him this time. He just wanted to not care.

Instead, he got that enraging voice in the back of his head that said, *Fffuucckk, Nicolas, you are a grade A asshole...* He could say something nice, for once. The Georgian *had* just pretty much single-handedly delivered them from being a bunch of splattered stains on the ground.

So he tried: "Hey, Ov-"

"Don't."

It happened so quickly Nick was left rather tongue-tied. The mechanic's voice quavered, and the tone that should've been disgusted or offended was dropped to a plea. Ellis flushed sharply along his cheeks, and Nick couldn't help but stare in disconcertion as the kid lifted a hand to quickly lower his cap down over his eyes and step away from him, crossing the truckbed to drop down to sit against one of the corners.

Feeling a twisting sensation, a stabbing ache of guilt, Nick tossed out the only reaction he had: he turned about with a moody growl under his breath and climbed down from the truck, stalking to the passenger side door. He threw it open blindly and climbed in, snorting out a bull-like breath as he shut it and settled down in the seat.

"You a'ight, Nick?" the big man asked, generally gruff tone sounding a little surprised at the sudden change he'd clearly missed, and turned his head to eye the gambler.

Nick didn't even bother finding an excuse. He just responded blandly, "Fine, thanks." and arched his back so he could drag his suit jacket off his shoulders and fold it in his lap, still hot from the blast.

Coach pushed the truck into drive and gently eased it to a roll, definitely unconvinced. He sped the Chevy up once he'd comforted himself that it hadn't suffered any real damage during the chase and the blast, and once he hit a good speed he tried just once more. "Somethin' happen?"

The conman shifted a glance up into the rearview mirror, staring a moment at the back of Ellis' downturned head - Rochelle hadn't moved. She was still looking back at the wreckage, turned around at the waist... keeping her distance, or maybe oblivious. Nick couldn't tell.

Nick saw Ellis' head start to turn just a little, and he risked continuing to watch through the mirror. The kid looked over his shoulder, lower lip bitten heavily between his teeth in a worried gesture, redness only just starting to drain from his face.

Another thing Nick couldn't tell: what that face meant. Ellis was so hard to read in that moment, despite being such an open book in any other situation. Confusion? Anger? Fear? None of them fit, but hell if Nick knew what did. And he definitely didn't know what the hell to make of that red colour that had been burning on his face.

"I dunno, Samuel. You tell me."
The nonsensical, mocking response did exactly what Nick wanted and nothing more: Coach let him be, gruffly and quietly falling to silence. For once, the conman was glad for the big man's complaints with his cigarettes. The itch to pull one out was a good distraction, although it did worsen his irritation as he sat rather still, and actually smoking him would've been a better one.

The drive to reach the highway (however winding, considering they had to go around the wreckage they'd caused, and a detour didn't immediately make itself known) was, in comparison, almost uneventful. Though no one in their right mind would complain in light of the near-death experience the Tank encounter had been, Nick found himself very close to doing so. At least it'd be better than just sitting around.

He had trouble finding anything interesting enough to overtake the constant echo of Ellis' pleading 'Don't' reverberating in his head, and the relentless musing his brain was doing on trying to figure out why the tone Ellis had said it in had been so goddamn painful to listen to.
Chapter 26

The sky was already dim by the time the truck's dashboard clock hit a solid '4:30,' green numbers flashing on a dusty orange backlight. Nick noticed the sun was still fairly high above their heads, but the air was full of smoke and ash as the wind blew it in swirls from the wrecked Savannah.

Coach had discovered that the back window popped up by way of a lever near his shoulder, and Rochelle and Ellis were both settled close to the now-open gateway. They'd eaten lunch like that, Coach producing a pocket knife from his backpack to allow Rochelle to crack open a few cans of cold spaghetti rings.

Nick's expression had been one of complete disgust at the concept, and he'd very nearly shuddered when Rochelle had cracked open the first one. The meal was suspect in a normal situation, but unheated and straight from the can - there wasn't a word for it. The likely-mostly artificial tomato sauce had separated into a slightly orange foam along the edge of the can, and the pasta was clumped in very questionably circular shapes.

She hadn't exactly looked enthused at the time, either, and with a disgusted wrinkle to her nose, Rochelle had stirred the contents mercilessly with the slim pocketknife. It had looked a little more normal after that, and she had the presence of mind to shake the next one before opening it.

Coach and Ellis had taken a can each without a word of complaint, and Nick had found himself looking on with a level of horror, like an outsider peering in on some cultish and alien ritual, as the two men had risked the first few awkward sips.

If he hadn't been so impossibly, gut-achingly, tear-jerkingly starving at the time, he would've probably thrown himself from the truck rather than take the meticulously-shaken can Rochelle handed to him a few moments later. Unfortunately, that had been exactly what he was, and with a curse and a sharp look of displeasure, he'd endured a mental battle for a straight five minutes before taking a sip.

It wasn't awful, but it was close to the worst thing he'd ever eaten. He only kept going by virtue of pure, iron will - and hunger.

Now, well after they'd finished up and settled back into watching the city peter out as they drove along, Nick found he'd never regretted something so much. His stomach was flipflopping with tiny gurgles under his blue dress shirt (suit jacket tucked between him and the door like a pillow), and he felt a constant pressure at the back of his throat, making him feel like he was gulping back a retch every time he swallowed.

"I can't believe you asshats fucking made me eat that." he growled under his breath for the tenth time, reaching over to roll down the window and lean his head into the wind. He breathed deep through his nostrils, annoyed to hear the same response he'd gotten just about every other time: "Could've starved." It was a half-amused Coach who said it, the humor apparently not doused by the repetition. "Say somethin' if you want us t'pull over.. sure the zombies'll respect a man's privacy."

Nick gave him a scathing look sideways, grumbling quietly and crooking his arm outside the window. "I'll keep in here, thanks." He let his chin settle on his elbow, curling up a little, not entirely aware of how the position looked rather sulky.
"Keith got hisself sick eatin' canned stuff once, but that was 'cause it had a bunch'uh bug bits in it. I don't think them pasta cans had any of that, Nick." The comment was only marginally more interesting than the fact Ellis had actually said something directed at the conman for the first time since they'd started driving again. The kid's voice was slightly unsure, and he kept his gaze focused down at his forearms, but all the same...

He'd spoken before, seeming at least normal enough for the other two not to get alarmed, but not once had he done more than glance momentarily at Nick before quickly averting his gaze with something a lot like embarrassment. The conman had gladly returned the favor, completely ignoring him and not even bothering to try and decipher his reaction.

The decision had felt almost tacitly agreed upon. Now, suddenly, Ellis was breaking it?

Drawing his jaw taut, Nick pushed himself into responding. His tone came out rather sharply, and he found himself reluctantly sanding it to a softer edge as the words came. "I'm not sure I trust anything that comes out of Georgia, but sure, Overalls. I'll make the fucking wary assumption that there aren't bugs in my pasta."

Giving a small, hiccup-like chuckle and leaning in a little bit through the window, Ellis stretched his arm in toward the dashboard radio. He could just barely reach the knobs, turning the radio on and listening to the heavy static for a moment. "Wasn't so bad.. Maybe we can get some kind'uh heat next time we eat."

Nick found he didn't mind the small-talk just then, settling more against his crooked arm and pulling in a long breath through his nostrils. Ignoring the matter entirely was so much more preferable to Ellis' injured behaviour. Green eyes flicked sideways to watch the mechanic's fingers twitch softly, clicking the radio through each channel, with the smallest of pauses as the static wavered in and out.

"I doubt heating that shit up would help much."

Rochelle injected into the conversation there, lifting up her hands slightly and waving them. "Wait, wait, back up.. what's this about Keith eating bugs?"

Nick snorted slightly at the question, flexing his fingers and resting his knuckles against his mouth as a small - but thankfully benign - 'urp' caught him offguard, tasting unpleasantly metallic.

"Well," Ellis started, nestling down against the bottom of the open window frame. He set his left hand against his chin while the other kept turning the knob, flexing his elbow a little bit against the bandages that were starting to loosen. "He met this guy, who was sellin' shit on the side'uh the road. Y'know, like a yard sale, 'cept… well. In the back'uh some guy's truck. So -"

"Just follow all safety procedures as relayed by CEDA officials and posters." All of them went silent. The man's voice was monotone and crackling softly as he relayed the words like so much regurgitated plastic. "Barricade yourself in the nearest defensible building and wait for further instructions. Evacuation can only happen if everyone remains calm."

There was a soft click, and it began again. "Please follow all safety procedures as relayed by CEDA officials and posters. Barr -" Ellis changed the channel there, sighing a bit with pursed lips, bringing back the cloying static that suddenly seemed so much nicer.

"Bullshit." Coach gruffed quietly, sighing as he let one hand slip off the wheel and rest on his lap. The truck rumbled along under a wide blue sign, proclaiming an oddly clean 'I-80.' The sign was good news, and as the road peeled out from the last vestiges of the city, they were drawn into a
widening highway.

"Why are those assclowns still spreading that? They were on the radio when I got here, too." Nick muttered against his wrist, moodily. "This place is a fucking wreck and they're not here anymore... hell, nobody's here anymore."

Rochelle slumped just slightly with a shrug, rubbing her fingertips against the bridge of her nose. "I had to memorize all their instructions. It's all just white noise now, isn't it... about as useful as being told to play dead - holding back mass panic by trying to stay reasonable, I guess, but.. I really thought they'd get it under control. Maybe they were just putting up a front."

"What? Putting up a front for cameras? Don't be fucking ridiculous, Ro'. This was apparently their best effort, and they fucked up." the conman sniped without raising his head, earning a disapproving look from Coach. He ignored it. "It's better off like this. You see how fucked the Vannah was? As if I'd give myself up to a group who can't keep a goddamn hotel from burning down."

Ellis fiddled with the knob a little bit more, rolling it less with intent and more with idleness. He drew his lips into a weird kind of curl, thinking a moment before he prompted, "Y'know, we are headin' to meet up with CEDA, Nick."

Nick snorted quietly, eyes narrowing a little as he moved a hand to settle on his stomach. "Yeah, and I have a fucking problem or two with that, but what exactly else is there to do? Go find a nice deserted island to wait the apocalypse out on? Fuck that. Besides, surely the military got called in by now. At least they have guns. And tanks. And helicopters."

Coach grunted, eyes flashing between the road and the gas gauge as he shifted his weight on his seat. "Either way, they ain't gonna just leave us, boy. We'll find 'em, 'n they'll have a plan. I got mo' confidence than you."

Rochelle nodded from where she was, upturning her palms quietly. "It'll work out.. and Nick is right in one way - there's nothing else to do even if we doubted them... We can't survive out here on our own. We have to find somebody."

Suddenly, Ellis jolted a little straighter, turning the radio off entirely. It startled all three of them. "Is that-? … It is! Nick!" His hand flung forward like a kid spotting candy, and pointed furiously downward. Nick couldn't do much else other than look where he was gesturing.

Bolted to the floorboard was a box, maybe the size and shape of a hardcover book. It looked to Nick's eye like some kind of squad car radio, with a few knobs and a squat readout that was currently unlit. A hand-held mouthpiece was latched onto the side. "The hell?"

"What is it, son?" Coach questioned, not able to spare much more than a few staggered glances, lest he lose track of his path on the highway.

"That's a C-B!" the mechanic chirped excitedly. He was back in full-force now, seeming thrilled with his discovery - and almost exasperated when the rest of the team didn't share in his enthusiasm. "C'mon, guys, y'know? Them radios truckers use tuh talk back'n'forth. Keith'n'I got one each so's we could talk all the time. We were gonna."

"Isn't that what phones are for?" Her voice was a little incredulous and a little teasing when Rochelle interjected.

Not one to let the wind be taken out of his sails, Ellis laughed. It was more real this time, and Nick
fell to a side-eye on the kid's face. He seemed okay, relatively… or maybe just distracted. "Naw. It's way cooler. C'mon, man, turn it on! Maybe there's someone out there."

Ellis almost met his gaze… and then didn't. Nick watched him start to deflate. He imagined it would look like a hole being poked in one of those inflatable tube men, slowly collapsing and falling in on itself, all that joy turning into discomfort and self-conscious energy -

Not okay. And not, apparently, distracted enough.

So, instead, the gambler reached down between his knees and flicked what looked like a power knob. When the readout stuttered to life, showing a faded green 01, Ellis whooped in interest. He held his hand out, eagerly, and it was only with a roll of his eyes that Nick unlatched and dropped the mic into his hand.

The CB radio must have been hooked up to the car, because when Nick leaned down to turn the volume up, static rose in the speakers again. "I'm starting to hate Keith more than usual." he muttered, and started to slump back down in his seat.

Unfortunately for him, that wasn't it. Ellis pointed urgently at the radio. He was so excited he seemed liable to crawl into the truck cab himself if he wasn't humored. "C'mon, Nick, scan through the channels. These usually have loads of -"

Nick reached the end of his patience. In one swift motion, he raised his foot and braced the heel of his shoe against the edge of the CB. It was bracketed to the floor, but he could tell at a glance the connection was flimsy. How fortunate for it.

One good application of force later, the CB was pried from its bracket with a rather unpleasant crack. There was a definite amount of damage to the case, but Nick wasn't much concerned as he boredly grabbed the thing and dragged it over to Ellis. It yanked some cabling along with it, but there was enough give to get it in Ellis' hands.

"Damn, Nick." the kid uttered, eyes a little wide until he got a look over the thing and ensured it was, in fact, still functional. "Could'uv just said you didn't want to." His voice was a little chiding, but he was mostly focused on the CB now.

Rochelle swooped in to grab and hold the radio, giving Nick a dirty look. The gambler gave her an utterly caustic smile before regaining his slump against the truck door, closing his eyes into the wind.

Looking toward Rochelle now, Ellis held the handheld mic near his mouth, thumb on the trigger. "We used tuh practice all the lingo and everything. They ain't got a real huge range, but who knows." The reporter didn't seem totally convinced, but nodded along anyway.

Unable to resist a grin, Ellis cleared his throat and pressed the trigger. He dropped his voice a few octaves, trying to sound gruff and serious when he spoke into the microphone, uttering; "Breaker, breaker. Anyone got their ears on?"

Rochelle couldn't resist laughter, even as she tried to stifle it with the hand that wasn't holding up the radio. Considering Ellis grinned back, it was clear he wasn't really trying to sound intimidating.

Silence reigned, though. There was no response, and Ellis seemed a little disappointed, scratching at his nose with his pinky. He hummed, and Rochelle shifted her hips to settle a bit more comfortably against the back of the truckbed.

"Well, maybe another channel." She suggested, smiling. "Not like we have anything better to do,
and we're annoying Nick. So there's that!" He nodded, although not as enthusiastically as she
expected. He spared the smallest glance toward the gambler, but Nick didn't so much as stir. He
may as well have been asleep against the car door.
She gave him a reassuring smile that seemed to shake him out of it. He pointed toward the radio
and instructed, "Well, try uh…" A moment of scrunched thought resulted in a quick, "Oh, 9 'n' 19.
They're special channels, I remember."
A touch bemused, Rochelle nodded and peered at the face of the radio. Finding the knob labeled
CHANNEL, she turned it experimentally. A click announced 01 changing to 02, and she twisted it
a few times until the number read 09.
It was quiet, like the signal was almost out of range, but if they listened carefully "…f͞oļl̕o͟w a̸l l̡ ̡s̛af͠ety̶ p̸r̸oce͞d̷ųres̕ as̶ re͢layed b̛y -"
"Oh for fuck's sake." Nick wasn't, in fact, asleep, nor did he appreciate hearing the CEDA
announcement again. Grouchily, he sighed, waving a hand in dismissal over his shoulder and
speaking easily over the CB's utterances. "Not that shit again. Are they broadcasting on
everything?"
Coach supplied helpfully, unperturbed as he maneuvered the car around a large crack in the
highway. "'Pparently."
Wincing a little, Ellis scratched at the back of his head. "That.. may be the 'mergency channel. My
bad. Ro', try 19...?" He watched with piqued interest as Rochelle twisted the knob, both of them
listening curiously as the clicks slowly sounded, shifting through various layers of static.
When the readout finally showed 19, it happened. A voice cut through, freezing all four of them in
their seats. Even Nick stiffened, although he didn't move at first. Someone struggled to speak over
the radio waves, female and sounding miserable; the sound was almost pathetic as she obviously
held back tears.
"- hel̶p..̡ ̧plea͏se͞, I'͞m ͢a͠t Riverview Road̵, outs ide͞ ͞o͞f͏ Savanna̕h̷. Plȩase,̛ if̷ a̡nyon̛e̴ ̶- ̵ug̨h,
God.̕.." Her voice softened, maybe rolling away from whatever it was she was talking into. "...I
ca̵n'̢t ͢ke̶e͢p ̷d͘oi͠n͡g this̕... it's͘ ju̧sţ ̷m̕a̶k͞i͘n̛g m̧e͢ up̡set .̧. ͘G-God̶,̨ ͞Ca̢rmine.̕. dǫn̷'t cr y̢.. d̨o̴n'͟t c̸r͠y̛.͞
I'll b̕e͡ fi̸n͡e.͞.͞"
For just a moment, they were all uncomfortably staring at the radio, disbelief stinging the air. Ellis
was the first to blurt out, "Thank the Lord, someone's alive out there! We gotta go help her!"
His concern was audible past his clear excitement, but still - Nick sensed the same brashly
optimistic reaction as he'd given upon hearing Rochelle and Coach's first gunshots. They were
going to tear off on some wild chase again if he didn't step in.
Ellis was just about to press the trigger and speak to the girl when Nick surged up, grabbing the
cable and tearing it from his hands. The coiled wire that connected it to the CB strained at its
limits, but it reached with only a slight jerk of the radio that Rochelle held in her hands.
The kid looked shocked, staring from his empty hand to Nick's irked expression. If Ellis hadn't
been afraid of him, he might have fought to get it back. Clenching his teeth on his lower lip, Nick
argued very coolly, "How much time do we have to waste running after every single little noise we
hear? How much gas, even? How many bullets?"


Ellis blinked slightly, raising one hand to rub slowly at the back of his head. Struggling to look at Nick without looking at him, he started to respond - but Rochelle ran him over. Ellis leaned back slightly and shut his mouth.

She lashed out at Nick, and it was harsher than usual. Crossing her arms carefully, she inspected him challengingly over the chair's shoulder. "That wasn't a 'little noise,' Nick! Are you saying you'd rather ignore that? Ignore somebody who needs help? What if you ignored us, back in Savannah - or we'd turned you away? Do you really think we'd all be alive right now, without each other?"

Nick drew closer to the door with a very low groan, still holding the microphone. He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Christ, Ro'... all I'm saying is maybe we should keep the radio off, unless we want to play musical chairs all the way to the beach." He muttered, cop- ing out a little from giving a real answer. He wasn't interested in this battle.

"Nick, we ain't got the right tuh make this choice..." Ellis pointed out a little cautiously, cocking his head and very gently moving to take his hat off. He scruffled his hair with his fingertips, worry chewing at his expression again. "We -"

Nick spoke with venom before he could stop himself. So much for not fighting.

"You 'ain't got' shit, kiddo. I don't give a damn about some woman I don't know, okay? How do we know she's not infected, or that she won't be dead by the time we waste gas getting over there? Can we afford to feed her? Will she even be any help to us? Can she shoot a gun? Get off my back and start thinking like we're in an apocalypse - because we are. Right isn't right and wrong isn't wrong anymore. Accept that or just leave me the fuck alone."

Nick jerked his chin to inspect the road outside his window. He felt like Ellis was staring at him, but after a moment the burning sensation of eyes on him disappeared, and Rochelle's voice prompted him.

"Nick, we're going to talk to her, okay?"

Her tone was suddenly gentler - soothing. It only raised his hackles more, but hell if he was interested in continuing this battle. Instead, he grunted a very noncommittal, "Fine." and practically threw the CB microphone at the woman. "It's your goddamn choice, I'm just not taking the blame when you regret it."

Rochelle managed to catch it, glancing nervously at the hunk of plastic. She let her shoulder nudge Ellis, who'd retreated a little bit back out of the cab, staring down at the cap in his hands with a screwed up brow and a twisting motion of his fingers. He didn't respond much more than a slight shake of his head.

"Okay..." she muttered, mostly to herself, and somewhat cautiously got her hand around the microphone in order to center her thumb on the trigger. She pressed it, and huffed once before trying a firm, "Hello?" It was probably close to the voice she used on TV; neat and serious.

There was no response, so she tried again, a little gentler but no less composed. "Hello? It's Carmine, right? Are you there?"

Silence.

Ellis lifted his head and glanced at the radio with an almost imperceptible frown. He wrung his cap in his hands for a moment before replacing it on his head, screwing it down solidly. "Maybe she left."
"Damnit, Nick." Rochelle shot an accusatory look toward the gambler, and it was clear enough what she meant. If Nick hadn't held them up, they might have made contact. She handed the radio and the microphone to Ellis, and leaned in to place her hand on Coach's shoulder.

"The place she mentioned. Riverview. Can you get us there, Coach?" she prompted hopefully, squeezing a little bit at the shirt under her fingers.

The big man grunted very simply in negation. Without taking his eyes off the road, he reached toward the floorboard near his calf and pulled up the atlas they'd taken from the gas station. He offered it to her, and she unfolded it, eyes going a bit wide as she tried to pinpoint where they were.

In rare consideration, Coach shrugged up a shoulder toward Nick and commented, "Boy, in all fairness.. we're gonna have to find a place to sleep tonight anyways. Ain't smart sleepin' in a truck."

The gambler would've produced a spot of sarcasm in response to that, but he was far out-numbered at this point, and his alternative was another long walk on the side of the road. So, he just snarled airlessly and shoved his arms into a cross over his chest.

He wasn't feeling petulant at all.
Chapter 27

Ellis had been humming a song for the last few minutes as they drove down a rather heavily tree-skirted roadway. The frustrating part for Nick wasn't that he was doing it, it was that he was doing it pretty well. His hum was a rather delicate, honeyed tenor, whatever song he apparently had in his head accented by the drum-like tapping of his wrists against his sprawled knees, and audible over the rushing wind that trickled around the sides of the car.

It was an odd diversion from everything else, and there seemed a breath held between all three of the others, like they were all wary of a bubble just a few inches away from them. 'Calm' wasn't the word for it - but it was something very close.

Coach was the one to finally speak up, his gruff bass a startling interruption. "Ya'll better hope we find gas or a new car, or we gonna be walkin'."

Nick grunted, moving his hand up to rest his palm against the warm car window, rings clinking softly with the motion. He'd rolled it up as they slowed down; strangely, the encroaching evening felt even warmer than the earlier hours, and it was cooler in the car. "Told you we shouldn't be wasting time chasing after pretty voices. If we lose our transport because of this.. I'll seriously be fuckin' pissed."

"Oh hush, Nick... how would you like it if you were trapped somewhere and the only person who might be able to go find you said 'oh well, sucks for you, my gas is too important'?" Rochelle chided him, leaning her cheek against her wrist and reaching around the car seat's headrest to try and pinch the gambler's ear.

He swatted her away quickly, shooting a dark look over his shoulder to express his displeasure. She gasped slightly and gave a, "Nick!", lifting up a little to stick her arm through the window and smack him soundly on the shoulder.

"Y'know he don't mean it, Ro'. bet'ch'ya he'd be jus' as bad off as that lady is if he was in her place." Ellis piped up with an entertained tone. He was grinning a little underneath his cap, and Rochelle gave a mirthful sound of half-shock at the concept.

Nick, conversely, went deadpan and lost all sense of humor. His voice got cold, his eyes a little colder. When he glanced back, Ellis met his gaze this time - even if Nick could tell it took effort. "As if. You're the goddamn kid here, Overalls."

Something about those harsh green eyes cowed Ellis, like they used to be unable to do - and where he'd originally responded to such looks with an entertained and unflappable grin, he suddenly grew a slow and subtle blush over the bridge of his scarred nose and spoke with a struggling tone. "I-I'm twenty-three, man!"

Nick noticed - and so did Rochelle, but where it made the gambler's deadpan twitch into the smallest of severe frowns, she laughed obliviously behind a hand. "Really? Could've fooled me." the conman muttered irately, looking away with a tight set to his jaw. There was an uncomfortable spark traveling up his spine - Goddamnit, Overalls... - and he wasn't enjoying it.

It was a restrained feeling, tempered by strange sensations roiling in his stomach with the same ill
gurgle as his meal. Jumping him was supposed to put an end to this. He can't even be angry at me right. After all, it wasn't like the kid was blushing at him. Ellis was uncomfortable, and trapped with Nick now - and Nick was trapped with him.

Rochelle stifled her laughter and rested back against their pile of supplies, strapped tight by a bungee cord to the truck bed. "God, you two... it's like watching cats and dogs go at it with you."

Coach gave a loud gruff of humor at the comment, his generally detached expression shifting into a wordless grin. Nick couldn't help but feel a little victimized under their entertainment, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ellis hiding tightly under his cap, embarrassed.

It was true, though - they were such opposites.

"Glad we could give you some kicks, not that it's hard with dumbshit back there." he responded in a fair monotone, glancing up through the windshield and scanning the road. The right roadside was starting to look a little swampy, trees skirted by vines and sunken down into a dipping, damp landscape. The air that breezed in from behind them was humid and dank.

"How haven't you lost it on this jerk, Ellis, honey?" Rochelle reached over to tug on the hick's cap bill, smiling at him under it. "Are you just that sweet?"

He didn't seem to know how to respond, gawping an instant and shooting Nick a glance like he were floundering - not that the gambler said a single word to help him. They weren't 'in this' together. "Uh- Well.. I mean.. he ain't.. it... -"

It was Coach who came to his rescue, interrupting the fumbling that was quickly leaving a bewildered look on Rochelle's face (and making Nick close his eyes with a pained exhale as he was forced to legitimately reconsider his apathy). "There it is."

On the left, there was a road cut into the treeline, marked by a green 'Riverview Road' sign. The gravel and dusty stone road angled up a fair hillside, lifting up from what was becoming a rather unpleasantly sticky swampland.

The moment Coach turned the Chevy into the road with a sharp turn, the truck went from smoothly rumbling along to a jarring vibration as the wheels ground and tumbled over uneven and loose gravel, and bounced into a few dips. Ellis, relieved by the distraction, was the only one who didn't stiffen up against the rough motions - in fact he shot into blabbering as the other three grabbed hold of nearby things.

"Man, you guys should see muh buddy Keith's driveway! This ain't nothin' compared tuh that... he was always wreckin' it up 'cause he kept drivin' the lawnmower over it. I told him not to, but he don't listen... this one time, he tried tuh walk his dog, Dusty, while he was mowin' the lawn. I mean nothin' bad happened tuh the dog, I'm just sayin' -"

"Son, you mind?"

The hick quickly nodded, catching the bill of his cap between two knuckles and slipping it up a little to see more clearly, not nearly as embarrassed by Coach's gruff shoot-down. They bounced along, vision obscured by the tight clothing of tree branches on either side of the road, for a suddenly tense few moments as none of them spoke.

The Chevy rattled between the broken remnants of what had once been a squat, blocking gate, and as they passed it, the road started to split off into small driveways. Their mouths were bedecked with neat, wooden mailboxes and tiny houses could be seen through the trees a few feet down each
gravel stretch - and Nick was a breath from commenting wryly how eerily normal the area looked when a flicker of movement caught his eye ahead of them.

"Awh, shit yeah! Zombies!" Ellis hooted, apparently seeing it at the same time.

Sure enough, the road funneled straight into the driveway of another house, and there were all-too-familiar, sluggishly wandering shapes scattered on the front porch. They stumbled like sleepwalkers, hands dusting over injuries that cut through their bloody clothes, and raising up to cover their eyes like not even the canopy above was enough to shade their eyes from the lowering sun -

Then they noticed the crackle of tire on gravel, and every single head whipped around violently.

"Tits," Nick muttered irately, quickly leaning down to drag his machine gun up from the floorboard. He tossed his already shed suit jacket over the shoulder of his seat, shrugging his shoulders quickly to try and loosen up a little. The moment Coach hit the brakes, Nick was pushing the door open and darting out, quickly doing a semi-circle to hop up smoothly onto the edge of the truck bed.

He sat on the rim and rested his weight against the cab. If he needed to, he could slip back and escape into the truck bed. As it was, he leaned in and got a bead on the approaching zombies, feeling his chest stiffen up a little as he focused.

"Ellis, Ro'," Coach ordered in his calm bass, as he clambered out of the truck and cocked his shotgun, moving toward the front of the truck before he took a stand. "Watch the back."

Obediently, the hick snatched up his pump-shotgun from beside him and scrambled to sit on the tailgate, patting the space beside him to invite Rochelle up. She obliged, but not without a dubious glance back toward the front of the truck.

It was a good move - though Coach seemed pretty apt at those - because as Nick gave in and started squeezing the trigger to speckle the zombies with bullets, he heard a shot behind him. A glance over his shoulder confirmed it; there were a few infected who must've been at other houses, and were now attracted to the commotion.

Rochelle pulled her handgun from the holster at her thigh, though, and Nick returned his gaze forward as the two of them looked to have a handle on it. He leaned a little out to the side, letting his cheek slip close to the side of his gun as he focused.

Two of them, though blood was pouring like so much rain from several wounds, scrambled under the worst of his fire and lunged for his legs. The conman quickly snapped his knees up to dodge it, nearly overbalancing backwards, and soundly swung the butt of his gun at their heads.

One of them got hit, staggering into the other one and going down with a loud, shrieking noise into the gravel. The manic infected seemed to struggle for a moment between attacking each other and getting back up, but Nick silenced the floundering with a merciless squeeze of the trigger that riddled their torsos with bullets.

Forcing a loud snort and rolling his legs into the truck bed, Nick took a moment to confirm that Rochelle and Ellis were still breathing. They were. The conman crossed the truck's width in two strides and took a standing aim over the truck cab to check on Coach.

The big man, however, was perfectly fine on his own. Nick watched as a particularly brutal shot of his gun blasted a pelleted hole right through two zombies in a row, sending them flailing in
staggering motions before they crumpled to the road, gargling and twitching as their deaths splattered red over the dusty gravel.

Nick nearly spoke up when a few more infected came barreling out from the treeline, clawing aside branches - and behind their snarling, a soft, doglike growl that echoed a little bit disorientingly around the glen-like piece of road.

Both he and Coach quickly swiveled to face them, but Nick recalled that growl a little too clearly and didn't waste time calling out, "Watch it, assclowns! I hear one of those fuckin' pouncing candyasses."

The truck rocked under his feet, disturbing his aim and making him scowl slightly, as Ellis and Rochelle jumped up in unison to scramble over and join him. "Ah, shit, like we need another one of those.." Rochelle muttered quietly under her breath as she crossed her wrists to brace her handgun on the flat of her palm.

Coach backed up slightly against the truck as the new wave tried to pin him against it, but reinforced with the other three survivors, they barely got hands on him. He had to shake off a little blowback that sprayed him, rather stoic when that included some suspicious chunks of what might have been shattered bone and bits of organ.

"Why're some'uh them different than the other ones?" Ellis piped up curiously, minding his bandaged arm as he swung down a leg to straddle the truckbed, scanning the area with his shotgun primed like he were playing a skeet-shooting game and just had to figure out where the next one would come from. "Why don't any of the ones we jus' killed have big tongues, or acid-spittin'?"

Another growl echoed out, too soft to pinpoint the direction. A sudden trio of infected came bolting from the treeline, thrusting themselves toward the truck in an attempt to climb it and get at the three in the back. "I dunno, Ellis - I think the disease mutates sometimes." Rochelle answered carefully, steadying herself on Nick's sleeve and kicking a zombie right in the face with the heel of her boot. It went down so hard, Nick had to doubletake.

"Damn, Rochelle. Y-"

They all spun around to aim in a different direction as the growl warped into a scream, what they'd already noted as the warning call before it jumped. They all, however, spun in the wrong direction - and with a very loud shout of something half-surprised and half-pained, Coach was struck hard by a pouncing shape - that came directly from above his head, crashing down on his shoulders.

Leaves and bark came with it, revealing that it had been up in a tree. Coach collapsed to a knee, trying to hunch away from it, but the thing was swiping claws at whatever it could reach of him. They scored lines along his back, tearing through the purple stretch of his shirt.

His shout quickly turned to pain, crumpling further, and the collapse of his sturdy body made Rochelle shriek "NO!" at the top of her lungs. It was her, then, that vaulted forward to jump down from the truck first. She grabbed hold of the thing's lithe torso and yanked back with all her weight and a fierce surge of adrenaline.

It howled like a rabid dog as it was disengaged from its target, bloodied claws swiping the air as its fairly light frame was hauled away. She struggled with it, simultaneously trying to keep it from getting at Coach or switching to swipe at her.

Nick and Ellis scrambled to jump down after the woman, the conman grabbing hold of Ellis' arm and shoving him upright when he nearly lost his balance with clumsy over-energy.
They were both prepared to attack, but before they could, Rochelle jammed her pistol against the back of the Hunter's neck and pulled the trigger, Glock torqued upward in case the bullet penetrated. She let go immediately afterward, fleeing the spray of blood and pausing to catch her breath only momentarily before rushing to Coach.

"Coach! Coach, are you alright?!" she pleaded in a rush, dropping down to the gravel and hovering her hands over the half-kneeling ex-football player. The scores up his back had torn through his shirt like so much wet paper, and there was blood welling up in mercifully thin lines along the broad expanse of his back. He groaned a little, roughly, but indelicately reached to set a big hand on her knee, expression unflinching though the motion must've hurt.

"Fine, baby girl… I'm alright."

Ellis quickly joined Rochelle in crouching next to Coach, though he didn't go quite as low. "Man, that don't look good!" he whimpered gently, and for some inexplicable reason, twisted a look over his shoulder at Nick like the conman knew what to do. Nick stood there a moment, rolling his jaw with no small amount of wariness, before stepping forward and setting his machine gun against his hip.

"You two stay here with him. He'll be alright, but we should find this girl and get him inside somewhere so we can get something on that. I'll check the houses."

Ellis nodded obediently, swiping his cap off and shuffling forward. He settled his palms against the worst of the cuts, pressuring it gently even as the tacky, hot blood trickled slowly against his fingers. Coach didn't say a word, seeming completely focused on Rochelle as she worriedly studied his injuries.

Nick felt his gaze drift over the football coach's wounds. He mulled over saying something like "I told ya so," or "Serves you right", or maybe "See, if you had listened to Nick, we would be on our way toward the shore, safe and sound. Honestly, let's just always listen to Nick. Nick is smart. Go Nick. Hoo-ray."

Instead, he turned away and walked at a quick jog down the road. The concentration of zombies around the house at the end of the road both improved the chances for the girl to be there - and improved the chances of her being dead. Nick wasn't really sure which one he was betting on more, but as he took the porch stairs two at a time and twisted at the waist to shoot at a zombie who'd somehow kept out of the fight, he felt just a little tense.

Stepping to the front door after replacing his gun on his shoulder, Nick settled his weight on the skewed welcome mat. His shoes settled oddly on its surface - it was rubber, with a multitude of tiny ribs covering it, making him shift slightly and feel unsteady. He sighed, wearily, before trying the doorknob.

It was locked - another good sign. There were claw marks and blood smudges on the face of the door, but it was a hard and thick kind of wood and the zombies had been unable to really make a dent. There were two windows on the front of the house, one of them broken but blocked with some kind of dresser. The conman moved over to the unbroken window and leaned in to squint through it. Closed curtains obscured his vision, and it seemed dark inside.

Grunting a little, uncertainly, the conman stepped back to the door and rapped his knuckles against it. There was a doorbell beside the doorframe, but he wasn't going to risk making noises that might attract more zombies. He leaned in and tried to call in a strained, half-quieted voice, "Hello? Anyone in there?"
The first sign of life inside was a small thud - the noise set him on edge, and he kept his machine gun close at hand just in case. However, there was utter silence afterwards... stifling silence... and if it had been a zombie, it wouldn't have shut up in panic. Humans did that.

"Hello?" he repeated, losing a bit of his monotone politeness and adding, "Zombies don't talk. Open the goddamn door."

That got more results, and he heard movement quickly hurrying to the door. A familiar voice spoke against the wood, hopefully, "A-Are you sure you're not, like... sick..?" She sounded somewhat near tears, and behind the manipulative smoothness that slipped into Nick's voice, he was frustrated.

He hadn't realized till now how generally lucky he was to have gotten saddled with the three that he was - they were strong, comparatively. He'd never handled weak personalities well, in any context. Even in his amorous exploits, he preferred at least a degree of fire.

"Carmine? Name's Nick. We got your message, and yeah, we're all healthy. Don't worry. One of us is hurt, though, so I really need you to open the door and let us in. We can take you with us afterwards."

There was a moment of hesitance, but his words were so thorough and so guidingly worded, there was no argument to make. There was a click, and suddenly the door opened. With little warning, a woman came rushing out.

She thrust herself into Nick's arms and up against his thinly shirted torso, like she were fleeing something, her very warm body plastered against his in a motion that brought back entirely too many memories. He was struck instantly by how incredibly good she smelled, like cream and chocolate, this terribly over-perfumed scent that burned his nostrils and he loved it.

He probably smelled awful, but she didn't, apparently, care.

His arms automatically lifted to grip onto her shoulders, and he had never been so glad in his life to silently accept an embrace from someone. Her hair was a flecked, curly (dyed) auburn and was in the middle of trying to smother him, as the top of her head aligned with his nose.

"Oh, thank God.. I thought .. I thought everyone was dead. Like, I've been waiting for CEDA - but the radio, it's just.. the same thing, over and over.." Carmine breathed against his chest, hands clutching onto the fabric of his dress shirt. He could feel her nails, let alone the whole press of her torso. Slanting a glance down as she pulled her head away just a little, rubbing a knuckle under one tearful blue eye, he struggled not to sigh.

At least she's not Southern.. bah, bullshit. Of all the times for me to be covered in zombie guts.

"Doll, I know, but we have someone hurt..." He was aware of a shortness that resurfaced in his tone, puffed against her forehead - and Carmine seemed to start, looking up toward his face. Instantly, red filtered up over her own and she pulled away, covering her cheeks with her hands.

"O-oh, God, I'm sorry.. tossing myself at strangers.. go, get your friends.. I just thought, like, no one - uh, anyway.." Nick could see the signs of an interested woman in a split second, all his instincts and radars ringing off - but for once he tried to ignore it all, reminding himself there were priorities... Unfortunately..

He let his lips form the coyest of smirks and latched gazes with her for just a split second - just short enough to leave her unsure if it'd actually happened. It was surely so ragingly inappropriate to
even pull any of this in the midst of what was going on, but honestly, with the very straight adrenaline surging up his spine and her obvious flustering at seeing his face, Nick didn't give a single fuck.

Feeling suddenly in an unbelievably good mood, the conman turned and darted down the stairs, strolling back down the road at a quick pace.

"Overalls! Ro'! She's here, let's get Coach inside. Ro', can you pull the truck up and park it?"

He could feel suspicious eyes on him from all three of them. They must've noticed - but fortunately, Coach was still their focus, and he managed to go without explaining. Rochelle backed up reluctantly with an agreeing nod as Ellis and Nick crouched down to get one of Coach's arms over their respective shoulders, though the big man tried to argue.

"Boys, I don't need no human crutches, y'all -"

Ellis shushed him rather confidently, ducking into the supporting hold he and Nick had and starting to walk them back toward the house, slowed to match the hurt man's pace. Struggling not to touch the man's injuries, it was an awkward shuffle, and Nick could see Coach's displeasure with their determination all over his gruff expression.

"Quit griping. I'm the one who has your sweaty ass leaning against me right now." the conman chided him rather pleasantly, ignoring the gruff, noncommittal snort he earned himself.

Ellis snuck a glance at Nick by tilting his head down, curling his fingers a little on his cap in confusion. He seemed primed to speak, but thought better of it hesitantly and looked forward. "It'll be a'ight, Coach... we'll get'cha fixed up'n you'll be back tuh orderin' us around." he promised, unfazed when he didn't get any better of a response than Nick had.

They carefully guided him up the porch steps, and as their footsteps rang out and they heard the truck rumble up after them, Carmine leaned out from the doorway, in the middle of rather nervously pulling her hair into a frizzy ponytail. Her blue tank-top let slip a few inches of her pale midriff, and the dark slacks that draped down her legs touched onto the tops of bare feet.

Ellis blinked once, quickly trying to tip his cap at her with his free hand. "Hey, miss! Sorry fer the rush, s'just Coach here.." he rushed as fast as he could, looking a little embarrassed.

She only gave them a cursory glance, backing up to open the door and gesture them in quickly. Her eyes flicked around the area, obviously anxious about having the door open. "It's… fine.. I-I guess it's bad out there, then?"

They shuffled sideways through the door, and to their immense relief, there was a lamp lit across the room, on a table beside a couch, that gloriously announced that the house had electricity.

"Yeah, miss.. it ain't real safe, but we can keep you outta trouble. We're gettin' real good at it!" Ellis chirped gently, lowering his chin and grinning lightly. Nick detached from Coach and let Ellis guide him over to the couch alone, helping him very slowly ease down to sit.

Carmine had this uncertain look on her face, hands finding their way to her hips, staring after them before shifting her gaze up toward the conman. Her eyes were slightly tearful again, probably at the sight of the blood on his back. "Nick, you said..?"

He was almost certain she didn't really need to ask him again, but God he didn't care. He well and truly did not care. "Right." he agreed, lowering his chin to meet her gaze shamelessly and adjust his dress shirt over his torso with his fingertips. He was going to play this for what it was worth.
"Feeling any better, doll?"

Carmine nodded, face darkening, for just a moment. "I... I guess. God, it's just so scary. I wasn't even supposed to be here - I'm house-sitting for my mom. She's on vacation, it was just supposed to be for, like, a week..." She slipped over a step toward him, crossing her arms cautiously over her stomach in a self-hug. "I never thought zombies were real... aren't you scared?"

Nick smirked subtly, glancing up to check on Coach and Ellis. The big man had gotten settled on his stomach, somewhat uncomfortably, and Ellis was crouched next to him, inspecting his back.

The conman caught Ellis sneaking a glance back toward him over his shoulder. It struck Nick when he thought about it - and suddenly he wondered what exactly was going through Ellis' head. Just what was he thinking, seeing Nick flirting?

"So he does like girls"? Or something else? ... wait, fuck. No, I need to get goddamn over this. I'm going to be fucking miserable if I don't just forget about it. Awkward enough that we can't get away from each other. Focus, Nick. Focus.

He didn't realize he'd taken long to respond, but he felt Carmine gently slip a hand onto his bicep. A very warm, very soft hand... he focused his mind, rolling his head a bit on his neck and slanting a smirk at her. In his repertoire of smirks, he aimed squarely between 'sexy' and 'confident.'

He knew his game was off when he wasn't certain if he nailed it.

"I'm pretty hard to scare, doll... just stay by me."

She took him quite literally, leaning against him and resting her head on his shoulder, taking advantage of the way he shifted his weight in reaction to slip her arm around his. If it didn't feel so wonderful in that instant, he would've probably found it irritating.

It was as she did so that Rochelle came up the stairs a little hurriedly, backpack strapped onto one shoulder. She ducked into the house, halting a moment to blink at Nick and Carmine with a very slow look of disbelief. It was with a tremendous smoothness that she transitioned into a calm, "... Hi. Name's Rochelle."

Carmine blinked back at her with a little flash of her eyes. There was something - something very distinct and inconceivable that passed through that look, and Nick felt it dribble past him like so much molasses. It was enough to make him shiver.

"Carmine."

"Yeah, I heard."

Rochelle moved on, walking quickly across the carpet to drop to her knees in front of the couch and survey Coach with a small frown, pulling the backpack to her lap. "Coach, honey, what are we gonna do with you?"

He chuckled suddenly, muffled into the couch. His response was too quiet for Nick to hear, but he wasn't even trying to listen.

Considering the two girls had looked at each other for all of five seconds before separating.. he felt like some colossal war had just occurred in front of him, and he felt a little warm. Nuclear fallout, maybe? We already have zombies.

"I'll go get some water or something, you guys, like, look thirsty..." Carmine pulled away from
Nick and walked quickly across the room, moving through an open doorway, the soft and dull sound of her bare feet audible on the wood.

Nick found himself smirking, walking to shut the front door and stand next to it, slowly rolling his dress shirt sleeves up to his elbows with slow motions of his fingers.

"Can't wait till she finds out you're an asshole..." Rochelle tossed over her shoulder, sounding irritated as she dug through the backpack. "Can't believe you're doing this right now." Ellis hunched down a bit where he sat, gnawing his lower lip and raising his brows under his cap.

"Hiss hiss." Nick coolly shot back, lifting his chin and closing his eyes with a pleased smirk.

Everyone was very quiet as Rochelle pulled a few large alcohol swabs from the backpack, packed in little sealed paper squares. The look on her face promised retribution, even if she didn't say a single word.

Leave it to Ellis to find a way to be the first one to talk again. "So, uh, man. Coach, this reminds me - I ever tell you guys 'bout the time muh buddy Keith tripped while he was usin' one'uv those spinny-string grass cuttin' things? See, he -"

"Son, do I look like I wanna hear 'bout that shit right now?" Coach gruffed very lowly against the couch cushion, silencing the hick soundly.

Nick didn't like how much effort it took not to glance over and eye the mechanic, giving in after a few moments and inspecting the slightly embarrassed look that was plastered on that face. Ellis must've seen his head turn - his eyes flicked over, and hesitant blue met stern green with a blink.

His expression filled slowly with pink, breaking off their gazes way too late. His hand rose up and he adjusted his cap, struggling with visible discomfort and lifting his shoulders. The conman's fingers curled on his forearms, re-closing his eyes... and then he pushed off the wall, walking across the room toward the door Carmine had disappeared into.

*Fuck this.*
"Baby- hnf.. Baby girl, watch yo'self! You ain't helpin'!"

Rochelle seemed surprised to notice how hard she'd been treating his back. After they'd gotten his shirt peeled off (which was a little unpleasant for more than a few reasons, although Nick would've been the only one with the guts to actually say anything and he was still in the other room.)

"Sorry, Coach.." she apologized, lightening her touch with the alcohol swabs as she cleaned the long gouges criss-crossing his flesh. "I'm just.. irritated."

The big man turned his head on the couch, squinting at her sideways with a gruff sigh. He didn't say anything, though, eyes flinching shut as little white, sizzling bubbles announced the alcohol's work.

Ellis slowly pulled his cap off his head, setting it beside him on the floor and rubbing his fingers through his brunette curls. He felt strange - but he'd been feeling strange all day. Every time he looked at Nick it came swirling back to him, and every time he looked away he swore Nick was looking at him.

He couldn't stop the blushing. He tried, but that had only made it worse, like trying to stop hiccups. Ellis just didn't know what to do besides try to forget about it, and the conman was making that impossible... the kid had this feeling about him. He could sense some kind of guilt, and it made Ellis want to forgive him, even though he had no reason to.

Fact was, they hadn't had a minute alone, not that Ellis was sure he'd be able to handle it if they had. He was frightened of what he'd say to Nick - he didn't even know what to say to himself. Particularly not now, when he'd caught himself listening to that suave, smug tone Nick had spoken to Carmine with and trying to reconcile it with the angry, growled one he'd heard on the rooftop.

He didn't know what it meant. He didn't know what any of it meant, really.

Realizing his face was getting hot again, Ellis tried to distract himself, turning his head toward Rochelle and replacing his cap on his head. "Yuh ain't.. really jealous, are you, Ro'?" he asked meekly, gnawing on the tip of his tongue as he tried to glance over her face sideways.

She rolled her eyes gently, freeing a hand to reach over and prod the tip of his nose with a fingertip. "Of course not, sweetie. I just don't get how he can't be civil to us for five seconds, but some - gah.. forget it.. I'll just annoy myself even more if I talk about it." Sighing, she returned both her hands to Coach, shaking her head.

"I'm just getting tired of his attitude. Every time I think I get him, he proves me wrong."

Like it was planned just to piss her off, there was a chime of a giggle from the other room, and - Ellis swore to God - one of the sultriest chuckles he'd ever heard in his life. It stiffened his spine and widened his eyes a little, leaning slightly back as a pang struck his chest.

It was like... pain. But worse. Like he couldn't breathe, and he felt dizzy, and he wanted to hide but all he had was the bill of his cap and that just wasn't enough. It scared him, a little.

"I'm going to, like, wring her neck." Rochelle muttered sarcastically, rather loudly tearing open a gauze packet. There went not talking about it.
But Ellis couldn't focus, and with a slight fumble, he pushed up to his feet and quickly grabbed onto the bill of his cap, tightening his jaw carefully. "I-I'm gonna go... get stuff from the car." he blurted out, backing up and crossing the room quickly.

He got the door open and rushed outside at the same instant Nick strolled back into the front room, Carmine tight on his heels. The conman glanced at the shutting door, one brow lifting, but he didn't slow his steps. He didn't make anything of it, not just then.

"Oh great.. Coach is shirtless." he tossed up absently, taking a drink from the bottle of water he held in his right hand. He dropped himself down into a lounge on the smaller sofa up against the wall, letting his left arm drape up over the back of it, inviting Carmine into the space it enclosed without bothering to look at her.

"Boy.. you watch it." the big man grunted quietly against the sofa, fisting his gloved hands a little as Rochelle gently bandaged his back. "I ain't in no mood."

Nick spread the fingers of his free hand, waving him off, closing his eyes as Carmine settled down on the couch next to him. She was impressively good at arranging herself in a curl there to lean up against him. *Man, you're a glutton for punishment, Nicolas... but she's completely your type, isn't she? Hot and bound to drive you completely fucking nuts within five minutes.*

"So, where are you guys planning to ... like... go? I mean, Nick said you had a plan." she prompted, lifting a hand to tighten her ponytail a little nervously. "CEDA hasn't -"

"CEDA is fucked." Rochelle snapped hostilely, cutting Carmine off and putting a rather sour expression on her face. "They pulled out. We're driving to the coast to get someone's attention. CEDA, or the military, or somebody, I don't care. Savannah is wrecked and the only way we're gonna find help is if we chase it down."

Carmine huffed the smallest breath, glancing up at Nick like she expected him to stand up for her. He sipped from his water, rather expertly pretending like he didn't notice. He wasn't particularly interested in stepping in the middle of anything.

"C'mon, baby girl.." Coach muttered quietly against the couch, drawing a sigh from her. She stewed just a beat, then glanced over her shoulder as she arranged the bandages on the big man's back.

"Sorry, it's been a long day. Ignore me." The apology was hollow and forced, but Carmine accepted it with a smug little nod of her head, settling into the crook of Nick's arm. He couldn't fight a smirk, meeting Rochelle's gaze when she glanced at him and giving her a little taunting bite of his lower lip.

Rochelle looked fit to stand up and deck him.

The victory - if he could call it that - was a little shortlived when Carmine spoke up, voice fairly sincere. "I'd be, like, crazy scared if I was out there in all that. You guys are really brave." Rochelle returned focus to her, and was surprised to find Carmine looking her square in the face, rather than swooning up at Nick.

"Oh." she uttered at first, startled out of a coherent response, guard broken by an actual compliment. She fumbled, and had to remind herself to continue smoothing a strip of bandage over Coach's back. "Well.. Thanks. We didn't really have a choice. Things just kind of happened. You just... survive, y'know? Do what you have to."
The girl reached up to fiddle with the curly end of her ponytail, seeming to think on that. Nick looked between the women with something that might've been confusion stewing behind his eyes. Damn. No catfight…?

Carmine settled on a demure smile, cocking her head conversationally. "I got, like, lucky this house had a generator. My mom's paranoia pays off; I'd never have made it out there."

"Yeah… well." Rochelle seemed a bit more settled now, and there was a tint of a more genuine apology when she added, "Hope your mom's okay." After Carmine nodded, eyes threatening to water a little, Rochelle returned her attention to her hands as she laid down the last of the bandages on Coach's injuries.

They both sighed at the job's completion, and Rochelle leaned back to pick up the bloody, torn shirt that lay on the ground, holding it up in front of herself and eyeing the rips.

"Dunno what to tell you, Coach... this is pretty bad." she sighed, lowering it a little. She seemed disappointed, looking over his bandaged back with a very tired brand of despair. 'I wonder if we can find you a new shirt..."

Carmine straightened up a little from Nick, rubbing a fingertip over one eyebrow. "You know, I totally can fix that up for you. I mean, it'll look awful, but that's better than being, like... shirtless, right?"

Rochelle looked over slowly, unsure, like she wasn't sold on any piece of good news right now. Her expression was kind of strained, but her voice was kind enough as she responded, "Yeah? That'd be great."

Brightening, the redhead jumped up to her feet and walked over to pluck it out of her hands with careful fingertips. "See? Aren't you guys, like, totally glad you ran across me?"

Rochelle just stood there silently as the woman left the room, heading up a staircase with the bloody shirt gripped in one hand. She waited until she was completely sure Carmine was out of earshot to plead in a slight sigh, "... Nick, please explain this one to me."

The gambler chuckled darkly, sipping from his bottle of water and shrugging a shoulder leisurely. "Just think really hard about railing her. It makes it pretty easy to handle anyone."

Coach and Rochelle were both silent for a moment after that particular comment. Nick thrust up his free hand, rolling green eyes and sighing. "You're the ones who demanded we come pick her up. I would've just kept going, but y'know what? Changed my mind now - thanks. You might just have gotten me in the pants of the only bangable girl left alive in the world."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Nick! I..." Rochelle couldn't even figure out what to say, lifting her hands to rub her temples. Coach sympathetically reached over to pat her shoulder, wearily letting his head slacken against the couch. "She's … okay, she's not insufferable, but..."

She didn't really know what she was planning to add after that. Between the valleygirl aesthetic and the damsel-in-distress act, Rochelle just balked, waving her hands in this vague gesture like that was enough. Nick didn't need her to elaborate; he just leaned forward, crossing his legs with an ankle settled on his knee.

"Quick view into the mind of a man, honey.. I don't really care."

She stared him down for a moment, then just gave up, sighing and standing up, wiping her forehead with a wrist. "...Ellis is taking a while, I'm going to go check on him."

Nobody argued as
she walked to the door, adjusting the bangles on her forearm with a sigh.

Nick looked after her, though. He wondered, teeth catching onto the rim of his waterbottle and suddenly nibbling at it.

The dim light inside made Rochelle squint as she opened the door, Savannah's burnt atmosphere swirling in against the pleasant air-conditioned environment inside the house. She closed it behind herself lightly, stepping down the porch stairs and glancing over toward the parked truck. 

Ellis was perched on the opened tailgate, one leg dangling off while the other was curled tight to his chest. He was in the middle of hugging it with both his arms, cap tipped low over his face, and Rochelle's brows quirked in confusion at the posture.

She slowly crossed the grass toward the truck, noticing he hadn't heard the door shut. Not wanting to sneak up on him, she called cautiously, "Ellis, sweetie? Are you alright?"

He stiffened but didn't look back, a hand quickly disengaging to grab onto the end of his cap bill and lower it a little more. She heard his throat clear, and he managed, "Uh... yeah, sorry... just thinkin'.." 

Walking up to him, Rochelle tipped her head to see under the shade of his cap and reached up a hand to touch his cheek affectionately. At first she'd had some scatter-shot worry that he was crying, but his blue eyes were clear and his cheeks were dry. "About what, hun?"

Ellis shook his head, but didn't try to push her hand away. In fact he leaned against it a little, and that motion set off an alarm in the back of Rochelle's head. She stepped closer and looped an arm around his shoulders, frowning. "What is it, sweetie?"

"I'm ... s'just.. awhh, Ro'. I can't tell yuh.." He wanted to, mostly because he felt like she might know what to do. But he couldn't. Even if he overcame his embarrassment long enough to tell her what happened, he was afraid to talk it out. He didn't really know what he'd say. Instead, he sighed and rolled his head against her shoulder, his cap clipping her neck in the motion and popping off his head to land behind him.

"Can yuh just sit here a minute..?" he mumbled a little sadly.

Rochelle instantly nodded, shifting just enough to sit next to him on the tailgate without breaking the embrace they had going. She gently petted his head, resting her cheek against the top of it, and spoke softly to him. All he could really do was be glad she didn't push him, and listen.

"I'm not feeling too great either, honey. I forget it when we're on the move... but it's hard to sit down and absorb everything. Now we're going to have to deal with another person on top of it all? I'm wondering how we're gonna handle this... I'd never say we should've just kept moving, but.. Nick isn't making this easy, -"

Rochelle was paying close attention to him, even if she'd started talking alone, and she felt him stiffen up and shift oddly. She held her breath momentarily, trying to work out if she wanted to bring it up... Was he upset with Nick? Had Nick done something?

She wanted to think Ellis wasn't jealous of Nick with Carmine, but he was a young guy, and she wasn't inclined to dismiss the possibility.

She didn't say anything, just sighing. "Anyway, I guess all we can do is try to get along.. We'll work it out. You know you can talk to me, right, Ellis? You're a real sweetheart, and I don't want you to feel alone."
Ellis nodded gently, sighing. He frowned down at his lap for a moment, wishing that her words made him feel any better. He felt this weight burning in his chest, like humiliation and uncertainty all coiled up in this tight knot.

He just wanted to talk about something else. "Th.. Thanks, Ro'... Is Coach doin' okay?"

She smiled down at him, tickling his ear and making him shy away with one of those grins he couldn't stop. "Yeah, sweetie. He's a tough guy, he just needs a little time to recuperate."

He nodded his head, turning it a little to reach his hand behind himself and find his cap, slipping it on. He rubbed his nose with his wrist carefully. "I wish he hadn't gotten hurt - it ain't right.."

Rochelle nodded in immediate agreement, leaning in to land a kiss on the top of his capped head. "We'll all end up hurt, I'm sure. Here, let me check your elbow, and then we'll go back inside together." Her hands slipped to pull his left arm toward her, and he obliged her with a slightly bashful smile.

Peeling back the tape and bandage, Rochelle unwrapped the bandage from his elbow, being gentle as it pulled away from the actual wounds underneath. It looked good, and she nodded as she turned his arm a bit and touched gently on the closed, scabbed cuts. "I don't think we need to keep the bandages on it anymore, do you?"

Ellis shook his head, smiling even though it was still a little tender. "Naww.. S'fine now."

She gently plucked at his nose with a knuckle, then hopped off the tailgate and beckoned him. She smiled at him reassuringly, and he started to forget about that pain in his chest. "Come on, sweetie. How's about we find some paper and pens and play tic-tac-toe? We'll send that smelly suit out to see if there's some gas around here later."

Ellis tagged close at her heels as they walked back to the door, and, smiling a bit down at his boots, Ellis thought he could handle this. Just move on, forget about it - he'd just stop thinking about Nick entirely.

It was easier that way, anyway, instead of trying to sift through what.. he was starting to think might be, feelings, or something so close he couldn't figure it out. Particularly not when all he had was the single advance of a very drunk Nick to use as reference. He'd never felt this way about a guy, but the thought only scared him by virtue of its unknowns.

He didn't even know what 'this way' was. It was just a bundle of confused reactions, intimations, suggestions: the way his face wouldn't stop lighting up; how his heart leapt up his throat; how he just couldn't make himself afraid of Nick, even though he felt like he should have been...

He pushed it away. It didn't matter.

Or he told himself that, until Rochelle reopened the door.

Nick was up on his feet, Carmine standing in front of him with a box of what looked like sewing materials at her feet and her hands freed to coyly inspect the little claw-slices in the fabric of his sleeves that he'd earned fighting zombies. She was in the middle of saying something along the lines of, "I can, like, sew this up too, if you want."

That pain came shooting back, forcing Ellis to drop his gaze, hands in tight fists. Rochelle muttered something to him - but he didn't hear it, blindly following her as she lead him across the room and started digging through a set of couch-side drawers.
He couldn't deny it.

It didn't matter that Nick had looked surprisingly unimpressed, visibly not liking having the state of his clothes pointed out.. and it didn't matter that they hadn't even once talked about what happened on the roof -

Ellis hurt, and he didn't know if it was jealousy or something else, but he just… hurt.
Chapter 29

There'd been a very strange silence about the house for the past few hours.

It was strange mostly because they did talk, but only amongst two groups; Rochelle and Ellis - and Nick and Carmine. The space between was so tangible it felt like a chasm. Any time an offhand question dared to cross the distance, it was notably awkward.

Coach was asleep, his body shifting slightly underneath the blanket Rochelle had found to drape over him, moving in time to his heavy snores. He was exhausted - maybe a little more than he should've been, but they'd already accepted they should stay the night. The fact Carmine's house still had electricity and running, hot water made them all glad to be there, considering they hadn't even been able to step into the bathroom in the gas station the night before.

They woke him up to eat supper, which had consisted of sandwiches, and he'd fallen back asleep shortly afterward. Ellis envied him - even though Rochelle stayed close at his side and entertained him to the best of her ability, he was still stuck with a full view of the other side of that chasm.

Carmine had started calling him "Nicky" halfway through the evening.

Rochelle and he were in the middle of trying to make an origami swan with a sheet of paper (neither of them had any idea how to) when he heard it the first time, this sticky-sweet giggle preceding it.

Ellis lowered his hands a little, calloused fingertips stilling on the paper for a moment. His brows furrowed, struggling not to let any more of a reaction slip. He wrestled with the weird knot of feelings, sighing silently. It was just as confusing as it'd been from the start.

Rochelle lightly snapped under his nose, startling him back into focus. She gently surveyed his expression, one brow lifted sympathetically, and he cleared his throat with a quick dart of his gaze back toward the paper, trying to remember what he'd had planned with the folds.

"How'll the sleeping arrangements be? Looks like Coach is melted to that couch, but there's still four of us to take care of." Nick questioned with a very distinct smirk, slowly rubbing his hand over his jaw while the other toyed with the fabric of Carmine's capris flirtatiously.

Nick was a master of the expressionless eyeroll, face tensing in discomfort. *Please don't say it again...*

Carmine pulled her leg away with a ticklish jerk, giggling as she worked her needle along a jagged tear in the shirt on her lap, stitching the purple-and-yellow fabric of Coach's emblazoned shirt back together. "Oh, we'll figure it out, Nicky... I have a guest bedroom and, like, a bunch of blankets somewhere, too."

"Oh, God. ... 'Nicky.' I really wish my standards were higher than this. Though, it's not really about standards, is it? He felt his gaze drag over toward Ellis and Rochelle, curled up and facing each other on the other couch, paper wadded up around them.

Nick had a perfect view underneath the bill of Ellis' cap. The kid's expression was struggling between emotions, and in an instant Nick felt trapped into staring at it, trying to read it - *Damn, is he... upset?*

*No way.*
"Where's your head, Nicky?"

His gaze snapped back to her at the rather coy question, a brow lifting subtly. "Just thinking. How'd you manage to keep safe since the outbreak? Seems most people didn't." he lied effortlessly, focusing her on herself rather than him, though he reflected that it would likely circle back to him after she answered.

She giggled and returned her attention to her stitching, pleased. "Oh, I just stayed inside. It was quiet for, like, a while, but when I turned on the generator I guess it sort of… attracted them. I blocked up the doors and they couldn't get in. My mom had a radio up in the attic, so I started, like, calling for help. I don't know what I'd have done if you guys hadn't showed up." She frowned slightly, snipping the thread and shifting her hands to start on another tear. "You know, my mom's dog was here, but - well it was, like, totally the weirdest thing… She just ran away the day before CEDA starting making announcements."

"Animals sense disasters. Maybe they knew before we did." Rochelle offered up quietly, grinning slightly as Ellis crushed up what must've been their tenth attempt at a swan and just shook his head. She reached out and pulled his cap down over his face, startling him.

"Maybe." Carmine agreed distantly, glancing over at the two on the couch before returning her gaze to Nick. She rolled her eyes gently, then focused back on stitching up Coach's shirt.

...or, it can NOT circle back to me, that's fine too. he noted, almost smirking. He stretched carefully, feeling his shoulders pop in their sockets and sighing a bit, silently. He could've used a smoke... and, patting his thin dress shirt, he realized they were in his jacket. Which was in the truck.

Rolling up to his feet, the conman tossed up absently, "Left my jacket in the car, I should get it."

Carmine gave him a rather winning smile as she tugged her needle taut. Rochelle glanced up at him in the same instant, but without the slightest bit of similar friendliness. "Take a gun." she ordered coldly, distracted only a moment when Ellis frowned and she traded a glance with him.

Nick snorted, reaching to the holster on his thigh and pulling his Magnum free, cocking back the hammer to make his point. They cleared out the forest on the way here; he didn't imagine his remaining three bullets would be necessary, anyway. "The concern is flattering, really."

He didn't wait for her to make another gripe, crossing the room for the door, but she grumbled after him anyway. "More worried the zombies might get sick if they eat you."

Nick didn't waste any time getting out to the truck. It was dark, light pouring from the front door behind him in a very meager rectangle. Whatever he'd said, he wasn't eager to be out in the open for very long. Dropping down the steps two at a time, Nick jogged across the grass toward the parked truck.

"'Zombies might get sick'... hrmmph. Bitch." he muttered quietly to himself, shaking his head. "Not sure what stick got up her ass."

He was just opening the door and leaning in to paw around for his suit jacket when he heard this breathless, quick laugh, manic and broken with exertion. It sent a chill darting up his spine, and he slowly curled his fingers on the fabric of his jacket, pulling back out from the car.

Green eyes darted around the area, warily, and he turned to slowly sidestep away from the truck. He pushed the door closed with his hip, wincing at the loud sound, and held his breath for a...
moment.

... nothing. Total silence, without so much as a rustle of the trees in the still night air.

*I'm not crazy, am I?*

Nick very slowly eased himself away from the truck, moving across the grassy lawn one step at a time. There was no way he'd imagined that - not laughter, and certainly not psychotic, reedy laughter.

His shoe settled on the first step up to the porch, and that soft thud of the hard sole preceded another break of laughter, choked and panted giggles that came out high-strung and burst forth like it were mocking him.

Nick froze again, and, turning to face the darkness that surrounded the house, called warily over his shoulder to the open front door. He was pretty sure that it was nerves that inclined him to a sarcastic intonation. "Ro'? Let's say you told a zombie a joke."

Her voice called back, bewildered. "...what?"

"What happens when you tell a zombie a joke?"

There was a pause, and Nick tensed cautiously, gun twitching to bear on perceived flashes of movement in the dark. "What the hell, Nick?" Rochelle asked again, shortly reinforced by Carmine, sweetly.

"Nicky, are you alright?"

The gambler spat it with distinct enunciation, tone irritated and a little urgent. It was just hard enough to see that even the trees swaying made him jump, aiming down the sights and twisting at the waist to re-focus himself at every stimulus. "Do. Zombies. Laugh?"

Rochelle never got the chance to give an answer to that particular question, though, and she must've heard something Nick didn't. Her voice shot to panic, and he heard fumbling as she - and, he thought, Ellis - struggled up to run to the door. "Nick, it's on the roof! Get in here!"

Though he knew it was entirely not the right reaction, reflexes jerked his head up to look at the house's roof.

The face that suddenly thrust into his vision over the edge of the roof was the stuff of nightmares, framed by broken-looking shoulders that jammed up in bony protrusions as it grasped onto the roof's edge. Waxy, plastic skin was stretched over the gaunt bones of a thin head, and its eyes were round and bloodshot bulbs popping and rolling wildly in shallow sockets.

Its mouth was stripped of all lip and its gums were bleeding like it had torn at them, hysterical breaths screeching through the fence of gnashing, glistening teeth that made up most of its visage, bared in a bloody grin three sizes too big. Tears and blood streamed from its eyes in rivulets, and Nick got a gust of fetid breath as it shrieked an agonized, gleeful burst of giggles and jumped.

"JESUS ASS CHRIST!"

It grabbed hold of his hair in great fistfuls with knobbed fingers, and he shouted as the thing used its grip to thrust scrawny, lean legs around his neck possessively, perched on one shoulder. He was blinded immediately as a clammy thigh clamped over his eyes, gripping on like a monkey.
The sudden weight made him stagger, and he felt fingers yank on his hair mercilessly and legs tighten as the thing leaned wildly forward. He just barely made it up the last few steps, wheeling about blindly.

He tried to flail out his arms to catch his balance, realizing too late that he had his Magnum in his right hand - one of the zombie's hands released his hair, and those fingers were suddenly digging into his gun-toting hand's wrist, yanking his arm behind himself like he were being arrested to smartly immobilize it.

Pain jolted through his arm, spasming his fingers and sending his Magnum clattering to the porch. His jacket went with it, thrust away in favour of trying to grab for the zombie and peel it off his face. It was too heavy, and all he managed to do was score lines on its back with his nails - an act that horrified him about as much as the slick and bony thigh pressed against his face.

The thing cackled hysterically between broken gasps of air as it thrust itself against his center of balance, forcing him into movement. He staggered, so busy trying not to fall over he couldn't even start resisting the pull of the thing's weight and manipulative fingers - and then he felt his hip collide with the waist-high railing that bordered the porch.

Choking a gasp that tasted like sweat and dirt, Nick tried to shift his weight and shove against the riding zombie, but he was already toppling over. Between his weight and the zombie's, there was nothing to do but brace himself for the fall.

He heard someone yell and, beneath the screaming cackles above his head, loud footsteps on the porch. Nick hit the ground hard, the wind rushing out of him as the impact trapped him under the clinging weight of the hobbled little zombie.

It had only been six or seven feet, but it hurt, and Nick struggled to breathe as the creature jumped hyperactively onto his chest and shoved his torso into the ground like it was trying to smother him, unable to get him up. Its heels dug into his ribs, and the air was compressed out of him by force.

Then, the weight was tossed off him in a sudden shove, pain stinging in his eyes as the zombie scrabbled to try and fight it. The thing shrieked madly with these terrified giggles, and Nick was aware of it running away as someone dropped to their knees beside him.

"Nick - man, are you alright..?"

Ellis.. of course, it's Ellis...

Shoving up from the grass, Nick spat and gave a cough. There was blood in the back of his throat - he'd bitten his tongue, and the note of copper sang out far louder than the dirt and rancid sweat he was smelling.

"Yeah." he muttered, surprised in the next moment to feel Ellis slipping hands under his elbows and trying to help him up. Nick immediately shoved him away, frustrated, and hauled himself up to his feet alone. He was breathing hard, and his nostrils flared as Ellis slowly stood up, too, his expression in a discomfited look of slight hurt.

"I said, yeah." he repeated with a swipe of his hand through his mussed hair, irked, and Ellis recoiled a step back. "Why didn't you kill it, for chrissakes? Now it's running around."

"..s-sorry..." the Georgian managed, and what had been blooming hurt became full-blown pain. Nick swore the kid was close to tears, and suddenly, found himself speechless.

He was hurt. Really, actually, honestly hurt, and the conman was silent with the realization as Ellis
turned away and just... walked back to the house, his workboots loud on the porch and face shaded under his cap.

Nick stared after him without a sound, aware of Rochelle standing on the porch and looking uncomprehendingly between Nick and the door, his dropped jacket in one hand and his Magnum in the other.

"Are you okay?" Nick almost didn't register it at first, but he realized with a straightening of his spine that Rochelle was talking to him. He jerked a nod quickly, dismissively, smacking palms against his clothes to pat off the grass and dirt he'd gotten on them.

"Perfectly. You know what that was? It was... psycho.. and I'm pretty sure it was humping my head."

She hesitated for a few beats, tapping her fingers on the articles she held, but took his cue to avoid the subject. Nick had no idea why she'd decided to stay instead of chasing Ellis down, nor why she was suddenly being nice to him, but he decided against arguing.

He felt a little shell-shocked. That.. hurt. It was nothing like fear or discomfort - it was outright pain, and Nick couldn't wrap his head around it.

"Yeah. They got called 'Jockeys' because they ride people like that.. when the CEDA post I was going to interview at fell apart, I didn't see much in the rush to get away, but - I saw one of those things ride a guy into a window so hard it shattered, and.. you know."

Nick nodded, allowing himself a small groan as he lifted his hands and wiped at his neck with his wrists, sighing irately against the dirty sensation that crawled all over him. "So they hump you into danger.. great. That's just fuckin' exactly what this apocalypse needed."

Rochelle gave the smallest of laughs, shaking her head and watching as he walked over to step up the staircase and hold up his hands to take his jacket and gun from her. "The laughter is just eerie, isn't it? I don't like them laughing."

She crossed her arms behind her back, and they were both silent as Nick tossed the jacket over his shoulder and reholstered his Magnum. He was just about to get free from her, turning toward the still-open door, when she murmured,

"What's going on, Nicolas..?"

Re-settling green eyes on her face, Nick narrowed them subtly. He stood for a moment, askance, before shrugging a shoulder and retorting effortlessly, "How should I know?" But it wasn't enough. There was still the admittance that something WAS going on, although Nick had the feeling Ellis had already given that away.

Rochelle sighed at him, jamming a hand in the pocket of her jeans and cocking a hip. "Will you suck it up for five seconds and talk to him? He's really upset, and he won't talk to me about it."

Nick thought of a few things to retort with... but for some reason, all that came out was a spat, "I planned on it.", as he twisted on his heel and stalked into the house. He was almost instantly stopped by Carmine, looking a little desperate and reaching out to grab his arms.

"Oh, Nick, are you like, okay? What was -"

The conman stuck up a hand to halt her, rejecting her embrace so suddenly she clasped her hands on her chest, startled and quickly looking disappointed. "Doll, I'm dirty and sore.." he enunciated
carefully, waiting just long enough to get a nod before stepping around her and crossing the room. The kitchen door was open, so there he went, pushing it open with his palm and steeling his lips tight.

The room was only half-lit by a small under-cabinet light in the far corner. The off-yellow glint struck the tile surfaces harshly, and through the haze, Nick eyed Ellis. The kid stood just in front of the kitchen sink, his head bowed and his hands curled into fists on the edge of the counter. His cap was set off to the side, tussled and curly brunette locks freed.

Nick very slowly drew the door shut behind him. For a beat, they were silent.

"Care to tell me what the fuck that was, Overalls?"

Not exactly how he'd intended to start the conversation, but he made no motion to take it back either. Nick stood there at the door, one hand still lingering on the doorknob and slowly clinking one of his rings against the metal, before advancing just a few steps in light of Ellis' silence.

"... Overalls." It was quieter that time. He didn't mean it to, but his voice lost its edge with the second repetition, and with it, Ellis turned his head slightly. His gaze flicked up to Nick, blue unsure.

"I dunno, Nick." Tired resignation lied in the words, and at the same time, Ellis re-averred his gaze with a slight downturn of his lips. The conman hunted green eyes over his expression, waiting for some kind of elaboration, tongue curling against the roof of his mouth.

Ellis swallowed, tasting the words before he spoke them. No amount of preparation helped, though, and he fumbled through it with a growing look of uncertainty and a heavy lining of insinuation.

"Why'd yuh go on 'n' do that? 'N why couldn't you.. why'd yuh just .. Why, Nick?"

Nick was silent for a short but heavy moment, lifting a hand to slowly rub his thumb over his lips. He could just imagine that was a question Ellis had been asking himself incessantly... now there it was, directed at him. He had no good way to answer it.

Tensely, he reached out and set a hand against the countertop beside him, maintaining a good distance from the kid. "I was drunk, kid. You've got a right to be upset." It wasn't an apology, but it was the closest Nick could get himself to go.

Ellis hesitated to respond to that, dropping his gaze down low to inspect the grout of the counter. Was he upset? Or just confused? .. what would happen if Nick leaned in right then and touched him?

"If it helps any... I wouldn't have done that otherwise."

Ellis' head lifted up quickly, though something kept his gaze rooted to the counter. He was silent, teeth moving to bite at his lower lip. With an indelicate inhale, Ellis lifted a shoulder and turned his cheek. "... whut's that mean?"

"It means what I said."

The hick flicked up his gaze, staring a moment at Nick and clenching his fingers slightly. He wanted to demand an answer.. prod further. He wanted to know if Nick meant he wouldn't have done anything at all.. or forced anything. He wanted to get a long look at those unreadable green eyes and see if there was some glimmer that said something else. Most of all, he wanted to ask Nick for advice, for help, for something.
What he said instead was this: "So you'd.. be okay if we.. pretended it never happened.. 'n' I fergave you?"

It hurt to say, and that winding pain suddenly re-knotted itself in his chest. Did he really want to do that? He had so many questions, but there was a sense of futility as he watched something in Nick's posture change. Something dissipated in that moment, and though he first thought it was a kind of relief, Ellis felt himself floundering when he glanced up and found Nick's green eyes distant.

Did Nick look... disappointed? Or was it a trick of the light over that pale color?

"That's fine with me." the conman responded, pulling his hand away from the counter and straightening his clothing simply. His face was so impassive, it was like nothing had changed at all, and Ellis' lips fell into a silent gawp open and closed. In an instant, it was like they'd signed a deal, and all Ellis could do was struggle to register his words.

"I'll leave you alone, you leave me alone... try and get Rochelle to calm down, too. She's gone all big sister on you, and it's getting annoying."

"O-Okay, Nick..." the mechanic managed very quietly, letting his weight rest against the counter as a slight chill worked up his spine. No... he didn't want to agree to this, but he was only really realized that as it slipped out of his control.

Nick reached to pull his jacket from where it lay over his forearm and instead tossed it up over his shoulder, turning away and walking to the door. "I'm taking a shower. See you in the morning, Overalls." His voice was flat... his gaze flatter and he didn't wait for a response before he opened up the door and left.

Ellis didn't give one until he was gone, anyway. He turned away slightly, leaning over the sink and staring down into the drain, his fingers gripping on the counter tightly.

"...okay, Nick."
Chapter 30

Ellis didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he woke up. A tiny clock hanging from the wall opposite him just barely glinted with enough moonlight from the window behind their couch to tell him it was a drowsy 1 A.M., almost three (very quiet) hours since he'd last heard from Nick.

Lifting his head a few inches, tired and disoriented, he noticed he was curled up against Rochelle's lap where they'd been sitting together on the loveseat. She had an arm over his shoulder, fingers curled gently on his bicep, twitching faintly in her sleep.

He blinked slowly, freeing a hand from the blanket draped over his sprawled form to rub the drowsiness from his eyes, trying to focus. He felt guilty now that sleep had taken some of the edge off his emotional turmoil - he'd been silent, unresponsive and brooding, even though Rochelle was clearly worried for him.

What could he have said?

Sighing softly, Ellis gently guided her arm off him and shifted to sit up, curling his bare toes against the living room carpet as he swung his legs off the edge. His hat and his boots and socks were all off, leaving him feeling a little bare.

Coach was awake, he realized, as he pawed a hand against his bare scalp - awake and looking at him from the couch across the living room. "You a'ight, son?" The big man was still on his belly, but he had his head braced on a wrist to lift it up a little. His gruff voice was gentled and curious, and his care put a small smile on Ellis' face.

"Yeah, Coach." he lied, feeling a small pang in his chest. "I need tuh use the bathroom, is all."

The big man simply grunted in acceptance, re-closing his eyes and turning his chin away. Ellis' smile widened for a split second before he gently sighed it flat, pushing up onto his feet before he could second-guess himself.

He didn't, but he was stuck in his lie now.

Padding across the carpet quietly on his bare feet, Ellis watched his own steps. He scratched at his stomach, itching up his shirt to get at an irritated scuff on one of his ribs, and somewhat reluctantly started up the stairs.

Nick and Carmine weren't downstairs and hadn't been since he'd finally left the kitchen, so he figured they'd gone upstairs together. The thought made him frown, telling himself that maybe Nick had taken the guest room and Carmine hers... but that wasn't likely.

He didn't want to run into them, let alone Nick. Not right now. That in mind, the hick started to tiptoe as he reached the top of the stairs, intent on getting into and out of the bathroom without getting caught.

There were a few shut doors along the hallway and, with a small squint, Ellis noticed that there was a soft light glowing out from the edges of one, betraying their location and making him relax as much as the sight downcast his gaze. The bathroom door hung open, fortunately.

Cautiously, Ellis slipped up to the bathroom threshold and stepped inside the dark, tiled room, his feet immediately chilled by the bare floor in a rather calming shiver.
Relaxing somewhat and figuring he'd just stay there a few moments and then go back downstairs, Ellis started to reach up to the light switch and flick it on. He froze when he heard a door open down the hall, however, and never completed the motion.

Quickly, the hick turned to press himself against the wall just inside the bathroom, holding his breath and jamming his back against the lightswitch painfully. There were voices, but Ellis couldn't make them out clearly, even though he strained to.

Leaning just slightly, he poked his head through the doorway, peeking down the hallway as subtly as he could. Carmine was hanging out of an open door, her eyes intent on Nick's face, standing in front of her in the hall.

As Ellis watched, he leaned in, catching her cheek under a thumb and bending his mouth to hers - and it was a deep kiss.

Ellis couldn't watch, his heart sinking to his gut and body reflexively recoiling back to hide in the bathroom like it could spare him the sight. He slowly slipped over to the sink and counter, leaning his weight heavily against it and bending forward. He rubbed his face into his palms, sighing.

Why should it be a shock..? Why did it even matter? Ellis had told him he hadn't wanted to accept that what happened had happened... He'd forgiven him (supposedly) so they could move on (supposedly)... Ellis shouldn't be surprised that Nick had gone on unfazed.

Maybe he'd wanted to see if Nick would argue.. maybe he didn't really think Nick would've given up as easily as he did - but Ellis had messed it all up and Nick had let him. Maybe that disappointment Ellis had seen had been imagined. Nick must've meant what he'd said - if not for the alcohol, he'd never have done that, anyway.

"...it ain't fair." Ellis mumbled very quietly, sighing in frustration and leaning forward until his forehead hit the bathroom mirror. "I think I might like yuh, Nick..."

Because suddenly all he could think about was how Nick had half-carried him after the Smoker had nearly killed him. Or how Nick had bent and let him in to eat breakfast with him. Or how they'd wrestled down the street and Ellis had caught him with a laugh glinting in his eyes.

Even the moments before or after the gambler yelled at him - like the flicker of regret after Nick had backhanded him. Or the fitful guilt tensing his shoulders as he'd stalked away on several occasions... or how one of his rants had been punctuated with a certain level of 'you could have gotten hurt'...

Ellis didn't think he was imagining it. Maybe he was being stupid, but all he had was his gut, and his gut liked being around Nick. Even if he was a jerk sometimes.

But it didn't matter. Nick had clearly slept with Carmine - why not, anyway? Nick didn't have any obligations or reasons not to. Ellis had told him to forget what happened.

If only logic made his chest stop hurting.

Slowly pushing away from the counter, Ellis drooped his head and chewed on his lip to keep it from trembling. He shouldn't have expected Nick to care at all, but it still hurt. Like he'd finally come to some kind of turning point, this new feeling struggle to breathe, and when he actually looked up he was alone.

Careful steps led him back to the doorway, and he looked out into the dark hallway, his gaze latching onto the line of light that shone out from under one of the other doors where it hadn't
As it suddenly hit him that Nick was in that room, alone, his whole spine stiffened in a surge of confidence. Nick had said it: Ellis had a right to be upset.

He'd be upset - he'd tell Nick just exactly how frustrated he was, and he'd let out these crippling emotions, and he'd inform him just how much it hurt to think Nick had turned right around and just jumped a girl he didn't even seem to like.

Ellis would've been okay, but that thought had just pushed something too far. He wanted an apology, and even if Nick didn't give him one, he was sure as hell going to ask for one.

Like closure.

Straightening out his clothes and the knot of his overalls, Ellis set his jaw and tried to draw himself up to some kind of height. He inhaled quickly and started moving before he could second-guess himself, lightening his steps as he passed by the room Nick had left and pausing in front of the lit door Nick was behind.

... should he knock?

Decisively shaking his head, Ellis just reached out and got hold of the knob, twisting it and thrusting the door open with a quick step to follow it as it opened.

Nick turned around almost instantly, his shower-clean but still unshaven face in a look of rather drawn interest, one brow raising. He'd been in the middle of undoing the last button of his dress shirt, suit jacket already tossed to the messily-made bed that protruded out into the middle of the room. His torso warmly filled the now loosely draping blue fabric, dark hair dusting his chest and disappearing into the shadow a bedside lamp cast across his stomach.

As his green eyes ticked onto Ellis, his lips gained a minute quirk downward, and he slowly let his fingertip twitch that last button free before he crossed his arms over his chest tightly. The motion did pull some of his shirt back into place, trapping it there.

"Something wrong, hayseed?" That was all he asked. As Ellis stood there in the doorway, gripping onto the knob and not quite inside, the conman's green gaze burned a hole straight through him. It was so fierce, Ellis couldn't get himself to meet it long enough to try and understand it, but somehow his resolve was unflagging.

He stepped in and shut the door.

"Yeah, Nick. Look," Ellis took in a breath, jutting his fisted hands carefully against his thighs. "You don't wanna hear this, but - I-I'm gonna say it anyway, 'cause you owe me a chance tuh at least say it."

Nick seemed wary, gradually and tensely curling his fingers in his sleeves before he gave a silent nod of agreement.

So Ellis lifted his hands to lightly scratch his fingertips into his loose curls, averting his gaze to the carpet between them. He felt his face warm, but did his absolute best to ignore it. "I'm - real mad, Nick. It ain't fair, pullin' whut you did 'n' then .. not even havin' the guts to say a real 'sorry'."

The conman inhaled quickly through his nose, slowly moving his legs to cross idly at the knees where he stood, his weight falling to the right. His voice was even - non-confrontational. A little strange, actually. "You said you forgave me. Didn't we move on?"
Ellis pushed his fingers a little tighter into their curls, shaking his head slightly and biting onto his tongue for a moment. "I... it ain't that simple. Yuh never even tried to talk tuh me all day! You were just actin' like nothin' happened... don't I get some kind'uh 'splanation? Or an apology?"

"I gave you an explanation, Overalls... I was drunk. Everyone's done something stupid when they were drunk, this one just included you." That struck Ellis a little. Nick was still calm, though Ellis felt like something else was teetering on an edge in his voice. Those green eyes sat on him, musing.

"Why didn't you try tuh apologize?" he repeated. Ellis realized his voice was strained... more pleading than he meant. He couldn't help it. He also noticed abruptly that Nick's shoulders twitched down at his question, just slightly.

His voice was quieter than before when he responded, though his tone was harsher. "I didn't make a calm pass at you, Overalls. I don't know if you noticed, but what happened wasn't exactly 'oh hey, I'm drunk and you look good today.' 'Sorry' is supposed to make you feel better? Because I'll say it, but somehow I doubt it'd do any actual goddamn good like you think."

"Ain't that my decision..?" Ellis only barely got it out, Nick's blunt retort choking him up slightly. His brows furrowed tightly, and for a moment, the two men were silent.

"... What do you want from me, exactly, Overalls? I can't believe you really barged into my room in the middle of the night because you wanted a 'sorry.'" Nick's arms crossed tighter, and he turned around to face the bed, suddenly freeing Ellis from the burning strength of his gaze. He didn't, in fact, apologize - and Ellis didn't miss that.

Ellis took a slow breath, fisting his hands tighter, and then cuffed one up in the air to point at him with it in a small gesture. He forced himself to say it. He had to know... "I'm askin' 'cause I - 'cause - Hogwash, Nick! I think I like you... 'n I been feelin' more'n more confused 'cause I don't know whut to do 'n' -"

He lost his composure with a fierce flushing across the bridge of his nose, voice going to a very quiet tone as he couldn't bear to look toward Nick's face. "... I'm askin' 'cause I - 'cause - Hogwash, Nick! I think I like you... 'n I been feelin' more'n more confused 'cause I don't know whut to do 'n' -"

The conman's head turned where the rest of his body stayed solid, staring a moment across the room at the mechanic before rolling his brows together slowly. "What in the hell kind of question is that, anyway?"

Ellis stubbornly kept rooted. His whole spine felt weak, though, teeth gritted together subtly in the back as he worked the words out from a tight throat. "... I'm askin' 'cause I - 'cause - Hogwash, Nick! I think I like you... 'n I been feelin' more'n more confused 'cause I don't know whut to do 'n' -"

He lost his composure with a fierce flushing across the bridge of his nose, voice going to a very quiet tone as he couldn't bear to look toward Nick's face. "...but it don't - matter, so. I just want a sorry, Nick. I ain't causin' any fuss, 'cause I know yuh slept with Carmine 'n' I ain't gonna say nothin' tuh nobody.. 'n'... I'll be okay if you can just give me a real sorry."

The silence for a moment afterward was completely deafening. He felt the weight of the air around him beating at his frame, determined to break him. When Nick's voice broke through, very evenly, it made him stiffen to imagine the things he'd say...

And all he said at first was "Overalls."

Realizing he wouldn't continue until Ellis gave him some kind of response, Ellis very slowly forced his gaze to rise, blue eyes uncertainly vulnerable without the comforting shade of his hat. He knew his expression was bright red, knew he must look humiliated... and it was some kindness that Nick took the lifting of his head as enough instead of making him talk.
"You're wrong." Ellis' knees started the subtlest of shakes, and he realized with a small, nervous rise to his pulse that Nick was smirking just faintly - sadly, even. All Ellis could do was give a small 'huh?'.

Nick stepped forward, silently crossing the room and letting his arms drop to his sides. He halted just barely in front of Ellis, cool gaze scanning over that expression, now drawn with anxiety and trembling with the beat of his heart. They were so damn close. "I didn't do anything with her."

Ellis felt his heart come to a very clamoring halt. He knew it showed on his face - he watched Nick read it and watched his smirk gain some more weight.

"I turned her down. And I wasn't in the mood to mess around with some two-bit Cali exile. I wasn't happy, either, you know. It's not like I wanted to do -" He did stop a bit there, chewing at his tongue to muse at wording before he amended, "I didn't like what happened."

Ellis struggled, his whole body feeling like lead as he tried so hard to absorb the words he was hearing, to listen to the low, sincere tone Nick spoke them with. Was that an apology for what happened on the roof, or downstairs? Ellis wasn't sure. He also wasn't sure how much the difference mattered.

His voice stumbled when he whispered up at the gambler, "Yuh.. I thought.. You didn't - sleep with her?" It was so obvious now. Why else would Nick still be so shower-fresh? Why else would they be so quiet saying goodnight in the hall? Why else would Nick be sleeping in another room?

Ellis felt like an idiot.

Nick was leaned in now, though, his arms uncrossed to bare the only sparingly covered expanse of his torso. "I didn't fuckin' want her." There was emphasis there on that last word, so subtle Ellis almost doubted if he'd really heard it. His expression was serious, eyes half-lidded, and Ellis felt himself immobilized underneath the soft smoulder of those focused and cold eyes.

"And kid?" Ellis could only barely nod his head, feeling like his heart and his head might explode with the blush rushing in quick, frantic little pants through his veins. His chest was pounding. "... if I hadn't been drunk, that would've never happened."

Dizzy, those words didn't completely sink into his brain before Nick was adding, voice intensely quiet and rough, "This would've."

Ellis felt the fingertips grip him first, their warm, blunt pads dotting a line along his jaw to hold his head in place with a firm touch. Anchored there, Nick leaned in further, and both their eyes shut in the same motion as the conman eased their lips together.

They both tensed. It was there in their shoulders and the way their bodies linked through that one motion and sparked in the contact - this taut sense of energy, anxious.

A small whimper, one of some subtle uncertainty, escaped Ellis and the shiver of every muscle in his form betrayed the waves of warmth that spiraled from the touch of lip on his. When he felt the subtle part of the conman's lips, the sudden and intense smell of soap, cigarettes, and something a little heavier swirling across his senses -

Ellis didn't pull away.
Chapter 31

Nick had never been easily swayed by kisses, not in any meaningful way. They were a means to an end; a method to lay out his intentions as bluntly as possible.

Just then, though, he could feel Ellis trembling under his fingertips. His mouth was soft and unsure, afraid to move. That tangible shock changed something in it for the gambler. He didn't mind as much that their bodies kept a good few inches of distance between each other, or that the kiss was so achingly tentative.

Then again - he wasn't usually one for slow kisses, either.

His fingertips sunk along Ellis' jaw as the kid failed to push him off, curling up his cheeks and tracing past his ears into the bare locks usually hidden under his cap. Nick let his fingers twine in the soft mop, using it as a light hold to anchor Ellis to him in the same moment that he simply felt at the strands between his knuckles.

Nick's tongue pressed gently past the part to his own lips, wetting over the hick's and encouraging him to open his own. He could feel Ellis' warm breath fanning over his face as the kid panted through his nose, and it sped up at Nick's advance.

The moment Ellis submitted to it, leaning his weight against the fingers in his hair, Nick stole the smallest taste of the kid's mouth with a feather-light intrusion of the tip of his tongue. He pulled away there, releasing him, more than aware of how Ellis gasped at the sudden connection between their mouths.

Nick's fingers spread and then curled in Ellis' hair, and he opened his eyes to scan over the younger man's expression slowly, a smirk touching his own lips. Ellis was red-faced, jaw softly slack as he hadn't quite recovered from the kiss. It was… nice-looking.

When he managed to regain some amount of self-awareness, his mouth quickly shut, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue self-consciously. A flustered "U-uh.." was all Ellis could really pull off at first, color deepening as Nick didn't waver in his focus.

God, that felt good... really fucking insanely good. "Not what you expected, Overalls?" he murmured, his voice sultry and a little smooth with want. Nick could see it set the kid on edge. He enjoyed it.

The use of Ellis' nickname was almost ridiculous in that moment. It felt like a joke, even to Nick, and Ellis struggled for composure as he breathed in and out a bit quickly. "Uh.. I dunno... yer bein' -... gentle, I uh - I didn't expect that, I.. guess..."

One of the conman's hands remained curled in Ellis' hair, but the other eased free and slipped down the Georgian's spine, working its way down the dip in the center of Ellis' back with his fingertips. Ellis noticed, reddening heavily over the bridge of his nose, his weight and hips shifting in slight uncertainty. "You prefer what I did on the roof?" he asked in a low murmur, rather intently maintaining his green gaze on Ellis'.

He was curious what kind of response he'd get.

There was a certain exhilaration flitting through Nick's veins he couldn't deny. He felt his heart beating uncharacteristically hard beneath his ribs. Maybe it was just the build-up to it all - he finally had the frustratingly attractive Georgian within his grasp, he was actually sober, and Ellis
was actually willing.

Willing, but looking immensely uncertain and quiet. Nick merely watched him and stopped his fingers just at the bunched line of Ellis' overalls, pressed against his skin through his t-shirt. He had to remind himself to slow down; that Ellis wasn't one of his usual targets, and didn't know what he was doing.

Nick wasn't very good at slow.

"N-no..." was Ellis' eventual, weakly mumbled response, gaze flicking between Nick's eyes and his mouth.

He knew that look.

Widening his smirk slightly, Nick suddenly purred, "Come here..." in a low voice, curling his arm and his fingers into Ellis' back to draw him forward and lean their bodies close together. Ellis immediately inhaled a sharp breath and darted eyes down as the motion pulled him tight against a very warm, bare chest.

Nick's arm tightly enveloped around his side and his other one released its grip on his curls to join the first. It pushed him to stumble his bare foot one step forward, and Ellis panicked slightly, although it was mostly in his expression and voice. "N-Nick.. I ain't.. sure, uh.."

Their hips were pinned close together now. Ellis didn't try to struggle away, even as his eyes went darting wide. Nick might've thought he was looking for the door, had Ellis' gaze not found its way back to his face, uncertainly.

His eyes were warm, stony blue, and searched Nick's for answers.

The gambler chuckled low, dropping his head to push a second kiss on him instead, tongue exploring the Georgian's mouth a little hungrily. Ellis' knees went weak, leaning forward into it even as the motion stretched his lean body flat against Nick's.

The conman lifted his brows against a surge of desire at the sensation coupled with the slow, tentative nibble of Ellis' teeth on his tongue. Shit. He growled a little in the back of his throat, and Ellis must've thought he'd done something wrong because he jumped slightly at the noise, breaking their kiss with a small gasp of air - but Nick didn't let him move away more than that, shifting his hands to grip onto the mechanic's slim hips.

"There's a whole lot I want to do to you."

There that tone was again - gravelly and dark, ragged with something lustful. Ellis shivered rather harshly as the words settled, trying to stifle the motion. He lifted his hands up to grip onto Nick's shoulders, bracing himself, and whimpered a question very quietly, "Yuh.. uh.. still do like.. girls, though.. right?"

For some reason, all the question did was make Nick smirk. He bent his head to the side, nipping lightly at the top of Ellis' ear, his stubbled cheek scuffing against the hick's. This is a new conversation...

Any other time, he would've found the question vexing. But, throwing the kid a lifeline was, he decided reluctantly, the least he could do. His voice was a rough approximation of sympathetic as he whispered against that ear. "Insecure, kiddo? Never looked twice at a guy before?"

Slowly, whining in a soft exhale at the ministrations to his ear, Ellis managed a shake of his head,
visibly struggling to stand up straight and not tremble.

"If it makes you feel better," And God it felt strange to admit, considering he'd only once so much as discussed the topic with someone else. Fact was, Nick had made Ellis struggle with too much already, and he felt very distinctly that he had earned a small sacrifice. Just a small admittance that he wasn't completely alone in his discomfort.

"I hate it a little."

Ellis blinked softly over Nick's shoulder, those blue eyes tipping to the side... but Nick didn't pull away from his ear, and before Ellis could respond, the conman tightened his fingers on his hips and curled his tongue against the kid's earlobe.

"A-ah!" Ellis yipped in a sudden fluster, startled, fingers clutching onto the older man's shirt. The open dress shirt bunched up with the motion, slipping a few inches off his shoulders, and Nick chuckled warmly against Ellis' ear as he rolled his torso a bit to the side.

Ellis quickly let go of the shirt, realizing what Nick was doing - and his breath caught as the conman wormed his dress shirt down to his bent elbows, baring his torso. With some reluctance, Nick let go of Ellis long enough to toss back his arms and ditch it entirely to the floor.

He grabbed hold of Ellis' wrist, loosely pulling him forward as he strolled backwards. Green eyes burned lightly as he smirked, Ellis staring - flustered - at his stomach as the Georgian stumbled on clumsy bare feet, following the pull. The kid was lost.

_You're not good at slow, Nicolas, but no reason to push him into it, either... God, this is not going to be easy._

Nick stopped when his calves hit the edge of the bed, dropping down to sit and spread his legs. Before Ellis could react, Nick tugged him forward to stand in the space between his thighs, slipping his hands up to curl on the back of Ellis' head and coax him into a bend for a third kiss.

Ellis quickly closed his eyes and leaned down into the kiss, one of his hands dropping to brace himself and landing just an inch to the side of Nick's thigh. He was warming up, Nick thought, so he pushed deep into it, slowly retracting one of his hands while he distracted the younger man with slow strokes of his tongue, enjoying the heavy trembles he got out of Ellis for his trouble.

Nick curled his elbow to get his hand on Ellis' stomach, hooking fingertips in his yellow T-shirt and pulling suddenly upwards. He chuckled in the back of his throat as his knuckles brushed up the Georgian's smooth stomach and Ellis froze up -

But the conman was shortly surprised, as the hick straightened up in a sudden surge and tugged his shirt up over his head. Nick's mouth went incredibly dry as the hick's torso flexed in his squirm to be rid of it, a soft flush settled all over his lean skin and accenting the slopes of his frame.

He wasn't built, exactly; it was more like a smooth layer of muscle that had developed from constant activity. He was _solid_, on the cusp of growing out of the last shaky remnants of 'young adult'.

Whatever it was, Nick liked it.

"Jesus shit." he muttered, very simply and a little roughly, reaching up his hands to curl them behind the kid's thighs and grip at the baggy fabric of his overalls. He could tell Ellis was uncertain, standing there, without even looking at his face.
Dragging Ellis a step further and sliding his hands up till he was almost cupping his rear, Nick leaned in and nipped harshly just at the kid's stomach. Ellis jumped slightly, his arms lifting up to loop around Nick's shoulders and grip his fingers against the conman's back.

His voice whimpered slightly above Nick's head, but the gambler was too focused to respond, trailing teeth and lips along the panting lines of the younger man's ribs. He was aware his stubble was scratching along Ellis' skin, more because the mechanic kept gasping and shifting as he traveled along with a hungry pace, maybe tickled.

Nick flattened his tongue against Ellis' skin as he reached the gentle slope of his pec, spine shuddering a little at the rather distinct taste that had slowly been creeping into his senses. Nick shut his eyes and brushed his mouth over the pink bud of Ellis' left nipple before flicking the tip of his tongue against it, enjoying the sudden clutch it caused fingers to take on his back and the tremble it sent down Ellis' stomach.

Noticing the lack of sounds, though, he reopened his eyes and flickered his gaze up. Ellis had his curly-locked head twisted to the side, jaw slack but mouth buried in the swell of his tattooed shoulder, and eyes squeezed shut against the hot flush that covered his face.

The expression was so clearly struggling with arousal that Nick couldn't help himself. Raising his hands to grip onto the back of Ellis' bundled-up overalls, he urged the hick forward with a demanding push, ending up tripping Ellis forward into himself.

Ellis quickly tried to regain his balance, his hips having sprawled intimately into the niche of Nick's - but Nick merely growled softly, using both his grip on Ellis' overalls and the leverage he now had with his thighs to thrust them into a half-roll, trapping Ellis under himself against the bed.

Blue eyes quickly widened, Ellis panting heavily and stretching out his hands to grip onto the bed-sheets a little urgently. "N-Nick..." he huffed anxiously, body squirming slightly. "Whut're you -"

That made Nick take a breath, the oxygen welcome to an otherwise starved brain. Ellis gave this small whimper as Nick settled into a straddle on his thighs, watching with parted lips as the conman's hands coiled on his thighs with burgeoning energy.

Nick met his gaze, forcefully. "Kid." When Ellis tried to look away, the gambler reached out and braced his palm against his jawline, forcing his face back forward. Their eyes locked in the dim light, and Ellis chewed his lower lip. "I don't play hard to get. You want this?"

The Georgian seemed to waver a moment, the chewing increasing. Nick actually felt he might reconsider for a beat of time - and then Ellis' head nodded, minutely, his breath held and his words a little stuttered with their proximity. "Y-yeah... S'just... I ain't real sure..."

Nick's expression must've given his thoughts away, because Ellis' rate of speech suddenly ratcheted up. If his face could've gotten any redder, it did just then. "I ain't a virgin or nothin', I just don't... I ain't done nothin' like this before, is all, 'n'..."

That made Nick laugh. It was low in his throat and rough with tension, and the younger man's face drew into something a lot like a pout. "Relax, Ellis. You're thinking too hard."

Ellis seemed unsure at first, so Nick drew back an extra inch and let out a sigh. If it had been anyone else, he might've lost patience. If he'd been a better man, Nick might've stopped and talked to him.

Instead, he just said, "Trust me, okay?" -
and thought, Except I'm the last person you should trust, kiddo.

He wasn't surprised when that worked, even if he got the distinct feeling that he'd taken advantage of the kid as Ellis' eyes softened a little. He nodded his head more seriously, voice just as soft. "Course…"

Nick didn't waste a moment, leaning down to close his mouth over Ellis'. He locked lips tightly and mercilessly deep, shutting him up and drawing an appreciative moan from the younger man. The nervous energy drained out of the mechanic, and Ellis tentatively reached up hands to touch at Nick's biceps.

His fingertips were calloused and warm, and Nick wished he could smooth out the goosebumps that raised in their presence.

Keeping that kiss held tightly and shifting his weight onto his knees, Nick worked Ellis' hips free of his overalls - he pushed them just halfway down his thighs, just enough. Nervous noises mumbled into the kiss with every movement, but Ellis' hips hitched up off the bed, as if to help.

That made Nick smirk, and his fingertips played for a moment over the soft inner thigh bared between the bottom edge of Ellis' boxers and his now lowered coveralls - then slowly slid up to the hick's underwear and gripped onto the fabric.

He broke the kiss as he stripped those boxers down, leaning back for a moment to glance down. Ellis was gorgeously laid out for him then, body sprawled out just enough to be vulnerable and a little clumsy. Where his arms and shoulders were crisply tanned, his abdomen and thighs were a little paler from remaining covered, lean but soft-looking.

And Nick's gaze found - now freed from his boxers and exposed to both the air and Nick's mercy - Ellis' cock arching up from short brunette curls. It made the gambler's spine straighten up, a sudden aching awareness of his own, constrained in now-too-tight slacks.

Lifting his left hand up to spit into his palm, Nick flicked his gaze toward Ellis' face, inspecting the struggle of arousal and embarrassment spread across those surprisingly attractive features. The gambler leaned forward on his knees, settling his mouth close to Ellis' ear as he just let his palm and then fingers trail along the other man's erection at first.

Ellis immediately hitched up his spine, knees trying to push up but unable to with Nick's weight on them. "N-Nick!" wobbled past his lips in a moan, blue eyes fluttering shut as the sensation set in, the cool touch of Nick's two rings making it all the worse.

"You can say stop..." he purred against the whorls of Ellis' right ear, almost tauntingly, letting his breath fan out in the quick pants it was escaping him. His grip on the kid became a little tighter as saliva slickened the motion, and he felt the tension underneath him rising as Ellis got harder.

"But I don't think you want to..."

The Georgian didn't even respond, whimpering and gasping as his fingers gripped on the sheets tightly. The anxiety was dissipating from Ellis as pleasure overtook it, Nick twisting his strokes at just the right point to draw a little extra jolt from it. The gambler couldn't help but draw back slightly to get a glance over his slackened expression.. shortly taking advantage of the lost look with a nip and lick of his silky-soft lower lip.

That brought Ellis a little out of his rut, mumbling in a soft whimper that didn't seem entirely thought out as another shudder wormed up his spine, "Y-yeah.."
Sitting there was getting uncomfortable, his abdomen tight and warm as his slacks seemed to just get tighter. Being shirtless helped, cool air brushing up along his back, but there was an undeniable heat that was building all over his front and the stroking motion of his own hand was arousing in far too many ways.

Effortlessly maintaining the tempo of his left hand, Nick moved his right to unbuckle his belt, flicking it apart with his pinky. The clink of metal drew Ellis' scattered attention, and he rolled his chin a little to glance down through foggy blue eyes, uncertainly trying to focus through a wave of pleasure Nick quite intentionally squeezed out of him just then.

Nick slipped his hand into his slacks, sighing faintly as he curled his fingers around his own length and pulled himself free, not near as carefully as he'd done with Ellis. He felt too urgent now, desire pressing into his stomach harshly, and he let his weight settle onto his knees in a quick motion to get a better angle and push his slacks a little more out of the way.

But - he only got a few strokes, synchronized with the ones he was giving Ellis that hadn't yet stopped, before he noticed Ellis suddenly unclench his hands from the sheets. Nick eyed him uncomprehendingly with burning green irises, panting harshly through flared nostrils, but Ellis didn't freeze up.

He was burning up with a blush from both arousal and embarrassment, but his jaw was steeled and he didn't falter.

That flat stomach flexed to bring Ellis to his elbows, slumping backward on one in a small arch, and bringing his other arm up to reach down and push his fingers to usurp Nick's on the gambler's dick.

"Ove-"

Nick let out a genuine, throaty moan of pleasure as those calloused pads snuck around him. He'd marvel at how arousing the forwardness on Ellis' part was later - for a moment, he lost all sense, manipulating the kid with his agile fingers with the same rhythm he rutted his hips lightly against Ellis' hand. It all got lost and mixed up, pulsing pleasure turning indistinct and vague, the rustle of clothing distracting and disorienting.

He heard Ellis give a choked whimper of an "Oh gawd," and the younger man's hips bucked up against Nick's hand to ride out his climax, spilling up onto the curled stretch of his abdomen. He came in waves as the gambler slowed his motions and soothed fingers in a drag up and down the hick's length.

It was difficult focusing, his brain swimming, and the gambler shifted his free hand to wrap his fingers around Ellis' and tighten them. His hips settled into fierce and shallow movements, driving the rhythm greedily.

Nick bent down to bury his face against Ellis' neck, breathing in sharply when his orgasm hit. He didn't have much control over his body then, hips jamming against both their hands with one final thrust and stilling as he growled fiercely.

He nipped a little at the crook of Ellis' neck and enjoyed the utterly exhausted little whimpers he got for it, not paying any mind to the fact he'd only added to the mess Ellis had made of his stomach.

The exhaustion that struck was so severe, Nick's legs wobbled as he rolled sideways off of Ellis, barely catching himself on a palm. He let out a shaky exhale and slid his legs off the edge of the
bed, body slanted toward the mechanic as he fell to an elbow and relaxed. The conman rolled his head back and closed his eyes, a smirk etching itself easily across his lips.

The soft shifting of the bed announced Ellis readjusting his clothing a little before scooting toward him, and he felt the Georgian settle slowly, and just barely, against his now-sprawled front. Ellis' shoulder was just pressed against his pec, but it was enough.

One green eye flicked open, glancing at the body next to his... the slick stomach, the untied coveralls and bunched boxers that he'd just barely gotten modestly back up around his hips... the bare chest, the reddened cheeks..

Lastly, Nick's gaze ended up shifting to meet Ellis'. He didn't look so nervous now - in fact there was an edge of happiness to the brilliantly exhausted blue of his eyes, this smile risking at his lips that was... cute.

"Thank'yuh, Nick..."

The gambler almost wanted to laugh. Being outright thanked, like I did the kid a favour... but the closest he came to laughter was a twitch wider of his smirk. He settled it soon after, and with a very weighty inhale that summoned what strength he had, Nick pushed on his elbows to roll to his feet.

"That's a first..." he muttered quietly.

Nick realized then that the loss of some of that smile was because of his actions, glancing down at the pillow on the floor. He lifted up his hands and tiredly rubbed at the expanse of his chest, each motion feeling heavier and heavier the longer he was awake. "I can make you go back downstairs if you'd rather, kiddo. It's that or the floor."

Ellis didn't answer at first, forcing himself up to his bare feet and taking a few steps to the side, getting out of Nick's way as he took the comforter off the bed, dropping it down next to the pillow and starting to pull up the thinner bedsheet left behind so he could collapse back onto the bed and slip under it.

"Naw... not really." Suddenly Ellis smiled again, visibly dismissing whatever it was that'd given him pause. He gently stepped over to lean in and wrap his arms momentarily around Nick from behind, catching the conman just before he'd turned to actually slide under the sheets.

"He wanted to sleep with me." He shouldn't have been surprised, but he supposed he was, a little. The gambler pulled the sheets over his frame, groaning a little as he settled down on the bed and pushed his head against the one pillow left there, starting to close his eyes.
Lifting an arm, Nick reached over to click off the bedside lamp, darkness thrusting up over the room in a sudden motion. He hadn't even relaxed before Ellis, shifting audibly under the sheets, tried to speak to him. "Hey, Nick...?"

A hush spilled out from Nick's lips reflexively, but rather unenthusiastically; "We'll talk tomorrow. Go to sleep, Overalls." He was too tired to handle conversation - he imagined the questions Ellis had. *I should've just kicked him out...*

A little too gently, Ellis' voice responded from the floor, "Okay. G'night, Nick." He didn't try again... and they both fell asleep quickly and deeply, unmoving.

Along the course of the night, Nick's pillow ended up wrapped in his arms.
Chapter 32

Nick felt his shoulder being shaken gently, and as he stirred, his body groaned a complaint. He could sense a few bruises over his body the Jockey had caused him, and the lazy pain left him unwilling to get up and break the pocket of warmth wrapped around him.

Wrapping his arms tighter around the pillow held to his chest, the conman growled a "What...?" under his breath without opening his eyes. He even buried his face against it, hoping the disruption would simply go away. He mulled over, distantly, if his Magnum was in arms-reach.

As consciousness settled more fully over his brain, however, his memory cleared and what was a foul mood trickled into a rather pleasant one. Recalling the previous night set all his nerves at ease, and the lean contentment that settled into his muscles softened the harsh grip he had on his pillow.

_Goddamn, last night was good... never been happier to've ruined my chances with a girl._

What hit him strangely about that, though, was that in no way had he been thinking what happened would've been the result of him rejecting Carmine. He'd stalked to the other room resigned to a cold, empty night and self-frustration.

But nothing, he decided, could ruin his good mood today.

"Sorry, Nick..." Ellis' voice made him pull his head away from the pillow, blinking flecked green eyes for a moment at the clothed mechanic kneeling beside his bed.

Ellis gave a slightly bashful smile there, adjusting the cap on his head slowly and shifting on his knees. "Ro came in 'n woke me up a few minutes ago. Carmine's real upset this mornin', we want you tuh try'n talk to her."

The pleasure drained instantly at the mention of - well, reality. Confirming the room was empty and the door at least mostly shut with a glance, Nick shifted his weight to roll to a seated position on the mattress. He let his arms cross, but didn't keep the sheets from sliding down to his lap.

Casually, eyes on the almost-shut door, Nick reached out and tucked a knuckle under Ellis' chin. He forced his face up so he could lean in a bit, dangerously close, like he might kiss him. He thoroughly enjoyed the embarrassment that flooded the other man's face. "What'd you tell Rochelle?"

"I, I uh.." Ellis, not exactly trying to get away even as his hands clamped over the edge of the bed like he might either push to his feet or fall over, stammered a little. He was blushing, the color spilling over the bridge of his scarred nose. "I told her we talked it out..."

Nick smirked neatly at the Georgian, stopping short before his predatory instinct escalated the situation.

"Give it away with that blush, dumbshit." He said it like he hadn't just been intentionally taunting the blush out of him. Ellis glanced up at the term, and even though he couldn't pick out a gentling that indicated it wasn't meant harshly, Nick clearly wasn't angry. "And what was 'it'?"

Keeping his head precisely where it was, Ellis downcast his gaze and cleared his throat uncomfortably. His voice lowered a little, and he seemed guilty. "...She sorta already had an idea... thought I was, uh.. jealous of Carmine likin' you an' we was fightin' over her.."
Nick immediately saw the irony, cracking a dark chuckle and releasing Ellis. He pushed his pillow back up to the top of the bed, then thrust the light sheets off his frame and made to stand up, buttoning his shirt slowly. The gambler noticed Ellis watching him sideways, still blushing, but feigned obliviousness.

"Pretty close." he commented lowly.

Ellis shifted to haul up to his feet, crossing his arms behind his back. He quirked his mouth a little, embarrassed, and dropped his chin to hide his eyes under his cap. "I-I wasn't jealous."

The conman smirked, straightening his dress shirt and tucking it into his slacks. He stretched his arms out, elbows popping pleasantly with the motion, then relaxed them to try to rearrange his hair into the cool slicked back look he preferred. It was getting hard without an actual gel, but he was making do.

"Then what were you?"

Ellis didn't answer at first, hooking his thumbs into the bunch of his overalls and biting onto his lower lip. A moment later, he managed, "I'unno.."

Nick tugged his suit jacket free from where it laid on the end of the bed, pausing just a moment as he was spreading it open to try and gauge Ellis' meaning. Shrugging the jacket on, he reached over and grasped Ellis' elbow, gentle on the scarring wounds there. Sighing just a little and turning the Georgian to push him toward the door, he prompted, "I'm not her fuckin' keeper, but where is she?"

"Ain't come outta her room all mornin'... Other reason Ro' told me tuh wake you up, 'cause she said you could go'n'get the door open." Ellis smiled under his cap at the touch to his arm, glancing over his shoulder at Nick a little brightly as he walked to the door.

The smile caught him off-guard. It was sweet. That bothered him.

Nick snorted, following after him, releasing Ellis' elbow and turning his own hand up to inspect it, feeling the warmth left over from their contact. He felt a strike of annoyance at his own discomfort - he didn't like being at a loss.

The hell do I do now?

The pleasant mood was gone, quickly as it had come.

Refocusing as Ellis stepped up beside Carmine's bedroom and leaned his shoulder against the wall just next to the door, Nick grumbled a wordless complaint and arranged himself in front of it.

"Carmine? You okay, doll?"

Noticing a slight fistling of Ellis' hands out of the corner of his eye, Nick smirked smugly. Not jealous my ass... Not hearing anything immediately, the conman leaned his head in and set his ear against the door, lifting his gaze a little and repeating, "Doll?" He tried the knob, softly, but it was locked.

The soft, sobbing sound of Carmine's voice filtered through the door, making Nick groan and pinch the bridge of his nose. He whispered just loud enough for Ellis to hear, utterly frustrated; "Oh, you have got to be kidding me... she's crying?"

The Georgian gave a weak grin, and slight guilt filtered into his features. "Well, yuh did turn her down, Nick..."
Nick flicked a narrowed look at him, snorting in displeasure. "Women..." Returning his voice to its louder call, his tone gentled to this strained pleasantry that actually made Ellis have to hide a laugh behind his wrist. "Carmine, doll, open the door and let me talk to you. I thought you were okay."

His expression was drawn with irritation, and it only worsened when Carmine didn't respond to him, her crying voice getting softer like she was hiding behind or under something.

".. we talked about this. It wasn't you." Nothing. Mouthing something foul, Nick dug his hand beneath his jacket and pried his wallet from the inner pocket tucked away there.

Flipping it open and snatching out a credit card from one of the folds, Nick took a step to center himself before the knob and gently work the card into the crack of the doorframe beside it. He tossed the wallet to Ellis so he could grip onto the knob with his other hand, glancing up at the door.

"Doll, I'm coming in... - ...Overalls, fuck off my stuff." Caught, Ellis shut the wallet back up before he really got anything from it beyond the fact Nick looked oddly angry in his driver's license photo, a plain grey shirt where his suit should have been. He tucked it into his pocket instead, looking a little abashed.

Jiggling the credit card against the lock forcefully, Nick felt it shove between tumbler and doorframe, a satisfying click as the simplistic lock mechanism reversed. Tossing the card at Ellis, too, with a limp motion for him to return it to the wallet, Nick gently opened the door.

At first, the room was pitch black. His eyes didn't adjust very quickly, leaving him uncertain for a moment, faced with a dark room and the soft, emotional sobs of a distraught Carmine. As he blinked them into focus and felt Ellis step up by his elbow, he started to notice something -

A red hue seemed to glitter on the very air itself, this directionless, reflecting light. It struck shadows at all angles, tinted with a foggy red glow.

"Fucking hell..?" He searched a little too long to find the source of the light, and even after he saw the glowing nightlight jutting out of an outlet on the far wall, he remained disturbed. With a nervous chill up his spine, Nick slowly stepped forward to turn his gaze toward where he swore the tearful weeping was coming from.

Half-hidden on the floor at the end of the bed, he made out Carmine's sitting form. She had her arms tightly wrapped around her legs, drawn to her chest to bury her face between them. Her body was angular - emaciated, chillingly enhanced by the red glow that filled the room and reflected shadows over the jutting bones of her body. Clothes that once fit her hung, draping, like a blanket over her skeleton. They were torn and shredded, like she'd tried to get them off.

Her auburn hair hung down over her weeping shoulders and around her downcast head, the only thing even remotely familiar to him. Slowly, as a sob made her body crumple forward slightly like a scarecrow jerking at the wind on its pole, her arms slipped away from her knees to try and cover her face.

Spearlike fingers - if fingers they could even still be called - tapered to wicked points, clacking together like scissors as she tried to settle them over her eyes to stifle a wrenching sob.

"H-Ho-ly shit! Car-" Ellis blurted from Nick's elbow, startled, and too quick for Nick to react in time. Grabbing an arm forcefully around the younger man's neck, he plastered him against his chest and clamped the other hand over his mouth, silencing him.
"Shut.. up.." Nick hissed into his ear, starting to slide his foot back and drag Ellis with him. Ellis grabbed onto the forearm that held a hand over his mouth, but didn't fight, stumbling a little to follow after the gambler backwards.

With a harsh sinking sensation in his gut, Nick saw Carmine's head jerk up a little. She's.. fuck's sake, she's infected.. She was fine last night - I fucking kissed her last night!

She growled, just subtly, and with the almost visible twist and torque of bones underneath greying and dead skin, her head turned to focus glowing red eyes on the two men, face oily and glistening with tears. The growling rose, and like some shambling animal, her limbs shuddered her up toward her feet, turning around.

Nick pulled Ellis back through the doorway just as a sudden scream tore from her, high-pitched and bloodcurdling. With an audible scrape and swish her arms went akimbo, splaying knived fingers to either side as reddened air sent jagged shadows down her front.

Ellis was the one who caught the doorknob and slammed it shut in front of them, not too late to see she was stepping forward to race at them. Releasing Ellis' mouth and neck in favor of snagging his collar and dragging him with, Nick tore away to run down the hall toward the stairs, a mantra of "Shitshitshitshitshit!" spilling from his lips.

The Georgian quickly adjusted, catching up after a stumble to sprint beside him, shooting a glance over his shoulder. Shocked, Ellis heard a loud crash as Carmine collided with the door - and then two of those spearing fingers burst through the wood, jabbing at the air and squirming as they tried to break more of it down.

Jerking his head back forward as Rochelle shouted, "What the hell?!" from downstairs, the two men quite nearly fell over each other getting down the steps. They barely stayed standing, and Nick grabbed Ellis' tattooed bicep to drag him along as he quickly made for Coach. The big man was sitting up on the couch, alert, shirt stitched back together with visible black thread.

"Wh-" Coach started.

"She's a zombie, get the fuck out!" Nick ordered urgently, more at Rochelle, dropping down to reach out and offer his shoulder to Coach. Ellis took his lead, and the two men helped Coach up to his feet, supporting him and quickly starting toward the door.

Rochelle didn't seem interested in obeying - she grabbed up the weapons they'd stored against the wall, darting over to push Ellis and Nick's guns into the Ellis' free arm but keeping Coach's shotgun. The mechanic tried to shoot her a concerned look, but she was already stepping away, a serious grit to her jaw.

Coach's voice was not happy in the slightest, even though he couldn't really stop - Nick was forcefully striding forward, like he might drag both of the other men if he had to. "Baby girl, what the shit are you doin'?!"

"Picking up the rear." she snapped with a strange tone, angry and upset at the same moment, aiming down the sights carefully at the staircase as another scream from upstairs announced the door breaking down. She backed up to follow the three men toward the door.

They were just starting down the steps - Rochelle just in the doorway - when Carmine came sprinting down the staircase, her claws dragging along the wall and scraping paint off it like wet paper. She growled, red eyes flashing madly at Rochelle in the depths of a sunken face, and then let out a scream as she bolted toward the door, reaching her claws out in front of her.
It didn't seem like Carmine was aiming for Rochelle. It more seemed like she would go through her if necessary.

Rochelle aimed low, body going stiff and weight rolling back onto her heels to try and stabilize herself against the oncoming recoil, and cried, "I'm sorry - but FUCK OFF, BITCH!"

The shotgun blasted off with a crack, and the bony remnants of who Carmine was shrieked a pained noise and stumbled, the shot pulverizing her hip as it passed through. She staggered and fell, her foot-long claws slicing into the carpet as she crumbled, screaming in rage.

Shoving the front door shut with a trembling hand, Rochelle turned and raced down the stairs and across the lawn, catching up to the three men as they were helping to shove Coach up onto the truckbed.

"I'll drive!" Ellis shouted, pausing just a moment to make sure the injured man had cleared the tailgate before bolting around the truck, skidding a little as he scrambled to get to the driver's side door and yank it open.

Rochelle jumped in after Coach, immediately dropping down to brace herself and grab onto the big man's arm. He wrapped his other arm around her head, pulling her into a hug and whispering something to her, expression stoic and morose.

Nick slammed the tailgate shut and sprinted to the passenger side, vaulting up into the truck as Ellis re-hooked the startup wires underneath the steering wheel and straightened up, the car purring to a rattled start.

The conman yanked his seatbelt on even though Ellis didn't bother, and as he screeched the truck into reverse and cranked the wheel to rip it over the lawn in a tight half-circle, reorienting it toward the road, Nick shot a glance toward the house's front door.

Those inhuman claws jutted out from the wooden barricade, jerking about as Carmine tried to break through again - but the truck was already peeling off onto the gravel driveway, Nick grabbing reflexively onto the edge of his seat even with being strapped in.

"...Fucking Christ." the conman muttered almost inaudibly, muffled further by the whistling of the wind as it blew over the still-open back window. Ellis heard him, though, and Nick's jaw twitched a little as the hick softly prompted, slowing down just a little to swerve the truck down the winding gravel road toward the highway;

"..you okay, Nick?"

The gambler didn't answer for a moment, his own heartbeat rushing in his ears and drying out his mouth as he stared at the passing trees, nerves only slowly settling. ...I could've fuckin' slept in there. With her. It. Fuck.

When he did answer, it was a solid and forced "Yeah." If Ellis' slow nod and drifting of his gaze toward the conman before re-focusing forward said anything, Ellis might've been thinking something similar.

Turning in his seat, Nick threw an arm over the back of his chair and glanced into the truckbed through the still-open rear window. Rochelle was curled tightly against Coach, the big man resting his chin against the top of her head with half-closed eyes. He was clearly uncomfortable, his injured back pressed against the side to support her, but he didn't move.

She was biting onto a fingertip hard and clearly, however successfully, fighting tears.
He could hear her voice, just loud enough for Nick to catch it over the crunch of gravel. "... She came down in the middle of the night, Coach... she was sweating - but she wasn't hot, was she.. she had a fever... I should've realized..."

Nick's urge to ask a harsh *Does that one have a CEDA-approved name, too?* faded into the back of his mind, and he drew his arm back toward himself and faced forward without uttering it.

He found he couldn't stop touching his mouth and glancing over his fingertips.
Chapter 33

The Chevy sputtered, drowning, as its engine huffed the last fumes of gasoline.

"Jesus. Fucking. Goddamn. Christ!" Nick growled furiously, slamming his hand on the dashboard to underscore every word. "The one goddamn truck we pick and it doesn't have enough juice to get us more than halfway!?"

Coach sighed wearily as he pushed himself away from the side of the truckbed, turning his head to survey the sky and thick river they were currently guttering their way past.

The highway they drove on had funneled them quickly through the dead, burning, and zombie-infected remnants of what had been outlying suburbs on the edge of Savannah, and they'd just been going over a wide bridge when their vehicle had given its first cough. The truck was rolling to a chugging stop in the middle, Ellis trying to pump the pedal with no success.

He gave in reluctantly and pushed it into park, breaking the hotwire job with a careful tug and letting the truck die with a heavy rattle.

"Boy, calm yo' ass... ain't helpin' nothin'..

"Oh yeah?" Nick was furious. "Well I'm glad you're here to set me straight. Please, Coach, share your wisdom - how the fuck are we going to carry your ass and all our supplies? Hm? Hitch Ellis up to a cart and wagon?"

Coach sighed again, pointing to the backpack stuffed into one of the corners of the truckbed. "Baby girl, get that?... Don't need no carryin', boy, an' we'll make do. Longer we bicker, longer we take to get our asses outta here."

Nick fumed as Rochelle retrieved the pack and Coach dug through it carefully, pawing through the stash there and giving their rather low ammo stocks a dubious glance-over.

"Nick..." Ellis whispered, catching Nick's gaze. The Georgian reached under the sight of the window to touch his sleeve, but before his fingertips so much as grazed the fabric, Nick snapped his arm away.

"What, Overalls?! Are you excited to be on foot for who the fuck knows how many miles? Keith do it once?" he retorted vehemently, feeling a very tactile awareness of the empty spot where Ellis' hand would have settled.

Those blue eyes flashed to uncertainty, brows scrunching over them in confusion as he retracted his hand like Nick had bitten it. The conman could just read Ellis' doubt at the rejection, even if the kid tried to bounce back with a hesitant cock of his head. It shouldn't have bothered Nick - it didn't bother him. "... naw, Nick. Can't help it, though.. ain't got no gas. May as well make the best'uv it..

Nick gritted his teeth a little, lifting a hand to slowly pinch down the features of his face in a self-distracting motion. Goddamnit, I should've stopped this at the beginning. Now he'll get clingy. Fuck.

I don't need this right now...

"Aren't you just a bottle of sunshine." Taking a breath and leaning down, he pulled his machine gun
from the floorboard and tossed the strap over his shoulder, opening the door of the stalled truck and stepping out.

It felt far too much like running away.

Rochelle glanced up at him as he came around the side of the truck, seeming too distracted with their situation to much notice anything awry. She gestured to Coach, now inspecting the laminated map they'd brought with them. "We don't have much ammo, Nick... not for any of the weapons. And it's a long walk down the highway."

Nick crossed his arms tightly, sighing in frustration. "When the hell did we use all our bullets? You two had a stash and a fuckin' half when we met you."

"The Tank." Coach closed up the map and tucked it into the backpack, shaking his head. "Y'all wasted a lot of ammo tryin' to kill that thing."

The conman's hackles rose a little, jaw setting. Though Coach's comment had been practically innocuous, it pissed Nick off instantly, fingers clenching on his own sleeves. "And what were we supposed to do, exactly? Ask it nicely to shoo?"

Coach eyed him, unimpressed, but his voice was fairly calm when he returned, "Boy, I ain't pickin' no fight, I'm sayin'...

Nick paused a moment, curling his tongue against his teeth... then shrugged, forcing his mouth into a flat line. There was no sense in needlessly fighting amongst themselves, even Nick knew that. Mostly. "Fair enough."

He could tell the ex-football player relaxed as he backed off. Coach glanced over the supplies they'd stashed in the truck, sighing weightily. "Can't take this shit... won't have no real meals, 'n not much ammo... betta be hopin' we don't run into much."

Ellis popped out around the cab of the truck, leaning against the side of the bed and resting his cheek against the butt of his shotgun. He was quiet, and Nick could feel the mechanic's gaze flickering on and off him worriedly, the whole length of the truck between them, in an attempt at subtlety.

Rochelle hopped up onto her knees and crawled over to break into a pack of waterbottles in the depths of the truckbed. "We grabbed some bottled water from the gas station back when. Let's take one each, and I'll try to stick at least a meal into the backpack somewhere.. something light."

Nick grunted without paying attention, turning a hand to inspect his ringed fingers. Why was I so goddamned nice to him? This is gonna bite me in the ass.

He lifted his head as a bottle suddenly thrust into his vision and, glancing up, found Rochelle offering him a smile. "It'll be alright, sweetie. We're close to home free."

Nick snatched it from her lightly, but it was tucked into one of his jacket pockets while his cigarette pack and matches were pulled out instead. He tried not to register the fact he was down to two cigarettes.

Carefully lighting up, he sighed sarcastically, "Oh, good, you're not bitching at me anymore, either?"

Rochelle's smile fell slightly - but it collapsed into something a little sympathetic. She reached out to set a hand on his shoulder, gripping the fabric lightly. "I am sorry about what happened Carmine, by the way... We're all just stressed.. and we were taking it out on each other."
Pulling on his cigarette, Nick sighed out a smoke-stained breath and, begrudgingly, nodded once.

"I know it's different when it's someone you know who turns. You get kind of numb to all this death, but.. watching someone go, someone you cared about, it's - " Rochelle winced, glancing down toward her feet. Nick had to remind himself that she'd said her cameraman had turned in front of her during the outbreak.

Whatever he'd felt or not felt for the girl, her emaciated frame and pinprick red eyes would haunt him. So, he took the olive branch offered even though he felt it grate at him a little.

"I was being sort of an ass."

She grinned at him, returning her attention to the pack of bottles, and her expression was pleasantly gratified. "Wasn't your fault... it's your default setting. I should know by now."

Scoffing quietly under his breath, but feeling loose, Nick stretched his shoulders out and rolled them carefully in their sockets. Ellis was still eyeing him, and he knew the kid wanted some reassurance, some kind of answer, that gave an explanation for his rejection.

Did you really think this was going to be a hit-and-run, Nick? You're stuck with him. You've gotta deal with this.

Glancing up and latching gazes for a moment, Nick mouthed a small and unemotional, 'Later.' To his relief, Ellis nodded firmly and lifted a hand to rub at his cap, looking away with an appeased settle of his expression.

"Oh!" the youngest startled a little when he found Rochelle leaning over to stick a waterbottle toward him, quickly taking it up to bounce it in one hand and flashing her a grin. "Thanks, Ro..."

"Might wanna come up wit' other weapons soon's we can." Coach commented, scratching lightly at his gut with a sigh. He pushed the tailgate down with a shove of his elbow, and eased himself to the edge to cautiously get his feet on the hard cement of the bridge.

All three of the others watched him a moment, but he seemed steady. The black stitching that crisscrossed his back was a cruel reminder of both his injury and the now absent Carmine.

"Like them zombie movies? Nail planks'n shit?" Ellis offered enthusiastically, stepping back to swing his shotgun pointedly through the air with a grin and tip of his head.

"Yeah, son, sure... like them movies." The big man reached into the backpack still gripped in one of his hands, and he pulled out the ammo they had left, sliding a thick machine gun clip toward Nick across the truck bed and offering out the box of shotgun shells to Ellis.

They both loaded their guns as Rochelle dug a few cans out of their supplies, Nick very intentionally avoiding checking what exactly it was. Coach dragged his own shotgun out from where it had settled in the truckbed, checking it over indelicately.

"Man, s'too bad we gotta leave this truck.. Y'know, I ever tell you guys 'bout the time Keith's car broke down on a bridge..? It would'uv been fine, 'cept, as he found out, the bridge was one'uh them bridges whut fold up when ships go by. So it starts openin', 'n'Keith -"

"Son, you mind..?" Coach interrupted, closing up his shotgun cartridge and gripping it up close to his chest. When Ellis ducked his chin and nodded obediently with a short "Okay." - looking slightly disappointed - the big man turned away from the truck and pointed down the bridged highway.
"We should get goin'. If I got where we are a'ight, 'bout two miles down is another river. After that we won't have no cities 'til Tybee Island 'n the coast, so we best be movin' quick, 'less y'all wanna get caught in the middle of nowhere wit' no cover at night."

Nick snorted, pulling his cigarette into the corner of his mouth and swiping a hand through his hair to slick it back a little neater. He muttered under his breath, "I'm sure zombies do great sleepovers. Maneippedis anyone?"

They'd been able to just speed quickly past the zombies before then, but now they were on foot - there was a distinct tension as they started to walk away from the Chevy, Coach and Rochelle leading with Nick falling behind... and Ellis trying very hard to match his pace and get beside him.

The air was unpleasant with a humid heat, sticky air bubbling up from the somewhat green river beneath the cemented bridge and settling around them with only slight wind giving it some movement. It made Nick sigh, and he complained in a displeased voice.

"Goddamnit, I walked to get into Savannah... now I'm walking to get out... Ellis' fucking mystical hick friend is lounging in some military post and I'm slogging down a highway like a bum... and you know what? I haven't heard any fucking helicopters around here, have you three?"

Unsurprisingly, he received very little response. He dropped down into a low mutter, swinging his arms slightly to get some air movement and a little relief from the humidity. "Well that's just great. Looking forward to getting abandoned at the coast just like we did at the hotel."

Ellis tipped his head a little, squinting out from under the bill of his cap to eye Nick carefully. The conman ignored him for the longest time, wordlessly walking on after Rochelle and Coach down the quiet decline of the bridge's end.

As the highway flattened out, Ellis tried to slow his steps and lengthen the distance between them and the other two - Nick noticed, and though he obliged and slowed too, he was frustrated by the gesture.

It made the conman snap, irritated, "What?"

The mechanic didn't recoil that time, scratching under his chin slowly and seeming a little hesitant when he answered, "...well, yuh did say 'later'..."

Nick immediately sighed, clenching up his jaw tiredly and pulling his machine gun into his hands to work and squeeze at the grip. He'd been expecting the kid to pry, but that didn't mean he'd prepared a response - it was easy to reject and easier not to, but harder when he wanted to walk the thin line between answers.

"Look, El. You didn't do anything, alright?"

Ellis gnawed on that for a moment, trudging on carefully. Something seemed to relax in his shoulders, although when he prompted Nick with a concerned tone of voice, his gaze shifted with sudden uncertainty between the concrete highway and Nick's face. "Whut's wrong, then?"

The conman glanced upward, eyeing the abandoned suburbs that skirted the grassy expanse on either side of the highway. Trees were scattered between houses and buildings, a thick and heavy bramble growing untamed.

There were zombies ahead, stumbling over the highway and along the curling sideroads that linked the highway up with the adjoining houses. It made them all walk a little quicker, weapons ready and nervously, incredibly aware of their flagging ammo supply.
"Is me being irritable news to you? What, am I supposed to be sweet to you now? Hold your hand?" He spoke under his breath, annoyed and laced with sarcasm. He found himself very distinctly avoiding looking over at Ellis, jaw set.

Ellis quickly bit his tongue at both the tone and the implication, fisting his hands around his shotgun protectively. There was something in the way he mumbled that sounded a little exasperated, a rare emotion from the kid. "That ain't whut I'm sayin', Nick.. but you ain't got a reason to be pissed with me, either.."

"I'm not pissed at you." the gambler hissed as quietly as he could, palming the side of his face carefully.

Unfortunately for him, Ellis was quick on the return, immediately shaking his head and shrugging his shotgun onto his shoulder. ".ain't real happy with me, neither. Just 'cause I tried tuh touch you…? It wasn't like I was tryin' tuh -"

"The fuck do you want from me, El?"

Ellis sighed in sudden disappointment, kicking his heel hard against the concrete in the middle of a step and dropping his chin to shade his eyes under his cap. "I dunno, tuh talk to you nicely fer a minute..? I'm still kinda... I dunno, we didn't even work out what happened, I.. was sorta hopin' we could talk -"

But Nick interrupted him, turning slightly at the waist to twist his gaze directly toward the Georgian's face severely. The words left him choppily, but emphatically, leaving no room for confusion. It was all he could do to keep his voice at a level that wouldn't carry, and he ended up hissing past his teeth.

"We got off. That's what happened. If you want to do it again, fine. If not, fine. Okay?"

Ellis wilted like he'd just been crushed, brows twisting over his eyes and weight shifting. He didn't even respond, just cleared his throat awkwardly and glanced to the side, scratching the back of his head through his cap.

Nick quickly found his frustration leaking out to nothing when the kid failed to speak up, a certain numb discomfort edging in in its place. He wasn't sure he'd meant it as harshly unemotional as it had come off.

When he spoke again, more a mutter this time, he found his words attaining a sticky layer of sympathy. "Look, I've never so much as talked to the guys I've screwed in the past once it was over. You're already strange for me, but don't expect… something. I'm not that kinda guy."

Ellis was quiet again at first, but his gaze moved a little back toward Nick as the conman softened to him, however slightly. He risked the question: "... Whut're you sayin'?"

Releasing an exhale through his nostrils, Nick shrugged a shoulder. "Just making it clear that touchy shit isn't flying with me. Nothing's changed, El. Get over it."

They were both very quiet, neither actually looking at the other. When the scattered zombies ahead took notice of their presence and started to wheel around to scramble toward them, Ellis muttered:

"Well, yuh really suck at tellin' when things change, Nick."

The tone was so vastly different all of a sudden, almost huffy with a sense of confidence. Nick straightened slightly, distracted from running forward to join the other two and help with the
zombies. Shooting a glance at Ellis' face, perturbed, Nick shot back, "What?"

Ellis cocked his shotgun and tossed up his chin, reaching out to shove at Nick's bicep and stagger him, almost playfully. He didn't flinch under the instant glare the motion earned him - he grinned a little, actually, though it was small.

"Yer callin' me El all'uv'a sudden."

Nick balked as the younger man sprinted off, one hand clamping his hat to his head as he high-stepped it to catch up to Rochelle and Coach just in time to beat back the first zombies that caught up to them. Apparently keeping in mind their dwindling ammo, the mechanic swung his shotgun like a bat and kicked with those thickly soled workboots.

Nick felt like so much cotton as he stood there, uncomfortably aware of the curl to his own tongue around the almost tactile sense he had of the nickname he hadn't even noticed starting to slip out of him. ...

... I guess I am...

"Nick, you enjoying yourself?!" Rochelle hollered at him over her shoulder in frustration, snapping him straight out of it. The three were slogging forward, gaining ground between little pauses to take out close zombies.

He scoffed hostilley, darting into a jog quickly and hauling up his gun to join them, forced to skid around a few mostly-incapacitated zombies on the ground that tried to grab him as he vaulted past them.

"Can't get clogged up fightin' this shit," Coach grunted, visibly struggling with his injured back as he shoved a zombie away with a hand to shoot it straight in the face. "Keep movin', y'all..."

He'd barely even finished the sentence before a familiar, wet shriek cut into the air. Without even looking, Rochelle and Nick shouted it at the same instant: "Spitter!"

Shoving through the infected in front of them, the four darted down the road with a slightly unorganized sprint, ignoring the angry screams of the zombies behind them. Nick stole a glance to either side, spotting a flash of green off to the right. A lanky, impossibly stretched figure staggered around the corner of a building, almost boneless limbs flailing eerily with its motion.

Electric green spewed down from what looked like the remnants of a mouth, though it was more like a massive hole that had melted away its jaw and bared the veiny remnants of its throat. A wet squeal preceded the shudder of the thing's frame, a hacking motion, and Ellis shouted a little to Nick's left as splattering green came shooting through the air to splash in front of them.

Forced to skid to a stop and struggle to get around the sprawling puddle of popping, hissing acid, the four quite nearly plowed into it. Flecks of acid threatened to catch them as it spat and sizzled, and judging by a short yelp from Rochelle, succeeded a little. "I'm fine!" she quickly added.

Twisting back once they were around the slowly calming puddle, Nick sniped the zombies behind them with careful gunfire, jogging half-backwards. Rochelle mimicked him, turning at the shoulders to shoot behind herself with her handgun.

"I'm getting incredibly fucking weirded out by this fucking disease perfectly designed to fucking kill us all." Nick shouted over the ruckus, irritated.

"Keep movin'!!" Coach repeated, gruffly but not annoyed, and they darted along the roadway as more zombies got attracted from the treeline and the roadside houses by the sound of gunfire.
Nick noticed Ellis whip around with his shotgun to offer a few blasts, one tearing through several zombies in a row as they happened to stagger into a haphazard line just in time. Not missing the move, the conman muttered a short, "Nice shot, Overalls."

Ellis tipped his chin to nod with his hat, flashing a too-confident, stupid grin before twisting back to continue running along the concrete. Nick resigned to just shutting his mouth entirely as they sprinted to escape what had been a tidy suburb and had become a nest of infected.

_Damnit._
Chapter 34

The light drizzle that had started to drool from the sky quickly became a secondary concern compared to the sight that faced them.

The bridge ahead, spanning across a quick-moving river yards thick, was blown to chunks and bits of concrete. Wide slabs protruded up from the greyed water, frothing as it swirled around them, and there were burn marks on the ground on either, now separated, side.

It was still smoking gently, just wisps that quickly dissipated in the mist of the river. Rochelle crouched next to the broken mouth of the bridge, in shocked silence, touching fingertips onto the concrete and reading over the scrawls that marred its surface.

What happened THIS IS THE ONLY BRIDGE

Get swimming, bitch.

Did CEDA do this?? military??

WE CAN'T TRUST THEM! joshua, cindy and i are safe! head for brunswick!

"At least we're not alone." she murmured with flagging confidence, staring at the words as Coach came up behind her. He gently pulled the backpack off of her shoulders, opening it quietly and prying the laminated map out from within. He scanned the surface, shaking it slowly to stir droplets of rain off it.

"We gonna have to find another way..." he gruffed quietly, almost forced.

Nick just dug his fingers deep into his hair and breathed out hard, feeling the rain splatter onto his shoulders slowly, nerves fraying. He felt Ellis step up near him and hover there, but didn't touch him.

I can't fucking believe it. I absolutely cannot goddamn believe it. They blew the fucking bridge. First the hotel, now this. I fucking knew it.

"...Man..." Ellis muttered, lowly. "I ain't never seen somethin' blown up that bad... well, 'cept fer when Keith blew up an engine in the shop.. he didn't notice the fuel leakin', 'n' it blew up in his face. Now, he don't -"

"Overalls, do you realize we might be fucked here? Seriously goddamn screwed?!" He more groaned it than anything else, exasperated and tired. All it did was make Ellis hesitate and glance at him, concerned.

The Georgian tipped his chin down, wiping a droplet of rain from the tip of his hat. "Coach'll find us a way 'round it... s'just a big river. Could always swim."

He said it so seriously, Nick laughed outright before he could check himself, quickly dropping it to a small groan as he slid his arms down to his sides. He lowered his voice, eyeing the mechanic sideways. ".don't even suggest that, dipshit. Bad enough it's raining..."

Quickly seeing Ellis wasn't taking him seriously in the slightest, those blue eyes flickering with humor and lips making for a stupid grin, Nick reached up and shoved his cap down over his face with a grunt. "Go check on Rochelle.. I'll talk to Coach."
The other man struggled not to laugh, fixing his cap quickly with both hands. He nodded in confirmation, turning around to trot across the few feet of road and drop down to crouch next to Rochelle, slipping an arm around her back. Nick looked after him for a moment, shaking himself a little to scatter stray droplets of rain, and sighed.

He's not scared at all, is he? Reluctantly rubbing his palm over his face and blinking through water in his eyes, the conman shook the thought from his head and turned his gaze toward Coach. He approached the big man, curling his fingers on his jacket.

"What's the game plan, Coach?"

Coach quickly sighed and turned the map toward him, drifting a large finger over the swathe of blue that marked the river's path across Savannah's outskirts.

"There ain't no way over but this damn bridge... We go down, we get to the coast a'ight. -" He gestured down to the empty plains of ground that followed the river's edge downward. "- through miles of flat land, anyway, and to the section that ain't developed... if we even make it wit'out starvin'."

Biting back frustration, Nick nodded, inspecting the wide river that separated them from the other side and flicking his gaze between the real thing and the map's interpretation. "What about up, then? Looks like we can loop up around to the end of it and meet back up with the highway."

Coach immediately glanced up at him, rather dubiously inspecting him before looking back down to the wet sprawl, filled with tiny, off-shooting streams, that made up the area north of them. "You really wit' the idea of us goin' through swamps?"

"Do you see another option?" Nick snapped defensively, swiping fingers through his hair to keep water out of his face. "Of course I don't like it, I like it as much as I do being stuck with you three at all, or as much as walking our way toward the massive fuck-up that is CEDA, but what else can we do? Turn back?"

"It's a thought." Rochelle suddenly pointed out from her place by the bridge, leaning her head against Ellis'. "They had more centers elsewhere, maybe in Florida... we could set up a better ride, scavenge gas and really set up for a trip... catch up with them somewhere else. These people are going to Brunswick..."

Nick crossed his arms, snorting, and stepped toward the bridge to jab a finger in the air toward it. "Look, I don't want to be the one to say this, but that was blown up. As in, cutting one area off from the rest. Half of me really wants to turn the fuck around and leave, but if they're marking lines in the sand I would reeeally like us to be on the other side of that line, late or not."

Ellis scratched his head under his cap, fingers digging into mostly dry curls. His expression scrunched in confusion, suddenly seeming to inspect the bridge with new eyes. "Why would they wanna do somethin' like that? There was still people here."

He pointed to the graffiti done in crude knifemarks and marker on the concrete, decorating the surface of what remained of the bridge.

It was Coach who spoke up, sighing wearily. The football coach didn't look pleased with his words, but he said them anyway, blunt and honest. "Retreatin', son... they can't control Savannah so they're pullin' out 'n cuttin' off."

Rochelle frowned, pinching down the bridge of her nose slowly, bangles clattering at her wrists. "I
can't believe that... what about all these people left behind? What about us?"

Nick answered that, crossing his arms tightly over his chest and shrugging. "It's what they do, Ro'. They fuck up and then cut their losses. Right now, we're their losses, and if we don't get goddamn out of here pretty soon, bridges might not be the only thing blowing up."

There was silence for just a few moments, the conman's cynicism hanging heavy in the wet air.

Coach broke it with a small grunt. "Nick's right here. Much as it's a risk, we gotta get 'round this river some way." He gestured downriver with one hand. "Less we find somethin' to cross wit', it'll be a real big damn detour."

Rochelle groaned a little and settled her head in her hands, massaging her temples softly. "We didn't plan for this at all.. we don't have the food for this, and definitely not the weapons.. should we backtrack?"

But Coach shook his head after momentary deliberation, folding the map up along the creases. "There'll be more houses near the river if we keep goin'. People live up there, even if there ain't no real towns. Lotta old land, houses from some generations ago."

"Yuh think there's anyone still around?" Ellis questioned, still staring down at the graffiti with a scrunch to his expression. He looked up as Rochelle gently grasped his bicep, and the two slowly stood up.

"Hope not." Nick grunted simply, turning his chin up to eye the grey sky as the drizzle started to calm slightly, just lightly splatting against his skin. "I think I'm done with meeting people."

Coach zipped up the backpack carefully after replacing the map inside, holding it out toward Ellis with a grunt. Although Coach had generally taken control of it, its weight on his back was painful with the wounds from his Hunter engagement. "Were you ever not, boy?" he questioned with light humor.

Nick smirked, adjusting the strap of his machine gun carefully. "We can pretend."

With Ellis taking on the backpack, they set off perpendicular to the road, tromping along the coast of the river. The dirt was a sandy grey and moist from the rain, and Nick found himself cringing a little as it squished under his shoes, reluctantly continuing on despite it.

Hardly surprising, Ellis slipped back to walk next to him within a few moments, although this time Rochelle took notice. She turned her head slightly, lifting a brow at Nick. It was an innocuous look, and he mostly got the sense she was silently urging him to be nice.

He shot her an annoyed look until she turned away, grumbling under his breath and scratching at the nape of his neck.

"Ey Nick," Ellis prompted, tucking his gun under his armpit to reach into his pocket. Nick glanced at him, arching a brow expectantly. He did relax a little when the kid wasn't whispering this time, clearly unafraid of the rest of the team hearing them. Nick wasn't sure he could stand another 'conversation.' "Yuh left this..."

The mechanic pulled Nick's wallet free from the pocket of his jumpsuit, offering it out. The sight startled Nick, and he quickly snatched it out of Ellis' hands, realizing he'd never taken it back after throwing it to Ellis earlier in the day. "Jesus, Overalls. You could've given this back a while ago." he muttered, protectively flicking the thing open to check over its contents.
"S'just a wallet, Nick... it ain't like we need money now anyhow - 'n you forgot too. I kept it safe'n I didn't look at nothin'." Despite the gambler's reaction, Ellis was smiling, adjusting his cap with one hand and dropping his chin a little.

Nick's fingers slowed on the wallet's folds for a moment, flecked green eyes raising and slanting to glance at Ellis a moment, the edges of his mouth softening. An urge struck him, much despite himself, and with a resigned sigh he stuck the wallet under the Ellis' nose.

"Here. Happy? Christ, you're like a five year old."

Straightening excitedly, Ellis quickly plucked it out of Nick's fingers and opened it with a look of fascination. Nick noticed the incredibly delicate way he cradled the thing, looking away with a small smirk.

Prying the leather apart and hunching over it to protect it from the rain with his head, Ellis practically swayed with the focus he had on the wallet. The ID tucked into the front pocket was this almost alien sight, too normal.

The angry expression on Nick's face in the square photo in the corner, seething as he composed it just slightly for the picture, was probably the only normal thing there. The bland grey shirt he was wearing stretched tightly over his shoulders, and Ellis realized too late he'd started staring, blinking his attention quickly elsewhere.

The name 'Nicolas D. Tobias' emblazoned the middle of the ID as well as the credit card tucked into the opposite fold, and Ellis stared at it for a long moment, curious. An apartment address was listed below and a birthday that Ellis realized - after a moment of obliviousness - was just a day after Christmas.

"Whoa, you were almost a Christmas baby.." Ellis pointed out, showing it to Nick like he didn't know. The conman smirked slightly despite himself, dipping his hands into his pockets to shield them from the drizzling.

"Only good part about that is it's an excuse not to celebrate your birthday."

Ellis flicked a curious glance at him, then back down to the wallet, rubbing a fingertip slowly against the raised text of Nick's ID. "I love birthdays. Presents 'n shit, 'n' I got tuh hang out with Keith tuh celebrate… we'd drink beer 'n' set off some fireworks. Always got in trouble."

Nick snorted a little, crossing his arms loosely and inspecting the river that flowed alongside them. Everything was so eerily quiet, not a bird in the sky. His gaze was inexorably drawn back toward the exploded bridge.

The kid's over-excitement... odd, Nick stuck between humor and a dissociative kind of numbness. It was weird, talking about life before. All Nick found himself thinking was how terrible an idea fireworks were. They'd attract zombies like flies.

"Like that's a shock, El. Doesn't sound like you are ever not hanging out with him.. I've seen girls less attached to their best friends."

The kid grinned a bit at that, though when Nick noticed the particular size of that one he realized he'd slipped again - El. It just rolled so smoothly, he didn't even notice before he'd already said it. He needed to stop. "I've known him ferever, I can't help it.. whut, you ain't never had someone you liked that much?"

"The hell do you think?" Nick asked dryly, tipping his gaze to slant it sarcastically at the other
man. Ellis laughed, dropping his chin and turning the wallet between his fingers slowly, much like he wrung out his hat.

"Guess you ain't worryin' about nobody, then?"

The gambler eyed him, judglingly, noticing the slight downturn of his voice. He shrugged, and comfort - molten with sarcasm and condescension - squeezed into his words. "Don't tell me you're wasting time thinking about your stupid friend? He's probably chugging beer and blowing something up in a bunker somewhere."

Ellis laughed again, starting to offer the wallet back slowly. "Yeah, yer right... oh man, I can't wait fer you guys tuh meet him.. he'll be so damn jealous we fought zombies 'n' he - didn't..." The last word was distracted, and what had been a relinquishing motion stopped.

The wallet had a side pocket, likely for change - of which Nick had none -, and inside it was a visible circle, pressing up against the leather till it left a soft outline. Curiously reaching a fingertip into the pocket, Ellis found himself touching the smooth shape of a ring. He'd just started to lever it out with his finger when Nick pulled the wallet out of his hand, quick but gentle.

_Ah, damnit.. I forgot that was in there._

"Whut, Nick..?" Ellis questioned, the soft way Nick had stolen it from him leaving the mechanic unconcerned but curious, lowering his hands. Blue eyes blinked, from Nick's face to the wallet as he tucked it back into his inner jacket pocket. "That special or somethin'?"

"Sort of.." Nick muttered evasively, taking a moment to wipe his wrist over his forehead for a beat before glancing at Ellis. "It's a long story... maybe later, kiddo."

Ellis' brows promptly scrunched up over his eyes, sighing and adjusting his cap to shade them slightly. If Nick wasn't mistaken, he almost looked irked. "We got a long walk... ain't got nothin' better tuh talk about."

Nick's jaw set a little, voice gaining an edge of warning and quieting as he repeated himself, not wanting in the slightest to get into another argument when Rochelle and Coach were so likely to hear. "I said, later."

Ellis shook his head, glancing up under the bill of his cap and frowning very explicitly at Nick - definitely frustrated, though it was hurt that fueled his retort, and Nick realized they hadn't really moved on from anything. "'Later' so you can get mad at me when I bring it up again?"

Before Nick could formulate a response, feeling his spine prickling with hostility, Ellis started to turn away and catch up to Rochelle and Coach. Before he escaped arm's length, Nick reached out and grabbed ahold of his elbow. The motion was unchecked, and it left him feeling stupid and wanting to let go.

"Kid, c'mon, stop..." he hissed harshly, "I'm -"

Rochelle chose that moment to turn her head and glance back, and Nick's hand released Ellis' elbow and dropped to his side in a smooth motion, gaze swerving to the side as stoically as he could. Ellis must've smiled at her, because she simply looked back forward with a small return of the expression.

Ellis glanced back at Nick after that, looking over his shoulder with a small frown. The kid wasn't going to let him off easy, and his voice was firm when he prompted quietly, "You're whut?"
Sighing through his nostrils, Nick ground his teeth gently together, flexing his fingers. It took every ounce of self-control not to roll his eyes as he reluctantly finished, "Sorry, I guess." He straightened his arms to pull at his jacket slowly. "... I really meant later, alright? Christ. Fucking aggravating."

Ellis looked at him a moment, hesitating.. and then broke into a small smile and slowed down to slip back next to him. Nick couldn't quite explain it, but he felt a vague sense of relief, even as he jerked his chin away to distinctly not look at Ellis. That was as close as he was coming to a meaningful apology.

"Thank yuh, Nick. I mean it." he murmured sideways, nudging the conman with his elbow gently. The smile lingered, and Nick didn't miss the light red that flushed over the bridge of his nose.

Sighing slightly, Nick curled his fingers in his pockets. He felt at the pack of cigarettes in his grasp - two left. Two too few. "Yeah, well, I don't want to deal with your fuckin' whining all day." he muttered quietly, shaking his head.

Ellis smiled blithely, trotting on at his elbow as they walked through the drizzling rain. He stayed rather close, even when it turned out there were zombies by the river's shore and they were forced to adopt a run along the wet grass, the rain picking up as they went.

Nick found himself not minding - even when Ellis tried to chatter amidst all the rain and fighting. Something made Nick think Rochelle and Coach didn't mind, either. It soothed something in the air, something that had been stirred up by the ruined bridge and settled uneasily on their minds.

Maybe fear.
The final straw that made it clear they needed to stop was when Coach suddenly stumbled to a knee in the muddy grass. He'd been so stoically plowing on, hardly speaking, that the abrupt collapse made everyone halt in shock.

Ellis was first to hurry forward, bending down and dropping to a crouch to grab onto his arm. He spoke loudly over the rain, concerned. "'Ey, Coach, man.. you alright?"

The big man tried to pull out of his grip, but to no avail, not quite having the momentum to win out against the younger man's surprisingly firm grip. "I'm jus' fine, son, jus'-" But he choked up a little, a shudder wracking his rain-drenched back.

Rochelle skidded up, biting her lower lip and shielding her eyes from the rain with a hand. "You're bleeding, Coach..." she pointed out, eyes latched worriedly to rivulets of pink that dripped from his shirt with the rain.

"Gotta say, runnin' on empty here, baby girl... damn rain." the big man admitted wearily, only slowly pushing himself up from the ground with Ellis' support. His whole body shook, bad knee crumpling slightly and shoulders drooped.

Nick hung back, hands deep in the pockets of his suit jacket to try to keep it wrapped close to him and body shivering with the wet cold sinking into his bones. He eyed the ex-football player at a distance, noticing how weak he seemed just then.

Green eyes flicked up, blinking past rain, and squinted to pick out shapes in the woods they'd only just been skirting up till then, following the river's edge. They weren't quite in the marshes yet, but the line was growing blurred as the ground grew waterlogged under their feet. He wasn't sure how much of that was oncoming swamp, and how much of it was flooding from the rain.

Sheets of it tumbled in haphazard lines from the canopy above, gathering in pools and dips as it streaked down tree trunks. A faint mist was gathering in the air, and with the sky darkening for evening and all surfaces glittering and sparkling, it was growing eerie to look at.

What Nick did notice was the harsh outline of a structure, standing thickly against the rain and trees. It made him squint for a moment, then he simply sighed and drew his shoulders inward. "I think there's a building up ahead we can break into." he suggested, gesturing with his chin. "Coach was right about that, at least."

Ellis kept himself next to Coach, supporting him loyally even as the eldest seemed to dislike leaning on him. They turned slightly, agreeing with small nods and gently starting into a hobbled walk.

Rochelle frowned at them, then pulled her handgun from her holster in a swift tug and lifted it up, shaking her head. "Nick and I'll go check it out. You two take it slow while we do that, okay?"

Coach grunted a reluctant affirmation, then warned, "Be careful, baby girl.." Ellis mimicked him in a smaller voice, but his eyes were on Nick, stony blues just barely visible under the edge of his cap. The conman met his gaze for just a beat, his rain-drenched poker face giving nothing away.

They parted quickly, Nick and Rochelle at a jog along the grass. The gambler complained bitterly as Rochelle dodged ahead and started to shove through the foliage with much less hesitancy than he did. "Leave it to me to wear a goddamn suit when this shit happens..."
He shook his frame slightly, scowling at the way the wet fabric stuck to his skin and hearing Rochelle snort softly. "I'm in jeans, honey... I'll smell like wet dog and be damp for days."

The conman wrinkled the bridge of his nose at the comment and muttered sarcastically, pulling his sub-machine gun from his shoulder and holding it loose with one hand. "There goes fantasizing about getting into your pants."

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, brows lifted like she might hit him, but her voice twanged with a kind of humor. "Watch it, suit, 'cause I can really easily trip you right now..."

Nick's expression moved to a threatening 'don't you dare,' at about the same instant his foot landed in a deep puddle hidden in the crawling fog with a splash up his shin. He immediately swore, "Tits!" and reached out his arms to regain his balance, prying his foot from the water with a sour expression.

Rochelle laughed at him, shaking her head and refocusing forward as they had to edge around a thick patch of bramble. The 'building,' as they came closer to it and the mist dissipated just enough to see, turned out to be two mobile homes parked tightly one behind the other, windows blacked out and nailed over.

"Oh hurray, redneck nests.. just what I always wanted." Nick muttered nastily as he pinched water off his face, making Rochelle laugh again, gentler that time.

"Be nice, Nick." she chided him, jogging along the grass toward them with her handgun still out at her side. There was fog clinging tightly to the ground at their feet, and both of them were blind - distracted by looking around themselves - to the sprawled zombie corpses they repeatedly just missed stepping on.

"I'm just saying. Why the fuck couldn't this have happened in, I dunno, civilization? Instead I'm stuck in goddamn Georgia." Nick complained, just as bitterly, as he lowered his machine gun slightly and stepped around Rochelle. He scaled the small set of rickety plastic stairs in front of the closer mobile home's door, dress shoes squishing a little unpleasantly with water.

She stopped just beside the stairs, crossing her arms slightly and smiling a little, her gaze drifting back to worriedly pick out Coach and Ellis' hunched forms as they slowly made their way to follow. "Bitching doesn't help, Nick."

Nick snorted dismissively, reaching to grasp the trailer door's handle.

It slammed open before his fingertips touched it, clipping him in the face and sending him sprawling down to the ground with a splash and shout of pain, hands immediately clamping over his nose to staunch the fast bleed that started. He barely had time to wonder what happened.

Rochelle shouted in alarm, jumping back frantically and throwing up her hands, nearly losing her handgun. "Ni- oh God, don't shoot!"

Squinting past the pain and the stars in his vision, Nick quickly looked up toward the open trailer door, eyes going narrowed over his knuckles as he found his gaze drawn to the barrel of a shotgun currently pointed at him. His heart beat a calm pace in his ears, gaze hardening to a dull threat.

A beat of silence ticked by. His eyes lifted up, and locked with the steely silvers of a man who must've been in his sixties or seventies, gripping that gun with an utterly unshakable confidence. His frame was wiry under a loose lumberjack's plaid jacket and thick jeans. They traded hard glares there, rain dribbling down onto Nick's prone frame and tracing along his face, mixing with the
blood leaking between his knuckles.

"Y'all don't try nuthin', now." the older man warned, suspiciously glancing at Rochelle and then darting his gaze up toward the shape of Coach and Ellis in the fog, shotgun wavering from its focus on Nick.

The conman didn't quite trust the opening enough to try and get up, though. There was no way he could get on his feet and take the man's gun before he got a hole punched in his gut for his trouble.

Ellis and Coach had halted, obviously realizing the situation even from a distance, and Nick found himself silently willing them to stay where they were.

"We're all friends here." Rochelle quickly managed, voice adopting a very cautious kind of reassurance even as her eyes were anxiously wide. "And we're all healthy... just... don't shoot."

The man gave a judging stare between them through the pattering rain, cocking his shotgun with a loud rattle of metal. "'Eard that afore. But I don't plan on shootin' you. 'Less you make me." he spat indelicately, gesturing with a nobbled chin toward the ground behind them.

Turning his head just slightly, Nick froze up a bit to find his gaze piercing the ground-level fog, finally seeing the still corpses plastered here and there against the wet grass. The only reassurance he felt came with the obvious signs of illness that marked them as infected and not innocent victims.

"Mind if I get up then?" the conman wheedled as coolly as he could manage, voice coaxing away from his anger. He was almost sure he'd avoided landing in outright mud, but the grass was soaking up into his clothing and making him all the more drenched.

A gesture wasted, it turned out, as the old man jabbed the shotgun toward him in the air and snapped, "Shut ch'yer mouth, ya damn Yankee slick."

Nick's frustration only mounted as Ellis' voice suddenly came from behind him. He must've left Coach, because his workboots could be heard in their loud - and wet - tromp as he jogged toward them. The conman growled, pulling his hand away from his bleeding nose for just a moment as the younger man blurted; "Hey, hey, whut the hell's goin' on?"

The old man hoisted his shotgun up to ward Ellis off, narrowing steeled eyes threateningly. "I don't abide no trepassin'. Y'all're damn stupid, sneakin' on a man's prop-er-ty like that. Could'a blown yer damn heads off, like all them walkin' dead."

Ellis slowed but didn't stop, unconcerned with the gun pointed at him and still stepping toward the prone conman with a glance toward Rochelle. If he was afraid, he didn't show it. "You should really work on yer Southern hospitality, man... we're all in the same boat here. Alright?"

It seemed he'd called the old man's bluff, as the stranger ticked his shotgun to follow the mechanic, but didn't shoot.

Dropping down slowly to a crouch next to Nick, Ellis offered a hand blindly, eyes on the other Georgian. The steely-eyed redneck merely watched them as Nick begrudgingly took the help, standing slowly and letting Ellis' hand remain on his elbow. The conman wiped his bloody upper lip clean with his bare wrist and sloughed the blood off with a shake in the rain.

"Hmphf." was uttered after a moment, and with some reluctance, the old man lowered his shotgun. He kept it in his hands and didn't budge from the mobile home door, though. "Why're y'all 'round here? Ain't naught for ya."
Relaxing with the immediate threat now faded, Rochelle broke off to quickly step over to Coach, wearily leaned against a tree at the edge of the muddy clearing. She protectively wrapped arms around one of his, both turning their gazes back to the scene in front of the mobile home.

"Tryin' tuh get to the other side of the river, man.. why ain't you?" Ellis questioned hesitantly, looking straight forward even as his fingers clenched a little on the soaked fabric of Nick's sleeve. The conman ignored him, panting through his mouth as blood leaked down the back of his throat and trickled down his lip, and focused on glaring up at the old man, annoyed.

The plaid-wearing man scoffed at that, rapping a hand on the side of his mobile home. He retorted very tersely, visibly eager to get them to leave. "Don't need no fancy 'C-E-D-A' pretendin' they gots a plan. Makin' it jus' fine on my own. Y'all'll be movin' on, then. There's some docks down yonder. Few miles, maybe more, less. Should be a boat - iffin I recall."

Nick snapped then, spitting sideways on the grass and curling his lips unpleasantly. "Look, you redneck asshole, we're-"

"I ain't talkin' t'you, Yank!" he warned hostilely. The subsequent lift of his shotgun was much more effective in shutting Nick up than his words were, and with a heavy grit to his teeth, the conman silently resigned to shooting icy daggers at him with his glare.

Ellis gently tried to step in front of him, fingers releasing his sleeve as he moved, and pulled his cap off to reveal the soaked, curly mess of his hair. He held it at his chest, wringing it slowly. His voice hit a sweet pleading note that could've charmed the sap out of a tree.

"Sir, we got a hurt man, 'n' we can't keep goin' in this rain. Yuh got two trailers. You think we could rest awhile here? We won't be no trouble, 'n' it'd be mighty appreciated."

The old man eyed him, slightly nobbled jaw jutting forward as his expression went stony in a begrudging look. Still heavily suspicious, he kept his gun brandished, but grunted indelicately, "Trailer's empty. Y'all keep quiet 'n' scoot off by mornin', fine. Any funny tricks, 'n' I'll shoot. And don't be expectin' no help from me if them dead'uns show up."

Ellis opened his mouth to thank him, hands gripping onto his cap - and got the trailer door slammed in his face, plastic rattling all over the vehicle. He blinked in slight confusion, recoiling back at the abrupt noise, then turned slowly to scan Nick's face and the blood still trickling from his nose.

"Man, you okay, Nick? That door sure hit hard..." His voice was concerned, replacing his cap on his head and scuffing his own nose with his wrist slowly.

Nick grunted noncommittally, lifting his hands to gently touch onto his nose, flinching as it hurt. It wasn't broken, but it sure wasn't feeling great, either. "Yeah... I'm fine. At least that psycho got talked down. Guess it takes a hick to talk to a hick."

Ellis smiled subtly, like Nick had said 'good job' instead. He tightened his wet cap on his scalp, then turned to jog over toward Rochelle and Coach, gently gesturing over his shoulder.

"C'mon, Coach, let's get you inside 'n' layin' down on someth- OW!"

Nick quickly turned on instinct, hand going for his gun, until he realized with a growing smirk that Rochelle had socked Ellis on the side of the head with a flat hand. He held his ear with a look of shock, less hurt than surprised. Even Coach looked surprised, deepset eyes a little wide, however tired he was.

"Don't just run into situations like that, Ellis! He could've shot you!" she chided, nostrils flared and
hip cocked with her frustration, quickly losing steam as Ellis hunkered forward a little and dropped his chin.

"...aww, Ro', I'm sorry... s'just Nick was down 'n' I didn't know whut was goin' on.." he whimpered, slowly righting his cap on his head with a frown.

She instantly sighed, pulling away from Coach and bending in to gently push his cap up and kiss his soaked forehead. Ellis squinted up a little hesitantly, starting to smile. "You did good. Just be more careful." Rochelle reassured him with a soft shake of her head, replacing his cap and pulling away.

"Let's jus' keep quiet so that fool don't have no reason to get mad, a'ight?" Coach grunted quietly, hobbling forward through the drizzling rain toward the second trailer. Rochelle and Ellis quickly ducked to help him along, and as they passed, Nick quietly stepped into line behind them.

"I will shoot him if he pulls something." the gambler muttered hostilely as he moodily touched his nose, suspiciously eyeing the silent, blacked-out trailer as they walked around it. "I don't trust him for shit."

Rochelle snorted a little, gently reaching up to open the trailer door. Both she and Ellis backed away a little, letting Coach trudge up the short set of stairs and achingly lean into the mobile home, looking around for a moment before clambering inside. "Don't cause trouble, honey.. at least Ellis got him to let us stay. Let's just keep our distance."

Nick held back, crinkling his nose heavily at the large camper. The thing was a shade of crisp white, but rusted at the edges and it creaked as Coach slowly moved inside. It was all the gambler could do not to outright gag. *If the apocalypse wasn't a nightmare of mine, this sure is.*

Squinting slightly, he did notice an awning extending out from the back. The rain pattered along its surface, draining out of the edges, and from what he could tell it looked rather dry underneath. The arm of a chair poked into view and, weighing being outside against crawling into some redneck's mobile home, Nick trudged over.

He ducked through the sheet of water that came down particularly thickly from the edge of the awning, pleased to find himself dry a moment later. He shook himself carefully, wringing his palms through his hair to slough off some of the water soaking the strands, and set to peeling off his jacket.

A small table and three foldable chairs, all pasty tan wood and surprisingly clean, were nestled up against the back end of the trailer like a porch. He laid the jacket over the back of one of the chairs, spreading it neatly to let it drip, and reached into the inner pocket to pull out his wallet.

With considerable relief, he found the lining of the pocket had saved it from the worst of the damage, though the bills he'd stowed inside his wallet were clearly damp. Resigning to not even thinking about it, he moodily set it and his machine gun down on the table and achingly seated himself on a different chair. It creaked a little under him.

Nick leaned forward, setting his elbows on his knees and closing his eyes as he cradled his nose in his fingertips. He was cold and drenched, but being out of the direct rain made him feel inexpressibly better, and for the moment he didn't care.

"Ugh... fuck that hurts..." he griped quietly, feeling along the bridge of his nose and only slightly reassured with the fact it was straight and not popping, though it hurt all the same. Even the slight pressure he put on was enough to start it bleeding again, and he quickly rubbed over his upper lip
with a knuckle, grimacing.

He could hear the camper groaning behind him with the movement inside, and he quieted to listen, though any chance of hearing words was out the window with the pattering of rain above his head.

They could only hope the old man hadn't been lying about the docks ahead - Coach would trudge himself ragged it seemed, injuries or not, but considering they'd barely even hit the marshes yet, they didn't have the time nor the energy to last if the weather was going to be so harshly against them.

Sighing, Nick leaned further into his hands, forcing his eyes open and staring out into the rain for the longest time. His gaze unfocused, and his mind reluctantly wandered toward the wallet sitting, lonesome, on the table beside him.

It took effort to force it back away.

...I'll go mad before we get out of here. I don't even like goddamn parks. This? .. is going to be hell.

Everything turned a little colder with his own observation, and it was with a sour disinterest that he listened to the shuddering creak of the trailer door opening again. His gaze only barely lifted at the sound of footsteps, although he wondered why he felt so surprised to see Ellis come skidding around the corner of the trailer, quickly dodging under the awning to get out of the rain.

Nick's eyes latched onto the quirky smile offered to him, breathless and hesitant. There was a very effortless shine to Ellis' expressions, every single one - the kid just glowed, and it wasn't just the wet gleam that the rain left his skin with.

Ellis had a beer bottle in either hand, and he offered one out to Nick carefully before the conman could say a word. "Ro' is lookin' at Coach's back.. 'n lookit whut we found inside.. could probably use it, eh, Nick?"

Flickering his gaze from Ellis' face to the bottle, Nick slowly straightened an arm to pull the offered beer from the hick's fingers. As he turned it to eye the label, with some suspicion, he offered simply, "Thanks, Ace. … Too bad the guy doesn't have moonshine, though. Not like I'm gonna need my liver when I'm dead."

Hooking the toe of his wet dress shoe behind the leg of the wooden chair beside his, Nick kicked it just an inch to turn the seat to face Ellis. His expression was nigh unreadable, eyes not even lifting, but the motion left no room for argument.

Ellis sat down in it even as a slow pink fluttered over the bridge of his nose, sprawling his knees into a half-cross. He kept his gaze just barely slanted under the bill of his cap, and slowly worked his calloused fingertips against the lukewarm glass of his bottle.

Nick cracked his open, taking a long sip and letting his gaze settle on Ellis. Even though Ellis was looking at the ground, he must've felt the weight of Nick's eyes, because his head bobbed subtly like someone stirring from a doze.

"... y'know, this one time, Keith'n I were out campin' by a river 'n it started rainin' like this - 'n li'l did we know that rivers swell up when it rains. Our tent just up'n floated away.. with us in it, too. Keith tried tuh use a flashlight as a paddle, but -"

In his silence, listening to the kid's voice ramble with a small smirk alighted on his lips, the gambler couldn't entirely pick out why... but he didn't completely hate it.
"A hacksaw? Really?"

Nick lifted his brows in disbelief, squeezing his fingers slightly down the length of his current beer bottle. It was his third and the last of the sixpack - Ellis had been far too eager to get the whole carton when Nick had complained at finishing his first - and he was feeling the buzz. Ellis had barely shut up enough to drink, but kept up, and their table was lined with the bottles.

"Yup. He should'uh just waited 'n' bought a new can-opener, but man.. he wanted them peaches.. 'Bout cut his fingers off gettin' the damn tin open."

Nick snorted, lips curled in a grin as he took a sip of beer. The sour taste had faded well before then, and the warm buzz was more than worth it. He had the itching feeling he should blame it for being entertained by Ellis' rambling - after all, that was better than admitting he was enjoying it for any other reason...

…like how much the kid was smiling as he talked…

Or, that the stories were actually fairly funny when he paid attention.

"How has he not killed himself yet?"

Ellis chuckled, glancing up at him and resting his forearms against his thighs in a lazy gesture. "Came pretty close a few times... He's real lucky. Or not, dependin' on how yuh look at it, I guess."

Nick encircled his fingers around his beer bottle, closing his eyes slowly. His drenched state had settled to a clingy, warm bubble of heat. His clothes stuck to his skin, but not unpleasantly so - and he'd noticed Ellis' were doing the same, and that was far from unpleasant.

The rain had almost stopped, just dripping down quietly now, but the sun was already falling and it left everything in a humid, moist limbo. There hadn't been so much as a zombie in sight, and the smell from the dead ones that permeated the air was so muted by rain they barely noticed it.

"You talk about him a hell of a lot, Overalls..." he commented with a smirking tone, reopening his eyes and flashing his gaze up toward Ellis.

The mechanic grinned, shrugging slowly and adjusting his cap with his wrist in an idle scratching gesture. He seemed a little embarrassed, and shook his head. "Sorry.. don't mean tuh be annoyin' 'bout it, he's just muh best bud..."

Nick shrugged carefully, flicking his thumb against the edge of his beer bottle and lowering his chin.

"Oh, you're annoying as hell, but I doubt you could help it if you tried."

Ellis grinned a little more, squirming his back away from the chair and pulling at his shirt indelicately to try and loosen the tight, wet clutch it had on his skin. The motion made Nick's gaze rivet painfully on the other man's torso as the yellow fabric shifted, fascinated. "Well, that'n he's got funny stories. Guess I'm kinda borin' otherwise."

Had Nick not had a perfect mental image - taste, even, - of what Ellis' leanly worked body was like under his clothes, it might not have been quite so enthralling... and had alcohol not wormed its way
into the equation. As it was, he watched the Georgian's shirt slide wetly over his slumped midsection, drawing ragged attention to every slope and divot.

"Uh.. Nick?"

Blinking green eyes up in a short motion, Nick realized Ellis had watched him staring. Although his instinctive reaction to being caught was to shake it off and maybe even cover his tracks with sarcasm, drunk him merely smirked and cocked his head to one side coolly. "Yeah?"

Quickly dropping his chin to avoid the gambler's gaze, Ellis struggled for a response that didn't potentially embarrass him. He apparently wasn't having much luck, judging by the flush creeping across his scarred nose, but Nick waited patiently without moving.

"...Wh.. uhh.. nothin'..."

Nick chuckled under his breath, lowering his chin and closing his eyes as the mechanic finally just gave up, sinking a few inches in his seat. Nick wanted to taunt him further, but instead crossed his legs, fingers adjusting the tight hold his damp slacks had on his knees.

Ellis worked his tongue between his teeth, warily, slowly tipping the beer bottle between his fingers back and forth. His face was an open book for his thoughts (if not their content), and Nick could practically trace the wheels turning behind his eyes. He seemed unsure, though Nick wasn't sure where that whirring thought was aimed until the other man reached out a hand to scoop up his lonesome wallet.

Nick merely watched, raising a hand to rub fingertips along his hairline tiredly, as Ellis drew out the dull, scraped golden ring from the inside pocket. He slowly rotated it in his fingers, blue eyes alive with curiousity as he inspected the soft gold surface.

The gambler's expression was drawn in this look of disdain, lips thinned tight to each other. He leaned in to set his bottle on the table, losing interest in finishing the last few swallows, and turned his gaze away to squint toward the foggy treeline.

He'd known it was coming. Expected it. Ellis wasn't one for patience, as he'd rapidly discovered. It wasn't that he wanted Ellis to hear the story behind his ring, but… they were going to die, Nick was sure. Maybe tomorrow, or maybe the next day. Nick didn't like talking about himself, let alone his past. But did it really matter, if their lives were on a timer? Maybe getting it off his chest wouldn't be the worst thing he could do.

*Guess impending death and dismemberment changes things. What do I have to lose, anyway?*

"This's a weddin' ring?" Ellis questioned slowly, almost breathlessly, gaze unmoving from the circle grazed in careful motions by his fingertips. His brows were gently coaxing together, scrunching up as he inspected the ring.

Nick sighed indelicately, shifting in his seat to brace his ankle over his knee in a sprawled motion, one arm thrown over the back of his chair. "Yeah." He could hear the annoyance in his own voice, deepened by his buzz.

He felt Ellis’ gaze jump up toward his face, uncertainly trying to mask the motion under the bill of his cap, and it took Nick a moment to realize why.

Almost laughing, brows going up slightly and a certain entertainment creeping into his expression suddenly, Nick clarified mercifully, "Divorced, you dumbshit." Though somewhere he knew he
should've been alarmed by the concept that that might matter to Ellis - like it was his business…

his beer-addled mind decided against worrying about it.

He just smirked, rubbing at his temple and watching Ellis with an upturned, narrowed gaze.

Ellis settled the ring in the palm of his hand with a small twist of his wrist, cocking his head very
slowly and pushing at it gently with the tip of his thumb. "Wow, Nick... you were married?"

The conman half-snorted, instantly regretting the choice when his nose gave a distinct pang and he
tasted tacky blood. "...fuckin' door..." He slid his hand over to gently soothe it with a light fingertip
brushed along the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, I guess, though honestly it was a big sham from the
goddamn start."

He was suddenly glad to be drunk, the words emotionlessly tumbling from him, tinged only with
an uncaring spite. Not even Ellis' gaze, those stone-blue eyes up and intent on his face as he spoke,
could ruin the distance he had from his words just then.

"Pretty brunette I met at a casino. Angelica, which is some funny shit if you like your irony hot off
the pan. Angel Palomo. She liked money. I do too, I guess, but that's a shitty foundation for
anything past a fuck or two."

Ellis screwed up his brows tightly there, fingering the ring slower at Nick's explanation and tone. It
had looked so well worn, like something lovingly used and carried everywhere, but he suddenly
wondered if that wasn't from careless handling instead.

The scratches seemed sadder, after that.

"Why'd yuh get married?" Ellis' expression hesitated a moment, shifting slightly and starting to
add, "... I mean..."

Nick sighed slightly, lifting one hand to wave him off. "I know what you mean." He twined his
fingers together, turning his eyes down to examine his muddy dress shoes. Alcohol made his brain
tick slowly, and he sighed. "This is much easier if I just start from the beginning, okay?"

If he was going to do this, tell this story, he needed to do it on his terms. Organize it. Chop it up
and lay it out where it couldn't touch him.

The Georgian nodded slowly, leaning down in his chair and watching Nick's expression with
reflective blue eyes. His weight shifted again, and the ring was cradled in a palm against his thigh,
fingers curling around it.

Nick locked his gaze on his own hands, steepling them over his knee and drawing his brows into a
tight look of distaste. It took effort to un-jumble the words in his head, and even more to remember
those important details he'd tried to forget.

"...I got in a high-stakes poker game maybe four years back. I was running ragged, had a few debts,
and I needed the money... and goddamn, the adrenaline. All the small players had been weeded out,
and by the end, it was just me, some lowlife, and this British whale. I thought for goddamn sure -"

"Whale?" Ellis interrupted, brows screwed up in confusion. He was so intent on the story he didn't
seem to notice his own outburst, focused on Nick's expression and slowly cocking his head.

Nick burst out a small laugh, giving the Georgian's bemused look a hard once-over. "It's a term,
kiddo. You call guys with way too much money to gamble away whales. Most of them are just rich
idiots who buy their way in, but you get psycho mock-mob boss types too. They don't like losing."
Turning a little red, Ellis nodded in understanding, quieting for Nick to keep going.

"Angelica was on his arm, like a good little cheerleader. He'd pass her money for drinks, she'd massage his shoulders and - shit... she was hot. Gorgeous, y'know? I nearly lost my focus a few times trying to catch hers, but she was so goddamn uninterested. Like I was nobody."

The conman sighed, turning his face to settle half of it against an uplifted palm, closing his eyes. A smirk started to grow behind the heel of his hand, body relaxing subtly. The fingers of his other hand twitched, and he could practically feel the cards under his palm.

"It went back and forth - I could never tell who was winning.. then, fuck if I know how, but I caught him in a bluff. He went all in on the last round, and I just risked it. Something in his face told me to do it. I had a straight flush, and I was sure he couldn't have gotten better."

Aware of Ellis straightening in his seat, leaning forward slightly, Nick rubbed at his cheek with some amusement. "Should've seen his face when I went in for it and he had to turn up three-pair. I thought he'd reach over the table and strangle me on the spot. Left that table with ten grand in chips."

Ellis whistled low, eyes riveted on Nick's face even as some of the nuances of the story went over his head. The conman's inebriated and unusually open expressions were elaboration enough to follow. "Bet he was pissed..."

"You're telling me. Not as pissed as Angel was, apparently, because next time I saw him she was gone. I stuck around in the casino, just to wait it out where there were cameras in case the guy wanted to try something - and yeah, I celebrated. I was halfway through a bottle of ... I don't even remember, totally drunk off my ass, when she showed up."

The hick scrunched his brows slightly, tipping his head. "Whut? Why?"

Nick almost wanted to say something sarcastic, but ended up just shrugging his shoulders. "She jumped ship when I beat her old guy. I guess he'd been losing his shine, and that had been the last straw. Maybe he'd taken it out on her, I dunno. Maybe I just looked like a new chance for more money. Fuck if I cared about that when she was practically dragging me to a hotel room."

"Don't sound much like the start to a weddin', Nick..." the mechanic prompted gently, expression struggling not to let slip his sympathy, wary… not that it worked, as Ellis was about as easy to read as a picture book.

Laughing harshly, Nick shrugged a shoulder and scanned the darkened treeline. "Don't be stupid, Overalls. Do I look like a romantic to you?" There hadn't been a peep from either trailer, and he didn't expect any. He'd already told Rochelle he'd get her when they wanted to change watch. The last thing he needed was the whole team getting in on his misery.

"Anyway, she stuck around. I don't know what it was, but I've never won so many goddamn bets in a row in my life. The winnings just piled up, like she was some goddamn lucky charm, and I couldn't have gotten rid of her if I'd tried... I guess she turned into a girlfriend somewhere. We fucked other people, don't get me wrong, but we were just... together. Every time we split, we'd get back together. That was how it was. She was just... a fixture."

Nick shook his head, and repeated, "We couldn't get rid of each other. So we got married."

Lifting his hands slowly, Ellis waved them back and forth in a gentle 'wait' motion, shaking his head. His tone was a little plaintive as he insisted, "But Nick, gettin' married is like.. a big deal...
yuh don't just.. 'get married'! Yuh gotta.. love someone, 'n cherish 'em, 'n shit."

Nick lowered his chin, distastefully glancing the hick over and sighing, letting his arms cross over the gentle curl of his own stomach. *Leave it to him.* "Overalls... marriage is worth shit. You want to know what our marriage was like?"

Ellis hesitated a beat, adjusting his cap with a knuckle, then nodded slowly. He seemed unsure if he should regret it, as Nick leaned forward and gestured blandly with his thumb.

"Las Vegas has little back alley churches, and they pass out services for maybe a hundred bucks. We were both wasted when it happened. Angel dragged me to this jewelry store and picked out her ring - which was the only expensive thing of the night - and we got hitched in rented knock-off wedding getups."

Ellis was frowning, leaning back a little with this sympathetic, strange sadness. He felt bad for the older man, those deeply intuitive blue eyes seeming to pierce right through the careless humor. It unsettled the gambler, and his mouth started to lose its grip on his own words.

"We woke up in a hotel halfway across town the next day.. almost didn't even remember what had happened. I'd already nearly lost the ring, not that I blame myself for wanting to take it off."

"Whut'd you do..? Did you love her?"

Suddenly Nick was sighing, and he rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead in frustration at the question. "Shit, kid.. I hated so much about her - her stupid texting, her bitchy girlfriends I didn't really know.. she'd grab onto my arm when she saw anything she wanted, like some spoiled teenager. The only times we were together was gambling, shopping, and at night in bed."

He suddenly fell silent. They both sat there for a few moments, Nick's eyes caught on the still shapes of trees around them, and Ellis watched him. It was clear he wasn't done, so Ellis just waited quietly. When it seemed like Nick might be stuck for good, he leaned forward.

Those calloused fingertips touched down on the table just beside Nick, spreading, and the ring was settled down with a soft clink. He pulled away, leaving it there as Nick glanced down.

The conman picked it up with nowhere near the same delicacy, almost snatching it from the table, staring it down between his fingertips with a stewing frustration. "... I'd wake up sometimes, before she did, and I wouldn't want to move. She'd be up against my chest and I'd just lay there."

The oiling of alcohol didn't help the admission. It stuck to his teeth, and he had to grit his jaw to fight the sour taste. Nick half expected Ellis to laugh, or say something stupid like 'Wow, Nick, you got a soft side, too?'

When he glanced up, scowling, to find Ellis silently returning his gaze with a softened and attentive expression, he felt more of it build up in his throat and slowly let it escape like so much air. Ellis was just accepting it, and it caught him off-guard.

"I made breakfast once, thinking she'd stick around to eat it, y'know? I couldn't say 'Hey, why don't you just hang around this morning'... too stupid, I'd never say that... She just took it to the couch to watch TV and looked at me like I'd grown a second head when I tried to sit next to her. I gave up trying after that. Wish I'd caught on and just left her then. Saved myself some pain."

Ellis' brows began their slow scrunch again, softly, above his eyes. "Somethin' happened?" he prompted gently, letting his gaze lift as his chin lowered, braced just beneath the bill of his cap.
Talking grew difficult. His vision felt unfocused, and Nick riveted his gaze on the ground, letting his hands lower to his lap. He wanted to blame it on the alcohol, but just then, he wasn't sure.

"... We needed a new car. She'd been using mine, but she wanted her own. Problem was, I was running out of money, and she didn't know. I had to get some fast, had to find a new gamble - a new bet... fuck if I was going to be the next guy she tossed aside. So I... went back to an old buddy."

Ellis frowned slightly, obviously not following, forcing Nick to exhale and shrug a shoulder, elaborating. "Sort of... a gang thing. I stole for him a few times. Little things, when I was younger and needed the money. Broke into a house once... it was a goddamn stupid choice, but when you need cash, you need it."

Blinking in clear surprise but slowly nodding, understanding, the Georgian drew his boots back under his chair and leaned forward, glancing over Nick's face. "What happened?"

"He got me into a game of blackjack. Wasn't interested in loaning me anything... he needed a player to fill a chair and I was good - so he'd give me the startup money to join. If I won for him, he'd help me out from there. I thought I could do it, really did. It was just a gamble on a gamble."

The conman deflated slightly, shaking his head once and gripping hard on the ring in his palm. "I lost. I lost it so fuckin' bad... I was in debt up to my eyes, and when he found out how hopeless me paying it back was, he went after me at home."

He didn't look up as Ellis' expression grew rapidly concerned; he didn't really want to see it.

"They stole my old car for collateral and beat the ever-loving-shit out of me. Random guy drove me to the hospital... I don't even know where Angel was. I remember trying like hell to get a nurse to call my house, to see where she was. I think I thought they'd attacked her too."

Nick felt, out of nowhere, the tip of Ellis' boot touch down on the tip of his. His gaze latched onto it, that odd little connection between them, like some poorly disguised offer of comfort. "Was she okay...?"

Nick laughed, spitefully and shortly, in the same moment he nodded. The words were just forced out of him then, he felt his jaw threatening to shut but stuttering open as he had to keep on. "She showed up the next day. Tossed a bunch of papers onto my chest -"

And he could remember how much that had stung, long after the spastic pain from a broken rib had ended.

"... and just looked at me... like she couldn't pick between being mad or just... pitying me. Then she left. I didn't look for the longest time - but I knew, y'know...? Bitch threw divorce papers at me. She'd gotten a card turned down, found out about the debts, who even knows... the well ran dry and she was gone, not a word... I really picked a girl for me. Heartless, greedy bitch, just like me."

Nick bent forward, straightening his legs and bracing his elbows on his knees so he could curl his head between his hands. He dug fingers into his hair, closing his eyes, fighting off the sudden feeling like he might retch. He was shuddering, and he didn't know why, his whole frame unsteady like so many rickety blocks stacked together - he muttered to try and excuse it, blood rushing in his ears.

"... I shouldn't've... Too much beer, not enough food. I can't... just give me a second. I'm - dizzy. You -"
His voice halted in his throat as hands suddenly settled, unimaginably warm, on his shoulders. Heat sunk into the muscles tensed up there through the fabric of his dress shirt, and his eyes opened in a flash.

Ellis stood just in front of him, leaning forward just enough to touch his hands down on those trembling shoulders, a concerned frown drawing his features down. His voice crooned very softly in understanding. "'Ey, Nick, it's alright.. yer allowed tuh be upset, s'okay."

Those fingers curled, rubbing in open comfort, and Nick's whole mind went to something like the low whine of feedback from half-plugged speakers. When Ellis lowered his voice and offered, "I'll go get Ro', 'n' we can switch the watch up.. yuh just need some sleep.. okay?" all he heard was 'I'll go.'

Nick stood up so suddenly that Ellis jumped, mouth open to utter something startled, right as Nick's came down hard to silence him. The conman stepped forward to snatch his arms around the mechanic's torso, pinning him with a tight grip to his T-shirt.

He felt a sharp exhale flutter against his mouth as he did, tensing himself for rejection - but Ellis' fingers curled on the back of his neck to lean into the kiss instead.

Their bodies struggled against one another, neither completely steady, and as Nick caught the kid's lower lip in a scraping bite, they staggered to hit the edge of the table nearby. Nick hit first, twisting to pull Ellis tight against him as he bent backward slightly over the table.

The kiss broke with a breath, Nick shuddering and his eyes slipping half-shut as the tight contact between them sent heat thrumming through his skin. He eyed Ellis' expression, watching the blush over the bridge of his nose and the huffing embarrassment over his face.

"…Don't move, dumbshit." Nick whispered, intently.

It wasn't a need for contact. It wasn't a need to feel connected. It wasn't a need to feel less alone. It wasn't any of those things.

It was just sex.

He was sure.

Ellis' fingers slid down just slightly to get a better grip on the back of Nick's neck, body anxiously shifting. His mouth gawped just twice, trying to find words, before he slowly lifted a hand to pull his own cap off of his head, throwing it to the seat of Nick's chair.

"Okay." Ellis carefully whispered back, managing to slowly give him a smile. It was that smile that made Nick kiss him again, slower than the first one, but no less demanding. Fierce. The fingers of one of Nick's hands gripped into his hair, flexing, and a soft shudder passed between them.

Things like 'we're outside,' 'there's a large chance we'd get caught,' and 'a redneck with a shotgun is two trailers away' left his buzzed consciousness as quick as they came as Nick slowly crawled the dragging fingertips of his free hand down Ellis' lean back, hooking onto the bound-up top of his coveralls.

"Say no, kid." It was all Nick could do not to laugh, harsh and quiet. "Before I do something stupid."

His whole body flinched with lust, and he found himself dragging in breaths through a smarting nose to try and slow his heartrate. He knew it was a terrible idea. Knew they shouldn't. Knew, most
of all, that Ellis would probably do whatever he said, and he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

And then Ellis whimpered something that alarmed Nick to a dead stop in the same instant it threatened to melt every last inch of hesitation:

"I trust yuh, Nick."

He turned the tide, flipping them around to pin Ellis suddenly to the edge of the table. He didn't care - barely noticed - as the motion rolled several discarded beer bottles right off and onto the grass with soft thunks.

All he could say as he pushed the hick's torso down flat on the surface, hitching Ellis' hips up to make it easier and loosen the scrabbled grip the other man had on the collar of his dress shirt, was a low, "You shouldn't."
Nick didn't know what it was - maybe it was just drunken lust, built up frustration. He'd have preferred that.

What he felt, though, as he dug his fingers into the bunched up fabric that swathed Ellis' hips, was need. Raw and brutal, tightening his chest till it was hard to breathe. He curled forward over the younger man, hovering their faces too close and not close enough. Their lower bodies had only the barest distance between them, just brushing.

"Why not, Nick?" It sounded so innocent coming from those lips, gasped open a little as Ellis' breath came in tiny huffs. He just didn't understand.

It took all his strength not to just steal those lips, but Nick waited, breath catching harshly behind his teeth. His eyes burned down on the younger man, green roving uncontrollably, drinking up every little inch they could like that might help him keep still.

Ellis' face was flushed, but his gaze held strong against embarrassment, darting between Nick's mouth and his eyes like he could discern some kind of hint on what Nick wanted. He lifted his chin, feeling a shudder pass through the man on top of him as he slowly leaned closer.

Nick muttered roughly and almost thoughtlessly, his voice dark with restraint and eyes sliding half-shut. "... Because I'm going to fuck you, if you don't get the fuck out."

He waited, just long enough, for the words to sink in.

Then he dropped his head and captured the kid's mouth. Their lips locked, the taste of alcohol heavy between them. Nick heard himself moan, and Ellis wrapped his arms around the gambler's torso, fingers clutching in his shirt to try and close the distance between them.

Nick growled slightly at the sensation, tightening his grip on the younger man's bunched coveralls and curling himself forward. As he leaned into a drifting grind on Ellis' pelvis, he let his hands slip down and grab his thighs. He dragged the Georgian's legs up off the ground and to either side of him, holding them there.

Ellis took the hint, uncertainly hooking his knees around Nick's waist, gasping a soft uncertain noise when it occurred to him he was, however sideways, planted firmly in Nick's lap. The sudden squeeze of thighs rattled the gambler's focus, and Ellis barely caught a flustered cry behind clamped teeth when the conman thrusted hungrily, and a little drunkenly, up against him.

Nick forced himself to a grating halt as he heard the sound, shuddering at the friction every single twitch caused between them. His fingers clutched and gripped at Ellis' hips, mouth going dry with the desire to hear that noise unstifled.

A sticky-sweet Southern drawl belting out his name, quavering.. losing control.. the flex of that incredible body under his grasp.. those blue eyes fogging over.. he hadn't gotten nearly enough of the kid.

"Goddamnit, El.." Nick cursed in frustration, voice ragged. He didn't know what was worse - how much he wanted Ellis, or how much he knew they shouldn't. Not only were they both having trouble stifling their voices so far, but the table was barely an inch away from clanging against the back of the metal trailer.
Ellis panted carefully, cheeks burning with something between embarrassment and arousal. He slowly pulled a hand away from Nick's back, reaching up to touch his fingertips to the conman's cheek. Calloused tips stroked stubble, and Nick stiffened under them, tensing up at the unexpected affection.

The mechanic whimpered up at him, quietly, blue eyes widened as they flickered over the conman's face. Anxiety was apparent in his reddened features, much as he tried to stifle it, and Nick could hear the little hitch to his breath.

Nick groaned through gritted teeth, recovering quickly and biting at Ellis' fingers with a dangerous smirk. "Picked a horrible fuckin' place to get me drunk, kiddo." He moved his hands to grab onto the edge of the table, digging in his heels to drag it and its cargo back an extra foot from the trailer.

Ellis quickly gripped onto the front of Nick's dress shirt, and as Nick released the table and leaned forward to brace one hand on the wooden surface just beside Ellis' waist, he felt the Georgian's strong grasp drag his dress shirt up. The blue garment slipped free from its tuck beneath his belted slacks, baring his stomach.

Nick dragged his teeth along the other man's neck, treating it equally with nips and flickers of his tongue. His free hand curled underneath Ellis' lower back, encouraging his hips a few inches up off the table and supporting him. The huffs his actions drew from Ellis were quiet and pattered right against Nick's ear, those full lips parted in arousal.

The conman's spine arched with a growl when rough fingertips flirted against his bare stomach, diving underneath the shirt they'd been working up. Ellis spread his fingers against the hair-dusted abdomen at his mercy, two warm hands slowly exploring up to the gambler's gently heaving chest.

Nick couldn't stifle it, those calloused fingertips burning against the sensitive skin of his torso and putting a wanting gravel into the edge of his voice. "Hn.. Overalls.."

An irritating chuckle tickled against his ear, slight relief leaking into Ellis' anxious tone as the hick gained a little power over the gambler - however short-lived. With a very low, "Shut it." Nick jammed his hips shamelessly against the mechanic's pelvis, enjoying the way it jolted Ellis into a vulnerable curl at the stomach and the strained yip that escaped him.

Ellis quickly clamped his teeth together, trembling a little with the effort it took to keep his mouth shut as Nick rolled his hips lustily up against him, smirking darkly into the other man's neck. Parting his lips to lick flat along Ellis' heated jugular, Nick sunk the ringed fingers of his supporting hand into his bunched coveralls and peeled it away slowly.

The fabric dragged across skin, taking the briefs underneath with it, inch by inch baring more of Ellis' rump to the humid air. Nick could feel him tensing up, gasping past gritted teeth, clutching his fingers against the warm skin of Nick's chest and struggling not to protest. With the conman firmly planted between his thighs, all it did was bunch up just at his crotch, not that Nick minded.

"You said you trusted me..." he murmured down to the Georgian, focusing flecked, pale green eyes intently on Ellis' blue ones. He'd reached a calm focus, a sober determination - and his lips were curled up at the edges. His smirk made Ellis swallow, before giving a careful nod.

"Y-yeah.." Hesitantly, Ellis tried to glean his meaning from those stubbled features, fingers creeping slowly to curl around the gambler's sides and get a better grip. "I mean - I ain't done it before, but… Yeah."

Nick simply purred, "Good.", right before he pulled his hand from the table and clamped it over
Ellis' mouth. His blue eyes instantly widened a little over flushed cheeks, uncertainly turning his chin slightly, only to find Nick's hand smoothly following the motion.

"Nhk?" he barely managed to say in a muffled voice, slow, uncomprehending confusion flattering on his face.

His breath puffed hot against Nick's palm, the conman chuckling lowly and bending forward to brush his lips against the scarred bridge of Ellis' nose. He explained lowly, tone gaining a gentler lull. "... It might hurt a little, so tell me if it does."

Those blue eyes blinked once, and Ellis slowly nodded in understanding without wresting Nick's hand from its place over his mouth, though his brows adopted a small knot between them. Nick straightened just slightly at the confirmation, drawing his other hand back up and closing his mouth around his ringless index and middle fingers.

He didn't give Ellis time to remain uncertain while he wetted his left hand's fingers - the gambler leaned his hips forward, pleasantly grinding up into the warm niche of his pelvis and holding a pressure there. It forced Ellis to curl up a little more, knees still hooked around Nick's waist, trapped underneath him and so perfectly balanced on the barely-large-enough table.

Ellis whimpered near-silently behind the stifling palm on his lips, pulling his arms out of the warm confines of Nick's shirt and retracting his hands with a shiver. One hand gripped onto Nick's blue-cuffed wrist just below where it had a hold over his mouth, just holding onto it rather than trying to pull it away. The other slipped to get his fingers curled on the edge of the table like he didn't trust his balance.

Bending down as he popped his fingers free from his mouth, Nick used his grip on Ellis' jaw to turn his chin to the side and up a little. He bit onto the other man's ear, teething along the delicate flesh and distracting him while his hand slipped underneath his hoisted-up lower body.

The sudden, full-body shiver that jumped Ellis' frame up against Nick when the conman's warm fingertip pressed suddenly against his entrance was electric. His breath huffed against Nick's palm in a harsh exhale, blush deepening rapidly until he was practically cherry red.

The tightness he felt there made Nick groan slightly, pulling his teeth away from Ellis' ear for fear of biting down in reflex. "Relax." he purred against the warm shell, letting his hips rock against the hick's slowly, the gentle friction steady and soothing.

Ellis' hand squeezed on Nick's wrist, tension focusing there as he tried to relax his spine. He visibly struggled with the sensation, eyes shut tight and face flushed attractively - despite his best attempt, Nick couldn't deny that his gaze riveted on the Georgian's features, narrowing.

Gritting his teeth slightly to distract himself from the waves of lust threatening to drip down his spine, Nick dared to press the tip of his finger inside. Just that, and no more, though he let his knuckle bend to circle it faintly against the worst of the tightness.

He didn't miss the flickers of discomfort over those scrunched brows, nor the little pained 'hn's and 'ah's just barely audible between his muffling fingers. The slow rock of the conman's hips filled the spaces between with flutters of pleasure, but they were there all the same.

Nick tipped his head to murmur to Ellis, peeling away his thumb from Ellis' mouth to allow him to talk. "Okay, Ace?"

It bothered him how much hinged on the response, how much attention he paid to listening for it.
His finger curled in little strokes, pushing sideways against the muscles that constrained around it, not stopping even if it made it harder for Ellis to talk - not sure if he could stand being still.

Ellis huffed out a breath loudly past his lips, struggling not to lose it with his mouth freed. He nodded quickly, the motion half a nuzzle to the fingers still laced on his cheek. "Nnhh.. y-yeah, Nick.. it just feels funny."

The conman smirked slightly, shifting his thumb to tease it over the hick's soft lower lip. It took effort not to lean in and kiss him, but Nick resisted it. He focused on straightening his wrist and pressing his finger a little deeper, circling.

Nick felt his whole spine go utterly stiff when Ellis lifted his chin up and pressed his mouth almost absent-mindedly to the tip of his thumb, whimpering a little against it. The brush of those lips around his digit was painfully arousing, bringing forth a deluge of mental images he found a little hard to shake.

He growled quietly, gaze narrowing on the Ellis' lips and jaw setting as he added a second finger to the effort of readying Ellis. The stifled yelp he got for his trouble made him smirk, particularly because of the fact that Ellis’ hips gave a gentle rock against his digits that seemed reflexive - and welcoming.

"Better?" he grated quietly, bending down so he could trace his tongue along the whorl of Ellis' left ear, enjoying the shivers he could feel underneath him. The younger man nodded, vaguely.

It was easier to move now, and Nick took advantage of it, digits dragging and pressing against the taut muscles surrounding them. He surged them a little deeper, patience flagging as the Georgian whined something, unintelligible, his knees shifting against the conman's waist. It sounded wanting, if tense.

Nick tried to think logically. He honestly did.

But he'd tortured himself long enough. Nick withdrew his fingers slowly and bent down a little. He worked to undo his belt onehanded, and Ellis must've heard the clink of the metal, because reflective, misty blue eyes suddenly blinked open.

The hand around Nick's wrist let go, suddenly grasping at the back of his neck. Ellis thrusted his weight in half a pull and half a lean, pushing their lips together. His stomach trembled with the effort of holding himself in enough of a crunch to manage it, and Nick withdrew his thumb just before their mouths met.

He muttered ".quit doing that, goddamnit.." out of the corner of his mouth, more in sarcasm than anything else, before shoving his tongue to deepen the kiss with a hard edge of chiding hunger. His fingers resumed their motion, and he rocked his hips a little, jostling his slacks open just enough to push his boxers aside and free his erection with a weighted, hot sigh into the kiss.

But he broke away then, startling Ellis at first. He leaned back just far enough to separate them and spat heavily into his palm, mouth wet with saliva from their kiss. He used it to slick up his cock, huffing quietly.

Nick then slipped both of his hands to Ellis' thighs, short-trimmed nails digging a little into the skin bared up around his hips, scraping slowly to get his fingertips underneath the younger man's coveralls. He pushed at the same instant, hoisting Ellis into a tighter curl and getting his knees closer to his chest.
Sliding his coveralls higher, Nick bit back a small groan as the smooth and warm flesh of Ellis' rump brushed against the sensitive skin of his hard-on. He dropped down to an elbow on the table, weight pushing Ellis' knees even further to his chest as his abdomen pressed down on the entrapping bundle of coveralls between his thighs.

He re-linked their kiss, just in time; Ellis whined against his mouth, blush so severe Nick swore he felt it just through the kiss, but his fingers clenched on the back of Nick's neck and his body trembled with a light flush. They were past the point of hesitancy.

Nick's free hand gripped his hard-on just below the head, slitting his gaze carefully and firmly locking their lips, determined to keep Ellis quiet. He let his hips press forward, a heavy shudder wracking him at that feeling of resistance, rocking his weight to work himself just an inch in.

Ellis' voice quickly grew urgent in its stifled noises, head jolting up to press deep into the kiss, expression scrunching up tightly. His arms wound over Nick's neck, fingers curling into fists, and there was a small whine as his body tensed up against the intruding length.

The clench sent Nick's eyes rolling up with a moan of raw pleasure, though he tried quickly to both silence himself and focus on holding still a moment, letting his hand settle into a bracing grip on Ellis' hip. It was only when Ellis' tension dissipated that he moved again, hips circling subtly.

The kid was so unbelievably tight, Nick honestly wasn't sure how he was fitting so far. His knees went weak and his whole brain swam with dizziness - he was lucky he had the table to lean his weight against.

He felt Ellis squirm, but he had him trapped and there was little room to move. Tightening his grip on the warm skin filling his palm, he worked his hips up at a slight angle to try and hit that sweet spot. Each movement was still a struggle against tense muscles, and Ellis' fingers dug into the flesh of his back, groaning against his lips.

Nick knew the moment he'd hit gold, because on the top of a shallow thrust, Ellis suddenly jerked with a surprised mumble, body giving an aroused shudder and muscles tightening around him in something a lot less protesting and a lot more appreciative.

The gambler broke the kiss the moment Ellis' outburst halted, leaving his lips parted to harshly force breaths in and out, staying close just in case. "Goddamnit.. you're.. tight as shit.." he muttered, gaze roving fiercely over the reddened face below his, those damp silky lips.

Ellis turned a shade darker, spluttering something at first before squeezing his fingers and curling them in the conman's shirt. "N-Nick - quit -" he muttered, almost pleading, like the gambler were mocking him.

Nick smirked, bending his head to tip his mouth into the crook of Ellis' neck, pressing him just a little harder into the table. His lips traced the line of a tendon down from his partner's jaw, voice a little oily with a taunt. "... Quit what? Quit fucking you..?"

The younger man's eyes went wide at the suggestion, and he shook his head almost too quickly, starting to blurt out, "No -"

But Nick didn't give him a chance, drawing his hips back and stroking them forward in a smooth motion. The angle was slack enough to brush against his prostate again, stirring up pleasure, and Ellis barely kept his mouth shut without anything to muffle it in.

It suddenly became a risky game, and Nick used his hand to keep Ellis' hips solidly where he
wanted them, adopting a slowly rocking rhythm as he found the resistance of Ellis' clenching insides loosening to a bearable grip.

Aware of the danger, Nick gave him no help to keep quiet, finding a heat crawling its way up his spine. He found himself enjoying the way the hick clamped his jaw shut and curled his head to the side, whimpering urgently to the slide of the conman's grating strokes. His gaze was riveted sideways, watching, hips hungrily pushing deeper every few moments.

Nick dragged his lips along the skin underneath them, shifting his weight subtly to widen the position of his shoes on the grass. The table made a soft click of protesting joints as he reached the crux of a rock forward, and he rose to the challenge offered, suddenly lengthening each penetration to draw out the same little noise.

"I'd say.. you're enjoying this, El.." he purred against the hick's neck, tone raw gravel and hunger. "Hmm..?"

The sound he got in response was a wary 'uuh-hhuh', cut off by a gasp and small grinded whimper. Ellis didn't notice till too late that Nick had freed his hand and crept it to burrow suddenly under the bunched coveralls in his lap. The gambler's ringed fingers wrapped around the erection otherwise ignored, teasing against the damp tip and stroking it slowly.

Ellis whimpered desperately, spine twisting and twitching as every motion dragged pleasure out of both sides. His expression struggled, eyes blinking quickly and head trying to tip a little to press his mouth against Nick's before he got too loud.

Nick denied him, letting him squirm, rutting his hips in deep and slow and just rocking his weight up against the hick's rump. He smirked, lips parted to pant, enjoying the practically begging whines it drew out of Ellis as he tried to shut himself up with bitten lips. "What?"

His vision was blurring, and he wanted nothing more than to close his eyes, but Nick resisted. He pivoted his hips, grunting a little himself as something clenched around his length and rewarding the younger man with a long stroke of his palm. "Want -" Nick growled quietly, nipping teeth against skin between the two words. "- something?"

Ellis' fingers dug into his back, tightening, a low whine spilling from his lips as he squirmed, curling his head further to the side. "N-n-nah.." he lied through gritted teeth, gasping them apart with one eye closing in a little flinch of arousal.

Pulling back slowly till his shaft nearly freed itself, watching each little flicker of pleasure as the motion rolled back, Nick let himself sit there a moment. The lust was building up as pure heat in his abdomen, body wonderfully loose as he skirted the edge of climax.. and he thrusted forward in a sudden motion, rutting into the hick's warm body, burying himself deep.

"Sure?" he whispered in a practical snarl, spine shuddering even more as the hick jolted up with his thrust, a unintelligible cry narrowly stifled with an almost dangerously bitten tongue. Nick was almost certain, had it gotten out, it would've been his name.

Its halt suddenly disappointed him.

Trembling under and around him, Ellis barely caught his breath enough to respond, voice shaking with a certain urgency, focus fluttering mistily. His voice was flecked with something like frustration when he muttered, "Please -"

Nick gave in without a word, snagging Ellis' lips with a small groan and arching up his back so he...
could thrust into the kid with sudden fervor. Ellis whimpered against his lips, blue eyes shutting and arms sliding up to wrap tightly around his neck, fingers clutching at the air.

The gambler's spine straightened out with a heavy shudder as the muscles around his length clenched down, Ellis biting onto Nick's lower lip with a stifled cry and clutch of his fingers as his climax sent shudders racing along his limbs. Nick pumped his fingers to egg it on, not caring as it got on the other man's shirt, rutting his hips up against the flexing muscles a few last times with a groan.

He pulled out suddenly and lifted his weight, letting Ellis' legs relax down some from their curl as the kid huffed desperately, bright red and breathless. The conman switched hands, narrowing his gaze down on the body slumped underneath him, tugging his own orgasm to completion.

He bit along Ellis' jaw, growling tightly with each motion as he rolled his hips slowly against his own palm to ride out the drugging pleasure that buzzed along his nerves, semen spilling down toward the ground in careless drips between his knuckles.

"...Fuck." was all he said, stilling just at Ellis' earlobe and releasing a shaky breath. He regretted their surroundings, wanting nothing more than to just collapse for a little while.. but he had to steel himself.

The conman slowly shook his hand off, leaning up to stand with only the slightest hunch forward. He grew a smirk as he slowly settled his slacks back into place, using both hands to re-belt it, noticing Ellis' eyes blink open slowly, panting as he shifted his gaze toward Nick.

It only took a few gulps of air for Ellis to whimper out a shaky response, slowly lifting a hand to run it through his curly-locked hair, palm catching the sweat along his forehead. "M-man... I can't.. feel muh legs.." He laughed a little, slowly.

Nick's eyes rolled subtly, leaning forward to survey the mess Ellis had made of the bottom few inches of his T-shirt as he let a hand trail along the smooth curve of the hick's bared upper thigh. His fingers caught on the top edge of his coveralls, tugging idly.

"I'm not carryin' you, if that's what you mean. Lucky we didn't get caught in the first place." he muttered quietly, grabbing onto the coveralls with both hands and bending forward as he shoved the Georgian's boxers and pants back on a little roughly, making him squirm and dusting a nip on his lower lip in the same motion.

Their eyes met, for just a moment, and Nick let his eyes slit.

Disoriented under his gaze, Ellis' blush flickered harshly over the bridge of his nose and he shook his head slowly. "D.. did it make yuh feel any better..?"

Nick suddenly stilled, staring down at him with something a lot like surprise, one brow raised. He slowly ground his teeth back and forth, trying to get a grip on how to respond to that. ".I don't think I need to tell you yes to that, Ace.. came as hard as you did."

Adding the mocking tail-end to his response succeeded in that calculated way his jibes generally did; Ellis flushed, darting his gaze away as he adjusted to the brash statement, tipping his chin down a little bit like he thought his hat was there to shade his eyes.

"Uh.. guess you did.."

Nick knew what he'd meant, of course - emotionally. Had 'it' made him feel emotionaly better. And that question was a problem all on its own.
"C'mon, El." he growled a little, voice full of a smirk, reaching out to tuck a knuckle under Ellis' chin and urge him slowly to sitting by the tug of his digit. "That table's gonna break."

Ellis chuckled a little, distracted from his mostly unanswered question, slipping to his feet and around Nick to recover his hat from the seat of the chair nearby. "S'.. hardly muh fault, Nick.." he mumbled, glancing sideways toward the conman.

Nick smirked, watching him with a slightly tilted head, not missing the slight bow to his legs and limp to his gait as he nursed the unfamiliar stretched and empty sensations after their screw. The conman picked up his jacket from the other chair, slipping his arms into it slowly, then retrieved his wallet and replaced it in the inner pocket of his suit.

The glint of his wedding ring caught his eye, abandoned where it was on the seat of the lawn chair, and he was just an instant away from convincing himself to just leave it.. when something possessed him to snatch it up, shoving it into a pocket with a mental curse.

He turned back around, relieved to see that Ellis hadn't noticed his dilemma - the kid was facing away from him, head ducked with embarrassment as he wiped his stomach clean with the unused sleeve of his coveralls.

Nick stepped forward, pushing Ellis with his shoulder slightly to get him moving. "Let's just get inside, killer. There's nothing out here anyway."

Ellis grinned sideways at him, bashfully, replacing his cap on his head and shoving his hands into the pockets of his coveralls as he slowly walked around the trailer for the door. "Wore me the hell out, Nick..."

Nick tailed after him, closely, gaze unfocused as he made his tired body keep moving despite the heavy urge to sit down. It was a pleasurable kind of laziness, joints loose and full of cotton, spine relaxed. "Good." he muttered tauntingly, falling silent as Ellis stepped up the three stairs to the rickety trailer, pulling open the door.

The mobile home was fairly thin, messy and dingy inside, and Nick did his best not to inspect it too hard as he stepped lightly after Ellis. He zeroed in on a small, dark red leather, armless couch planted up against the wall halfway through, barely outside what qualified as the 'kitchen.'

The last third of the trailer was a closed room - a bedroom, Nick figured. He gestured limp-wristed at it as he tiredly stepped over to the couch and sat down with a pleased rumble. He shifted himself around to find a comfortable sitting position and curled his arm on the back, settling his head against it like a makeshift pillow. "Go tell Ro' we're going to sleep."

He saw Ellis nod at him, standing a few feet away, before he shut his eyes, melting easily into his less-than-optimum sleeping posture. He listened without opening his eyes as Ellis padded across the trailer toward the door. The whole structure shifted with his weight.

Nick may have even dozed in the time it took Ellis to stir Rochelle and pass the watch on. All he knew was he jolted a little when the trailer shifted again, and Ellis' footsteps found their way back to him.

"'Kay… She's gettin' up."

Nick nodded his head mutely, but noticed Ellis was frozen where he was. It occurred to him, even exhausted, pretty quick; there was no other place to sleep, other than on the bare floor. He didn't bother to open his eyes, merely sighed slightly and shrugged his shoulder to indicate the space on
the couch next to him.

"May as well just get comfortable here, Overalls. Nothing else to do."

Ellis laughed quietly, scratching under his hat slowly and approaching to drop himself onto the other half of the couch. "Wasn't sure if.. well, anyway." He bent forward to pull his boots off, wiggling his toes in a stretch.

The kid drew a knee up to his chest, giving a slight huff as he did like the gesture ached a little. He wrapped his arms around his knee, using it and his biceps like a pillow.

His shoulder rested against Nick's, forced to by the fairly short couch they had to work with, but the conman said nothing but a "Night, kid." He didn't mind as much as he'd thought he would - just a little contact, enough to warm the left side of his body.

Ellis obliged him, the short and gentle quality of his response making the conman furrow his brows a little. He wouldn't be kept up by stories, at least - though he felt like he could've slept through it anyway. "G'night, Nick."

The problem was, he had felt better.
Nick's first instinct upon waking up was to nestle his face further against his pillow. A pleased
smile filtered up onto his features as he pulled it closer, letting himself stew a moment in the
pleasant recollections of the previous night.

He should've felt more conflicted - he never wanted to be that vulnerable, not to anyone, and his
acute awareness of his own need was alarming. He didn't consider how recent the divorce was to
be a good enough excuse to forgive himself for it.

There was nothing really to be done, though... and somewhere he was surprised by how easy Ellis
had made it. No hard questions, no judgement. Just sympathy and acceptance. He hadn't had that
kind of experience in years... maybe a decade.

He hated that it had worked on him.

Sighing just a little and feeling his good mood slipping away from him, Nick burrowed his face
further down into the fabric pressed to his cheek, letting his arms move to clutch harder on his
pillow. His nose gave a loud sting of pain as the motion jostled it, but he ignored it.

It wasn't supposed to turn into some 'thing' - he hadn't even expected or wanted to get any
sympathy, let alone end up screwing the kid.

But it had, and as sure as Nick was that Ellis' unerring determination to inject emotions into it, and
friendship, was to blame, he had trouble relaxing with the knowledge how much he'd wanted the
badly planned and badly timed intimacy.

Needed.

He hated need.

He wanted to convince himself it had just been raging lust finally snapping free in his mind, but he
knew better. Nick had broken down last night, and God, that infuriated him. You don't need
anything from anyone, least of all from some twenty-three year-old Georgia redneck. He had to
keep it together.

I dunno who messed with your head more, Nicolas.. your ex or the kid.

For some reason, shoving the two into the same corner of his mind made him relax. As his fingers
tightened, trying to adjust his pillow into a more comfortable clutch against his body, he heard a
little hiccup of air just a few centimeters from his face.

And then it hit him.

He didn't have a pillow.

Nick immediately recoiled his head up, startled, eyes shooting open to view with some shock the
position he'd rolled himself into. Ellis was dead asleep, his back nestled up against Nick's chest and
his arms draped loosely down over the gambler's where they were laced over the younger man's
abdomen.

Nick had even turned on the couch, one leg curling underneath him loosely, so he could draw Ellis
into his lap and align them closer together. Nick's head had gotten nestled into the crook of Ellis'
neck, face turned into the soft fabric of his T-shirt. They were cuddled so tightly, bodies warm and familiar against one another, that it was painfully obvious they'd been settled like that a while.

"What the hell!" Nick blurted reflexively, trying to shove Ellis away from himself and off the couch. The jostle woke Ellis halfway up, making him gurgle slightly in confusion and grab onto the nearest thing - that being Nick's forearms, dragging him with.

The two tumbled off the couch and onto the dingy trailer's carpet in an undignified pile, rolling a little, Nick landing underneath Ellis' startled weight. He immediately growled, trying to wrest Ellis from his form and nearly getting an accidental elbow to the face for his trouble.

Ellis scrambled like an overturned turtle on Nick's torso, disoriented and struggling into awareness. "Wh-what happened?! Where's muh -" One of his hands clamped onto his head, finding the cloth of his cap tightly settled on his head, and calmed down considerably to try and regain his senses.

Blue eyes blinked, head turning to look over his shoulder at the scowling conman he was laying on top of. "Nick? Whut the..?"

"Get off!" Nick growled in a low tone, shoving again until Ellis clambered off him. The conman quickly hauled up to his feet the moment Ellis' weight was off, turning his body away and adjusting his clothes snappily.

His gaze confirmed with some anxiety that the trailer's bedroom door was still closed, and they were alone. This trailer's windows weren't boarded up like the first one, though they were shuttered closed, and the dim golden light of morning filtered in in soft slashes.

Huffing a sigh deeply, Nick focused on straightening his lapels, moodily rooting himself where he stood. He kept his voice down, irritated. "Remind me not to sleep near you anytime soon... I'm not a goddamn stuffed animal..

Because it definitely hadn't been his arms wrapped around Ellis.

When he didn't get a response, he tipped his head, glancing over his shoulder. Ellis had hunched down against the front of the couch, body curled at a weird angle and hands laced over his thighs, pain dousing his features.

Nick blinked slightly, coolly dropping his hands and half-turning around as his brows moved into a vague lift. ".. What?"

Ellis merely shook his head in silence. He tried to adjust his weight and roll over, ducking his chin to hide underneath the bill of his cap rather than look at Nick, but didn't manage. He slid back down to a crouch.

Nick didn't let up, turning entirely and approaching a step. "What?" he repeated.

"I-I'm fine, Nick, jus'- ow.." He sounded embarrassed and a little humiliated, distinctly avoiding looking at the gambler and slipping his arms to wrap instead around his waist.

Nick realized what was going on with a sudden halt, breaking into an abrupt smirk before he stifled it. He tugged his slacks up an inch or two by the thighs, pain dousing his features.

"I-I'm fine, Nick, jus'- ow.." He sounded embarrassed and a little humiliated, distinctly avoiding looking at the gambler and slipping his arms to wrap instead around his waist.

"I'm not a goddamn stuffed animal."

"Sore, kiddo...? Sorta forgot to warn you."

The Georgian nodded quickly, once, lifting a hand to tip the bill of his cap up slightly. He whimpered it, even quieter than Nick, and the conman felt a little tug of guilt. "Y-yeah. It s'posed tuh hurt?.."
Nick chewed on that for a moment, then gave a shrug, lowering his head so he could scratch at the back of it with his pinky and ring finger. "Under better circumstances, no. Spit doesn't do much."

Ellis whined a little, pushing his weight off his rump with a wince, bending himself oddly. He braced his hands on the floor to lift up a little, slumping on the sturdy muscles of his shoulders. "Man.. I'm gonna have tuh walk 'n shit."

The gambler smirked again, leaning in to get hands under Ellis' arms. He hoisted upward, intent on pulling Ellis to sit back down on the couch. "Up, Overalls... just rest a minute. And let me know if you start regretting it."

Ellis turned a startled glance up toward his face, quickly grabbing Nick's elbows and pushing his heels against the carpet to help. "U-uh.. I didn't mean it like that." Nick's knowing, dark look of humor shut him up, and the moment he settled down on the couch his expression screwed up in discomfort.

"G-gaahh, man, that don't help none -!"

Nick rolled his eyes, standing up and reaching up a hand to push at the side of Ellis' head with his palm. He toppled the Georgian to his side like a bowling pin, landing with a soft 'oomf' on the leather cushions. "Like that, dipshit."

"Hey, you ain't the one in pain. Be nice." Ellis chirped back defensively, grinning a little as he lifted his head slightly from the couch and adjusted his cap. At least his humor's intact. Goody-goody.

Nick rolled his eyes, turning away and buttoning together the middle of his suit jacket. "I'm in a different kind of pain, kiddo. It's called dealing-with-you pain."

Ellis curled an arm underneath his head and settled down a bit against the couch cushions, watching Nick fret his clothing into order. "Yuh ain't a barrel'uv laughs either, man." Ellis teased.

The conman snorted a little, relaxing his arms to a loose cross over his stomach. "Ha-ha.. Shush. I'm going to go check on the other two so we can get moving. Try not to complain too much, will ya..? I don't have a good excuse for you."

Ellis scratched at his cap, grinning a little and closing his eyes. "Alright. See 'bout food, too.. I'm starvin' fit tuh kill."

Nick rolled his eyes again, shooting a dull look over at Ellis and stepping toward the bedroom door with a small grumble. "It'll be shit again.." The gambler opened the door with a slight caution, leaning in to scan the small, dark excuse for a bedroom.

Rochelle was sprawled out under a blanket on the floor, her legs gently crossed under the fabric and her arms settled in a drape over her waist. Coach took up most of the bed, settled on his stomach. At first Nick thought him asleep - and he prepared his mocking 'so much for keeping watch' speech - but the door opening made Coach's head lift.

The gambler didn't acknowledge him, just stepped in and halted by Rochelle's feet, nudging her calf with the toe of his dress shoe until she stirred. "Hey."

Her weight lazily shifted, stretching her spine up off the ground and giving a yawn. Brown eyes flickered open, wandering a moment before they latched onto Nick. A smile flashed over her features, making him raise a brow, and she sat up carefully.
"Oh, hey, Nick." He swore there was something coy in how she said it, and it made his brow twitch suspiciously. He never liked that tone, not from anyone. "What time is it..?"

Nick snorted, jostling up an arm and glancing at his bare wrist. "I dunno. Let me check my watch." He turned around, raising his hand so it sat between his eyes and the squat window inlaid into the wall, barely spilling the dark gold of the swampy morning. "Just about exactly morningish."

Rochelle rolled her eyes from where she sat, stretching her arms over her head before she started to push her blanket off and stand. She rather dryly prodded him as she reached to find her boots and slide them onto socked feet. "You're cranky.. wake up on the wrong side of the couch this morning?"

Nick stiffened up, hackles rising as the phrase struck him. That couldn't have been a coincidence - as much as he desperately wanted it to be. Tightening his jaw, Nick turned around, gaze turning scathing as his heart skipped a few beats.

But she wasn't even looking at him, tightening the straps of her boots with delicate tugs. Her expression was settled in this half-entertained smile. Nick hadn't inhaled a breath to snap at her before Coach interrupted gruffly.

"Cut the boy a break, babygirl... I ain't in a good mood either." He slowly started pushing himself up, chuckling a little as he rolled toward the edge of the bed. "Mornin', Nick."

Nick gave a monotone grunt as a response, eyeing Rochelle and her smile with a sense of restlessness. What if she'd seen them sleeping - that ridiculous spooning he'd somehow initiated in the middle of the night? How could he deal with them finding out?

Rochelle stood up with another yawn, stepping over to the edge of the bed. "How're you doing, Coach? You seemed pretty okay by the time I fell asleep."

"Fine, babygirl." Coach affirmed, sitting up on the edge of the bed and reaching a hand over his shoulder to touch onto his back. "Ain't hurtin' no mo', jus' a little stiff."

She gently leaned around him, looking over his back and tenderly peeling his shirt up to look at his bandages. "We should probably head out as soon as we can. I don't want to push you too hard, but we're so off-track, you know?"

Nick crossed his arms tightly, feeling a frown entrenching on his features. Rochelle's normality eased some of his worry, but he still felt... awkward. A little angry. He sighed weightily, rolling from heel to heel. "We'll walk slow. If we're going through goddamn marshes, we're going to want to stick close to each other, anyway."

Coach snorted a bit, bending to pick up their backpack from the ground just beside the bed. He pulled it into his lap, minding not to bump Rochelle as she worried over his back, and dug into the main pocket. "Crazy man mentioned a dock, didn't he? Maybe we'll be a'ight."

"As if." Rochelle teased with a laugh, settling his shirt back down with a small sigh. Her brows fretted into a small knot as she stepped back, crossing her arms. "Looks pretty good. Those things are vicious, huh.."

"Bit.." the big man agreed a bit wearily, giving up his digging in the backpack as he pulled out a plastic-wrapped cinnamon roll. "Here." He tossed one toward Nick, barely glancing over as the conman caught it with a slight crinkle of his nose.
Nick tucked it into a pocket, the plastic crinkling under his fingers, then held his hand up again.

"Something for Overalls, too."

As Coach obliged, tossing a second one over, Rochelle moved to sit next to him on the edge of the bed. "You and Ellis should look around for some weapons we can keep with us. We're going to be out of bullets pretty soon... there's got to be tools around here or something." Rochelle offered up, simply, taking one of the packages from Coach and starting to tear it open. "We'll check around in here to see if there's anything useful."

Nick sighed slightly, grating his teeth together subtly. He shrugged, backing up a few steps toward the door. "Fine, fine... but hurry up."

They didn't argue as he left, shutting the door behind himself, and he turned around to face Ellis. He tossed the bun unceremoniously at the kid, hitting him in the shoulder and startling a "Nnghn whu-" out of him before he shifted enough from his slight doze to comprehend.

Digging it out from behind himself, Ellis flashed the conman an oblivious smile. "Oh.. thanks, Nick.." He bit onto a corner, twisting his head to tear into the plastic and happily peel it away from the pastry.

Nick shrugged, raking fingers through his hair. He felt rushed, wanting to get out of the trailer and alone. The idea of being found out fucking Ellis was bad enough - but then having to be around those people constantly, the knowledge floating around like some kind of contagion? He'd rather have shot himself.

"Sure." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks and turned to cross the cramped trailer, irately chewing his lower lip, only to hear Ellis' chirruped voice call after him.

"Where yuh goin', Nick? Ain't ya gonna eat somethin'?"

Nick didn't even look back, glancing upward as a plea to somebody to let him get away successfully as he carefully enunciated, "I'm going to go take a look around for some weapons. Hick's gotta have something dangerous lying around."

There was a pause where Nick thought he could slip away. Unfortunately, he'd just gotten a hand on the doorknob when he heard the leather couch creaking as Ellis shifted to get up. "You shouldn't go on yer own, 'specially if yer gonna be pokin' around that guy's stuff."

Nick half-turned, scowling, as he watched Ellis flinch his way up to his feet. He shoved his cinnamon bun between his teeth, the heavily processed pastry dangling from his lips, and gingerly stepped across the trailer toward Nick.

"I can handle it fine, and it's not like you're loads of help right now." Nick scathingly pointed out, feeling his fingers clutch and relax slowly. He was trying excruciatingly hard not to lash out, knowing full well the kid would just get sulky again.

Ellis shook his head dismissively, freeing the bun from the clench of his teeth with one hand and chewing on the little nibble he'd torn off accidentally. "Naw, I just gotta walk it out, is all. Company's good, anyhow."

"I don't want company." Nick growled stubbornly, feeling his irritation mounting.

"Sure yuh do." was Ellis' cheerful retort, catching up and gesturing Nick to continue through the
doorway with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Overalls," the gambler snapped, leaning toward him to growl quieter, startling the mechanic a little. *There went not lashing out.* "I said no. Go sit the fuck d-"

The bedroom door across the trailer opened up, Coach trudging out with a little creak of the mobile home as he moved across it. He glanced up at the two men by the door, deepset eyes uninterested and a brow rising quizzically.

Nick opened the door, grabbed Ellis' sleeve, and shoved him down the stairs all in the same motion. He didn't look back as he followed after, growling quietly to himself and slamming the door slightly. The gambler stood with a tight scowl as Ellis caught his balance and gingerly winced, turning toward him.

"Jeez, Nick.. whut's up with you today..?" The Georgian had a slight scrunch to his brows, uncertain and edging into frustration. He tore a piece of his breakfast roll off, popping it into his mouth with a slight noise of appreciation.

The conman rolled his shoulders in their sockets, giving a sigh. Some of the immediate hurry dissipated with being out of the trailer, but having Ellis there hadn't been his preference. "Bad mood."

Nick turned away from him, scanning the dusty-gold morning and the foggy clearing around them. A broken-down truck, wheels long gone and chassis overtaken by creeping weeds, and a small shack against the treeline seemed the best options for hunting weapons.

He stiffened when he felt a hand touch his elbow, gripping his sleeve. He looked over his shoulder, slowly, to find Ellis frowning at him. That pretty face was drawn with enough concern to overwhelm his discomfort, gaze hesitant. "Nick, did I screw somethin' up..?"

Nick could've groaned, trapped under that look. He shifted his weight, feeling a strangled sense of frustration and sighing at it. "You.. didn't. Look, we can both agree neither of us wants Ro' and Coach finding out about last night, right?"

The mention of it made Ellis blink, hand releasing Nick's sleeve as he took a half-step back and turned a little red. He scratched at the back of his neck bashfully, swallowing slowly. "Uh...

"Yeah, no. So I'm on edge... I don't want to deal with that bullshit, not one goddamn bit, and you acting clingy isn't helping."

Ellis kept scratching, slower, focusing his gaze on his breakfast roll as he tried to stifle his embarrassment. "I just didn't want you walkin' around alone, Nick - I ain't tryin' tuh cause you trouble."

Nick dug his hands deeper into his pockets, inhaling through his nostrils slowly. "Just watch it, Ace. If they find out... that's not what I want to be dealing with while I fight for my life through a swamp."

Ellis nodded, carefully, and reached up to adjust his cap. "Sorry, Nick.." He bit his tongue momentarily, then glanced up out from under the bill of his cap and risked; ".. you asked me if I regretted it.. You don't, do yuh?"

That made Nick smirk suddenly, even if there was some exasperation there. The conman, confident with the door being shut behind them, leaned forward to grab Ellis' jaw and tip his face up. He licked a fleck of cinnamon from the kid's lower lip, startling him into a gasp.
"Dipshit." he informed him simply, releasing him with a small push just to make him stumble.

It was .. a non-answer. He couldn't say he regretted it, but the question didn't sit well with him, either. He couldn't very well say 'no, not at all, in fact I needed it pretty badly' as was the truth, but he didn't want to say yes, either.

How could he manage to reassure the kid without encouraging the very clinginess that was making him so anxious? There was no good answer, and it was all complicated further by the fact that he was starting to like the younger man's company.

So he didn't really say anything.

Nick saw the little pained wince as Ellis re-caught his balance, pressing his wrist to his mouth in a quick motion to wipe his lips clean, and shook his head. "I told you to stay lying down. It's going to be miserable enough dealing with your whining the whole way, without you making it worse."

Ellis brushed his clothes flat with his palms, lifting his chin a little with something like defiance. There was a smile in his eyes, kept low. "I ain't gonna whine; Coach was walkin' with his back cut up 'n' he didn't say a damn thing."

Nick snorted, reaching up to rake his fingers through his hair again. "We'll see."

The conman felt Ellis walking close at his elbow as he turned to walk toward the shack he'd seen. It looked like it might be a toolshed - they could only hope. "So we're lookin' fer weapons?" Ellis prompted, past his chewing on another mouthful of cinnamon roll, cocking his cap up on his head with a nudge of his wrist.

"'Nail planks'n'shit', yeah." the gambler mocked lowly, quoting the mechanic's words back at him. Ellis laughed, clearly catching on, and he rolled his eyes. "We're so close to being out of ammo, this might be our last chance to find some good stuff. And hell, if anyone can find something dangerous in a shed, it's you, right?"

"Heh." Ellis scratched at the back of his head, squinting one eye. He stepped around Nick, limping a little to trudge up to the shed and peer at it before trying the rickety-looking door to see if it was locked.

The dingy wood swung open with a small unpleasant noise of crunching hinges, spilling light in on the shelves and boxes inside. Ellis was just about to make a comment, releasing the door handle, when something in the hinges suddenly snapped outright and the door came tipping over like an over-sized domino.

"Mother Mary!" Ellis yelped, tossing up his hands to catch it and doing an odd shuffle backwards as the weight was a little too much to hold up at first. Nick broke into a laugh at the sight, a brow cocked and expression trapped in a smirk, but he did step forward and grip onto the edge of the door to help lower it to the ground as Ellis crawled out from under it.

"And that's why I make you go first." he taunted dryly as they both straightened, turning his hands over in suspicion of splinters.

Ellis stuck his tongue out with a shake of his head, straightening his cap and sighing in disappointment as he realized he'd dropped the last few bites of his roll in the scuffle. "I was gonna say them hinges didn't sound good... dammit."

Nick snorted, curling his fingers in his lapels and gesturing at the shed. "Anything in there?" he prompted, encouraging Ellis to check it out in his place. He could see the spiderwebs from there.
Ellis 'hmm'ed, stepping over the fallen door with those heavy workboots tromping loudly. He ducked into the shed and started to dig through the shelves curiously.

"Few things." Nick could hear the clanging of metal against metal as Ellis poked around, not quite successful in doing it quietly. He wasn't too worried considering their distance from the first trailer. "There's a shovel in here... couple saws - that'd be pretty damn messy, heh.. Oooh, an axe!"

He wasn't sure he liked the excitement in that last exclamation. Sighing a bit and pinching a brow, Nick rolled his neck. He noticed that the Georgian had himself bent at a weird angle to lean into the shed, and it left his rear in plain view. It wasn't a bad distraction. "Shovel sounds good, and the axe. Else?"

Nick had to jump when a shovel suddenly tossed itself out of the shed and landed by his foot, startling a "Sh- Ellis! That nearly hit me!" out of him.

"U-uh, sorry! I thought you were payin' attention!" Ellis did sound chagrined, leaning back to squint over his shoulder to make sure it really had been 'nearly.'

Nick grunted irately, bending down to somewhat unpleasantly grab hold of the shovel's grip and heft it, finding it a little lighter than he'd expected. The metal shaft must've been hollow. "Just pass the axe back, will you? I like my limbs where they are."

Ellis nodded in quick obedience, fighting a laugh and pinching his lips together, before he bent in again to work the axe out of wherever it was. He held it back out behind himself, waiting for Nick to drop the shovel and take it from him.

Ellis dug back in once his hands were free, something falling over and clattering softly. "Umm, rake ain't much use.. hedgeclippers?"

Nick curled his lips in disgust at the concept, rolling his eyes and swinging the axe loosely. The effort behind meticulously snipping off zombie limbs was not a pleasant thought. "Should see if there's something in the truck. Wrench or something."

"Yeah, I don't see nothin' else real useful in here fer zombie killin'.." Ellis agreed, voice muffled as he leaned in to dig into a box. "Yuh wanna go look?"

Nick shrugged a little bit, moodily straightening his jacket and tossing the axe up to rest against his shoulder as he moved to walk toward the broken down truck. "If that guy shoots us for messing with his stuff, I'm ducking behind you..."

Ellis laughed after him, audibly. "He has a shotgun, man. It'd go right through both'uv us."

Cringling his nose heavily, Nick shook his head. "Sick." He smirked a little anyway, somewhat unhappily pushing through higher grass as he waded up toward the broken down truck. "If that guy shoots us for messing with his stuff, I'm ducking behind you..."

Ellis laughed after him, audibly. "He has a shotgun, man. It'd go right through both'uv us."

Digging through screwdrivers and hammers of various sizes in the unorganized container, he was at first disappointed to find mostly small tools and nails. It took getting down pretty close to the bottom for him to see the slim edge of something long - drawing it out, he was pleased to find himself wielding the wicked coil of a crowbar.

He hefted it, leaning back out of the truck and stepping away. The quirked tip was sharp and the whole thing sturdy steel, and he was rather content with it. "Hey, kiddo. Look what I f-"
He stopped, blinking, as he turned his head to find Ellis standing a few feet from the shed, mouth caught open in awe. Clutched in his hands was the rusty red shape of a chainsaw, serrated teeth jutting out along the blade.

"Ohh maah gaaawd.." he heard from afar, like the kid had just found Jesus.

Nick quickly palmed over his forehead, exasperated, and tucked his crowbar underneath his belt to let the hooked tip catch on it. He jogged back toward the other man, gesturing at the machinery with a look of disbelief. "I leave you alone for five seconds and you find a fucking chainsaw?!"

Ellis held it up in awe, grinning hugely. "Look, man! It's gaaawrgeous! Aw, you CAN'T say this ain't awesome!"

The conman put his hands to his hips, forcing out a sigh. "I'm saying it. This ain't awesome. This ain't awesome at all. You'll have to carry that thing, and it'll just be more of a burden than anything else."

Ellis wasn't daunted in the slightest, lovingly inspecting the chainsaw's handle and mouth, wielding the thing with far too much enthusiasm. "I can carry it fine! It's AMAZIN', man! Killin' zombies with a chainsaw! That's like a dream come true! Man, I can't wait tuh brag tuh Keith about this!"

The trailer door (theirs, fortunately) opened with a small creak, and Coach trundled down the stairs with a hand up to rub at his forehead. He spotted the two after a moment, but stayed near the trailer, leaning up against it with a brow lifting. He called out, "What you two arguin' 'bout? Any luck?"

Nick gestured to Ellis in disbelief, calling back exasperatedly. "The dipshit wants to take a chainsaw with us, like it's not a heavy, loud, near useless piece of junk. Talk some sense into him, please, Coach?"

The big man looked between the two (Ellis still enthralled with the chainsaw) dubiously for a moment, then broke into a weighty chuckle and shrugged a shoulder. "Let 'im take it if he wants to. Can always drop it if we need."

Nick stared him down, certain the man was just agreeing with Ellis to be contrary, and gave a frustrated pinch of his nose as Ellis whooped cheerily and darted back toward the shed to dig inside and - Nick could only guess - find a strap for the thing to lash it to his back.

The conman just shook his head in disbelief, calling back exasperatedly. "The dipshit wants to take a chainsaw with us, like it's not a heavy, loud, near useless piece of junk. Talk some sense into him, please, Coach?"

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The conman just shook his head and walked moodily toward the trailer, stopping to pick up the shovel and axe in either hand. "We found a few things - y'know, other than a fucking chainsaw..."

Coach chuckled again as Nick walked up. His general sense of weariness still lingered, like he'd seen all this before and was just repeating the motions, but he looked considerably improved. "Mm-hm. Babygirl found something too."

Nick lifted a brow, holding the shovel out in offering. Coach accepted it, inspecting it a moment before just lowering it by his waist. "Yeah?"

The trailer door swung open again, and Rochelle stepped out with a cast-iron frying pan balanced on her shoulder. Nick looked at her with one of the dullest stares he'd managed all morning. She flashed him a bit of a grin. "Hey, worked for Frank West..."

The conman just shook his head in disbelief, rubbing at his face in exasperation. "Chainsaw, shovel, crowbar, and frying pan. That's just wonderful. We're a real superhero team now."
Rochelle hopped down the stairs laughing, patting his shoulder with her free hand and leaning out to wave over at Ellis. "We're not quite out of bullets yet; you'll have a little more time with your precious machine gun... Ellis, sweetie, are you about done?"

The kid tramped up to his feet proudly, so excited he'd apparently forgotten about his sore rump (for the moment at least), and hoisted up the chainsaw to throw his arm through his makeshift strap, a tied-up piece of leather that looked like he'd torn it off something. The strap was tight, holding the chainsaw firmly to his back, and he loped back toward them joyously.

"This is so cool, Ro'!"

Rochelle giggled a bit, shaking her head, and reached up to tickle his cheek when he got close enough. "Take that axe from Nick, honey. That thing's gas-run, yeah? Won't be any more reliable than our truck."

He obediently turned around and held out a hand to Nick, grinning. Nick gave him an unimpressed shake of his head, sighing, as he handed the hick the axe and crossed his arms, glad to be rid of the weight.

"Okay, folks." Coach gruffly interrupted, straightening up and adjusting the backpack slung over his arm. "'Nough time wastin'. We got places to be 'n marshes to cross - y'all ready?"

"Yeah, yeah, just hold on." Nick grumbled moodily, turning to jog back to the 'porch' at the rear of the trailer. He found himself smirking as he picked up his machine gun, throwing its strap over a shoulder, and Ellis' shotgun, carrying it with. His gaze lingered on the table, amusement and an odd sense of warmth trickling down his spine.

It may have been stupid - but worth it.

Nick returned to the group, tossing Ellis his shotgun and swiftly starting across the clearing. The others followed his cue, and they aimed themselves back toward the river they'd been following before.

"Least it ain't rainin' no more." Coach pointed out with rare, blatant optimism, swinging his shovel idly to loosen up his shoulders as they walked.

Ellis laughed gently, walking in Nick's footsteps with his free hand up to grip onto his chainsaw's strap, swinging his weight a bit gleefully. He was utterly tickled with himself, and it didn't seem much could dampen his joy. "I thought the rain was nice. Cleansin' 'n whutnot."

"You'd be the one to find a silver lining in being trapped in a goddamn rainstorm.. I for one, did not fuckin' enjoy getting soaked."

Rochelle rolled her eyes slightly and glanced down at her boots with some kind of inward humor as Ellis retorted, grin widening. "Least it didn't happen while we were really IN the swamp! Yuh'd really be mad then. Get all muddy."

The conman narrowed his gaze a little. He couldn't even smirk at that, shivering at the mere suggestion. "Madder than I'll be at going through a swamp at all?"

Ellis was just about to start considering that when, as the four tromped past it, the redneck's trailer door suddenly swung open a few inches. It gave a horrendous screech as it did, like it had rusted just overnight.

"HEY!" the old man hissed loudly, and Nick stiffened up, going for his machinegun reflexively.
Rochelle jolted to grab his arm and stop him, giving him a 'don't' look. She very gingerly turned to peer toward the door and the two, gleaming steel eyes inspecting them from afar.

"Sir, we just took a few of your things. We need them pretty badly.. if you want something in return, we-"

"They're crazy. ALL of 'em."

There was an awkward silence after the eerie, paranoid little snarl she got in response. The four traded glances delicately, Nick making a very concerted effort not to say a word, considering how much the old man had made it clear he hated him.

"...What do you mean?" Rochelle prompted with the gentlest tone she could manage, nervous.

"They'll kill ya… They don't care. They want you dead." Nick felt weirdly nervous after the man's muttering... he swore those steel, fierce eyes were pointed directly at him - but the words weren't threatening. They were warning.

Ellis adjusted his cap carefully, squinting slightly, and frowned a bit. "They're zombies, man... we been fightin' 'em, we'll be alright.. you just keep safe in here, huh, man? We-"

The man suddenly swept the door all the way open, shouting furiously as he leaned out, his wiry torso trembling with the effort. "Git outta here!" The trailer door slammed shut violently, and something clicked, leaving only silence as the man locked himself in.

Rochelle slowly glanced between the other three, nervously scratching the back of her head.

"...anyone else want to go?"

They didn't even nod, just all slowly moved to continue out of the clearing, maybe a little faster after that.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nothing could dampen Ellis' determination. He was bursting with energy, like the weight of the chainsaw lashed to his back lightened him, and he confidently slogged forward at the head of the group as what had been fairly flat ground began to melt into soggy, dipping marshes. The fog thickened, making it harder to see and disguising puddles that he tramped through without a care.

He trooped through the pain that every step sent stabbing up his spine, thinking it'd get easier if he just pushed through it - and it did, a little, as his adrenaline peaked and numbed some of it.

The zombies had started appearing in the misty swamps the moment they left the redneck's clearing. Ellis knew he still had a stash of bullets for his shotgun in the pockets of his coveralls, but he let the thing stay strapped to his shoulder and stuck underneath the bulk of his chainsaw, using his axe instead.

The four scrambled through a patch of thick shrubs, on alert. It was hard to see the infected before they attacked, the mist obscuring their slumped and sometimes sitting forms within bramble and emaciated trees, and it lent a very claustrophobic sense to their surroundings. It took a lot of effort to keep track of where they were, following parallel to the river as it dipped and curled.

The air was humid and unpleasant, making them all huff, and Nick scowled as a mosquito smacked straight into his cheek. He wiped it off with a grunt, jogging swiftly just behind Coach and Rochelle. Ellis swore the conman's gaze kept slanting up toward him.

Ellis grinned, feeling that little jump of his heartbeat he'd started to experience under the survey of those green eyes, and looked forward again to watch his steps over the musky ground.

It made him move a little faster, determined not to give into the pain threatening up his spine with each step. Looking weak in front of Nick was a secondary concern only to this loyal sense that he had a responsibility now to keep what was between them - whatever that was - secret. Nick's stress that morning had solidified that much in his head; he wasn't about to give into the pain and make it worse.

"I told y'all this was just like them zombie movies!" Ellis called breathlessly over his shoulder, grinning, oblivious as usual. "Can't believe we're in a swamp! If them zombies don't get us, the blood farmers will, man.."

"Doesn't the comedic relief always die early on in movies?" Nick shot back, grunting as he ignored the latter part of Ellis' comment. He was keeping surprisingly close to the group compared to his usual tendency to hang back, Ellis noticed - he cracked a bit of a smile at the observation.

'He's warming up' was nicer to think than just 'he doesn't want to get lost in the swamp,' even if Ellis knew better.

Rochelle snorted as she high-stepped it over a particularly deep-looking puddle in the grass with a small hand from the ever-watchful Coach. "Erm.. Blood farmers, sweetie?"

"Yeah, Ro'. That crazy guy back there was just the start. We ain't hit real swamp country yet! They eat people 'n shit out here."
He heard Coach snort behind him, the big man sounding a little disbelieving. He was using his shovel as idle support, like a walking stick, the sharp-edged scoop digging into the ground with every other step. "Son, you ain't right in the head."

Ellis shook his head, turning about on the thick heels of his workboots to walk backwards and illustrate the words pointedly with the head of his axe. "Naaww, man! Muh buddy Keith met some once! See, he was tryin' tuh -"

His story cut itself off at a sharp "Overalls, look out!" from Nick. The Georgian twisted around with a slightly burdened wobble under the load of his chainsaw coupled with the rigidity of his pained lower body, startled to see -

nothing.

He scrunched his brows slightly, turning his head a bit to squint in either direction into the marshy surroundings, wielding his axe with flexing fingers. Ellis gave in as Rochelle started to laugh, rotating his head and pushing out his lower lip in a confused expression at the conman.

Nick was smirking for the first time in a half hour, swinging his crowbar in idle circles with an expertly turning wrist. "Keep focused on the whole 'walking' thing or you will get jumped, Ay-lus."

Ellis felt a warmth dart over the bridge of his nose as he realized he was being made fun of, refacing forward with a quick tightening of his fingers on his axe. "I-I was payin' attention! Just warnin' y'all..."

The Southern drawl Nick mocked him with was a strange mix of hilarious and embarrassing, and there was an intensity behind it that made Ellis' face heat up. He felt like there was something past the bluster of the insult, like it might've been affectionate at the source.

He felt that often.

"This swamp is creeping me out." Rochelle admitted in a low tone, adjusting her grip on her skillet. "I hope you guys are sure about this whole thing... I still think we might've been better off turning around."

Nick scoffed, shaking his head solidly as he avoided some knee-high brambles, grousing wordlessly under his breath. "Toward what, Ro'? You think it would've gotten better going backwards?"

She shrugged her shoulders, glancing back at him with a small frown. "I didn't argue, did I? I just can't help but wonder if we're making a mistake... what if they had more evacs set up and we went the wrong way?"

Coach sighed lightly, shaking his head and speaking up before the visibly riled Nick could retort. "We had to make a choice, baby girl." The conman just glanced off to the side, unbothered to be pushed out of the argument.

Ellis grinned a little as his boots sloshed through a puddle, something distinctly squishing underfoot, glancing over his shoulder again and piping up optimistically. "We'll make it fine, Ro! 'N we're goin' tuh the beach. Ain't that neat?"

She smiled at him, laughing with a shake of her head as she lifted up a hand to wipe over her forehead. A heavy sigh passed her lips, gesturing her frying pan around to their surroundings. "Ellis, you are crazy ... how can you think about the beach right now? I think I'm growing moss in my lungs."
He chuckled a bit, hearing a snarl a few feet to the side and turning to face it, axe going up defensively. His voice kept a ramble even as he hacked clumsily at the onrushing zombie, catching it right in the shoulder and nearly lopping off a good portion of its neck. His breath huffed a little around his words, the pain stinging along his pelvis making it a little hard to start back walking after the zombie was dead.

"It ain't that hard. I ever tell y'all 'bout the time muh buddy Keith stuck himself in a freezer fer like an hour? He spent the whole time thinkin' of fires'n'shit tuh try and warm up. 'Pparently it really helped! ... 'course, now that I'm thinkin' 'bout it, that might'uh been the hy-po-thermia.. man, cold burns over ninety five percent of his body. Would'uv lost fingers iff'n he hadn't'uh curled up around his hands!"

"You're both total nutcases." Nick muttered as he smacked a branch away from his face, unpleasantly cringing his brows as the slimy feel of waterlogged wood clung to his skin. Ellis was startled by the next phrase - sure, the conman had humored him last night when they were alone, feeding into his stories and honestly listening.. but he hadn't expected it to continue.

"Why the hell was he even in a freezer?"

Ellis felt his face light up, adjusting his cap carefully and raising his voice with a hitch of laughter, grinning. "He wanted tuh figure out if he could live in Alaska. It was one'uh them - uh - trial runs."

Rochelle released a loud laugh, almost startled, shaking her head in disbelief.

Coach grunted a bit, scruffled features drawing into a slight grin even as he pushed forward into the swamp. His bum knee gave him some difficulty on the rough terrain, but the eldest was never one to give in to difficulty. "Gotta give him credit... he's darin'."

"That's a.. nice way to put it." Nick snorted slightly, making Ellis laugh.

He stepped up to a fallen log crossing over their path, gingerly climbing over it with a wince stifled into his shoulder. It honestly did hurt, and having to bend up to clamber over it knocked the wind out of him.

He stumbled getting off, and he thought Nick noticed. He felt that little prickle of awareness as a gaze locked onto him, but there wasn't time to get questioned. As his boots settled down in the sagging ground on the other side, a strained "uurrhbbh" groaned a few feet to the side.

Ellis quickly moved to get his footing, bracing himself with one hand on the log and the other lifting his axe up.

Stumbling out from the enshrouding mist around them was the bloated, almost bubbly shape of a zombie Ellis immediately recognized from the inside of the van he'd cracked open in Savannah. It staggered through the water on wobbly legs, stubby arms swinging to keep up momentum, the putrid skin of its frame stretched over billowing lard.

"Awwh, gross!" he complained with a slight edge of giddiness, backing up and straightening his cap as the thing moaned with a burp and seemed to eye him, its already questionable gait slowed by the swamp it was mired in. "It's that thing again, Nick.."

He was quickly joined by the other three, vaulting over the log, Coach only with some difficulty. Less, Ellis swore, than he had. "Egh.." the conman muttered with a crinkled nose, looking ill as he inspected the thing's unhurried staggering. "Someone want to shoot it?"

Rochelle started to pull out her pistol from the holster at her hip, brows lifting as she moved to aim
at it. She found herself laughing just a little, hesitating. "You don't want to give it a little hug, Nick?"

The conman rolled his eyes, firmly asserting as he took a few steps back, "No way I am getting near that fat-ass... no offense, Coach.."

The big man started to turn his head toward Nick, expression scrunching into a look of dry unamusement. "Boy, watch yo'se-

That was precisely when the zombie decided to vomit, whole body shuddering with the effort to throw forward its head and spray over what must've been feet of distance. All four of them shouted out in one horrified sound, and they scattered to try and get away from the fluid.

"Oh, fucking tits!" was Nick's utterly disgusted outburst as he got his feet under himself and desperately checked himself for splatter. He looked about ready to burst something, flushing with agitation. "Of all the goddamn zombies -!"

Coach shook a chunky mess off his arm, looking sickened before glancing up to see that the zombie had disappeared into the mists when they'd jumped away. He took in a heavy breath and shook his head, disgusted at the stench. "That is so damn nasty..."

"Oooh, why didn't we shoot faster.." Rochelle whined a little, shaking her hands squeamishly even though they'd all pretty much escaped the vomit - or the worst of it, at least. "I don't even remember CEDA talking about a puke zombie."

Ellis chuckled, pulling at his shirt to shake off a bit of blowback that had struck the fabric, wrinkling his nose at the steaming green mess that was splattered on the grass and the smell it was letting off. "At least we're already gross, huh?..."

"Getting puked on by a goddamn zombie is not my idea of a good time... what the fuck kind of defense is that?!!" Nick fumed, fanning his face to try and flush some of the stench from his still-bruised nose. He backed away from the vomit-stained ground, growling, "Goddamnit.. let's just.. keep going."

He halted to the suddenly piercing sound of approaching shrieks, rising up in a directionless echo that seemed to come from all sides - or maybe it did.

"Uhh.." Ellis started, tensing up as he lifted his head to look around. The sound was quickly growing louder, reverberating off each other above their heads like conflicting waves meeting in frothing crashes. "That kind..?"

"Shit." Rochelle cursed loudly, grabbing tight to her frying pan in one hand and her pistol in the other. She set off at a sprint, vaulting this way and that to make it over the uneven, marshy ground. "Run!"

Ellis could tell right off the bat it was a bad idea - the pain of running that hard rose up in gnawing, straining flickers, faster than the adrenaline could. His vision threatened to blur, forcing him to focus on the colors and shapes of the other three and chase after them.

The horde came like a flood of hungry wolves, sprinting out from the mist and skidding to sprint in their footsteps. Ellis knew he was lagging behind, whimpering as he forced himself to turn, hacking behind himself with the axe. He felt it connect with something with a squelch, quickly returning his focus to not tripping.

"Is runnin' really a good choice?!!" Coach shouted, voice gruff and severe, the collision of his
shovel with a zombie's body audible as it crushed bones.

"I'm sure as fuck not stopping!" was Nick's yelled response. "There's too fucking many!" Ellis tried to work up the breath to say something - but he didn't have any, this numbness settling in under the pain the work was putting into his body. His eyes were tearing up, weight flinging into each step just to manage.

A hand clawed at his shoulder, stumbling him, and he barely swiped his axe back in time to split the hunting arm from its body before its sharp fingers dug in. For the first time he regretted dragging the chainsaw with - it made everything harder, and the weight of it was jamming into the dip of his lower back and grinding in the pain.

His workboots sailed over puddles and rocks, catching here and there and threatening repeatedly to trip him up as the discomfort left him breathless.

When something grabbed hold of his shirt, clawing into the flesh of his back and tugging, he just collapsed forward into the ground, hitting hands and knees hard. The zombie bowled over him, scratching for his face, but the bulk of his chainsaw kept it almost at arms' length.

Ellis tried to shake it off, pushing with his shoulders, but all that did was make it claw harder. Another one joined it with a thud that nearly prostrated him, and Ellis felt like he was going to be dogpiled and devoured within moments.

White suddenly flashed into his field of vision, so startling and abrupt he thought he was passing out... but no, it was that warmly familiar, dirty white that made up Nick's slacks, sprinting closer and just barely skidding to a halt before him.

Something cracked overhead as metal crowbar met flesh, the weight of the zombies trying to climb on top of him suddenly flinging off and blood dusting his cheek from the impact. Nick straightened from the swinging of his crowbar, dropping down quickly to a crouch.

Ellis' whole spine spasmed painfully as he dropped to a hunched sit and his weight collapsed onto his rump. He tried to push against the ground and stand up, but his body was too numb, adrenaline exhausted.

Nick's face materialized in front of his, leaning, with a fierce scowl and intensely focused gaze. "Fuck, Ellis!" It was half a question and half a statement, and Ellis was suddenly aware of the tears streaming down his cheeks. He tried to choke something out, but Nick was already leaning over him, dragging the chainsaw off of his back with oddly gentle yanks.

The moment it was free and in his hands, the conman stood up, stepping over Ellis with one leg to stand with the younger man's curled form straddled by his calves. Ellis tried to move again, feeling his wet face heat up and throat close with humiliation as he shook his head to try and clear the tears from his eyes. A sharp "Stay!" from Nick made him freeze, twisting his head in time to see Nick yank the ripchord with a growl.

The chainsaw roared to life in his hands, chugging audibly on gasoline, blade just spinning up as the first wave of zombies hit them.

Nick braced it against a cocked hip, shoving the spinning teeth to catch the attacking bodies that vaulted toward them before they made it. The spray was awful, gore and separated limbs going every which way as the blade mowed through flesh and bone.

The conman laughed slightly, sounding practically bewildered - like he couldn't believe what he
was doing - as his arms vibrated to the violent roaring of the saw. He hacked it in a half-circle to hold back a pressing wave, cringing under the splatter of blood.

They came in throes, knocked aside just as quickly. They didn't seem to have any kind of survival instinct, carelessly running at him, life extinguished instantly as the chainsaw hacked through vitals.

He chucked the thing away when the horde died out. The chainsaw's roar turned into a splattering squelch as it buried into the wet ground, spinning a little and digging down further before stalling into silence.

Nick crouched back down in front of Ellis, sighing harshly as his gaze ticked over the kid's expression, reading the pain in more places than just the tears. "Okay, you win, the chainsaw was a good idea."

Ellis gave a little hiccupped chuckle, glancing up through wet lashes and breaking into a frown soon after as he tried to push up to standing again, faltering with a tremble. Humiliation burned on his cheeks, and he shook his head. "I can't..."

"I know." Nick interrupted, brows twisting into a scowl as he heard Rochelle and Coach start to get themselves together and retrace their steps toward them. "It's my fault." He gave a deep inhale, frustrated, and moved.

Ellis found his throat closing up as Nick turned around in his crouch, reaching back his arms in offer. The gesture was clear; Nick was going to carry him on his back. "Nick.." Ellis barely managed, unsure and protesting, but the conman berated him quietly.

"Just get up, Overalls, and don't ... say anything. We have to go. Now. I'll come up with something."

Ellis carefully crawled forward, feeling his face heat up fiercely as he gripped onto Nick's shoulders tightly and curled against his back. He didn't want to, but he wasn't confident he could walk just then.

Nick gripped under Ellis' knees to brace him and pull his thighs against his waist, shoving up to stand with a firm grunt. The motion startled Ellis into jolting his arms around the conman's neck, hands clutching onto his own elbows, and he hid his face under the shadow of his cap.

"What happened? Ellis sweetie, are you okay?" Rochelle was immediately concerned, footsteps hurrying to rush back toward them, but Nick had already started walking and he didn't stop even as she reached him.

Nick's voice was terse when he responded, still supporting Ellis' knees with cupped hands. "He's fine. The dipshit took too much with him. Tripped and hurt himself. That horde nearly had him - go get his axe, Ro'."

Rochelle nodded, too visibly worried to mock the conman for his care just then. She ran back to find Ellis' abandoned axe, leaving Coach to eye the two with some disbelief. "Guess you were right, Nick." he admitted, pulling his gaze away to glance around them gaugingly.

Ellis felt his frown worsen, embarrassed, and he lifted his head a little from Nick's shoulder. Half of him tried to keep in mind the chainsaw hadn't actually been the problem - Nick's admission echoing a little in his head - but he felt the guilt anyway. "M sorry, guys..."

Nick's gaze flicked to the corner of his eyes, narrowing vaguely before he merely shook his head.
The conman didn't seem troubled by the younger man's weight, but weighing him down was just another reason for Ellis to feel guilty.

He started to continue, squirming his weight, "I just dunno if I can -"

"Will you shut up, Overalls...?" Nick practically demanded, gritting his teeth. Ellis heard it in his voice as much as he felt it in the tension of his back: frustration, but not at him. "Christ."

"Better listen, son, if you're really hurtin'." Coach agreed, wearily turning to start moving when Rochelle caught back up, the two flanking Nick on either side as the conman trudged carefully forward. "Piss him off 'n' you're walkin'."

Rochelle sympathetically reached up to rub Ellis' shoulder, casting him a gentle smile sideways. "You'll be okay, honey. That really was a little much to sprint with."

Ellis wanted just a little to defend himself, but he merely nodded his head, tightening his arms around Nick's neck. Even like that, he hurt, but he simply bit his lower lip to stifle it. It was better, however stinging.

He felt embarrassed, humiliated, but when Nick's fingers squeezed onto his knees in a silent gesture - he felt a little better.

It started to drizzle again as they kept walking through the swamp, puddles swelling up and grass turning to almost mush underfoot. Nick immediately snarled a long series of complaints that continued on as they walked.

It took Ellis a while to realize it was never specifically about having to carry him through it.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO DrDevio on DeviantArt - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
"Keith broke both his legs once... 'cept I didn't have tuh carry him or nothin' - he had tuh be like, in bed, fer weeks, 'cause the hospital was all smart on him 'n wouldn't give him no wheelchair. See, last one they gave him, he hooked it up tuh these fireworks tuh try'n make a rocket chair... damn thing caught on fire, 'n then his pants were burnin' too, 'n his cast - man, that shit was funny. Well, it wasn't real funny when he was tryin' tuh roll around with this huge cast on, like a beached whale on fire or somethin' - but when he put it out, it got funny again."

Nick's skin tingled with every word warmly ghosted against the shell of his ear. He swore he must've been deluded, but something about the Southern tone rambling on was pleasant. It lulled him through the sputtering rain and unpleasant stench of the swamp, like the humming the kid had done in the back of the truck they used to have.

Like white noise while trying to fall asleep.

Ellis spoke lowly, aware of how close his mouth was to Nick's ear, but almost thoughtlessly. His voice had a sweet hint of amusement to it, absent-minded. Coach had tried a few times to get the kid to hush, but especially with neither Nick nor Rochelle backing him up, Ellis would just start up again a few moments later.

"Hell, they didn't even give him crutches or nothin'. Didn't even think they could do that."

Rochelle laughed gently, stepping over a puddle and shaking her head. She was using her frying pan like an umbrella from the spastic rain only barely making it through the tight swamp canopy overhead. Ellis' axe was hooked in the back of her belt, his shotgun tossed over a shoulder by the strap. "Poor guy. He doesn't seem like he'd take bed rest very well."

Ellis shook his head, grinning just a bit and flexing his fingers slightly, turning his wrists to grip onto Nick's lapels. "He was sooo antsy, man... I tried tuh cheer him up, though."

"I'd love bed rest right now." Nick said simply, adjusting his grip on the hick's knees for the twentieth time. He was starting to get sore carrying Ellis, and his arms had long since gone fairly numb, needles crawling up his biceps when he moved them.

Not that he said a word - he still couldn't believe how much pain the guy had been in, and it knotted something strange in his gut. He should've been more careful. It wasn't like he hadn't known - he just hadn't thought. And he'd wanted it so bad.

*Leave it to you to ruin the kid's first time, Nicolas, you idiot.*

A sigh passed his lips, noticing that Ellis' arms had tightened around his neck again, those fit biceps hot against his neck. He shot a critical look sideways at the Georgian but said nothing, glad to notice Rochelle and Coach weren't focusing much on them.

He let his footsteps slow to put some distance between them, focusing on picking his way over the ground and sliding in line with Coach to let the bigger man plow a path through encroaching bramble.

"How're you doing, Fireball?" he uttered quietly once he'd lagged enough to feel comfortable, turning his head to eye the mechanic's expression as Ellis cocked his head onto the conman's shoulder.
Ellis fumbled slightly, rapidly turning embarrassed, unable to hide under the bill of his cap from Nick's level gaze. "Uh... you don't gotta keep carryin' me, man."

Nick snorted slightly, glancing forward and squinting into the swamp carefully. "Not what I asked, dipshit." That quieted the kid, and Ellis only hesitantly adjusted his grip on the conman's neck, biting onto his lower lip. "...I'll take that as a 'still hurts.' You're kinda light, y'know, kiddo." Nick chuckled sardonically, a smirk settling onto his lips.

Ellis' brow scrunched up defensively, shaking his head quickly and nearly clocking Nick in the side of the face with his capbill. "Nuh-uh!"

"Yeah-huh."

"That's just mean, Nick..."

The conman broke into a dark chuckle, enjoying the huff of embarrassed breath against his ear. There was something ... very comfortable in Ellis' closeness. His body hummed lightly in appreciation of the warm press against his back. Any sense of their respective filth was numbed by the resigned awareness that they were both equally dirty and it probably wasn't going to change anytime soon.

"Hey.." Ellis gently prompted, turning his head again and actually hitting Nick that time. The tip of his cap bill nearly jabbed Nick in the eye, catching his temple, but he was talking before the conman could complain. "Thanks, though, Nick. I mean it."

Those arms tightened around his neck, and Nick smirked despite himself, shrugging his head to push them away with an air of play. "Why?" he returned under his breath. "I'm the one who hurt you in the first place."

Ellis' face lit up, turning slightly down into his bicep in embarrassment. "I sorta pushed you intuh it, though. It wasn't yer .. fault I got hurt, or nothin'.." he bravely challenged, head shaking. "I wanted tuh do it, too.."

_Sure it wasn't, you dumbshit._ Nick exhaled silently, jumping his weight mid-step to stabilize his balance with Ellis' added weight. He spoke in a low tone, a brow cocking and gaze focusing ahead.

"Don't mention it, kiddo... I'm in shape enough to drag your lazy hick ass a little. Not, however, up to saving it again when you screw yourself up worse being a dumbshit. It's this fucking swamp that's going to drive me nuts."

The Georgian grinned slightly, lifting his chin. His voice relaxed slowly, even gaining a bit of a confident taunt to it. "Yeah.. Yer suit ain't lookin' too good, man.."

Nick smirked, turning his head to narrow eyes at the other man's face, dangerously.

"I will drop you."

Both their heads lifted sharply when Coach's voice gruffly barked from ahead. "There's the river, y'all."

They'd gotten slightly disoriented when the horde had struck, and lost sight of the river's edge for some time. The fog, only barely lit by shattered, rain-damp afternoon light, hadn't helped their sense of direction at all.

Nick sped his footsteps up slightly, catching back up to Rochelle and Coach as smoothly as
possible without being too obvious about it. Rochelle glanced back at him anyway, and he ignored it with a strong deadpan of faint irritation.

"And look," she prompted, lifting up a hand to point before rubbing her arms in a cold motion. The swamp trees broke open into the bank, morosely spewing fog down onto the surface of the fairly quickly-flowing river, "that guy actually told the truth. I can see a boathouse."

Ellis craned his head around Nick's, excitedly, as the conman pushed lightly around Rochelle to squint down the river with a sigh of relief. The dark shapes and angles of a dock jutting out into the water was topped by those of a building.

"Do we know where we are well enough to get around?" Nick risked somewhat dubiously, falling to light pants as he inspected the opposite shore.

It looked... basically identical to their side.

"Think so." Coach affirmed simply, rubbing the back of his head. "The highway's just a few miles off. 'Bout parallel to the river. We cross, we should hit it pretty quick just walkin' straight through the swamp."

"...Oh my God, it's Christmas - more shit water. Just what I always wanted."

Rochelle - ignoring the conman's gripes - nodded quickly at Coach, exhaling and turning to flash a confident smile. "We save a lot of time crossing the river instead of going all the way around it. We should probably rest and eat there before we cross. Beyond that, though, we're going to have to hope we make it to town, because we didn't bring much more food."

A small groan from Coach made Nick smirk, and he sniped at the bigger man as they all turned carefully to start moving down the riverbank again. "Zombie apocalypse diet not working for you, Coach?"

The big man turned an unamused look toward him, shaking his head. "No man deserves to eat like this. Shit, I was too hurt to enjoy those damn sandwiches we had earlier."

Nick snorted, stepping over a puddle with a slight jump. Ellis spoke in friendly offer at his ear, and Nick felt him start fidgeting against his back. "You can have my part'uh lunch, Coach, if yuh want."

Coach laughed gruffly, shaking his head and adjusting his grip on his shovel. "Nah, son. I'm kiddin' around. You keep yo' lunch. I'll live 'till we find a city an' some real food."

"I'm hungry as shit." Nick complained in a low grumble, frustrated. "Ran out of smokes last night. They would make this whole episode a little less fucking insufferable."

"Yuh shouldn't smoke, Nick." Ellis informed him matter-of-factly, turning his head onto his shoulder and nodding. "It's bad fer yuh! Muh dad passed away smokin' too much. Lung cancer."

Nick's brow cocked, focusing forward. His immediate urge to smack the kid for chiding him was doused by that particular tidbit, and the conman was silent as he chewed on it without being certain of how to react. Ellis certainly didn't seem fazed by it.

Rochelle, on the other hand, immediately cooed, turning around to look back at him as she walked with a frown. "Aw, sweetie... I never knew that, I'm sorry!"

Ellis unwound one arm from Nick's neck, quickly scratching at his cap bashfully. "Naw, Ro', I
wasn't even born when it happened. Still had muh mama." He flashed a smile, that idiotic grin, unflappable.

Nick retained his silence.

Rochelle shook her head lightly, palming a tree carefully for balance as she circled around it. A sigh left her lightly as she did so, boots sliding a little on a patch of mud. "Must've been hard, for both of you."

Ellis chuckled, licking his lips cautiously. "Sorta. S'why she spent so much time with Keith's mama 'n' pa, 'cause she needed some help while I was still a li'l guy. But Keith'n'I caused so much trouble, I dunno if she was better off!" He laughed louder, head tipping, a little chagrined.

"You're a good kid, son. 'Course she was." Coach injected, in that gruffly unquestionable tone he had a tendency to speak with. Rochelle nodded in rapt agreement, laughing gently.

Ellis smiled, burying his face against his bicep slightly and looking away with a blush filtering up over the bridge of his scarred nose. That seemed to end it - Nick filed the fact away in the back of his head, only then noticing he never really had mentioned a father.

There was a slight upward slope they had to scale to get to the small boathouse, the fog melting around them and clearing to allow a better view of it and the docks. There were two gas-powered boats hitched up to the dock by rotting rope, rust lacing their sides - Nick gave them a cursory inspection as he forced himself to carry Ellis up the hill, dubious.

"We'll check to see if those boats work.." Rochelle offered as she cocked a hip tiredly. Nick spared her a glance, and it was all the gambler could do not to frown. "You two check that boathouse out and see if there's anything in there."

Am I crazy, or does she keep putting us together all of a sudden? … No, I'm just being paranoid. The conman didn't question her, though, merely nodding and shrugging his grip on Ellis' knees a little sturdier. "River's pretty fast. Don't know if we can paddle them over, if the engines don't work."

Coach shrugged at that, sighing a bit wearily. "We'll see." he gruffed simply, stepping past them and leading the way toward the dock, Rochelle moving forward after him.

Nick exhaled simply, walking toward the slightly run-down building with an interested gaze. Ellis held tight to his neck, looking around, adjusting his cap with a carefully lifted shoulder. "We ain't doin' too bad, eh, Nick? 'Specially considerin' the whole bridge-blown-up thing!"

The gambler snorted a bit, stepping up to the building's door and rolling back his weight onto his heels. "Careful, kiddo, I'd keep from saying too many things like that... karma, I told you before.." He gently pushed on the hick's knees, letting him down slowly.

Ellis cautiously climbed down from Nick's back, a slight flush darting over the bridge of his nose. He very gingerly settled onto his feet, standing with a slight wariness and delicacy. He flashed a smile when Nick cocked a brow at him. "'M fine."

Nodding simply, Nick turned back to the door and tried the handle. A displeased noise left him when it failed to turn, the door refusing to budge. He gave it a few extra yanks, aware of Ellis' gaze on him, then snapped a simple, "Goddamn door."

A hand swiped his crowbar from its safe holster under his belt, twirling the thing once before
jamming its end between the door and the threshold. He smirked over his shoulder at Ellis. "Told you this would be handy."

The kid grinned and scratched at his head through his cap, watching a little curiously as Nick thrust his weight into the crowbar, cracking the door open with a loud snap as the doorjam that was holding it shut broke easily.

It nearly broke its hinges, too, and Nick reflexively darted a little to the side, clearly expecting it to collapse atop him just like the shed had done to Ellis. It simply sagged to one side, though, retaining its place in the threshold.

Ellis burst into a loud guffaw, covering his mouth with a wrist to try and stifle it. "Karma." he teased sweetly.

Nick's eyes rolled, darting a severe glare at him even as his mouth twitched into a smirk. "Smartass." he grunted, shoving the Georgian's cap down on his face before stepping through the door, ignoring the startled laughter he left in his wake.

It turned out to be more a shack than a boathouse, though the darkened and cramped space was devoid of any life. There was a dingy cot against one wall, a few shelves stuffed with trinkets, books, and fishing equipment, a single-chair, a lonely table - and, to Nick's extreme pleasure, what looked like an old gas stove in the middle. He strode quickly to it, bending forward to examine the knobs uncomprehendingly.

Nick spoke over his shoulder without looking, examining the coil in the center of the metal stove. There was a propane tank hooked up to the side, and the used his foot to kick it a little, hearing it slosh. It wasn't empty. "This might actually work. Oh Christ, I could really go for a hot meal right now... oh, something hot at ALL.. I do not fucking enjoy this 'roughing it' shit."

He heard Ellis chuckle gently behind him, not paying attention as he found a dial on the back. Twisting it, he could hear the soft hiss of gas escaping, but when he looked for a starter, there was nothing.

"Damnit. I think this is old-fashioned or something.. there's no flame. If I hadn't used up all my matches..."

Admittedly losing some of his enthusiasm under the new obstacle, Nick grunted, reaching out to shut off the gas rather than waste it. He straightened and turned around, scowl starting up - turning straight into Ellis.

The Georgian had tipped his hat far back on his head so the bill stuck up, and Nick's already started half-step settled their faces so close their noses brushed. The conman was startled, quickly settling and narrowing his eyes slightly in examination on Ellis' wide blue ones.

Ellis was red in the face before he'd even turned around, Nick could see it in the light drifting in from the doorway - and the kid didn't step back, just lifted his shoulders a little.

It hadn't been an accident.

Smirking lightly and slowly putting his hands back onto the front edge of the stove without moving his face, Nick lowered his voice to a ghosting whisper. "... you're awful forward for a good little Southern boy."

The word barely finished themselves on his lips before Ellis leaned himself forward, eyes shutting as he nestled his mouth to Nick's and bravely kissed him. The soft and yielding plush of his lips set
a strong contrast to the stubble that scraped pleasantly against Nick's skin as the conman let Ellis do it, feeling the anxious shudder of warm breath dust against his cheek as the younger man's air escaped him.

Nick turned his head a few inches after a moment to break the kiss. He hummed simply in expectation and gazed half-lidded toward the doorway.

Ellis spoke up quickly, visibly embarrassed but oddly determined. He took a few steps back and dropped his chin to inspect his feet as he pulled his lips in to lick them. "Thanks fer savin' me back there..."

Nick wanted to smirk and scowl all at once. Ellis was clouding his judgement with those blue eyes and drawled voice - he was like this spot of warmth, and Nick was cold and sore. The intimacy pushed him so out of himself. How long had it been since he'd flirted like this...

And with a man, no less - that outright alarmed him.

"Sure, kiddo." he returned, turning away from him and kneeling in front of the cast-iron stove. He examined it, but didn't really look at it. He just knew he didn't want to look at Ellis, let alone meet his gaze. "It's not the first time."

Ellis smiled, with that warm blush and tipping his head in slight defiance, even where Nick couldn't see it. His tone went cocky, squinting faintly. "'Ey, I saved yers a few times, too..."

Nick stifled a laugh, turning his head to examine his surroundings instead, mulling over how to get a spark on the pilot. "You generally got me in trouble in the first place, too, kiddo." His wandering attention let him catch a sideglance at the younger man.

The smile on Ellis' face was glowing - stupidly pleased. He tugged his cap back into place, bashfully straightening his shirt, and shrugged up a shoulder against his jaw. "Let's see if we can find some way tuh start the stove up, Nick... I'd like somethin' hot, too."

The gambler nodded in agreement, smirking as he stepped away from the stove to kneel down in front of one of the couple shelves and start digging through it. Ellis hovered a little behind him, wary of kneeling or crouching. Every time Nick glanced at him, that stupid smile was still lingering.
Chapter 41

The smell of warming stew that started to encroach over the inside of the shack was one of the most wonderful things Nick had smelled in his entire life. Any other day, he would've looked at the contents - beef and potatoes, he thought, or at least some attempt to mimic them - with nothing but disgust.

That day, however, he couldn't have begun to care.

Not only had they managed to light the stove (Ellis found a metal file, and striking it with his axe had shot enough sparks to do the job) which he stood in front of now, stirring the four simultaneously heating cans of stew one by one with a pen they'd also found rummaging around… but Coach and Rochelle had walked back in with even better news: one of the boats was working.

"I want a shower." Rochelle complained lightly, gently beating her boots against the corner of the open door to try and shake muck free, seated just inside the shack. Coach was relaxing on the cot in the corner, Ellis having found a careful perch on the edge of the table nearby, swinging his boots slowly.

The shack was a little cramped, but they arranged themselves quickly. No one really argued when Nick grabbed the cans from the backpack and started to cut them open somewhat messily with the sharper end of his crowbar. His hunger was visible enough in the determined force of his motions that it seemed smart just to stay back.

"You could go take a dip in the river, Ro'." Ellis suggested cheerily, playing affectionately with his cap and twirling it a bit on a finger. He spun it, over and over, catching it every time it wobbled and nearly fell.

She snorted lightly, shaking her head and putting down her boots in favor of gently rubbing at her socked, wet feet, sighing. ".You're welcome to it, sweetie."

"Even I'm not that desperate." Nick stated simply with a small half-laugh, leaning forward to hover his face over the cans with a hungry sigh as his stomach gave a tense grumble. The ineffective, slow heat of the old stove was only starting to curl up through the tin.

Ellis noticed, resting his cheek against his shoulder and watching the gambler's impatient shifting. "Jeez, Nick. You usually snub yer nose at everythin' we've been eatin'."

"He likes complainin', that's all, son. Finally got too hungry to bother." Coach commented with a chuckle from his relaxed recline on the cot, hands settled on the bulge of his gut.

The kid opened his mouth, looking a little defensive, but Nick spoke first in annoyance and overrode him. He could tell Ellis was going to stand up for him - and that was not something he needed. "I can bitch if you want, Coach. I got plenty in reserve."

The big man cracked an eye open, glancing at him in consideration. After a moment, he chuckled again, settling his eyes back closed. "I take yo' point." Battle avoided, Nick leaned down and dipped a fingertip to the surface to one of the stew cans, popping it into his mouth with an almost lusty eye-roll.

It honestly didn't taste that bad.

"So, Rochelle," the conman prompted without turning around, casually cocking his hip to settle his
weight into a slight lean. She looked up at him curiously and a little warily, not completely certain of his intent. Nick didn't make small talk - that was supposed to be Ellis' job. "Been meaning to ask you about something."

Turning around in her sit and resting her back against the threshold of the door, Rochelle pulled her legs into a crossed position and returned to rubbing her feet. Her brows lifted just a bit, interested. "Uhm, okay."

Smirking slightly and turning his head to glance at her over his shoulder, Nick lifted a brow.

"Boyfriend?"

Rochelle immediately lowered her head, more startled than embarrassed, straightening her spine a little and lifting hands to adjust her hairtie. "Jeez, suit... I didn't even really think you'd paid any attention when I mentioned it before."

"I pay attention when women turn me down. Ego."

Ellis perked up curiously, unable to stifle himself - though Coach didn't even open his eyes. It obviously wasn't news to him, Nick noted. "Oah, you got a boyfriend, Ro'? Man, how come yuh never mentioned that none?"

She laughed gently and shrugged, gaze softening on her knees. "It's not really a good time to be thinking about that kind of stuff, sweetie. I don't even know if he's... okay. Although I'd like to think if I can make it, he could too."

The mechanic seemed to think on that, head gently lowering to scratch at his head in consideration. He responded in somewhat chagrined apology. "I guess I don't got nobody tuh be real worried about. Whut with Keith gettin' my mama 'n' himself tuh the evac. Y'all do."

Rochelle waved him off quickly, shaking her head with a smile. "I'm glad you don't, sweetie. Don't feel bad, okay? We have other things to be thinking about."

Deciding the soup was hot enough, Nick circled a hand over a can with either one and picked them up somewhat carefully. The bottoms were hot, so he held them tenderly by the very top rim, avoiding cutting himself on the ragged opening. He turned on a heel, stepping over to lean down next to Rochelle and offer it down in front of her face.

"Not right now we don't." he pointed out, smirking.

She rolled her eyes gently and took the can from him, sniffing at it with a small smile before her gaze moved back up. "Do you actually care, or are you just trying to bother me?"

"Bother you? When have I ever done that?" Not even bothering to mask his smirk, Nick hoisted up a shoulder and turned to start walking over toward the reclined Coach, offering out the other stew can. Ellis had gotten up behind him and gone to get his own, rather quiet. "I'm a goddamn saint."

The big man accepted the can with a gruff nod, though no words passed between them. He sat slightly up, adjusting on the creaking cot, and resigned to sipping from the stew can with a fairly morose expression. Nick rolled his eyes silently, annoyed, but merely turned away to sit himself on the table's edge that Ellis had abandoned.

"Alright, alright." Rochelle acquiesced with a shake of her head, laughing faintly and turning herself to relax more against the threshold of the door. Ellis trodded back across the shack with his can. When he saw Nick had taken his spot, he squinted a little - to which Nick didn't do more than
raise a brow in challenge.

Ellis relented, though, hitching up his coveralls carefully and scooching down against the wall to sit right next to Rochelle.

"His name is Jacob. We've dated on and off since college."

Hungrily taking a large swallow straight from his can, a little disoriented by the thick and vaguely tinny broth, Nick boredly watched her from a distance. He only fractionally paid attention, more interested in sipping without slicing his lips on the rim.

"On'n off?" Ellis prompted, far more curious. Blue eyes blinked raply at Rochelle underneath his cap, blindly taking a swig from his can and swiping his mouth with a wrist as he chewed obliviously.

Rochelle lifted her shoulders in a gentle motion as she flexed her toes in their bootless freedom. She seemed slightly conflicted, some kind of dilemma reading in the depths of her tone. "I, um.. I struggled a lot with getting a job and trying to make my way into a news station. I had to put it before him a lot."

Nick snorted slightly, chewing on a small piece of chewy beef and eyeing the can as he judged it at least edible. He sniped sarcastically, "Ooh, jealous house-husband. The drama."

Glancing at him like she might throw one of her boots, Rochelle rolled her eyes. "He wasn't 'jealous'... I did put him second a lot. Missed dates, long nights... he never really got used to it, and it frustrated him sometimes."

"Yer still together, though, right? Yuh must like each other a whole lot." Ellis - stupidly optimistic as always - pointed out, grinning goofily under his cap. Rochelle couldn't help but laugh at him, charmed all over again, reaching out to gently poke the tip of his nose.

"Mhm. He's a really sweet guy. Sorta serious, unlike you, but he stands up for me. Plus, he's got a cute butt."

Nick interrupted with a mocking grate to his voice, entertained, the warmth spreading through his core making him feel inexpressibly better. He forgot how good it felt to eat a cooked meal, even if this barely qualified. "How's Jakey-boy feel about you rushing away to say hello to the nice zombies all alone?"

Rochelle began to sigh slightly, expression raw with the nerve Nick struck so unerringly well. Ellis squinted at her, head tilting, and she let a hand set on his knee. "Not too good... and he just thought it was a flu. He didn't want me to go at all, but.. the opportunity was just too good, at the time. I thought it was gonna be my big break. Sure wish he'd tied me down or something."

"He's gotta be worried sick thinkin' about'ch'ya!" Ellis scratched at his head, scrunching up his nose in a bothered look.

She started to frown gently, pushing it away with an exhale. "Aren't we all.." She flashed him a smile instead, rubbing the knee under her palm and leaning back to take a long sip. "You have any girlfriends, sweetie?"

Ellis almost immediately laughed, Nick fighting a smirk as he muffled it against his can. The conman noticed those blue eyes darting toward him but shying away from actually meeting gazes. He looked nervous.
The concept Ellis thought he'd care was a little.. disarming, but Nick dismissed it as best he could.

"Um.. a few, but nothin' too big."

A blush settled across the bridge of his nose, gently embarrassed. He scratched it with a fingertip. "Muh buddy Keith was always real big on tryin' tuh get me datin', so he'd set me up. Never turned out good."

Rochelle's smile turned to a little bit of a grin, leaning in teasingly. "Blind dates? Got plenty of those from my old girlfriends. Cute boy like you, I'm shocked they let you go."

Quietly, swirling his stew can with a sated lick of his lips, Nick quipped, "He must have picky cousins."

Coach snorted in disapproval from the cot, a gruff sound. The gambler didn't even bother to look, smirking as Ellis' blush darkened and he quickly uttered in his own defense, "That ain't even cool, man.. I just didn't like it much, that's all... wanted tuh meet a girl on muh own, y'know? Fall in love or - or somethin'."

Nick glanced away. His smirk remained, but something dissatisfied settled in the back of his head. He couldn't quite pick it apart, and he didn't try too hard, settling for annoyance. The words came out rather critical. "Hrmpf. The dream of every prepubescent girl."

It made Ellis duck his head, hiding under the bill of his cap.

Rochelle cocked a brow in his direction, disapprovingly, shaking her head. "Be nice, suit. It's sweet, you jackass."

She turned to pat Ellis' knee gently, affectionately reassuring the youngest of them; "Ignore him, sweetheart. He's just a cranky old bat."

"S'okay, Ro'." Ellis flashed her a smile underneath his cap, confidently. She blinked, getting the distinct feeling she'd missed something - Ellis had this knowing look on his face, embarrassed but unbothered. It made her smile back, hesitantly.

Rochelle cocked a brow in his direction, disapprovingly, shaking her head. "Be nice, suit. It's sweet, you jackass." She turned to pat Ellis' knee gently, affectionately reassuring the youngest of them; "Ignore him, sweetheart. He's just a cranky old bat."

Coach grunted wearily as he heard that, rolling his weight to get feet on the ground. He tossed his empty can to the floor, rubbing the back of his bald head carefully. "Mmhm, son. Sounds like a damn good idea 'bout now."

"Restless, Coach?" Nick muttered somewhat abrasively, setting down his can and sliding to his feet. "Figured you'd be the one to vote we rest longer, old man."

Oddly, all the ex-football player did was chuckle. The lack of reciprocation made Nick drop to a simmer, silent as they somewhat reluctantly gathered together their weapons from where they'd laid them around the shack.

Rochelle spoke up as she spun her frying pan in a hand, watching Ellis affectionately shrug his shotgun onto a shoulder, checking the gun over. He seemed well enough. "I'm a little worried about this whole boat thing. Have any of you actually worked one before?"

Coach and Ellis both nodded in unison. It made her relax, her eyes rolling slightly in relief. "Oh, good. I thought we were just jumping on it and jabbing at buttons."

"That sounds exactly like us." Nick muttered sardonically, sighing slightly as he spun his crowbar like a cane just at his hip, stepping out of the shack and stretching. The canopy ended just above them, pleasantly letting sunlight in from the late afternoon sky and dripping heat down on an otherwise cold landscape. The fog had melted somewhat, though it still clung to the river's surface.
here and there.

"Har har." Ellis retorted as he rested his axe on his shoulder, tromping close after the conman. The kid almost excitedly started toward the docks, not waiting for Rochelle and Coach to get out. Nick eyed him, considering following, but let it be after a moment.

Turning and waiting for them, Nick sarcastically lifted a brow. He spoke as the two filed out of the shack, still toying with his crowbar. He still had the burden of his near-useless submachine gun just as Coach had his shotgun - maybe they'd find more ammo.

"Over the river and through the shithole swamp - or something like that."

"Woods, honey. It's woods." Rochelle sighed a bit, though she was smiling, her head turning when she noticed Ellis was already down at the docks. She jogged down the slope, boots slipping a little on the perpetually soggy ground. Nick and Coach walked after her, and as they gingerly stepped onto the rickety dock built out over the water, it creaked tiny complaints.

Ellis hopped off the edge of the dock with a soft 'hup,' landing with a bit of a wobble in the base of one of the motorboats. It bobbed on the water unsteadily, hitched to the dock by a gritty rope, but he balanced on it as he dropped down to a crouch and inspected the engine.

"I really don't want to get on that." Nick muttered, halting a few feet back from the edge of the dock and staring mistrustfully at the motorboat. Coach snorted as he walked ahead of him, walking close and sighing down at the boat.

"Rather swim?" the big man retorted, glancing as Rochelle stepped carefully off the dock to join Ellis on the boat with a little more hesitancy. She turned back to hold her hands out to him, offering help onto it.

Nick didn't utter a word in response, moodily side-stepping to stare with disdain as Coach made the step to get on the boat. It certainly rocked the boat more than Rochelle or Ellis had - the mechanic gave a little 'whoa' before he caught himself as it wobbled, and he looked terribly chagrined when Coach gave him a dry look.

The conman couldn't drudge up the humor to laugh at the scene, irately examining the boat as it continued to wobble while Coach got seated down on one of the plank seats, looking disgruntled.

"Someone tell me why we're doing this again?"

Rochelle broke into a slight laugh, settling down next to Coach and watching Ellis fiddle with the engine, turning a few knobs and adjusting the throttle. "Good lord, suit, just get in already."

He scowled at her, scoffing a frustrated noise before clenching his fists and jumping the short distance onto the boat. His footing slipped slightly as he landed a little short, heel half landing on the rim of the boat.

Fingers clutched the knee of his slacks - a strong grip, steadying him firmly. Ellis', of course, and when he glanced down, the kid grinned just a little up at him underneath his cap.

Nick smacked him on the top of the head just enough to make him duck slightly away from it, grumbling, "Watch it."

Ellis chuckled quietly to himself, releasing the conman's slacks, and Nick found himself struggling not to go for a second thwap. He resisted the urge, just shaking his head and shoving himself down to sit on the edge of the boat, locking his grip tight on the rim and leaning forward.
"This baby needs a name!" the excitable Southerner chirped, patting the boat's motor and standing up. He jumped back off the boat, crouching down to uncoil the rope from one of the dock posts, grinning a bit at the other three as he held the rope with a waggle. "Whut y'all think?"

Coach was not wholly entertained. His reaction made Ellis squirm just a little, guiltily. "I think you should get'chyo ass back in here an' fire it up is what I think."

"..awwh, Coach, m'just sayin' - baby needs a name if we're gonna be ridin' it!"

The big man sighed, seeing Ellis was stilling with a slight pout out of his lower lip. "Son, we're ditchin' it the moment we get to the other shore. What's it matter?"

Nick interrupted before Ellis could respond, rubbing his forehead with a sigh and leaning down into the boat's bottom. He looked like he was getting a headache, a slightly unsettled scowl on his face. "Oh let the dumbass name it, goddamn...

Rochelle giggled faintly despite herself, crossing her arms with a slight shiver. She prompted, "How about Lucky?"

Ellis slapped his chest pleasantly, tossing the rope free with a smile half-shaded underneath the bill of his cap. "Fits 'bout right! A'ight, Lucky it is. Lucky, thank you fer yer service!" He jumped back onto the boat, pressing and twisting a few switches on the engine and grabbing hold of the ripchord. He yanked hard, flinching a bit as the engine sputtered and then kicked, rutting loudly into life.

"Loud bitch." Nick muttered quietly, lowering down in the boat and eyeing Ellis suspiciously as the mechanic settled down, grabbing hold of the throttle. The boat had already started to drift on the flowing river, threatening to get swept away.

Loud enough to catch attention, and a few straggling zombies floundered into view, scattered up and down the shore. They didn't seem to understand how to reach them, and one or two simply fell into the river.

They never surfaced.

Ellis twisted, easing the boat into a shuddering first few rollicks forward as the engine kicked up a notch. With Ellis turning the throttle carefully, the boat rotated slowly to face the opposite shore. Cranking up the engine and twisting the motor into gear, 'Lucky' broke forward through the river's flow to skate forward with a rumbling rattle of gas.

Smoke drifted out from the rivets of the engine, but Ellis seemed unconcerned. Nick forced himself to ignore it, though it unsettled him plenty, sighing heavily as he shifted somewhat uncomfortably on the edge of the boat.

Water speckled up as the boat skated gently through it, wet droplets hitting Nick's back. He looked over his shoulder, staring irately at the water like he could threaten it into stopping.

"See? Not half bad. Good job, Ellis." Rochelle commented, pleased, turning her head to look toward the other, approaching shore.

"If only Lucky were a yacht." Nick grumbled, earning a laugh from both Rochelle and Ellis.

Ellis tsked, though, grinning gently at Nick. "Careful, man - second strike. Don't go insultin' a lady's honor. S'my job tuh protect it - gentleman 'n' all."
Nick snorted, starting to roll his eyes though a smirk risked at his features. He'd just relaxed his fingers from their whitening grip on the edge of the boat when the aged motor gave a sudden sputter, the whole length of the boat bouncing slightly with the kick.

"Fu-"

His center of balance went completely askew, and before he could scrabble for a grip, he lost his tremulous seat on the edge of the motorboat. The conman went backwards into the river, tipping with a heavy snarl, and though he felt Rochelle grab for his arm, her fingers slipped.

He hit the water with a flat splash, the cold sending a shock up his spine, and the liquid seemed to open up to try and swallow him. He quickly kicked out cloth-swathed limbs in reflex, bobbing straight to tread water, and he heard three voices laughing hysterically over his head.

"Oh mah gawd, that is the funniest shit," he could hear Ellis' stupid voice, cracking with his laughter. "Man - I'm sorry -"

He took a deep gasp as his mouth bobbed above the water - and then he lost a few inches, water swirling up over his face and making him shut his eyes and clamp his jaw shut. The water had no surfaces, no handholds - he couldn't reach the boat, either, fingertips snatching at nothing.

There was a startling clarity to his thought just before the water snapped shut over his face and he sunk, blindly grasping and clawing hands doing nothing at all.

*All the things I know how to do, and swimming isn't one of them. My fucking luck.*

He could feel himself sinking, no particular sense of how fast or which direction as the muggy water darkened his surroundings. The water suctioned around his ears, silencing all noise but a constant, brutal pulsing against his eardrums.

Every limb hunted for some sense of a solid surface, mind calm as he focused on holding his breath and not daring to let a single gasp threaten his sealed lips. Surely they'd notice - eventually - that he wasn't coming up. He clamped a hand over his nose, feeling like the curling motion made him spin.

Or maybe it didn't. He couldn't even tell, dizziness disorienting everything but the instinct to paddle blindly, not even certain of the direction he was facing - or if it was working.

The sudden grasp of something on his ankle made him seize, feeling a violent drag upward - or he figured upward. He scrabbled toward it, grabbing at his own body to try and push against the weight of the water toward the force.

The grip switched as he got closer, and an arm wrapped around his torso, a body suddenly shoving up against his. There was nothing to be done but grab onto it in return, spitting out a bubbled breath and feeling his chest compress tightly.

He felt legs kicking and the other arm swiping through the water next to him, and the dragging thrust pulled them both up. They hit the surface with a splash, two voices gasping, and Nick wasn't surprised in the slightest to find himself clutching onto Ellis.

The gambler's ears were still full of water, but even as he hacked for air, he could hear voices. They were unintelligible, and he ignored them, blinking his eyes and gripping tightly into Ellis' shirt as the kid dragged him through the water.

They bumped against the boat, and three pairs of hands were suddenly on him, all yanking and
gripping, pulling him up into the boat. He felt the rim of the boat jam against his stomach, scrambling at it and rolling unceremoniously into the bottom.

His ears crackled as they drained of water, the voices coming clearer to him as he shoved his elbows against the bottom of the boat and sat up, shaking his head out furiously and touching hands onto his drenched body uselessly. "Christ, are you okay, Nick honey?"

Rochelle dropped down to crouch almost on his knees, bending in and reaching to cup his cheek worriedly. He immediately recoiled, spitting sideways as he tasted something gritty. "Fine!" was all he could really manage before he coughed again, crawling slightly backwards to escape her as he noticed Ellis hauling himself up into the boat.

"Man, I feel so bad!" Ellis was already apologizing, scrambling up over the rim and plopping down with a wet slap, shivering a little. He'd ditched his hat before jumping in after Nick, so his curls draped freely about his ears and forehead, soaked through. "I - didn't.. - You - .. Man! I was laughin'..'"

Nick groaned slightly, sinking down and squeezing his hand over his scalp to try and stop the droplets trying to roll down his features. He didn't even want to listen to it, let alone encourage the conversation. "El.. shut up."

Coach's voice came from behind him - chuckling. "Can't swim, eh, Nick?"

The temptation to turn around and punch him was astounding. He decided against it. Only, as Nick reached to paw at himself, realizing that his submachine gone was gone but his crowbar was still solid in his belt and his Magnum was still strapped to his thigh, the unexpected happened: Rochelle defended him.

"Coach, don't you dare, or I'll throw you over the edge!"

The big man was soundly silenced. Nick was sure it was the water in his brain, but he felt like turning around and sticking out his tongue. Instead he just collapsed, resting against the side of the boat and blearily coughing a few times.

Ellis crouched to where he could reach the throttle, gently pushing the boat to rumble into a forward motion again from its idle. The river had been pushing them downstream with every moment they spent still. He leaned in toward Nick, frowning hugely as he inspected the half-drowned conman. The younger man was just as drenched as Nick was - and they'd just started to dry from the rain, too. "Man, are you okay?"

"There.. aren't any.. goddamn rivers.. in the city." the conman muttered out, defensively. For some ungodly reason, Ellis burst out laughing.

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Even worse, Nick heard a chuckle spill out of himself in response. He went limp in defeat, and when he rolled his head, he found his forehead resting on Rochelle's bicep. He didn't even fight it, just relaxed there for a few beats.

She stayed still - like someone greeting an unfamiliar, suspicious cat.

"I guess you ended up taking a dip, Nick... how'd you like your shower?.." she questioned gently down to him. All he could do was shake his head, wanting to snap and lacking the will.

'Lucky' bumped the shore of the river with a resounding thud, engine growling as she hit resistance. Had Nick looked up and seen the comforting towers of a cityscape, or even just a
regular house - or at that point, anything dry and not green - he might've not whined.

Pulling away from Rochelle's arm to see nothing but more swamp, however, made him give a
sharp, "Fuck me."
Nick was blisteringly silent as the four slogged through the new swamplands. These were darker and wetter than the other side of the river - where there had been light foliage, there was now wicked bramble that caught on their clothes and scored irritated lines over exposed skin.

His sarcastic, caustic griping was far better to Ellis than his current unyielding silence. Silent thought froze his expression into a deadpanned look of seething frustration, and though Ellis walked close behind him, the conman paid him absolutely no attention.

He didn't, on the other hand, chase Ellis off.

Ellis took some comfort from that, biting onto his lips in attempts to keep himself quiet as he struggled to figure out what to say. Ellis was sure Nick's fall - and now his foul mood - had been his fault, and he whimpered ever-so-quietly with guilt every few steps, watching the conman intently.

The swamp was miserable, even Ellis had to admit it, upper bodies threatened by the razor-sharp limbs of thickets and lower bodies struggling through ankle-high and deeper muck. Nick's clothes had gotten thoroughly soaked by the drop in the river, but now his already wet slacks were gaining a fast-growing shade of green as they soaked up algae and swamp-water.

Ellis felt a little hitch of hope, watching Nick use his crowbar to push away an arm of bramble. He noticed that he held it a little longer than necessary - without looking back, or even pausing in his steps - so the branch broke and flopped limply instead of snapping back in his wake, potentially to smack in Ellis' face.

It couldn't have been on accident - maybe Nick wasn't mad at him.

So he tried.

"'Ey, Nick... y'know, it don't look like there're any zombies over here. There was some back on the other side, but I ain't seen hide nor hair so far."

The Northerner didn't say a word, pushing forward silently and giving a soft hiss as a bramble caught him in the cheek, drawing a small cut along his cheekbone. He ducked away from it, continuing onward.

Ellis fidgeted his hands a bit on the shaft of his axe, adjusting his weight and using the red metal head of it to push away a branch so he could slip past. He cleared his throat gently, trying again. "Yuh think them blowin' the bridge worked? Maybe we'll have an easy go of it, if they cut 'em off..."

Even throwing in a risky optimistic statement Nick always seemed to bite his head off at - 'karma' and 'tempting fate' and all that - didn't prompt a response. The conman just kept on moving forward, taking little spurts of unvoiced frustration out on brambles that snagged at his clothing.

Less worried and more perturbed now, Ellis scratched at his waist, plucking out a piece of branch that had literally stuck to his shirt as he passed it. He held his breath for a few beats, watching Nick, then felt more words escape him like so much air from a speared balloon.

"... Not that I'd mind zombies or nothin'. I mean, yuh gotta admit, it's cool how good we are. Zombie killin' badasses."
Nothing. Not even a glance.

"I can't wait tuh tell Keith all these stories. He'll be so damn jealous, y'know?"

Silence.

"Cept fer the couple times we been hurt, we've been doin' damn awesome."

He couldn't even rile Nick into responding. Ellis could practically hear his retort - "Yes, Overalls, because nearly getting your spine fucking ripped out or getting crushed into a pile of mush by a truck-throwing zombie is just goddamn awesome." Strange how clearly he could imagine the conman's voice.

And then reminding himself that Nick was still utterly silent made him sigh.

The breath left him loudly and frustrated, though he hadn't meant to do so audibly. It just slipped out, and his gaze dropped to inspect the ground and find his footing a little better.

Getting his head bitten off would've definitely been better than silence. He thought Nick must've been fuming about the dive he'd taken - or embarrassed, even. He wanted to distract the gambler from thinking about it, but he couldn't very well do that if he was getting the cold shoulder.

It was a few steps later, stumbling gently over a stone buried in the ground, that Ellis raised his head again. He nearly tripped over himself when he found Nick's head turned, green eyes absolutely lazered onto his face.

"What?"

The Georgian gawped, brows darting up and weight wobbling as he caught himself. "Uh, what?" he reflexively blurted back, startled. If Nick was annoyed by the repetition, he didn't let on, merely glancing ahead and stepping around a stump in the flooded ground.

"You sighed."

It was flat in its delivery, nothing like the fuming tone Ellis imagined in his head. Nick stated it like he were describing the color of the sky - so matter-of-fact and dull his voice suggested he shouldn't have even had to say it at all. His brow cocked up, expectantly, and Ellis fumbled.

"..uh.. well, yeah. Sorta. Sorry?"

Green eyes rolled slightly, vaguely annoyed. When the conman turned back forward to watch his own advance, Ellis started to deflate a little, thinking he'd be ignored again and he'd lost his chance. Nick talked again, though, a moment later. "And why? Did you get a leak in that airhead of yours or something?"

Furrowing his brows a little, Ellis let out a chuckle, more relieved than offended. "Yuh weren't sayin' anything. I thought you were angry at me again." He hurried his steps slightly, catching up a bit.

Ellis didn't notice when the quickened slosh of his boots splashed the back of Nick's leg with swamp-water, and the conman's shoulders stiffened up. Nick sighed slightly, voice taut but still only superficially annoyed, leaving Ellis still a little bemused by his lack of hostility.

"Since when do you need input from anyone else to talk? Last I checked you were perfectly fine on your own."
The Southerner chuckled again, louder and a little more relaxed this time. He shrugged his shoulders, and pointed out bashfully but with a distinct honesty, "Well, yeah, sure.. when I ain't tryin' tuh get you tuh talk to me.."

Nick glanced back at him, brow cocked, examining him for a lengthy moment as he slogged on. Ellis felt that jump in his pulse at those green eyes and their pierce, aware of a heavy swallow bobbing his head. Turning back before he walked into something, Nick gave a sigh that lilted into a tired half-chuckle at the end.

"Touché."

Biting back a smile, Ellis stomped on a swinging branch before his foot, crushing it into the muck. "So yuh aren't? Mad at me, I mean..

Nick kept his attention forward, voice absent and matter-of-fact. "You didn't make it happen, it just did. I'm soaked and cold, and not all of us have a compulsive desire to talk constantly."

The kid couldn't help but probe, voice gently interested. He felt a little proud that he'd gotten Nick to talk again, even if the conman had up a wall, and he didn't want to let it slip. "...Thinkin' 'bout somethin'?"

Ellis felt a smile flash over his face when Nick responded with an admitting, "Yes." under the loud crashing of Coach breaking through a thick bramble ahead of them with his shovel.

"What?" he risked, almost excitedly.

Nick didn't respond at first, suddenly lost in the effort of gingerly stepping through an area of swampland that threatened, in places, to drop all the way to knee-height. Only dark spots in the muck warned of the sinkholes, and it took focus to edge around them while not, in the same moment, walking facefirst into a branch.

The ground leveled out after a few minutes, the swamp water shallowing. As he relaxed, giving a slightly frustrated shake of his head as he caught a glance of his own state, Nick did give a response.

"Hawaii."

Ellis wasn't sure if he was deflecting or just messing with him, but he didn't argue. Nick didn't want to talk about it, he guessed, and that was okay. Instead, he snorted, adjusting his cap on his head with a wrist. "So long as yuh ain't angry. I was just worried is all."

The conman scoffed faintly, sending a dubious look behind himself and shaking his head. "I'm about as fine as anyone else in a swamp, during the apocalypse, freshly near-drowned. ... Ooohh-fucking-wait...

Ellis couldn't help but laugh, grin lopsided. There was that scathing tone he'd imagined, and oddly, he felt relieved to be at the mocking other end of it. Before he even knew what was happening, their voices started a soft, tumbling back-and-forth. Subtle amusement laced the faux-argument, even in Nick's mocking.

"Ey, I'm wet'n'shit, too."

Ellis could see Nick's eyes roll by the toss of his head. "Oh, please. You practically enjoy being dirty, you redneck."
"I don't enjoy it, I just don't mind."

"Hmpf. You act like there's a difference."

"Yer just too uptight, yuh Northern slick."

Nick outright laughed, pushing away a branch with his forearm as he walked past. This time, he did let it go. It whipped Ellis in the face, but there were no brambles, so it was just a dull smack that made him blink a few times, startled. "I'm not going to apologize for being tidy."

Ellis snorted lightly back at him. "It ain't 'tidy'... it's 'O-C-D.'"

The conman wasn't amused in the slightest, shaking his head. "As if. If I were that bad I'd be hyperventilating in this shithole. It just pisses me off."

"Uh-huh." Ellis dubiously shot back, grinning at the back of Nick's head. "Bet if you got yer hands on a bar of soap right now, you'd try'n make love tuh it."

"Don't be so dirty, Overalls." Nick scathingly chided him, a smirk sneaking into his voice when he tacked on; "I'd marry it first."

Ellis broke into laughter, shaking his head with a disbelieving edge. It almost surprised him that Nick would make a joke like that. He stumbled slightly over a rock hidden under the surface of the muck, catching his balance with a lifted hand and careful step. "Woo-ee, yuh really are crazy, man."

Nick smirked more, shrugging up a shoulder as he touched a fingertip gently onto the slice across his cheek. It came away with a little line of blood, but he just flicked his hand away. "Says the hick who's goddamn enjoying the apocalypse."

Ellis paused for a moment at that, thinking, before his response escaped him in a gentle mumble. He felt a little stupid, bashfully scritching at the back of his neck. "... I'm really only enjoyin' it 'cause I've met y'all. We're like a family or somethin'."

He felt himself shrink a little when Nick laughed sharply, shaking his head. "Aww, just because you met us? How adorable."

Shifting his fingers on the shaft of his axe, Ellis somewhat pointedly responded, "... well, whut're the chances you'd ever'uv lasted this long around me otherwise?"

There was silence for a too-long moment as they trudged forward through the swamp. Ellis felt, at first, a sense of pleasure at winning an argument and shutting the older man up. However - the longer the silence crept on, the more Ellis had to consider his own words.

They were true, weren't they? Without the apocalypse to force them together, Nick probably wouldn't have hung out with Ellis. Let alone become his friend. Let alone … whatever they were now. He wasn't sure if it bothered him or not.

Fate was funny, anyway - there would always be 'what if's.

Ellis might've mused on it awhile, but his head bounced up when the conman hissed out a short, "Overalls, hurry up." He'd lagged behind in his thought. A flickered blush darted over his nose, lowering his cap slightly and hitching his axe onto his shoulder to high-step it to catch up.

All three of them had stopped, watching him jog closer. He screwed his brows up a little in
confusion as he looked between Nick, Rochelle, and Coach, surprised they'd halted for him.

Only they hadn't.

Nick was the one to bring it to his attention, gesturing forward without looking directly at him. His tone was scathing, but quietly so. "Good job, Ace. You tempted fate yet again and it bit us in the ass."

Sure enough, the swamp ahead of them was spattered with zombies that hadn't quite yet noticed them. They were black with muck and blood, crawling and struggling around like dogs, snarling and clawing at one another with more hostility than usual.

Rochelle sighed, exhausted as she tossed her frying pan slightly between her hands and wiped sweat off her brow from the muggy swamp air. "... maybe we can go quietly and avoid some of them?" she pointed out hopefully, craning her head to try and get a grip on how many there were.

Nick's sigh spoke for itself, not that the conman could resist a cynical elucidation.

"As. Fuckin'. If."
Crowbar met flesh with a sickening crack, and the snarled recess of the male zombie's eager mouth tore open into a wide gash as its face split in half. Nick swept past the falling corpse, quick to reorient himself as another one flung itself through the muck toward him.

"We'll just sneak past them, she says." Nick growled loudly, catching sight of his three companions fighting out of the corners of his eyes.

The conman had to jump back slightly when the zombie leapt at him, jamming his crowbar straight into its neck as it practically tried to tackle him. They both stumbled, Nick shoving its weight to the side as fast as he could before it landed on him. "Quiet as a mouse, she says."

Jerking his weapon free from the dying thing with a shudder, he returned to slogging forward, jaw tight. "Avoid them, she says."

"Nick, will you hush and keep moving?" Rochelle pleaded, smashing her frying pan into the outstretched arms of an attacking zombie, breaking them both at the elbows. A second hit to the face, when it failed to stop coming, halted it for good.

"Oh, sure," the gambler scoffed harshly, hearing a bloody squelch behind him and glancing back to see Ellis taking the head clean off a nearby infected with his axe. It went flying then landed somewhere in the muck, joined shortly by its body. "If we all just hush, they'll go away. Because they're blind. And stupid. Congratulations, you've uncovered the secret to surviving the apocalypse. Everyone's saved."

Nick never ran out of energy for sarcasm.

They ran in unsteady zig-zags, no longer having the luxury of picking their way through the swamp brush with the slim but constant flow of zombies their presence was attracting. They had to power through it, and it wasn't easy going.

Nick balked in the middle of pushing through a small wall of vines when Rochelle suddenly gave a loud, "SHIT! Augh!" He struggled to turn around, catching himself on a branch and having to jerk against it to just break it off.

The woman's pink shirt made her immediately visible, muck or not. Nick's brow cocked to see her hunched forward, clawing at her face with one hand while blindly swinging her frying pan with the other. Mud was splattered over her face, completely obscuring her vision.

Agilely skittering around her in the mud was a zombie, completely slathered in the stuff until its slick - and seemingly naked - body had a greenish-brown, almost alien quality. Its yellow eyes shone like lamps out of the dripping plane of its flattened face.

All the other three had time to do was shout before it leapt at her, latching onto her shoulder with hands and curling in to snap down jaws on her arm.

Her scream was an awful and pained sound as the thing bit straight into her tricep, and she jerked a step to the side, stumbling through the muck. There was a hoarse shouting from all three of them, leaping toward her to help.

Nick got halfway when she twisted her weight in a violent, mud-blind jerk, slamming her frying pan into the thing's head with a *SPANG!* that knocked it clear off her upper arm.
It went flying to the ground, landing with a splash in the muck and shrieking a weird, keening growl before suddenly prostrating itself. There was a bubbling squelch as it sunk beneath the surface of what had to be just barely two-foot-deep swampwater, the muck pooling up over its skin, and it disappeared.

Rochelle stumbled to the side, blindly backing away from the subtle bubbling and spilt blood that marked the settling water it had sunk under. Her sloshing footsteps shuddered waves around, and as the other three staggered to stops next to her, the splashes of their passage only made it worse. The disturbance made it hard to see where the creature went.

"Ohhh, fuck.." Rochelle cursed in a groan, nearly dropping her skillet as she tried to wipe her face with that wrist. Her attacked arm stayed limp - the bite was deep, straight into muscle, and blood was already streaking down toward her elbow. "Th-that thing.."

Ellis grabbed her around the waist with one arm, pulling her back more and jamming his axeblade into the ground with a splash of water. He used his hand to help her wipe the mud off her face, Coach and Nick circling them with eyes on the water and a few zombies that had come running at Rochelle's shout.

"Damn thing disappeared!" The big man sounded disbelieving, swiping his shovel through the water testingly after soundly crushing one of the straggling infected with its blade. "Hell's bells.."

Rochelle blinked rapidly as Ellis gingerly wiped her eyes, pulling her face away slightly as her vision cleared, though her eyes still stung furiously. "I'm fine, sweetie.. I'm fine.." She tried to reassure him, turning herself a little against his chest and moving her shoulder a little to blearily get a look at her bite wound.

"It threw mud at me... like it blinded me on purpose. What the hell.."

"We've got to move." Nick stated bluntly, though only after glancing and seeing that the wound was minor. The mudman's disappearance had him nervous, fingers twitching on his crowbar. It wasn't that he didn't see she was injured - but hanging around like sitting ducks for a bite made him antsy.

Ellis shifted uncomfortably on his feet, shaking his head as he gestured to the bruising bite on her arm. The thing had nearly bitten straight through her skin. "She's bleedin', Nick."

Coach, at the same time, started to pull his backpack off his shoulder, reaching for the front pocket. "We'll wrap it quick."

Rocelle started to protest, pulling gently out of Ellis' grip, when Nick's growled voice shut them all down. "We're all bleeding! If we stop everytime one of us gets hurt we'll get shit-all accomplished - this isn't a fucking day hike. We need to keep moving."

She agreed as fast as she could before Coach got angry, nodding her head quickly. "He's right, boys. I'm fine - I'm a woman, not a girl, huh?.. just hand me the pack and I'll wrap it while we walk."

Reluctantly, Coach gave her a stiff nod, adjusting his grip on his shovel and handing the backpack over to her. She tucked her skillet under her good arm, carefully starting to dig through the pack as Nick gestured them on impatiently.

"If yer sure." Ellis agreed gently while he yanked his axe out of the ground, stepping just ahead of her to guide her on as she focused on digging out a bandage roll and wrapping her arm lightly.
Whether they acquiesced to continuing or not, their pace decidedly slowed. Nick didn't seem to have a problem with that, at least, maintaining footsteps that kept him ahead but didn't leave the other three behind, Coach and Ellis sticking close to Rochelle.

"I think it really did that on purpose." she murmured faintly, brows furrowing slightly as she tucked the bandages in on themselves. The bleeding stopped against the gauze, though she held her arm carefully at her side as she packed the roll back up.

Ellis blinked back at her attentively under the bill of his cap, adjusting it momentarily. "What'cha mean, Ro'?'"

The kid's voice did what it always seemed to do; brought a gentle, sisterly smile to her face and made her shake off whatever topic she'd had an instant before. She shook her head subtly and tossed the backpack to Coach. "Nothing, sweetie, forget it... keep an eye on the water, will you? That thing makes me nervous."

Coach hmmphfed quietly, slogging forward with his shovel raised and deepset eyes scanning their surroundings slowly. "Thing disappeared in foot-deep water. You ain't the only one nervous. Hope it gets Nick."

"I'm right fuckin' here." the conman injected from his place only feet away, wielding his crowbar at the sounds of light sloshing ahead that didn't quite match up with their footsteps.

"I know." the big man challenged easily.

Nick rolled his eyes vaguely as he darted around a blocking tree, the thick trunk splattered with moss that dissuaded him from laying a hand on it to balance himself. He nearly stepped right onto the lap of a zombie sitting down on the ground and leaning up against the tree trunk, scraggly and torn clothing tinted green with muck.

It startled him so badly he reflexively slashed his crowbar straight across the thing's face, even after his mind tried to note that the zombie wasn't moving. It flopped limply to the side, neck cracking unenthusiastically as it landed, and a flood of flies swarmed up from the now-uncovered gore that was its back - stripped down to the gleaming white of spine and ribs.

"Jesus..." escaped him, jerking his chin away and forcibly scanning the swamp around them. He cleared his throat slightly, slinging his crowbar vaguely through the air to shake off some blood from the metal. He hoisted it as zombies came springing from the muck further ahead.

He heard footsteps joining him, splashing through the water, and as he slashed at a charging zombie with the curled end of his crowbar, a shovel violently smashed another into the muck beside him. The zombie practically crumpled like a crushed can, and had it not sprinkled him with blood, he'd have found it comical.

"Hoo-eee, them zombies don't got no chance 'gainst us.." Ellis whistled lowly, readying his axe as an infected tried to flank them when they advanced forward through the muck. He took off an arm with a swift swish through the air, but the thing kept coming, snarling as blood gushed down its side from a stumped shoulder.

Rochelle wasn't out of the game, sure enough, because before he could get his axe up again to get a better hit on it as it launched toward him, she smacked it straight on the ear with a *SPANG!* and it went down like a load of rocks.

Ellis gave her a sideways look of admiration, shaking his head. '"Damn, Ro'. You got my 'pology
"fer worryin' bout you, ha-!"

"-ehhehe!"

They all froze up at the intruding cackle. Nick instantly felt his chest tighten, the clammy feel of almost skeletal thighs on the sides of his head all too fresh on his mind.

"Shit." Rochelle quickly cursed, half-spinning as she tried to pinpoint the thing.

Squeaky pants, practically hyperventilating, came in disorienting spurts from all directions. Nick didn't stop walking, forging through the swampwater with a heavy scowl on his features, and the other three followed his lead.

Coach grunted to all of them as he wielded his shovel up, rounded jaw flinching a bit; "Stay close. It gets someone, you get that shit so fast... yo' own head better be spinnin'."

"It can hump someone else's face for once." Nick growled through gritted teeth, shooting a glance as he swore he heard something splash off to his right after a restrained, sobbing hiccup of glee echoed through the swamp. He had - but it was a normal zombie, catching their presence and starting to struggle toward them with a shriek.

Ellis caught that one too, jumping to the side to intercept it before it got to the other three and slamming his axe straight into its chest. He had to kick it off the blade, the zombie struggling as it collapsed to the ground, snapping at the air.

It was underneath the splashing of its flailing limbs that Nick distinctly heard a hacking cough trickling through the foliage. His eyes narrowed slightly, whole spine straightening in alarm. Oh this isn't good.. Rochelle had only enough time to blink at him before an incoherent and gruff bark of a shout startled her out of words.

Whipping around, they saw the considerable bulk of Coach going down fast. He hit the ground with a splash, swinging his shovel wildly in the air as he rolled slightly onto his back, spluttering. The fleshy tongue that was quickly advancing up his leg, twining into the fabric of his pants, went violently taut and started dragging him through the water at an unbelievable pace.

"Tits!" Nick shouted, joined by a "Coach!" from Rochelle, an "Oh mah gawd!" from Ellis, and a suddenly manic fit of laughter from the Jockey still yet hidden. It wouldn't stop, growing louder, absolutely shrieking with agonized hilarity that seemed eerily mocking as all three of them bolted after Coach.

They were losing ground - fast. Within moments, them slowed by the muck and clutter of trees, he was almost yards distanced from them.

The big man grunted in pain as he was slammed over a rock, skidding across the muck effortlessly. He tried to jam his shovel into the ground and stop himself, but all it did was tear the weapon from his fingers. "GET THIS DAMN TONGUE OFF-!" he shouted, enraged even more by the constant chittering glee of the skulking Jockey, only to break off as he saw where the tongue was dragging him.

Nick saw it, too. It was leading him toward - and up - a tree. The probing tip was quickly making its way up the big man's torso, and fast making for his neck. It was going to try and hang him.

That was when Ellis decided to yelp, the sound mixing in with a sudden terrified squeal from the Jockey. Nick heard the thud of weight against weight, and he spun around mid-step, eyes darting narrow.
Ellis was pin-wheeling his arms, losing all momentum as the skeletal creature currently clinging to
the back of his head leaned back hard, dragging nails against his jaw to tip his head back.

"Git- GITTIT-! GITTIT OFF ME!" Ellis yelped in a strangled tone past the bony fingers clutching
at his mouth, nearly stumbling but just barely catching his balance. He didn't have the balance or
the sight to shove the thing off, if he even could. Nick felt an instant of floating indecision.

And then he twisted, skidding in the water, and bolted back towards Ellis with a shouted, "Crush
that fuckin' tongue!" at Rochelle.

"Get Ellis!" was her immediate response, their separating instantaneously agreed upon as they
broke off to run their separate directions. Nick could still hear the big man's weight splashing
around as he tried to slow his passage, but he narrowed his eyes on Ellis as the kid was wheeled to a
near-stop.

Suddenly, that Jockey's terrified, whitened eyes lit up with a bloody glee, and its sobbing, lipless
mouth snapped grinning teeth shut with a yellow sparkle. Blood spilled down its chin when its
warped jaw made its lower teeth jam right into the upper palate of its mouth, and with a strained
'eeeeeee' of absolute bliss, the thing jerked its weight to yank Ellis into movement to the side.

"Gyaah!" the hick burbled, stumbling into an almost jog as he tried desperately to keep upright
against the tipping force. The thing shrieked a laugh as it hunched forward over his face, bending
its head down toward his, and he felt blood dribble onto his features past the hands it had clamped
over his eyes to blind him.

"Overalls!" Nick shouted after him in frustration, catching up but not quite fast enough as the hick
picked up speed. "El, just stop moving!"

He watched the mechanic wobble his arms, startled, and with a violent shove, the Georgian tried to
stop. Nick felt a chill jump up his spine when the zombie suddenly shoved against his head,
twisting and clawing with giggled frustration as he tried to fight it.

The shift of weight sent Ellis falling forward, unable to stop himself, and the Jockey grabbed onto
his head, fingers curling against his neck. It violently jumped its weight onto the backs of his
falling shoulders, riding him to the ground.

Ellis' head went underneath the maybe foot-deep swamp water, the zombie jamming its weight
directly onto the back of his head. He immediately panicked, gooey bubbles exploding around the
barely-visible circle of his head as he tried to shout, and his arms struggled up to try and shove at
the Jockey's cackling frame.

Nick skidded up with his crowbar already raised like a sword with both hands, tensing up his
shoulders and giving a snarled, "You creepy asshole!" just before he went to stab the wicked end of
crowbar straight down into the skeletal, fleshy thing's heaving back.

It jumped off Ellis like a flash of lightning.

The conman could hear its laughter rising to an ear-splitting screech, scrambling in the water
nearby, as he felt his whole weight behind that crowbar aimed directly to impale Ellis straight into
the ground.

Pure reflex and adrenaline suddenly shot his elbows straight, and with a gut-sinking squelch of the
crowbar and his knees hitting the water, his weapon stabbed down in the muck bare inches from
Ellis' prostrated frame. Nick felt his whole spine go stiff, bile burning hot at the back of his throat
as he recoiled his hands from the crowbar.

*Jesus fucking ass Christ it nearly made me - Jesus!*

Ellis jerked up out of the muck just then, gasping for air with a slack jaw as he spat and hacked swampwater. He shoved to hands and knees, struggling to get his breath as he was clearly disoriented.

Darting his gaze up, Nick saw the hunched and broken-spined creature grinning at him furiously. He locked eyes with it, though its eyes were bloodshot and bulging so far out of its head they were cross-eyed. Barely a beat later, it leapt, aiming straight for his face with a cackle.

It didn't get a foot before Ellis suddenly moved, tearing the crowbar from the ground with a swift yank and hoisting it up into the thing's path. Already in flight, the Jockey landed gut-first into the end of the weapon, crumpling around it. Ellis couldn't hold it up when it gave a scream of genuine pain, and he had to fling the Jockey away with a shove.

It landed back in the water a few feet in front of them, nearly submerged in muck, and started to giggle incessantly as bruises flooded its torso like quick-spreading paint. The pink flesh turned purpled, and it must've snapped its spine like that because it failed to even move beyond the rolling of its head as it tittered away softly.

Ellis slumped a little out of breathlessness, staring at the zombie for a moment before looking over his shoulder at Nick. The conman arranged his features in a stiff expression, clamping his teeth together.

They were both silent for just a beat, just long enough to take a breath. The conman's heart was racing in his chest, lungs burning with the desire to just rest, and he still tasted bile on the back of his tongue.

Twisting his head, Nick averted his gaze from the situation and strained to see through the trees. He could only barely make out slivers of dirty pink and purple, Rochelle and Coach's clothing vaguely visible, and they both were alive and on their feet. Rochelle must have gotten to him in time.

"You okay, Fireball?" Nick indelicately asked, adjusting his weight to push to stand in the muck, disgusted. "It.." He didn't finish the sentence, instead reaching down a hand to offer Ellis help up.

Their hands met with a sudden warmth. It was the only point of warmth in Nick's entire body, those rough and muddy fingers settling into the grip of his. The thought of what the Jockey - so ... intelligently - had nearly tricked him into doing...

Nick let go of Ellis' hand the moment he was steady, gripping at the air with his tingling fingers, and the kid smiled weakly but widely at him. "M alright. Thing done nearly drowned me.. man, that shit - you saved me again, Nick. Ain't never gonna get'cha tuh owe ME nothin', this rate - Shit!"

It struck him, features startling into a half-gasp. "Coach!"

And he was gone, sprinting through the muck like nothing had happened. Like he hadn't just nearly drowned - like Nick hadn't nearly killed him with a crowbar. And like the skeletal creature lying, silent then, hadn't even existed. Everything just flashed to concern for their teammate.

"I fuckin' envy you." Nick muttered under his breath, spitting at the Jockey's corpse before jogging after Ellis. He felt his hands trembling at his sides, fingers shivering till the two of his rings right
next to each other clinked a few times.

*I need a smoke...*
Chapter 44

Slimy yards of coiled tongue was tossed about in what must've been a frantic struggle to get it all undone from Coach's frame, and as Nick stepped up, Rochelle and Ellis were circled around him, fretting and worrying over him.

Nick inspected him carefully from a distance, tightening his grip on his crowbar to keep his hands from shaking. They were all covered in mud and slime, Coach and Ellis the worst of it. They looked so bedraggled at that point, they barely stood out against the zombies.

He offered a light - not kind, but innocuous - "You alright, big man?" as the ex-football player got steady on his feet, hands wiping some of the mud off his face and grimacing.

"Only got a short ways before Ro' broke the tongue." Coach answered simply, landing a hand on Ellis' shoulder in something like reassurance. There were messy, dark lines of bruising skin at the base of his neck where the tongue had started to constrict.

"It was up in the tree - it got away," Rochelle admitted, rubbing her forehead with a wrist tiredly and looking around. "I'm not sure where, but I don't hear it anymore."

"Couldn't care less, long as it ain't here." Coach grumbled roughly under his breath, stepping away from them and looking around carefully. "Just y'all keep an eye out, case it comes back. Ain't lookin' to get dragged off again."

Ellis reached up to gently adjust the hat on his head, worriedly examining everyone from top-to-bottom. The blue cap was as muddy as the rest of him, making Nick's nose crinkle subtly. "So everyone's alright?"

The conman glanced down at his own hands, inspecting his fingers and their white-knuckled grip on his crowbar. Try as he might, he just couldn't shake that image of what damage he could've inflicted on the kid had he not reacted fast enough - death, probably. His body weight would have pushed the crowbar straight through his ribcage.

It was so bracingly different from the carnage of killing zombies - and not just that.. he'd killed a guy before - before the apocalypse. This was different.

He didn't know what was more disturbing: almost killing Ellis, or the fact that the Jockey had intentionally driven him to it.

"Nick?"

He hadn't realized Ellis had been waiting on a response from him. When he looked up he found himself the focus of all three, and it was enough of a shock to knock him clear out of his reverie. Annoyance firmed his expression, and he glared quickly. "What?"

Coach shook his head faintly in distaste, quick to turn away and gesture on into the swamp. "Only good thing 'bout that was it took us forward. Don't think we're off-track much.. I'll admit, I'm turned 'round, but it should be that-a-way."

Ellis wasn't so quick to get distracted, his concern pinpointed toward Nick. He only half turned to look ahead through the trees, raising his hand to rub at the sore places on the back of his head and his shoulders where the Jockey had jammed elbows and knees against him. "You lost yer shovel 'n' I lost muh axe, man.. we gotta find 'em before we go..."
Rochelle nodded in agreement, gently inspecting her bandaged arm and the bitemark-shaped blood stain in the gauze. "Definitely can't leave those.. you guys think we're close to the highway?"

"Should be." was Coach's simple response.

Nick didn't wait more than a few beats before he turned around and started to backtrack, gaze scanning the ground. There was a distinct trough in the ground where Coach had been violently dragged along, and he stuck close to that at a quick pace.

"'Ey, 'ey, Mr. Gamblin' Man, hold yer horses.."

He heard Ellis hurrying up behind him, and he let out a vicious sigh, speeding up his footsteps through the swampwater. "What? Let's just find these fucking weapons.."

"Nick, jeez, slow down - whut's up?"

When Nick didn't answer, the kid made a grab for his sleeve. The conman snapped his arm free and turned at the waist to glance back at him, continuing a few steps even as he responded angrily, "Take your goddamn pick."

Ellis' blue eyes blinked alertly, and Nick realized too late he shouldn't have bared his face. He felt his expression being pierced straight through - it was like he was trying to protect himself from a flame with a chunk of ice.

Rather than say anything, Ellis deliberately stepped around Nick and continued forward along the path they'd torn through the swamp. He merely canted his head toward the older man, silently waiting for an explanation.

The gambler flexed his fingers on the metal of his crowbar, letting out a calming sigh. "You're still not really catching onto the whole, 'Nick's in a bad mood all the time!' thing, are you?"

Ellis hopped over the remnants of a log Coach had likely only narrowly missed, turning his head slightly to squint back at Nick with a good-natured grin that said 'no.' Staring slightly at the Georgian's dirty and lively face, jaw setting, Nick felt his resolve dim.

Oh, it's no big deal, kiddo. Just almost killed you.

"It's .. nothing important. I just really hate those jumper things, and now we're all fucking covered in mud. It smells like a fucking sewer out here. I've never, and never wanted to, see this much green and brown in my life."

"I've been dirtier." the Southerner corrected cheerily, glancing down at the layer of mud that was caked onto pretty much his whole front. "You should'uh seen muh buddy Keith after he tried fightin' a gator. He was tryin' tuh tame it 'n' shit.. - Shovel!"

Ellis suddenly interrupted himself, reaching down to dig into the muck carefully and pry Coach's shovel up. He shook it off, half-turning and squinting past Nick. He wagged it a bit in the air, clearly gesturing their success to Coach and Rochelle.

The conman inspected him in silence, seeing the stupid grin threatening on Ellis' face. It made his brows furrow, feeling like he'd never get used to the persistently good mood Ellis was maintaining. Nick pointed out, "Still need your axe."

Ellis glanced at him, grinning lightly and reaching the shovel out to prod toward Nick's chest. The gambler stepped away from it with a slight flinch, like the muddy handle could actually still make
him dirtier. "Yup. Not too far."

Nick shook his head, grumbling quietly, and turned to continue along the swampground. Stepping around a tree, he could already see the handle of the axe sticking out of the muck ahead and lifted an arm to point toward it. "Go fetch, ya damn chihuahua."

"Sure." Ellis agreed, two seconds before he loped past Nick toward the weapon - tossing the shovel at the conman as he did.

Nick caught it out of utter reflex, immediately stiffening at the squishing feel of the mud that covered the thing's handle. He cringed tightly, missing out on his chance to glare at Ellis as the younger man bolted to go get his axe.

Sighing and shifting his grip on it, resigned to his mud-covered misery, Nick turned around and started to backtrack again. He went slowly so Ellis could catch back up. He hooked his crowbar on his belt to free his other hand, turning it palm-up so he could stare at his fingers.

They were still shaking.

*Damn it. C'mon, Nicolas, get your head on straight.* Taking a deep inhale, Nick let his eyes fall half-closed. It took all his focus, all his attention, but with one smooth exhale... they stilled. He felt the cold pressure in his throat of a bluff -

The kind of bluff he made with a 7-2 off.

"Y'know whut I just noticed?"

Ellis bounced into place next to Nick like he'd teleported, hoisting his muddy axe up onto his shoulder. He grinned sideways, brightly and stupidly, shaking his head even when Nick didn't respond past a small, cool glance.

"There ain't no frogs in this swamp. Man, last time I was in a swamp I was campin' with Keith, 'n we must'uh camped on like a nest or somethin' - well, frogs don't make nests, but y'know what I mean."

Nick let himself sigh a little, cocking a brow sideways at Ellis silently and staring. The Georgian wasn't looking at him anymore, blue eyes gazing forward, but Nick could tell he wasn't oblivious. Shaking his head and looking back forward, he retained his silence for a few moments - noticing that Ellis suddenly did, too.

It didn't matter. They were both fine. Nothing happened. There was no reason to give it another thought.

Then: "You know, it really is shit-all quiet in this place." left him in a quiet hiss as they walked on, gaze darting around a moment before refocusing as Rochelle and Coach came into view ahead, waiting for them expectantly.

Ellis' head bobbed, adjusting his muddy cap with an equally muddy knuckle. "No birds or animals or nothin'... kinda creepy." The mechanic hoisted his axe a bit more, showing it to the other two as they approached.

"Oh, thank God." Rochelle sighed a little, slumping her shoulders and resting her skillet against her hip. "I was worried we'd lost weapons."

Nick chucked the shovel at Coach lightly, the big man catching it with a hard edge to his gaze.
"Try not to get dragged off on us again, eh, Coach?" the conman taunted, a smirk stiffly risking on his features.

The football coach was not impressed in the slightest. He jammed it lightly into the ground, resting his weight on it momentarily, and shook his head. "I didn't see yo' ass helpin' me."

Tension sparked, Nick annoyed to find their careful balance of dislike against necessary cooperation faltering again. He reached down to draw his crowbar, cocking his weight slightly. "No? That probably has something to do with the fact I was helping Fireball over here. Sorry, I forgot your fat ass needs two people to drag it around."

"Nick! Out of line!" Rochelle took the step between her and the conman, threateningly, earning herself a tight glance of those green eyes. "We split up, Coach.. Ellis got jumped by a Jockey. Had to." she added, glancing at the ex-football player and his tightly set jaw. She seemed on the verge of a sigh, exhausted with the two men's arguing.

The big man just shook his head, turning and walking harshly away with his shoes making wide splashes in the muck at his passage. For once, Rochelle didn't chase after him, standing there for a moment before sighing for real.

"Sorry, Ro'." Ellis piped up, chagrined, and she quickly looked over at him.

"For what, sweetie? It's not your fault - and it wouldn't be yours, if you didn't get all bitchy, suit." Her dark eyes gaze Nick a pointed glance, smiling very faintly. She was trying to read him, and he offered nothing but a cocked brow. "He's just tired... we're all tired."

Nick crossed his arms over his chest, breaking into a stiff scowl and shaking his head. "And muddy, and cold, and sore. Boo hoo. I'm not fucking impressed."

He was almost completely sure that Coach could still hear him - and he didn't care. In fact, part of him wanted the big man to wheel around and come back to start a fight. He was practically itching for it.

Rochelle sighed, softly, glancing up at Ellis with the gently conspiratorial smile. He gave her an almost curious look, and looked startled when she suddenly stepped between the two men.

Her frying pan was tucked beneath an arm neatly, and she slipped her left hand into Ellis' and her right hand into Nick's - prying the latter so forcefully out of his crossed position that he didn't have time to argue.

The conman practically gaped right out of his scowl when he realized what had just happened, Rochelle's fingers twining with his till she had a tight grip. Smiling between them, she took a step forward to pull them both into movement. Ellis followed along eagerly, grinning bashfully, but the still-horrified Nick she had to drag.

And she did.

"Come on, boys. Look at the swamp! It's getting shallower as we go. Soon enough we'll be out of here, and we'll find a nice place to sleep tonight so we can rest and get cleaned up."

Ellis leapt full-force into the optimism, drawl sweet as honey as he cooed, "Oah, 'n' we'll get somethin' real tuh eat tonight. Real big dinner, just like before the zombies. And cake! Man... I miss cake."

Nick awkwardly tried to adjust his fingers in Ro's grip as he stopped digging in his heels. He didn't
like holding hands - it was childish and stupid and intimate. It didn't even make him feel angry, just uncomfortable. And there was, of course, the fact that their hands were covered in mud, blood, slime, and who knew what else.

"Mhm!" Rochelle cheerfully agreed, brightening even further to see Coach halt ahead and glance back at them, the big man waiting for them to catch up with a stern but calmer expression. "Maybe we'll find one of those cute 'Kiss The Cook' aprons and stick Nick in it."

"Hey!" the conman protested in a monosyllabic, agitated outburst, subtly glancing toward Ellis to see the Georgian swinging Rochelle's gripped hand lightly like a skipping six year old girl. He almost laughed - it was so ridiculous.

He realized, too late, that Rochelle's scheme to make them brighten up had worked, much to his chagrin. He felt awkward and out of place, but not on the verge of explosion like a few moments before.

"Yer the one who claimed the oven back at the boathouse, man.." Ellis laughed, instantly catching on and grinning with a drop of his chin to hide underneath the dirty bill of his cap.

Nick felt tension flicker across his brow, wanting to be annoyed but at the same time too tired. He shook his head, giving a flare of his nostrils as he sighed, trying to pull against Rochelle's grip again. They walked up to and passed Coach, the ex-football player walking behind them.

"See? We're all fine. Right, Coach?"

The big man gave a sigh and then a light grunt of agreement, deepset eyes downcasting as he trudged on. Giving in to Ro', like always.

Nick would've found it funny, had he not been too busy trying to find an angle that would let him escape Rochelle's iron grip on his hand. The third or fourth attempt in, Rochelle finally let their hands go. It probably had more to do with her injury and wanting to let her arm lay slack, but Nick couldn't care less - he snatched his hand away and curled his fingers into a fist quickly, relieved.

The intimacy was unwelcome.

"Hey! Look!" It was Ellis who blurted it suddenly, pointing up through the trees. There was just a beat of silence before the other three caught on, and with a sudden flood of overbearing relief, Nick saw the subtle grey curve of a roadway through the thinning trees ahead.

"Lord Almighty…” Coach swore with a quick palm of his forehead. "Is that shit what I think it is?"

"Sweet Christ I hope so..." Nick practically whispered, raw, gesturing just vaguely before snapping his fingers tight onto his crowbar and bolting forward into a jog, darting over the ground and through creeping trees.

He heard the other three join after him but he didn't look back, determined on that bouncing strip of grey like it was a mirage that might disappear if he so much as blinked.

"Hoo-eee, home stretch, y'all! Are we pumped or what?!" He talked like he was trying to get a crowd excited. The kid always had that sense of firm joy in his voice, though. Unbreakable. Like nothing could ever go wrong.

Rochelle giggled gently to Ellis' excitement, her shaking head audible in her lightly huffing voice as the four ran along with increasing energy. Where they pulled it from, sore and muddy, who knew. They just did.
Nick broke through the treeline with a shudder as the full existence of the highway in front of him settled in, not even sparing a glance around himself. He vaulted the roadside railing with a swift motion, one palm to the top of it pushing his body into a curling leap, and the moment his feet touched down on asphalt he just dropped into a crouch.

His palms settled down on the hot surface, hungrily leeching at the sun-baked warmth. A heavy sigh escaped him, almost groaning, closing his eyes and relaxing for a moment.

Footsteps and shuffling announced the other three clambering over the railing after him, and he was aware of Ellis and Rochelle snickering quietly. He didn't even care, and he basically said so: "I could seriously just kiss all of you right now. I have never in my life been so glad to see a road."

"Jeez, Nick. I thought you were gonna marry soap, not a darn highway." Ellis laughed gently, standing a bit tiredly next to the blissful, crouched gambler.

Nick smirked faintly. He tipped his chin up to absorb the sunlight flickering down from a brazen sun, unburdened by a dank swamp canopy. He didn't enjoy being outside… but just then, he loved the open sky. "What can I say… there's a lot of me to go around."

Rochelle snorted in relieved humor, stretching with her good arm and flinching a little bit as she did. "There's a word for that, honey."

Cracking open an eye, Nick glanced at her, smirking a little wider. He was tempted to make her elaborate, but as he turned his gaze, he noticed something down the road. Maybe half a mile, if that.

It was a cluster of buildings, a little pit stop that had formed along the highway. The unbearable relief it sunk into Nick's brain was far too much when compared to the fairly boring couple blocks of white-washed buildings, decorated with an unlit, gaudily signed fast-food restaurant and a yellow-roofed gas station.

Not even the zombies wandering around as little hazy shapes across the road could ruin the view.

"Well. I don't know about anyone else, but I am staying the night there."

Coach's hand extended into his vision, and Nick followed it up to the eldest survivor's face. The ex-football player wasn't really looking at him, but his expression was almost sedate as he offered the gambler a hand up from the ground.

Nick examined it. He was tempted to reject it, but escaping the swamp was reason enough to celebrate. So he took the help.

*Just this once.*
Chapter 45

There was a static electricity in the air as they cleared their way toward the dull, extinguished spire that had once been a Burgertank sign.

The thing wheedled back and forth on a spindly base, vaguely twitching on dead and loosened gears meant to rotate it in circles. As run-down as it and most of the other buildings in the area looked, the stark contrast against the swamp they'd been mired in for hours made it practically heaven.

Not to mention, securing food was primary on their list, even compared to finding where they'd sleep and get cleaned up that night. The stew had been warming and much appreciated, but it hadn't exactly been filling, and Ellis' suggestion of a big meal struck so many nerves in Nick's brain that he wondered why he'd even gotten excited at their lunch.

The screeching, gurgling noise of a Spitter nearby would have normally made Nick's spine stiffen - some mix of a demented toddler and a drowning cat - but, compared to the Jockey's tear-struck psychosis, it was almost unimpressive.

"Acid thing." Coach warned unnecessarily, punctuated by the very wet noise of his shovel's edge sticking in the torso of a zombie when he struck it. He had to shake it off slightly, grunting as the dying thing tried to claw at him even as dragging itself forward just shoved the blade deeper into its torso.

Nick glanced over his shoulder, green eyes flicking to check that they were all together. A short, "Keep up, Ace." was muttered back to Ellis when he lagged behind a little. The kid's face lit up underneath caked-on mud, speeding up to get in line with the gambler.

"Oh hurray," Rochelle grumbled slightly with a rare cynicism, swinging her frying pan into a zombie's forehead and knocking the thing straight to the ground, her energy faltering as every hit hurt her arm. "Let's all get our faces melted off."

Nick found himself snorting as he jogged on, head shaking, and he retorted sardonically when the flow of zombies had broken and the four of them took the chance to bolt along the road, "But that's my second best feature."

Despite knowing better, the woman cocked a brow at him sideways and questioned, "Second?" Sure enough, Nick took a precious second to raise a brow at her lecherously, his smirk deeply and brazenly suggestive. She groaned at him, fighting a guilty laugh, and slipped behind Coach so she could hold her arm gently.

"Whut?" Ellis questioned, glancing around beneath the bill of his cap, clearly missing the joke. Rochelle shook her head at him quickly, unwilling to explain it and sighing.

"Let's just get in the stupid Burgertank before that Spitter gets a shot in..."

Nick couldn't help but feel slightly mortified that he was really praying that the fast food place was still stocked - maybe being picky was ridiculous in a zombie outbreak, but honestly, he was struggling to forgive his stomach for growling. Add on not having a smoke in a while, and his appetite was revved up.

Which brought up a good point.
"Anyone else a little freaked out that we're still hungry for meat when we've been slicing and dicing countless sick people for a few days now?"

The silence he got in return was answer enough, a mix of 'no' and the begrudging admittance that he was probably right. Normality was questionable anyway - maybe they'd all gone nuts already. They hopped the sidewalk, just two blocks from the Burgertank's parking lot.

The violent slurp that rang out announced the projectile spat suddenly at them - it came so suddenly, splattering just behind them, that Nick couldn't catch precisely where it had come from. He shoved Ellis forward with a palm to the shoulder with the same motion that he leapt forward to get out of the way

As it turned out, the latter wasn't fast enough, because Nick felt a heavy splash against the back of his extended left calf as some of the fluid struck it.

It didn't burn the fabric - just leaked through like water… and then before he knew it, his calf lit up in pain. The stuff burned like his leg was on fire, and an unrestrained shout broke out from his lips as the stuff sizzled audibly. "Ah, tits! S-stupid shit-!"

He was the only one, apparently, because concern instantly swiveled to him as his leg gave a shudder under the bubbling, agonizing sensation, and he stumbled.

"Y'kay, Nick?" Ellis quickly chirped, taking the shaft of his axe to the face of a zombie that bolted out from one of the buildings next to them. He cocked a quick look toward Nick, concerned, brows all furrowed up as he did. The conman didn't respond immediately, struggling instead to not make a sound as his agonized leg twitched wildly in protest.

He managed to keep moving, using the momentum of his stumbling to push himself on as he limped painfully. The acid bit angrily from his knee to his ankle, popping and snapping, every second exponentially increasing the pain. When Nick glimpsed back over his shoulder, he saw that the whole back of his slacks was stained a deep shade of red, like the skin of his calf had just… melted.

"F-fuck." he muttered, disgusted and a little in shock.

As best he could, he ran at an angle, avoiding sharing the injury. This instinctual need to hide it kicked in, primal and deep-set. Like a wounded animal. "I'm fine!" Nick was sure adrenaline was the only thing keeping him from realizing the full breadth of his agony. The acid only slowly started to quiet down its mad sizzling and gnawing on his calf.

They made it across the parking lot quickly with a growing crowd of zombies at their heels, shadowed by the towering sign, running toward the plaster-and-glass Burgertank building. Rochelle reached the Burgertank's glass-paned door first to throw it open. The inside was empty of zombies, something that gave them no small relief.

With little hesitation, the four piled in, slamming the doors shut behind themselves and turning the fat lock in the center of the door's handle to close it tightly. Zombies, maybe ten or so, slammed into the glass behind them, beating on the door with fists and their faces. Red and black liquid of indeterminate source smeared on the surface in faint highlights of their assault.

There was a moment where the four survivors stood there, staring at the temporarily useless pounding of the infected. They were panting, and muddy, and took a good few seconds to really came to terms that they genuinely were standing in the tan-tiled, fairly clean innards of a fast food place.
Ellis broke the moment - valiant, as always, reaching to take his cap gently off. "Man... last time I ate here was when I was waitin' fer Keith tuh get outta the hospital.. he'd done broke his knee, snapped it like'uh twig I tell you, tryin' tuh -"

What came as a surprise was that Ellis interrupted his own story, suddenly staring in shock at Nick. The conman, flinching past his pain, spat through gritted teeth, "What?" He glanced down belatedly, and he realized that the blood from his leg was starting to drip down to the tile in a fast-spreading puddle around the heel of his shoe.

Seeing it crystallized its presence in his mind.

And it *hurt.*

He cursed violently, stumbling sideways until his knee hit one of the small tableside benches that edged the restaurant. He dropped down to it with a gasp at the sensations that flooded his system, whole leg seizing up stiffly as agony wrenched his head downward.

Coach was the first to his side, already pulling their pack off his shoulder and wearily dropping to a knee. Nick glared at him, trying to recoil uncooperatively, but the big man grabbed his leg just above his knee and gave him a severe look.

Gruffly ordering, "Hold still.", Coach gave no ground. Nick just had to suffer through it.

Ellis anxiously stood just behind the ex-football player, wringing his cap in his hands as he glanced between Nick and the clamoring infected outside. Rochelle stepped up beside the bench, reaching out to try and gently settle a hand on Nick's cheek calmingly. He shrugged her off instantly with a grated sound.

Coach started to peel Nick's pantleg up off the profusely bleeding calf it was stuck to, gentle inch by gentle inch - the eldest was surprisingly careful, though he could've easily done otherwise. Nick bit furiously at the air, because gentle or not, he could feel every seize of pain as the fabric of his slides pulled away from - and with - melted skin.

"C-chn..?" he barely managed, voice strangled with pain - more than anything wanting to know why Coach, of all of them, was trying to help. The man stopped for a beat when he glanced up, seeming to recognize and understand the question on his face.

Deepset eyes flicked up at him, serious and unwavering. There was no begrudging displeasure, no badly-hidden vexation... maybe not concern, either, but Nick could live with that. "Gotta get it bandaged, Nick. Don't argue wit' me - I ain't gonna let yo' ass get hurt."

The two headstrong men stared each other down for a moment, unblinking with only the banging of infected on the glass and the pattering of blood hitting tile to break the silence in the room. Then, slowly but with ferocity, Nick reached down to undo his belt.

He yanked the leather strip free from his slides' loops, and as he did so, Nick caught his breath enough to speak.

"... Go quick."

Acquiescing instantly, Coach returned his attention to the gambler's leg. Nick raised his belt to his lips and grabbed hold of it between his teeth. He clenched down hard into the leather until he felt it denting slightly around his canines.

The slacks came away with no small agony as Coach folded them up cautiously, fabric tearing at
the mess the acid had made of his calf. Blotches of skin had been eaten away, and Nick just turned his face to avoid seeing it as he grinded his jaw hard against the belt.

His vision went dim more than once. It felt like Coach was peeling his very skin away, instead of his pantleg, and it was all he could do not to kick his leg away. He knew it was trembling, could feel his muscles giving throbs and twitches all of their own volition, and hated it.

Rochelle's hand settled on his cheek, and this time Nick was far too stiff with pain to shake her off. She held his stubble-lined jaw carefully, fingertips moving in the smallest of strokes. Faint strangled noises grated past his teeth, though the leather belt tightly held in his jaws did wonders for keeping him quiet and funneling his frustration.

Ellis' voice gently chirped from somewhere close, though Nick's grip on his surroundings was dull as Coach tucked his slacks at the bend of his knee and started to dig for bandages in their pack. "I gotta take care'uh them zombies outside... okay? .. don't let Nick fight yuh or nothin'."

Rochelle tried to protest quickly, but she'd glued herself to Nick's side and could only watch with a distressed set to her jaw as the Georgian turned and scampered into the Burgertank's kitchen, just exactly what he intended to do unknown. "Damnit, sweetie." Sighing quickly, she bent down to settle her elbow on the back of the bench and rest her cheek against the side of Nick's twisted head. "How's it look, Coach?"

"Not good." he gruffly responded, staring at Nick's leg for a moment before reaching back into the pack. He drew out a waterbottle, twisting it open. "Ain't much we can do. We need alcohol, antibiotics, somethin'. Lost a lot of skin."

Nick started to let out a scoffing sound past his impromptu muffler, but when Coach grabbed his foot by cupping the front of his ankle and twisted it a little to get the wound facing upward, his scoffing sound turned into an elongated growl of pain.

"Damnit." Rochelle repeated, glancing at Nick's expression sympathetically as the conman's brow beaded with sweat under the struggle to stay still. She pet his jaw carefully, fingertips catching on stubble, and commented with soothing humor, "Least it wasn't either of your best features."

A near-silent "k'uh" announced Nick's gritted snort in response to the observation.

Coach glanced up at him, warning, "Gotta rinse it off." Nick merely twitched his head in acquiescence. He braced himself for the pain long before Coach grabbed the waterbottle and tipped it over his leg.

Water poured out in a small trickle, and it may as well have been more acid for how badly it hurt. Nick lurched before he could stop himself, body surging away from the sensation - but Coach merely gripped his knee like a vice and continued. The water sloughed off red and splattered onto the tile, revealing the ruddy flesh underneath.

His skin was burnt away in patches down to the muscle, a kind of pungent smell tainting the air. Nick might've been frightened by the sight, had the pain wracking his body not made a nice distraction.

As fast as the blood rinsed off, the skin welled up and leaked more. The only real improvement was washing off the sticky remnants of the deactivated acid, and the algae and mud from the swamp. Coach seemed to recognize the futility, giving one more splash of water against the flesh before reaching for the bandages.
Nick closed his eyes, the urge to vomit surging as Coach started to wrap his calf. He started around the ankle, winding the bandage over itself to layer it as much as possible. Coach moved quickly, but the burning agony caused as it made Nick flinch traumatized leg muscles made the whole thing seem endless.

The pain was plateauing as his nerves overloaded. His whole leg was too inflamed to really tell when Coach was done and when he removed his hands, only realizing it was over when the big man actually leaned back. Nick honestly couldn't discern the difference - the pain continued unabated. Blood covered his hands from the job, and the ex-football player looked disgruntled as he set his palms to his thighs.

"Done, Nick." he reluctantly stated, reaching into the backpack by his knee again once the worst of the blood was wiped onto his pants. He pulled a small pill bottle out, cracking the top off and rattling out two tablets onto his palm and offering them out to Nick.

"Old knee pills. Take'em."

Eyeing them with a breathless whinge past his still-clenched teeth, Nick blindly spat his belt onto his lap and grabbed for the water bottle. He pulled his head away from Rochelle's hand, chugging a mouthful of water before he took the pills. He couldn't identify them at a glance, but Coach's explanation was enough.

He was vaguely surprised at the idea that Coach's knee was bad enough to need painkillers, but just then, he could only be grateful.

They went down hard, sticking in his throat and leaving a strange, chalky taste that stung at his eyes. Gritting past it with another swallow of water, he muttered a flat and still-pained, "Thanks."

There'd be time later to be a jackass.

After a moment, the conman shifted to lay on his side and hunch his torso down against the bench. He crossed his arms over his head and shuddered down to try and hold as still as he could with his leg stuck awkwardly sideways.

He swore it was on fire, and the bandages sat like sandpaper on his tortured calf. He wasn't sure he could walk on it, not without a lot of agony.

Rochelle gently touched a hand between his shoulderblades, glancing toward Coach with an immensely grateful look. He shrugged back at her, wearily getting to his feet, and wiped his hands against one another. "Was hopin' we weren't gonna figure out what that shit could do."

Alternating between fingertips and nails up the back of Nick's neck, taking advantage of his silence and stillness to try and soothe him, Rochelle rolled her head back slightly and sighed. "And where the hell is Ellis? Didn't he say he was -"

The sudden splatter of something against glass made all three of them flinch. Rochelle and Coach twisted to look toward the glass-paned front of the Burgertank, and Nick's head lifted just a bare inch to glance past his shoulder.

The cluster of zombies that had been beating uselessly at thick glass door all suddenly pulled away, stumbling a little back as what looked like grease and lard dripped their torsos. It was heavy and chunky, somewhere between yellow and brown, and covered them in liberal splatters.

For just a moment, the three stared with uncomprehending hesitance - and then a soft flicker of orange dropped down, like a falling star, and hit one of the zombies' shoulders.
Fire caught over the grease on its frame in ripples, burning blue and red, and the flailing cluster of zombies quickly spread it. Within instants, they were all caught up in flames, and their angered clawing turned into something a lot like panic as they scrambled at each other. The fire ate away at them.

There was a kind of shocked silence in the Burgertank as the zombies outside fell like flies, reduced to a burning mess in front of the door as the grease fire refused to be beaten out. Silence, anyway, until Ellis’ voice flooded from the kitchen and he skidded, bouncing excitedly, right after it.

"Hoh mah LORD, that was AWE-SSOOME! Y'all see that?! Tell me y'all saw that!! If y'all didn't see that we are FINDIN' more zombies 'n' I AM doin' that again!"

Nick was the first one to start laughing.

Faint, pained huffs of laughter or not, the moment that happened, Rochelle and Coach were doomed to follow. Ellis stopped where he was, a bashful edge to his unerringly proud grin, looking between the three slowly. It took him a moment, adjusting his muddy cap, but he apparently decided the laughter was a good thing and edged over toward Nick.

The conman quieted much sooner than Rochelle and Coach managed to, the two holding their heads slightly as the big man's gruff chuckling mixed with Rochelle's lighter giggling. Green eyes slipped to the barest slant as he glanced up at the kid.

"Y'kay?" Ellis mumbled down to him, somehow going from excitement and pride to concern all in the space of a second.

"Fine." He wasn't. "Painkillers are kickin' in already." They weren't. "What did you do, anyway?"

Clear blue eyes flickered over what Ellis could see of his face, and Nick felt a sense of futility as he knew full well the other man could read he was lying. Ellis smiled gently at him anyway, curling his fingers carefully at his sides as he resisted the urge to reach out toward him. "Fast-food greasetraps'n'fire don't mix none..."

Coming down from her laughter, Rochelle breathed a little gasp and shook her head, bewildered. "You come up with the weirdest ideas, sweetie."

Grinning gently, Ellis glanced back at her and cocked his head slightly. "I got another one if y'all are interested any." Nick took advantage of his distraction to drop his head again, burying his head against his shoulder painfully.

"It involve food?" Coach questioned, demure, and quick to remind them all of just why they'd even come here.

The Georgian nodded quickly. "Yep. Think I saw a breakerbox up on the roof. 'N' since the sign outside is still movin', I figure there's still power. Bet'cha we can get the kitchen workin' just like new. How's some steamin' Burgertank burgers sound?"

Nick's voice drifted up from his hunched and unmoving posture on the bench. It gained some straining edge of sarcasm, something that relieved Ellis to no end - even if Nick's shoulders were still stiff with pain.

"Hurts me to say... but fucking amazing."

Ellis practically tripped over himself to twist around and scurry back toward the kitchen to fulfill
the promise like he'd been commanded. Rochelle chased after him to help, and in the quiet, Coach settled down on the bench across from Nick.

He eyed the conman in silence. Nick closed his eyes and focused on breathing.

Clattering from the kitchens, interspersed between giggles and soft voices, brought the whole moment to a strange calm. If he weren't busy praying for any vague sign that the painkillers were starting to kick in to take the edge off the pain flowing up his leg… Nick might've dozed.

Or maybe that was just the shock.
Chapter 46

The lingering smell of greasy meat made it hard to consider leaving the Burgertank. It was warm and comforting, a little piece of pre-infection life, even to Nick's mind.

Of course, the medication lightly fuzzing his thought process helped that sensation along, too.

They'd gotten tremendously lucky. Although the power to the building had been interrupted, all it took was resetting the breaker to reinstate electricity. Perhaps more lucky was the fact that the meatlocker had enough insulation to keep the supplies cold. It must've only been a day or two since the power was interrupted.

The last thing they needed was food poisoning. There was no time to be sick.

*Or hurt.* Nick mused, glancing at his leg.

"Do you think there's a house nearby?" Rochelle was murmuring to Coach by the kitchen doorway, turned away from Nick and Ellis. The kid had sprawled on the bench opposite Nick's, head nestled against the wall and chin tucked to his chest, cap dropped low over his face.

Ellis wasn't asleep, fingers tapping out a little rhythm against his own happily plump stomach, but mowing down four cheeseburgers - only beaten out by Coach - had made him visibly sluggish. Nick kept his focus on the conversation going on as he buried his face into his crossed arms, nose just brushing the table he'd dragged over to himself and slumped onto.

It took more effort than it should have to keep from closing his eyes. He felt full and a little sick, although the burgers had been cooked far more lovingly than they would've been had the Burgertank been really running, and the painkillers were doing a number on his focus.

*Leg still hurts like a bitch, though.*

"Can't know till we look." The big man responded in a low voice, still cleaning a few fingers off with the slow introspection of a prisoner prodding his last meal. "We ain't sleepin' here, an' if Nick don't get cleaned up 'n' rested his leg ain't gonna heal."

She nodded vaguely, resting her forehead tiredly against the steel doorframe. She turned her body slightly to inspect her bandaged arm and dirtied clothes, exhaling. "Any of us go much longer without really getting cleaned up and I think we'll go nuts. We need laundry, showers, the whole shebang... I still feel like I'm in the swamp."

Wiping his hands on the sides of his shirt, Coach sighed weightily and let his shoulders shrug up. "Yep. Problem is gettin' to it. We gonna carry him? Might get in trouble on the way."

Rochelle half-nodded even as she argued slightly, pushing her fingers into the tight pockets of her jeans. "We'll deal with that when we get there I guess... we did clear out most of the infected, right?"

"At best there's a Spitter out there." Coach grunted simply, crossing his arms. He glanced up toward the windows that made the front of the Burgertank, looking out into the street. Electricity was still flowing, as they'd already found out, and some abandoned mechanism tried to turn on broken streetlamps as best it could. They flickered madly, almost strobelike as they cast wild shadows on the dark evening.
"Worst, whole horde's waitin' to catch our asses."

She laughed lightly, glancing down to the toes of her boots before shifting to rest her head on his shoulder. Her eyes closed, face turning away, and he let the greying, stubble-cloaked swell of his cheek set against her forehead.

Ellis softly spoke up from the bench, apparently having been listening to the not-so-private conversation from his sleepy position there. His chin lifted just slightly, enough to slant shaded blue eyes under his capbill. "Ain't like we ain't fought 'em before, right?"

Coach glanced up toward the younger Georgian and his softly twitching fingers. "Didn't like it those times, either." he noted in a low voice, reluctant.

"Awh, c'mon, Coach." the kid tossed back, shifting his weight to push an elbow against the cushion of the bench. His head lifted a little more and he flashed a grin, goofy and confident. "Y'all take this too serious! We're badasses."

Nick felt his chest compress slightly with a silent sigh. He forced his shoulders to tense up, finally hauling his torso straight to pull his head off his forearms and sit up. All three gazes instantly twitched toward him, alertly, and he felt like swearing.

"You don't take this serious enough, moron... but we're goin' anyway."

Rolling his shoulder to get a hand against the top of the table, Nick pushed himself up off the bench to his feet. His weight started wholly on his good leg, other lifted into a soft curl at the knee to just barely brush the toe of his dress shoe to the tile.

He took a step before anyone could argue, and the moment his weight shifted to his other leg, his whole frame shuddered in pain. Even the faintest attempt to flex his calf muscle sent such pain through him, he felt a little like those zombies outside - flames seething over his skin.

An inhale turned into a whining exhale.

"Nick! Don't be stupid, let one of us -" Rochelle didn't get any further than that, the conman firmly shutting her down with a glare as his balance shifted back to his good leg.

"What? Carry me?" His expression was defensive, fingers in a half-curl at his sides, and his nerves were practically visible. That animal instinct came back; hide it. Camouflage it. Run, even. "We need everyone with free hands to fight."

Ellis crawled up out of the bench, one hand holding his cap to his head while the other grabbed onto the table to hoist himself out of his comfortable sprawl. He stood up with a jump, blinking, and his voice was argumentative when he stated, "... yer not in no shape to. You can't even walk."

Ignoring a gruff chuckle from Coach at the brave challenge, Nick turned his head with a tight frown. Ellis didn't so much as blink. "Y-" Frustrated at being so firmly disagreed with, he snapped fingers into fists and shifted the focus. "... that's not the point. You three still can. If you're holding me up, you can't fight."

Ellis rubbed at his cheek carefully and took a step forward, seeming unfazed by the conman's stubbornness and not giving up. He lifted up one of his arms to mime ducking underneath Nick's.

"Just lemme crutch you a li'l, man. Yer gonna be miserable if you try walkin'."

Sighing through taut lips, Nick eyed him. The kid was right, unfortunately, and just leaning against
someone was at least less injurious to his pride than being carried. It was either take the compromise or walk alone - and his leg hurt like hell. The last thing he wanted was to trip and fall in the middle of a horde.

"Oh, give it up, suit." Rochelle chorused from across the room, laughing softly with her head shaking.

"For fuck's- fine." Nick snapped dully, reaching back to grab the pill bottle from the table. He rattled two more out into his palm, downing them dry. Too early from the last dose, probably, but overdosing on painkillers was the least of his concern. It made him cough just slightly, shaking his head, before he stuck out his arm blindly and tucked the bottle into his jacket pocket.

Ellis scooped up his weapons from beside the bench, his shotgun strap going over his shoulder and his axe held close to his hip. Nick eyed him as he scurried underneath his arm, settling strongly against his hip and gripping fingers in his suit jacket to support the gambler.

The mechanic was as sturdy as he was enthusiastic. Nick could already feel himself putting a lot of weight on the Georgian, gritting his jaw softly. It didn't really ease the pain, but at least it didn't get worse. "I hate you so much."

"Awww.. yeah?" Ellis softly uttered up at him, and Nick's resolve flickered a little. He let out a sigh, hearing that plaintive note just at the edge of the Georgian's tone, and relented.

The conman just uttered a vague, "Your shotgun's in my side..." It was, the very butt of it nudging into his rib, but not nearly enough to actually bother him. Ellis' immediate and half-panicked shifting to adjust the gun made Nick smirk. He must've seen it and realized he was being made fun of, because he bashfully re-settled himself.

"Okay," Rochelle affirmed, pulling her frying pan from its place on a nearby table and walking over toward the door. She looked out into the street, leaning against the glass of the door as Coach stepped after her, retrieving his shovel from beside the booth. "If Ellis can keep Nick up then Coach and I'll handle the fighting. I'm thinking I saw a house or two behind the stores while we were coming in."

She stepped to hold the door open with her hip, nose wrinkling slightly at the cooked zombie corpses still sprawled in a ring just in front of the doorway. She stayed there to keep it open, gaze starting to scan for danger.

"Smells like ham." Nick snorted morosely as the stench wafted in on a chill night breeze, breaching what had been a pleasant interior. Ellis burst into a stifled laugh, slightly confused, gently grasping onto Nick's wrist as it dangled off his shoulder.

"That ain't nice tuh pigs, Nick."

Even though it amounted to Ellis supporting Nick as the conman swung his weight gently in a one-footed hop, their footsteps synchronized as they walked through the doorway and gently walked down onto the Burgertank parking lot. Nick snorted slightly at the mechanic's words, though he realized a beat later that Ellis said it with a little too much sincerity.

"You're such a dumbshit." he chided in a sidelong mutter, using his shoulder to push Ellis' head. There must've been a smirk in his voice to match the teasing shove, because Ellis gave a blithe smile.

If there was a smirk, it quickly disappeared under the soft and stifled noise of laughter over their
shoulder. Nick registered with no small alarm that Rochelle must've been paying attention to them, and agitation flickered in a slightly panicked rush.

_Oh damnit-_ 

Letting go of Ellis wasn't exactly an option, so Nick was forced to just stare on ahead and pretend he hadn't heard a thing. In retrospect, he chastised himself; for all his efforts to dissuade Ellis from acting close to him, he seemed to be having more trouble with himself. _Damnit, Nick._

"Zombies." Ellis' voice warned in a chirp, fingers suddenly gripping harder onto Nick's wrist. His hip checked the conman's, like he was half ready to pick him right up off the ground and run.

The blinking streetlights made it hard to really see, and the sight they did allow wasn't comforting in the slightest. Infected were already starting to catch sight of them, scrambling up from the highway and store-front sidewalks toward them. If not for the bodies still left behind from the four's run through several hours ago, there would've been little evidence they'd already come through.

"Cleared out, my ass." Nick grumbled.

"On it." Coach announced from behind, his loud footsteps striking hard on the parking lot as he circled to get ahead of Nick and Ellis. The big man swung his shovel perfectly in time to collide with the first zombie to approach, a bone-crushing thud sending the infected woman straight to the ground.

Rochelle quickly joined him ahead of the other two, and they cleared the way at a professional pace. Nick kept staring at her back as she jogged forward and took the occasional swing at a zombie, and his mind tried to float a moment in paranoia.

_There's no way she knows. You're being stupid._

The distraction made him lose the careful rhythm he and Ellis had in their walk, and the younger man had to catch him with a sturdy grasp when he stumbled. "Watch yer footin', Mr. Gamblin' Man. I got'cha."

Nick wanted to wrench away. Instead, he just muttered a sardonic, "Oh, good."

Ellis picked the worst of times to be so implacably gentle, but all the gambler could do was tighten his arm around Ellis' neck and shudder faintly as reflex had made him put down far too much weight on his injured leg. There was no time to recover, so he grinded his teeth against the pain and put most of his weight on the younger man as they crossed the highway.

Rochelle got a swift hit to an infected's shoulder with the edge of her frying pan, though the thing kept coming even as its arm cracked painfully back. It lashed out at her face with its other arm, and she had to jerk back to avoid grasping digits that had rotted into claws.

The woman shoved it away with an elbow to the jaw, narrowly recoiling before it snapped at her arm, but she took advantage of her lean backwards to give it a hard kick in the knee. "Will you bastards quit trying to bite me?!"

Decaying bone snapped with nauseating ease, toppling the thing over, and Rochelle circled past it quickly to keep moving with a glance back to make sure Ellis and Nick were still safe.

The four jumped the sidewalk on the other side of the street, seeing that the gas station ahead made for an easy exit away from the highway with the open pavement ringing it. The windows of the gas
station were broken open, and even from that distance, Nick could see blood scrabbled all over. He definitely wasn't going to be the one that suggested they check it out - their goal was something more sheltered, anyway.

As they dodged forward onto the parking lot, surroundings lit up by more reliable lamps set into the gas station's flat awning, Coach lifted up a hand to trace the sharpened shadow of a rooftop up against the treeline ahead and out of the lamps' reach. "That look like a house to y'all?"

One of Coach's shoes hit hard down on a drainage grate in the parking lot. The metal clanked against the concrete softly, shifting underfoot. Despite the fact it couldn't have fallen through the hole, it being smaller than the grate's width, the feeling still made him step off quickly.

"Contrary to what you might think..." Nick muttered irately, curling into a slightly useless fist the fingers of the hand Ellis had gripped by its wrist. "...saying 'yes' to that doesn't actually make it any more or less likely.. so let's just shut the fuck up and check it out."

Coach did not look amused when he glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't bitch or anything, honey." Rochelle laughed gently behind herself, jumping over the grate entirely. She eyed the gas station, humor draining out of her posture steadily as she inspected the bloody handprints scrabbled all over the edges of the broken windows.

As Ellis' heavy workboot gave a loud thunk when it landed on the drainage grate, Nick lost it slightly, yanking his weight forward with a low growl to snap in obvious irritation,

"Swear to God, if I hear one more goddamn word about my 'attitude' I will strangle-"

Ellis suddenly staggered, and after that first wobble, went down completely to a knee and an outthrusted hand. Nick felt an unintelligible shout tear from his own lips as he slipped down with the Georgian, landing hard on the asphalt parking lot - and his wounded leg.

His vision blacked out for just a split second, but the feeling held on like hooks all along his skin. Pain and immediate anger both had to be put on hold when Ellis let off a panicked, "Oaaahhh- Oh Lordy, somethin's got me!" The kid was twisting backward, grabbing onto his own coveralls and trying to yank his leg toward himself like it was caught. It wasn't a Smoker - he wasn't being pulled away.

Nick grabbed Ellis' shoulders tightly, using the leverage to twist himself upright without budging his leg, both looking for the problem and making absolutely sure Ellis didn't go anywhere.

A pale, gnarled hand had its fingers jammed through the grate, visibly wet and emaciated around brittle bones, tightly wound in the loose jean material of Ellis' coveralls and jerking down like it could pull him through the metal grating.

Anger flaring up more than anything else, Nick practically snarled as he ripped his crowbar out from under his belt. He distantly recognized his own voice, just exploding out like so much compressed air.

"LEAVE IT TO YOU -" Gripping the crowbar tightly, he jammed it straight through the grating and into the back of the grabbing hand, though the thing barely even reacted. Those fingers just curled tighter in Ellis' pantleg, squeezing even as the crowbar made a hole in its flesh.

"TO FUCKING PICK -" Nick was pretty sure all three of the others were frozen up in favor of staring at him. He couldn't rein himself in just then, tearing the crowbar free to attack at it again,
hacking through the thick metal lattice. This time the hand started to falter, the damage crippling the thing's delicate wrist.

"THE ONE PERSON -" When Nick twisted the crowbar to one side in a jerk, there was a sudden gory snap, and the clutching hand snapped off its forearm in a sprinkle of red. There was a thud and splash underneath them as something fell into water, though it was impossible to begin to see what it was through the barely platter-sized grate.

Nick grabbed onto Ellis' shin, ferociously shoving him away from the grate so his coveralls tore away from the frigid hand's grip.

"KEEPING ME ON MY GODDAMN FEET, YOU ASSHOLE!"

With a small wobble, the half-curled, disembodied fingers lost their grip on the grating and they disappeared with - after a moment - a much softer 'sploosh' in what must've been the drainage pipes underneath.

Panting heavily, Nick stared down at the asphalt, energy quickly flagging as the stress-fueled rage that had floated him just a moment before drained out of him. He slowly dragged the crowbar back under his belt, slumping. Ellis was panting, too, as he slowly moved to his feet, and three sets of eyes blinked on the gambler's hunched form.

Coach's hand offered down in front of Nick's face. He glanced up through a stray strand of dark hair that traced down his forehead, green eyes tired but expression aflame with stubborn cynicism. He was sweating - too much, and he knew then that he'd overdone it with the painkillers.

"Let's get yo' ass back up, Nick."

Hesitating for just a moment, the gambler shifted his weight to reach up and grasp Coach's hand tightly. Ellis quickly grabbed onto his elbow, Rochelle supporting the other, and the conman was straightened up by their unified effort. He muttered a simple admittance; "... I feel like shit."

"We'll get you cleaned up." Rochelle sympathetically murmured, reaching up to pat his jaw (with stubble that was growing softer as it grew longer) just once before pulling away. He belatedly grunted at the show of affection, rolling his head away even when it was far too late.

Ellis ducked under Nick's arm again with the grip he had on his elbow, holding him up carefully. The kid nodded at Coach and Rochelle silently, urging them to get moving quickly as he got a good enough grasp on Nick's waist to push him into a step.

"Hey, thanks, man.." the Georgian spoke softly sideways to Nick, blue eyes flashing underneath the bill of his cap as he gazed toward his face. He paused - then prompted him, in a naively obvious attempt to distract Nick from the even more obvious pain he was in as he limped hard on his leg.

"Y'know, I ever tell you 'bout the time my buddy Keith got his whole damn lower body stuck in a street sewer-hole?"

Nick, tiredly, shook his head. He could see a huge smile blossom at the motion, just under Ellis' cap-bill. The lilting chirp of Ellis' voice played in his ear as they carefully picked around the massacre of a gas station, reaching an odd gravel road that trailed toward the roof-shaped shadow looming against the treeline ahead.

They drifted out of the grasp of the gas station's light, and everything seemed a little too still.

"Heh. This's a good one. See, he was sleepin' in the back of his truck 'cause it done ran outta gas.
He was waitin' fer his pa tuh come 'n' get him - well, that's a whole other story in'uv itself, but I won't get intu that none - but anyway, he's sprawled out under this tarp, 'cause it's rainin', right? Well turns out he done pulled over intu a fire lane or somethin' - so this towtruck comes 'cause someone called the cops, and they start haulin' the car away! Well, when you add tippin' the front'uv the truck up to the acceleration, yuh get Keith rollin' straight outta the truckbed. Next thing he knows, he's scrabblin' -"

"Shush, son." Coach suddenly interrupted, wielding his shovel carefully as the evening's vague light started to make the house ahead more visible. It was two stories, a darkly painted wood paneled house with tightly curtained windows. The front door was broken forward off its hinges, lying at an angle on the steps, but there didn't seem to be any blood or signs of zombies around.

Ellis - unbothered by being shut down - piped up cheerfully as they approached, still alert. "Hey, maybe we got lucky 'n' it ain't infested or nothin' -" Nick 'shh'ed him sideways, sparing him a dull look that he knew Ellis understood.

*Don't jinx it, Ace.*

Stepping up to the stairs, Coach carefully bent down and got a hold on the fallen door. He grunted slightly as he picked it up, avoiding scraping it on the brick steps as he pushed it upright and gently set it against the face of the house.

"Let's all go in together - careful, a'ight?"

There was a soft nod to Coach's words, and gingerly, he stepped into the dark house first. Rochelle slipped back to let Ellis help Nick up the stairs, and with Nick relying mostly on Ellis to forcibly haul him onto each step, they got in quickly.

Coach held his breath slightly as his gaze roved blindly in the darkness of the house. He let one hand palm along the wall just next to the doorway, hunting for a lightswitch - when his fingertips brushed the plastic rectangle nailed into the wallpaper, he carefully flicked the switch.

A sudden, loud whirr startled all of them, Rochelle grabbing quickly at Ellis' back with a soft sound of alarm. It took a moment, but Coach chuckled suddenly, shifting his finger over just an inch to find the second switch on the panel and click it up.

The ceiling fan hanging down in the center of the room flicked on its flowered-glass lamp, and the slowly spinning blades above it gave a humming whirr as they started to pick up enough speed to give a subtle breeze.

Laughing, softly, and releasing the Ellis' shirt, Rochelle mumbled as she stepped forward and looked around the living room. "I'd like to point out we all just got scared by a ceiling fan. How screwed up is life right now?" Furniture was tossed gently, like someone had left in a rush and just dragged things out of various end tables and cabinets, but there was no sign of blood or infected - just panic.

Snorting, Coach turned toward Ellis and Nick. He eyed them a moment, then gestured with a shoulder. "C'mon, you two. Let's find a bathroom an' let Nick start cleanin' up while the rest of us handle things."

Ellis nodded obediently, glancing at Nick to make sure he was ready before taking a gentle step. The ex-football player turned to lead the way across the living room, edging for the hallway with his shovel still up.
Rochelle waved softly after them, wielding her frying pan and glancing around carefully. "I'll find the laundry room and see what we can do about getting our clothes cleaned u- oh, damnit." Her eyes suddenly rolled as her own words struck her, turning away. Her tone betrayed a smile, though. "The woman gets stuck with the laundry. How did I not expect that...?"

Chuckling softly, Coach forged forward into the hallway, flicking on the light in there with a knuckle. He looked up a staircase to his right, gaugingly, too distracted to interrupt Nick when the conman gave a sardonic smirk down at the floor and tossed back a loose retort.

"That's just wrong, babydoll... you shouldn't be doing laundry... you should be in the kitchen seeing about a snack." Dropping his head forward quickly to laugh, Nick didn't really pay attention as both Ellis and Rochelle gave him a long stare, the latter more disbelieving than offended.

"Ass." the woman ghosted on mouthing lips, shaking her head and turning away as Coach started to scale the carpeted staircase. The behaviour was ... little strange, but not completely outlandish. The gambler was definitely a little out of it.

"Are yuh feelin' alright, Nick?" Ellis questioned worriedly as he looped his arm tighter around the conman's torso and pushed a hand against the staircase's banister. The stairs were tough to maneuver, but at a slow pace, they followed in Coach's heavy footsteps.

The conman gave a subtle grunt, still smirking vaguely at his own wit. "It's .. I probably took one too many painkillers. Done it before, not serious, sport... just kinda a bad buzz... oh, and my goddamn leg still hurts."

Ellis instantly gave him a frown, fingers curling slightly in the fabric of his suit. He didn't speak in the end, focusing on getting up the stairs without tripping. It got dark as they scuffled over the small platform in the middle, the light from the hallway not reaching up into the second floor.

Coach carefully leaned into the new hallway, palming the walls again for a lightswitch. He found it with his thumb, and the lights flicked on, revealing a starkly empty hallway with a few doors.

Two of three laid open, along with a small stairway up to an attic, and the light was enough to see that the room directly on their right was a bathroom.

Stepping toward it, the big man nudged the door open all the way and carefully scanned a deep-set gaze over the room. "Looks clear. Gotta do somethin' bout the front door, but there ain't nothin' in the bathroom... Ellis, you got him, son?"

The youngest survivor nodded obediently, holding Nick like an over-inebriated friend - the conman didn't argue, gaze focused longingly on the bathroom in front of them. "Mhm. I'll keep muh eye on this city slicker."

Coach didn't wait for any more, putting his shovel over his shoulder and stepping around them to go back downstairs, his steps heavy on the carpet. His voice was audible when he reached the downstairs and spoke to Rochelle, heavy and gruff, though the words were unintelligible.

Ellis caught himself sighing gently, glancing at Nick's face under his cap bill. "Yer worryin' me, Nick." he mumbled softly. Green eyes flicked sideways toward him, breaking their wanting lock with the bathroom doorway, and the gambler's brow twitched up.

An honest response spilled out of his lips. "My leg's hurting like hell, my head's half full of cotton and half full of knives, and I feel like I slogged half the swamplands with me... ya ain't the only one, Ace."
Ellis chuckled good-naturedly, looking slightly relieved at the flash of brutal cynicism. "Really whaled on that zombie what had me in the gratin', Nick... thought you'd gone right off yer rocker." He pushed forward to help the limping gambler into the bathroom, free hand darting to switch on the light.

The white bulb flashed on, scattering gentle gleams all over the silvery, glazed tile bathroom - blue accents scattered here and there like warm brushstrokes - and revealing the dried streaks of dark red blood that were stained into the washbasin sink.

"... oh, yay." Nick mumbled, reluctantly pulling his arm off Ellis' shoulders. The other man didn't let go of him - he tagged after him, worried, fingers keeping a slight hold on his suit jacket. The contact felt .. good ... guiltily so, fuzzy brushes that made Nick want more far more than his broken frame should've let him.

The gambler limped toward the bath with a faint huff to his breath, turning around to slowly slide down to sit on the edge. Ellis was still grasping onto his jacket, unwilling to let him go like he might crumple at any moment. Sighing and half-annoyed, Nick grumbled, "Quit that, Ace, I've got it."

"Sorry." Ellis quickly apologized, backing away, although only after Nick was settled. His gaze shifted down to get a look at the blood-stained leg of his slacks. After a beat, he turned to start digging through the bathroom cabinets, shuffling loudly. "Just worryin'."

Nick sighed again, quieter this time, bending forward to grasp onto his pantleg and gently work it up to his knee. He touched the edge of the bandages that wrapped, dark red, around his leg delicately with fingertips, feeling a flutter of apprehension threaten to rise bile up the back of his throat.

Despite Coach's efforts to clean it, the bandages were already soaked through. He'd get an infection for sure like this.

Softly, his deft and calloused hands pulling an entire drawer out of the cabinet, Ellis questioned, "Hey uh.. Nick? Mind a question?" He turned around, walking back to kneel in front of the gambler. The drawer had first aid supplies in it - just basic things, a tube of antibiotics and a lot of tiny bandaids that were utterly useless to their goal, but nearer the back was a few rolls of gauze. The gauze had been bought long ago and abandoned there at the back, while the bandaids had clearly seen avid use. Open wrappers were spilt all over the bottom of the drawer. That was how it should've been - little cuts, papercuts and nicks, not melted skin and bleeding muscle. Nick almost forgot to answer, staring at that drawer with a distant gaze.

"What?" was his eventual utterance, starting to gently grip fingertips onto the top edge of his bandage to pull it free from its small knot and begin the unwrapping process. Ellis' hands suddenly dropped the drawer on his lap, and they brushed Nick's aside, stopping him. Their fingers touched, lingering too long and recoiling too quick all at once.

The gambler wanted to grab him, but he didn't, just... resigning himself. You want to kiss him, don't you, Nicolas... well get your.. fucking act together. Drop it. You don't need shit from him.

He hated needing others. Need was weak, and vulnerable.

"Lemme do this.." Ellis trailed, blue eyes glancing up out from under his cap just long enough to see that Nick wasn't going to argue. Noticing the stilling of Nick's shoulders, Ellis softly focused on pulling bandage away from skin, soft but steady, relenting when it pulled but not hesitating too
Nick's breath hissed, softly, though the pain was a little dull at this point. Ellis' constant progress made it more bearable, but only by a small degree. The gambler was aware his gaze was locked on Ellis' face. Mental pep talk: *is doin' greaaat so far.* "What question?" he repeated.

Carefully, a small wince flickering over his features as more of the acid-burnt wound was revealed under his hands, Ellis dared his question. "...On the stairs.. you ..." He hesitated, paused. His jaw shifted on the words, catching Nick's eyes with an intent focus though the conman's expression was deadpanned in vague pain.

"Said yuh'd .. taken too many painkillers before -"

Something in Nick's mind was still working at full throttle, because he caught the kid's meaning there and shut him down with a simple, "No, it wasn't on purpose. Either time."

He heard the soft breath of a sigh, Ellis' fingers hesitating a moment before quickly starting back up. There was genuine relief in his voice when he spoke - real and vibrant, and Nick thought it was ... something. "Sorry, Nick.. I had tuh ask."

Sweet, maybe. But when wasn't he?

He always was, and that was the problem.

Frustrated, Nick glanced down at his knees. He wanted to not respond at all, but he couldn't bring himself to. Sardonic wit spilled out as a compromise. "Yeah, well... if my ex couldn't make me throw myself off something tall, nothing can. Cept maybe you, if you try hard enough."

With a gentle guffaw, Ellis smiled at him lightly, peeling the last few inches of bandage of Nick's calf. He eyed the leg for a careful moment, the skin agitated and inflamed, bubbling up in a few places. Blood trickled here and there over the dried layer of it that had collected heavily under the bandages, the flesh quick to split back open. "Don't look real good - uh... I ain't real sure whut to do, but let's clean it'uh little. Mind flickin' the bath on?"

Nick obeyed with a small exhale through his nostrils, twisting the nozzle above the bath faucet and then letting his fingers trail in the soft spray of water that rained down to follow. It was cold, but he didn't care much. Cold was numbing. He'd take numbing.

Ellis leaned back toward the cabinet, pulling open the swinging door underneath the sink's basin and pulling a washcloth out from the linens piled there. He got up on his knees as he faced forward, leaning in to stretch his hand underneath the faucet and get the cloth wet.

The Georgian talked softly as he shook the washcloth out and then returned to sit on his heels. Gently, cautiously, he started to clean the conman's leg with the wet, soft cloth, daubing away dried blood in thick splotches.

Skin came off, too, in sheets like cracked slate. It started bleeding again in more than one place, but the cold water had a soothing effect. "Reminds me of this one time when Keith done cracked a radiator in the shop on accident... heh, blasted boilin' hot coolant all over his hands... me'n his brother had tuh like, carry him, screamin' like a girl, to the hospital... they had tuh do this graft thing on his thumb 'cause it got burned so bad... guess where they done got it from?"

Nick didn't respond, watching Ellis with a downturned chin. Nerves flashed with each daub, but there was a cottony sensation between Nick and the pain. When Ellis had cleaned the worst of it, he grabbed the antibiotic tube and squirted a helping onto his thumb, leaning in to focus hard on...
daubing the gel onto the deepest parts of the burn. He was liberal, but with the burn taking up the entirety of Nick's calf, there was only so much the tiny tube could do.

"His butt, man. Like you can't tell or nothin', 'cause it healed up real nice, but he's gotta live knowin' his thumb was his butt once. That just ain't right." Nick watched the Georgian talk without listening - watched those lips move, those blue eyes flicker with emotion. Little blinks of sympathy as he worked.

The thought of getting lost in the kid again - those plaintive whimpers in his ear, that flushed face, the shudder and tremble of his body under Nick's hands... it was the only thing that made sense, the only thing his brain could grab onto. He'd only had him once and he wanted him again - no, needed him again.

The pain and the soreness and the exhaustion - they wouldn't matter after that... oh, he needed it. The pit in his stomach and the grinding pressure of his jaw made it very clear that it was far more than just base desire behind it all.

'Well, yuh really suck at tellin' when things change, Nick.'

Thinking about those words all over again panicked him. What if he needed Ellis too much? He couldn't stand that - he could stand anything but that. He'd rather battle the prospect of loneliness than accept the thought he might need Ellis for something deeper than gratification.

Anger streaked in just faintly, disorienting him as the thoughts came faster than he could process. You're such a weak dumbfuck, Nicolas. You should've just fucking Carmine and let Ellis stew himself into hating you. Save yourself all this fucking trouble. Why did you walk away?!

But he had his own answer.

He'd even given it out loud to Ellis, back then - and boy, did he regret that now, its truth even more than its utterance at all. ... because you wanted him. Not her. Fuck that line! Fuck it!

As Ellis softly tucked the top of the bandage under itself, looking it over carefully before glancing up with a reassuring grin - that fullblown, idiot grin - and a soft, questioning twist of his head, Nick forced himself to breathe. He'd just take some time - he needed to sleep off the medication and heal up a little. Just a break, a night to himself. Clear his mind.

He could hold off for a night - or maybe two. Or maybe he'd just end it entirely. Besides, a deeper voice chimed in helpfully. Gotta back off a little, with Rochelle acting strange. It bolstered his resolve so it was a little less panic-fueled and a little calmer. Sensible. Logic helped settle his mind.

Silently turning away and reaching for the bathtub faucet was enough to give Ellis the hint that Nick was going to try to bathe. The Southerner got up and left carefully, lingering only a moment to give Nick a curious stare.

The sudden fluctuation in his behaviour didn't go unnoticed, but it was so quiet and subdued, where Nick's moods were usually so harsh and burning - Ellis didn't know what to think, and didn't have the time or the opening to investigate.

Something far more obvious became apparent a little under an hour afterward: Nick had left his muddied and bloodied clothes folded at the top of the stairs, retreated into one of the two upstairs bedrooms, and locked the door without so much as a word.

Ellis could hardly recall the last time he'd stood outside a door, so intimidated by the wooden barrier locked shut in front of him he couldn't get himself to knock on it. There wasn't a light on or
even a scuffle from inside.

His hurt was only beaten out by his confusion.
Ellis felt his brows fidget closer and closer together as he tried to focus on gently moving the wet clothes from the washing machine into the dryer. He couldn't shake the weird knot in the bottom of his throat, making his voice a little strained.

"I dunno. He just locked himself in, didn't even say nothin'."

Rochelle sighed softly from where she sat on the edge of the dryer, cleaning the dried mud off her boots with a damp towel. They'd raided the bedroom downstairs for extra clothes to sleep in while their clothes were in the wash, but it was full of women's clothes, much to Coach and Ellis' chagrin.

The big man had simply retreated into the other upstairs bedroom with a "goodnight," ditching his dirty clothes at the top of the stairs like Nick had. It was probably for the best - the thought of Coach trying to fit into anything they found was ... unpleasant. He'd helped barricade the door with a few pieces of furniture before he left, so they were safe, at least.

Ellis found himself a blue set of pajamas bottoms - which, had they not had a little bow below the navel and a sewn-in sheep just at his ankle, would've been pretty androgynous - and a plain white shirt. Both of them were a size or two too small, so the shirt clung softly to his shoulders and lifted an inch or two up his stomach whenever he moved, and the bottoms squeezed at his hips. The legs, at least, were loose, meant to be too long and flow freely - so for him they just about fit.

Fresh socks provided a warm, dry relief for feet that had spent entirely too long trapped in waterlogged, muddy boots - and his hat had been lovingly washed in the shower with him, so it sat proudly (and a little wetly) atop his drying curls.

"He's in a bad mood, you know that, sweetie." Rochelle comforted him gently, shaking her boot out slightly and giving it a look over. She'd found a pair of little red shorts and a black camisole, and her dark hair was out of its tie, falling in a loose wave of braids to her shoulders. The smell of soap from both of them was almost sticky in the air, mixed in with the deep smell of detergent from the clothes that Ellis chucked into the dryer.

He shut the door with a palm, sighing. "I... I guess." Ellis should've known better than to talk to Rochelle about Nick - the conman would've died (or killed him, or both) if he'd known that Ellis was even risking betraying them to her. He just felt too lonely and confused not to talk to somebody. "Just worried 'bout him is all... his leg's bad enough, but with him actin' so weird... I dunno what tuh do."

Dropping her now cleaned boots to the ground with a soft thud, she reached behind herself to get Coach's shoes. Letting her shoulders relax as she settled into the rhythm of cleaning them with a balled-up edge of the wet towel, Rochelle smiled softly at him.

"You're a sweetheart, Ellis. He's just being.. Nick, and Nick's a little silly. You have to understand it's not you - you know he likes you. Even if he's a dick."

Quickly turning his head away, Ellis tried to focus his gaze on the wall to will away the beginnings of a blush over the bridge of his nose. Rochelle didn't mean it like that, but...

"I dunno, Ro'. He sure ain't actin' like it. S'just confusin' tryin' tuh be his friend, 'cause I know he's nice on the inside... maybe a li'l lonely, but then he pulls stuff like this... s'like we're back tuh square one, all at once." Sighing cautiously, Ellis turned the dryer's dial and listened for a moment.
as it started to whirr into action. The machine vibrated a little bit, a comfortingly familiar hum filling the air.

Rochelle curled her legs slightly, bracing her bare feet against the now-trembling door of the dryer. Turning the boots in her hands and clapping them together slightly out over the floor, she shook her head. "Why do you think he's lonely, h'uh?"

Ellis' blue eyes blinked softly, glancing up. "... 'cause he ain't had many friends?"

She laughed slightly, rubbing her forehead with a wrist. "Yeah, but that's not what I mean. He pushes people away - probably even more when they're good for him."

Scratching at his stomach carefully with a thoughtful look, Ellis rested his hip against the edge of the silent washing machine. "He wants tuh be alone?"

"Who wants to be, sweetie?" She paused in sympathy, setting Coach's shoes down beside herself on the dryer to reach over and stroke his bicep. "We don't always do the right thing for ourselves. You know you cheer him up, even if he wouldn't admit it."

"But .." The kid trailed off slightly, lowering his head with a shake of it. Pulling the too-small shirt back down over his tummy, he started to fiddle with the bow of his pajama bottoms.

Rochelle laughed gently under her breath, jumping softly down to her feet and walking the couple steps between them. She reached up to tickle at his chin, smiling as he scrunched up his nose.

"But what, sweetie?"

Scratching at his head through his slightly damp cap, Ellis gave a little pull downward of his lower lip. "Uhm... well, I dunno. He's got the right tuh choose whut he does, but.. if he's tryin' tuh shut himself off... are we s'posed tuh et him?"

She didn't have an immediate response to that. Her gaze shifted slightly, and for a moment, Ellis thought he saw something a little worried flicker over her expression. She drew her smile back up with a breath, settling a hand on his cheek comfortingly.

"Good question, sweetheart. I don't really know for sure. You're gonna have to decide that, I think... you know him better than I do. Trust your gut, it's what my dad always said."

Ellis smiled. He couldn't help it, comforted by the palm cradling his cheek and feeling a strange flutter of pride at her words. To think he knew Nick better than the others... and the concept that he might just have a good instinct... he felt flattered. "Yuh think so?"

Nudging his cap up with her thumb, Rochelle leaned in to nuzzle his nose with hers playfully. He outright laughed at the gesture, blinking his eyes shut momentarily. "Yep. You're a pretty smart guy. Smarter than Nick is, I think."

A blush fluttered over Ellis' face, coloring the gently scarred bridge of his nose. He quickly pulled her into a hug to hide it, snuggling his face down against her shoulder. "Thanks, Ro'... I feel a lot better."

She got her arms around his torso to return the hug, tickling his ribs playfully while he couldn't get away. He immediately started to laugh, squirming away from her fingers. "We'll sneak out in the morning and go see if one of those stores has cigarettes. That'll cheer him up, even if they're nasty."

"Okay." he agreed with a smile, voice a little stifled with lingering laughter. Releasing her, he put
his palms to the edge of the dryer and hopped up on it, kicking his feet softly as the thing chugged underneath him. "Hey, I'll stay up tuh watch the clothes, Ro'. yuh look tired."

Judging by her pause, she definitely was, though hesitant to outright admit it. After a moment and a soft sigh, she cracked a light grin and nodded, patting him on the knee. "Actually.. that'd be sweet of you, honey. I'll grab the couch, you can have the extra room downstairs.."

"Nonono, no chance, Ro'." Grinning gently, Ellis leaned back until his shoulders hit the wall, chin nestling onto his chest. "I gotta be a gentleman somehow! Besides, I'd wake you up rustlin' with the clothes if you were just out in the livin' room."

Reluctantly rolling her eyes at first, Rochelle giggled softly and crossed her arms. "Oh alright. You're too sweet, y'know that?" Bending over his knees lightly, she lifted his cap and kissed him on the forehead before replacing it.

He smiled as she left the laundry room, calling a soft 'g'night' after her. The dryer whispered warmly and quietly underneath him, and for a moment, he looked distantly at the doorway. As her footsteps receded up the staircase, Ellis sighed, talking under his breath to the air, like she were still there.

"... maybe you're right, Ro'. I know somethin's wrong with him, 'n' he ain't tellin' me... it's this whole closed-up thing he's got goin' on. He's gotta be scared, but if I can help... don't that mean I should?"

He toyed with the bow at the waistband of his pants, gaze trailing down his legs and the soft blue fabric that draped over them. He let his eyes close, daydreaming in a soft doze.

There'd been a distinct tension under the surface in the bathroom. Nick had been staring... hotly. But everything else had been distant, like he'd been desperate to get Ellis to leave. Ellis barely knew how to navigate the situation as it was, but trying to decipher the older man's behaviour made his brain spin.

It just didn't make any sense.

"I think he likes me... I mean he don't not like me at least. He just ain't real good at sayin' it. Or even thinkin' it maybe... but what does that mean fer me? Am I s'posed tuh push it or would that just make it worse?"

Trusting his instincts was a lot easier when he didn't feel so conflicted.

What if Nick was lonely up there? Regretful, as Ellis knew he could genuinely be - with a hurt leg, a fuzzy head, an empty room, and nobody there to distract him. Ellis felt his chest tighten slightly with worry just thinking about it.

Nick was too proud to look for help, or even admit he needed it. Ellis couldn't blame him for that - that was just Nick, and that was okay. But he couldn't sit by and let him hide, either, could he?

Rochelle was right. He had to follow his gut, and there was no way he could just go to sleep knowing Nick was upset. Not when he had the chance - the ability - to make him feel better.

"There's muh gut feelin'." he affirmed out loud with a soft pat on his thighs, smiling suddenly with his certainty. "I ain't gonna let him hang out tuh dry all alone... 'n' you can just deal with me, Nick!"

A sudden 'bzzzzt' sounded so abruptly - not even all that loudly - behind him that he yipped out of
reflex, whole body pitching in a startled jump. He nearly fell straight off the dryer, barely stopping himself with a foot quickly thrust out to the floor.

After a moment of blinking, Ellis couldn't help but break into an embarrassed guffaw, gently standing up and turning around to crack open the dryer. He hadn't expected it to be done already - he must've been dazed out longer than he'd thought.

"Um.. after I fold the laundry, anyhow."

Gently pulling out the first handful of clothing, Ellis started to fold them. It was second nature after having to help his mother so often - which made it slightly less uncomfortable when he pulled out Rochelle's underwear. The warm cloth rustling around was almost relaxing. He was glad to notice Coach's shirt, stitched up the back with black thread, was still in one piece after the wash.

Not to mention, Coach's briefs were huge.

All their clothes looked so clean. It was strange. Admittedly, there were a few stains that hadn't come out - probably never would - but colors were suddenly brighter, less dreary. And they all smelled like... home.

Nick's suit was startling. Ellis froze up a little as he pulled the jacket out, holding it by the shoulders in front of himself. It was a stark shade of white now - fascinatingly so. Leaning forward softly before he really thought it through, Ellis risked a soft nuzzle along the jacket's lapels.

It smelled like detergent... but it.. felt like Nick. Wonderfully like him - like burying into his shoulder. He'd never met anyone who wore what Nick did. All the memories, all the sensations, just looking at it... it was all Nick and only Nick.

He felt so immediately guilty and embarrassed, he had to fumble to fold the jacket carefully. He knew that type of clothing should've been hung up, but there wasn't much of an option. He'd just fold it along the seams and hope for the best.

Quickly folding the slacks and blue dress shirt to join the rest, Ellis sighed slightly. Maybe Nick couldn't admit to having feelings, but he was starting to feel rather aware of his own. He'd had crushes before - on girls, maybe, but it sure felt the same. Feelings were feelings, and as terribly embarrassed and a little nervous as it made him to think...

Ellis felt for Nick. He liked being around him, liked his humor and his sarcasm, liked his friendship. He liked more than that, but Ellis shook the train of thought off before it got embarrassing.

He hoped, suddenly, his determination to keep Nick from shutting down wasn't selfish.. but he kept the thought away as best he could. After all, Rochelle had told him to trust his gut - and how could caring for him be selfish?

Piling the clothes up neatly, Ellis gave a firm nod and gathered them into his arms. Feeling better, he turned away and padded on his socked feet out of the laundry room, gently turning the light off with his elbow as he passed by.

He dumped his shirt, boxers, and coveralls carelessly onto the couch, figuring he'd change in the morning. The living room ceiling fan gave a soft breeze as he walked underneath it toward the hallway.

He settled Rochelle's clothes down in front of the bedroom door just beyond the staircase, giving a soft and grateful smile at the door's blank face. Tiptoeing so as to not wake her, he backed up and
went up the stairs two at a time.

Ellis felt a little nervous as he walked over to the bedroom he knew Coach had taken. He felt like he was procrastinating... and Coach was the only thing left to handle. Setting his clothes down in front of the door, Ellis let out a sigh and pulled Nick's clothing to his chest thoughtfully.

He was definitely nervous, heart starting to threaten to beat faster in his chest.

What if Nick just yelled at him and kicked him out? ... he wasn't sure how he'd handle that, for all the confident build-up to it. Taking a steeling breath, Ellis tiptoed back up the hall and past the staircase... coming to a wary halt in front of the intimidating door separating him from Nick.

He inspected it for a moment, softly fiddling fingers on an edge of the blue shirt. There was, of course, the immediate obstacle of the thing being locked. He must've tried to convince himself to knock on it twenty times already - but he was determined now.

Leaning forward softly, he tried to whisper in a loud-enough but unobtrusive voice; "Nick...?" in case the conman was awake. Listening with a held breath, Ellis waited for what must've been a full minute.

Not a peep. It made him frown a little, hesitating. He had to find a way. Nick always did.

It struck him with all the force of a speeding train. Blue eyes blinked twice, then flickered down to the clothes he had cradled in his arms. Suddenly excited and inspired, he bent down to drop them next to the doorway, hurrying to the bathroom. Sure enough, Nick's wallet was on the edge of the bathroom counter, a little bundle of brown leather.

Scooping it up with a smile, Ellis flipped it open as he walked back to the doorway. Drawing Nick's credit card out of one of the slots and then tucking the wallet under his arm, he skittered up to the door and nestled against the side.

Feeling a certain thrill rising in his pulse, he held onto the knob with one hand while jimmying the credit card into the crack of the door. He felt sneaky. Twisting while he pushed, Ellis tried to mimic what he'd seen when Nick had performed this very act.

He could feel the edge of the card start to work between the doorjamb, gradually. Judging by the fact the light rattling and scuffling wasn't stirring any response from the conman, Nick wasn't conscious. That did make Ellis feel a little better about being ignored, though Nick had certainly locked him out to begin with.

Smiling when the lock suddenly gave way, clicking softly, Ellis very slowly turned the knob. His breath caught slightly as he opened it up, leaning his head in to nervously blink into the dark room.

Light fluttered in as beams from the hallway, illuminating the room in a thick streak as the door opened. Ellis' eyes immediately jumped to the bed, and a slow-spreading blush over his face was the only evidence that his heart hadn't completely stopped in his chest.

Nick was limply sprawled on his back, arms akimbo and fingers lightly curled in the sheets. The blanket had been wrestled somewhat from his naked frame in obvious agitation, twisted over his stomach and only barely wrapped around his legs. His injured leg had slipped free of them entirely, freshly bloodied bandages stark white-and-red against the sheets.

What Ellis immediately noticed was the soft tremors threatening along Nick's limbs. They were like shivers, but the house was warm enough and he shouldn't have been cold. When he blinked up toward Nick's upturned face, those severe brows were twitching in and out of a furrow.
There was no pillow on the bed - though that confused Ellis at first, he noticed it was lying a few feet away from the end of the bed, crumpled against a set of drawers like it'd been thrown there. Strange, and more evidence of agitated restlessness.

Unable to wrench his attention from the scene in front of him, Ellis carefully tiptoed forward. He gently set Nick's wallet and card down on the end table next to the bed, his fingers reaching up to click the bedside lamp there on.

Yellow light spilled over the shivering gambler, flecking shadows along the curves of his upper body. They danced as every tremble and breath made them flicker through the crisp hairs dusting Nick's chest and trailing down his stomach. Ellis' throat was wound tighter than a knot, intimidated equally by just how handsome Nick was lying there and his own worry at the tremoring.

He practically drifted backwards to close the door, heart fluttering in his chest. As it clicked shut, Nick's head rolled to one side, and Ellis froze where he stood, hand locked onto the doorknob.

A "fhh..." escaped those thinned lips, the sound crumbling as Nick only barely vocalized it. It was soft and gentle, too short to give any hint on what he might've been saying, though there was a tone to it... a certain desperation.

Ellis quickly crossed back to the bed, not tiptoeing so much anymore, for his concern. He softly bent down, gaze roving over Nick's face. The man had to be having a nightmare, and Ellis immediately wanted to comfort him out of it. He slipped a hand tremulously to touch the back of Nick's, warm fingertips touching sweat-slick skin, and he spread his fingers to clasp over the gambler's trembling fingers.

His lips were parted to speak the older man's name, but he never managed, startled into silence when Nick suddenly grasped his hand in return. Cold fingers twined messily with his, squeezing and grabbing before they stilled. Blue eyes blinked between their touching hands and Nick's face - he was still deep asleep.

Ellis' stomach knotted warmly, a blush spreading across the bridge of his nose. The gesture was unexpected… and nice.

"Whut're you dreamin' 'bout, Nick..? Gotta be somethin' bad." he mumbled, gently resting a knee up on the edge of the bed so he could lean down and get a better look over Nick's expression. Thoughts flickered indecipherably over those features and, watching the flood, Ellis felt a rising urge to wake him up or soothe him.

The closer he got, the less his guilt about sneaking in mattered - the less anything mattered, really. The hurt at being shut out was fast becoming a vague memory. Carefully leaning closer with a distinctly fluttered thrill in his stomach, Ellis softly nuzzled his nose against the gambler's, whispering to him fervently.

"'Ey.. you ain't alone.. yer okay, Nick."

Turning his head slightly, he risked slipping a little further to brush his lips against Nick's, tightening his fingers on the cold hand they cradled. Nick let off a soft breath, the sound a gentle acknowledgement of the kiss. Ellis couldn't help but drown slightly in the feeling.

His other hand slipped up to settle on Nick's chest, fingers stroking along his skin and tracing the tremoring lines of his ribs. Ellis gently closed his lips around Nick's lower, leaning into the kiss with closed eyes when the gambler shivered his lips apart, reacting pliably to the soft warmth.
As his fingers played a calming path over skin only slightly warmer than the hand he held in his own, it struck him just how cold Nick was. He needed to warm him up.

Moving gently and slowly like he were trying to get close to a wild animal, Ellis shifted his weight to press himself against Nick. He put his front flush against the other man's side, tucking his shoulder against Nick's chest and using his grip on Nick's hand to wrap the older man's arm around himself.

As he gently settled up against the gambler, knee bent to keep from touching Nick's injured leg, he was startled by a sudden movement. It was just an idle shift, at first, and Ellis felt a flash of uncertainty as he thought Nick might awaken.

However, Nick was still fully unconscious as he swept his other arm through the air to circle abruptly behind Ellis' back. His fingers grasped in the younger man's shirt, drawing him tightly against his body, and it was all Ellis could do to keep from gasping as his head was pushed underneath Nick's jawline.

Nick held him. Tightly. Like they were falling together.

The gambler rolled, vaguely, in the motion. His body turned and the sheets twisted against his hip as he drew toward the heat source in his arms. Ellis had to reciprocate, reaching the arm that wasn't underneath him to cross over Nick's waist and clutch fingers against his back. "It's alright, Nick." he mumbled, chest clenching with sympathy.

It was the softest, neediest Ellis had ever seen him - his head went fuzzy with a certain breathless affection. Ellis tucked his cheek against the older man's neck, ear tickled by the facial hair creeping down from Nick's jaw. The gambler was still trembling… but softer now, and Ellis could feel his breathing had slowed.

"S'better," he whispered softly to Nick, smiling as the older man's arms tightened around him. "I ain't mad at'cha, Nick. I can't be mad with you bein' scared. Just wish you'd say it instead - I can't read minds or nothin', man…"

Leaning his head down, Ellis kissed tenderly at the crook of Nick's neck. It was just an affectionate gesture, soft and faint, but the reaction he received was far from it. A faint growl sounded against ear, rumbling in Nick's throat - and it startled him enough to make his head recoil.

Lifting his chin, Ellis risked a glance toward the other man's face. Nick's brows were wrought in some dim emotion, his lips parted faintly. Ellis' movement made Nick shift again, and his tighter grip pushed their bodies almost flush - close enough to press their groins together.

Ellis' borrowed pajama bottoms didn't offer much of a barrier and, underneath the thin sheets, Nick was stripped bare. It left nothing to the imagination, and Ellis tried to squirm backwards to no avail as the gambler's arms refused to let him go.

Stifling a gasp at the soft pressure, Ellis tried to draw his head back. He felt the moment slipping out of control, lip catching between his teeth. Nick's trembling disappeared entirely as his body was completely drawn out of whatever nightmare it'd been trapped in, in favor of paying far more attention to the other man.

He couldn't do anything but stiffen when Nick's hips shifted, drawing into a sleepy nudge forward. His movements were lazy and tired and intoxicating in their gentle friction, mindlessly seeking out the warmth and pressure of the other body.
"N-Nick -" he managed, urgently, a rising sense of insecurity overtaking any other feeling. It wasn't like he didn't want it… and he'd accomplished his goal of stopping the nightmare… but Nick was asleep, and this wasn't what he'd meant to happen.

He tried to snake his hand up to press his palm against the older man's waist, to shake him, but all he did was frustrate the sleeping gambler. If Nick stirred, it wasn't immediately apparent - he rolled harder, thigh searching suddenly forward to press into the niche of Ellis' legs. It rubbed, shifting with Nick's canting hips.

Ellis couldn't help it as his body reacted strongly to the pressure, shoulders trembling up and head tipping back slightly with a slipped moan of appreciation as his body responded.

In reply, a low purr slipped from the conman's mouth. The sound was tinged with a certain awareness. The pressure of Nick's lazily hardening erection up against his inner thigh made Ellis shudder abruptly, reflexively pressing into the contact and grunting, "A-ah - Lordy..."

As if the words registered - or maybe just the tone itself - Nick's fingers gripped tighter in their clutch against the younger man's back. The gambler might have rolled atop him entirely, but the shift of his leg must have pressed his wounded calf into the bed, because suddenly Nick was awake and swearing.

"Fuck-!" left him in a slur, barely coherent and taut with pain. Ellis had to lay there, eyes wide, as the gambler pulled away from him in a vague shove and blinked bleary eyes open to glance down at his leg where it lay against the mattress. He glared, as if it had insulted him directly. "Fuck."

For a moment, the older man flicked his gaze around the bedroom with slow thought. It seemed like he might relax back down and return to sleep - until he noticed Ellis.

Ellis could only freeze when Nick's attention ticked back toward him. It was a slow realization that passed over Nick's face, staring in sudden interest at the body in his arms. The bedside lamp gave illumination to every edge of rising confusion on his features as his gaze found Ellis held with such flushed, tense silence against his chest.

The conman's lips parted subtly, inhaling, but Ellis blurted out a stammered, "U-uh, I -" before he could speak. But Ellis had no explanation, no excuse. He hadn't even thought to prepare one, not thinking this was where he'd end up - and now that he was underneath those intense eyes, anything that could've sufficed as an explanation folded like a broken lawn chair.

"Um…"

They both blinked for a subtle moment, Nick's fingers twitching slightly on Ellis as if trying to comprehend how they'd gotten there. When his eyes had seemed to finally tick over every inch of the Georgian's flushed face and warm body, he stopped.

Of all the things Ellis anticipated, it wasn't what followed:

Nick smirked. "I was havin' the funniest dream, Fireball..."
Chapter 48

Nick's voice was almost flustered and slightly breathless, but so unexpected and flirtatious that Ellis' heart skipped a few beats. He was almost unable to focus when those lips purred out soft - yet so darkly intent - words.

"You broke into my bedroom and started trying to screw me while I was sleeping... that doesn't sound like you at all."

Immediately, Ellis turned a deep shade of red all across his face, trying to squirm away from the tight grip that had him around the waistline. He quickly removed his arm from around Nick and wormed away by an inch or two, fistng his hands awkwardly between their chests as the conman's smirk solidified even more.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't think - I was - jus' - It just happened! I only meant tuh - And you were -"

Fumbling and visibly humiliated, Ellis tried to pull back and scramble away from him - but his whole body crumpled in simpering weakness when Nick's free hand slipped suddenly to dive between his thighs and stroke deft fingers against the bulge that betrayed Ellis' arousal.

It was one thing to rub against him - but to actually be touched by the conman was something entirely different. It shocked him into completely losing his breath, hands fumbling forward to grip onto Nick, one at his shoulder and one at the bicep of his questing hand as they lay face-to-face on the mattress.

Ellis could feel Nick's gaze on his face, though he tried to duck his head down as petting fingers drew a struggling whine out of him, choked a little. They mercilessly played with him through fabric that may as well not have been there, sending tremors through his body at maddening speeds. "Ch- chh, th-that - uh-..."

"Just couldn't leave it alone..." the conman murmured in a graveled tone that was almost introspective, reaching up his other hand to curl it behind Ellis' neck and scratch fingernails against the Georgian's delicate hairline. "... how'd you even get in here?"

Ellis couldn't begin to work together more than stammered sounds to respond with, arousal driving him out of his mind as Nick's fingers found the sensitive head of his dick through his pajamas and toyed with it lustfully. He felt like he was being tortured for information - and so well.

"I was trying - " Nick shifted his other hand up, gripping fingers in Ellis' brunette curls. He used the grip to pull Ellis' head back slightly, gazing over his helpless expression and the flush settled into his skin. Ellis couldn't even gather the effort to try and turn his face away, giving a pleading whimper. "- to avoid this.."

Ellis couldn't ignore that, though - he steeled what focus he could gather together and huffed a struggling breath. Focusing his gaze on Nick's, burning in embarrassment as the conman tightened his grip on the kid's hair subtly as if in chastisement, he forced a gradual, "Wh-why?"

Nick cocked a brow at him, quietly, both his hands going slightly still. He didn't seem about to respond, but it was clear enough that he was thinking. After a beat, he released the grip he had on the back of Ellis' head, letting his hand drop down to the Georgian's shoulder and trace down the length of his arm till it circled around his wrist.

"You should've left it alone." he stated, tone suddenly much more serious. Ellis felt a nervous blink
flutter his lashes, some of the numbness leaving his limbs when Nick's hand stopped its cruelly,
dazzlingly wonderful manipulation.

The only thing that gave him some hope, hanging on the silence, was that Nick's gaze etched out a
small 'but' as it ticked over his face. Sure enough, with an exhale, the conman's words turned into a
mutter.

"Even if I'm glad you didn't."

The words made Ellis' panting lips twitch into a smile, lowering his awkwardly fisted hands
somewhat slowly until he could flatten his palms against Nick's stomach instead. Fumbling slightly
with a very disarming awareness that they were both aroused, he mumbled hopefully, "Really? I
thought... I thought you were mad."

Nick snorted softly, shifting his weight to push his hip and an elbow against the mattress and lift
his body up. He worked his way backwards, dragging himself toward the headboard of the bed.
Ellis cautiously tried to help him move when a clear flush of pain threatened along the conman's
face. His injured leg scraped along the bed as he moved, the muscles tightening reflexively.

That didn't stop a clear smirk from sprouting on his face. Turning onto his back and setting his
shoulders against the headboard with his torso relaxed in a half-sitting position, Nick relaxed and
gave a heavy exhale. He circled an arm around Ellis' waist and pulled him close, urging him into a
straddle on his lap.

It didn't take much more to get Ellis to move. He kept his toes curled up, ensuring he didn't nudge
Nick's legs in the motion, but followed the pull to slide up and settle himself into a seated position
on the older man's thighs. He slid as close as he could, stopped only by his knees pressing into the
bottom of the headboard.

Ellis' breath caught in his throat, almost a cough, when Nick's face ended up in a lustful gaze mere
inches away from his. "But, you are gonna have to apologize for waking me up." he growled
softly, still smirking, slipping a hand to tug one finger in the waistband of Ellis' pajama pants.
"'Sorry' just isn't good enough... Ace."

The Georgian's chin lowered slightly, gingerly reaching down to grab onto the lower edge of his
shirt. "You should uh... stay still, Nick... Yer hurt." he whimpered softly, pulling the shirt up over
his head with a slight squirm as the tight material fought him.

He could feel his skin heat up under the lascivious gaze examining the flushed slopes of his torso,
jumping nervously when softly-padded fingers suddenly traced a line around his navel while his
gaze was obscured by the shirt.

Nick whispered to him in a low purr, stroking the delicate trickle of hair down the center of Ellis'
stomach with the backs of his knuckles. "You make that really hard." To drive the innuendo home,
Nick rolled his waist up a few inches, grinding against the vulnerable rump straddled over his lap.

It made Ellis shiver strongly, quickly embarrassed by the obvious enjoyment that played over his
features and the tiny sound that squeaked out of him. He could feel the heat and hardness of the
other man's interest, and it sent nervous arousal up his spine.

Nick gave a slight sigh, smirk hollowing almost imperceptibly, and slid his hand to settle flat on
the inside of Ellis' thigh. Even that was distracting, the touch making the muscles under Nick's
palm jump. "Where's my wallet?"
Ellis didn't have the will to even question 'why,' trembling a bit at the hand just subtly gripping at his leg. He quietly shucked his shirt over his shoulder, carefully stretching out to the side to reach his arm toward the bedside table. His fingertips just brushed the wallet lying behind the lamp, but enough that he could paw at the wallet and scoot it closer.

Nick's hand merely dragged along skin as Ellis moved, so when he reached the full length of his stretch, it was torturously close to his groin again. It took a lot of effort by Ellis not to intentionally lean forward a little more and push against those fingers - but more, unbeknownst to him, by Nick not to touch him.

The conman hummed a little bit as Ellis shifted back straight in his lap, and he plucked the wallet from the mechanic's fingers with a small smirk. "I'm surprised you're not asking me already."

Ellis fisted his hands lightly beside his own hips, gaze darting down to watch Nick's fingers as they toyed at his wallet. His mouth dried a little bit, making him lick his lips cautiously, but he managed to respond with some of the stimuli removed. "Ask whut...?"

"'Is it gonna hurt again.' Don't you care?"

The younger man hesitated. He curled his fingers a little tighter. Of course he did - he didn't want to collapse again, didn't want that humiliation a second time. Certainly didn't want to have to withstand Coach and Rochelle's confusion if they found out he somehow got hurt... again.

But... enough to not do it at all?

Leaning forward slightly onto his knees, Ellis craned his neck slowly until his cheek touched one of Nick's wallet-holding hands. Maintaining the still, observant gambler's gaze up at a slant, he nuzzled his cheek against the back of Nick's hand and whimpered, "... No. I wanna... I want you."

If his goal was to startle Nick, it worked. Those green eyes flashed and then narrowed, fingers tightening. Nick clearly wasn't going to ask again, suddenly snapping his wallet all the way open and digging into the billfold.

Ellis noticed, it so close to his face, that there was no money in that billfold. He'd felt a certain weight when he'd picked it up so he hadn't thought anything was different, but that huge wad of mostly-stolen cash Nick had stowed away was gone.

Hidden in its place, Nick took out a little round tin that had just fit into the empty wallet folded up. Ellis instantly felt a little knot start in his throat as he read the 'petroleum jelly' label, realizing two things at once - Nick had thrown his money away to fit it, and he was going to use that. On him.

The former made his chest tighten up in half-guilt and half-affection, and the latter made his whole spine stiffen up. "You... -"}

Nick stuck the tin between his teeth, holding it there with a slight bare of his teeth. He reached forward, grabbing fiercely onto the waistband of Ellis' pajamas at either hip. "Take 'em off, Ace, 'r I'll strip ya myself." he grated past the tin, tone incredibly serious.

Ellis quickly obeyed him, breath huffing as he forced himself to squirm his hips free of the tight pajamas. Though Nick spoke like he had an option, Nick didn't even let go of the waistband, ending up doing most of the tugging himself.

His gaze flickered vibrantly to watch every little wiggle back and forth, and as the other man crawled slightly off him to pull them entirely off his legs, he growled in annoyance. Ellis nearly apologized, but Nick just dragged him back into place the moment he was free of the pajamas. He
slid deftly attentive hands along the bruised and scratched bare frame in front of him, conflicted arousal rising under the surface of his predatory determination.

Ellis blushed harshly, following Nick's hands as they pulled him forward into an upright kneel, stomach in line with Nick's face. He couldn't help but freeze up, aware of the fact that the embrace pressed his erection into Nick's midsection. The conman didn't seem to mind it in the slightest, ignoring his hesitation as he wrapped one arm around the Georgian's waist to hold him tight, cheek scraping against a rib.

He retrieved the tin from between his teeth with his free hand, popping the cap off with a thumb like he were flicking open a lighter. Ellis heard the little pop and jumped slightly, nervous much despite himself, making Nick chuckle deeply. The very noise turned Ellis' knees weak as it puffed against his side.

Agile fingers circled the tin with a thumb and middle finger, digging his index finger deeply in the thick gel puddled in the tin. It was probably supposed to be used as chapstick, but Nick had other intentions. "Trust me?" The question was punctuated with the soft lave of a wet tongue along Ellis' lowermost ribs, making him shiver even more when a stubbled lower lip followed in its path.

Ellis gnawed at his lower lip, cautiously raising his arms to grab onto the top of the headboard and stabilize himself. It put his arms curled next to Nick's face, and the conman tipped his head on a seeming whim. His gaze slanted out of the corner of his eyes to keep it on Ellis' face as he bit gently at the younger man's bicep. He teased skin with tight nips, putting a little bit of suction on it.

Feeling a fluster cloud his focus, Ellis tried to shrug his shoulders without displacing the gambler. Nick released him anyway, a healthy pink brought up to the skin where he'd sucked at it. Voice a careful echo of humor, he tried to tease, "Didn'tcha tell me not to last time..?"

Nick paused for a moment, breathing slightly heavily against the ribcage his face was curled toward. He pulled his chin back, glancing up at Ellis, expression unreadable with a twitching brow. He inhaled - then exhaled, shaking his head. "... Yeah, I did. And look who's here. Again... you dumbshit rednecks never learn."

He punctuated the statement by a small snort, tightening his arm around Ellis' waist and stroking fingertips along the swell of his hip. His tone changed suddenly - serious again, but honest.

"Deep breath. This'll be good. Promise."

Ellis nodded firmly, taking in a long breath and letting it settle in his lungs before exhaling. The motion sent a flutter of relaxation down his muscles, though Nick's subtle sincerity helped even more. His heart pounded in his ears, but he did everything to hold his composure as the conman advanced his free hand to ready him.

The first touch of Nick's jelled finger was enough to make Ellis jolt. It was - wet, and lukewarm in a strange way. That first sensation was intimidating, but Nick didn't waste time before he gently circled his fingertip, and strange wetness turned into a fascinating, tingling kind of slickness.

Ellis whimpered slightly without thinking, the sound coming out a little questioning. He fisted his hands, trying to turn his face away from Nick's gaze as he felt his own flushed skin. The conman humored him and didn't chase after him, instead leaning forward to gently press his mouth against Ellis' sternum and nip at the firm skin of his pecs.

Taking advantage of the Vaseline's slickness, Nick pushed him a little. He curled his finger to work it inside the other man, continuing a gentle circular motion to push against tight muscles. A small
"Nhg..." escaped Nick, quickly stifled with a slightly wanting bite down on Ellis' chest.

The Georgian barely kept still, shivering with a helpless clenching of his hands as Nick only just controlled himself against leaving a mark. It all immediately felt so much better than the first time - and that had felt good, after and around the pain. This time, it was just a full and tingling sensation, rising into a pleasant pressure.

He knew his hard-on was pressing into Nick's stomach, and he would've given anything to shift his position and pull away. He just knew Nick could feel every little throb that shuddered through his body, and embarrassment flooded him every single time, distracting him self-consciously.

Ellis was just about to break and apologize when Nick suddenly pulled his mouth away and chuckled against his skin. Hot breath spilled over wet flesh, creating a tickling sensation that crawled over his chest. "... You sure help a guy's ego."

Mocked, Ellis quickly shook his head, embarrassment shifting to defense. "I-It ain't muh fault! Don't make fun'uh me.. I ain't really ... felt this before...

Chuckling again, the tone dropping to a sultry gravel, Nick let his finger drift against the muscles surrounding them, stroking and pushing at them with a little bit of a curl. "I like it." He pushed hard, suddenly, working in all the way to his knuckle. The motion was so sudden Ellis pushed abruptly forward, a moan jerking out of him as the penetration slickly completed, pleasure pulsing through his limbs.

Nick enjoyed his moan, smirking faintly as he took advantage of the moment to squirm a second finger in place, stretching those muscles easily and watching the shudders travel up Ellis' body.

"Just like that."

The Georgian whimpered helplessly, pushing his hips back against the fingers with a suddenly much more desperate edge. The conman obliged him, the plea setting a thrill up Nick's spine he couldn't quite deny, curling and scissoring his fingers a bit. Ellis' whole body followed the motions in little shivers, head falling back slightly with a whine.

Nick murmured sideways to him, voice grating slightly - but with arousal, nothing else, the arm around Ellis' waist tightening with a subtle want. "Okay, kid? You're drivin' me crazy like this..

"Mm-yeah," Ellis quickly confirmed in a tiny simper, trying to gasp himself back to breathing properly. "I-It just feels - ..." He flushed darkly before he could say it, but Nick certainly understood.

Leave it to him, though, to taunt as he gently retracted his fingers. "Feels?" With those hungry green eyes staring him down, smirk amused in the most predatory of quirks, Ellis quickly huffed into a hesitant, momentary silence.

"...G-Good." Floundering under Nick's continued smirk on his face, Ellis glanced down slightly, embarrassed out of any good sense. He felt empty now that Nick had pulled away, a vaguely uncomfortable feeling that made him want more.

The gambler pushed him slightly away, just a couple inches, so he could adjust his hips. Releasing Ellis' waist, Nick snatched up the tin from the mattress and dug with a fingertip again. He scraped out all that was left, unbothered as he tossed it across the room blindly and took his own erection in the palm of his hand.

Ellis couldn't stop himself from watching, a little shocked and fascinated all at once. Nick chuckled
to see those blue eyes so wide on his hand as he lubed himself with a practiced squeeze and stroke, reaching up his free hand to a knuckle under Ellis' chin and tip his face up.

The kid blinked, not adjusting fast enough, startled when Nick suddenly kissed him. He melted into it, eyes drifting shut, submitting instantly when the conman's teeth nipped at his lips to demand they part.

Ellis murmured a softly nonsensical noise, deep tastes fluttering across his senses as their mouths locked momentarily, just softly, then broke apart. Nick eyed him with that knuckle still in place, hand having stilled on his hard - and now slick - length.

"... You're gonna have to help me here, El." There was that little pet name. This time it was special - soft to an impossible degree, the whole utterance holding that same kind of tone. Nick had to admit he couldn't manage with his bad leg, and Ellis fumbled quickly to shift his position.

"I-I can do it." he promised immediately, serious. He put one hand onto Nick's shoulder, fingers flexing on the smooth skin beneath them, noticing a certain flicker of emotion in the green eyes on his face. He couldn't quite work out what it was. "I didn't want tuh make you hurt yerself..."

Smirking faintly, Nick let his hands shift to set on Ellis' thighs. He squeezed at them subtly, gaze darting over Ellis' sincere, wildly blushing expression.

Ellis carefully edged himself forward, trying not to look Nick straight on as he adopted a sturdier straddle on the conman's lap, knees spread. He could feel his shoulders trembling, eager to move but hesitant all the same.

Those eyes just burned at him. He'd never get over them - not those pale, focused dishes that tore straight through his consciousness and examined every speck of emotion like so many cards in Nick's capable hands. Ellis had never looked at a man and thought he was beautiful, but he did now.

He lowered himself down on bending knees with a bitten tongue, aware of Nick's steadying hand bracing his dick, helping Ellis guide himself onto it. The first breach made Ellis shudder, almost startled with how easily he came down on it. The warm, velvety-slick shaft stretched him till he shivered, the smooth slide immensely different from the rough push of the first time - but the same, in a way, too.

Aware of Nick's suddenly very tight grip on his thighs, and how those eyes were slitted half-closed, Ellis used his grip on Nick's shoulder to support himself as an outright whimper just blurted straight out of him. He rocked his hips slightly to gain a few more inches downward, stars sparking behind his eyes as the motion sent pleasure shocking up his spine and muscles tightening around the intruding length.

"H-hn- Jesus tits, Ellis, just like that..."

Nick audibly wanted more control, a kind of frustrated uselessness chewing at his tone. He gripped at the Georgian's thighs, not happy at all with his position... but turned on all the same.

Ellis couldn't help but notice a faint flush to generally pallid, thin cheeks, shocked to see such a thing on the conman. It made him all the more determined to see it through, cocking his hips forward gently as he bore down tightly, coming closer and closer to Nick's lap. He had to stop just a moment as he breached about halfway, struggling to relax.

It was a different pain; gentler. Muscles vaguely protesting, instead of a burn that brought tears to
his eyes. More than that, it was an ache, and not unpleasant.

Ellis couldn't even breathe beyond desperate pants that escaped him in quick huffs. He felt stretched to impossible limits, that shaft of warmth and an unforgiving stiffness filling him to the brim in a slick kind of unity. A hammering heart sent a quick pulse shooting across his skin and it melded with the heavy throb pressing urgently up into him through Nick's erection.

He wrapped his arms around Nick's neck, cradling the gambler's head on his forearms, and let his eyes drift shut with a slight shiver. He let his hips roll slightly forward and backward, just a few inches, giving a whimpered sound of pleasure as the motion strained against his tightened muscles and pushed Nick's length a spine-numbing inch deeper.

"You're killin' me, Ace... You gotta relax..." Nick grunted heavily, fingers sliding up Ellis' thighs in a scratching grasp. He gripped onto the other man's hips, stroking his palms in small circles. He practically vibrated with the urge to thrust upward, but a twitch of pain closed one eye when he shifted a leg in reflex to get leverage, bandaged calf grating against the mattress.

Ellis quickly tightened his arms, a biting moan fluttering out sharply at Nick's advance. He bent his head, stretching down to beg a kiss off the conman. They were both breathless, and the kiss got heavy fast, mutual noises stifled between their mouths.

Spreading his knees slightly in a forceful push against the mattress, Ellis worked his body down to take in all of the conman's hard erection, pushing down into his lap with a tight nestle. The conman's hands suddenly dug nails into his hips, and a shudder passed up Nick's body, punctuated by a frustrated utterance against Ellis' mouth.

It got easier with his body acclimated to the full width and length, tension relieved by the heavy kiss and the thrilling attentions Nick was lavishing to his lips and tongue. That was almost all Nick could control, unable to really move anything else, and he thrust full-force into it.

Ellis coaxed himself into a slow rise and fall without breaking their kiss, the motion eased by the slick lube. It was a wonderful feeling, sending shudders and shivers up his whole body. Every inch he lost by lifting up made him want it back desperately, but the absence made pushing back down again all the more incredible.

It was a torturous see-saw, and judging by the subtle prickling of sweat along Nick's brow, Ellis wasn't the only one suffering.

Groaning as he bit along Ellis' lower lip, Nick adjusted his arms to wrap fully around the kid's waist. Strong arms hugged around his hips to help him rock his weight up and down when the Georgian faltered. The added embrace - that bit of invaluable intimacy - made Ellis whimper, eagerly speeding up his motions to build up some friction.

He couldn't even feel his legs, the motion so driven by blind determination that he was barely cognizant of his own motions. He didn't really know what he was doing; he only knew that whatever it was, it felt good and he wanted more.

Pleasure shuddered up in crackling jolts, and though Nick didn't have enough control and Ellis didn't quite have the bravery to twist and search for that sweetspot Nick had discovered… but it didn't really matter - the movement felt wonderful all on its own.

"N-Nick -"
chastisement. He must’ve heard the desperation, though, because one arm slipped free from the embrace, and his hand snuck between their bodies to circle around Ellis’ erection.

Toying deft fingers over that sensitive flesh was like flicking a switch, and suddenly Ellis was rocking his weight twice as hard and fast. He couldn't stay still, riding the older man with a certain level of desperation as the motions rubbed him against Nick's hand, too.

The bed below them threatened to bump back into the wall with each bounce. There was a few inches of space to use, freed so the lamp could plug into the wall, but it was close. Ellis didn't have the sense to stop himself, too enthralled in pleasure as he worked down onto Nick's lap and against his palm.

What Ellis didn't expect, struggling with the increasing tension building around his core and the unbearable stiffness that Nick's fingers only made worse, was for the conman to come first.

It happened suddenly, when his knees gave out a little and his body collapsed down to jam down fully to Nick's lap. He must've shuddered with the sudden penetration and tensed around Nick, because the gambler's hips bucked up harshly, the older man pulling his mouth free to tip his chin up and groan a deep-throated sound of pleasure.

Just a graveled purr, vibrant and rolling off his tongue like so much honey. His head hit back against the headboard of the bed, hot breath escaping him in a huff.

The rush of pulsing warmth that spread deep inside him made Ellis shudder, a startled exhalation escaping him as the position he was in let him feel every little twitch of the conman's climax. It felt strange... and incredible... all at the same time, shock flowing up his spine, but it was so warmly intimate that Ellis just lost his composure, disoriented.

"O-oah Christ!" Ellis had no idea how loud he said it. It felt like it burst from him, hurried, but ... he really couldn't decide just how loud it'd really been. Nick crooned to him in lustful support, voice immediately sending him rocking into climax.

"That's it, Ace.."

The gambler's fingers stroked Ellis through his orgasm, digits squeezing up his hard-on to egg it on. His hips bucked up mindlessly a few times against Ellis, driving home the sensations, but he only had so much leverage without using his injured leg.

Ellis quickly wobbled to collapse against Nick's front, whimpering uselessly as his body buzzed and hummed, almost crippled. Nick soothingly gave one last stroke of his member and then stilled entirely, gently pulling his hand away to wipe it on the mattress without looking. He let his head tip against Ellis', mouth nestling against the other man's ear.

They breathed hard in the silence that settled in as they both calmed down, bodies plastered against each other in an intimate sprawl that was sweaty and hot and... wonderful. Nick's breathing was soothing in Ellis' ear, making his eyes slowly close as his cheek rested more fully against Nick's collarbone.

Ellis shifted to re-arrange himself gingerly, lifting up off the gambler's lap to disconnect them. He kept close, though, sliding into something like a sit next to Nick against the headboard, slumped down so he could stretch his legs out with a sigh. The gambler's good leg and his tangled lightly, both of them melting into place.

An arm slipped behind his shoulders, and Ellis felt a warmth spark in a place far deeper than his
skin as Nick's forearm pulled him closer, face nuzzling to where he could press his mouth against the delicate ear near his lips.

The shiver the motion caused in Ellis was sedate, more a flutter than anything else. It made Ellis smile, not wanting to move from the embrace that so warmed him. Ellis nuzzled back against Nick's face, and though he felt a slight stiffening of the gambler's form, Nick didn't pull away.

Instead, Nick spoke, voice low and unobtrusive while a hand turned slightly to settle flat against Ellis' right bicep, fingertips tracing the curl of his tattoo. It tickled. "Didn't mean to finish in you. Sorry.. should've warned ya."

It should've made Ellis blush, speaking so brazenly about it, but just then all he felt was warmth. Sticky warmth, maybe, but - more than that, too. "It's okay.. I kinda ... liked it. Felt real funny-like."

Nick chuckled lowly at that, and Ellis broke into an outright grin at the sound, hiding his face slightly against Nick's shoulder. The gambler always had this low, nasal snort to his laugh, like he was constantly mocking or sarcastic - but there was a honeyed layer it got sometimes that made him wonder. Ellis was sure he had a genuine laugh hidden somewhere, something wonderful and sweet, but stifled it.

Imagining it made him happy. But a little sad, too.

"How did you get in here, anyway..? Not that I'm angry, it's just - I did kinda lock the door." Nick shifted his weight, reaching one arm down to grab at his knee, eyes drifting to examine his bandaged calf. It had bled through again, but lessened, and there was some blood on the sheets.

"I uh... kinda used yer credit card. Like you did, back when...." Ellis didn't elaborate.

Nick blinked at him, pulling back to get a look at the Georgian's face. Breaking into a smirk, he shook his head, letting his head tip back against the headboard. One hand drifted to settle against the back of Ellis' neck, the other replacing itself around Ellis' torso. "You little thief in training.. I'm an awful influence, aren't I?"

"Maybe." Ellis smiled gently, slipping his hands to settle on Nick's sides, fingers curling a little. He didn't know what was going on, didn't know why Nick was allowing them to stay so close for so long... but he loved it. Thrived in it. "Ain't that my call, though?"

"No. You're the innocent, oblivious one." Nick snorted almost imperceptibly, green eyes half-closing. "You don't know what's good or bad for you."

Ellis thought on that for a moment, uncertainly, letting his face nuzzle slightly down. "Is that why yuh locked me out? 'Cause you thought you were a bad influence 'n' I couldn't... protect muhself from you or somethin'?"

Nick's fingers stilled for a moment - and then he let his nails stroke along the back of Ellis' neck, slowly. "Is that what you thought?"

Not really minding the dodgy response, Ellis relaxed a little more, the soft stroking on the sensitive back of his neck making his whole body tingle sleepily. "Naw. I kinda figured you were feelin' vulnerable... wanted tuh be alone..."

"Heh. So you broke in?" Nick wasn't really accusing. There was no serious emotion to be found anywhere in either of them, really - just calm words, soft tones. They were drained of any energy to do more than that.
Ellis couldn't help but smile gently, drowsily limpening his grip on Nick's torso. "I didn't want you tuh be alone up here."

Nick didn't respond. Those fingers softly scratched along his hairline, shifting up to pet through his hair, too. The motion was as calming to him as it was putting Ellis to sleep. He almost wanted to say something - but Ellis didn't seem to expect it.

It was nice... the silence. Nick didn't have to try and come up with something to explain away why he was being gentle, or second-guess himself. He stroked at the skin under his fingertips, feeling Ellis' breaths against his shoulder.

He could just relax for a moment, gather himself. Bask in the afterglow.

Nick wasn't sure how many breaths he'd taken, how long it had been, before he inhaled deeply and spoke. "Hey... El." Nick let himself pause a moment, settling his mouth against Ellis' hair, a soapy smell deeply swirling into his nostrils. "You don't have to break in next time. I won't lock you out."

When Ellis didn't respond, Nick lifted his head, turning it a little to glance at his face. A smile sprouted on his face, quickly stifled and drowned into an even line. Ellis was asleep against his shoulder.

Sighing carefully, Nick gently disentangled himself from the sleeping kid. He eased Ellis down with his hands, careful to let him down softly so as to not disturb him. The moment he settled down, Ellis made to curl up, pawing his hands limply on the mattress in search of Nick.

Seeing his restlessness, Nick let a hand drift to rustle the mechanic's curly hair. Just a soothing brush with the pads of his fingers over the brown locks, enough to ease him. Ellis immediately relaxed with a content sigh.

It was hard to roll out of bed for Nick, wincing as his injured leg throbbed painfully. Cautiously lowering his feet to the floor after sliding himself across the mattress, he sat on the edge for a moment, hanging his head with his elbows on his knees. His body slumped bonelessly.

He looked over his shoulder, feeling exhausted in all the right ways - and a few wrong ones. A smirk settled lightly onto his lips, turning into a smile a beat later. *Sorry, kiddo... If it helps.. I actually do wish I could stay.*

Then it died, withering on his lips, and he gazed uncertainly toward some distant point for just a moment.

He did. And it felt… unfamiliar.

Putting all his weight on his good leg, Nick stood up, keeping an arm softly extended to hold his balance. He let himself reach back to pull the blanket up and draw it carefully over Ellis' frame, tucking it around his shoulders.

His fingers trailed over Ellis' cheek as he pulled away. The contact tingled, but Nick straightened up and carefully turned away to walk toward the door. He picked up his wallet as he went, body shuddering with each step that put even the slightest weight on his hurt leg. He ended up limping, barely pressing down with the ball of his foot.

Nick would get cleaned up, get dressed, and carefully crash on the couch downstairs. Ellis could have the bed. If someone asked, he'd just say he'd offered to play guard and they'd traded.

No one'd be the wiser.
Fingering his wallet as he opened the door, flinching, Nick glanced at it. He'd hidden a few hundreds in an empty credit card slot. He was never one to pull all of the aces out of his sleeves.
Consciousness didn't come gently for the conman - Nick must've been trying to roll over in his sleep, because suddenly he jolted awake with a flurry of pain, completely disoriented except for the knowledge that he was in agony.

"Sh-Shit! Fucking leg!"

Blurring it out, Nick forced himself to hold abruptly still, body completely rigid. Panting slightly, he kept completely immobile while the pain ebbed slowly. The needled sensations that had sprouted all along his bandaged calf started to calm.

Exhaling a deep breath as a numbness settled in behind the pain, Nick let himself move. His arms were crossed over his chest tightly, cradling something imaginary to his body. He eyed his own arms, turning his hands at the wrists to examine his palms. Did he wish he'd woken up with Ellis against his side? He wasn't sure anymore.

Rolling his eyes slightly, Nick exhaled calmly and craned his neck lightly to try and look around from where he was sprawled on the couch. It took a moment to re-organize his thoughts, feeling on edge. The front room was dark, lit only by the morning light streaming in from the windows and a light that was on in the hallway leading up to the second floor.

The house was quiet, only a constant buzz from the ceiling fan overhead that was lightly rotating. He tipped his head up into the breeze, sighing quietly.

Sleep had been easy. Certainly far easier than the first time he'd tried to go to sleep that night - Ellis had exhausted him, and it had been a deep sleep till he'd apparently tried to move.

Shifting his weight to carefully try and get his elbows back behind himself, moving to pull himself to sit up on the couch, Nick's shoulder brushed against something uneven and firm where his head had been resting on the cushion. Confused, he pawed back a hand to grab it, dragging it in front of himself.

Green eyes turned a bit shocked as he held Ellis' cap in front of his face.

What the hell? Ellis' hat? Why - what? He was confused out of his mind, probably worsened by only being freshly woken up. He turned the cap in his fingers with a bewildered attention, a thumb straightening it out from where it'd been folded a bit strangely under the weight of his head.

Had Ellis put it there? Like a pillow? He supposed that meant the others were already awake, although there was a heavy silence in the house that made him wonder.

Starting to put the hat down, Nick's brow rose in curiousity when a folded, torn bit of paper tumbled out from the inside onto his stomach. "Well, that's helpful." He snorted vaguely, holding onto the hat as he picked up the note and shook it open by an edge.

The handwriting was neat enough, a little curly with sharp angles. The words got smaller and more crammed together as it went, Ellis rambling hopelessly on a too-small piece of paper. He'd torn it off from a larger piece, apparently thinking he'd only take a few inches of paper.

As if.

'Mr. Gambling Man,
"Hah. Yeah, *that's* what that means, dumbshit." Nick had to turn it over to read the rest, a little arrow pointing him on.

'Gonna try and get you some cigarettes while we're there. Wish I knew what kind of snack you like. But Ro says they'll just leave me if I don't get a move on. I'm leaving my hat with ya! We'll be back real shortly.'

Shaking his head, Nick tossed the note away with a sigh. He felt slightly amused, imagining Ellis scrambling to write the note up while Coach and Rochelle waited impatiently.

It was strange. He sat there for a moment, in silence, realizing slowly that he trusted them to come back. All three of them. He would've gladly put money on it. That security, that safety... had he ever known what it felt like?

Damn I hope they do find some smokes.. what I'd give. Christ.

Using a hand to grip onto the slacks of his injured leg, Nick carefully turned himself on the couch. Letting his feet settle on the carpet, he tested his footing as he straightened his somewhat messily dressed body. Straightening out his dress shirt and tucking it more neatly into his slacks, he sighed, rolling his weight onto his bad leg.

It distinctly hurt, pain making his brows twitch uncomfortably, but it didn't crumple like it had the day before. Inspired, Nick put his palms to the couch and gently pushed to stand up. He was still going to be limping, but hopefully less, today.

Hobbling carefully away from the couch with Ellis' hat left behind on the armrest, Nick advanced toward what looked like a small kitchen next to the laundry room. He needed a drink - water would do, though something alcoholic would've been even better.

Wincing slightly as he crossed from carpet to cold tile, Nick aimed for the sink. He flicked on the tap, running a fingertip through the stream that splashed out in an uneven pillar. It was... lukewarm, but his mouth was dry.

He reached up to open an overhead cabinet, hunting for a glass. A coffee mug came first to his fingers, and he turned it to glance inside. It seemed pretty clean, but not enough for him to quite trust it.

His mind inevitably drifted to the night before while he ran the mug underneath the tap, letting water gather up inside it and then pouring it out with a slight shake. He should've been the mature one - the confident one who knew what he was doing.

Instead, he was pretty sure Ellis was the one assured in his decisions.

_Guy jumped me like a cheap whore. Jesus. Turned him gay quick, didn't you, Nicolas? Hah._

Unfortunately, blaming the situation on Ellis didn't work too well. Nick still had a lingering awareness of holding Ellis close, body warm and perfect against his chest. His brows furrowed, squeamishly yanking a paper towel off a roll attached to the bottom of a cabinet just beside his head to scrub at the mug with.

It had felt good. Right, even. He couldn't deny that - it just had.
Ellis did something to him. He saw through Nick's ploys and pokerfaces, even when the kid couldn't really understand why. Ellis played him without any kind of intent to, broke him down with bumbling skill. It scared him.

_Maybe he's good for you._

Startled by the thought, Nick's fingers slipped on the slick mug and he dropped it into the sink with a loud clatter. Wincing quickly, he dived a hand to pick it back up, checking to see if he'd broken it.

Good for him - that was a strange thought. He didn't necessarily like it, either.

Sighing in annoyance, he let the mug fill up with water before shutting the tap off. Turning away, he used his free hand to push himself up, hopping onto the edge of the sink and forcing himself to relax now that he could dangle his bad leg.

Nick sipped from his mug with an expression about as pleased as a drenched cat.

He'd just take it simple. There was really no meaning behind his behaviour. They just laid close for a moment. It was natural after sex. He definitely shouldn't have felt uncomfortable about it - even if it had been intimate. Or touching Ellis soothingly afterward - even if he had felt his chest tighten. Or his own reluctance to leave - even if he had sincerely wanted to stay.

None of it meant anything, not really.

Simple fact was they had a good thing going, and Nick liked simplicity almost as much as he liked good things. There was no guilt in letting it happen - especially if it felt good. _It's the fucking apocalypse. Can I just have this one goddamn thing?_ 

Scrunching his nose at his mug, he grumbled a little. The water tasted tinny. He would've given anything for bottled water, but that wasn't much of an option. Not to mention, he didn't know how long the others had been gone and when they'd come back.

He felt a little useless. Bored, even. It grated at him that they'd 'let him sleep' like some cripple. He wasn't crippled, just wounded. Glaring at his bad leg only stirred a sense of resentment in his gut - but there was no one to yell at. He was alone.

Standing up with a slight 'umf' as he landed his weight entirely on his good foot, he restlessly looked around the kitchen. He had to do something while he was waiting.

Nick limped over to the fridge, opening it up and gazing inside as he took a swig of water. There wasn't much, mostly condiments and old Tupperware containers with questionable contents. At the very bottom of the fridge, though, was an empty bottle of beer tipped on its side.

He eyed it, head tipping in sudden interest as an idea struck him.

"Heh."

Bending down with a hand balancing himself on the fridge door, Nick picked up the bottle and tucked it into his suit pocket. The glass was cold from being in the fridge, and it chilled lightly at his hip. He abandoned his mug of water on one of the shelves in the fridge, leaving the door open carelessly.

He smirked, suddenly feeling in a good mood. He could still remember the night he'd learned how to make a Molotov Cocktail - sitting on a cold cement wall, fingers tight on his own knees, watching clear fuel chug into a bottle in fascination. He'd been a kid back then... learning how to
"Figured you'd take to a history lesson better if it was hands-on, Nick. You remember who used the first Molotovs?"

"They weren't called Molotovs when they were first used."

That laugh. The loud one that made Nick feel hilarious. "... Little smartass."

Nick hobbled slightly as he started pawing through cabinets. Ten to one there was hard alcohol somewhere in the house, stashed away. He just had to find it. "Let's see, booze, booze..."

He found a few bottles behind a bunch of cooking spices. Weak wines and a bottle of some chocolate cordial left him disappointed at first. A moment later, though, he spotted a clear plastic bottle nearer the back, quickly leaning in to drag it out. Much to his approval - it was actual vodka.

Shitty vodka, but high-proof. It'd be enough.

Grinning subtly, he set both the bottles he had on the counter. Uncapping the vodka, he carefully filled the beer bottle halfway, eyeing the subtle shadow of rising liquid through the brown glass.

"Fuel..."

Pleased, he put the vodka bottle down and hobbled over to the sink again with his half-made Molotov gripped tight in one hand. Picking up the bottle of dishwasher detergent just beside the sink and shaking it slightly, Nick snapped the cap open with one hand.

He poured it carefully into the bottle, adding a few inches of height to the mixture inside, shadow and light swirling perceptibly inside the bottle as the heavy detergent dribbled through the alcohol.

"Thickener..."

Replacing the detergent bottle back up against the wall, Nick went through the nearby drawers carefully until he found a washrag. Winding it up into a twist, he jammed one end into the mouth of the beer bottle, working it a few inches in.

Surveying his work with a content smirk, Nick set the thing down on the counter carefully.

*Just needs a light and it's set to go. Damn, you're good, Nicolas.*

He had to laugh. Getting something to focus on had definitely made him feel better, and now he felt like he'd actually done something useful with what could've been wasted time. "I should've done this earlier. Fuck zombies."

Digging through a few drawers, he found one full of various junk that had a few matchbooks inside. He stowed one in the hidden pocket on the inside of his suit, with his wallet.

Ellis was going to freak when he saw. He probably had a story about Keith burning himself alive with one of these. Rochelle would likely disapprove and give him one of those 'Where the hell did you learn that' looks... Coach, ten to one, would just shake his head and frown. That seemed to be his reaction to Nick.

*Speaking of - where the hell are they?*

He was fast getting tired of waiting. Who knew how long he'd been asleep - and add on the time he'd wasted screwing around... it wasn't his job to sit around and wait for them like a housewife.
"Fuck this." Setting the bottle on the counter and abandoning it, he turned and hobbled carefully back out of the kitchen.

Circling the couch, Nick worked his black-socked feet into his shoes ditched just on the carpet. As he winced slightly, having to bend down to help his bad leg into the shoe and grab his crowbar settled nearby, he re-noticed Ellis' hat perched on the couch armrest.

Smirking lightly, he wormed his foot into his shoe and straightened back up. Nick tucked his crowbar underneath his arm and picked up the blue cap, eyeing it for a moment. He still couldn't believe Ellis had left it with him. He was tempted to pretend to lose it. *Ellis would have an aneurysm.*

Chuckling at the thought, Nick undid the width adjustment in the soft mesh back of the cap. He pulled his suit jacket up slightly, working the band through one of the belt loops above his backside. Snapping it closed, he let the hat dangle down from its makeshift hook. His jacket hid it pretty well when he snapped it back in place, though he could feel it.

He'd fuck with Ellis a little. Just a few minutes of terror - he mocked a Southern accent already, rolling his eyes in humor as he turned to limp toward the door. "Oh, yeah, Ay-lus. I ever tell you 'bout the time yer cap fell right outta my hands into that there sewer grate outside?"

Cracking himself up, Nick carefully pulled a light table set up on its side away from the doorway. They'd somewhat unbarricaded the door to get out, but replaced that to keep Nick safe. He admitted being a bit annoyed they didn't think *one* of three might be able to stay back with him, but he wasn't about to dwell on it.

*I'll wait till I find them to bitch about that.*

Stepping gladly through the doorway, Nick tipped his head up into the sunlight. It was maybe late morning, and the sky was clear to a wonderful degree. The sun warmed pleasantly at his skin, making him shake his head and run a hand through his hair.

Hobbling down the few steps leading onto the gravel road, Nick pulled his crowbar from under his arm and held it with an absent swing. He carefully walked down the road, leg not hurting too badly to manage.

His gaze wandered his surroundings as he walked at as fast a pace he could manage, slightly uncomfortable being alone and injured… though he wouldn't've admitted it aloud. He didn't see any zombies, just a few dead bodies that looked pretty fresh. The other three must've run into them on the way.

Nick relaxed a little with that thought, though he didn't lower his crowbar. He started to hum a flat tune, shoes crunching on uneven gravel as he approached the back of the gas station's parking lot.

He was glad to step onto asphalt as the gravel road turned into parking lot. It gave him much better footing and a smoother walk, lessening the pressure on his bad leg. Sighing in slight relief, Nick angled toward the gas station building with a smirk.

He had to step over a few infected bodies, glancing at them only momentarily before crinkling his nose and looking away. Tucking his crowbar into his belt, he stretched out his arms lightly.

*If that dipshit tries to give me some of his candy I'll smack him...* Chuckling absently as he limped along the wall, he gave a shake of his head. This was the gas station that had been broken and covered in blood, and all the windows busted. Light spilled out into the parking lot so they must've
found a working light.

He was just two steps away from the corner of the building when he heard it.

"Ain't the zombies bad enough!?"

It was panicked and confused to a desperate point - Ellis' voice. There was a level of terror in his tone that set Nick's teeth on edge, his skin prickling sharply. He'd never heard that from the Georgian. Not once.

*What the fuck?!!*

Immediately, Nick went flat against the wall, eyes narrowed. A cold sensation spilled down his spine, perking for the next sounds. They were in front of the gas station, not inside it.

"We can do this tugether! Yuh don't gotta -"

Ellis' yelp and a sharp smack, the familiar sound of metal against skin, made anger flare up so sharply in Nick he couldn't take it. Sliding his head to the side, he let his gaze slant to see around the corner just next to him without baring more than he had to of his face.

He saw Ellis stumbling into Coach and Rochelle's quickly grabbing arms, holding his cheek with a shocked look of pain as blood started to trickle from a split on his cheekbone.

Standing just a few feet away from them on the asphalt was a blonde woman, re-aiming the handgun that she'd clearly pistol-whipped Ellis with. All Nick could see of her features was the frizzy and dirty yellow hair falling around her shoulders, and the torn-up, bloodied, and darkly stained leather biker getup she was wearing.

"Shut up, pussy." she snapped, sounding practically amused with him. Jerking the handgun at Coach, she cocked a hip and ordered, "You, tubs. Take off the backpack."

He'd been on both ends of that gun before - but the fact the woman had hit Ellis... vibrant, flowing rage spilled into every single inch of the conman's skin. He was on fire - and then emotion drained from him as his heart adopted a steady thud in his chest.

Nick pulled back there, expression absolute stone as he reached down to pull his Magnum out of its thigh holster. He eased the ammo well open, softly, staring just an instant at the empty holes returning his gaze with blank faces. Had he really used his last bullets? The swamp had stolen so much from them… energy, time, supplies, ammo…

Pretending you had the upper hand was far harder than pretending you didn't.

Returning it into place with a snap, he looked up and let his fingers settle into a confident squeeze on the grip, finger on the trigger. There was a murderous steel to his expression, an unflinching grit to his jaw, he hadn't felt in years.

Stepping out past the corner of the building with a solid stance that didn't betray an inch of pain, Nick aimed his Magnum right at her back and spoke coolly.

"Bad move, bitch."
Chapter 50

The air might've cracked under the weight of the moment's tension.

The muzzle of Nick's Magnum glinted in the sunlight, aimed dangerously at the blonde's spine. She stiffened, holding utterly still but for the smallest turn of her head to gaze back at him. One muddy green eye sized him up past dirty strands of yellow-blonde hair, a metal stud protruding from her brow.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Ellis immediately tried to wrest out of Coach and Rochelle's grip, panicked, but they held him fast. "Nick! Nick, don't -!" There was something distinctly horrified in his expression, and Nick had a very strong feeling Ellis knew his gun had no ammo.

The last thing he needed was Ellis giving him away. Just looking at the kid made every cell in Nick's body tremble with anger - his cheekbone was bruising into a dark purple, blood reaching his jaw in that soft trickle.

*I will fucking kill you, you bitch.*

Rochelle silenced Ellis first with a careful squeeze, but the blonde tightened a dirty finger on the trigger of her pistol anyway, aimed unerringly towards the three. " Shut it, kid, before I shut it for you." she stated without looking away from Nick.

"Don't say a word, any of you." Nick snarled in a demand, tone so angrily severe that Ellis whimpered faintly, blue eyes nervously darting between the two guns being pointed around. Rochelle held tightly onto him, looking at Nick... confidently. She trusted him.

Coach - Nick couldn't tell. Maybe he was just resigned to trusting him.

Nick's gaze met the blonde's again, green boiling silently like acid as his stony expression and tone threatened all on their own. "Put. The gun. Down. Keep pointing it at them and I will fucking put a bullet in your spine."

She smirked carelessly, letting out a small laugh and jerking the nose of her pistol slightly. "I have your little friends under the knife right now, buddy. You want to try that again?"

There wasn't even a split second before he was retorting, pure anger rising insensibly deep beneath a cool expression of veneered hatred. He almost interrupted her entirely. "No, not really. Because I can blow your fucking head off before you even think about thinking about pulling that trigger, bitch."

The blonde didn't seem to soften in the slightest, gaze flickering now between Nick and the other three. Her weight adjusted on her boots, tongue slowly sliding over her lower lip. "I can take at least one out before you get me. Up to losing a friend, fuckface? Or are you gonna sidle over like a good boy and start emptying your pockets?"

Nick let his finger tighten subtly, wishing furiously that he had a loaded gun in his hand. This was too much of a gamble - too much at stake... God, he had to get that gun out of her hands.

But he didn't pause. Didn't let any time pass, to give away his insecurity.
"So? Shoot, bitch. I don't give a shit. We're all gonna die sometime." he questioned carelessly, not even drifting his gaze away from her face. His eyes narrowed further, and on a risk, he let some of the rage buried down slip into his voice. It grated, snarling, going deeper with anger. "No matter how this works out, you end up splattered on the ground for the zombies."

That seemed to give her pause, jaw grinding out to one side. Her weight shifted with a slight nervous motion, bringing a fast pulse to Nick's heartbeat. The very last thing he needed was for her to panic. If she tried anything... and he didn't shoot her immediately... she'd realize the con.

He growled darkly, a level of calm threat flattening his voice as he put it in simple terms: "Put the fucking gun down, and we can all walk away."

Adjusting her grip on her handgun, the blonde clamped green-brown eyes on his sharply, narrowing and furrowing her brows dangerously. "Looks like we've got a little stalemate here. One of us is going to have to bend over."

"No." he asserted, angrily, taking one strong step closer with a jerk of his pistol. Nick knew he was winning when she didn't risk trying to shift her aim to him in retaliation. "You are going to fucking drop the weapon because anything else will get you a fist-sized hole in your chest before you can say I'm Nick's bitch."

Darting her gaze subtly, she chewed on her tongue, visibly considering that statement. "...Fuck. It's not worth dying." Her expression hollowed slightly, lips going taut against one another. "This would've been a whole lot simpler without your pussy ass involved." she muttered, angrily, her wrist limping.

With a frustrated motion, she let her handgun fall from her fingers, it clattering away on the asphalt. Almost mockingly, she lifted up her hands like she were being held at gunpoint even when Nick let his attention shift away from his Magnum in favor of carefully advancing forward. He bent down to pick up her pistol, gripping it quickly in his left hand.

Letting his fingers roll on the pistol's grip, Nick felt a surge of anger burn up the length of his spine. It felt heavy in his hand - hot, and his fingertips dug into the rubber that coated its grip. Straightening cautiously, his gaze jerked up to the blonde's face. Underneath frustrated green eyes, she was smirking faintly.

Nick could only vaguely hear Rochelle's voice, oblivious to the anger coursing through the gambler. "Oh thank God... I thought someone was going to get killed... she jumped us in the gas station, Nick. I'm so glad you came and found us."

In a motion that seemed to just float with such enraged ease, Nick suddenly took the few steps between them and whipped her straight across the face with the butt of her own pistol.

It struck her mouth instead of her cheek, and she went down with a strong yelp of surprise, thudding flat on her back. One of her hands quickly went up to cup over her lips, blood trickling between her fingers. He might've broken a tooth. "You fucker!"

It wasn't revenge enough.

There was a distinct silence whirling around Nick's head as he aimed the loaded pistol straight down into her face. His whole body coiled behind it, feeling the hot steel stretch out over his fingers. His index finger toyed with the trigger underneath it, arm tight with tension.

*Shoot, Nicolas. Pull the fucking trigger.*
He was sure he heard voices, speaking to him softly, but he shut them out. He could imagine the other three telling him to calm down, put down the gun. That it was over. Getting increasingly panicked when he failed to respond, gun completely steady in his hand.

The blonde's green-brown eyes simmered up into his over the barrel of the gun, threatening. *The bitch hit Ellis. She threatened to kill them. Are you just going to fucking let it go?!!*

Christ, he felt possessive. Over-protective - a deep offense boiling to acrid hate at the thought of anyone doing anything to Ellis. He should've been there to stop it... but this would have to do. Revenge served hot on the head of a bullet.

_Do it._ His finger tightened, feeling the steel trigger start to roll back on its joint, centimeter by centimeter growing closer to firing -

"Nick." Heavy with that Southern hum, the utterance of his name pierced his thoughts. His finger stilled, realizing Ellis had come to stand just beside him. The kid's presence suddenly broke his determination, and his body froze up.

He'd have done it.

Fingertips touched the back of his wrist, warm and gentle. Nick felt himself blink sharply, gaze darting down to the hand settling over his. It very gently pushed downward, and though his whole arm was stiff as iron, the pressure gradually lowered his gun until it pointed blankly down to the cement.

Jerked into clear thought like he'd been knocked free of a trance, Nick felt tension wring out of his muscles in a slow dribble. He turned his head, and his gaze met Ellis'. There was a certain understanding, a coaxing warmth, in those blue eyes. The younger man smiled at him soothingly, blood tracing down his dirty cheek. "Yer alright, Nick. Let it go."

Nick's breath left him in a slight huff. Glancing between the blonde and the man beside him, he slowly pulled his finger away from the trigger. The anger drained out of Nick slowly, suddenly completely loosening his tense arms. When it seemed sure he was back in control, Ellis let his fingers pull away, fisting that hand cautiously around the ghosted warmth of their contact.

There was nothing he could do but look away, frustrated. He didn't know what he felt. Was it guilt? He'd have killed her, he knew that. It wasn't the first time, but never like this. Like an execution. Self-defense went out the window the minute she lost her gun.

Rochelle seemed even more shaken now, giving him a distinct look of uncertainty.

Oddly, on the other hand, Coach was calm. He gave Nick a firm nod, assured, and deepset eyes seemed impressed. Nick wasn't sure why - it was Ellis he should've been impressed with... the kid was the only reason the thief wasn't dead.

"What's your name?" he spat down at the blonde, dangerously warning her with deeply twitching brows. He felt his anger flicker hotter when she gave him a smug narrow of her eyes, silent, but it was under control now. "Fine, bitch. Are you alone?"

Rochelle gently pulled away from Coach, walking forward to set her hand softly on Nick's arm. The blonde was clearly not interested in responding, gently soothing her bleeding mouth with her palm and downcasting her gaze defiantly.

"You 'xpect lootin', but can't say I thought folks'd turn to armed robbery." Coach quietly noted, crossing his arms carefully with a sigh. The blonde laughed sharply like she'd just heard something
"We can leave her at the house after we get all our stuff." Rochelle suggested quietly. "There's supplies and electricity there, so it wouldn't be cruel."

Nick was instantly incredulous, turning his head to give her a disbelieving look. He shook her hand off, his usual tone of general disagreement returning in place of genuine anger. "Cruel?! Not being cruel was not fucking shooting her in the head! Far as I'm concerned being kind is telling her to fuck off right now."

That riled a response out of the woman, blood speckling her front when she spat out, "Fuck you."

Ellis uncertainly scratched at his head, sighing softly. 'Tunno, Ro'. I'm sorta with Nick on this one. She's dangerous." He didn't say it outright, but as he spoke, he lifted his hand and touched softly on his cheek, daubing away some blood with his fingertips. His expression was slightly hurt - he just wanted the woman away from them. No one could blame him.

Rochelle looked around for a moment, hesitant, but when she saw the sentiment worn into all three of her friends' faces, she gave in wearily with a sigh. "Alright, your call - majority rules and all that."

Immediately moving with the permission, Nick dropped to a bend at the waist in front of the blonde. He glared down at her severely, twisting his wrist to flip his Magnum around in his hand so he held the muzzle. He didn't care enough about the weapon to hang onto it when he had a perfectly fine pistol to replace it with now.

She didn't flinch when he suddenly stuck it out toward her face, but it took her a moment to understand he was offering it to her, not preparing to hit her again. "Get the fuck out of here, right now. I don't care where you were going, you go back down the highway like a good girl. If I see your goddamn face again, you will regret it. Capiche?"

"Aw. You're so sweet. Dick." she snarled through bloody teeth as she went to snatch the Magnum out of his hand. He jerked it slightly out of her reach just at the last second, giving her a long, dark warning stare.

"... you fucked up, blondie. Zombies are nothing compared to what I'd do to you if we were alone right now." Sliding the Magnum into her hand, he straightened up and crossed his arms easily. A smirk settled flat on his face, watching her as he felt the other three step up behind him.

The blonde shoved herself up with her palms, quickly getting the Magnum in her hand. She backed up, eyeing them carefully as her boots slowly rolled with each cautious step backward.

Nick wasn't surprised in the least when she got barely a few feet away and suddenly lifted up the Magnum to take aim right at his chest. Rochelle didn't have time to do more than jump in horror, and Coach's hand clapped on his shoulder like he were prepared to shove the conman to the ground, but it was too late.

Her finger pulled back on the trigger hard - and it clicked dully. Nick gave one little blink in reaction to it, smirk unwavering, as her spiteful grin turned into a faltering look of shock. The blonde pulled the trigger one more time, cursing ferociously under her breath.

"There's no fucking ammo in this thing?! You bullshitted me, you fucker!"

Feeling Coach's hand go slack on his sleeve, Nick coolly lifted up his gun-toting left hand, aiming neatly with a straight arm. He tipped his head so he could gaze straight down the length of black
metal, feeling a smirk curl up his features.

"Run, bitch."

She did. It took her a moment, staring from the useless Magnum in her hand to Nick's loaded pistol, but as the repercussions of what she'd just tried to do fully sunk in, she bolted full-speed across the parking lot, scrambling to sprint down the sidewalk before he could shoot.

Coach actually laughed slightly, chuckling a bit gruffly as she disappeared around the edge of a building. Nick let his arm fall, smirking faintly, and the big man clapped him on the shoulder.

"You did good, Nick. Can't believe that gun wasn't loaded. Yo' gamblin' habit came in handy fo' once."

There was an honest compliment there. Nick overlooked the 'for once' - maybe Coach might actually start to get along with him. He inhaled cautiously, shrugging up a shoulder and glancing over it. He felt his gaze tug toward Ellis' bruised face. "It was messy. Too much risk."

Rochelle teased him lightly, but she seemed distracted. Her brows were furrowed a little - she didn't look to be recovering as quickly from the blonde's attempt at betrayal, gazing after her with a slightly tight stance. "Awwh. That's the sweetest thing you've ever said about us."

"Hah. Yeah... you guys... not me getting shot in the face or anything..." he quipped morosely, earning an elbow from the pink-shirted woman. He flashed her a small smirk, and she shook her head subtly.

"I'm just glad we're all okay, man... that was scary." Ellis sighed out, closing a hand over his pretty badly bleeding cheek. Nick suddenly felt a little disgusted holding the gun he was, and he jammed it in his thigh holster with a grunt.

"I doubt she'll be back." Rochelle suggested, sighing. "You're pretty scary when you want to be, Nick, sweetie. I'm not complaining, it's just..." She trailed off, shaking her head and giving a light smile.

Even though he was mumbling slightly, tone seeming a little forced, Ellis started in on a story; "Reminds me'uh this one time muh buddy Keith was tryin' tuh learn how tuh skateboard but he thought it was too borin', so he took these huge tin sheets 'n built-'"

Coach interrupted him almost immediately, weary, rubbing the back of his bald head. "What in the hell does this have to do with what just happened, son?"

Ellis blinked slightly, chuckling lightly. "Oah, well the hobo whut started livin' underneath his ramps tried tuh mug him with a knife while he was skateboardin'. It wouldn't'uh been so funny if Keith hadn't'uh been unconscious at the time, what with him fallin' straight off the ramp ontuh his head. Ain't like Keith could have put up no fight. He took his wallet'n'cash'n'everythin'."

There was a silence, momentarily.

Nick chuckling faintly broke it, and with a tired noise of consternation, Coach reached into his backpack. He unzipped it without taking it off, blindly digging a hand into its contents. "We got some things before she jumped us, Nick."

A plastic pack of gummy worms was tossed at Ellis, a small box of cigarettes at Nick. There was a short whistle of glee from the mechanic, brightening visibly as he clutched the bag to his chest.
"Thankyuh, Coach!"

Nick didn't say a word, just nodding his head with unspoken and deep appreciation, breaking the pack open. He needed one just about then - for a few reasons. He let the filter nestle between his lips, reaching into his inner pocket to pry out the matchbook.

He lit it as Rochelle looped her arm in Coach's and pulled him gently to start walking back toward the house. Nick thought she did so rather suddenly, but he didn't argue. "Let's get everything we need from the house and get going. I don't really want to hang around here too much longer."

"Mm. Agreed." Nick quietly affirmed, shaking out his match as the tip of his cigarette caught dull fire. His free hand reached back to curl on Ellis' elbow, guiding the kid to walk next to him after seeing Ellis was so thoroughly distracted in trying to tear into the plastic bag in his hands.

Inhaling deeply, Nick let the smoke roil out of his nostrils, the burn distracting him as he started to limp lightly after them. The adrenaline was gone, and he realized he probably should've been more careful with his leg. It was fast starting to hurt fairly badly, the pain reminiscent of the skin of his calf splitting down the center.

Speaking far under his breath so the other two couldn't hear him, he caught his cigarette with his teeth and talked past it. "You okay, kiddo?"

"Yeah, I jus' can't get this dang thing open..." Ellis mumbled, deeply invested in his work trying to pluck at the sealed plastic and tear it as he tagged obediently along with Nick's gently pulling hand.

It made Nick snort, unable to stifle it. Snatching the bag out of his fingers, Nick tore the thing sharply at the top before replacing it in Ellis' hands. "Not that, dumbshit."

Ellis started to happily reach in and grab one of the shiny gummies piled up in the pack, but all of a sudden, Nick's hand slipped past his face and curled fingertips under his jaw.

Turning his head, Nick made the Georgian look up at him, touching his thumb gently under the bloody tear across his cheekbone. "This." Ellis' eyes winced softly, but a blush built up along the bridge of his nose, nearly stumbling from surprise as Nick tenderly examined the wound.

"U-uh -" the younger man uttered in a little breathless noise, lips parting softly. Nick could see his blue eyes flickering around his face. "I-It's okay.. hurts a li'l but it - it ain't like I ain't had way worse..."

Nick blew a smoky breath out to the side of his mouth, releasing Ellis' jaw before anyone could have spied the gesture. His gaze narrowed, fending off a building anger. He couldn't help but question himself - was he going to feel this incensed if Ellis got hurt by zombies, too...

Where is this even coming from... Stupid. You're being stupid.

"I think I'm the only one here who's been held at gunpoint before. You alright?"

"A-ahw.. yeah, Nick." the Georgian mumbled, dropping his chin subtly like he had a cap bill to hide underneath. He rubbed at his jaw, smoothing gently over the space where Nick had touched him. "'M fine... Just real glad she didn't call you out on the gun... that scared me more."

"Yeah, well... good move, stopping me back there, Ace. Been told I need reining in sometimes." Nick sighed deeply, looking forward. "We'll get a butterfly on it... I think I saw some in that bathroom."

"... Butterfly?" Ellis repeated vaguely, blush spreading even along his bruised cheek. Nick smirked
softly, adjusting his cigarette with his fingertips at the question. The Georgian seemed disoriented, and he wasn't sure if it was lingering discomfort from the blow to the head. Or, maybe Ellis didn't know how to react to Nick being… kind.

*That makes two of us.*

"Bandage for deeper cuts. Works like a stitch."

Ellis didn't respond for a few moments, focusing suddenly on dragging out a gummy and biting down on it. He chewed ineffectually at it, the end dangling from his lips much like Nick's cigarette.

Nick felt protective. He didn't even know if he liked it, but the feeling was there. At least it fueled anger rather than any other emotion. He could take anger. Anger was easy, and smooth, and numbed him.

Pulling on his cigarette as he limped forward, he kept a glance going toward Ellis, curiously. The Georgian clearly had something to say, but he seemed to be mulling it over.

His stare must've urged the kid into talking, because - swallowing down his worm with a bit of a gulp - Ellis glanced up with those blue eyes and prompted in a whisper, "'Ey Nick - are you? Okay, I mean. I ain't seen you look so angry before, not even when I piss you off.."

Drawing a tight breath from his smoking cigarette, Nick furrowed his brows. He wasn't wholly sure how to answer that, and immediate instinct had him striving to avoid the conversation entirely.

The words just worked out of him, careless to a point. "I'm fine, sport. I had to do something to scare her into giving up - y'know, the whole, the gun was actually empty thing? Threats work pretty well."

Ellis nodded faintly as they approached the house. He didn't argue, but Nick had the feeling he'd been seen through anyway. It probably wasn't the last he'd hear of it, unless Ellis decided to be kind.

The Georgian certainly wasn't hurt by being avoided. Nick felt himself startle slightly when fingers brushed his, planting a gummy between his fingertips. The gambler couldn't even pretend to be agitated at the gesture - he just eyed the thing, twirling it between his fingertips for a minute. If he hadn't been so hungry, he wouldn't have eaten it.

What was Nick supposed to say - 'yeah, seeing you hurt just drove me absolutely fucking homicidal'? That didn't sound right in his head, let alone spoken aloud.

They fell silent on the topic anyway, the distance between them and the other two waning as they came up to their makeshift pit stop, immediately spreading out to give the house a final once-over for supplies. Nick's leg was growing insufferable quickly, and he kept it a secret when he slipped a dose of painkillers from Coach's pack. He'd sweat them out before it could give him more nightmares, anyway.

And if that didn't work, Ellis seemed to be a good enough remedy.
"That has got to be the coolest shit I have ever seen! Man, I didn't know you could do that, Nick! Keith did once, but he didn't do it right 'cause it exploded when he mixed whatever it was he was tryin' to make it with - didn't even set no fires, just popped the bottle like a damn balloon! Man, he still ain't never told me whut went wrong... 'Course that might'uh been 'cause he don't remember it none. Glass shards went right intuh his head, man! Doctor said he hadn't never seen a thing like it. He was bald fer like months after 'cause they had tuh shave his head - Keith, not the doctor."

Nick couldn't help but laugh under his breath, resting his forearm against the kitchen's threshold and leaning his weight on the wood. Ellis was inspecting his Molotov like an over-excited kid, fingers rather delicate on the brown glass.

"You don't think that's a little dangerous?" Rochelle tried to gently suggest, scratching at the back of her neck with her pinky as she slightly dubiously watched Ellis' enthusiasm. "I don't know if doing what Keith does is a real smart thing..."

The conman smirked, letting his wounded leg curl up slightly onto its toes to relax it. "Good thing I know how to make it right, then, isn't it...? Dumbass hick probably fucked it up. Besides, Ro', it's just one and it's not like we're going to let Ellis use it."

"Whut?! Why not?!!" Ellis immediately protested, spinning around and giving a frown as he held the softly sloshing bottle to his chest. "But it's so cool -!"

Laughing with a shake of her head, Rochelle reached out to gently pry the thing from his hands. He looked distinctly unhappy watching the bottle pull out of his grasp, practically pouting as he clutched after it.

"But -"

"Let it go, sweetie. Hate to say it, but I trust Nick more than you with this."

Pouting slightly, Ellis let his hands drop to curl on the looped fabric of his coveralls and sigh. He kicked the toe of his workboot lightly on the kitchen tile, resigning with a fair amount of reluctance. "I wanna at least see it go off..."

Nick snorted in amusement, gesturing with a pinky to Ro' that she should just set it back on the counter. She obliged him, flashing a soft grin of humor at Ellis' expense. "Dumbshit, of course you will - it's not like the four of us separate much. It'll just have someone with good aim throwing it."

Ellis' expression turned a little affronted, tone gaining a stubborn edge. He tried to paw at his hat, fingers sinking into bare curls when he forgot he still hadn't gotten it back. "'Ey, I got perfectly fine aim! Just's good as you!

"What are y'all arguin' about?" Coach gruffly interjected from the front room. His tone was half-amused - he was busy going through the supplies they'd found around the house, organizing and picking. It was rather funny to Nick (and somewhat revealing) that, even to him, 'supplies' suddenly meant almost solely 'any fucking thing we can put on a wound.'

They were all getting injured so much, the space that they had in that backpack was wasted if not
taken up by medicine. Even food was a hesitant afterthought when they could likely scavenge as necessity hit.

"Ellis wants to play with fire." Nick taunted over his shoulder with a deep pull from his cigarette, smirking as the youngest survivor shoved his hands into his pockets with a teasing sour look.

Coach chuckled, sounding more energetic than he'd been in days. The big man had always seemed on the edge of weariness, looking over things like he'd seen them a hundred times before and couldn't be surprised, but since they'd gotten back inside the house something had entered his voice.

Nick wanted to call it inspiration - it was odd.

"Ellis, quit that shit. Last thing we need is yo' ass wit' a firebottle."

Ellis jutted out his lower lip, bouncing on his heels discontentedly. He gave a heavy sigh and resigned to the ex-football player's decision, not looking very happy at all. He was like a kid refused candy - something rather funny to think when he promptly comforted himself by pulling his bag of candy out of his pocket and nibbling on one.

"Awh, shit. Alright, alright... man, I can't wait tuh tell Keith we fought zombies with a Mollie!"

Nick snorted with a shake of his head, turning away and limping softly out into the front room. "Come upstairs, Ace, and stop obsessing over the damn bomb... you need something on that cheek unless you want a scar on that dumbshit face of yours."

Whatever he said, Nick had to admit that Ellis' enthusiasm made him smile inwardly. He'd been proud enough of it himself, but Ellis' *that is the coolest thing in the world* attitude was - flattering.

The conman crossed the living room to where the couch was, leaning his forearm on the top cushions. He stuck out a hand as he rolled his cigarette to the corner of his mouth, gesturing blankly for the backpack. "I think you guys stole most of the stash upstairs. You mind if I look in there real quick?"

Coach glanced back over his shoulder before hoisting the backpack up to where Nick could reach it. He held it there, rubbing his brow with the fingertips of his other hand. He questioned the gambler as he did, lightly. "Yo' leg lookin' better? You're walkin' on it okay, looks like."

Nick gave a small nod as he dug into the backpack, flicking through the arrangement of what medicinal supplies they did have in hunt of the little winged shape of the butterfly bandage he needed.

"Yeah. It still hurts like a fucking bitch, but I think last night did it good. -" He meant that in a few ways, Nick reflected momentarily, fighting humor. "- and it's manageable. I'll be slow, though."

"Ain't no thing. We don't have any swamp to go through anyways." the big man responded gruffly, laying his arm over the back of the couch with a sigh. Those firm eyes flickered back, and he pressured, "Don't push it, Nick."

The gambler flashed him a smirk, pausing his search to let his forearms rest a bit on the couch. His head cocked at the implied concern for his safety, curiously. He had to question into the topic - his tone was non-confrontational but sarcastic, and he tore the issue straight open. "One minute we're okay, next minute we're at each other's throats. We're a weird duo, aren't we, Sam?"

Looking unamused at the use of his name, Coach resigned into a chuckle a moment later. All he
said was "Yep.", turning his head back forward and looking away.

It was a strangely .. satisfying response, one that he could get behind. Nick liked it and its brazen simplicity. That was just the situation, and they both knew it. You know, if we both accept we're never going to get along, we might just get along.

Laughing under his breath, Nick tucked a wrapped butterfly bandage into his palm when he found it. He turned away from the couch to hobble toward the staircase to the second floor. He noticed Ellis was still in the kitchen and called out sharply over his shoulder, "Overalls! For fuck's sake, step away from the Molotov!"

The kid scampered out a few beats later like a dog who'd been swatted into motion, abashedly chasing after Nick with a piece of candy dangling from his lips. Nick swore there was a light flush over his face, and he felt himself smirk. "S-sorry Nick!"

"Whatever, sport, just c'mon." Nick shook his head, starting up the staircase with a slight wince. Scaling stairs was a lot different than walking on flat ground, and he felt himself slowing down to try and hop his weight as much as he could on his good leg.

The effort of hoisting up his body weight on every other stair sent jagged pain up the back of his calf, a weird stretch in the scabbing flesh making him flinch. It was not going to heal overnight, much as Nick wanted it to.

He felt frustration rising up his spine even though Ellis patiently and calmly followed a few steps behind him. The younger man may as well have started laughing at him for how much Nick started grinding his teeth.

As they reached the middle platform, Nick let out a little huff of pain. Ellis started to say something in reaction, but he didn't get further than the first, sweet 'N' sound of the conman's name before Nick blustered, "Shut up."

The Georgian relented, keeping quiet, just watching Nick struggle up the stairs with a renewed urgency now that he clearly felt rather defensive. He grumbled quietly as he reached the top, pulling himself up with a hard grip on the edge of the doorway. A soft shiver tremored up his spine, but it was more frustration than anything else.

Pushing the half-closed bathroom door open, Nick flicked on the light with a knuckle. He sighed through his nostrils, smoke flowing with the motion, and pried his cigarette from between his lips. Flicking the dying thing into the toilet by his knee, Nick bent over the sink to turn on the tap with one hand while the other grabbed a hanging hand towel. Blood was dried into the porcelain, making Nick crinkle his nose slightly in uncertainty. Considering there was no signs of disturbance anywhere else in the house, it was strange.

"Think someone cut themselves shavin' or somethin'?" Ellis inquired from behind him, gently trotting into the bathroom as he shoved his pack of candy into his pocket. There wasn't a whole lot of room, so when he took a stance behind Nick, it was close to his elbow.

"Maybe if they were a hemophiliac." Nick retorted sardonically, rolling his sleeve up slightly so it didn't get wet when he cupped his hand under the pouring water. He adjusted the temperature just a little so it wasn't too cold, then soaked a handful of the towel he'd found.

"That's just silly, Nick. Whut're the chances'uh that?" the kid blinked dubiously, raising a hand to scratch at his forehead in uncertainty. Funny how he bent his hand a bit as if he had to avoid
bumping a cap - Nick could see his curious eyes examining him through the bathroom mirror.

Nick didn't bother to laugh, too busy being impressed at Ellis' knowing the word to make fun of him for not getting the sarcasm. You're pretty smart, El, but holy shit, are you dumb... He felt a smirk tip up the side of his mouth. "I dunno, maybe someone died in here. You believe in ghosts?"

Ellis grinned lightly, shifting his weight a little. Their gazes met on the mirror, neither seeming to really notice the other was staring through the glass. "Didn't used tuh believe in zombies." he taunted, promptly chuckling.

The gambler rolled his eyes with a subtle grin, breaking the gaze as he straightened. He flicked off the tap and patted the bathroom counter. "Get up here, dumbshit. Let Dr. Nick fix ya up." Turning his head to watch as Ellis circled around him, Nick chuckled faintly.

He was blushing. Again.

"Shouldn't scar up, Ace." he added, closing the bathroom door quietly with his heel. He noticed Ellis sneak a glance over at the door as it shut, but he didn't actually comment on it. "Be a shame to mark up that pretty face of yours."

"E-ey! Pretty nothin'..." Ellis protested slightly, hopping up with a little squirm to sit on the edge of the bathroom counter. He set his hands behind himself, fingertips tapping out a quiet tune on the glazed white tile. "Besides. I ain't gonna go through the dang apocalypse and not come out with some cool scars."

Nick snorted lightly, stepping over. He let his hips push between Ellis' knees, settling between his thighs with a dark smirk and a lowered chin. Ellis immediately slumped back a little, turning an interesting shade of red and squirming his knees just the tiniest bit. "Shouldn't be surprised you'd think that way. I'm not looking forward to my leg scarring up."

"Oh, uh... Didn't mean tuh -" He spoke like he'd affronted the older man, so Nick gave him a vague grimace that dissuaded him from apologizing. Instead, Ellis tried to bury his chin against his chest and hunch down from Nick's face. "... It'll be okay, though, man. I mean, gettin' splashed with acid is pretty badass."

"Is that what I felt? I thought it was searing pain." The conman leaned forward, feeling Ellis' knees rub against his hips as he did. Any other time, he might've taken advantage of the moment - but he focused, taking his weight off his bad leg and curling it a bit while he pulled the wet-edged handtowel up to clean up Ellis' bloody cheek. "Honestly, I'm shocked you aren't more scarred up. Having a friend like Keith."

It'd mostly clotted, but as he stroked the washcloth closer to the bruised cut itself, it threatened to bleed again. Nick let his other hand cradle Ellis' other cheek, lifting his head up to force the other man to stop hiding and to hold him still.

Ellis shut his eyes, but his lips curled up in a smile, chuckling even as a soft 'ow' whinged into his voice. "Well... yeah, I mean, Keith's got some cool ones. But he don't let me get hurt or nothin'. Actually, this one time - it's a short story, I swear -"

"You have those?" Nick teased, dabbing the towel right over the wound and soothing Ellis with a stroke of his free thumb as the kid pulled in a sharp breath. Even when the pain seemed to fade from Ellis' face, he found his thumb still moving faintly.

"Haaw."

"Haaw." the younger man retorted quietly, brows lifting slightly before he just continued. "One'uv
Keith's first real crazy stunts, he had me helpin' him build this bomb. We was gonna chuck it intuh a lake tuh see whut an explosion underwater'd be like, y'know? ...Well, turns out he did somethin' wrong, 'cause we ain't so much gotten the dang thing put tuhgether when it goes off. Got a chunk'uh metal right to my shoulder," He reached up to poke a fingertip into the swell of his shoulder, just below his clavicle. "damn near in muh neck."

Nick uttered an unpleasant grunt, unable to help it as he cleaned a bit of stubborn dirt on Ellis' cheek while trying not to hurt him.

Ellis tried to nod, not thinking, and Nick had to grab him and shoot him a chiding look. After a quick blink of apology, he spoke, looking a little embarrassed. "Yep. After that, Keith was always real careful tuh get me outta the way if things went sour. Ain't - y'know, now that I think about it, ain't really got hurt since then."

"So that's why you're not a cripple. I wondered." The gambler set the towel down and focused on drawing the butterfly bandage carefully out of its paper wrapping.

Ellis relaxed slightly as Nick pulled his hands away, reaching up one of his own to touch at his cheek gently. "Aww, nah. He never lets nothin' happen tuh me 'cause of his stunts. Kinda gets me heated sometimes 'cause he's always keepin' me outta the cool parts. 'Cause they're the explodin' parts, y'know.. hah!"

Noticing the other man was feeling at his cheek, Nick quickly swatted his arm away with his elbow, snorting a little. "Doctor says no touch-y... - I'd say something about adrenaline junkies being stupid, but I've got my fair share of addictions. Probably hypocritical of me."

Ellis guessed at his meaning curiously, holding still for only a few moments before he tried to lift up his hand again to feel at the injury curiously. He was like a dog scratching at a wound. Too bad Nick didn't have a cone. "Gamblin'?"

Nick chuckled at that, darkly, suddenly snatching up a hand to grab Ellis' wrist. The mechanic stilled instantly, but Nick wasn't done - he slowly let his grip loosen, fingers turning intimate as they loosely stroked at Ellis' wrist. His gaze slitted faintly, face rather close to Ellis'.

He pulled the Georgian's arm down, letting his fingers lose a few inches every time they moved so his palm caressed down the length of the other man's forearm. Ellis was rapidly reddening, lips stuck parted in uncertainty.

"... That's one of them." Nick responded vaguely in a low purr, releasing Ellis' arm now that it was limp on the younger man's thigh. If anything, that certainly stopped his attempts to mess with the injury.

"Y-y- uh - h-ha - that.. uh -"

The poor kid was fumbling so hard, obviously completely caught off-guard by the response, that Nick couldn't bring himself to let Ellis keep going. He'd intended to leave it at that, already pushing it way too far, but he couldn't just let the Georgian hang.

...he's so fuckin' helpless, I swear...

Leaning in, Nick shut Ellis up with a kiss. It wasn't teasing, no play about it - he stole that silky mouth forcefully and held it to be sure Ellis wouldn't try to finish whatever sentence it was he was trying to form.

Ellis tasted sweet - like candy. The gummy worms, of course, but it seemed almost right for those
lips to taste of sugar and cherry. It was an innocent taste, not over-processed lipgloss or lipstick like Nick was so used to. He probably tasted like cigarettes.

He regretted that.

Their breaths mixed, soft and slow, lips warm against each other. What had been intended to last for a second or two turned into several before Nick even realized. The kid's hands started to lift up, but Nick saw it in the shift of Ellis' shoulders and let his own hands move to push them back down.

Sighing reluctantly, he pulled back there, licking his lips slowly and glancing away.

He felt... awkward. And that was new. He felt like he'd suddenly stepped into unfamiliar territory, onto unfamiliar ground. That wasn't the kind of kiss he was used to.

Ellis mimicked him, but kept his lips pursed quietly as he shifted his weight a little, exhaling carefully. That brushed his thighs against Nick again, but it was just a pleasant buzz of contact. "... that was nice." he breathed gently, brazenly honest, his blush having faded to a light tint over the bridge of his nose.

Nick didn't say anything at all, raising his hands up to return to his task. Turning Ellis' chin up with a thumb after peeling away the tape on either edge of the butterfly, Nick firmly applied the bandage to close up the wound.

It sealed nicely, the white material sticking skin-tight to Ellis' cheek. It'd stay.

"How's that, Ace?" he questioned, lowering his hands and glancing the hick's face over before meeting his gaze. Ringed fingers toyed with Ellis' overalls absently, watching the kid twist around at the waist and look at his own face in the mirror, squinting slightly.

He smiled brightly, popping his lips a bit in appreciation. "Real good. Thanks, Doc'. I bet'cha it'll be right as rain before you know it."

Nick snorted, then chuckled helplessly as Ellis' thank-you really sunk in, patting his hands together as he backed away a step. "I should goddamn think so, with all the hard work I put into that shit." he retorted, smirking sideways.

Ellis laughed, turning back forward to gently push himself off the counter. "I appreciate it, Nick. S'real nice'uv you... I mean, even lookin' past the kiss.." His boots met the tile with a soft thump, grinning abashedly.

"Ha. Looking past it? I'm hurt." Ellis perked to correct him, looking instantly surprised, but Nick gave him a sardonic 'I'm kidding' look and shook his head. "C'mon, El. We should get back downstairs, spent enough time up here. Trying to get me in trouble."

The Georgian chuckled, reaching into his pocket to pull out his bag of candy again and pick one out. He was burning through them fast. Nick expected him to get sick, at the rate he was going. "Sorry, Nick... but yer the one who done started it."

Nick crossed his arms immediately, lifting a brow at the accusation in cool, deadpan determination. After a small roll of his lips, he returned, "You're the one with those lips." He wasn't about to be blamed for the situation.

Intrigued by the unvoiced challenge, Ellis bit a gummy in half and chewed gently at it. He hrmfped, flushing slightly as he noticed Nick's eyes flick down to watch him chew. "..Yer the one who can't quit lookin' at 'em."
Lifting his brows, Nick felt a little thrill dart up his spine. Ellis' sweet naïveté had fast grown on him in a way he'd never have thought possible, but the Southerner had flashes of lively stubbornness and a quick intelligence that was… fascinating. "Do I, now?"

Grinning widely before the motion stung his injured cheek and he had to quickly stop, Ellis rolled up onto his toes and bobbed his head in a cocky fashion.

The conman advanced a step toward him. Ellis was quickly getting in way over his head, and though Nick knew Ellis wasn't really meaning to, he couldn't fight it. The impulse to chase was too strong. *Those goddamn eyes*...

"You -"

"Hey boys?" It was perfectly innocuous, innocently questioned from the other side of the door. Nick and Ellis both jumped hard, the latter practically choking on his mouthful of candy.

Talking loudly to cover the tiny little hiccoughs Ellis was stifling with his wrist, Nick felt a slight frustration drag at his mind. It wasn't at Rochelle, either - it was at himself. *Fuck, Nicolas. Not only can't you control yourself for one goddamn second, but now you're putting both of us in danger? Christ.*

... 'danger'. He didn't know why such a harsh word came first to his mind.

"Yeah, Ro'." He at least had the self-control to manage his tone, pulse beating strongly in his chest. He bent his head to raise a brow at Ellis, trying to see if the other man was going to choke to death. Ellis quickly waved at him in reassurance, swallowing tightly to try and relax himself. "Sorry, getting a bandage on Overalls is like getting a leash on a cat."

She didn't seem suspicious in the slightest, just giggling gently once at his explanation. "No problem. Coach just wanted me to ask you if either of you were hungry - we found cereal in the kitchen."

Trying not to sigh in relief as she seemed oblivious, Nick pushed his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket and closed his eyes. "Yeah, sure. I'll come down in a sec'." he answered dully, nudging Ellis with his elbow to interject.

"Thanks, Ro'!" Ellis reflexively responded, curling his fingers into fists lightly with an embarrassed look. At least he managed to sound sincere.

"Okay. We should head out pretty soon. Hope your cheek's okay, Ellis, honey." Judging by the way her voice quieted, she was walking away, and Nick could hear her footsteps on the staircase softly after a beat.

Nick didn't understand how he'd missed the sound of her ascension. He stood a moment in silence, eyeing the door as his frustration deepened a little, agitated. After a moment, Ellis nudged him out of it with a genuinely apologetic tone.

"...uhm, I. I'm sorry, Nick. She could'uh walked in..."

The conman quickly sighed, reaching underneath his jacket to undo Ellis' cap from his belt. He pulled the thing free, shaking it a bit. Ellis gasped with abrupt excitement at the sight, hands shooting up in an eager grab.

"Take your damn hat, Overalls." Nick slipped the cap straight on Ellis' head, pulling it down to obscure his face with a chuckle. "Shocked you haven't asked about it."
Ellis pawed at the cap, squirming it into place higher up in embarrassment. A soft blush was spread over the bridge of his nose and into his bruised cheek, and he shook his head. "Awhh.. man, you kept it on you..?"

Feeling slightly defensive, particularly after nearly getting caught, Nick pushed Ellis toward the bathroom door with a palm and rolled his eyes. "Ah, shut up. It was either that or listen to you bitch if I lost it."

Ellis smiled brightly as he opened up the door, chuckling softly in that way that made Nick think he'd been seen right through. He really hated that. "Thankyuh, Nick." Limping softly after him, the conman shook his head, unable to be as frustrated as he wanted to be. Ellis' voice was just too sincere.

"Man. I remember the day muh buddy Keith'n'I got our hats. They're a pair, y'know! Well, 'cept his ain't got no bill 'cause he done cut it off in a chainsaw accident... man, weird story, that one. 'N' his is all burned'n'shit.. Well, anyway, we got 'em custom sewn 'n shit! The li'l truck patch on there, y'know? For our autoshop. Man, that was a good day. I swear I ain't taken it off fer more'n a couple hours since I done got it, ha-haa. Maybe it was a good luck charm while you were bluffin' that lady! Sure been my good luck charm…"

Nick's gaze lifted up, watching Ellis' back as he listened to his tone rise in enthusiasm with every word. Every inane... rambling... implacably happy little word.

He wondered to himself how long it'd be until they could have sex again. The four needed to make progress down the highway toward the shore, particularly after all the time they'd been wasting, but they couldn't go non-stop.

Nick found himself planning for it. He hadn't planned a single thing up till then - each time it had been accident, happenstance, or Ellis' own determination forcing them together. Now, suddenly, Nick discovered a distinct section of his mind working rather hard to gnaw on just when 'next time' would be.

It was a thing, now.

He just didn't know what that thing was, exactly.

Ellis offered up an arm to help Nick down the staircase. The conman glanced at it - and though an impulse had him wanting to take the help, he didn't, shaking his head in vague rejection. Ellis merely lowered his arm, mostly unfazed. He watched Nick take the stairs with renewed ferocity, snarling in mock-anger as he went:

"If I don't get some fucking food here in a second, I'm going to kill someone. And it may not be a zombie."

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 52

In retrospect, their arsenal was pitiful.

Nick was the only one with an actual loaded gun, and they didn't have extra clips for it. His crowbar was sturdy and had the wicked edges perfect for destroying fragile zombie limbs, but his range of motion and strength were both crippled now by his injured leg. The Molotov was jammed tight into his belt, but he was definitely saving that for an emergency.

Coach had lost his shotgun in the swamp so he only had his shovel, and the hollowed metal handle was starting to bend dangerously like it might snap. His strong swing did a serious number on the metal frame - it was likely going to break soon enough.

Rochelle's pistol was still attached to her hip, but it was empty, leaving her only with her skillet. That was useful enough, but - even though she didn't say a word - swinging the heavy thing exhausted her fairly quickly. It was cast-iron, and certainly not made for this.

Ellis had the best of the melee weapons. His axe was sturdy and he handled it with all the expertise one might expect, and his powerful shotgun was still slung to his back even though he'd run out of ammo. The big weapon was a bit of a burden when compared to the fact he couldn't even use it.

"God fucking dammit, and I thought getting a gun would save me some pain. But no-o.o. It may as well be fucking useless - I'm such an idiot. One fucking clip. Because I can definitely count all the zombies on one hand."

His anger manifested in the ruthless way his crowbar jammed into the neck of a zombie that came at them from the side. The area immediately around the house was mostly cleared out, but that didn't last long. As they'd gotten back onto the highway and began walking down it to start the day's trip, zombies had popped up from seemingly nowhere, attracted by their voices.

It turned into a bit of a battle to continue down the highway, especially with their pace slowed to make sure Nick kept up on his bad leg. They kept moving, though. They passed by broken-down and crashed cars, but every time Ellis risked a momentary glance, he'd see right off that they wouldn't run.

They were stuck on foot - for now.

Ellis smiled a bit, sympathetically, at the conman's tone. As normal as his bad moods were, the Georgian still felt a bit bad to hear him so frustrated. None of them really wanted to be so up close and personal with the zombies, and the mess from using melee weapons was hard to avoid.

As if on cue, a hard swing with Ellis' axe struck a bit lower than he intended and nearly separated a zombie from his lower body.

He did cringe a bit as organs spilled out like a broken piñata, the sight disturbing, but merely jumped around it to re-align himself with Coach without letting himself look too long. There never really was time to dwell on things.

He and the ex-football player took the lead, Rochelle picking up the rear with Nick between them all for safety. "Least we'll have a gun if we need tuh shoot somethin'." Ellis offered, keeping an eye out around them as they picked their way down the highway.

He did wonder slightly if that blonde would come after them; if he'd been on the other end of
Nick's gun, he certainly wouldn't.

"Oh good." Nick muttered to himself sarcastically, voice fawning with fake relief. "Because, you know, we definitely don't need to right now. No-siree-Bob. Doing completely fine."

Coach spoke gruffly as they went, swinging his shovel defensively when a zombie tried to take a bite out of him. Ellis had to dodge away abruptly to avoid getting hit by the shovel's backswing, but he didn't say anything. "Gotta be guns 'round here somewhere. Much as brainin' these zombies works, it'd go faster wit' better firepower."

"Yeah." Nick said with a snort, humored despite himself. "Wouldn't've had a problem with that bitch back there, either." No one seemed eager to respond to that. Ellis' cheek stung a little as he thought about it, something like a frown sneaking onto his expression. He shook it off, but he had to wonder - would Nick really have shot her?

"We should've been keeping a better eye out. We've probably passed by places that might've had some." Rochelle reluctantly uttered after a moment, repeatedly glancing over her shoulder with a certain nervous air. "All the guns always come out in doomsday movies - and Christ, we're in the South, come on."

Coach leaned his shovel against his shoulder with a barely-withheld sigh when the zombies ebbed for a few seconds, shaking his head. Deepset eyes flickered around area - beyond the Burgertank and the ruined gas station, there was a few more buildings. "You think we should stop an' check the rest of these places before we get outta here?"

Nick immediately grunted, taking advantage of the break to glare at the couple stains already working their way into his suit. "Not worth the time. You guys are the ones who were antsy to get out of here, anyway."

Scrunching his nose, Ellis touched a fingertip to his bandaged cheek, uncertainly feeling at the white closure holding his wound together. Nick noticed, shooting him a dark look. "I think we're doin' okay with whut we got. I mean, if I got where we are right, we should get tuh the beach by the end'uv the day, right?"

"If everything goes to plan." Nick moodily asserted, shaking his head.

Rochelle laughed softly, her voice a bit chiding. "You're too much of a pessimist, N-" she started, but like some terrible irony, a loud growl from off to their right interrupted her.

"Ah tits, Hunter!" Nick snarled, immediately whipping toward the sound with a spin on his good leg. They all barely had enough time to get oriented before the thing lunged suddenly into sight, already howling out a strange call - it was a bonechilling scream, double-layered with a strangely human tone and the echoed shriek of an animal.

It was just a flashing dark spot in the air, flying from the roof of a building nearby and launching itself at Rochelle. The thing knocked her straight off her feet as it collided, hitting the asphalt with a thud and a cry.

Ellis immediately swung around and started to bolt toward her, axe already coiled to the side with tensed arms ready to swing it. He breezed past Nick like a shot, not even registering that the gambler was scrambling for his holstered pistol.

She managed to get her boot up, kicking the thing straight in the stomach before it could really get latched onto her and begin to rip her apart. It only gained her a few extra seconds before the
creature snarled angrily and pounced back into place.

Claws snatched onto her clothes, centimeters from tearing into her torso with wicked nails. The Hunter snarled down at her, a bloody face visible under the shadow of the thing's torn hoodie, just an instant before Ellis' axe swung straight through its neck.

Its body toppled backwards violently in an attempt to follow the flying head, arms still clawing at the air for just a few seconds. It shuddered to a stop, blood spraying out from its ruined neck like a broken faucet.

Ellis immediately reached down to help Rochelle out from under it, wincing. He hadn't really meant to make it so messy. "You alright, Ro'? Shit, that thing hit you hard!"

Panting as she scrambled up to her feet with his help, she quickly nodded. Her hands touched onto her cheeks as she got steady, exhaling hard with a shaken shudder. "O-Oh yeah, just - wow. I think I just had a heart attack... Thank you, sweetie."

Nick lowered his pistol from the half-aimed position it was in, pushing it back into his holster with a grunt. Nick stayed where he was as Coach backtracked, the big man intent on checking Rochelle out for himself. "Good reflex, Overalls."

Ellis would've responded proudly, but about then he glanced down, and his face burst into a bright red. He tipped his chin up hard, embarrassed, and tried - unsuccessfully - not to fumble when he said, "Uh - Ro'... yer, um.."

"What?" she said before she looked. Ellis couldn't bear to look again, but he could see her reaction out of the corner of his eyes as she noticed the rips the Hunter's claws had put into her shirt as it had clutched at it. They ripped straight through the Depeche Mode symbol on her chest.

Needless to say, the silky black of her bra and brown of the skin around it were very visible against the pink shirt. Rochelle couldn't believe it, cheeks darkening with the realization that all three men were in their own stage of trying to cope with the sight.

Coach - freezing up halfway to her, jaw a bit dropped, staring in mortification.

Ellis - bright red and eyeing the sky with an antsy shifting of his weight.

Nick - adopting this slow tilt of his head, rather content with the situation.

"Ahk!" she blurted, turning around entirely and clapping her hands over her chest. Ellis was the only one with the decency to look away, but the fact the youngest survivor - her little brother in spirit - had seen past her shirt at all was almost as bad as Coach's shocked stare and Nick's visible interest.

"Uhh, s-sorry, Ro'!" Ellis blurted in apology though nothing had been his fault, scratching at the back of his neck before he pushed his cap down over his face, embarrassed.

She sobbed, "Why me! First Coach, now me!" in horror, hunching forward to examine the damages. A wolf-whistle from Nick made her blush harder, and Coach snapped out of his daze to cover a large hand over his eyes and struggle to stifle a chuckle.

Ellis risked looking down now that she was turned away, hesitantly setting an arm on her shoulder comfortingly. "I-It'll be a'ight, Ro'! We'll um..." But he trailed off. He had no idea what they'd do - go back to the house and get her a new shirt? - not that he could really think straight at that instant.
The conman laughed, shaking his head, and let his arms cross over his chest. He fairly reluctantly suggested, "Flip it around. Not that I'm condoning the hiding of perfectly good breasts."

"Nick!" Ellis practically wheezed over his shoulder, shocked. He felt a tiny flicker of something at the older man's careless flirtation, but it confused him more than anything and he tried to shake it off.

The gambler smirked at him, chuckling lowly. There was a little knowing slit that reached those green eyes as Nick reacted to the name, and Ellis winced a bit, feeling petty. He sure hoped Nick didn't think he was jealous.

".. that's.. a good idea, but you're still a jackass, Nick..." Rochelle whimpered a bit, already starting to pull her arms into her shirt so she could flip it around. She tried not to pull it up too much, but she ended up showing a good bit of her lower back anyway.

Coach crossed his arms as tightly as he could over his chest, distinctly stepping in front of Nick to block his view. The gambler smirked at him coolly. "Most women can take compliments, ya know."

"Try a compliment an' yo' ass might get a better reaction." Coach gruffed, lifting his rounded chin to level gazes with the conman. A small, taunting grin snuck onto the Northerner's face... and Coach returned it in kind, though his was softer.

Ellis stood at a rather nervous distance, gripping the bill of his cap with his non-axe-wielding hand. He hated when the two men fought, mostly because their kind of fighting was the moody, sparks-flying kind. They had incredibly strong gazes, and they were both too stubborn to give up.

Needless to say, watching them actually not fight was absolutely terrifying.

"...Um, hey. Guys? We can go now." Rochelle sounded much calmer now, and when Ellis blinked back at her, she'd successfully turned her shirt around. The collar rode too high now, pinned to the base of her neck, but it was definitely a better alternative.

Rochelle sighed slightly, uncomfortably reaching a hand to pull at her shirt softly as both the older men swung about and started down the highway again. She smiled as Ellis stepped to walk next to her, shaking her head.

Neither said anything about it, but they shared a look. Coach and Nick were determined to be strange, it seemed. They were silent now, Nick limping along behind the ex-football player, but Ellis couldn't quite help wondering at them. Were they finally getting along?

He'd have liked that.

The Georgian prompted Rochelle sideways, nudging her arm with his elbow. "You 'kay, Ro'?

She laughed gently, shrugging her shoulders. The woman turned herself at the waist a little to look back at the tears in her shirt. "At least it was just the shirt, right? Bit of a breeze on my back, but hey. It's a little hot out here anyway."

"Haw." Ellis grinned softly, swinging his axe at his side lightly. "Yeah, them claws ain't messin' around."

The four slipped close, clustering tightly in formation. There was, unfortunately, little time before zombies reappeared on the highway, centered around scattered crashed cars that had been driven into trees or each other.
The little cluster of buildings ended soon after it'd began. It melted back into bare highway bordered with a few feet of grass on either side, untamed forest starting after that. They were definitely out of the swamplands now that they'd gotten distance between them and the river, and, consequently, the air turned drier. And hotter.

It didn't have the heady salt that would mark their progress closer to the shoreline, but it'd get there eventually. A green sign off to the right had about half of its face left, the rest blown off by a careening car that was just barely visible from where it'd crashed straight into the forest.

The distance label was unfortunately part of the casualties, but a distinct '-bee Island' announced that they were going in the right direction. It was strange thinking on how much had happened in so short a time - they were on their sixth day, yet it'd felt like an eternity.

Ellis could've been friends with them for years for how close he felt to them. They were all at their worst, bedraggled and exhausted and wounded, struggling with an impossible kind of disaster, and yet there they were - working together. Like a team.

He couldn't imagine not knowing them now.

Using the steel toes of his workboots to his advantage, Ellis kicked an infected right in the shin as it launched at him from the side of the road. The creature clawed at him as its leg shot out from under it and sent it tumbling, catching dirty fingers in his shirt, but he shoved it off with a wince.

"Hey.." Nick suddenly prodded aloud with an uncharacteristic lightness, in the middle of slashing a zombie straight across the face with the curled edge of his crowbar. "Does that look broken-down to you guys?"

Blinking to see what he meant, Ellis tipped his head while fending off the infected with a swift slash of his axe. There was a little black sedan sitting half off the road a few yards ahead, its tires digging into the grass.

There was a man's corpse sprawled in front of the trunk on the asphalt, sitting slumped against the rear end of the car with one hand still outstretched limply toward a shotgun lying a few feet away. Two infected were kneeling around it, their arms working to tear into the body with a somewhat leisurely intent as they were oblivious to the approaching four.

Although Ellis knew Nick was talking about the car, he couldn't wrench his gaze away from the zombies ripping away at the dead man. Disgusted, he felt a flutter of genuine anger. How many people had died like that?

It was a terrible way to go.

"Sure looks good." Coach grunted curiously, sweeping a zombie straight off its feet with the flat side of his shovel's blade. "Shit, folks, if we get a car -" The big man didn't finish his sentence, but his meaning was clear enough. They could've really used the car just then, and he didn't want to jinx them - maybe Nick's weird superstition was starting to spread.

Ellis would've broken in with something hopeful anyway, but he was too distracted by the infected. The sight was suddenly a little too much. "Stupid zombies." he muttered with a huff, feeling a kind of wretched feeling flicker into life in his gut.

He was tired of seeing people die - tired of seeing his friends get injured.

He hefted his axe with sudden determination, eyeing the zombies intently before he broke into a sudden sprint toward them, dodging around Coach and Nick. His footsteps, hard on the asphalt,
quickly drew their attention, and they spun around to snarl excitedly at him. Covered in blood and gore, flies buzzing around their heads, the infected scrambled wildly onto their feet to race toward him.

He met the first one with a heavy swing of his axe, clipping it right in the face. The blade stuck in its skull - staggering Ellis slightly as the zombie shuddered and jerked in death throes. The momentary hesitation as Ellis tried to jerk it free gave the second one a chance to launch at him, mouth snapping toward his face with bloody teeth.

Ellis outright let his axe go, punching the gnashing zombie with a hard right hook to the cheek. It staggered back, weak neck snapping up at a strange angle, and Ellis caught hold of his axe again where it stuck out of the dying zombie's head.

He braced his boot against the infected's face, rearing back to yank his axe free. Though the second infected was already recovering and coming at him again, Ellis managed to raise the axe over himself and bring it down hard on its face, momentum carrying the blade through.

Its head exploded in half in a splatter of blood, the body's arms pinwheeling for a moment before it sluggishlly slumped to the asphalt in front of him.

Ellis huffed, lowering his shoulders and letting his axe droop toward his leg. He felt a distinct swell of satisfaction with getting the dead man's revenge - only to feel a sinking realization pierce his mind and drown it out.

He knew the infected were long gone, past any stitch of humanity. It wasn't guilt that suffused him then - it was a strange futility, an unfamiliar uselessness. He stood there quietly, blinking, as footsteps slipped up behind him. The step-stepstep of his limped gait, dress shoes audible on the asphalt, made it clear it was Nick even before he spoke.

"Overalls?" he questioned quietly, expectantly. His voice was silk and gravel, the nickname choppy as he spoke it around a cigarette.

Ellis slowly reached up to lift the cap up a little, expression slightly conflicted as his gaze adjusted to glance toward the dead man leaned against the back of the car. Blood covered him, clothes torn open messily, barely hiding exactly how much damage the infected had done to his chest. "Them zombies were people before all this, too." he said quietly.

He knew his voice betrayed him. He felt strange and small, struggling for some kind of excuse that would make him feel better. It was like his legs had just dropped out from under him - he couldn't think, confused. His gaze was quiet and inspective, fighting for sense in the scene in front of him.

"It ain't really justice, is it?"

There was a silence. He could feel Nick's presence at his elbow, hot and tangible and safe. He wanted to turn around and look at him, but he stayed still, almost holding his breath. He could feel eyes on him, and though he expected Rochelle to hug him or Coach to set a hand on his shoulder... they didn't. He didn't know what he wanted to hear.

Maybe nothing.

He was supposed to be the positive one.

A hand settled on the top of his head, warmth seeping through the fabric of his cap, but he didn't look. The press of a hard ring against his scalp made his eyes slip downward, a soft calm passing through his body at the touch.
A beat of hesitation, that hand stilled on his head - and then it shifted, pushing Ellis' hat down a bit over his face. "You did good, Ace." Blinded by his cap bill, Ellis felt a tiny smile breach onto his face as he looked down at the ground for a quiet moment.

Mumbling a "Thanks", he did so too late for Nick to hear. The conman had already emotionlessly limped forward, halting in front of the dead man and examining him heavily. He didn't say a word, just gazed at his body for a moment.

Then Nick glanced backwards, finally, and something in the arch of his brow was encouraging as he looked over all three survivors.

"Well?"

Suddenly, Ellis jumped forward, feeling light again. With every ounce of enthusiasm he could muster, Ellis started to circle around the black sedan in interest, trying to examine it and see if it might still run.

He could only pray.
Pulling hard on his cigarette, eyes slitting half closed, Nick held up his charade of examining the double-barrel shotgun in his hands. As much as stealing from a dead man seemed terrible karma - something he was only sensitive about when it suited him - it wasn't the first time they'd taken advantage of the dead. They needed the weapon, anyway.

The gun was too heavy for his tastes, but held some serious power in the thick mechanisms behind the cold steel barrels. He'd already decided he'd let Ellis have it; the mechanic was probably an expert at powerful shotguns like that, more than any of the others. They didn't have time for someone to pull a muscle trying to control the recoil.

All that, though, he'd already decided within a few seconds. It was a couple minutes later now, and his attention was focused on watching Ellis out of the corner of his eyes. The kid seemed okay - recovered, his head back on straight and his body moving with enthusiastic attention as he was elbow-deep in the innards of the hatchback sedan's innards. His gaze was interested and his motions were fluid.

He seemed okay.

Ellis definitely hadn't been a few minutes ago. Nick couldn't help but eye him from a distance, rolling his lips subtly against his cigarette and taking advantage of his lazy lean against the car to keep off his bad leg. That expression, that tiny voice - Ellis had frozen up like he were standing in pitch black darkness, terrified to move for fear of finding out where he was.

Not that Nick could hold it against him; the kid was generally absolutely unflappable, with this impenetrable sense of optimism that bended and folded to work around even the scariest of moments. Who could blame him for a moment of weakness?

He did feel a subtle tug in his chest. It wasn't worry, just... attention. Focus. Maybe he did feel a little protective. The last thing we need is to start breaking down. We've gone this far - we have to keep going. All in on the last hand.

Were they insane not to be just as upset as Ellis had been for a moment? Were they certifiable for being able to get out of bed, to keep moving? Maybe they were all long gone already. Buncha psychos.

Sighing furtively through his nostrils, smoke roiling up around his face, Nick mock-aimed the shotgun. He had to brace a good bit of its weight on his shoulder, hand cradling the base of the barrel to hold it aloft. Rochelle spared a glance toward him, though most of her attention was on Ellis as she leaned against the car just a few inches from Nick's elbow.

Coach was at the edge of the road, quiet, gaze scanning up the highway as it curved into a masking treeline with all the fluidity of a cement river. He had that weary look all over again. Zombies trickled toward them, on and off, and Coach paced around them to defend their current perimeter.

"No leaks," Ellis suddenly announced, straightening up. Blackened dust smudged the palm of his left hand, and when he wiped his forehead, a little spot of dark color drew itself across his temple. "No shot pipes or nothin'. Ain't gonna explode if we try the ignition, anyhow."

Nick felt an incredulous twitch draw his brow up severely, lowering the shotgun in his hands.

"Explode?" he echoed sharply. "That was a fuckin' possibility?"
The youngest guffawed loudly, gaze thinning as he smiled over the engine spread out in front of him. "Never know, man. This one time, muh buddy Keith was workin' on a car what had a bad oil pump, 'n' he goes tuh -"

Rochelle stepped off the sedan, gently circling around Nick and walking forward to join Ellis. She set a hand softly on his shoulder which promptly interrupted his story, smiling at him and questioning, "What can we help with, Ellis?"

It was a fairly kind version of the usual 'this isn't a good time,' and Ellis only blinked for a split second before breaking into a grin and patting the car's nose.

"Well, figure the keys're 'round here somewhere. Hell, may well be in the car. Wanna go try it, Ro'?" The mechanic flashed a smile at her, brightly, gesturing toward the driver's side. The windows were tinted almost completely black, blocking them from getting any kind of view inside. "Ain't like they could'uv gone far."

She nodded in agreement, walking around him to get to the driver's door. Nick watched her test the handle, the door popping open with only a little protest. "If you're going to talk about exploding, I'm getting the fuck away from this thing," he grumbled, annoyed to be the only one apparently unsettled by the comment.

He carefully backed up to limp next to Coach, crossing his arms with the shotgun cradled in them and giving a scan around them. The big man glanced at him, chuckling lowly and shifting his gaze to refocus on what was going on.

Rochelle slipped into the driver's seat, jumping slightly as the hot leather of the seat pressed against the skin on her back bared by her torn short, burning her. She sat at a slight lean forward, wincing a little, and went feeling for the keys.

When her fingers brushed against the steel of the ignition, keyless, she started to frown. Refusing to give up, she curled a leg slightly to bend down, feeling on the floorboard. Maybe the man had been in a rush to jump out of the car and dropped them -

Sure enough, her hand touched a bit of metal, and a jingle confirmed it. Grinning excitedly, she snatched the keys up and straightened to let the tip just barely poke into the ignition. "You aren't touching anything, are you, sweetie?" she called out, noticing the hood was still up.

"Nope."

Slipping the keys into the ignition, she bit her tongue a bit before taking in a significant breath and turning it. One click, and the lights on the dash flickered on. The small meters twitched into various positions - the car had a little over half a tank left, which was a relief. Two clicks, and the radio fluttered into life with a blank static, just barely audible. It was set to what should've been a music channel.

She nervously pushed the key further against the soft spring-loaded pressure, and the engine purred alive with a healthy rumble.

Ellis was immediately shouting, jumping around on the grass like an idiot as Rochelle broke into relieved laughter. She released the car key in the ignition and slid herself back out of the car to stand up. "WOO!! SHIT, YEAH! WE GOT WHEELS, BABY! RR-RRRRRR-RRRRRR!"

His mimicry of the sedan's engine was too much - Nick broke into laughter much, much against his better judgement, palming his face cautiously with a quick quirk to his lips to angle his burning
cigarette away from his wrist.

Coach laughed gruffly, clapping a hand on Nick's shoulder as if in comfort. Nick let his palm slip off his face at the gesture, taking a pull off his cigarette when the big man left his hand there. Entertainment lingered enough to keep him from brushing it off.

Nick wasn't impossible at all the time. It was a good moment.

The ex-football player eyed Ellis, shaking his head, as the youngest survivor excitedly gave one last "Hoo-yeah!" and slammed the sedan's hood closed. He laughingly chided, "Boy, yo' ass needs to calm down."

Rochelle had just stepped around the door when Ellis snagged an arm around her waist and pulled her into a hug, grinning stupidly. The woman fought a startled yip, stumbling slightly before adjusting to the hug and returning it. She couldn't help but giggle, flicking Ellis' cap bill up a bit to kiss his (un-bruised) cheek.

"Good job, hee-haw." she teased in a whisper, like the kid had summoned the car out of thin air.

Ellis blushed, immediately, giving a bashful drop of his head before perking right back up. Nick felt exhausted and a little warm watching him - he was just so spastic with excitement, it was unbelievable.

"C'mon Coach! Gimme a break - we got a car again, man! We deserve a li'l cheerin'! Yer a football coach, ain'tcha? This is one hell'uva touchdown, man!"

The big man shook his head wearily with a sigh, but he was smiling, clapping the hand on Nick's shoulder once more before stepping forward. Nick blinked an eye at him, trying to decide if he should be annoyed or not. "I ain't doin' no touchdown dances, boy." With that, Coach chuckled outright, pleased.

Ellis smiled goofily, pleased beyond words to hear the big man laughing so much. He pulled away from Rochelle, bounding to the open car door to lean in and look it over excitedly. "Man, this reminds me'uh my ma's car..."

Nick pulled his cigarette from his lips, tossing it aside carelessly and shoving the shotgun under his arm. His gaze flickered up and down the car's length, a hunch suddenly striking him with a satisfied purr. "Hey, pop the trunk in there, Overalls."

"Hm? Oh yeah, sure..." The kid bent in further, reaching for some switch, and the trunk snapped a few inches open with a dull sound. Nick promptly turned and limped gently over toward it, taking care to keep his shoes out of the puddled blood on the asphalt.

Rochelle perched her elbows on the front of the vibrating car, curiously looking over it toward the gambler. "Got a thought, Nick? You have that ... face."

"The handsome one? I have that all the time, doll." The corpse drowned the air in a sickening copper haze, but Nick ignored it, getting himself balanced in front of the trunk with most of his weight on his good leg. He let his hands settle on the sedan's spoiler, elbows close to his hips so he didn't lose his grip on the shotgun, flicking a glance up sharply.

Snorting with a smile, Rochelle rolled her eyes and sighed. She let her chin set in one of her palms, lifting brows and taunting him affectionately, "Passing up the chance to show us up, suit?"

He smirked, amused, and cocked his head. "When you put it that way... Simple. Why would you
take the time to go for your trunk if you were being chased by zombies? Why not run for the door and drive away?"

Nick got no answer, just an interested gaze from all three.

Content with that, he pushed up with his palms and hoisted the trunk door open. Hearing the satisfying pop as it locked open on clean steel hinges, he chuckled to himself, looking down into it. Ellis was the first to scamper over to see, Coach side-stepping curiously a moment later. Rochelle just leaned a bit to one side from where she stood.

Nested carefully against each other in the floor of the trunk was a line-up of three hunting rifles and a - smaller than the one Nick had under his arm, and single-barreled - shotgun. Even better was the boxed ammo stuffed into the far back.

"Okay," Nick admitted with a smirk. "I like the South a little more now."

Coach exhaled, shaking his head in slight disbelief. After rubbing his wrist against his forehead, he subtly crossed in front of his chest and nodded down at the dead man solemnly. "What were the damn chances, y'all."

"I cannot tell you how relieved I am right now." Rochelle sighed softly, pressing her hands to her face gently and admitting, "I wasn't sure we could take all this hand-to-hand much longer..."

Ellis scrambled forward a bit, reaching into the trunk and scooping up the shotgun ammo box. He peeked at the front, grinning happily within a few seconds. He started to pull the shotgun off his back before he'd even started to speak. "This'un's the right caliber fer muh shotgun! Man, I been waitin' tuh be able to use this thing again!"

Nick spared him a glance, bewildered, as the mechanic happily started to load the pump shotgun. They now had an array of weapons, all distinctly better than the one Ellis clung to - though admittedly, handled very well - and all he could focus on was getting it more ammo.

He didn't argue. Not then - Nick just wasn't in the mood to bitch. He felt too smug, and Ellis looked too content. "Good thing it's open season on zombies." The conman offered the shotgun in his arms to Coach, not even trying to convince Ellis into taking it like he'd originally planned.

The big man took it without complaint, examining it for a moment before outright tossing his shovel to the ground. It was almost broken, anyway, and he very visibly didn't want to carry the thing anymore. He handled the shotgun with no small amount of relief. "Thank the Lord."

Tucking it under his arm, Coach pulled the backpack off his shoulder and started to stow away the extra ammo boxes so they'd have them on hand.

Nick quickly picked up two of the rifles, one in either hand. He loaded them both carefully, having to juggle them slightly and alternate holding one under an arm to manage it. He backed up from the trunk as he finished, circling to offer one to Rochelle.

She blinked up at him, brows lifting at the weapon, an obvious pinch touching her browline that said she'd never handled such a large gun. Her hand had just started to lift up, outstretched to take it from him, when an odd... heavy sound thudded flatly in the air.

Not just the air, though. The ground. The very noise trembled a bit underneath Nick's dress shoes, like the highway asphalt itself gave the tiniest of whimpers. Everyone froze up, all at once, when it happened again.
A third time.

Snapping his head to the side, Nick realized rather dully how incredibly useless everything was. How doomed any small victory was. How absolutely fucked they'd been from the start - were now - and would be until they all got killed. Every ounce of warmth drained straight out of his body, and adrenaline rose up like a thundering wave, suffocating.

The massive shape of a Tank crept toward them on the highway, lumbering with such lazy exhaustion it might as well have been sleep walking. Rippling, fleshy muscle shuddered to pull its comparatively withered lower body along on apelike knuckles, deformed little head just a lump between its trembling shoulders.

"In. Side. The. Car." Coach whispered, voice never so simultaneously near-silent and unarguably demanding at once. He backed quickly up to the passenger door, opening it as silently as he could.

Rochelle's fingers latched onto the rifle Nick had offered with the same hurried, cautious twist that turned her around to rush to the car. Ellis was quick and silent as he got around her, clearly intent to get behind the wheel.

For once, Nick didn't dare risk uttering a single word to argue against the kid driving them. His whole throat was closed up, darting after Coach to try and get in on that side with his rifle snapped tight to his chest.

He didn't know what it was - maybe it had been Coach opening the door, or maybe Nick's own shoes had been a little too hard on the asphalt as he stumbled when his leg protested in a flash of pain. Maybe it was just the sudden movement as they all bolted as silently as possible toward the car doors.

All Nick knew was suddenly, the Tank was roaring ferociously, and every ounce of laziness was gone. The horrendous sound of tearing stone could be heard like rocks being violently grated against each other, and Nick felt bile snarling at the very depths of his throat when he saw the huge monster tearing a slab of asphalt right out of the road.

It broke out from the rest of the highway like it was no stronger than paper - the slab must've been at least the size of the car itself. With an enraged howl of intent, the Tank reared back and threw it.

It sailed. Unerring - fast. Perfectly aimed to land straight on a vehicle that was in park… half-rutted in muddy grass and rain-soaked soil… not even partly occupied yet...

*There's no fucking way we get out!* There's no fucking-

Nick was shouting before he realized it - no, screaming. His voice shattered in the air with such guttural desperation - panic - he didn't even believe it was his own. "GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM THE CAR!"

It was a scramble. Everyone suddenly exploded into movement, just flashes of colour. Nick couldn't see straight, reflex spurring him to bolt away from the car while his brain screamed for him to drag everyone out by hand, like he had the time -

But they all obeyed the command without the tiniest hesitation, bolting away from the car as quickly as they'd started toward it. There was barely feet between them and the car as they started to run in all directions, panicked.

The slab struck just an instant later. Metal screamed as it was crushed underneath pure asphalt, glass shattering while the car's chassis collapsed helplessly by the slab's unadulterated weight.
Nick felt shards strike his back, little sparks of pain, and he could hear Ellis yelp as the same happened to him.

As the car crumpled, some mechanism broke. Along with a violent shriek as the engine exploded dully, the car horn suddenly flicked on and didn't stop. It was a dull sound, but so loud and at a constant pitch that immediately reverberated up into the air and through the trees surrounding them.

However, the slab wasn't done there - it bounced on the crushed car, violently breaking in half, one of those halves suddenly tailspinning in the air and shooting after the survivors like it were chasing them.

A loud crack sounded out like a shot as the bottom edge of the sailing piece of highway struck Coach directly in the back of the head. He went down instantly, nothing more than a stuttered shout escaping him before it cut off, and he hit the highway rolling.

They all instantly skidded to a stop, scrambling, Rochelle letting out a scream. Nick's gut turned to stone. Terror and shock mixed to a potent, sickening taste in the air as the big man landed face-up, blood welling up fast and visibly on the back of his head just instants after he touched down.

His expression was unmoving, a ghastly mask of stilled pain.

Nick didn't have so much as a second to think it through before he spun around, tearing his Molotov from its makeshift holster on his belt with one hand while the other ripped his matches out of his pocket.

The match caught fire on the very first strike against the book. Fingers perfectly steady, adrenaline putting his body into a sudden equilibrium, Nick caught the Molotov's rag fuse on fire and reared back. He threw it as hard as he could, and only just registered the dark, frothing shadows behind the Tank.

The horn was attracting the infected.

Ellis' voice joined Rochelle's, shouting as they both collapsed at Coach's side - alarmed and incoherent. Nick barely turned around in time to hide his face from the explosion of heat that separated them then from the Tank and impending horde, splattering liquid catching fire in a sudden howling wave.

It licked onto the ruined sedan, and spilled gasoline fed the fire almost to the point of explosion. The flames screamed higher, tearing at the air and sending blinding light roaring everywhere.

They had to run. The only option was to run straight into the forest. It was that or race backwards on an open, stretching highway - and there was probably more infected coming at them that way.

Any other day - any other time - any other point in his life, Nick would have simply bolted.

That day, he shouted with as much fury as there was snarled panic:

"Grab his legs!"
There was nothing to do but run away. Coach's condition put terror into all of them - even Nick seemed on the verge of losing his composure. They ran for the treeline in an awkwardly synchronized half-jog. Ellis carried the weight of Coach's upper body against his back, hunched forward, arms locked tightly with Coach's backwards.

The big man's shotgun was clutched in Ellis' right hand, his own faithfully lashed to his back by its strap and now trapped slightly under Coach's weight.

Nick and Rochelle had him by either leg, his thighs on their shoulders and arms wrapped around them. It was a struggle balancing his dead weight - and Ellis prayed softly under his breath that that phrase would remain a metaphor.

"Pleasebeokay, pleasebeokay, pleasebeokay..." he whimpered at a constant pace, heart racing as every muscle tensed to keep Coach on his back. He could feel hot blood trickling onto his neck from the big man's head wound, and it brought a harsh knot to his throat.

The inferno that had exploded into existence behind them raged with such energy, now gasoline-fueled, that Ellis could still feel the heat as they struggled down the slight decline that fed into the highway-side forest.

Ellis plowed into the forest, leading the way on sturdy feet as the three dodged around trees with the unconscious football coach balanced between them. He could hear Nick's voice spitting out a constant flow of curses, but they couldn't stop.

The Tank roared furiously behind them, weight thundering audibly over the crashing of the flames. The scream of the infected horde started a low undertone as they raced along in its footsteps, not sounding intimidated in the slightest by the fire.

The forest wasn't nearly as hard to navigate as the swamps had been, and the ground was fairly level, but fallen trees cluttered the ground. Ellis stumbled slightly over a stump he didn't see, feeling the whole of Coach's weight threaten to fall. He gasped slightly, struggling to get his feet back under himself with a grit of his jaw.

"Shit!" Rochelle blurted, panicked. "It's throwing -"

There was a violent crash that vibrated all around them, trees shaking madly and leaves falling around them in a whirlwind. Ellis could just look back enough to see the burning chassis of their car breaking its way through tree limbs, getting stuck in the dense canopy and slowly beating its way to the ground through branches.

The vehicle was still on fire, and flames caught onto the trees it touched as gasoline sprayed from it in burning trickles. The fire was spreading quick up the trees, burning pieces of branch showering down behind them.

Nick growled a little incoherently, and Ellis felt Coach's weight shift again unexpectedly as Nick moved. He winced slightly, shoving his shoulders to get a better grip and focusing on forging forward, hearing gunfire just behind him.

Zombies were breaking through the treeline, fire turning them into mini infernos as they scrambled limbs wildly through the air. It was almost eerie to watch, their visions clearly obscured by the flames as they crashed straight into tree trunks.
Nick had twisted around to shoot behind them, his arm bent strangely to hold up his fairly large rifle against his shoulder. His aim went wide as a result, unable to handle the recoil without two hands, and every time he missed he let out a low snarl.

The Tank was still trying to chase after them. They could hear the crashing as it smashed at trees angrily, tearing them out of the ground with ground-shuddering roars. Would it stop, or would it really tear its way through the trees until it reached them?

The three ran as fast as their awkward arrangement allowed, Nick picking off flaming zombies whenever they got near. It was all they could do, aware that every step put them one more step away from the highway.

Flames were spreading behind them, picking up speed as the infected carried it with them. It licked up tree-trunks, spewing dark smoke up into the air and dirtying it with flecks of ash and burning leaves. It got hard to breathe, and Ellis felt a strike of anxiety that they might get overtaken by the forest fire.

The zombies, however, could only go so far before they collapsed, limbs burnt away beyond repair. They started to die out, tripping over themselves to the forest floor with screams of pain and stilling in the midst of the flames that ate them up. As they lost the zombies, the fire lost its momentum, and the survivors left the majority of the flames behind.

It could still catch up to them if it didn't burn out - especially with gasoline now added to the mix.

Ellis couldn't really say how long they'd been running before they couldn't hear the Tank anymore. As a certain silence settled in, their own exhausted huffing came to the forefront. Faltering to their own audible exhaustion, they all slowed, and Ellis weakly bent forward as they came to a stop.

The canopy was dark overhead. It was just near the afternoon, but the dense leaves above them criss-crossed into a blinding gridwork of dull green and muted the sun. The trees clustered around them thickly, and the air was clogged with trailing smoke.

Ellis' lungs burnt with a lack of oxygen - slowly, gradually, he slumped down to take a knee, feeling Rochelle and Nick go down with him. They set Coach down on the leaf-covered ground, and Ellis rolled out from under him, twisting around to look at the limp ex-football player a little helplessly as he set the big man's shotgun down.

A whimper left him. "C-Coach..."

Rochelle hurried in a hands-and-knees scramble to get to Coach's head, letting out a heart-wrenching noise of agony as she saw just how much blood covered the whole back of his head. She softly lifted it up, scooching his head into her lap as she just dropped into a limp sit next to him.

He wasn't moving at all.

"Fucking fuck all this!" Nick snarled, kneeling, voice enraged into a rough gravel as he threw his rifle to the forest floor. He slammed his fist into the ground before pushing up to his feet, a shudder wracking him as his leg was clearly in serious pain. Ellis twitched his head up, uncertainly, blue eyes flicking wildly over Nick's face.

"Fucking bullshit!" he shouted, rolling his head back as if to level his fury at the heavens. "This is so much goddamn bullshit! The car's fucking gone. That goddamn Tank is out there, and now - we're in the fucking middle of some fucking forest on fucking fire and what?! Coach is going to fucking di-"
"Shut up!" Rochelle shouted, whipping her head around to face Nick, body wracked with an angry shiver as it broke out of her. Her expression was wrenched in a look on the verge of utter breakdown. "You fucking asshole!"

The gambler's whole body went still, shock leveling his expression.

"How could you - don't you dare even think that, you fucking… prick! Shut up, just, stop -" Her voice broke. Her whole body broke, head lolling down to her chest as a sob wrenched out of her throat. She grasped her hands onto Coach's shoulders, and it was as she seemed primed to start shaking him that Nick silently approached.

He slipped his hands under her arms, and Ellis watched wordlessly as the conman gently pulled her away. Her first instinct was to fight, turning sharply and drawing her hand into a flat plane and slapping him across the cheek. She didn't have the leverage to hit hard, but it stung.

The gambler bore it with no more than a flinch and grabbed her again, pulled her closer. "Shh. Hey." he spoke lowly, tone soft. Nick's flecked jasper irises were constricted with a cool remorse, and his motions were fueled by a silent apology. "Ro'... I didn't mean that. I didn't."

One punch straight to his bicep, much harder… and then Rochelle slumped against his chest, breaking into sobs as she buried into his shirt. The conman didn't say anything, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and lowering his head to press his chin against the crown of her head.

His eyes half-closed, but not before slanting up to meet Ellis' and silently gesture with a glance towards Coach.

Ellis jumped into motion at the gesture, blinking heavily and rolling his head down to hide it as tears welled up at the corners of his blue eyes. He dug into the backpack, searching for the bandages stowed inside.

As he found them, slightly fumbling fingers nervously started to wrap Coach's head, binding it tight over the darkly bleeding wound at the back of his skull. He carefully dropped down to sit on his boots, pulling Coach's head onto his lap.

Nick stood there quietly, feeling hot tears soak through his shirt. He let his eyes close entirely as he confirmed Ellis was working, focusing on the woman in his arms. "I'm sorry, 'Chelle." he murmured honestly. "He'll be alright. Coach is a tough guy - don't worry about him."

She let out a soft whimper, shoulders shaking up as she struggled to hiccup in breaths. "Wh-what if -"

"You shut up." Nick stopped her immediately, folding his arms tighter against her back. He could feel her crumple a little as he did, knowing how out of character this was - for both of them. It just didn't matter. "He'll be alright. Guy wouldn't abandon us."

Rochelle trembled quietly, still against his chest, as small sobs jumped up her spine. He just held onto her with a small sigh, brows subtly screwing up on his forehead. He hadn't thought - the words had just left him.

You're fucking heartless sometimes, Nicolas.

He re-opened his eyes to look over her head at Coach and Ellis. The younger man was gently finishing up the last few revolutions of Coach's head, the bandages tight to the big man's traumatized skull.
"We gotta stop the bleeding..." the conman said simply, voice low and eyes serious as he gave a small nod. "After that, it's a dice roll."

Ellis lifted his chin a little, and Nick's alert gaze picked out the subtle rivulets that traced down his slightly dirtied cheeks, shining. "I… think it's stoppin'.." the Georgian responded softly, biting his lower lip. "Got it bandaged tight anyway..."

Nick's eyes narrowed minutely - he didn't miss the tears and he wasn't about to ignore them. His voice gained a slight lull, sighing vaguely at the edges. "Hey." he prompted.

Ellis blinked back up at him, just barely slanting his gaze underneath the bill of his cap. His eyes were reflective, shimmering in the bare light that crept underneath his cap, and there was a hesitant self-conscious twitch to his brows.

"You're not breakin' down on me too, are you, kiddo?"

The Southerner smiled lightly, bowing his head back down and lifting a hand to carefully use his wrist to wipe at his eyes. Blood-smeared fingertips curled a little into a half fist, and he sighed before returning to binding Coach's head up the rest of the way. "N-.. Naw. 'M alright. I can't take Ro' cryin' is all..."

As if the comment shook her slightly, Rochelle hesitantly pulled her head away from Nick's chest. She seemed to get awkward, turning half away from him and looking back toward Coach and Ellis.

Her hand wiped at her face, and Nick averted his eyes as she sniffled and rubbed at her nose. He felt uncomfortable, eager to get his personal space back. "S-sorry, suit. I ... I'm just.." she started to apologize, frowning. She faltered slightly when Nick shook his head, dropping his arms to his sides.

"Hey. Let's just not talk about it, huh?" His words made her exhale a soft snort of humor, and she pulled away from him to almost float hesitantly back to Coach's side. Nick stayed where he was, putting his hands slowly into his jacket pockets and just watching.

The woman gradually got down to her knees, reaching down to softly rest a hand against Coach's cheek. She stroked it faintly with a knuckle, shoulders slumping as a whisper escaped her. "... you better be okay... we need you, big man..."

Ellis stretched out a dirtied hand to settle it over Rochelle's, squeezing her fingers softly. He tried to catch her gaze and she met it after a moment, taking in his reassuring smile.

Rochelle squeezed back, lifting her head with a slight sigh. Her head turned, and she looked back through the trees hesitantly. Her gaze met Nick's, and she gave him a soft, grateful-edged smile.

Nick tensed his jaw vaguely at the look, avoiding matching her gaze, instead lifting his chin to mimic her and look around. He turned entirely, squinting to gaze back where they'd come from. He could make out the burning orange of fire, far in the distance behind them, filtered through the trees and gleaming up in sparks.

Sighing, subtly, Nick pushed back onto his good leg and dug his cigarettes out of his pocket. Tapping one out onto his palm, he went for a match, letting the cigarette settle between his lips before he lit it. "... We can't move him much. Even if he wasn't a fatass... until he's conscious, he needs to stay still, or he'll really fuck something up. Get him in a better position.."

Nick rolled his cigarette with his tongue, lifting brows slightly as he watched Ellis lean forward obediently. The Georgian gently worked his arms underneath Coach's torso, cautiously starting to
pull him toward a tree so they could sit him up against it.

Rochelle quickly joined him in the effort, and together, they got the limp football coach settled in some semblance of a comfortable position against the tree. As they pulled away, Rochelle slipped to sit next to him with a sigh.

Ellis rolled back onto his rump, slumping a little as he put his hands onto the ground just behind himself, lifting his chin so he could look back at Nick. "Whut're we gonna do?"

He stayed turned away, pinching his cigarette between his fingers and pulling it from between his lips to exhale a long cloud of smoke. A curl of his tongue turned it into a shivering ring halfway through.

Nick savored the burn of nicotine on his lungs, giving a heavy shake of his head before replacing the cigarette where it was and hobbling back to retrieve his rifle. He cocked it carefully, obviously not trusting the zombies to stay away for long.

He didn't know what to do. So he shrugged, and he lied. "Wait. Try and wake him up every once in a while. If it just knocked him unconscious, it shouldn't be that long."

There was a huge caveat behind that if. None of them were doctors - hospitals didn't even exist anymore. No 911 to call. No ambulance would show up to take Coach to safety.

"Get comfortable. As fuckin' likely as that is."
Chapter 55

Nick rolled what must've been the fiftieth pebble of its kind between his fingertips, eyeing the hole in the tree a few yards away he'd been aiming for. He was perched on a root, injured leg rested out straight in front of himself while his other one was half-curl in a slight crouch.

Squinting faintly, he took the shot, feeling a rather dull sense of satisfaction as the pebble disappeared right into the knot. It was only the second one he'd managed to get in. Letting out a sigh that wasn't so much bored as tired, the gambler rested his elbow onto his knee and set his chin on his knuckles.

There was an uncomfortable silence and had been for a while - it wasn't so much between them as around them. All of their attentions - Nick's included - were on the very quietly snored trickle of Coach's breathing. It was this grounding thing, as much a relief as it was stressful.

Hours. They'd been there for hours, maybe two or three if Nick's innate sense of time was still functioning properly (which, considering how much had happened in mere days, was unlikely). The waiting was less painful than the awareness there'd been no signs of Coach stirring.

Rochelle was curled up against the same tree Coach's body had been settled on. She was toying with the edge of her shirt, eyes half-closed with their tired slant downward. Every few minutes, she'd lift her head and look at the so-silent football coach.

Ellis was predictable - he picked a spot on the forest floor perfectly in the middle of everyone and flopped down flat, one leg gently bent with the other crossed over so his boot dangled limply in the air. He twitched it to a song in his head, blue eyes quiet on the leaves overhead.

Curling his tongue behind his teeth, Nick picked his rifle up from next to him. He set the stock against his shoulder, tipping his head to absently scan their surroundings through the scope.

They'd had to deal with a couple zombies stumbling over them. The forest fire was still burning off in the distance, the smell very faint in the air, and Nick had to figure that all the activity in that direction was distracting the infected from finding them. If the forest was as clogged with infected as the swamps had been, they should've been dealing with the things near-constantly.

Not that he was complaining.

His gaze dragged back toward Coach as he lowered the rifle. A small twitch flickered over the conman's brows, tiredly crossing his arms. Pale green eyes flickered to trace the man's bandaged skull and the blood splotched into the gauze. They'd already changed it once, and they were running low on bandages.

Honestly, his leg needed a fresh set - but they didn't have enough.

So basically, you're either going to wake up good as new - or slip into a coma and die. Great. Fuckin' great, Coach, you stupid fuck. What the hell are we supposed to do?! Jesus.

Frustrated, Nick lifted a hand to rub over his forehead, squeezing down the profile of his face. He felt - bad. Like sick bad, like he hadn't slept in days even though that was significantly the opposite. Hell, all things in perspective, they'd gotten plenty of sleep.

Yet, there he was, feeling like shit.
Pushing his rifle to the ground again, Nick tiredly stood up. He gave a slight wince as his weight rolled onto his bad leg, shuffling a little to adjust, before crossing the distance between Coach and him.

He stepped right over Ellis, making the kid jump slightly and sit up, blinking after the conman curiously with those ever-questioning blue eyes. Rochelle glanced up, too, but only when Nick got closer.

The gambler bent down slightly in front of Coach, uncomfortably slanting his weight to keep off his injured leg. He reached out, knuckling the ex-football player's shoulder firmly. "Coach. Hey." His tone was annoyed, like they were walking and the big man was just lagging behind.

It wasn't the first time he'd tried. He was the one with the guts to do it, and the one of them who was least likely to get emotional. Rochelle watched, trapped between hope and disapproval all at once. Her fingers curled a little nervously on her shirt.

"Coach. No offense, sweetheart, but beauty sleep isn't really in the schedule." Staring a moment, Nick let his teeth grate gently against each other. Coach's slumped form didn't so much as twitch, his chin to his chest and breath holdings its shallow tempo.

The more Nick listened to the unresponsive, heavy whoosh of air, the less it reassured him. It was dull and tacky - not the calm snore of a sleeping man. "Coach," he repeated, reaching down to grasp onto the man's forearm and hoist it up, shaking it firmly.

Waiting a moment, he let out a sigh, frustrated with the lack of reaction. Nick set Coach's arm back down, straightening up with a distinct scowl. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jackets, pushing at the fabric in annoyance.

"How long is he going to be out?" he growled quietly - rhetorically - as he turned on a heel. He yanked his cigarette pack free from his pocket, dragging one out and slipping it between his lips.

Rochelle gave a sigh of her own, her brows pinching together softly. She curled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, settling her chin between her knees. The question, however unanswerable, breached a barrier in the atmosphere, and she spoke up.

"I wanna talk about something..." The way she said it was a little bored and a little tired, gaze downcast slightly. She wrapped her arms a little tighter around her knees and looked back up after a minute, giving a slightly apologetic smile.

Nick started to light his cigarette, arching a brow as he touched the end of his match to it. "Oh, yeah? Like what?" He turned away to face off into the forest, bending his head over his cigarette. Ellis sat up onto his palms, looking curiously between them as Nick rattled off a list sarcastically. "Talk about Coach?... just how we're going to avoid that giant meat-monkey still out there?... where we're going? The odds of us dying on the way there? Oh, maybe the odds of CEDA never showing up and us starving to death when we get there? Take your pick, doll."

Rolling her neck a little with a sigh, Rochelle tangled her fingers together and prompted; "Where'd you guys go to school?"

The conman snorted slightly, smoke escaping him in little puffs with the motion. "School? Jesus. You know it's sad when that's a better topic of conversation than what's going on at the time." Rochelle gave him a slightly twisted frown, just a faint exasperation about it.

Ellis gave a grin, lifting a hand to rub his nose with a knuckle. "Muh ma schooled me fer a long
time at home." he offered pleasantly despite Nick's sarcasm, shifting his weight to get more comfortable against the leafy ground.

Rochelle immediately broke into a little sad smile, cocking her head. She jumped on the offered information, relaxing quickly. "Oh god, you must've been the cutest kid -" Ellis gave her an embarrassed look, pulling his cap down slightly over his face, and she cut off with a not-so-apologetic "Sorry."

Nick admitted a bit of interest, if - he figured, defensively - only because the longer Ellis talked, the longer it would take for the attention to turn toward himself. Besides, the kid would like holding up a conversation. "She was a single mom. Why wouldn't she kick you out to school when she could?"

Ellis picked up a leaf between his fingertips, rolling it into a ball slowly. He chuckled, pouting out his lower lip good-naturedly. He teased with a light tone, shaking his head softly, "Not everyone's as sensible as you are, Nick. Haw."

Giggling gently, Rochelle tipped her chin up to smile at Ellis. "He may be an ass but he usually has some kind of point. Did she just want to spend the time with you, or what, honey? My parents would've never had the energy to do something like that."

Ellis patted his hand on his shirt, flopping down flat to the ground. He let his arms cross underneath his head, contently nestling down into the leaves like he was lying on a bed. "Awh, yeah, sure... I wouldn't trade havin' all that time with her fer nothin'. I think she just wanted tuh be there fer me, y'know?"

Nick limped himself back to the tree root he'd claimed as his own, passing Ellis closely. He approached the root protruding up from the ground, but rather than wearily drop all the way down, he simply leaned back against the tree itself. Rochelle cocked her head, smiling. "That sounds really nice, sweetheart."

"He's a real momma's boy." Nick said with some dull humor, just a tint of that mocking drawl sneaking into his Northern intonation. As it always did, it made Ellis laugh, utterly tickled by the mimicry.

"Mhm. A li'l." the mechanic chuckled in ready agreement, rubbing at his temple with a thumb a little bashfully.

Rochelle tightened her arms around her legs, leaning forward and stretching out her spine slightly. "Uh.. Ellis.. honey... about your mom." She hesitated slightly, curling her fingers. "Do you... think she's safe?.."

Ellis immediately nodded, adamantly, wagging his elbows softly in an idle gesture. "Yeah! She was with Keith when he done called me up. I made him swear he'd keep her safe, heh."

Smiling gently, she gave a nod. Even from a distance, Nick could read a little falter of her expression, only for a second - she didn't have the same assurance, not that she expressed that to Ellis. "When did you start going to a real school, sweetheart? I mean, I assume you did, at least for highschool."

Ellis nodded, twitching his boot gently in the air. "Yeah, eventually.. I decided I wanted tuh go to school with Keith 'bout halfway intuh middle school. St. James, south'uh Savannah - it was okay. I made friends pretty easy, I guess, haw. Muh ma was worried I wouldn't fit in on account'uh bein' homeschooled so long, but it was a'ight."
"What?" Rochelle teased, laughing subtly against her knees. "You and your adorable little self not making friends? As if."

He smiled, shrugging up his shoulders and turning his head to settle his cheek against the ground. Peering around the bill of his cap, he flashed an easy grin. "Oh I dunno 'bout that... Keith had more friends than I did, 'n'most'uh mine were really his. It ain't like they didn't like me or nothin', s'just - y'know. Keith's so dang interestin'."

"I can see him holding a lot of attention." She smiled softly, and though she didn't outright say it, there was a little sympathy on her face. Nick noticed it too but held his silence - ten to one, Ellis never even considered that he should've had a problem with being second best. The kid was smiling blithely as always, a little proudly even.

Y'know, the more I think about it, the more I wonder if Overalls doesn't have a crush on the guy. It nearly made him laugh.

Nearly.

"Yeah, he was real popular. Had all them stories, y'know, 'n'everyone loved it when he'd talk back tuh teachers'n shit. Muh mama taught me better, y'know, but Keith was always kinda crazy. Anyhow, after gettin' through high-school, Keith'n his bro Paul 'n'me started workin' at an auto shop tuh start earnin' money. Didn't go tuh college, haw. Too much money."

Ellis glanced back toward Rochelle, giving a small shrug of his shoulders and a smile. "Anyhow... whut 'bout you, Ro'?

Rochelle leaned back against the tree behind her, gaze drifting slowly toward Coach. She watched his chest slowly expand and collapse, stubbled face expressionless as he slept away. "Mm. Public schools all the way, up in Ohio. I had a couple close friends but I spent most of my time working on school newspapers. Doesn't usually win you much in the way of popularity." She grinned gently.

"Wow." Ellis cooed softly, head cocking. "Yuh been intuh news that long? I mean, I been intuh cars that long so it ain't no new thing or nothin', but -"

"I'm disappointed." Nick interjected, a smirk already warning that it was going to be something inappropriate, well before he added, "I always pictured you as the cheerleader type. School newspaper? Really?"

Rochelle held her own with a humored smile, lifting up her chin. "Sorry, Nick, I know you like the slut types, but I was writing articles, not wearing mini-skirts."

Ellis snorted a little helplessly, head tipping. "Y'all're just weird..."

"Anyway..." Rochelle re-directed forcefully, shooting Ellis an apologetic look. "Sorry, Nick, I know you like the slut types, but I was writing articles, not wearing mini-skirts."

"Y'all're just weird..."

"Anyway..." Rochelle re-directed forcefully, shooting Ellis an apologetic look. "Yeah. My mom wasn't totally enthused with the whole thing, but I've been into news since I was a little girl. I think she was sorta hoping for a lawyer or something."

When Nick spoke up again, Rochelle gave him a dry look before he'd even really started to talk. He gave her a wordlessly defensive 'what' gesture, expression victimized, and then spoke. "It's okay. She can't really say I told you so' when you run into her again and have to say your news job shafted you straight into the zombie apocalypse. Becoming a lawyer is even more of a clusterfuck."

She blinked once, annoyance evaporating as she parsed his words - then broke into outright laughter, clamping a hand over her mouth quickly as if embarrassed to have done so. "O-oh God.
I'm going to have to remember that one! That's good, suit."

The conman smirked, taking a heavy pull from his cigarette.

Rochelle did her best to recover, clearing her throat a little and rubbing her wrist over her forehead. Flashing a quick smile, she cocked her head. "They paid my way through college, anyway. It wasn't the cheapest thing, but hey. Film and journalism university - creative arts stuff. I liked it a lot."

"Sounds real swell, Ro'," Ellis said with a smile, tipping his head a bit as he shifted on the ground, letting his legs spread out flat with a soft exhale. "Too bad the whole zombie thing had tuh mess up yer career, y'know."

She laughed gently and waved a hand dismissively at him. "Hey. Story of a lifetime, right? Maybe I'll do a whole documentary on it and end up the richest person around - y'know, and .. not zombiefied."

Sharing a little blurt of giggles between them, it only took a few minutes for the thingNick had been dreading to happen. They shifted their focus to him with a dragging motion, practically in slow motion, sending a stiff sensation up his spine as he automatically released a faint noise of disapproval.

"What?" he groused before they'd even said a word.

"S'yer turn." Ellis prompted cheerily, not balked in the slightest by Nick's irate start. He shifted his weight, propping himself up on his elbows carefully and smiling merrily. "I mean, you can't go tuh school tuh be a gambler, right? Did'cha like.. have a job planned or somethin'?"

Nick narrowed his gaze slightly, exhaling smoke through his nostrils. He pulled his cigarette away from his mouth, rolling it between his fingers. "... Nope, too busy planning out how I was going to be President of the United States." he responded sardonically.

He swore Ellis had to doubletake before actually flashing him a 'tsk' look. The mechanic sighed a bit, adjusting his hat with his wrist. "Aw c'mon, man. Yer so closed up it drives me nuts!"

Rochelle laughed gently from where she sat, shrugging her shoulders. She was already giving up, glancing off to the side with an absent smile. "Let it go, sweetheart. No sense starting a fight if the big bad conman doesn't want to share."

Ellis was just about to relent, starting to ease back down to the ground with a slightly disappointed expression, when a loud crushing sound somewhere in the distance had all three of them jumping slightly.

Nick wrenched his body around to scoop up his rifle from the ground, Rochelle and Ellis both glancing at him. He pulled it up to his shoulder, gaze flicking between the scope and the landscape as he scanned around them.

Though he didn't immediately see anything except vaguely shifting foliage, he didn't relax either. They'd pretty much confirmed there were no animals around, not that they really knew why, so he wasn't just going to brush it off. This wouldn't be the first infected he'd had to pick off before it found them that evening.

As Nick stood there quietly, green eyes palely twitching at every shift of a shadow, Ellis dropped all the way down. He sighed a bit as he hit, pulling his cap off his head so he could squint around without lifting his head.
"Reminds me'uh the time Keith'n I went campin' in a forest like this. He tried tuh tie the tent up tuh a tree so's it'd be real sturdy, but found out too late it had a bee nest in it... He was climbin' it tuh attach the ropes... got up tuh the first strong branch 'n' slipped. Hit the nest on the way down... thing stuck right ontuh his foot, man, and I mean tight on there."

There was nothing. *False alarm?*

Remembering the surprise of infected climbing up roofs and trees, Nick scanned high, too, but saw nothing. He started to lower his rifle, musing.

"I had tuh take it off with a knife -after he fell unconscious from hittin' a branch on the way down, anyhow. Bad thing was he took off his shoes tuh climb, like Tarzan, y'know - man, his foot was like ten sizes too big fer like a whole year. He still can't eat honey without gettin' the shakes! ...just in his foot though. Muh mama jokes 'bout his foot bein' one'uh them Mexican jumpin' beans, but man, I think it's sad."

Rochelle commented decisively, brows risen a little; "You are the craziest person I've ever met."

Ellis gave her a chuckle and grin, slowly replacing his cap on his head.

"Yuh ain't met Keith yet."

In a flash, Nick saw it - it was so misshapen as to confuse him an instant, like maybe it was just a shadow or a shrub. Narrowing his eyes carefully to squint, he jerked his rifle back up and focused through the scope, taking advantage of the magnification.

When the thing turned to face him, he realized why it so confused him. It was oversized to a mutant degree - but only on one side.

From shoulder to hand, its right arm was bloated to almost the full width of its torso. Dark, hardened skin cracked like concrete over its arm, elbow seeming completely frozen by the pure density of the 'flesh' that surrounded it. Its chest stretched slightly to try and support it, wilting on the other side to such a degree that the other limb was no larger than a wrung towel.

Clearly decrepit, its arm flopped bonelessly as it seemed to take notice of Nick, facing him. Its head was almost a skull, skin sunken in to seamlessly follow the curves of its bone structure. Glowing eyes bore straight into Nick's - and he couldn't quite help himself.

"What the fucking shit -!"

It roared. Not quite like the Tank's deafening, world-shattering howl - more like a bull, with that eerie, deep layer to the sound that held subtle human tones. It was more than enough to make them all jump, and Nick felt his gaze blur when the zombie suddenly broke into a full charge.

It moved faster than should've been possible, breaking through shrubs like they were nothing. Leaves went flying as it tipped its weight to thrust its oversized arm in front of itself like a shield.

Ellis scrambled up from the ground, going for his shotgun in an awkward half-sprinted crouch, keeping out of Nick's line of fire. "Whut in the Lord is that!" he blurted, almost fascinated.

Nick had never pulled a trigger so hard in his life. The rifle went off with a crack, unsilenced, and a splash of blood announced its striking the zombie's shoulder, the bullet piercing squishy flesh.

Panicking just the slightest bit when the thing didn't even stagger, the conman took a quick step back as he yanked the reload bar on his rifle and took another shot. That one struck too, but it hit its strong arm with a puff of dust and a strange sound like it had implanted into rock - not skin.
"Whatever the fuck it is, it's not - Shit!"

The thing broke through the last bits of protruding branch that separated them and it, and it hadn't so much as slowed. Nick very sharply realized that his back was near-brushing against a thick tree trunk - he was going to get rammed straight into it.

The impact could very well kill. He was a beat away from bailing out, just throwing himself from where he stood, when something hit him from the side instead. Startled into a strangled noise, Nick grabbed his arms quickly around Ellis as the kid tackled him out of the way, and the two collided to the ground, rolling messily away in a tangle of limbs.

Another shot cracked out just as they hit the ground and the charging infected hit the tree, and when it collided, it slumped down stone-dead.

Nick barely stopped Ellis and his rolling with a hard grasp onto the ground, fingers digging a little in the leaf-clotted dirt. He ended up on top of the kid, both of them having grabbed on to one another in reflex.

The wind was knocked out of Nick and a fresh wave of agony flooded through his leg - but he had the sense to get his head up and blink quickly back toward the zombie, more focused on that than the mechanic he was sprawled over.

Seeing the half-exploded remnants of its skull bleeding gruesomely between its lopsided shoulders, he flicked a glance toward Rochelle. Sure enough, the woman was hunched a bit down against her tree, her rifle clasped tightly in her hands. She looked a little shaken, but her gaze was on the weapon, not the now-dead zombie.

"W-wow." she uttered, more to herself. "Strong gun."

Ellis' voice dragged Nick's attention back, coughing between words and voice a little wary. "You okay, Nick? That thing done nearly plastered you against that tree like a bunch'uh jelly.." The conman blinked down, exhaling a large breath as he recalled their positions.

Nick pulled his hands out from under Ellis' weight, shifting off the kid with a hurried jerk. He felt uncomfortable, and immediately, hostility blurred its way into his tone. Rather than look at Ellis, he grabbed for his leg, trying to soothe it and only making it hurt worse. "Yeah - thanks for that, dumbshit. Getting crushed by you was definitely much better."

"'Ey," Ellis immediately defended himself, pushing up onto his elbows and brushing his shirt off slightly. His brows scrunched slightly, and Nick felt a sinking sensation in his chest as green eyes picked up a real confusion in the blink of blue ones. "What'cha rather I do, watch you get hurt?"

"Ey," Ellis immediately defended himself, pushing up onto his elbows and brushing his shirt off slightly. His brows scrunched slightly, and Nick felt a sinking sensation in his chest as green eyes picked up a real confusion in the blink of blue ones. "What'cha rather I do, watch you get hurt?"

"Damnit... "Yeah, sure." he growled a little, feeling backed into a corner. "Considering it's either that or get crushed by you shortly afterward - I'll take the zombies."

Ellis started to stand up, shaking his head, ready to disbelievingly question the conman's abrupt hostility, when Rochelle spoke up. "Guys... Coach."

Both of them suddenly lost track of their argument. They turned on a dime, Ellis skidding and Nick hobbling, to hurry over to the big man. Rochelle had already scooted over while they were arguing, and she was bent in a little, holding Coach's cheeks in either hand.

The fight had shaken something in him, because he was suddenly twitching softly in his heavy slump against the tree trunk. His bandaged, red-stained head gave tiny jerks - what Rochelle was trying to stem the flow of by holding his cheeks firmly - and his fingers worked in and out of heavy
Nick felt his pulse jump right up his throat, thinking he was seizing. He nearly uttered the thought, not having the first idea of what they should do to stop him, when they heard the soft, gruff utterance of a broken few syllables.

"A- nnh."

It was miserable. Just miserable, dejected to an exhausted, listless degree. Nick would have never believed the gruff man was capable of that kind of voice, had he not heard it himself. While it was sobering, too, the raw emotion behind the indecipherable sound lent a hopeful thought.

He was dreaming. A nightmare, maybe, frenzied from the head trauma. *Maybe that means he's closer to waking up?*

All three of them were quiet for a few moments until Coach's body stilled, Rochelle gently cradling her hands against his rounded, stubbled jawline while she let her forehead tip onto his, eyes closing. Ellis softly reached out to set a hand on her shoulder, reassuring, and Nick just stood silently for that time.

When Nick did speak, it was with a low tone and a serious edge. "That's good. He's getting better." *Is he?*

Rochelle nodded slightly in agreement as she pulled her head back, a little too fast, emotion clearly stringing up her throat. "R-right. Good. Good sign.. Should we try to wake him up more?"

Nick didn't like being the go-to, not when he hadn't planned it out himself. He needed upper hands and plotted cons, not ... best guesses and vague concepts. He felt his jaw go a little taut when Ellis' blue gaze joined in the questioning, bright and aware on his face, and he avoided meeting it.

"I say no." he said simply. "Even if we woke him up, he'd still be too weak to do anything. I'm not carrying him - my fucking leg still hurts just from running his fatass here. Hate to say it but I think we're bunking here for the night."

Ellis flashed an expression, just momentarily, that suggested he was thrilled at the idea of camping out. The mortal quality of their situation settled in after that, and he wilted a little. He bit his lower lip slightly and nodded sedately, squeezing Rochelle's shoulder sympathetically. "More chance we lose that Tank, anyhow, right?"

"Right." Rochelle agreed softly, turning herself to sit back down beside Coach. She sighed softly, watching his face even closer now. His breathing sounded clearer, a bit of a snored rumble re-entering the noise.

Nick stood there just a minute, listening to the sound, feeling a growing sense of doom crawl up his spine. He wanted to punch himself, in retrospect. *Nicolas. Just take a minute. Just - just stand here for a second and think. Think really hard. Take all those stupid, nicotine-drowned brain cells and think.*

Ellis blinked a bit at Nick, sideways, blue eyes gazing over his features like he could read the intense thought making its way across those sharp angles. He was completely oblivious to the true nature of it as Nick practically deafened himself with a mental: *Did you... just fucking... suggest... CAMPING?!!*
Nick wasn't necessarily sure what he'd signed up for when he'd found himself suggesting they spend the night in the woods, but he knew this was definitely not it.

Building a fire was complicated by the fact that everything was a little wet from the rain a day and a half ago, humidity kept in by the thick canopy. Ellis had been intent on making them a little pit - he scraped it out, clearing the leafy overgrowth with the heel of his boot, and hunched over a pile of damp tinder with the assurance of "aw, it'll be fine" as he took Nick's matches.

His precious matches, the ones that were the difference between cigarettes and no cigarettes. The difference between maintaining his sanity, and killing his entire team with his bare hands.

Ellis promptly wasted every single one.

Had Rochelle not been there to stare him into a silent fume, Nick probably would've strangled the disappointed Georgian. The wet wood just wouldn't catch fire, and there was nothing fibrous available to coax them into a burn.

What started - unfortunately - as a mere frustration, quickly turned into a legitimate oversight. The temperature rocketed down within hours as the darkness of night swept in behind the canopy overhead, a hard cold settling in as the sun disappeared entirely.

The moon slipped just enough light between the leaves to illuminate the forest. It was a beautiful crystal color, glazing everything with what could've been silver. Or ice, was Nick's sardonic decision - although it wasn't that cold, thank God.

He felt shivers creeping up and down his limbs as he pulled his suit jacket off of himself, the thinner fabric of his dress shirt quickly chilling. Rochelle had fallen asleep curled tightly against Coach's side, snuggled into the man's torso - for all the world - like a little girl would her father.

He should've found it funny, really, made fun of the two for the joint delusion of family they had between them... but mostly he just found himself sobered by it.

You gotta wake up, Coach. You can't leave me in charge. I can't hold this fucking team together, you know that.

Bending forward, aware of Ellis' gaze on him as he did, Nick spread his jacket carefully over them. He covered them as best he could manage, snorting a little when Rochelle squirmend faintly and then slowly settled back down. Though Coach was probably the warmest pillow one could ask for, she was still shivering in the cold, particularly with the back of her shirt torn at the shoulderblades.

"Night kids." Nick quipped quietly, crossing his arms over his chest and giving a harsh shiver as his body protested the cold. He turned away, hobbling back toward the tree he'd been curled up against with his body tightly hunched in on itself.

Ellis leaned against the same tree but at on different side, and he turned a little bit to look up as Nick approached. The untouched moonlight flickered underneath the bill of his cap, giving his skin a soft glow. The kid flashed him a small smile, a tiny bit hesitant, curled up into a ball with his arms buried between his torso and his knees. He wasn't shivering quite as much as Nick was, but he was still obviously suffering.

The mechanic had been dozing along with Rochelle while Nick kept watch over the team, but a
few zombies had crept up on them. Nick handled it fine, but the gunshots woke them all up. Ro' had fallen back asleep quickly, but Ellis hadn't managed so well.

"That was real nice'uv you, Nick." he gently chimed, blue eyes rapt on Nick's face.

The conman snorted slightly, easing down to sit against the tree again. He forced even his tightly bandaged leg into a bend, wrapping arms around his slacked knees. His teeth chattered softly together, putting a warble into his voice he wished he could stifle. "I dunno about n-nice. Just smart. She's little and h-he's -" Oh for fuck's sake, Nicolas, you're stammering like an idiot. Fuck cold! Fuck the woods! "- hurt. Priority or whatever."

Giving an annoyed grit of his jaw as his shiver just had to sneak in that last stutter, the gambler let his head roll forward to set his forehead against his bicep. Try as he might, he couldn't stop his voice from trembling as his muscles flinched with his shivering. Trapping his tongue between his teeth between sentences silenced any chattering, at least.

"I thought the South was fuckin' w-warm?"

Ellis released a little sigh, then shrugged up his shoulders. "Usually. Kinda temperamental lately, though." was his hesitant response. "Plus, we're hungry… that makes it feel worse."

Nick grumbled slightly, shivering back against the tree. He didn't really need that particular reminder - his stomach was aching, but the pain from his leg made a nice distraction from it. "Great. Just great."

"Yer shakin' pretty bad, y'know, m-man." the mechanic pointed out seriously, curling his hands into tight fists and putting them to his mouth to huff into them. "How's yer l-leg doin'?" Nick couldn't help but feel a little smirk touch his face as he heard the other man start to stammer too.

It was a weird thing to find triumph in, but he did.

The gambler tightened his arms slightly and shrugged his shoulders. "Fine." he lied - at first, then mulled it over before admitting: "…Kind of." He reached one hand to the collar of his dress shirt, closing up the two buttons that he habitually let stay open. It immediately felt uncomfortable against his neck, but it sealed up some heat in his core.

Ellis frowned a little, eyes drifting toward the gambler's injured leg, but Nick wasn't interested in talking about it.

He lifted his head just slightly, glancing up at the other man with a small smirk, re-directing the conversation. "D-didn't you tell a story about that idiot Keith spending a bunch of time in a freezer or something?" Ellis nodded, falling to a little smile. "Well, fuck if he's going to b-be better than me."

The kid laughed gently, lowering his head a little as he succumbed to a heavy shiver. "Keith nearly l-lost fingers doin' that, so, y'know... But it ain't that bad. Just chilly." His laugh turned into a tiny hum as he hunched down, a guilty expression flickering over his face. "Really sorry about the matches, N-Nick... I didn't mean tuh waste 'em all..."

"I'll just reach over and punch you whenever I get the itch for a cigarette." the gambler morosely retorted, settling his hands onto his biceps and rubbing carefully. He was only getting colder; he could feel it creeping in - he'd never really had a great cold tolerance.

Ellis kept watching him, head a bit bowed and gaze just blinking underneath the bill of his cap. Blue eyes were sympathetic, a little smile sprouting up on his face as it became clear Nick wasn't
all that angry with him anymore.

"That's a'ight. Although I dunno if it'll really help w-with yer problem."

Nick smirked a little, fidgeting his body into a closer curl against his good leg. If he could've just bent his bandaged leg just a little more - he could've built a little bubble of heat. As it was, air trickled between his knee and his torso, chilling him all over again. "Maybe it'll shut your l-little trap a bit.. that'd be a p-problem solved."

Grinning subtly, Ellis tipped his head down a little. He rested his cheek on his bicep, turning his chin to squint at Nick sideways. "You could always just ask me tuh hush if it really bothers you so much."

"Oh, bullshit!" Nick immediately shot back, disbelieving, his head lifting a bit. One brow cocked up accusatorially, "I tell you to shut up all the t-time and you never listen."

Ellis laughed gently, tightening his arms on his knees carefully. His tone was a bit coy when he pointed out, "Maybe y-you should try askin' instead'uh demandin'."

Nick eyed him sideways, jutting out his jaw a bit with a severe look as he shivered quietly. He had to weigh his pride against everything else, and considering the size of the former, that was a fairly complicated process. Eventually, he spat it out. Mostly.

"Could you p-possibly shut up?"

The younger man busted out into a surprised guffaw, quickly clapping a hand over his mouth to shut himself up with a careful glance toward Rochelle. Seeing she hadn't stirred, he looked back, lowering his hand to grin at Nick, shaking his head. "You suck at askin', Nick, but okay. You go'n'get some rest. I'll keep an eye out."

Nick smirked a bit as Ellis pushed his back against the tree, curling up tightly around his legs with a shiver. The kid went silent, gaze flicked up toward the black canopy overhead. A smile lingered over his face, even one shaken every few seconds by a tumultuous shiver.

The conman looked away, too. He let his gaze halt on Rochelle and Coach, shrouded over by his jacket, and he watched the slow rise and fall of their frames. He wasn't wholly sure he'd really intended to shut Ellis up, but... Ellis was smiling and the playful tint in the silence around them felt...

Okay.

Fuck it's cold. he complained to himself, struggling to control his shivering. He knew he should've been trying to get comfortable and get some rest, but he was too cold to even think about it. He was going to be absolutely miserable, he just knew it.

... and then he blinked slightly, more closely inspecting Coach and Rochelle, his mouth making for a slight, displeased twist as his brain took an unpleasant turn. Body heat was the best way to keep warm after all - they certainly looked comfortable.

He couldn't help but shift, uncomfortably tightening his arms around himself. Was he an idiot to think about cuddling up to Ellis? Of course his immediate answer was 'yes,' but that didn't stop him from thinking about it.

It was so out of his comfort zone, even though he had an excuse this time. What if that was the only way he was going to get to sleep and not sit there freezing all night, unable to do anything but
shiver quietly and stew? The idea of falling asleep snuggled with the other man was one of those thoughts that panicked him senselessly.

But Ellis was shivering too...

Frowning slightly with a scowl, Nick forced out a sigh, head turning a little to eye Ellis sideways as the kid shivered gently into his own knees.

The gambler cleared his throat lightly, slowly forcing himself to uncurl. He let his injured leg stay at a half-bend, propped up on the heel of his shoe against the ground, and stretched out the other casually. Ellis glanced at him a little sideways, curiously, and Nick nearly second-guessed himself.

When a full-body shiver attacked his self-control, he relented. "...eh. Hey, El..

Ellis' head turned fully toward him, twisting a bit to blink at him with those pretty blue eyes. They reflected the moonlight with a shine, and Nick couldn't quite meet them. The gambler was clearly uncomfortable, a kind of awkward strain touching the twitch of his mouth, and Ellis rapidly fell to attentive curiosity.

"Yeah?"

Adjusting his shirt slightly and exhaling on the wave of a shiver, Nick shrugged up a shoulder in a slightly defensive motion. "It's - ... fucking cold." he said a little flatly, lips pinching together. Each word came out in a struggle. He felt inexpressibly annoyed with himself, getting more and more eager to just drop it entirely. If it weren't for the bracing cold, he might've.

"I was starting to th-think - maybe - we c-could -"  

Nick stiffened in startlement when Ellis suddenly crawled away from the tree. He watched with slightly mistrustful attention, frozen up. The kid turned around, and without so much as a word, he maneuvered over Nick's straightened leg to crawl hesitantly against him.

The conman didn't stop him, so he kept going. Ellis settled down gradually, gently tucking himself to sit between Nick's thighs on the ground, aligning their bodies with Nick's chest to his back. He relaxed backwards, body pushing to erase the distance between them.

Nick took a moment to realize he was holding his breath, but as Ellis tilted his head to rest back against Nick's left shoulder and blink at him - bruised face reddened with an obvious blush - it escaped.

"... Yeah. That." Nick felt like he was working to defuse a bomb when he tried to find where to place his hands. He hadn't felt so fumbling and unsure in a long time - carefully, he let one arm slip over and around Ellis' torso, digits catching and bracing on his waistline, and rested the other on his own thigh.

Ellis chuckled bashfully, averting his gaze a little bit as he lowered a hand and plucked at the fabric of Nick's sleeve where it crossed over his midsection. He seemed to relax when Nick accepted the embrace, and Ellis nestled down with a sigh. "I-I figured. 'M real cold too..."

That wasn't going to last too long. There was an innocently pleasurable heat building up between their chilled bodies, warming them. The conman tried to push his anxiety away - he tried to just succumb to the embrace, reaching for that peace that had crept into him the night before.

He shifted his arm off his thigh, allowing his free hand to reach up and brush against Ellis' shoulder. He felt the smallest gasp of air escape the other man as he let his thumb trace idly up and
stroke along the curve of his ear.

In return, Ellis’ fingers adopted a subtle fussing with his shirt sleeve, and the soft brush and shift of his fingertips against his forearm put a comfortable limpness to the conman's body. Nick's eyes half-closed, slowly, and he felt a sigh bubble into existence in his chest - more a purr.

For a silent few moments, inch by inch, their bodies slowly melded together. Fingers explored the spaces open to them with a lazy touch, and their motions coaxed each other to a soothed relaxation as the cold was all but forgotten.

It was strange - but good strange. Wonderful strange, and so warm Nick swore he was dozing already.

Realizing that he might actually do exactly that, he suddenly spoke lowly. Nick lowered his chin to rest his cheek against the side of Ellis' head, his voice dropping to a gravedale, private level with how close their faces were. "Changed my mind..."

He smirked as Ellis turned his head to look at him, questioningly. "I won't smack you every time I want a smoke." Nick reached up a hand to pull his cap off the kid's head with a twist. Dropping it to the ground just by his hip, Nick ignored Ellis' soft 'b-but' expression at the loss of his hat, slipping fingers into his bared brunette curls.

Using the grip he had now, he pulled Ellis' head to twist it back so he could draw the other man into a kiss. The Georgian gave the tiniest of surprised noises, though he didn't fight it, eyes closing as their lips pressed together. Although a gentle exhale parted Ellis' plush lips in a certain vulnerable invitation, Nick resisted it.

Pulling away slowly, Nick curled his lips in to hold onto the warm taste of Ellis lingering on them. He let out a sigh through his nostrils, releasing Ellis' hair to just softly slide his fingertips along the side of Ellis' neck until his hand re-adopted its position against his shoulder.

Some mix of embarrassed and just relaxed, Ellis rolled his head back against Nick's warm shoulder. The gambler closed his eyes, brow twitching together a little bit - but calming. He let himself sit for a moment, brain slowly scanning through every little nuance of how their bodies laid against each other like he could desensitize himself to the entire thing.

There was a question on his mind - it'd been there a while. He felt like it wasn't so much that the moment was calm enough to bring it up to Ellis, but more that he'd never convince himself to ask it again if he didn't ask now.

He felt like he was burning slowly, calmly - but unerringly. Inhaling deeply, he exhaled deeper, and spoke in something a lot like a whisper. His mouth was only a few inches away from Ellis' ear. "Kiddo... I don't wanna -" He paused, then tried again. "You mind if I ask you something?"

The answer came even softer than his own voice, and he could feel Ellis' words trickle against his neck in the form of warm breath. "'Course I don't, Nick. Anythin'.'"

It made him chuckle. Just once, just subtly. More a puff of humored air. He chewed softly at his tongue, trying to work out the best way to word it. Ellis patiently waited, head turning faintly until one blue eye blinked up toward Nick's face.

"Weren't you raised Christian?"

Ellis smiled lightly, squeezing softly at Nick's shirtsleeve between his curled fingers. "Catholic..."
Discomfort tried to settle in when Ellis didn't catch on and he realized he'd have to explain himself - but something about the way the younger man's fingers worked subtly against his forearm and wrist through the blue fabric of his shirt... it was soothing.

Even their voices made it easier - Ellis' tone was unassuming, gentle, almost to the point Nick thought he could've just never spoken another word and Ellis wouldn't have questioned him.

"Eh... I'm just... trying to understand you." It took a slight breath to mold the words, but he forged on, trying to focus on something in the distance. "I'm your first ... guy, yeah?" He didn't really wait for an affirmation, already knowing that much. "Well... fuck, El. I'm not even religious and I flipped shit the first time."

Nick sort of wanted to correct him - but at the same time, he didn't. Ellis' version of 'flipping out' made him jealous. He'd practically shut himself in his house for good he'd been so disturbed by the revelation, and what he'd done.

The kid wasn't done, though. "Religion don't got nothin' tuh do with it... S'like muh mama says, you - well there's a story. Yuh mind..?"

The gambler let a loose chuckle spill out of him, surprised at the talkative Southerner asking permission to tell a story. That didn't happen often. He let his head tip down, mouth pressing tiredly into Ellis' muscled shoulder, and he nodded simply in acquiescence.

A sigh left Ellis, subtle and small, and he started with a dozing honesty. His voice was lilting and soft, and the gambler listened with a silent attention, eyes closing.

"We used to go tuh church every Sunday, since I was just a li'l guy. She wanted me growin' up right, y'know? I remember bein' so gosh-danged bored when I was a kid, haww... but I started likin' it as I grew up. Actually paid attention, heh. Man, she was so happy when I started gettin' involved... me too, y'know? .. oah, anyhow.. I was like thirteen at the time, 'n'this pastor came visitin' from somewhere else. I always liked when they brought in guys from other churches - makes yuh feel real connected with somethin' bigger."

Nick didn't say anything, but he did feel his face drawing into a vague frown, muffled into Ellis' shoulder. The words didn't parse, at first, but something in Ellis' tone did. The need for acceptance. The search for meaning - purpose. The drive to understand and feel understood.

He hadn't given a shit about these things in a long time.

"Well, I dunno if... they didn't really know whut it was he was gonna preach or - heck, maybe they did know. All I know is he got up there 'n' the first thing he started talkin' about was family values - y'know, the sanctity of marriage 'n' such... I mean, that was all good... but then outta nowhere, he started harpin' on how the only righteous couple was a man 'n' a woman, 'n' how society was goin' all the wrong ways, 'n' how we should be ashamed uv ourselves fer lettin' men be with men 'n' women be with women... I didn't even know whut I was hearin', but I just knew somethin' was wrong. Muh mama was white as a sheet. I still remember her face, sittin' next tuh me - she had muh hand in hers 'n' she was squeezin' it real tight..."

The kid trailed off softly. His tone was thoughtful, drifting as he clearly remembered the moment
so vibrantly. Nick let him sit for a moment, quietly, and then softly prompted him with a minute adjustment of his shoulder. That was enough, and Ellis re-adjusted his head on Nick's shoulder, suddenly smiling with closed eyes.

"She carried me outta there real fast. I was confused'n'scared… but she stopped just outside, got down'n'took muh hands.. still remember whut she said, almost word-fer-word.."

His voice even softened a bit, like a respectful mimicry. "'There's never an excuse tuh hate folk. It don't matter who they are or whut they're doin' - even if yuh don't feel the same way, everyone's got the God-given, human right tuh be who they are. You do too, peach.'"

The kid chuckled softly, voice full of a smile. Nick found himself with something near to one on his lips, hidden away. It was impossible to resist, especially when no one - not even Ellis - would see it, anyway. Ellis didn't seem to notice he'd included what must have been his mother's pet name for him - peach.

Nick felt almost awkward with the knowledge. It was too private. He didn't know where to stow away that piece of information… and neither could he figure out how to forget it.

"We didn't ever go back tuh church, neither - she said it took more than bein' a church tuh be a place'uh worship. Heh. ... I guess I never thought I'd end up bein' in this situation, but... y'know. I ain't scared or nothin'. I just know I like you, Nick. Can't be nothin' wrong with that."

Nick's arm slid down, joining his other arm in slipping around Ellis' torso. He tightened his grip, grasping his own elbow to frame the younger man between his biceps, and gazed suddenly off into the trees.

"... Ellis, you are one of the most naive people I've ever met."

Nick bit his tongue slightly, chewing against it. He should have been upset. Or uncomfortable. Or felt something. He should have laughed off the kid's words, at least, but all he really felt was tired. He felt paper-thin.

And somewhere, guilty. He wasn't sure why.

"You're a funny change for me, Ace."

Ellis smiled, glancing down toward his lap. "Me, too." His fingers tightened on Nick's sleeve, and he settled into a comfortable slouch, one of his hands slipping to rest on Nick's rifle and taking ownership of the gun. "Get some rest, Nick."

Obedient for once, Nick closed his eyes.

Part of him needed desperately to think about the next day, needed to obsess over the possibility of Rochelle (or - fortune willing - Coach even) waking up and seeing them, immediately pegging them for what they were.. needed, in particular, to ask himself 'what they were.'

The rest of him threw it all away to senselessly, thoughtlessly, carelessly hold onto the body in his arms. There were more questions than answers and he just didn't care.

He couldn't find the energy.
Chapter 57

The night was quiet. If there were any infected remaining in the area, they didn't find the survivors - maybe it was fortuitous that the fire hadn't lit. It would have drawn attention, inevitably, and the last thing they needed was a horde.

It was that quiet that lulled Ellis. The silence, and Nick's warm body molded against his back. The gambler gripped him like a lifeline, breath a subtle snore against Ellis' ear. The pleasant feeling it spawned in Ellis' chest only heightened as the night passed on uneventfully.

He hadn't meant to fall asleep.

Honestly.

It wasn't so much a conscious decision, as it was an event that took place without his knowledge. He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep; he only realized he was abruptly waking up - and it was definitely not night anymore.

The temperature had risen back up, and Ellis could tell instantly. He hadn't felt so warm in a long time, nuzzling his head closer to his adopted pillow - which was, by the stubble scratching pleasantly against his temple, the crook of Nick's neck. He didn't want to open his eyes, didn't want to ruin the perfect bubble around his mind.

He definitely didn't want to think about what could've happened if something had found them while he dozed.

Ellis had never slept with anyone before - Keith didn't count, because they'd always been in separate sleeping bags or one took the floor while the other took the bed. The knowledge that he and Nick had really slept together - nuzzled close, like Ellis had seen him with his pillow before - gave him this pleased high.

His fingers wound deeper in the thin fabric of Nick's shirtsleeves. He felt his heart flutter when Nick's arms, wound tightly around his upper body, pulled him closer in return. The deep rise and fall of the gambler's chest shifted Ellis with it, this peaceful rhythm that only made it harder to think about moving.

Settling his body back into the relaxed slump it'd been asleep, Ellis tried to convince himself not to drift off again. They couldn't just stay there all day - snuggled down and warm, safe in a deep corner of the forest. They had to get up.

As if in solid disagreement, one of Nick's hands sleepily found its way into Ellis' hair. Fingers wound in short brunette curls, tips brushing against a sensitive scalp and sending Ellis into a melted sigh. He could feel the edges of the gambler's rings, the cold press mingling with the soft warmth of agile digits.

"Nick.." he whimpered in soft affection, turning his body around. He barely managed the gesture with how tight Nick's arms were around him, but he successfully rolled himself to face Nick and bury his face against his neck.

He wanted to hear the conman's voice - and though he didn't necessarily want to wake him up, he felt a sense of curiousity wondering just what Nick would be like that morning.

Though Ellis had ended up distracted back then, he was pretty sure he understood what had
happened back in the swamp trailer. They must've gotten snuggled together in their sleep, and
Nick's vehemently angry reaction had spawned from that. That, and both other times Nick had
found a way to avoid sleeping with him.

He wasn't sure it was just the idea of getting caught, either. The gambler seemed to have some
deeper fear of it, some kind of resentment of the closeness, and - though the cold had had plenty to
do with it - Ellis was thrilled by the fact Nick had finally given in.

Ellis sighed in a pleasant exhale, muted into Nick's shoulder. Their conversation the previous night
was still fresh in his mind. He was happy Nick had asked him - even if the gambler seemed
adamantly against sharing things about his past and Ellis still had only fragments, Nick had
brought it up… even though the conversation had been visibly hard.

Ellis felt trusted. He really hoped he'd helped - his mom's wisdom had certainly always guided him.

Reluctantly lifting his head and feeling Nick's hand slip out of his hair, Ellis forced his eyes open.
It was light, maybe just after sunrise - Ellis didn't really want to crane his head too far to check. He
blended carefully past a blur of sleepiness, trying not to shift more than he had to. Seeing Nick's
sleeping face put a smile on his own, and he couldn't resist just looking him over for a quiet
moment.

It set his pulse to a strange rhythm, gaze flickering over those sharp features. Nick hadn't shaved in
a while, and his jawline was getting dark with stubble. He was… handsome, his expression smooth
and calm, even though his cheeks were a little drawn and his eyes tired and dark underneath. A
little breath caught warmly in Ellis' throat, forcing it out in a sigh.

He could feel it deep down with a tremulous kind of awareness - he really liked the other man. A
lot. He'd felt something close with his last girlfriend... just looking at her face had made his head
hum.

Looking at Nick made his whole body hum.

Settling his face just in front of Nick's, he snuck his head forward, just nuzzling the tip of his nose
against Nick's in the tiniest of brushes. He couldn't help the affection; he wanted - needed - to share
the feelings he was having.

His heart fluttered, hearing a little half-hum escape the gambler. Gently smiling, he playfully raised
his chin to close his teeth around the tip of Nick's nose, nipping a bit. A little 'haw' escaped him
when Nick's face wrinkled softly in sleepy distaste and he tried to nudge his head away, rolling
limply on his neck.

"Nnh." the conman mumbled vaguely, whole body shifting as he suddenly tried to roll over and
escape the Georgian's grip.

Ellis let out a chuckle before whispering apologetically, "Alright, alright - sorry… don't leave..." He
had to dig his knees into the ground a bit, tightening fingers on Nick's shirt, to keep him from
rolling off the tree. Ellis held onto him till he settled back down, a weary but faintly calm sigh
filtering through the gambler's nostrils.

Sympathetic and in light of the endearing restlessness Nick was showing, Ellis was just starting to
settle back down to hold him when a hand touched flat onto his back.

He blinked, freezing. He knew where both of Nick's were - and that was definitely not Nick. His
whole body shifted slowly, awkwardly, trying to move away from it at the same time he tried to
Craning his head lightly, Ellis felt a chill settle in as his gaze found Rochelle's just a foot behind him. His breath stopped in his lungs - and the feeling was something similar to being at the very bottom of a very deep ocean.

His chest cavity might have crumpled in on his heart right there.

"O-oh - It ain't -!"

Rochelle was crouching gently, one hand rested on her thigh while the other was settled on his back. She had this quirky look of sympathy, one edge of her mouth lifted up in a smile and chocolate eyes a little narrowed.

"It ain't whut it looks like!" He quickly panicked, wheedling out the words, trying to back-pedal off of Nick and roll himself sideways onto the ground. "I-it was real cold and - we just - he - i-it ain't like -"

"Whoa, whoa, shh, sweetie..." she shushed him, lifting up hands in a soothing motion to try and stop him before his panicking woke Nick. He was hesitant to stop, still half-atop Nick and awkwardly sprawled as he dropped his head shamefully.

"It's okay." Rochelle whispered gently, smiling at him. She offered him a hand, motioning for him to carefully move away. "C'mon, I just wanna talk to you, sweetheart. It's me, remember?"

Ellis dropped his gaze toward the ground, biting carefully at his lower lip. He didn't take her hand, just slowly crawled away from Nick and to the side. He stood up hesitantly and slid his hands into the pockets of his coveralls. His ears burned. His stomach rolled in his gut until it hurt.

Still smiling even though he hadn't taken her hand, Rochelle softly looped an arm through his. "Let's just get a little ways away so we don't wake the boys up, okay, honey?"

He nodded. It was all he could do.

Pulling him away, carefully, she rested her cheek on his shoulder with a sigh. He went awkwardly stiff next to her, silent, looking up to frown gently at the sleeping shape of Coach still draped over with Nick's jacket.

Nick was going to hate him.

The ache shifted from his chest, up his throat, and behind his eyes. He felt the rising pressure, and it was all he could do to suck in a small breath and keep the watery sensation at bay before it brought tears to his eyes.

They walked softly away from the clearing they'd made their 'camp' in, the silence of the forest overtaken by the rustle of leaves and branches against one another. The smell of gasoline and smoke was still tangible on the breeze, along with a heavy scent of burnt flesh and decay.

They didn't go too far, though - Ellis could still see the two sleeping men when Rochelle stopped him gently, sliding her hand down his arm until she grasped his fingers between her own. He wasn't sure what to do, so he just reciprocated the gesture, trying to avoid her gaze by focusing it toward Nick.

"... So -" Rochelle started, only to halt. She glanced up too, and they both watched in momentary silence as Nick started to fidget in his sleep, seeming aware he was alone.
His hands twitched on his torso, grabbing at his own dress shirt - and apparently disappointed by it, because he tiredly moved them to grab elsewhere, searching. When he found nothing, his arms slumped in a lonely, grasping cross over his chest, head lolling forward silently.

He didn't wake up.

"...so," she repeated, and when Ellis forced himself to look back, he was mortified to find her fighting a wide smile. It… hurt, *stung*, like she was laughing at him. "you and Nick are... a thing?"

Like the question opened a floodgate, Ellis just started rambling. Every time he reached the end of a sentence, he stammered and vaulted into a new one - he never really had an ending for them. He didn't know what to say that would make this go away. Didn't know how to fix this.

His face turned a vibrantly humiliated shade of red, fighting a half-step back, tearing his hand from hers and jamming both his hands back into his pockets. "I-It ain't whut you think, it's just it was cold 'n' he - there ain't nothin' goin' on, really, yuh just - See, we just needed tuh - I mean, we ain't a 'thing,' we just - I'm the one who - Awh man… Ro, it ain't -"

She clamped her free hand onto his cheek, giving him an exhausted look and laughing gently. "Sweetheart, I love you, but you've got to be the worst liar I've ever met."

Her laughter cut. Ellis immediately broke into a frustrated whimper, pulling his head from her hand and turning away from her. Rochelle faltered slightly as she watched him, smile fading into a frown.

"... honey, what's wrong? You're… more than embarrassed, aren't you?"

Ellis carefully buried his face in his hands, only barely stopping himself from rubbing over his bandaged cheek. He was humiliated and frustrated all at once - but not for himself. Nick's agitated sigh still rang in his ears, standing awkwardly in front of the trailer. Barely looking at him. The tortured uncertainty plastered all over his face - sunk deep into his tone.

Nick wanted to keep them a secret. Now Rochelle knew, and Nick would despise him, and he'd ruin any shot they had - any shot at… *something*.

The pressure behind his eyes peaked, and he couldn't stop it when his vision blurred.

"Man... It... Nick's gonna be so mad, Ro'." He knew his voice was shaky, but he couldn't stabilize it. "He didn't want nobody findin' out - I screwed it up! I didn't mean tuh fall asleep - s'just it really was cold 'n' it was so nice 'n' - Shit! 'M so dang stupid! He's gonna hate me…"

"Honey! Honey, it's okay!" She tried to reach out and catch hold of his elbow, but he wobbled away from her, breath hitching with a whimper. He blinked, hard, trying to get the tears to clear.

"No, it ain't!" he argued breathlessly, a frustrated shake of his head punctuating the words. "He's so unsure 'bout everythin'… 'n' he trusted me! How'm I gonna tell him? He'll never forgive me! I -"

Giving up trying to stop him, Rochelle just gave a sigh and spoke over him, crossing her arms carefully behind her back. "Who says he has to know?"

Ellis halted at that, lips pursing carefully. He risked a tremulous glance at her face, even as he knew it revealed the moisture trembling in his eyes, hesitantly lifting up his shoulders as he dared to hope he understood. "Y.. you mean you'd...?"
She smiled gently, soothingly, giving a relieved sigh to see him catching on. "If you don't want me to say anything, I won't say a word. To anyone. Cross my heart."

Rochelle didn't even have time to react before he suddenly swept her up in a tight hug, hands clutching a bit on the torn remnants of the back of her shirt, absolutely bolting to close the distance between them. A little squeak escaped her, quickly wrapping arms around his torso to balance herself when his squeeze took her a few inches off the ground.

"Oh muh gawd, thank you so much Ro'! Yuh got no idea how much that means tuh me! I thought yuh were gonna tell him 'n' Coach 'n' Nick was gonna be so upset 'n' he'd hate me 'n' I couldn't - I couldn't take that… Awh, man, I really thought I ruined it, Ro'!"

She quirked a brow, patting at his back in an attempt at comfort as the younger man buried into her shoulder and exhaled in almost frustrated relief. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't mean to panic you so much.. I'll be honest, I've had an idea about it for a while. I just... never saw a good way to bring it up."

"R-really?" he managed, surprised. He pulled back slightly, blinking at her as he gently released his arms enough to set her back down. When he blinked, a tear escaped and tumbled down his cheek. He swiped at it with his shoulder. "You.. knew? Like at the house night before last?... when we were talkin'?.."

"Yeah, kinda." Rochelle gave him a gentle smile, a little apology sneaking up over her expression. "I've had a little feeling about it since the trailer. Came out to check on you two and you were... well, pretty comfortable." Ellis started to redden, fidgeting a little. "Not quite as comfortable as last night but -"

He gave an interrupting, "Ro'.. c'mon…", flustered and giving a careful smile. Humiliation was quickly turning into a little giddy high. Coming down from the fear left him with the fact Ro' knew. He sort of wanted her to, or at least someone to. That and she seemed to approve... it made him happy.

"Hey, I'm just observing." She smiled at him, reaching up a hand to tickle a fingertip against the tip of his nose. "I kinda just thought it was a funny accident, but… you guys had been acting weird, and I thought maybe, but… I didn't know for sure until now."

Ellis nodded just a little, looking down. A kind of awkwardness snuck up over his face, and Rochelle noticed. She smiled, reaching up to brush the stray tear away with a thumb, lowering her voice even further in a teasing hush. "So... you've gotta tell me some stuff, honey. I'm dying to know. Is he sweet to you?"

Breaking into a blush, Ellis turned his chin away a little bit, ducking her finger. "A-awh, Ro', c'mon -"

Rochelle smiled affectionately, cocking a brow and then her head. "Please? Just a little? Give a girl something, huh? I just wanna know he's being good to you, sweetheart. So I can decide whether or not to whoop him."

He chewed carefully on his lower lip, averting his eyes in embarrassment. It was a good kind though - his heart fluttered lightly and he struggled to control his blush. He couldn't even get a response out before Rochelle was laughing.

It didn't hurt this time.
"Oh my god, you're red as a tomato." Her laughter faded a little, and her head quirked. Some thought flashed over her eyes, but it was gone as quick as it came. She flashed him a smile. "You really like him, don't you?"

Ellis just blushed deeper, trying to hide under a bill cap he didn't have. Hesitantly, his head turned, and he carefully looked back at the sleeping gambler. He didn't need to think about it to know what his response was. It just came out, easy as breathing.

"Y-yeah. I really do, Ro'."

"Oh sweetheart..." She leaned forward, catching him with a kiss to the cheek. He ducked his head subtly, grinning lightly. "I knew he was sweet somewhere in that cold heart. You can just tell, you know? He's got these moments - between the asshole ones... oh honey. I just want to know everything, but - I won't. Secret's between us, I promise."

Ellis chuckled bashfully, adjusting his weight a little bit and biting on his tongue. He was embarrassed to say it - but he did anyway, fumbling out the words. "W-well.. I don't mind .. y'know, talkin' about it.. a li'l..."

With no further prompting, she clamped hands onto his elbows, leaning forward and beginning the barrage. It just made him think of his mother, grilling him after a date. It made him smile. "What's he like? I mean, is he different with you? Gentle? He can't be a raging dick all the time, right? Has he told you anything secret? Have you guys - y'know... -"

"Ro', I said a little!" Ellis guffawed back helplessly. He definitely didn't want to encroach on that subject with her. He sighed quietly as Rochelle gave a little shake of her head, apologizing wordlessly, and then whispered gently to her.

"... He's real touchy about sayin' anything about.. y'know. Feelin's. He don't like talkin' about it, 'n' he don't like sayin' it none... but - sometimes he gets this... look. Or says somethin'... and it makes up fer everythin' else, y'know? Oah, Ro', is that girly?"

Rochelle's smile never faded throughout his admittance, and her hands slid up to grasp his shoulders instead, squeezing a little as she stated firmly: "Yes. But that's just how I like you." Ellis wasn't wholly sure if he should be bothered by that or not, but he couldn't help but smile stupidly as she pulled him into a tight hug, snuggling their foreheads together lightly.

He was usually bashful about being that affectionate with women. It wasn't really gentlemanly - but it was different with Ro'. She was like his sister. They'd all become like family, with life or death in the balance. He felt comfortable as he hugged her back tightly, beaming.

"I really like 'im, Ro'..." he whispered privately, indulging in the fluttering joy of the fact, and she giggled, pulling her head back.

Rochelle leaned up to plant a kiss on his forehead, making him blink, and smiled at him. She whispered back teasingly, "C'mon. Let's wake your sleeping beauty up before he gets too lonely."

She stepped around him, catching his hand to drag him with as she walked back toward Coach and Nick. He stuttered a bit, laughing with an embarrassed edge and squeezing at her fingers in protest. "Ro', quit..."

"Okay, okay." she relented in a gentle tone, quieting as they approached their 'camp' - such as it was. Rochelle gently laughed to herself as she broke off to walk over to Coach, bending down next to him, while Ellis bashfully crossed toward Nick.
He was a little relieved to see that she wasn't watching him when he shuffled down to kneel next to the conman. She was still smiling, admittedly, and he just knew she was still thinking about the whole thing... but her gaze stayed well away as she gently checked the bloodied bandages wrapping around Coach's head.

Clearing his throat a little, Ellis reached out a hand to grip softly on Nick's sleeve. He tugged lightly, trying to stir him as nicely as he could. "'Ey, Nick." he soothed carefully. "S'mornin'..

The gambler hummed vaguely, his body shifting slightly as the movement touched his consciousness. One of his hands lazily reached out and grasped onto Ellis' wrist, the motion as sleepy as it was quick, and Ellis gasped a little.

"Nick." he repeated a little more firmly, feeling his cheeks light up as the still-mostly-sleeping conman's fairly strong grip suddenly started to pull lightly, like Nick might yank the younger man down to lay with him.

Of course, it wasn't like he really had to hide from Rochelle anymore - but it was still instinct. And, anyway, they had to hold up the illusion. The last thing he wanted was Nick getting suspicious.

The tone must've hit something, because Nick's fingers loosened and he shifted slightly, lifting his head suddenly. Green eyes blinked awake, expression blank as he adapted to the abrupt consciousness.

Ellis' lips softened back into a smile, watching him wake up. He squeezed his fingers subtly in their grip on Nick's sleeve, then let go, putting his hands onto his knees. "Sorry, man. Time tuh get up."

Nick moodily lifted up his hands to rub over his face as consciousness gave way to a slightly pained expression, bending forward slightly. He gave a groan, then carded fingers roughly through his hair. "... tits." he hissed out, short and sweet.

"Whut?" the Georgian questioned with a worried bite to his lower lip, cocking his head. "It ain't yer leg, is it?" He'd made a concerted effort to keep from touching the other man's injured leg in the night.

"Hurts like a bitch... and I think I got a few knots from sleeping on this damn tree.." the gambler admitted in a testy grunt, lowering his hands to put his palms to the ground and push himself up. Ellis hopped up to offer his hands out to help - and he was pleasantly surprised when Nick grabbed hold of his forearms and accepted it without a word.

The kid gave a little frown, then chuckled. He crossed his arms behind his back, fingernails scratching gently at his forearms where Nick had grasped him. The gambler huffed audibly as he tentatively tested his weight on his injured leg. "Sorry, Nick. Guess I was comfier than you were."

Nick smirked faintly, squinting in pain as he forced his spine to roll back till it snapped in a few places. Giving a shaky exhale of pleasure as he straightened, he shrugged a shoulder. "Eh. I'm mostly.. really fuckin' hungry."

Ellis chuckled softly. They'd gone far too long without sustenance. Their energy would flag soon. "Me too." he agreed in sympathy. "Real thirsty, too."

The conman exhaled heavily, and glanced up. His gaze flicked onto Rochelle, staring a moment. Ellis could just see thought dart up over his expression, a slight tautness touching the edge of his mouth, and the Georgian's pulse darted up a few notches.

When Nick matched Ellis' gaze, arching up a brow just slightly, the mechanic flashed him his best
reassuring smile. There was a part of him that regretted lying to the gambler… or lying at all, really… but the rest of him figured it was a better alternative. Not just for him, either.

He wasn't sure if Rochelle's acceptance of them would comfort Nick like it had him.

He spoke in a faint whisper; "I woke up first.. s'Alright, Nick."

Nick was visibly relieved, expression calming and gaze re-adjusting forward. Ellis felt a little flutter of conflict in his chest, uncertainly holding fast onto his smile and curling his fingers up. Half of him was glad to spare Nick what was obviously so painful for him - and the other half felt a little tiny flicker of disappointment.

He wasn't really sure what part of the whole thing disappointed him - and he didn't really have a chance to examine it. Before it truly set in, Nick glanced back at him and lifted a hand to rifle ringed fingers lightly through the other man's dirtied curls.

The motion sent a full-body shiver of warmth right down Ellis' whole frame, blue eyes blinking widely open, and he meekly glanced up to meet entirely-too-sharp green ones.

"Thanks for last night, El."

Ellis gawped quietly after him as the conman walked cautiously forward to join Rochelle, a snarky "How's your pillow doing, Ro'? Nice and flabby like always?" (a half-insult she didn't rise to; merely rolled her eyes) already escaping him as he strolled over.

His cocky swagger was only faintly daunted by the way he had to swing his injured leg to avoid bending at the knee too much.

When the initial surprise faded, Ellis fell to a tiny smile. He hummed very faintly, crouching down to retrieve his hat from the ground and quickly shake it off. Slipping it back onto his head, he put hands into his coveralls' pockets in a slightly embarrassed gesture, walking to join the other two.

Those words were going to be ringing in his ears for a while.
It was that time, when everything came to a head and it was either wake Coach up, or …

They didn't want to consider what the 'or' was.

All Nick knew was that they needed to get moving, before hunger rendered them incapable of fighting their way back to civilization. He was already feeling weak, and he knew his leg needed cleaned and fresh bandages. The wound had scabbed over, so it wasn't bleeding actively, but the ache worried him.

The last thing he needed was an infection.

Rochelle and Ellis crouched down to either side of Nick, three gazes all focused solely on Coach's slumped frame. There was a level of anxiety in the air, and for the first few beats, not even Nick seemed ready to make any kind of jibe.

There was a very telling silence around them at first, like a held breath. The gambler had already retrieved his jacket from the big man, and he was still straightening out his lapels with a deep sigh.

Ellis was, predictably, the first to speak up. He somewhat hesitantly adjusted his cap, tipping the bill down over his face. "...Whut're we gonna do if he don't wake up?" His chin lifted up a bit, glancing from the two faces next to his.

Nick drew his mouth in a small flinch, sighing again. He snuck the smallest glance sideways at the kid, musingly, before shrugging his shoulders. Ellis was visibly fretting, expression stuck in hesitant concern, and when Nick reached for something reassuring what came out was: "Then we start really worrying."

Damn, you're good, Nicolas. he barbed self-critically.

The gambler jumped a little when both Ellis and Rochelle's hands suddenly latched onto either of his jacket sleeves. Giving a slightly annoyed look at either of them, he exhaled a frustrated sound and shrugged up his shoulders to shake them off.

"Jesus, you two.. Calm the shit down. I'm kidding. He's going to wake up, okay? …the fuck off me.."

The conman dropped lightly to his knees, lowering a bit further though it made his leg protest. He flexed his ringed fingers faintly in the air before leaning forward, setting hands onto Coach's shoulders. He felt his teeth grate lightly against each other. There was a choice between being nervous and being angry; he chose the latter. He usually did. Come on you stupid, useless fatass... come on, don't do this to us.

Tightening his fingers in the ex-football player's shirt-sleeves, Nick carefully shook him - just enough to disturb how he was sitting. The man's head shifted lightly with the motion, rolling a bit. "Coach. It's been long enough, ya lazy fucker."

A soft grunt escaped the slumped man, the sound faintly aware, and the conman felt his brows lift. An excited exhale left Rochelle by his shoulder, and Ellis outright jumped.

"Oh thank gawd.." the youngest practically wheezed, scrambling forward a bit to grasp onto the injured man's wrist with both his hands. He seemed far more confident now that there'd been a sign
of Coach's surfacing consciousness, giddiness creeping into the edges of his voice. "Ey Coach, man!"

It took Coach a moment to stir, shaking his head with a slow groan of almost pain. Nick let himself relax back, retracting his hands and wiping them slightly on his jacket with a look of disdain. He rearranged his features into something uncaring, preparing to disengage and let the others have their reunion.

Then, the ex-football player launched his whole body straight off the tree.

For all his weight, Coach careened with the agility of a cat up half onto his knees, twisting slightly as he rammed his strong shoulder straight into Nick's chest. The motion was coupled with a confused shout that turned strangled at the last second.

Nick went down startled, slamming flat on his back onto the grass with a choked "FUCK-?" as he threw up his hands to defend himself, seeming to expect Coach to continue coming at him.

The big man didn't, though, just catching himself on a knee to hover there, disoriented and trying to get a hold on his surroundings. His flat nostrils were flared out as he panted, gaze flickering with a sort of energy not usually in his features.

More than that - confusion.

Rochelle scrambled forward to get her hands out in a soothing motion in front of him. "Hey, hey, Coach! Calm down, it's us!" Her expression was drawn up in a concerned look, thick and unglossed lips pursed with concern.

"That's what I get, is it?! Are you fucking kidding me?!!" Nick couldn't contain it, anger breaking forth all over his stubbled face with a sharp scowl. The only comfort he took was that the blow had flung him straight backwards, and he'd managed to kick up his injured leg and keep it from taking the fall.

"I hate all of you assholes. Jesus."

Coach's generally strong expression seemed so confused, like their words didn't make sense. "Nh-What? What the hell .." He made to pull back slightly, dark eyes latching onto Nick's angered expression as the conman started to pick himself up off the ground.

"Yuh took a nasty hit, man. Been down fer the whole night." Ellis explained sympathetically, looking slightly worried as his gaze flickered over the football coach's expression and then down at Nick to check the gambler hadn't been injured. "You feelin' okay?"

"Y-yeah." the big man hesitantly confirmed, slowly leaning himself back until his shoulders hit the treetrunk behind him. His expression was genuinely disturbed, slowly lifting his hands to touch his head. "Sorry, Nick."

He quickly winced, obviously pained, letting his head gently roll forward with a grunt. Rochelle relaxed just a little bit, scooting closer to settle hands onto one of his arms comfortingly. "You're okay, baby. We're all here."

Coach slowly reciprocated the gesture, his hand settling over Rochelle's with a heavy pat and squeeze. "Yeah, babygirl.. I.. damn, my head ain't feelin' right."

Growling faintly under his breath, Nick forced himself off the ground to stand up. Ellis offered out a hand to help him up, and the gambler's first instinct was to brush him off, his pride too injured to
accept it.

But, after a beat, Nick begrudgingly clasped forearms with Ellis to drag himself up with a slight limp on his bad leg. *It isn't gonna kill me to be a little nicer to the kid. At least when he isn't actively being an idiot.*

Ellis flashed him a bright smile underneath the bill of his cap as he steadied, pushing his hands into his pockets as they released each other's grip. Nick resisted a small head-shake, exhaling as he glanced back at Coach. He felt a smirk burning at his jaw but effortlessly killed it.

The ex-football player lifted his head slightly, seeming a little more composed after taking a few deep breaths, but his next words brought a weird and unsure silence from the other three. "Where the.. shit, y'all. Did we crash that car.?

His gaze traveled between their faces, reading the discomfort and faintly taken aback by the trailing silence. He rubbed his palm flat against his stubbled cheek, wearily. "...what're y'all starin' fo'?

Nick slowly brushed dirt off his back with a slightly twisted arm, brows flattening and mouth vaguely quirked downward, more like he was irritated than concerned. There was something oddly genuine in the way he suddenly forewent using 'Coach.' "You don't remember, Sam? The Tank?"

Slowly, the big man shook his head, the motion tender. "Shit's kinda .. fuzzy. Last I remember, we…" He trailed off, eyes lowering to examine his hand, flexing his fingers.

Ellis helpfully rubbed a palm against the side of his head, inputting his gentled explanation. "Tank showed up, man, just when we were gettin' in the car. Threw a big chunk'uh road at us, man! Nearly crushed us all. It hit you right on the noggin."

Rochelle nodded raptly, reaching up her hands to gently touch Coach's head bandages, expression focused as she tried to decide if they needed to redress them. He winced as she did, just a faint grimace. "If Nick hadn't've been watching... Jesus, we'd all have.." She fell to a small frown, seeming struck by her own words.

Nick snorted slightly, tone rising back up in a flare of mock annoyance. "Oh, shocker.. that asshole was helpful? I can't believe it."

The woman flashed a demure smile sideways at him, shaking her head with a sigh. She seemed more humored than anything else, and Nick's eyes narrowed into something like a faint smirk. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

Coach suddenly rubbed his fingers down the bridge of his nose, seeming pained, and Ellis bent in slightly with a concerned lift to his brows. He spoke with earnest apology, waving a dirtied hand up at Rochelle and Nick to hush them.

"You okay, man? We overwhelmin' yuh? Keith cracked his head once on this rock while he was tryin' tuh bungee-jump at home, 'n' I kept tryin' tuh ask him all them questions whut yer supposed tuh ask someone with a concussion, 'n'-"

"Son, you're the only thing that's gonna overwhelm me…" Coach chuckled faintly, but quietly, frowning downward as he carefully pushed himself away from the tree slightly. He didn't look steady. Ellis smiled a little, bashfully raising a hand to scratch at the back of his neck.

"Yeah, well." Nick grunted slightly, muting his expression and crossing his arms over his chest. His fingertips flicked idly at a few tears in his jacket, darkly stubbled jaw setting forward. He didn't like Coach's behaviour. "As much celebrating as I'd just *love* to do, we're sort of on a time crunch
Rochelle frowned a little, setting her hands on her thighs and glancing up at the gambler. "At this point? We haven't been before now?"

Nick threw his hands up slightly, shrugging carelessly with a sigh. His voice grew impatient, and harsher. "No, we've been on vacation before now. I'm just saying. We've been sitting around all night, I'm done doing shit-all."

She leaned back in her crouch, getting a little riled in Coach's defense. Drawing her brows together a bit, she cocked her head. "Nick, sweetheart, if Coach needs to take it slow then that's what we're going to do... how would you like it if -"

"Babygirl." Coach interrupted wearily, reaching out to grasp onto her arm. She allowed herself to be calmed, meeting his gaze with a warm look of concern. "It's a'ight. I'm feelin' okay. I don't wanna hold us up. Boy's right sometimes."

Rochelle paused an instant, glancing his expression over before nodding. "I'm just worried. You scared us pretty badly." she admitted lowly.

He chuckled slightly, letting go of her arm and instead focusing on getting himself up on his feet. Ellis was the one who skittered forward to help him stand up, scooting under one of his arms to take on a fair amount of weight.

The big man didn't seem to mind, succumbing easily to the offered help. As he got up straight, he brushed his pants off slightly with a hand, sighing. "Smackin' heads ain't no new thing. Got a few concussions back when I still played football."

"We knew you'd be alright." Ellis cheerily noted, drawing a small chuckle from the big man. Coach adjusted his hand to reach up and set it on the back of Ellis' capped head, patting it in a gruff gesture. In the same motion, he pulled his weight away from the mechanic, seeming hazy-eyed but sturdy as he got his own footing.

He hated to be the paranoid one, but his gaze stuck on Coach suspiciously. He didn't know what he anticipated, but he knew something was wrong. The relief he felt at Coach's return to them was... muted. He just felt irritated instead.

"Just glad I'm not the one who has to drag Ellis and Ro' away, kicking and screaming without you."

Nick gave a slight sigh, the sound annoyed, and he maintained an edge of it in his voice as he turned away. He carefully gathered their guns up one by one, encircling an arm around them to hold them close.

"Oh, yeah, sure. You two and your death-grip on my sleeves a few minutes ago really just screamed confidence." He sensed the heavy glare he got from Rochelle - and, pretty sure he was pushing it a little that morning, uttered, "Not to change the topic or anything.. but Coach's fantastic wake-up call reminded me. We never really talked about that zombie last night."

Well aware he was definitely changing the subject, Nick held a deadpanned expression while somewhat gingerly straightening up with all four weapons now held in his arms. Coach shot him a small gruff look that conveyed a surprising amount of apology.

"Zombie?" the big man questioned warily, and though the question itself made sense, his tone
was edged like he didn't understand why he might've missed it. Nick couldn't quite help but keep an idle eye on him.

Ellis blinked slightly, cocking his head curiously as he stretched out a hand to gesture for his shotgun. Although he was obviously just asking for it to be passed over, Nick stepped toward him, his mouth lightly taut as he slid the shotgun's strap over the hick's arm one-handed.

"Here, sport."

Nick saw a slight flicker of surprise over the mechanic's face, but Ellis recovered quickly, shrugging into the strap with the gambler's help and flashing him a grateful expression as he spoke. "We got caught by a real crazy zombie last night is all, Coach.. was kind'uh weird, wasn't it? Yuh know anythin' 'bout those, Ro'? Sure had a real nasty arm on it."

"I don't know, sort of.." she somewhat hesitantly affirmed, stepping forward to pull her rifle out from under Nick's arm without waiting for him to pass it to her. "I'd never seen one face to face, but I guess it makes sense. Called Chargers. For obvious reasons - CEDA wasn't really very creative…Another thing we have to worry about, I guess. Ellis got you out of the way pretty fast, though, yeah?"

She was teasing him. He narrowed his eyes, disapprovingly, and shot back in a caustic tone: "Well if Ellis' reflexes are good enough, then the rest of us should have no problem."

As Ellis snorted a good-natured laugh despite him, Nick lifted Coach's shotgun in the air with a firmly raised brow. "Think you can handle a gun?" He expected the big man to stubbornly swipe it from his hands, and sure enough, that was precisely what he did.

"I'm just fine.." the ex-football player gruffed, smacking his shotgun strongly to his shoulder. Deepset eyes flickered away, and he gingerly reached up a hand to touch onto the back of his head. He was still lacking that towering sturdiness Nick was so used to seeing, in his gaze and his posture. "Y'all plannin' on tellin' me what this mess is about a zombie?"

"Man, it was wild!" Ellis chirruped, enthused with the statement as he stretched his arms above his head, squirming a little as his spine cracked. "I ain't seen somethin' run that fast since - well there was this one time, muh buddy Keith'n'I went tuh his uncle's ranch, 'n'he had this bull. Keith said he knew how tuh ride bulls - but I should'uh known he was full'uh shit when he jumped the fence, screamin' shit in Spanish 'n'-"

Coach sighed, raising a hand to hush him. His expression had fallen to a slightly discomfited, stern look. Either the big man just couldn't quite handle Ellis yet, or there was something else. "... Son, is this goin' somewhere?"

Laughing gently as the kid turned a faint color of pink and uttered a 'sorry,' Rochelle lifted up an arm to point a small distance away from them. "It's dead… We kinda shoved it in some bushes so we could sleep without .. well, thinking about it, I guess. You can go take a look if you want."

Coach nodded wearily, trudging toward the shrubs she was gesturing at. Nick idly kept an eye on him sideways, watching his footsteps to be sure the eldest wasn't unsteady. He seemed a little too unsettled, all things considered - it wasn't like strange zombies were a particularly new phenomenon.

The conman crossed his arms carefully as he adjusted his rifle against his shoulder. He inhaled tightly and suggested, "We should probably stick to the trees for a while until we know for sure
that Tank isn't hanging around. It didn't get very far chasing us into the woods and I'd re-eally like
to keep that handicap on our side of the table."

Ellis nodded, leaning his weight forward in a small rock on his heels. Blue eyes flicked up to scan
the forest underneath his cap, lifting a hand to scratch gently around the still-purpled cut on his
cheek. "Yuh don't think it died in the fire?"

"Maybe." Nick shrugged his shoulders, cuffing a knuckle against the tip of his nose in a dismissive
gesture. He felt a little sting somewhere as he was reminded of the Molotov he didn't have
anymore... He missed it more than he should have, a little more than made sense. "I do know I'm
not looking to test that theory. The muscle-bound fuck certainly wasn't afraid of it."

"None of them were." Rochelle's brow scrunched slightly, and the woman gave a sigh as she
somewhat uncomfortably reached over her shoulder to pull her torn shirt a little more into place. It
didn't work much, a significant swathe of her bruise-dotted back bared to the air.

"Did you see how they just ran straight through it..? God, seeing them chasing after us like that, all
on fire - stuff of nightmares. Doesn't help to think they were.. you know."

Nick snorted slightly - he could tell where her trailing words were leading, and he couldn't help but
shake his head. 'They were people once.' He wanted to argue the point, but it just wasn't worth it.
As Ellis laid a hand on her shoulder, the gambler scoffed instead.

"Well, aren't you grateful. I'll leave the Molotov at home next time, I guess."

She flashed him a slight frown, but it was humored, a slight laugh escaping her in retrospect. Her
hand patted gently onto Ellis', squeezing with a tight affection. "Suit. You know that's not what I -"

When Coach suddenly stumbled backwards, his heavy weight unsteadily moving away from the
bush in an almost swerving motion, they all snapped to silence. Nick's gaze narrowed faintly,
almost suspicious on the big man's frame as he backed away from the patch of shrubbery they'd
half-rolled the Charger into.

It was like he'd seen a snake. His whole body was tense, trying to hurry backwards in the same
instant he moved with the half-frozen trepidation of an acrophobic working his way away from a
ledge. Only thing was - though Nick's brisk gaze immediately scanned for it - there was no danger
in sight.

"...Coach? Coach, whut's wrong, man?" Ellis hesitantly prompted, adjusting his cap to lift the bill
slightly so he could get a better look. He didn't seem wholly sure how to react, torn between
stepping forward and staying put.

Rochelle outright stood up, protectively flashing to a frown and advancing a few steps. Her head
craned a little, looking for what had upset him - but like Nick she came up with nothing.
"Sweetheart?"

The word had barely left her before Coach swung entirely around and suddenly gripped his hands
into fists. The one holding his shotgun twitched slightly, fingertips curling into metal. "Let's go."
he gruffed, simply and flatly, with an edge of struggling frustration.

The ex-football player practically stormed forward. Had Ellis not dodged away, he might very well
have shoved straight past the kid with one of those still-strong shoulders and knocked him down.

Nick stared at his back as the man passed and continued forward, the gambler's expression calmly
annoyed while Rochelle and Ellis fell to quiet gaping. "What the fuck, Coach?" he snapped after
"We're done here," was the firm response, snapped back without so much as a turn of Coach's head. The football coach didn't stop, either - and when Nick fell to the realization that he would leave them behind if they didn't move, he growled in loud agitation.

Green eyes flicked away from his back, and Nick was somewhat disturbed by the realization that Ellis and Rochelle were both looking at him for answers, blue and brown eyes drowned with concern and uncertainty. More than Coach's behaviour had, the conman felt shoved off his guard by the focus.

Rochelle shifted her weight slightly, a little shiver overtaking her despite herself. She tried to straighten her spine, look steadier, but her voice betrayed her insecurity. "Is something wrong with him..?"

He didn't like being looked to. He didn't give wanted comfort, he gave unwanted cynicism. The dual worry he had lazered onto him made him tense, maybe moreso because underneath his reflexive recoiling, a bit of him wanted to find words to soothe it.

Nick just didn't have them.

"Fuck do I know?" he quickly muttered instead, snapping a hand quickly to gesture that they get moving to follow after Coach. Backing away from them, the conman darted to recover their backpack from up against one of the treetrunks, shoving an arm through the thing's dirtied strap.

As he got it settled on his shoulder, gripping his rifle with both hands, he turned to make his way after them.. only to promptly balk, finding neither Rochelle nor Ellis had moved an inch.

Somewhere, his ever-ticking brain kept tabs on Coach as he got further away. Purple and yellow, cross-crossed with black stitching, marked his passage as he almost blithely forged further on through the trees.

Ellis reached up hesitantly, making as if to scratch at his jaw. "H-he's actin' weird.." the youngest survivor worked out slowly. Nick balked a little more as his gaze ticked over the Georgian's fretting expression.

Worry left such dark wells in airy blue eyes. Depths of vulnerable emotion - naive and stupid, and somehow ... captivating. Innocent, like he couldn't bear the difficulty and complexity of the moment and how it had so quickly and effortlessly collapsed from what should have been simple joy at Coach's waking up.

Nick felt the plea in those eyes, the begging hope for an explanation that made it make sense.

...You're a fucking genius at bluffing. Bullshit it, you assclown.

Drawing in a tight breath, the gambler molded his expression into a blank look of dismissal. He shrugged the backpack tighter onto his shoulder and his rifle stock tighter in his grip, sweeping forward with a large step to push himself between the two.

One arm landed over Rochelle's shoulders, the other over Ellis', and with a swift motion he spun them around and guided them to start walking. They quickly adapted to his limped, yet quick pace, making to catch up at least a little with Coach. Nick beat his voice out of the stressed sarcasm that he felt rising up his throat.

"You two'll figure him out. You're fucking annoying like that. For right now, let's just try and let
him get his head straightened out on his own. Okay, Girl Scouts?"

Maybe not *all* of the stressed sarcasm.

Rochelle immediately smiled, shoving her shoulder slightly into his with a shake of her head. It didn't fade right off the bat, even when she glanced up to focus her gaze on Coach's back.

Ellis guffawed gently. Just softly, faintly... but Nick noticed the younger man's body lean subtly into his, side molding against the gambler's, upper arm pressed into his ribs intimately. That said a lot more than his laughter did.

Nick shoved the both of them away before they could get too comfortable, Ellis a little harder than Rochelle. They both had to stumble to catch their balance, and he put his arms to his sides and picked up his pace to put a little distance between them. "Right now, I'm just interested in getting our dumbshit selves somewhere safe."

Green eyes edged with a level of focus as they bored into Coach's back, following the ex-football player as he walked on ahead. The distance between them was minute now, just enough to give the big man some space.

Had it been the Charger? Or something else? Even hoping his injury was as simple as a concussion, they came with amnesia, disorientation, confusion... that just on top of a laundry list of other symptoms, ones Coach would likely not admit willingly. He was stubborn.. in his own way.

The conflagration and car alarm had swarmed the area with infected. Only as the fire-damaged, slightly ruined section of the forest let them see a little clearer, did Coach make any motion to re-join them... still in silence, but there all the same.

Nick didn't see the Tank, but it was clear enough they weren't going to slip by easily or unscathed.

*Yep. This is just a fuckin' vacation.*
Smoke rose in pillars from the ruined bit of forest that had been so damaged by Nick's Molotov. Even though it had burned itself into ash, the air was still clogged with the lingering smell of something acrid.

Zombies wandered the area, snarling and growling so loudly at each other Nick could feel his skin prickling slightly. They were obviously agitated, drawn there by the commotion of the night previous and, it seemed, worked into a froth by the fact they hadn't actually found the survivors.

At a vague glance, the conman would've guessed somewhere between thirty or forty of them had gathered around the area. Unlike the usual scene where most of the zombies had fallen to sitting or laying down, almost exhausted, these were all wandering with enraged restlessness.

Fights broke out between them like manic dogs, and it was all too easy to repress any kind of lingering melancholy about their long-gone humanity.

The Tank had, in fact, died in the conflagration - its body was a burnt mass slumped lifelessly into the ground. Judging from the blood spilled all around it and the strange slashes of pink amidst the blackened scorch marks, the frenzied infected had taken their rage out on it.

"Tits." Nick muttered in a quiet tone, craning his head slightly to see just how far they'd wandered down the highway. He could still see the curve of the road where the Tank had appeared from to begin with, and there were only a few zombies that had broken off from the group. "I think if we just back up a little we can walk along the road and avoid them."

Ellis nodded in the corner of his vision, rubbing his jaw carefully with the heel of his hand. He sighed a little, perturbed, but his mood was still greatly improved compared to earlier. "Shit, they're riled. Looks like when muh buddy Keith tried tuh fill up a wasp's nest with -"

"This look like the goddamn time fo' that shit?" Coach hadn't snapped at Ellis like that, maybe ever. There was an honest edge of anger in his voice, standing just off to the side with his shotgun tightly held in his clutches.

Ellis withered slightly, blinking toward the eldest with a small expression of hurt. Generally the interruptions didn't bother him too much, but he quivered a little underneath Coach's glare. "J-Jeez, Coach, I'm sorry..

Nick had honestly intended to stay out of it - give him space and let Rochelle and Ellis deal with it. That, however, struck a deep nerve that wasn't going to go quietly. The conman whipped around on his good heel, facing the ex-football player.

Coach straightened slightly, aggressively narrowing his gaze and tightening his jaw, but Nick didn't so much as flinch. "If you have a fucking problem, you take it out on someone who deserves it. Get me?"

The big man jerked his chin up slightly, gruff voice straining against the low tone he forced it into to keep from alerting the infected near them. "I ain't takin' no shit out on nobody. You think yo' ass's got the right to preach that shit anyway?"

Rochelle lifted her hands up, brows moving into a slightly frustrated pinch as she tried to calm them down. "Will both of you quit? We're kind of not in the spot to be arguing right n-"
Coach's interruption sent a shock right across her face, his angry tone having the same effect as if he'd slapped her instead. "I can see that!" She went stock-still, hands curling into fists. Injury spilled into the crinkle of her brow and the slight slump of her shoulders.

Nick was just on the verge of an honest growl, reaching more than the end of his rope. It was much easier to let himself get protective when it came out in the form of anger, and he was more than willing to confront the man no matter what that meant - a good right cross to the jaw being high on that list - as the eldest had now lashed out at all three of them in a row.

Unfortunately, he didn't get the chance. Coach's voice had raised to a loud bass, frustration overwhelming sense, and the noise brought a sudden shriek just ahead of them.

"Mother Mary!" Ellis blurted, taking a half-step back in surprise. One zombie closest to them had noticed the man's outburst, and with its strangled cry of awareness, a disturbance raised up over the whole area.

Tearing away from their fights mid-swing and jerking to spin themselves around as they halted mid-step, the horde suddenly flocked toward the sound, frenzy heightening when they actually saw the survivors through the trees.

Adrenaline spiked in Nick's veins, anger flooding down his spine. He now had a couple reasons to punch the football coach. As he swore softly under his breath, quickly setting his rifle up against his shoulder and folding his head down to look through the scope, he only barely convinced himself to push them down into his gut for later.

"Aim high, Ro'," he ordered emotionlessly, pulling the trigger when flesh flashed through the glassy eye of his rifle. Blood sprayed up to announce his hit, but there was no time to even see the zombie go down before the frothing horde refilled the gap.

The rifle reloaded smoothly, just a sharp yank on a bar only an inch or two above the trigger, and a shell went flying off to the side, a fresh one pushed into the barrel as he released.

She didn't hesitate to set up just a few inches from his elbow. He was dully pleased to see a shot ring out next to his, another zombie going down under Rochelle's gun with a sharp hit to the chest.

Ellis scurried forward to get closer to shotgun range from the oncoming horde, a couple yards ahead of Nick and Rochelle but not crossing their line of fire. He braced himself against the burnt remnants of a tree trunk, hoisting his shotgun up as he blasted off the heavy gun into the horde.

They overcame the survivors in a frenzied sprint, stumbling over the falling bodies of their downed kin, unbalked. Half scrambled for Ellis and half for Nick and Rochelle, splitting up around a larger tree and undaunted by the guns pointed at them.

Nick could see Ellis was forced to hurry backwards from the horde, frantically jamming his hand into his pocket to go after the ammo stashed there. His gun hadn't nearly been loaded enough. "A-aah- shitshit!" The knowledge distracted the gambler, shooting blindly forward - he could hear his shots hitting flesh, but he knew he wasn't paying attention.

The conman was instants from shouting out his name when Coach charged forward to defend him, suddenly racing into the fray where he'd hesitated a moment before. The ex-football player shot straight into the front of the massing infected with a howling shotgun blast, blowing them back just enough to buy Ellis time to reload.

Relaxing to see the kid supported, Nick returned his erstwhile divided attention to the zombies
charging his and Rochelle's slightly removed position. Not quite, it turned out, quick enough - because the moment his vision flicked forward, a blood-splattered infected leapt straight at him.

He just barely thrust out his arms in time to strike it in the gut with the nose of his rifle and, as it lashed mottled nails out to try and gouge straight into his eye sockets, he fired. Its whole body jumped, stomach ruptured by the shot, but even when its lower body went limp with the shattering of its spine, it still tried to claw at his face.

"Jesus ass Christ, these fuckin' things -"

Nick shoved it off, disgusted, angrily dodging back a step to let it die, helplessly clawing at the air where it landed. It was hard to hear even his own voice over the gunfire and screeching of infected, this rising anthem of violence, and Nick simply kept close to Rochelle while they picked infected off in unison.

She was, he noticed, a natural with the weapon - the strong recoil almost seemed to strengthen her determination to control it, a fierce focus attaching onto her tense expression. Drowning, he could only imagine, aching frustration that they were fighting at all.

Green eyes noticed blood trickling down her jaw and neck suddenly when she turned her head to aim a shot farther to the right - he hadn't seen her get hit, but claws had scored nasty lines across her cheek.

Nick focused on shooting as fast as he could manage, picking up an even rhythm of firing and reloading. He would've far preferred a machine gun for the situation - but he had to deal with what he had, and the rifle did tear considerable holes in the infected onslaught.

Bodies piled up in front of them with a gruesome ruthlessness, the smoky air only further polluted by coppery blood and a nauseating scent of decomposition worsened by each infected that went down in wet struggles.

The gambler was just starting to relax, firing a bullet straight into the open mouth of one of the last zombies and nearly separating its head from its shoulders, when his eyes picked out the sudden flash of Ellis' grimy yellow T-shirt. The kid stumbled back under the sudden charge of a desperate zombie, the large male infected getting the upper hand on him.

He thrust up an arm to shove it away so he could get a little space, but made the mistake of aiming high. The sudden outthrust of the arm toward its face only encouraged the zombie to switch targets, going from an outright tackle into a lunge to bite down on the offered limb.

Teeth sunk straight into the soft flesh of his forearm, jaw locking down - and Nick's whole spine shuddered with a needled sensation, driving him to a gritted jaw when Ellis cried out in utter pain.

"AH-HAH-HHOOWWWW!"

Ellis tried to struggle, reflex making him jerk his arm, but all that did was worsen the bite. Nick furiously twisted around to take aim straight at the zombie's head, but... there were too many chances to miss, too much likelihood Ellis might flail himself into the conman's sights. He could still feel the way his crowbar had sunk into the marshy ground, a hair's breadth from driving into Ellis' back.

His hesitation gave Coach a chance to react. The big man whipped around at the mechanic's cry, and he rushed forward to get his shotgun jammed right against the infected's side, blasting a hole straight through its ribcage.
The thing jerked violently and went immediately limp, but its jaw was still locked tightly shut around Ellis' forearm. The Georgian quickly crumpled slightly down, falling half to a knee, and Coach followed with him. His deep voice was audible even over the dying gurgles and screeches still echoing from the infected clinging to life from their positions on the scorched ground.

"Whoa, whoa, Ellis.." he gruffed carefully, big fingers getting a hold on the infected's head and starting to pry the thing's jaw apart as gingerly as he could. Ellis' expression spasmed painfully, breath hitching as he tried to stay still. Fresh, ruby-red blood trickled down the zombie's chin. He'd broken skin.

Nick watched with a critical eye, trying to get a hold on his anger as his shoulders tensed. He wasted no time stalking toward them, Rochelle close at his heels, and he had to resist the urge to shove Coach away and take care of Ellis himself.

It was a very deep-seated reaction - strong and grating. It unnerved the conman slightly. He was already slightly frustrated with himself for his balking at shooting to begin with.

"G-ghn... A-aaow.. shit.. hurts.." Ellis whimpered, turning his head away as the zombie's teeth pulled free from his forearm. The moment he got free, he pulled his arm in like a wounded dog, clasping a hand over the fast-bleeding bite. Coach shoved the still body to the side, wiping his hands on his pants and staring slightly at the injury.

"We got any mo' bandages?" the ex-football player asked almost hesitantly, lifting his head to look up toward Nick and Rochelle with an exhaustedly sunken look to his face. The conman was already pulling the backpack off his shoulder, shoving it into Rochelle's arms.

Nick's arms crossed slowly over his chest as she took it, rifle held by the warm barrel in one hand, and his voice absolutely cut with venom. There was no sympathy for that exhaustion. "You're fucking lucky we didn't waste all of them on your fucking useless head."

Coach gritted his jaw faintly, broad shoulders tensing. One hand slipped up almost reflexively, wide palm touching the bandages still wrapped around the crown of his cracked head. "... Yo' ass pickin' a fight wit' me for gettin' hurt now? It ain't like I did that shit on purpose."

The conman responded with all the speed and snap of a stretched rubber band released just before the breaking point. "You sure fuck up a lot on accident."

Rochelle fell to a slightly uncomfortable silence, slipping down to crouch next to Ellis and gently get an arm around him. His shoulders hitched, pain swarming his posture as he tried to tighten his fingers to stop the bleeding on his own wound. Her fingers soothingly joined his, flinching at the hot blood but not pulling away.

"Hey, sweetheart.. you're okay, it's just a little thing. You're our big tough Georgia boy, right..?" She smiled gently as he whimpered but nodded furiously, hiding his face slightly under the bill of his cap. Her free hand pulled the backpack open, finding gauze as quickly as she could.

Coach slowly pushed himself up to his feet, hostility curling his hands into fists. He stood a far amount taller and wider than Nick, but the conman wasn't intimidated in the slightest - he didn't even try to puff himself up, in fact, confident in the absolute knife-sharp edge of his gaze.

"An' yo' ass is just perfect, huh? Look, I got worked up - I ain't -" He let out a heavy exhale, tightening his fists a little further. "My head ain't feelin' right an' I wasn't thinking. A'ight? You wanna keep fightin' or drop it an' move on to gettin' Ellis some help?"
Nick kept his gaze furiously locked onto the big man's deepset one, not wavering in the slightest. He was done dancing around, spitting fire with a serious edge to it. "Your getting worked up could've killed us. You want to drop the self-righteous bullshit routine and take a look?" One arm escaped, and he pointed sharply at the two sitting almost between them.

It was difficult not to dwell hardest on Ellis' injury. It wasn't just that it was the most serious, either. Every little whimper that escaped the kid, every little pained huff as Rochelle wrapped his wound tightly, only fueled more anger in Nick's voice. He didn't even have to look.

"Ellis got bit. Rochelle got clawed. I nearly got my eyes taken out. Looks like you took a hit to the shoulder." Coach only seemed to notice it when Nick pointed it out - the collar of his shirt was ripped at the clavicle, blood leeching faintly into the purple fabric from a clawmark just at the slope of his neck.

A sudden shriek from the road jolted Nick attention for just a beat, snapping his rifle up and taking quick aim on the infected who'd bolted from who-knew-where. A quick shot to the face sent it sprawling to the asphalt, blood gushing, and Nick glared after it for a beat before whipping his attention to Coach like nothing had happened at all.

"The girls were fucking crying over you - you know that? And what do you do? Wake up and get us all fucking injured because poor Coach is feeling off. It's really fucking hard to be any kind of happy to have you alive when you're screwing us over. What'd you do, wake up on the wrong side of the tree trunk? Got a headache? Poor Sammy have a nightmare? Well buck the fuck up and start acting like the Coach I could actually respect a little. Right now I'm a fucking inch away from tying you to a tree and leaving you for dead."

It hit. Hard, judging from Coach's expression and how harshly he suddenly looked down at the grass. His eyes roved slightly in a small line, unwilling to raise back up and meet Nick's even as they burned into his skull fiercely.

Slowly, seeming genuinely disconcerted and twitching toward remorse, Coach gruffed lowly, ".When'd yo' ass suddenly get in charge?"

"When yours decided to stand down." Nick retorted harshly. Coach outright fell silent, stiffening slightly into an uneasy slump. Something snapped in the football coach, something big and important - but when his shoulders hitched back up, it was with a faint resignation that seemed to announce that Nick had gotten through.

Tension dissipated from his posture, gaze re-focusing on the here and now. That seemed the best point to leave it. Anger vented but not gone, the conman turned toward Rochelle and Ellis, gaze locking instantly on the Georgian's face.

Rochelle risked a glance up, expression nearly as pained as Ellis' as she softly tightened the last layer of bandages onto his forearm. ".He's in pain. We really need to get it cleaned, too. He'll get sick if we leave it like this."

Ellis tried to protest even as he lowered his chin a little more to hide further under his cap, lower lip twitching slightly. ",M-'m okay, I jus'-" Rochelle flashed him a hushing look, and he hesitantly shut up.

Nick sighed, carding fingers tightly through his hair - just to do something with his hands other than strangle Coach or check the Ellis' injuries on his own. Stress built up in his chest, worsened with the very helpless sensation of not being able to do either of the two things he wanted to.
"... Goddamnit." the conman let out, turning suddenly on his heel and focusing his gaze somewhere else. His fingers flexed quietly, wishing with every ounce of his soul he had a smoke.

Wrapping both her arms around Ellis now, even when he turned his head a little away from her, Rochelle glanced up at Coach's slumped frame. Her gaze softened slightly, a sigh escaping her, and in Nick's silence she risked breaking into the conversation.

"Coach.. you've gotta talk to us, sweetheart. Something happened this morning and we can't help you if you don't tell us." She hesitated a moment, seeing his eyes close and a heavy inhale widen his chest. "I know you're the big man and you want to be a rock - but it just can't work like that all the time. We all need each other."

There was a soft beat of silence, Ellis lifting his head slightly. Blue eyes were rapt on Coach's downturned face, fuzzed with pain as the fingers of his injured arm seemed to twitch autonomously. "We ain't mad, Coach. ... well, Nick's only steamed 'cause he's worried."

The conman stayed turned away, giving little more argument than a small head shake at the statement. He just quietly reached into the pocket of his jacket and worked out a cigarette, settling it uselessly between his lips. It soothed him, despite the fact he couldn't light it.

Coach let out a small chuckle, Ellis' assurance striking a slight humor into his expression. The big man crossed his arms slowly over his chest, curling his fingers into fists and trying, visibly, not to frown as he started talking.

"Naw. Y'all should be mad. I got us hurt.. I wasn't thinkin' straight." The ex-football player sighed heavily, uncrossing his arms to reach down his hands and offer both of them help up. "I'm sorry I yelled. Gotta understand, I... didn't mean to cause us shit."

Ellis smiled gently, instantly softening at the eldest's apology. He wiped his hand on his coveralls before reaching out to take the offered help, carefully folding his injured arm against his chest as Coach hauled him up to his feet one-handed. "It's alright, Coach. We've all done a few dumb things. You just got all riled. Shi-iit, you remember when I set off that car alarm back in town?"

Rochelle giggled faintly, reaching up to gently take Coach's hand and pull up to her feet. She set a hand against her bleeding cheek, flinching just a little at the sting but smiling through it. "Yeah, with Nick's head. I think he was a little angrier that time, though."

A chuckle escaped Coach, heavy and tense but drifting toward honest humor. He shook his head slowly, crossing his arms loosely behind his back as if to keep his hands, smudged with Ellis' blood, out of his sight. "Guess I got lucky, seein' as he didn't smack me like he did you."

Nick half-turned, lips taut around his cigarette. He watched with a focused bewilderment, gradually furrowing his brows. Was Ellis really turning things around that instantaneously?

"I'd agree, man." Ellis grinned, rubbing a hand over his bandaged forearm softly. He dropped his gaze to examine it, some blood leeching up through the white in a dark crescent. "He was kinda lookin' like he might whack you a good one."

All three of them laughed gently that time, and Nick couldn't help but turn around entirely. He let his hands shove out palm-up, speaking with an edge of disbelief around his unlit cigarette.

"Wow. Seriously?" His brows arched up, annoyance rising when he got their attention quickly. "That quick, you guys are all buddy-buddy again? Am I the only one still pissed about this?"

Coach slowly sideglanced at Rochelle. The woman nodded at him, smiling reassuringly, and he
exhaled heavily. Taking careful steps forward, Coach advanced toward Nick, stopping a little bit early when the conman started to stiffen.

"Nick... gotta say, I'm findin' you easier to respect. You really stepped up. I needed a check."

The conman tightened his jaw a little but lowered his arms after a moment, some of the confrontation leaving his posture. He clearly didn't appreciate the compliment in its essence, but he let it go without too much of a fight. "Yeah, whatever. I'm not gonna let these two fall apart just because you take a nap."

"'Preciate that. An' you not smackin' me like Ellis said. Got enough of a head wound already." The big man chuckled lightly, though Nick's heavy deadpan didn't allow for any reciprocation. Coach quickly quieted, falling to a deep sigh. "A'ight, a'ight. What you want from me, Nick?"

Letting out a sharp breath of agitation, Nick re-crossed his arms darkly and lifted up his shoulders. "Jesus, you have to ask? Some kind of explanation instead of just 'oh well, I made a booboo, let's go dance in a field of flowers together'? We sacrificed a good bit for your little tantrum and I'd fucking like an answer."

"I'm going to fucking hold you to that, you asshole." Nick snorted simply, gaze narrowing slightly. For all the cursing and that tagged-on insult, Coach chuckled, wiping his hand on his slacks before offering out a shake to the gambler. "Wouldn't 'xpect nothin' less from yo' ass."

After a small stare and inhale, Nick accepted the gesture with a tight grip, tension spreading up his jaw as he sighed. His grasp was vicelike, casually trying to crush bones, and Coach just took it amicably. "Fine. But I reserve the right to kick your ass if it's a bullshit explanation."

"A'ight." The big man agreed with a gruff of humor, turning around slightly as he released the shake. "Now can we get goin'? I dunno 'bout you folks, but I am two inches from starvin'."

Ellis brightened into a smile, swiping his hat off with his good arm to smack it gently against his thigh. "Oh thank the Lord, someone's talkin' sense! I ain't been this hungry since ..." His chin turned up softly, thoughtful, and Rochelle quickly set a hand on the back of his neck to stop him and let out a laugh.

"Sweetheart, I can see your head coming up with a story. Let's get focused on moving, okay?"

He blushed slightly, nodding, and tried hard not to look too bashful as he straightened up. "Uh... yeah, 'course."
Rochelle pushed her arms into the straps of their backpack, getting her rifle set up in her arms. Smiling gently at him, she glanced up at Nick and nodded. "You wanna take lead, suit? I'm gonna stick close to Ellis. I don't think he can -"

"'Ey, 'ey!" the youngest quickly complained, interrupting her with a minute jut of his jaw. "I ain't broke or nothin'. I can still fight. Don't be babyin' me like that.."

"Sorry, sweetheart, sorry..."

Nick sighed tightly, annoyance darting into his expression as he waved quickly to hush them both. The conman turned away, hitching up his rifle carefully, to step his way through the forest and aim for the road.

"Least we don't gotta worry 'bout that Tank." Coach idly affirmed from behind as their footsteps betrayed the other three quickly falling into rank behind the gambler.

Some part of Nick itched a little at being forced into the vanguard. He'd fully expected Coach to re-assume leadership over their group, but it didn't appear to be happening as quickly as he'd prefer. Plus, taking the lead stole away any chance to surreptitiously check if Ellis was okay.

_I swear to fucking God if Coach got him seriously hurt, I'd -_

He had to stop himself, feeling his teeth quickly threaten to bite straight through his cigarette. Instead, he forced himself to take his irritation out on a corpse he passed by, taking a swing with his good leg to kick it in the head.

A slightly unsettled wave of self-awareness trickled down his spine, faintly unpleasant, particularly when he felt multiple eyes on him from behind.

_- ... Well. At least my temper's intact, right?_
Chapter 60

Normally, a spate of silence would've been a godsend in the conman's eyes. Particularly with Ellis in the mix, a lull in conversation was almost golden. He should've taken the chance to delve into his own head and glory in some isolation.

Unfortunately, that time, all it did was bring very piercing attention to the slow gnawing of his stomach on its own lining. Nicotine had always killed his appetite, so now forced to go without that leveling factor, he was suffering particularly badly.

There was something humbling about listening to his own stomach grumble and roll, complaining childishlly about its emptiness. Each step risked another growl from the depths of his abdomen, and try as he might to hold an arm crossed over his gut or tense up his body against them, they wouldn't be stifled.

The four trudged along the edge of the highway in loose single file, Rochelle picking up the rear and Nick leading with Ellis and Coach between them. The road was fairly clear of zombies, but not completely. Nick kept his rifle near his hands just in case, pausing imperceptibly to pick them off far ahead before they even noticed the survivors.

Nick felt a constant tug at his mind, this agitating awareness of the other three's proximity. He was just waiting for one of them to pipe up and tease him. They were all hungry, but he swore his stomach was punishing him for something by being so incredibly loud.

So he spoke first, tone tight with annoyance. No sense in even giving them the chance to prompt the subject. "So, ladies - who was it who suggested we not worry about packing food? Something like 'oh, we'll find more on the way'?"

Rochelle laughed faintly from the back, the tail end of the sound falling into a sigh. "Mostly you, sweetheart."

She was completely accurate, of course, but that didn't stop Nick from scrunching his brows and shooting a dubious glance over his shoulder. "That doesn't sound like me at all. I'm smart."

The woman's head shook a little with her eye-roll, shouldering her rifle to free her hands and adjust the thick-braided ponytail messily arranged at the crown of her head.

A chuckle came from Coach in interruption, the big man somewhat heavily trailing in Nick's footsteps. "Let's be fair... ain't nobody's fault. We should'a been at Tybee already. Just have to suck it in 'til we find us some eats." For all his seriousness, there was a distinctly mourning edge to the eldest's voice.

Nick spared a glance and smirked, seeing the subdued consternation written all over Coach's travel-weary, dirt-streaked features. "Maybe we should've holed up at that burger place and called it a day, eh?" the gambler scoffed back a bit mockingly, though not quite picking a fight.

Much to his chagrin, the statement instantly backfired when his stomach gave a noise that could've intimidated a lion. Nick just felt his pride slip right out from under him.

_Gah, Jesus shit, I'm hungry._

Coach returned the now fading smirk with an edge of self-satisfaction, widening a little when Nick shot a scathingly blank look at him and faced forward with a bit of a limp. Coach tossed his
shotgun up under his arm and released a heavy sigh that - while still amused - did admit some level of resignation.

"Don't even remind me, boy. Those might'a been this man's last burgers."

"Oah, Coach!" Ellis' voice was thankfully free of the pained note it had been starting to hold. His arm must've stopped hurting him quite so much, though when Nick glanced back, the gambler could still see him nursing it against his ribs. "Don' lose hope, man. Bet'cha we'll find some grills or some such down at the shore!"

Nick smirked faintly, the kid's seriousness adding a layer of humor, like Coach was a dying man hoping for an organ donor - not a meal. "Plenty of meat going around for it, too. Anyone up for a zombie burger?"

He couldn't help but laugh at the wave of disgust he immediately felt washing up the whole of the group - except, as he might've guessed, Ellis. Before any of them said another word, Ellis cheerfully interjected:

"I ever tell you guys 'bout the time muh buddy Keith tried bein' a cannibal? He -"

"What the hell, Ellis?!" Rochelle blurted slightly, disbelieving. She quite nearly stopped walking entirely, a horrified note flashing over her face at the few words he got out.

The Georgian seemed curiously surprised at her reaction, turning his head to blink at her with a bemused look that only worsened her horror. "Huh?" He seemed to understand after a beat, suddenly flashing an 'oh' look and waving up a hand. "Well that's just what he told people!"

The kid laughed, shaking his head fondly. "Turns out he didn't know cannibals ate people, he only thought they ate raw meat. That ain't even half right, 'cause cannibals cook people before eatin' 'em, right? Well, anyway, he was like, eatin' all this raw meat fer like - a week... Man, he got 'bout five kinds'uh salmonella 'cause - hell if I know where he done got it from - it wasn't cleaned right or nothin'. The doctor had tuh -"

Nick had never felt quite as desperate to interrupt Ellis as he did just then, landing a hand on his forehead with an exasperated scowl. "Jesus, Overalls, I didn't want my appetite ruined that badly!"

It was a little funny, the urgency with which Rochelle nodded her agreement and Coach grunted his.

Laughing as he stepped off the highway and kicked his workboots through overgrowing grasses on the side of the road, Ellis scratched at his neck bashfully. "Whoops. Sorry y'all..."

Rochelle sighed a little, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers. She overrode the kid smoothly, tone attaining a kind of worry. "In all seriousness, guys, what are we gonna do? I don't know what we're expecting down at Tybee."

Coach shrugged his shoulders, rubbing his wrist against his forehead. "We'll be a'ight once we get there. Big beach, lotta condos an' hotels. Went down there wit' my girls a couple times. Real nice area, whatever you wanna think 'bout Savannah, Nick."

The conman snorted with a distinct deadpan, flipping him off over his shoulder nonchalantly. "Are you kidding? I just love this place. Fucking zombies, shitty-ass cars, disgusting swamps filled with fucking zombies that we have to go through because of the shitty-ass cars.."

Coach gave him a dryly unimpressed look in the midst of his rant.
"I am so - goddamn - excited - to explore the zombie-infested gravel of our wonderful Savannah shoreline. We can even set up a nice burial at sea while we wait for CEDA to not come."

"Can it, Nick." Coach gruffly ordered, exhaling deeply. There was a definite edge of irritation to the statement, but it was contained within a steadily controlled calm. Nick smirked. "Some of us are still hopeful, a'ight?"

*Looks like I can't get a rise out of him that easy. Good.*

The gambler scoffed anyway, shaking his head slightly. A breeze fluttered through the air and sent gentle waves over the roadside grasses, cooling the warm late-morning heat. "Yeah, yeah. Someone needs to be, I guess. You ask me, -"

"Did we?" Rochelle questioned a little tiredly, laughing afterward with tangible disheartenment. She clearly wasn't up to handling Nick just then, and though he snorted with affront, he didn't outright fight back.

Ellis flopped his head back with a blithe smile, adjusting his cap on his forehead to wipe a little sweat from his brow. "Everyone just simmer down, we'll get somethin' tuh eat soon 'nough! No sense gettin' all ruffled! Why don't we play a game or somethin' while we walk?"

Coach snorted, shaking his head slightly and shouldering his shotgun so he could glance back at the other man a little disbelievingly. "Boy, don't you ever quit?"

"Awh c'mon!" The mechanic laughed outright, ducking his chin a bit as he gently touched at his own injured arm, dirty digits fingering along the bloody stain on his forearm. "Whut else're we gonna do? We can - ooh, we can play twenty questions! Awh man, I used tuh play that with muh mama all the time!"

"Before or after she did your nails?" Nick mocked in a mutter that Ellis didn't catch, too busy bouncing in obvious excitement. The conman focused on dragging out his pack of cigarettes and just patting it from hand to hand, gaze latched onto the road smoothly unfolding in front of them.

Ellis cheerfully pushed his good hand into the pocket of his coveralls, resting the elbow of his injured arm on the swell of the tied-up fabric. "I'll start, I'll start!" he chirped, tipping up his chin for a quiet moment, face scrunching up with thought.

Coach and Rochelle shared a faint glance past him, the big man giving a silent chuckle and shrugging up his shoulders. She grinned back, relaxing a little with a sigh and lifting a brow at Ellis from behind.

It took him a moment, those wheels turning in his head almost visibly. He was oblivious to the wordless dialogue traded around him, and there was a bit of a silence trailing as he focused.

"'Kay!" Ellis announced suddenly, no enthusiasm lost, a wide grin flashing over his face as his head whipped faintly back and forth to look up and down the small line they had going. "Got it!"

Rochelle sighed with a smile, tipping her head. "Alright, sweetheart, I'll go first. Is it an animal?"

The youngest survivor nodded adamantly, grinning like a loon underneath the bill of his cap. "Sure is."

In a gesture that drew a faintly surprised snort from Nick at the front, Coach readily played into it, a chuckle at the edge of his voice. "It got wings?" Nick glanced back with a slight grunt, flashing the big man a sour look.
"Goddamn kids, all of you.." he muttered under his breath. Coach outright laughed at him, the sound a gruff boom that he seemed to belatedly regret when a flicker of pain crept over his face, placing a hand on the back of his still-bandaged head.

Ellis was mostly oblivious, tipping a curious glance between the two men before giving a hop mid-step onto and off of the highway asphalt with a light hum. "Nope, don't got any wings."

Rochelle lightly stroked her chin between her index and thumb fingers, tipping her head. "Huh, okay.. does it have scales?"

"Nope."

Coach and her shared a significant glance around him, making the hick guffaw with a happy lilt, contentedly plodding forward. The ex-football player inhaled a breath and questioned, "It bigger than you?"

The game was broken for just a moment when Nick spotted a few zombies ahead, carefully taking them out with the scoped rifle.

Ellis gave a gentle whistle of appreciation when the gambler snagged headshots on each one, the infected violently snapping back with the force of the shots before scrabbling down to the ground, dying. Nick threw a look over his shoulder with a thoroughly wolfish smirk darkening the densely stubbled terrain of his face, not responding but seeming pleased by the recognition.

The Georgian felt a slight flush dart onto the bridge of his nose as his eyes drank in that expression for just an instant, clearing his throat quickly and lifting a blue gaze to the faintly grey-stained sky. Smoke seemed permanently stitched into the clouds, moody and tired.

"Sure is, Coach."

Rochelle 'hmm'ed a bit in thought, lengthening her strides slightly to pull up and walk next to Ellis. He jumped slightly in surprise, catching a hand onto his cap like it might fall off, and she gave him a nose-crinkled smile sideways. "Is it something we eat?"

"N-naw." he quickly negated. "No way."

His blush darkened slightly, suddenly reminding himself Rochelle knew about him and Nick. Their subtle interactions probably weren't so subtle anymore. Ellis found his relief at her acceptance gingerly questioned by a sense of regret, and he second-guessed just how much he'd wanted someone else to know.

He didn't want to have a secret he was keeping from Nick.

"It a wild animal?" Coach's prompt shook Ellis back into focus. He averted his gaze, finding a bundle of flowers growing on the roadside far ahead of them and focusing his eyes on the smudge of color.

"Uh.. it can be."

Coach chuckled ahead, rolling his shoulders slightly and pausing subtly when they popped. "Son, that ain't no answer..."

Ellis immediately defended himself with a grin, shaking his head. The humor brightened his tone up. "Nuh-uh, I can say 'maybe'! I gotta, 'cause we might have a different idea or somethin'uv if it's yes or no." Rochelle nodded next to him matter-of-factly to confirm the idea.
Coach snorted, slipping a calm grin over his shoulder before relenting. "It usually a wild animal?" he questioned deliberately.

Ellis laughed instantly, guffawing gently with a duck of his head. "Naw, ain't usually. 'M countin' that as another question, hope yuh know!" The big man shook his head with a chuckle, seeming entertained by the mock-threat.

"Okay, okay.. " Rochelle hummed, crossing her arms over her chest and slipping her hands under her arms to reach back and feel at the tears stretching across her shirt at the shoulderblades. "Does it live in a house?"

"Oah.." the kid uttered, hesitating an instant. He flexed the fingers of one hand, musing, his teeth worrying at his lower lip carefully. "Hmm."

"Another maybe?" the woman teased playfully, brows raising up. They went higher when Ellis gave her a slightly apologetic nod, breathing out a laugh and shaking his head. He tucked both his hands into the pockets of his coveralls, chin jutting out slightly. "It don't live in people houses."

Coach lifted up a hand quickly, gesturing with a slight snap to catch the hick's attention. The big man was fairly enthusiastic about it, glancing back. "You thinkin' of a dog, son?"

Ellis laughed quickly, wagging his head in a shake. "Naw, naw... I said it's bigger than me, remember? Ain't a dog."

Rochelle cocked her head to the side in interest, lifting her chin with a slight frown. Coach wasn't disappointed so much as curious, focus scrunching up his brow. "Huh." she hummed curiously. "People do own it, though, right? As a pet?"

"Yep."

Ellis was grinning, thoroughly pleased with himself as they grew stumped. He tipped his head to an unheard song, cheerfully bouncing from step to step with a slightly cheeky confidence.

There was a moment of thoughtful silence, walking on as the road started to curve rather sharply. Rubbing his jaw, Coach seemed just on the verge of another question when Nick's voice suddenly broke the silence, tone sharp. He hadn't spoken a word for who knew how long. "Store!"

Ellis blinked, tipping his head to one side in utter confusion. His initial reaction was pleasant surprise at the concept of Nick breaking into the game, but then the actual word registered in his head and he couldn't help but guffaw.

"Nick, that ain't even an animal, whut're you -"

He saw it before he could continue: just ahead, breaching the treeline like a slow-moving ship as the roadway curved, was the red-brick shape of a convenience store built into a small clearing on the side of the road. A green and red-striped sign hung above the door on the eave of its black-shuttered roof, baring a slightly worn '7-ELEVEN' just above the glass door.

"Praise the Lord!" Coach boomed in almost exhausted excitement, breaking straight into a run up the road and blowing past Nick like the wind. If his bum knee bothered him, he definitely didn't show it.

"I have to agree with that." Rochelle gasped, smiling hugely as she darted after Coach, hunger
squeezing any ounce of propriety out of them in favor of pure, driven urgency.

Ellis bounced up to Nick's side quickly, nudging his shoulder with his own. He flashed a smile sideways when the conman glanced at him with a slight brow arch. The kid couldn't help but remember the conman's injured leg, and his tone was encouraging when he uttered, "C'mon, Nick, let's go get some food. 'M hungry's shit here."

Nick snorted, reaching up a hand to cuff the Georgian's capped head slightly. He pushed into a quick jog, muffling his limp as best he could as he chased the other two down the road, a grinning Ellis close at his elbow.

The tiny, gravel parking lot in front of the convenience store was completely empty, deep ruts the only sign cars had ever been there at all. The four crossed the highway to reach that side, slowing just slightly as they approached.

From far away, it had seemed all but pristine - maybe a little bit of desperation tinting their view of the thing, like a mirage in the desert. The closer they got, though, the more a quiet disarray became noticeable.

One of the windows was broken, glass shattered around the ground and the concrete sidewalk just in front of the doorway. A single bloody handprint streaked down the glass door, straight out of every horror movie Ellis could remember seeing.

"Don't see no zombies." Coach warily noted, double-barrel shotgun back tight in his hands and jaw set. There was a very tight determination in his posture, just hunting for something to shoot - the man was hungry and infected would not get in his way.

They clustered tighter together as sense overrode urgency, cautiously approaching the door. Even though Coach took lead, brandishing his shotgun, Ellis found himself protectively slipping in front of Nick, almost unaware of the motion. He pulled his shotgun off his shoulder, starting to settle into a grip on it that didn't hurt his injured arm too much.

He tried not to think about how much it was going to hurt to shoot, with the recoil and the sensitivity of the bite in mind.

The conman shot him a sudden 'the fuck are you doing' look and grabbed his sleeve lightly as green eyes followed his movement. Forcefully, Ellis found himself dragged back a few steps, and before he knew it Nick was in front of him.

All he could do was blush, frowning slightly with a tiny edge of consternation. Ellis wasn't sure how much of it was just sense, with Ellis injured, and how much of it was the gambler being protective -

A tiny flutter in his chest said he hoped it was the latter.

"A'ight, y'all," Coach sighed, glancing behind himself to make sure everyone was close as he stopped just in front of the glass door. The lights were off inside, eerie glints off steel shelves only barely showing through the darkness. "We ain't passin' this up, but watch yo' asses, a'ight..? Last thing we need is more injuries. Don't got no clue what's in here."

Rochelle and Ellis nodded raptly, but Nick sniped quietly, tone tense. "Oh, more zombies, don't even bother wondering... there's probably another fucking Tank packed in there somewhere and we're all going to die."

The big man only spared him a glance before turning forward, sighing deeply and turning his
shoulder to open the door with his elbow carefully. As it opened the first few inches, a loud 'clang-alang' sent them all jumping out of their skins.

"Jesus tits!" Nick swore sharply, grabbing at his rifle with a scowl. There was a bell attached to the top of the door, dangling down and swinging almost mockingly toward them. Rochelle laughed a little nervously, reaching back to pat the conman's arm lightly.

Ellis hunched a little, leaning around Nick's bicep and lightly worrying his lower lip between his teeth. When Coach, sighing, pushed the door all the way open and carefully leaned in to squint around, he stuck a hand back. "Can't see shit. Don't we got a flashlight somewhere?"

Rochelle gave a quick 'ah,' hurrying to pull the backpack off her shoulders and bury a hand into one of the longer side pockets. She carefully pried the black plastic flashlight out, the only one they still had with them, somewhat nervously patting it into a hand and flicking the 'on' button.

When the lamp just barely-visibly lit up under the midday light, she breathed a sigh of relief and passed it to Coach. He gripped it, shining it into the store and carefully scanning around.

There was blood splattered here and there, and the place was clearly looted by someone before them. A few of the shelves were empty, but there was still more than enough to give them some hope. Coach's flashlight shined over a Slurpee machine near the counter, completely busted open by a gunshot, strange shades of orange and purple spilled all down the machine in dried rivulets.

"No zombies." Coach gruffed. "Would'a noticed that bell, anyway. Looks like we're clear." He stepped in, leaning to the side. There must've been a light switch, because he reached out and with a faint 'click,' fluorescent lights flashed on all down the length of the store. The big man straightened up, holding the door behind himself for the other three.

That urgency resurfaced as it became a matter of piling in. They were all hungry, and junk convenience store food or not, there was still food in the 7-Eleven.

Nick wasn't surprised when they scattered, Coach and Ellis almost immediately going for the candy section along one of the walls as Rochelle just wandered down an aisle, biting at her upper lip. The gambler smirked slightly, glancing along the shelves in the hopes of something plain. He spotted bags of chips lining one of the shelves on the opposite sides, and he walked toward them, sighing faintly.

"Guess we've all got to lower standards on a lot of fronts." he thought slightly morosely, reaching up a hand to stroke his jaw with a flat hand. He was getting dangerously close to passing from 'rugged' to outright 'unkempt,' stubble dense and getting softer.

"Oh mah gawd," Ellis practically squealed from the other side of the store, drawing Nick's attention for just a beat. He couldn't quite see them where they were hunched behind a shelf, but he could only imagine the abuse the sweets aisle was going through. Plastic crinkled madly as they must've been pawing through the limited stocks. "I ain't been this hungry since - I ain't ever been this hungry!"

"Gonna make yo'self sick, son." Coach gruffly chuckled, amused but chastising in the same tone. Considering Nick could see the crown of his bald, dark-skinned head sticking up out of the same aisle, he scoffed a bit at the ex-football player's statement.

Nick shook his head slightly, unsurprised. "I don't wanna hear you guys fucking complain when you're ill." was all he said, annoyance forced, too pleased to really be irked as he stopped in front of the shelf and plucked off a bag of plain chips.
"No way, Nick! Hoh mah gawd, I'm in heaven."

Nick tore into his bag hungrily, turning his body toward the wall as he grabbed a handful and carefully shoved them into his mouth. It was immediate, punishing bliss, the vaguely salted shapes crunching under the pressure of his teeth and roughly scraping at a dehydrated mouth. The taste struck him harder than a shot of liquor, a slight moan escaping him as he forced himself to swallow.

His throat was almost too dry to even manage the motion, and his hunger just barely overrode the discomfort as he realized how much he needed some water. Turning away, he walked toward the fridges near the back. If the lights worked, they probably still did, and cold water seemed almost orgasmic just then.

"Man..." Rochelle faintly murmured somewhere over his shoulder. "It's so weird. I shop in this store all the time... it's so strange looting it."

Nick couldn't help but choke down another handful of chips, wincing a little as he did. He kept turned away, not particularly wanting his desperation to be seen by the other three. He just kept quiet, leaving the sentiment oddly hanging in the air as he downed stolen chips.

He felt grease and salt tacky on his fingertips, but he just couldn't care, holding that hand away from himself with a slightly squeamish posture as he stepped up to the refrigerators and opened one up.

Sure enough, a flutter of cold air confirmed that the fridges were operating, and he quickly snatched up a bottle of water before announcing the fact over his shoulder. "We have cold drinks in here, if you guys can tear yourselves away from the chocolate for five seconds."

The gambler tucked his chips underneath his arm, cracking open the bottled water and lifting it to chug steadily. One eye shut slightly, and he must've downed half the bottle before he forced himself to stop, pressing his wrist to his mouth.

"Whoa, breathe, suit..." Rochelle's voice suddenly teased behind him, making him stiffen up. He quickly tried to compose himself, moodily glancing back at her as he swallowed. She stood there with a bag of beef jerky in one hand, a ribbon of meat held between her fingers and jaw moving faintly as she chewed a mouthful she'd already taken.

"I'm thirsty, shut up." the conman muttered defensively, retreating a few steps. She smiled at him in slight apology, focusing on getting a bottle of soda from the fridge.

"It's okay. I'm happy, we deserve to unwind a little... you see Ellis and Coach..?"

Nick stood there for a moment, wanting to bury himself back in his bag of chips but hesitating. He swiveled his head slightly, glancing toward the two across the store, but he couldn't see more than the shifting of their shadows or hear more than a low hum as they whispered back and forth.

"I assume they're acting like five year olds." he scoffed quietly, swigging a mouthful of water instead.

She laughed softly, cracking open her bottle and taking a drink before it had even stopped fizzing. Her nose crinkled a little, the foam catching her in a slight cough. "Maybe, but is that really so bad? Let'em, Nick. We all need it."

Nick grunted a slight breath at her, one of faint resignation. His gaze traveled slightly, looking back toward the two men across the store. If he tipped his head, he got just enough of a view between
two slightly disturbed shelves to see Ellis' face.

The kid was grinning - hugely, carelessly, biting into a bag of Rolos one-handed as he nursed his injured arm against his chest. 'A kid in a candy store' didn't describe it, as accurate as that was.

A dull, thudded heartbeat suddenly rang loudly in Nick's ears, making him shake his head and look away. Irritation knotted his brow slightly, feeling a warmth up his spine he wanted to say he didn't understand.

Denial worked as well as anything else, but some tiny part of him entered a silent wrestle with the concept that he felt.. *something.*

Nothing defineable, and nothing good.

"Yeah, whatever.." he said with a small roll of his eyes, distracting himself more than anything else. "It's not like I could stop them if I tried, and fuck if I'm telling Coach to back away from the chocolate. He warned me already."

Rochelle laughed gently at him, re-opening the fridge and pulling out two sodas - one of them diet. She tucked them in her arms, juggling things slightly, and flashed Nick a smile as she turned away. "Have a little chip on your face."

Blinking instantly, Nick scowled and lifted his hand up quickly to wipe the crumb away from the edge of his mouth. He grumbled a faintly playful "Yeeahh, fuck you.." as she just walked away, crossing the aisles gingerly to walk the drinks over to Coach and Ellis.

A small smirk caught him off-guard, shoving his bottled water into the pocket of his jacket and digging for a handful of chips again. Leaning against the cold fridge door, content to stay where he was, Nick hungrily munched through his mouthful and - he swore - couldn't recall ever enjoying cheap chips as much as he did just then.
Lined up on the concrete sidewalk in front of the 7-Eleven, the survivors relaxed with their choice foods piled in their laps. The noon sun was pleasant down on them, warming and soothing overworked bodies.

Nick let his gaze trace lazily along the treeline across the road, exhaling deeply as he took a sip of water. It was... strangely nice, sitting there. Ellis was cross-legged at his left, Coach at his right, and Rochelle was pacing out a calm line in front of them.

The motion was usually a neurotic one, but Rochelle was relaxed, halfway through her bag of jerky and sipping on her bottle of soda. She just couldn't quite sit still.

"Man, this makes me think'uh Keith." Ellis chuckled softly, reaching into Nick's bag of chips and pulling out a couple. Nick glared faintly as his eyes followed the motion in its entirety, but allowed it. Ellis tossed them into his mouth with a limp wrist, chewing with a smile.

They'd taken advantage of time to clean his forearm, and Nick had kept apathetic distance as Rochelle washed off the bite wound with a bottle of water. It wasn't optimal, but without any kind of disinfectant, it was the best they could do. It at least removed the grey-black residue left behind by the infected's saliva.

At this point, catching the Green Flu seemed unlikely - but even regular humans could pass a heaping amount of bacteria with a bite. They needed some alcohol, or hydrogen peroxide, or something.

Unfortunately, they were also almost completely out of bandages. They'd had to re-wrap his original ones, placing a little patch of fresh gauze just over the bite.

"I miss just hangin' out sometimes. Really too bad you guys ain't met him yet. He'd love y'all."

Nick snorted lightly, leaning back slightly and gingerly stretching out his legs. He bent forward and loosely tugged up his pantleg, craning his head a little to inspect the bandages wound around his calf. They were stained weird shades of red and rust in a splotch down the back, but they were dried and it didn't hurt as much as it used to.

Of course, that wasn't necessarily a good sign.

Maybe he'd ruined nerves - maybe whole muscles. The scarring was going to be wicked, but hopefully the limp would go away.

The idea that it might not made his brow screw up.

"We should change those."

Coach's voice startled him slightly, not realizing he'd been being watched. It was said low, almost enough to be secret between them, and Nick spared him a small scathing look. He still wasn't sure how to feel about the man, and he definitely didn't need pity. "With what?"

The big man shrugged in a gesture that admitted uncertainty, glancing away again with a subtle air of resignation. "Jus' sayin'."

Nick mused at him for a moment before looking back to his leg. There was a dull pain behind the
ex-football player's eyes, fading in and out depending on whether Ellis or Rochelle were looking at
him. *Headache?* he supposed.

Rochelle only allowed herself a momentary blink toward the two men and their muttered
conversation before she refocused on Ellis and gave him a grin. Her boots twisted on the gravel,
completing another pace and pausing for a few beats. "We'd probably be boring to him. No crazy
stories, no stunts."

"You kiddin'?" Ellis grinned, licking salt off his fingertips. "I'm gonna love talkin' tuh him next
time I do. He's gonna be so jealous'uv all the stories we got. Can't wait tuh see his face when he
realizes he didn't do *nothin'* in the apocalypse!"

Coach chuckled slightly, shaking his head as he threw back a handful of M&Ms. "Most people'd
pray to do nothin', son."

Nick tossed his pantleg back into place, straightening up. He threw his chip bag into Ellis' lap,
gingerly standing himself up with a shake of his suit jacket to shift it back into place. "You're
talking to a full-blooded redneck, Coach. I'm shocked they didn't all just board up their houses and
hold out with their shotgun collections."

Ellis merely guffawed cheerily, sweeping up the chip bag in his bad arm and digging out a handful
of chips.

"I'm Georgian too, Nick." the big man noted with a fairly serious tone of voice, glancing up at the
gambler. "Wanna say that shit 'bout me?"

The gambler sneered a little, deciding against giving a real answer to that. Instead, he turned toward
Rochelle, reaching out a hand. "Hey, Ro', give me the pack. I'm gonna go in and steal some more
shit."

She gave him an unamused look, even though his wording was clearly aimed to ruffle her feathers.
Shaking her head slightly, she pulled the backpack off her shoulders and offered it out to him.
"Asshole. You don't have to say it like that."

Nick took it with a roguish grin, slipping a strap over one shoulder. "Sorry, sorry. I'm gonna go in
and *permanently borrow* some more shit with *distinct regret* at having to do so. Better?"

Rolling her eyes, Rochelle turned away, smiling across the parking lot with a shake of her head.
"Oh, loads."

Snorting in amusement, Nick turned and stepped toward the door. He landed a hand on the top of
Ellis' head as he passed by, screwing the cap down over his eyes and making him yelp lightly in
surprise.

He swore the younger man swiped at his knee in retaliation, but his knuckles only grazed the edge
of Nick's pantleg - and when he glanced back, the Georgian had his arms settled innocently in his
lap. His blue eyes were only barely visible underneath the down-turned rim of his bill.

Nick let his eyes roll, smirking, and ducked back into the 7-Eleven. He was careful with the door,
levering it open gently so the bell didn't ring this time. With the disarray and spots of blood, the
place felt a little more eerie when he was alone.

He shook off the feeling as best he could, closing the door tightly behind him.

Nick had definitely meant what he said, more than determined to stow away some food and see
what kind of medical supplies they had left… but there was another goal he had in mind on top of that.

The gambler walked past the aisles, sending only cursory glances down the rows as he moved toward the counter. The shot Slurpee machine had left a sprawling puddle of swirling flavors, sticky, dried liquid staining the tile. He crinkled his nose slightly and stepped around it, careful to keep his shoes out of the mess.

If he was ever in his life going to wonder what one of those drinks tasted like, that immediately ruined it for him.

Nick went behind the counter, hobbling slightly as he slipped in front of the cash register. He tugged his slacks up a little so they didn't strain at his knees when he moved into a crouch, bending down to get a look in the drawers underneath.

A faint smirk touched his lips as he reached in, pulling out a small display box lined with blankly packaged condoms. He hadn't seen them anywhere in the store earlier, and them being under the counter was his only hope.

As he snatched up a couple, his fingers hesitated slightly, feeling the wrapper between his fingertips. *Am I planning this too much? … Sure, we're probably going to fuck again, but - ... shit. This is still a fling, Nicolas, don't start second-guessing yourself. You're just being prepared.*

Nick reached into the inner pocket of his suit, dragging out his wallet to open it up. He tucked the prophylactics away, stowing them deep in the billfold of his wallet, dark jaw set in a slight clench.

*You're allowed to not completely hate someone's company, you know.*

Sighing subtly, the conman closed and tucked the wallet back away into his jacket. He wasn't interested in losing the good mood sustenance and drinks put into him, and if he focused too much on the issue he'd end up agitated.

"Ookay, Nicolas." he muttered quietly. "Focus and find some fucking supplies, Jesus." With a deep sigh, he reached up to get a hand on the countertop and push himself to straighten up -

And his palm squelched lightly as he landed it right on a semi-solid puddle of stale Slurpee mix.

Flailing instantly to straighten up and get his hand away, he gave a practically agonized noise of disgust, dragging his sleeve up to make sure it didn't get stained. He couldn't actually work out a coherent sentence, sputtering, "Oh for - I - fucking - ass -"

Settling suddenly for a simple growl, Nick quickly half-jogged away from the counter and darted through the aisles.

There was a restroom in the very far corner, women's on the left and men's on the right, and he fully intended to jam his hand into the sink and scrub his hand till the disgusting sensation went away.

"Tits… Of all the shit luck." the conman muttered simply, sparing a small glance over his shoulder as he reached the other side of the 7-Eleven. He could see through the door, and fortunately the other three didn't seem even slightly interested in what was going on inside.

Forcing a heavy sigh, the gambler reached out his other hand and made to push the men's bathroom open.
The swinging door didn't budge more than an inch. He shoved harder, and it jingled audibly against a lock.

"Fuck!" he snapped in outrage, staring for a moment at the door before releasing a tight grunt. Annoyance made his brows crinkle, stepping away from the door with a frustrated motion and reaching out to try the women's restroom instead.

Sure enough, it swung open.

The gambler sighed with a resigned drop of his head, awkwardly holding his hand at a tilt. The well-lit, tiled room curled off to the right into an alcove, a full bathroom stall built into the space. A sink - complete with a plastic soap dispenser hanging a few inches to the left of the ceramic bowl - stood against the wall.

It wasn't overly effeminate. Sure, there was a painting of multi-colored flowers nailed to the wall in some cheap attempt at girly decoration, but beyond that, only the lack of a urinal really betrayed it as a woman's restroom.

"Thank-you, universe." Nick muttered moodily to himself, stepping in and praying in the far back of his head none of the others suddenly decided to come check on him. "Having a hard-on for a guy isn't nearly fuckin' emasculating enough... I really needed this just now."

There was blood there, too, a few strange slash marks cut into the tile just in the center of the room and flecks of red scattered around. He avoided them without too much thought, more than used to the sight.

Crossing the bathroom with a quick half-limp, he stepped up to the sink and tore out a paper towel from the dispenser just within his reach on the wall. Using it to touch the faucet instead of touching it with his hand, the conman flicked on the water and grunted.

The water hissed out into the sink, pattering against the ceramic.

Nick pumped a little soap into his palm, quickly dunking his hand underneath the stream of water. It was cold, and he put his hands together to scrub at his sticky palm with a disgusted expression.

The soap bubbled up into a healthy foam, and much to his relief, the tacky layer of Slurpee came off fairly easily from his palm. He slipped into a slight bend forward, scrubbing slightly harder when the feeling didn't leave quite as quickly as the weirdly orange coloration itself.

Over the hiss of water - a soft sound shuddered behind him, making him blink and freeze.

"..u-uwh."

It was weird, unintelligible, but distinctly human: a stifled noise so quiet he almost doubted hearing it.

The conman moved with an almost cautious slowness to shut off the water, gradually turning his head to the side to look back. The stall door was closed, and he craned his head to try and peek through the gaps in the structure.

"... Is someone there?" he risked, tone tense to the point of hostility. He hadn't even thought to check the stall - *Fuck, I'm an idiot.*

There was silence, and not even a shuffle to answer his question. He slowly picked up the paper towel he'd torn off, quickly squeezing it over his hands to dry off. Gently, Nick bent his body,
aiming to crouch down and look under the stall door, when a clear whimper sounded.

It was a miserable, emotion-strained noise - a little sob, just barely held back from turning into a louder noise.

For just an instant Nick thought it was a survivor. A small moment of surprise flooded him… and then Carmine's face flashed into his mind, and those pain-wracked sobs he'd heard muffled through the bedroom door.

Nick's blood ran cold in his veins, spine going stock still. Reflex had him instantly moving to step away, half-panicked and half-focused, intent on getting to the door and getting the hell out. *Holy fuck, is that another -*

He hadn't moved more than an inch when there was an abrupt, terrible squeal of something impossibly sharp against metal, and the stall door swung suddenly open.

She stumbled out almost drunkenly, body almost struggling to hold itself together as her weight staggered on bare feet. Bones jutted against tight, death-grey skin, and her clothes were torn to bloody shreds on her body. Light hair hung in clotted strings down around her face, framing a sunken face that was hidden behind up-turned hands.

It was, on top of everything else, the claws that sent every single nerve in Nick's body into a panicked spark. They were disfigured, knobbled spears jutting out where her fingers should've been, skin inflamed painfully at what were once her knuckles. The unnatural movement of her skeletal frame stumbled her frigidly toward Nick.

Nick had disturbed her and she seemed drawn to him now. *Fuckfuckfuckfuck- The only hope he had was centered on the fact she wasn't growling like Carmine had before she'd attacked. He didn't even have his rifle, and the handful of bullets in his stolen pistol were not going to take her down if Rochelle with a shotgun hadn't even been able to manage that with Carmine.*

The conman backpedaled toward the doorway as silently and steadily as he could, aware his teeth were digging into his tongue hard enough to draw blood. Every step he took, she stumbled to regain the distance, following him with the heavy smack of bare feet against the tile. Hidden behind her hands, she let out a distressed sob, body wracked with the motion.

Nick's back hit the door, and he suddenly half-bolted to shove himself backward, trying to get through it and close it behind him, intent on shutting her in. Unfortunately, the heavy thud of his shoulders against the door seemed to abruptly rile her out of her haze.

Those spear-like fingers parted, and bright, glaring red eyes blinked before fixing on Nick's face. A growl filtered out of her - loud and sharp.

"FUCK!" slipped straight out of Nick as he threw himself through the door, and the utterance molded with the sudden snarl the greyed creature gave out as she leapt forward. He slammed his body onto the other side of the door, trying to shut it in her face, but she hit it just before it closed. Elongated claws jammed through the space between door and doorway, worming a moment before she shoved violently against the other side.

She was strong.

The gambler turned to run, abandoning the bathroom door, every instinct telling him to just *bolt.* He could hear her snarl furiously behind him, a chill sparking up the back of his neck at the sound.

Nick got maybe four steps before a sudden spasm made his injured leg jerk, the unexpected pain
sending his gait into a stagger. It sent him completely off balance, and with a clatter, his weight
violently checked the shelving next to him.

He shot out an arm to half-catch himself, sending a few cans on the shelves scattering to the floor.
A bag was swept off by his elbow, splitting open just by his foot and spilling sugar across the tile
with a soft hiss.

His attempt to regain his balance wasn't enough. He scrabbled for purchase on the shelving to try to
get enough of a grip to get back on his feet, but with a thud of dread in his gut he felt claws
suddenly land on his back. Sharp points dug straight into the fabric of his suit jacket, splayed
beside his shouldered backpack.

They pierced it and cut effortlessly through his dress shirt, too - jerking into his skin with burning
points of pain. It was as they yanked back suddenly, a high-pitched growl mixing with the swish of
those claws through the air while she prepared to slash full-force at him, that he suddenly realized
she was going to kill him.

It came as a disjointed awareness. He'd had that thought before, but it always came with a plan to
escape or a sudden focusing of his adrenaline to defend himself. This time it just plastered itself
over his consciousness, crass and matter-of-fact.

He'd never really felt that before. It shook him, hard. He was going to die in a bloody mess and that
was that.

"Fuck." he just barely ghosted, chest suddenly compressing with a pain he didn't understand - a
tremoring agony, body already steeling for the ripping strike of those impossibly long claws.

They'd rend him.

Only they never struck. The feeling stung on his back with burning nerves, a twisted game played
on him by his consciousness, but those claws never struck home.

Wh-what - the hell?

It was only with a shuddered breath that he got his frozen joints to move, turning his head and torso
slightly to look over his shoulder. He couldn't feel anything except the burning on his back, and it
was numbly that he realized she'd slipped down to her knees.

There was something animalistic in how she bent forward, painfully bony frame unsteadily settled
in a kneel, claws hovering just over the tile. For just a beat, Nick had no idea what she was doing -
and then she leaned down a little more.

She slowly lapped out a grey tongue, reaching past sharpened, jagged teeth, and licked at the sugar
spilt on the tile. Saliva, blood, and sugar mixed into a strange drool down her chin, suddenly
completely ignoring Nick's presence.

That realization shocked his brain into working again - and, just the same, his body. He felt his
limbs go into a cold focus, heart trying to escape through his ears as the rush of blood deafened
him a little.

The gambler slowly inched his shoe forward, just barely skating it over the surface of the tile.
Every twitch of her head made him flinch, but all she seemed to care about was the sugar, lapping
it up messily with soft clicks as her claws touched the tile.
One step - two... three.. Nick felt his bad leg struggling to hold steady as he worked forward in a slight strafe, each step speeding up slightly the further away he got. He felt bile gathering in the depths of his throat, the taste acrid and cruel.

It took every ounce of self-control he'd ever had not to break as he reached the end of the aisle. His shoulders shuddered slightly, straining to hear her suddenly growl and decide to chase after him again.

He put his hands softly to the door handle. Opening it was agonizingly slow, green gaze darting up to the bell at the top of the door, daring it to make a single sound. Slowly... carefully, it opened, the bell silent as he moved it so cautiously.

"- until I got older. There's no beaches in Ohio, you know." Rochelle was laughing gently, her pacing stalled as she stood with her arms crossed just next to Coach.

Nick pushed through the door with a stumble, instantly turning around and focusing on closing the door now. He rushed slightly compared to opening it, and it took only an instant for Rochelle to notice him and look over, head tipping at his posture.

"Nick?"

The name didn't even make sense to his ears. He just needed to get away, to breathe, and without so much as a sound he let go of the door and rushed off the concrete in front of the store. He walked unsteadily on the gravel just a few feet, stumbling when the bile at the back of his throat and the sickening adrenaline in his veins suddenly sent him into a slight gag.

He doubled over, hands going to his knees, forcing in a violent breath to stop himself from retching. The backpack fell right off his shoulder, awkwardly thudding to his wrist as his clamped hand kept it from falling all the way. Humming in his ears sounded a lot like voices, and he was aware of a rushing movement behind him.

He forced breaths through gritted teeth, focusing on the exhale and inhale - trying to calm himself. Oh, he'd hate himself for the emotional shock later, he knew that much - but he'd really, honestly believed he would die.

The conman's leg gave way, and with a stagger, he let himself fall to his good knee on the gravel. Strangled relief calmed his heaving gut when Ellis dropped down right next to him, a strong hand settling between Nick's shoulderblades and slowly rubbing, soothing.

"He needs water..." the kid urged, voice even more strained with concern than his expression was. Coach or Rochelle must've gotten it, because the next thing Nick knew, Ellis was gently sliding a half-drunk bottle of water into one of his hands.

The conman blindly took a swig, but instead of swallowing, he swirled and spat it out on the gravel, trying to get rid of the rank taste in his mouth with a grimace. He shut his eyes, bending his head slightly.

"'Nother.. Carmine. There's another fucking Carmine in there - shit..."

That was all he could manage for a little while, chugging mouthfuls of water carefully. He was fairly sure the only thing keeping him from outright vomiting was the strong fingers working in smooth circles on his back - avoiding, consciously, the faint tears and dots of red on his white suit jacket that marked where the Witch's claws had pierced his back.
"Sweetheart, I don't understand."

Rochelle's voice was gentle and coaxing, the woman bent down in front of Nick as he slowly rubbed his temples with trembling fingertips. They'd relocated closer to the highway and further from the 7-Eleven, Nick seated a little less awkwardly with his arms draped over his slightly spread knees.

Frustration was apparent on his ragged features, growling slightly before repeating himself for the third time. "It stopped and started eating sugar. For fuck's sake, you are hearing me correctly. It went from tearing me to fucking pieces, to licking sugar off the ground like a dog."

Ellis sat on his knees behind the conman, posture drawn into a slight slump as he focused on slowly inspecting Nick's injured back. They were small pierce marks, just deep enough to have stained a little blood through his jacket and dress shirt.

The conman didn't seem to mind Ellis touching him, maybe even calming down under his hands - even if Ellis was slightly self-conscious of Coach and Rochelle being so close. Making sure that the gambler was okay was prioritized far above that.

His touches were stifled little paws, feigning interest in the small injuries when really his calloused fingertips just petted what they could. Coach and Rochelle weren't paying him an ounce of attention, but he slunk down a little anyway.

"Okay, Nick. Okay." Rochelle sighed a little, rubbing at the cheek that wasn't clawed over. "I understand. It's just strange, is all. I never imagined them having any kind of.. weakness."

Nick growled a little. All the talk seemed to do was agitate him more - over his bowed head, Coach sent a small glance around to the other teammates, shaking his head in a short gesture of frustration.

Worry clenched the Ellis' gut, more concerned for the conman's mind than his body, even if he busied himself with glancing over the wounds on Nick's hunched back. He probably wasn't the only one of the three who could tell Nick was more shaken than he would've liked to let on.

"We shouldn't'uh let you go in alone..." Ellis muttered quietly, tone self-berating, and he frowned toward his knees. He shuffled down a little, longing to do more for the older man. "Them things are real nasty."

Nick didn't look back at the kid, but he did shake his head dismissively, palming over his eyes in exhaustion. "I should've brought my goddamn rifle and shot it in the face..."

Coach exhaled heavily, weary expression drawn in a tight look of borderline agitation. "Ain't like we expected it. Just good you got out a'ight." He rubbed at his shoulder, giving a shake of his head. "Gotta clear the bathrooms next time."

Nick just barely smirked, tilting his head to glance up toward the eldest survivor. "Aww. He does care." Even that was acerbic, daring Coach to get angry.

He didn't.

Coach merely gazed back at him, wholly unimpressed.
Rochelle sighed just a little at them, stuck between annoyance and relief that their dynamic had returned to something like normal. The woman re-adjusted the backpack on her shoulder and let her posture slump minutely. "I don't know, Nick. Better you ran. I mean... whatever type of zombie that is, it doesn't go down easily."

Her voice faltered slightly. Recollection and a little bit of guilt lowered her head, one hand stretching back to rub at her shoulder. "The, you know.. first one didn't. They're tough."

"And creepy." Ellis mumbled a bit, adjusting his cap on his head with a knuckle before replacing the hand on Nick's shoulderblade. He let his gaze trail over the conman's back, his expression deeply bothered. "Cryin' like that. S'like they still got emotions or somethin'. Ain't natural."

"You're really going to talk about natural right now?" was the grumbled chastisement that dribbled from Nick like glue, shaking his shoulder suddenly to push Ellis' hands away. Something stirred in the gambler's mind as his nerves smoothed over, and he rejected the touches. "There's nothing natural about any of this."

Ellis let him go, withdrawing his hands and pushing his weight off his heels to stand up. He shook the denial off easily, unbothered; if anything, it was a relief to see Nick coming back into his usual demeanor. "Sorry, man. It's extra weird, how 'bout that?"

The statement brought a subtle snort from the conman, a reluctant humor, and Nick lifted up a hand to rub over his forehead. Coach clasped a hand on Ellis' shoulder, passing him his shotgun a beat later. "Think we best keep this sugar thing in mind, y'all." the ex-football player affirmed.

"What?" Rochelle questioned, stepping in front of Nick and offering down her hands. He gave a small glare, but sighed. Taking her hands, she hoisted him up to his feet. "Why?"

"Maybe." he gruffed quietly, scratching the stubbled swell of his cheek. "Second time we ran into one of those. Figure we shouldn't pass by somethin' that might help against 'em. Far as I can tell, they ain't somethin' we're gonna wanna get close to anyway."

Nick snorted, focusing his gaze down as he distracted himself with shaking gravel dust off his suit. "Yeah, let's all get bags of sugar and we'll skip our way east. Over the river and down the yellow brick road."

It took a moment for the words to actually register, but Ellis burst into laughter, clapping hands over his stomach and doubling over just a little. "Oh jeez, Nick." The conman instantly twisted around, annoyance arching up a brow at the humor clearly at his expense.

"Jeez what, Ay-lus?" he challenged a little, adjusting his lapels on his chest with a flat palm. The familiar banter made things a little easier. It gave him something to focus on, anyway.

Ellis caught himself, stifling his laughter with a knuckle pushed to his lips. Nick's Southern mocking only made it worse, blue eyes squinting with barely contained amusement. He shook his head, quickly. "Nothin', man."

The gambler eyed him with very apparent consideration, and Ellis was getting familiar with that look - the one where Nick couldn't decide between letting him go or chasing him. It was a strangely feral expression, even though it was a verbal fight rather than a physical one.

Ellis grinned back at him gently, amused and suddenly aware he was lucky they weren't alone.

Or was he disappointed? The line abruptly blurred, and Ellis hurried to avert blue eyes before his bruised and cut-up face flushed.
"Okay, boys, don't fight." Rochelle checked them with a laugh, lifting up a hand to wave it in the air between them. She turned away, pulling her rifle against her hip and sliding a palm over her hairline. "C'mon. Let's get out of here before that thing decides to come ask Nick for more sugar."

Nick broke his gaze on Ellis' face with a snap, scowling the moment his gaze landed on Rochelle's face. The joke didn't sit well in the slightest, and Nick's voice had this angry grate to it. "Real funny, Ro'. Fuckin' hilarious. I'm dyin' here."

Her face flashed to something honestly apologetic, but just as she opened her mouth to respond, Coach shook his head to silence her. He offered Nick's rifle to the man, and with a begrudging snatch, Nick accepted it.

The gambler turned away, focusing on checking the gun over. His motions were violent, tearing the ammo cartridge free to inspect it. Ellis frowned gently, a sigh itching at his throat. He'd almost made the gambler cheer up again.

Considering Nick seemed intent on removing himself from them, Coach nodded carefully and tucked an arm around Rochelle's shoulders. He pushed her gingerly to start walking toward the highway, gesturing with his fingers to motion Ellis with them.

The kid blinked, indecision tearing him apart in an instant: follow Coach and act normal, or hang back and draw suspicion.

Unfortunately, Ellis knew which one Nick would've told him to go with. A little smile twitched at his jaw, and he submitted to the snarky voice in the back of his head he attributed to the gambler.

Shoving his cap down on his head, Ellis let the bill slip down to cover his eyes. Nick riveted his gaze on his rifle, pupils unmoving as he refused to watch Ellis slip out of his vision to tag after the two.

It was strange. Under the smooth, flawless veneer of anger, Nick felt his attention trailing after the Georgian. He didn't know if he wanted the kid to stay with him, or what - but, much as he'd want to reject the notion, he was a little too well-acquainted with just what that feeling was.

Longing. Stupid, childish, needy longing. It made him want to shove the muzzle of his rifle between his teeth and pull the trigger.

But Ellis wasn't Angelica, wasn't walking away from him because he didn't care. Ellis was Ellis, and Nick had been the one to shake him off. If he hadn't done that, the Georgian would probably still be at his side.

Nick quickly lifted up a hand to pinch down the bridge of his nose, shaking off the feeling with a sigh. It was the near-death experience that had done it; that and everything else that had gone wrong lately.

Growling as he tossed his rifle onto his shoulder, Nick forced himself to turn toward the slowly retreating trio. He didn't want to be near the gas station any more than any of them, and certainly not alone.

Green eyes flicked up - and with a blink, he realized Ellis was trodding along behind Coach and Rochelle backwards. The curly-haired mechanic was staring expectantly toward him, and as their gazes fell to a lock, he gave a subtle lift of one hand in a small waving motion.

'"C'mon."

it said. Ellis was smiling, gently.
Not without a small snort of forced derision, Nick adjusted his rifle a little more comfortably on his shoulder. He let his chin drop and pushed his weight to start walking forward, eyes half-closing. He didn't hurry; he instead kept his distance from the leading three, maintaining a few feet to give himself some solitude.

Ellis didn't try to draw back and meet up with him. He seemed to take some hint from the conman's posture, satisfied that Nick had come at his gesture. That capped head bobbed back forward, and he pleasantly bounced along behind Coach and Rochelle, shotgun gripped in his good hand.

His chipper voice crossed the gap between them and Nick as effortlessly as a bird winging out over a chasm, unburdened, not a care given to the breadth and depth. He'd fallen into the unflappable optimism and young obliviousness that seemed to rule his brain.

"Y'all wanna play I Spy?"

Of course, considering the helpless snorts Ellis earned himself from all three of his compatriots - even Nick, stifled with a shake of his head - his mood was more contagious than any of them would've admitted.
Chapter 63

"C'mon, Nick."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"But it's fun!"

"Absolutely not."

"C'mon, man, it's yer turn!"

Nick wasn't even going to dignify that one with a response. Or, at least, he told himself he wasn't - even if pride and a hair-trigger sarcastic wit had his mouth open after a beat of silence. He would've retorted, too, but Ellis was already babbling over him.

"... well, actually, it's been yer turn like five times already, but -"

Groaning in exasperation, Nick threw his hands up in the air. It was all he could do not to reach back and strangle the kid. Even worse was how Rochelle played into it, although Coach at least held his silence. His half-amused attention was more on Nick's distress than it was on the game itself.

The duo had been going on for half an hour, and Nick was sure they'd pointed out every iota of color in the dreary landscape surrounding the highway. Still green in the sunbaked trees, billowing white in far-off clouds, cracked black in the worn asphalt, dusky brown in the spaces between crawling grasses - little purple flowers just sprinkled along the treeline. Nick's shirt, Rochelle's still-faintly-pink nails, Coach's white-gauze-swathed head.

Ellis' enthusiasm - those wide, hunting eyes - could have painted the world in swathes of vibrancy for how quick he seemed to find them in their surroundings. All Nick saw was a haze of foggy red and grey, exhausted and frustrated.

It almost ached with how much he had to squint to comprehend the things Ellis pointed out. Not that he'd have admitted he'd been paying attention at all.

As they got further, the treeline melted away, a musky plain overtaking the ground and foreshadowing the beaches ahead as trees turned to bush turned to scrub. The asphalt burned its way through clay-mixed dirt, sunlight searing quietly down from a mostly blue sky.

When the heatwaves rising up in clouds from the roadway started to get unbearable, they'd shifted over to walk just along the roadway's edge, following the yellow-brown strip of grass deadened from car exhaust.

Ellis pouted out his lower lip at Nick's silence, flopping his uninjured arm in a little plea. There was laughter hiding at the edge of his voice, though. "C'mon, Nick. Just do it once 'n' I'll leave yuh alone. You ain't even given it a try! Who knows, yuh might like it."

"Yeah, suit." Rochelle giggled gently, covering her mouth with her fingertips. She swayed subtly as
she walked, only a minor limp to her step from a bruised body. "Loosen up a little."

Coach gave a low chuckle, trudging on at the head of the group. He didn't look back, but Nick shot a glare at him for good measure anyway. Rochelle and Ellis walked just at the gambler's heels, and he grunted quietly back at them. "You guys have been doing just fine on your own. I don't play stupid games."

"Yuh play card games, don't'cha?" Nick started to whip around at the waist, eyes narrowing, but he could tell from the playful glitter to Ellis' eyes that the younger man didn't mean it in the oblivious way he generally did. He was poking fun.

Nick turned back forward, slowly, giving a low sigh and raking a hand through his hair. Part of him wanted to smirk, but he shook it off, grumbling instead. "... I gamble, kiddo. Call it stupid again and I'll sock you."

Laughing behind a stifling hand, Rochelle rolled her eyes gently at Ellis. "You're no fun, suit. Some of us are trying to pass the time."

"Really? Passing the time? Well you're making it hell for everyone else, so quit." The gambler shoved his hands into his pockets and exhaled, staring forward as he strode along the grass.

Ellis sighed just a little but grinned, knuckling his capbill down over his eyes. "S'Alright, Ro', we'll quit. We pretty much ran outta stuff anyhow. My fault fer tryin' tuh involve him." Nick shot a look over his shoulder, a little glare, exasperated. Ellis kept that grin with a sly edge, blue eyes just barely visible underneath his cap.

The gambler shook his head and refocused forward, glancing out to the side of the road with a squinting attention. The area was too hilly and the scrub too dense to see anything in the distance, but the road signs had been counting down to 'Tybee Island' with comforting speed.

Despite himself, Nick spoke up again, a slight slump touching his shoulders as he glanced down toward his injured leg and examined the subtle limp to his gait. "... I don't feel too confident about CEDA showing up, but I'm glad we're almost there. Fucking tired of walking."

"Bet Coach could carry yuh." Ellis teased with an almost serious edge of concern. The conman snorted, rolling his eyes.

He must've been more obvious than he thought eyeing his leg, because Rochelle sped up a little and reached out to touch a hand onto his shoulderblade inquiringly, voice gentling. "How is it feeling?"

Shrugging her hand off easily, Nick wiped the edge of his mouth with a wrist. "Eh. Doesn't particularly hurt, just weird to walk on." He leveled his voice into nonchalance, even if there was a little falsity to his words - it did hurt, on and off.

"Once we get to the coast we can settle down." Coach shrugged from his place at the front, sternly apologetic. "Till then, we gotta keep movin'. Sorry, Nick." Nick gave a careless gesture of one hand, spurring Rochelle's gaze to move to the big man.

She drew her lower lip between her teeth, cautiously. "... You're probably not feeling too hot either, Coach. All this walking and heat - is your head okay?" He shrugged again. That bandage-crowned head dropped a few inches with a snore-like sigh.

"A'ight, babygirl. Li'l headache, but ain't no thing."
Ellis bounded forward slightly, his injured arm swinging tenderly at his side as he held his shotgun up against his shoulder. Grinning a little, he affectionately sideglanced over his companions, shaking his head.

"Man. We are lookin' rough, ain't we? Real beat up. Heh - I ever tell y'all 'bout the time Keith got himself intuh a lion's en-clo-sure at the zoo?"

Nobody interrupted, so he babbled, shaking his head lightly with a smile.

"See, he thought they locked 'em up at night 'n' he wanted tuh go 'n' like, find claws tuh make necklaces out'uv. Tuh sell. Turns out they didn't lock 'em up like he thought - 'n' well. Let me just tell you, I ain't never seen him run so fast as he did that day. 'Cept fer the time he tried tuh kill a wasp's nest with homemade spray what didn't do nothin' but piss 'em off..."

Rochelle gave a bewildered blink, having to sort through the information for just an instant before tremulously questioning, "Keith got mauled by lions...?"

"Oh, naw." The kid guffawed gently, flapping a hand in the air. "He jumped the fence 'n' ended up in the next cage over. Flamingos got'im."

As if there was a reaction to that other than disbelief.

"Ey," Ellis interrupted himself lightly, bobbing his head slightly in brash curiosity. "Coach. I just went and reminded muhself. Weren't you gonna tell us whut had you all riled earlier? I meant tuh ask at the gas station, but then that whole zombie thing happened."

There was a beat of silence between them where Coach's reaction was uncertain, but with a small sigh, the big man gave a shrug of his shoulders. "If you wanna know. Got my sense back now, don't mind talkin' about it. Ain't nothin' real cheery, but I promised y'all I'd explain."

"Please, do." Nick grumbled sardonically, although he was just as eager to hear an explanation as the other two... even if his eagerness came from an edge of anger. "We can all hold hands while we share."

"Ignore him." Rochelle urged, leaning forward to punch at Nick's shoulder. The conman whipped his body weight to the side just fast enough to avoid the swing, shooting a scathing glance at her as he straightened his jacket. "Go ahead, Coach. What's up? May as well talk while we walk."

The big man gestured subtly forward just as Rochelle spoke. Nick noticed where his hand was pointing, a little nod touching his head as he registered Coach's point. There were a few zombies scattered on the roadway ahead, and Nick sidestepped to get around the eldest.

Bringing his rifle up to his shoulder, Nick squinted into the scope and got them in his sights. His footsteps slowed and his breath stilled to try and steady his aim.

He didn't shoot as well as he'd hoped, but the distance between them and the zombies left the zombies strangely unaware. A shot hit one in the shoulder, and its whole body jerked back with an exaggerated stagger. It seemed to lift up a hand and paw at its injury, head craning, and the other couple infected lashed their bodies around toward the sound.

A second shot brought it down, and it stumbled to the asphalt. The crack of the rifle stirred the attention of the infected around it, and they seemed to just get a bead on the survivors as the gambler adjusted his aim. Nick took them out before they made much ground, and between his shots, Coach talked in a gruff tone.
"That zombie y'all killed in the forest, the one wit' the big arm... it just.. struck me wrong. Real wrong. Shit was like Carmine again."

Ellis blinked in confusion, setting a hand on his jaw gently with a slow concern. "H-h'uh? Carmine? What'cha mean, Coach - you don't mean... you recognized it...?"

Coach shook his head, carefully, deepset eyes focusing on the zombies and Nick's sharply focused work. "Nah, son - not like that. It was just the... type. Charger, whatever Ro' called it." He quieted for a moment, a hand lifting to rub at the rounded swell of his stubble-rough cheek. Nobody spoke up for a moment as he seemed to muse silently, brows knotted. When he continued, it was with a sudden change - it seemed - of topic.

"I had boys - my football team. We had practice the day everything went to shit. Most of 'em were feelin' under the weather, but we were gearin' up for a game, so... they showed up anyway."

Nick caught on instantly to where Coach was going, his jaw setting stiffly. He kept it to himself, silently gazing through the rifle scope and pretending not to even be listening.

He chuckled. "Good boys. Made me proud. ..." Then he hesitated, watching Nick finish off the last of the handful of zombies, clearing the road. The gambler lowered his rifle, and Coach exhaled. "... They started turnin' in the locker room."

Rochelle shot up a hand to cover her mouth, nearly stopping in her tracks. "O-Oh -" There was no 'I'm fine,' or 'it's alright' - Coach just lowered his head in slow grief and shook it. A stiffness touched his voice, composed with harsh recollection. "I ran in quick as I could, but.. that shit was just... they changed so fast. Half of 'em were Chargers by the time I got in there. The rest.. they didn't stand no chance."

Ellis gently took his cap off his head, holding it to his chest in a polite gesture. He frowned down at the ground, meekly scruffling fingers through his hair as he did. "Coach, man.. 'm sorry.."

The football coach sighed deeply, palming gently over his face and squeezing down the bridge of his nose with thick fingers. "Wasn't nothin' anybody could'a done. I wish.. damn. Wish I'd sent those sick boys home. Savin' the rest would'a been better than seein' 'em dyin' like that, gettin' crushed by their own friends.. shit just ain't right."

"You never told me that." Rochelle murmured, shoulders a little slumped. She reached Coach's side, setting a hand on his arm. "How.. soon was that before we ran into each other..?"

He gave a weak chuckle, shaking his head. "Not too long. Wasn't gonna tell you, babygirl. You were fightin' with yo' own mind, gettin' used to all this shit. Had to protect someone.."

A zombie stumbled out from some shrubbery alongside the road, clawing at its own face sluggishly. Nick took it out with a cracking shot, a small scowl touching the corner of his mouth. "... So you saw the zombie and lost it." he prompted, coolly.

"Yeah." the big man sighed. "We ain't run into those things before - first time seein' them again after that. Flashed back a little, that's it. Guess this crack on the head was still messin' wit' me." Coach gave a gruff shake of his head, straining for his composure as he tiredly adjusted his grip on his shotgun. "Still sorry fo' that. Let y'all down. I should'a kept it under control."

"Naw, naw, man.." Ellis quickly protested, shaking his head as he slowly slipped his cap back onto his head, knuckling it down over his eyes with a small smile. "I would'uv been way more upset. We're all here fer each other -" Nick started to snort. ":- shut up, Nick. - All that matters is that yer
okay now."

Coach's voice lowered a notch, deepening with a certain, indescribable emotion. He looked over his shoulder toward the kid, nodding his head. "Preciate that, son." Ellis smiled back easily, the expression softening.

Nick subtly palmed over his mouth as Rochelle rubbed at the big man's upper arm, comfortably. "I'm sorry, Coach.. I really am. You know there was nothing you could've done, right?"

"Yeah, babygirl. Just... don't seem like that sometimes."

The gambler pushed his free hand into the pocket of his jacket as he lowered his rifle, silently shaking his head. He didn't say a word at first, disinclined to admit that the explanation was any shade of satisfying. It was with a faint grunt that he uttered anything at all. "Could've used this information before you flipped shit, but hey, what the fuck."

Coach gave a low chuckle, glancing ahead at Nick. He let Rochelle's arm slip entirely into a loop with his, tiredly slouching his shoulders with an air of resignation. "Yo' ass has gotta be the angriest person I ever met."

The subtlest smirk touched Nick's lips, privately, faced well forward where none of the other survivors could see - and entirely absent from his voice. "It's my super power."

Ellis bounced slightly, lifting his brows with a sudden cap-shaded grin. "Ooh, ooh, I bet'cha we all got super powers."

Nick rolled his eyes, voice drawled with tired sarcasm. He shook his head slowly as he grumbled. "Yeah. With my New York anger, your redneck stupidity, Coach's ravenous appetite, and Rochelle's cutting-edge journalism, we'll rule the world."

Coach lifted up an arm, pointing suddenly off to the right. His gesture interrupted Ellis' sudden woosh of excitement at Nick's fairly humoring - if sarcastic - statement, drawing attention to a little shape breaching the sloping horizon. "Check it, y'all."

A lighthouse was the first sign of Tybee. The black nose of it towered up, a rounded shape stretching out against a pristine sky. There was no sign of a light at the tip, a deadened kind of loneliness about the protrusion. "We're close." Rochelle murmured, eyes going a little wide as she examined the lighthouse's silhouette.

Nick snorted slightly, lifting up a hand to gesture them faster as he broke out into a subtly limped jog. "Yeah, for all the good that'll do us when CEDA never shows up."
"Nick - left!"

The gambler reacted reflexively to Rochelle's instruction, swinging his rifle to catch a zombie with a shot in the chest as it raced for them. The four moved in a seamless jog, tightly clustered in a protective quadrant with Ellis - the most injured of them - behind Rochelle and Nick, and Coach taking up the rear.

The infected had sprouted up like flies as the survivors approached the lazy beginnings of Tybee Island's sprawled beachfront community. Bushy and un-maintained trees lined the street, low to the ground and shading the roadway from the sun.

The buildings that peeked out from under their canopies were little white-painted homesteads, columned porches built with an odd regality had they not been covered in gore. Most of the doors were open or busted down, dried blood splattered over and around them in the ghost echoes of violence that had happened days ago.

The scent of salt was like glue on the air, but any sense of oceanic purity was crudely marred by the decay and the stench of the infected, cloying as perfume. The irony - not lost on Nick's sick sense of humor - was thick in the short blood spray that pattered over his face when his shot tore through delicate organs, so morbidly like the wind-tossed fleck of water on a sea breeze.

Wiping his face quickly on his sleeve, feeling the fabric drag roughly over his unkempt facial hair, Nick growled.

"I have never felt this dirty and disgusting in my life."

Coach snorted slightly, head craned to blast off his shotgun into the body of a sprinting zombie, sending it to the ground with a gargling rage. "You ain't the only one."

They were all covered in dirt and gore - and sweating - but Coach's yellow-and-purple top was especially soaked through in growing patches. They all probably smelled, too, but body odor seemed insignificant with their senses permanently scorched by the smell of death.

"Quit whining.." Rochelle mumbled playfully, squinting against the recoil of her rifle as she shot the arm right off a zombie that was just stirring out of its almost lethargic rest against a porch staircase. "You guys don't have your shirt ripped half-off."

"Y'all considered us takin' a break here?" Ellis chirped questioningly as he ducked a little out of their arrangement to carefully shoot off to the side at an infected crawling out from behind a parked car. He was a bit unsteady with his shotgun, the blast taking a toll on his injured arm and flickering a little twitch over his expression, but he managed.

"I mean, judgin' from that sign we just passed, we still got a few miles till we really hit the beach."

Startled slightly, Nick half-spun before reminding himself they'd passed the sign already. He hadn't paid any mind to the distance they had to go. "Ugh." he uttered in a small growl, drawing his brows into a twitch. ". Goddamn it. Seriously?"

"Yeah." the kid apologetically confirmed, shaking out his arm just a little. "'N', y'know, we could take the night 'n' find us some wheels. Shit, we're all too tuckered out 'n' beat up already!"
Coach seemed to consider that, jaw rolling forward and a grunt escaping him. He kept a protective eye on Ellis until the kid gravitated back into the center of the group, shaking his head a little. "Ain't a real friendly neighborhood."

As if to punctuate the statement, a small gaggle of infected came bolting out from behind one of the houses, seemingly attracted by Ellis' close shotgun blast. Their shrieking, hands clawing the air as they ran, made Nick wince slightly - the infected were fairly stupid when undisturbed, but when something attracted them, they came in floods.

"That's the LAST thing we need."

"...fuck." the gambler muttered in belated self-chastisement as he registered his own thoughts - it was his turn to tempt fate, apparently.

Nobody paid him any attention, and he silently sidestepped Rochelle, joining her in facing the charging zombies. He gritted his teeth a little, watching his first shot strike straight through one's stomach and split it open.

Organs spilled in a greasy splatter from the torn wound, but the infected kept coming for a few steps before it seemed to notice its own injury and collapsed to the road on its still-jerking legs.

Backing up just a step, Nick grimaced a little when they got too close. He quickly got his rifle up and used the butt to smack straight across his attacker's face, the strike seeming to disorient it as it staggered back.

Rochelle fired straight through the torso, and the zombie went down with a gurgle.

Coach took careful aim around Rochelle and finished off the last one with a precise shot from his heavy shotgun. The blast knocked it straight off its feet and pulverized its ribcage. They started to relax as the last death-gurgle guttered out, glancing around quickly to make sure there wasn't any more on the way... but the respite was shortlived.

A wrenching cough, echoing through the air until it was hard to tell for sure where it had come from, made them all jump. Nick just got his rifle up, ready to aim, when a sudden 'ssplhk' heralded the sudden whipping presence of a tongue coming straight for his face.

He shot blindly in what he thought was the right direction, yelling out, "Shoot the -!" as the tentacle tightened - but it was a shot in vain. The tongue yanked hard, closing like a vice until his arms were entirely trapped together and his gun was directed upward, and wrenching him forward.

The gambler shut his eyes, bracing himself for the inevitable pain of collision he was going to have with the asphalt, inwardly snarling that it had caught them unawares. He was just about to go down when arms circled around his waist.

Ellis' body plastered against his, the shorter man's frame fitting up against Nick's in a determined cling. An incoherent yelp escaped the kid as the Smoker's pull prepared to drag him with, too. There was, however, just enough of a pause, enough of a stagger, for Rochelle to grab onto the Georgian by the hips and dig her heels in hard.

A breath later, Coach had his arms around nearly all three of them, hauling back with a barking yell. "NO YO' ASS DON'T!"
Their positioning placed Nick as the rope in a game of tug-o-war. Pain shot up his shoulders as the tongue, desperately slithering up toward his torso, practically wrenched his arms out of their sockets. "Hgh - Fuck!" he snarled, feeling the tongue's sticky tip burrowing around his shoulder to try and envelope the whole foursome.

With a fierce jerk, Ellis, Rochelle, and Coach heaved back. A loud snap announced the violent rending of flesh - and Nick, in an instant of incoherency, was half-convinced it was his arms tearing free of their attachment to his body.

Instead, the tongue broke just by his ear, and with an impressive chorus of shouts they all tumbled backwards with their own forceful heaving. Nick tried to fall sideways, rather than straight onto the others, but the tongue had gotten enough of a twine on them all that there wasn't anything to do but fall together.

Grunting, they went down like a bunch of bowling pins, struggling to get disentangled and not hit each other with flailing arms.

"Woah!" Ellis yelped a bit, clumsily trapped underneath Nick's weight. His hands slipped up, rough fingers working to push enough of the tongue free from Nick's arms to let the older man roll off. "Hoo-lee shit, that was cool! We done beat that tongue-thing like pros!"

Coach gave a weak chuckle, voice winded from the harsh collision that he'd taken the brunt of. He held still where he was, stoically uncomplaining, as their efforts slowly got them all crawled off, shoving the tongue out of its sticky wrap on clothes and limbs.

Nick managed to roll off Ellis when the tongue loosened around his arms, and he settled onto his knees to catch his breath. Rubbing his hands on his shoulders, he let out a pained groan, head shaking.

With him off, Ellis and Rochelle scrambled off easier. Ellis carefully bent down to help Coach up off the ground, while she bent over next to Nick to put hands on her knees and pant. "Jesus. I thought we were all gonna go down..

Nick grunted quietly at Rochelle's statement, wincing at the tingling pain that spread into his shoulders and upper back., but he was oddly quiet about the injury. No accusations, no sarcastic thank-you blaming them for his pain as was so like him.

He felt strange. Cared for - and very uncomfortable. Green eyes filtered out through mostly closed lids and underneath drawn brows, eyeing his companions as they recovered from the ordeal. They'd all leapt to save him from getting pulled away, no thought, no hesitation.

He'd expected it from Ellis, but not all of them.

Coach patted his hands on his thighs, heaving a fair sigh and nodding at Ellis in thanks as he got to his feet. He still seemed winded, but the eldest recovered fast, voice low. "Mmhm. Me too, babygirl. Guess it can't pull everythin'. Good job, y'all."

Ellis turned on his heels at Coach's words, blue eyes blinking bright across the road. The tongue had snapped back a bit like a rubber band with the breakage, but it was visible lying like a dead snake sprawled up the length of a lawn and draped up over the porch railing of a house. It trailed into the open doorway, still twitching vaguely with constricting muscle that seemed desperate to cling to anything.

"It ain't dead yet, though." he chirped, clapping a hand on his cap to hold it to his head and
scampering suddenly alongside the flinching tentacle toward the house.

Nick was getting up to his feet in an instant, ignoring the sharp pain circling his shoulders as he pushed himself up off the concrete. "Hey!" he snapped, pupils constricting in a flash as his gaze followed Ellis' movements. "Dumbshit! The hell are you doing?"

Ellis flapped a hand over his shoulder reassuringly as he vaulted up the porch steps, not seeming to notice that the other three were a hair's breadth from running after him. "Just take'uh sec, gotta kill it."

"Son, you get -" Coach started, voice rising, but Ellis was already ducking inside the darkened doorway. The football coach grunted something that may've been a curse, wiping his wrist over his forehead. "Let's go."

Although Coach had said it, Nick was the first to start moving. He gritted his teeth a little, angrily, tenderly holding his shoulders a bit lower than was normal to try and take some pressure off his joints.

*Second time you've disappeared into a house with a Smoker. God-fucking-damnit, Fireball.*

"Ellis!" Rochelle called out, half-jogging at Nick's heels. She was just on the verge of worry, brows a little furrowed, and her voice dropped. "Knows better than to run off on his own..."

They trampled up the staircase, Nick grasping ahold of the railing to push himself a little into each step. He pushed his scowl down into a deadpan, burying his worry, and snapped simply, "No, he doesn't."

A loud shotgun blast made them pause just a beat before forging forward. Nick shoved himself through the doorway, intent on charging in and dragging Ellis out - preferably by the ear - but he stopped halfway through. He should've remembered what happened when a Smoker got shot, considering he'd been the victim of it twice already, but he'd just about forgotten.

The house's front room was filled with a foul smoke that smelled like roadkill cooking on a roasting blacktop. Nick instantly recoiled, but when the sharp, wheezing sound of Ellis breaking into gasping coughs struck his hearing, the conman braced himself.

*Stupid -*

Clamping his forearm over his mouth and nose, though the fabric didn't smell all that much better, Nick thrust himself forward into the smoke. He had to close his eyes, the clingy smoke threatening to sting his eyes, and in the end he just held his breath against his sleeve.

*idiot -*

He aimed blindly for the sound of Ellis' distress, free arm outswept to feel for him. The gambler was vaguely aware Rochelle and Coach hadn't followed him, a little annoyance darting up his spine at the fact.

*dumbass -*

Now he was the only one going after Ellis, the only one throwing himself into the smoke after him.

*fucking -*

... he looked selfless - or worse, like he cared.
That was not good.

- assclown!

His hand collided with fabric, and he twined fingers sharply in Ellis' shirt. Without allowing more than a beat to process it, Nick just started hauling him back toward the door. He felt Ellis struggling, but ignored it past making sure the kid wasn't trying to shoot him in surprise. Judging by the desperately breathless coughing Ellis was crippled by, nearly stumbling as he blindly followed Nick's pull, the kid had gotten a face- and lung-full of smoke.

The gambler shoved Ellis around him, spinning the Georgian, and pushed him out the door first, letting him half-fall into Coach's arms. Nick staggered out of the doorway, quickly gasping in a breath as he breached the smoke, lungs giving him a burning chastisement for how long they'd gone without oxygen.

Ellis was collapsed heavily into Coach's arms, hacking and coughing like he was dying, the sound only worsening when Coach rather tenderly patted his back. Nick brushed himself off carefully, grumbling quietly, before turning a critical eye on the Georgian.

Those stony blue eyes were watery and reddened, face screwed up painfully as he tried to suck in air that didn't clog his lungs like burning char. Nick felt a little tug of sympathy, only to bury it down.

"Good job, kiddo." he muttered quietly instead, lifting a hand slowly to rub at his shoulders. "Good fucking job."

Rochelle bent down a little, fanning at Ellis' reddened face with a careful motion. Even though she and Coach hadn't even entered the house, her voice was a little rough, holding back a cough as the smoke drifted out. "Ellis, sweetheart, breathe - Jeez. That stuff really reeks, doesn't it…? I hope it's not dangerous."

That thought hadn't really struck Nick, but he kept a flat expression, turning his head a little. He glanced at Coach, the big man holding Ellis with a paternal patience as the mechanic leaned against his side limply, wracked with mewl-like coughs.

"S-Sor-ry -" he hacked out between breaths, covering his mouth with a fist and flicking the tiniest of bleary glances toward Nick.

Nick scowled at him - holding it steadfast against the blue-eyed apology.

Sighing, Rochelle lifted up her hands to rub her face for a minute after giving Ellis a little pet on the shoulder. "I think Ellis was right. I vote we stake out here - wrangle a car, eat. We're hurt and exhausted, and I could really go for being on the inside of one of these houses right now."

Lifting up both his hands to rub at his shoulders, wincing at the soreness in his joints, Nick had to agree. He closed his eyes in a motion that, though seeming tired, was more to save himself from having to see Ellis floundering as he tried to recover from his coughing fit.

"Fine. But if we get a working shower, I am going first, fuck all of you."
Chapter 65

Nick was angry.

Being angry was the easiest way to ignore everything - including Ellis.

Coach and Rochelle were checking the nearby houses for their best option, and that had left Nick protecting Ellis as the still-winded kid recovered from the Smoker's abuse. The conman solidly maintained his gaze on their surroundings, refusing to so much as acknowledge Ellis' existence behind him.

Ellis was overconfident and reckless, and Nick hated him for it. It put him in this loathsome position to care, and worry - and he blamed the feelings on Ellis. If he could just be a little more careful, Nick wouldn't have to be put in that vulnerable place.

But they were in the zombie apocalypse and Ellis would always be in danger. They all would.

The Georgian sat on the porch, arms draped over his knees and back hunched to widen his chest and ease his breathing. He kept rubbing at his eyes, giving a rough cough every few seconds.

His voice was hoarse, but he talked anyway, interrupting himself with a small swallow every few words. "N-Nick.." The conman didn't react. "Nick, man, are you pissed at me..?"

Nick silently rubbed at his shoulders with his free hand, alternating, wincing subtly with an otherwise blank expression. He wasn't going to talk to Ellis, not about this. The hick had a frustrating habit of understanding him and the last thing he wanted was to examine his own emotions.

"I was just tryin' tuh -" Ellis stifled himself, frowning heavily as he coughed into a fist, wincing. Blinking through misty vision, he reached out, trying to grasp Nick's sleeve. "Nick.."

The gambler smoothly dodged it when he sensed Ellis leaning forward, sparing the smallest glare over his shoulder for Ellis. He regretted the motion immediately, because it put his gaze onto Ellis' pleading blues.

"C'mon, man. I feel bad enough already without'cha ignorin' me - I didn't mean tuh freak you out..?"

Gritting his teeth slightly, Nick snapped, his determination flagging. "Just shut up." He was hungry, and tired, and so much of his energy was going into just keeping his guard up. He didn't have any left for this.

Ellis relaxed a little with Nick's response, even if it cowed him. He lowered his chin a little, hiding underneath the bill of his cap. "M really sorry, Nick." he insisted breathlessly. "S'just, I don't always think. I just wanted tuh.."

He hesitated, for just a beat, and then he admitted it weakly: "I just wanted to impress y'all."

Nick felt Ellis' hand go for his sleeve again, and when those fingers brushed against his wrist he rejected it with a jerk again - but something faltered in his spine, and with a small growl of frustration, the gambler slipped down to sit on the bottom porch step.

He bent forward, rubbing his face with flat palms, agitated. He was in such a stupid, frustrating position. He wanted to keep Ellis out of danger, and fine. He could live with that, even if it was an
agitating reflex. What he couldn't stand was anyone knowing that but him.

Why can't you just not give a shit, Nicolas? Jesus. What the fuck is so hard about that? Let someone else protect him. It's not hard.

Nick sensed Ellis' gaze on his back, but the younger man was quiet for a while, respectfully. Slowly, Nick heard him shifting, and the Georgian thudded his rump from step to step until he slid to sit right beside him.

He gently stretched out his legs, digging his heels into the ground, not saying a word. Nick didn't chase him away, though he inwardly flirted with the idea.

In the end, they sat there quietly for a few moments, neither moving and neither making to speak. Nick kept hunched down, rubbing his forehead with closed eyes, and Ellis gazed down the road with scrunched brows.

Slowly, giving little hiccoughs here and there, Ellis coaxed himself to end the silence. "Keith is always real reckless, y'know. Guess I get it from him, not thinkin' afore I do shit." When Nick didn't speak - but didn't protest either, Ellis gently nudged his shoulder with his own.

"... still mad?"

The gambler snorted, pulling one hand away from his face. He stretched his arm up without moving, smacking Ellis across the side of the head with a flat hand.

The Georgian jumped a bit, blinking and catching his hat as it tumbled off his head. He chuckled softly, giving the stinging spot a little rub before replacing his cap and nudging it down over his eyes.

"Of course I am. I'm stuck with a fucking reckless child." Nick spat sideways at him, tone low and hostile and eyes half-closed. "You just can't not act like a dumbshit, can you?"

The insults fell flat - Ellis smiled back at him. He took a moment to sigh, rubbing his still-gripping knuckles against the bill of his cap, then murmured, "Good thing yer here tuh drag me outta the smoke, then."

Nick shook his head. Simply, shortly, and he growled a little as his face turned forward again. Ellis let his chin tip up to gaze at the conman's face. Agitation wrenched the edge of his mouth down, a natural curl on ruggedly stubbled features. "That's not my goddamn job. You're so goddamn... guh. I should've just let you suffocate."

The words did little but make Ellis' smile deepen, exhaling in a tiny sigh. He was confident in his understanding of the gambler's anger - Nick was worried, and anger was his defensive reflex. If Ellis didn't understand that yet, he'd be stupid.

If anything, Ellis was a little flattered.

"C'mon, Nick." he pleaded gently, feeling guilt tug at his stomach. "Please quit bein' mad? 'M real sorry I didn't listen to y'all. I promise I'll be more careful next -"

"No, you won't." the gambler snarled, curling fingers into fists. "You'll do something stupid and I'll have to kill myself trying to drag you out. We're in so much fucking danger, for Chrissakes, Ellis! Can you act like that intimidates you for one goddamn second?"

Rather than respond, Ellis gave a sigh. He glanced down toward his knees for a moment in silence,
listening to Nick growl to himself.

Slowly, the Georgian reached up to twist his cap a bit to the side, getting the bill cocked away. With still-lowered eyes, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to the gambler's cheek, plush lips nuzzling onto thick, softening stubble. "Sorry..

Nick jolted under the kiss, spine straightening to reflexively jerk away. Ellis felt his face heat up when the gambler twisted around to inspect him, frustration thickening under his surprise.

"The -" Seeming, Ellis swore, flustered, the conman fumbled and then fell silent. He gave a minute growl before turning to stare off into the distance, eyes almost hazed and mouth pinched into a severe line.

The kid ducked his head down, feeling a little embarrassed by his own actions, especially considering he'd successfully startled Nick. He rubbed at his neck, lowering his chin, and gave the smallest of bashful chuckles.

"Don't be mad, Nick. It ain't like I got hurt none or nothin'. 'M alright, yer alright - heck, we're doin' pretty okay considerin' we're in an apocalypse 'n' all that. We're practically -"

Mid-sentence, Nick's body turned. One hand set on the porch stair to brace his weight, the other snapping up to grasp straight onto Ellis' shirt, fingers curling in the fabric. He tugged the kid close, dragging him into a lean until he could turn ice-cold eyes straight onto his face.

Ellis felt his lungs expanding to give an inhale, but Nick's glare made him freeze up, unsure. He blinked into half-squinted green eyes, not making any motion to pry free from his hold, trusting implicitly. It took a moment for Nick to speak, sharply examining his face, eyes unreadable beyond a cool anger.

"Ellis, you are the last person I want to hear talk right now. You are fucking insufferable."

The Georgian opened his mouth to respond.

"Shut. The fuck. Up."

With some reluctance, Ellis acquiesced, clamping his jaw shut and lowering his chin a little. He felt the smallest pang of hurt in his chest, though he tried to ignore it. Something in the gambler's shoulders relaxed, and he let go of Ellis' shirt with a dark sigh and a small push to straighten Ellis out on the step.

Fingers curling with stress, the gambler hunched down to set elbows on his knees and rake digits through his hair, forcing the dark strands into place. A deep sigh escaped him, exhale and inhale visible in the shifting of his back.

Ellis examined his hands, setting them on his knees with the tiniest utterance of "Jeez." under his breath. He tapped his fingers against the fabric of his coveralls, resisting the urge to sigh.

For some reason, that had bothered him more than anything Nick had said beforehand.

They sat in silence for a while, Nick's fingers taking a slow massage on his own shoulders. Ellis noticed it, eyes flicking toward him, but didn't say a word - just returned his gaze down the street to watch the wind rustle along the leaves of roadside trees.

He did his best to remind himself Nick didn't really mean it. However, that was easier to think than to believe, and try as he might to stifle it he felt a frown working its way onto his face. Ellis wanted
to protest. Force him to talk and apologize, even if it was in that backwards not-so-apologetic way Nick had of moving on.

He didn't.

Better to let it sit for a while, so Nick could have some time to think on it. He'd only get angrier if Ellis pushed it. Had he made a mistake by kissing him…? It had just… happened… It had felt right.

A sharp whistle broke the silence, coming from down the road, and Ellis lifted his head. He blinked once, then lifted a hand to straighten his cap out on his head. He mumbled, "That's Ro'. C'mon."

Setting his jaw a little, Ellis pushed himself up off the steps and curled his hands into his pockets. With his shotgun slung over his shoulder by the strap, he quietly set off down the sidewalk toward the noise.

Nick fell into step behind him after an instant, and the two wordlessly walked toward the direction of the whistle, stepping over infected corpses as they went down the sidewalk. Ellis felt Nick's gaze like one feels the burning pressure of a too-close match, but he didn't let himself react.

He was allowed to get his feelings hurt - wasn't he?

Rochelle's pink-shrouded form flashed into sight leaning out of a house two blocks down. She had a grip on the doorway, other hand raising to wave at them. Ellis returned it with a smile, picking up his pace as he skittered across the concrete.

The house had a white-picket porch, all prim and old-fashioned underneath draping roadside trees. The lawn's grass was faded and patchy, as if struggling to grow in poor soil. Ellis jumped the fence with a quick leap, getting the hand of his uninjured arm on the slats between the fence points and using it to vault over.

The fence wobbled dangerously with his weight. He was aware of Nick snorting behind him, and the conman stubbornly continued down the sidewalk until he reached the fence's gate.

"'Ey, Ro'! Y'all find anythin'?"

"Yeah." She smiled gently, watching him as he loped across the lawn to stand before her. "A lot of these houses are just nightmares on the inside - but this one's pretty clean."

Ellis scratched at the back of his neck, shutting an eye as his forearm brushed into his cheek. "It ain't like we're too clean ourselves, Ro'."

Rochelle gave a little shiver, shaking her head and thumbing over her shoulder. "Ohh, no, sweetheart. When I say nightmares I mean… dead bodies in the beds and … blood everywhere, like someone fell into a blender. Not exactly a good place for sleep."

Crinkling his nose gently, Ellis uttered, "Oh." He snuck a glance over her shoulder, but the porch eaves didn't let in much light, and the house was eerily dark. Although he started to question just how they'd looked around, he belatedly noticed the flashlight in her other hand and stopped. "... Guess there ain't no power?"

"No.. but there's still some hope. Coach said he thought he saw a backup generator in the backyard, but I wanted to bring you guys back before we went outside again." A slightly tired breath escaped her, stepping back into the house and clicking on her flashlight.
Nick caught up with them, growling in irritation as green eyes severely flickered over what Rochelle's light beam illuminated of the house's front room. "Where is Tons of Fun, anyway?"

Coach's deep voice rumbled from inside the house, more amused than anything else. "Watch it." Nick didn't quite jump, but he stiffened. The football coach came up behind Rochelle, his shotgun rested on his shoulder. He gestured into the house, shaking his head. "Preciate the concern, though, Nick."

The conman spared him a subtle glare. "Ha."

Speaking up a little, Ellis scooted into the house past Rochelle. "Ey, least this one's got a proper door, right?" Her flashlight filtered in, lighting up the odd shapes of a family's dining room.

A tall dining table took up most of the front room, chairs encircling all sides but the one pushed straight against the wall. A kitchen sat further in, only a small bar-style counter separating the two rooms. The left side of the house was cut off by a half-closed door.

A staircase led to the second floor, up against the back wall, and there was a door beneath it that must've opened into the backyard.

"Oh yeah, a door. Aren't we fucking lucky." Nick grumbled, raking fingers through his hair. Ellis didn't respond, feeling a little torn - and a little guilty. The older man was reacting to his voice at least, even if he was being sarcastic about it.

Shiit - should I... say somethin'..?

Ellis kept his gaze roving over the house's walls, fighting a sense of hesitance. He waffled too long, and the opportunity passed.

"Two bedrooms upstairs." Coach stated, lifting a hand to rub at his forehead with his wrist. He seemed about to continue, a questioning lift touching one low brow, but Rochelle broke in with a breezy tone:

"I'd rather bunk with you, Coach. Let's split up like we have been so far."

Ellis felt his ears heat up a little, but he didn't risk turning around and looking at her. He knew entirely too well she was doing it for his sake - or, rather, their sake. It didn't really matter, though, not in the end.

What did matter was that they'd be in the same room.

The guilt swept in again, and Ellis lifted up a hand to rub at his jaw, wincing off into the darker corners of the room. He regretted getting his feelings hurt so quickly. So it was Nick's fault - a little. It wasn't like Nick had done anything beyond the norm.

Ellis, on the other hand, had just gone out on a limb and kissed his cheek. It was... impulsive.

Maybe Nick didn't like the affection.

Hoh, boy. I am over-thinkin' this! We had a li'l misunderstandin'. He's upset. That's all... I'll make it up to him. It'll be fine.

The gambler snorted lowly, retorting as his gaze traced Ellis' silhouette against the darker backdrop of the house's innards. His tone was low and artificial, ringing out with a hollow thrum. He was just on the verge of genuine frustration, a laziness lowering his eyelids as he kept it in check and forced
it into the facade of mockery.

"Sure. Leave me with the chatterbox. I see how it is."

Rochelle rolled her eyes with a shake of her head, setting a hand on her stomach with a deep sigh. "Deal with it, suit... Anyway, if Coach and Ellis want to go look into the power, we can take some downtime and rustle up some food..?

She'd barely even finished the words before Nick was pushing past her, coolly plucking her flashlight right out of her hands and walking for the staircase at the back of the house. He lit his way with a steadily twisted wrist, voice tossed over his shoulder.

"You ladies have fun with that. I'm going to go lay down."

Ellis blinked after him, feeling a little lost for words as the conman headed upstairs without another word. His lips drew together in a slow frown, wondering after him, wishing he understood - but Coach had a hand clapped onto his shoulder a beat later, and he had to force himself to think clearly.

"C'mon, son." the big man grunted gently, pat-patting before gently wheeling Ellis to walk toward the backdoor. "Figured you might be able to help out here. Gotta get this generator-thang workin'. I don't wanna be the one listenin' to Nick whinin' if he don't get his shower."

Ellis quickly swallowed, bobbing his head with an easy smile. He lowered his gaze as the eldest guided him across the house. "'Course, Coach. 'M sure it ain't gonna be too much trouble, just maybe fuelin' it up since it ain't au-to-matic or nothin'. Heh - I ever tell you 'bout the time muh buddy K-" He saw Coach's slow, sideways glance before the big man had a chance to interrupt him. Bashfully, he curled in his lips, giving a little cough and dropping his chin.

"...Uh, well. Turns out you can't run yer lawnmower on beer or it explodes. I mean, not right off, but it starts makin' this real crazy ruckus and after a minute -"

Rather than being annoyed, Coach was laughing, head shaking as he pulled Ellis into a little sideways-shake of a hug with the grip he had on his shoulder and sighed.

"Son, yo' mouth could play runnin'-back on my team any day."
Chapter 66

The second he got behind a closed door, Nick threw the flashlight straight across the room. The beam went wild as it pinwheeled through the air, and it clipped the edge of the guestroom's bed to go shooting straight down to the floor with a clatter.

"FUCK!" he snarled in peaking frustration - finding immediately that, with no windows to let in any light, he'd thrown himself into pitch darkness.

"Fuck." came to his lips at the realization.

"..fuuuck.." hissed out of him in a small exhale as he started to slowly move forward, aware he had no grasp of the layout of the room from the tiny snapshot he'd gotten before he'd flung the flashlight -

- and when he stepped straight into a chair, getting his foot stuck in the legs and tripping over it, he chanted it angrily: "Fuckfuckfuckfuck!"

The conman went down blindly, hands quickly shooting out to try and catch himself. He landed half-bent over the fallen chair. Try as he might to salvage some piece of his dignity, one edge of the wooden seat jammed into his crotch like some sort twisted last jibe from fate.

He went limp as a kitten grabbed by the scruff, groaning a little at the wave of gut-wrenching pain driven deep by the collision - it could've been a lot worse, but he still ended up in that reflexive fetal position as he maneuvered himself sideways off the chair tenderly.

He didn't know what hurt worse: his groin, his leg, or his ego.

Lying there for just a moment, he sighed, letting his head rest on the carpet as stars flickered behind his eyelids. Calm down. Jesus. He felt so inordinately frustrated. It was enough to deal with Ellis' recklessness all on its own, but the argument they'd had was messing with his head.

Nick made people mad. He upset them, he insulted them. He did it all the time and he did it intentionally, and he didn't care to do anything different. That was just how it worked, and he liked it that way. It kept everyone at bay and off-guard.

Unfortunately, watching Ellis crumple underneath his anger was about as satisfying as jamming thumbtacks into his own hand.

He didn't know why. Maybe it was because Ellis was such a rubber-skinned kid all the time that when Nick hurt his feelings, he knew he'd done something honestly over the line. Or maybe that, in all truthfulness, he hadn't meant to hurt him at all.

Ellis was supposed to shrug it off - not absorb it.

Rolling softly to get his hands underneath himself, the gambler slowly crawled to his feet. A heavy wince lingered over his features, soothingly rubbing a flat palm against his still-tender groin as he limped forward.

His free hand was outstretched, feeling for the bed that he remembered seeing. When his fingertips brushed against it, he climbed up onto the mattress, slowly shuffling to the other side until he could see the fallen flashlight, shining dully against the floor.
The gambler strained to pluck it up off the floor, letting his legs slip off and sitting himself on the edge of the bed as he snatched it up. Using the flashlight to illuminate the room, Nick examined it. It was a quaint little guestroom, mostly taken up by the single bed that he currently sat on.

The single, one-person bed.

He stared for a quiet moment, examining the room and the lacking width of the bed he sat on. They'd either cram together or one of them would sleep on the floor - fine. He could stand that.

**Probably depends on if he forgives me or not.**

Wait - forgive ME? His nose crinkled suddenly, head rearing back as he struggled with his own wording. *He's the reckless idiot! Why am I - ... Why should I even care? Fuck that. He can sleep on the floor for the shit he puts me through. Fuck. That.*

Clicking his flashlight off with a suddenly frustrated grunt, Nick flipped himself to lie down on the bed, crossing his arms underneath his head as he thudded onto the pillow. The gambler wordlessly scowled up at the ceiling, stewing.

*Goddamnit, Ellis. Goddamnit.*

His vision was just starting to adapt to the darkness, picking out shapes and silhouettes in the room, when he closed his eyes. He felt his brows scrunch on his forehead, agitated, but he focused instead on relaxing as best he could.

The gambler lifted up his shoulders a little, tenderly stripping his suit jacket off. It took a slight squirm to free himself from the cloth, groaning slightly as discomfort returned to his shoulders. In a rare moment of carelessness, the gambler just flopped his arm to shuck his jacket to the floor, going limp when his arm dangled over the edge of the bed.

The apocalypse days had been marked by a general ache, a full-body kind of overexertion, but when something hurt more than normal everything else seemed to fade away in favor of a crystalline, piercing awareness of the new injury.

He needed a shower. A scalding hot shower to burn away all the disgusting sensations and, even better, emotions clinging to him like smog - completely start fresh, like a bleached surface.

His shoulders ached, a pain sunk into the sockets. He wanted to rub them, but to do so would've meant lifting the other arm, and now that he'd gotten laid down he didn't even want to move. So he didn't.

Relaxed in the dark, somehow comforted by the silent shadows encircling him, Nick dozed. It was easier than it should've been, all things considered.

Easier than it should've been to nap dreamlessly, too - he was sure he did fall asleep, even transiently, but there were no imprinted images to mark the drifting of his subconscious. Not even the faded ghost-like memory of a mostly forgotten dream.

Nick might've doubted that he'd fallen entirely asleep, but when he suddenly grasped for consciousness, it was with a face-full of cloth. He was used to the feeling, instantly rolling his face further into the pillow with a small growl as he tightened his arms in their embrace on his impromptu partner.

Whether he liked the habit or not, it wasn't something he could exactly stop. It at least gave him something to bury his face in while ignoring whatever it was that stirred him.
"...Nick.. c'mon."

*Oh, of course. Ellis. Never anything but Ellis.* Growling under his breath, Nick pulled his face away from the pillow enough to talk, agitated. He didn't look at first, hoping he could just chase Ellis away vocally. "What?"

Ellis chuckled softly, a nervous edge to his voice Nick wasn't used to hearing. "Man, I can't never tell how yer gonna wake up.. half the time yer all snuggly, 'n' half the time I think yer gonna tear me up."

"I'm considering it." the gambler muttered, forcing his eyes open and turning his chin a little. He spared one green eye to stare up toward the kid, disoriented at first. The room was still pitch-dark, but Ellis held a plate with a lit candle in either hand, the small flames scattering a fair amount of light in wavering shudders.

Ellis immediately wilted back just a tiny bit, and as he gave a hesitant half-smile, Nick snorted, unmoving. "And call me 'snuggly' again, I goddamn dare - wait." Suddenly something clicked in his head.

Ellis and Coach had gone to get the power working.

Ellis was now standing in front of him with lit candles.

Nick could tell the Georgian knew he'd realized it, because he took a careful step back, lifting his shoulders almost defensively. "I'm real sorry, Nick!" The gambler groaned near-silently, burying his face back into the pillow and inhaling heavily against the fabric as if to suffocate himself.

"I know you were lookin' forward tuh a shower, man, but the thing is, the generator's real busted up - I think it shorted out somehow. Coach'n'I did our best, but -"

"Just stop." Nick snarled into the fabric, still... unfortunately... breathing. "The one fucking thing I ask for..." Twisting slightly and shoving the pillow aside, the conman got himself up, shoving to sit on the opposite edge of the bed from Ellis. "Just a god-damn shower.."

He slumped, body in a lean curve and back straining subtly against the fabric of his dress shirt as he just gave up trying to hold his posture. He glared forward at the wall, furious.

Ellis shifted on his feet, frowning. The mechanic gingerly stepped to the side, setting one of the candles down on the bedside table. He crossed the room with the other, setting it on a dresser, so the light reached the whole room. "It'll be okay, Nick... y-"

"No." Nick didn't look over, palming a hand down his face with tense fingers. He scratched harshly on his stubbled jawline, the softening scruff rustling under his fingertips. "Just fucking no, Overalls. I cannot handle your bullshit optimism right now."

The Georgian adjusted the candle plate softly, centering it with a sigh. "I'm just tryin' tuh -"

"I said -"

But Ellis wasn't having it. A huff escaped the Georgian, turning around where he stood. His jaw jutted forward slightly, arms slipping into a loose cross over his chest. "Will you quit interruptin' me?!"

Nick straightened slightly, turning at the waist to stare at Ellis across the room. Green eyes pierced through him, burning, strangely silent. The Southerner didn't get angry often. *Okay. Cut to the*
Giving a small breath and kicking a boot softly against the carpet, Ellis lifted his head, meeting Nick's gaze after a moment. Blue stubbornly held green, mostly unintimidated by the glare, holding his ground.

This wasn't about electricity anymore.

"...Look, Nick, if yuh feel like shit then say so. If yer tired then say so. But yer just yellin' at me and gettin' mad, 'n' it ain't gettin' us nowhere."

Nick felt his body stiffen, growling, eyes narrowing slowly. He rolled his shoulders slowly, head tipping. He was silent for a moment, staring, and then questioned in flat sarcasm, "Permission to speak?"

Ellis didn't rise to that, holding his gaze silently.

"Listen, Georgia. If you can't handle getting yelled at, fine. I'll stop yelling at you - at the same time I stop saving your stupid redneck ass." The gambler lifted up a hand, jabbing a ringed finger at Ellis spitefully. "I hope you enjoy your respite from my fucking temper while you're getting strangled, eaten, mauled, and crushed to death."

Ellis frowned heavily, clamping a hand onto his hat and adjusting it on his head. The bill lowered just a little, not quite low enough to hide his eyes, nor the uneasy flutter that traveled across them. "That ain't funny, Nick."

The conman threw his hands up, regretting the motion as it pivoted sore shoulders. "Am I laughing? Christ, Overalls. Every goddamn time I turn around you're throwing yourself into danger or running off. Please, give me a fucking excuse not to chase after you anymore."

With a little groan, Ellis squeezed fingers on his truck-adorned hat. "Nick, will you -"

Apparently not having learned, Nick interrupted him anew, a snarl touching the edge of his voice as he pushed his hands onto his knees. "I can't fucking take my eyes off you for two minutes!"

Ellis broke, yanking his hat straight off his head with a jerk of his arm and raising his voice to a near-shout, "Maybe that's why yer so damn pissed!"

They both froze. Neither really moved for a moment, a loaded and uncomfortable silence playing over the moment.

Nick slowly turned to face the wall, lowering his chin to focus his gaze on the carpet between his shoes. It shouldn't have surprised him that Ellis knew what was going on. The kid had an unnatural sense for people - and he was undaunted by any of Nick's attempts to shoo him away.

No, the Georgian knew.

It pissed Nick off and unnerved him all at once.

Ellis hesitated where he stood. He didn't necessarily regret the outburst, but he could feel the anger vibrating along the conman's frame and it cowed him a little. Slowly drawing his cap into both his hands, feeling at the fabric in a shy gesture, Ellis drew in a careful breath.

He shuffled just the smallest of steps closer to the bed. "...I worry 'bout you too, y'know. It ain't like it's bad. We're a team."
Nick didn't say a word at first. He lifted up a hand and rubbed at his brow, closing eyes with an 
inhale. Frustrated, there was a deep, roiling sarcasm to his voice when he did. "Aww, aren't you 
cute. All in touch with your emotions."

He listened to Ellis' little laugh in response. It was a sweet-edged noise, a little relieved now that 
their voices were lowered again. The Southerner approached a little more, bridging the gap, but 
Nick kept his eyes closed.

His mocking did give a little admittance - through his not denying Ellis' assertion, he subtly 
confirmed it. He didn't particularly like that, but better do it in a backwards fashion than say it 
outright.

"Y'know I really am sorry, right, Nick..?"

Ellis' voice was hesitantly gentle. He was closer than Nick had thought, just at the end of the bed, 
and Nick sighed wearily. "Yeah, sport. I..." The conman slipped a hand up, slouching forward 
slowly and rubbing at his sore shoulders.

'Am too'? Was that what he was going to say?

"... just don't have the confidence you do that we're not all going to die. Horribly. Soon."

Ellis smiled gently, giving a soft sigh and rubbing his face. The relief he felt as the argument 
stopped was crippling, a swelling kind of warmth bubbling in his chest. He'd been right, and all 
that was left was a little bit of guilt at so stubbornly making Nick admit it.

"I know." he uttered, apologetically, slipping his cap back onto his head and screwing it down a 
little. "Like I said, I was reckless runnin' off like that. I'll be more careful if it's gonna freak yuh out 
like that, okay?"

Nick groaned softly at the phrasing, rubbing his shoulders with both hands now as stress stiffened 
his back muscles. It worsened with the inward reminder that he wasn't going to get the scalding 
shower he'd promised himself.

"I wasn't -" He stopped, though, exhaling with a little roughened edge. "... Well, remember the last 
time you disappeared into a house with one of those things...?"

Ellis' smile gained a feisty edge of humor, guffawing gently and scuffing his knuckles against the 
bedsheets. "Heh, aww, yeah.. man, feels like for-ever ago. You came 'n' saved me back then, too!"

A small snort escaped the gambler, hanging his head and masking a subtle half-smirk under the 
shadows crossing over his face in the lowly lit room. "Don't make that a habit, alright? I'm all for a 
good smoke right now, but those assclowns are a little more dangerous." He closed his eyes tightly, 
leaning forward until his elbows braced on his knees.

"Yeah..." Ellis trailed softly, seeming to fall silent for a moment. Nick wasn't overly surprised 
when he felt the bed bow behind him with Ellis' weight, but he expected the younger man to slip to 
sit next to him or just sit on the other side.

What he didn't expect was the mechanic to shuffle up onto the bed and into a kneel behind him, or 
to set hands on his shoulders.

They were deliberate, warm hands, hard-worked and calloused. Though he could feel hesitance 
through the fingertips, Ellis' uncertainty bleeding into his touch, it was barely a beat before they 
squeezed gently on his shoulders.
Nick started to open his mouth, not quite startled but prepared to question the contact - but he halted when the touch circled, heavy thumbs rolling into the muscle of his shoulders.

Using the muscles on either side of Nick's neck to brace his grip, Ellis shifted the pressure from his thumbs to the heels of his hands, digging wondrously into sore muscle. Even through his shirt it felt fantastic - Nick felt an actual, honest groan tear from his throat.

"Over-" he half-uttered, spine shifting straighter to encourage the touch even as his voice gave a little questioning twist, not sure he should be submitting so easily... and then Ellis pushed upward, following his spine to rub into the back of his neck, calloused fingertips circling directly onto bared skin with a hesitant pressure.

The shudder Ellis got out of the older man as he stroked into the sweet spots along his spine was crippling. ".ffuuuh.." Nick ghosted. He barely noticed how Ellis was nursing his injured arm, putting less pressure with that hand so he didn't flex his bitten forearm any more than necessary.

Ellis laughed very gently, just a little, bashful guffaw. Nick couldn't get the inspiration to be annoyed, lowering his chin to surrender his neck to the Georgian's fingers and letting his eyes drift shut. "You hurt yer shoulders when we were fightin' that Smoker, right..? Been rubbin' at 'em a lot."

Unresponsive, at least in coherent words, Nick hummed out a pleased noise. He lolled his head just a little to the right as Ellis traveled back down to his shoulders. A wild thought had Nick wishing his shirt was off... but he couldn't get himself to interrupt Ellis long enough to strip it.

"Shoulder massages're real nice. S'fun, makin' someone feel better." 'Fun' wasn't the word Nick would use to describe it - nor was 'better.' The conman had no idea how the kid knew how to do it that well, and just then, he didn't care.

Ellis shuffled forward slightly, getting closer, and Nick felt the plane of Ellis' tummy just nuzzle against his lower back as he leaned forward. He murmured, something shy entering his voice, even when Nick didn't pay the slightest attention. "Used tuh do this when muh mama was workin' double shifts."

With a tender, firm squeeze, Ellis rubbed the heels of his hands tightly into the flesh of Nick's shoulderblades. The conman arched backward, groaning, his heels digging into the carpet.

It brought them closer. Nick didn't notice, but Ellis did.

The Georgian's voice softened further, hiding the slight shake to his voice as his pulse jumped into his throat. "Hope it's okay..." He leaned his head down just a little, eyes half-closing, hovering his face just to the side of Nick's.

All the while he kept his hands working, squeezing through his shirt and manipulating the sore muscles underneath his palms. Circles and strokes, presses and slides... following the shiver of Nick's frame to find what felt good.

Nick smelled... good. It was a strange experience, one that dizzied Ellis a little. Nick didn't smell good like cologne and soap, but musky. Deep. Underneath the blood, sweat, and grime that was becoming so expected, he just smelled good.

Ellis couldn't explain it. It wasn't a scent, so much as it was a feeling.

"Mmnh.. El..." Nick mindlessly uttered, a throaty arousal to the tone. The conman didn't really realize how much he gave away in the simple slip: the thrumming heat creeping up his spine and
the building pleasure with the simple contact of Ellis' hands and body.

He let his hands travel down a little on Nick's back, spreading fingertips to ghost carefully around the small circles of blood where the Witch had injured him. More on whim and impulse than anything else, Ellis leaned in and nuzzled his mouth down the side of Nick's neck in something between a kiss and a graze.

He felt Nick stiffen. For just one single instant, Ellis was certain he'd made a mistake.

Then - one of Nick's hands lifted up, fingers burrowing underneath Ellis' cap to curl into his hair. His hat tumbled away, baring his face to the low candlelight and the burn of Nick's green eyes. Ellis' confidence came undone, a blush darting across the bridge of his nose and spilling onto his cheeks.

A low breath escaped Ellis as those fingers pulled his head up just a few inches, Nick catching his lower lip in a firm bite before capturing his mouth in a kiss. He used the grip to pull Ellis closer, their bodies slowly starting to turn, hunting out more contact and a closer touch.

Nick slid his leg into a curl on the edge of the bed so he could twist further. He had the kid pliable to him, ripe for the taking -

Then his bandaged calf scraped on the edge of the mattress. Nick hissed before he could stop it, and Ellis drew back from the kiss at the sound, pushing against the fingers on his scalp. A concerned quirk touched his face.

Unfortunately, Ellis was not slow on the uptake. His eyes went down toward Nick's leg, arousal dissipating as fast as it had arrived. Concern rose in its place.

"Damnit -"

"Nick?" the kid questioned, even as he propped his weight on a wrist placed against the older man's shoulder and reached out his other hand toward the gambler's injured leg. "You okay?"

Nick tried to bat Ellis' hand away, but the mechanic stubbornly pressed his body around him and got a hand on the leg of his slacks. Tugging it up gently, harder when it caught against the mattress, Ellis didn't give him much choice but to cooperate.

"I'm fine - Kid. Leave it. There's nothing to do."

If Ellis heard him, he didn't indicate it. He simply shuffled Nick's pantleg up until he could get a look at his bandaged calf, a frown quirking at his mouth. His head cocked, fingertips touching at the edges of the stained stripe down the bandages. "Nick…" he muttered in vague chastisement.

It had only been a day and a half since they'd changed them, but all the moving around had agitated it into bleeding on and off, and sweat and dirt from traveling and spending the night in the forest hadn't done it any favours.

Okay, Nick admitted internally. It doesn't look great.

Blue eyes flicked to the side, catching the gambler's gaze. Nick could see the stubborn glint in them. "We gotta clean you up. Why didn't you say nothin'?"

"Say what? It's not like we have enough bandages to change it. We didn't even have enough for you." Nick gestured with his chin toward the kid's wrapped forearm, and Ellis gave it a blinking moment of attention. He considered it. Then his gaze was right back onto Nick, fiercer this time.
"We could'uh done *somethin*. Whenever Keith gets real injured, we gotta change his bandages all the time. 'N' you ain't even on meds or nothin'."

Sighing, Nick reached up to draw his hand across his forehead, exasperation sinking into his voice. "Ellis, it's -" However, he didn't get much further before the Georgian was up off the bed and onto his feet.

"Gotta be somethin' in this house we can use tuh clean it up." Ellis assured him, off-handedly, moving before Nick could catch him. He watched in rising annoyance as the kid loped off toward the bedroom door. "You just sit, Nick, I'll look around. We'll get'cha fixed up right."

Sourly trailing his hand down his face and onto his chest, scratching at the patch of skin bared by his unbuttoned collar, Nick narrowed his eyes into frustrated slits. He resigned to watching Ellis tear out of the bedroom, hearing his progress through the house on heavy boots as he rooted around.

Complete with hollering at Rochelle and Coach, voice muffled through the walls. Nick groaned faintly in frustration, allowing his body to collapse back onto the bed. He could still feel the warmth where Ellis had sat, suffusing into his lower back.

"My idea was more fun."
Nick propped himself up on a pillow, and his bad leg was stretched out off the mattress, foot balanced on the chair he'd previously tripped over. The position suspended his calf in the air, and Ellis kneeled next to it, hand-towel in one hand and a dish full of water between his knees.

Ellis tossed the cloth over his shoulder, freeing his hands up so he could reach and start undoing the bandages tucked just beneath Nick's knee. He didn't pay too much attention to the air of suffering radiating off the man laid face-down on the bed.

He was practically sulking, and he'd seemingly thrown himself at Ellis' mercy like a martyr on the pyre.

The bandages didn't uncoil so much as they peeled away, stiff with dried blood. Ellis tried to be gentle, but also go quick enough so as to not draw it out. Even if Nick held his silence stubbornly, the tendons under his knee twitched perceptibly as pain made them jump.

"Sorry." Ellis apologized, getting only more silence in return. It wasn't like he liked causing the man pain - but if he didn't do this, he didn't think Nick would. He sighed a bit, under his breath, but was undaunted. Peeling away the bandages, his nose crinkled a bit at the state of Nick's leg.

The skin was mostly smooth around the clotted scabs that had built up, marred by the occasional strip of raw red-pink where the bandages had pulled away skin. The only comfort he took was that it was shallow, and it didn't bleed much as he revealed it.

His concern laid more in the clear liquid seeping from some of the deeper sections, mostly around where the acid had made skin had bubble up in slim patches of raised flesh, like welts. That, and the faint red streaks snaking up the side of Nick's legs.

He knew enough from dealing with Keith to recognize the signs of an infection. He frowned, continuing to unwrap the bandages until he'd gotten Nick's leg entirely freed. "Man, I dunno. It don't look great. You feelin' okay…?"

Nick's voice was muffled. And annoyed. "I was going to feel great." Unsurprised, Ellis merely shook his head. He knew perfectly well what he'd stopped from happening, and knew perfectly well that Nick's face-down position had been adopted, at least partially, to disguise the fact his slacks were still tented.

Not that that was bound to last long, considering the pain caused by Ellis' examination.

He tugged the dirty bandages free of Nick's ankle, tossing them to the ground with a thoughtful glance. Nick had been right on one count; they were running out of bandages, and they definitely didn't have enough to cover the wounds. Neither could they do a patch-job like they'd done with Ellis' forearm.

The swathe of damage was just too big.

"Nick." he sighed out, voice tinged with a note of plea. "We gotta do this."

A faint grumbled phrase was lost in Nick's pillow, inaudible, and then he returned the younger man's sigh. "Yeah." was his vague acquiescence, body shifting faintly without moving his leg. "It hurts. What do you want me to say? Christ."
Ellis nodded his head slightly, then tilted it, gazing thoughtfully at the slope of Nick's calf before he reached up to tug the handtowel off his shoulder. "Guess puttin' on that anti-biotic shit didn't really help too much." He carefully dipped it in the dish he'd filled with water, letting the fabric soak for a moment. "Maybe it'd be real worse if we hadn't, though."

Nick grunted, hearing the sound of water pattering as Ellis lifted up the cloth. "Not sure it's meant for a fucking acid burn." He shifted his arms to clench his hands on his forearms, squeezing the pillow between his biceps hard enough to crush it in preparation for the pain. Ellis noticed the movement, a sympathetic twist at the edge of his mouth.

"I'll go fast." he promised, folding the cloth into a square and gripping it against his palm. "Sorry." Water trickled down his forearm, scattering on the carpet, and Ellis leaned in to swipe it along the edge of the wound testingly.

The older man's leg clenched, but if it hurt too badly, he wasn't about to let on. Even so, his lack of a vocal response attested to the genuine pain he must've been in. Ellis felt a small clench in his chest. He steeled himself, focusing on cleaning the wound.

It was worse near the center, where the skin was bubbled and welted. There, Nick did utter something when Ellis forced himself to wipe the area with a firm hand; it amounted to a slurred, "Godfuckshit."

A tiny split tore itself over the welted flesh as Ellis' cloth brushed past, and a liquid oozed out like he'd lanced a boil.

The Georgian raised his brows a little, turning the towel to examine it and the liquids of various consistencies and colours that now marred the threads. "Sick." he uttered under his breath, in a tone full of curiosity and interest rather than any kind of disgust.

"What?" Nick hissed out, urgently, and Ellis had to remind himself he'd spoken aloud.

"Uh, nothin'. Nothin'." He folded it over to a different side, returning his attention to Nick's calf. Daubing carefully, he attacked the site until he'd cleared it of pus.

Every touch made the gambler shiver, to varying degrees, and he spoke through a tightly clenched jaw. "It felt a lot -" A huff of pain interrupted him there as Ellis pressed his palm against the towel, flat to his calf, a firm pressure applied before he peeled it away again. "- better before you started touching it."

Ellis tipped his head sympathetically, swinging his gaze up to look toward the older man. Nick's body was in a position stiffer than a plank, shoulders trembling softly. He gave him a break - but just as long as it took him to dip the towel back into the water, re-wetting it. Red dissipated into the dish, staining the water.

"That ain't really a good thing, Nick. Yuh can't just ignore it."

The gambler didn't give that a response, though that may have had to do with Ellis returning his attention to his leg. He didn't intentionally go on the attack to prove his point, but the swipe of his cloth was enough to shut Nick up.

He tried to clean around the scabbing stretches of flesh, figuring they were better off left alone. There was, however, loose and browning flesh and crusted blood that he tried to abrade off without applying more pressure than necessary. Ellis could hear Nick breathing in ragged inhales and exhales, and the Southerner chewed at the inside of his cheek.
He felt guilty. Necessary or no, listening to Nick suffer wasn't something he enjoyed.

It was only stubbornness that kept Ellis going, working from knee to ankle, cleaning the residue and sweat off. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing.

Ellis surveyed the wound critically, giving some final attention to the deepest sections before leaning away. The older man didn't utter a word as Ellis swapped the cloth into his other hand and reached into the deep pocket of his coveralls, drawing out the tube of ointment he'd found in one of the bathrooms.

At least antibiotic gel was ubiquitous in most households.

"Well… can't hurt tuh keep puttin' it on."

He uncapped it, and after a moment of thought, fist ed it in his hand and tipped it over Nick's calf. Ellis squeezed like he meant to empty the entire thing out. The gambler jumped slightly as it hit his leg and curled into spools of lukewarm opaque gel, grumbling a protest.

"Yeah, it can."

Smiling a little, despite himself, Ellis drew the handtowel back up and used a clean, drier edge to smear the antibiotic liberally. He didn't bother to aim for any particular spots this time, trying to get it anywhere and everywhere.

For all Nick's complaints, the conman was at least cooperative.

The pain must have been lessened, because Nick managed a full question without huffing or stumbling, though his voice was taut. "Where'd you find water, anyway? Thought the power was out."

Ellis stopped mid-motion, mouth gawping open in thought. He'd already decided against sharing that piece of information - so he failed to answer, forcing out a casual, "Uh, hang on. Gotta grab somethin'.", hoping Nick would get distracted in the meantime.

He was also hoping the gambler wouldn't notice the toilet's tank lid had been removed in the hallway bathroom.

Ellis got to his feet, dropping the cloth into the bowl with a wet slap and brushing his hands off against one another. He worked his way over to the dresser in the corner of the room, maneuvering by candlelight, and started to rifle through its contents.

He'd had the thought while looking for supplies to clean Nick's wound. Wrapping the injured leg in a shirt would keep it protected, at the least. It wasn't exactly sanitary, but the house and its contents were pretty clean, all things considered.

Whoever had lived there must have packed and left, because there wasn't much left beyond some socks and a few scattered articles of clothing. Ellis' eyes landed on a grey undershirt, grabbing it and inspecting it.

The room was too dim to get a good look. He turned to step closer to the candle nearby and squinted, trying to ascertain if the shirt was clean enough for his purposes.

"Really?"

When Nick spoke, it was more composed than before. Ellis jolted his head up a little, looking
toward the bed, and Nick had turned his head to gaze toward him. His eyes were on the shirt in a critical slant, clearly disapproving.

Releasing a soft sigh, Ellis sniffed at the undershirt in his hands. It smelled clean, looked clean… "Best we got." He said it thoughtfully - like he wasn't completely convinced himself - then met Nick's gaze and offered a reassuring smile.

The other man's eyes ticked over his mouth, musingly, before the gambler slumped back down against his pillow in silent resignation. "… Fine, fine."

That made Ellis laugh as he folded the shirt into half. It was soft, and subtle, finding the gambler's quiet and persistent agitation endearing. "Sorry. I looked fer bandages, but I dunno if they got enough Band-Aids fer this."

"I miss hospitals." Nick muttered as a retort, tone almost scathing. "And I never thought I'd say that."

Walking back to his place on the carpet, Ellis bent over and examined Nick's leg, thoughtfully looking between it and the shirt in his hands. "It'll be okay, Nick." he promised, ignoring the other man's scoffing exhale. "I ain't gonna let'cha get hurt." Ellis draped the shirt over Nick's calf, laying it down lightly.

He kneeled, working on tying it off by the sleeves and the bottom edges. Nick grunted a little as he drew the knots tight, and Ellis looked over his work with some satisfaction.

Some.

He'd have loved to give Nick better treatment, but at least he felt like he'd done something. He set his hands on his hips, fingertips rubbing at the fabric of his dirty coveralls. "A'ight. That's it - feel any better?"

Nick's response was expected and shot back instantly. "No." Ellis merely watched, head tilting, as the older man coiled his body away from the bed. Pressing the knee of his bad leg against the edge of the mattress, Nick maneuvered his other foot to the ground and made to stand up.

When he wobbled, Ellis was instantly to his side, catching an arm around his waist and ensuring he didn't fall. His presence made Nick stiffen slightly, but the gambler merely leaned against him long enough to slide his wounded leg off the chair and straighten it out.

He tested his weight on it and glared down at the grey fabric swathed around his lower leg, a scowl creeping onto his face. Ellis felt his heart sink a little at the look - he hadn't expected Nick to be enthused, but… he'd tried.

It must have shown on his face. When Nick glanced at him, green eyes scanning that expression, it was with a long-suffering sigh. Their argument came swarming back, all at once, and it was past a frustrated, stubborn feeling that Nick made himself take a breath.

Reluctantly, Nick reached down to grasp at his pantleg. He shuffled it, shaking it out of the messy fold it had taken above his knee, and let it fall down around his lower leg. It just barely fit around the makeshift bandages, and it was bulged around his calf, but he managed. "… Yeah. It's better. Thanks, Ace."

Ellis lifted his chin, breaking into a pleased grin - but Nick was faster, tipping his head to catch the younger man in a kiss. He muffled anything Ellis might have said in return, and the kid only seemed at a loss for an instant before he returned it, lips warm as they locked with Nick's.
Nick just wanted to shut him up. He didn't want to talk; didn't want to say more than he'd already said.

It was Ellis who drew his hand up Nick's side, grazing fingertips to grip at his ribs through his dress shirt. His hand suffused warmth, and it slowly crept up until it could rest against Nick's chest. Something shifted in their embrace when it settled there, soft and affectionate.

Almost reflexively, Nick turned into the younger man, an arm slipping forward to circle around his waist and draw him closer. Their bodies fit together, familiar; Ellis fit to him effortlessly. _Wanted_ to fit against him.

He didn't want to think about it, or the feeling it spawned, the _clench_ - in his gut.

His chest.

It was a cold feeling… and then, suddenly, hot.

They stood there, faces pressed close, and Nick wanted so badly to deepen the kiss to something more. He would have given anything to take them to the ground, to fuck him until every wild emotion made sense -

Ellis broke the kiss, suddenly, though he moved like it hurt to pull away. Those blue eyes just barely opened as he did, his expression masked by the cast shadows of the dim candlelight. It took a moment for him to lift his chin, matching Nick's gaze. His eyes were warm, melted.

"They're waitin' downstairs… We, uh -"

Nick nodded before he even really registered the words, cutting Ellis off with the motion. His arm slipped away, followed shortly by his body. Separating settled something back into place in his mind. Control, maybe.

"Yeah." was all he said, and his voice was low, but mild.

He felt calm, for the first time since he'd nearly been speared through the chest in the gas station. Calm like the feeling of downing that first shot of whiskey, or taking that first puff off a fresh cigarette.

It should have shaken him, but he held onto it. He needed it.

Nick drew in a breath, focusing on taking a few steps away. His leg throbbed, sure, but the taut and stretched pain was gone, along with the crust and residue Ellis had cleaned off his wound. When it didn't fail under him, Nick moved for the door.

He was aware of Ellis lagging behind him, kneeling down to the carpet to pick up the bowl and the bandages, cleaning the mess they'd created.

Nick waited.
Ellis and Nick returned downstairs in single file. Although he walked with a limp, Nick did so mostly to ensure he didn't stress the 'bandage' wrapped around his calf. Otherwise, there was a lightness to his movements.

He was in a significantly better mood than he'd been in when he'd left.

"Hey, boys." Rochelle greeted them from across the room. She was perched on the edge of the dining table, a candle-adorned plate cradled in her hands. Hot wax had dribbled down onto the plate's surface, and she was in the midst of gently prodding at a few beads of the semi-solid substance.

Nick gave a casual nod, slipping his hands into the pockets of his slacks as he moved. He had his suit jacket tossed over a shoulder. "Hey doll. Any news on food?"

Rochelle glanced up, her brows lifting in slight surprise. She'd expected Nick to be furious when next she saw him. She cocked her head to one side, gaze sliding toward Ellis for just an instant before she questioned, "Ellis did tell you, right?"

"About the power? Yeah, sure." The gambler shrugged his shoulders, crossing the room toward the table. He grabbed ahold of a chair and flipped it around, straddling the back of it and crossing his arms on the dining table. "There's got to be some shit in the pantry or something."

Ellis followed after him carefully, sticking his hands in his pockets. He gave Rochelle a cautious little smile, reassuringly.

"Well," she responded cautiously, blinking once at Ellis before returning her gaze to Nick. She thumbed over her shoulder toward the kitchen, and Nick noticed the shuffling and tinkling of what must've been Coach hunting around. "Coach wanted to fix us up supper. Guess he's still feeling a little guilty."

Ellis immediately gave a frown, lifting a hand to paw at his cap. He approached the table to pull out a chair of his own, flopping down into it limply and lifting up to set his bootee against the edge of the table.

"But we ain't mad at him… He didn't do nothin'."

Rochelle laughed gently, lowering her voice and her gaze. She set a hand flat on her cheek, and the scabbed clawmarks that traced from her jaw to her cheekbone. "Of course we aren't. But guilt doesn't always make a lot of sense."

Nick lifted up one hand, setting his knuckles against his cheek. He arched a brow lazily, almost closing his eyes. "If it gets me food, he can guilt himself into an early grave."

Rochelle shot him a threatening look, clucking her tongue slightly as if considering taking a swipe at him. She turned at the waist, merely placing the candle down on the table, and sighed. "Ass."

"Hungry ass." the gambler corrected her, smirk lingering.
Rolling her eyes, Rochelle focused on Ellis, leaning a little toward him. She smiled gently at him, fingertips rolling a drop of wax into an uneven ball. "He'll be okay, Ellis. Don't feel too bad. Sometimes you just have to wrestle your own demons."

The kid deepened his frown a little, sighing softly and lifting up his arms to cross them behind his head. He nuzzled back onto his forearms, closing his eyes with a slowly relaxing expression. "Guess so.. man. Wish we could cheer him up."

Coach's deep voice came from the kitchen, startling them all. It was probably silly to think the big man hadn't heard them talking, but they'd figured there was enough distance between them. "Y'all wanna make me feel better, start eatin'."

There was a chuckle to the edge of his voice. As much as there was a little chastisement to the shortness of his interruption, he seemed in a good enough mood as he walked into the dining room.

He'd taken a wide cooking pan as a makeshift tray, cradling it on a flat palm. On one side was a pile of sandwiches, cut into triangular halves like it might make them more attractive. Ellis could only guess what they were at first, but as the big man got closer to the table, the creamy smell of tuna struck his nose.

The other side of the pan was stacked with saltines, smooshed together like Oreos with peanut butter between the crispy squares. Four cans of soda lined the middle of the pan in a little arrangement. There was something careful and deliberate about the arrangement - like Coach had worried over it.

It was Nick who started the cheer. He gave a surprisingly sincere "Heey!" and lifted up his hands to give a slow clap, one that Rochelle and Ellis joined immediately, applauding the eldest's efforts with a little chipper 'whoop!'.

Coach laughed in a booming baritone, his expression almost embarrassed as he stepped up to set the pan down on the center of the table. He waved them off, grinning, gesturing to the makeshift supper. "There was some shit in the cabinets. Canned tuna, peanut butter.. soda was in the fridge. Warm, but figure y'all don't mind. Ain't no four-star restaurant, but it'll get us through."

"Awesome job, Coach." Rochelle murmured, smiling brightly as she tucked a loose braid behind her ear. He met her gaze, and there was a warmth between them.

Ellis was bursting with excitement before he'd even gotten his hands on any of it. "This's great, man! Muh mama used tuh make sandwiches like this - hoh man, I ain't been this hungry since - hoh man!" He started to scramble up from his seat, reaching out his hands.

"Whoa, whoa, kid." Nick lifted up an arm from the back of his chair, firmly waving Ellis to stillness. The younger man blinked at him, starting to lean back, confused as to just why he was being chided.

"Whoa, whoa, kid." Nick lifted up an arm from the back of his chair, firmly waving Ellis to stillness. The younger man blinked at him, starting to lean back, confused as to just why he was being chided.

Leave it to Nick to snatch up the sandwich Ellis had been clearly aiming for with a snarky grin. "Higher IQ eats first."

"'Ey!" Ellis yelped in protest, vaulting straight up from his chair and charging the distance between them. The kid got an arm around Nick's neck and grabbed onto his sandwich-gripping wrist, wrestling it away from his mouth just as he'd went to take a bite.

Nick outright laughed as the Georgian tackled him, choking a little and twisting to elbow Ellis in the stomach. With his chair spun around, he quite nearly toppled backwards, hooking his good leg
with the chair's to keep himself up. "Hey! Hey! Get off, ya smelly hick! You're ruining my suit!"

"Yer suit's way gone, man! Gimme my sandwich!" Ellis retorted, grinning hugely as he deflected the elbow with a little squirm to the side. Nick fought him, snapping at the air as he tried to get a bite off the edge of the wide triangle of bread and tuna.

Rochelle and Coach could only look on in slightly bemused silence. They traded a glance, and the woman responded with a shrug and smile, as if to say 'they get along sometimes, I guess'. Coach rolled his eyes, resigning to a chuckle.

"You gimme my sandwich or I'll steal all'uv'em 'n' you can see how yer IQ fills you up!" the kid railed, voice only just fending off the laughter tickling over his expression. He whipped his free hand at Nick's head, but the gambler dodged it.

"Okay! Okay! Just get off and I'll hand it over, jeez!" he complained, shoving at Ellis again. The kid gave a satisfied harrumpf and stepped away, releasing Nick's wrist and neck slowly.

Lifting up with an affronted shake of his shoulders, Nick sloowwly straightened his collar and sloowwly patted down his torso with his free hand, sloowwly raking fingers through his hair to make sure Ellis hadn't mussed him up any more than the apocalypse already did -

And then took a huge bite of the sandwich in his hand, chewing with slow appreciation.

Rochelle burst into laughter as Ellis gawped at Nick's cat-who-ate-the-canary smile, Coach joining an instant later, shaking his head. "Y'all calm yo' asses down, we got plenty of food."

"Yuh - you ate muh -!" Ellis stuttered, huff-puffing as he stared at Nick's chewing mouth.

"Uh-huh." Nick confirmed, wiping a little fleck of tuna off the corner of his lips with a knuckle and sucking it off. "It was good, too."

Coach picked up a sandwich with a sigh, leaning over the table to stick it straight in front of Ellis' nose. It took the mechanic just a second, but the smell overwhelmed his disbelief, and with a little sigh, Ellis took it from him and shoved the whole thing into his mouth.

It was Coach's turn to look shocked, staring at Ellis' chipmunk-cheeks as he ravenously chewed. The kid's baby blues blinked back at him innocently - though he at least had the manners to put his wrist over his mouth.

"If Ellis can do it, so can I." Rochelle claimed, just before cramming an entire sandwich in her mouth.

She nearly choked, less from the mouthful and more from blushing laughter as her actions tickled all three of her male companions to stitches. The mere concept of full bellies and real food was drugging.

Nick laughed more than any of his teammates had seen, maybe ever. It was something honest and raw, revealed within the safety of the private company, stowed away from the cruel realities outside the house. He tried to lean over and prod Rochelle's cheek, forcing her to fend him off with batting hands and muffled squeaks.

That was pretty much how the whole meal went. They didn't quite realize how starved they were until they smelled that pure, savoury scent of tuna, so tantalizingly spread between bread slices. And they didn't realize how good they felt until they were in the middle of devouring it.
The saltines went just as fast, peanut butter washed down with eager sips of soda. Nick seemed to hesitate at first, a little crinkle touching his nose at the sticky food, but hunger drove him forward.

Between bites, Ellis rambled. Half of them were - and Nick was surprised at himself for recognizing this - stories he'd told before, disastrous Keith adventures and their antics around Savannah.

But there was reminiscing, too. It wasn't melancholy or longing - he chirped blithely as he talked, drawl pleasant and expression moreso. No one tried to stop him, not tonight. If anything, they prompted him, questioned him, encouraged him.

He beamed the whole way through.

"This's just like when muh mama 'n' Keith 'n' his parents'd get tuhgether at the park 'n' have picnics 'n' shit - awh, man, only time I didn't see his parents stressed out.. they were real nice folks, they were, s'just bein' parents tuh Keith wasn't no easy thing. Not with him havin' two other brothers! Aw, man, Paul 'n' Riley are just the coolest. Riley's just like ten, but he's got the craziest mouth, man! Learns all his cusses from Keith, I swear. Paul's real level-headed, got all this sense. Think he stole it all, so Keith'n'Riley didn't get none! But Riley never did hang around us too much 'cause he's liable tuh get hurt, y'know.. - oah, I never mentioned Riley before? Aw, well, he done gone tuh his aunt's over in Colorado when Keith's parents passed away, but he comes back sometimes. Heh.. he likes playin' tag. Pretends he's all rough'n'tumble, but fact is, I ain't never seen that kid without him beggin' tuh play tag with me! Haw. Good thing I like tag, too."

Coach scanned slowly over all three of them with a happy twinkle to those deepset eyes. Maybe he stole a little bit of his football team back, seeing them all so happy - or maybe a little bit of his family. Maybe both.

Ellis wound down as the food did. His voice faded out, focus growing distant as he happily examined the little bulge to his belly.

Nick stood up from his chair and picked up his suit jacket from where it lay over the seat. "Okay," he admitted, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out his slightly crumpled cigarette box, prying one last stick from the broken cardboard. He'd wasted a good number, just self-soothing with them unlit between his lips while he had no matches to light them.

He stepped around Rochelle's seat, the woman watching him curiously, and bent down to light it on the slowly melting candle.

The cigarette slipped between his lips, and he puffed in a heavy breath and turned his head away to blow the smoke off in another direction. Nobody denied him the pleasure. "Maybe the apocalypse can have its good moments, too."

Coach chuckled lowly, resting his hands on his stomach and leaning back in his chair. "You in a good mood, Nick? Good to see."

"Temporarily." the gambler uttered with a teasing half-smirk, popping his lips on his cigarette with a groan of barely withheld pleasure as the nicotine sung through his veins. "Makes me miss homecooked meals, but ... not too badly."

"You cook?" Rochelle questioned with an edge of honest curiousity. Nick nodded with a shrug, a little casual edge to it.

The gambler rolled his cigarette between his knuckles, relaxed. "Yeah. My uncle was obsessed
with his Italian roots - guess he thought I needed to learn how to cook. I can run the pasta gauntlet pretty well, couple other tricks. Enough to eat."

She gave him a fairly fascinated blink, Ellis' head lifting up drowsily to do the same. They were all acutely aware of how valuable information about Nick was - so rarely given out. "I never was that good in the kitchen -" She added as he started to smirk: "Stereotypes aside."

But she smiled back. Ellis was contagious - her chocolate-shadowed eyes lit up as she spoke, no sorrow in the recollection of her loved ones. "Jacob does all the cooking. Even got him a little flowery apron one Christmas.. as a joke, of course, but he wore it. He looks so cute in it."

"You know any Italian, Nick?" Coach, with a chuckle to his voice, questioned.

Nick smirked at the words, rolling his eyes with a little wave of his wrist in a negatory gesture. "I didn't care that much. Just enough to pay attention to the food talk. And understand when he was yelling at me."

Ellis' attention didn't waver, insistently curious, sleepy eyes blinking up toward Nick with an utterly enraptured glimmer. "C'mon, Nick..." He looked about to fall asleep, exhausted from all the excitement and the food. They all did.

Nick glanced up at him, lids lowering as he pulled a slow drag on his cigarette. He was silent, for just a subtle moment, then offered, "Okay, sure - saccente. Means 'smart-ass,' more or less. His favorite nickname for me. You can probably get why."

"That's so neat.." Ellis drawled, squirming a little to get more comfortable as he set his cheek against his own shoulder. His body flopped slightly, voice lowering. "Man.. I dunno if I got any roots or nothin' like that.."

The conman snorted into his cigarette, closing his eyes as he succumbed to the hot pleasure burning against his lower lip. "Pure 100% redneck, I'm sure.. gasoline and beer flowing through your veins."

When Ellis didn't retort, the gambler smirked. "...What? No cityslicker retorts? I'm disappointed." Coach's gruff clear-of-the-throat was the only response, and Nick reopened his eyes, arching a brow. The big man was nodding towards Ellis, and Nick glanced over.

The kid was fast asleep, already nearly drooling into his shoulder with the clumsy slump of his head.

Nick wanted to laugh.

Rochelle rested an elbow against the table, smiling over at him. Her eyes softened, practically fawning her gaze over the dozing shape of his face. "... Probably time to get bunked up, anyway." she murmured in a low tone, though Ellis didn't look about to stir anytime soon. "Can you get him upstairs, Nick, or do you want some help?"

The gambler shrugged a shoulder, adopting a fairly blank expression. "He's a kid.. I got it."

Tucking his cigarette into the corner of his mouth and tossing his suit jacket around his neck, Nick walked over to Ellis' chair, leaning down to get an arm under Ellis' knees and one under his arms. Hauling him up, Nick made sure his head flopped away so the Georgian didn't drool on his shoulder. That capped head obeyed limply, mouth hanging open as a little sleepy mumble escaped him, half-stirring.
Nick glanced at Coach and Rochelle, giving a roll of his eyes as he adjusted his grip on the younger man's frame and gave a little smoke-wreathed sigh. "See you two assclowns in the morning."

Rochelle waved at him, entertained. Coach just shook his head with a chuckle and turned his gaze down toward the dining table. Nick didn't linger much - just carried Ellis back toward the stairs.

He wasn't all that heavy, although Nick's shoulders complained in a dull ache. The staircase was a little tough, with Nick's leg still acting up, but the conman trudged through it with a stiff jaw. He'd left the guest bedroom door open behind them, so it was just a matter of carrying Ellis through the doorway.

Nick shut it with his foot, gently, sighing as his gaze alighted on the bed. He stood there for just a moment, staring. They hadn't discussed the sleeping arrangements, and now Ellis was unconscious.

... oh for chrissakes, don't be a dick, Nick. Just give him the goddamn bed.

What, did he have an angel on his shoulder now?

Resigned, Nick carried Ellis to the bed after turning the lock on the door with an awkwardly twisted hand. He nudged the blanket out of the way and set the younger man down on the mattress. Straightening, the gambler glanced down at him, examining the limply sprawled body.

The candle had burned itself low, darkening the light even further. It lent a warm glow to the room, and to Ellis' skin. Nick found himself reaching down a hand, a knuckle touching down the shape of the kid's cheek, tracing a little bruise with it.

He was as soft and warm as he looked...

Turning his wrist a little, Nick let his fingertips shift to a slight cradle on the man's cheek. He could have slid down and kissed him - he wanted to. There, he froze, staring at his own hand like it had betrayed him.

What are you even doing, huh? He didn't even have the energy to enthusiastically yell at himself in his own head. It came out like a tired whine. Looking for a replacement? Just because your bitch wife left you doesn't give you the right to -

Ellis mumbled a little, incoherently, turning his face into the warmth against his cheek. Nick blinked when a little drool from the edge of Ellis' mouth dampened the side of his thumb. He pulled his hand away reflexively, and slowly wiped it on his shirt.

... Who are you kidding with this shit, Nick?

"I need some sleep." Nick sighed, under his breath. He bent forward to pull the blanket over Ellis' body, watching the Georgian roll against the soft layer with another mumble… then still. He didn't look completely content; he more appeared too exhausted to move.

The gambler retreated to the end of the bed, dropping down to the carpet there. It wasn't completely uncomfortable, although he knew his back would hate him the next morning. He folded his suit jacket into a pillow, setting it down on the ground, and let himself crawl stiffly down to the floor.

Sprawling out on his back after putting his cigarette out on the footboard of the bed, he settled his head on the lump of fabric and closed his eyes. A small sigh escaped him, that determined noise that relaxed his muscles for sleep.
He needed to sleep.

The thing was...

Rest didn't come. He lay there, comfortable in his position and his satisfied stomach and the cigarette smell still lingering on his lips and in his lungs... and his mind blankly stared into oblivion with a very blunt resistance to sleep. He felt it, like a cloud, a buzzing anxiety that rose to fill the silence around him.

... *Fuck.*

Did he have to count sheep? Sing himself a lullaby? Was sleep really going to hide from him on that night, of all nights? Time ticked by like molasses. Agitation revived his usual, energetic self-beratement.

_Goddamnit, go to sleep. You ate. You have a lot of shit to do tomorrow. Go to sleep, you fucking piece of shit._

Silence answered him - but a roaring silence, rudely sharpening his senses as he listened to the nothingness all around him. It should have lulled him to sleep. Instead, it only seemed to stir him further.

_Godka-

"Nnhm." sleepily drawled from the bed above him. Just a little, innocent, mid-sleep noise, reacting to whatever dream bounced in Ellis' head. Nick's eyes flashed open, staring at the shadowed ceiling as his attention perked for the sound.

A little sigh huffed out of the Georgian, drowsy and quiet.

Nick fought the thought that popped into his head. He fought it hard, refusing to even let it coherently form past a trailing _Maybe_. It made him tense where he lay, fingers curling slowly into fists - the pressure building like a coiling spring until he burst.

Silently, the conman got a grip on the footboard of the bed and pulled himself up off the floor. He kicked his shoes off with a firm jerk, toe to heel, and crossed to the side of the bed.

Without a word, he tugged up the blanket and crawled into the bed beside the kid. Rather than hesitate or move cautiously, he threw all concept of sneaking out the window and just shoved his arms around Ellis, dragging the sleeping man into a close embrace from behind.

There was only so much room on the single bed, but it was enough, and forced them close together.

Ellis didn't even stir beyond a little nudge of his head and a vague sigh that melted him back into Nick's arms. The blanket settled slowly over both of them, gently falling upon the slopes and edges of their spooning frames.

As Nick's mouth settled against the back of his head, slow inhale dragging in the cloying notes of sweat at the base of Ellis' neck, the conman discovered something incredibly frustrating:

He fell asleep almost effortlessly.

Chapter End Notes
He came to awareness in a hospital room -

No.

_The_ hospital room.

He knew that instantly; he knew, somehow, exactly where he was. It was this intrinsic awareness before he'd even opened his eyes.

"You don't - understand! I need to know where she is!"

IVs tied him to the bed. A cast protected the broken bones of arm. The sheets strangled his breath, too tight, too clinging, swaddled like bonds on his aching body -

Then they were gone.

He got up.

"I don't fucking care how fucking injured I FUCKING AM, GIVE ME A GODDAMN PHONE!"

He started toward the door. It was closed before, but now it was open, and he walked through it with a slow determination. He knew what he was walking toward, but he couldn't control himself. Couldn't stop.

"Angel.. pick up.. Angel.. for fuck's sake.. for fuck's sake pick up.."

The hospital was empty and that made no sense.

If only sense mattered.

"Christ. Christ. Shit. Where are you?!"

The helplessness. The anger. The terror. It was a smoky fog and it drowned him, and everything turned dark and cramped. His vision blurred. He started running down the hallway but he hurt -

He tasted blood and he hurt -

"I -"

She was there, at the end of the hallway. Crying into her hands, curly locks a mess on her head and trailing down onto heaving, dark shoulders.

Nick wanted to hold her. Just one more time.

She was right in front of him.

He reached out.

His fingertips touched the thick hair that fell around her shoulders. Just brushed it, tenderly, fingers trembling as if she might disappear. Her hair was soft and smelled like cloying perfume.

Her crying stopped.
Nick couldn’t breathe as she slipped to her feet. Slowly turned to face him.

Lifted her chin.

"I don’t..."

Those familiar features were sunken.

Pale.

Bare as the gleaming bone of a skull, eyes burning red.

A mouth of needlepoint teeth opened to shriek as she slashed out with the brutal claws that had replaced her fingers. She tore open his chest and he stood there, ripped clean to pieces and all he could say was a vague “I don’t understand."

Nick woke up and the nightmare broke like a crack of lightning, but the bedroom was dark. Pitch dark - black like the roiling shadows that clouded at his perception.

A burning fervor tore into every inch of his half-curled body. He was shivering - but sweating, lungs struggling to expand in his chest. Something was touching him and he panicked, trying to pull away and escape it, blindly.

But it was Ellis.

Just Ellis.

Suddenly, the breath that had been torn from his body returned, and Nick gasped silently to calm a wrenching stomach and a spinning head. Struggling, the gambler got upright, pushing his back against the headboard of the bed and clamping a hand over his mouth to try and soothe himself.

His fingers shook and green eyes stared sightlessly into the dark, shadows burnt with the image of that shark-toothed face. His other hand traced down his side, trying to confirm that his body was in one piece.

All the movement stirred Ellis from his sleep, limp body shifting gradually to drag his head up a little from the mattress. "Nick...?" he mumbled sleepily, rolling very slowly over to face Nick's warm body.

He scooched toward the embrace that had abandoned him. "Nick? Where..."

There was only so much space on the single bed, and Nick couldn't go far. He panted carefully, still and stiff as Ellis' arms drowsily found their way to frame his waist. That curly mop settled cheek-down on his chest, affectionately.

Nick didn't move, not an inch. His pulse pounded in his chest and his head, a haunting nausea and adrenaline making him swallow deeply, over and over. Ellis might have dozed back off had he not felt Nick's heart thudding frantically in his ear.

The kid slowly raised his chin, gaze blindly and blearily blinking toward Nick's face. He drawled, slowly, concern bleeding into his tone freely as he peeped into the silent dark with waning confidence. "Yuh 'kay..? Somethin' wrong?"

Nick's attention tore down to the Georgian, eyes just closing in the darkness. He forced himself to croak a response through his tension, tone taut. "Yes. No. ... Go back to sleep."
Ellis sighed softly, half in exhaustion and half in resignation. He laid there for a moment, silent, and then quietly nuzzled against the gambler's chest. Those worked arms tightened on Nick's torso, fingers winding in his shirt.

"Mhn.. Okay. 'M here if yuh need..."

He was already mostly gone, last words a vague mumble as his mind succumbed to sleep again, warm breath going steady and calm against Nick's chest. Ellis seemed content, laying there against him, drifting off.

The conman silently drew his arms around Ellis' neck, resting forearms on the muscled slopes that made up his shoulders, staring silently into the dark as he held the younger man close.

It took time to fall asleep again.
Only half-awake at the start of his yawn, Ellis found himself stretching deliciously as it petered out. A smile plastered easily across his face, skin humming with the close touch of Nick's body - the first real sensation Ellis felt, waking up. Those lightly clothed arms wrapped around him, embracing with all the tight need that Ellis had seen him clutch a pillow.

They'd slowly dragged him up Nick's chest, the older man's back half-propped against the headboard in a half sit, until his head nestled under the gambler's chin. Nick's arms held him there with a strangely conscious tension.

Ellis felt his chest tighten, smile widening with a drowsy affection.

He couldn't really recall what had happened past the fact he'd dozed off at the dinner table, but he could fill the blanks easily enough with their current situation. Nick must've carried him upstairs and tucked him in.

With him.

The room was dark when he lifted his head, squinting carefully to get a grip on his surroundings as his eyes adjusted. Ellis glanced back at Nick's face - he looked exhausted. Exaggerated by shadows, dark circles and the scruff of his stubble made him haggard and pale.

Some of Ellis' good mood tapered off, hesitant as he examined the sleeping expression of the gambler. Although Nick's arms had him a little trapped, Ellis wormed an arm free to reach up and touch fingertips to Nick's cheek.

He petted gently, calloused fingertips rustling over facial hair. With a little sigh, Ellis shook his head, sympathetically. "Man. Wish I could'uh gotten you that shower, Nick... yuh ain't lookin' too hot."

Ellis craned his head up, stretching to kiss Nick's forehead. His lips brushed between the conman's brows, a little guffaw escaping him as they twitched in recognition.

He nestled his forehead against the conman's, closing his eyes with a light sigh. For just a moment - a few, sparing seconds - he laid like that, enjoying the way their bodies laid together. The embrace was warm and soft. Nick supported him with a certain strength, both in his arms and the stability of his thick torso, and Ellis felt safe there.

He'd never really felt like that before. It left him giddy, but sleepily so.

Ellis moved to pull away reluctantly, head bobbing slightly, but the conman's arms suddenly tightened around him as they felt his frame shifting. Needily, like a little unconscious 'don't go.' Ellis' heart twisted up into knots.

"Yeah..." he confided in the sleeping gambler. "You'd hit me fer sayin' it, but yer pretty cute when yer asleep."

Waking him up was definitely not in Ellis' plan. The gambler was looking a little under the weather, even if his mood the night before had been unusually good, and Ellis wanted him to sleep as long as possible. Resolved, Ellis carefully started to extricate himself from Nick's embrace.

It was, he imagined, like wrestling an octopus.
Ellis couldn't help but grin as Nick's hands honestly fought his attempts to worm away, refusing to release him. Ellis got an arm free, reaching out to grip on the edge of the mattress and brace himself - but Nick just gripped fingers in his shirt, holding him fast.

He started to pull the fingers free from the fabric of his shirt, gently, but the conman's other arm encircled his waist and tightened. Nick seemed primed to just roll over on top of him and settle the matter entirely, his brows folded up in a certain discontent.

Ellis sighed after a moment, smiling, and he got a firm grip onto both of Nick's wrists. Forcing them away with a measured strength, the kid crawled himself sideways out from under the covers, wriggling his legs a bit to get free.

Nick seemed frustrated for an instant, rolling onto his side with an exhausted grunt as Ellis let his wrists go. As his body flopped down, he stilled, face turning into the mattress and frame suddenly going limp in defeat.

Ellis gave a bemused glance up his frame, breath catching just slightly at the gambler's starkly handsome, exhaustion-rugged face. Looking at him, Ellis couldn't help but think he looked lonely. Guilt struck at him just slightly, nagging. "... Here." he murmured down to the gambler, reaching over to the bedside table to pick his cap up from where Nick must've set it down.

He gently tucked it under one of Nick's hands, patting his fingers into a curl on it. "You watch it fer me again. So you don't wake up wonderin' where I am."

Smiling cheerily down to the unresponsive gambler, Ellis felt a distinct confidence swell in his chest at how he'd handled the situation. Pleased into a soft bob of his head, he carefully maneuvered around the bed.

He tiptoed to the doorway, and tested the knob. It opened with a soft click that betrayed the reversing of the lock mechanism, and he hummed a little bit as he slipped through and shut the door behind himself.

A soft pat of his hand on the closed door was his final goodbye to his sleeping lover.

The sounds of Coach and Rochelle speaking came softly up the stairwell and Ellis scampered down to find them, his socked feet padding on the stairs. They'd extinguished the candles for the morning, with the sun just starting to dust a low grey over the horizon, the light filtering in through mostly curtained windows.

Coach sat at the dining table, the group's guns laid out before him and his hands quietly working to reload them one by one from the ammo stash they had stowed away in their backpack. Behind him, Rochelle knelt on the carpet, a grey T-shirt having replaced her torn Depeche Mode one. She fiddled with the pink fabric, seeming reluctant, her gaze soft on it.

"Of course, Coach... heck, I -"

Ellis' approach made her stop, lifting her head to smile easily at him. "Hey, sweetheart! You sleep well?"

He nodded enthusiastically, rubbing at his neck as he walked. He padded up to the table, retrieving his boots from the floor. "Mmhm! Sure did." As he scooped them up, he dropped down into a chair, bending to start worming his feet into his workboots. "Whut're y'all talkin' about?"

Coach chuckled lowly, shaking his head as he loaded bullets into one of the rifles. "Just chattin' - wonderin' if we're gonna keep in touch after we get safe. The closer we get, the more it's on my
mind. Got our own families to get back to, but we sorta made a new one here."

Ellis' blue eyes blinked wider in a fair bit of shock, surprised by the words. He kicked his heel a little against the carpet, wiggling his ankle to settle his foot flat in his boot, shaking his head emphatically. "Shit, Coach. 'Course we're gonna stay tuhgether! We're tight, man! I can't wait tuh tell Keith all the crazy stuff we've done. Y'all are gonna love meetin' Keith'n'muh mama! They'll love y'all. I wanna meet your families, too."

Rochelle laughed gently, setting her shirt down on her lap and reaching up to adjust her hairtie with careful fingers. "That's how I feel. I want Jacob to meet the people who saved my life."

"Baby girl, I'm gonna give yo' man a shake for dealin' wit' you." Coach teased, setting the rifle down and rubbing hands over his face in a casual kind of exhaustion.

"We'll be like'uh big extended family." Ellis chirped, pleased, setting both his now booted feet onto the floor. He gripped onto his knees, smiling between the two. "You guys 'n' Nick 'n' me 'n' all our families 'n' friends - man, I'm excited already!"

Coach's eyes darkened slightly as his brows settled, his chin lowering and spreading shadows over his face. He returned his attention to the guns on the table, reaching out to idly straighten one.

Ellis leaned a little back in his chair, head tilting slightly as he noticed the big man's sudden change. He frowned just momentarily, concerned, and tossed up a hand questioningly. "Coach? You alright, man?"

The football coach nodded shortly over his shoulder, letting his hand fall flat over the rifle's stock. "Yeah, son. Ain't important."

"Well, sure!" he protested, tone drawling with reassurance. He cuffed his own nose, sniffing a little, brows furrowing. "You saw him last night - we had a great time!"

Coach gazed at the kid for a moment, in silence, deepset eyes resigned in their focus. Ellis shifted a little under the stare, discomfort rising as the first tickle of second-guessing threatened at the edges of his mind.

"He's part'uv our family too." Ellis insisted, confusion setting his teeth on edge. He could read the
doubt on Coach's face - the sympathy, almost, like Ellis was being naive. "Whut, Coach, you sayin' that he's gonna just drop us or somethin'?"

The big man lifted up his hands in a quick soothing motion, shaking his head wearily. "Now, son, I ain't dissin' the man. I'd like us to be friends. Just don't want you gettin' yo' hopes up if he don't wanna hang around like we do."

Rochelle got to her feet. Her brows were furrowed, body poised to interrupt, but Ellis was already taking a step forward and gesturing out a hand. Discomfort flicked, with a burn like the spark of flint on steel, to agitation. He felt his fingers curling slightly against his palms, a weird heat touching his cheeks.

He got angry.

"You ain't bein' fair. He ain't even done nothin' wrong - so he ain't always been nice, so he's got his temper. Nick's gotten real close tuh us, but whut - you think he'd just up'n leave us once we got safe?"

Coach sighed heavily, tone lowering to a gruff rumble. He seemed exhausted more than anything. "He's got pride, son. Don't always let us recognize who matters. Just sayin' - if I understand him any, he might just want to leave. Ain't always easy to admit you needed help."

Ellis' face flushed just a little more, unused to the frustration coursing through him. The ex-football player's words scared him, a sudden, previously untouched train of thought occurring to him. Adrenaline raced through him, and then a lopsided nausea.

Surely he'd stay with them. There was no way Nick would leave them.

"After all we been through .. 'n' you.. man, I can't believe you'd say somethin' like that! I -!" Ellis started, his voice raising, fully intent on arguing to the end… but Rochelle suddenly reached out and grasped his shoulder, silencing him with a start. He glanced toward her, feeling embarrassment rise up his spine when her eyes met his with a soothing blink.

He quieted, that embarrassment turning to shame. He dropped his gaze to his boots, ears burning vibrantly. He'd almost graduated to full-out yelling at the eldest - it wasn't right. He hadn't meant to get upset.

Coach was just trying to be honest. Ellis left his fingers curled in fists, but pushed them into his pockets instead.

"C'mon, you guys. Let's not argue about things that haven't even happened yet." Squeezing Ellis' shoulder when he nodded gently and firming her smile when Coach did the same, she stepped up to the dining table and started to pick up her rifle and Ellis' shotgun.

"Now, Ellis. Let's hunt up the street a little and see if we can find a car. Coach and I were talking about it, and we'd much rather hitch a ride than get stuck walking. It's only going to get hotter."

She smiled comfortably, looking between them with a certain assurance. Ellis couldn't meet her gaze, remorse coloring his voice when he cleared his throat. "Y-yeah, sure, Ro'. Uhm.. reckon that's a great idea."

Giving a little sigh of relief, Rochelle turned and slipped along the wall toward the front door.
"Okay. Coach'll stay here and make sure Nick stays safe." She opened it just a crack, gazing out into the street. Ellis almost went after her. Guilt tugged at his chest, though, and he waited just a beat before turning his chin up hesitantly toward Coach.

He opened his mouth, eyes already melting with apology, but Coach spoke first. "Sorry, Ellis." The big man rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand, giving a tired chuckle. "I don't trust him like you do. That's all."

Ellis blinked at him for just an instant, breaking into a little smile, forgiveness and apology mingled into one odd bubble of hesitant emotion. "Nah. I'm sorry too... got all heated there. He is kinda prickly." Coach reached out, clapping Ellis' shoulder lightly. He shook him just a bit, and Ellis grinned into the gesture - then softened his voice, meeting the eldest's dark-eyed gaze levelly.

"Just try tuh give him a chance, h'uh? Please."

The big man nodded. "I trust you, Ellis. Got my word I'll keep tryin'. An' hey, just means when we're all tucked away safe after all this, you can rub it in my face."

Ellis smiled at him, ducking forward to wrap arms around his shoulders in a hug. Coach seemed outright startled, blinking for just an instant before chuckling wearily and reaching up a hand to clap a hand between Ellis' shoulderblades.

"Thanks, Coach."

Coach just shook his head, oddly amused. For all the world, he might've been just a little embarrassed, too.

The youngest survivor darted back to scoot behind Rochelle, pulling his shotgun from her hands and the two shortly ducking outside. Zombies had re-emerged over the night, the day already warm even though the sun hadn't truly risen beyond a few sparks of orange dully gasping to life amidst grey clouds. Humidity, death, and a sticky, salt-drenched heat mixed together to leave an unpleasant musk to the air.

It was, though, not nearly as unpleasant as the way the argument lingered in the reaches of Ellis' mind.
Rochelle picked off infected at a distance. Her rifle cracked with a sharp sound, body twitching just a little with the recoil. The first few went down easily, but as the gunshots betrayed the two's presence, the infected flocked toward them like starved dogs.

Hiding his wince as his forearm ached, Ellis walked slowly at Rochelle's side, shotgun up and ready. The Southerner moved with an unsettled quiet as he took down the ones that got closer.

The harsh blast sent zombie parts flying like confetti, and it was hard not cringing at the blowback. Rochelle's new shirt wasn't clean for very long. The grey fabric quickly got spattered with shades of black and red, settling into the now-normal grime of the apocalypse.

Wiping a little blood from her forehead, she pointed down the road, head nodding. Ellis quickly followed her gesture, silent as his gaze alighted on the yellow-painted home a few yards from them.

"That house a few blocks down has a garage. Gate's closed, too. Probably a good shot if we wanna find a car."

Ellis nodded wordlessly, reloading his shotgun with a cha-chunk. He advanced down the road, sidestepping a little to get closer to the sidewalk. He, however, only got a few steps before Rochelle's hand alighted on his arm.

Looking quickly back at her, Ellis did his best to look confused - but Rochelle gave him this 'don't give me that' look and sighed, tugging on his arm til he stopped moving. "Sweetheart..."

"Yeah?" he mumbled, something a bit guilty lowering his voice. He shuffled on his feet subtly, looking more like a meek teen than the level-headed zombie killer he had been an instant before. His eyes avoided hers.

Rochelle squeezed gently at his elbow, letting out a small sigh. "Don't let it get to you, Ellis. Coach didn't really know what he was talking about. He's just worried, that's all."

The topic brought a flush rushing up to Ellis' face, averting his eyes up the road and giving a little huffed breath. "I-I ain't. I just... didn't like hearin' that is all. I wish Coach'n'him got on better."

"Me too," she agreed gently, brows pinching over her eyes. "but I think it's bothering you more than that, too. I can see those little wheels spinning. I'm here for you, remember?"

He hesitated, jutting his chin out just a little. He lifted up a hand, rubbing gently at the back of his neck. "... I know that, Ro'. Means a lot." Smiling gently at her, he shut an eye as she lifted up a hand and brushed a smudge of dirt off his forehead affectionately.

"So?" Rochelle prompted with gentle expectation.

Ellis sighed, gesturing with his shoulder to urge her back into motion. They traveled down the sidewalk at a slow pace, Rochelle's gaze settling forward instead of watching his face.

"Tunno, Ro'. The idea of Nick just disappearin' once we get safe.. I don't think he would, I really don't! It ain't like him! S'just.. guess it's scarin' me now." An exasperated sigh left him, lifting up a hand to rub at his face. "Shit, I feel like a real jerk fer doubtin' him."
The struggling of Ellis' fear and guilt was painful to watch, leaving Rochelle resigned to a gentle
shake of her head. She rubbed gently at her chin, quickly vaulting into reassurance. "You said it
yourself, honey. He's changed a lot, just in the time we've known him. Maybe he would've at the
beginning, but I don't believe he'd do that, either."

Glancing at her sideways, Ellis' eyes softened in earnest hope at her words. "That's whut I wanna
think! We've all gone through this tuhgether, he wouldn't just up'n'leave the minute we got outta
danger..

"Not a chance, sweetie." She smiled encouragingly, setting a hand on his shoulder. Ellis couldn't
read the subtle doubt that wavered at the far end of her voice. "He's part of the family too,
remember?"

"Yeah." Ellis bobbed his head in agreement, lifting his chin with a burgeoning confidence that was,
maybe, bolstered by a raw need to believe his own words. "He is! I dunno why I'm worryin'. We're
fightin' through the apocalypse! Yuh don't just walk off after it's all said'n'done, not even if you
were the biggest jerk in the world."

Rochelle started to respond, adjusting her grip on her rifle, but Ellis was off like a shot, let off the
leash of his hesitance to run with newfound, overwhelming confidence. "He just wouldn't wanna
admit it. It ain't like he's used tuh bein' friendly.. we just gotta help him a little. Y'know? Funny,
him actin' all smart when he's clueless. Haw. Bet'cha that'd get right under his skin, too."

There was enough of a breath there for Rochelle to slip in, smiling coyly. "So, you think you two'll
still be an item when we get rescued?" Her tone - almost sly with teasing interest - lit pink over the
bridge of his nose.

"U-uh - well - I don't see why not! I like'm.. a lot, 'n' he's.. I mean…" His blush deepened, rolling a
shoulder a bit as he tried to work out his wording. "I'd sure like tuh - um...

"I think.." Drawling pleasantly, Rochelle interrupted him, trailing her words with a bit of a sway to
her hips as she walked down the sidewalk. "I think.. someone's twitterpated."

Ellis scratched quickly at his cheek, blinking shyly and ducking his head. "Uh - whut -"

"You heard me." She was smiling, footsteps now outright bouncing as she moved down the road.
Her expression beamed, taking visible pleasure in the words she promptly interrupted Ellis with at
each turn.

"R-Ro' -"

"Enamored."

"I -"

"Smitten."

"Will yuh -"

"Infatuated."

"Ro', quit! I-I ain't -"

"In looveee.." she sang out playfully, lifting up her rifle to aim down the sights at an infected
shambling out of the house. The gunshot drowned out Ellis' plaintive, "Stoppit!" as he rubbed
down his face in dismay.

Rochelle grinned quietly at him as the zombie slowly clawed at the gaping hole in its neck, gurgled, looked up toward them - and then collapsed forward to tumble bonelessly down the staircase of the porch.

"Sorry, sweetie. You're an easy target."

Ellis gave a huff of distress, blush over his whole face by then, biting at his lower lip. She smiled as she glanced over the look, eyes lighting up with a certain affection, and she lowered her voice. "You are totally falling for him, aren't you?"

The Georgian couldn't sputter a response fast enough.

"Hey, I get it!" she assured him gently, lips twitching like she might start giggling at any moment. "I'd still rather die than let him get any, but trying to say that... intense look he gets sometimes isn't kinda sexy would be lying."

Sure enough, as Ellis gasped out, "RO! Hoh mah gawd!", shock plastering itself over his face with a healthy glow, she broke into borderline hysterics. He swiped at her with one hand, pushing her away, but she only laughed more, dodging a little as they walked.

"I - so whut, h'uh?" he bleated, pawing at his burning cheeks and desperately wishing he had his cap to hide underneath. "Maybe I am! He's real nice when you get tuh know him!"

Laughing cheerily as she stepped onto the driveway of the chosen house, starting to herd Ellis toward the garage door, Rochelle hummed, "Mhm. Like how he carried you to bed last night.. I wonder who slept on the floor?"

Fighting his embarrassment was a very tough endeavour. Ellis spoke with a flustered force, blurting out the words in faked confidence. "Neither'uv us!"

That completely broke Rochelle - she halted in her steps, cascades of laughter sending her hands shooting up to cover her mouth as doe-brown eyes widened. Ellis' ears and face burned with not-quite shame, averting his gaze even as he smiled bashfully, chagrined by his own admittance.

Rochelle tried to calm herself after a few seconds, a couple deep breaths stopping the laughter. She reached out to grasp onto his elbow, a certain seriousness bleeding onto her expression and a little color lighting her cheeks.

"So, you two have... y'know?"

Her trailing innuendo made Ellis leap a step back, gawping with a fishlike gasp of air. He babbled complete nonsense for an instant, amounting to barely one or two half-words and stuttering syllables, before he got enough composure to be coherent.

"R-Ro'! I can't talk 'bout - that! Yer a girl! I mean, yer like muh sister, basically!"

Rochelle grinned at his stammering, thumbing over her lower lip. "Hey, I'm older than you, boy. And..." She blinked, head cocking. "...I'll take that as a yes?"

Ellis huffed at her, rubbing his cheek quickly and looking away. "Well.. yeah... I mean, not last night or nothin', but - yeah - " He tried, forcing himself to talk, slow word by slow word. "H-he's.. y'know.. sorta ... well, real focused on... that. N' uh.. well, jeez, I ain't exactly been... against... - oh, Lordy. Nope." Fiercely blushing, he turned away, cupping a hand half over his eyes as he fled.
for the garage door. "Nope. Can't talk 'bout this with you."

Rochelle chased after him quickly, some of her amusement draining from her expression. Her voice softened, coaxing his attention back to her like he was a skittish deer. "Okay, okay, I understand... how about this."

Reluctantly slowing to a stop, Ellis glanced back at her, lower lip dragging between his teeth.

"Have you talked to him about it? You know.. how you're feeling, liking him?"

He blinked lightly at the question, rubbing at his ear a bit awkwardly. "W-well, no, not really.. Not yet, I mean."

The woman's voice got more rapt as she pushed him, and he noticed a little concern wrinkling her brow. "Why not?" It made him back up a little, gently shrugging his shoulders in vague defense, though he didn't know what he was defending against.

"Well, I wanna be real sure 'bout it before I go sayin' anythin'!... 'n' besides, he.." Ellis faltered just momentarily, but the instant was more than enough to pique Rochelle's interest. She cocked her brow, and Ellis averted his gaze, chewing on the words carefully.

He was floundering again, but gentler this time. "I guess he ain't too keen on likin' other guys. Y'know. S'why I got so scared when you found out... 'cause I didn't know whut he'd do if he knew y'all knew."

Rochelle nodded, pinching her earlobe between her knuckles. The motion was deliberate and thoughtful, ponderous to what would've been a comical degree had Ellis not been nervously eyeing the motion. He couldn't tell exactly what had her so deep in thought.

Shaking her head a little as if conscious of his worry, Rochelle turned away a little, gaze narrowing up at the house. "You think he'd just drop you if he got.. 'found out,' or whatever?" She quickly tried to reassure him, voice softening again. "I'm not trying to imply anything, sweetie, I'm just.. wondering."

Ellis shrugged again, glancing down to the toes of his boots and rocking onto them a bit. He mused, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, then responded, "Yuh told me before, he's lonely 'cause he pushes people away. Even when they're good fer him." He sighed quietly. "I… I think he likes me, too. He just..."

His voice fell to quiet.

Rochelle watched him for a moment that then trailed into a few of them. She pursed her lips together, worry flecking onto her expression, unsure - suddenly her ability to reassure him was balked under the dark realization that she didn't know if she was convinced.

The very grim idea that Nick really would leave him played into Rochelle's mind, an unwanted reality. The sight of them sleeping together in the trailer, the woods - the knowledge that Nick had carried him up to the bed and slept with him then too... that they'd been intimate.

She wanted to believe the fantasies of sudden and strong love in the middle of the end of life as they'd known it, but somewhere, doubt and a protective instinct stirred.

If Nick left them, or abandoned Ellis, at the mere knowledge someone knew about them... or even worse, abandoned him when the only obstacle between them and an actual relationship was admitting his feelings.. what did it matter what emotions may or may not have surfaced?
Before her frantically ticking mind could go much further, Ellis suddenly moved forward and crouched by the garage door, forcing aside what had been - for him if not her - a few beats of discomfiting silence.

"Well, it don't matter much. Whut happens, happens, 'n' everythin' else is worryin' fer no reason. Let's get this door open."

Rochelle felt a twinge of sympathy, aware that despite the smile he flashed firmly up at her, she'd done little but spin him in a mental circle. Nodding, apology threatening to drown out her returned smile, Rochelle crossed her arms carefully and watched as he gripped onto the handle of the garage door.

Tugging it up with a grunt, the kid had to hold it with two hands to fight the natural momentum of the gears and keep the movement slow. The rattling of the metal door was a soft atakatakatak clattering as it rolled along the slatted tracks to ease open, folding neatly along the ceiling.

As it rolled up, the greyed orange light of the morning filtered into the garage. Beyond the shelves of various tools and bottled chemicals, there was the immediate and very pleasant sight of a dark blue minivan. Ellis grinned in appreciation, bobbing his head, quickly losing that little hesitance about his behaviour.

"Awh, yeah! Sorta clunky, but it's like perfect, man! Cozy, bunch'uh room.. ten tuh one, if it's here, the key's 'round here too!" He straightened up to let the door settle entirely folded away, bouncing quickly inside the garage with a giddy energy.

His head swooped a bit from side to side, looking the van over with judging eyes. Rochelle immediately chased after him, keeping her rifle close. "Hey, slow down!" she warned sharply. "There was a zombie coming out of the house, you can't be too sure.."

Ellis gave a little puff, tearing his eyes from the car with an obedient nod. "Yeah, yeah, yer right... Sorry."

Hoisting up his shotgun a bit, Ellis carefully sidled around the van, inspecting the garage's depths past the wide rectangle of light streaming in from the door. It was a fairly large garage, even with the van taking up space.

The Georgian went quiet as he focused, some of his newfound excitement fading as he fell to seriousness. He peeked around the back of the van, pointing his shotgun ahead of his gaze. The light left him a little blinded, squinting into the dark, and as his eyes adjusted he recognized the welcome sight of a keyrack nailed into the back garage wall.

Glinting metal made him grin, eagerly confident that the van's key was there. "'Ey, Ro'! Think I found our key! See, back -"

It took him a second to notice the weird, bloated silhouette a few feet to the left, standing there in the dark and previously hidden behind the nose of the van. The air, in retrospect, had seemed a little fouler as he got further in, but it was hard to tell the difference between a zombie or the smell of nearby corpses.

Instinct said shoot, and he shot.

The explosion that tore through the air an instant later startled him into a yelp. It sounded wet, like he'd shot a waterbed. Disoriented, he had no chance to scramble back when the explosion came coupled with a splatter of what might've been the foulest substance he'd come into contact with
since Keith's experimentation with diet shakes.

It was hot. And greasy. Watery, acidic bile mixed with rock-like chunks of completely solidified once-foodstuff, blended together with a nauseating consistency. It spattered in a wide radius from the bursting Boomer, hitting the walls and the back of the van - but, most importantly, a good portion of Ellis' upper body.

The shock of it rushing down his face and shoulders was enough to send his stomach wrenching straight up his throat. He couldn't smell anything but the scent of vomit, making him claw out at the air, shotgun nearly clattering from his hands.

"Oh my God! Ellis!" Rochelle shrieked, stumbling back one step before rushing forward. She quickly got to his side, grabbing onto his elbow to try and steady him, a gag shuddering up her spine as the stench hit her. "Oh - God," she repeated, a little lower.

Ellis panicked suddenly when his lids gave a reflexive blink under the dribble of vomit and bile. A fierce burn cut across his eyes, nearly making him cry out, particularly when blinking further only worsened the pain.

He sputtered, the acrid taste bleeding into his mouth and making him wither, though he managed to whimper through it, "I-I can't see nothin'!"

Though he couldn't see and couldn't smell, Ellis could hear. It started just instants later, slow but steady. Reverberating with all the power of a thunderstorm, the heavy screams and shrieks of hunting infected rose up around them - baying hounds on the trail.

It shook the very substance of the air and vibrated like static electricity. It was a haunting, tangible, murderous call to arms and it struck a cold dread straight into Ellis' gut. He remembered watching a horde turn on itself under the influence of the stuff he was covered in.

"Oh God." Rochelle breathed, horror touching her voice. "The smell... Ellis, we -!"

Ellis' voice rose, repeating the words "I can't see!" frantically as he scrabbled a hand up against his burning eyes, clawing as the burning of bile against his eyes only worsened and he couldn't get the putrid goo to stop obscuring his vision. "They're comin'!"

Rochelle suddenly left him, and he panicked, pawing out for her with his other hand. His shotgun clattered to the cement, startling him as it hit the floor, and he froze slightly, forcing himself to calm.

The screaming of the horde started to grow to a deafening level as the sounds drummed at his ears, but underneath it he heard the fierce atakatakatakata! as Rochelle frantically dragged the garage door back closed.

She gave a cry of frustration as she did, throwing her entire weight onto the door. He flinched a little as he heard the metal slam violently into the concrete, the whole thing shuddering with an odd wobbling rattle.

It closing, sealing them inside, only barely muffled the screaming and shrieking. The sounds just grew more echoed, piercing the garage walls and rebounding around them.

Now they were both mostly blind, the closed garage door having flung the place into darkness but for the small rectangle of plastic that mocked a window in the center. Ellis whined slightly in pain, stuck in a half-cringe as his eyes burned dully in his head, and stuck his hands out blindly.
"Ellis -"

Rochelle's met his in the dark as she swept her arm slowly through the air to find him again, their fingers instantly twining in mutual comfort, mutual relief.

"Ellis, sweetie, are you okay?!"

He nodded his head for a dumb instant, disoriented and pained, quickly sputtering out words as he registered the fact she couldn't see now, either. "Y-yeah - I just - muh eyes, I can't -"

The two didn't even get further than that before the terrible sound of bodies colliding brainlessly with the garage door sent a certain fright down both of their spines. It was pure, primal savagery, the screams just outside as faces, hands, and feet clawed and kicked at the garage door.

It shuddered with the force, bending in with little dents under the infected's assault. They shrieked in pain as they broke bones bashing themselves into the metal plating, and shrieked in determination as they kept clawing.

The sound spread rapidly on all sides, the infected hunting for a different way in, clawing at the walls as if they could burrow their way through.

Fueled by the sound of impending death gnawing on every corner of the house, adrenaline kicked in. Rochelle's head swung up, gaze catching on the tiny glint of metal in the back that Ellis had seen before her and called out.

Car keys.

"... Ellis, I'm having a Keith moment." she announced, voice trembling with some mix of fear and burgeoning, frenetic excitement. The younger survivor's vomit-soaked head lifted with a visible quiver in the darkness, blindly facing toward her voice.

"Get in the van!"
Shooting upright in the bed, Nick grabbed out blindly, reaching for a body that wasn't there. The sounds of screaming infected pierced the air with a muffled closeness, disorienting and confusing his mind like the last clinging remnants of a nightmare twisting reality. The noise, however, was real.

Ellis was gone and there were zombies somewhere.

Nick bolted from the bed, thrusting aside blanket and pillow with blind motions. His fingers brushed against a bit of plastic as he thrust it all away - Ellis' cap. Cursing a steady stream of expletives that were only half-coherent with sleep, the conman snatched it up before he knocked it to the floor.

Tucking the hat under his belt, Nick glared at nothing, feeling a distinct anger boiling up his spine at being - seemingly - left behind again. He scooped his jacket from the floor as he passed the end of the bed, shrugging into it as he ran.

He could hear Coach's voice shouting a fierce, "SHIT!" from downstairs, speeding Nick's already rushing gait as he thrust the bedroom door open and hurried down the staircase. He skipped a step with each jump despite the protest of his leg.

"What the fuck is going on?!" he snarled, skidding a little on the bottom step and bolting across the front room. Coach stood at the dining table, a grim expression darkening his face, snatching up his shotgun and Nick's rifle. "Where are the girls?"

"Don't know." the big man responded, jaw set fiercely.

That was all he said, tossing Nick's rifle at him. The conman caught it by the barrel, flipping it around quickly to get the stock set against his shoulder and his hands in place.

With an unspoken sentiment of worry between them, the two men bolted toward the front door. Nick reached it first, quicker on his tender leg than Coach was on his bad knee, and pushed the front door open with a growl.

Squinting into the musky grey of the morning's light, the gambler rushed out onto the yard, rifle up and spinning for a target. He found plenty.

A thick stream of infected, their shrieks rising to a piercing howl of mob violence, poured down the street like a tumbling mudslide. They didn't so much as spare even a snarl for Nick or Coach's presence, lazered onto their target.

Which was, Nick could only guess, their missing companions.

The conman followed their path with his gaze, spotting the house they were gathering at. There was no sign of Rochelle nor Ellis, no sound of gunfire. No hint of if they were alright, or even still alive.

Deep in his gut, Nick felt a surge of panic that matched the burning terror of his bad dream the night before.

"Ellis!" Coach shouted behind him, roaring, voice carrying with a fearsome ease. "Rochelle!"
There was fear in his tone, manic desperation in his wide eyes, and he charged past Nick to thunder down the yard.

He paid the infected even less attention than they paid him, running maybe a yard away from him without even noticing. He shot sideways into the horde, and the ones he hit stumbled to the concrete, but the rest just kept sprinting.

Nick chased after him with a vengeance, pumping shots into the stream of zombies as he ran. The infected were circling the house, bashing at the closed garage door and the walls with limbs that bled from the effort.

It was like watching vultures flocking to a corpse, all violence and dominant hunger. They attacked each other as much as the house, mindlessly swiping nails slicing into the tumultuous waves of flesh all around them.

"You fucking piece of shit zombies!" tore from the conman's throat, shouting in utter rage. His snarling didn't even earn him a speck of attention from the infected now milling around the house en masse.

Nick and Coach had just reached the house before that one when they both skidded to a stop where they were, a sound louder than the whole zombie horde making them both gape in silence.

The garage door exploded outward, metal tearing and screaming as it broke from its moorings. The infected beating at it got crushed underneath it, run over with bloody ease as the charging nose of a dark blue van came bursting through the metal and gore.

Its engine roared, wheels squealing as it powered through the mess of broken aluminum sheeting and zombies like a steamroller. Blood spattered the hood as zombies hit the front bumper like bugs, shrieking as it ruthlessly sped over them.

"Jesus tits." Nick barely ghosted, watching in utter disbelief as the van screeched over the remnants of the door and squealed down the driveway, rolling to a smooth stop at the end.

Coach gave this bewildered laugh, clapping his hand on his cheek in relief, almost humor - the horde that hadn't been killed under the initial collision raced toward the van, mindlessly scrambling. Some of them had climbed up to the roof, and they leapt off, bouncing off the asphalt to chase after the car.

It threw into reverse with a visible jerk, and after the initial roll a few inches forward, went shooting backwards up the driveway. Skidmarks burnt into the concrete with a squeal, marking its path as it hurtled backwards to run over the infected lining up behind it.

The van rollicked as it thudded and thumped over their bodies, thick chassis squishing them underneath its weight. It jerked to a stop just before the fallen garage door, pausing an instant before rolling forward again.

With a swerve to the side to clip a few straggling zombies with its nose that it had just barely shot past, the van came humming down the driveway and turned sharply onto the road.

Nick palmed over his face, staring silently as the car veered along the street to roll to a stop just beside him and Coach. Every inch of Nick expected Ellis to come whooping and grinning like an idiot out of the driver's seat - he waited for it, ready to smack sense into his stupid redneck head...

Only to have Rochelle fling herself out instead, stumbling onto her feet from the tall van's interior, looking winded, exhilarated... and a little frantic.
"Holy Mother of Jesus, Rochelle!" Coach exclaimed in a bewildered bluster. "Are you crazy?! What in the shit were you tryin' to do-"

But Nick interrupted him, voice sharp as the business end of a knife when he snarled the words. "Where's Overalls?" Rochelle only glanced at the gambler once, eyes widening a tick in surprise, before she scrambled backwards and opened the side door of the van.

"He's okay. He just got... well, a Boomer caught us off-guard, and -" she breathlessly managed. Nick had started to take a step forward, but that halted him, a scowl rising fiercely over his face.

"Wait, the vomiting thing?"

Sure enough, as the car door opened up, a very distinct stench struck the air. Rochelle gently reached in, pulling Ellis out of the van by the elbows. "H-hah.. ow.." the kid breathed, head bowed, bile-soaked body curled in on itself.

Nick recoiled several steps, a short "Oh for fuck's sake!" escaping him. His nose wrinkled, hand lifting to stifle over his nostrils, though the effort did little to mask the smell now that it had invaded his senses.

Coach hustled past him without the same reservations, helping Ellis down to the road as the kid blindly pawed at his and Rochelle's supporting arms. Coach tucked a knuckle under his chin to lift his face up, eyeing him critically.

Ellis' expression was screwed up in pain, short whimpers escaping him with every breath, some mix of pain and disgust. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, but that hurt, too.

"He can't see - do we have some water left?" Rochelle murmured, voice throttled with barely restrained disgust and concern. Coach nodded shortly, reaching over his shoulder to unzip the backpack hanging between his shoulderblades.

He wormed fingers blindly into the sack, prying a half-drunk waterbottle from the pocket and offering it up to her.

"Shit, son." he grumbled quietly. "Yo' ass smells worse than these zombies." He leaned back slightly as Rochelle uncapped the bottle of water and bent down into a slight crouch beside Ellis. Nick watched at a distance, disgust roiling in his stomach and an acrid taste settling at the back of his throat. Rochelle tenderly started to pour water onto the upturned plane of his face in little portions, wiping with her thumb to clean him off.

Ellis yelped in gentle pain, squirming ineffectually as some of the water dribbled toward his ears and into his hair, but Rochelle merely cooed a soft, "Easy, sweetie, easy." and shook her hand off with a bit of a flinch.

"We've gotta be careful around those guys." she explained nervously, voice a bit quick as she kept her mind off what she was doing. Ellis cringed as she gently dribbled water over his eyes, holding still as the cool water eased the burn and flushed his bile-irritated eyes. "They don't just puke. Ellis shot it, and it… exploded, almost. If we all got hit at once.. blind, disoriented like this… I don't wanna think about it."

Rochelle got a hold on the bottom of her shirt, grabbing a fistful of the fabric and bending up a little so she could wipe over Ellis' eyes with it.

He started to blink, little quick motions, not seeming quite as pained now that she'd cleaned most
of the sludge away from his eyes. Recovering, Ellis pulled away from her doting touch a little to
lift his own hand and rub the heel of his hand over his eyes, whimpering gently.

Coach nodded in simple agreement, clearing his throat in a rumble and glancing over his shoulder
at Nick. The gambler barely returned his gaze, disgust entrenched on rugged features, and the big
man chuckled.

"Squeamish, Nick?"

Agitation swelled at the tease, Nick's pride making his jaw stiffen. "No, I'm not a big fan of the
bodily fluids of fucking zombies. Overalls is going to smell like that shit now! We can't bathe!"

Coach merely chuckled again, returning his gaze to Ellis with a bit of a grimace. "Yeah. Guess
we'll have to figure somethin' out soon. You a'ight, Ellis?"

"Yeah..." he managed hesitantly, lifting his whole arm to rub his forearm down his face and wipe it
dry a little, sighing as he shook his head. "Shit burns! Thought I wasn't never gonna see again."

Pulling his arm down, he eyed it, the weird smudges of green making his nose crinkle. "Man... shit.
Done been puked on by a zombie." Some of his energy was reviving as the pain ebbed, but when
he blearily squinted his eyes up at the other three, they were full of shining tears and bloodshot - a
strange contrast to the stony blue of his irises.

The greenish, putrid gunk still caked his curly hair and smeared down his neck and shoulders, and
Nick gave a horrified "Guh." He turned away, examining the dented and blood-soaked hood of
their newfound vehicle.

"Goddamn women drivers." he mocked loudly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Look at the
number you did to our ride."

Rochelle turned on her heels, and glared back at him with a crinkle to her nose. "Ass. I had to get
us out of there somehow - it's fine." Pushing up to her feet, Rochelle reached down to offer Ellis
help up.

He took her hands with a sigh, grinning gently despite himself as he blinked his reddened eyes
wearily. "I dunno - Ro' was a real badass back there... Ain't like I could see nothin', but she saved
us like'uh real pro. Them zombies didn't know whut they was dealin' with!"

Giggling softly, Rochelle shook her head and wiped her hands off on the thighs of her jeans. She
stepped up to the van and set a palm on the metal, releasing a sigh as she looked over the van's
silhouette. "It wasn't that big a deal."

There was a thumb and half its connected palm caught between the front vanity plate and the
bumper of the car. She grimaced, and nudged it off with the toe of her boot.

"Naw, Ro'!" the kid insisted, grin widening. He snuffled slightly, rubbing his eyes again with his
wrist. "It was awesome!"

She smiled at him, patting the van with her fingers. Her cheeks got the vaguest color to them,
obviously flattered, but she changed the subject anyway. "It has a full tank, guys. It'll get us the rest
of the way."

Nick interjected in a low grumble, rolling his eyes sharply with a sigh. He let his arms uncross,
adjusting his rifle until he could slip his arm in the strap. "Assuming it doesn't get smashed by a
Tank."
Rochelle ignored him completely, rubbing her cheek with the flat of her palm. She turned to face all three of them, voice tightening with seriousness. "Does everyone have everything? We have the pack, our guns... did you pack away some food just in case, Coach?"

As the big man nodded, confirming the statement, Ellis lifted his head, reddened gaze moving to Nick's face with a needy squint. The conman knew instantly what he wanted, brows scowling just a little bit.

Nick pulled his jacket away from his body slightly, flashing the younger man with the sight of his cap tucked underneath the conman's belt. Relief touched the Georgian's expression, flicking a grateful look at Nick's face and looking back at Rochelle.

"Think we're good." he chimed weakly.

Coach adjusted his grip on his shotgun, nodding at the van. "Guess we best get movin' then. Ain't nothin' left fo' us here. Who's drivin'?"

Nick immediately opened his mouth, primed to mock Rochelle's driving with another jive, but Ellis straightened up before he spoke and blurted out eagerly. "Oah, I ain't gotten tuh drive us none!" he piped, peeking bloodshot eyes at his companions hopefully.

Snorting loudly and shooting a disbelieving look at the mechanic, Nick jabbed a thumb at the van. "Sport, let's just ignore the fact you only just recovered your sight and your eyes look like tomatoes..."

Ellis blinked a few times, seeming cowed slightly by the statement and running a knuckle tenderly under his sore eyes.


A little puff escaped the Georgian, affronted at the same time it had an edge of entertainment at Nick's visible squeamishness. He patted a hand over his hair, nose wrinkling a little in retrospective regret as his fingers touched onto bile-soaked strands. "Well I didn't mean tuh get puked on, man. T'd'uh stopped it if I could!"

Nick set his fingers into loose fists, eyes narrowing and trying to meet Ellis' gaze meaningfully. His voice put vicious emphasis onto the words. "You could've stopped it by not running into trouble like an idiot -"

"Be nice to him, Nick. He didn't, we just got caught off-guard." Rochelle sighed, sympathetically glancing Ellis over. "Besides. I think getting covered in puke is punishment enough without you yelling at him."

Ellis gave a little "heh," eyes flinching down tenderly in their sockets to examine his own body. A small blush touched his cheeks as he scratched his nose with a pinky and shifted on his boots lightly.

He'd gotten Nick's meaning well enough. Their argument was still fresh enough in his mind... It hadn't been half a day and Ellis had already gotten into trouble again. Blue eyes blinked up though Ellis' chin stayed low, and he tried to get across a little soft-gazed apology to the older man.

Nick rolled his head on his neck subtly, sighing in slow agitation and shrugging. He met the gaze, squinted dubiously, then turned away. "Whatever. I'll drive the damn ugly van."

Nobody argued, so the gambler rounded the vehicle toward the driver's seat. Rochelle moved
toward one of the back doors, Coach following behind her to get in after her - but when Ellis padded after Nick, reaching for the passenger's side door, Nick halted in place.

".. and what do you think you're doing, Fireball?" he questioned with an edge of disbelief, staring Ellis down. The kid blinked, stopping where he stood, chin lowering a bit hesitantly.

"Uh." he mumbled. "Gettin' in the car..?"

The conman arched a brow testily, shaking his head back at the Georgian. "No." he stated simply.

Ellis gave a guffaw, twisting into a questioning noise at the end, his head cocking in a puzzled gesture. Coach stopped halfway into the van, lifting his head to watch the two with an entertained humor. "Er.. No?" Ellis repeated, voice rather lost with confusion.

"No."

Nick turned on his heel and started to stride down the length of the van in silence. Ellis scooted around the front of the van, hurrying to peek around it at him as he walked, bewildered. "Uh.. this about the smell? You want me tuh switch with Ro'?

"No."

"Er… with Coach?"

"No."

Ellis halted as he reached the end of the van, arms going slightly akimbo and voice turning plaintive. "W-well ... what'cha want me to do, then?! I'm sorry I smell bad, Nick, but I can't help it none! What'cha gonna do, lash me to the top'uh the car?"

Nick didn't stop when Ellis did, stepping behind the van and turning around. "I wish." He bent down, gripping the back door handle and throwing it open. Nick retreated a step and pointed into the luggage space like one might order a dog into its cage. His free hand pushed the button on the door that opened up the back window, the glass rolling down smoothly.

Coach started laughing as he settled into the van, Rochelle twisting around in her seat to arch a brow at Nick over the backs of the seats. "Nick.. are you being an asshole?" she questioned, sighing, not getting so much as a glance from the conman.

He was too busy staring at Ellis expectantly.

Ellis gawped at him. "You ain't serious."

"Very. In." Nick's expression was so blankly serious, Ellis could only fumble for a moment, standing there, faltering under his deadpan command. Giving a little huff of air, Ellis hunched down his shoulders and slunk around the open door.

He crawled up into the back of the van, flopping down onto the floor of the cargo space with a sulky drop of his head. There was enough room for him to stretch out his legs, and Ellis leaned against the back of the seats to get out of the way of the door with a little jut of his lower lip.

"This's just mean, Nick."

Nick shut the door on him with a slam, smirking at him through the window in a sudden break of his flat expression. He rolled green eyes, wrinkling his nose and stating. "You. Fucking. Smell."
Ellis stuck his tongue out at the gambler, crawling forward so he could stick his head - and the majority of his shoulders - out of the open window and dangle his arms down the back of the van.

The kid hung as limp as a dying man, mumbling sadly, "S'till mean."

The Georgian had shut his eyes, but they blinked back open blearily as his hat was stuffed over his face. He quickly grabbed the bill, adjusting it back onto his head properly - but by the time he looked up Nick had already disappeared around the corner of the van.

He peeked back over his shoulder as the gambler got to the driver's door, shoving it open and stepping up into the seat. He pulled his seatbelt over his chest, eyes narrowed forward as he ferociously thrust the van into gear.

"Alright, assclowns. Buckle up and shut up. Except for you, Ellis. You just focus on shutting up, and if your reeking redneck ass falls out the window, we'll consider ourselves the luckiest people in the apocalypse."

Ellis turned his face forward, holding his hat to his head and smiling faintly into the breeze that swirled through the open window as the van rumbled into motion.
The air conditioning was on full blast, cold air blowing pleasantly along the curvature of the van's interior. The tangy taste of coolant, burning on the tails of every flutter of air, was a somehow relaxing sensation.

As was expected, the radio played nothing but static, not even the CEDA announcements providing some kind of sound. Nick had shut the radio off as soon as he'd turned it on.

The strong vibration of air conditioning acted as their music, orchestrated by the idle flick of Nick's finger as he directed the plastic flaps more toward his face, heightening the sound as the wind whistled through the vent.

It blew down toward the floorboards, too, and the cold air soothed his injured leg in a pleasant chill. Nick's right arm settled back onto his thigh, left lifted to drape his hand with a wide grip on the steering wheel as he coaxed the van along the road. His eyes bored into the road ahead, half-narrowed into the artificial wind, examining the deadened grey sky.

It was like the very essence of death had coalesced into a lurking fog, building up overhead in a wispy presence.

The neighborhood continued as they drove, houses speckling the sides of the road. It was a community-turned-graveyard, not a hint or sign of life... except for the infected wandering about in droves.

Water was visible, dully sparkling browns and deep blues, from between the trees lining the road on the lefthand side. It was the murky sight of an estuary, pouring in between what must've been the southern edge of the Carolinas and northern Georgia.

The right side was crumbling into sandy plains, covered over by a browning blanket of grass and bushes. Foggy air hung low to the sloping ground, crawling in from the rivers and refusing to seep away, even under a sun that burned hot through the grey clouds gathering in the sky. The air was hot and bloated under the streaks of bare sunlight that breached the tarnished cloudscape.

They were getting closer to the sea; closer to Tybee; closer to what should have been rescue. There couldn't have been more than a half-hour's drive to the seaside blot of land that Tybee Island made its home on, but under a mournful sky, there was little excitement among the four.

Just quiet.

A lingering, harmonizing quiet that bespoke a certain unease.

Nick let his gaze slip over and over into the rear-view mirror, gazing between his companions with a silent distance. One of them should've spoken up, brought up some topic to ease the tension or distract from the grimness that they drove so quickly through.

Ellis gazed out through the back window from his exiled place in the back of the van, Rochelle had her eyes on her hands as she fiddled her fingers against one another, and Coach had his eyes closed.

The gambler gave a slow shift where he sat, turning his body slightly and returning his gaze to the road. He let a sigh escape him, raising his hand to stroke along his jaw, scratching into the dark path of stubble underlining his face.
Goosebumps rose along his arm as the air from the vents suddenly blew into his sleeve as he lifted it up. Flexing his fingers, he let a stiffness touch his jaw.

"You okay, suit?"

Realizing Rochelle had turned her attention on him, probably at the sigh, Nick let his arm drop back to his lap. "Peachy." he returned with a caustic shortness, shooting a glare at her through the rearview mirror.

She laughed.. just a small breath of a noise, turning her face back toward the window. Maybe something in his biting sarcasm revived something in the air, because, taking a breath, she prompted;

"Looks like rain."

Although he'd practically been hoping for a comment just as stupid and mundane as that one, Nick found his temper revving up in his chest. It was all he could do not to lash out at her with actual seriousness.

"Oh no," the conman grumbled, thumbing over the seam of the steering wheel. "Rain. I guess we're all just doomed - I mean, the fucking apocalypse was one thing, but rain? Jesus Christ."

Rochelle started to open her mouth, but he interrupted her sharply, sarcasm dripping off his voice in gallons. "Wait! I just had an idea! I think I can save us." With a little gasp to emphasize his motion, the gambler dramatically lifted a finger from the steering wheel...

...flicking the windshield wipers on with a nudge of the switch. They squeaked over the dry glass in a little eek-eerk, leaving a smirk on Nick's face at his own mockery.

"Ass." Rolling her eyes gently, the woman set her elbow against the door and her cheek on her knuckles, casually lifting her brows. "Are you going to melt, Nick? Or maybe you're like dirt, and you'll just turn into a big sludgy pile of mud."

Nick's brows gave the smallest of twitches together, lips doing the same - and then he snorted. "At least mud will smell better than Overalls does."

The open window that Ellis' head was half stuck out of immersed him in a flow of wind. Though it failed to more than rustle the encrusted curls peeking out from his tightly-screwed-on cap, it provided enough whistling noise to deafen him to the conversation. He only vaguely heard the words, head bobbing a bit to twist back.

"H'uh?" he queried, uncertainly.

"Anyway," Rochelle prompted, trying not to laugh as she stopped the conversation before Nick could explain it. She let her head shake. "it won't matter if it rains or not, right? Once we get to Tybee, we're setting up more permanently.. Find ourselves a nice house or something to hole up in."

Ellis scooted himself closer to the back of the seats, leaning away from the window so he could hear better. Blue eyes blinked widely, a curious eagerness creeping over his face. "Oah, y'all wanna bet they got beach houses'n'fancy shit out there? It'll be like goin' on vacation!"

Nick snorted, rolling his shoulder in its socket and glancing up at the rearview mirror. He could see Ellis' face, green eyes raking over the hick's features with a silent intensity before he raised his voice. "Yeah. You, at a beach house. Some rich asshole is already rolling in his grave."
Ellis stuck his tongue out at the conman with a little smile, the sight making Nick's brow arch, then twisted back around to return to peering out the window. Nick didn't say a word, just forced his gaze back onto the road.

Nick eyed a small cluster of infected shambling at the edge of the road ahead of them. He let his hand drift, the van slowly easing to follow, and he gave a pleased scowl as the front bumper clipped them like so many bowling pins.

They collided hard, rolling off the hood with shrieks of rage. When blood splattered on the windshield from the hit, Nick just flicked the windshield wipers on again, the squeegee-like rubber pushing the red and black mess out of his vision.

"And don't say 'permanently.'" he stated flatly.

Wincing at the gore marking the windshield, Rochelle leaned her head back a little bit, sighing. "Sorry, sorry." she apologized, waving a hand slightly. "Until CEDA gets here, I meant."

Nick let the van veer back straight on the road, eyeing the zombies in their broken attempts to get up as they collided and rolled on the asphalt, crippled in the wake of the van, blood smearing the road and arms flailing.

"If."

Rochelle let her hand flop down with a slightly resigned limpness, eyes going slightly wide with a bewildered gesture of disbelief. "Christ, suit." she chided. "Can I go two words without your pessimism jumping all over me?"

The conman snorted, tightening his grip on the steering wheel as a bit of irritation tightened his jaw. "Maybe if more people took my 'pessimism' to heart, we wouldn't have put trust in CEDA to begin with… and this wouldn't've happened at all."

She outright laughed at that, glancing out the window. Her brow scrunched up slightly, entertained at the same time she was a little serious. "Honey, if more people took you to heart, the whole human race would throw itself off a cliff in hopelessness."

"Ow." Nick lazily retorted. "Because we're really better off getting eaten alive by zombies."

"Y'all quit." came gruffly from Coach's throat with a sudden finality. "Ain't no use arguin'. Yo' ass is still here, Nick, so you must not see another way. An' you know he's right in bein' suspicious, baby girl. Won't know anythin' til it happens. Just gotta keep goin'."

It shut everyone up, just the whistling of the open window and the deep thrum of the air conditioning to highlight his words. It was quiet again, but the blank truth of Coach's words drained the tension.

Forward was the only direction they had.

The van rolled over the concrete with cautious speed, Nick's subtle adjustments to his grip on the wheel marked by the tacky rustle of his fingers on the leather and the soft veering of the vehicle to avoid potholes and the wreckage of the occasional broken down car.

Idly, Nick examined them as they drove past. A fact played into his ever-observant mind, though transiently so and dismissed with some conscious effort: nearly all the abandoned cars were facing the opposite direction they now drove.
The implications of this fact trailed through his consciousness, but with some resignation, they were pushed aside just the same. He considered mentioning it, but kept his silence in the end. *Forward or bust. Well, shit.*

As the van rolled on, Tybee's black and white-patterned lighthouse grew ever more prominent on the near horizon, a dark shape on a dreadful excuse for a spring sky.

A sign ahead, green and wide with bold white lettering, announced 'Tybee Island - 2m.' Graffiti scrawled over it in unintelligible lines, nearly obscuring the sign's content, but not quite.

Nick gave a subtle sigh of relief, relaxing his shoulders and letting the back of his head touch onto the headrest of his chair. "Almost there." he tiredly stated, eyes narrowing on the road as his foot pressed just a little harder onto the gas pedal.

The engine gave a happy rumble, the sound eagerly thickening as the speedometer twitched up a few centimeters. Nick kept himself from going too fast, wary of crashing their hard-earned vehicle.

His focus tore away from the road slightly when their stench-riddled mechanic suddenly spoke. The whistling of the wind around the window muffled his voice, and none of the three really heard him clearly.

"What, Overalls?" Nick called over his shoulder, shortly. "You say somethin'?"

The kid obediently turned his head around, leaning more into the van. Ellis' voice blabbered from where he half-kneeled, matter-of-factly. "'The Angels are here.'"

Craning her head back at him, Rochelle gave the huddled Georgian a bewildered look. "...What in..?" She shot a glance at Coach, the big man's eyes opening and his head lifting a little, before looking back at Ellis. "What are you talking about…?"

Ellis lifted up his hands in an unsure gesture, thumbing over his shoulder. "Oah, I dunno, Ro'. I just read that on the back'uv that there sign. Someone wrote it there."

Nick glanced quickly up into the rearview mirror, eyes narrowing on the fast-disappearing shape of the road sign. He could see lettering, drawn in what looked like red paint, but it was too far to make out by then.

A scoff escaped his lips, nose wrinkling slightly at the concept. *More religious bullshit. Great.*

"O-oh." Rochelle quickly uttered, lifting a hand. She made this gentle motion in the air, almost coaxing, as if patting his shoulder from a distance. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, sweetheart… People do weird things in disasters. It's probably nothing."

Blinking a bit, Ellis let himself relax against the van's inner wall, curling his legs under himself and adjusting his cap on his sticky head. "Yuh think they're just writin' nonsense?"

Resigning himself to staring ahead at the road, a crease beginning between his brows out of pure unease, Nick gave a snort. He tightened his grip on the wheel and gave a shrug. "No, Ellis. There's *angels* running around now, too."

Coach gave a gruff little sigh, re-closing his eyes and settling back down into his seat like a tired watchdog returning to his vigil. With a simple firmness that dragged them back into a low quiet as the van drove on, he grunted:

"There ain't no angels in none of this shit."
Chapter 74

Tybee Island was a fairly average seaside islet.

Multi-story condominiums and tall hotels rose up against the fog-smothered sky. Dotted here and there, hidden amongst the breezily-structured houses, were stores and businesses - but they were almost hard to pick out in the Island's dense lodging.

Although salt carried on the breeze with a sharp crust, the sea was still hidden from sight by the couple miles' width of Tybee's city. Little flashes and strips of blue peeked out from behind the clinging smoke and fog that masked it, hinting at what would've been a gorgeous sky.

And yet - something was wrong.

They hadn't so much as entered the gridlike, criss-crossing streets of Tybee Island before it became apparent. Something was terribly wrong, beyond the smell of decay that followed them, or the dark gloom of the sky. Nick's fingers went white-knuckled on the steering wheel, and he ground his heel onto the brakepad to bring the van to a creaking halt.

Green eyes narrowed sharply, the very shadows of his irises darkening as they took in what was so immediately visible down the length of Tybee's main street.

Bodies.

Zombies layered the streets in bloody smears, coloring the asphalt sick shades of brown and black. Although there were signs of bullets here and there, the majority of them had been taken down with something sharp. Very sharp.

They were sawn to pieces at the joints.

Limbs sprawled with clutched fingers, torsos sliced in half with blackened innards pooled around them amidst the dried gore of their own demise. Arms and heads laid like the snapped-off pieces of abused dolls, blood drained out of them and splattered freely on the concrete.

Flies buzzed in eager buffet lines down a street mottled with the messy remains of countless mutilated infected and puddles of dried blood they clouded around hungrily.

"What. The. Fuck." Nick hissed through gritted teeth, gaze darting about what he could see. It wasn't horror so much as disbelief - a sick kind of disbelief, deep in his gut, and the fierce jam of his foot onto the brake said all that was needed to be said about his uneasiness.

"What the fuck."

His seat shifted as Coach's heavy hand gripped its head, using it to lean himself forward. The football coach's jaw set tightly, examining the scene with serious eyes as both Rochelle and Ellis reacted with little gasps.

"That don't .. look good." Ellis whimpered hesitantly, his whole body craning up with quivering effort to peer down the length of the van and out the windshield at the road. The unsettled tone to his voice matched what had suddenly spiked into an anxious atmosphere. "But it means.. someone's here, right?"

The scent of blood - and other liquids - drifted into the van's interior with a slow stench.
Rochelle nervously leaned forward, drawing her rifle from the floor of the van. She set it on her lap, gripping it tightly, and shook her head. "I don't know, sweetheart... I don't know if that's good news or not."

Green eyes riveted on the gory street beckoning them into what should have been a peaceful seaside town, Nick growled with a frantic and tense energy. "This is a goddamn slaughterhouse! Who the fuck -" He shifted, shutting off the buzzing air conditioning with a twist of the knob. "...I don't like this. I do not goddamn like this."

Coach grunted roughly, eyes falling to a squint. He shook his head, slowly, averting his gaze from the road for a moment to inhale. "We been killin' plenty ourselves... just the way of things now."

"Way of things my fucking ass!" Nick snarled, thrusting a hand up to gesture into the street ahead of him. He used the other to violently shove the gearshift into park, freeing him to twist around and glare at his companions. "Are you seeing the same goddamn shit I am?!"

There was disbelief in his voice, almost razor-sharp with unease.

"Yeah, Nick, I am." Coach's stubble-shaded face downturned, eyes closing with a tired effort as he stoically withstood the conman's growling. "I don't like it either, but if someone saw us runnin' around killin' shit, they'd be nervous too. We can't jump to no conclusions."

Rochelle warily reached one hand over and touched Coach's shoulder. He glanced at her, meeting her gaze, letting his grip shift on the head of the front seat. "Coach... I think suit's right here. If there's a bunch of guys running around with... I don't know, machetes, we need to be careful. We don't know if they're friendly."

From the back, Ellis gave a nervous laugh that made him hunch, scratching his jaw with his thumb. Nick, seething with a visceral dislike for what lay in their future, raked his gaze up to meet the kid's blue ones as if they might steady him - calm the raging desire to turn the van around and just drive away.

Ellis lowered his chin to slant his vision through short but dark lashes, that stony blue glimmer flustering under Nick's gaze, though his voice held strong.

"Haw.. sounds like some real bad horror movie or somethin'... Y'all don't.. really think they're crazy or nothin', do y'all? I mean, ain't no different from me usin' that axe before. Right?"

Keeping his gaze right where it was on Ellis' face even when the kid averted his eyes just a few inches, Nick gave a scoffing 'hah,' reaching up a hand to scratch at the stubble gracing his unshaven neck. "Overalls... if you started flailing around, chopping zombies into little gruesome pieces with an axe, I'd run the other fucking way."

The Georgian grinned. That uneasy nervousness broke for all of an instant, beaming that goofy smile all over Ellis' dirty face, and Nick felt something soften in his gut.

Rochelle gave a careful nod, lowering her chin and bending her head to gaze back down the street. A slight smile forced onto her face, jaw setting. "Yeah. There's survival and then there's... massacre. This just feels wrong, I don't know..."

She trailed off as Coach sighed, rubbing his face in a quick motion, wide palm scruffling the aged planes of a round face. "Well, there ain't much lee-way. We're headed this way, we're goin' this way. If there's folks here - fine. We stay outta their path. We got other concerns." His voice had reached that matter-of-fact command; that certainty that allowed for no doubt.
A tired, resigned, but still breathing instinct to build a game plan and lay it out with a strong hand.

"And if we get jumped by fucking psychopaths with swords?" Nick retorted sarcastically, shoulders rising slightly and teeth gritting a bit. He turned his head back around, refocusing on the bloody mess that awaited them - but moreso, with his expression turned away, the sight of his companions' faces in the rearview mirror.

Coach, stoic and slow, shook his head. "We defend ourselves."

Ellis' distress was immediate, a crease drawing itself between those brows with a flash of instant comprehension. Concern flooded his quieted voice and widened his eyes with a slow, innocent disbelief. "Whut... kill them?"

Rochelle gave a nervous swallow, examining his face before turning around to the worried mechanic in the back of the van. She forced a smile, fisting her hands slowly. "Not if we can help it, sweetheart... of course not. I really hope it doesn't come to it. But - ...

Ellis slowly crossed his arms on the back of the seats, rubbing at his muscled biceps as if the thought actually chilled him a little. His expression drew into an upset frown, curling a little bit in on himself as he sighed, nodding to stop her attempts to explain.

"Nah... I get it. Man, I hope we don't run intuh them. Or that we're misunderstandin' things."

Nick gave a heavy snort, raising a hand over his eyes and bending forward slightly as he struggled not to burst into anger again. His palm ran down the shadowed planes of his face with a stressed tension, fingertips agilely tracing his own features.

"Jesus tits. Give me zombies over crazy fucks any goddamn day. Jesus." he muttered lowly to himself, growling deeply as he dropped his hand back to the wheel. "Fine. Let's get murdered by a bunch of nutcases, fine, great. Fucking wonderful. I've come this far to get chopped to little pieces. Goddamnit."

Coach sighed, reaching over the shoulder of the chair to pat Nick's in some reassurance, an edge of laughter touching his voice. "They can't chop a van into pieces. Keep drivin'."

Glaring shortly over his shoulder, Nick gave a grunted sigh and resettled in his seat. He shoved the van back into drive, letting the van ease forward with a foot just touching the gas pedal to keep it to a slow roll.

"Shut the window, Ellis. I don't want to smell you, either, but - lesser evil."

"Haw." The Georgian obediently crawled back toward the window, bracing his weight with an elbow against the wall of the van as he rolled the window back down, sealing them off from the gruesome waste that had been made of Tybee's front streets.

All four of them had eyes focused, silent and anxious, on the road ahead. They all craned forward as if they were watching a plot unfold on a moviescreen - not through their car windshield.

Nick drove at a cautious pace, his eyes alert and attentive as the van carefully hummed forward. Avoiding what mess he could, he swerved the van gently along the street, following the main stretch of the highway that dominated the smaller side roads.

The gore only seemed to get worse as they rolled carefully into Tybee. There were piles of bodies, all butchered like so much meat, blood having spurted onto the cement. Dried - but was it as dried as the blood before it?
Occasional thumps rocked the van up an inch or two, just subtly, from where Nick failed to dodge a limb. The jerk was weak as the flesh went to mush underneath the tire treads and the van's weight.

"This ain't right, man." Ellis muttered softly, quietly.

It was like a slow-moving horror ride, click-clacking gradually along a railroad through a grotesque landscape shaped and molded to frighten. Nick dug his fingertips into the steering wheel in a slow knead, wishing the van's engine were a little quieter.

Graffiti painted the sides of buildings here and there, in scrawls. Nick couldn't stop himself from reading them, jaw twitching, gaze flickering back and forth from the street to their shapes.

The only thing was - they weren't words. They were numbers.

'103'
'95'
'105'
'110'
'110'
A few houses down, they were there again.

'107'
'101'
'111'
'118'
And again.

'113'
'107'
'116'
'125'

They were rising - chunk by chunk, piece by piece, in sick tandem with the piles of bodies that layered the streets. Nick felt a slight stiffening in his gut, tearing his gaze away eventually and focusing on driving down the street.

"You guys think we've killed that many so far?" he scoffed, voice taut with barely withheld nerves.

Tense silence responded to him, just the slow shifting of weight and a slight collective breath. He snorted a little into the silence, flexing his fingers slowly, gaze traveling over the road. They narrowed.

The blood was red - brighter. It wasn't glistening, but it was - definitely - fresh. There was no
denying it, and Nick's spine straightened slowly against the seat with a rising suspicion. They were getting close and he didn't know what to.

"... maybe," Rochelle started to half-whisper, as if they might be heard. "we should -"

A violent jerk shocked the whole van, a strange, sharp explosion kicking up the back of it just a few inches. A metallic, scraping squeal started in an instant, and Nick slammed on the brakes. The van wobbled, drifting into a half-spin on the road.

The squeal rose to a practically deafening level, screaming this metal-on-concrete noise as the van jerked to a stop. Flashes of light flared up in Nick's peripheral - sparks flew up around the lefthand side of the van, yellow and orange.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Nick snarled, twisting his head sharply to try and scan for danger. He couldn't see anything right off, but the buildings had closed in now that they were in Tybee, and there were too many shadows, too many corners, too many places to hide -

Ellis' voice yelped, a little tumble thumping him against the back of the van before he could catch himself, with no seatbelt to steady him. "W-WHA - ow!" He whacked his head on the back window as he fell, wincing as he just barely caught his hat from falling.

Rochelle and Coach weren't nearly as displaced, grabbing at the nearest thing to sturdy themselves and wincing as the shrieking sound died out. "Are you okay, Ellis?!" she called quickly, clutching at her shirt slightly.

"Y-yeah!" he affirmed, scrambling a little to get back to his crouching position, blinking in surprise out the window. "Jeez. I think we done blown'uh tire! Ain't never seen it go like that!"

Nick spat out, shoving the van into park with a bewildered tone, "Blown a tire?! Are you fucking serious? In the middle of this fucking place we blow a fucking tire?!"

Immediately grunting, Coach turned himself. He pulled his seatbelt off with a quick motion, reaching to open up his door. "Maybe we can find a spare. We got a mechanic on hand, after all."

Perking slightly at the insinuation, Ellis gave a quick nod, gaze flicking up to try and coax Nick down from his rage. "Y-yeah, Nick! I'll be alright.. we'll just get it changed, 'n' be on our way.." He raised his hands, splaying hands in a soothing motion.

"Before -" Nick snarled, ripping his seatbelt off and going to throw the driver's side door open. "- or after we end up with stumps for limbs?"

Wincing with a little sigh, Ellis squirmed back and pushed the back door open on the van. He stumbled out as it swung open on a slightly mechanized joint, stretching his legs with a quick wiggle that rustled his sagging coveralls and popped him in indeterminate places.

"We'll be fine, Nick!" he promised, earnestly. As much as he tried to mean it, though, Ellis felt his heart rate picking up in his chest.

When Nick just rolled his eyes, throwing up his hands slightly before bending back into the van and dragging his rifle out, Ellis quieted. Nick gripped the weapon tightly, going tense as he stood next to the car, gaze tracing the zombies messily cut to pieces around them.

Ellis rubbed a knuckle at his nose carefully, glancing at Rochelle as she slipped out of the van. She gave him a supportive smile, wielding her own rifle, and nodded. "What'd we hit, anyway?" she questioned, voice softly unnerved.
Bobbing his head with a little shrug, the kid quickly scuttled toward the offending tire. It was completely ruined, totally deflated in a mess of stripped rubber. The sparks had come from the metal wheel as it scraped the heavy weight of the van against the concrete, and the rubber was almost entirely split away.

Ellis knelt down, giving a little sigh as he did and reaching out to touch it. The rubber was hot, and he squinted thoughtfully, worriedly. "I dunno.. don't make much sense, I mean, there ain't nothin' but zombie bits lyin' 'round - man."

His thumb gently stroked the tire rim, biting at the plump flesh of his lower lip. "I hope it didn't bust up the axle none.. that ain't no quick fix... I - "

As he touched it, something tumbled free, hitting the concrete with a soft clatter underneath the car. It tinkled, almost, and Ellis blinked in curiousity. He immediately bent lower in his crouch and reached his hand under the van to paw for it. "The heck...?" he mumbled, curiously.

Nick's voice hissed at him from the other side of the van as his face gently pushed against the van's wheel well, feeling for whatever had fallen. "Ellis!"

Automatically realizing what he'd just said, Ellis moved to reassure him, patting along the concrete in his hunting. "Sorry, sorry, Nick, I didn't mean that - it probably ain't hurt none, I'm just worryin'. We'll get back on the road real -"

Two things happened at once:

First, Ellis' fingertips brushed the hot shape of a bullet, his eyes widening at the feeling. Second, a shape coalesced in his peripheral vision, movement shifting out from behind a building at the side of the street.

Rochelle's gasp confirmed it. "Holy -"

The Georgian jerked quickly to scramble away from the van, moving to get to his feet as he flipped the bullet in one motion into his palm, secreting it away in a fist. Blue eyes widened as he stared out, gaze flickering quickly up the road to look toward the movement.

Three shapes, actually - three people.

A woman and two men, their clothes filthy with blood and gore, faces smudged with even more blood. Step by step, approaching from either side of a building, they moved in silence. The lengthy shapes of gleaming weapons dangled from their hands - a long blade, a wide machete, a slim butcher's knife.

Guns were lashed to their shoulders, but without the slightest intent to reach for them, they gripped their blood-drenched blades with a certain tightness and advanced in a strict triangular formation toward the four.

Slowly.
Startled and without his shotgun, Ellis took a defensive step back as soon as he got to his feet. At about the same instant, Nick shot full-speed around the van, pure barreling force. He planted himself bare inches beside Ellis, rifle up and aimed, expression all but stone with matter-of-fact murderous intent.

"Don't get any goddamn ideas. One more fucking move and I blow your brains out!" he threatened in this rough, growling tone of voice, not an ounce of emotion in it that wasn't pure fury.

The three interlopers stopped, holding in a loose semi-circle where they were. Coach and Rochelle moved in tight next to Ellis and Nick, bolstering their line. Rochelle seemed hesitant to raise her gun, and Coach held his shotgun up at his hip, pointed only generally in the strangers' direction.

Ellis grasped hard onto Nick's bicep with one hand, pushing the other deep in a pocket to stow away the bullet. His gut instinct told him to hide it for now. The conman didn't so much as blink, ignoring the touch as Ellis anxiously looked past him toward the group.

The woman of the group - her dark hair falling to her jawline, a strong face marked by wild hazel eyes - lifted a hand to her brow, slowly, shading her eyes with the wrist of the hand that wielded a sword. On closer inspection, the heavy blade appeared to be a katana.

More importantly, though, Ellis' eyes caught onto the sleek muzzle poking up over her shoulder; a sniper rifle was lashed to her back. It was heavier than the thin hunting rifles Nick and Rochelle had in their hands, almost military-grade, with a fat scope hitched just before the stock. Ellis' eyes narrowed, tightening fingers around the sniper bullet in his palm and feeling a distinct sense of betrayal.

Amusement crossed her expression, trickling like a contagion to infect the two men at her heels until all three of them seemed poised to laugh.

They didn't.

The man on the right moved to wipe his machete off on his tan cargo shorts, the blood dribbling down the barely-recognizable fabric with a sludgy consistency. "Looks like you are having some car troubles." His voice rolled and halted with a Spanish accent that worked its way around the words, bright brown eyes narrowed as he examined the four facing them down.

Ellis' fingers tightened on Nick's bicep, squeezing at him through his sleeve - the feel of the still-warm bullet in his hand had him almost panicked as he stared at their attackers, but he held his silence, unmoving.

Coach warily adjusted his weight, shifting his grip on his shotgun with a subtle huff. There was distrust written all over his face, in all those tired age marks. He held his ground and spoke with a heavy civility. "We a'ight. We blew a tire - got a mechanic wit' us, though. Figure we can fix it up."

The third person was a hulking bear of a man, broad shoulders and a stout, gutted torso straining under tight red plaid and torn jeans. He grinned, white teeth blocky through a thick blond beard that ate up the whole lower half of his face, adjusting his grip on the bloody butcher's knife as he snorted.
He spun the blade, flipping it against his thumb in an eager, tic-like gesture. "Ain't gonna do you shit. Looks to me that junker's tore up like a used bitch. Say y'all are out of luck."

The shorter man snickered in a lowering tone, lifting a hand to run his thumb along a cut that was bleeding down his sparsely stubbled jaw. He glanced sidelong at the man in plaid, voice thick with mockery. "You'd know about 'tore up bitches,' ¿eh, cabrón?"

Lowering his brows, the bulky man swiveled his butcher's knife to gesture at his companion solidly with the dripping tip. "Sure would, cah-brone." he snorted deeply in a matter-of-fact drawl.

There seemed to be something that had gone over his head, if the shorter man's amusement was any indication.

Rochelle found herself lifting a hand to nervously cup over her mouth, glancing between the three carefully. Her voice rose in confident urgency, though her eyes were widened. "Look, we're just passing through.. we're trying to -"

The woman, voice svelte with an inner humor, interrupted in a practical croon. She let her katana slip down to press its tip into the ground, blood leaking down the metal in slow waves. "Passing through? No, no, not a chance. Your four look exhausted, and if your car's broken down, you'll need some help." Hazel eyes flashed over the woman's shoulder to smile from the two men at her heels to the four survivors. "Right, boys?"

The machete-wielding man gave a grin, relaxing back onto his heels and letting his weapon settle lazily against his shoulder.

"Sí sí. They look like they could use the help..."

Nick bristled despite himself, never having released his grip on his rifle. Green eyes narrowed, voice spitting with sarcastic graciousness. "Oh good, a bunch of idiots with sharp knives are here to save us. Thank God. We've been so fucking helpless until now."

The bearded hulk leaned forward slightly, expression squinting with a certain distaste as his humor disappeared all in a flash. He jabbed with his knife, making Ellis flinch, a protective swell touching his chest at the same time his fingers squeezed urgently on Nick's elbow.

"Y'all see our counts?" the husky man growled. "Bet you pups ain't even seen that many zombies. We been clearin' the way for li'l shits like you."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Rochelle quickly coaxed, suddenly stepping forward to lift her hands and wave both Nick and the angering Southerner down. "Come on, guys. We're all just trying to make it out here. Let's not get off on the wrong foot." There was a little panic in her expression, eyes darting between the two riling men. "Nick, just - calm down a second."

The gambler snarled quietly, frame stiff with a refusal to lower his weapon. He just stared, unflinching as Ellis nervously stepped around him, fingers reluctantly releasing the conman's sleeve.

"Guys are so difficult to handle sometimes." the dark haired woman smiled, lips curling easily despite the cut bleeding down her lower lip. "Macho testosterone." Rochelle returned it forcibly, nodding her head, jumping at the offered olive branch.

Trying to ignore the intense glare from Nick and the silent unease from Coach and Ellis, Rochelle turned her palms up gently, focusing her gaze on the other woman. "Okay, look. Let's just get introduced, okay?"
Her voice was strengthening, chin raising with determination as some of the initial fear ebbed. The three were odd, the atmosphere tense.. but they didn't seem overtly hostile, or ill-intentioned.

When nobody protested, she prompted; "I'm Rochelle. These guys -" and she gestured appropriately toward them as she named them. "- are Nick, Coach, and Ellis. We've been heading to the shoreline for a few days."

Crossing her arms over the ruined purple blouse on her body, the woman smirked, eyes narrowing as she examined the four. "Brenda."

Letting his butcher's knife fall to his thigh, the husky man on her left gave a deep clear of his throat and spat sideways, wrinkling his nose a bit as he did. He knuckled a bruised finger over his blood-matted beard. "Jerry."

Plucking at the blood-spattered wifebeater stuck tight to his lithe torso, the third member gave a wide grin and locked eyes with Rochelle rather tightly, head nodding smoothly. "Christophe. You can call me Chris, bonita."

Rochelle's eyes widened just a twitch, utterly caught off-guard by the flirtation that came so simply and easily from the blood-drenched man. Her lips moved in silence as she struggled to react, but she was saved from answering by the other woman's smooth voice.

"You're lucky we found you."

Nick's mouth opened immediately, brow twitching together sharply with a growl and ready to protest the statement, but Ellis stepped in quickly to stop him. He threw himself in front of Nick, blurtling out words with an unprepared hurry rather than let the older man get riled up again.

"It's nice tuh meet y'all!!" Ellis squeezed on the bullet trapped in his pocket and between his fingers, feeling his heart jump when all three of the people turned their gaze on him. He sensed Nick stiffening behind him.

The widely built Jerry grinned, toying his butcher's knife against his shirt and laughing with a guttural rhythm. "Y'hear that?" He craned his head to eye his companions, heightening his voice a bit in mimicry. "'Nice to meet y'all!'" The man only grinned harder at himself. "Kid's glad to meet us."

Christophe joined him, snickering with a rapt twist of his head. Ellis shifted a little, slight discomfort edging up his spine as the mocking struck him. He pulled a small smile up onto his face, fighting for it, plastering it on his face uncertainly.

"W-well sure, I -"

Forcibly, Nick nudged his arm. The Georgian slipped a glance back at him warily, and the conman shook his head. Just once, stone-faced and firm.

Coach wearily rubbed at the back of his neck, speaking up with a slow force and thin humor. The big man forced himself to relax somewhat, though his gaze remained protectively alert. "Don't make fun wit' the boy, he's had a bad 'nough day already."

Brenda snorted, tucking her hair behind her ears, though the short strands made to slip free again soon after. "I can see.. take a Boomer to the face, prettyboy?" There was a coo to her voice, smirking, and she bent her head slightly to catch Ellis’ gaze.

A slight flush darted up his face, jaw tensing under her eyes. He didn't say a word, tightening
fingers on his gripped bullet like a lifeline, and Coach stood up for him. The ex-football player shifted his shotgun to rest on his shoulder and shook his head. "Ain't pleasant. So, if y'all don't mind, we should be on our way... sooner we get movin', sooner we find a place to bed down 'round here."

Chris smiled with a little cocky nod of his head, spinning his machete in slow circles with his wrist. "Mm... B, don't we know a hotel just a few streets over that was still lit up?"

She hummed in response, rubbing her chin with her thumb. "Actually we do." Hazel eyes slitted as her lids lowered, lips curving up as she trailed her words. "Say, you guys could tag along if you wanted. Your van's a goner and we can help you out."

Rochelle uncertainly looked over her shoulder, glancing between her companions, her lips pinching and brows moving together. "Ah..." she uttered, unsure. Nick's eyes glared with utter distrust, and Ellis stood with a deer-in-the-headlights silence, his fingertips almost clawing at his hidden bullet.

There was no way to reveal it with the strangers standing right there -

Coach calmly sighed and interrupted, a weary pause to his eyes betraying his discomfort. He made a decision all in an instant, firmly accepting the offer despite that flicker of unsurety on his face. "Sounds like a good deal to me. We don't got much to offer back, 'cept extra hands."

The machete-wielding Spaniard, maybe mid-twenties, smirked. "Lo sabemos." he snickered in what was so clearly a mocking tone, eyes rolling up with a bright humor. He turned around, the other two moving to slip behind him.

Brenda smirked over her shoulder as she walked at his elbow, gesturing the others on with a smooth swipe of the long katana wielded in her left hand. "Consider it a gift." she hummed with a lazy tone of voice. "Between survivors."

Nick growled, firmly lowering his rifle to glare after them. They didn't seem inclined to look back, moving with a cocky assurance that they'd either be followed or not, and it just riled him up even more.

He spat like an angry alley-cat, turning with a twist to face Coach aggressively. "What the fuck are we doing exactly?! Who decided getting cozy with the crazies was a good idea?"

Coach's resigned face started to shift, ready to respond with a certain confidence, but Jerry halted in his steps. Nick's anger had heightened his voice too much for it to go unheard, and the hulking man turned around to stare back toward them.

"Crazies?" the weighty Southerner fiercely returned, chin jutted and bunching his bloodied beard up at his jawline. It looked half like he'd bit into something, red smeared through his facial hair. "Crazy nothin'. You're lookin' at the Angels of Death, shitface. If you got any sense you'll fall in line real quick."

Returning to following his companions, the hulking man left a practically caustic tinge to the air as the four stared after him. It made sense - and yet Nick found himself staring anyway, gut flopping just once in an angry motion.

He rolled green eyes slowly back to the other three, gazing at them an instant. "And there are our angels." Nick snapped, simply, tone bristling in a blatant I told you so."

Rochelle fidgeted with her rifle, gazing down at it as she nodded slightly. "Guess so." she murmured in slight hesitance, glancing up after them to pinch her brows.
Coach grunted heavily. He'd shouldered Ellis' shotgun, snatching it up from the back of the van, and he gestured with it a little bit to make sure Ellis saw it before he forced himself forward. He advanced after the three strangers, setting his shotgun against his shoulder and seeming to resign himself.

"Just keep close, y'all. Van's dead, anyway, and if they know a good place to bunk down... well. They ain't tried nothin' so far, and I'd rather keep 'em where we can see 'em. Just keep close." he rumbled back over his shoulder, voice tired.

Staring after him for a beat, Rochelle slipped a glance between Nick and Ellis. The woman forced a smile and nodded, shrugging reluctantly. "Come on, guys. At least we'll get showers, right? We'll just be careful. Better to be friends with them than piss them off."

She moved to follow Coach, hurrying to slip beside him and raise a hand to his bicep. The woman walked by his side, gaze forward with a nervous quiet as they followed in the Angels' footsteps.

Nick gave a frustrated sigh, slipping his arm into the strap of his rifle. He gazed shortly at Ellis, the mechanic hesitantly returning it, frozen for a moment. "... I don't trust this. At all." Nick stated simply, blunt honesty uttered with a flat tone to his voice.

He started to turn away, waving his hand to encourage Ellis to come after him, but the younger man grabbed the hand with a sudden snatching motion. Nick jerked to a halt, completely and wholly stilling as Ellis' fingers tightened around his wrist.

Green eyes flicked to blue and read the panic in them. Something tightened in Nick's brows, his eyes attentive. "N-Nick." Ellis whispered with abrupt insistence, fear suddenly kicking his heartbeat into overdrive. Nick would know what to do.

Nick examined the Georgian's soft face with a twitching brow, staring an instant before shooting a small glance forward to make sure they weren't falling behind too much and weren't being watched.

He half-snapped, "What..?", forearm twitching underneath Ellis' calloused fingers as he stirred a little from his initial surprise. The Georgian hesitantly dragged his hand out of his pocket, eyes darting to mimic Nick's as he checked to make certain there were no eyes on them.

The Angels walked on, up the road, not concerned with them in the least.

Biting his lower lip, he lifted up his hand to show it to Nick as he uncurled his fingers, displaying the sniper bullet cradled in his palm. The thing was crushed and marked by black rubber from the collision with the van's tire.

Nick's gaze alighted on it, and it took only a split second for that sharp mind to connect the dots.

In one swift motion, the conman tore his hand from Ellis' and gripped the wrist of the hand that held the evidence. Nick, capturing Ellis' gaze firmly as those blues widened a bit at the grip, enunciated out his response carefully.

"Don't say a word. Don't even think about it."

The warm touch of his fingers turned Ellis' hand until the bullet tumbled off and to the concrete, disappearing amidst the blood and gore that splattered the grey stone. Ellis flicked his gaze once from his twisted hand and back to Nick's face, confused into a dropped jaw.

"Wh."
Using the grip on Ellis' wrist, Nick firmly pulled him to start moving. Ellis stumbled a bit but caught up, brows knotted in confusion as he shot a little glance back toward the now-lost bullet. "Why?" he asked, puzzled.

Nick's mouth brushed too-near his ear as the conman whispered to him, sharply, ferocious tone leaving no room for argument. "Play oblivious. Aces in the hole have to stay in the hole - if they're gonna play with us.. fine. Let'em."

The conman let his hand go and stepped away, brushing his suit flat. His expression went to a calm deadpan as he started to fall into place behind Coach and Rochelle. Ellis scooted next to him, feeling a little redness touch his face as his ear tingled from the brush of Nick's breath.

Ellis kept quiet, obediently curling his hands into fists and nodding, wiping the thought from his head. He trusted Nick - he knew what he was doing. Some of the panic lifted, and he relaxed a little, comforted at not being the only one to know.

He could play oblivious, with Nick backing him up.

"Heh - bet y'all can't wait till I get in the shower, h'uh?" the kid playfully prompted, voice lightening as he pawed at his chest a little and scooted up to peer at Coach and Rochelle. They looked at him, some bemusement entering Coach's face as Rochelle snorted.

"Yeah, stinky."

Gazing forward at the calmly strolling silhouettes of the so-called 'Angels of Death,' Nick's green eyes burned with a ferocity that didn't seep into any other part of his face.

_Thing is - I play fucking hard._

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO [Courtney Hahn](https://www.courtneyhahn.com) - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
Nick couldn't help but glare, watching the procession as the Angels led them down the road. He had a sick twitch in his stomach - judging, hostile. It was eerie watching them fight, taking a visible pleasure in the violence.

It was like they *liked* being covered in blood. Like they stuck to their blades to get as close to the violence as possible - he could just sense it, see it on their faces, in their voices. Unspoken. Tangible.

It was different.

There was something very wrong with them, and Nick felt this tension, like there were a rubberband held taut just before his face and it would snap free at any instant. His muscles tensed, preparing for it.

"¡Morid como los perros!" Chris yelled with a fanatic edge of excitement, slicing his machete straight across the face of the infected running for him. The zombie shrieked, face splitting open in a gush of blood, and the youth grabbed it by the scraggly hair.

With a few hacks at its struggling neck, he severed its head with a meaty shudder, blood spraying from weak arteries. The man laughed joyously as he flung the head toward the giant Southerner nearby, the skull flying with bloody splatters. "¡Coge!" he burst, voice harshening around the 'g'.

Jerry snarled, barely dodging it as the messy projectile flew past him. He kicked it away, the thing rolling wetly across the concrete, and shook a bloodied fist at the other man. "Told you to quit. You know I don't know that Mexican shit!"

Chris rolled his eyes and sighed with this hum, thumbing his nose at the man and muttering, "Corto de luces.." He threw a hand up as he wiped his other on a drier part of his shirt, chiding the huge man with a casual gesture. "Castellano, Jerry - o español. Spanish! There's six thousand miles between Méjico and España."

"They both ain't here," the plaid-bedecked man grunted, hoisting his butcher's knife up to ready for a zombie that charged out from an open house's door. "Fuckin' wetback." He lashed out when it was just arms-length away, and the knife buried in its chest with a little flash of blood.

Reaching out to grab the thing's grungy shirt, Jerry held it away from himself as he wrenched the knife free and stabbed again, the sleek metal tearing through skin and bone, hacking through ribs.

The zombie clawed and swiped at him, scoring lines against the sleeves of his shirt, but Jerry didn't so much as twitch as he ripped the knife violently downward to tear its chest cavity mostly open. He shoved it off, the thing unmoving as its body crumpled amidst its own innards.

Brenda walked at the front, her stance wide. Dealing with oncoming zombies only required one or two slices from her sharp katana, wielded with an amateur's grip but - nonetheless - effective. It tore through bone and sinew like nothing, lopping off limbs as the woman toyed with her infected prey.

Their rage kept them coming even after they'd lost their arms. She'd merely back up, amusement displayed over her face as the things uselessly staggered at her. Sooner than later, a swift two-handed swing would lop their heads off at the neck, and they'd go down.
She laughed with a sigh as the men argued, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes with a finger that left a streak of blood over her brow. "Jerry, don't embarrass yourself." If the heavyset Southerner heard her, he didn't react. His expression didn't change… but it didn't seem to change that often.

Like it was stuck between rage and lust at all times.

Tossing her head a bit, Brenda called over her shoulder, "Enjoying the show?"

Nick moved carefully down the road, sidestepping the remnants of the Angels' massacre. Blood streaked his shoes despite his attempts, and it agitated him more than it should have. He growled faintly under his breath, glancing back at the three following in loose single file behind him.

Ellis was just a few inches behind him - the kid had latched onto him with a vengeance after sharing the evidence of the Angels' subterfuge. He seemed unsettled, but that was probably more at the secret they were keeping, rather than the violence occurring ahead.

The kid's eyes were riveted thoughtfully on Nick's back more than anything else, anyway.

Coach picked up the rear, his shotgun ready just in case they got flanked. However, the Angels were fronting the battle and little got past them. His expression was a stony mask of calm, betraying nothing.

"Oh yeah. We could really learn a few things." Nick retorted sarcastically, examining Rochelle in particular - she was even worse than Ellis at hiding her thoughts from her face. Not that he was worried for her; he was just observing.

She looked nauseated.

Brenda snorted with some derision, not blind to the mockery. Turning around to walk backwards, she lifted her katana to eye the length of the blade. "Squeamish? Please. They're just shells. They were weak; they died. Now it's us, or them."

Nick crossed his arms over his chest, rifle tight against his back the way he'd strapped it to his shoulder. He gave a sigh that flared his nostrils, trying to soothe his own discontent. Self-control wasn't one of his virtues, but it was far easier when his mind had moved into con mode.

And, for now, keeping the peace to some degree was part of the con.

"Neat logic you have there," he stated simply, some razor to his voice. 'Keeping the peace' didn't mean he had to hold his tongue. "I don't give a shit about killing zombies. I'm just pretty sure getting wet over it isn't as normal."

With a slightly anxious tone of voice, an on-edge sincerity that made Nick's jaw twitch, Ellis reached out to paw at his jacket slightly and warned, "Nick.. careful, man.. don't start no fights."

"We like fights!" Crowing a little laugh from ahead, Chris gave a wave of his machete over his shoulder. His skin was a sunny tan where it wasn't stained with pinks, reds, and blacks. "El traje sure told you, eh, B?"

The woman gave a short blink at Nick before smirking, swiveling her katana faintly as she walked backwards with an unerrring balance. "You're a liar if you say you don't like the freedom. If you just embraced it, you might be doing as good as we are."

Nick snorted, waving a hand in dismissal at her as his gaze went half-lidded. His voice dropped to
something indifferent, unconcerned, and she cocked her head at him in interest "Trust me, doll. I know what freedom is. I've just kept my sanity, too."

"Hope your sanity fills the place where your balls were." Jerry grunted, pawing down his front with a hand. Nick gritted his teeth just a little, eyeing the man with an irritated narrow. He would have loved to make him regret that -

- if the Southerner weren't a good few inches taller than him…

…and a fair few pounds heavier than him…

…and carrying a butcher's knife…

A cackle sparked up from an alleyway. The familiar, fetid laughter trembled with utter panic, and the cowed shape of a hunched Jockey came scrambling out onto the street. It clawed at the air, moldy fingers dripping with blood, sprinting toward them on bowed legs with a restrained giggle.

It aimed right for Ellis, and he started to go for his shotgun, ready to intercept it - but Brenda gave a casual wave over her shoulder to stop him. He hesitantly lowered it, head craning slightly in confusion.

Jerry readied his butcher's knife, flexing thick fingers on the handle. "C'mere, you cock-eyed bitch!" He burst into a slight jog, running straight at it without the faintest edge of fear.

The Jockey leapt with a trickling giggle right as the stout man lifted his butcher's knife up, and swung it with a fierce roar. The blade flashed between the Jockey's outstretched arms, and it struck it straight in the face.

The creature's elongated jaw split under the strike, teeth shattered and face falling in around the blade. A gurgled squeal of pain, high-pitched, like the dying keen of a rabbit, escaped it. Jerry calmly let it fall to the concrete, squirming and twitching as blood gushed from its broken face.

He eyed it for a casual moment, rolling his wrist slowly. As the Jockey gave a little broken giggle, whimpering and almost looking up at him, he lifted up a thick booted foot and smashed his heel downwards onto its skull.

Blood, brain matter, and shards of skull spattered against the bottom of his jeans. He twisted his boot a bit back and forth, sending twitches down the Jockey's body as it gave a few last flickers of life.

"Jesus Christ," Rochelle mumbled just faintly, just loud enough for Nick to hear. He didn't react - just flexed his fingers, taking stock of the plaid-garbed man and listening to the realistic voice in the back of his head that pointed out firmly: You cannot take him in a fight.

Nick chewed on that, amending, A fair fight.

Coach stepped toward Rochelle, laying a hand on her shoulder lightly. The big man lowered his head slightly, sighing weightily and murmuring in simple comfort: "It's a'ight, baby girl." There was something discomfited in the crunch of his heavy brows. "Gotta stop 'em somehow."

He didn't sound completely convinced.

Turning around as the Jockey died ahead, Chris wiped his palm flat down the side of his machete, cleaning it with the gesture and holding his hand out as the sloughed-off blood dribbled from his digits.
"As a child, in España," he uttered thoughtfully, eyes on his own hand. "we had la corrida - bullfighting. Watching the torero performing the faena, the bull slowly dying but fighting hard... you forget which one you were cheering for."

Jerry stepped away from the Jockey, shaking his boot off and giving the corpse a swift kick to get it out of his way. He gripped his knife firmly, glancing ahead as his thick beard shifted with a pleased smack of his lips.

"I just like seein’ the cocksuckers squeal."

Rochelle turned entirely around, lifting a hand to pinch at the bridge of her nose. There was almost anger on her expression, overwhelming the nausea. The pleasure they took was almost tangible. The whole thing disgusted her.

Chris’ head perked up as she did, vibrant brown eyes suddenly flicking toward her. He blinked twice before lowering his machete, voice rising to carry to her. "Preciosa, are you alright?" There was the softest lisp in the middle of the word, almost imperceptible, as his tongue caught between his teeth to form a faint 'th' sound where it should have been a 'si'.

"Fine." she near-snapped, forcing herself to turn back around and curling her hands into fists. She rolled her jaw forward, lips taut against one another, eyes hot with a kind of agitation. "You guys are just... really something."

Ellis twisted his head, meeting Rochelle's gaze a bit mournfully, offering a little apology under the bill of his cap. "Ro' - they're just zombies... y'know?"

Rochelle gave a tiny huff, crossing her arms over her chest and averting her gaze slightly. "Doesn't mean you have to mutilate them. They were people once, too. We don't enjoy it, we just do it."

Blinking just a moment, it seemed to take Chris a moment to understand, gaze flicking over her face and the rest of them.

"¡Ay! Of course." the man yelped in sudden inspiration, whipping on his heel to pivot his machete in the air, pointing it toward Jerry and Brenda in a smooth swoop. "We are scareng them. They are not used to Los Ángeles. Gentle!"

Coach squinted slightly, inspecting the Spaniard from afar. Something shifted in his face, not wholly certain, seeming a little inquisitive at the man's earnestness. The big man reached out to re-settle his hand on Rochelle's bicep.

"A little calmin' down wouldn't be outta the question." Coach agreed simply, jumping on the opportunity. "We ain't much for the violence. Just tryin' to keep safe."

An angry grunt left the husky Southerner, pawing fingers violently through his close-cut hair. Jerry spoke like Coach hadn't, gazing toward Christophe with a sneer. "Half an hour'n'you broke like a runt horse. I'll be gentle when I'm rammin' my hand down your throat, amigo."

Chris’ chest started to expand slightly under the blood-drenched fabric of his thin shirt, rising to the threat - but Brenda interrupted, sighing. She reached up to draw her sniper rifle into her hands, tipping it to check the magazine. "Calm down, you two. If our guests are uncomfortable, let's humor them. Guns, now."

Jerry opened his mouth fiercely, ready to argue, at the same time Chris slipped his machete into a makeshift holster at his hip and pulled his assault rifle from its position lashed on his back.
"A kill is a kill, Jerry." Brenda affirmed, gaze sharpening as she ordered harsher: "Guns."

The hulking man gave a subtle growl before shoving his butcher's knife under his belt, visibly stewing. His hands were slow to pull his chrome shotgun from its holster, almost sulking as he obeyed the woman.

Ellis fidgeted a little, crossing an arm over his chest to grip onto his elbow. "Phew. Thank the Lord they're puttin' them knives away." he mumbled gently, sneaking a glance at Rochelle and giving a comforting smile. "See..? They ain't impossible or nothin'. It'll be okay, Ro'."

Rochelle screwed her brow up slightly, blinking with faint surprise as Chris tipped his head to flash a grin at her over his shoulder. She worked her brow into a little dissuading knot, forcing herself to nod at Ellis.

"Yeah.. let's just keep moving, okay, sweetheart? The sooner we get away from all this mess, the better.."

Nick snorted, slipping his hands into the pockets of his jacket and giving a disgruntled exhale. "Which mess is that?" he muttered under his breath, so quiet he was likely the only one to hear it.

The group moved down the road in their clotted formation, the brutal violence switched out for the cleaner execution of bullets. Infected flocked out onto the street from the sandy alleyways between buildings, eagerly hunting out the sound and smell of living flesh.

With the chance of friendly fire far lessened by the way the Angels backed out of the fray, Rochelle and Nick wielded their rifles and took shots around the leading threesome. With an aim honed by adrenaline-rushed practice over the past few days, they weren't unimpressive.

Rochelle landed a bullet straight in the head of a zombie lurching for Chris. The man gave a low whistle and flicked a low-lidded glance over his shoulder. A smile lit up over his lips as he recognized it had been her, and he gave a little purr of, "Gracias, señorita."

She nodded once, simply, but Nick noted the very subtle shift of colour on her cheeks. The gambler allowed himself an instant of amusement at the same time he weighed the observation.

It very well could come in handy. If he could just gather enough information, enough to tip the scales in their favour, were the situation to come to blows…

The shape of a three-story hotel, rising up above the shorter buildings that surrounded it, marked their destination a few blocks down. Brenda gestured to it with her rifle, explaining, "That'd be it. We spotted lights on, but didn't waste any time checking it out. We last a little longer than you."

Nick would've snapped at that, had the lamenting sound of a subtle sob not come from the yard just beside them and interrupted his sarcasm. He stiffened, instantly side-stepping away from the sound and shooting a mistrustful stare at the building that separated them.

"Shit." he grated.

Coach glared an instant in the direction of the noise, shaking his head a bit slowly. He rubbed his wrist at his jaw, exhaling. "Ain't in our way, Nick." There was the tiniest of gentle edges to the big man's gruff voice. He was aware that the conman's reaction was a little more visceral than he'd like to admit.

"Yeah," Ellis piped, reaching up a hand to pat Nick's shoulder reassuringly. Nick twitched a bit under it, not wholly pleased with all the attention. He was tempted to lash out, but all it would do
was draw more focus on his intense disinterest in another run-in with the creatures. "We'll let her be. Don't worry 'bout it none."

If he closed his eyes, he could still see his ex's shrieking face, gutting him with razor-sharp claws.

"Let her be?" Brenda echoed, turning entirely around and cocking her hip subtly. She arched up a brow, examining them with some disbelief that was mirrored on Jerry's as the husky Southerner glanced back too. "What, the Witch?"

Rochelle nodded slowly, settling a hand on the top of her rifle's frame. "I.. guess so, yeah. The crying things. They're nasty, we've had a few run-ins with them.. none of them ended very well." Her gaze lowered just a twitch. "A friend of ours turned into one."

Chris, running bloody fingers through his spiked-up hair and leaving streaks of red in the strands, gave a bite of his lower lip as he hummed with trailing sympathy. "Que lástima.. I -"

With a swift jerk of her chin, Brenda interrupted him carelessly, reaching out her hand toward Jerry with a grasping motion. "They're easy. Take a lesson from us." The man seemed about to snarl, but acquiesced to her silent request with a dull silence, offering his shotgun out to her.

Nick curled his fingers into slight fists, agitated as his gaze narrowed sharply. "Lesson? Jesus. You've got to be the most annoying, cocky fucks I've ever met. Those bitches are wicked, and I'm not going to listen to you spew bullshit to stroke your ego."

Brenda snorted simply, taking the shotgun from Jerry's hands. She lifted it up, tossing her rifle back onto her shoulder and holding the shotgun tight. Without retorting, the woman merely turned and started walking for the side of the house where the noise emanated from.

Gaping slightly, Ellis jolted after her, hand reaching up as if to stop her. "Wh-whoa! Miss, whut're you doin'? Them things are dangerous -"

It was Rochelle who snagged the back of his shirt, halting him. Ellis struggled ineffectually before stilling, his head twisting to flick his gaze from Rochelle to Brenda's calmly striding shape.

"She knows what she is doing, tío." Chris hummed with a small bob of his head, thumbing over a brow. Jerry rolled his squinted and small eyes, scratching into his heavily bearded cheek as he watched Brenda disappear around the corner.

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the soft, restrained sobbing of the nearby Witch. A held breath -

- and just as that sobbing shifted into a half-confused snarl, rising into a growl, there was a series of cracking gunshots and a terrible, keening scream of animal agony. It sent the hairs rising up on the back of Nick's neck, and he practically felt the shudder from beside him as Ellis recoiled.

Rochelle croaked a bit, releasing Ellis' shirt out of pure surprise. He scuttled back to make up the distance, almost bumping into her, brows going up as he quickly grabbed for his hat.

There was silence, then, and Brenda reappeared around the corner. She strolled, casually thumping Jerry's shotgun against her thigh with a slow calm, fresh blood speckled against her shirt.

Nick gripped onto his rifle, narrowing his eyes. He licked his lips, slowly, examining her closely. The ghosted echo of gunshots and that inhuman scream still reverberated in his head. "... So, they do die." he reluctantly uttered, rolling a shoulder in its socket.
Jerry smirked, crossing broad arms over a barrel chest. "Couple good shots to their head, and they die screamin'. Gotta catch them unawares, while they're sobbin'. Step to the bitches and shoot'em up good."

When Brenda reached them, a smile lit her face. Her eyes were dark below slightly messy brows, and she hummed faintly before she spoke.

"Everything dies. It's just a matter of how long it takes."
Chapter 77

The hotel's front door refused to open.

It only took a moment or two of eyeing the blockaded door for action to be taken. Nick would've suggested looking for a back door or going through a window, but no. With a running start, Jerry went at it, his shoulder turned forward like a battering ram.

The husky man collided with a resounding thud, the door crushing inward with the creaking death cry of wood. He barely skidded to a stop in the threshold as the door broke off its hinged and slammed into the floor inside, shrugging his shoulder a bit to roll off the pain.

Dust sparkled in the air from the shattered wood, and Nick squinted a bit into the doorway. "I would've done something a little less extreme, but whatever. That works." he muttered, cuffing a ringed knuckle at his nose.

"Jerry's a little excitable." Brenda smirked, stepping forward to maneuver through the doorway. She walked over the fallen door with a careful balance, glancing around the lit lobby. It was empty - maybe the hotel had been closed when the outbreak hit, or they'd all evacuated.

There was a check-in counter straight ahead, and a few scattered couches, flanked by tables that were decorated with plastic flowers and pamphlets. The ground was all grey-tan carpeting, a monotone drollness to the environment.

Rochelle gave a slight snort, rubbing at her arm. She glanced at Jerry hesitantly as he patted his shoulder. "You okay, there? People break arms like that..."

He outright laughed, dropping his hand and flexing his arm. He wasn't overly muscular, just huge and broad, but the motion was still intimidating as his bloody plaid sleeves stretched over his bicep. "They do if I'm aimin' for 'em." he scoffed simply.

Coach rubbed at the back of his neck, giving a weary chuckle as he turned around to gaze around the street, making sure they hadn't attracted any zombies with the noise. "I'll believe that. Hate to play you in football."

"I ever tell y'all 'bout the time muh buddy Keith broke his shoulder tryin' tuh bust down a door...?" Ellis' head perked up a bit, grinning slightly as he reminded himself of the story. Nick immediately tensed up. There was no way Ellis' talkative tendencies would go over well, but there was no stopping him.

Ellis tossed his hands up, voice rising as he relaxed. "See, Paul was in charge'uh the garage keys, but he lost 'em without knowin' - I mean he ain't the kind'uh guy tuh lose stuff, so we was real surprised - so Keith was tryin' tuh get intuh the garage, so he got this crowbar, 'n' -"

Jerry pushed into the doorway, boots cracking on the fallen door as it shifted under his weight. "Someone shut him up?" he growled, irritated. "I got a knife for that if y'all need."

The flare of anger that bled red into Nick's consciousness had him grinding his teeth in a subtle motion. It was hard not to say something, in the face of such a threat to the kid, but he held his silence as the husky man walked into the hotel after Brenda.

"Ignore him, mis amigos." Chris muttered sideways, stepping around Nick to pass through the doorway. "He has the brain of a pig."
Nick crossed his arms over his chest, snorting slightly. "And he's dirtier than one." He didn't bother glancing at Ellis; the younger man was fiddling with his hat in silent embarrassment, and that was sign enough that Jerry had cowed him.

"Ha!" Chris cried as he maneuvered over the fallen door and turned back around. The Spaniard leaned in out of the doorway with one hand gripped on it to balance himself, offering the other, bloodied hand out toward Rochelle with a quirked smile and lowered chin.

"Ten cuidado, bonita. I'll help you -"

Rochelle's face darkened slightly, lips tightening against each other. She slipped her arm into the strap of her rifle and lifted her chin, walking through the doorway without more than a glance at his extended hand. "I can walk over a door, thanks, Chris." she muttered, shortly.

She glanced around the lobby, hanging close to the door. Brenda had ducked behind the counter, bent over and examining the computer system set up before her. She moved with some familiarity, a faint buzz sounding out as if something was printing, though Rochelle couldn't see exactly what she was doing.

Jerry stood idly next to the staircase that led up into the further floors, resting his shotgun across his shoulders so he could hook his wrists on either end in a casual gesture.

Chris glanced after her with an almost sad curl of his rejected hand, sighing as he leaned against the doorway slightly. With a subtle slump, he glanced at the three yet outside and waved them in.

Nick couldn't help but snort, shaking his head slightly as he slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket and moved to step through the doorway somewhat delicately. "Aww, we don't get a hand in? I'm disappointed." he quipped carelessly.

A little wrinkle touched Chris' nose as he backed up. There was a light in his eyes, though, watching Ellis skitter in after Nick and Coach trudge in last. "Let's not and say we did, eh?"

Brenda straightened up from her work behind the counter, displaying a short stack of keycards settled in her palm. "There. Room keys." She smirked a little, snatching up a pen and scratching numbers onto their plastic faces with a grating sound. "Should be the first four upstairs - or do you snuggle together at night to keep away the bad dreams?"

Sighing a little, Coach sniffed once and rubbed over his nose. "Four keys is good, thanks.." He approached the counter, holding out an open hand, and Brenda smirked as she handed the cards over. "Are y'all gonna stick around?"

Brenda shrugged up her shoulders, using a pinky to brush her short hair behind her ears. "That's more a question for you. You're the one in our path." She glanced at Jerry and Chris, lifting up a hand to snap gently. "Come on, boys. Let's hunt up some lunch."

Grunting a little, Jerry turned around to walk back to the door, holstering his shotgun in favor of his cleaver. "What, we're feedin' 'em too?" he growled, slipping a hostile glance toward each survivor as he passed them by.

When Ellis in particular didn't flinch, the husky Southerner paused in his stride, baring his teeth under the fur of his thick beard to snarl at the youth. Ellis stiffened his jaw and just blinked, staring out from under the bill of his cap. Their gazes held.

Jerry moved on with a small flare of his nostrils, ducking out of the hotel in frustration. Ellis hunched a bit the moment he left, giving a weighty sigh of "Hoh mah gawd..." and sneaking a
glance at Nick, eyes wide.

The conman merely smirked, the expression hollow.

Chris sighed idly, crossing his arms behind his back and moving to follow in the hulking man's wake. "¡Hostia, Jerry! Calm down. We will feed you, too." He moved toward the door, glancing toward Rochelle with a smile as he passed her. "Anything I can get you, bonita?"

With a bite to her tongue, Rochelle fisted her hands carefully with a shake of her head. "Just food, thanks." she responded with an even tone, shifting a glance toward Coach almost helplessly.

Coach gave a small chuckle, just shaking his head in response as Chris smiled widely. The man palmed a hand over his chest, sighing a bit and promising in a low murmur, "I will improvise."

Brenda walked up behind Chris as he spoke, shoving a hand against his back and pushing him with her palm. "Move it." she ordered brusquely, eliciting a yelp from the man as he hurried to escape her, rushing out the door.

He called "¡Te voy a echar de menos!" behind himself, voice earnest even as it faded.

Unable to help himself, Nick snorted as they disappeared, looking toward Rochelle with a smirk. "Aww, he's going to miss you." he mocked, waggling his shoulders a bit. She gave him a helpless whine, palming over her face.

The atmosphere suddenly changed. Tension drained with the Angels' disappearance, freeing their voices and loosening muscles they'd almost been unaware were clenched. Like they took a group sigh together, relaxing.

"Is that what he said..? Oh, God.." She turned miserably, setting her forehead with a groan against Coach's shoulder. He patted her back in comfort, though there was poorly restrained amusement on his face.

"You got an admirer." he gruffed, sympathetically.

Ellis perked slightly, glancing from the tormented Rochelle to Nick's face for a lengthy moment before speaking up. "Oah, you know Spanish, Nick?" he questioned with burgeoning curiousity, unable to help himself.

The conman shrugged, some of his amusement draining from his face. "I married one. You have to pick up some things." He rubbed at his jaw with a thumb, rustling against his building facial hair, a simplicity touching his tone. "That or get shit-talked without knowing."

Coach, still patting Rochelle's back, gave a chuckle. "If you hear that Chris boy talkin' indecent about Rochelle, don't you go translatin'. Don't wanna hear that shit." He extended the hand that held their room keys, offering two to Nick. "Anyway.. let's all get cleaned up. Meet in the hall after you're done. We got some talkin' to do."

Smirking again, Nick took them with a dark wink, tossing one of the keycards over his shoulder to Ellis. The kid caught it easily, eyeing the rectangular shape with a bit of a furtive drop of his chin. "Don't worry. I'll be keeping all of that entirely to myself."

Rochelle gave a pained squeaking sound, raising a hand to clamp over her eyes tightly. "Oh my God. Someone hit him!" she begged, hunching her shoulders.

The conman started to laugh, not at all expecting anything to come of it. When Ellis' hand suddenly
whacked the back of his head, he blinked, face flickering entirely blank. Slowly, Nick turned around, mouth closing into a taut line.

Green eyes stared down blue ones, darkening with jagged agitation that blossomed over his face with a disbelieving anger. Ellis' grin was wide and confident as he shifted a bit from foot to foot, antsy underneath the older man's rising fury.

"She told me to." Ellis hummed a bit, lowering his chin and blinking slowly as if he could talk his way out of it.

"Fucking hick." was all Nick said before lurching forward to try and grab for him. Just what he intended to do was a mystery - mostly because the instant he shifted to move, Ellis was skidding around and sprinting across the room, hand clamped onto his hat to keep ahold of it.

Coach and Rochelle both struggled not to laugh as the two men bolted across the room. Ellis scrabbled for the door of the stairway, managing to scoot inside and try to kick it shut behind himself.

Nick caught it on a palm before it shut, thrusting through the doorway and chasing the Georgian up the stairs. "Get the fuck back here, Fireball!" Nick snarled, using the railing to vault himself a little faster as Ellis gained on him. The younger man was a bit quicker on his feet, even putting aside Nick's bad leg.

"You do not fucking hit me and then run away!"

"I do if I run quicker'n you, Mr. Gamblin' Man!" the Georgian beamed, broken down into guffawing laughter between half-pants. He thundered up the steps, workboots hard on the carpeted stairs as he skidded around the bend, reaching the second floor.

The gambler felt the muscles of his legs burning as he ran up the steps, eyes narrowed with a feral intent as he thrust himself up the last step. Ellis didn't bother to shut the door this time, scrambling to get his room keycard arranged properly in his hand as he bolted through it.

Ellis glanced hurriedly at the door numbers, finding the one that matched the scrawled '2' Brenda had inscribed on it. He was struggling to stop laughing, giving a squirm as he spotted his door. The Georgian quickly scrambled up to it, trying to slide it into the electronic lock, fingers shaking with adrenaline and laughter all at once -

He shoved it in and tore it out, too quick, too messily. The machine beeped a denial and blinked a red dot at him, rejecting his attempt.

"Oh, fer -!"

Nick collided with his back with a growl, pushing him hard into the door with palms to his shoulders. Ellis' laughter cut off with a sharp gasp as his body was suddenly shoved into the flat face of the door, Nick's body pressing into his.

"Don't fucking hit -" Nick started to fume, seething, only to have his voice halt to a stuttering breath. He quieted slightly, lids lowering, the tension fading from his body as his hips brushed against the slope of Ellis' rump. He'd been denied the previous night, and the contact sent blood flooding from his head toward better regions.

He ached.

There was a moment of silence, with just their exertion-strangled breaths to break it. Nick's hands
kept a vicelike grip on Ellis' shoulders, holding him against the door. His breath panted against the back of his neck, bringing goosebumps to the other man's skin as Ellis gave the smallest of inquisitive sounds.

The urge to press closer against him… flip him around and rut between those willing legs… was almost overwhelming. The stress of the afternoon and the adrenaline of the chase - which had, in all honesty, not been sexual until that very instant - fueled a sudden lust that nearly overwhelmed all sense.

It was the sound of rising footsteps from the stairwell that had Nick suddenly retreating back. He stared for an instant at Ellis as the Georgian, reddening slowly as he glanced at the conman, took a step away from the door and turned to look at him.

"... Go take a shower. You stink." Nick snapped simply, turning away and shrugging a shoulder slightly closer to his jaw. He glanced down toward his own room key, examining the number and seeing he'd been handed '3'.

Ellis gave a slightly embarrassed lower of his head, fidgeting with the keycard in his hands as he watched Nick walk away. "Prissy cityslicker..." With a little self-soothing huff, the mechanic turned and unlocked his door more carefully this time. It allowed him in this time, and he stepped inside.

It only took a few seconds for Nick to come to a stop in the middle of the hallway. He stared idly toward his room, just a few feet away, thumbtip rubbing on the plastic surface of his keycard. An invitation to a complimentary breakfast was printed on the front in brilliant yellow text.

It was a simple question. He could go to his room. Or...

With a decisive stride, Nick turned around and quick-walked it back to Ellis' doorway. The door latch guard had slid inward to block it from closing all the way - he wasn't sure if Ellis had done that on purpose, and he didn't bother to think on it. He just thrust the door back open and stepped inside before Coach and Rochelle reached the top of the stairs.

Ellis had his hand on the bathroom door handle, ready to open it, when Nick's sudden intrusion made him jump. He craned his head to blink at the conman, startled, tensing up almost defensively. "Uh… is somethin' wrong..?" he questioned as Nick flipped the latch and shut the door behind himself.

Standing stiffly against the door, the conman stared at him for a moment, hands in fists at his sides. It was like Nick honestly didn't have a response. He just examined him from afar with a tight stare.

Slowly breaking out of his stiff freeze before the doorway, the older man casually dragged a hand through his hair and merely retorted, "No.", moving forward to adopt a perch on the edge of one of the two double beds that took up most of the floorspace. Ellis watched him set his rifle down on the floor, and gradually broke into a gentle smile.

The kid gave a good-natured little chuckle, rubbing at the tip of his nose with a curled knuckle, and nodded his head.

"Okay."

Nick held silent as Ellis slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. He listened acutely to the rustling and shifting through the doorway, brows knotting up slowly. There were plenty of things 'wrong' - but the clumsy sounds of Ellis' existence made it all a little easier to handle.
Since when do you not want to be alone, Nicolas?
Chapter 78

The shower poured down steaming as it struck Ellis' back. He groaned with the sensation, ducking his head as the hissing water fell down the slopes of his frame, hot water playing over sore muscles and washing away dirt and blood.

He carefully lifted up his hands and ran fingers through his hair, raking through curls and encouraging the water to cleanse the dirty strands. Turning his face up into the stream, Ellis shook his head furiously, water drenching his face.

He let the burn of the hot shower grow against his closed eyes and cheeks until he truly couldn't stand it, twisting his head out from under the water and gasping. The scalding, wet sensation was bliss to parched and decay-clogged senses.

Running his hands gently over his chest, fingertips scrubbing over the soft muscle of his pecs, the kid flinched periodically as he touched onto sore cuts and bruises. The pain of nudging injuries was outweighed by the simple pleasure of running, hot water, but the pain remained.

He'd stripped the bandages off his forearm, and as he stood under the pouring water, he lifted his arm to examine the bite wound there. The scabbed semi-circle bitten into his skin was ringed with purple and yellow, ugly bruises bled into his skin. Other than that, though, it seemed on its way to healing.

He'd gotten lucky.

Gently dunking the injury under the shower's spray, wincing as he did, he surveyed the rivulets of off-color red that flowed down his body and circled into the small drain at the far end of the tub. The grime that had gathered on his skin swirled away under the heat.

Try as he might, he couldn't shake the awareness of their questionable safety, and he couldn't stop his thoughts wandering toward the Angels. They were acting docile enough - except, of course, for Jerry.

Jerry honestly scared him.

He was built like Keith's brother, Paul, but larger and angrier. Paul was docile and calm, hard to rile or upset - almost the polar opposite of his younger brother. Jerry was fury and rage. Ellis felt like he wouldn't hesitate to hurt someone.

Ellis was intimidated by him, and was very glad they'd gotten away from him for however long it was. Brenda seemed... composed, but he sensed there was something else under her calm. He didn't like her, either. He didn't know about Christophe. The man liked Rochelle, which made Ellis like him, but he was working with the others.

He, presumably, had agreed with the choice to shoot their van. It wasn't impossible that he was just putting on an amicable front, to mislead them.

Ellis frowned.

Cupping his hands under the shower water, he let it build up into a puddle on his palms and splashed it, scrubbing, into his face. The mostly-healed cut on his cheek stung fiercely, along with plenty of other little injuries.
Ellis was about to reach for the tiny bottle of soap perched neatly on a shelf above the tub's rim when he heard the door open.

Startling, Ellis grasped onto the plastic-coated curtains that separated him from the bathroom and held them still, poking his head out from the side with an almost bashful hunch behind the curtains. He peeked out into the bathroom.

"N-Nick!" he protested, eyes widened under the curly mess of hair plastered on his forehead. The conman hadn't even bothered to shut the door, walking up to the bathroom counter on shoeless, black-socked feet. "Whut the hell!"

The gambler snorted slightly, glancing sideways at him as he pulled open the counter drawers and rifled through the complimentary supplies secreted away. "I want to shave. Calm down. It's not like I haven't seen you naked, anyway, dumbshit."

Ellis stood there for a moment, squirming on his feet under the hissing shower as he examined the older man. "Well.. yeah, but - ..." Nick had stripped off his jacket, handsome frame slouched there as he looked through the drawer. "Well, could yuh at least - close the door? Jeez.."

Nick stilled his hands for a minute, turning his head to meet Ellis' gaze with a dull stare. Barely withholding a sigh, he turned around and leaned toward the door, closing it with a tight click. "Kid. Shower."

The younger man huffed slightly as he tossed the curtains back into place, turning back under the water. He closed his eyes, burying his head under the steaming shower and gasping his mouth open a little as the water poured down his features.

He reached out to snatch up the soap bottle, turning his head out of the water as he popped it open. Squeezing a glob of it into his palm, the kid blinked repeatedly and carefully started to scrub his torso. He could hear the sound of Nick's success in finding supplies to shave with, hear the hiss of shaving cream.

Liquid soap turned into a thick foam between his fingers, lathering up on his skin in thick swathes of bubbles. Stretching a bit from side to side to spread the sweet-smelling soap across his body, Ellis tried to ignore Nick's presence.

That was difficult.

His mind kept drifting toward him, imagining those swift fingers lathering up his jaw, the soapy foam spread over his bearded cheeks. The concentration that would undoubtedly draw his face into a look of steely focus, dragging a razor along the shape of his lower face, shearing his jawline down to smooth skin.

Ellis couldn't decide if the actions were intrinsically attractive, or if he just found them attractive because Nick was doing them. Maybe he just liked everything the older man did.

Suddenly possessed by an urge he couldn't quite stifle, Ellis leaned to the side and snagged a fingertip on the edge of the curtain. Feeling a blush rise up over his face, he craned his neck until he could peek past it.

Nick leaned forward on the cabinet, his body braced with one lowered hand that rested its palm on the counter. The rest of his frame fell to a casual slump, legs crossed, and he had his chin slightly lifted as he gripped the cheap plastic razor between his thumb and index finger.

Shaving in slow lines, the conman worked with a quick and practiced intensity, shaking off globs
of lathered soap in the sink. His features uncovered with each stroke, wet skin gleaming subtly behind the razor's touch.

A blank satisfaction eased his brow, examining his own face in the mirror as he cleaned up. The man looked as good clean-shaven as he did rugged - Ellis' eyes traveled across his features for a moment, suddenly wondering what he'd look like if it were a normal day.

Neat. Tidy. Dressed in something that hadn't gone through the apocalypse.

Ellis had just let out a tiny sigh, fascinated, when Nick's gaze flicked sideways and caught him staring. The kid gasped, jolting back reflexively, despite the fact that he'd blatantly been seen.

A plastic-sealed toothbrush suddenly shot straight through the crevice he'd left between the curtains and the wall of the shower. It made him yelp, slipping slightly as he scrambled to catch his balance. There was a cushy mat on the bottom of the tub that kept him stable.

"Hey!" he protested, bending down carefully to save the makeshift projectile from the rushing water trickling over the bottom of the tub. He craned his head back out of the shower, expression chastising. "Don't throw stuff!"

Ellis chucked it back at him, catching him in the shoulder. The conman jolted slightly with a careful jerk back of his head to avoid nicking himself with the razor. He snorted, patting his shoulder off where the toothbrush had left a little imprint of water. "Don't stare at me."

Huffing a bit, Ellis pushed the curtain back into place, turning back into the stream of water to avoid the topic. He rubbed his stomach lightly, enjoying the scattering droplets as the water struck his chest.

He was quiet for a moment, gazing up at the ceiling with a slight redness to his face. He couldn't exactly determine if it was caused by the heat of the water, or embarrassment. However, their silence had been broken, and Ellis found himself talking within a few beats. He turned his head, scruffling at his ear, and called gently to the conman just across the room.

"Do you trust 'em, Nick?"

Seeming unperturbed by the change of subject, Nick gave a loud sigh of derision, clacking and rustling sounds marking his movement. "Shit, no. They remind me of some old acquaintances - and believe me, that's not a compliment."

Ellis thoughtfully raised up an arm, scrubbing soap into either armpit. "Why ain't they doin' anything...? They're bein' nasty'n'such, but they ain't done nothin' threatenin' or nothin'. Heck, I think Ro's bein' courted."

He said it so conspiratorially that Nick laughed, a little short as he stifled it after a second. Water ran in a short spurt from the sink, shut off again after a moment. "I don't know, kiddo. They've got something up their sleeves, and I don't like it."

Nick quieted for a moment, not a sound breaching the curtain, and Ellis stilled with a hand covering his eyes from the spray of water.

"... Yer smart, Nick. What'cha think is goin' on?"

He could hear the conman inhale, deeply, and exhale deeper. The sound was thoughtful, but the older man withheld whatever he was mulling over. Abruptly reversing the conversation a few seconds, Nick lowered his voice to a sly tone. "So, Ro's being courted, huh?"
Ellis' brows screwed up a little at the question, turning around to rest his shoulder against the wall of the shower and gaze toward the conman though the curtains blocked his vision. ".. Well, yeah. You been watchin' 'em same's me. I was thinkin' about tellin' him she's got a boyfriend, but I figure she can do that herself."

Nick's voice deepened, just a little. "Did I court you?"

The Georgian snorted outright, rolling up his eyes a little and ruffling his hands in his hair. The question made him blush, examining his toes in the pooling water. "No," he responded with a bit of a huffy air. "Yuh jumped me like'uh typical rude cityslicker."

Nick gave a laugh, sharp at the edges but - softer, somewhere in the center. The water ran again outside the shower, and the conman's voice was a bit muffled as he was patting his face down with a towel. "I guess you're right."

Ellis smiled a little, turning his body toward the shower so he could rub at his wounded forearm. A soft wistfulness snuck into the twist of his lips, eyes closing. That doubt crept back in, stealthily, encroaching on his thoughts. Rochelle's questions came back to him.

Courting was for romance. Did Nick consider them romantic - did he want them to be?

Part of him wanted to ask. It was just a little part of him, though, snuggled away under the gut instinct that said he shouldn't; Nick was Nick, and he'd be selfish to push him any further than he was willing to go.

But maybe he was a little scared to ask, too.

Focusing on showering, Ellis gave a little sigh and smiled, stretching his hands behind himself to rub at what he could reach of his back. It wasn't the time, anyway, when they had worse things to deal with.

Ellis was just about to turn the conversation back toward the Angels, when the curtains suddenly rattled down the railing. Its movement brought a flood of bright light and Nick's attentive green gaze.

The Georgian yelped like he'd been smacked, his panic splitting his brain into two halves: one that jolted him to spin around and hide his front, and another that jolted him to press against the wall of the shower and hide his back.

Frozen with indecision, Ellis stood under the drizzling shower with a small gape of shock as the clean-shaven Nick smirked in at him from where he stood outside the shower. There was still a little shaving cream just below his right jawline.

He'd taken his shirt off, body bared to the air, all cuts and bruises and chest hair, a confident presence that loomed over Ellis. His smirk was curled with intent, propping the foot of his injured leg against the closed toilet. He gently tugged his pantleg up so he could undo the knots of his makeshift bandage.

Ellis could only vaguely struggle at words, body melting slowly back against the wall as Nick's eyes ticked over his body while the shower pattered against it. "Wh-wha- Nick - Whut're you -?"

The gambler cocked his head to one side, quietly. The grey undershirt slipped off his leg, a greasy line of antibiotics shimmering along the fabric where it had been locked tight to Nick's skin. His injured leg, burned from ankle to knee all along the swell of his calf, had reached an aching shade of red as it healed.
The skin was still mottled and painful, but it looked much better than it had been previously. Ellis would have been proud, if he weren't so distracted.

Nick smirked a bit, lowering his hands to gently unbuckle his belt. "Jumping you." Sliding the leather undone with little metallic clicks, he sunk his thumbs under the waistband of his slacks and boxers.

Ellis' gaze followed with a wordless obedience as he pushed them down his frame, stepping out of them smoothly. Nick licked his lips, smirking wider as he garnered Ellis' rapt attention. Blue eyes widened slightly as they took in the stark nakedness bared to them, and wider at Nick's graveled tone of voice. "Like.."

The conman folded his slacks easily, then pried his feet free of their socks. He tossed the lot over to the bathroom counter where his shirt was neatly folded. ".the rude.."

Ellis' gaze was helplessly drawn up to meet Nick's as the conman's green eyes burned into his. He took his rings off in a smooth motion - one from his right hand and two from his left. They were placed in a careful pile on the edge of the counter. ".cityslicker.."

Nick stepped into the tub with one simple movement, one foot slipping over the wall and catching his balance before he let his injured one move to follow. The shower immediately took to the task of soaking him, droplets of water catching on his skin as some of it struck him and some of it misted off of Ellis' skin.

"..I am."

All concept of space disappeared in an instant. They were just there, together, no distance between them even as they had yet to touch. Ellis couldn't so much as breathe, staring with parted lips, goosebumps rising over his skin in defiance of the hot water.

He must've been breathing, though, because the tiniest of "Nick.."s left him, just a faded utterance.

Nick reached back and swept the curtain back into place with a smooth swoosh of rings on the railing. As a dimness covered them from the stifling sheets, the conman advanced the step between them and Ellis found himself gripped in circling arms.

His eyes shut instantly, surrendering as Nick's mouth latched onto his neck. The smooth brush of Nick's cheek against his jaw was a strange feeling, Ellis' light hints of peach-fuzz stubble now the only friction between them, but the conman didn't so much as pause.

Teeth grazed at his neck, sucking lightly at wet skin between tiny bites. The attention had Ellis' head rolling to the side, a moan tearing out of him. The sound only heightened when Nick's hands started to trace down his back.

They followed every slope, every divot - stroking along slick skin and pulling him closer. Their bodies pressed with an unabashed kind of closeness, legs and torsos nuzzling as they shifted this way and that, blindly following the motions of the other.

Nick trailed up his neck, licking and nipping at wet skin, moving up to his jaw.. tracing down along it, grazing over the gentle slopes of his lover's chin.. and then, suddenly, their mouths were locked amidst streams of errant water, lips playing against each other and tongues brushing with a slow intimacy.

Mumbles of the gambler's name were lost in the hiss of the water, and Ellis let his arms slip up, wrapping around Nick's neck and using the grip to push against him harder. He wanted to be closer,
tighter, drowning in the heat and drug of touch.

Nick slipped his hands down, fingers searching with a grasping determination, following the lines of Ellis' thin waist until they reached his hips. Ellis couldn't help but moan, shivering slightly as they sunk to grip onto his thighs, curling just beneath his rump.

He was pushed back with a surge, thudding against the wall of the shower as Nick's hands pulled one of his legs up, forcing Ellis' thigh to brace against his hip. Ellis arched his head back, pressing into the wall, groaning as the position pushed Nick's stiffening length against his.

All of their own volition, Ellis' fingers jolted up to twine and curl in Nick's hair, the strands going silky-soft as they got wet. He clutched at it, exhaling hard as a low growl escaped the older man - but it was aroused, not irked.

Those lean hips rocked in a slow motion against him, hard flesh nudging and rubbing. The shower made everything slick, and Nick thrust him against the shower wall in a fierce frot, never quite pulling away - just relaxing down, then grinding upwards.

Fingers gone wild in the seeming permission they'd gotten, Ellis gripped tightly onto the hair between his knuckles, pulling Nick's head a little closer so he could push their mouths tighter together. Their breaths huffed between driving kisses, water sneaking between their lips as the shower misted through the air.

"Lord - nh.." Ellis whimpered between the ferocious attacks of Nick's mouth. The conman shifted his attention to the kid's lower lip, only barely making it easier for him to talk. "Sh-shit.. Nick - please -"

Nick silenced him with a kiss so hard his head hit against the wall of the shower, forced back. Ellis' eyes shut against the speckling of water against his face and the pulse of arousal that burst up his spine, making his body quiver.

A growl passed through the kiss, deep and hungry.

The Georgian was vaguely aware of Nick's hands leaving his thigh, trailing away. He pay attention, just hooking his leg around Nick's to keep it raised and drowning under the biting, kissing, licking pressure of Nick's soothing assault. He moaned deep in his throat, hearing a subtle echo of the sound from the Northerner.

All Ellis knew was, a few breaths later, Nick's hand slid underneath his thigh and drew a finger up against the delicate muscle that ringed his entrance, exposed by his raised leg. The touch made him near-shout a vague phrase against Nick's mouth, the sound a mixture of pleased and pleading.

"Shh," Nick murmured against his mouth, so quiet it was just a subtle sound under the hiss of the shower - but he pinned Ellis hard against the wall immediately after, hips rocking up a little to force Ellis' leg further into a curl and spread him wider.

Ellis' body squirmed, spine arching uselessly in the bare inch that Nick's feral press gave him to move. He gasped senselessly against the older man's mouth, quaking upwards in a jolting arch that let him rub against Nick's digit, back scraping against the smooth wall of the shower.

Nick was panting through his nostrils, brows screwed up in fierce concentration. He pushed against the tense muscle, massaging without penetrating, watching and listening to Ellis' reactions in quiet fascination. His stare should've made Ellis embarrassed.

It didn't.
Ellis could only take it so long. He shuddered, dragging his hand from Nick's scalp and reaching down. He grabbed around their erections, thumb and digits circling to press them together. Nick stiffened at the gesture, then shifted his free hand to grip the side of Ellis' head and hold his cheek, fingertips curled at his jawline and ear.

Lips pressed together to stifle them both, Nick thrust into the squeeze of Ellis' digits, all while the fingers of his free hand were kneading at his entrance in hungry stimulation. Nick dared to slip a fingertip past the tight muscle, but no more, without any lubrication to speak of.

It was enough.

Between the friction of their frotting and the teasing at penetration, Ellis could only manage a whining exhale, the sound flooded and husky with pleasure when it broke a little in the center. Nick's weight pushed harder, till there was no space between them at all.

Their bodies moved in slow unison. The hot trickle of water between them, the foggy quality of the air, the half-murmurs and names uttered in gasps, the constant kisses traded between their lips, the pleasure traded between thrusts and squeezes - it all mixed into this intoxicating, suffocating act.

Even when the motions turned jagged, orgasm rising in this impatient wave that almost came upon them unexpectedly, neither of them broke pace. Ellis gripped his fingers tighter, wrist moving to stroke in time to Nick's thrusts against him. Pleasure tingled through his body, building on his skin, overwhelming his senses.

Release came in rolling waves, blinding and deafening Ellis to everything but the way Nick's body arched up against his, compressing him against the wall as he shuddered. The way Nick's breath caught against his lips, the way his hand gripped the side of Ellis' face, possessive and desperate, thumb biting into his cheek. The stuttered sigh that left him, hot and full of honeyed pleasure. How his eyes slipped shut, how his head cocked to the side.

The orgasm that rocked Ellis' body had him shivering as he came onto his own fingers, hips bucking and a cry leaving him that vaguely resembled a plea - though for what, he didn't know. All Ellis knew was that he loved the heat between them, insulated by the warm water and the humid air.

He loved the feeling in his chest as they came down.

He loved… this.

Nick slowly, softly, moving with a certain exhaustion, slipped away from the wall of the shower and lowered himself tenderly to sit on the edge of the tub, crushing the curtains into a fold underneath him. His arms refused to let Ellis go, and the Georgian had nowhere to go but onto his lap, turning to slip and sit on his thighs. The conman silently caught his breath, eyes closed.

Ellis relaxed down against him, his arms looping over Nick's shoulders. He slumped, turning his face into the man's wet shoulder with a tiny, content sigh. His hands idly slipped down to stroke at the back of Nick's neck, tracing between his shoulderblades.

He didn't expect the other man's hands to do the same - but for a moment… a passing, subtle moment… they did. Faintly moisture-wrinkled fingertips raised up and touched onto the back of Ellis' wet head, brushing through his short curls. They traced along the sides of his head, playing over muscular shoulders and down a gently trembling back.

…and then Nick shifted, hands dropping with a calm abruptness to the edge of the tub on either
side of them. He was quiet for a moment, shoulders shifting under Ellis' touch, and then let his chin lift to nudge Ellis' cheek with his forehead.

"Let's clean off, Ace."
The mirror turned back Nick's stare, reflecting the poor mood that stirred and brewed within the pale colors of his eyes. His fingers moved in a well-practiced path to brush his hair into place, other hand reluctantly grasped on the thin spraycan of hairspray he'd scavenged from the bathroom counter.

The spray smelled like chemicals, an unpleasant burn that made him long for hair gel, but it was beyond him to care. Piecing his appearance together was like some ritualistic effort to maintain what the apocalypse had torn from him - and there was a cautious fervor to it.

He was the same person he'd always been.

The divorce hadn't changed anything.

The outbreak hadn't changed anything.

Ellis - most importantly Ellis - hadn't changed anything.

The mantra felt stubborn and tacky in his head, fighting the unpleasant reality surfacing in his brain: the clumsy, over-exuberant Southerner had become important to him. His company, his voice, his stupidly joyful smile, his safety. The intimate warmth of his body.

It was almost impossible to fight the lure of Ellis' personality; for all his pride, Nick knew he wasn't invulnerable to the kid's charms. Ellis was good; he was nothing like the people Nick usually spent his time around. He could forgive himself for growing fond of him... but the slippery slope threatening below had him recoiling.

Suddenly the thought occurred to him - the possibility of Ellis falling for him.

Or, worse, him falling for Ellis.

Nick knew he was capable. After all, he'd loved his wife once, or something close to it. And Ellis was naive enough to believe something like that could work, that they could somehow be… something. Be together.

Did Nick even want that, if Ellis offered it? Wasn't there a timer, ticking down steadily, preceding the eventual moment when he would leave? Thanks for the kicks, see ya never?

Maybe Nick didn't mind his company. Maybe he even liked it. Fine; he could accept that. There was a lot to like about Ellis, a lot of things Nick wasn't used to seeing in people. A lot of things… stupid, childish things… that he could appreciate.

But needing him? Wanting him, past the creature comfort of sex?

It made him shudder, made him angry with himself. He wanted to slam his fist into the very mirror he stared into, like his reflection was the inner part of him that had the capacity to love at all. If he shattered it, it would all just go away. He could leave it behind - just broken glass on somebody else's bathroom floor.

It's never that simple. some somber part of him mused. Much as you want it to be, Nicolas. You're trapped in the same clusterfuck of bullshit everyone else is.
"Hey, Nick!" Ellis' voice chirped from the bedroom, through the open doorway. There was a casual joy to his voice, unburdened. Nick felt his shoulders lowering slightly as he listened to it. "I just done noticed, there ain't no little chocolates on the beds. I wonder if they keep like, stashes in hotels."

Failing to tear his eyes from his own reflection as he sculpted the swirl of his hair between short mists of hairspray, Nick gave a hollow smirk, exhaling. "Yeah. They have a whole closet full of little candies." he responded idly, tipping his head.

Ellis' response was a bit excited, laughing, his footsteps bounding around the hotel room with a kiddish abandon. "Haw, that'd be awesome, man. We should find it or somethin!'"

"I'm sure Coach would eat all of it, the fatass." Nick snorted, thumbing over his brows to straighten stray hairs. No point in worrying about it right now. On the bright side, maybe we'll all be dead by tomorrow, and it won't matter.

That undoubtedly shouldn't have made him feel better, but it did.

"Aww, that's real mean, Nick." the Georgian hummed in a lower tone of voice, though there was still a smile plastered all over his words. "He's lost some weight, past couple days! You can tell."

Straightening, the conman forced his gaze away from the mirror to grip onto his dress shirt. He pulled it tight over his stomach and eyed his waist speculatively. He could see definition in places that were generally unmuscled, and the fabric seemed to have a little extra space around his frame that he didn't remember.

"We all have."

"I've been gettin' more muscles!" Ellis beamed gently, voice growing suddenly louder as he approached the bathroom with abrupt interest. "Turnin' intuh a real zombie-killin' badass."

Nick rolled his eyes subtly, reluctantly turning away from the mirror. He leaned back, resting his hips against the edge of the bathroom counter and crossing his arms over his chest, expectantly gazing at the doorway.

Ellis came through with a huge grin, tugging his sleeve past his shoulder with a finger while he flexed his bicep next to his head. The tribal tattoo on the swell of his arm flexed, a dull blue. The gambler eyed the sloping muscle, indulging Ellis, a brow rising slightly.

"Pretty good, sport. You're looking more like an adult every day."

Ellis gave a scrunch of his nose, patting his sleeve back down on his shoulder and dropping his arm. He padded into the bathroom, approaching within a foot from Nick. "Yer just jea-"

The kid's blue eyes moved to Nick, widening suddenly. For a beat of silence, they examined him, and Nick was sure the younger man was swept away by his meticulously arranged appearance. The change surprised him, Nick figured, into losing his train of thought. "- ..whoa."

Nick couldn't help but laugh, leaning forward just an inch with a growing smirk. "Jea-whoa?" he echoed in question, knowingly, pleasure stirring with the stroke of his ego Ellis' reaction offered.

Ellis blinked twice as the word shook him into sense, shifting his gaze to meet Nick's, staring just an instant before returning seriously, "Why do yuh smell like muh grandma?"

Nick's face went blank for a split second before a murderous scowl spawned over his expression
with all the fire of a raging storm. Fueled by the distinct tearing sound as he felt split his pride in half, Nick went after Ellis with a snarl.

One hand snatched up the spraycan settled at the edge of the counter, the other grabbing the front of Ellis' shirt tightly. The kid yelped in shock, trying to jerk out of his grip as the conman strode straight into him, shoving him backward repeatedly.

"Your GRANDMOTHER?!!" Nick growled furiously, stride unbroken as Ellis scrambled and stumbled backwards with his pushing. The kid struggled, gaze shooting over his shoulder to try and keep his balance and avoid walking back into anything.

"U-Uh!" Ellis protested, bewildered as Nick had him backing up into the bedroom in quick order. "Sorry! I'm only sayin', man! You just smell funn-"

Rather than let him finish, Nick shoved him backwards onto the bed with a flat palm, maintaining his footing just ahead of it. Ellis yelped as he struck the mattress with a bounce, scrambling out his arms to grip fingers on the bedspread, a blush dancing over his face.

"Nick, I'm sorry, I only said it 'cause muh grandma was always doin' her hair up all poofy 'n' she uses -" Ellis' apologetic, half-panicked rambling cut short again when Nick lifted up the aerosol with a stiff arm.

The younger man had about two seconds to gape, eyes widening, before the squeezing press of Nick's index finger had a cloying mist dousing him straight in the face with the low hiss of pressurized hairspray.

Nick watched with satisfaction as the mechanic practically seized in horror, hacking and spitting as his hands went up to cover his face. Ellis flailed out of the blast with a distressed splutter, batting at his nose with a sound of pure disgust.

His panic had him rolling right off the bed in a swift motion, thudding onto the floor with a dull tumble, one foot still half-caught on the very edge of the bed and twitching a bit as he squirmed on the floor. "EHG! AHUGH- UGH GAWD, NI-ICK!" he protested between splutters.

Nick blinked with a completely calm deadpan, tossing the can onto the mattress with a casual croon. "Whoa, Ay-lus. Why do ya smell like yer gramma?"

He turned away, leaving the other man to suffer where he was, walking across the room to the door. A simple turn of the knob opened it enough that he could slip outside into the hallway.

Rochelle was curled up against the wall several feet down, resting on the floor with her legs neatly tucked under her weight. Her skin had a healthy color to it, suffused by a clean glow, and her fingers were busy trying to tighten the braids throughout her hair.

She glanced up idly, waving a pinky at him without stopping her current work. "Hey, suit. Are you killing Ellis?"

There was a simple, casual humor to her voice, and Nick responded in kind, blinking with a slow emotionlessness. "Yep. Doing us all the favor."

She smiled a bit, just a flash, closing her eyes as she pulled her hair into the bunched ponytail at the back of her head. "Oh, good." she returned airily, changing the subject an instant later. "Coach is getting dressed. He'll be out in a second. He really wants to talk to us all."

Nick approached her somewhat slowly, slipping his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "Mnh.
Yeah, me too." He moved to the wall next to her, resting his shoulders against the wall and crossing his legs. A small exhale parted his lips, letting his eyes close, too.

There was a calm quiet between them for a moment, broken only by the sneezes and coughs that came whimpering from Ellis' room. Nick's brows creased, eyes focusing on some point off in the deep shadows of his closed lids.

Slowly, with all the grace of a newborn foal, the Georgian came stumbling out into the hallway, pawing at his face in disgust. "M-Man! That wasn't - that wasn't cool, Nick!" Ellis complained as he screwed up his expression, snorting out breaths. "I got junk up all in muh nose, now!"

The gambler gave a short laugh, smirk a little cruel as he cracked one eye open to glance down the hallway at the staggering mechanic. "Serves you right, you stupid redneck." he muttered, even if the edge to his voice was fairly dull.

He couldn't drudge up much sympathy, not when his ego was still bruised.

Rochelle rolled her eyes, a snort escaping her as she patted the space beside her on the floor, straightening her legs out to offer her lap. There was a sly humor written all over her face, blinking in an apologetic gesture. "Aw, poor sweetheart. Come here."

Pouting severely, Ellis reluctantly skulked past Nick. Blue eyes were quick to flick sulkily at his face, though Nick just smirked, and Ellis scampered on to slip down beside Rochelle. He flopped to lay his head in her lap, kicking his legs out to sprawl and bump socked feet against Nick's shoes.

"Hey," the conman protested in a snap, dodging away from the strike and shooting him a glare. Ellis stuck his tongue out.

"Now, Nick, we just got Ellis clean. Let's -" As Ellis' head plopped onto her lap, a whiff of the over-doused hairspray struck her and she blinked, leaning away a little. It took a second for her to recover, lowering a hand to pet it onto Ellis' damp cap. " - ...erm. Let's not get him smelly again so soon."

Giving a little huff, Ellis snuggled into her lap and closed his eyes, arms crossing over his chest in a loose gesture. The conman glanced down the hall, smirking and cuffing his clean-shaven jaw with a knuckle.

Rochelle's eyes lowered to Ellis' face, tipping her head a bit to see past the bill of his cap. "How's your arm, sweetheart?" she questioned, even as one of her hands slipped to grip onto his wrist. He let it go limp, submitting to her motion to pull his forearm up a little where she could see.

"Good." he affirmed, only flinching a little when she touched a finger near the heavily-bruised bitemark into the flesh of his forearm. The scabbed dents where teeth had pierced skin were agitated, but the shower had cleaned them off and brought the swelling down.

"Sure is a good thing we can't catch this virus, h'uh..?" Rochelle murmured, letting his arm settle back onto his chest. She gave him a smile, leaning her head back against the wall.

"I'll be the first one to shoot him if he starts foaming at the mouth, no worries." Nick reassured sarcastically, sending a smirk at Ellis.

The mechanic blinked his eyes open to wrinkle his nose at the older man, harrumphing. He easily flicked his capbill up a bit with a thumb so he could broaden his range of vision, shaking his head. "Well, yuh'd be the first person I'd bite, so that's fair, Nick."
Before anything further could be incited, Coach came out of his room with a gruff solemnness hanging about his demeanor. He glanced up and down the hallway, then gave a wary sigh before stepping all the way out.

Nick gave a sarcastic salute with one finger as the ex-football player walked up, examining them, but got no more than a glance in return before the big man was talking. He wasted no time.

"A'ight, y'all. Now, I figure we need to be keepin' on the same page here, bein' a group. None of us are used to this shit, exceptin' Nick. So let's just get it out there. Do y'all trust them, and how far?"

The moment of quiet that ate the air after his words was bloated with uncertainty and forming words. Ellis blinked at the ceiling, carefully tipping his chin a little so he could see Coach's face. and then glanced at Nick.

The gambler caught the glance but didn't meet it, well aware of what Ellis was silently asking. He took a small breath, setting his jaw fiercely forward.

If he were the only one who knew about it, he'd have kept the knowledge to himself. Ellis didn't have the same mindset, wouldn't really understand the logic behind it - that they would panic, and panicking was generally detrimental to holding control over the situation.

Ellis would have followed whatever he said, but the guilt of manipulating friends would've been painful to the younger man, where the gambler was used to it. Whether it was the smart choice or not, Ellis clearly didn't like it.

No, Nick wouldn't force that on him.

"You guys aren't going to like this." he stated, immediately drawing Rochelle and Coach's attention. She cocked her head slightly, clearly questioning, and Nick released a heavy sigh. "Our tire didn't blow. We didn't hit something or run over something. They shot it out."

Widening her eyes, Rochelle seemed to take the statement like a blow. Her gaze went a little distant, looking away to uncomfortably press the back of her head against the wall. "..why would.."

Coach got this look on his face - this subtle distaste, immediately turning grim, his weight shifting and a tension stiffening his frame. He set a thumb against his chin, leaning his head against it. "..You sho'?"

A snort left the conman, thrusting his hands up in a small motion. "No, I'm totally bullshitting. Yeah. Ellis found the bullet just before they showed up."

Coach got this look on his face - this subtle distaste, immediately turning grim, his weight shifting and a tension stiffening his frame. He set a thumb against his chin, leaning his head against it. "..You sho'?"

He found himself regretting the words the very instant they rolled off his tongue. Coach swiveled just an inch on his feet, suddenly locking eyes onto the prone mechanic, teeth setting on edge. "An' you didn't think we all needed to know that shit until just now?!!"

Ellis recoiled a little from the hostility, startled. He half-sat up, propping his weight on an elbow with a frown underneath the bill of his cap. He started to respond, but Rochelle interjected, tone slightly pained. "...why in the hell would you keep us in the dark about this? We should've gotten away from them from the start!"

Straightening slightly and setting his jaw with all the forced confidence of a stubborn kid, Ellis pushed to defend himself with a strong voice. Nick fully expected the younger man to throw the blame on him, but he didn't.

Nick couldn't help but smirk a little, intrigued by the loyalty.
"We ain't had no time away from 'em 'till now! Now we got an edge 'cause they dunno we know. We can talk 'bout it 'n' figure ou-"

Coach was, unfortunately, smarter than Nick would've liked to claim. Ellis didn't get much farther before the big man snapped his gaze onto Nick's face and crossed his arms. He probably recognized Nick's influence behind the uncharacteristic phrasing - and Nick didn't know how to feel about that.

"Nicolas, just what were you thinkin'? You got more sense than this!"

The conman gave the subtlest of sighs, lifting his gaze to the ceiling as any hint of amusement disappeared from his face at the chastisement. "I have more fucking sense than most of you, thank you. Look, I wasn't keeping the information from you for laughs. I had reasons."

Rochelle straightened up slightly, a frown dragging the edge of her mouth down. She put a hand on Ellis' shoulder, shaking her head. "We're supposed to be a team, Nick. We're supposed to work together, not just go along with your 'reasons.'"

"Now that ain't fair." Ellis protested firmly, squirming slightly as he curled one leg up toward himself, stabilizing his weight. "Y'all ain't even givin' him a chance tuh explain!"

The youngest survivor seemed a bit satisfied when his complaint actually worked. A silence settled in for a beat or two as he glanced between them. He rolled a little bit to lean against the wall next to Rochelle, adjusting his cap on his head slowly with a small nod at Nick as if to say 'go ahead.'

Nick let his arms cross, jaw tightening. He spoke with a slight edge of hostility. "Look. They shot our wheels but didn't kill us - why? Logic says they want something. The question's what they want, then."

Although there was a certain disgruntlement about his features, Coach nodded stiffly. "Assume you got ideas 'bout that, too."

"Maybe, maybe not." the conman returned, gaze somewhat narrowing and a hand lifting to cradle his shaven chin between his knuckles. That was honest, at least; he couldn't be sure. "They aren't being violent. Toward us, anyway."

Rochelle uncomfortably set her hands on her lap, squeezing a little at her thighs. She questioned, hesitantly, "What if that changes...? Maybe we should just leave, while they're gone."

Nick immediately shook his head, slipping his free hand into the pocket of his slacks. "No, no. We're fucked now. Leaving might get us in more trouble than we're already in."

With a slight stiffen, Coach leaned forward, gesturing solidly at Nick. "Who says? I ain't comfortable wit' us bein' here anymore. I aim to protect y'all, an' havin' us stuck wit' people who'd shoot wheels out from under you ain't in my game plan."

Frustration rising, Nick enunciated his words a bit more carefully, stressing out the syllables with an irked force. "It's pretty clear they're a bunch of cocky fucks. People like them... they don't let you go easy. It rarely ends well, and never on your terms."

He had experience.

He jerked his shoulder into a slight shrug, exhaling. "They've claimed this place as theirs, and we were fucked the minute we got on their radar. If you ask me, that's why they shot the car - so they could get us where they want us."
"So... what?" Rochelle half-snapped, gesturing with open hands. "We just casually hang out with the people who almost caused us to crash? The van could have flipped - what if we'd gotten hurt? How are we supposed to stay here if they're dangerous?"

Leaning forward slightly with a small narrow of his eyes, dangerously exhaling a breath through flared nostrils, Nick moved his hand from his chin to tap his temple pointedly. "I dunno, Rochelle, maybe that's why I fucking wanted to keep it quiet while I worked out a plan. So you two didn't freak out and get us killed."

She glared solidly at him for a few beats, slipping her arms to cross over her chest. He glared right back, matching her fire tenfold with a snarl reaching his voice.

"I am trying to minimize the risk of us all getting chopped into little. Fucking. Pieces. You guys are not the only ones trying to fucking protect the group! Can you just trust me for all of five goddamn seconds?"

There was a little silence that trickled between them, some of Rochelle's anger fading as her gaze stayed locked onto his. A small frown started to lower her brows, sighing with a slow puff. Reluctantly, she glanced up at Coach.

The big man didn't meet her gaze right off, giving a heavy shrug of his shoulders and holding his silence for a moment before speaking.

"... Shit, Nick. It ain't 'bout not trustin' you." Coach's voice was abruptly slightly regretful, and when he glanced at the conman, his eyes matched it. Nick shifted his weight back a bit but didn't let his expression move a centimeter, caught off-guard by the reaction.

It was... genuine.

Coach made a firm gesture with a hand, as if to indicate all of them. "But you gotta trust us, too. It ain't fair for you to be makin' those choices without us. If you got a plan an' shit, keep us in the loop. Like Ro' said. We're a team, but we can't stand by you if yo' ass don't tell us what's goin' on."

Nick was silent, flexing the hand that was sunk into his pocket. He examined Coach's face, almost unsettled by the honesty and firm compromise layering the eldest's voice - particularly when Rochelle nodded in agreement.

He wasn't totally sure he liked being reasoned with. He'd have preferred yelling or arguing.

"... Fine." he forcibly uttered, letting his free hand settle on the curl of his dress-shirted stomach as if to assuage a wave of nausea. "We act calm. Play their game, let them feel in control. Tomorrow we'll let them know we're headed to the beach to get rescued and out of their hair. Who knows, if they're not too addicted to the killing spree, maybe they'll want to come with us and we can all be a happy little family."

Nodding slowly, Rochelle raised a hand to wipe her mouth carefully. "Yeah.. yeah, okay. I can get behind that. Judging by them so far, they're kinda scary, but they ain't unreasonable or nothin'. They got us tuh this hotel, right? That was nice."

Ellis rubbed at his nose with a wrist, hesitantly speaking up with the argument having ebbed. His head perked alongside own words, glancing around at the team. "They're kinda scary, but they ain't unreasonable or nothin'. They got us tuh this hotel, right? That was nice."

Coach shook his head a little, letting his arms cross over his gut again as he lowered his chin. "I
ain't sho', son. If we're puttin' stock in Nick's assessment, it wasn't 'bout doin' us a favour. Just keepin' us corralled."

"Well -" Ellis wavered a little bit, adjusting his cap with a knuckle and letting a wrinkle touch his nose. "...well, I guess that ain't so nice, huh. Man... I don't like thinkin'uv these folks bein' so nasty! It ain't right."

He shifted, sitting a little straighter against the wall as his voice grew in earnestness. "They'll come with us, right? We can all get rescued. They don't gotta stay out here none, fightin' zombies. I know y'all don't like 'em, but we're all just people. We gotta stick tuhgether!"

With a small sigh, Nick slipped his hand free of his pocket to screw his palm down on the top of Ellis' head, knocking the bill of his cap down over his eyes. "You're real naive sometimes, kid." he muttered, a wry smirk touching his lips.

Ellis hunched a bit but held still, blinking momentarily before lifting up his chin to peek through the bare inch of space between his bill and the bridge of his nose.

"They will, though, right..?"

Blue eyes hunted for reassurance it couldn't quite find, and his desperation sunk a slight uncertainty into everyone's expression. The silence that met his question twisted into a cruel hum. Nick stiffened his jaw a little when they turned to him, lowering his chin - it wasn't a promise he could make.

He couldn't even promise they wouldn't end up killing the Angels in self-defense.

Forcing out the words, Nick stiffened against the tug of guilt as Ellis' expression fell slowly under his rebuke. "El, we don't even know if they want to get rescued. For all we know, they're enjoying running around like a bunch of Chainsaw Massacre wannabes. For all we know, they're not going to like us trying to escape this hellhole."

Coach's head lifted slightly at that, gaze narrowing. "...You think they'd stop us, Nick?"

The conman crossed his arms over his chest, gaze lowering until it hit the floor. He let his teeth grind together, just a little, his head tilting. "I don't know what they'd do."

He let his eyes close, inhaling tightly as he chewed over his words, looking away from Ellis' face lest the kid's worried look start to get to him. He had to focus. "What I do know is that right now, while we're sitting here talking about them and what we're going to do..."

Rochelle blinked slightly with the implicative trailing of his voice, her own lowering a little bit as she finished the sentence for him.

"... they're doing the same thing."
Chapter 80

The slow scream of the blade's sharp edge raking down along the flat face of the window was enough to drive anyone insane. It reverberated through the grocery store like the death knell of an animal.

Jerry glowered out through the window, hand unerringly on the handle of his cleaver, muttering into the fur of his beard. "You're really pissin' me off. Just how much more I gotta take?"

The Angels' leader stood a foot or two behind him, a blood-splotted bandage wrapped around her thigh. Her arms were crossed, something a lot like agitation flecking her expression, though there was a cool veneer of calm over her face. "Everything pisses you off, Jerry. You'll have to be more specific."

Raising the butcher's knife up to start a new cracking line down the surface of the window, parallel to the first, Jerry snorted dully. "You tell me why we're playin' nursemaid to these bitches."

"Because." sighed from Brenda's lips, her body stepping close behind his. She reached to place a hand on the handle of his knife from behind, almost soothingly pulling it away from the glass. "If they're still alive, it means they're good. You don't make it out here without some talent."

The bearded man snorted, turning his head around sharply to glare straight down into her eyes as she smiled. Brenda was undaunted by his height and the anger in his eyes. "Good, my ass. I've had shits more impressive'n that lot!"

Chris gave a chuckle under his breath, speaking up with a subtle tone of mockery. "That says more about you than them, tío." He paced into one of the aisles, searching for food on the shelves. The place had been ransacked before them, but there was still things hidden away between torn-down shelving and piles of abandoned packaging.

Ignoring the Spaniard but for a smirk, Brenda tapped a fingertip on Jerry's meaty wrist, holding his attention when a flash of anger threatened to jerk his gaze toward Chris.

"If we had a group full of people like you, we'd all be dead." she stated harshly, making his gaze narrow in fury. "We've been cutting it close since Phil disappeared and you know it, Jerry. We've been losing people. We could use the firepower, and they're zombiekillers."

Jerry tore his wrist from her fingers, raising the cleaver to point it straight at her face in a brash threat. "We don't need no more firepower, not from pussies like that! Not the Angels! We've been kickin' ass, without that shitbag Phil - or any of 'em." The muscle beneath his left eye twitched, barely masking hatred.

Brenda arched a brow, gazing at the sharp edge of the cleaver's blade with a certain distance, unafraid and unimpressed. "My leg says otherwise, big boy. Nobody saw that Hunter before it landed. If Chris had been a foot further from me I'd be dead." She stated it with a hint of venom, touching a hand onto her wounded thigh in illustration. "You weren't an Angel until we pulled you out from under that Tank. Were you kicking ass when you were choking on your own blood?"

He glared, fuming - but something kept him silent.

"I think they're cunts. But they're cunts with promise, and we're going to keep a tight grip on them until we can figure out just what we want to do with them."
Snorting quietly, Jerry flexed his fingers on his cleaver handle, the edgy tension touching his husky shoulders that usually came right before physical violence. "I know Gonzales has a hard-on for that black bitch. Didn't know you had one too."

A soft, irked snort from nearby was Chris' only reaction.

"Which one, huh, Bren? Pretty boy with the big mouth? Or the Yank bitch with the tiny dick? Or are you hot for big guys?" Jerry's cleaver was twitching in his hands, like he ached to take it to something. Or someone.

Brenda let her arms cross over her chest, lowering her chin to affix a cold stare onto his face. He met it solidly, teeth showing amidst his beard in off-white blocks as he bared his teeth.

Slowly - enunciating every syllable, as if he might not follow otherwise - she hissed, "You can knock Chris around, but don't make the same mistake with me. I'll cut your fucking hand off and cram it down your throat, rough. Just how you like it."

There was silence between them for a moment, just boiling stares and clashing threats sparking silently in the air amidst their breath. With a small twitch of an eyelid, Jerry broke gazes first, growling in a low tone.

Brenda smiled smoothly, raising a hand to caress fingertips over the beard-masked shape of his thin mouth. "There we go." Leaning forward slightly toward his stiff frame, casually stretching to make up for the height he had on her, she let her lips drag along his cheek.

"Sorry, big boy, but someone has to rein you in. You get so violent."

Jerry stared her down with a hungry glitter to somewhat small, dark eyes, one huge hand moving to drag fingers along the shape of her hip as she stepped away from him - but he said nothing at all. Tension, vibrating with an edge of arousal, made him turn back toward the window and glare out into the street.

Brenda walked across the store linoleum to join Chris, tracing fingers down her stomach slowly. She spoke idly over her shoulder. "We'll take them out for a test run tomorrow. See how they fight without us clearing their every step. No more baby-sitting, don't you worry, Jerry. I want to see just how they work."

Chris idly glanced up, straightening slightly and stepping away from the shelving. He fiddled with a smushed, bagged loaf of bread between fingers, sighing as Brenda approached him. He spoke up with a more meaningful tone now that Jerry had been tamed. "B, I do not think they will be as eager to join us as you think. They do not like us much."

Her gaze narrowed, laughing slightly. She snagged the bag from his hands, flipping it over and idly examining it. "We don't like each other, either. You think it matters, now?"

The Spaniard lifted up his hand, flapping fingers in a slow gesture at her. "Ya, pero - we still work together. I do not think they could work with us, not for long."

Brenda gave a snort. She shifted the bagged bread to one hand, leaning down slightly to get a better look at her bandaged wound in the dim light casting through the grocery store's front windows. "What are you, Chris, the cunt whisperer? Is your new girlfriend afraid of getting messy?"

Christophe's jaw hardened a little, erased in an instant with a smooth smile up at her. "I am just saying, hermana, I do not think they will be happy to join."
"Then they don't." she returned with a growing edge to her voice, moving her gaze to suddenly eye him, a hand lifting and brushing her short hair back from her face. "I'm not going to suck them off to get them to fight with us."

Lowering his brows slightly, Chris cocked his head, chewing at the inside of his cheek for a calm moment. His eyes didn't betray his thoughts, but there was doubt in his eyes. Speaking up, he lifted his machete to tap it against his chin. "¿Entonces qué?"

When that didn't register immediately, he exhaled a little and repeated, "Then what?"

Jerry set his hand flat against the window, tracing the pale cuts he'd made in the glass with a fat thumb. A snort escaped him, dully. "We chase 'em out like the pigsheets they are. Let 'em find someplace else to curl up'n'die."

A smirk crossed Brenda's lips, setting her hands back a bit to brace her shoulder against the collapsed shelving beside them. "If they have an issue with that.. we can always give them some alternate options. Jerry's itching for a good time, anyway."

Chris' gaze shifted to the floor. He didn't say a word, scratching slowly at his jaw with the edge of his machete with a blank expression. If he'd snorted or laughed, he might've gone unnoticed - but his complete silence made Jerry turn around, gazing at him across the room.

"Problem, a-mi-go? You gone real quiet on us." he snarled lightly, casually dragging fingers through his beard.

A short shake of his head had Chris straightening up, setting his machete down on his lap. "Ay, no, hombre. No hay un problema. Just thinking that I do not want to be a part of your good time, ha."

He lowered his chin slightly, fighting an uneven smile.

Jerry pulled away from the window, walking across the linoleum floor with a slow flex of his hairy-knuckled fingers on the handle of his cleaver. He moved with no particular rush, yet his broad steps covered the ground between them in seconds.

"Just 'cause you got a crush on that bitch don't mean shit, José. You think we're gonna treat 'em special?"

"Did you hear me say that, Jerry?" Chris returned, expression folding to a brow-raise and flat mouth. He didn't flinch, not even as Jerry grew closer, towering. "All I am saying is maybe the violence should be saved for los muertos vivientes, ¿sí?"

"Zombie, person." the husky man snorted, shaking his head in a dismissive gesture. "What's it matter now? World's changed, brother. The fighters live, n'the weak die. I kill one of them fuckers at the hotel, I'll mark my count up just's well."

Brenda reached out a hand in the air, waving her fingers in a slow motion, though a smirk crossed her face. "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry. Nobody says anyone's going to die, not yet. If they turn us down and leave like good little troopers, hey, we'll let the zombies take care of them."

"Until then," she affirmed, letting her gaze burn on Jerry's for just an instant to silently reiterate the punishment she'd promised him earlier. "we'll treat them like fighters. Bitch all you like, Jerry, but no fighting."

The husky man gave a growl, agitated. He raked a hand through his short, thinning hair, gaze narrowing as he gestured up at her with his knife. "When they turn out to be a buncha useless bitches mewlin' at our feet, you'll wish you'd listened to me 'n' saved all this time."
"Sure, sure." the woman promised with a bit of a lull to her voice, humoring him. She leaned back slightly and lowered her chin so she could palm over the bandage wrapped around her thigh.

Chris gave a slight huff, rubbing his wrist against his mouth in a slow wipe. It had gone a little dry, despite himself. He forced a laugh, expression leveling to humor. "I think nuestros amigo is jealous, B. Worried they'll steal your attention, como un niño."

He stiffened up sharply when Jerry suddenly took a step to close the distance between them. One heavy hand swept toward his face, and Chris didn't react fast enough to dodge the cleaver as Jerry drew its sharp edge against his cheek.

Jerry didn't cut him, exactly. He merely pressed it there, the cold edge biting against flesh, and watched with no small pleasure as Christophe made it happen. The Spaniard jolted away just a little too slowly, and the movement caused the blade to split the skin of his face in a thin line beneath his cheekbone.

The Spaniard immediately bent to one side, clamping a hand over the wound as blood burst down his cheek in a tacky sheet of red against his honey-brown skin. Pain stung along the tear in rapid jolts, enough to make his eyes water.

"¡Qué te jodas! Será hijo de puta - asshole - agh, ¿por qué, por qué, por qué?" he spat in a flurry, blood trickling between his fingers as he squinted in pain, just barely able to look up in accusation at the husky male.

Jerry slid his blade against his palm with a hostile wrinkle of his nose, wiping off the trim line of blood that decorated its edge. "Shut your yammering trap, you're hurtin' my ears..." He shook his head, snorting at the Spaniard. "One way or another, them cunts'll die - if I gotta do it, or if the zombies do."

Flashing a dark look toward Brenda, almost daring her to shut him up again, Jerry gave a short snarl and slipped his cleaver under the wide strap of his belt. He turned away, ignoring Chris' furious utterance of, "Vete al mierda, gilipollas...", and started to walk toward the entrance of the grocery store.

"Let's get the food and go." he grunted behind himself, and as he re-took his position by the window, it was clear he didn't intend on helping the process. Bouncing his cleaver from hand to hand, he glowered out into the street in silence.

Brenda said nothing to him, instead bending forward slightly to smirk aside at Chris. "Poor little chico." she crooned with a cruel edge, drawing a sarcastic snort from the Spaniard, pained.

"Jerry cannot - eh, take a joke? You would think I had learned." he half-chuckled, reluctantly keeping his palm against the wound to stifle the bloodflow as best he could. The pain vaguely ebbed.

Turning on a heel and moving down the aisle, Brenda smirked at him as she passed by. A hand raised, rapping on his skull with a knuckle before she stepped away and maneuvered down the aisle in search of more food.

"Don't get too attached, Chris. If you're right about them, I wouldn't be surprised if Jerry ends up getting his way."

Letting a half-smirk fall onto his face, the Spaniard looked away. He turned, lingering where he stood to gaze back toward the window Jerry stood beside. It was marred with thick gashes from his
cleaver, sparkling with light that reflected through the cracked and powdered glass. Taking on a hue from the lowering sun, it shone like the glimmer of slow-dripping blood.

"Sí... he usually does."
Chapter 81

It was a whole hour before the Angels returned. Nick was a few seconds away from stealing Coach's backpack and digging out the food they'd stashed there when they heard footsteps down the hall.

Despite Brenda's jibe earlier, the four had ended up in the same hotel room: Coach reclined on a bed, Ellis sprawled out on the floor, Rochelle curled up on the windowsill, and Nick had adopted a pace back and forth across the room.

They hadn't been talking much, but it was an amicable silence. Just tense.

Nick eyed the doorway, giving a subtle sigh before stalking to it when it seemed no one else was rushing to do so. He pulled the door open sharply, leaning out to glance down the hallway. One hand lifted to give a small gesture to someone, open-palmed.

"Hey, dumbass. Over here." he sniped, leaving the door open as he stepped back into the room. Nick gave a shrug as he moved to stand beside the prostrated Ellis, hands slipping into his pockets in a defensive slump.

Christophe came through the open door a beat later, his arms stacked with two grocery bags. He smiled a bit, slipping inside the room with a beleaguered sigh. "This 'dumbass' is holding your food, you know, señor."

Rochelle leaned away from the window slightly, blinking at the Spaniard. He had a long, bleeding slice from his cheekbone to his jaw, raw and open with smeared and clotting blood over the pinkish gleam of bared muscle. He didn't seem concerned with it as he carried the bags to the closest bed, setting them down.

"La electricidad is still on in some places, where the lines are not broken. Bread, meat.. all sealed, no fear." he stated as he touched a hand over the bags, indicating the contents. "Some agua, too."

"Good. Thanks." Coach grunted, not moving from where he had comfortably settled himself. His expression was dubious, but reserved. "Took y'all long enough, not that we ain't grateful. Started thinkin' y'all weren't comin' back."

Chris lifted up his hands in apology, promptly raking one through the spiky brown hair that tickled around his ears. "Mis amigos were being unos plastas - annoying, ¿sí? - and demanded we eat first. Lo siento."

Ellis sat up, crossing his legs in a lazy motion and cocking his head. "Uh.." he started, scratching at his chin. Concern flickered over his eyes, undaunted by the uncertainty in his tone. He couldn't resist empathy. "S'okay.. But, whut happened to yer face..? Hunter or somethin'?"

"Hm?" Chris palmed over the injury, pulling his hand away an instant later to examine the sprawl of blood that trickled down his already-dirty fingers. "Oh, no es nada. Jerry talks with his knife when he is angry. I stood too close, ha!"

A frown settled on Ellis' face, sitting up a little straighter. "He cut you? .. Man, that ain't .."

Nick interrupted him with a short tone, crossing his arms over his chest. "You say that like you're surprised, Ellis..." Flicking his pinky in a small gesture, the conman moved to the side of the bed to dig through the grocery bags. "I'm only surprised the fuck didn't take his whole head off. No
offense, Christophe."

Snorting, the man let his thumbs settle in the beltloops of his cargo shorts, brows lifting. He wasn't bothered in the least - if anything, there was a little amusement in his voice. Nick probably seemed tame compared to his regular companions. "Claro que sí. Of course."

Rochelle got up slightly hesitantly from the windowsill. There was a wary kind of frown touching her mouth, uncomfortable. She moved forward, bending down to pick up the group's backpack from the floor. "Don't take this the wrong way, Chris, but come here a minute."

The Spaniard perked up, eyes lighting with a bright attention as he crossed the carpet toward her. "¿Qué?" he questioned, stopping a foot or two from the woman, glancing around the hotel room. He looked slightly confused, but pleasantly so, like the non-hostile environment charmed him.

Rochelle pulled a scrap of gauze from their satchel, one of the last pieces they had left. There was a beat of hesitance as she looked at it, but a weary sigh later, she turned back to him. It wouldn't make much of a difference if one of them got wounded. Carefully stepping a little closer, she squinted vaguely, gently using her thumb to press the gauze against his wound.

Chris flinched a little, an 'ay' escaping him, though he held still. He raised a hand to hold the gauze in place over the cut as Rochelle went back to the backpack to find some tape. "Preciosa, you are too kind." he murmured, gazing toward her with a glitter of appreciation crossing his eyes. "I feel better already."

"Kind nothing.." Rochelle returned in a mumble, using her teeth to tear a few pieces of tape off. "You're bleeding."

Nick was grinning, teeth flashing with fairly cruel humor. He pulled the loaf of bread out from the grocery bag, undoing the twist-tie to drag out two pieces. "So, are you two going to fuck right here, or..?"

"Nick!" Ellis hissed, a hand clapping over his mouth in disbelief. The hick scrambled up from the floor, scooting quickly over to the conman's side to shove at his arm with an elbow. Nick just smirked, offering the bread to him.

Rochelle's face darkened slightly, but she seemed unsurprised. Forcing a sigh as she reached up to tape the gauze in place, she very deliberately didn't meet Chris' gaze, instead shooting a glare sideways at Nick.

Holding his expression perfectly still, the Spaniard bit his lower lip, turning his chin a little bit to give her better access to his cheek. His bright brown eyes lifted a bit, seeming to consider saying something - and then thinking better of it.

"Watch yo'self, Nicolas." Coach grunted faintly, adjusting his head against the headboard of the bed. Nick flashed him that same smirk, getting his own slices of bread and holding them open toward Ellis expectantly.

Arching a brow slightly and setting a hand flat over the bandage as Rochelle settled the last piece of tape to hold it in place, Chris tried again. "Tu amigo is about as quick with his tongue as Jerry is with his knife. You will need more bandages than this, mi bonita."

Rochelle gave a sigh and flashed the youth a frown, turning away from him to intently focus on packing the satchel back up. He blinked at her back, touching fingers along the soft shape of the bandage taped against his cheek. The man almost looked downtrodden as his joke fell flat.
Ellis carefully cracked open the plastic container of sliced ham, sniffing it once before he seemed satisfied. Plucking out a few slices, he laid them on one of Nick's bread halves obligingly... even as he maintained a disapproving slant to his mouth.

"Well, I should go back." Chris somewhat slowly affirmed, taking a couple steps backwards. "Los Ángeles will be downstairs to make sure none of the monsters make any wrong moves."

*Or us.* Nick mused with some wry humor, turning to settle his rear against the edge of the bed and take a large bite out of his sandwich. He gazed with no small judgement at the Spaniard's face, examining as he chewed.

*You aren't going to persuade me with some food and a good chat. Not buying it, kid.*

Rochelle didn't say anything, just zipping up the backpack carefully, eyes furtive on her own movements. Coach gave a nod at Chris past her, gruffly, setting a hand on his gut. "Thanks fo' the food. Tell the rest of 'em that too."

Chris nodded, turning back to the door with a small thumbs-up. "B hurt her leg on the way, so we are taking a siesta and will probably not move again till tomorrow. Rest up, mis amigos - we will talk a mañana. Then we can figure out what we are doing, ¿sí?" He slipped out into the hallway with that, hands moving into his pockets. He had just disappeared around the threshold when he called back:

"Adiós, preciosa."

As if breaking suddenly off a leash, Rochelle suddenly turned around and almost hurried across the room. She ducked through the door without sparing a glance back to her team, expression drawn in something frustrated.

Nick perked up his head at her rushed exit, breaking into a smirk. He made as if to stand up, like he was going to sneak after her and eavesdrop, but Ellis grabbed firm onto his sleeve and held him down with a 'don't you dare' look.

He relented, if only so he could focus on eating.

As Rochelle stepped outside of the room, she quickly glanced over and saw the Spaniard hadn't made it far. "Chris," she hissed slightly, keeping her tone down as she crossed her arms and stood where she was. The man immediately stopped and looked over his shoulder, eyes lighting up all over again.

"¿Sí, bonita?" he questioned with a growing smile.

Rochelle bit hard onto her tongue, letting her hands slip into fists. A slight exasperation bled into her expression - and her voice. "My name's Rochelle, okay? Just.. can you call me Rochelle?"

The man's smile grew a little more and he turned around, cocking his head. "If you want me to, sí. Have I offended you? I didn't mean to, m- Ro..chelle." There was a little wrinkle to his brow, quickly smoothed, as he copied her pronunciation. The name came with an ounce of effort, like he wanted to harshen it to a 'ch'.

Sighing, Rochelle gently lifted up her hand to cover her eyes gently, squeezing at the bridge of her nose. "I'm not.. offended. I just kinda need some space, okay? ... Look, I'm flattered, but I already had to deal with this kind of thing from Nick. I'm not interested, and I'd really appreciate it if you dropped it."
Chris' expression faded a little, for just a moment. His shoulder lowered an inch, but with a blink, he rebounded into a bright smile. "Es una lástima, but I am not trying to do any 'thing,' Rochelle."

"You're flirting with me. A lot." she asserted, curling her hands on her hips and holding firm. She leaned forward slightly, jaw setting as she tried to lock gazes meaningfully. "Just stop, okay, Chris? Please?"

The Spaniard gave a sigh and lifted a hand, stroking down the bandage on his cheek with fingertips. With a moment of thought, lids lowering over bright brown eyes, he uttered a rolling string of Spanish to an uncomprehending Rochelle. "Eres como una rosa - ¿es muy hermosa, sí? La admiro, pero no intento casarla."

Struggling for a moment, Rochelle blinked with some uncertainty as Chris smiled at her and turned away. She felt herself blushing without even understanding exactly what he'd said - maybe it was his tone, or the glimmer of his eyes.

As he walked down the hall, she gave a slightly frustrated roll of her eyes and prompted, "And what did that mean..?"

He laughed, a burst of inward humor, and spoke easily over his shoulder. "I said, you are like a rose, and I am just admiring you like you deserve. I can stop, if you prefer… but I'll be sad to let you go without compliments. Buena noche, Rochelle."

Rochelle was left standing there for a good minute as the Spaniard disappeared down the stairs, a kind of frustration weighing on her shoulders. She gave a sigh, lifting a hand to rub her face as a scrunch twitched her brow.

Letting her arms cross over her stomach, Rochelle turned back and slipped into the hotel room, unpleasantly shaking her head when she felt gazes lift up toward her. She silently shut the door behind herself, moving to dig through the grocery bags and start making her own food.

She was well aware Nick was staring at her with a devilish smirk, and she didn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledgment. She did, however, mutter out a question as she put her sandwich together with no small hunger.

"... You guys are sure they really shot out our tire? It's not a misunderstanding or something..?"

Ellis was the one to answer, piped up around a mouthful of bread and ham as he turned his head to blink blue eyes at her worriedly underneath the shadow of his cap. "I found the bullet muhself, Ro'… there ain't no other explanation."

Giving a small sigh, Rochelle turned away, carrying her sandwich back to the windowsill. Her face was drawn in something between confusion and frustration. Nick asked somewhat slyly as she went, voice deep with a bit of an edge, "Why would you ask that, doll?"

As she rested down on the sill, curling a leg underneath herself and lifting her sandwich to go for a small, subdued bite, she mumbled, "No reason." The gambler snickered behind her, though it halted with a hitched 'uhp' as Ellis probably elbowed him. Rochelle could hear the light scuffle as Nick retaliated.

Chris seemed sincere, but maybe it was an act. Why would he have aligned himself with someone like Brenda - or, worse, Jerry - if they didn't share the same values? Then again, if the alternative was going it alone… maybe he didn't have a choice.

Yet, he'd taken the same pleasure in taking zombies apart as the others - unless it was just a way to
cope. She'd stopped thinking of them as sick humans a long time ago; it hurt to think that when they had to kill them. Desensitization was really the only way forward, if one wanted to keep sane, but… wasn't there a line?

Was that hypocritical of her?

Rochelle might have groaned if she didn't know her teammates were still looking at her. She withheld it, swallowing her mouthful and staring at the rest of her sandwich in thought.

... *Girl... you should've stayed with Jacob.*
Chapter 82

Kicking the bedsheets off of himself, baring his sprawled body - dressed only in his boxers, hat, and crumpled socks - Ellis gazed up at the ceiling with a frustrated crunch to his brows. It didn't really surprise him that he couldn't sleep. They'd split off to their separate rooms, and the lonely tension had his mind on overdrive.

The Georgian wasn't used to feeling unsafe - at least not in this way. Not from other human beings. It unsettled his very grasp on right and wrong. He felt like curling up and hiding, a sense of worried unease driving him to a fearsome frown.

He wanted to believe the whole situation wasn't what they thought, that they'd all just misinterpreted the Angels' behavior and they could all just talk it out and head for rescue together. Unfortunately, his hope was faltering. All he could think about was Nick's voice, his doubt.

"People like them... they don't let you go easy. It rarely ends well, and never on your terms.'

It was nothing like the threat of zombies - it was so much worse: a dark, conscious betrayal.

It wasn't normal and it wasn't right.

It scared him, afraid to breathe lest the quiver of his exhale break what composure he had left. His head flopped, blue eyes half-open to anxiously gaze around the lightly furnished hotel room, trying to distract himself.

Quickly, he recognized that the very effort of trying to calm down was only heightening his fear and quickening his pulse. Giving an almost desperate sigh, Ellis rolled himself to the edge of the bed. Swinging his legs off, Ellis sat there with a heavy tremor to his worked frame.

He rubbed slowly at his bruised torso, fingertips light on his speckled wounds. Blue eyes were distant, thoughtful, restless in the dark.

"Man..." he mumbled.

With a little clench of his jaw, Ellis reached up to suddenly take his hat off. He closed it between his hands, rolling his body carefully to slip down to his knees next to the bed.

Leaning forward slightly, he let his hands fold into a clasp with his hat gripped between his palms. He closed his eyes, lacing fingers and bending his head until he could rest his chin against their clustered knuckles, reverent.

"Lord? I know yer probably real busy, 'n' there's a whole lotta people askin' fer you right now.. 'n' I told muhself I wouldn't bother you none 'cause I was real well off, considerin'." The words drawled with an intimate rhythm from his lips, brows softening. He gave a chuckle, fondly, tipping his chin down a little more. "Mama always told me not tuh bother you none fer stuff I could handle on muh own. But that yer still there fer me if I ever needed."

Just the contact with another presence was enough to calm him, making him smile even as his voice fell to a pleading earnestness.

"Well, I do, man. I know yer keepin' muh family all safe, but muh new friends need help, too. We've been doin' alright, but I'm real scared right now... these folks don't seem real nice, Lord. I'm afraid they're gonna try'n'do somethin' awful."
His shoulders lowered as his fears slipped from him with ease, pleading into his hands. "Please keep an eye on us. I don't want nobody tuh get hurt, Lord, not even them - but you gotta keep muh friends safe."

Ellis took a slight breath, his fingers slipping and linking together with a tightening grip as he smiled against his knuckles. "They're real amazin' friends. I'm real grateful fer gettin' tuh meet 'em." Opening his eyes and peeking up slightly, raising his head, Ellis sighed softly.

"... Please, don't let nothin' bad happen. I trust you, Lord."

Gently lowering his hands and resting his forearms against the edge of the bed, he murmured a simple, "Amen." and released an almost relieved sigh. The sense of warmth he always felt after praying, this completed reassurance, fell over his mind with a calming touch.

He smiled softly, moving to push up from the bed and get to his feet. The kid gave a gentle stretch as he stood, rubbing at his stomach with a sigh. As the stretch loosened up his muscles, Ellis started to lean down, moving to re-crawl into bed. He felt calmer then, and a spark of hope re-stirred in his chest that he might be able to fall asleep.

He hadn't so much as set a knee on the edge of the bed when a light flashed on in the hallway.

Ellis blinked, startled, turning around to eye his room's door. Light flooded under the door's bottom edge, this golden aura of light filtering in over the carpet fibers. Ellis stared with a head-tilt of incomprehension, almost awkwardly postured with his arms still stretched toward the bed.

Any burgeoning thought of some tangible holiness disappeared when footsteps broke the stream of light. They passed by his door with a slow, heavy gait - so close the boots left silhouettes of shadow on the crack of light that spilled beneath the door.

Ellis watched them walk past his door, the crawl of the trodding shadow leeching into - over - and out of the glow from the hallway. Uncertain, Ellis crept across the carpet, approaching the doorway with careful and tip-toed footsteps.

His heartrate started to pick up in his chest again, making him swallow with an uneasy gulp. Cautiously, he reached out to grip at the knob, turning it slowly. He could hear the creak of the door's mechanisms as he turned it, and with a held breath, Ellis opened the door a few inches.

Peeking into the hallway, Ellis felt his body stiffen at the sight of the Angels' largest member stalking slowly down the carpeted path.

The man's form was perked with the attentive focus of a hunting animal, head twitching to follow the whim of his gaze and the lumber of his frame. His knife, though not in his hand, was glinting at the dirty block of his hip, tucked crudely under his belt.

Slight panic had Ellis staring, fingers tightening on the doorknob, silently fearing the man would try to reach for one of the door handles he passed so slowly by. As Jerry reached the end of the hotel hallway, he stopped, pausing to gaze through the half-curtained window at the far end.

Ellis' frightened brain realized almost too late that he was going to turn around.

Jolting back inside his room, Ellis jerked the door closed in a rushed motion. He kept the knob entirely twisted so it didn't click, and used his shoulder to brace against it and stifle the sound as it thudded back into place. He felt himself panting, eyes wide with a sense of mounting tension.

It was all he could do to try and stay calm, pressing his ear against the door to strain for sounds
from the hallway as his heartbeat jumped and twittered in his ears.

He could hear the man's approach down the hallway, slow and casual, boots rustling against the carpet with each sprawling step. As it came closer, Ellis retreated, silencing his panting with a hand over his mouth as he stared at that stream of light under the door. His skin trembled with the force of his pulse, a silent mantra of 'Please don't'uv heard me please don't'uv heard me please don't'uv heard me...' frantic over his consciousness.

The first flash of black touched the light underneath his door, that first footstep breaching the glow, timed to a spike in Ellis' heartrate - and then the whole shape of a planted foot stomped straight into the center of the doorway as another step was taken...

And then the shadow halted.

Ellis didn't wait for anything to happen, didn't so much as pause. He didn't question or reason; he bolted. Socked feet moved with stumbled panic to race the few feet between him and the closet door, scrambling through the cracked doorway in such a flurry that he clipped his hip hard on the edge of the door.

Adrenaline too high to react, he forced the door shut behind himself, the sound ringing out loudly to his sensitive ears. He blurted a "Shit -" at the noise, but just turned around, mind focused on one thing: he'd noticed earlier there were locked doors connecting adjoining hotel rooms.

Blindly feeling in the darkness, Ellis felt his hands hit the back wall of the closet, and from there he slid his palms along until he caught the edge of the doorway. Quickly fumbling for the doorknob, Ellis tried to twist it.

It didn't budge.

He whimpered a frustrated sound, feeling on the knob. There was a lock built into it, and he twisted it, going the wrong way the first try in his hurry. It clicked unlocked when he corrected himself, and when he tried the knob again, it twisted... but the door didn't still move.

It was locked on both sides.

He didn't know if the door to his room had been opened. He swore he hadn't heard it, but he was panicked - maybe he'd missed it. It was locked, he tried to tell himself - but Brenda had given them the keys. Maybe she'd made more. Maybe the husky Angel was hunting for him. It would only take a second to determine where he was hiding.

Ellis didn't know what he was terrified the man would do, but he knew for a fact he was terrified.

"Nick!" he hissed, desperately, voice struggling between a whisper and a yell with a tremble that left it pleading as it broke over the gambler's name. "Nick!" The conman had to hear him, had to come and unlock the door on his side - had to.

Jiggling the knob uselessly, pushing his weight against the door as if he could force it open, he sent a nervous glance over his shoulder at nothing. Ellis felt the wooden frame of the door pressing against his bare shoulder roughly, a spark of pain flicking at him like he'd earned a splinter. "Nick! Open the door, man - Nick, please!"

Ellis was inches away from pounding at the door with a fist, desperation peaking to a blinding fear. "Nick! C'mon! Wake up!"

The sound of movement on the other side pierced through his panic. With a sudden click, the door
gave way and Ellis tumbled through into the dimly lit closet connected to his.

He fell, all grasping hands and shoving fear, straight into a startled Nick.

"The fuck -" the gambler uttered, the words ripped straight out of him as Ellis' body collided with his with a panicked shove. They both staggered, collapsing more into Nick's closet than Ellis'. The older man was still mostly clothed, but his dress shirt lay unbuttoned, and when Ellis thrust into him and grasped arms around his waist, he buried against a bare, hair-dusted abdomen.

Silent, Nick's arms circled around Ellis' bare back. Unringed fingers, soft with pure warmth, cupped over his spine as the conman slid with him to the ground. They collapsed into a messy kneel, Ellis' fingers clutching in his shirt at the base of his spine.

Ellis' ribs were heaving with the force of his panting, a disorienting sense of relief washing over his whole body as Nick's arms surrounded him. He whispered furiously, mouth half-pressed against the gambler's sternum. "Oh, gawd, Nick, thank you - I - shit, shit -"

"El, breathe, Jesus Christ.." Nick tried to shush him, brows winding together in confusion. He slowly ran a flat palm along Ellis' shivering back, soothingly, as his other arm fell to a loose embrace around the Georgian's shoulder.

The kid gripped him tighter, arms vicelike as they clung to his torso, but Nick didn't say a word. Surprise turned to a darkening kind of calm, directionless anger stirring on the conman's face as he lowered his chin against his chest to try and examine the younger man's expression.

"Why the fuck are you in my closet..?" he murmured, bewildered, toward the top of Ellis' curly-haired head. The words were a gentle kind of demand, like Nick couldn't decide yet how to react.

Shaking his head slightly, Ellis forced his head to pull back just an inch, gaze flicking up toward Nick's with widened disbelief. "It was that Jerry guy, Nick!" the mechanic whimpered, fingers tightening. "He.. He's -"

There were footsteps out in the hallway.

Nick's head craned with a flash, one of his hands darting to cup Ellis' jaw and place a thumb over his lips, silencing him. From where they were collapsed, they could see the room door. Both men stared in silence as footsteps shadowed slowly before the door, swaggered with slow thuds - but this time, they didn't stop as they wandered past.

It wasn't until the vague sounds of someone descending the stairwell at the end of the hallway trickled through the wall that Nick spoke up - and he spoke up with a growl, so low and cold and hateful that Ellis flinched.

"If that fucking redneck pig-fucker so much as fucking mentioned doing a single fucking thing -"

Ellis had to stop him before he continued, pushing against the hand on his jaw with urgency. "N-no, he - I was just scared, Nick, 'cause.." He broke off, momentarily, and Nick merely gazed coolly at him as he found words. "He was walkin' down the hall all... weird-like… 'n' I poked muh head out 'n' I thought he saw me, 'n' then he stopped at muh door, and…"

Losing that razor edge to his voice as he dropped into the effort of soothing him again, Nick shifted his fingers to cradle Ellis' jaw a little more fully, pulling his chin up to meet gazes. Ellis felt himself calming as green eyes raked over his face, the Georgian's stiff frame softening.

"Kiddo, you're alright."
Forcing a small nod, Ellis took a calming breath, mostly-bare body melting a bit onto the conman's lap. Nick's thumb picked up a small caress down his cheekbone, a tickling kind of sensation trailing after its touch.

Ellis closed his eyes to it, though his brows twitched into knots anyway.

"He scares the livin' daylights outta me, Nick.. it ain't right fer a man tuh be like that." Ellis' voice was just a mumble, confiding in the gambler with a fervor. That sixth sense for people's personalities was cruel to him this time; there was nothing redeeming behind the husky Angel's sneer, and it haunted him. "I don't like him, Nick, I don't like him one li'l bit."

"I don't either." Nick confirmed, gaze narrowing slightly as his voice thickened with the intimacy of their confiding, close bubble of comfort. "But Fireball."

Ellis lifted his head a little, blinking in recognition, hesitant. Nick let the arm dangled around his waist slip a bit tighter, pulling Ellis onto his lap with a small hoist. The kid felt himself inhale, a hand slipping up to set flat onto Nick's chest to balance himself.

"Nothing's gonna happen." Nick's gaze was firm, voice riding that edge between a growl and a whisper. "If we have to kick their crazy asses all the way to Hell, we'll make it through. We've slogged through zombies all the goddamned way from Savannah. Three nutcases aren't going to do shit to us."

The Georgian wanted to believe it - he felt himself craving that security.. but he was mumbling before he knew it, eyes half-closing. "I - I dunno, Nick. I ain't so sure.. I feel like somethin' bad's gonna happen.."

"What, you?" the conman almost drawled, twisting his wrist suddenly to angle Ellis' chin up. His brow twitched, mouth drawing into a thin line of disbelief, eyes going low and sultry. "Come on, Overalls. You're the most sunshine-and-rainbows guy I've ever met. Don't tell me our sparkling hope is losing steam."

Ellis couldn't help but smile, helpless to the sudden flash that quirked his lips up, a slightly embarrassed snort escaping him. "Nick..." he protested in a mumble, but Nick was off already.

"I'm the cynic here, kid. You're not allowed to take my job." the gambler leaned down slightly, and Ellis' eyes gave just a momentary lower as their faces came closer. "It's all I've got, and fuck if some little dumbshit hick is taking it from me."

Shaking his head slightly to lean his cheek away from Nick's hand, Ellis gave a sideways smile that bordered on shy even as he furtively tried to keep the gambler from distracting him. He wanted the kiss he saw threatening on Nick's face, but -

"I'm bein' serious, man. Whut if they go crazy on us? Whut're we gonna do..?"

A sigh escaped those thin lips, Nick's mouth closing into a small line for a beat. Green eyes examined Ellis' expression, and in an instant he formed an answer. "You're gonna drive *yourself* nuts if you keep thinking about it. What'll happen'll happen, we can only clean up *after* the shit hits the fan." Nick's hand released his jawline. "You trust me, right?"

"Yeah." Ellis instantly murmured - so quickly, in fact, Nick gave a pause to smirk a little wryly.

Nick's gaze moved away for a moment, musing on something in the distance, before returning to the younger man's face. He spoke honestly, if reluctantly. "I think they are going to do something. And I think it'll come to a fight - but if we have to, we will, whatever it takes. We'll come out on
Ellis gazed up at him for a moment, something in the statement quieting him. Lifting his hand slightly until he could settle his hand on Nick's, Ellis exhaled.

"I don't want you tuh get hurt. I don't want anyone tuh get hurt."

Nick's lips quirked in a smirk. "Even Jerry?" he almost airily questioned, gaze firmly rooted onto Ellis' sobered blues.

The kid just nodded.

The conman laughed outright, the sound making Ellis smile despite himself. "Stupid, stupid hick. Fuckin' unbelievable." Nick's arm lifted up to encircle his neck, pulling the younger man into a forceless headlock. Ellis just closed his eyes as it folded him against Nick's chest, shifting his hips to twist a little and fit better into the embrace.

Ellis let his chin shift just a little bit up and down in a nuzzle, drawing his brows into a furrow. Feeling the soft rhythm of Nick's heartbeat in his ear, he demanded in a murmur, "Promise yuh won't get hurt."

He cared. He cared so much, like he'd never cared for anyone. It hurt, like his eyes might water at the pain in his chest. Like he could feel himself tearing apart at the seams just thinking about something happening to Nick.

Nick's breath tickled down onto his neck when he responded, sending shivers down Ellis' whole spine and goosebumps over his bared skin. "Promise." his voice half-hummed against the crown of Ellis' head.

Nick knew acutely it was probably a lie.

They sat there for a moment, Ellis buried into the warmth that was Nick's embrace, the conman's fingertips traveling to play over his body with a kind of slow progress that was somehow - though the word was not one to fall easily onto Nick's shoulders - innocent.

The kid's head lifted, breaking out of the press of Nick's arm slightly. He glanced up at Nick's face as the conman glanced down at his, and their gazes held for a moment of silence. There was no communication, no words - just wide-eyed affection clashing and melting and grazing against cool thought. A softened blue against a pale green.

Ellis silently leaned up, craning his chin and bracing his hands against Nick's stomach. He brushed his mouth against the other man's, the gambler leaning down an inch to let him get closer.

Nick put a faint downward tip into the kiss, a soft suction caressing the plump shape of Ellis' sweet bottom lip and giving him room to give a gently appreciative exhale as the kiss settled in.

They stayed like that for a hazy moment, slow motions only just straying from that first contact that hummed so vibrantly on Ellis' senses. There was some kind of indistinct contentment with just staying like they were - for a moment.

It broke as softly as it started, their faces just slipping apart with the taste and tingle of the kiss still alive on skin and nerve. Nick's gaze examined distantly over his face, making Ellis' eyes lower slowly as a smile twitched onto full, wetted lips.

Ellis automatically reached up his arms to loop around Nick's neck for support when the conman
shifted his hands underneath the Georgian's thighs, somewhat sorely shifting to start standing up.

"Come on, Fireball. Guess I'm stuck with you, now."

He wasn't totally steady, careful to keep their dual weight balanced. After a moment, Nick got upright with Ellis' body held tight to his hip, thighs gently embracing his waist and supported by his hands.

Ellis let his face just bury into the older man's shoulder, tightening his arms carefully as the sensation of being carried - body against Nick's so-warm one, breath soft on his ear - made his eyes close.

The walk to the bed was short, and Ellis tightened his grip as Nick lowered him onto the mattress with a careful bend and exhale, struggling more than he'd let on. Releasing him with some reluctance, Ellis flicked a glance at him, shyly lowering his chin as he crawled backwards on the bed to make space for the older man.

When Nick slipped down next to him, he got onto his side, facing the younger man. The sprawl of his open dress shirt gave this inviting view of the gambler's torso, spawning an urge to nuzzle against him.

When Nick silently - expression slightly firm - lifted up his arm in an invitation, Ellis scrambled to accept it, eagerly rolling his body to press into the space created by Nick's extended arm.

Snuggling down against his torso, Ellis closed his eyes as Nick's arm momentarily extended to grasp at the blankets and tug them just halfway up their bodies. The fabric settled into a snug fit around them as the conman's arm lowered to drape over Ellis' bare torso, hand resting on the mattress beside them.

It felt peaceful. Peaceful and warm, and Ellis let his hands slip up between their bodies until he could just lay hands on Nick's skin, burrowed into the safety that was his draped arm. It was almost enough to get him to sleep - but what little sleep he got was shallow.

When he did drift, he'd merely wake up again, some dread pressing at the back of his throat and making his skin crawl. Maybe the remnants of dreams he didn't remember. He tried not to move, tried not to make a sound, lest he disturb Nick.

The thudding heartbeat he could hear beneath the older man's sternum was the only thing that soothed him.
"Rise and shine, sweethearts!" cried Brenda's smugness-lined voice. The harsh sound of metal rapping on wood made Nick jolt up in bed, arms - that had fully encapsulated Ellis' half-curl body over the course of the night - dragging the kid with.

Ellis gave a half-asleep yelp, burying into Nick's arms at the abrupt awakening, but Nick merely slipped a hand to the back of his neck to support him against his chest. He spared a glance down, mouth burying into the soft, curly-haired mop that was his lover's head.

As much as Nick's body was wired to hold onto something as he slept, Ellis' seemed to be wired to oblige him. The younger man was snuggled tight against him with no space for anything else.

The window built into the far wall of the hotel room betrayed the early hour; it was only just morning, a deadened sun spitting out a few shades of orange like the unwanted pulp of a fruit. "Time for some ammo-hunting, and we thought you all could join us. The guns are hungry!"

Glaring toward the closed door, Nick tried to shake himself out of the heavy-handed grip of sleep. His eyes laid half-open, body aching unpleasantly, and he gave a faint grunt of denial. "Jesus Tits." he grumbled, unpleasantly shifting his hips to roll onto his back on the mattress, blanket stretching as they tried to follow him. "Could wake up to a nicer voice."

Ellis didn't let go, clinging as the conman adjusted his position, and he lifted his head slightly as his body stilled in a sprawl on Nick's body. Frowning, the younger man tiredly dragged a hand from its place around Nick's waist, rubbing sleepily at his eyes.

Nick smirked slightly at him, arching a brow and letting one arm pull away from Ellis. He crossed it under his own head, supporting it up a few inches so he could examine the Georgian's sleepy face. His other arm rested in a lazy dangle over Ellis' bare shoulders.

That almost-nude body stretched and squirmed on top of his, succumbing to the whims of his slowly wakening muscles. The conman's smirk turned slightly dark, a kind of lecherous enjoyment lowering his lids as Ellis' oblivious motions rubbed all the right places in all the right ways.

He probably would've said something, had Ellis not suddenly flopped down in defeat. He gave the smallest cry of distress amidst a yawn, burying his face against Nick's chest.

"I don't wann'uh get up."

The childish statement made Nick's brows lift up, but as he gazed over the kid's collapsed frame, he could read real exhaustion written into his posture. There were dark bruises under his eyes, like he'd not slept at all. A subtle flatness touched his lips, sighing.

...Poor dumbshit's worn out. Kid can't handle this. You're used to not trusting people, Nicolas, but he's not. Damnit.. of all the rednecks you have to take under your wing, it had to be the innocent one.

"Ellis, you're not a kid." he protested, hoping to stir the kid into indignant energy. "It's time to get moving."

Shaking his head, Ellis buried tighter against Nick's chest, fingers curling slightly as they gripped onto his skin. A soft whine left him, voice lowering into a whisper. The words left a warm imprint of breath against his skin as his lips moved. "Li'l longer, Nick, please.. I just wann'uh lay here with
It wasn't so much the soft, gentle way Ellis pleaded - it was the sincerity in his words that gave Nick pause. He drew his head back just an inch, brows crinkling, before he forced himself to close his eyes.

"Come on, Overalls. We gotta go." he prodded as distantly as he could, feeling a stir of sarcasm in his tone as his mind narrowed in on that little piece of him that wouldn't have minded that.

That was the kind of thought he typically suffocated under layers of razor-sharp denial. This one got let off easy - he just pushed it aside.

The Georgian's voice fell to a pitiful nakedness, and Nick felt his resolve breaking under Ellis' plea. Had he gotten any rest at all? "I don't wann'uh get up yet.. not tuh be 'round them Angels.. 'm too tired, Nick.. can't we stay..?"

Nick started to chide him again, shifting an arm to try and get an elbow under himself and prop his body up, but Ellis' chin lifted slightly to look at him before he could.

He looked gorgeous in the low light. A ghost of curly-haired, soft-skinned perfection - a mirage of kiddish beauty, stretching up from the mattress with a muscled solidity Nick wanted to touch. Those sleepy blues pinned him where he was with melted pools of desperation.

*Oh my God.*

"Fuck, okay!" Nick blurted, lifting up an arm to suddenly shove his forearm over his eyes, rubbing against the loose fabric of his shirtsleeve, as if Ellis might blind him. "Christ, turn off the pity headlights, Jesus.."

Ellis didn't seem to get what he meant, a little frown touching his lips as he blinked up at his lover.

"I get it, okay, kiddo?" Sighing, Nick lowered his arm from his face and let it settle beside himself, drooping down into the mattress in resignation. "Christ." Ellis' eyes softened a little, guilt slipping into his eyes. He dropped his mouth to the gambler's chest, grazing full lips against the trickling of hair tracing along his skin.

It was a mournful little gesture. "... sorry, Nick. I couldn't sleep none last night, is all. Feels like I ain't slept in days."

Nick eyed him almost warily, letting his jaw roll slowly in its sockets as he let out a sigh. He raised his hand from the mattress and drew it down his face instead, squeezing out any emotion that might have decided to surge up. "You and me, both."

The younger man got a sympathetic quirk to his mouth, lifting his head as if to speak. Before he could, there was another call from the hallway, louder:

"Get up before the zombies do!"

Nick sighed, gesturing with his free hand at Ellis as he removed the other one from Ellis' hair, shooing Ellis away from him. The kid, reluctance written over his soft face, crawled off of him to thump softly onto the mattress beside him, already curling up.

The conman sat up where he was, letting himself slump gently as he raised hands to start buttoning his shirt up. He felt Ellis' gaze on his fingers, just one blue eye peeking from the muscled arms that
were crossed before his face.

"They just want to go ammo-hunting, right..? I'll talk them into letting you hang back."

Ellis smiled a little, burying his head a little more against his arms. "Really..?" escaped him in a grateful murmur, voice softening, like he was already falling asleep. Nick just rolled up his eyes with a small sigh, nodding.

He scooped his rings off the bedside table, pushing them onto their usual fingers. "Anyway, you look exhausted. If you go out there half-asleep, you'll just get yourself killed. Or one of us."

the gambler grumbled as he arched his spine, using a flat hand to tuck his shirt under the waistband of his slacks.

"But you owe me. Now I'm going to have to deal with these assclowns all on my own."

Giving a small pat over his stomach, Nick bent down, holding his shoes still where they waited on the floor so he could slip his feet into them. He glanced up when he heard the smallest guffaw escape his tired lover.

"Sayin' you'd rather I come?" he teased sleepily, turning to roll onto his belly and settle his face against the pillow, arms crossing over the curly mop of his head.

The gambler rolled his eyes. Reaching to the squat nightstand beside the bed and picking up his suit jacket from where he'd laid it over the counter, he shrugged into it, tucking the fabric against his frame with a few tugs. "Well, when you put it like that.. I'm glad you're staying behind."

he retorted, thumbing over his mouth in a slow motion.

Nick took a step forward, bending down with a hand bracing itself on the mattress. The way it bowed under his fingers alerted Ellis to his approach, and the kid's head lifted a little, blinking at him.

A smirk touched the conman's face, dark with a calm composure that smoothed over his clean-shaven features. "Say thank you." he demanded simply.

Ellis eyed him for a moment, peeking up from the pillow with a slow-growing shade of pink along the bridge of his nose. He pushed against his elbows, lifting up onto them with a lazy slouch to his spine as he stretched his head up. The gambler didn't move, examining his motions calmly as the Georgian reached up to kiss his cheek.

A brow arched, and Nick licked his lips, musing for a moment as Ellis gave him a smile. Eventually, he shook his head, reaching up his hand to shove Ellis' head back down, ruffling his hair in the same gesture. "Close enough."

It was to the sound of Ellis' sleepy laughter, muffled into the pillow as he curled tightly into the mattress, that Nick turned around and moved toward the door. He sighed, sliding his palm over his hair to make sure it was in place. He let his expression level out, disinterested as he slipped out into the hallway.

Brenda and Coach stood at the far end of the hallway, both of them with arms crossed and stoic gazes. It was as likely that they were conversing as it was they were merely standing there, locked in some silent battle of the minds, vying for dominance.

It turned out to be the former, but Nick found himself entertained by the idea all the same.

"Fine wit' me." the big man was in the middle of saying. "Last thing we need is to run outta
bullets." He noticed Nick as he spoke, lifting up a hand in recognition, even as he continued uninterrupted. "Y'all know where a gun store is, then?"

"Of course we do." Brenda returned, craning her chin up idly as her fingertips plucked at a scab down the side of her jaw. "It's maybe three streets over. Pretty small place, but last we saw, it hadn't been ransacked too much. We'll find what we need."

Snorting, Nick slipped a hand into the pocket of his slacks and arched a brow as he approached. "You guys sure know your way around. Tour Guides of Death is more like it. How cute."

The woman glanced at him, gaze narrowing for just an instant - he read something alien there, something cold - and then she flashed a smile at him. He returned it, not the slightest bit of humor etched on his face. "And on our right, we have an ugly douchebag."

"The best-dressed douchebag in the apocalypse." Nick shot back in a purr, cuffing his chin with the tips of his fingers in a rude gesture. "Overall needs to stay behind for a bit. We can swing back by and catch him once we're done finding ammo."

Brenda turned entirely to face him, her dark brows lifting, unamused. "What? Is he hurt?"

Nick shrugged up his shoulders, settling both hands in his pockets now and leaning back on his heels calmly. "He's exhausted or something. I don't care, I just don't want that dumbass swinging around a shotgun half-asleep, get me?"

Coach chuckled, leaning back against the wall slightly as he let his arms half-cross. The hotel room door next to them opened up with a creak, Rochelle stepping out with a bit of a blink as she eyed the three just by her door.

"Fine, sure. No skin off my nose." the woman spat back, brushing her fingers through her hair in a short motion. "Coddle your kid however you want. I didn't realize you guys were running a daycare."

"Seriously, fighting, again?" Rochelle muttered, seeming frustrated as she closed the door behind herself and raised hands to tie her hair tighter. "This is just one big pissing match to you guys."

Nick smirked, lifting his chin a couple inches in a nod. "I'm pretty sure men have more distance. Might be better to just throw in the proverbial towel, doll."

Although Rochelle rolled her eyes as her insult was just used as more fuel, sidestepping to lean against the wall beside Coach, Brenda rose to the occasion with ease. "Women have less to cut off. Take your pick, slick."

That was more than an idle threat.

Nick gave an unpleasant wince, straightening out his arms to press his elbows into his sides. "I don't like hearing that from a bitch with an actual sword. Let's call it a draw."

The lazy way Brenda cocked her head to the side and smirked said she disagreed, but she tossed up a hand anyway. "We'll leave Jerry to guard the hotel, then. He'll be pissy about missing the fighting, but he's pissy about a lot of things."

... Shit.

Nick's gaze went distant within a split second, fingers going into a curl in his pockets. Of all the outcomes, Jerry guarding Ellis was very low on his list of desireables. Unfortunately, he'd walked
right into it - walking out of it wasn't going to be easy.

"Do you really want to deal with that fuckhead angry?" he questioned sardonically, examining a spot on the wall with disinterest. *If I reverse now... shit. Fuck.* His mouth felt dry out, despite himself.

Much to Nick's chagrin, Coach interrupted - against him. "Don't want the young'un gettin' caught by infected and bein' alone, Nick. Safer this way."

"In a fucking locked hotel?" Resisting the strong urge to glare at Coach, frustrated with the unintentional betrayal, Nick forced a shrug. "If you guys want to leave another fighter behind for no reason, fine.. just saying."

He couldn't press, not without tipping his hand - not without drawing attention to himself. He should have dragged Ellis out of bed himself.

Rochelle rubbed a knuckle against her chin, gaze lingering on Nick as she lifted up a brow.

"Whatever works, Brenda. At least this way, we'll know you guys will want to come back to get him, right?"

She said it with a laugh, but Brenda eyed her humorlessly. A narrow touched cold-glazed eyes, letting her hip cock to one side sharply, straining against tight jeans. "Don't trust us, bonita?" She clucked out the word, mocking Chris' accent. "Think we'd leave your little buddy behind?"

The hard-edged hostility had Rochelle bewildered in an instant, lowering her chin and raising hands in an apologetic motion. "That's not - I -"

"That's exactly what she meant." Nick growled, suddenly taking a step forward as he engaged a stare of such pure, driven force that Brenda had no option other than twisting her head to regard him. "And it's true."

Brenda smirked at him slowly, a small quirk touching the edge of her mouth. She gave an idly confident lift of a shoulder, uncrossing her arms. "Probably is." she uttered, turning away from him. "Let's go. Time's wasting." she said simply over her shoulder, footsteps dull against the hotel carpeting as she moved toward the staircase.

The sway of her hips, a confident kind of stride, had Nick's eyes following. He had to shake his head, shaking away the reflexive interest like cobwebs, before his secondary brain could betray him.

*No. Bad Nick.*

He took a step back, turning toward Ellis' hotel room. He kept his voice casual, off-hand. He'd slip back in and tell Ellis the change of plans. There was no way he could leave the kid behind with the Southern Angel. "Yeah, just give me a second. I'll catch up."

He didn’t see it coming.

Before he could get more than a step away, Brenda stopped. She spun on a heel, sliding a hand onto the shaft of the katana lashed to her hip. Her fingers grazed the handle, idly, like she were merely adjusting it.

Nick wasn't stupid. It wasn't so casual a gesture.

Their gazes met, and there was a glint in her expression. "Your guns are downstairs." He examined
the depths of her eyes, and found nothing but a cold, predatory pleasure. "We'll be coming back. No reason to hold us up, Nick."

Brenda's expression unsettled him. He felt, suddenly, the stakes had raised. He had the intense sensation that he'd fallen a step behind. That she had a plan, and he didn't know what it was. She wanted him to leave Ellis - had he handed them a hostage, just like that?

Fury boiled at the base of his throat, before he could stop it. Slow down, Nicolas. You're being paranoid. You don't know anything. Don't over-think. Keep your cool.

Whatever he might think, making a scene wasn't an option. If he was right, arguing would only worsen the situation. If he was wrong, he'd be raising questions for no reason. The last thing he needed was to blow his cover with Ellis.

Smoothly, Nick drew his hands into his pockets, fingers thumbing at the material of his slacks. He kept his face flat, barely acknowledging her aside from a dismissive, "Yeah, alright. Don't get your panties in a wad."

The Angel's leader flashed her teeth in a grin, wordlessly turning to continue her movement toward the staircase. Nick followed, his gaze dulling to a glazed stare on her back. What is your fucking game?

Nick was aware of Rochelle pressing to slip beside him. He initially ignored her, but she swung her weight and bumped her shoulder into Nick's bicep, making him fight the urge to snap. He glanced at her instead, skeptically raising a brow.

"Thanks for the backup, suit." she gratefully explained, flashing him a smile. "You're not too bad sometimes."

Nick snorted, freeing a hand from a pocket to straighten his jacket on his frame. "Don't mention it. When it's between your kind of bitch and that kind of bitch, I'll be on your side every time."

Rochelle blinked at him for a quiet moment, lips parting a little, visibly trying to decide how annoyed she should be. With a small sigh, she ended up just shaking her head, stepping ahead of him to descend the stairs.

He didn't have time to worry about her feelings, and he didn't need to be talked at right now. Drawing reluctantly to follow in her footsteps, Nick noticed Coach moving just behind him - blissfully silent. He lowered his lids, half-closing his eyes as he walked, brain on overdrive.

He'd just have to come up with a contingency plan.

Nick didn't realize quite how deeply imbedded his protective instinct had grown to be until just then - the swelling feeling that he was lashed to the cause of Ellis' safety. He'd promised Ellis everything would be fine.

... problem is, I'm a lying son of a bitch.
No one noticed Nick do it.

He moved with a calm disinterest, ignoring them, and under the tension of organizing the two groups… nobody had the mind to pay attention to him. He filtered into the background of their conversation.

Jerry's shotgun was placed on the hotel check-in desk, and Nick sidled up next to it on light steps.

"If something goes wrong and we need you, Jerry, you know the signal. Three, two, one shots. Other than that, we'll be back in maybe half an hour." Brenda ordered simply, cocking her hip where she stood just in the middle of the lobby.

Nick let his gaze wander as he slipped his hand up, thumb bracing the very tip of the shotgun's barrel against the counter to keep it still. He gripped a bullet from his rifle between his index and middle finger, slipping it in line with the barrel.

"Sure, sure. I know." the man grunted angrily, rapping knuckles on the window. Deep irritation had his brows wound up in knots, badly-restrained anger tightening the strong tendons of his neck. "I'll watch the damn place."

Standing at a distance from the others, Chris seemed quieter than usual. He had his machete in hand, and was idly flipping it from hand to hand, barely listening to the conversation going on around him. He was closest to Nick, but also the least aware - so Nick took the chance and proceeded.

Using his smallest finger, he pushed the bullet into the shotgun barrel. It slid in deep with a soft rattle - and then abruptly, silence, as the metal lodged into the cylinder tightly. He tested it, carefully tipping the gun a little to ensure the bullet was stuck securely. The next shot fired would hit the blockage and explode.

The cruelty was more than worth Ellis' protection.

At best, the barrel would split, warp, and render the gun useless. At worst, it would backfire and injure the hulking Southerner. A pleased sensation settled into Nick's chest, pulling his hand from the weapon and turning away with a smooth motion.

Rochelle was in the middle of bravely speaking up, hand stretched behind her back as she itched at a spot on her lower back, when Nick glanced over. "Thanks for staying behind, Jerry, we jus-"

He sneered at her with an angry gesture of his head, turning away, like she weren't even worth looking in the eye. "Fuck off." he stated easily, raising up a thickly-furred arm to set his forearm against the wall and lean into it.

Half of Nick felt the urge to slip into the conversation and attack the guy - but then, there was that satisfied part of him that knew he'd already slipped the knife into his back.

*Pun intended.*

Strolling away from the counter, he didn't so much as spare a nod for the others, striding to the hotel doors. Coach gave him an almost fatherly 'and where are you going' look as he passed, but Nick merely pushed the doors open and slipped outside.
The crusty smell of salt dragged the air down like the clinging grip of a wet towel. Nick could've choked on it had he taken a deep enough breath. Stepping onto the sidewalk as the doors swung shut behind him, the gambler pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket, turning his chin upward.

His gaze ticked on and off the sky, examining the muddy grey around the edges of the horizon as he stood quietly on the sidewalk before the hotel. The criss-crossing streets, bedecked with house after house, were clotted lightly with unkempt and untrimmed trees.

It was hard to see too far, but he could see the shambling shapes of infected crawling around in the shadows. The early morning hour didn't seem to have any special meaning to them. They moved as they always did: lethargic, slow, and crippled by the occasional spray of vomit or seeming headache.

Yet ready to flash to murderous ferocity within a split second.

Nick was faintly aware of the doors opening again behind him, and a soft-footed presence slipping near him. "It rained again." Rochelle noted with some hesitance at the gambler's elbow. Like it meant something; like it mattered.

He glanced at her with a vague mask of disinterest and shrugged his shoulders, letting his elbows straighten against his ribs. He couldn't help the cool note that lined his voice. "It's not raining now."

The street still glistened from the weather, growing heat only just starting to burn the dampness away. Chris, Brenda, and Coach slipped out of the hotel behind them, moving with a rigid formation that kept the two groups mostly separated.

"Alright, let's get moving before Jerry gets bored." Brenda easily commanded, pulling her sniper rifle off her back. It flipped into her hands, a casual grace in how she handled the weapon, and she tossed it against her shoulder so she could look down the scope and examine the road before them.

The short Spaniard at her side lifted up an arm to point down the road, bright brown eyes alive with a certain humor over the slip of gauze still taped to his cheek. "It is down that way, mis amigos. If we hurry we may get there and back before he gnaws his own arms off."

The snort that escaped Nick as he glanced over his shoulder, examining the hotel's darkened face, was cruel. Or blows them off. He was aware that they had started to move away, but for an instant, he didn't care.

Sabotaging the gun was one thing. However, the satisfying knowledge that the man was more likely to kill himself with it than anything else was dulled by the awareness that there was a lot he could do without a gun.

With his cleaver. Or worse, his hands.

Suddenly, the win felt hollow.

... If you do one single thing to that kid.. I'll tear your sick fuck head off with my bare hands.

"Come on, suit." Rochelle called back at him gently, snapping his attention forward. Growling slightly, he moved into a hurried stride to catch up, grunting noncommittally as he reached her side.

They moved quietly down the street, the survivors taking point with the Angels a few steps behind.
There was a slight tension in the air, worsened by the glower etched onto Nick's expression and the presence of the infected so close by but not yet aware.

"Keep your ears open." lazily escaped Brenda's lightly curled lips. She lifted her rifle, tipping her head to gaze through the scope. "The rain attracts Witches. There'll be at least one or two of them around still."

"Rain?" Coach questioned, the deep swell of his brow crinkling in a coil of wrinkles. He rolled his shotgun in his hands, glancing around slowly, suspicious now.

Chris gave a laugh, idly turning his assault rifle in his hands. "Sí. Las pobres putas like the rain. Helps them to look even sadder." His footsteps brought him to within kicking distance of a half-crushed tin can on the concrete.

He glanced down at it, smiling for an instant.

"Olé!" he cheered, startling everyone but Brenda. With a swift kick, he sent the can clattering down the street ahead of them. The loud noise shattered what had been a distant quiet, and like the fired shot of a commenced race, the gates opened.

Screaming infected came bolting out from behind buildings and under trees, their attention quickly diverting from the rattling can to the live bodies only a few yards away.

Clawing and snapping at the air in eager rage, they came racing down the road at the five. Nick cursed, sparing a glare for the grinning youth as he jerked his rifle up to his shoulder and took aim. "You're as bad as Overalls!"

Rochelle and Coach did the same at his sides, a strong line protectively clinched together, and the firing of their guns came in spotty unison. Shots snapped the infected back with splatters of blood, downing them in threes.

It was a practiced kind of order. They'd been fighting together for what felt like a lifetime, and there was a familiarity to the very way they stood. The flood of infected barely came close before their net of gunfire had them picked off.

Even without Ellis, they worked in such tandem Chris and Brenda likely didn't even need to help.

Pride made them anyway, though Chris gazed over them for a moment with a quirked grin. He seemed affably impressed, looking toward Brenda with a gesture of his arms that seemed to say, 'see?'. He could only watch as Brenda darted to the side with a dark twist to her mouth, getting a line of sight to pick off zombies where she could.

"Keep moving." she ordered, as Chris' assault rifle lent its rattling gunfire to the mess.

Coach led the five forward, advancing at a quick walk over the carnage they were painting in front of them. With an idly dismissive smirk on her face, Brenda took advantage of the cover fire they provided to get ahead of them just by a few inches.

Nick smirked, noticing. He wasn't one to talk - but her ego amused him.

The gunfire didn't quite cover the squeal that echoed out from one of the houses, chilling with the almost alien quality the choking keen had. "Spitter!" Rochelle warned, not an instant too soon.

A hacking sound came just after, announcing the acid projectile had been launched. The sound had Coach barreling forward, using the strong shape of his shoulder to ram through the infected that
had managed to get close.

They screamed at him in denial, but got little more than a swipe or two at his frame before the force of the collision knocked them off balance, falling like pins. Shoving them aside, the football coach cleared enough room for Nick and Rochelle to leap after him and get out of the way.

The acid came in an almost shell-like membrane, like a coughed up organ, exploding upon so much as touching the concrete behind them. It splattered in a wide puddle, the liquid hissing and bubbling as it spread out. The noise left Nick with a wince as the agony of his calf resurfaced as a dull ghost of a memory.

This time, though, the Spitter's attack had missed, and the dribbling line of electric green acid from the window of a house just beside them gave away its position. Brenda twisted in a smooth motion, her rifle jolting up to her face.

Her footsteps paused just long enough to steady her aim, and after two shots in rapid succession, the Spitter screamed out a death cry that gurgled with pain. Splashes of acid dribbled out from the window as it died.

Only a flash of it was visible as it fell over, clawing out bony, flapping arms. They just barely witnessed the ghastly shape of its acid-melted face, jaw and throat completely torn open and bloodied by the fire of its own spluttering saliva.

"Good shot." Rochelle automatically called out, turning to shoot a zombie lunging out from behind a fence on the side of the road. Brenda smirked with some condescension, facing the other woman with an arched brow.

"It's called experience."

Nick noticed the almost elongated shape of a Smoker lean suddenly from behind a building just over her shoulder. It was clouded by the thick, buzzing smoke exuding from rotten pores all over its skin. Glistening tendrils draped around its shoulders, grabbing and squirming at the air like living worms.

He didn't say a single word.

"I'm trying to compliment you." Rochelle shot back, lowering her rifle slightly to glare back at her. Chris stood just next to her, and, consciously or not, she left him to protect her back. "I knew you couldn't take a joke; can't take a compliment, either?"

He did protect her flank, with a grin, brows raising as the short spit of his assault rifle knocked limbs off the few nearby zombies left. "No progress..." he half-mumbled to himself, kicking out swiftly to collide the toe of his shoe with a fallen zombie's face, crushing its nose in with a splatter of blood.

Brenda had her hand ready to lift up and point at the other woman, a confident quirk upward touching the corner of her mouth… right as the Smoker suddenly cawed out a shout-like cough. Its tongue whipped audibly through the air to catch around her shoulders with a greasy, constricting wrap.

She had all of a second to widen her eyes, accusation flying over wild hazel irises, before the thing yanked her back off her feet. Brenda struck the concrete half-curled, taking the brunt of the impact on her lower back, legs kicking out as she went skidding backwards over the road.

Rochelle gave a shout of immediate concern, taking a step forward with an outthrust hand as if she
could catch hold of her. Nick resisted a laugh as hard as he could, lifting his rifle and side-stepping to try and get a bead on the Smoker's jerking body as it reeled her in.

It was tempting to let her get taken away, but...

Before he could, Coach had already shot - at the tongue itself. The blast of the man's double-barrel shotgun ripped straight into the shuddering rope of flesh, the bullets striking with such tearing force that the thing split into bloody strings.

Brenda's weight proved too much for what was left of the tongue-turned-tentacle, and it snapped violently, leaving her to skid a few more inches and stop. She kicked furiously, the fleshy length still twined around her, snarling.

"Get this off me!"

A deep sigh escaped Coach, lowering his weapon as Chris bolted with a fleet-footed agility toward the prostrated woman, bending quickly to a knee and putting hands on her to try and drag the tentacle out of its wrap.

"Gettin' there." the big man affirmed. Nick slipped him a smirk sideways, a little sharp twist, and Coach returned it with an uncharacteristic guile written in that thick brow. He'd been perfectly aware, too, and Nick felt a surge of fondness for the guy.

"¡Tranqui, tranqui, B!" Chris cried softly, pulling his machete from his belt. He held it up, dodging the shove of Brenda's knee as she fought the twine of the Smoker's tongue. "I have to get it off without cutting you!"

She stilled with all the contentment of a wild animal being treated.

Rochelle bent down slightly as Chris worked the tongue undone with careful slices of his machete, sawing the fleshy limb apart. "Sorry, Brenda, I didn't see it.. too busy arguing." she apologized, her expression drawn in a look of concern as she examined the fallen woman. Rochelle let a hand slip onto her own chest, questioning softly, "Are you okay?"

The woman growled slightly, waiting just long enough for the tongue to loosen around her torso. She shoved it away, and Chris with it, the Spaniard giving something of a hurt up-thrust of his hands as he retreated from her.

"Fine." she retorted stiffly, shooting a cursory glance at Coach as she brushed herself off slightly. The words, "Good shot." left her with some force, working out the syllables as if through gritted teeth.

He obliged her with a nod, and that was that. Visibly eager to move on, Brenda turned away. "Let's go." she ordered within a breath, starting forward with a stalk to her step. Chris moved quickly to follow after her, replacing his machete in his belt and tossing up his assault rifle.

The survivors moved after them, quick to re-group in a small line, though the Angels had retaken the lead. It was all Nick could do to keep his face from turning into something pleased, forcing it into flat disinterest.

He didn't expect it when Rochelle slipped next to him and nudged him. He glanced over out of the corner of his eyes, idly, and she grinned at him in utter silence. The concern that had glazed her expression hadn't been so honest, either.

'Nice.' was written all over her face.
The muted crush of glass underfoot marked the first step into the gun store. The windows had been blown inward from some impact, leaving the dimly lit store dusty and fogged inside from the free-flow of air. The glass, tinted and shatter-proof, had fallen in sheets, crystallized into fine webs across the tile.

The five moved in a cautious line, still on alert as they entered the building. Shady wooden shelving lined the walls, hooks adorned with guns of various sizes, glass that had once protected them broken just like the front windows.

Pistols hung beside full-sized shotguns, and there was a large, latticed set of shelves against the back wall that hung open. The thing was maybe half-full of ammo boxes and loose cartridges, labeled with tags.

"Definitely have been folks here before us." Coach noted in a grunt, gesturing at the empty hooks where guns had been taken and the spill of bullets across the floor from torn-open bullet cases.

Chris made his way first to the ammo closet in the back, stepping carefully over the mess made of the floor. "They were in a rush, too. What a mess, dios mío.."

Rochelle crossed her arms over her chest, watching Brenda boredly trace fingers over the racks of guns. "There was a lot of panic when the infection hit. I'm surprised there's anything left at all, honestly."

"Stupid commoners." the woman muttered, taking down a shotgun to examine it with displeasure. "They're lucky we're here."

With an arched brow, Nick echoed her, disbelievingly. "Commoners?" He shot a scathing glance in her direction as he shook his head, voice smooth with a cool taunt. "Are we in the fourteenth century or something? Christ."

Brenda shrugged, pointing the shotgun downward at the floor. "You know what I mean." She grasped at the cable lock wound through the ejection mechanism, jiggling it a little. It kept the gun parts from moving at all - they'd have to remove them. "There's a reason we're here and everyone else ran away or died. This kind of disaster culls the weak."

Tossing it to the ground, she ignored the loud clatter as the shotgun landed by her feet, uselessly. "It's just a test."

Somewhat carefully, Rochelle moved across the gun store to stop just behind Christophe. He noticed her, smiling over his shoulder enthusiastically. She forced a small smile back, a sigh escaping the corner of her mouth.

"Oh yeah, the fucking zombie apocalypse is a test to prove your goddamn ego. Totally worth the hundreds of thousands of lives." the gambler returned coldly, brows drawn in a neat scowl.

Brenda laughed, turning her head to examine Nick with a lifted chin. "We've been traveling south since New York. Overall, we've probably killed four thousand zombie bastards since the outbreak. If that's not proof we're something better, what is?"

"Better than what?" Nick shot back with a spitting sarcasm. "The dead and the deader?" The sour tang of hostility in the air left both Brenda and Nick in stewing silence, glares passed between them.
in a slow trade of agitation.

Rochelle leaned forward slightly, murmuring to Chris as he picked through the ammo cases. "Is she always like this?"

He chuckled, brows lifting and a small glance slipping over his shoulder. He lowered his voice, confidentially. "Sí. But worse, ever since we lost our old leader, Brock." He passed a box back to her, offering the right caliber for her sniper rifle.

The woman took it from him, a small nod touching her head. The news struck her oddly, unexpected, and she chewed on her lower lip softly. "Oh." she uttered, apologetically. "I'm sorry.."

Chris shrugged his shoulders, giving a laugh softly with a light edge of resignation. "He ran straight into a Hunter. Nothing anyone could do, he was -" Seeming to suddenly lose the word, breath catching on his tongue as it curled faintly between his teeth, Chris merely clasped his hands on his stomach and exploded his fingers outward to mimic the spilling of innards. "- destripado, before anyone could move. ¿Comprendes?"

Giving a nod, Rochelle lowered her gaze, drawing her lips gently in a line of sympathy. "Yeah.. I'm really sorry, that's awful. I've been jumped by one of those things before.. nearly tore me open, too."

Chris turned slightly, left arm packed with a few cases of ammo. He set his free hand on her elbow, a soft touch that made her head twitch up in surprise. "Don't worry. It won't happen to you, conmigo aqui."

She opened her mouth, but he was already stepping away.

"Survivors stick together, ¿sí?" he elaborated, moving past her to carry the ammo back toward Brenda as he grinned to himself. Giving a small huff, Rochelle shook her head, sling her rifle onto her shoulder so she could start loading bullets into it.

Brenda perked up as the Spaniard offered the ammo out to her, bending slightly to look through it critically. "So." she prompted, idly, gesturing with her free hand at the other survivors. "Tell me. What're your plans?"

Coach pulled a heavy pistol from a rack behind the store counter, examining it. "What you mean?" he responded, lifting it up toward Nick.

The conman arched a brow in interest. He could tell from afar it was a Magnum, much like his own that he'd lost. Instantly intrigued, he stirred to close the distance between them, plucking the weapon from Coach's hand to turn it in his fingers.

"You all must have a reason to be in Tybee. End of the road here, there's nothing but ocean after this, unless you backtrack. Why?" Brenda questioned bluntly, taking one ammo cartridge from Chris and moving to attach it to the loops she'd built into her belt for that very purpose.

Nick paused, feeling his nerves kick in at the question. He gave a smooth nod of appreciation at the ex-football player, turning the gun over. He started to muse on how to remove the cable lock - only to discover the lock wasn't actually cinched shut. Snorting, he tore it out, giving the slide a pull to test it.

"We figured the shore was our best bet for survival." the gambler responded flatly, passing Chris by at a distance as his shoes crackled over the glass. The uncertainty of how the conversation would go was something he didn't like at all.
When Chris uttered a low whistle, Nick glanced at him. The Spaniard plucked a box of .50 caliber bullets from the boxes he held in his arms, offering it up. Although instinct had him wanting to reject the offer on principle, Nick reluctantly lifted up a hand.

The Spaniard grinned a little, tossing it his way. Nick caught it, prying the box open and thumbing out eight bullets so he could start loading the pistol. He was prepared to stoically ignore the man rather than offer a thanks - but Chris never looked for one.

"Survival?" Brenda parroted, her stance going wide as she set hands on her hips, thumb toying against the handle of her katana lashed crudely to her belt. "If you want to survive, you have to keep moving. Hiding in a beach house is just waiting to die."

Coach sighed with that weary tone, shoulders lifting. "We ain't trying to hide. We got families to find." A softening of his expression left him rubbing at the back of his head, adding, "Don't y'all?"

The cruel snort that escaped Brenda had Coach shaking his head before she'd even begun to speak. "Please. That's not even part of this world anymore. Being alive is the only thing that matters, not family or friendship. It just holds you back."

Rochelle let her chin fall to her chest, sighing very softly. She glanced over at the Angels' leader, lips pursed and a certain disbelieving sadness glazing over the chocolate-brown of irises. "...I'm sorry for you, Brenda."

The statement made Chris' head lift up, blinking at her. There was a curiosity about his gaze, an almost awed interest in the way he perked up and held his silence.

"Why?" the woman retorted, but with a jut of her hip, she continued before Rochelle could even make to respond. "Hardly the point. What were you planning on doing here, then? Curling up and crying on the beach? What about your 'families'?"

The sarcastic condescension in that last word didn't go unnoticed.

"Sounds good to me." Nick injected sardonically, eyes rolling upward as he thumbed bullets into the cartridge for his Magnum. Ignoring him, Coach crossed his arms on the weighty bulge of his gut, giving a deep exhale from the very depths of his lungs.

"We're going to the shore to try and signal the gov'ment." he stated with a deep simplicity.

Brenda's head reared up like she'd been struck.

The motion was mirrored in how suddenly Chris lost his grip on the ammo in his arms. The boxes split on the tile as they fell, bullets scattering in all directions with a loud clatter.

Brenda didn't even wait for the sound to subside before she started yelling, expression warped in utter rage as her hands curled into fists. There was something like betrayal written into her features. Something cold in the deeper parts of her gaze. "Government?! Are you fucking suicidal? You're here to call in the government?!"

Unsettled, Coach lowered his chin, examining the two Angels slowly. "Course we are."

Nick turned on a heel, slowly slipping the cartridge back into his Magnum. He pocketed the ammo box, an uneasy deadpan freezing his expression in place. His fingers twitched to grasp the Magnum but he held back, gaze narrowing.

Although a slight paleness had reached his expression, Chris twisted around to lift hands and
gesture with open palms at her, slowly. A mutter of "Uy, mi dios.." escaped him, right before he raised his voice. "B, hermana, calm down."

"No!" she snarled, facing him with a violent cut of a hand through the air. He took a half-step back, eyes narrowing as he lifted a hand to wipe over his mouth almost nervously. " Shut the fuck up, Christophe!"

"Brenda, he's right, calm down." Rochelle urged quickly, fumbling to get her arm through the strap of her rifle and shrug it on. "I know - CEDA .. they didn't do much right. But we need to get safe. It's gotta be better than being out here."

The woman backed up a step. Something feral was burying into her voice, shoulders arching with the threatened posture of a cat. "CEDA?" Jerking a fist up in the air and giving it a violent shake, her voice rose a pitch - edged with an awkward, straining laugh that lit up her eyes. "You think CEDA's safe. CEDA is dead, you fucking idiots!"

"Dead?" Rochelle echoed, brows crunching together. "What -"

In a swift motion, Nick stepped to her side, landing a hand on her shoulder to quiet her. She gave him a slightly panicked glance that he didn't meet, green eyes lazered onto Brenda's face. Her previous cold composure was unsettling enough - but her newly exposed, trembling mania made his heart rate raise.

"B.." Chris tried again, stepping toward her with a careful shake of his head. His pale nervousness had turned into an almost anxious intensity, voice calm and reasonable, but shaky. "They must not know.. just calm down, we can talk with them."

"Know what?" escaped Nick in a hiss, gazing between the two. His footsteps were slow and cautious as he drew to stand in front of Rochelle and Coach, sliding a glance toward them. They were as bewildered as he was, though he merely disguised it better.

Brenda reached out to grab the front of Chris' bloodied wifebeater so hard he stumbled, short stature losing him leverage. He grabbed her wrist out of reflex, but - despite the tension in his shoulders - failed to shove her off. "They." she spat, word by word, just a centimeter from his face, ignoring Nick entirely. "Will. Leave."

Shoving Chris away, Brenda gripped a hand onto her hip and leaned forward slightly, her body cocked as she stared Coach down solidly. "You're going to go away. You're going to leave quietly, right now, and go far away."

As the Spaniard caught his balance, he shot a glance sideways, meeting Rochelle's gaze. She frowned, trying to silently beg him for an explanation, uneasiness written into every inch of her face.

He held her gaze, stilling, for a full breath before breaking it forcefully, turning entirely away from her and toward Brenda. He gave a frustrated, urgent sigh and outthrust his hands, breaking into a flurry of Spanish as his discomfort peaked. "Brenda, cálmate, por favor. ¡Estás reaccionando exageradamente! No tienen malas intenciones - necesitamos - "

"This is some kind of misunderstanding." Rochelle interrupted his building fervor, clamping a hand onto her cheek in frustration. The Spaniard seemed to realize what he'd been doing only belatedly, giving a strange shake of his head, paling. "We're just trying to get rescued, Brenda… Isn't getting word to the government, or somebody, our best -"
"No." she snapped back, glaring at Rochelle fiercely. A lift to her chin had her short hair falling back from her face, baring all of the scowl that enveloped her expression. "You're trying to kill us all. And you'll leave, right now."

With a clutch of her fingers in frustration, Rochelle shot a glance at Coach and Nick, panic worsening on her features.

"We ain't leavin'." Coach affirmed, gaze steady on Brenda's face. "Y'all can just move on if you don't wanna get rescued with us. This is all we got, Brenda. Taken too much blood an' sweat gettin' here."

"You are not -" she hissed, furiously, advancing a step toward the counter that separated her and the big man. Her voice trembled with barely-restrained anger. "- calling the military on us. I will not fucking let you."

"Then what'll you do?" Nick shot back suddenly, voice raised with a lash of hostility. Brenda's gaze flicked to him so fast her pupils dilated, examining him for a silent moment. Something cold entered her eyes, and it was a beat of time before a small quirk downward snuck at the edge of her lips.

Moving slow, the woman reached up a hand. "I'll call Jerry." she stated simply, voice trembling with barely-restrained anger. "And he'll bring your little kid here so you all can be on your way to the shore. We'll head out before you can get word to the army. Time to move on, anyway."

Nick felt his chest twist slightly, frustration rattling his nerves at the reminder that Jerry had Ellis. He held his expression stonily, jaw setting quietly.

"We're going to leave, B?" Chris questioned, suddenly relaxing his shoulders and lifting brows as he examined the woman. There was something surprised in his voice, almost disbelieving. "Let them have Tybee?"

Her head nodded with a slow confirmation, turning to face the store's door. "Nothing else to do." Pulling her rifle off her shoulders, she aimed it out the window, blindly.

A smile broke over Chris' face, setting a hand flat over the bandage on his cheek as if to soothe himself. He turned his head, sparing an almost tiny glance over the three survivors behind them. "...I'm sorry, amigos. You may not find what you are looking for, but... podéis intentar. You can try, ¿si?"

Nick crossed his arms over his chest, staring at Brenda's back. His brain struggled to comprehend the sudden shift. There was no way she'd changed her mind in a split second - there had to be something going on.

Coach gave a nod, letting his hand lift from the counter. His face visibly relaxed, "Thanks, boy. Sorry y'all don't want to come with us."

Chris gave a slightly nervous chuckle and shook his head, running a hand down the flat shape of his stomach under the blood-clotted fabric of his shirt. "We will be fine." Beside him, Brenda let off one shot into the air, the sound cracking as it echoed.

She paused, silent, for a moment - then shot off twice in quick succession, the gunshots reverberating against each other with enough force to carry quite a ways, but not quite enough persistence to start attracting a horde to their exact location.

*Something doesn't add up.* He felt it, that tingling sensation that trickled up his spine as he was
hunted out someone's poker tell. A pattern, a hidden tic, something.. his mind had registered it but he had yet to notice.. Something's wrong - what's wrong...

"You guys were starting to scare me, heh.." Rochelle hesitantly injected in Brenda's pause, her head shaking as she said it, wiping at her forehead. "Guess we're all just on edge..

Come ON, Nicol-

"Lo siento, Roch-"

Brenda had reached the second shot of her last round of gunfire when it must have hit both of them. Nick went stiff, feeling the strike of realization driven hard like a stake into his chest when Chris reacted with him.

The signal had been three, two, one.

Brenda was shooting one, two, three.

Chris turned around on a dime, eyes shooting wide as a shout left him with such panic he glued all the words together on his tongue, coming out in this roiling mess. "NO, B! ¡BASTA! ¡PARATE!"

His pleas were punctuated by the third gunshot that finished the signal, and there was an instant of silence but for the small tinkle of Brenda's bullet shell hitting the tile and Chris' gasped last syllable.


The woman glanced over her shoulder, smiling with a certain serene condescension. She shifted to get up to her feet, tossing her rifle onto her shoulder with a deep, fluttered sigh. "Signaled Jerry. Like I said."

Voice trembling, Rochelle straightened up, her eyes going wide. "Signaled him to do… what?" she forced out, visibly cringing when Chris spoke up dully.

There was a shocked kind of stillness about his expression, gaze still locked on Brenda, explaining with a slow matter-of-factness. "Three shots and down is danger from the zombies. The other way.." He hitched up for just an instant there, fingers going into fists. "..is danger from people."

Brenda smirked calmly, just getting out the sweetened words, "Jerry'll have your precious fourth member in pieces within a few minutes. Nice bite-size pieces." when Nick lost it.

All sense of cool, of calculation - it went right out the window in a blinding kind of rage that left only enough room for one single thought to reverberate in all the space of his mind:

He was going to kill her.

Nick didn't go for his gun. He was going to kill her with his bare hands, and then he was going to do the same to the other two. "WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST DO?" He broke into the kind of adrenaline-drowned, blind sprint that numbed even the awareness of his own limbs.

He didn't notice the swift motion of her other hand, didn't hear the shocked shriek from Rochelle's mouth that might have warned him. He only realized it after it had happened - Brenda swept her katana out of the crude holster at her hip and had it up and pointed at him in a clumsy second, both hands clamping onto the long grip.
The blade sheathed itself in his shoulder by virtue of his own momentum. There was an almost audible grating sound as it passed by bone. Nick felt the slide of the metal slicing straight through his shoulder with a disconnected kind of sensation at first - and then his body seized up as he recognized the pain.

"F-fuck -" escaped barely-parted lips, freezing mid-step, his body twisted just a little as the sword's pressure pushed it back. The tip of the blade, gleaming with the steel of its construction and his blood, had impaled through his shoulder with a few agonizing inches protruding behind him.

"Nick!" Coach shouted, weight shifting as if to rush in - then freezing, seeming to realize that lunging forward might only make things worse. His gaze locked, wide and infuriated, on Brenda. "Lord Almighty, what in the name of - what've you done, girl!"

Brenda smirked straight into Nick's face, his gaze latched onto hers as he stood stock-still against the waves of cringing pain radiating out from his shoulder. Blood seeped in a dull circle into the cloth around the pierce.

"Nothing. I figure I'll let Jerry kill all of you. He'd whine if I took all his fun."

Vaguely aware of the horrified utterances spilling from Rochelle like whimpers, Nick cracked the tiniest of snarls, body frozen between moving forward and moving backward. She held the sword steady - but there was something in her eyes, her smirk, that made Nick convinced she'd jam it down to cut through to his chest if he incited her to.

She waited just a moment, just long enough to confirm the victory… and then Brenda yanked the katana back with a firm grip, sliding it out of his shoulder with a speckle of blood. He let out a hiss of pain, his body shuddering as he grabbed at the wound.

Nick barely kept his footing, hunching protectively forward as he clamped his hand tighter on the bleeding hole in his shoulder. Rochelle's arms swept around him from behind, dragging him back with a near-whine, and he relented.

They slipped to the bullet- and glass-dusted floor in an awkward mess, the woman quickly pulling him to lean back against her chest. She clamped her hand on the other end of the wound, fingers splayed behind his shoulderblade, to staunch the bleeding.

"Are you okay?" she whispered furiously, tightening her fingers as blood trickled between her knuckles.

All Nick got out past his gritted teeth, spine twitching as the pressure of their hands worsened the fire burning through his shoulder, was "Overalls." She gazed at his face for an instant.

Was there fear on his expression that she saw? Nick didn't care to know.

Coach thudded to his knees beside them, one arm wrapping around Rochelle's back and the other gripping Nick's bicep. He held a fierce silence, flickering a glance between their faces before looking up toward Brenda.

She didn't so much as return it. "Chris, get a gun on them." she ordered solidly, examining her freshly bloodied katana and slowly wiping it off on her thigh. "Jerry'll be here real soon."

The Spaniard slowly moved, turning to face the survivors. Bright brown eyes were widened, all the color gone from his face as he pulled his machine gun from his back and got it in his hands.

Tears threatened to mist at Rochelle's eyes, breaking under the weight of the threat to Ellis and the
sight of Nick clutching his bleeding shoulder… and now Chris, directing the nozzle of his machine gun in her direction.

She opened her mouth, starting to force something out -

But Chris uttered, "... lo siento." with a voice that fractured in his throat, and she fell silent, so trapped between pleading and cursing that all that escaped her was an incoherent noise of distress.
Chapter 86

The distant opening of the hallway stairwell didn't stir him. The sound of footsteps down the hall didn't, either. The halt of them, just outside the hotel door, coupled with the vague rumble of a 'heh,' only just pricked at his consciousness.

When the door slammed open on its hinges from the ruthless kick of a bootheel, threshold shattering at the deadlock, *that* woke Ellis up.

A garbled shout escaped sleep-numb lips, kicking against the now-constraining drape of the blankets. The animal distress that clouded his brain had him scrambling toward the edge of the bed, aware of nothing but the need to get away -

- and then a thick hand grabbed his ankle through the blanket, and despite the protesting shout that escaped him, dragged him straight backwards over the mattress. His clawing freed him from the swaddling bedsheets right before he flipped off the edge of the bed.

His torso hit the ground with his head landing second, a collision that knocked him into a momentary haze of disbelief. Just as he'd gotten his hands against the floor to try and shove up, a weight pressed against his chest that shoved his bare torso back down with a thud.

Jerry rolled his wide ankle slowly, digging the toe of his boot deeper against Ellis' bared breastbone. "Mornin', pup." he thundered, pupils dilated wetly with an eager kind of inspection.

Ellis' eyes widened, grasping his hands at the fabric of Jerry's jeans. His fingers clawed into his calf, twisting and arching under the weight of his boot as it pushed him against the ground. "Ch-huh -!

"Figured this was gonna happen. Time's up, bud." the man snarled down at him, bending slightly forward. Ellis felt himself panicking as the compress of his boot and sizeable weight slowly crushed into his sternum.

"Whut're -" the Georgian gasped with what air he managed to suck in. Tugging and pulling at the fabric he grasped between his fingers, he shoved at the man's weight with little effect. Jerry was simply too heavy. "- you doin' -"

He had to get free. Terror plunged his body into spasmodic movements, punching and battering at Jerry's leg, though he could get little leverage. The blows were ineffective - all the man did was shift his weight, the heel of his boot nudging to a bruising angle.

"Don't know what happened, don't much care." Jerry uttered, examining the struggling youth under his boot with a sickly pleased grin beneath his beard. "Your buddies are dead or waitin' to die, 'n' I'll be takin' care of you."

The words suddenly numbed Ellis' brain. His arms still struggled, a subconscious part of his brain focused on nothing but self-preservation, but his mind flatlined. The shock traveled through his body on the waves of pain from his shuddering torso.

"N-No -" ghosted out of his lips, face red with forcibly held breath and vision blurring from lack of oxygen. "That - ain't -"

They didn't die.
They couldn't die.

To say that they were dead was like saying the world had flipped on its end and the sun had blinked out.

It was simple: Ellis didn't believe it.

"I knew y'all wouldn't last. Been dealing with pussies like you a long time. Ain't nothin' new. If it weren't for that fuckin' spic, we'd'a killed you right off. Saved some time... just like with that fucker, Phil."

Jerry slowly, deliberately eased down into a crouch where he stood, sliding his other leg into a kneel so he could lean more into the foot balanced on Ellis' chest. The weight of his pressing boot reached such a point that Ellis could only release a noise of utter agony, a crackling, airless sound that had no substance.

"Now, I just gotta figure out how I wanna handle you." Jerry growled down at him, something ferociously unnatural about the excited huff of his tone as he uttered the words. "Real slow, I reckon.. make you cry fer mama. This'll be good."

The man reached down, spreading thick fingers to grip into the curls of Ellis' hair and twisting his head to one side. The pain of the pull on his hair and the sharp twist up of his neck were irrelevant next to the compression of his chest and the fear stoked by the words.

"Don't you worry, boy." Jerry let his other hand grab onto Ellis' jaw, thumb digging into the soft skin beneath his jawline. "After we get done, I'll cut somethin' off and take it back, so your friends can say bye."

That spark of familiar intuition flared up in the back of Ellis' mind:

*The cleaver.*

His hands moved before his mind fully worked out the consequences. Jerry's choice to crouch dropped his hips into arms reach - but more importantly, his belt. Tucked underneath it was the cold shape of his cleaver, and with a fierce grit of his teeth Ellis grabbed for its hilt and tore it free from the leather.

Jerry let out a "Fu-" right before Ellis sunk the knife into his thigh.

Tearing straight through his jeans, the sharp blade buried several inches in the muscle and flesh underneath. Blood spluttered from the wound as an animalistic roar escaped the man, and Ellis felt a crippling inhale of air seize into his body when Jerry's weight rolled off him - just enough.

Ellis felt his fingers slip from the cleaver's handle as the realization that he'd just *stabbed another person* sunk in, but he tried to grab for it again, forcing his oxygen-starved brain to focus. Before he could, Jerry released his hair and jaw in favor of applying a fierce strike across his jaw with rough knuckles.

Head jolting with the strike, Ellis gave a soft growl of his own as stars blinked over his eyes. The pain startled him into movement, blindly scrambling the moment he got his bearings. The mechanic shoved his body out from under his assailant's boot, grabbing a hand onto the edge of the bed to try and get to his feet.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" the Angel bellowed, voice throaty and raw with pain. He slid onto his knee and wrapped hands around the blade jutting from his leg, like he could stifle the bloodflow.
As he stood, Ellis' body almost collapsed when he tried to suck in a breath. Agony sparked over his chest. It was a bone-deep kind of pain, like his ribs had crumpled in on themselves. His sternum ached, and he placed a hand over it - he could still feel the crushing sensation of the tread on Jerry's boot.

Jerry, focused on tearing the knife from his thigh with a snarl, ignored him at first. Blood colored his jeans in a burst of red, the clench of his muscle worsening the spill. The blade had likely plunged straight into an artery. He shoved a hand onto the wound as he straightened up, whipping glowering eyes toward Ellis.

"Li'l bitch!" he bellowed. "You'll regret that, if I gotta cut a sorry outta yer mouth!"

Adrenaline drove Ellis more than strength, stumbling on his feet, and he shoved himself into an awkward gait toward the busted-open door.

"Get back here!" howled from over Ellis' shoulder, deep voice vibrating with threat, hunger, and something ecstatically thrilled. He could hear Jerry thundering after him, but he just focused on moving, limbs numb and abused chest heaving.

Scrambling out the doorway into the hall, lightened by his lack of clothing, Ellis didn't risk looking back, and didn't risk thinking about what was behind him. If he could just make it to the stairwell... he could slam the door shut, buy himself enough time to get downstairs... his gun was in the lobby...

The sound of a cocking shotgun halted him.

He froze mid-step, boxer-shod, muscled body trembling. He was posed like a statue, limbs bent in an echo of pure panic and motion. His eyes widened with the crystalline awareness of the gun being aimed at him, a heat and a pressure pooling into the flesh of his back where it aimed.

"Gonna scream?" Jerry drawled, almost lustful greed turning his words to a greasy kind of sensation that crawled along Ellis' skin.

Ellis turned his head, incrementally - enough to watch as the husky Angel tipped the shotgun until it aimed at his legs. The man meant to take them out from under him, cripple him with a blast to the calves.

There wasn't even enough time to come to terms with the idea that he was going to be shot before it happened. All there was time for was to stiffen for it, prepare for the physical shock, when the sound cracked out.

It exploded in the echoing hallway, so loud Ellis' eardrums shuddered in his skull and the air seemed to jolt. The instant the noise reached him, though, something went wrong - it turned into a metal-rending noise. It sounded more like the detonation of a bomb than a gunshot, and Jerry screamed.

It was more denial than pain, more rage than agony, but Ellis whipped around in the wake of it regardless. Eyes widening in disbelief, he stared in shock as Jerry staggered backwards, shotgun falling to the ground as he raised hands to clutch at his face.

The gun tumbled to the hallway carpet, its barrel exploded along the top edge. The metal curled in on itself, blown to pieces around the barrel. Blackened and ruined, the gun was a dark companion to the blood that spilled down over Jerry's fingers.

Shrapnel from the explosion had pierced his face in a wide swathe, the damage hard to discern with...
his hands cradling it as he roared senseless curses and snarls. The skin between his fingers was pink where it wasn't red with blood, as though he'd been scalded.

He stumbled back two more steps, and then - like a tree felled by the blade of a chainsaw - toppled backwards.

Jerry landed with an audible thud on his back, body spasming as ever more blood spilled down his face - and from his neck, too, where a particularly large scrap of metal had pierced it. The snarls started to turn into strange chugging noises, and as Jerry failed to get back up, Ellis' tension dissipated.

He almost crumpled in on himself instead.

The thudding torment of his abused and crushed chest, the stinging pain of his jaw - neither seemed to overtake the awareness that he was watching a man struggle with creeping death.

Tenderly, slowly, Ellis pushed himself to approach, feet padding on the carpet. "H-Hey.." he barely whispered. The little part of him that had adopted Nick's voice shouted and battered at his consciousness, demanding he remember what Jerry had just been doing.

Pity drowned it out.

"H-heb - man, are.. yuh .." His voice was tiny, winded, from hesitance and the damage done to his chest, carefully edging closer as his eyes took in the blood slowly pooling around Jerry's shoulders.

What was going to be something like 'okay' turned into a broken yelp of fear when the husky Southerner jolted suddenly off the carpet, moving like a man possessed, blood and bile spilling from a broken face.

Ellis panicked backwards, stumbling on his own feet, as Jerry roared incoherently and just barely got to his knees. His dark red hands reached for Ellis in rage - and then he fell forward onto his face, thud edged with the squish of ruined flesh crashing into the carpet.

He twitched, in waves. Red pooled on the carpet around his head.

Heart beating so hard in his chest it actually hurt, stinging ribs making him curl in on himself, Ellis didn't let himself linger. The death-wrung visage of Jerry's bloodied features boreed into his brain with such vibrancy that he couldn't get himself to look at his body for a second longer.

There wasn't any time. The others were in danger, and nothing - not even guilt - usurped that fact's position at the forefront of his mind.

Uttering a soft, "'M sorry -", Ellis bolted back into the hotel room. Staggeringly un-steady on his feet, the kid passed through the still-open closet doorway, numb as he scrambled to find his clothing.

Putting it on was like shoving ice-frozen limbs into a jacket, and he found himself cramming his limbs into the wrong folds of fabric over and over. It frustrated him into furious sounds, muttering "Shit. C'mon!" as if he could chide his own hands into functioning.

Motion was painful, his chest in no way recovered, and something about the way a certain part of his side hurt made him worry Jerry's weight had fractured one of his ribs.

Clumsily tying his overalls around his waist, Ellis snatched his hat from the nightstand. Shoving it onto his head, he tucked the bill down over his eyes and steadied himself. It took a few slow,
painful breaths to reclaim his calm enough to retrace his steps.

He had to find his team and he had to find them *fast*; nothing could happen to them. Not his friends.

Not Coach.

Not Rochelle.

Not *Nick*.

He slid into the doorway of the hotel room, gaze alighting on Jerry's still body. The man was still laying face-first in a growing puddle of sticky crimson blood. Ellis' confidence trembled at the sight. He knew the man's death hadn't been at his hands, but...

"... I'm real sorry, Lord." he murmured softly, a wave of shivers making him shake his head. "Forgive him, if yuh can."

An oily sensation lingered on him. The fear of - and confrontation with - death sat heavy in his winded chest, cruelly real. For all the times he'd seen infected die, hacking and spitting on their own blood..

It didn't match up to this.
Fear kept Ellis' feet moving, even when the pain in his torso should have had him unable to move. His gaze darted around the street as he moved along the sidewalk in the bloody wake of what was clearly the missing five's passage. He kept his shotgun held tight in his hands, stock pressed into his shoulder.

Infected hadn't quite yet re-taken the street, leaving it eerily quiet as Ellis hurried along it, dodging corpses. He could hear the vague noises of their presence around him, separated by houses and streets but moving closer. The noise reverberated and grew louder on the dull air as his adrenaline-heightened senses had him perked and hyper-aware.

Only increasing his anxiety was the soft, far-away noise of an occasional sob. Ellis instantly recognized it as the despondent cry of a Witch - and he stiffened his bruised jaw, determined to avoid it. The creatures were slow when they hadn't been disturbed, so surely he could just skirt around them and keep his distance.

They couldn't have gone far, of that much he was certain. Not with the group splitting up. They'd have stuck fairly close, and if he followed the signs of combat, he could follow in their tracks. The urge to start yelling out their names stung at his throat, but he resisted it, moving with a tender delicacy. His body ached with every step.

"'M so stupid..." he mumbled to himself, stepping around and over the corpses of downed zombies. He kept as alert as he could, heart pounding in his sore ribcage, aware of the dangers of moving alone. Smokers, Jockeys, Hunters… any number of zombies could effortlessly undo him now that he was isolated.

"So, so stupid."

He shouldn't have slept in. In retrospect, he almost couldn't forgive himself the decision; he'd just been so exhausted, and a part of him wanted to believe everything would be fine. He wished Nick had made him come anyway - hadn't given in to his complaints, had just dragged him out of bed by force.

Thinking about Nick made his chest clench.

Carefully ducking close to the building line, Ellis tried to scan the buildings ahead of him in search of any signs of a gun store, trying to ignore the whispers of crying voices that flickered in and out of his awareness. There must've been a few of them nearby - but he couldn't mind them.

They weren't his concern.

There was a deep sensation of anxiety in his gut, unsure - was he walking into danger? Had the Angels really turned against them? Maybe Jerry had simply gone rogue, and the rest of the group didn't even know.

His fingers tightened on his shotgun, wrestling with the sickening thought that he'd have to actually shoot at them. He'd been going for it when Jerry was chasing him, but would he have been able to really pull the trigger?

He saw the Angel's bloodied, burnt face every time he blinked.

Ellis had just enough time to register it when a strange noise echoed out from behind a building just
beside him. It was like a garbled sentence, half-formed words, snarled and huffed. He started, immediately halting to face the sound with his shotgun lifted up, uncertainty widening his eyes.

A dark shape staggered out into the light, only a few yards' of distance between them.

It was the same shape they'd seen in the forest before Tybee. Warped into a lumbering hulk, almost all of its mass leached into the awkwardly heavy left side of its body. The twisted shape of its shoulder and blunted arm sagged its weight to one side. As its bloodied skull twisted to get a beady eye on Ellis, all that weight focused in on him with a clumsy aim.

The thing roared, a strangely human voice choking out inhuman noises, and in a flash it catapulted into a charge that shook the very earth its bloated feet thundered on.

Ellis flung himself to the side, attempting to jump out of the way. The moment his body made to curl, though, with arms stretching to catch himself on the sidewalk he dove for, a flash of pain exploded up his abused torso. What should've been a roll turned into a wild crash into the concrete.

He landed hard, feeling the Charger come exploding past him. The creature's shoulder, wrapped in concrete-like flesh, barely missed him. A yelp and whimper of pain escaped him all in a rush as he flopped into a half-curl around a heaving, aching torso. "Sh-shit-" he managed, eyes squeezing shut amidst a flush of moisture.

He had to breathe to try and calm himself, but breathing hurt. The kid struggled to try and get up, jamming his elbow against the sidewalk to roll upwards. Gasping at the pain, he gritted his teeth and fought through it, scrabbling onto hands-and-knees.

The infected monstrosity struck the building on the opposite side of the road with a tremendous crash, leaving a wide dent in the wooden material of the house's foundation. It violently staggered back, shaking itself as blood trickled from a few shallow scrapes at the impact, groggily regaining its bearings.

A chugged sound of anger, escaping it roughly, warned Ellis as the Charger turned around to focus on him again. He flicked a glance up, mind discerning suddenly that the building that he'd rolled himself in front of had a sliding glass door. It led into a living room.

Forging through the pain, Ellis shoved himself up to his feet and staggered the two steps it took to align himself with the glass. He twisted a glance quickly over his shoulder to eye the Charger.

His mouth was half-open to pant little shallow breaths, unable to take in any more air lest the expansion of his chest burn crippling pain down his side. Ellis challenged in a thickly pained tone of voice, "C'mere, yuh.. dumb.. zombie.. sonnuvabitch. I been dealin' with folks bigger than me all mornin'."

Reddened, almost withered eyes gave a dull spark of uncomprehending, pure rage. The words meant nothing to a mind ruined by the Flu, but a sick, innate desire for nothing but crushing him into the ground made the very sight of his movement and the sound of his voice infuriating.

The Charger roared fiercely as it kicked into a full charge, the entirety of its weight leaned into the blockish shape of its warped shoulder. Bolting at him with unerring intent, there was no stopping it.

Ellis flung himself out of the way again.

The weakness of his body slowed his reaction. He dodged the majority of the charge, but the strong, rock-hard elbow of the arm curled across the Charger's body struck his shoulder. The blow sent him into a violent spin. Ellis went down hard, slamming into the sidewalk with a shout of
pain, losing his grip on his shotgun as it rattled away.

Crashing, breaking glass announced the zombie's collision with the glass. It couldn't stop even if it had the mind to, and as it ran itself straight into the thick glass, its roar seemed to raise a degree.

Wildly crashing and staggering, it thundered its weight as glass shards gashed and sliced into its flesh, hitting the weaker parts where its mass wasn't ballooned into an almost rocklike surface. Blood gushed out as it crashed into a table in the house's living room and went down, struggling in the dark of the building's interior.

Ellis shivered at the pain sparking up his side, slowly cringing a hand to cup where the worst of the pain emanated from. He forced his head to turn, craning back, and watched with some distance as the Charger bludgeoned itself straight into layers of broken glass across the floor.

The clumsy stagger of its own weight doomed it.

The thick glass did it in quickly and messily, its half-stunted and half-bulky body collapsing into the carpet as it twitched and roared in the spasms of a struggle. Unable to stand, it rolled and jerked uselessly, only worsening the injuries as it ground itself into the glass.

The Georgian weakly averted his gaze, letting his eyes close for just an instant as he huffed shallowly. A lightheaded sensation was starting to sink in, pain and stress and crippling loneliness making him shiver. It was a fierce kind of determination that made him set hands flat on the concrete.

Crawling the distance between him and his dropped shotgun, Ellis carefully tucked the weapon under his arm. Gritting his teeth, he crawled up to his feet, staggering as a soft wheeze left him at the effort.

"Man.. think I really hurt somethin'.." Forcing a tiny chuckle at the utterance, making himself crack the smallest of grins, the kid urged himself to start down the road again, leaving the struggling Charger behind. It was dying with excruciating slowness, but it also wasn't going to get up again.

"Nick, yer gonna.. be so mad. Heh." He was only just whispering, ribs hurting too much to talk any louder, even if there had been anyone to listen. "Probably whack me a good one fer gettin' in trouble .. agh.. again... don't think I'd blame you none, I reckon.."

Ellis didn't know why he'd started talking to air… but suddenly he couldn't stop, moving tenderly down the road with his shotgun held clumsily in his hands. He was a wreck and it occurred to him he had no idea how he was supposed to save anyone, let alone fight the remaining Angels, as injured as he was.

"Fact is.. I got'uh right to be mad, too.. you said we'd be okay.. well shit, Nick.. y'all ain't safe.. Ro' and Coach and you - you might be hurt, and Jerry's -" Footsteps wavering, gait weakening, Ellis' voice slowed, emotion and guilt drifting into it with the slow force of a rising tide. "Shit. Yuh promised me you wouldn't get hurt, either.. damnit, Nick. You better keep that one or - I'm - I'll .."

His voice quivered suddenly, eyes lowering, something more than pain bringing a slow moisture to his eyes.

He didn't want to cry.

"I'm'uh be so mad.. damnit, Nick."
Shoving a wrist against his eyes abruptly, so fiercely his whole body stuttered one step to the side, Ellis blinked the tingle of tears away. Setting his jaw against pain and emotion, he surged forward, falling silent as he tucked himself closer to the line of buildings, walking for a moment in silence.

The only indication he was going in the right direction was the remnants of battle, zombies littering the streets. Bullet wounds pegged through their chest or tore through parts of their faces, and they were recent enough to stir Ellis to move faster.

The faintest sound of another Witch struck his ear, but over that - something else. Scuffling, scraping. It was too far to discern clearly, but it was enough for him to assume he'd found them. Or an infected.

Either answer made him clench his hands on his shotgun.

The building in the next block must've been the gun store. There was no visible sign to identify it, but there was a light on inside and it was the only lit building he could see down the darkly treed, salty-aired street.

Lightening his weakly padding footsteps, the Georgian carefully moved along the face of the building at his shoulder. He strained to listen, hoping to hear the voices of his friends, any of them, but all he could hear was silence.

Silence, and the soft scuff and crush of footsteps against tile and.. something crackling, tinkling. Like glass.

Frowning with a heavy wince, Ellis eased himself closer, slipping across the alleyway between the two buildings. Sidling up next to the few feet of wall before it opened up into broken windows, he flattened himself against the gun store's front corner as best he could.

Tenderly, slowly, Ellis crept toward the edge of the window. He didn't let himself slip too close, afraid to let any part of him peek around the corner for fear of being spotted. Hovering there, he held his breath, struggling to listen.

It sounded like the slow rhythm of someone pacing, boots grinding against tile and glass, and the silence around it was deafening. For all the world Ellis swore there was only one person in the building.

For a moment, he doubted that there wasn't.

Quietly glancing up toward the sky, Ellis let his eyes slip closed and mouthed a soft and airless, "Little bit more luck." before reopening them and painfully twisting to peek one eye around the edge of the window.

The broken outline of where the glass pane had been laid a jagged frame for the sight inside. Brenda paced with a nervous air, twisting her katana in her hand in slow, easy circles. She was facing away from Ellis, but in mere instants would likely turn back around.

Chris stood just a few feet from the window, his assault rifle in his hands and aimed. Coach's backpack dangled from his shoulder, loosely, like some war trophy. He stood with a stiff kind of silence, immobile, gazing down toward the far left wall where his assault rifle pointed.

Ellis didn't quite understand at first, until he lifted just a little onto his toes and saw them.

All of them - Rochelle, Coach, Nick - seated on the floor, leaned against the wall. Rochelle and Coach sat with Nick reclined low between them, head on Rochelle's chest and eyes tightly closed.
The man's jacket was off and his dress shirt half-unbuttoned to bare the swell of his shoulder.

Blood stained down his chest and into the fabric of his blue shirt, and Ellis' widening eyes took in what was clearly a wound to his shoulder. They'd stuffed Nick's suit jacket against the injury, and the white fabric was blotted with blood where it had soaked through.

Their expressions were grim - tears stained Rochelle's face, uselessly streaked down her cheeks where she hadn't even bothered to wipe them away in favor of gripping hands tightly onto Nick's jacket-made-bandage. She cradled him protectively, tightly, mouth buried into his slicked-back hair.

Coach was stonily distant, staring at a point across the room like if he just stared long enough a hole would start to burn in the wall that they could escape through. Misery lined the crunch of his brows, something Ellis had only seen the like of as he'd recounted the story of his lost football team.

Nick -

Ellis ducked out of sight just as his mind took in the whole image, dropping his chin carefully. There was not a single speck of emotion on Nick's face - not a crease of pain, not a twitch of anger. It was like a blank slate of pure nothing, and it gave Ellis chills of worry and fear all at once, strangled up.

He had to think. He had to think fast and get them out. Every inch of him wanted to just scream out that he was alright and demand Chris and Brenda let them go - wanted to rush in and reason with them.

They were people. They'd listen.

... but he could still feel the ruthless press of Jerry's boot crushing his ribcage under his weight, and the image of Christophe directing a gun at them was still imprinted on his sight. It wasn't worth the risk, as much as thinking that they'd try to kill him scared him.

He had to accept that they would.

Ellis was always coming up with a plan. He'd grown up with Keith - the master of schemes, the quickest, wildest, and craziest thinker in the entirety of the world. He'd watched Keith turn everyday moments into life-threatening adventures time after time, pulling excitement out of nothing.

A person didn't watch that and not catch on. He was quick, and he had a sense for crazy plans that worked. He'd just killed a Charger with a sliding glass door. He'd made a zombie-killing weapon out of fast-food grease traps. He'd killed a Tank with a gas station.

He could handle this.

He just had to...

to...

Just...

The frightening silence of his own mind played back to Ellis' tired consciousness over and over, like an empty record on repeat - just the vague rustle of the phonograph's needle grazing over the disc's surface.
Uncertainty charged up his spine along with the taste of bile up his throat, frozen there for an instant, fearfully realizing that he didn't know what to do. He didn't even know if he could do anything. He was hurt. He doubted he could even hold up to the blast of his own shotgun with how battered his body was. Ellis stood only on adrenaline, and there was no way he could even try to fight Brenda and Chris like he was.

As he inhaled, slowly, trying to calm his stomach and his mind, two things pierced through that fear and implanted themselves in his consciousness, spreading roots with lightning-fast speed -

The distant sound of a Witch keening gently... and the soft spark, the subtle hum, the gentle itch.. of an idea.
Chapter 88

You just had to let him stay. You just had to be so fucking stupid as to let him stay.

Nick had crawled in on himself, utterly detached from his body and expression, anger vibrating in the very essence of his mind. He was useless and injured, arm immobilized by Coach's firm grip on his bicep and body held tight against Rochelle's chest. There was nothing but frothing self-hatred building in his consciousness.

All you had to do was say no. You fucking knew better. You fucking knew something like this was going to happen. Couldn't even take the chance of getting caught, even when you fucking knew.

His teeth bit onto his tongue, trying to dull the pain of his speared shoulder. He kept his eyes closed, but he could hear the slow pacing of Brenda's boots against the glass-dusted floor, like the gradual rhythm of a metronome.

God fucking dammit. You left him alone. You fucking left him alone.

He should've been working on an escape plan, but there was a large part of him trapped in cloying distress. If Ellis was dead... if Jerry had managed to kill him - or maybe did something worse than kill him... if his sabotage hadn't saved him...

"Are you okay, Nick?" Rochelle's voice whispered in his ear, silencing his train of thought. He gritted his jaw, fighting with the urge to stay silent. Her cheek pressed against the top of his head, holding him close.

Voice taut with something between pain and anger, Nick forced out a dark, "What's it matter?"

He didn't know what he meant. Maybe it was because he was probably going to die - or maybe because Ellis probably already had. He honestly didn't care which it was, this apathy stirred deep in his chest.

Fuck, Ellis... Fuck, I'm...

He couldn't even think the word. What did an apology mean, anyway?

"It's all gone to shit.." he hissed, tone strangled with infuriated heartache. He hated himself for it, bile acrid on the back of his tongue as he tried to drown out the emotions.

She stared at him for a moment, a slow fright making her swallow. Something in his voice intimidated her into silence, and carefully, she lifted her gaze to examine Chris.

The Spaniard stood pale as a ghost, completely immobile as he pinned his rifle on the three. His gaze was focused somewhere below their feet, and it was unresponsive and distant. His expression was drawn into a tense stare. She couldn't tell if he was thinking, or just numbed into silence.

He hadn't said a single word in a long time.

"Chris," Rochelle tried, softly. Her eyes flickered subtly toward Brenda, her voice straining to carry to the man but not her. Chris' head just barely twitched in acknowledgement, gaze unmoving. "... Chris. I can see you don't want to do this."

She fell silent, hopefully, but he didn't react. He didn't say anything or even so much as flinch.
Frustration made her straighten up just a little, plea falling to a weaker tone. "You're a good guy.. we both know this isn't righ-"

"Will you shut the fuck up?" Brenda called toward her, halting her pacing suddenly. That snapped Chris' gaze up, abruptly scanning over Rochelle's face with a slow graze.

Rochelle kept her eyes on his, begging with the lock of their gazes, holding fast even as Brenda raised her voice. She didn't waste any effort focusing on the Angels' leader, pouring her attention into Chris' blanched face.

This certain haughty self-assurance bled into Brenda's tone, chastising. "You should be thanking us. We're saving you from a much messier death." Crossing her arms, the Angel leader slowly dropped her chin and gave a half-laugh, shaking her head. "Well, except your little prettyboy. I don't even want to know what Jerry did to him before -"

"Shut yo' mouth."

Coach's voice was cold with bitterness, that deep and rumbling bass that struck the air like a beaten drum. Anger curled the edges of his lips, furiously staring Brenda down.

A weird strike of humor crossed Nick's mind - sardonic and dark, and a little too truthful. Some of us are going to Hell. Not a chance, doll…

He let his eyes close again, a sigh expanding his chest and sending pain shooting through his shoulder.

"What are you thinkin'?

the big man suddenly demanded. Releasing Nick's arm, he pushed his weight to stand up, stiff on his bad knee. Brenda stiffened up and aimed at him with her rifle, but he didn't balk.

"Killin' yo' own kind. You been killin' zombies too long - head's twisted. We should'a worked together, girl. We should'a gotten saved together."

Brenda snorted, scoffingly, giving a fierce jerk up of her chin. "You're the one whose head is twisted, old man. You were going to kill us all. I can't let that happen... not even a chance. So you die."

"With what?!" Coach growled back, thrusting his hands to either side, brows scrunched in a grief-stricken pain. "Kill y'all wit' what?! You're the one holdin' us at gunpoint! You're the one who -"

He was primed to speak of Ellis, but his voice broke, eyes dulling to something miserable. All he could finish with was a muted, "Shit."

Brenda gazed at him, expression regaining that wild flicker. That cold, animal rage. She leaned forward, grasp shifting on her rifle. "Containment, they said." the woman hissed, finger tightening on the trigger slightly. "You didn't see their version of containment. The military killed so many people.. and you're fucking calling us crazy?!!"

Nick's head lifted just subtly, pushing against Rochelle's. Killed..?

He gazed fiercely across the room at Brenda, numbly blinking. It took effort, but he forced his voice into something composed, ignoring the dry taste of bile in his mouth. "...What the fuck are you talking about?"

Brenda gave a laugh, a cold, sharp laugh that scoffed at its edges. She flashed a smirk at him almost hysterically, struggling to keep her voice low. "You fucking heard me. I'm not letting you bring them here, not when we're surviving.. not while we're alive."
"No, you've got to be confused.." Rochelle argued, shifting to sit up slightly, ignorant of the way the shifting sent strikes of pain through Nick's shoulder. "There's no way. Maybe they were infected, and they had to protect the survivors."

"You're a fucking dumb bitch." Brenda snapped solidly, drawing her head back slightly and lowering her rifle as if unthreatened. "They don't care about protecting anyone. I saw them gun down a crowd of people, just because they thought they were Carriers. And you're running toward them. Bringing them to us!"

Carriers?

Gritting his jaw suddenly, Chris lifted his head. His paled expression was struggling with badly-contained distress, confused between anger and sadness. He twisted around, facing Brenda and thrusting out a hand. He spoke for the first time in a long time, voice roughened with conflicted emotion.

"Please, stop! B, we've already gone too far, we have to -"

"That's right." she spat, jabbing a finger in his direction, hazel eyes narrowing. "We've already gone too far. Too late, chico. The Angels already made a decision: they're dying. Are you an Angel of Death, or aren't you?"

Chris' voice raised, advancing a step toward her in plea. His tone moved into something argumentative, flinching toward anger. "Los Ángeles did not make a decision! You just told Jerry to kill the boy! ¡Él no hizo nada malo, por el amor de dios!"

Brenda examined him for an instant, jaw tightening. Suspicion entered her eyes, feral and cold, as he argued against her. "You were always a little dumb, Chris." she muttered softly, letting her jaw loosen. Hazel eyes lightened, and she moved to cross the gap between them.

Her movements were slow, catlike, body stiff with energy. She looked as if she might as easily hit him as talk to him. Leaning in close, turning her face a little to affix him with a low gaze through her lashes, she dropped her voice to a murmur.

"I'm tired of waiting for Jerry." Her gaze turned hot on his, making him stiffen slightly as he stared back at her. "Shoot them, Christophe. Right now. Or I'll cut your fucking arms off."

His lips moved in a useless gape, brows raising slowly as he struggled out words. Voice almost faint, he shook his head. "Mi hermana.. this is.. haven't we done enough, B? Let's just make them leave. No quiero hacer -"

Reaching out, Brenda gripped his chin between index and thumb, catching on the little trail of stubble lining his jaw. He didn't flinch, just held her gaze. "Baby, I don't care what you quiero."

She dropped her other hand sharply, grabbing ahold of his shirt to spin him around and direct him at the survivors. "I care what you do."

Bright brown eyes widened slightly as he froze in place, gazing over the three seated on the floor. Nick watched his eyes, saw the distress, saw the second-guessing. He knew a fold when he saw one - but was the guy strong enough to resist?

There was a chance...

just a slim chance...

Nick felt Rochelle's breath catch by his ear when Chris faintly shook his head, lowering his rifle...
slightly and dropping his chin. The Spaniard was refusing. Something miserable flickered on his face for a moment, before he spoke - firmly. ".. No, B. I can't."

That momentary flash of hope disappeared when Brenda sighed. With a violent motion, she snatched Chris' assault rifle right out of his hands. He tried to fight it, yelping as he grabbed after the weapon, but a swift elbow to his face had him jolting back.

"G-guh- Brenda, what -!" he garbled, choking as he re-caught his balance, dizzied. He grabbed at his nose as blood trickled from a nostril where her elbow had smashed into it. Brenda snarled a disparaging breath at him, lifting the rifle.

"I have to do everything myself." She said it lazily, tired, like there were no more importance to the moment than doing overdue dishes or taking out the trash.

The woman took aim, finger slipping onto the trigger, and four shouts of denial rose up in such violent unison the air itself tremored. Nick jolted up, only to get crushed back down as Coach thrust himself over both him and Rochelle.

Every inch of the ex-football player's bulky frame shoved to shield them, and the flash of his expression that Nick got - it was peacefully calm, satisfied with that final action.

Nick had never seen the like.

"Don' move a single damn muscle!" broke into the moment with such Southern-drawled force, such unexpected demand, it froze everyone in place.

There were no words for the feeling that swept over Nick's mind - none that he'd volunteer - for the shudder of warmth that eased into his body from his scalp to his toes. The wash of feeling that overtook numb nerves. Gratitude, though he didn't know to whom.

Any pretense that it was for his own life was beyond him.

... Kid...

Green eyes darted to the window, widening in utter, frozen silence as they took in Ellis' wide-stanced form out in the street. He faced them with all the poise of a gunslinger, confidence spilling from every inch of his muscled frame.

Words escaped Nick with such breathless incoherence he only mouthed them - they were just for himself, a ghost phrase on his lips. *You gorgeous fucking dumbshit redneck, you're alive...*

In either hand, at shoulder height, Ellis held up an off-white paper sack, marked with the familiar lettering and shapes of sugar bags. He wielded them like grenades, the folded tops cracked open into funneled mouths and his fingers tightly clutching them.

A soft shriek escaped Rochelle, clamping her hands over her mouth as tears shocked out of her, running down her face in relief. Coach fell just an inch to the side, sliding to a knee on the ground, still holding the other two tightly as a wary but helplessly broad grin cracked over his face.

"Oh my God - Ellis!" she managed, shivering. "Ellis, you're okay!"

Brenda stood stock-still where she was, gripping the rifle tightly, gaze narrowing fiercely on Ellis. Her aim didn't waver from the group huddled on the ground, especially after noting that Ellis wasn't even wielding a weapon. "... Jerry didn't take care of you." she stated matter-of-factly, chewing on the idea for a moment.
Ellis shook his head, quietly, lowering his chin slightly so the bill of his cap shaded over his eyes but didn't totally obscure them. Regret broke into the layers of confidence, and with that small crack, Nick noticed the pain bleeding into blue eyes.

The kid was hurting. Badly.

"No.." he returned, maintaining a steady voice. "Somethin' went wrong with his gun. He..."
Brenda's eyes widened at his falter, genuine shock touching hazel irises. "'N' I'm real sorry fer that, but y'all best be puttin' down yer guns now. Ain't no one else gonna die."

A soft "Hostia…" escaped Chris' lips, gazing in disbelief at the Georgian. He stood with a limp kind of resignation, staring, seeming unsure how to respond to the news of Jerry's death. "No lo puedo creer…"

Brenda stared for a moment, body stiff - and then she laughed. She laughed as if she'd never heard anything funnier in her entire life, lowering her rifle slowly and lifting an arm to point at him. Her laughter was high and frantic, so close to a shriek, it was hard to tell the difference.

"Oh my God. You're even cuter than I thought.. I'm almost glad Jerry didn't kill you so I could see this." Flattening her fingers, she gestured at him, brows rising as a grin widened over her expression. "What are you going to do, sweetheart? What is it you even have there.. sugar?"

Ellis tipped his wrists. Spilling out from the bags came a slow wave of sugar, the white crystals pouring down to the ground at either side of him. "Yeah." he responded, giving a weak smile. "Never could resist muh sweet tooth."

Nick's eyes widened.

Sugar.

It struck him like a thrown punch, whole body going stiff. A small ".holy shit." escaped him, just a gust. He suddenly reached out, gripping Rochelle's arm hard. ".he's a fucking crazy genius."

She shot a look sideways at him, past the tears clouding her vision, panic twitching at her lower lip. "N-Nick, he's going to get himself shot, what are -"

"He's a fucking crazy dumbshit genius," the gambler insisted, staring. Coach glanced at him too, wordlessly confused, and for a moment there was silence as Brenda gave another laugh, shaking her head. She swiped her wrist at her eyes as if to brush away tears.

Brenda crossed her arms, cocking her hip gently as she tapped the assault rifle against her shoulder. "I think he's lost his little mind." she uttered, arching a brow as she watched the sugar tumble down, building in piles on either side of him as his wrists kept turning slowly.

"Amigo, what are you doing?" Chris questioned weakly, raising up his hands in a bewildered gesture. "Are you okay?"

As Ellis' fingers pinched on the bags to tip them entirely over, the last shuffling few piles of sugar tumbling down to the concrete, he tossed them aside. "Y'all might wanna be skidaddlin' here in a second." he advised, glancing down the street.

Brenda laughed, shifting her arms to cross ever tighter. She leaned forward slightly, lowering her lids over her eyes. "And who says I shouldn't shoot you down where you stand, babyface? Hm? And then shoot your friends?"
Raising both his hands and blinking back at her, Ellis indelicately thumbed either direction along the street.

"Well, fer starters, them."

The soft rise of a gentle, mournful sob tickled into the air, broken with grief. Brenda's frame stiffened for an instant - but just as soon, she relaxed, rolling her eyes up. "You really are fucking stupid. I already showed you I can handle a Witch. You think that's going to scare me? I'll take care of it right after I take care of you."

"I didn't say it." Ellis murmured back with a chuckle. He gave a small smile that faltered a little after a second, gesturing again, a little more insistently. "I said them."

Brenda gave a frown, staring at him for an instant. With a small growl under her breath, she violently uncrossed her arms and stalked toward the window. Leaning her head out, she shot a glance down the street -

- and froze.

Nick couldn't help but grin, feeling it itch at his jaw, tighten at his neck - he grinned with the knowledge of what she must be seeing.

"Rain attracts Witches, does it?" he growled softly, raising up a hand to clutch onto his shoulder, palm gripping his jacket-made-bandage close to his wound. "There'll be a lot of them around, will there?"

Brenda snapped a small glance back at him, hazel eyes murderous, before she looked back through the window. "Jesus Christ." escaped her in a mutter, voice collapsing into disbelief, and a little horror.

There must've been three of them - no, a fourth stumbled out from an alleyway - just down the street. Staggering on withered legs, bony knees jutting out at awkward, shuddering angles, the Witches came in a slowly gathering wave.

Twisting her head sharply, she saw two more in the other direction - wandering, ambling, lamenting their way toward the gun store. Their hands were stretched out, wicked claws grasping at the air, needily. "Jesus Christ." she repeated.

Ellis gently tucked a hand into his pocket, slouching in a motion that was somehow relaxed, nursing his side. "They're kinda tender, y'know.. maybe you could kill one. Or kill us. But the gunfire'd upset the lot, wouldn't it?"

Rochelle sat up slightly, grasping at her shirt. Her brows were up, anxiety and creeping hope struggling on her face. "Is.. is he really..?"

"Yes." Coach grunted. There was a grin on his face - the kind of grin that swam with pride. Drowned in it. Shattered every wall on his gruff face to bare a look of such broiling, triumphant pride his shoulders trembled with it. "Yes, he is."

"B.." Chris uttered, eyes widened. He took a few perilous steps toward her, moving his hands into a soothing gesture. "B, I think it would be smart -"

"Shut up!" she snarled back at him, hissing, fingers shaking and her pupils flashing into near pinpricks as she panicked. He retreated a wary stride or two when her gun turned on him, threateningly. "Of course you fucking want to run, you fucking useless idiot!"
Dropping her chin with a violent motion, Brenda gritted her teeth violently. Grinding them against one another, she very slowly lifted a hand to rake fingers through her hair, clawing at her scalp. She fingered and stroked at the trigger of the assault rifle, raising it up, desperate to shoot, shaking with the urge to \textit{shoot} - and then dropping it an inch, terrified to.

Ellis stood with unblinking, hazy confidence, glancing occasionally at the approaching Witches without the slightest sign of anxiety.

There was a moment of tension that rose ever higher as the sobs grew. Louder and louder, reaching a mournful tone that vibrated through the air as they approached on both sides.

When Ellis pointed out almost helpfully, "I don't mean tuh rush y'all, but if yer gonna run, you might wanna go ahead'n get on that...", Brenda suddenly let out an almost shriek of rage. Shoving herself forward, she messily vaulted through the broken store window, landing with a clumsy balance on the sidewalk outside.

"Fuck you all!" she snarled, voice low, afraid of upsetting the advancing creatures. "Go ahead, kill yourselves! I hope the Witches tear you to pieces and the military bombs what's left!"

Brenda sprinted across the street, bolting for an alleyway to escape. It was the only time she'd ever looked truly afraid. Ellis watched her, a brow lifting slightly with an almost tired paw of his jawline, tender on the bruise Jerry had left behind.

Nick couldn't help but roll his head back, closing his eyes, resigning to the exhaustion that suddenly struck. A dry smirk quirked up the edge of his mouth, releasing a sigh of disbelief. "The dumbshit did it.." escaped him in a mutter, thick with humored awe.

Startling his head up was Rochelle's sudden shift and blurt of, "Chris -"

The Spaniard had dropped their backpack to the ground and started, silently, to run after Brenda. At his name he paused, mid-step, almost flinching. Reluctantly, he turned his head, glancing at her. There was something like shame on his face. Shame and regret, darkening the warm brown of his eyes.

She scrambled to get out from under Nick's weight, the conman giving a pained growl as he was shifted by the motion. Coach got an arm around his shoulders, and Nick scowled slightly as he was leaned against the ex-football player instead.

Rochelle couldn't even open her mouth to speak before Chris gave a slow smile, pained. It was apologetic. "Eres demasiado buena para ser verdad." When he added, "Lo siento.", it was with a glance over toward the two men still on the floor.

He darted just one step closer - just close enough to reach out and cup a hand onto Rochelle's cheek, and her eyes widened, stiffening under the touch. She tried to turn her face away at the same time she snatched out to try and grab his arm, to stop him...

But Christophe bolted, sprinting into a leap that vaulted him through the window. Landing with a skid, he stumbled slightly, then caught his balance to sprint across the street. Rochelle gave a useless step after him, quickly reeling herself back in to curl her hands into fists at her sides.

She watched him disappear into the alley Brenda had bolted through, and she could only stare for an instant before Ellis' limping through the doorway caught her attention.

"Are y'all okay..?" he pleaded in a soft tone, glancing immediately over them with a stutter of his gaze on Nick's bloody shoulder.
Rochelle's eyes alighted on his face, staring - and then she let out an cry of raw emotion, bolting across the glass-flecked tile. She thrust herself at him, wrapping arms around him tightly in a desperate hug, voice frantic with concern.

"Ellis! Ellis, sweetheart, Ellis, I - oh God, we thought you were - oh God, baby -" Her voice halted, then softened. "- .. a-are you okay?"

She only seemed to notice how he'd frozen then. Pain drenched every inch of his soft expression, body shuddering as he tried not to collapse, weakly wheedling out a faint, "R-Ro' -" through gritted teeth.

When she moved to let him go, afraid that she'd hurt him, he did collapse a little. The shudder of his body had him almost falling to a knee. "Ellis!" Quickly but tenderly re-gripping him by the biceps to hold him up, she gasped in worry.

"M .. okay.. Ro'.. just.. d-don't.. squeeze like that.." he mumbled in a dizzy kind of chuckle, eyes fluttering faintly, threatening to roll back. Vaguely, his gaze tried to skim up to gaze across the room, hunting out Nick's face.

Blue eyes met green.

"What happened, sweetheart?" Rochelle murmured, worriedly, reaching up one hand to touch onto his bruised jawline. "Was it zombies, or…?" Her thumb fretted over the dark shape on his skin. Ellis didn't even pay attention, eyes softening as he stared at Nick.

The conman let his lips quirk up in a small smirk, lifting his chin slightly to ensure the Georgian could see his mouth. 'Good job, kiddo.' he mouthed intently, holding that gaze ferociously.

He meant it.

A stupid, slow grin touched the kid's lips and a flood of miserable, pained tears flushed up over his eyes right before his whole body went ragdoll, collapsing as consciousness escaped him. Like Nick's pronouncement was the last thing he needed to hear before he could sleep.

Rochelle yelped in surprise, quickly catching him, although she struggled a little to hold him up. Shooting a helpless glance toward Coach, she uttered, "Uh.. help.. he's out like a light."

The big man glanced at Nick, and the conman gave him a stiff nod of acquiescence. Shoving away from the older man, Nick propped himself against the wall, holding his jacket tight to his wounded shoulder. A little grunt of pain escaped his lips.

"Go on, Sam, I'm a big boy." he uttered with a small smirk, dropping his chin to tiredly glance at his shoulder. The sight of his jacket so thoroughly blood-soaked, streaks of blood trailing down his chest and arm, made him sigh. "I can sit here and bleed all by myself."

Coach got up off the floor with a weary shove, quickly moving toward Rochelle. He scooped Ellis into his arms, taking him from Rochelle with a tenderness that seemed out of place from his bulky frame. The kid fit into his arms easily, folding up limply against his chest.

Coach let a hand hold his head up against his shoulder, glancing up toward the gun store windows.

The Witches had reached the sugar - it was strangely like watching a horde of puppies crawling for one food bowl. Gruesome claws and withered body swayed and bent to get to the sugar piled on the concrete, falling to bony knees as if in worship, sobs faltering as they feasted.
"We best get outta here, y'all..." Coach wearily urged. "Ellis did a real fine job gettin' us free, but them bitches ain't gonna be distracted by that sugar fo' too long. We gone too far to get caught by them now."

Rochelle gave a distracted nod, gently stroking the back of her hand down Ellis' cheek before circling around Coach to move away. She picked up the backpack Chris had relinquished back to them, and then slipped up to the gun store counter, gathering up the weapons they'd had taken away from them.

They bundled awkwardly on her shoulder as she slipped her arm into the shoulder straps attached to their frames, and Nick's newfound Magnum, she took in hand. Approaching him, she held down her free hand. "C'mon, suit." left her gently, tears dampening the corners of her eyes.

Nick lifted up his good hand, other arm limp from his impaled shoulder down, aching. "Easier.. said than.. done." he muttered. He clasped hands with her, groaning tightly as she circled her other arm behind his back and gently pulled him off the ground.

He was weak on his feet, nursing his bloodied shoulder, but as he wrapped his good arm over Rochelle's shoulders, he steadied. "There we go." she murmured to him, giving him a small smile as she placed the Magnum into his thigh holster for him.

As he let himself lean on her just a little, she pecked a kiss onto his cheek, making him blink.

The gambler cracked an almost disbelieving glance sideways at her, arching a brow - but despite himself, he decided against saying anything. The tears in her eyes were worsening, and he held his tongue.

The four slipped together, Nick and Rochelle hobbling carefully toward Coach. Rochelle's free arm lifted to slip her hand over Coach's bicep and cradle Ellis' cheek, moving close to Coach's side.

With no sense of personal space between them, bodies moving in a tired unison and leaning against each other in a cluster of protective need, they paused for just a moment. Just a beat.

In silence, pressed close, there was an instant of examination. They took stock - let it sink in that they were all together again, alive. Hurt, but safe. Scared - but safe. Something had long since settled between them, an unspoken but very real tie. Something familial, forged out of a bond as strong as blood.

They moved to slip outside of the gun store in one tight group.

The cluster of six Witches, burying greedy mouths into the sugar melting onto the sidewalk with the glue of their saliva, didn't even stir as they moved carefully past them. The sugar would run out, eventually, but for now...

They were utterly harmless.

*Your kinda plan, wasn't it, kiddo? Nobody actually got hurt by it.* crossed Nick's mind with a faint, almost wistful sarcasm.

*Little dumbshit genius.*
The splash of liquid onto his shoulder brought such fierce pain, Nick's body seized with a calculated stomp of his foot against the kitchen tile.

"Jesusfuckingtits!" he wheezed in pain, the hydrogen peroxide fizzing furiously as it leeched into the wound. Rochelle had found it in a bathroom cabinet at his behest, though at this point, he almost regretted that she had. His hand shuddered on the brown plastic bottle, jerking it away as he grated his teeth through the sensations.

They'd broken into a small house several streets over, distancing themselves from the Witches and where the Angels had fled toward. Coach was setting a weakened Ellis up in the one bedroom the house had, and Rochelle hovered in the kitchen doorway, watching Nick where he was seated in a kitchen chair.

He'd taken his shirt off, digging his back painfully against the back of the chair, little gasps leaving him as the liquid did its work.

"Nick," Rochelle urged, watching with struggling discomfort as the conman panted, growling, through the pain. "Isn't there something else we can do?"

Nick shifted his weight with a soft snarl, gaze half-lidded as he let his body slouch backwards, lips parted. "No." he asserted, setting the bottle between his thighs and grasping the rag draped over his knee. Craning his head, he daubed around the bloody gash in his shoulder, wiping the reddened foam drooling from the injury.

"Gotta.. clean it up. Goddamn.. dirty sword. Gonna get infected… Not going through that shit again."

His arm trembled with the effort it took not to stop, gaze slanted as he cleaned the wound off carefully. Blood leaked freshly from the gash behind his washcloth, and he could feel it trickling down his shoulderblade from the other side.

"Christ." Rochelle mumbled, rubbing over her face carefully with her palm. "She could have killed you."

Nick gave a sharp chuckle, falling to a snarl of pain as he pressed the rag down onto the wound. Gritting his teeth as he squeezed it into his flesh, he muttered, "I'm the one who rushed her like an idiot."

Rochelle gave a soft smile at that, shrugging her shoulders with a lowering gaze. "It's okay.. we all panicked." The phrasing made Nick pause. Green eyes flicked up toward her, narrowing, though his pained body was already so stiff it was hard to tell how much of it was pain and how much was annoyance. "Ell-"

"I didn't panic." he returned sharply, pulling the cloth away. His spine arched forward, both in discomfort and to crane his neck back and try to get a look at the back of his shoulder. Blood and foam bubbles leaked from the crevice made into his shoulder, trailing down his shoulderblade in a wide, smudging path.

He reached his arm back, hissing slightly as he wiped at it a little harshly. "I just.. didn't think."

The conman sighed slightly, the sound full of a graveled discomfort, examining the wound on his
shoulder with a severe gaze. The heavy foam of the working hydrogen peroxide clung to the ragged corners of the gash, still sparking with a painful fizz here and there. "Don't even fucking know how bad this is. Felt like she hit bone."

Rochelle watched him for a moment, letting her arms slip crossed over her stomach. Her gaze flickered over the agony built darkly into his shaven face, a soundless sigh escaping her as the edge of her mouth twitched down.

Before his mind could wander toward Ellis, as he just felt it itching to do, Nick turned on his seat. Arching his spine slightly against the chair, he reached up tenderly with the hand of his hurt arm and carefully pinned fingers around the wound.

"Hey, Nick...?"

Maybe it was the experience they'd just shared, but something stirred in her. She'd seen the look on his face when he thought Ellis was dead... maybe now was the perfect opportunity to broach the subject. Talk to him about... them.

But was it her subject to broach? She didn't know how he'd react.

Nick only responded in a grunt. Putting a little pressure to force it open, gruesome shades of red and pink marking the through-and-through channel the katana had left behind, Nick gritted his teeth carefully before lifting the bottle up.

Steeling himself with a shallow breath, it took him a moment to gather the strength to pour. The liquid fizzled straight into the wound, the pain digging deep as it burned on raw muscle, droplets pattering rapidly to the tile underneath him.

Cringing a little bit as she watched the pain fluctuate over his face, growling silently as his heel kicked into the tile again, Rochelle lost her will to speak to him. She shook her head, instead. "Forget it.. I'm gonna see if there's any medical supplies here."

Nick lifted his head to demand she just finish her thought, but she was already backing up into the living room and turning away to disappear into the house. He snarled a little after her in useless anger, slouching in his seat.

"Fucking Christ, that hurts." he muttered to himself, sitting there for a moment as his shoulder hissed and popped in his ear. Taking in deep breaths, though the sour smell of hydrogen peroxide and blood reached his nose, he calmed himself.

Stretching gingerly to set the bottle on the floor and re-snatch up his rag instead, he forced his body to lift up. Shifting to his feet with a small wobble, he stepped across the tile toward the counter and let his hip rest against the edge.

Turning on the faucet with a finger, he pushed the rag underneath the stream, squeezing and wringing it out one-handed. Wincing subtly as the blood leeched down into the drain, he let it rest in his palm as it ballooned with water.

Leaning forward, the gambler let his shoulder hover over the sink as he lifted the rag to squeeze it against the wound, letting the water spill onto his skin. It hurt - though less than the peroxide did - and he closed his eyes tight as he carefully swabbed over the wound.

Tending to it with a fiercely set jaw, he washed the rag off again, listening to the hiss of the water against the sink. Letting his head slouch, he tossed it over his shoulder to clean the exit wound, aware the sigh that left him was edged with a growl.
Footsteps sounded behind him. Without opening his eyes, the gambler squeezed the rag against his skin to urge the water to dribble in cleansingly, placatingly cold waves. "Y'know, last time I had to do something like this, it was a gunshot straight to my leg... missed a debt payment." A half-laugh escaped him. "I had alcohol that time - real stuff, some whiskey if I remember right. Shit, it fucking burned.. healed up okay, though."

"... I'm gonna go 'head an' assume you ain't talkin' about ownin' to a bank." Coach commented somewhat judgmentally, a very audible disdain in his low voice.

Nick jolted with a startled "F-", shooting a look instantly at Coach as the big man stopped a good distance away from him, examining him from afar. His brow was arched high. "Jesus Christ, Coach. I - .. thought you were Ro'."

The big man crossed his arms easily, giving a low, rough chuckle. The judgement didn't fade. If anything, it heightened a little, though it seemed in good humor. "You talkin' to Rochelle 'bout that shit, boy?"

"More than I'd talk to you about it." the gambler muttered, refocusing forward as he glanced at his shoulder, wiping across his wound with the edge of the rag before dropping it into the sink and dousing his hands under the faucet.

Coach chuckled again, lowering his rounded chin. "Point." He shifted his weight, letting one hand scratch into his ribs gently. He approached, but only enough to lean against the table in the center of the kitchen. "How you doin'? Heard you cussin' up a storm. Shoulder hurts?"

Nick shook his head vaguely, not answering. He shook his hands off in the air, shutting off the tap and reaching up tenderly to wipe them a little drier on a hanging washtowel attached to a hook.

The big man eyed him for a moment, gaze seeming to soften as he held his silent for a weighty moment. The gambler turned around, slipping back to the chair to retake his seat, resting with a deep sigh.

There was a moment where Coach examined him, and Nick didn't so much as register his presence. Then, "You wanna talk, Nick?"

Lifting his head an inch, the conman humored him, meeting his gaze for a moment. He gave a heavy exhale, settling the elbow of his uninjured arm on his knee to slouch down, hand idly scratching on to the bare curl of his hair-dusted stomach.

"You threw yourself in front of us." Nick stated, the words holding all the substance of fog with the quiet way he uttered them.

Coach's eyes lightened a little at the statement, gazing over Nick as if studying him anew. He inhaled a gruff breath, releasing it with an almost snore-like sound escaping him as he rumbled. "You put yo'self in front of a gun for us before."

The thief at the gas station, Nick supposed.

The gambler reached down a hand to tenderly tug up his pantleg by the knee. He gave a little snarl, wordlessly, lowering his chin, focusing instead on glancing at his calf. It would take a long time to heal, but healing flesh had sealed over the surface in a way that comforted him. "Yeah, yeah.. I remember.." he muttered, almost trying to rescind the statement entirely.

Coach didn't quite let him go.
"We're family, Nick. Maybe the closest we got at this point." The Northerner uttered a grunt, shrugging his good shoulder. Coach chuckled a little, resting a hand on the table and leaning down. His other hand went to his hip, strangely paternally. "That scare you?"

"It doesn't scare me. Christ." Nick spoke flatly, shaking his head. "I just think it's stupid. We'd have died anyway, even if you hadn't been in the way. We were all going to die either way. When I put myself in danger back then, it was because I knew I could actually do something."

The big man exhaled slightly. He seemed to eye the gambler, stewing on something for a moment before speaking. "Ellis would have been dead whether or not you jumped Brenda an' got that shoulder messed up. Still did it."

Nick stiffened, gaze lazering suddenly onto a point on the floor. It was true, of course, but he didn't need anyone to recognize that fact. Growling lowly, he muttered, "Yeah, but I could've bashed her stupid bitch face in if she'd been a little slower... anyway. Don't twist my words. Ass."

Unaffected by the aggression, Coach gave a chuckle and shook his head. He lifted a hand to rub at his head, fingertips scratching at the low layer of greyed stubble building up on his scalp. "Ain't twistin' no words, Nicky. Just bein' honest."

As Nick gave a little curl of his lip in a vague gesture of contempt, Rochelle slipped back in, holding a large, sealed bandage in either hand. "Here you go, Nick.. there's a first aid kit in the closet, but it's really bare. Bandaids mostly. This is the best we've got. If you ask me, tomorrow, we should find some stuff and bind your whole shoulder. Hi, Coach."

The big man gave her a gruff smile as she stepped past him. Nick straightened a little in his seat, reaching up his good hand to take the packets from her, but Rochelle ignored him entirely. Standing at his elbow, she broke open the sealed wrapper and peeled out a bandage about the size of her palm.

Nick let himself tense, grumbling slightly as she bent forward. Rochelle placed the bandage carefully over the wound on the back of his shoulder. A wince crossed his face as she used her thumb to seal the bandage to his skin.

"What're we going to do?" the gambler grumbled, gritting his teeth a bit. He eyed her motions sideways, seeming a little mistrustful. "Overalls is out for the count. We can't keep moving..

Rochelle gave a weary sigh and pulled away, touching fingertips to his bicep to nudge him straighter so she could reach the entrance wound. Unwrapping the second bandage, she tenderly moved to cover the gash, shaking her head. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm .. God, I just need.. rest. With people I can trust."

Her voice faltered a little there at the end, brows lowering above her eyes, focusing suddenly on the effort of placing the bandage gently. Coach reached out to set a hand on her shoulder, sighing.

"Way I see it, we stay here awhile." he laid out with a slow tone, half-closing his eyes as a deep breath escaped his nostrils. "You an' Ellis need to rest. Babygirl an' I'll keep watch, trade on sleep. Don't want them Angels sneakin' up on us or nothin', but yo' ass needs to stay down, Nick."

The conman twisted his mouth down slightly, straightening away from Rochelle's hands as the bandage settled into place. Laying a palm onto it, he turned, pushing up from the chair and reaching for his shirt where it lay folded over the counter.

Gingerly, one-handed, he started to shrug into it, slowing as he had to move his injured shoulder.
His gaze flicked down to his suit jacket, the thing wadded up and blood-stained just a few inches from his foot on the floor.

It was like the last piece of sense in the world, broken and ruined.

He felt an odd apathy to it.

"So I guess we're not believing them?" he questioned, dully, tucking his shirt into place but not bothering to button it. Fighting a cringe at the way he had to move his shoulder, he turned at the waist, glancing at them.

Rochelle blinked a little at him, crumpling the empty wrappers in her hands with some hesitance. Her jaw was stiff - maybe a little too much, fighting an inner turmoil she hid from her voice. "Them what?"

"About the military."

There was just a moment of silence as Rochelle lowered her gaze to the floor, shoulders falling. Coach glanced at her, moving a step closer to slip an arm around her frame, exhaling. His eyes, deepset with a weary seriousness, met Nick's.

"If we believe them - then we got nothin'."

Nick examined him for a moment, silently, tracing fingers down the buttons of his dress shirt. There was a certain truth to that, though Nick found himself cynically shaking his head, gaze flicking away.

"I'll keep an eye on the kid." he stated flatly, slipping a hand onto his hip and turning to walk with a soft limp to his gait as he somewhat tiredly moved to leave the kitchen. Rochelle's head lifted up after him, voice lightening.

"Let us know when Ellis wakes up, will you, honey?"

The conman gave a silent thumbs-up over his shoulder, relaxing his arm a little afterward and letting his hand slip to cup over his injured shoulder. *Sure. Right after I get done with him.*

He slipped out of the kitchen and into the living-room, turning tenderly for the short hallway to the bedroom. He let his eyes half-close, a certain numbness edging his body as he moved, focusing on the goal of getting to the bedroom before he let himself collapse.

Nick vaguely heard Coach and Rochelle start talking behind him. Unconcerned, he slipped up to the bedroom door and reached out to crack it open, only a cursory glance spared for the small painting nailed into the wall by his head.

He stepped in with a turn, closing the door behind himself. The whole house was painted a seabreeze shade of blue, and the bedroom was no exception.

Bruised and exhausted, Ellis laid in a limp sprawl on the bed, dirty overalls and clumsily arranged limbs utterly out of place on the lacy bedsheets and lacier pillows. He was like a dirt smudge on a neat handkerchief, and as Nick examined him, he found himself cracking a smirk.

*God, you're such a hick.*

Nick felt a faintly light-headed sensation as he walked himself forward, stepping over the sandy-colored carpet stained with the dirt and blood from Coach's shoes. Ellis' workboots sat on the floor
at the end of the bed, and Nick moved to stand just next to them, carefully bending down and lifting up either foot to work off his shoes.

Bending his bad leg made him wince a little, but it was nothing compared to his shoulder just then. "Glad you're getting your beauty sleep, kid." Nick grumbled under his breath as he arranged his dress shoes in a habitually neat pairing a good foot from Ellis' dirty workboots.

Ellis' lack of response put a stopper on Nick's sarcasm, and with a posture of wistful exhaustion, the conman straightened up. He set a hand forward on the footboard of the bed, examining the shapes and curves of Ellis' sprawled body.

And then his face.

The soft palette of innocence that made up his features, full lips half-parted with a childlike sleepiness that belayed the pained kind of weakness that had led him to pass out in Rochelle's arms. As Nick's gaze traced his features, half-tipped into the mattress and shaded by his cap as they were, it alighted on the blossoming bruise that shaded his jaw.

It was big, and it made him frown.

If he tilted his head, he could almost trace the lines of heavy knuckles along the shapes of the bruising skin. His imagination or not, it stirred a kind of agitation in his gut, uselessly gnawing on his brain.

More than a little frustrated, Nick let out a sigh. He glanced around the strangely barren bedroom - either a temporary beach house that received little personalization, or a house that had been stripped before whoever owned it ran.

A wicker chair in the corner caught his eye, and he limped over to grab ahold of it by the arms, carrying it with the seat braced against his knees gingerly. Walking it back to the bed, he lowered it down just beside the mattress and sighed, letting his body turn to slip down into the seat.

Relaxing into the chair with an almost lustful sigh, the gambler let his head loll back against the chair's back, closing his eyes. "Just 'cause I've gotta sit on vigil for your stupid ass -" the gambler muttered disdainfully. "- doesn't mean I can't relax."

Crossing his legs tiredly, he let his hands drape into his lap, slouching down into the chair without pushing his injured shoulder against it. His eyes slipped half-open, examining Ellis' sleeping face as he stilled into a sore kind of slump.

"Whatever that bastard.. did.." Nick grumbled, the words falling from his lips with no small distaste. He wanted that to be absolutely nothing. The idea that Ellis had been a victim in any sense of the word just... grated at Nick.

There was pleasure to be taken from his makeshift trap working.. but very, very little.

It was his ex-wife all over again. The cluelessness. The fear, building and building and building upon Nick's inner voice's constant tirade of cynicism and pessimism to slowly mount into such a crippling wave of firm belief in the very worst of possibilities... Nick beat the voice into silence, but it left an imprint.

An imprint of guilt.

"... I'm sorry, Fireball."
Chapter 90

It was like a slow form of torture.

The water drops pattering on Nick's consciousness were his own thoughts, returning again and again as many times as he'd shoo them away. There was almost a rut growing in his mind as the same musings passed across his awareness - the same agitated impatience, the same want.

Staring at Ellis' unconscious frame, watching breath inhale into him and exhale out of him, noticing the small shifts of discomfort as he tried to find a comfortable position on his stomach; Nick was driving himself slowly insane with rejected urges.

He thought about crawling up into the bed and touching that bruised body until he woke up.

He thought about crawling up into the bed and whispering in Ellis' ear until he woke up.

He thought about crawling up into the bed and just falling asleep next to him, so it wouldn't matter when he woke up.

Every single time ended the same: Nick sitting slouched in the same, immensely uncomfortable position on the wicker chair. He dozed in and out of stubborn consciousness and refused to give in to sleep, or those thoughts.

He was almost certain that his spine was slowly folding to fit the awkward slope of the chair's back.

It hurt - he just lacked the initiative to move, especially knowing if he got up he would doubtlessly end up in Ellis' bed. The inviting comfort of the mattress and alluring slopes of Ellis' sprawled body were an added cruelty on top of his rampant - if slow - imagination.

Rochelle had slipped inside for just a moment, wielding a plate of tuna sandwiches - just two, perched on top of each other on the small plate. She didn't say more than a soft 'here,' passing Nick the plate and stopping to examine the sleeping Georgian for a moment.

Her eyes had betrayed a shaken worry, distracted and unfocused. She left with her head shaking, rubbing at her eyes, visibly holding it together in front of Nick and slightly eager to get out of the room.

Least she has Coach, he distantly observed, leaning back in his chair with an unpleasant groan of discomfort and picking the plate in his lap up. Not surprised I'm not exactly her confidant.. kind of an asshole.

He half-laughed, tiredly amused by the concept as he picked up a slightly malformed tuna sandwich with two fingers.

They'd gotten crushed a bit in the backpack, unavoidably. The tuna had soaked juice into the bread with a visible leeching and left them far less picturesque than they'd been that first time. Nick gazed at the one in his grip for a moment, examining the crumples in the bread, and sighed.

He didn't even particularly care.

Taking a sizeable bite, he leaned back into the chair slowly and slumped down as he chewed. The fish still twanged on his senses, sort of a creamy aftertaste sticking to the roof of his mouth.
Green eyes gazed at Ellis' face as he swallowed, licking a stray fleck of bread off his lower lip.

"You're missing out." he commented sarcastically, but his eyes lingered as if to be sure the words hadn't actually enticed Ellis to wake up. He found a spot on the bed to re-direct his gaze toward when it didn't.

Grumbling an irate "stupid Sleeping Beauty." under his breath, Nick reached his free hand down to grasp onto the arm of his chair. Moving with energy he didn't really have to spare, the gambler shoved his chair around jolt by jolt until he faced away from the bed, moodily gazing toward the wall as he took a second bite.

His shoulder had fallen to a constant sting of pain. The muscles around it were inflamed and abused, protesting both the intrusion of the original sword and the painful reactions of Nick's makeshift disinfection. It hurt, no doubt, and something about the pain was putting a pit in his stomach.

After the first two swallows of tuna sandwich, he was fast losing his appetite and finding a warm kind of nausea in its place.

Frustrated, he forced himself to take a third bite and then shoved the plate onto the bedside table by his elbow. Pressing a palm onto his bare stomach, he closed his eyes as he chewed and swallowed, wincing through the gurgle that worked its way up his midsection.

Getting ill was last on his to-do list, and it was with that in mind that he focused on deep, swelling breaths, despite the discomfort it set into his shifting shoulder. "C'mon, Nicolas." he muttered to himself, fingertips soothing up the sensitive curl of his tummy. "Pull it together."

His body was in turmoil and it irked him. All the urging seemed to do was make it worse, stomach twisting in his gut as he breathed, and every motion pushed him closer to a real sense of anger.

It culminated in a violent snarl, suddenly fisting a hand and punching the heel of it down against the arm of his chair in a fit of pure frustration. He would've calmed back down with that, reined himself back in, had it not suddenly registered in his body that he'd just used his injured arm to do it.

The pain came in a spasm, twisting him forward into a hunch over his lap as he clasped up his hand to grip his shoulder. His eyes shut, holding his shoulder tightly and keeping it still as he breathed through the pain like he'd been trying to breathe through his nausea.

His shoulder hurt under his palm - all the touch did was make it hurt worse, rising until his jaw gritted his teeth together.

"Fuck." left him faintly. He opened his eyes in a slightly pained motion, about to stare blindly at the floor - when he saw what Rochelle brought that he hadn't even noticed her place down.

A pill bottle, knocked over when he'd jerked his chair around in a fit. He blinked slightly, startled by the sight - she'd barely even spared him a glance. He'd have hardly expected that kind of thought from her, certainly not wordlessly.

A slight huff escaped him, reaching down his hand in a limp gesture to scoop up the bottle as he straightened up. He popped the cap with his thumb, gazing at the labels as he did. They weren't painkillers, but he read 'anti-inflammatory' amidst all the text along the edges and that was enough.

Tossing back the bottle to tap two of the tablets into his mouth, he swallowed them with only a small choke. Pills had never been that difficult for him to down, although they left a sour taste on
his tongue, acrid and unpleasant.

Settling down into the chair with a slight grunt, Nick let his wrist settle over his forehead, closing his eyes again. He knew it was a little bit of a placebo effect, but he did feel slightly better as he sat there, inhaling deep into the very bottoms of his lungs.

Despite the fact that he grumbled a low, "Good job letting me know about that, Ro'.", he knew he probably wouldn't have thanked her anyway.

Strange how things like that were starting to register.

Sighing slightly, feeling his fit of emotion fall to a slowing, dull hum in his chest, Nick shifted his weight. An unpleasant kind of half-scowl settled on his face, but he pushed himself out of his chair with a rolling motion, reaching his feet and catching his balance.

Turning about, he stepped around the chair. It was only a short distance to the door, and he walked to it with a firmly set jaw. The small twist-lock in the center of the knob was cradled easily between two fingers, and he turned it, satisfied with the click.

Returning back toward his chair, he didn't sit down - breathing deep, he edged up to Ellis' bedside. Gazing down at him for a moment, he let his body turn and take a seat on the edge of the bed, resting himself down and letting his injured arm cradle on his lap.

Wordlessly, with his breath catching in transient flickers of pain, Nick reached out a hand and set his knuckles against Ellis' cheek. His gaze played over the press of his fingers against the soft skin beneath them, the way his knuckles so gently traced his cheekbone.

His thumb escaped the fold of his fingers, slipping down to settle against the vicious bruising on Ellis' jaw. The purpling bruise imprinted into the Georgian's skin made Nick's temper stir all over again, but he only had an instant to wrestle with it.

The moment he touched that bruise, the kid's body set to an almost fervent shift. Before Nick could recoil his hand, Ellis was whimpering uselessly where he laid.

Ellis let off a frantic "nnnh-" under his hand. It was almost like a sleep-muffled 'no.'

It was a pitiful sound that Nick accidentally set off. Ellis' hands gripped into the sheets and his head tried to twist away, the motion one of pure distress. Nick reared back slightly, startled and not wholly certain how to handle the situation.

Pretty sure that's not how that was supposed to go, he wryly self-chided, leaning forward quickly and reaching down his hands to try and catch hands onto Ellis' frame. "Kiddo, hey, easy!" he soothed, fingers spreading on the smooth muscle of the younger man's shoulders.

He tried to still him, keeping the Georgian from hurting himself with his frantic squirming, but the touch made Ellis shoot out an arm to lash at his forearm, almost panicked.

He had a strong swing, and Nick genuinely winced with the collision. He coughed a little, twisting his body to make sure no errant flail hit his injured shoulder, losing his grip on Ellis' shoulders. The Georgian clawed and flopped his body onto his back, instinctively taking pressure off his ribs.

Grunting slightly, Nick leaned further forward, determined. He slipped a hand up and pushed Ellis' cap off his head, spreading digits softly into his hair, palm resting on his temple. Stroking fingertips against the curls underneath them, he tried again, "Ellis. Wake up before you break somethin', champ - it's Nick."
The words breached his panicked half-consciousness - the kid woke up with a gasp, whole body convulsing in a sharp gesture that would've thrust him into a sitting position had the pain not immediately kicked in and stopped him. "Whut -"

Nick watched with a slightly sympathetic twist to his mouth, keeping his fingers half-twined in Ellis' hair as the Georgian faltered down into the mattress. Soft whines escaped him as his abused body shivered and twitched.

"G-gh - oh - gawd - it hurts -" he whimpered breathlessly, body squirming in time to the little gasps that passed his lips. There was pleading in his voice when he managed a weakened, "N-Nick -"

"I'm sorry, kiddo." Nick murmured, letting the pads of his fingers sift through Ellis' curly hair in an attempt to comfort him. He leaned down, body slumping into a small slope to reach his head down and graze his mouth against Ellis' cheek.

The gambler dusted a subtle kiss there, breathing in and out slowly as he tried to maintain a smooth tone of voice. His palm traced down Ellis' cheek, pushing his chin slightly up so he could better examine his face. "Where's it hurt?"

One of Ellis' hands weakly lifted up, dragging calloused, warm fingertips to grip the older man's wrist loosely. "E-everywhere." he mumbled, one clouded little blue eye opening up to glance at Nick's face, the other closed tightly.

Nick gazed at him silently a moment, pulling his head away just an inch. The bruise blossoming up from his jawline made the gambler's jaw tighten, annoyed, but worse was the look in Ellis' eyes. The exhaustion, the fear, the vulnerability.

Slowly, the gambler eased the elbow of his bad arm down onto the mattress by Ellis' shoulder. It hurt to rest his weight on it that way, but he gritted his teeth through it, letting his head lower again to settle his lips against Ellis' ear.

He brushed his mouth along the whorls of the hick's ear, soothing and gentle. Ellis' breathing settled just a little, a soft hiccup trickling out of him. His eyes closed, and Nick could feel him relaxing as he teased the soft skin under his lips. "Bad dream, El? You woke up pretty scared.."

"Yeah.." Ellis whimpered honestly, the word catching in his throat with a small hitch. He shook his head slowly, though not enough to stir Nick from his place. "I-I .. I'm still.. - .. everythin's okay, right?"

Slipping fingers deeper into Ellis' hair, the gambler let his hand cradle underneath his head. A sigh escaped him, turning his chin to gaze over the younger man's face. His lips left his ear to hover over his cheekbone. "Yeah. Everyone's alright, kiddo. Shit, you saved the day. Y'know that?"

Ellis' gaze was a little shy when his eyes opened, blue muddled with pain. He glanced at Nick, their gazes meeting slowly. A smirk touched the gambler's lips, steadying his voice as his eyes narrowed.

"Leave it to you to come up with a plan like that. Actually impressed me a bit with that one, Ace."

A little smile rewarded Nick's attempts. It was a faltered and tiny version of his usual brilliance, but a smile all the same. "H-heh -" he hiccuped through a wave of pain that had him cringing in on himself, brows lowering over pretty blue eyes. "Must be a real wreck if yer complimentin' me like that.."

Nick chuckled slightly, just a small noise. He shook his head a little and traced the Georgian's face
with his fingers, letting himself enjoy the contact, trying not to overthink. He'd been so sure Ellis was dead… "You are a wreck, but I'm serious. You played a good game back there, El. Saved our asses."

Ellis melted a little into his palm, the inner edges of his brows rising softly in a flicker of emotion. He raised a hand to slowly settle his fingers over Nick's as they cradled his cheek, stroking fingertips into the spaces between the older man's digits.

The intimate touch of fingers made Nick's spine stiffen just a little - but it was a good kind of stiff. He let it happen.

"Yuh still got hurt.." Ellis whimpered gently, gaze flickering to his shoulder.

"Yeah. I lied about not getting hurt... not that I wanted to." Nick admitted, chin lowering slightly and a brow lifting up just an inch. He shrugged his injured shoulder up dismissively, wincing at the pain it earned him. "Better get used to that whole lying thing. I'm trying to kick the truth habit."

Ellis gave a little smile, lips parting as if to speak, but Nick interrupted him with a quiet edge. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about himself. "Let me check your chest out, kid.. if you broke ribs or something, we have a problem.."

Immediately, he noticed Ellis pull away. Slight discomfort flashed over his face, but it wasn't the innocent blush of embarrassment at Nick's intent to strip his shirt off - it was something else. Something unfamiliar, and shamed.

Nick zeroed in on that emotion in an instant.

"Hold still." he ordered with a firmness touching his voice. He pulled his hand away from Ellis' cheek, disentangling the Georgian's fingers, and ignored the slight protest as he reached both his hands down to take a gentle grip on Ellis' shirt.

"N-Nick - 'm alright, really. I just need some rest or somethin'.. you do too, y'know - let's just..'' His voice hitched as his shirt started to roll up with Nick's tenderly pushing thumbs. The gambler's knuckles brushed against the soft, nicked-and-bruised skin of his navel, making his frame shiver. ". ..let's just forget 'bout it, okay-?"

As his fingers grazed up the other man's flat midsection, Ellis' head rolled a little to the side, brows drawn tight together. "D-don't -" Ellis was too hurt to fight beyond his plaintive voice. Nick ignored him entirely as he peeled his shirt up his battle-worn but somehow still soft frame, uncovering skin inch by inch.

His left side was colored by a purpled bruise, tracing close along the curved shape of his ribs. It was dark and deep, reddened where the skin actually stretched over the rib bone. "Mmh. Looks some kind of fractured." Nick stated with a dark flatness.

"Nick.. 'm fine, just -' Ellis tried to flop, tried to twist away, but the pain stopped him mid-motion with a little gasp. Nick frowned slightly at the noise, but it hardly dissuaded him. There was something he didn't want Nick to see, and Nick was going to find it.

As his off-yellow Bullshifters shirt folded up past his pecs, the logo crumpling into a faded mess of ink, Nick recognized just what that was.

The whole front of his smooth chest had fallen into a nasty bruise, expanded along the delicate dip of his breastbone and shading into his pecs. There were subtle patterns crushed into his skin, blood darkening them to weird shades of purple and black.
Nick felt his emotions flatline, this calm pulse in his chest. His pupils constricted sharply.

Dangerously.

Ellis' voice was soft and almost frightened, eyes on Nick's stone cold face as the gambler hunched over him, staring at the imprint of Jerry's boot on the Georgian's aching chest. "It .. it ain't so bad."

"He stomped on you. Like a fucking dog." he stated, green eyes flicking along the almost-visible shape of a bootheel dug deep into Ellis' skin. He reached down a hand, moving to trace his fingertips over the bruise. "What else did he do?"

His touch made Ellis flinch, though it was only partially out of pain. "Nothin', Nick. -"

The Georgian reached up a hand to try and catch Nick's wrist - but Nick snapped his hand violently away an instant before they touched, voice raising. Hostility prickled his frame, tone turning jagged and sharp with hissed fury. "What the fuck else did he do? What the fuck else did I let him do?!"

"Nick..." Ellis pleaded, his voice dropping in gentled response. ".. it wasn't yer fault." His hand dangled where Nick's wrist had been - hovered there, as if they had touched. There was a desperation in his eyes, breath turning shallow in flaring nostrils. "He didn't do nothin'. please, Nick."

It took an instant for Nick to really register it. Anger flooded every inch of his mind, making it difficult to make sense of anything but the almost violent urges crawling up his spine - but it was Ellis' eyes that did it. Sparkling, pain-clouded blue shot sense into him - and Nick let his shoulders fall to a slow hunch, gritting his jaw. Silence swallowed him for a moment, gaze darting from Ellis' face to the bruises.

He was making it worse. All he was doing was making it harder on the Georgian.

His gaze shifted away with a sharp frustration, unwilling to look at Ellis when he spoke. Anger faded to a renewed sense of tired guilt, frustrated with himself. Slowly, working the words out, Nick uttered; "... I just - I shouldn't have left you behind. Fucking stupid. I -"

When Ellis reached up again, this time to settle a hand onto the older man's arm, Nick didn't jerk away. Strong fingers gripped his sleeve with a needy tightness, a small smile resurfacing onto the conman's bruised face.

He spoke with soft promise, strong despite his breathlessness. His thumb stroked at the conman's bicep, affection bleeding through the motion. "I know, Nick. 'm okay, fer real. He didn't do nothin' but bruise me up... don't feel guilty or nothin'. I jus'..."

Ellis' expression faltered there, gazing up at Nick. His silence made Nick look at him again, and his gaze landed on a face struggling with need. He knew the look of someone eager for touch, for comfort.

Nick stared down at him for a silent moment, gaze growing distant as his mind chewed on that expression. Rolled it around in his brain - the choice of words, the emotion behind it. The consequences of giving in.

He just didn't have the energy to reject the urges anymore.

Bending down suddenly, Nick leaned his body into a close hover above Ellis'. Still half-twisted away with his legs off the edge of the bed, he craned his waist to bring his mouth in line with the
younger man's. Their lips met and locked with what had become a familiar clash of senses - plump and thin, soft and harsh.

Nick gave no ground and allowed no breath, thrusting deep with an agile tongue that stole every ounce of sense from the kid. He felt Ellis inhale underneath him, jaw shifting to submit to the kiss with a trembling confidence.

A hand touched onto his side, thumb flicking underneath the open left wing of his blue dress shirt, and Nick's breath purred subtly when the calloused pad of Ellis' thumb traced along his tense hip. His hand pulled a little bit on his side, and Nick could read the desire like it was printed on Ellis' forehead.

He could handle desire.

Even if somewhere, he knew it was a little more than just sexual.

Pulling back from the kiss, leaving Ellis to gasp softly, lips wet and gaining a slight flush of red to the sweet skin, Nick gazed over his face. The intensity of his examination brought a blush to Ellis' cheeks, though he held firm underneath it. "Relax, kiddo. Just close your eyes and relax." he stated in a soft tone, that edge of gravel laying a husky lilt to his voice.

Trustingly, Ellis did so - there was a gorgeous kind of calm that softened his features as he rolled his head back into the pillow, curly hair nuzzling into the lacy fabric in a subtle, fluffy halo around his face. "Okay.." he murmured softly, voice clogged with an almost drowsy sense of pain.

Nick would get rid of that.

The gambler bent to settle lips over Ellis' - but he didn't let them lock into a kiss again. He teased, pulling away the instant Ellis' lips parted, and grazing his mouth along the gentle bow of Ellis' full lips to kiss a little further down.

Inch by inch, he moved along his face like that - he felt a smile flicker underneath his lips as he passed along the edge of Ellis' mouth, a soft little private thing, silently passed between them.

As Nick's lips reached his cheekbone, he slipped one of his hands to settle his palm flat onto Ellis' navel. His stomach shifted underneath Nick's fingers, seeming surprised by the warm gesture, and Nick curled his digits to stroke fingertips along the soft trickle of light hair sneaking down from Ellis' bellybutton to the wrap of his coveralls.

"N-Ni-?" the younger man started, but those fingers had already started to graze down along that dusting of hair that marked its path. In a soft gasp that was almost endearing, Ellis' body gave a tremor and his shoulders seemed to shift deeper against the mattress. "Oh."

Nick wanted to chuckle, but he resisted, lips reaching the kid's ear with a soft exhale. He nipped teeth onto the soft earlobe pressed against his lips, biting with a gentle edge to tease sensitive flesh.

His fingers crawled up over the Georgian's coveralls, spreading as his palm pressed down against the thick fabric. He stroked down into the niche of his groin, feeling the soft shape of Ellis' cock under the constraints of the denim. Ellis' breath shallowed out as the gambler's agile digits traced the subtle bulge, thumb catching on the crook of his hip to brace his hand.

"Forget all that shit." Nick growled quietly, tongue escaping to flick over the earlobe and the little red marks his teeth had left. Ellis gave a whine against his cheek, breath fluttering with a stuttered pleasure as he melted like putty in the gambler's hands.
Cupping his crotch, Nick squeezed with his palm in slow, gentle waves, following the small shifts of Ellis' hips as the twitches of pleasure made his body twitch, too. His middle and ring fingers dipped down to rub tips in small circles on the loose, heavy fabric, teasing low against the tangible shape of the younger man's organ.

The soft catch of Ellis' breath and the way he held it betrayed the pleasure Nick's hand spread into the private reaches of his body. His chin lifted in blushing, vaguely mortified want, head turning against the gambler's mouth.

The older man's body shifted subtly, rolling his shoulder back so he could curl up his arm and retreat fingers to the waist of his coveralls, sinking underneath. Bypassing the loose fabric of his boxers, Nick brushed fingertips against the downy curls that graced the soft skin of Ellis' groin.

"Like that, Ace..? Hmn?" he purred with a hot twist to his voice, fascinated by the youth's reactions.

Sinking his hand in lower, he let the pads of his fingers trail up the stiffened base of Ellis' cock. He dragged a softened groan out of the younger man, those hips shifting faintly underneath his palm. "Mnh.." escaped petal-soft lips as Ellis' blue eyes closed. "S'-s'nice.. real nice, Nick.."

There was an intimacy in touching Ellis that Nick wasn't used to - a virginal, innocent quality to the very warmth of his body. A fragile creature cradled trustingly in his hands. He'd never gotten so close to someone with their heart so vulnerably placed on their sleeve. It was almost intimidating, realizing that.

He slowly dragged his tongue along the curvature of Ellis' ear, nipping teeth in small suckles, as he wrapped his fingers around the rising flesh warm and velvety against his palm. Slowly curling and uncurling his fingers led them into a tender stroke, the rise of which urged Ellis' hips up to follow, and the fall of which made them shiver back down.

The play of his fingers was quickly coaxing blood into both Ellis' cheeks and his length.

"G-gawd." Ellis uttered slowly, arching a hand up to reach Nick's slightly ruffled hair. The swirls and sweeps of his arranged hair were still in place, held by stiff hairspray that Ellis could feel against his fingertips as they grazed up the back of Nick's neck. "I-I was real.. Lord, I dunno whut I'd'uh done if you'd gotten.." left him, faltering at the end.

Maybe it was the strike of pleasure as Nick toyed his thumb along the rigid edge of the erection's head, the dry pad of his finger stroking sweet skin, or the words that should've come next. The gambler understood the silence, and with a small exhale, he dragged his mouth away from Ellis' ear, tracing a path onto his cheek.

"Forget about it."

Nick let his whole hand encircle the width of Ellis' member, tightening on the hard flesh. He could feel the faint shifting of silky skin underneath his digits as he pumped it loosely, aware of the soft arching of Ellis' spine and the faint whimpering that left his lips at the dry stimulation.

"I'm right here."

Nick's body shifted as he let his fingers twist and play along Ellis' erection, squeezing shifts and noises out of him with a gentle force. The kid's thighs parted slightly, spreading in a way that seemed to invite the gambler to slip between them, but Nick resisted.

He wanted to, but Ellis was too injured. He had to focus.
Bending his head, Nick craned his neck down to settle his mouth against one of the flushed nipples just on the edge of the large bruise spilt onto his lover's chest. He closed teeth around it, toying his tongue against the delicate flesh as Ellis gave a gentle-throated moan, startled. Ellis' hand came with him, curling a little on the hair just at the base of his neck.

His nipple perked under Nick's tongue, a heated wave of arousal hardening the bud of flesh. He tugged at it almost playfully with his teeth as he brushed his thumb over the slit at the tip of Ellis' erection, enjoying the quivers he stirred in Ellis' body.

A little bit of wetness leaked onto his thumb, a soft throb pulsing through the younger man's length.

"O-oh- ohh.." drawled out of the Georgian with a subtle undertone of awe, spreading his fingers to stroke at the back of Nick's neck, pawing and kneading as a flustered pleasure swarmed his nerves. His hips rolled, need edging the weak shift of his body, unable to do more than that with his injured torso. "H-hn.. L-Lordy .. oh, Lord, please .. don' stop..

Shifting to nuzzle his lips across Ellis' chest to reach his unattended nipple, Nick let himself halt to gaze at the thick bruise facing him down. That stir of anger resurfaced - the Georgian's chest must've nearly collapsed under the weight of the hulking brute.

Funneling that anger into intent, Nick sped and tightened his pumping hand within the tent of his coveralls, feeling Ellis' breath pick up above his head and shudders turn to a constant squirm of those narrow hips. He closed his mouth around the yet-untouched nipple, letting his lips set a subtle suction against the warm skin.

That tipped him over - too much stimulation on too many unprepared nerves.

Ellis' body jerked with a sudden undulation, a subdued moan twisting his chin up high into the air as his heels dug into the mattress and his waist rollicked upwards. A groan spilled out of him with the same slow urgency as his climax.

It was a lazy kind of orgasm, and Nick found his head lifting to watch the slow squirm and flutter of the younger man's body. Pleasure overrode any recollection of the pain on those soft features. It was an almost enrapturing sight, seeing the blush-wrought Georgian come undone with such weak, trusting, un-self-conscious pleasure.

His fingers curled about the hot head of Ellis' length, squeezing and soothing him through the climax that rippled through his body. As the kid slowly calmed, breath whimpering in soft, appreciative pants through reddened lips, Nick let his hand gently drag out of his coveralls.

He could feel the sticky fluid between his knuckles, but his gaze was too alert on Ellis' face to bother sparing a glance for his hand. He shifted his weight, rolling his shoulder down a little bit as he eased out of his position, and winced a little at the discomfort spread through his injured shoulder.

Putting all his weight on it had been a bad idea, but a worthwhile one.

Stretching his arm back to wipe his messy hand carelessly on the side of the bed, Nick let his neck straighten and craned his head forward to graze his lips along Ellis' panting lower one. The soft, plump flesh taunted him until he couldn't resist the urge to nip at it with the softest of bites.

Ellis was melted beside him, eyes fogged with the afterglow. He murmured a little incoherent noise at the nip, nuzzling his face at the gambler's gently, and reached up a hand to paw fingertips along
the gentle slope of Nick's neck in a tiny pet.

Nick chuckled a little at the touch. He moved slowly, shifting his weight in a gentle roll of his body to ease up the mattress till his good shoulder caught on the headboard. Nick pressed into it gently and let his legs slip wearily up onto the bed behind him, parallel to Ellis'. He gazed sideways at the youth, shifting his arm to invite Ellis against him.

The kid tenderly shimmied into the space between his bicep and his chest, moving with a slow weariness. He nuzzled his face into Nick's neck, not seeming even conscious of the fact his shirt was still pulled up his torso and his coveralls were shrugged a little low on his hips.

"Mmnh... Nick.." left him in a soft little moan, body slipping flat on the bed to keep pressure off his injured ribs, but keeping snuggled close to the man's chest. His cheek was hot against Nick's neck, pressing close with an affectionate kind of need. "Don't hurt so much now.. haw.."

Nick lowered his head to press his cheek against the top of Ellis' head, burying into the curls and flips of his hair. Green eyes half-shut, aware of the calm hum in his gut - arousal, pleasant and satisfying in its purring existence. He was content to not get off.

He wasn't usually a particularly selfless lover. 'Get more than you give' was a good unspoken motto, but that time was different. Maybe the pain in his shoulder took the edge off, or maybe he just wanted to make it up to Ellis. Maybe he just didn't have the energy.

He was too tired to argue with himself over it.

"Good." the gambler uttered in a quiet tone, lifting a hand to settle it against the back of Ellis' neck. He petted the nape of his neck, soothingly, distracting the both of them with the soft brush of skin on skin. "Can't have my efforts go to waste."

He felt Ellis' smile against his neck, soft and easy. "Can yuh stay here, Nick..? Please..?"

Nick nodded his head just enough to get the motion across. He shifted his arm to get it a little more comfortably placed around Ellis' shoulders, letting his body slip down and rest against the bed's pillow. "Yeah, sport. If it'll keep you from losing it again, I guess I'll lie here awhile. Get some rest, alright?"

*Nobody needs to know he woke up.*

"Thanks, Nick... means a lot. 'N' really.. it wasn't yer fault." He blinked a little as Ellis laid a little kiss against his neck. He glanced down, but Ellis' face was buried too snugly against his shoulder to be seen.

Or to see him - Nick let the smallest of smirks touch the edge of his mouth.

"Sure, Overalls." Nick stayed precisely where he was as the freshly exhausted youth drifted to sleep against his neck, breath shallow and pitifully warm as it trickled down onto the sensitive skin of his chest.

Ellis was a fair amount more comfortable than a wicker chair.
"What're you doin', babygirl?"

The bathroom was filled with the headache-inducing scent of bleach, heavy on the air despite the constant hum of the overhead ventilation that tried to circulate in fresh air. Rochelle shook her head from where she knelt next to the bathtub, arms reached over the edge. "Nick's jacket.. he got blood all over it." she forced out. "I found some cleaning supplies in the utility room."

Coach approached a few steps, gazing over her work.

The tub had several inches of cold water in it, tinted slightly pink with blood. She'd laid Nick's jacket mostly flat in the tub, and with rubber yellow gloves loosely encapsulating her hands, scrubbed slowly at the white fabric. "Hmm." he uttered, distantly. "Nice of you."

Rochelle shrugged, shoulders tensing a little as she leaned further forward. One of her hands lifted up, grasping the bleach bottle by the handle and dragging it off the edge of the tub. She drizzled a little more over the surface of the suit jacket, replacing the bottle with a small sigh.

"I needed to focus on something. My mother always cleans when she needs to think - figured I'd give it a shot."

For a moment, neither of them spoke, the only sounds being the sloshing of water as Rochelle bent back forward to resume scrubbing at the jacket. Blood stained the water in clouded streaks, rustling free from the fabric.

Coach edged forward, turning around to settle down on the edge of the tub. He exhaled deeply, leaning forward to settle elbows on his knees. He rubbed gently at his forehead, focusing forward toward the open bathroom door. "I took first watch so you could sleep, y'know, Ro'." He didn't say it accusatorially, just honestly.

"Yeah." she sighed, a light sense of regret flickering over her face. She glanced over at him, hands still working the fabric against itself, speed and fervor increasing gradually with each word. "I know.. I should've just told you to sleep. Sorry, Coach."

"Nah, babygirl." he negated with a shake of his head, a small slope up touching his lips. His head turned, eyeing the way she scrubbed at the jacket with a slightly raising eyebrow. "What's got yo' nerves all wired?"

Rochelle shook her head, voice loosening with a bit of an airy tone. Her focus darted back into the tub, narrowing. "I'm just tired, Coach. I'm fine."

Coach exhaled, leaning back and letting his hands clasp between his knees, knuckles wound up. The small slope of his mouth flattened out again, seriously. "Not by the way you're abusin' that jacket, you ain't. Won't do much good gettin' the blood out if it's torn to shit."

Not seeming startled so much as resigned at his observation, Rochelle let go of the suit jacket and leaned up, her shoulders cracking softly with the motion. She frowned vaguely, examining the pile of fabric swaddled up in the shallow, bloody water, elbows resting on the edge of the tub to relax her weight.

"... I feel..."
She didn't get two words in before her voice faltered, a shake of her head silencing herself. She made to lean in, intent on continuing with her work, tension flooding her face with a tightened jaw and a severe pinch to her lips. But Coach reached out and set a hand on her shoulder, halting her.

Warily, chocolate brown eyes - so often, before the apocalypse, lined by a layer of carefully applied mascara and highlighted by a dusting of eyeshadow - shifted up to his face, softening. "We're all safe, you know, babygirl." he uttered in a low tone, gruff and slow. He met her gaze with a solid force, confident and coaxing. She seemed to fluster at the statement, sighing, dropping her head to push stray wisps of hair back from her forehead with the soft inside of her elbow.

Her voice faded a little, quieting, as she spoke. "Y-yeah. But.. we're not the only people in the world. Carmine was fine until we showed up. We got Jerry killed, too. Of course I'm glad Ellis is okay, and Nick is recovering, but - we're not supposed to plow through people like zombies."

Coach squeezed at her shoulder, chin lowering into the gentle slopes of his slightly thick neck. He sighed, shaking his head. "What you mean, babygirl? We been doin' our best to survive. We ain't been tryin' to do anybody harm - protectin' ourselves is all we can do."

Shrugging her shoulders gently, Rochelle's eyes softened slowly. She worked her thumbs against each other in slow circles, the rubber gloves folding up in scrunched wrinkles between her digits. "All we can do? God. Isn't that sad."

"Ain't our fault how all this went down, you know."

Rochelle's gaze dropped, brows lifting subtly. She slid her arms to cross at the wrists, hands dangling down in their rubber casings. "I should've just grabbed Chris by the shirt and whooped him upside the head. Dragged him with us." grumbled out of her, frustrated and a little wistful.

The big man chuckled, leaning forward just a little and letting his hand fall off her shoulder. "Imagine you would'a carried him all the way here if you'd gotten the chance. Boy chose to leave, babygirl. Can't blame yo'self."

She shook her head instantly, spreading her fingers in a hapless gesture as ever more frustration bled into her voice. "I was going to stop him, Coach. I was going to make him come with us."

There was a kind of self-consciousness to her voice; an almost hesitance, like she was trying to justify a crime. Coach immediately hunched his shoulders at the tone, rubbing his palm into his forehead with a tired grunt. "It -"

"You saw it just like I did." she insisted, leaning back to slide to sit on her heels, a frown dragging down the corners of her mouth. "He was having a change of heart there at the end. He didn't want to hurt us. He never did - it was Brenda that lost it.. it all just.. went so crazy."

"Ro', babygirl," Coach coaxed, a restrained exasperation flooding his posture as he lifted up his hands and waved them at the wrists. "I was right there, I know what happened. Don't gotta explain anythin' to me."

She deflated slightly, glancing down at her hands with a small nod.

Giving a quiet sigh, Coach rested his elbows on his thighs, re-winding his fingers together between his knees and focusing deepset eyes somewhat thoughtfully on his dirt- and blood-encrusted shoes. "Babygirl. I know it all seems real dark right now. I know none of us'd want to get anyone hurt. But you gotta understand - if they'd given us a chance, if Chris'd stayed wit' us.. we'd have forgiven
'em. We'd have worked it out."

Rochelle inhaled, chin raising, but Coach wasn't done.

"It wasn't our doin' that got 'em in trouble. We ain't cruel folk an' I'd never turn no one to the dogs, but I ain' one for kissin' the feet of a murderer, you hear?"

When she frowned, he gave a slight, weary chuckle, half-apologetic. "I know, Coach. And it's not.. it's not that I think we did anything wrong. It's just not fair that we left him behind. I'm worried.. that he'll get hurt because of us. I can't imagine she'd be very happy with him after all that."

Rubbing into the sore joint of his thumb, Coach nodded in a gradual motion. "He knew you wanted him to stay, babygirl. He left on his own."

Rochelle gave a deep exhale, frustrated. She leaned up onto her knees again, bending into the tub to dip down her fingers into the water and pull the plug on the drain. The foamy, red-stained water started to drain out in a whirl above the metallic grating, and she watched it with an irked crunch to her brows.

"I didn't.. want him to.. I just.. didn't want him to get hurt, either. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of us."

There was a moment of silence, her eyes ticking to follow the swirl of water into the drain.

Her head lifted a little when he set a hand on her shoulder again, squeezing tighter. There was a serious tone to his voice when he spoke. "Babygirl, nobody did. A'ight? If things could have gone different, we'd have done it. Fact is, we weren't in no kind of control."

Rochelle sighed, nodding slowly as the tub emptied. Her fingertips trailed in the water spilling past them, eyes narrowing, and her silence was suddenly a bit stifling. The big man sitting beside her gazed at her with an almost weary focus, aware he didn't have the words she needed.

He couldn't promise Christophe would be alright - that their presence hadn't been the reason behind what might be his death or injury. He didn't, couldn't, know. In all truth - the likely answer was that he would be in trouble because of them.

Brenda didn't seem forgiving.

Coach shifted to stand up with a bit of a crack as his knees popped, uttering an 'egh' as he did and reaching down a hand to rub at his thigh slowly. "I'll be in the livin' room. Gonna block the doors best I can, keep us safe. You come out when you're done, we'll talk more, yeah?"

"Okay, Coach.. thank you. How long do you think Ellis'll need to rest..?" she questioned quietly, reaching down to pick up Nick's suit jacket by the lapels. She shook it slightly as Coach gruffly sighed, his chin lifting to gaze at the ceiling.

His bulky shoulders shrugged up wearily, speaking with a slow nod. "Don't much know - won't, till he wakes up an' I can get a look at him. Had a few players take some nasty chest hits before - if he's got broke ribs, he'll be hurtin' for a good while. If we're lucky, he's just gotten himself bruised up an' with some rest, takin' it easy, he'll be back to normal real soon."

Rochelle bobbed her head in a simple motion, shaking the jacket out gently. She twisted the bath faucet on gently, its dial still aimed at 'C,' and leaned in to hold the suit under the stream. She gently started to shake and turn it, avoiding the urge to wring it out, letting the water rinse away the bleach and left-over blood.
"Okay." she agreed, voice softened, but distant.

Coach left with a quiet steadiness, something respectful but slightly clueless in how he retreated. He didn't really know how to comfort her. Rochelle didn't look back, lips pinching as he trudged out of the bathroom and back into the living room. Her gaze stayed stoically focused on the jacket.

The bleach and cold water had done wonders for the fabric, though there was a deadened tint to the jacket, tired and worn. The wide stains of blood from Nick's shoulder were almost entirely gone, just faded pink blotches left behind where the worst of it had started to set.

Pleased with her work, though her smile was a little weak, Rochelle let the jacket hold underneath the water for a few more moments. She pulled it open and turned the sleeves, making sure all the bleach had been leeching out of the fabric, and got up to her feet, holding it over the tub.

"The thankless toils of a woman." she ghosted to herself, voice faded.

Stretching her arms up, she carefully folded it over the curtain rod, the jacket dribbling water freely from dangling edges. Stepping back from it, Rochelle peeled her gloves off, sighing as she tossed them over the edge of the tub. She gazed at the limp suit jacket, musingly.

At least I fixed that.

Wiping her hands flat-palmed on her thighs, Rochelle turned away, somewhat quietly leaving the bathroom. Her gaze flicked up to note Coach examining the living room, alert eyes looking for the best way to block up the door, but she angled her steps away.

Instead, Rochelle moved into the hallway just beside her, glancing up at the bedroom Nick and Ellis had taken over. As much as Nick's brooding silence put her on edge, she'd feel better knowing Ellis was still resting as comfortably as they could manage.

Maybe letting him know she was cleaning his jacket would put the gambler in a better mood, too.

That, and she did want him to come out of there at some point so they could talk about everything. Regroup. For all his cynicism and cruel bluntness, Rochelle almost wanted to hear his feelings. It wasn't that she respected his unpleasantness, so much as she needed it.

Maybe hearing 'of course they deserved what they got, they tried to fucking kill us' in that low New Yorker accent, all ego and confidence and biting spite, would actually do her some good.

Stepping down the hall, Rochelle edged up to the door, flattening her hair down on the top of her head with a palm. She reached out to grasp onto the knob, just holding it. Raising her other hand, she gave a gentle knock with her knuckle.

Silence.

Arching a brow slightly, she stood there for just a moment, inhaling. Nick had likely fallen asleep in his chair - something she'd chastise him for when she got the chance. Sleeping in a chair with his shoulder in the state it was...

Gently, Rochelle made to turn the knob, intent on slipping in as quietly as possible - only to have the knob click ineffectually in her hand.

Blinking, her eyes widened a little, examining the face of the shut door. She knew for a fact she hadn't locked it last she left, which could only mean that something had happened - or, for that matter, was happening - that Nick didn't want them to see.
A smile flickered brazenly over her face, and she took a step back from the door. She thumbed over her smiling lower lip and started to turn away, moving to join Coach. She'd interrupted enough, and she had no intention of making more of a nuisance of herself.

At least one thing was still as she expected.
Chapter 92

With the front door blocked up, a coffee table and a few chairs pinning it shut, there was a little bit of security in the tiny house. One of the windows had been broken open, a few scrapes and blood streaks hinting that someone had jumped or been thrown out of it, but someone before them had boarded them up and it was otherwise calm.

Resisting the urge to doze, Coach sat up straight against the back of the small sofa, his arms arranged in a tight cross over the subtle bulge of his weighty gut. Rochelle's body was curled into his lap, arms crossed in front of her face to bury her eyes against them.

Her shoulders rose and fell with the slow breaths of deep sleep, undisturbed even when Coach's frame gave a comfortable rumble as he cleared his throat.

She hadn't said much to him after they'd talked. She seemed introverted, maybe a little distant and even more than that - exhausted. It didn't bother Coach; he could tell that, wholly successful or not, his talk with her had eased some of the distress.

Just the fact that she'd crawled up onto the couch and fell asleep against him said he'd done at least something right.

Deepset eyes flicked down as her head turned, a soft mutter of air escaping her as she buried her face into her elbow. The motion pushed her shoulder slightly against his stomach, one of her socked feet falling off the edge of the sofa to dangle limply.

It made him chuckle, a paternal tenderness to his voice.

Letting one hand lower from the tight cross over his core, he used a thick pinky to flatten a loose braid above her ear. The motion was painfully nostalgic - an automatic reaction, natural to him, just a reflex.

Ro' was strong - brave and serious, ambitious, with soft and gentle sides that were anything but vulnerable. Stubbornly surviving no matter what. She was, he had no doubt in his mind, a picture of the kind of woman his daughter would grow up to be.

Maybe it was stupid to see so much of an eight year-old girl in a twenty nine year-old.. or maybe just human nature, to find comfort in something.

He didn't mind. She seemed to need a father, as much as he needed a daughter - it saddened and made him smile all at once. Every time he called her 'babygirl,' there was a little pang of melancholy in his chest that missed his daughter.

Gazing forward, Coach somewhat tiredly clenched and unclenched his fingers, working the sore joints. They popped and snapped, the immediate pleasure of the sensation ruined by the tension that started settling into the digits the moment he stopped.

Relaxing his head back against the sofa, the football coach eyed the subtle flick and swish of the paint that coated the ceiling.

He was tired. Not just in the literal sense of the word - tired of fighting, of running, of hiding in the faded remnants of a dead city. His knee ached and his shoulders ached even more, and he couldn't help but run through the last few days over and over in his mind.
What things had he done wrong? What errors had passed in his judgement that had cost them?

Where could he have led them differently?

He'd always felt confident leading a team, whether or not everything went perfect. A mistake was a chance to get better - something they could discuss and replay, bounce back from, improve on. But football games hadn't been life or death.

Nothing in his life had ever been as serious as the team he was leading now - suddenly every twist and turn, every decision, haunted him a little. They were doing the best they could, but they weren't doing very well.

Was going to the military a mistake they'd regret? If the Angels were telling the truth, and the military was killing people… but if they didn't seek out the government, what would they do? The idea of letting go of that hope was terrifying.

An unpleasant exhale left him as he rolled his head back up straight, reaching up a hand to feel at the back of his head. Fingertips spread over the healing wound across his skull, pressing slightly.

The scabbing flesh felt soft, more like muscle than crusting flesh. It hurt to touch, and with a slight wince he retracted his hand, flexing his fingers again. At least he'd healed. They were running out of room for error.

A gentle sound from the ceiling snapped his attention up. His brows lifted, gaze narrowing. He held his breath an instant, trying to confirm he'd even heard it.

[Scuff... scuffle... scritchscufflescrich.]

"Babygirl." he gruffed instantly. Reaching down, he gripped onto Rochelle's shoulders, fingers squeezing. "Rochelle, wake up."

She stirred with a quiet squeak of an inhale. Lifting her head, she blinked wearily, brows lifting. "Nnh..? Coach?" One of her hands raised, shoulder rolling in its joint, curling her fingers into a fist to rub at her eyes. "..what's up?"

Soundlessly, Coach lifted a hand and pointed at the ceiling. She lifted her chin, confused, gazing up with her neck sharply sloped to crane upwards.

There was a moment of silence - it happened again just as Rochelle was about to break, lips formed into a confused, "Wh-"

[Rattlescrich. Scuffle.]

Immediately, both of them were in motion, slow and entirely awake. Rochelle leaned away from his side and rolled onto her feet from the couch, a hand dropping to the ground to silently scoop her rifle up.

Coach stood, catching his shotgun from where it leaned against the sofa. He wielded it with a grim set to his jaw, shaking his head. "You think there's an attic, babygirl?"

"I don't know.. I didn't think to look when we were checking the house out.." she whispered back reluctantly, eyes focused on the ceiling, darting to try and pinpoint the noise. "Maybe it's on the roof..?"

"Don't think so. Sounds too close fo' that." Shaking his head, Coach set the stock of his shotgun
against his shoulder and gestured toward the hallway off the living room. "Closet in there, ain't there?"

Rochelle nodded, finger slipping onto the trigger of her rifle as she followed his indication. "May be a trap door to the attic."

Moving slowly, they crossed the living room, breaths vaguely held as Rochelle led the way toward the hallway. Coach considered passing her by and taking the lead, but her footsteps had a swift and fierce drive that made him reconsider.

The closet was a few inches askew from the closed bedroom door. Quietly, Rochelle edged up to the door, slipping up to the threshold and reaching out to grip the knob. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Coach was still with her.

When he nodded, she twisted the door open, glancing into the closet.

There were metal shelves lining the inside of the hall closet, strangely empty but for a couple folded quilts and some boxed-up sports equipment. Light trickled into the small closet from the living room, just the small lamp they'd turned on to keep the house inconspicuous.

The quiet shadow lining a square in the ceiling drew her eye.

Scuff scraaaaatch skitter.

It was louder now. She nodded.

"Yep. Attic." Chocolate-glaze eyes darted back over her shoulder, lifting brows with a slight uncertainty - though not quite hesitance. She shook her head slightly, eyes curious. "What do we do?"

Coach lifted his head slightly. He gazed at the trapdoor built into the ceiling, brows furrowing in a wide crunch. "Should check it out.." he uttered, slowly. That was the obvious option, but there was one problem - there was no way he was getting into the attic. Between his weight and his bad knee, he wouldn't make it.

That left Rochelle.

She must've read the thought on his face, because her jaw suddenly tightened with awareness. Rochelle flashed a hesitant smile, lifting her shoulders. "Lift me up there?"

The big man immediately shook his head in stiff rejection, taking a step back and thumbing over his shoulder. "No chance, babygirl - I'll find a ladder or somethin', go up there myself."

Rochelle reached after him, palm up. Her smile softened, corners lifting as she put her rifle against her shoulder. "Coach, I'm a big girl. C'mon. I'll just hop up on those big strong shoulders of yours and take a peek. Okay?"

Frowning an instant, Coach examined her. A bottled-up kind of affection touched his chest, exhaling deeply in half-amused frustration. "Child, where does yo' ass get off bein' that stubborn? That how yo' parents raised you?"

She beamed a small grin, nudging the air in his direction with a knuckle and giving a little laugh. "Nah, but you've been doing a good job teaching me."

Scuttlescritch.. scuff.
Coach would've laughed if he hadn't been too busy sighing and hanging his head.

Shoving his arm through the strap of his shotgun, Coach edged forward and slipped into the doorway of the closet. He dropped down to a knee, letting his bad one stay slightly straight, and lowered his head. "Go on then."

Giving a gentle pat onto his shoulder before she moved, Rochelle stepped closer to swing a leg over his neck. It was an awkward little scoot that got her seated on his shoulders, wobbling slightly as his height lifted her feet off the ground.

She gave a little "whoa," voice turning slightly serious as Coach gripped her legs just above the knees. His shoulders were wide and strong, though weakened from disuse. There were tangible echoes of a broad-shouldered, youthful football player.

Setting her free hand at the inch or two of shoulder to the side of her left knee, Rochelle lifted her chin, eyeing the ceiling. She pushed her jaw forward slightly, fingers squeezing on his shoulder. Steeling herself with a sigh, she gazed at the attic entrance.

"Okay, papa bear." Rochelle ushered him on, nodding her head. She gripped her rifle tightly with her free hand, gesturing up at the ceiling. "Lift me up."

Sighing reluctantly, Coach tightened his grip on Rochelle's knees and pushed himself up, sturdy as he slowly reached his feet. Rochelle kept her eyes on the ceiling, brows tensing over her eyes as she got closer to the trap door.

It got within arms reach as Coach set his knees to a half bend. She gave a soft "okay," and Coach stillled with a small wobble. His head craned up just a twitch, gazing mistrustfully up at the ceiling as he did.

"Careful, babygirl." he grunted quietly, holding his position steadily. He unhappily watched her raise up her gun, using the end of the barrel to push the trap door up out of its frame.

It didn't have a hinge; it was just a square piece of wood, placed into notches, and she somewhat clumsily got it nudged up and scooted it out of the way. In its absence, there was just a black square of dead air.

Scri-

A noise that had started ended just as fast, freezing to silence. The lack of sound was noisy all on its own, white noise that set her heart to a nervous beat.

She blinked up into the blackness, freezing up a little.

"Hey, do you -"

Without a word, Coach reached down to scoop his flashlight out of his pocket and flick it on. He raised it up, offering it to her, a little soberly. She forced a smile and raised her steadying hand off of his shoulder, taking the flashlight from him with a mumbled, "Thanks."

Straightening her spine, Rochelle stretched her head up closer to the hole in the ceiling, feeling Coach lifting underneath her to help the motion. Directing the flashlight above her head, the woman gave a slightly nervous breath and pecked.

Her face breached the edge of the attic trap door. She trailed a quick gaze around in a circle, tensely quick in the motion to look all around her, desperate to pick out what was making the noise -
- and then she shrieked, "Oh God!"

The flashlight dropped out of her hands so fast it nearly clocked Coach in the head, and her rifle almost followed. She violently arched up her hand to shove against the ceiling, trying to push herself down. "Oh God! Put me down! Coach!"

Dropping instantly to his knee, he reached up and grasped fingers tight in the loose grey T-shirt that had replaced her pink one. Coach dragged her forcefully off his shoulders, getting her as far from the ceiling as possible by practically carrying her to the ground.

She was still gasping out little squeaking curses, limply tumbling down half to the floor as he pulled her fiercely. "Christ -"

"Ro', what?! What, babygirl?! Is it a zombie?" Coach grasped her shoulders, shaking her just a gentle inch, voice fervent. She quickly shook her head, lifting up a hand to roughly rub over her face.

"N-No." she negated, voice giving a little shake. "No. It's a.. it's a body. There's a dead body right.. right there. It.. Its face is blown off. And - there were -" Rochelle might have finished her sentence had a scuffle not sounded above their heads, darting her eyes up. She merely pointed at the open hole in the ceiling.

Coach blinked at her for an instant, jaw setting. He lifted up his chin, gazing at the dark attic to follow her gesture. Slowly, moving like sparkling little termites, a few glittering eyes peeked over the edge of the open hole.

Rats.

One of them, frantic with twitchy curiosity, gripped a tiny, clawed paw onto the edge of the attic doorway and leaned down. Bloody whiskers framed a twitching nose just before it disappeared, darting into the darkness.

Coach slid a hand around her shoulders, comfortingly squeezing her as she closed her eyes. "Alright, babygirl. Breathe, child, you're alright."

Rochelle buried her face quickly in his shoulder for just an instant, trying to regain her composure, then pushed away with a shiver. "I'm okay, Coach. It just startled me, that's all... God. Zombie apocalypse, and I get scared by rats. … I think they're trying to... eat him."

The sharp click of an unlocking door sounded an instant before Nick burst from the bedroom door just on the other side of the hall from them, taking a half-step out to quickly get a lock on where they were. His shirt hung open, the lightly hair-darkened stretch of his chest subtly heaving with honest adrenaline. Green eyes were lit with hostility, burning and fierce, driven by an almost protective anger.

With ever-sharp intonation and a narrowing of harsh pupils, Nick spat out the one thing that - to him - always seemed the best of ways to react to a situation.

"The fuck?"
Chapter 93

Gazing up at the open attic doorway, Nick crossed his good arm over his chest, injured shoulder loose in the joint as his other arm dangled. He tensed his jaw, agitated, dragging his thumb along the fabric of his shirt.

"Rats." he growled. "It had to be shitty rats. Of all the fucking things."

Rochelle stood just at his elbow, hands gripping at the edge of her shirt and curling fingers in it. Her expression was just slightly nervous, and she gave a shake of her head. "Maybe we shouldn't mess with it. We thought it was a zombie, but it's not, so.. let's just.."

The gambler shrugged up his good shoulder, sighing. "I'd like to know they're not mutant zombie rats that'll come down and munch on us when they're done up there." Green eyes flicked over his shoulder, pointedly. "Besides, I'm awake now, thanks to your girly screams."

Huffing, Rochelle thrust up her elbows and glared at him, no small affront lacing her voice. "You try sticking your head up into an attic and getting.. ugh. The body's right by the entrance, I practically touched it."

Rolling his eyes at the disgust on her face, Nick gestured up at the ceiling. "Maybe there's supplies up there we could use, anyway. Guy probably tried to set himself up in there."

"Is it worth it?" she questioned dubiously, nose wrinkling slightly as she looked back up at the open hole.

Nick gave a snort, reaching down to slip his new Magnum from his thigh holster, running his thumb gracefully over the cold metal. "Of course not."

Coach re-emerged from the other half of the house, a folded stepladder gripped in his left hand. He raised it a little in a slow gesture, sighing. "Here, Nick. I hauled babygirl up there on my shoulders, but let's skip that shit."

The gambler flashed a subtle smirk, one fairly unamused. He watched Coach put the stepladder in place, the metal bars creaking unfolded with an unpleasant rattle. "Color me disappointed."

Coach gave him a healthy look of annoyance, stepping back as he got the stepladder set up. Unimpressed, the big man gestured up it, offering Nick the flashlight held in his other hand. "Get yo' ass up there, Nick."

Grumbling airlessly, Nick snatched the light out of his hand - using his bad arm to wield it - as he raised his Magnum up by his cheek, slipping his finger onto the trigger cautiously. He turned to set a foot onto the first step of the ladder, glancing up into the attic.

The flashlight sent a square of off-yellow light shooting up to the arched ceiling of the squat attic, oddly still. If he listened, he could actually hear a rat squeak quietly above his head, startled by the light.

Agitated and scowling, Nick climbed the next two steps in quick succession, his head and shoulders breachin the attic doorway all in one fierce surge. The flashlight gripped by his other hand was only slightly helpful, as it seemed to scatter more shadows than it lit up.

There must've been nine or ten rats all gathered around him in this cultish mob, blood and dust
turning their brown-flecked fur a matted black. Glittering eyes all turned on him at once, anxious energy flicking tails and whiskers in strange patterns that communicated feral hunger.

*Oh fuck me.*

Nick took his flashlight and swung it at them, light-first, like it were a torch.

Grim satisfaction touched his expression as the rat horde burst into terrified squeaks and scattered like so many ants. They disappeared into the darkness and the nooks and crannies of a dusty attic.

"Mutant zombie rats my ass." he announced back down to Coach and Rochelle, smirking. He heard Rochelle sigh, in a mix of relief and annoyance, and he reached up his good arm to hook it on the edge of the trap door.

Grunting carefully, Nick forced his other arm up, too, getting a grip on the square hole. Pain arched through his shoulder as he pushed, and a small noise of discomfort escaped him, starting to haul himself through.

He felt Coach grip his ankles from the ground, pushing up to help, and between them Nick got himself wormed up into the attic. He went doubled over on the edge, weightless, then kicked up to shove himself the rest of the way.

"Agh." he muttered in self-sympathy, twisting around to sit on the floor, legs still dangled. He'd just started to straighten out his clothing, nursing his shoulder a bit, when he noticed what was across from him on the other side of the attic entrance.

A man laid face-up on the floor, his chin cocked up so fiercely it was like he'd snapped his neck. A bullet hole was messily gouged through the center of his face, shattering bone and scattering flesh.

He must've shot into the roof of his mouth in the hopes of a quick suicide, but panicked or lost the nerve. It had fired through his nose and eyes, not through the back of his head like it should have. The result was a horrifying mess of disfigured features.

Nick screwed his face up in disgust, directing his flashlight at the ruined visage looking him dead-on. Bone, teeth, skin, and the weird bulge of bloodshot eyes half-out of their sockets made him barely recognizable as human.

The rat's work had gnawed deep into meaty skin, and the gambler could actually pick out teethmarks scraped along the white plates of a bared cheekbone.

"Chrissakes." he muttered privately, wiping a wrist over his mouth as if to stop himself from inhaling the gory air. "Guy shot himself." he announced down, sliding his legs up into the attic space carefully.

Getting his feet under himself, he scanned his flashlight up onto the ceiling. Blood and speckles of white splattered the wood panels above the body. "Yeah. Guess we can be glad the rats didn't kill him." Rochelle mumbled from below. "Anything else?"

Nick shrugged slightly, turning around to scan the attic. "Let me look." His heartbeat was a steady, but quick, thumping in his chest, muted by the conscious denial that there was anything to fear.

"Be careful, sweetheart." Rochelle warned softly.

There was very little there - some wadded-up insulation in one corner, turned into a nest by the rats that had now returned to it, the pink cotton twitching and shifting. On the other side, there was a
blanket centered along that wall, swaddled into a small circle like a bed.

A notebook sat open in the middle of the blanket, a few candles long-burnt out on small plates around it, one of which sat next to a radio that seemed the focal point of the tiny camp.

There was a pile of food trash in the corner, shoved as far away as possible, and the smell of souring preservatives hung like a smog in the air. Bottles of water lined the walls here and there, some empty, some full - and some dark with a musky yellow liquid Nick refused to consider for long.

He would've completely turned around and just gone right back downstairs, had his flashlight not flickered over the lonely shape of a woman lying limp in the other corner of the attic.

"Shit." he uttered, going stiff. It wasn't a Witch - there was no sobbing, no emaciated bones jutting out at odd angles.

Her pale body was dressed only in a string bikini, upper body covered by a T-shirt that was far too large for her and stained by blood and black, crusting dribbles. She was utterly still, slumped against the wall.

Was she dead? He couldn't tell.

One of her arms was stretched up, bent awkwardly at the elbow to arch her forearm up into the air. She was tied by the wrist to a post against the wall, a bloodied belt binding her with a force that had reddened and swollen her fingers.

Clawmarks gouged into her forearm and the base of her hand, like she'd tried to claw the bound limb off - like an animal chewing through a trapped leg.

Nick could only utter, "Shiiiiit."

"Nick?" Rochelle called up, maybe hearing his curses or maybe not hearing anything at all. "Hey, suit, how's it going up there?"

The gambler approached one step at a time, moving slow and easy, gaze fixed on the corpse suspiciously. As he drew closer, a strange noise breached his consciousness - the radio wasn't dead. It was on, at a soft volume that just barely reached him.

Nudged.

... nothing...

Then she vaulted suddenly up, moving like a person possessed, a shriek of rage escaping her full-force as she snapped toward him. She reached the end of her bound arm like a dog reaching the end of its leash, an audible crack sounding from her shoulder as she jerked against her bonds.

A pale face was gaunt with illness and lined by stringy brown hair, eyes lit to a gleaming yellow, and she gnashed bloody teeth with spittle and trickling black vomit trailing from her mouth at every breath.

Nick shouted out of surprise, immediately cracking off a shot from his Magnum. The sound boomed in the claustrophobic attic, ringing in his ears and echoing through the floor. He missed her head, though, as surprise had him staggering backwards - and stepping directly onto an emboldened rat, its squeak cut off as he crushed it underfoot.

The slip of blood had him tripping back onto his rear on the attic floor, swearing fiercely. "Fuckin'!

The bullet pierced her shoulder, whizzing into the wall behind her, but she didn't so much as twitch as flesh and blood sprayed with the hit. Snarling and screaming, the infected woman jerked and yanked at her bound wrist, legs going akimbo with her desperation.

He was vaguely aware of Rochelle shouting, scuffling announcing her immediate vaulting up the stepladder to come after him. He didn't bother to look over, staring instead at the woman seizing before him, as he re-aimed his flashlight to pour light over her struggle.

It was mesmerizing - pure feral hunger, absolutely incoherent. No ability to register anything but her target, and what was keeping her from her target.

The light only seemed to enrage her further.

She started to wheel around, free hand going for her bound wrist. Fingernails dug into flesh, tearing skin out by the inch, and she ducked forward to bury her teeth into the side of her hand, gnashing on the tied-up limb with a gurgling scream as her own blood pooled into her mouth.

Rochelle clambered up with a sudden clatter and tumble, rifle raising to protrude defensively in front of herself as she messily shoved her body up into the attic. "Nick, are you -" and then she saw the zombie, starting, brows shooting up as her eyes took in the woman.

"Holy - We're okay, Coach! We're okay!" Her voice was a little frantic, approaching in a side-step to get closer to Nick. Brown eyes, black in the darkness, flicked toward him, worriedly. "You alright, suit? She didn't get you or anything, did she?"

Nick shook his head in short order, lifting his Magnum to gesture at the bound infected. She gave a shriek of anger, twisting her body violently and clawing out her free hand, blood trickling down her fingers and bloodied teeth bared in rage. "Not a chance. I got her in the shoulder, but I don't think it did much."

Rochelle stared at the woman worriedly, finger still on the trigger of her rifle, not relaxing in the slightest. Her arm was tense with the urge to shoot, but something about the woman's helplessness.. the vulnerability of her bindings..

She was a snarling, rage-embroiled beast, but her body and her face were too close to human to
dull the resemblance.

"Whut's goin' on?! 'Ey, whut's happenin'?! Guys!!"

Ellis' voice mewled from downstairs, his voice staggered as walking must've been beyond painful. Concern poured from his voice, almost scared. Coach's rough baritone instantly spoke up, too low and gruff to really be understood, moving away from them as he must've started herding the kid back to bed.

Fully aware he'd fight without confirmation they were okay beyond Coach's word, Nick twisted his head, calling with a fierce tone. "Lay back down, dumbshit."

The ruckus downstairs quieted.

Nick and Rochelle re-focused on the woman, cautiously. She'd returned to trying to gnaw through her wrist, little pained growls and snarls bubbling through her teeth and blackened blood poured down her arm in crusty layers. She chewed against bone she'd begun to bare, the sound awful and grating.

He was the one to suggest it, voice firmed with a confident tension. "Should we kill her?"

Rochelle gave an awkward half-shrug, forcing a nod as she raised up her rifle, aiming carefully at the woman's face. "Yeah.. I guess. She's completely gone."

The zombie snapped her face back forward, suddenly locking sights on Rochelle's gun, like she was aware of her impending doom. The fact seemed to balk Rochelle, uncertainly fingering the trigger.

In an instant, Nick lifted his Magnum and buried a bullet straight into the center of the zombie woman's head. She snapped back, collapsing against the wall, going silent and still all in one sharp motion. Her yellow eyes fell to a dull glow.

Rochelle jumped, but only slightly, lowering her rifle with a slow blink. She glanced at Nick, chin dropping. "... thanks." she managed softly. He responded with a minor smirk, slipping his Magnum back into the holster at his thigh.

He stood up with a careful motion, mindful to step over the crushed rat just in front of him. Rochelle reached out to put a hand under his elbow and help him up, assistance he accepted without acknowledging it.

Laying his hand on his injured shoulder, Nick turned to face the swaddled-up blanket, using his other hand to aim the flashlight. He approached with cautious footsteps, immediately bending down to shut the radio off and stop the incessant crackling. The notebook caught his attention next, and with a small grunt, he dropped to a knee next to the camplike nest.

Rochelle slipped up behind him as he scooped up the notebook. It was open to a page, the writing scrawled in messy clumps down the face of the page with a pencil. Tipping his flashlight onto the paper, he focused on working out what it said, ignoring the woman bending down to read over his shoulder.
Flicking backwards with his thumb, Nick noted there were entries before it - a few just as broken and incoherent, slowly growing neater and more sensible until he reached empty pages and stopped.

He only glanced over the other entries before shutting the book, disgust wrinkling his nose. Rochelle seemed slightly startled when he did, straightening up, her expression sober as she turned her chin to glance over the attic room.

"They must've locked themselves up in here.. tried to hide." she murmured, wiping her wrist against her mouth slowly. "Poor things.."

Nick laughed, getting to his feet. He tossed the notebook onto the blankets, abandoning it like so much trash, and gave a one-shouldered shrug at her. "Poor cheating fuckers, you mean. Our zombie friend over there was definitely not his wife."

Rochelle gave him a slight frown, crossing her arms over her chest tightly. "The guy's dead, Nick.. him being a cheater's probably the last thing we should be thinking about. Can't imagine you were the type to be faithful, either."

She said it offhandedly - but it left a bruise. Nick just smirked at her hollowly, grim face only half-lit by his flashlight, and gestured for her to move. A strand of dark hair fell onto his forehead in a subtle curl.

"There's nothing up here. Just bodies and rats. Let's go. We'll lock it up and forget about it." His voice cut, something dark touching his gaze. Rochelle backed up a little, nodding quickly in faintly apologetic hurry. She hadn't meant to hurt him - hadn't expected it to.

Nick slipped past her, using his flashlight to make sure his footsteps were clear of rats. The vermin had started to wander back out, hungry. He approached the attic entrance, starting to crouch down and begin the descent.

Standing there, gripping her biceps, Rochelle called gently after him. "I cheated on Jacob once, you know, Nick.. he didn't deserve it, no matter what he'd done to drive me to it." Rochelle shook her head, chewing at her lower lip, regretfully. "I don't claim to be perfect.. I didn't mean.. I'm sorry."
As one foot slipped over the edge, Nick stopped.

Green eyes flicked up, then over his shoulder, gazing back toward Rochelle. He flashed a smirk, unamused, and shook his head. Slowly, as if she were so wrong he could only laugh at her. "Want to know something funny?"

She blinked at him gently, questioningly.

His voice lowered. It was just a growl in the stale air. "The first time I ever cheated on my ex, I actually confessed it to her the next day. Told her I didn't know how to stop myself. I even said I wouldn't mind if she left me for it, because I knew I'd never get better, and she deserved better. You know what she did?"

A tiny shake of her head tried to encourage him, gentle, Rochelle's fingers lacing together softly.

"Batted those stupid fucking doe-eyes at me. Said 'Sorry, were we not supposed to?'"

A sharp and derisive snort left the gambler, and in one swift motion, he jostled his hips to swing himself down out of the attic, reaching feet onto the stepladder. He disappeared downstairs all in one flash of blue and a restrained swear.

"Bitch."

Rochelle gazed after him for a moment, sympathy straining at her expression as she frowned. It was probably that very sympathy that Nick so quickly left to avoid seeing. The sobering reality of that thought had Rochelle sighing her expression flat after an instant.

She turned around on an impulse, bending down gently and snatching the notebook up. She tucked it into the waistband of her jeans, pulling her shirt over it as if to hide it. Rochelle had no idea where the urge had come from, all she knew was she wanted the journal.

The ring-bound paperback notebook was cold against her stomach as she hurried after Nick, not eager to be alone in the attic.
"I'm so glad you're okay!"

Rochelle's attention was almost overwhelming as she doted over Ellis' form, cupping hands on his cheeks and nuzzling her nose to his in a fervent gesture. He laughed helplessly, wincing and flinching as the laughter seized his chest up, but undaunted.

"You had us so worried. I can't tell you how hard it is to see you this hurt!"

Ellis reached up his hands, weak fingers clasping over hers on his face, and grinned - huge and brilliant under all the affection. It was the kind of smile that melted icebergs. "Girl, c'mon. Like a li'l beatin's gonna stop me. Just need some rest is all."

Nick stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed over his stomach. His shirt was rebuttoned, but only half tucked into his slacks, and his expression was indifferent as he looked on. It was easy to distance himself when the 'reunion' was the second time he'd seen Ellis up and aware - not that he wouldn't've played calloused and uncaring regardless.

Coach approached the bedside a bit forcefully, managing to wedge himself close enough to offer a hand to Ellis. The kid's grin softened, craning his head as he stretched out his hand to clasp Coach's, their fingers curling over the other's palm in a playful kind of handshake.

"Good to see you up an' talkin', son. Had us worried." he gruffed affectionately, brow crunching up as he gave a smile, teeth showing with honest emotion.

Ellis gave a smile and somewhat tiredly laid his head against the pillow underneath it, letting his hand slip to touch his chest and graze over the shape of his ribcage. "Nah, man... just glad y'all're okay, too. Man. I ain't never gonna leave y'all like that again!" He shook his head gently, a soft sigh escaping his lips as his shoulders nestled into the mattress.

A sarcastic snort grunted out of Nick's throat, brows arching as he returned somewhat lowly, "Damn. I liked the break."

Despite the fact Ellis grinned weakly, unaffected by the statement, Coach flashed Nick a dark glance anyway, shaking his head. "Can't bullshit that one, boy. Ro' an' I saw yo' ass freakin' out, same as us." It earned him a long stare from irked green eyes, the big man confidently returning it.

The two probably would've launched into a full-scale war had Rochelle not loudly spoken up, smiling warmly at Ellis from where she sat beside his hip on the mattress. "That must've been the stupidest, greatest plan I've ever seen play out." She leaned forward, eyes almost rapt on Ellis' face as he broke into a tiny blush. "What even made you think to do that?"

He chuckled, voice softening as he relaxed into the boneless exhaustion of his body. "Well, I dunno. Just heard them Witches all cryin', 'n'I remembered how Nick ran into that one who done got distracted by all that sugar, remember?"

Nick's jaw set, chin raising as a brow arched in disbelief. "Aw, I'm inspiration." he stuck in, tone mocking.

Ellis continued as if he hadn't even heard him, though the edges of his plump-lipped mouth quirked up in a tiny grin. "Just sorta got the idea, 'cause there was this li'l store real close by. All happened real quick."
Putting her hands into an open-palmed gesture to urge him on, Rochelle hummed in a little half-sympathetic, half-impressed swoon, intentionally trying to pump up his ego. "Just like that? I'm just amazed you came up with it so fast, and under all that pressure."

Embarrassed, Ellis quickly - in that 'aw shucks' fashion that came so naturally to his sweetened tone - shook the praise off, raising a hand to gently scratch fingertips underneath his cap. "It ain't nothin', Ro'. You hear 'bout folks all the time doin' real crazy shit tuh save the folks they love'n'such. I was just tryin' tuh protect y'all, that's all."

Coach crossed his arms, grinning lightly. His voice was a bit skeptical - but playfully so. "How'd you know it was gonna work?" he questioned, brow crunching up over his shaded eyes. "We didn't know it attracted 'em like that."

Ellis raised up his shoulders tenderly, chuckling a little with a lowered chin. "Risk worth the takin' - I had tuh do somethin'. Yuh don't always know things'll work, but you don't get nowhere not testin' 'em out. Learned that from Keith. 'Course, he also gets himself junked up doin' that, so."

"Certainly saved our butts." Rochelle grinned, reaching down to brush knuckles against his cheek. "Ellis, my hero!"

His tiny blush turned to a full-scale redness, grinning hugely as he rolled his chin away with a mumbled protest. He gently scratched at his neck, blinking slowly. "I just wanted tuh get y'all safe, that's all. 'N' hey, now we know how tuh get around them Witches if we need!"

Coach chuckled, tightening the cross of his arms and glancing down at his shoes. "Well, if sugar attracts 'em, too, I ain't keepin' that shit on me. Fo' sho'."

A snort escaped Nick, glancing at the eldest with an arching brow and lowering shoulders. He spoke with the utmost sarcasm, rolling his eyes up sharply. "Apocalypse warriors - a gun in one hand, a bag of sugar in the other."

Breaking into sudden half-giggles, Ellis slipped his hands underneath his head, arms crooking to nestle his head into them. "Hoh man. I was pretty damn badass, wasn't I?"

The gambler took a slight step back to let his posture fall to an idle swagger, retorting, "That wasn't exactly what I meant." He'd have continued had Rochelle not clapped her hands on her thighs gently, straightening where she sat.

"Okay, okay. Enough chatter, boys. You two - " she thumbed at Nick and Coach, both stiffening at the gesture like guilty schoolboys. "- shoo. I'll check him out and figure out what kind of injuries we're dealing with."

Both of the men seemed ready to argue, though their reasons were most likely different, but Rochelle was on her feet and chasing them out before they could get a word in edgewise. "Out, out." she commanded, urging with her hands to get them out of the bedroom.

Coach obeyed somewhat easily, but Nick tried to turn back at the last instant and snap at her. Rochelle whacked at his bicep sharply, voice demanding but grin gentle. "Keep moving, asshole."

Nick just muttered a curse and stormed out.

Sighing softly, Rochelle closed the door, turning back to smile at Ellis, the hick in the midst of gingerly trying to sit up in bed. "You okay, sweetheart?"

He nodded eagerly, smiling gently back. "Yeah. I mean, it hurts, but not so bad." Lifting his hand,
he pressed it cautiously to his chest. "Worried I broke somethin', though... hurts tuh breathe, 'n'move'n'such." A little chuckle, then cough, expression sobering, punctuated the statement.

She gave a nod of sympathy, approaching, settling down on the edge of the bed gently. "Okay, sweetie. I'm gonna try and figure that out. Shirt off for me?"

At the words, Ellis immediately turned an interesting shade of red, suddenly crossing his arms over his chest like the protective clasp of a shirtless girl. "U-uh - I'm fine, Ro'. You ain't gotta do nothin'." She arched a brow. "I just need rest is all."

"Oh, sweetie." She sighed gently, lifting a hand to rub fingertips at the bridge of her nose in slight, creeping exasperation. "I've seen men shirtless before. I'm sure you're very impressive, but it's nothing I haven't experienced before."

Ellis' blush darkened, spreading over his cheeks and lighting his ears at the tips. "Um. Naw, I ain't - well, okay.. I'm a li'l shy, but - that ain't.. it.. exactly."

Rochelle arched up her brows, expectantly, cocking her head. She smiled with simplistic affection, amused at his struggle. "Yes, sweetie?"

Voice getting even lower, Ellis whispered nervously, gaze flickering anywhere but Rochelle's face as his expression struggled in and out of a look of mortification. "W-well.. Nick sorta.. y'know, I woke up, 'n' - 'n'we kinda - Well, he sorta left'uh.. li'l.."

He barely even ghosted the word; ".hickey."

Sighing slightly, Rochelle lowered her chin, smile turning wide with a certain exasperated humor. She tried to control her voice and keep it fairly level, coaxing him in a confiding whisper. "I already know about you two, it's not like I'm gonna be surprised. I just want to look at your side, okay?"

Ellis' face was beet red, completely horrified - an expression that was excruciatingly cute on his face - as he scooted reluctantly and carefully back against the headboard to sit up. "If it'll make you feel better, I won't even say anything." she promised.

He moved with a hurried embarrassment, silent now, trying to get it over with as fast as he could. Gripping fingers onto the edge of his shirt, he worked it up his torso without moving his body too much, frowning. As the shirt pulled up over his head and he crumpled it up to lay it in his lap, baring bruised and battered skin, Rochelle's eyes widened.

First in sympathy, then in shock. The full weight of Ellis' injury struck her, the puddled colors over his chest and the angry shading along a visibly tender rib. "Oh, Ellis -" she started to gasp, frowning in genuine horror at the bruising on his sternum - and then she saw what had stirred his embarrassment.

Just along the edge of his left nipple, tracing the circle of delicate, darkened skin, was the obvious pink shadow of a hickey. The skin was flushed softly from the attentions of a careful mouth, innocently pink colored compared to the dark purples and blues of Ellis' injuries.

Rochelle collapsed into a wholehearted burst of laughter, utterly surprised.

Ellis' brows went shooting into a crunch, lower lip dragging out in a horrified pout as his blush burned on his face. "Ro'! Oh muh - Ro'! I knew I shoulda just -" He yanked his shirt back up against his chest protectively to hide himself, ears bright red and voice stuttered. "Q-quit laughin'!"
She tried - ineffectually - to stop herself, putting her hands up in quick defense, waving fingers a little. "I-I'm sorry! It just caught me offguard, that's all. I thought you meant.. on your neck or something, not - oh jeez.." Rochelle started to lose it again, lips twitching as she tried her best to stop the restrained laughter that escaped her between words. "God, we were out there worrying about you, and Nick was in here -"

"C'mon! C'mon, Ro'.." The Georgian frowned heavily, posture beyond mortified. He shifted the shirt against his chest, trying to cover himself even more. "Just ferget 'bout it, will yuh..? I'm embarrassed enough already..

Nodding quickly, Rochelle forced a smile to help stifle her laughter, reaching down hands to pat his leg gently. "Right, right. I'm sorry. I'll stop." She dropped her chin a little, smiling at him soothingly. "Okay?"

Slowly, with visible embarrassed reluctance, Ellis lowered the shirt to his lap, frowning heavily as he let his shoulders relax. He huffed out stuffily, blinking, "Okay."

She grinned at him affectionately, scooting forward softly and leaning down to get a look at his bruises, speaking quietly. "Sorry, sweetheart… Just… as long as he didn't make you hurt yourself. You were supposed to be resting. Lech."

Biting her lower lip to further fight her smile, Rochelle focused on his injuries. She gently traced the line of his rib, feeling along the bone and palpating the section in the hopes of understanding the injury. It felt in one piece to her, nothing moving or shifting out of place.

Break or not, the touch erased any lingering blush from Ellis' face. "Aah - ooww.\" she whined, rolling his head back as pain fluttered over his expression, weight shifting. She pulled back immediately, frown deepening as she flexed her fingers, sighing.

"Can you breathe deep?"

He obeyed, reluctantly, taking a large and slow breath that expanded his chest. He winced near the tail-end, but nodded, exhaling with a smack of his lips. "Yeah… Don't feel nice, but it ain't bad."

She nodded. "I don't think it's broken, but it's definitely not good. Maybe it cracked under all the stress from this." Raising a hand to touch onto his breastbone, she examined the bruising on his chest, so tangibly in a bootprint shape. Rochelle didn't say anything, though - not a word.

There was no use in questioning it, anyway. She figured what it was from.

"Does it hurt here, too?" she asked gently, tenderly tracing the bruising. The bruising was a little more even and lighter than on his side, but worry still dragged her expression down.

The Georgian shook his head slightly, eyes lowered to look over her hand. "Not too bad.. just when I breathe, it kinda tenses up funny-like. Sorta hurts, 'specially when I move, but it ain't awful or nothin'."

She nodded, rubbing her jaw with her thumb carefully as her other hand lingered on the bruise, unhappily gazing over his torso. "Wonder what we could do to help it heal.\" she murmured to herself.

The examination made him fidget slightly, self-conscious, and a nervous chuckle escaped him. "I ever tell you 'bout the time muh buddy Keith tried tuh skate up the side of a tree?"

Smiling gently, Rochelle let herself laugh. "Haven't heard that one.\" She shifted, turning her waist
and letting herself settle a little bit against the headboard beside him. He adjusted with a little grunt to accommodate her, slipping an arm over her shoulders and settling her against his side.

Turning his chin, Ellis let his cheek set against her shoulder. He closed his eyes, glad to change the subject - and gladder to be talking about something. "Thing was, he'd been watchin' too many cartoons... he was only like thirteen, mind... 'n'he got all convinced gravity didn't really matter so long's you were goin' fast 'nough."

Her brows raised, already sensing trouble.

"So, he takes this skateboard, right? From his bro' - 'cause before Paul got kinda big he skated all the time.. so he takes it'n'convinces me to help push him down this hill. We get him aimed real careful at a tree. He didn't know how tuh skate, really, y'know."

Ellis bobbed his head gently, gesturing with the pinky of his other hand. "We got all the way up tuh the top'uh this hill, he gets on the skateboard.. I start pushin' him, 'n'he starts goin' down. He's yellin'n'flailin' his arms, barely stayin' on the darn thing. Picks up speed faster than a cat whut's got his tail on fire."

There was a little pause.

".. that's another story, too. The cat was okay, though."

Rochelle resisted the urge to grin, tipping her head into the nook of his arm and closing her eyes.

"Anyway, turns out gravity don't much care how fast yer goin'. He didn't go up the tree - went straight into it. Doctor said if he'd been goin' much faster, he'd'uh died. He had splinters over ninety-five percent'uh his body. All the nasty places, too! Broke like two ribs."

Cringing in sympathy, Ellis lifted up his chin to gaze at the ceiling, grinning with a little cough as his chest gave an ache. "Anyway, moral'uv the story is, he didn't get no cast or nothin'. They said there weren't no way tuh bandage up ribs, 'n'it actually made it worse or somethin'. Keith was supposed tuh stay outta trouble while he healed up. 'Course he didn't, but.. y'know."

The woman gave a laugh, shaking her head. She reached a hand to touch at the bruises along his rib, musingly, expression now thoughtful. "Guess that means you're due for some bed rest. Imagine we can hole up here while we figure everything out."

Ellis gave her a little blink, head cocking as he aptly noticed the phrasing. "Is somethin' up..? Thought we was gettin' tuh the shore to signal CEDA, like we been plannin'."

Rochelle's voice wavered a little, not wholly certain. She quickly smiled and shifted forward, crawling out from the embrace to get up to her feet gently. "Of course, honey, don't worry about it." she soothed, like a parent to a child who'd just noticed they were upset. "You just focus on resting."

The kid frowned. He wasn't stupid - but he didn't want to push her, either. He was too tired to press the issue. "'Kay, Ro'. Just lemme know if somethin's up, alright?"

She smiled at him, reaching over to cup a hand on his cheek. She petted her thumb on his cheekbone, brows softening. "I'll try and get Nick back in here, okay?" she whispered with a little wink.

Ellis broke into a muted blush, quickly ducking away from her and sighing out an exasperated, "Ro'..."
With a laugh, she pulled away. "Sorry, sorry.." she said, though her expression was far from apologetic. Moving toward the door and opening it to retreat outside, Rochelle only stopped when Ellis chirped after her.

"Hey, Ro'..?"

She glanced back, raising a brow expectantly.

Ellis smiled maybe a little shyly, the tiny quirk brilliant on the bashfully dipped plane of his face, shaded by the bill of his cap. "... Was he really freakin' out when y'all weren't sure where I was?"

Rochelle's quick grin before she closed the door was more than answer enough.
Chapter 95

Nick frowned heavily, fingertips tapping on his thighs as he stood leaned against the kitchen wall. His shoulder ached, sore and abused, and he felt uneasy irritation flooding his system.

Maybe he didn't like someone else taking care of Ellis. It was a stupid kind of possessiveness, agitated at being chased out from what he'd claimed as his post. Now he stood stiffly waiting, silently boring holes in the opposite wall with his gaze.

It was made even worse by the fact he knew he'd left a mark on Ellis' chest. Ellis was an awful liar. He could only hope Rochelle didn't notice amidst all the other bruising... or that the hickey, light as it was, had faded already.

He should've known better than to put a mark on him like that, but it was too late to more than distantly chide himself for letting himself get so lost in the moment. It had just happened; teething and sucking pleasure out of the kid.

And Ellis' reactions had been worth it.

Nick struggled with the images floating to the surface in his mind's eye, so vivid he could still recall every single detail. It was a dreamy reality in his head, punctuated by the soft echo of how Ellis' voice had buckled into whimpers and heated puffs in the air.

Maybe Ellis had messed around with girlfriends and cuddled, kissed - but Nick was the first one to take him, pin him down and thrust into the warm space of his body till neither of them could breathe. Ellis took every gesture and touch like it was a new, aweing experience.

It was ... nice.

The kid may not have known how to fuck, but he was learning - and his body was raw and tantalizing perfection. Tight ass, soft skin. Rough, tactile hands. Lean, tapered hips that fit perfectly into Nick's grip.

Worked masculinity built into the strength of his arms and chest, an active and young body, eager to please and enjoy and blossom under the attention.. Bright, innocent eyes, quick to haze with flattering ecstasy. An honest and reactive voice that confided more truth in a gasp than most of Nick's lovers had in the whole of his life.

And then there were his lips.

_The Holy Grail of Georgia, I fucking swear._

Every time they parted with that warm, pinkened softness to utter a breath, or a quiet little 'Nick,' the gambler felt the urge to drag him to his knees and get fingers in his hair.. pull his chin up, catch those blue eyes..

Nick didn't realize how deeply entrenched he was in that train of thought until a sudden tight pulse in his gut suddenly warned him he was dangerously risking setting his body off.

_Teaches me to skip getting off. Fuck, I need to stop thinking._

He gave a tight grunt, furrowing his brows in slight annoyance at the easy interest of his body. A tiny, fastidious motion had him brush a thumbtip at the edge of his mouth as if half-convinced he'd
find a spot of drool. Fantasizing was a pleasant way to distract himself, but he should've had more self-control.

It was a bad time. A hard-on would've been a bit troublesome with Coach just across the room.

As if sensing the acknowledgement of his existence in Nick's posture, the big man suddenly stirred on the living room sofa, glancing at him. Sleepy brown eyes took a firmly alert gaze over his expression, one brow lifting.

"You a'ight, Nick?" he questioned across the room, voice rough and pointed.

"Mnh." was the gambler's quiet response, shifting his position and raising a hand to clasp over his shoulder. The light pressure of his fingers against his wound set violent vibrations of pain through him, the discomfort and Coach's attention dulling any sense of arousal. "Just thinking."

Chuckling, Coach slipped an arm to rest over the back of the couch, fisting his hand. His body gave a slight shift, the sizeable width of his gut relaxing into a slump. "I get worried when you start thinkin', boy."

Nick sent him an irked glance, though his mouth was quirked in a minute smirk. The pain had his jaw taut, hiding it behind a tight mask.

"What 'bout, then?"

The conman shrugged, lowering his head and letting his fingers spread on his shoulder to slowly feel along the square of his bandage. "Nothing important." Coach's snort suggested he figured otherwise, but he didn't argue - just turned away and closed his eyes, head slowly shaking.

Coach let the silence sit for a moment, then breached it again. "What was it y'all found up there, anyway? I got an idea but wit' Ellis wakin' up, didn't have no time to talk 'bout it."

That made Nick laugh, a short burst of humor that turned his voice to a sour tone afterward. "Nothing important, again. Some guy and his mistress hid up there to keep safe. She got sick somehow and started turning, he tied her up... Being a dumbfuck, he promptly got too close and got bit. Guy killed himself out of fear, I guess."

A frown edged Coach's face, sighing deeply with the kind of nod that indicates he'd expected what he heard. "Guess y'all ran into the woman up there, still tied up?"

"Yeah." Nick nodded simply, letting his hand drop off his shoulder and loosely crossing his arms over his chest instead. "Just glad she didn't turn into a Witch or something. I gave her a bullet to gnaw on."

Coach's legs shifted, letting his knees straighten out a little. He seemed to wince, glancing at his bum knee and focusing his gaze there. "How'd y'all know so much? Ain't like the zombie told you. An' you're smart, but not that smart."

Nick gave a slight scoff, rolling his eyes up in a small motion. He took offense, but didn't rise to the occasion. "There was a journal." He let himself shrug, one-shouldered. "Dying message bullshit.. apologizing to his wife, all that shit."

The eldest's reaction was little more than a grunt, but he did rub his cheek, idly speaking after a moment. "May be somethin' useful in it."

Mouth dropping into a frown, Nick arched up a brow and made a slight gesture with his hands,
throwing them up in the air dismissively. "What, look forward to reading some idiot bitching about his zombie girlfriend?"

Coach chuckled softly as he spoke, shaking his head and resting an arm over his stomach, fingers draping down in a limp gesture. "Nah. But I figure we need as good a feel fo' what's goin' on as we can get. Might have somethin' useful in there about CEDA or the military, what they were doin'."

Slowly crossing his arms, Nick let that one roll around in his head for a moment. Cocking his jaw forward, he chewed on the soft flesh of the inside of his cheek, lids lowering in faint thought. "You're not going to hear an argument from me about not trusting that bunch.. guess you have a point." He noticed Coach start grinning, and raised his voice sharply. "I guess."

"Sho' sho', Nick. Where'd it go?" the big man questioned, mouth still drawn in a grin.

Nick smirked right back, smugly, taking a pleasant dose of enjoyment out of shooting him down with what may as well have been a threat. Like hell he was going back to get it.

"Left it in the attic."

Coach had just started to sigh, raising a hand toward his face as if to palm down the length of it in exasperation, when the soft creak of Ellis' door opening interrupted him. Both of them twisted to gaze at the hallway, silent in attentive expectation as Rochelle slipped out into the living room, arms crossed over her stomach.

She glanced at both of them, then forced a tired smile, her unpainted lips a bit scuffed from dehydration and nibbling. "He's okay. His rib looks pretty bad - I think he cracked it, but it's still in one piece. Bruised up and it hurts him. He's got a big bruise on his chest, too." She mimed out a soft patting onto her breastbone. "He's breathing okay, just painfully. I think he needs rest. And meds."

Nick held stiff, only a small shrug shifting his shoulders as a response. His eyes had the subtlest of glazes over them, some mix of distant and frustrated.

Coach gave a wholehearted sigh and nodded his head, rubbing carefully along the rounded, gray-stubbled shape of his jawline. "Sounds 'bout right. Y'all got any idea what kicked the shit outta him so hard?"

One single word escaped the gambler - "Jerry." There wasn't enough substance to it to convey any kind of emotion, but his eyes gained a private, viper-green flicker of angered venom. It dissipated almost as soon as it thundered into his irises, reined in with a deep breath and forced control.

Rochelle nodded in agreement, crossing her arms over her stomach and raising a hand. She rubbed gently along the lower edge of her lip, eyes closing. "Yeah, I thought so, but I didn't want to ask about it."

"Shit ain't right." Coach grunted, a finger starting a slow thump on his stomach in agitation. "Really gets under my skin, seein' him hurt like that. Just ain't right."

Sighing, Rochelle shifted onto one leg, hip cocking a little. She let her chin lower and brows lift, voice soft. "I'm just glad he's okay. He'll be hurt for a while yet, but I don't think it's anything serious. We just have to keep him down."

With a nod, Coach glanced up at the ceiling, gaze getting distant for a moment. "Mmhm. Had a few boys in my team who got some rib injuries before.. rest'll do it an' not much else. Wish we could get some ice."
Coach's voice dropped - suddenly - questioning, "Wonder if he's a'ight wit' havin' killed the man. Can't imagine the boy's used to it..."

"He didn't." Nick spat, shortly. His fingers flexed vaguely, lids lowering. The two flicked their attentions toward him, alertly. He didn't really care - they could look at him as much as they wanted. It was already done. "I did."

With a frown that was more unsure than anything else, Rochelle focused close onto his face, shaking her head a little. Her expression was uncomprehending. "You were with us. How-"

"I slipped a block into his shotgun before we left, as insurance." Nick stated, hands raising to straighten his dress shirt slightly. "When he tried to shoot Overalls - like he must have - it probably blew up in his face and killed him."

There was a moment of silence. It was thoughtful, absorbing the new information, and Rochelle seemed to reflexively grip onto the edge of her shirt and wring out the fabric between her fingertips.

"Is that why you wandered off at the hotel...?" Her gaze lifted up, meeting Nick's. The conman barely even reacted at first, a stiff shell holding his expression in blank honesty, but he noticed something. Under the understandable surprise... her face was soft.

There was no doubt. No accusation, no judgment - she understood what he'd done and it didn't upset her. There was only a kind of sadness.

It wasn't like he needed their approval - he'd done what he'd done and nothing would change it, let alone convince him he regretted it. But something intangible relaxed in his chest, like the lowering hackles of an animal.

He nodded.

Coach settled a hand on his knee firmly. He shrugged up his shoulders, nodding firmly with a deep sigh. "Did a good thing, Nick. Chances are today would'a gone different otherwise."

Rochelle gave a little nod, flicking a glance at Coach and raising a hand to rub at her chin as she offered the gambler a faint smile.

Nick shrugged up his good shoulder, a breath exhaling with a slightly resigned edge. He raised a hand, clasping his palm over his injured one, a skin-tingling pain fluttering freely at the touch. "I'm just that good." he muttered sardonically.

"You gonna tell him?" Coach questioned, rubbing his knee slowly as he crunched up his brow. "Boy might be blamin' himself. Can't expect him to handle it real well."

The gambler crossed his arms, snorting as he lifted his gaze to the ceiling. "If he mentions it, sure. But I'm not about to bring it up. Rather the kid think it was a gun misfire - or, preferably, forget about it."

The edge of Rochelle's mouth quirked down slightly, cocking her head in gentle question. "Don't you think you should explain it to him..? If he thinks it was his fault... I mean, not that you did anything wrong."

"Glad you think so, Ro'." Nick shot back with a layer of sarcasm, flexing his fingers. He wasn't necessarily hostile, but there was a layer of retort. "Fact is, the kid's already calmed down and I don't want to bring it back up."
Coach shook his head with a shrug, waving fingers in a subtle gesture at Rochelle. "His call, Ro'. Whatever makes it easiest on Ellis is a'ight wit' me."

With a slight bite to her lower lip, Rochelle nodded. Reluctance twitched into her brow, but she held firm with a small smile. "If you guys say so. Just - make sure he doesn't blame himself, okay, Nick?"

The gambler gave a one-shouldered shrug that very much said, 'why the fuck should I care?'

And, as long as Ellis seemed oblivious to any assignation of guilt, Nick didn't care.

Patting a hand on her thigh, the woman glanced between them, voice raising as she changed the subject with a gesture of her head. "If we're going to have to stow away in here while he recoups a little, then maybe we should stock up."

The ex-football player nodded his head easily, flicking his thumb against his palm. "Should find some food. Maybe there's some kinda pharmacy nearby, somethin' wit' medicine we could give him, help wit' the pain."

"So, what?" Nick uttered with a level of disdain, arching up a brow. "We can't leave the dumbshit here alone."

Rochelle gestured up with her hands, flashing a small smile at him. She seemed to restrain it slightly, discontent with the situation. "Much as I don’t want to… We could split up. You hang back and watch him, Coach and I go out and find some things."

The gambler snorted as Coach agreed with a nod, widening his stance. Flashing a frown, Nick shifted his arms subtly, jaw twitching as pain flushed up his neck. He'd almost hoped to get a little break from the Georgian - he wasn't sure how he'd manage to keep his hands off the kid, injuries or no.

"What the fuck? Why am I the babysitter?"

"Cause yo' ass is just as useless as his right now." Coach said with a grin that split straight across his face, laughing outright for a moment.

Nick's desire to punch him straight across his face was tempered by the fact he was right. The gambler glared, chin tensing as frustration cocked his head, voice lowering to little more than an irked mutter.

"... Not as useless as the fatass who couldn't make it up into an attic."

The dual unamused glares he found focused on him was much less insufferable than being laughed at.
Slightly pained blue eyes lightened as Nick opened the door. Ellis had burrowed down into the blankets as if in search of comfort. The slopes of his shoulders, pale above the sleeves in a farmers' tan, were bared by a sheet loosely tucked under his chin.

He had his arms crossed over his chest, fingers gripped into the blankets and holding it close, and the gentle bulges of muscle at his biceps and shoulders laid an odd contrast to the kiddish smile that flickered innocently over his face.

"Hi, Nick." he uttered, quiet with a level of shyness. He tipped his head a little, cap-topped curls tickling at his ears as he blinked past the gambler. "Where'd Coach'n'Ro' go..?"

"Out." Nick explained simply. He shut the door behind himself, more out of reflex than anything else. He had his rifle tucked between his elbow and side, a thin glass three-quarters full of water gripped in his free hand. "They're supply-hunting." The kid nodded his head gently. He started to shift, elbows moving as if to lift himself up to a sitting position, but Nick halted him with a flat gesture. "Easy, sport. No reason to move. You're on bedrest."

Obediently, Ellis eased back down. He did reach behind his head tenderly, pushing his pillow up a bit so he could support his head against it. "Man.. really stinks." Settling into the position, he pursed his lips, blinking hazily at Nick as the gambler moved across the room.

The older man was, by all appearances, a complete wreck.

The husky grey shadowing his jawline was short, only the faintest bristle spreading on recently shaven skin, but enough to worsen the haggard grimness on his expression. A low brow scowled over turbid, stormy eyes, hair swept back from stressed rakes of his fingers.

His shirt was almost completely untucked from his slacks, dangling down around his hips but for one tiny section that still clung to the waistband just above his right pocket. The trapped fabric billowed softly down toward his thigh.

He had, at some point, undone the buttons at the wrists of his sleeves, and they hung open around his hands. His injured shoulder was slumped weakly in discomfort, and his gait nursed his Spitter-lame leg to the point where he just slid his foot most of the way.

A gentle frown touched Ellis' lips, head cocking a little to one side. He watched quietly as Nick circled the bed, tiredly dropping down into the chair still placed close by. The gambler's body seemed cold as he hunched in on himself and set the rifle down on the floor, and Ellis' frown worsened a little.

"Ni-" he started, only to halt when the other man suddenly raised the glass of water in offer. He blinked, a little surprised, gratefully reaching up a hand to take the glass from him. "Oh.. thanks, Nick.. thought that was for you, heh..

Their fingertips brushed as the glass changed hands - goosebumps rose up Ellis' arms, and his eyes reflexively darted toward Nick's as if to gauge his reaction. Only… Nick was glancing at him, too.

Green discs were absolutely hoarse with something almost too fierce to be mere interest.

"Figured you were thirsty," the conman stated, reaching to the nightstand and grabbing the pill bottle Rochelle had left behind earlier. He cracked it open and tapped two tablets out, offering
them to Ellis without wavering his gaze. "Plus, here."

Startled into a blink, Ellis dropped his eyes, accepting the pills and pulling the glass close.

"Thanks, man.. I sorta was. Didn't wanna bother nobody.. feel dumb layin' here, haw.." He popped the tablets into his mouth, a little clumsy to get the rim of the glass to his lips. He slowly tipped it up to sip at the lukewarm water and down the pills. A genuine blush ticked light pink over the bridge of his nose, settling most of the glass' weight against the cushion of his lower lip as he drank a few extra swallows.

There was a kind of rare and not completely unpleasant awkwardness in the air. A self-conscious awareness of what had happened last they'd been alone: Nick's total focus on him, the complete surrender Ellis' pain-crippled body had gone through...

How good it had felt to have Nick's mouth on his chest and hand stroking at him. He'd never known something like a nipple could be so pleasurably sensitive, but the feelings still lingered, the tickle and brush of the blankets against his bare chest almost bothering him.

Ellis glanced up a little warily, in the middle of a swallow. He noticed Nick was still staring - now, raptly, at his mouth as if every movement of his lips fascinated him. The surprise at how very closely he was being observed had him choking on his water.

Nick straightened a little as the kid nearly spat it out in surprise, Ellis quickly grasping a hand over his mouth to force himself to swallow, ears burning softly in embarrassment. A few droplets of water trailed down his chin, and he struggled to wipe them off with his palm.

A slight smirk touched the conman's face, lightening some of that husky, grim darkness. He watched the Georgian try to recover, voice lowered with humor. "Okay, Ace..? That's a drink, not a bath."

Ellis forced a slight nod, re-catching his breath as he swallowed down his mouthful. He shot a glance at Nick's face, relieved to see the gambler wasn't solely focused on his mouth anymore, and cleared his throat a little.

Shyly, he crossed his arm over his body to gently set his glass down on the bedside table, wiping his hands on his blankets. "U-uh, yeah, sorry.. I just - are you starin' at me..?"

Starting to shake his head, Nick paused - there was a drop of water still clinging on near the edge of Ellis' mouth, inviting with the quiet sparkle of refracted light. A sudden downward quirk touched the gambler's lips, and he reached up a hand.

"Yeah, sorta." Nick admitted in a low tone. "Got some water there.. let me."

The motion nearly made Ellis jump in surprise, but he relaxed at the last second. Nick's thumb crooked, the pad of it subtly brushing down the soft skin at the edge of his mouth, wiping off the water droplet. Though a worsened blush spread across his face at the contact, he held his head trustingly still.

As that digit lingered, the rest of Nick's ring-bedecked fingers curling to cradle under his chin and bracing the rest of his hand so he could pet along the soft bow of Ellis' upper lip, Nick's gaze sharpened.

Nick needed him. His body vibrated with it. He wanted Ellis wrapped around him, to bury into him until everything fell away but them. He needed to know they were both alive, needed to lose himself in sex so he couldn't - didn't have to - think.
It was easy to pour himself into lust. Distill the tight feeling in his chest into arousal and physical need. Otherwise, he might have realized it was something else.

His voice lowered, gaining the slowest of vibrations in his throat like a badly restrained growl. There was a lull to how he spoke - but who he was trying to calm was arguable. "How're you feeling, kiddo? Side hurt? Chest?"

Mumbling against Nick's thumb, blue eyes a little wide with something confused, Ellis softly responded. "N-nah.. it don't really hurt, I'm oka-"

"Liar." Nick immediately shot back, voice breaking into a full-on gravel as he slowly leaned forward, lids lowering over his eyes to fall to a slow blink. "Your eyes are the worst fuckin' tell I've ever seen."

In time to the words that so slowly rolled from his lips, Nick leaned further forward, body almost creaking with the tiring effort of bending. His eyes flashed softly, interest taking the breath out of him and hollowing his voice. "You and your stupid - tell me if it hurts."

The gambler was right, as always - everything hurt, from the pressure of just laying there on his body, to the pulse beating quick patters in his chest. He wanted to be strong, though.. not out of pride but out of the desire to make it easier on his companions.

Now Nick was demanding the admittance out of him and he didn't understand why.

Ellis' eyes shut tight as Nick leaned himself over the bed slowly, and he could feel the crackle of sensation just before the tip of Nick's nose grazed his, an achingly small touch as if the conman were fighting to hold back. Breath was tangible in warm puffs against his face, slow and heavy.

"Nick're.. you.. okay..?" Ellis whispered carefully.

He needed it, so badly.

The gambler's knuckles dug into the soft skin under Ellis' chin, demandingly, but not roughly. "Just say it." he insisted in something closer to a snarl. "Don't lie. I need to - fuck, Ellis.. for fucking once.. don't be a fucking idiot."

Ellis parted his lips to respond, a quiet word on the tip of his tongue, when Nick closed his mouth over the Georgian's. His thumb was a barricade between them, sealed under Nick's lips and pressed tight to the soft part of Ellis', and the kiss was a still union of skin that seemed to relax something between them.

Nick didn't move for a moment, holding there. Noticing his frozen posture, Ellis tenderly reached up a hand, slow and easy, to touch his cheek. He crept fingertips up the lightly bristled shape of Nick's jaw, cradling it with wide-padded fingers in a gesture of worry.

The gambler vocalized the quietest 'nngh' as the Georgian's fingertips traced that path, a honey-sweet growl of real arousal, and all in one sharp jolt he straightened up and away.

A hiss of pain announced the way the motion hurt his shoulder. His fingers went from cradling Ellis' chin to curled into a fist, punching knuckles with a thud into the headboard above the younger man's head. "Tits."

Ellis flinched only in surprise, immediately shifting half-onto his elbows to blink up at the gambler, lips lingering parted as he forced in a delicate breath. There was a moment of silence -just a moment, Nick hanging there in grim silence, brows taut in a scowl of almost hatred.
"Nick...? It's okay... I'm here."

He said it so soft. So sincere, so real. He saw through him like he were made of glass.

Nick couldn't stand it one instant longer - he knew for an absolute fact if he heard one single syllable more out of Ellis' lips he wouldn't be able to control himself. The imagined taste of cherry-sweet lips on his tongue was already torture enough.

He had to go. Get out. He had to retreat from the room and get away from those silky lips and too-vulnerable honesty that he was so painfully, violently close to taking advantage of.

*Stop being so - fucking.. Ellis. Stop it.*

Ellis' voice was a half-formed whimper by the time Nick was out of the bedroom. His hands fumbled on the knob, twisting it too hard and shoving out with a stagger. Green eyes shut, tracing the path to the kitchen he'd absorbed in a blink, the subconscious acknowledgement of an escape route.

His body vibrated and thrummed, purred and growled, alive with urges and needs and a frustrated denial of it all that had him shaking his head to nobody. He stumbled, half-drunk, into the kitchen, reaching out a hand blindly until his palm hit counter and he could finally stop.

Stopping brought every single pang and twitch and purr to a resounding crescendo on his senses.

His panting echoed in the tiled kitchen, breathing heavier and thicker than it should've been. Pain spasmed in strange places, imagined places. With a flat-palmed grip he clutched fingers over his groin and the cloth-masked bulge of an aching erection that spread stiff urgency through his muscles like wildfire.

"Fuck." he hissed, jaw gritted and head falling forward. He half-bent over the edge of the kitchen counter, forehead hitting the flat face of a blank wooden cabinet, the wood thumping dully with the collision and the door shifting a little on its hinges.

"Fuckjesustits. He's too... he's hurt. he's - fuuuuck.. Nicolas. Nicolas, man.. calm.. down.. you do not.. need. anything this badly." He rambled in a low growl, voice almost weak, injured shoulder flopped with an exhausted kind of resignation as he couldn't stop his fingers from rubbing a little against the pulsing flesh separated from his fingertips by only two thin layers of fabric.

"Shitfuck."

Just that tiny taste of Ellis' skin.. half-fantasy, so quick and short was the touch between them.. had him half-mad. He knew a lot of it had to do with how he'd gotten himself revved up the first time Ellis had woken and then denied himself release - but another part of his mind defended his self-control, stubbornly.

Maybe it was the stress or the lack of cigarettes or the near-death experience or the relief at Ellis' survival or the injury or the adrenaline or -

*Bullshit, Nicolas.*

That left the simple fact he just *needed Ellis.*

"Fuckshit." Thudding his head against the cabinet softly, squeezing his eyes just a little tighter, he felt his hips bucking all of their own reflexive want, rubbing into the cradle of his fingers in desperation.
He'd take care of himself right there if he had to. He couldn't move, anyway, so stiff and almost agonized were his joints, arousal like acid on his ability to function. His own touch was pitiful against the soaring need buzzing on his nerves, but he'd do it - just to temper that immediate need.

As his fingertips caught onto the end of his slack zipper, pinching that metal clasp and tensing with the intent to jerk it down and ease some of the pressure - the last thing he expected to hear was the soft scuffle-thump of a weak footstep.

Nick should have expected Ellis to come after him.

As if he were thinking straight.

The kid stumbled into the kitchen doorway, hair a curly mess with his cap tipped on his head. He walked with the slow wobble of a sleepwalker, body encapsulated by the dragging weight of the bed's lacy-white blankets, a little train created behind him by draping fabric.

He'd pulled them with, fingers clutching idly to keep them wrapped around himself, though they fell to bare the span of one pale, muscled shoulder. The blue swirls of his tattoo entwined at the top of his shoulder, leading down his bicep with a sloping grace.

His socked feet caught on the blanket with each step, worsening his weak gait, and he moved with a wince that betrayed the pain of his body. He still had his coveralls on - they peeked, bloody and grimy from days of use, from underneath the blanket as he moved.

Nick froze as he approached, gaze locked onto that disheveled, pained image of the young Georgian - so obviously beaten down and weakened, but pressing on toward him. Slogging through the pain. Refusing to let him go that easily.

It was pitiful and horrible and ... nice.

"N-Nick - whut'd I do?" The question came in a little half-cry, blue eyes wide and hazy but alert. Pain left his voice warbled with a degree of honest distress. "Why'd you - yuh can't just .. go walkin' out like that, man..

"You fucking dumbshit-! What the hell are you doing?" It escaped Nick as a full-throated snarl, wild with misplaced anger and pulsing arousal. He twisted around to face Ellis completely, body tense, the drape of his untucked dress shirt providing some accidental cover to the erection in the confines of his boxers and slacks. "Get the fuck back to bed before you hurt yourse-

The irony flashed over Nick's mind too late. The ferocity of his tone, his posture, startled Ellis. He made to stop a foot or two from Nick, chin lowering with a slight hesitance, but caught his foot on a fold of the blankets instead and tugged it out from under himself.

All in one weak crumple, the stubborn Georgian standing before him went tumbling forward in a messy flail of blanket and flashes of bared, bruised torso. His hat toppled to the tile, a little bleat leaving him as he fell, and Nick hissed a borderline slurred, "Fuckingshittohell." and snatched out arms to catch him.

The pain of moving his injured shoulder that way, on top of holding Ellis up with it, should've been fierce enough to kill his arousal - but all he could focus on was how Ellis' neck sloped down into his shoulders. The flesh was smooth, full of little muscled spaces and sensitive-looking dips and a delicious kind of familiarity Nick wanted to just bite into.
As Nick's arms encircled him, blanket and all, Ellis seemed to relax. He still struggled to get his feet back under himself, but he let himself lean toward Nick's presence. He stabilized with some effort, and he lifted up his chin softly, blue eyes glancing apologetically toward Nick's face.

Ellis was so warm, bundled up in blankets and pulled close to Nick - not quite pressing against him, the blanket a buffer between them. The gambler didn't want to let go, just wanted to pull him to the ground and climb his way into those blankets. Screw him there on the floor, deep and slow and thoroughly, draw so many shivers and waves of orgasm out of his body that he'd fall asleep right there..

"Thanks." Ellis whispered.

Maybe it was that completely Ellis-like reaction that did it. The complete ignorance that it was Nick's fault he'd fallen at all; the complete incomprehension of 'blame' in such a situation. The total obliviousness to how many thoughts were shooting over Nick's mind, selfish and greedy thoughts.

Just a soft little 'thanks.'

Maybe that opened the gate in Nick's throat that had prevented the honest admittance. Maybe he was so finally exasperated by the Georgian's sincerity that he just gave in.

"Kid. You need.. ya need to go back to bed." He saw the 'why' stirring in Ellis' eyes and didn't even give him the chance to vocalize it, his own voice going rough with what was turning into unadulterated lust. "I'm really.. not good for you right now. Okay? I can't handle you. Just .. go."

The Georgian shook his head just a little, body shifting like he were trying to stand up on his own. "Nick.. whut's goin' on?" A hand lifted, pawing loosely at Nick's wrist, brows furrowing above his eyes. "Talk tuh me. I ain't thinkin' real straight right now.. help me out."

Shaking his head, Nick set his jaw in a flash of frustration, hips aching with the urge to move. Rub or thrust or something, to relieve the pressure. He was just hard. "Look, just-"

"Tell me." Ellis asserted with oddly strong demand for a voice so weak and whimpered. He frowned a little tighter, drew his brows a little closer, and Nick gave a slow grunt of agitation, fingers flexing on the fabric they clutched.

"Fine."

With a firm kind of care to avoid hurting his already abused body, Nick pulled Ellis closer. The kid's eyes widened with a shocked glaze, brows going totally level, as their bodies dragged a bit flush against one another. The rock-hard press of the gambler's erection got abruptly pressed into his hip through the blankets.

"Wh-whoa.." whimpered out of Ellis' lips, pink flesh dampened by a quick flick of his tongue as he couldn't really shift his weight away from the jabbing proof of what was 'wrong.' Embarrassment flooded his face. "Nick.. man.. I didn't mean to.. uh- 'm sorry, did I make yuh this bothered..?"

A harsh little snort escaped Nick's nostrils. He felt a shudder of want creep up his spine as his eyes followed the wet gesture of Ellis' tongue over the shape of his mouth, a nervous motion. It was all he could do not to rock against him.

"No, I randomly pop boners from Hell." He didn't want to say the words that came next. He wanted anything but them passing his lips - he wanted to be selfish and greedy, and he hated himself for it. "Look, just ..go back to bed. I can take care of it."
Nick didn't expect Ellis to fight him - he'd expected an embarrassed blush or an awkward nod, injured body slinking away to hide in the bedroom and leave him be. Those blue eyes, though, sparked a bright intent. There was a stubborn refusal to his tone that overwhelmed the apology.

"No." His body shoved clumsily forward, pressing harder against the slightly taller man, hip rubbing shamelessly right into the tangible hotness gathered in bulged lust at Nick's groin.

A groan left his throat, rough arousal peaking to an almost painful point as his body pressed close to Ellis' - but not close enough. He wanted skin, and his self-control was whittling down to a shred, encouraged by Ellis' refusal. "That ain't yer call, s'mine. 'N'I ain't goin' away. You can't make me."

"Fucking stubborn.." Nick hissed out of the corner of his mouth. Tightening fingers, he let his face dip forward, catching lips against Ellis' jawline. A little huff of air left him as lips grazed over peach-fuzz stubble, skin warm with a thick blush.

He just wanted to.. do something. Bite his ear, sink a hand under his coveralls.. feel him. "You're making this fucking.. difficult..

Turning his head, Ellis pushed lips against Nick's cheek. A silken mouth parted against his skin, brushing against him, making to speak - but to Nick it was begging him to thrust his tongue into it and shut him up.

"'M'okay, Nick.. you'll be careful.." There was a little pleading note to his voice, melded seamlessly with embarrassed confidence - a blushing face and a little smile hidden behind blue eyes, nuzzling his lips so their noses bumped tenderly. "Jus' help me up on the counter.. we'll take care'uv it tuhgether.."

Nick could feel the shy reaction of Ellis' body as they nudged closer, just the hesitant beginnings of arousal, pressing into him in return.

That was it.

Nothing could stop him at that point - he was so far gone, and permission was too much a strike to his determination. He'd have hauled Ellis up off his feet if he could, blanket and all, but his shoulder trembled at the mere passing thought of the action.

Tightening his grip around the Georgian, he pulled him instead, their bodies moving in clumsy unison backwards. Nick dragged him around, pushing him gently into the counter. A grunt left him, reaching down to grab fingers in Ellis' blankets.

It was a slightly awkward scramble to get Ellis seated on the edge of the counter, a soft whimper escaping Ellis as he squirmed up. "S'okay." left him immediately after the noise, reassuring. Ellis leaned back a little as he found his balance on the small space of counter between the edge and the kitchen sink behind him.

He was breathing a little hard as Nick leaned toward him. His legs shifted, spreading, and the gambler reached down to paw ringed digits and pry the blankets away from him. They fell in layers, baring the Georgian's naked, bruised upper body and baggy coveralls.

Nick's mouth went completely dry as he got fingers on Ellis' stomach - grazing and petting along his thighs, feeling the slopes of his hips, lustfully gripping at his waist in a desperate little echo of what he really, actually wanted to do.

Digging fingers in the folds of his coveralls, Nick tugged them down, nudging Ellis to wiggle a little bit. Together they got the thick fabric down his hips and a few inches down his thighs, boxers
dragging with them.

Curly hair trailed up from his groin, narrowing into the shy little trail up his stomach, and the arched erection at a thick half-mast peeked a pinkened tip out from under the waistband of his boxers.

Nick reached down, hooking a finger in his boxers and tugging them down to hook under the base of Ellis' cock, fabric taut over his lap. Goosebumps spread up Ellis' chest, pleasant embarrassment shutting his eyes as Nick leaned into the warm space created by the blankets and his body. The lacy sheets made a loose nest, and Nick let himself push close to Ellis, getting between his thighs and nipping teeth at Ellis' lower lip.

Moving almost tenderly, Ellis reached down a hand, digging between them until his fingers reached Nick's zipper. The feeling of clumsy digits catching ahold of the tab and peeling it down was almost too good - the release of pressure and how it made him groan blissful.

"Right now.." Nick's voice had that rich growl to it all over again. It lowered to just a purr, gravel and heat melted into his tones as wolfish hunger trickled out with each word. "Right now, I don't want anything but to strip you down and push you up against a wall.. pin you there and touch you till you're squirming for it.. aching for it."

Ellis melted further into shock with every sharp, dirty word. Nick had only seen his eyes that wide, that full of disbelief, on the rooftop the first time he'd ever grabbed him - only this time, the blush that slowly rose up to redden his whole face was... different. Not panicked or shocked.

Rough-padded fingers worked his slacks down enough to reach his boxers, slipping underneath those to brush fingers against Nick's erection, throbbing for attention. His touch was sincere, caring... completely embarrassed, but unwilling to stop.

"Explore every little spot on your goddamn body until you can't fucking remember what it's like not having me on you and in you." Growls seethed out of Nick, in time to the way he panted. His good arm lifted, hand cupping behind Ellis' neck to lean him back just a little while making sure the crown of his head didn't collide with the cabinet.

The same care wasn't given to himself, as he thudded his knee straight into the kitchen counter trying to push forward and mold against him. The pain was short and passing. He let his injured arm limply snake between Ellis' body and the blankets, burying in the warmth. He held him firmly, trying to make sure he didn't jostle the injured Georgian accidentally.

Ellis' fingers encircled flesh so velvet-hard and aching there were beads of precum already gracing the stiff tip, wrist twisting a little to pull him out from under slacks and boxers. Nick snarled out a little more, darkly.

"I'd make you stammer out exactly what you want.. just so you were a goddamn blushing mess by the time I pound you straight into the fucking wall.. bite those ears of yours till you're begging me to kiss you." Nick leaned his head suddenly forward, lips just grazing Ellis', green eyes feral as they locked onto his.

"And I wouldn't. Just because it'd make you squirm."

Despite his words, Nick did kiss him. Fingers gripped tight into the kid's hair as their lips locked, tongues playing a damp game between them, shudders edging their shared breaths as their bodies came close. Ellis' thumb arched back, and with a clumsy gesture, he pulled their rigid lengths together in one tactile hand.
Nick felt his whole body shudder, heat absolutely insufferable against his skin as the Georgian stroked them together, shy at first. The subtle lubrication of Nick's leaked precum gave a sticky kind of rub to the motion, flesh pulsing softly as Ellis' hesitant touch and the gambler's needily rocking hips had them frotting slowly against one another.

Growling softly, Nick bit at Ellis' tongue, just little nips to keep his attention. The feeling of ridged, erect flesh stroking against his own between the calloused surfaces of Ellis fingers was overwhelming.

He snaked his hand back up, shoulder aching as it shifted in its joint, and he let the kiss break. Saliva clung between them with a heated huff, and Nick raised his hand to lick over the pad of his middle finger, tasting nothing but Ellis.

Ellis gasped a breath as he seemed to register the gambler's motion, moaning out a soft "H-hah - Nick.." right before Nick stole his lips again. A grunt passed between them, and Nick's cradling arm dropped a bit, fingers tracing down onto Ellis' back.

Fingertips played over the smooth skin dimpled at the base of his spine, rubbing at the muscled slopes forming Ellis' tempting rump. Nick sunk his spread fingers to cup over that flesh, and his middle finger curled to bury between cheeks and rub roughly against his entrance.

The Georgian's back tried to arch, a cried little shout preceding the way his hips tried to cock back and egg on the touch. Nick held him still as best he could, abandoning his mouth in favor of trailing little bite-suckles along his jaw. "Stay still." he chided, regretfully, wishing he didn't have to.

"Hhn -" Ellis whimpered, voice going hazy with the sensation. "Ho-h gawd.. I.. y-yeah, that's.. real nice.." There was a little pain to the sound as his squirming had clearly hurt, but pleasure and plea drizzled over it. His hand tightened to bring the rub of their erections a little rougher and a little faster.

Nick trailed his mouth down his jugular and into the crook of his neck, intent on flustering the Georgian further if it made his hand speed up. His orgasm was building up in his gut and he wanted nothing more but to thrust into the welcome sensations playing around his erection.

Leaning his body a little forward and biting down softly on his jaw, the gambler let his fingertip circle in the wet space he'd made for himself, playing on that thick ring of muscle and putting a little pressure to tease at penetration.

"Christ." the gambler muttered almost regretfully, his voice sultry and harsh with graveled climax, body trembling as he held back as best he could. He wanted to thrust his finger in and push at that clenching muscle, feel Ellis out from the inside. "Can't fuck you.. I'll hurt you."

Ellis told him it was alright the best way he knew how - he kissed him with those soft lips and twisted his wrist to roll their aching lengths against each other, precum glistening under his fingers.

His body was weak and injured, but every promise to take care of Nick was acted out by tender, calloused, manipulative hands. There was so much else Nick wanted to do, but for a moment or two, he forgot about everything but that feeling.

Even when Nick's orgasm hit like the crushing tidal wave he'd expect from so long a build-up and so frustrated a libido, knocking his head back and his eyes up, moaning with a fierce growl and a hazy bite of his lower lip.. he managed to maintain the thought to keep his finger moving.
That, the very tactile sensations of Nick's throbbing orgasm against his own erection, and the flood of warm semen, sticky and intimate, between his fingers left Ellis a gasping mess just a few strokes away from a softer climax of his own.

His body bucked in a weak shiver, a graceful kind of shudder running up his spine. Nick felt every muscle in his body tense up, tasted the ecstasy on his breath, cradled him through it.

Nick held him with that wrapping arm as the sweaty bubble of heat between them melted tension out of his muscles. Their panting came in short huffs, contained in the stubborn lock of their lips, and their hearts raced in pleasured unison as the afterglow echoed in lazy waves of warmth.

Fingertips spread and petted in the younger man's curls, wordlessly, holding him up so he could melt without having to support himself. Cleaning up, hiding the evidence, getting Ellis back to bed - it could wait just a few moments.

For a little space of time, nothing hurt.
"Ow, Jesus -"

Nick winced heavily as he carried Ellis to the bed. The younger man had claimed over and over he could walk, but the first time Nick let him go, he'd nearly fallen straight to the floor. So, he clenched his jaw and picked the kid up in his arms.

He wasn't sure what hurt worse, his shoulder or his ear as Ellis rattled off a stream of apologies straight into it.

"Sorry, sorry, man - sorry, I should'uh walked - sorry!"

Giving a slightly frustrated sigh, Nick stepped heavily up next to the bed, gritting his teeth as he started to bend his knees. Ellis nervously gripped fingers in his shirt, craning his head to peek at the mattress as Nick lowered him down. "Kid, calm down.. I'm not at my best but I'm not a goddamn cripp-"

Right as he said it, his shoulder spasmed. He figured it was the flex of muscles around his wound as he shifted Ellis down toward the mattress, the kid's weight held up more and more by Nick's arms and less supported against his chest.

The pain made Nick jerk, gasping in a sharp breath. Before he could regain his balance, he and Ellis went stumbling down to the bed, landing with a bounce and squirm. Nick tried to catch himself with a knee to the edge of the bed, but he ended up prostrated over the Ellis' stomach.

Convinced he'd crushed the Georgian, Nick immediately shifted to try and push himself up, gritting his teeth at the lingering vibrations of pain. Only - as he started to move - Ellis broke into laughter.

It was a weak sound, soft and intimate, broken up by little snorts of pain that were oddly endearing. His eyes were bright with humor and his lips were quirked up at the edges, and there was such a contagious air to it Nick had to stifle a smirk.

"Shut up, dumbshit." he demanded, putting his weight onto an elbow on the other side of Ellis' hip, body in a half-lounge over his waist.

Ellis didn't. He was trapped in giggles, and he lifted up hands, lazily waggling fingers in the air above his face. His drawled Southern accent turned into a stiff attempt to mimic Nick's harsh diction.

"'I'm not a god-damn cripple' .. uh-huh. You say that right before collapsin' on top'uh me. I look like some kinda pillow tuh you, Nick?"

Tensing his jaw against a small grin, the gambler reached up a hand and gripped Ellis' nose firmly between two knuckles. The kid immediately started squirming his head, pawing at the hand with little squeaked complaints. "No, pillows are more comfortable."

"Quit - quit - aagh Nick -" Ellis bleated, laughter muffled into nasal snorts and head lolling. He gripped onto Nick's wrist, but couldn't pry it away. "Le’goo muh nose-!"

Smirking a little, Nick tightened his knuckles, squeezing at the nose trapped between his digits. His struggling was cute to watch, something comfortable in the playful shove and nudge between them. "I will, when you say you're sorry for laughing at me, Ay-lus."
"You say sorry fer fallin' on me!" Ellis protested, reaching up with his other hand to palm flat at Nick's cheek, pushing him away with a straightened arm.

Nick laughed outright, a sharp but easy sound, leaning back as Ellis pushed him away. "No." He closed one eye, turning his cheek against Ellis' palm and snapping his teeth as if to nip at the younger man's wrist.

Gasping slightly in protest, Ellis retreated, darting his hand away from the older man's teeth and retorting, "Then no!" Nick let him get away, smirking, and gave a slight sigh as he released his nose, too.

Pushing weight onto his elbow, Nick straightened up, a little wearily. He sat on the edge of the bed, raising a hand to cup over his shoulder, smirking at the Georgian. "I'd make you pay for that, if we weren't both fucked up."

Ellis stuck his tongue out, rubbing his newly regained nose.

Nick snorted, rolling his eyes slightly. "Dumbshit." Sliding off the mattress, he slid back into his wicker chair, sighing heavily as he draped himself into the seat. He let his bad leg lift up, relaxing his heel against the edge of the mattress.

His eyes closed, chin lowering to his chest. He settled his arms into a loose cross over his chest, relaxing his injured shoulder. At the sounds of movement on the bed, though, his eyes reopened. Ellis rolled gently on the bed, tenderly arranging himself so he could lay on his side and gaze toward Nick.

Rather than acknowledge it, Nick shifted to let his head tip back until he could gaze at the ceiling. Ellis seemed content with that, eyes drifting away and then back in alternating patterns. He wrapped his arms around his bruised torso, fingertips drifting over the bruising on his side.

"Wonder how long I'm gonna take tuh heal up..." Ellis murmured, voice almost airy with a quiet thought. "Probably hurt real bad to shoot muh gun. Sorta useless."

Nick shook his head once, responding equally quietly, though rougher. "Don't worry about it, kiddo. We can rest until you get back on your feet. If we get antsy or we need to move on, shit, we'll just carry you. Coach hustled you like a bag of potatoes here."

"Man, I really passed out back there, haw.." The kid snorted softly, nuzzling his face against the pillow until he was looking at Nick on a tilted axis. "You probably ain't shootin' too well either, with that shoulder..."

Giving a slight laugh, Nick shifted his shoulder at the mention of it, glancing sideways at it. He could see a damp spot of blood in the center of his dress shirt's shoulder, over where his front bandage was. Red shone amidst the dried stains and splotches on the rest of the fabric, but he didn't mention it. "No, not really.. had to shoot my Mag up in the attic. Fuckin' thing has a wild recoil, hurt like a bitch."

*Which probably didn't help the bleeding.*

Ellis nodded his head, lazily but not un-alertly. His eyes fluttered shut, tightly. "Sorry, man.. wish I hadn't'uh gotten you hurt like that..

Rearing his head up slightly, Nick arched a brow. He eyed Ellis' turned face as the edge of his mouth quirked down, a snort of disbelief quick to come to his breath. "Got me hurt? You weren't even there, Ace."
A little sigh puffed out from Ellis' lips.

"S'whut I mean."

Rolling his eyes, Nick gave a sigh of his own. He flexed his fingers slowly, letting a hand lift up to touch his temple in a massaging gesture. He carded digits through his hair, tracing the curvature of his ear. "Look, kid - have you thought about how that would've gone down if you'd been with us?"

Ellis was silent, and Nick took it as a 'no.'

"Simple. They'd have fuckin' shot us down like animals. I wouldn't have been hurt, I'd've been dead. All of us would." He saw Ellis stiffen, curling his knees up a little. A bit of distress fell over the kid's features, muted and saddened. He didn't let it stop him, but he softened the ruthless cynicism in his voice just a little. "It didn't exactly work out great, but I'd much rather take a sword to the shoulder than a bullet to the brain. Get me?"

"Yeah." Ellis mumbled softly, turning his face into the pillow. "I'd'uh rathered neither.."

Nick gave a short laugh, a harsh little noise, and let his palm settle flat on the curl of his tummy, closing his eyes. "Me too, kid. But you've gotta take the hand you're dealt."

His words were met with a slight silence, Ellis' face half-hidden in the plump pillow underneath his head. Nick's brows lowered, forcing a sigh. He straightened in his chair, letting his leg slip off the bed to lean in toward the collapsed Georgian until his face was a mere foot or two away. "Hey, this ain't all that bad, Overalls. We've got the other two doing all the work and we get to rest. I'd say that's a win."

Ellis laughed suddenly, the sound a bit tired but no less sweet than usual, raising his head weakly and giving Nick a slow grin. His voice was confiding and a little flirtatious, almost accidentally. "You sayin' you like sittin' here with me, Mr. Gamblin' Man?"

... Smartass.

Nick rolled up his eyes, arching a brow as he didn't quite meet Ellis' gaze head-on. His voice gained a weighty monotone as he retorted, "Yes, Overalls. I would prefer sitting around with you to being dead."

The younger man's laughter, stifled with snorts and weak 'haw's, made Nick smirk. There were these wounded coughs laced into the noise, and beyond the pitiful sense of vulnerability, it was just the smallest bit endearing.

That smirk flashed into a heavy scowl when the younger man reached up and grabbed Nick's nose in retaliation.

Ellis laughed himself clear out of breath.
Chapter 98

A crack of thunder woke Nick up like a slammed pot just beside his ear.

"FUCK-!" he shouted at the absolute top of his lungs, goosebumps shooting up the whole length of his body. He nearly flung himself out of the wicker chair, stopping at the last moment to sit poised on the edge, fingers clutching into the armrests.

It was raining. Hard. Water crashed and splattered on the roof, gaining ferocity by the second. Was he dreaming? He didn't even remember falling asleep, just remembered letting his chin turn and his cheek settle against his shoulder - so maybe he'd closed his eyes for just a second...

...fucking Jesus.. What the fuck kind of weather is this?!

The window in the corner of the room couldn't even be seen through - it was just sheets of water, thrown against the glass like frothy waves against a stormy shore. It was dark, and Nick couldn't tell if it was late or if the greyed clouds were stifling the afternoon sun.

Nick was vaguely aware of Ellis shifting on the bed, dragging toward the edge of the bed like he might crawl off and climb onto Nick's lap. His blue eyes were wide and wheels were turning behind them.

He assumed the kid was afraid of the weather - leave it to him to pick a lightning-shy Georgian to bunk with before a storm. Nick was about to ask him just that, when Ellis' gaze lifted up to glance at him, expression lit by a series of flashes scattered through the nearby window.

Ellis shouted weakly, "Nick! Wha.. where's Coach'n'Ro?"

Nick's eyes widened a tick, then narrowed. "Shit." escaped him, a low curse. Ellis was right. Coach and Rochelle were out hunting supplies, and he had no way of knowing how long they'd been gone. Or, more importantly, where they'd gone.

If they're lost in this storm -

Steadying himself with his grip on the chair's armrests, Nick gestured soothingly at Ellis. "Maybe they just didn't wake us up. Let me check." he half-shouted back, voice muffled under an extended crackling sound, echoing through the roof.

The kid nodded with a hesitant scrunch of his brow, painfully moving to sit up on the mattress. He let one hand cover over his side, hand flat to immobilize it. "Wh-whut if -"

"I don't know." Nick cut him off, tension building into his shoulders. With a small scowl spared for the water-drowned window, accusatorially, he stood up. His shoulder ached, a cold tremble on his skin as he used the heels of his hands to help push himself up against the chair's armrest. He gritted his teeth, fighting to ignore it.

Nick could feel Ellis' eyes on him the entire way to the door. The kid flinched at every roll of thunder, but Nick now had the feeling it was more sympathy for Rochelle and Coach than fear. Opening the door into the hallway, Nick edged his head out. The house was nearly pitch black, the only window in the living room curtained over, but he could tell fairly easily that he was alone.

He tried anyway.
"Ro'!" he barked, anger bleeding into his tone as he stumbled down the hallway and into the living room. "Coach! Are you idiots here?!" Silence responded, and he growled slightly as he set a hand on his shoulder, gingerly. As much as they needed supplies - namely medical - it couldn't have been worth losing contact.

Now their teammates were out in the midst of a thunderstorm. Nick couldn't even get his head around a plan to find them, not in that kind of weather - as if chiming in agreement, a strike of lightning sounded so ferociously he felt the carpet under his feet shiver. The noise came so close alongside a flash of light that it must've touched down dangerously nearby.

"Fuck.." he swore, agitated, head twisting aggressively to glare around the room as something a lot like worry dug claws into his gut. The unusual sensation fluttered nausea up his throat, but he swallowed it down, charging to the front door of the small beachhouse. He'd helped them block up the door behind them, agreeing Coach would come and bang on the bedroom window once they'd returned.

He stared at the coffee table blocking the threshold, body poised to grab ahold of it and start dragging it out of the way. He had to find them, and if that meant getting his shoes and a gun and thrusting himself out into the storm himself, he -

...Nicolas, don't be an idiot. One ringed hand raised up and he dragged fingertips down the planes of his face, frustrated. What are the fuckin' chances you could find them? Slim to none.

It turned into a mental argument, and he wasn't sure who was winning.

They aren't idiots... probably left a trail, or memorized landmarks, or something.

...And the chances either of you could see them in the rain?

If they're lost, the faster I start looking for them, the faster I'll find them.

...Because you're in the proper shape to go running around in a storm.

I'm fine, I can shoot a gun.

...No you aren't, and barely.

Fine. So we find a way to put up a signal, at least turn the lights on so they might be able to see us.

...Along with every zombie and katana-wielding psycho in the area.

"Fuck." he uttered, outright pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index, green eyes adopting a blank stare on the air for a moment. He'd efficiently talked himself into and then out of every option left to him.

The rain splattered and crashed on the roof over his head, like stomping footsteps over the shingles. He squinted slightly, listening to the noise, imagining for an instant what it was like to be out in that storm.

He didn't like it.

A soft, aching "Nick?" called from the bedroom. Nick only just heard it over the rain, but it made him grunt, body suddenly tightening. Ellis was obediently staying in bed, but that didn't mean the younger man wasn't paying attention.
And alone.

Nick gave a small growl, forcing himself to turn back. He slipped across the living room with light footsteps, bracing his jaw into a steely tension as he turned into the bedroom doorway. His brows flinched as a flash of lightning speared brilliant shocks of white light into the room, leaving ghosted imprints of imaginary shapes on his eyes as it faded.

The Northerner cocked his chin up to glance at Ellis as the Georgian saw him in the doorway, and those blue eyes spoke pools of questions with a mere blink. Nick sighed, heavy and tight, letting the thunder fade out before he spoke.

"We have to wait." he stated.

Just that - simple. Flat. He had explanations ready, planned and laid out, prepared to convince Ellis, fight him if he had to... but an argument never came.

A small frown touched the edges of Ellis' lips. Short lashes lowered over his eyes. Silently, he raised up a hand and reached for Nick. There was feet between them but he stretched his fingers like he could touch him with fingertips.

Biting down onto his cheek, Nick rolled his eyes up slightly - but relented. His body was stiff with agitation, but the Georgian needed the reassurance. He crossed the room, injured shoulder slumping slightly. A slight snort escaped him as Ellis' fingers brushed his abdomen, curling in his shirt as if to keep him close.

"Calm down, Overalls. It's just rain." Settling down onto the edge of the bed, Nick let his back rest against the headboard of the bed, raising up his left arm so Ellis could get comfortable against him.

Ellis did, eagerly but weakly. He snuggled against Nick's side, head resting on his chest and eyes closing. His fingers tightened on his shirt, body relaxing with a weak little exhale.

"Nick..." the younger man mumbled against his chest. "Whut if they don't come back? Or get hurt while they're out there?" The gambler didn't say a word, gazing at the window as a flash lit the room up again, followed by a tremendous crackle of noise. His arm lay limp over Ellis' shoulders, fingers curled into a loose fist. ".. 'm'uh li'l scared."

A sigh escaped Nick's lips, turning his head slightly. He gazed down at Ellis' face, voice tense and words slightly forceful. "Don't underestimate them, kiddo. They're strong and smart. They'll hole up somewhere and find us when the rain stops."

Frowning. Ellis lifted his head from Nick's chest, blue eyes opening subtly to glance up and meet his gaze. "I wouldn't wanna be out in this rain.." he uttered back, almost dubiously. "Attract those Witches again.. whut if th-"

"Ellis." Nick interrupted sharply, bending his head to catch his gaze more fully. He flicked up a wrist and got his thumb under Ellis' jaw, forcing his face to stay where it was, framing the edge of his jawline. "Look. I'm worried too. Don't think about it, alright?"

The Georgian blinked at him slowly, lids lowering softly to half-close his eyes, worry dragging down the edge of his mouth. "Alright.." Ellis' cheek settled back down against his chest, eyes closing all the way with a small, wetly self-conscious lick of his lips. He pushed his cheek into the gambler's sternum, sighing as the storm thundered on around them.

"... can we talk 'bout somethin'?" the Georgian murmured. ".. I'm worried, I don't wann'uh sit here'n'stew.."
Exhaling, Nick gave a shake of his head that seemed more a shrug. He was more inclined to want to sit there and stew, but he was getting used to Ellis' voice and he almost didn't mind. "Sure, kiddo. Talk away. You're always good at that." There was a little mock to his tone, but it was tired.

That was all the other man really needed.

"... Muh mama likes storms." Ellis spoke, voice soft and a little breathless. Nick didn't shift, didn't look at him, just listened. "She'd always go out on the porch'n'look intuh the rain. Got wet'uh lot, y'know, came in sneezin', but she'd just smile, like it was worth gettin' sick. I think it made her remember Pa, 'cause they met when her car done broke down in the rain'n'he stopped'n'--"

Thunder exploded overhead, sending something crashing to the floor. It sounded like a plate hitting the floor, and there was a shattering sound on the other side of the house. Ellis jumped clear out of his skin, digging fingers into Nick's shirt, grunting faintly in pain as the gesture made his chest hurt.

As the static electricity in the air slowly settled, Nick raised a hand, settling it flat on Ellis' head, fingers delving into fluffy curls. ".n?" Nick half-taunted, drawling the syllable. It seemed to settle the Georgian, and he continued with a quiet sigh.

"He helped her get her car runnin'... fixed it up right there on the side'uv the road, didn't even complain or nothin'. She liked tuh tell me that story. Always got this real big smile, y'know, like she could still see him standin' there, soaked through tuh the bone'n'not carin' one bit, just helpin' her."

"Nice guy." the older man inputted fairly sincerely, though a bit of sarcasm jumped into his tone immediately thereafter. "In the city he'd probably have stolen her car. Or her."

Ellis just snorted softly, flicking a thumb against Nick's chest as if in chastisement. "Naw, man.. he treated muh mama right, like'uh gentleman. Muh Pa was a real nice guy, leastways, from whut I know. He wouldn't'uh done nothin' like that."

Nick arched up a brow slightly, a little snort escaping him. "Like father like son." He adjusted his arm, trying to get his injured shoulder a bit more comfortable, bicep cradling Ellis' head against his chest.

For some reason, that made Ellis beam. Nick could feel it like a fire against his chest, this grin. It was a familiar grin, an easy one. Ellis had heard that before, but it made him no less proud.

"You like storms, Nick?"

The gambler was silent for a moment, lids lowering to half-close his eyes. There was a ... thump, in his chest. Ellis had the - to Nick - unique quality of asking about him, and seeming, for all the world, genuinely invested in his response.

"Don't really have an opinion, kiddo.. they are what they are."

Ellis blinked at him curiously. He must've sensed there was something there, because he waited. Nick flexed his fingers to slide and comb through the kid's curly hair, gazing at the window for a moment before a breath left him, relenting.

"When I was a kid, we had this fuckin' bad storm... thunder, lightning, pouring water, the whole shebang. It wasn't in the forecast, so I left my umbrella at home - and walking across the Bronx in that kind of weather wasn't exactly my idea of a good afternoon."
Perked with interest though he didn't lift his head, Ellis curiously prodded, "If it was that bad, why wouldn't yer parents come'n'pick yuh up?"

A half-snort left Nick, gripping onto one curly-cue strand of hair at the crown of Ellis’ hair and tugging on it. "My parents were busy fuckers.. both of them worked full-time to pay the bills. I mostly lived with my uncle -"

"The Italian one?" Ellis questioned, and the fact he remembered made Nick smirk a little.

"Yeah, the Italian one.." he confirmed with a restrained near-chuckle, pausing an instant as thunder rolled loudly outside. "He would've come and gotten me if he'd had the chance, but the fact was he was probably passed out drunk at home. Good guy, just.. got his mouth taped to the bottle."

Ellis nodded his head softly, resting where he was. "Keith's pa was like that, too. He was a happy drunk though, just got real loud'n'laughed."

Nick smirked a bit, arching up a brow. "I wouldn't call Unc' happy, but he was alright. Just needed help out of his own puke sometimes, or he'd lose his keys.. it was either learn how to pick locks to get us inside the house, or leave the poor guy to sleep in the street."

The kid laughed against his chest gently, brows scrunching over his eyes. The humor was dulled by a sense of sympathy, and the Georgian shifted his body gingerly. "Man. You had'uh lot'uv responsibilities when you was little."

"Most people do." Nick shrugged his good shoulder, just an inch. It was strange talking about the 'real world' - hard to grasp just how gone it was. "You saying you never had to help your single mom take care of you?"

"Well, sure.." Ellis tenderly agreed, eyes closing. The adrenaline was wearing off and the worry was kicking in - Nick felt the younger man's body tiredly relaxing. "Had tuh cook sometimes, 'n'clean up the house. That was only 'cause she spent all her time waitressin'.. 'n'then came home tuh teach me schoolwork'n'shit."

Nick gave a gesture with his head that indicated he'd made his point. He glanced at the window, silent for a moment, and Ellis nudged him softly with his head.

"Anyway, sorry, you were talkin'..."

The gambler smirked a little, shaking his head. He shouldn't have had patience for the interruptions, but Ellis had this honest curiosity in the way he did it. He wanted to understand.

"Well, this storm was just a bitch, so I pretty much had no choice but to just wait at school until it blew over. I didn't want to get caught hanging around and have some nosy teacher tell my uncle, so I went to break into the World History classroom and hide out in there. Figured all the teachers were gone."

He paused, and sure enough, Ellis piped up. "Guess they weren't? Hoh man, you get caught pickin' locks in school? Man, Keith did that once, 'n' -" Nick was going to let him ramble, but Ellis seemed to catch himself. A little bob touched his head, and with a small hum-mumble, he chuckled. ".anywho. Yeah?"

Spreading fingers in his hair, Nick lifted up his chin, head settling against the headboard with a sigh. "Yeah, the teacher was there. Brett was his name, Brett Sullivan.. I only half knew him.. he was my teacher, but I just sort of sat through school back then. He was way in the back of the classroom, smoking a cigarette and grading papers."
A laugh left him, this short sound, quiet with recollection.

"He'd taped over the fire alarm so the smoke didn't set it off. Teachers got fired for that shit, and I walked in on him just puffing away. Thought for sure I was going to get the boot from school - he'd caught me breaking in and I knew he'd never let me stick around to spill the beans on him smoking."

Ellis' brow was scrunched up in sleepy attention. He followed the story with Nick's emotions; his brow suggested some kind of tension, but Nick was smirking and humor was in his tone, so he smiled idly.

"The guy looks up, and he kind of eyes me for a second. Real steely stare, sizing me up. I think he half didn't recognize me as his student. Then he shifts.. pulls a cigarette out of the box next to him, real slow, and offers it up to me."

Nick shook his head, smirk twisting up his mouth. "I mean, Unc' had let me drink before, and I stole a smoke or two when he wasn't looking, but.. holy shit, this teacher just looked me straight in the eye and bribed me with a cig. I took it, but I don't even think I smoked it. I just stuffed it in my pocket and stared at the guy. I was still waiting for him to kick my ass, I think."

"Whut'd he do?" Ellis murmured curiously, seeming fascinated by the story. Maybe it was the idea of a younger, more easily intimidated Nick.

Grinning a little, the older man sighed. "Nothing. He kicked a chair out and nodded at it and I sat down. The guy just goes back to smoking and grading his papers. We must've sat there for an hour until the storm fucked off. I was so goddamn confused I never said a word - when the rain slowed down, I just got up and left."

ScRUNching his brow softly, sleepyly shifting his head, Ellis questioned, "H'uh..? He didn't even say nothin'..? Wasn't he worried about gettin' in trouble?"

Nick shook his head slightly, a vague edge to it. "I guess not." The storm seemed second to their conversation - it thundered and crashed, but the two men noticed it less and less, comforted in their closeness. "He didn't mention it afterwards, either. Never even looked at me in class, didn't call me to stay behind, didn't nag on my uncle. I didn't need trouble but I couldn't understand it. He was pretending like it never happened."

A sigh left the gambler's lips. It felt oddly good to express things, share a little. The whole memory was something private and important, something he kept to himself - but Ellis was easy to talk to. It was unfamiliar.

"I don't remember what got into my head.. I guess I was just so goddamn curious. I went back to his classroom after school, and the door was unlocked. He was there, and he'd put out a chair for me already. Like he fuckin' knew."

He heard a little gasped breath from Ellis, but it was soft and sleepy. The kid was dozing. Fighting it - but dozing.

"I asked him why he didn't tell anyone I was trying to break in. He gave me this smile and asked me why I never told anyone he was smoking. I didn't really know how to answer that..." Nick snorted. "I came back every day after that. Unc' never really asked. Just as long as I was home for dinner, he didn't care what I did."

"Brett was always there. He stayed as long as I did. We talked, I guess." Suddenly, Nick's voice
grew vague. His gaze faded into a distant stare, thoughts trickling over his expression and lips dragging into a small quirk downward. "I didn't want to talk to him about me. I didn't want to talk about my parents, or my uncle. I didn't want to talk about that bullshit. I think he knew that, and he didn't push it."

Nick gave the smallest of half-laughs, scrunching his brows over his eyes before releasing a sigh. "Somehow got me fascinated with history. I didn't give a shit about a single word he said in class, but after school, we just.. talked. He'd teach me and I'd ask about it and I guess I got into it. Can't say I remember any of it now, but back then.. I needed the distraction. I needed.. someone to look up to, who actually wanted me around.. or something like that."

A snort escaped Nick, eyes closing in the lightning-lit dark with a slight humor to the shake of his head. "I liked the '20s in America. If there was one thing Unc' demanded I understand it was that Italians made kick-ass mafias.. Brett knew a lot about gangs, war bullshit, and I wanted to hear it. I guess it left a mark, h'uh? The slimy fuck I am today."

A soft murmur of a hum, warm against his chest, was the only sign Ellis was still awake. It was a little protesting - Nick ignored it, letting fingers shift in the kid's hair, just subtly.

"After a while, we started leaving the school and walking the city, just wandering around. Turned out he was a real character. Only guy I've ever really respected. He showed me things - how to shoot a gun, cheat at poker, hotwire cars... he was how I knew how to make that Molotov. He liked to say he was immersion in history, but I didn't give a shit. I loved it. The guy was smart and sarcastic and he gave me something to give a shit about. It was fun, I was good at it, he.."

Nick's voice suddenly stopped. He felt the emotion - the regret, the memory, surging up to clinch vicelike around his throat, dragging his brows into a crunch. Ellis seemed to shift at his silence, sleepily, but Nick held it.

He had no idea why he'd told Ellis so much. There was no way the Georgian would ever understand, if only because Nick could never express it.

There were no words for the months he'd spent, whittling himself to the honest truth that he liked danger and lying. He liked cheating and stealing. He liked succeeding because of his own intelligence. His mind was built for it, and it took that long for him to realize it.

Nor could he even begin to explain the events that followed.

Ellis was innocent. Too good. He'd never get what was so different from him - Nick wasn't evil, but he was bad. They were too different, and Ellis would never get that those lessons, that illegality, were the core of Nick's existence. The only thing he'd ever cared about.

Nick abruptly wished he'd never even opened his mouth. Ellis would just judge him, that little nose would crinkle and he'd go 'jeez, Nick, he sure taught you some bad shit...' and Nick would hate himself for bringing it up.

Ellis' head lifting vaguely, exhausted blue eyes glancing up at his face. Flushed pink lips quirked in a smile, and the kid mumbled: "He was kinda like a dad tuh you."

Nick was incredibly quiet. He just gazed at him, utterly silent, expression still in a look of blank attention. He should've smirked or snorted or shook his head, something to dismiss the statement, but instead he just stared. The younger man didn't seem bothered by it, though he was so exhausted he seemed to drift off right there, the silence giving him an opportunity to lose focus.
Ellis was one surprise after the other.

"... yeah."
They hadn't heard the Witch crying, neither of them. Coach and Rochelle were running in the rain, trying to re-trace their path back to the others. The big man was clinging his supply-stocked backpack to his gut as if he could protect it from the water, though his whole body was soaked through already.

The Witch stumbled out of an alleyway just feet ahead of Rochelle.

A snarl left it, almost like a startled "Wh-?", and glowing red eyes lifted up to glare past scraggly, dripping hair. Rochelle stuttered to try and stop, arms going up - but the rain-slick concrete greased the soles of her boots and she only came to a frozen halt bare inches from the creature.

The creature's scream came in time to a roll of thunder, like a twisted union of nature and flesh. It was an unnatural and warped set of sounds, and panic bubbled in Rochelle's chest as raindrops hissed and cracked against the sidewalk.

As it screamed, the sound more terrified than angry, its arms rose up. Claws spread wide, raking against each other as they unfolded from the awkward half-curl they'd been holding before her face. The blade-like edges gleamed with rain, sweat, grime, and blood.

Rochelle's second instinct was to shriek, but her first instinct was to lift up her gun and shoot.

The loud crack of the rifle shuddered her shoulders, and the bullet collided with the Witch's chest. There was a strange wheeze, like the expulsion of air. The blast must have taken out a fist-sized hole in her torso, baring shock-white, meatless bone and the water-soaked, pulsing shape of an organ - but it didn't stop her.

Unbalked as a grimy grey-red blood trickled from the hole just in the center of her emaciated ribcage, the Witch started to lash out again.

Coach felt his heart stop in his bulky chest, a painful breathlessness catching in the depths of his throat, and pure instinct overwhelmed him. He was clumsy when he thundered forward and got his arms around Rochelle's waist, hauling her backwards like she weighed nothing. His whole body had a stiff unresponsiveness to it from the frigid rain pouring down on his limbs, biting straight through his clothing and skin.

The Witch's strike missed, claws whistling through the air and faintly groping as swollen knuckles twitched half-bent in a painful gesture. She didn't stop screaming, the sound almost rising in pitch, catching her balance with a stumbled, sliding stagger on the wet concrete.

The ex-football player was already hustling away, dragging Rochelle into a half-turn to shove her into motion with a flat hand right on the small of her back. "GO!" he shouted in that no-nonsense bark.

The wide oceanfront town's street was drowned in puddles of water, ever more crashing down upon the asphalt surface, and the two took flight down the stretch of road with water splashing up at their heels. Direction and orientation became secondary behind the base instinct to run.

The Witch's screaming, shrill and ghastly, bled through the crashing of thunder in ear-splitting waves. Her movement was inaudible behind them, bone and sinew just barely seeming to hold her joints together well enough to carry her in a frantic sprint after them - however, the shrieking that left her made it clear she was gaining on them.
She was rickety and emaciated, but fast.

"We gotta get off the street!" Coach hollered, rain pouring down the curves of his face and choking his words with a few swallowed trickles of water. A squinted glance over his shoulder made him cringe, body hunching down to pick up the pace of his barreling stride.

They took a sharp turn, peeling off the main road onto a smaller street. The rain skidded under their shoes, but when Coach stumbled, Rochelle was right there to grab ahold of his wrist. She kept him moving, pulling him along behind her until he got his feet under himself.

He kept behind her - if the Witch caught up, it'd be to him, not Rochelle.

"Where?!"

Panicked, Rochelle flicked her gaze along the buildings at either side of the street. Her brain shut down slightly, wilting at the scream echoing murderously behind them and the flashes of slashing claws she could see behind them - but she was lucid enough to think.

_Sturdy - something sturdy, something thick - or she'll break through like Carmine -_

A regular door wouldn't cut it, and through the thundering sheets of rain, Rochelle couldn't see anything else. They were surrounded by palely painted wood condos, one after the other, the flimsy and breezy shapes of beachhouses.

All going for one of those would do was slow them down.

_Gotta get off the street, gotta get off the street - gotta -_

A tiny grey-brick building flashed into her attention on the right. It was shoved squatly beside a convenience store, peeking out into the street. A sign nailed over the doorway, half-knocked off its moorings by the storm, identified it as 'Welsh Pawn Shop.'


"There!" Rochelle shouted, frantic, jabbing up a hand to point at it. Coach didn't say a word, just twisted to angle toward the shop, breaking into a full sprint as she did. Bolting over the sidewalk, they reached it at nearly the same time, and Rochelle twisted the door handle with a sudden inhale.

_Shit! What if it's -_

It opened.

Coach's arm swept around Rochelle's waist, practically carrying her over the threshold as they stumbled, soaking and squeaking, into the hardwood-floored pawn shop. It was pitch-black inside but for the flicker and flash of white lightning that slanted in from the small windows, and Rochelle scanned it for danger as best she could, spitting blindly as water trickled down her lips.

It seemed devoid of any inhabitants, infected or otherwise.

Coach slammed the door shut, shoving his weight against it. He grunted heavily as he braced his weight there, and it was lucky he had. The Witch collided with the other side mere instants later, its screaming vibrating through the door.

The big man winced, but the door held strong. For the moment.

A loud clatter and creak warned of the rake of claws against the thick, dark-painted door, the
screaming rising in pitch as the Witch seemed to panic. The thuds of her hands and crack-thwacks of her claws were horrendously loud, fueled by a strength her broken-down body shouldn’t have had.

"We gotta block it!" Coach grunted, trying to get a grip on the wood-paneled floor with the squeaky treads of his shoes. The door jolted and twitched against his shoulder with increasing urgency.

Squinting into the dark, Rochelle was quick to look for options. The pawn shop had been looted - the main counters, inlaid with glass panels to show off the goods inside, had been broken and seemed mostly empty but for a few strange knicknacks.

It was, fortunately, well stocked in furniture.

There was a chest of drawers rested up against the wall. The dark wood piece came up about to her chest, and without waiting a moment, Rochelle bolted over to it. Gritting her teeth and panting through her nostrils, the woman gripped onto it in a slight hug, letting her knees half-bend.

Even adrenaline wasn’t quite enough. She pulled and yanked, a sound struggling out of her that was more like a shriek as her boots slid and scuffed on the floor. Each inch was a battle, and just as she gasped in a breath, ready to shove her weight even harder into the work, Coach was next to her.

The door thudded and jerked from the Witch’s assault, but it stayed closed even with him gone. Hopefully it would remain that way long enough for them to get the drawers in place.

Coach gripped onto the edges with heavy arms, and his whole body strained up as he dragged backwards, shoving his shoulder into the wall to get a little traction. The drawers scraped across the wood with a painful screech, no doubt gouging marks into the hardwood floor.

Grunting and shoving in unison, Rochelle and Coach managed to pull the thing in front of the doorway. Coach got hands flat in the front of the drawer set and shoved hard. It scooted loudly to sit flat against the doorway, bracing the wood, and the door steadied to a simple shiver with each of the Witch’s strikes.

As it squeaked that last inch, Rochelle collapsed down to a knee, breathing hard as she planted hands over her eyes, scrubbing water out of them.

They could still hear the sound of claws digging into wood. Turning, gasping with attempts to catch her breath, Rochelle weakly leaned her back against the chest of drawers. Her eyes lifted, scanning through the shop more thoroughly this time. It struck her, suddenly.

There was no back door.

Oh, God…

They were trapped.

She started shivering soon after sitting down, lifting her head numbly as Coach bustled a few steps away from her. The big man half-tripped over a chair, grunting as he whacked his hip into it, but hardly stopped beyond the action of knocking it aside. He dropped down next to a faded nightstand, getting a grip on the old wood.

A sudden cracking sound had Rochelle's head jerking up. Her eyes lifted, body twisting, and her lips parted as a gasp left her. The squirming point of a bloody claw just barely pierced the door an inch above the dresser, like a nail driven through the wood.
They were trapped, and the Witch was breaking through.

Oh, God.

Horror touching her voice, softly, Rochelle uttered "Coach -" She dragged an arm around herself, trying to still the tremors beginning along her spine. He didn't react, hauling the nightstand up off the ground.

His bad knee tried to buckle under himself, and the pain of recovering was obvious in how his shoulders seized up. He forced himself to stagger backward, body stiff as he carried the nightstand back.

Coach piled it on top of the dresser, shoving it close to the door to blockade it a little more, almost intentionally slamming it straight against where the Witch had started to break through. His jaw was tense, dark eyes bleary as he blinked through the rainwater that soaked his entirety.

He seemed ready to turn back around and go for something else to add to the barricade when Rochelle reached up and grabbed his hand. "Coach.." the woman got out in a soft voice, strands of soaked black hair trailing down her forehead.

Freezing, he forced his gaze down, meeting hers. Her eyes were wide, and serious, fingers slowly shifting to slip between the thick shapes of his knuckles in a loose link. The Witch's screaming, so close to them, didn't stop.

His voice was stern and almost angry when he gruffed back, "Ro', don't look like that... We just gotta -"

The nightstand shuddered, squeaking forward a little. Rochelle jumped at the noise, and Coach squeezed suddenly at her hand, eyes flicking up and deepset brows scrunching. The howling wavered, a sob mixing into the noise, and the Witch seemed to lash out even harder.

Rochelle's voice was suddenly weak. It trembled, body trembling even more and teeth chattering together as the cold rainwater soaked her to the bone. She gripped Coach's hand tightly, shaking her head. "She's gonna break through."

Gritting his teeth, Coach twisted slightly, not quite letting go of Rochelle's hand. "We'll just slip out the back. It ain't -" He froze up as he saw what she already had, mouth slowly sealing.

There were no other doors.

"You think a pawn shop sells sugar?" Rochelle joked in a whisper, half-smiling as a little choke dropped her chin.

Coach tightened his jawline, staring around the lightning-lit room as the door thumped behind them. The cracks of breaking wood were increasing in volume and consistency, its claws gouging through the door at a quick pace. "Babygirl..."

"Sorry." Rochelle muttered back, raising up her free hand to cup fingers over her eyes. They trembled. "Sorry, I - I ran us into a dead end. It just looked like the best shot, I.. I'm sorry, Coach -"

With a fierce crash, something broke, and the nightstand on top of the dresser shoved forward. The wood behind it shattered as the Witch's claws dived through the door, stabbing through and flinching as wood splinters pierced the rough flesh of its hand.
Coach dragged Rochelle up off the floor and into a protective embrace just barely in time to get her out from under the nightstand before it fell. The thing broke into two halves where she'd been sitting, chunks of wood scattering against the floor.

She flinched sharply, burying into his chest. Coach led her into a slow retreat backwards, his gaze firmly rooted on the claws as they tugged and yanked to free themselves from the wood and lash out again. Some of the holes were large enough to see the Witch on the other side, its grimy, off-grey body jerking and seizing as it wailed and keened, ribs heaving.

"It ain't yo' fault, babygirl." Coach whispered, pressing lips to the top of her head, damp hair muffling his voice. His arms tightened, holding her close. "None of it's yo' fault." He could feel her shoulders heaving, starting to cry against his chest, hot breath gasping into the soaked fabric of his shirt.

"I should have had us get inside the second it started rainin'. you hear me? It was my fault, this shit's my fault. I thought we could get back to the boys without runnin' into trouble."

Coach held her, cradled her, and he felt the dull sensation of his heart breaking within his chest. He held her like he'd hugged his daughter as he'd packed away his things, trying to find the words to explain that it wasn't goodbye forever.

He still couldn't find them.

The Witch broke through with a whole arm, the sound a horrendous crash of breaking wood. Its screams filled the pawn shop as it clawed at the air, buried in the door up to its shoulder. Blood trickled from where broken shards of wood had stabbed into its skin, but it barely reacted.

Swinging with its other claw, it started to widen the hole, hacking with frantic energy as it tried to cram its body through.

Coach didn't expect Rochelle to pull away from him. Twisting suddenly, she jerked out of his arms, scrabbling to get her rifle strap off her shoulder and the gun into her hands. Setting her jaw past a tiny sob, she shook her head, aiming up her rifle at the Witch with a trembling grip.

"I'm not going down without a fight." Rochelle growled, brow fierce. Her eyes were swimming, but her voice was wrought with fury. "Let's give her something to cry about."

She shot, the sound cracking through the pawn shop with an echoed volume - and the bullet struck straight through the door, a meaty sound announcing that it had hit. The Witch didn't even react as the bullet buried straight into its chest, breaking a wide patch of door away with a sharp punch with steely claws.

Coach felt a burst of pride choke his throat closed, and he scrunched his brow tightly, silent as he dragged his shotgun into his hands from where it dangled at his side. He stepped up beside Rochelle and raised the double-barrel shotgun up to shoulder-height and fired.

The blast not only took out a section of the door, but a section of the Witch's shoulder. A strange grimy blood poured down its arm as bone shattered and flesh tore, the tattered shirt that barely clung to the once-woman's torso slipping to bare a sunken breast.

It still didn't stop.

Coach felt his body stiffen as if preparing for impact, even as he moved to reload his gun. The Witch clambered up its torso onto the top of the dresser, squirming through the hole it had created in the door, raking its back raw on the shattered wood.
"Sorry, Coach." Rochelle whispered sideways, almost wryly. Her chin was low and she'd lowered the barrel of her rifle a little. Just an inch.. and just enough to express her resignation, even as she forced her finger back on the trigger.

Coach wanted to tell her he loved her, but nothing came to his tongue. Just air and a choked-up sensation that froze his gut. So he smacked the shotgun barrel back into place and lifted it to fire a second time.

The Witch's scream hit a climax as it made to crawl forward off the dresser, claws raising up and stretching out toward them. A burst shoulder and the chalky spill of gore from the hole in its side meant nothing to it. It was all animal instinct.

It would be a split second's sprint from the door to them. They were going to die.

Coach gritted his teeth.

The last thing he expected was for the Witch to jerk to a violent halt, whole body seizing up.

It screamed, forward motion stopped as if it'd reached the end of a leash. Its torso crashed into the front edge of the dresser, buckling forward. Even as it clawed toward the floor to try and stop itself, its body slid backwards.

Rochelle froze up, Coach doing the same. There were hands.. human hands, grabbing a hold of the Witch's waist and dragging it forcefully back, struggling as the creature's screams turned absolutely ear-shattering.

Like being touched terrified it.

A voice came snarling from outside, muffled under a crash of thunder, and there was a scuffle as the Witch slipped entirely back out of the doorway. Shadows flashed over the hole in the door, but nothing coherent could be made out of it through the rain.

As the thunder eased, the voice became audible: "¡-uta madre!" Strangled with effort, the Spanish intonation was clear and aggressive.

Complete relief mixed with a tidal wave of complete panic, and Rochelle bolted forward, nearly shrieking. "Chris! Sweet Jesus - Chris!" Coach was right behind her, and they both slammed into the chest of drawers at the same time, shoving and pushing the thing out of the way.

"¡Que te jodan!" The chatter didn't stop, mixed in with the Witch's screaming and his own grunts and struggles as if the Spaniard was bodily wrestling it. "Give up! Gah!"

Coach's throat was too closed up to even breathe, practically kicking at the dresser to shove it away from the door. Rochelle darted around him the instant there was space, gait wild as she pounced the door, shoving it open and skidding out into the rain.

Christophe had the Witch pinned to the wall of the pawn shop, gripping the thing's wrists to keep its claws away from him. The Witch screamed straight in his face, a visible cringe all over his sopping features, and its infection-strengthened body struggled violently.

There was a long gouge along his arm, freshly bleeding. Every time he got the Witch's wrists flat to the wall it would surge back toward him and he'd have to struggle to keep the claws away from his face. He couldn't grab for his machete; the Witch didn't let up long enough to allow for the movement.
Rochelle could hardly move, gapping into the rain, shock tightening her chest. "You .."

Bright brown eyes flashed sidewards, blinking past the rain, seeing Rochelle so close. Panic widened his eyes, just barely wrestling the creature to the wall. "¡Oiga! Shoot her! ¡Ayúdame, por favor!"

The shout shocked her out of it, and Rochelle quickly lifted up her rifle. She jolted forward, taking aim at the Witch's struggling head, her face messily pressing up into the scope. She fired just as Christophe's hand slipped, fingers wet from the rain.

The Witch screamed fiercely as its claws collided with his shoulder. His eyes widened, body stiffening as the slice of its blade-like digits slashed into his shoulder.

The bullet exploded through the Witch's skull, its body jerking up and going limp like so many cards blown over. It slid down the wall, head nearly entirely obliterated but for a few shards of bone still maintaining some semblance of a skull.

Lightning and thunder screamed in the Witch's place - but it was silenced, finally, body slumping.

Christophe staggered backwards, losing his footing and crashing down to the asphalt. A low, keening sound - rough and raspy with pure agony - made its way past his lips, hand crossing over his body to grip his shoulder. Blood poured up from the gash, spilling onto the asphalt to spread in the puddling rain.

Expression stiff with sudden grimness, Coach hustled forward around a shock-frozen Rochelle to drop quickly down next to the youth. "Whoa, boy, calm d-"

And then Coach went silent.

Gasping out slightly, Rochelle hurried a couple steps closer, a hand raising to cover over her mouth. Rain drenched down over them, lightning exploding overhead, and Christophe's eyes closed against the downpour as he gargled a choked scream. "F-fucking - whore -"

Coach half-muttered a "Shit," bending down. He slipped a thick hand underneath Christophe's head, lifting it up a little, and hunched over him to shield him from the worst of the storm.

"I-Is he - okay?" Rochelle risked, side-stepping a little, hesitance muting her shout over the thunder.

The big man's head shook. That scared her more than anything.

With a frustrated noise, Rochelle forced herself closer, dropping harshly to a knee next to Christophe's hip. When she saw the wound to his shoulder closer, her eyes widened in horror, gut wrenching so hard she almost retched.

The Witch had cut nearly three-quarters of the way through his shoulder. Blood obscured it, but a few inches past the shoulder strap of his grimy wifebeater there was open air. Only bits of muscle and flesh held it together at the inside of his arm - even his humerus had mostly shattered at the collision.

Arteries and veins leaked violently from the sundered socket of his shoulder. The faint movements and tremors that crept down the length of his nearly detached arm were little seizures and flexes, like those of a dying animal.

"Oh God." Rochelle barely whispered, the act of forcing her gaze away from the gore almost
painful, so hard was her horror riveting her to it. She dragged her eyes up to Christophe's face, the Spaniard's features paled to a ghost white and drawn in excruciating pain.

"Coach... oh my God, his arm... Coach, we have to help him..." Rochelle leaned forward, in a surge, stretching fingers up to touch the youth's cheek. "He came back to find us. He just saved us."

The big man gripped the back of Christophe's head, rain thundering against his back as he shielded the other man from the spray. A deep, grim uncertainty worked its way through his expression, crinkling his brow and dragging his mouth down.

Chris' body twitched, knees moving into a little bit of a bend, as if he were going to hop up to his feet. His eyes were glazed over with pain, breath coming in short, quick stutters. Rochelle dropped her hands to gently touch onto his abdomen, like she could calm him.

He didn't even seem conscious.

"Help me carry him inside. We got supplies." Coach stated, voice fierce - and shaking. There was a nausea etched into his brow, but a stubborn decision built into his voice. "Ain't sho' we can save the arm."

Rochelle didn't even respond, ducking to try and slip her arms underneath Chris' legs, gazing up uncertainly as Coach moved his arms. He scooped under the Spaniard's torso with one as he practically held the man's nearly-lost arm together with the other.

The Spaniard let out an almost exhausted scream toward the sky as the movement jostled his shoulder. The mere touch of Coach's hand sent agony through his body. Dark eyes rolled up underneath his lids as the shock set in, jaw going slowly limp.

"But.. we gotta do what we can."
The grungy smell of blood roiled so thick in the air it was tangibly wet against Rochelle's skin. She could taste it in the back of her throat, blood and bile, and every time she swallowed it turned into a gag. It took all her self-control not to turn away.

"You gotta hold him."

Coach had said it three times already. The Spaniard was sprawled on his back on the pawn shop floor, water and blood mixing together in a thick smear around him.

Muffled groans escaped the youth at strangely high pitches, the pain keeping him from slipping entirely unconscious. Rochelle's expression was drawn in a look of sympathetic distress, aware of the way Chris' eyes slipped in and out of focus - awake.

The blood pouring from his nearly-cleaved shoulder had slowed to a gush, leaking onto the hardwood floor. The bronzed glow to his skin had faltered to a pale, sickly shade, as much blood loss as it was shock.

Rochelle's head jerked when Coach suddenly growled, snapping in front of her face - his fingers were covered in blood, and it was the sight of them more than the wet snap itself that pushed her to move.

Covering Chris' eyes with one hand as if it might calm him, Rochelle forced herself down to her knees and toes, bracing her other against his uninjured shoulder. She pressed him carefully flat against the floor, using her palm to still the tremors and small seizes shaking his frame.

"Coach." Rochelle muttered, her voice struggling with each syllable. "How - how are we going to stop the bleeding..? It'll only get worse if we .. take his arm.."

The ex-football player was grim as she'd ever seen him, jaw locked in a steely clench that expressed nothing but a faint uncertainty. He shook his head, silent, and straightened up a little from his kneel.

Coach undid the buckle of his belt, tugging the dark strip free of his beltloops and giving it a once-over in his hands. He squeezed it slightly, stretching at the unforgiving leather, his mouth downturning sharply.

"I ain't sure, babygirl." Leaning down, Coach turned his body slightly, bending over to gaze over Chris' injury. "Best tie it off. Might help slow it down." He delicately thumbed a line from Chris' armpit to the top of his shoulder - there was just a few inches of space before the wound. Just barely enough.

Rochelle kept her hand over Chris' eyes, soothingly, as unlikely as it was that the Spaniard registered the touch. Her chin trembled, eyes squinting slowly as she watched Coach slip the belt underneath what remained of the youth's shoulder. "Do you.. know what you're doing?"

"'Nough." Drawing the belt around the stumped shoulder, Coach slipped the tip through the buckle. A gruff shadow covered his eyes as he tipped his chin, gripping the leather tight as he pulled it closed.

The loop drew tighter and tighter on Chris' skin - and Coach kept pulling, till the leather started to bite into his shoulder. As the belt viced around the width of his arm, digging in with creaks of
leather and the rasping of the buckle clattering along, the flow of blood staggered to a weird trickle from his sundered shoulder.

The makeshift tourniquet, tightened by Coach's strong grip, did a mediocre job of pinching veins shut. Some deeper blood vessels kept on undaunted, but the sight of the slowing drain was reassuring. Rochelle felt a tiny huff of air escape her that she'd been holding.

Chris didn't seem to feel the pressure, his slow groans and almost frothed twitches of pain unchanging. Rochelle let her thumb bury into his sweat- and rain-spiked hair, rubbing at his scalp and brushing it back from his forehead.

"He'll be a'ight." Coach muttered in a low tone. Bicep taut with the strength it took to hold the belt in place, he reached his other hand to pick up Chris' machete. "Don't worry, babygirl, we'll make sure he's a'ight."

Rochelle reflexively twisted her face away, mouth screwing up at the confident way Coach held the blade, but he wasn't going for the Spaniard's arm - yet.

Folding the straining belt back a little, the football coach set the tip of the blade against the leather and twisted it in rapid half-circles. Lining it up in the center, Coach worked a little hole into the belt, the blade tearing through the material with some struggle.

Little tufts of brown hide built up on the blade, sinking in twist by twist. When the sword suddenly jerked forward as it breached through, Coach tossed it to his lap, shaking his hand out with a frown.

There was a tense silence as he leaned forward, tugging the belt just a little tighter before he used his thumb to push the buckle hook through the makeshift hole. It shut with a snap, and the big man leaned back to eye it all. The biting indention around the belt's width squeezed flesh into a reddened flush, and the longer he looked, the more the wound seemed to be clotting up instead of gushing.

Inhaling a deep sigh that made his nose wrinkle with the smell of blood, Coach glanced up at Rochelle. There was a nauseated tension to her jaw, and her gaze flicked nervously toward his face when his did. "Guess it's working."

"You gonna be okay, babygirl?" Ignoring the statement, Coach eyed her, settling a hand down on the handle of Chris' machete. He felt at it, half-heartedly grasping the glaze-sheathed wooden grip.

She shrugged minutely, brows dragging together over milk chocolate eyes as she feigned humor. "I … might pass out, but I'm not the one losing an arm.. Sweet Jesus, I can't believe we're doing this..." Her chin dropped, an aching gesture of disbelief, and Coach frowned.

He wanted to reach out and grip her hand, but his were covered in blood already.

"We gotta. He ain't gonna make it if we don't get bandages on that, and we can't wrap it like this." A deeper frown touched Rochelle's face, and Coach leaned toward her slightly. "Babygirl - he already lost his arm, we ain't condemnin' him to anything. Bone's broke, thing ain't even connected."

Sympathy was plastered all over her eyes. Her lips pursed together, brows flinching, and Coach could tell he wasn't helping. "If we could get him to a hospital - they'd find a way to reattach it..." Coach frowned at her for a moment, silent, and Rochelle sighed with a sharp shake of her head. "I know, I know.." she mumbled, frustrated. "Just.. Do it fast. Okay? He's in a lot of pain."
As if in acknowledgement of the statement, Chris gave a seizing jolt, his spine trying to arch. "Hluh-gghhn- dios... duel-" escaped him in a sputter. Rochelle had to quickly slip her hand flat on his chest, holding him down, struggling with the spasms wrenching him.

It was pathetic to watch - like a dying bird.

Giving a sigh, Coach reached back, pawing his backpack close to himself. "There's adrenaline in here - might help him last, and with the pain.." He yanked the zipper undone, digging into the contents until his fingers brushed the plastic adrenaline auto-injector.

He felt Rochelle's gaze flick to his face, watching him as he gripped the injector in a fist. "Health class." was all he gave as an explanation, thumbing the safety cap off. The ex-football player leaned over, gripping one hand onto Chris' knee. Holding his leg still, Coach braced his weight on a knee and swiftly stabbed the auto-injector into Chris' outer thigh.

The plastic folded up as it hit his leg, baring the needle as it plunged into skin, burrowing through the fabric of his cargo shorts. Coach held it in place as the adrenaline absorbed, making sure Chris' leg didn't move.

After a quiet count to ten, Coach pulled the injector free and tossed it aside. He set his palm flat to the same spot and rubbed in rough circles, glancing up to eye the Spaniard. "C'mon, boy - don't back out on us now."

The adrenaline worked fast - although Christophe didn't react to the injection, within a few nervewracking beats he was showing the rush. His breathing, already shallow and quick, sped up to quick pants. Sweat beaded up gently over his forehead, and although a strange flutter started at his eyelids as if he was in distress, he quieted slightly.

Coach acted the instant he regained some semblance of calm - he gripped the machete and leaned forward, setting the tip of the blade against the wood just an inch from what clinging muscle and flesh remained to keep Chris' arm connected to his shoulder.

Deepset eyes rose to scan Rochelle's face, as if looking for something. His jaw set, and he reluctantly nudged, "You wanna look away?" She did, mouth flinching as her gaze darted off toward the wall, and Coach took that as permission to go.

He chopped down, as accurately as possible on that clinging stretch of flesh. Without a serrated edge, the blade's slice was awkward and messy as it clipped through muscle - but with a grunt, Coach forced the blade down to the floor.

Unfortunately, Chris felt it.

The full-bodied scream that burst out of him startled Rochelle nearly into losing her grip. Wincing heavily at the sound, she quickly clamped a hand over Chris' mouth, stifling the scream into a strange groaning.

"Christ.. if it wasn't storming we'd have infected on our asses.." Rochelle mumbled, squinting harshly as the Spaniard's jaw gnashed under her grip, saliva panting onto her palm. She kept her other hand gripped on his chest, soothingly rubbing in slow circles. "I-Is he conscious?"

Coach didn't respond. Forcing the blade in a ragged sawing motion with the sickening noise of slicing flesh, he tensed up his spine as what was left of Chris' shoulder broke apart.

Blood spilled from newly sawn flesh, but it was a slow dribble with so much of the bloodflow cut off by the makeshift tourniquet. Flecks of ruined bone stuck to the blade amidst smeared blood,
and with a restrained shudder, Coach tossed it away with a clatter.

The youth's arm lay precisely where it had been an instant before - but it was suddenly different. Like plastic, almost, or rubber.. a slow leak of blood from bared meat the only sign that it was anything but.

It was just lifeless bone and sinew, a strange tension to the bulge of bicep, as if it were stuck in a flex.

Rochelle couldn't bring herself to watch when Coach delicately scooped fingers underneath the detached arm's elbow and picked it up, grip awkward on the rapidly chilling dead weight. It was limp and loose at the joints, but he quickly tightened his grasp to try and keep it immobile, holding it far away from his chest.

"What are you.. going to do?" she forced herself to ask, a thick silence following as Coach gazed toward her.

When he finally responded, it was slow and matter-of-fact. "Bury it outside. Ain't gonna throw it out fo' the zombies to get at, no sir." Rochelle nodded quickly, a little bit of relief touching her brow - only to fade.

"Do you want me to go with you? It's storming, Coach -"

"No." Coach immediately asserted, gesturing at Chris with his chin. "If he's got any senses 'bout him, I ain't havin' him left alone. You start bandagin' up his ar- .. shoulder. Leave the belt on, may keep him alive. I'll help when I finish up."

Chris had fallen to faintly groan-lined whimpers, sweat beaded thickly across his face. There were exhausted lines drawn into his face, pale and sunken, all the vibrant and swarthy glow gone from his skin.

He looked oddly young and cold, and Rochelle softly dragged his head into her lap, placing both hands on either side of his face and stroking with her thumbs. "Okay, Coach." she mumbled stiffly.

Rochelle was silent as Coach indelicately crossed the pawn shop floor back to the doorway. She reached out, dragging the backpack closer - lifting it out of the blood seeping along the floor - and starting to dig into it for gauze and bandages.

Her knuckles brushed the hard back of the notebook she'd secreted away in there when he wasn't looking, but she ignored it.

When Coach slipped outside into the storm through the broken door, Rochelle was starting to unroll bandages. She leaned forward to start wrapping him up, looping it around his neck to cross straight over the raw plane of his ruined shoulder.

The feeling of solitude as Coach disappeared was cloying - painful. She kept moving, mechanically, brows dragging together as shudders traced the Spaniard's body. He seemed to have finally lost consciousness, the adrenaline maybe causing enough of a reprieve from the pain to lapse into sleep.

His breath came in stuttered chokes.

"I'm so sorry..." Rochelle muttered, a flush of guilt dragging a mistiness clumsily to her eyes - she bit it back, forcefully, but no amount of self-control could hide the quiver to her voice.
"None of this should've happened."
Chapter 101

Ellis had slept like a rock through the rest of the night - but Nick had had no such luck. The very first time he'd stirred, some kind of ghostlike nightmare striking a cold shiver up his spine, he'd shot straight out of bed and set to pacing.

After that, sleep had come in blinks and waves, and he'd spent most of it stiffly stewing on the wicker chair beside the bed. He watched the storm rage on outside, refusing to fade.

It showed on his face, a haggard pallor and deepset circles under his eyes. No amount of a stiff upper lip helped Nick's appearance, and as sure as Ellis was that he didn't look up to par himself... he didn't like what he saw.

It was the young hours of a dark morning, light straining in through the window in off-orange sputters that just barely lit up the room. The storm outside hadn't stopped so much as abruptly died, and the stench of damp earth and waterlogged wood crept in through the walls, bloated and moldy.

Lifting a hand to rub at his eyes, Ellis let himself relax against the headboard of the bed, sighing a little. He dropped his gaze to look over his own torso, examining the spotty bruises that still marked out a faint boot tread along his chestbone.

"You okay, Nick? Seem sorta off it this mornin'." Rubbing at his jawline, Ellis re-focused up on the older man's frame, cocking his head. "You look like yer sweatin'."

Giving a sharp frown, Nick raised a hand almost reflexively to brush his wrist over his forehead - he was hot, no doubt, and a little clammy streak of sweat wiped off on his skin. "I'm fine, killer."

Settling his feet flat on the carpet, Nick shifted to stand up from the bed. The awkward tension of his heavily scarring calf, rubbing against the inside of his slacks, was still unfamiliar.

"It feels like the AC's out."

Although that was a partial lie, as he did feel feverish... the fact remained that the air was stiff and unmoving, thick with humidity. It wasn't exactly hot - the storm had cooled everything off - but it felt strange.

Ellis lifted up his chin and cocked his head a little, blinking. "Y'know, I thought it was kinda stuffy in here... just figured it was me." In an almost thoughtful motion, the kid gently got a grip on the blankets draped over his frame, tossing his wrists up to shuck the sheets off himself.

The motion left a little cringe on his face, but he quickly shook it off. Barechested, a layer of sweat lightening his skin to a low glisten, he curled his coverall-swaddled legs up to a half-bend - slow and easy. "Think the power's out?"

Arching a brow, Nick glanced over his shoulder. He focused on straightening his dress shirt and arranging it on his shoulders, but he let his eyes graze along the Georgian's battered form - pupils dilating with a slow darkness.

Ellis was all pale skin and flush muscle, building up to a healthy farmer's tan about his biceps. Scattered, old scars, speaking to energy and excitement and recklessness. Childish injuries.

Nick's scars reeked of bad bets.

"Only one way to find out." he sighed, almost hesitant. Lifting one hand as his other hand flattened
his shirt against his body, Nick reached underneath the lampshade of the bedside table's light and twisted the knob.

It clicked, audibly, but the lightbulb failed to light. In reflexive stubbornness, Nick turned the switch a few more times, but nothing changed.

"Don't look good." Ellis chirped, stretching his hand up and digging fingers into his curls. A little frown lingered on his lips, and Nick glanced back at him, snorting a bit.

"When does it ever?" he half-mocked, returning both his hands to his shirt. He started buttoning up from the top down, not even looking down as his fingers moved with agile familiarity. "Ten to one, the storm knocked lines down."

Slipping his legs weakly off the edge of the bed, Ellis squirmed to sit up, wincing here and there as pain spasmed his ribcage. "Damn. Guess there ain't no chance fer a shower."

Nick arched up a brow, almost startled, smirking as he turned his head to examine Ellis' face. His gaze flicked up and down his body, lingering on the sweaty shapes of his hips. "That sounds like something I should be saying, not you."

"Ain't like yer the only one who likes'em, Nick." Ellis pointed out a little mutedly, giving a half-smile up toward the older man. Pawing a hand flat onto his stomach, fingers curled, he nodded his head. "Don't matter, though. We gotta go find Coach'n'Rochelle. Mind passin' muh shirt over here?"

Agreeing in silence, Nick turned, scooping Ellis' shirt up off the nightstand where Rochelle had put it. He offered it out, dangling it a few inches before the younger man's face. When Ellis took it, their fingers grazed.

The Georgian didn't exactly blush - but there was a smile, a little glow, and he focused raptly down toward his lap as he slipped his arms into the off-yellow Bullshifters shirt and gently tugged it over his head.

Nick felt a tug of a smirk at the edge of his mouth, amused, but he turned away. It was a strange thing, idle flirtation, not even fueled by lust. It was without goal or intention, just brushes of skin and flashes of embarrassment - the latter on Ellis' face, anyway.

The natural reflex was to chase after him, continue the flirtation until they ended up in bed.

Unfortunately, as was becoming common in the apocalypse, there were much more important things to be dealt with. Try as he might to ignore it, Nick was worried. With the weather at a stand-still, he'd have expected Coach and Rochelle to be showing up.

It had been at least a half hour since they'd woken, and likely plenty more than that since the storm itself had stopped.

They were nowhere to be seen, and that meant it was time to hunt them down.

"Okay, kiddo." the gambler announced, closing up the last button of his dress shirt and tucking the excess fabric into his slacks. He winced a little, keeping his injured shoulder still, and sighed. "I'll get you set up in here, load up your gun. It'd probably be a bitch to shoot but you shouldn't need it."

Raking fingers through his hair and pushing it away from his sweat-lined forehead, Nick took a deep breath. Ellis was growing a frown, slowly lifting his brows as he eyed the gambler.
"I don't know what's here. I don't think there's any food or anything, so don't hang out if I don't come back." Nick lifted a hand, two fingers straightened in simple order. "You wait two hours, and then you start worrying. I'd tell you to move on, but you'll pr-

"Wait?" Ellis interrupted, roughly, disbelief quick to bleed into his tone. "Ey, you ain't implyin' I'm stayin' here, are you?" Taking in a breath, Nick started to turn around, not surprised at the struggle.

What he didn't expect was just how hard Ellis would fight him.

"Whoa, whoa. Hold yer damn horses there, Mr. Gamblin' Man." the Georgian blustered, gripping hands onto the sheets at either side of his thighs and staring fiercely up at Nick. "If you think, fer one second, I'm gonna lay here while you go runnin' out all alone tuh find Ro'n'Coach, then you best get yer head checked."

Nick lifted up his hands, palms out, shushing him with a frustrated glare to his eyes. "Ellis, you're injured. I don't even think you can shoot a gun, let alone keep up with me."

"So're you!" Ellis shot back, pointing up at Nick's shoulder.

Rolling his eyes, the gambler let his arms cross over his stomach, narrowing his eyes on Ellis' face. "Kid, you've got a fractured rib. I've got a little hole. First infected that gets a hand on you, you'll be a whimpering pile on the ground."

Ellis' body stiffened up, straightening, and he jutted his jaw out with a stubborn set. "First Smoker or Hunter or Charger or horde whut gets you, you'll be helpless. I had tuh run on my own, Nick. I wasn't movin' fer ten minutes before I nearly got hogtied'n'eaten."

"Shows how good you are." Nick spat back, sparking a genuine frown of hurt on Ellis' face. He hadn't really meant to sound so serious about it, but it was too late to retract the words. "Look, Overalls, I'm not letting you come with. You'll slow me down and I need to find them fast. End of story."

"No," Ellis retorted. The Georgian pushed on the bed, straightening up to his feet with a slight wince. "I'm comin' with you. You need someone tuh watch yer back, 'n'I ain't lettin' you go off all hoity-toity, fixin' tuh get yerself killed."

Sharpening his gaze, Nick leaned forward, hostility raising up his shoulders. There was only a foot or two of distance between them, but Ellis stood his ground. "Overalls, this isn't a yes or no question. You're staying."

"No."

"Ellis -"

The Georgian took a half-step forward, voice raising with a sudden fluster of emotion, jaw stiffening and hands curling into fists. "I almost lost y'all once, I ain't layin' here tuh lose y'all fer real!"

That silenced Nick for a moment.

... Goddamnit.

Reaching up, Nick grasped the kid's shoulders. It wasn't rough, just a grip, and Ellis lifted his chin slightly to match his gaze. Stony, clear blue eyes were dark with a kind of restrained fear.
"Ellis. What happened back there - wasn't your fault." Nick enunciated it carefully, seriously... and green eyes leveled with blue ones with a layer of honesty. "Nobody knew all that shit was going to happen, and nobody knew this storm was going to happen, either. It's nobody's fault."

A huff passed through Ellis' nostrils, gaze shifting to the side suddenly as a frown of half-guilt strangled over his face. "I know." he muttered, shoulders lowering a little under Nick's palms. His whole body went limp, in fact, brows lowering.

Slight relief eased Nick's brow, thinking he'd broken through the Georgian's stubbornness. "Then quit blaming yourself and lay back down. I'll be back with Rochelle and Coach before you know it."

As if.

"No." Ellis returned quietly, frowning through the argument. "You ain't leavin' me, and that's that. Remember back when that Smoker nearly got you? But we grabbed you, 'n' broke the tongue - 'n'I tried to run in and kill it? Yuh got real mad at me, made me swear not tuh run off no more?"

Nick started to nod, features harshening, ready to bark out how that had nothing to do with the situation - but Ellis wasn't having any of it, already retorting back, breathlessly forceful.

"Don't you start runnin' off on me too! It ain't fair, Nick, I worry just like you do!"

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Nick lifted his hands up from the younger man's shoulders in an agitated gesture, flexing fingers. He turned away, scratching at the back of his neck. "Jesus fuckin' Christ, Overalls. You're stubborn as shit."

There was a moment of silence between them - tense. Slow.

Closing his eyes in a sharply irritated motion, breathing in deep as if to focus himself, Nick didn't expect it when Ellis' hands slipped between his elbows and his waistline.

Stretching fingers gently forward to half-embrace his waist in a hug, Ellis let his forehead rest against the back of Nick's neck, his shorter stature leaving the posture oddly comfortable. His voice had quieted to a near-murmur, and Nick felt the words in puffs, hot against his shirt.

"I can't sit here not knowin' if you -" A strangled pause, short and embarrassed, and then he recovered, slowly nuzzling his face against Nick's back. " - if y'all're okay.. I gotta come with, Nick. Okay? Please?"

Something stiffened Nick's spine. Maybe it was the closeness.. the need.. or maybe it was that vocal stumble. Regardless, a sudden and inexplicable desire for space and silence jammed its way into his brain and set his skin to crawling. He reached down to push Ellis' hands away.

"Get off, Overalls, you're sweating all over me." he muttered, abrasively, straightening his shirt. Embarrassed and a little startled at the reaction, Ellis quickly acquiesced, backing up a step and pulling his arms in toward his own sides.

Sighing in near-frustration, Nick raised hands up to rub at his temples. His shoulder ached with a persistent complaint, and his fever was giving him a headache.

He hadn't necessarily meant the words to come out as harsh as they had. They'd just slipped out, and the silence in their wake was ... uncomfortable. Nick flicked a glance over his shoulder, and he didn't like the sight.
Ellis was quiet, rubbing at the folds of his coveralls with his thumbs as if to distract himself. His ears burned slightly as he stood there behind Nick, feeling suddenly intrusive.. and a little rejected.

Ellis curled his lips inward, trying to gather the breath to apologize - and then Nick growled.

"Fine. We'll go together." His voice was low and agitated, resigned to giving in. Nick turned around, facing a surprised Ellis. "If only to make you fuckin' shut up. Jesus. And because you'd probably just come sobbing after me if I tried to leave, get us both ki-"

Ellis' arms were around him again in an instant, squeezing, making them both wince with pain. The Georgian nuzzled up against his neck, bleating out, "Hoh man, Nick, thank yuh - I couldn't sit here, Nick, I just couldn't.. I promise I won't cause no problems, I won't lag behind none.. you just see, you'll be real glad I came with!"

"I'm already regretting it." Nick muttered, shutting one eye, painfully shifting his shoulder in the midst of the hug.

"Get off!"
"Keep close."

Nick found himself regretting the command the instant he'd given it. He winced sharply as his first step out of the house was followed by the thud of Ellis' front against his back. It startled both of them, and Nick whipped his head around to give a dull glare over his shoulder.

Ellis was bright red, an apology all over his face as he caught his balance and scooted back a step to put space between them. He shifted his grip on his shotgun, reaching up tenderly to nudge his cap-bill down over his face. "U-uh, sorry, Nick - I thought you -"

"Wanted you to climb on me like a fucking five year old?" Nick muttered back, frustrated. He straightened out his clothes, almost roughly.

They'd found Nick's suit jacket in the bathroom, oddly clean. It had been reviving, comforting, although it was far too hot to consider wearing it. Nick had tied it around his waist, a strange companion to Ellis' bulky coveralls.

Nick shook his head, dismissing the argument before Ellis could apologize again, lifting his chin to gesture forward. "We got problems, kid."

Tybee's streets were a fair wreck. Windows had broken, spreading glass over the asphalt, and powerlines were toppled and dead. The electric cables had been ripped free of the wooden poles and lay like crushed snakes.

Worse than the debris was the infected that had gathered. It seemed like they were drawn to the house, attracted by some sixth sense for where the two were but unable to quite pinpoint them.

They stumbled around, clawing idly at each other and themselves - falling to their knees and vomiting, black liquids dribbling from their mouths like crude oil. One snarled, tackling another and biting into its shoulder.

The fight that resulted was completely isolated between the two, just wrestling and clawing to the ground. Nick watched with a slightly raised brow, adjusting his grip on his hunting rifle.

"Whut're you thinkin'?" Ellis murmured, leaning forward until he could whisper into Nick's ear. The graze of plush lips and the warm huff of breath made Nick scrunch a brow, but he didn't say anything. "They ain't noticed us yet.. maybe we should sneak around?"

"Sounds like a good idea to me." Nick agreed in a low voice, flicking a glance along the street. "If we stick to the edge of the street, stay low, quiet..." He nodded - then arched a brow. "Can you even do quiet, kid?"

The Georgian craned his head, sticking his tongue out at the gambler with a little smile. "Watch yer mouth, slick. I'll be quieter'n you."

Nick snorted slightly, cocking his head to get a better look at the Georgian's face, raising both brows. "Wanna bet?" He said it with a growl.. a low noise, challengingly. It seemed to cow Ellis, lips parting in a soft breath - but he leaned closer instead of away.

The gambler flicked a glance over his face, smirking suddenly, using his good shoulder to shove the younger man back a step. Ellis winced at the push, quickly catching his balance with a
plaintively whispered "Ow!"

It was the first time he'd let on to being in pain, and even that he quickly disguised. He straightened and smoothed out his expression. Nick noticed, and the strangest feeling bubbled sharply in his gut.

Amusement - and a little pride. It was a funny feeling, sparking over his mind. Ellis was stubborn and tough, and as much as it agitated him, it impressed him a little bit, too.

Nick smirked wider, shaking his head subtly, dismissing both the conversation between them and himself. He wasn't eager to follow that train of thought. "Playtime's over, kid, we gotta get moving. Coach and Ro' are waiting, come on."

The two men slipped away from the house. Staying close to the face of the building and moving in a slow half-crouch, they eased softly onto the sidewalk, breaths practically held as Nick led the way.

The infected that clotted the streets seemed oblivious to them - at least temporarily. Nick wasn't eager to test it, eyes quick to scan for the best way to proceed.

Cars lined the side of the road, and Nick padded softly to duck behind the first one, a small green sedan with its side door ripped off. Ellis slipped behind him, hushed, crouching down and settling a hand against the side of the car.

Nick glanced back at him, nodding sharply. He thumbed forward, speaking so lowly it was more mouthing than actual words. "If we stay behind the cars, we should be alright..." He flicked a glance along the sidewalk, scanning along the row of buildings that cushioned their side of the street.

The infected seemed, at least temporarily, contained to the road - he couldn't see any creeping around on the sidewalk. But they were putting themselves at great risk. If the infected were alerted, they'd clot up and overwhelm them.

Sighing, Nick shifted, letting his back slip against the side of the car. He could feel water, left over from the storm, soaking into his back from the surface of the metal. A frown edged the corner of his mouth down, and he glanced toward Ellis' face. "The only issue is we don't know where we're going."

Ellis nodded a little, shifting slightly to match Nick's posture. "Maybe they left signs or somethin'. They're real smart, Nick, they wouldn't'uv just gone off without thinkin' about a plan."

Letting off a small grunt noise, Nick craned his head up, slowly straightening until he could see through the car windows. Staring out into the street, he watched a zombie shamble past, slowly. "I'd like to think so." He muttered back, glaring slightly. "But I'm not sure. Fuckin' idiots probably thought nothing would go wrong.. goddamnit."

Ellis gave a slight frown, cocking his head and glancing up at Nick. The conman could see his attention from the corner of his eyes, but he didn't look, narrowing his eyes further.

"Last fucking time I let them go off on their own, goddamn." Nick reached up a hand to rub at his brows, harshly, frustration sinking in even deeper to his tone. Shifting, he dropped a knee to the sidewalk so he could lift up a little higher, scanning the street with a faint mutter. "If I were some assclowns, where would I g-"

"Nick.." Ellis interrupted in a whisper, reaching suddenly out to put a hand on the gambler's sleeve. Nick silenced, arching a brow with a small sideglance. "Why .. didn't you go with 'em?"
There was a moment of silence before Nick reacted, twisting his head away and shifting his arm out from under Ellis' hand. "Is this really the best time to be chatting?" he hissed softly, raising his head to re-focus on the street.

Undaunted, Ellis scooted a couple inches closer, his knees nudging into Nick's thigh. "I'm whisperin', Nick." he said almost dully, matter-of-factly, continuing on earnestly. "It ain't 'cause yer injured -"

"Overalls." Nick muttered, warningly.

"- 'cause you wouldn't'uh let them talk you down fer nothin'." Drifting into something like a gentle smile as he traced his own line of thinking, Ellis reached out again, gripping for Nick's sleeve. "Ro' could'uh watched me. It would have been okay."

"Ellis." Harsher that time, darker.

Ellis' fingers touched down on his elbow, and he grasped at the fabric, tugging softly - mindful of Nick's injured shoulder. He whispered, furtively, leaning forward until his breath huffed against the gambler's ear. "I'm just sayin'… You don't gotta lie. You can just say you wanted tuh stay with me. I don't min-"

Snarling in a huff of air, Nick reached to grasp Ellis' shirt in one swift snag. The kid startled, but Nick was already pushing him hard into the side of the car, silencing him. "Will you -"

The thud was followed instantly by a gasp, Ellis cringing in on himself as the collision shocked through his torso. His eyes widened slightly, grabbing Nick's forearm with his free hand and huffing out a noise of pain.

The moment Nick had done it he stiffened, seeing the pain and the edge of confusion all over Ellis' face. As fast as he'd grabbed on he let go, shaking off Ellis' grip.

Shit -

As the Georgian regained his breath, wheezing softly, Nick retreated a few inches. He bristled slowly, shoulders raising, and his voice went ruthlessly sharp as he spoke.

"I wanted to fuck you.." He quickly twisted his head away to avoid seeing Ellis' expression as the younger man slid down the side of the car slightly, winded. Green eyes went sharply narrowed, frustrated. "Okay? I stayed behind so I could fuck you. Is that what you want from me? Is that the gushy bullshit you want?"

Nick expected anything but Ellis' jaw to stiffen. Expected anything but those pain-wrought brows to tighten up, anything but Ellis to lean forward, pushing away from the car to retort back at him.

"You were .. were beggin' me tuh leave you alone." he whispered, voice hushed with tension and hitching with pain. He honed a fierce stare on Nick's face, coughing faintly and tipping his chin up challengingly. "So yeah. That's bullshit."

Nick started to grit his teeth, anger rising up his spine in a flood. What did Ellis expect - want? Nick to admit the violent desperation he'd felt to get Ellis in his arms after thinking him dead? Now, of all times? He snapped up a hand, ready to jab a finger at the kid and growl a response - ready to fight him off, defend himself...

… and then they heard the snarl. It was idle, more questioning than anything else, but irrefutably close. Maybe even just on the other side of the car they ducked behind.
Cursing silently with a sharp jerk of his head, Nick dropped down into a low crouch, setting his hand on the damp sidewalk concrete. His other hauled his rifle up and quickly got a grip on the trigger. Slipping his head up a faint degree, Nick snuck a glance through the car window, eyes narrowing.

There were three or four zombies gathering close to the car, alert and gnashing their teeth. Feral yellow eyes flicked around, and they had their mouths hanging open.

Like dogs, huffing a scent.

Ellis mimicked him, silently, flattening against the car and snapping both his hands onto his shotgun. Blue eyes flicked up, then back to Nick, focused. ‘Move?’ he mouthed, questioningly, uncertainty darting up over his expression.

Something sunk in Nick's stomach, chilling to a frozen focus. Even with what Nick had said, Ellis was looking to him for answers - earnestly, genuinely. Trustingly. There wasn't even hurt on his face.

*God, you're an idiot.*

Nick nodded, silently, mouthing back; *'Easy.*' He gestured smoothly to wave Ellis with as he made to crouch-walk along the sidewalk. They kept tight against the car and low to the ground, slowly - quietly, but not quietly enough.

The snarling grew louder and closer, attracted to the rustle of their clothes and scuffs of their boots. Nick felt his breath huffing, shallowing, pupils narrowing as he scanned the sidewalk ahead of them for a plan, an option, a way out.

The two men darted to the next car, crossing that empty space between them. It was only a few feet, a couple strides, but Nick felt a stab of vulnerability in that instant - only breathing again when they'd reached the truck ahead of them.

Ellis crept along so close their bodies moved in sync. Each step was met with another, each shift shadowed. Nick wanted to snap at him for being so close, but he held his tongue, focusing.

Slowly, Nick crouched up to the haunch of the truck, listening to the snarling that was growing closer and louder every second - multiplying. Every step was encouraging the infected toward them. They were screwed and he knew it.

Raising a hand, Nick gestured sharply over his shoulder, a crooked finger beckoning the younger man closer. Ellis was crammed up against his back in an instant, face shoved next to his to listen.

"Kid..." he whispered, just a faint breath against Ellis' cheek. "We're not going to sneak out of this.. You book it down the street, and I'll cover you." He saw Ellis' expression shift, saw the argument before it came. "I'll be right behind y-"

The scream of rage came from behind them, an excited shriek. Nick glanced back long enough to see the zombie standing yards down the road, reaching out with bloody hands, grabbing at the air between them.

And then Ellis' hand touched his.

"Naw."

Fingers stretched and grasped and suddenly they were holding hands, digits twining up - and in one
surge, Ellis bolted up to his feet and ran. Nick was a split second behind him, any of his desire to
fight drowned out by the way Ellis' grip threatened to drag him.

The horde exploded into life in their wake. All in an instant, every infected on the street was
screaming and sprinting after them. They scrambled over the cars like ants to pour onto the
sidewalk behind them.

"Tits!" Nick snarled, feeling the sweat between their fingers and gripping on tighter. The shrieks
grew fast behind them, and when he snatched a glance over his shoulder, it was one he regretted.
"Fuck!"

The infected were running far faster than they were.

"You wanna make a stand, Nick?" Ellis shouted back at him, his voice full of a strangled pain.
Running with a fractured rib had to be agonizing, but he kept moving, nursing his torso with every
step. "We could fight 'em -"

"We're gonna get fucked!" Nick snarled. "Don't stop!" With their hands linked between them like
lifelines, the two men sprinted down the sidewalk, the distance between them and the horde
thinning rapidly.

Ellis shoved up his shotgun, gesturing down the road mid-step. His voice was full of that spark,
that inspiration, that Nick was starting to trust - reluctantly. "Look, that car up ahead -" Nick saw it.
A silver sedan, the back door hanging wide open. "- we jump into it, use it like a bunker.."

Nick instantly nodded, no hesitation. It'd give them something to put their back to, and that was a
feeling Nick would pay money for. "Let's go." he snarled, suddenly widening his stride and closing
the gap between Ellis and him, their hands clasped between their bodies.

It occurred to Nick in that single, adrenaline-drugged instant, that he'd never held a lover's hand
that long in his life.

When Ellis skidded to a sudden halt, so hard the two men collided, Nick's head jerked up. He'd
recognize the shape that staggered out from behind the alleyway in front of them anywhere. It was
burned into his brain in all its gruesome existence.

The Boomer turned bleary eyes toward them, its shuddering sac of a body twitching as pustules
strained on its skin. Stub-fingered hands splayed out, and as its body seemed to jerk back, a garbled
hoarking sound seized its whole body in one fierce motion.

"Shit!" both men blurted in unison.

It was Nick who acted first. He snatched his free arm around Ellis' waist, snarling at the pain of
moving his shoulder, and jumped hard to the side. He could feel Ellis moving with him,
surrendering to the motion.

They hit the front of the truck, rolling half-onto the hood, Nick taking the brunt of the strike. The
Boomer's chunk-filled spout of vomit exploded ahead of it, spewing through the air like the spray
of a hose. Nick struggled to get his footing, Ellis rolling off of him to do the same, huffing sharply.

The smell was horrendous - but the sound was worse, between the splattering and the retching.

Nick was inches away from bolting, ready to sprint across the street and make a break for one of
the side alleyways, but Ellis grabbed him by the tied folds of his suit jacket and halted him. "W-
wait .."
Whipping around, already snarling a sharp, "What?!", Nick saw it too.

The horde had caught up to them just in time for the first few to take splatters of vomit head-on. They seemed to halt, skidding on the slick concrete, clawing at the air and raising hands to touch at their skin - feeling the goo, the bile, under their fingertips.

They seemed… shocked.

And then one of the infected behind them, one that hadn't taken the brunt of it, lashed out in a punch so fierce its arm speared through the zombie in front of it. Fingers clawed and squirmed, like it was trying to feel the bile its counterpart was covered in.

All in one screaming motion, blood mixing with vomit, the horde fell in on itself, collapsing like a black hole. It was like Nick and Ellis didn't even exist. They shrieked as they tore into each other, scrambling like starving animals, clawing and biting.

Nick stared. Ellis was staring next to him, their bodies half-pressed against each other, fingertips vaguely touching at the other's clothing, shocked. Uncomprehending. Just looking on like it would make sense any second.

The only thing that became clear was that there were more infected coming. Shrieks rose up around them, approaching fast from either direction of the streets. The sound, and the awareness of how the vomit had attracted hordes before, startled Nick into thought.

He grabbed Ellis' elbow, whispering sharply against his jaw. His cheek felt rough against the peach-fuzz stubble that covered Ellis' - like sandpaper. "We better get the fuck out of dodge, kid. Got company."

Ellis nodded shortly, and they parted in a clumsy turn, Nick leading the way this time as they bolted across the street for a smaller side road. He could tell Ellis was slowing, and he was sharply aware of it.

Who knew how badly the Georgian had injured himself running around - not to mention the fact that Nick had shoved him, hard.

The horde thickened behind them as more infected came shrieking to join the mess. The zombies didn't spare so much as a growl for the fleeing men; they were too busy tearing into each other. It was pure violence, as if they were looking for something they couldn't find. They hunted, searching in the organs and viscera of their fellows.

The survivors ran hard down the sidewalk, sprinting, Ellis close on Nick's tail. He snuck a glance back over his shoulder, making sure the infected weren't after them. They weren't, not by a longshot.

The sweet inhale of victory made Ellis laugh, suddenly. It was this hitched guffaw, a little drunk with pain, and the instant it started he couldn't stop it. His footsteps wobbled, slowing, hitting the face of the building next to him with his shoulder and spinning a little.

Nick forced himself to stop too, skidding, hearing Ellis' steps stutter. Reaching out a hand quickly to stabilize himself on the wall, he half-turned, glancing back at Ellis. He expected to see the kid collapsing, but instead...

"They.." Ellis was breathless, laughing in such short and fast gasps he sounded giddy. "They got **puked** on, man... holy shit.."
Straightening a little, Nick stared for a beat, almost startled... and then he felt the chuckle surge up his throat before he could control himself. He pawed up a hand over his eyes, rubbing into his forehead, feeling the heat emanating from his skin.

"They got puked on hard, kid." Nick shook his head, letting himself hunch forward as he caught his breath. Humor touched his voice, a little sarcastic, a little dark - but humor. "I think we are officially the first people alive to see zombies get puked on."

Ellis stumbled a step toward him, and without seeming to think, the Georgian swept arms around Nick's torso and squeezed. It was almost wrestling at him, just laughing, disbelief all over his face.

Nick didn't react at first, moving with the staggering motions. He just stared down, wanting to shove him off just like he'd done before.. but, slowly, a strange twitch began at the edges of his mouth that felt like a smirk.

His arms shifted up, like he might return the gesture -

And then a gunshot rang out, echoing above their heads, a heavy blast that exploded on the air even from a distance. Ellis froze, head jerking straight, brows crunching. "That..."

Nick frowned sharply, sliding back one step and twisting away. Ellis turned away from him without a single hint of hesitance, releasing his waist and perking up on the toes of his workboots.

The gambler tensed, defensively raising his hunting rifle even though there'd been no whizzing of bullets to warn that the shot was directed toward them. "The fucking hell -"

Another gunshot rang out, identical to the first. Calm, orderly, and loud.

Close. Maybe a couple streets over.

A smile broke over Ellis' face, and he reached out, almost smacking Nick in the forearm. The older man jerked slightly, glaring at him sharply, but Ellis completely ignored him with a bleated, "Nick! Hoh muh gawd, Nick! That's Coach's shotgun! Double-barrel, could tell that from anythin'!"

Blinking once, Nick absorbed that in an instant - and relief flooded him, real, honest relief.

The smirk that flashed over his face was huge, flashing teeth in a lopsided strip as he let off a short sigh. Nick raised up his rifle, pointing it at the sky without bothering to aim, and shot off a bullet.

The gunshot cracked in the air, making Ellis jump a little bit, but he was still grinning.

"Sic 'em, Fireball. Let's get our team back."
Ellis led the way with all the grace of a newborn fawn. His rib was seriously starting to pain him, even though he didn't say a word. Nick watched with some small degree of concern as the Georgian zig-zagged and stumbled ahead of him on the paved, condo-dotted road.

He was tempted to make him slow down, but Ellis was far too busy zeroing in on their lost teammates. Regardless, the sooner they found them.. the sooner the kid would calm down and take a break.

They moved down the center of Tybee, parallel to the oceanfront. The scent and smell of salt was starting to sift through the gory air, drifting in between the still-cramped buildings that huddled at the island's center. The thick rows of buildings and the dark foliage planted around them blocked any view of the ocean, but the greyed horizon seemed.. deeper.

Like the wide-open waters were just out of sight.

Coach's shots had quit after Nick had responded, and with good reason - ammo wasn't exactly expendable, and the sound was more likely to attract the infected toward them. Nick and Ellis had already had a near brush with a horde, and getting into a tangle with another one wasn't high on their list of things to do.

The gambler kept ears and eyes on their surroundings, minding the blundering mechanic ahead of him. The streets weren't devoid of infected, and Nick was quick to snap his rifle up and pick them off at a distance before they even really caught wind of the two men.

His shoulder pulsed in a slow, feverish rhythm, and his hands were much unsteadier than he was used to. The rifle sight trembled as he glanced through it, and he missed once or twice. Or three times. Or more. Nick was pretty sure Ellis never noticed, or maybe he did - but knew enough to bite his tongue.

Between the fever and the twitchy feeling as a want for nicotine turned into a need, he wasn't feeling great.

"I think it's around this corner." Ellis wheezed softly over his shoulder, pace picking up as he scooted down the sidewalk. Nick couldn't help but grunt, fighting the urge to order him to slow down.

Much against his will… the conman was eager, too.

He would have wanted more time to compose himself, to settle his face in distinct nonchalance for the reunion. He would've liked to plan out something cold to say, and well up the anger he'd felt the night before to take out on them today. He felt too much worry to see them as suddenly as he did.

Ellis skidded around the building at the end of the block, head perking up sharply as he pecked down the sidestreet. The strange wheeze-squeak that escaped him was a precursor to his bolting down the road, emotion thickening his voice as he quite nearly dropped his shotgun.

"G-Guys!" he yelped, disappearing behind the gaudy little convenience store just next to him. Nick gave a slight growl of annoyance, lowering his rifle and chasing after him around the corner at a quick jog.
Coach and Rochelle were running at them from the opposite direction.

It was almost laughable how much of a mirror image they were: both Coach and Nick slowed instantly upon spotting that the entirety of the foursome was there, but both Rochelle and Ellis sped up, breaking into full-pelt sprints towards each other.

They hit with an audible thud, and Ellis' loud cry of pain as their hug squeezed his chest was muffled by the way he buried his face into her neck and wrapped his arms tightly around her. Rochelle got her arms around Ellis' torso, pressing her cheek to the side of his head.

They hugged, squeezing and clinging, Ellis' shoulders shaking with emotion and the physical pain of all the contact. "Sweetie... it's okay. We're here, we're all here..." she murmured to him, tears streaking down her face. "You did great."

Nick stepped up slowly behind them, examining the embrace with a small sigh. He couldn't help it, and underneath the small mocking smirk that darted up to his face, there was a soft exhaustion. "Aw. You guys are cute."

Coach reached him just as he uttered the words. He was somewhat surprised to see the eldest sticking his hand out for a shake, but he gave in quickly, reaching out to clasp hands.

Coach's fingers were crusted with blood, and Nick started to question it with a raising brow - but the older man interrupted him immediately. "Good to see you, Nick." he grunted, smiling with that gruff but sincere expression he tended to hold to. "How's yo' shoulder?"

Nick returned it with a slight grin, a strip of teeth showing between stress- and dehydration-paled lips. "Feels like shit." he answered honestly.

The big man's smile widened, a baritone chuckle escaping his barrel-chested lungs, and he responded easily, "I'll be gentle, then." Nick only had time to blink before Coach used his hand to wrench them into a hug, the light embrace affectionate and genuine, but only actually bringing their shoulders into actually touching.

Nick's first instinct was to recoil, but something stopped him. He sunk into the feeling of belonging, of family, for just an instant. Green eyes lowered slightly, relenting to the fiercely sturdy grip Coach had him in.

"Good to see you, too, big guy." he reluctantly, quietly, uttered. The gambler clapped a hand on Coach's back, his body relaxing.

And then it was over.

Coach let him go, and they turned away from each other like nothing had even happened. They didn't even trade glances or pass a look between them - just turned away and focused on Rochelle and Ellis, a mutual dismissiveness to the other man.

The two younger survivors broke away from each other, finally, a smile beaming over Ellis' face as Rochelle grasped and squeezed at his hands. She was tearful, and suddenly his husky grey-blues were misted over, too. "J-jezz," he stammered, lower lip trembling with emotion. "Yer makin' me cry, too, girl..."

She could only give a laughed sob, leaning forward to press her forehead to his, sighing. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I'm just - I'm okay. Coach took care of me." Ellis scrunched his brows up, sniffing, his blurred vision making him blink rapidly.
Rochelle let him go when he suddenly perked up, gaze darting toward the ex-football player, eyes going as wide and jaw giving a tremor. He whined, softly, "C-Coach..." and bolted toward him, composure lost.

The big man grunted in surprise as Ellis pounced his waist, arms encircling the weighty gut of his midsection. Coach softened, eyes hidden under the shadow of his deep brow, and let an arm wrap around the other Georgian's shoulders.

"You a'ight, son?"

Ellis couldn't get out a response, just clung on in silence.

Rochelle took a second to wipe at her eyes, breath trembling, before she turned her gaze on Nick. He was quick to meet her gaze, grinning slowly, his voice low and easy-going. "What, no hug for me?" he murmured, expression turning into a teasing leer.

He hardly expected her to actually approach him - and his features went totally surprised when she stretched up and kissed him on the duskily stubbled cheek. It was short, soft - but very real, so real Nick fell to a pleased hum.

He sighed wearily, his eyelids dropping in lurid examination as she stepped away from him. "Couldn't get one on the lips, dollface?" he taunted, voice a husky roll.

Rochelle threatened him with a jut of her jaw, wiping at her eyes again as she fought a smile. "Shut up, jackass.. I'm glad you're okay."

Nick smirked at her, ever entertained at her expense, voice lightening as fast as it had darkened. He tiredly crossed his arms over his chest with his rifle caught in his elbow, cautious of his bad shoulder. "You too."

She looked away, smiling for a moment, taking in the sincerity without meeting his gaze.

However, he caught something else before Rochelle really turned away. Conflict tugged her head down, that smile disappearing in a flash as her gaze darted to the ground. Even as Ellis reluctantly pulled away from Coach, snuffling and beaming in a weak mess of joy, Nick zeroed in on Ro'.

He held his tongue, but the very familiar buzz of cynicism rose back up and mellowed out Nick's very unfamiliar buzz of affection. Something was wrong.

"Y'all don't even know how worried we were..." the kid sniffed, breathing heavily in little huffs. "When that storm blew up.. I was so.. just.." He scrubbed at his eyes, muscled shoulders shaking softly. "I don't wanna ever split up again."

Coach set a hand comfortingly on his shoulder, sighing, gently squeezing. "It'll be a'ight, Ellis. Ain't gonna be doin' that again anytime soon. We gonna stick together, no more 'we'll be back soon' shit."

Ellis nodded, weakly, slumping very gently as if his energy stores had run out and he was left with only the pain vibrating through his ribcage. "I sure hope yer right..." he mumbled with a slight wince. "Seems like it always ends up that way, though."

More than aware of the Georgian's pain, Nick interjected sharply, "As adorable as this whole thing is, we should get off the street. Rest, and get the fuck out of dodge before anything decides to ruin
our little reunion."

He kept a stiff jaw, not betraying the fact that he was mostly saying it all for Ellis' benefit.

"Where'd you guys stay overnight?" Nick realized he'd stepped smack onto the issue before he even finished. Rochelle cringed, turning her gaze away, and Coach looked at her with a flinching jaw.

The lie tells were everywhere.

There was silence like radio static, sharp and fierce, and even Ellis was quick to notice the tension. He frowned, delicately, resting a hand on his side, aligned with his ribcage. "What's wrong...?"

Rochelle immediately turned to him and put her hands up in a soothing motion, trying to control her expression in front of him. "Nothing, sweetie, every - we're.. fine." She got choked up, her voice tremoring, and she had to look away before she lost her composure entirely. "Coach and I are fine.. we just.. Last night, -"

Rochelle wasn't going to be able to make her way through it. She could feel it, and the struggle showed on her face. Darting a glance toward Coach, she almost pleadingly bit at her lower lip.

The ex-football player took over.

"Somethin' happened." His brow scrunched deeply over his eyes as he inhaled a tight breath. His arms crossed over his chest, the deep barrel of his torso deflating slightly with his following sigh.

Ellis and Nick both stayed silent, gazes on the older man. Ellis' face was rapt with concern, open and honest... but Nick hid his eyes under a deeply scowled brow, agitation muddling any real understanding of his expression.

"We were bein' chased by a Witch the storm brought in. Jumped out of some alleyway, an' we ran into it before we saw it... Bitch chased us down a few streets an' got us backed into a pawn shop. Nearly had our asses, too."

The horror was evident on Ellis' face. He frowned, tightly, reaching up to weakly settle his hand flat on his trucker cap. Blue eyes darted to examine both Rochelle and Coach... but neither of them looked injured. Not any more than the last he'd seen them, and the blood all over them didn't seem to have an origin.

Confusion overtook the shock.

"How..?" he breathed.

Coach shook his head, sighing deeply as his chin lowered. "We wouldn't have made it, son. Would'a been you an' Nick. Thing had us cornered, an' it wasn't dyin'." His gaze dropped, looking toward his sneakers with a vague frown. "That boy, Chris -"

"What?!" Nick and Ellis both blurted out at the same time. Ellis' face went surprised - but almost brightly so, like he was half excited. Nick, on the other hand, clenched his jaw up aggressively, his voice sharpening to a razor's edge.

"What the fuck was he doing here?" he continued, drawing all three's gazes. "How the hell do you know that other bitch isn't hot on his heels? He could be bait... or, shit, working together!"

Coach quickly tried to soothe him, his hands going up, spreading thick fingers in a mediating
gesture. "Now, Nick, calm down." he ordered gruffly. "If he wanted us dead he could'a watched that Witch tear us apart. He threw himself at it to save us."

Nick wasn't sold in the slightest. It was all over his face, this thick distrust and grim disbelief that stirred little sympathy. He grunted, lowly, shrugging with his good shoulder. "Hardly matters. He's dead, right? The Witch took care of him?"

Hesitating, Rochelle averted chocolate brown eyes toward the asphalt beneath their feet, dark with absorbed rain and matted with lost foliage whipped from limbs by the gale winds. Curling fingers in her blood-spattered grey T, she frowned, shaking her head.

As if tuned to her pain, Ellis slipped toward her, letting one arm limply loop around her waist in a comforting squeeze. He tried to duck his head, peering out from under his bill-cap, but she avoided his eyes.

"Not.. not exactly." reluctantly left her, unwilling to meet anyone's gaze. Grief tangled her brows together, and she clenched her hands - fighting the ache that had kneaded into the muscles of her left arm. Her shoulder burned..

A ghost pain, from sympathy.

Nick's pale green eyes narrowed on her face, some of that instinctual anger smoothing out of his features as - for a silent moment - he drank in that grief. He didn't apologize, didn't ask her what had her face so paled...

But his voice was a little gentler when he demanded simply, "Where is he?"
Chapter 104

There was a stench in the air - it wasn't blood, it was more like sinew. Like bone and muscle: the actual stink of sawn flesh, sour and gutwrenching. Nick was stiff as a board as he stood in the pawnshop doorway, the broken door swung open beside him.

At first glance, Nick wouldn't have even known Christophe was alive.

His left arm had been reduced to a stump, tightly wrapped with bandages that looped around his neck and torso. Blood had soaked through the cloth rapidly, and even though much of it had crusted over, there were still damp spots.

Chris' whole torso was stained with blood, blotches smeared on death-pale skin. He'd surely lost more than his body could produce. They'd covered most of his body in a stitched quilt from deeper in the shop, but it had fallen down to bundle in his lap, just loose waves of yarn.

"Jesus." the gambler uttered, feeling Ellis' presence nudge up against his back. Aware of his approach, Nick somewhat numbly took a half-step to the side, letting him see. The kid leaned around him, peering inside, and a hitched breath sucked past Ellis' lips in shock.

The strained breathing that chugged Chris' torso up and down was sickly and barely noticeable.

"D-damn, guys.." Ellis mumbled hesitantly, reaching out in reflex to grab onto the back of Nick's shirt, trying to cling onto him. "He don't look good..

Nick grunted slightly, letting his body shrug away from Ellis' touch before the Georgian made contact, crossing one arm stiffly over his chest. Ellis didn't argue, slipping his hands into the low-sagging pockets of his coveralls instead. "Not everyone's your invincible buddy Keith, kid." he groused under his breath.

"I know.." the Georgian forced out a little apologetically, warily looking from Nick to the slumped Spaniard. "I-it's just.. they said they killed like, four thousand zombies or somethin'? ... and one Witch does this tuh him..?"

A small arch touched Nick's brow. He lifted a hand, pointing sharply straight at Ellis' chest. "One guy did that to you." Rochelle slipped past them as he spoke, making her way into the shop, shoulders lowering as she approached Chris. "We all get fucked sooner or later, sport."

"You're a real comfort, thanks, Nick." the woman of the group muttered over her shoulder, slipping down to her knees. She frowned deeply as she reached out, setting the back of her hand against Chris' forehead. "He's so cold. I thought he'd run a fever..."

Coach's baritone echoed into the room from outside the doorway, where he lingered, gaze directed out into the street. There was a harsh quiet to his expression that didn't allow much to be gleaned, but he seemed on edge. "Probably in shock, babygirl. Blood loss."

Seeming hesitant, Ellis wrenched himself from Nick's side, limping to stand on the other side of Chris from Rochelle. Frowning, he let himself collapse down to the floor, body crumpling with an exhausted slump. His arms curled around his own torso, hugging his ribs as if to hold himself together - but his voice was full to the brim with concern for the other man.

"Whut happened?"
Rochelle shook her head, hand lowering to feel Chris' cheek, too. "I'm not really sure, sweetie. He just came out of nowhere.Grabbed the Witch by the waist and hauled her back. He saved us. I was just starting to say my goodbyes when he showed up." The little bit of a half-smile at the edge of her mouth faded fast.

"Next thing we know -" Coach added with a thick nod, wrenching his gaze away from the street. He quietly entered the shop, stepping past Nick to reach a stand-still a few feet behind Rochelle. "- he's wrestlin' it in the rain like a madman. Bravest thing. Gets it pinned to the wall, he's yellin' at us to shoot it, and babygirl gets a shot off right into its skull..."

The way he trailed off was telling enough. His head shook in a grisly gesture.

"But not before it sawed his arm through. Right?" Nick coldly finished, thumbing at his jawline with a drawn look of agitation. Stirred in his memory, he could feel the frigid press of razor-sharp claws to his back, piercing his skin like needles. Inches away from ending his life, with nothing but the sour stench of rotting orange Slurpee to send him off. "Like paper."

Rochelle cringed, but nodded, lifting her hand to cover her face underneath a palm, shoulders drooping. "If I'd been a little faster... if I'd just reacted a couple seconds sooner... but it'd already torn through so much of his shoulder, we just..." Her head shook. "There wasn't anything we could do..."

There was a certain silence afterwards. Rochelle's fingertips lingered on Chris' jaw, discomfited, her expression something between nausea and anger. Coach approached enough to settle a hand on her shoulder, but she faintly shrugged it off with an apologetic shake of her head.

She could've used the comfort - but comfort had a way of breaking composure, and she had to get through this.

Exhaling a deep breath into the quiet, Nick shifted. He walked in near-silence toward a stunted nightstand, letting his hip lean against it to take some of his weight off his aching feet. It was with a dark droop to his chin that he quietly scoffed, "I guess you guys want to take care of him or some shit." Frustration bled into his tone.

Rochelle, startled straight out of her silence, turned on him instantly. A frown downturned her mouth as she gestured toward the wounded Spaniard. "Suit, are you seeing the same damn thing I am? He lost an arm saving us! And it's the second time he's saved us! Are you seriously -?"

"Overalls saved us back there." Nick harshly returned, tone acidic. He saw Ellis straighten up uncertainly, blue eyes darting toward him with some surprise. "Not this fucker. This guy stood there and watched while a psycho bitch nearly murdered us all."

When Rochelle opened her mouth, he continued, voice raising with every word, anger flooding through him faster than he could help.

"Before you fucking cry about 'oh, he was changing his mind' and 'oh, he wasn't going to shoot us,' I don't give a fuck about what he was thinking about doing. We still would've been FUCKING DEAD!"

Nick didn't realize how loud he'd gotten by the end of it until Coach shot him a sharp stare.

"Nicolas."

The big man's dark baritone was enough to silence Nick. Rochelle, in pained quiet, gazed toward her knees. The conman shrugged, cutting his gaze to the side with a fierce snort, but he acquiesced with silence.
Wearily lowering his head, Coach shook it slowly. "I know you ain't real trustin', Nick. An' I ain't much for puttin' trust in someone who nearly killed us, either. But I watched him save us." A tired glint touched his eyes, and he very tenderly slipped his hands into the pockets of his pants, the fabric sagging a little with the loss of his belt. "If we just sit by an' watch a man die, whatever he did... we ain't no better than them zombies out there. Or them Angels."

There was a bloated instant of silence with the impact of the statement. Ellis let his gaze move from Coach to Chris to Nick, frowning, a little crunch touching his brow. He turned around, and those deep, soulful blues caught Nick's mercilessly.

"He's right.. ain't he, Nick?"

The question, that helpless tone of pleading, chilled Nick's spine. He stared back, hating Ellis for putting him in that spot, brows lowering over pale green eyes with a frustrated sigh.

Ellis was just so naive. Even moreso that he looked to Nick for answers… Nick, of all people. The one person least prepared to provide them. He had the faintest moral compass of them all, and yet there the kid was, begging him for validation.

It occurred to him, then - like a brisk slap in the face - that he'd forced Ellis to watch Jerry die. Nick turned away with a deep shrug, a sharp exhale. He slipped into the pawnshop doorway as if a few feet would detach himself from the group, pulling his rifle into his hands and examining the street.

"Whatever. You guys don't need my blessing, I can't stop you from wasting your time." he muttered, abrasively. "I'm stuck with you idiots." Using his foot, he kicked the pawnshop door closed - even though it was mostly broken. The wide hole torn into the center of it let him gaze out into the open air, turning his back to his teammates stiffly.

Coach sighed deeply, the sound rumbling, his focus turning back toward Chris' slumped body. He seemed to ignore Nick's existence all in an instant, dismissing him the same way Nick dismissed them.

"What you thinkin' we should do, babygirl?" he murmured down to Rochelle.

She barely responded, just a faint sigh. Her expression had fallen to something numb and frightened after Nick yelled at her, and it was lingering in that state. "I.. I don't.. I don't know. We have to help but, but we.. how the hell..?"

Ellis hesitated, looking after Nick with a kind of thoughtful disquiet. Nick had this way of angrily masking his agreement. The older man couldn't admit he was wrong, not out loud, so he just shut down. He couldn't be seen caring.

But he did care - reluctantly, maybe. He'd started to care more and more, Ellis was certain.

"The bleedin' ain't stopped, not wit' the belt or the bandagin'." Coach continued, morosely, gazing at the back of Rochelle's dropped head. Ellis' gaze rolled back to focus on the big man. "We gotta figure somethin' to do 'bout it before he bleeds out. Lord knows how he ain't already."

The woman couldn't help the sigh that left her, frowning, lifting her head slightly to stare at the blood-encrusted stump of Chris' arm with a shudder. "But what..? We tried tying it off, and putting pressure on it.. we don't have anything to sew him up with, and even if we did.. we'd probably just make it worse. We're not doctors, Coach, we're not - Jesus." She seemed to scare herself, rubbing at her face with her palms as a slump touched her body, hopelessly shaking her head.
Ellis quickly put out a hand to touch her shoulder, stretching over Chris' body, trying to comfort her with a soft squeeze. "It'll be okay, Ro." he promised, gently. "We'll figure it out..."

But Rochelle shook her head a little more, frustration sinking her tone into a low mutter. "I- ... I'm not so sure.. You don't know that. None of us know that. He could die, and it'll be all our fault."

Ellis recoiled, frowning softly at the rejection. He shot a small glance at Coach, but the eldest was silent. The hopelessness from both of them ached, but even through the real hurt on his face, he was stubborn.

He couldn't let them give up.

"Hey, guys.." he murmured, voice lightening in an attempt to soothe them. "I know yer scared, nobody wants no one tuh die.. but c'mon. If we calm down'n think 'bout it, we'll come up with somethin'. We always do."

No one responded. Both Coach and Rochelle avoided his gaze, and exhaustion stunk in the air even stronger than the gore.

Setting his hands against his thighs, Ellis tried to straighten up. Pain stung through his midsection as the motion strained his bruised ribcage, but with a grit of his teeth he bore it silently. "Y'all got him this far. We all got this far. We're all real smart, we can do this, I know we can."

"He's missing an arm, Ellis.." Rochelle spoke in quiet frustration. "He's missing an entire arm."

There was a deep, anguished disgruntlement all over Coach's face when he shook his head. Deeply, slowly, he mirrored Rochelle's distress almost perfectly - and his baritone was darkly regretful. 'I ain't sho', Ellis. We ain't got the supplies, ain't got the know-how..."

Suddenly, Ellis was alone.

Rochelle stared at her knees, Coach closed his eyes with the negative swing of his head, and Nick stood disconnected and silent by the doorway. Ellis shivered a little at the gloom, lowering his chin, and with a quiet exhale he mumbled, "If y'all give up we definitely ain't gonna save him."

Gazing at Christophe for a moment, Ellis fell silent. He frowned at the Spaniard's pale face, the slightly rounded features sickly and smudged with blood. The man's skin trembled with chill, and a constant twitch plagued his browline.

The gruesome stump that was left of his arm, painted a deep crimson through the bandages, drew Ellis' gaze.

They had to do something.

"C'mon, guys." he urged, louder, turning his head to flick his gaze between them, almost desperately. "We're the smartest folk this side'uh the world - look at whut we all done, gettin' so far, survivin' this long..." He was begging. "We can do anythin'. We just gotta put our heads tuhgether -"

"What heads?" Rochelle thrust her hands out with the sudden shut-down, lifting her head and gesturing at Ellis. At Coach. At herself. At Nick. "Us? We're nobody, Ellis. We need help. We need someone who knows what they're doing."

Frowning, Ellis started to argue, mouth opening - but Rochelle didn't let him. Her voice got rougher and more emotional, but fiercer all at the same time.
"I'm a news producer, Ellis. I talk about heroics, I don't do them. You're a goddamn mechanic. The best you can do is give his car a check-up. Nick is some slimeball from the gutter who probably knows how to hurt him better than nurse him. The best qualified here is a high-school health teacher."

She looked on the verge of tears, shaking her head, and Ellis stared at her with a tremble of his chin. "Ro'.." he mumbled, injured. "Yuh don't mean none'uv that - we can -"

"No, I really don't think we can." She turned her head away, jaw tensing. She couldn't meet Ellis' gaze, not seeing the hurt there, the disbelief. "He needs a hospital. And a doctor. And anesthetic. And surgery. And drugs. And a therapist. He needs everything we aren't, Ellis. He needs -"

It was Nick that interrupted her. His voice was dull and uninterested, but so unexpected it shut them all up for a thick moment of silence.

"Fire."

All eyes were on him in an instant, staring, both in surprise that he'd even spoken - and in confusion at the utterance. Ellis perked up the easiest, shaken out of his slump, brows scrunching over his eyes.

Was Nick standing up for him..? Helping him, or was he going to add to the hopelessness? Ellis was intimidated for an instant, genuinely so. He turned lightly to rest his weight on a knee, frowning toward Nick. "Whut?" he questioned, softly.

The gambler turned on one heel, a dark kind of frown touching the edge of his mouth. He gazed back at them with a distasteful scowl shadowing his face. "If you fuckin' dumbshits are done crying…" he spat, voice speckled with insult. "Start looking around. We need fire."

Ellis felt this weight lifted off his chest, this brightness starting to lighten his features. Nick's pale green eyes cut a glance over his face, this minute gesture. The older man's nostrils flared faintly with a sighed breath at the hopeful smile threatening at the edges of Ellis' mouth.

"Why, Nick?" Coach questioned almost dubiously, a darkness lingering over his expression as he crossed his arms over his wide gut. They'd swung back into antagonism - but that was fine with Nick. He'd asked for it, anyway, shouting at Rochelle. "Thought you weren't gettin' involved.."

Nick snorted at him, shouldering his rifle stiffly with a sharp narrow of his eyes. "Not going to watch you guys mourn a guy that ain't dead yet, either. Fucking useless, all of you."

"Well, fuck you too, Nick." Rochelle muttered with a weak tremble to her voice. "I'm sorry I'm a little hopeless after watching a guy get his arm torn off."

The conman shrugged his uninjured shoulder, barely sparing her more than a glance. A crinkle touched the bridge of his nose, exhaling deeply. "So you're going to watch him die, too?" Ellis winced, hiding underneath the bill of his cap.

It wasn't inaccurate, but…

Nick's words struck Rochelle like a slap, eyes going wide and body recoiling. She looked like she might jolt to her feet, anger flooding her jawline for a moment - but she stayed rooted on her knees.

Coach stiffened in her defense, brow lowering over deepset eyes. "Nicolas -" he started, aggressively, looking entirely prepared to start a fight. Those thick shoulders tensed up, but Rochelle reached back to put a hand quickly on his knee.
"N-no.." she muttered, curling fingers in his bloodied pantsleg. "He's right. It's okay, Coach. He's an asshole, but he's right."

It was apparent that Coach didn't want to back down. He eyed her for a lengthy moment before exhaling and letting his shoulders lower, discontentment apparent on his face. "Yeah, a'ight."

"Yeah, a'ight." He rumbled lowly, tightening his crossed arms.

Hopefully, Ellis rooted his eyes on Nick. He couldn't help being in a little bit of welcome shock that the conman had actually stepped in for him - for them all, really. Just when he was really starting to question if they did have a chance.

"So," Rochelle sighed with a dry spite, letting her arms slip around her midsection in a slow hug of her own waistline. "What's your plan, suit? Pick through his pockets and toss him out?"

Nick smirked faintly, shaking his head with a slow scratch of his rugged jawline. "Kid."

Nick sharply prompted, gaze flicking to Ellis' face. There was an impenetrable stiffness to his expression, this distance he put forth, but their eyes met with a comfortable ease.

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"Break out the hick genes and light something on fire. We're gonna need heat, sport. A lot of heat, A.S.A.P. Not the singe-your-eyebrows kind - the ninety-five-percent-of-your-body kind. Get me?"

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Ellis nodded. Uncertainly, but stubbornly, and he was already lifting up to his feet and starting to look around the pawnshop with a thoughtful frown by the time Nick looked away from him. Ellis did his best not to let his gaze fall on Coach or Rochelle, feeling a little injured.

The gambler rubbed into his eyes with his knuckles, muttering under his breath, "You guys asked for it."

He didn't look happy.
The machete was beyond dirty. Gore and rust layered it in a flaking mess that Nick examined with disgust. There was nothing sterile about anything they were doing, and it frustrated him. He took the sleeve of his suit jacket and tried to scrub at the surface, grind away some of the blood.

Some of it came off, but not all of it. It was the best they had. He needed something light and flat and metal for cauterization.

The sounds of Ellis scrambling and rooting around in the hunt for a way to light a fire echoed through the pawnshop, flashes of his grungy Bullshifters shirt visible past looming pieces of furniture. He hadn't had any luck yet, but it didn't douse his enthusiasm.

The constant flow of mumbling seemed stubbornly endless as he chattered to Rochelle about every knickknack he got his hands on. She bore it in silence, listlessly following him as he wandered, preferring his voice to staring at Chris.

It was clear on her face that she had no hope. There was something tired, something resigned. She didn't even seem to have the drive to humor the Georgian in his chatter, let alone help him search. She just followed in his footsteps, nodding emptily here and there to indicate she was listening.

"If the shock doesn't kill him, infection's gonna." Nick muttered, sighing. Coach grunted, standing over his shoulder quietly with a stern kind of posture. He'd been keeping a close eye on Nick ever since their argument - a little too close, honestly.

Clenching his fingers tightly, Coach let his head shake. "We got alcohol, but I ain't sho' if anything'll help."

Nick sighed in a tired gesture, a cold grit touching his jawline. He nodded, gesturing with a flick of his wrist that encouraged Coach to produce the alcohol. "It isn't going to make it worse." he stated, harshly. "And not doing it could.. so yeah. Get it."

The elder seemed a little agitated at being ordered around, but he turned away anyway, dropping down to an uneasy crouch. Reaching out to get ahold of the group's backpack, he started to dig through it, gentle with their freshly retrieved medical supplies. "We gonna take his bandages off?"

"Not now." Nick shook his head. He spoke in a stiff tone, exuding confidence he didn't have. "Only once we've got everything together. If we take the bandages off, he'll start bleeding even faster. We'll take them off and get him cleaned up a little in a minute."

Before Coach could respond to that or prompt a new question, doubt all over his expression, Nick lifted his head. Craning his neck slightly, he hunted out the Georgian in the musty pawn shop's environs. "Hey, Ellis?"

The Georgian popped up like some clumsy prairie dog, intently nodding despite the exhaustion and pain inlaid into his face and the soft circles underneath blue eyes. "Yeah?" he returned softly, forcing a small smile.

For how gorgeous his smiles could be, he sure did suck at faking them.

"Have you seen a pan or something? Serving tray or whatever?" Nick asked, lifting his hands so he could make gestures in the air to try and illustrate his words. As much as he wondered after Ellis' wellbeing, there was just no time. Nor privacy. "Something flat, with a rim."
Ellis gave a blink, eyes trailing upward for a moment in thought as he seemed to consider the request, before he disappeared behind a dresser. He was all quiet perseverance and stubborn confidence - and it made Nick smirk.

Not that Nick would've admitted it, but he drew a little strength from the kid's presence. Considering both Rochelle and Coach were angry with him, Ellis was really the only friendly face in the room... and the only one not drawn with gloom.

Nick still hadn't gotten used to being trusted like Ellis trusted him, with that whole-hearted, naive sincerity. No one - absolutely no one - ever had.

"Why a pan?" Coach grunted, pausing in his search for the bottle of alcohol tucked in the bottom of their backpack. He glanced back at Nick. There was doubt all over his expression, like he didn't believe Nick even knew what he was doing, and the gambler let out a sigh.

Green eyes, pale and narrowed with annoyance, darted up to meet his. Serious agitation darkened Nick's features, voice curt. "Are you gonna question me every step of the way?" The bluntness made Coach bridle.

That static between them surged back to a tangible crackle. "Someone's gotta monitor yo' ass." the big man returned aggressively, and there was definitely zero trust in his expression. It wasn't like Nick cared, necessarily. It just agitated him - stirred up anger and spite.

I'm perfectly happy being the bad guy. It's apparently the only thing that gets us anywhere.

"Come on, honey." he crooned, voice full of sarcasm. "I just got home, let's not fight."

Coach snorted, turning his head back forward with a fierce shake of his head. His shoulders stiffened up, sighing throatily. "If you didn't want a fight, you did a damn shit job of avoidin' it." he chastised, simply, and the accusation made Nick's brows furrow in frustration. "Ain't time to be kickin' Ro' when she's down."

"I'm very sorry for trying to save someone's life while you guys walked yourselves in circles." he retorted sharply, expression drawn in disdain - and a little exhaustion. "Next time I'll keep my fuckin' mouth shut."

There was a bristling between them, this almost physical rise, catlike in nature. It threatened to get even nastier - until Ellis suddenly came limping out toward them, wielding a flat, china serving tray in his dirtied hands.

It was almost laughable, the way he cradled it on his palms like some scrubby waiter - let alone the proud smile on his face. "This work, Nick?" he chirped hopefully, offering the pan down to the conman. If he noticed the hostility, he pretended not to, blue eyes almost shyly slanting to peek at Nick's face.

Ignoring Coach for the moment, Nick lifted up the machete in his injured left hand and let it settle into the basin of the tray - it just barely fit, but it fit all the same. "Yeah, kiddo." he praised, allowing his gaze to meet Ellis' for a beat.

Blue and green sparked, Ellis' brows softening in this little look of reassurance. Like he was trying to say 'Yer doin' good, Nick.' Just a little flash of support amidst all the hostility. Nick looked away, breaking the gaze without acknowledging it.

"Just put it down." he muttered, thumbing toward the floor next to him. Ellis obeyed, slipping into a weak bend to set the tray down where indicated. He retreated without another word, returning to
the hunt for something to burn. "Get the alcohol, Coach."

With some reservation, Coach - mute - moved to retrieve a bottle of isopropyl alcohol. The liquid inside sloshed easily like water, but the very bridge of the waves within were touched by a slight stickiness. It was, fortunately, a fresh bottle, with the cap and seal still intact.

"You guys got lucky." Nick commented, making a stiff attempt at friendliness. "Where'd you find the stuff?"

Coach cracked the cap off with an audible crunch, shooting Nick a slightly dark look as he did. If the gambler hadn't known better, he'd almost have thought the football player was threatening him with the gesture. He was used to it - just not from any of his teammates.

But, whether Coach had intended the motion that way or not, Nick's attempt was rewarded with something like chatter. The heavyset man shrugged his shoulders, leaning in slightly to carefully pour the alcohol into the tray. "There was a little pharmacy down the way. Mostly ransacked, but Ro' found some things."

The alcohol poured over the bloodied, rusted metal, filling up the tray slowly. It was laughable to think they'd ever sanitize the blade, but Nick still felt he needed to try. He nodded, gesturing for Coach to stop once the liquid submerged the metal entirely.

"We can use the rest to clean him up." Nick leaned back slightly, frowning. It was all too easy to let his mouth downturn into something honestly disturbed. "If we soak it for a little it'll... help, with not getting him infected. If you ask me, he's already sick, but there's no sense making it worse."

Coach nodded silently. Nick had to doubletake slightly when the older man didn't second-guess him. Maybe Ellis' presence had shaken Coach out of his anger, or reminded him they had the other two to worry about.

Speaking of...

The conman lifted his head, gazing more directly at the ex-football player. A serious crunch touched his brow, voice lowering, and Coach returned it with sober attention. "When we find something to heat it up... you should take Overalls and Ro' out. I'll handle it, you guys don't need to be here. Cauterizing is messy. It'll hurt like hell, and stink worse. Not exactly fun to watch."

Sighing brusquely, the eldest survivor lifted a hand to rub at his forehead. His gaze moved deeper into the pawn shop, staring toward their other teammates. "Gotta agree - they don't need to see that shit."

A snort touched Nick's breath, shifting on his knees as his position grew more uncomfortable the longer he sat in it. "I said 'you guys.' Are you sure you want to be here?"

It wasn't really concern, that much was clear in Nick's voice. It was more that Nick would rather he do it alone, where no one else's emotions or panic could distract him. He worked better alone, thought better - if Coach lost his nerve...

The big man shook his head.

"Sure as hell don't, but if you need extra hands, ain't gonna let it be one of them." Nick continued to gaze at him with no small amount of doubt, examining his features judgingly, a small rough noise escaping his throat in a grunt. Coach met his gaze and affirmed, "I'll stay, Nick."

His confidence gave the gambler pause.
As much as they agitated each other, and as vastly different as their tactics were, there was an undeniable comaraderie between them. They were both older, weathered. Though circumstances erased the gaps between four very different people, there was still that awareness that Ellis and Rochelle were ... so much more vulnerable, younger, fragile.

That, and their younger teammates had families to go home to. Although.. Coach has a daughter, doesn't he? Guess that makes me the loner of the group.

Nick gave a frustrated nip of his lower lip, shoving away that thought. Of course he didn't care. He didn't need anyone to worry about him - no one ever had, and he'd gotten along just fine. He was used to it. He certainly wasn't trying to save himself for someone else's benefit.

"Think he'll stay unconscious?" Coach questioned, brows low over deepset eyes. He shifted his gaze to examine Chris, licking at his lower lip with a weighty sigh. There was a confiding quiet to his voice, a hesitance.

The idea of Chris waking up was not exactly pleasant.

Nick shook his head with a vague shrug, reaching up a hand carefully to crook a knuckle underneath the Spaniard's chin. Lifting his head with some struggle against the utter dead weight of his joints, Nick squinted at his face.

He wasn't sure what he expected to see. The foreigner's rounded face seemed gaunt, pale compared to the russet tan Nick remembered, his cheeks drawn and darkness circled under his eyes. His skin was slick with sweat.

"I hope so." was all Nick responded with. But probably not.

The deep stench in the air - which had an edge of fear and uncertainty now, not just blood - threatened to hush them into silence, had Rochelle's voice not suddenly arrested them. She came quietly out from behind a strange stand-up clock, arms crossed.

"Where'd you learn to do this, Nick?" The question raised the gambler's head, and he eyed her momentarily. She didn't have quite the doubt all over her face like Coach had as he questioned Nick's actions, but it wasn't really curiousity, either.

Nick tossed a hand limply at her, leaning back onto his heels to smirk up in her direction. "Don't you have a little hick to help?" he questioned pointedly, voice darkening with sarcasm. "Be more useful than bugging me."

Her arms tightened, and she leaned forward slightly, voice gaining a stubborn edge of frustration. "If we're doing this, I just want to know what's going on. Do you actually know what you're doing, or are we just lighting his arm on fire and calling it done?"

Nick arched a brow, examining her for a second. "Done, or well done?" he offered.

He'd have laughed, but it was painfully apparent that the pun had been accidental by the fierce agitation trembling her lower lip. Giving a slight sigh, he turned away from her, shrugging as he gazed over the unconscious man's bandaged stump.

When he spoke, rough features drew into a cool smirk. "I used to torture people for a living. After you cut off fingers, to make them talk, ya know, you have to stop the bleeding someh-"

Rochelle was as amused as a drenched cat. "I'm serious." she snapped, hugging her arms around herself with an angry shift of her weight. The clench of her fists was stressed. It was very clear she
was at her wits' end, and there was no space left for being mocked.

Unfortunately, seeing that he shouldn't immediately made him do so.

"Okay, okay." he sighed, and the seeming relent made Rochelle relax, her brows lowering a little over her eyes. He shook his head slightly, dragging out the words with a tender, sincere reluctance. "I used to be a doctor."

Disbelief immediately shocked Rochelle's eyes wide, blinking at him, her stance opening slightly as she cocked her head. Even Coach straightened up, this weird incomprehension in how the two stared at Nick. "You.. you did? Jeez, I -"

"Hell no." Nick snapped, smirk returning as he rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. Rochelle gave this absolutely infuriated toss of her hands, muttered a swear under her breath, and turned to stalk back toward where Ellis was knee-deep in furniture.

Coach gazed at Nick in deep, deep disapproval.

All Nick had to offer was a small smirk and a coy, "I do play my fair share of doctor, though."

Sighing with a frustrated shake of his head, Coach crossed his arms and looked away. His voice was exasperated when he grumbled, "Ought'a smack you one, knock some sense into yo' thick head."

"Hey, hey.." Nick muttered in slight self-defense, re-focusing his gaze on Chris' stumped arm for a moment. "Watch the threats. Like it or not, you need me, Tons of Fun."

Coach didn't look sold, but Rochelle's voice interrupted from across the pawn shop before he could retort. "Hey, guys? I think Ellis found our ticket." It was strange, hearing a little note of hope in her voice again, something lighter than grungy dread.

Nick gestured a hand in a short wave to get Coach to stay, somewhat uncomfortably getting up off his knees and half-staggering to a settled stand. He gave a sigh as pain stabbed through his left side, and he somewhat weakly clasped a hand over the injured swell of his shoulder.

Curiously, Nick made his way toward them, stepping a little agitatedly over a fallen, rolled-up rug. Craning his head faintly, Nick caught sight of Ellis knelt down, pawing aside a small table with little squeaks as the feet of the cheap card table grated against the floor.

Underneath it was the dull shape of a portable grill, like one might take to a tailgate. He arched up a brow, staring slightly dubiously as Ellis glanced back at him. Blue eyes lightened confidently, and he smacked a hand against the grill's side. It clanged softly, the grating rattling inside.

"Even got a li'l propane tank hooked up here." Ellis shifted on his toes a little, tapping at the white canister that was attached to the side of the grill. "Ain't near full, but should give us enough."

Frowning slightly, Nick approached slowly, giving Rochelle a fair berth at first. She clearly hadn't moved on from her anger, but didn't outright say anything. She just passed him a look that read a little anxious, like he might shut down the idea.

Nick didn't meet her gaze, focusing on the grill instead. Agitating her enough to get her to leave him alone was fine with him. He had more than enough on his mind; namely, the task ahead. "That should work, kiddo. Drag it out and get it lit."

The small smile that appeared on Ellis’ face, proud he'd succeeded, was quickly hidden under the
shadow of his trucker cap. He reached out, grasping ahold of the legs of the grill to start hoisting it up off the ground.

Ellis wouldn't have said a word, but he struggled, and it was obvious. Any other day and he'd probably have tried to balance it on his head just to be stupid - but that day, he was only barely holding himself together.

Although Nick was prepared to step forward and help, Rochelle beat him to it. He could tell she was intentionally cutting him off by the way she stepped in front of him, and that fact agitated him slightly. He felt a twitch of annoyance at his brow, watching her scoop her hands underneath the grill's belly and help Ellis move it.

The kid gave a small look of thanks, leading the way as they backed it up.

Rochelle was being spiteful, that much was clear to Nick as he gazed after the two. Why, exactly, she thought isolating him from Ellis was a way to spite him… that was beyond him.

It bothered him, and not just because of the little stir in his gut that felt like regret.
Chapter 106

Whether he showed it or not, Nick was unsettled.

Prying the grill's grating free from its moorings, Nick set the metal aside and shifted in his weary kneel. He eyed the depths of the appliance with some doubt, but said nothing, expression devoid of any interest at all. Though he had his reservations about what was to come, even the self-centered gambler knew that adding his pessimism onto everything else going wrong wouldn't help anything.

But that didn't mean his mind wasn't running wild circles.

Say what he might, it wasn't as if he'd actually done this before. It was hollow knowledge, never put into practice. The logistics were fairly simple, he kept reminding himself easily - heat a flat metal tool, press it to the wound in short intervals... two seconds at most, lest it cause more tissue damage than necessary... repeat until the bleeding stops.

*And cross your fingers the fuck doesn't die from shock. Or infection, whichever bites him in the ass first.*

Nick wanted to laugh.

*Kills hundreds of zombies without more than a scratch... then the unlucky fucker meets us, gets his arm lopped off by a Witch, and dies from germs. Lady Luck's a PMSing whore.*

There was a pack of matches dropped inside the rusted grill, half-used up and blackened with char. The conman could feel Ellis' warm presence by his shoulder where the younger man stood beside him, but Coach and Rochelle were busy arguing in low tones near the front door.

Coach had pulled her quietly aside to convince her not to watch the 'procedure' - *if we're gonna call it that* - and, judging by her infuriated expression and the heated motions of their hands back and forth, it wasn't going well.

Whether Coach's intentions were good or not, Nick could have told him from the start that Rochelle would put up a fight. Even if the eldest had the best chance of them all to get her to acquiesce, she was no pushover. Whatever else Nick might have called her.

Although, he had definitely thought she might... however secretly... want to be absent for the gruesome things ahead.

Scowling as he reached into the grill's fat basin, Nick scooped the matchbook up, fingertips squeamish on the blackened paper as it rubbed black streaks off on his fingertips. It was odd to be distressed about ash when his skin was tacky with sweat and blood, but if he gave up all his standards, there'd be no saving his sanity.

"You just twist the gas on and drop in a match, yeah?" the gambler questioned over his shoulder with some disgust. Like it or not, cauterization wasn't the only thing he didn't exactly have experience in. The tailgating grill was something of an alien invention to him, archaic and strange with its spindly legs and rusty belly.

*The day you use one of these, Nicolas, is the day the world really has gone to shit.*

He had directed the question at Ellis - but the kid didn't respond.
Nick turned his head to direct an annoyed raise of his brow at his teammate, only to see the Georgian worriedly gnawing at his lower lip, completely oblivious to the older man. Instead of watching Nick, he'd twisted at the waist to watch Rochelle and Coach's quiet argument unfold, and had been like that for who-knew-how-long.

He seemed faint, something very out of character for the youth Nick had grown to know. Be it the injuries or the current atmosphere of distress in the room, Ellis reflected a tender worry, fretting uncertainly with his hat indelicately twisted and wrung out in his hands.

*Leave it to him to internalize everything.* Nick sighed, heavily, sparing a moment to rub at his forehead. He could feel a certain disgust lining the exhale, forehead crunching. The Georgian wasn't aware of just why the two were arguing, not yet, and that was just fine as far as Nick was concerned.

The gambler had already had to fight Ellis on separating from him once today, and he wasn't looking forward to repeating the argument. The kid would probably argue just as fiercely as before, and Nick honestly didn't want to deal with it - especially not in front of the others, with how quickly Ellis had gotten worked up over it.

The last thing he needed was a lover's spat.

"Hey, dumbshit." Nick prompted, a little louder, annoyance peaking at the thought. There was something comical in how naturally Ellis responded to the insult-made-nickname, turning his head to force his blue-eyed attention on the gambler.

He gave this slow… and painfully small… smile, cocking his head in a gesture of apology. "Uh.. yeah? Sorry, I was just -"

Nick barely bothered to listen to what he knew was going to be a fumblingly false explanation. Ellis was worried and it was blatantly obvious, but it was in his nature to deny it - as if it were for others' benefit. Like he had some responsibility to keep optimistic.

It was absolutely infuriating.

Turning his gaze back to the grill and tapping a palm thickly against it, Nick's dismissive expression was enough to silence the Georgian's attempt at justification. Quieting, Ellis quickly scooted closer, leaning down to rest his hands on his knees and bent down as Nick reiterated, "I was asking how you light this fucking thing."

"Ah.." Ellis uttered, smile softening a little as he eagerly took up the implied request for help. Shifting his weight and reaching up to replace his trucker cap on his head, he dropped down to his knees next to Nick, the contrasting fabrics of Nick's slacks and Ellis' coveralls grazing subtly as the younger man's mimicry of his position settled their thighs against one another.

"Just light that match up." he directed, flicking a glance at Nick's face. The gambler ignored his gaze for the most part, letting his jaw flex as he obeyed, tearing a match free from the booklet in a well-practiced motion.

Moving in unison, Ellis reached forward, grasping the small twist-dial at the neck of the attached mini propane tank. He settled his fingers tightly on the metal, but didn't turn it quite yet. He watched sideways as the gambler struck the match against the strip of rough abrasions on the side of the matchbook.

It took two tries to work through the ashy residue at the tip of the match, but it lit with a flash of
orange-yellow and a subtle snap. Nick held the burning stick up between two fingertips to usher Ellis on.

Nodding, the Georgian twisted his wrist to flick the gas on. A creak sounded as the metal pipeline opened up, and a hiss announced the escape of intangible gas as it dissipated through the perforated tube down the length of the grill's belly. A faint shimmer trailing close to the metal identified the gas.

"You can toss it in, now." Ellis instructed, bobbing his head. He seemed so easily calmed by the simple act of giving him something else to focus on.

Nick couldn't help but wonder if he was really that distractible, or if it had more to do with his own presence. Ellis either had the attention span of a guppy - which was likely… or he was easily comforted out of his distress by Nick's efforts.

Try as he might to settle on the former, he found some portion of himself intrigued by the latter. It pleasantly agitated him, that intimacy. Nick tossed the match into the grill with a squint, shaking away the thought before his discomfort grew visible.

The falling fire tumbled over the free-flowing streams of gas below, and in one instantaneous wave, flames lit up all along the length of the pipeline. Chutes of fire hovered above each hole, thin but edged with whitened heat. They arched up, eagerly stretching into the air where they would normally lick at the bottom of the grill's grating, tiny orange pillars anchored to the pipe by wisps of gaseous propane.

As the grill settled into a calm burn, Ellis let off a gentle chuckle. Shaking his head tenderly, the mechanic reached up and patted Nick's shoulder once, as if in congratulations. "See? Ain't so hard." His hand was warm to the touch, playful.

Unamused - but, oddly, not nearly as agitated as he should've been, Nick shrugged the gesture off with an idle lift of his shoulder. His voice was low with a certain growled chastisement. "Knowing how to use this rusty piece of shit isn't really something to lord over me, kid."

Before Ellis could respond to that with anything beyond a growing smile, Nick reached up his hands. In a swift, disgusted motion, the gambler wiped his ash-smeared fingers snobbishly against Ellis' shirt, leaving streaks of black behind as he cleaned his hands of the mess.

Caught off-guard, Ellis burst into a strangled snort as the touch tickled his waistline, squirming back onto his heels to retreat from the older man. "Hey - Watch it, mister fancy suit." He reached up to push Nick's hands away at the wrists as his nose scrunched up, this kiddish look of entertainment sparkling over his blood-smudged, soft-featured face.

Ellis was uniquely emotive. Dirty or freshly showered, smiling or asleep, in the midst of battle or in the midst of a thought - whether it was dumb cluelessness or feisty retort, clouding fear or brilliant joy, his face glowed with the pure force of his emotions. It was this raw honesty that never failed to draw the gambler's critical eyes.

Normally, it was the sign of a good mark. Nick wasn't really sure how to deal with it from a lover.

"Goddamnit, Coach! I'm not a child. I want to be here for this!"

Rochelle's voice exploded with a scattered kind of fragility, desperation sunk into her tone. Neither men spoke for a moment, but neither turned to look, either. Ellis' gaze dropped quickly to his lap, expression flashing to something weakly crestfallen, and Nick averted his gaze to stare at the grill.
They listened in wordless tension, observing the jagged silence as Rochelle caught her composure and Coach held his breath, resigned and tired.

Then he responded - simple and flat, stern with a gruff edge of withheld emotion. "That ain't yo' choice."

There was clear discomfort laced into the air, raising the hair on the back of Nick's neck with static electricity. Usually he was the one in or causing an argument, not watching from the sidelines, and certainly not watching Coach and Rochelle argue. It was like watching his parents fight, though Rochelle was some years younger than him.

It just flat out felt wrong.

His statement visibly shocked her, and with this sharply huffed exhale, she glanced over her shoulder toward the two men. It was like she'd only just remembered they were there, and with a self-conscious toss of her head, she angrily jabbed a finger at the door. "... Outside. Now."

Moving stiffly, she pushed her way out of the pawnshop and into the street, not even bothering to look back. Coach followed her at a distance, deeply scruffed features drawn in a look of weariness. Stubborn - but weary.

Then they were gone, voices just hums through the broken door.

Nick could have gotten involved, stepped in and been the asshole such an argument needed, but he had other things to focus on. Coach would either convince her or he wouldn't - either way, Nick didn't much care. As much as he wanted to handle what was to come on his own, it wasn't worth fighting over.

He glanced at Ellis, surreptitiously, without turning his head.

The kid had re-adopted his worried gnawing on the plump shape of his lower lip, a stressed gesture that drew the rest of his face into an idle look of distance. For all the things Ellis handled so easily, arguments were definitely not one of them. Not when it was between what he'd claimed as his new family.

Forcing a sigh thickly through his nostrils, Nick lifted a hand to gesture toward the china tray that contained Chris' machete, soaking in alcohol. "Get that, Ellis." he ordered, tone short.

If he had to manipulate the kid's distractibility to keep that insufferable hurt-puppy look off his face, he would. It was simple enough to keep him busy, considering how the Georgian jumped at his every word.

Obedient as always, Ellis perked up quickly, reaching his hand to re-adjust his trucker cap on his head. "Sure." he murmured, amicably, flashing a small glance toward Nick's face. There was something apologetic in his gaze, like he knew Nick was exasperated.

Scrambling up from his knees to get on his feet, Ellis circled the gambler with his short-legged trot, boots heavy on the pawnshop floor. He stepped up to where the tray sat on the floor, bending down so he could scoop the 'sanitized' machete out of the pooled liquid, grasping it by the now-darkened wood handle.

Alcohol dripped from the blade in wet splatters, and Ellis winced inwardly as his damp fingertips burned, the liquid finding cuts and nicks in his abused, calloused skin. "Ain't real clean or nothin'." Ellis pointed out, ignoring his discomfort with a shake of his wrist. He examined the notched and aged metal of the weapon-turned-tool, dubiously. It was a bit shinier now, but hardly optimal.
Nick sighed again.

"I know. But it killed some bacteria, and it's better than nothing." The gambler gestured about the pawnshop with his good shoulder. "Even if we found a clean knife or something in here, we need the wide blade. Otherwise I'm gonna be at this for an hour, and nobody wants that. If you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it."

Frowning but nodding his head, Ellis doggedly returned to his side, thudding back down to his knees weakly. His gaze was trapped on the blade as he held it up to his face, examining it with a slow-ticking thought. He seemed bothered - worried, maybe.

He wasn't going to offer it out to Nick, so the older man took it.

Nick's fingers curled over Ellis' with a firm touch. Their digits grazed and pressed together, fingertips prying the Georgian's grip from the machete. Ellis' eyes went wide and his joints limp as the older man slowly twisted the machete's handle out of his grasp.

The thick silence afterwards was highlighted by the slight reddening of Ellis' face, and the way he pushed his hands into his lap in shy embarrassment.

Licking at his thinned lower lip, Nick resisted the urge to tease the Georgian for it. It was far too easy to set the youth off his game, the play of his fingers more than enough to pull those endearing little reactions out of him. Nick wasn't afraid to admit the way it preened his ego.

Making fun of Ellis was almost as enjoyable as the end-game.

*And more fun than anything else right now.*

Leaning forward, the gambler slipped the machete into the burning grill. He balanced the flat blade against the burning pipeline, fire sputtering as it struck the metal before settling into a calm nuzzle against the machete's surface. Burning bright shades, the small licks of flame shivered soundlessly along the blade.

"Shouldn't take too long to heat up." Nick sighed, voice thickening, faking confidence. He let one hand lift up to rest on his injured shoulder, pressing his palm into the point of aching pain where the katana had speared through him. "Meantime, I'll start on - "

"Nick." Ellis blurted almost tensely, a little hesitance to his tone. The gambler's expression twitched to an instant scowl, sighing vaguely at being interrupted, but he held his tongue. Green eyes flicked over toward blue, but Ellis kept his gaze downwards, tapping his fingers against one another.

"You were avoidin' Ro' earlier... how do you know how tuh do this?"

The gambler wasn't exactly shocked by the question, although it did catch him slightly off-guard. Examining Ellis' face for a moment, Nick licked at the backs of his teeth, withholding a second sigh as he relented in a low tone. The kid already knew most of the story, anyway.

"Remember what I told you last night?" he stated a tad shortly. The Georgian quickly nodded, thumbing at the palm of his left hand, still stubbornly avoiding Nick's eyes. It wasn't exactly reticence - but something close.

Maybe he was trying to give Nick much-needed space.

"It's just another thing I learned about. Gruesome hack medicine. I think I thought it might come in handy one day. My uncle didn't exactly encourage me to trust hospitals. Or doctors. Or anyone,
come to think of it." The gambler turned his chin slightly to face his younger teammate, offering a slow smirk that finally coaxed Ellis to look at him. "It seemed cool at the time. I forgot about the whole agonizing pain part, I think. Pretty useless shit to know how to do, huh?"

The Georgian peeked over that sarcastic little lilt on Nick's mouth, full lips drawing into the smallest of uncertain pinches. Gears turned on his face as he seemed to mull that over, expression full of thought and consideration. Nick couldn't help but arch up a brow, waiting.

Then Ellis pointed out: "Ain't useless now. We're savin' Chris."

Nick outright laughed, a short and slightly humorless sound. Reaching up, he settled a spread hand on Ellis' capped head, scruffling his trucker's cap into his scalp and pushing the bill to tip down over his face. The mechanic didn't protest, just closed one eye and lowered his chin a little bit at Nick's touch, lips curving upward. "Yeah, yeah. Rainbows and puppies and silver linings, I get it. Yeesh."

That curve turned into a grin, Ellis' teeth showing between his lips as he beamed underneath the shadow of his capbill. Nick's insult backfired, making Ellis smile instead of mocking him like he'd intended - and Nick wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Ellis looked so damn pleased.

Nick hadn't expected their return quite that soon, but with a sudden shuffle of footsteps, the pawnshop door re-opened. Rochelle and Coach stepped back in, a certain solemn quiet to the way Coach led her in.

The gambler dropped his hand from Ellis' head as suddenly as he'd placed it there, letting himself turn around at the waist to eye the other two. The Georgian mimicked him, that softness draining from his expression as he returned to a worried frown.

Rochelle had calmed significantly, tugging idly at the soft flesh of her earlobe as she followed behind Coach, adjusting her rifle where it was strapped onto her shoulder. Her gaze darted to the deeply unconscious Chris, flicking over his gaunt, sweat-flecked face, but she didn't stare too long.

The ex-football player continued forward toward Nick, but Rochelle stayed just inside of the doorway.

"Did you two kiss and make up?" Nick queried with a snarky tone of voice, gazing between them with a smirk. He could tell easily enough that Rochelle had relented, just by her body language and the way she lingered at the doorway.

The woman shot a small, knowing glare toward him, but otherwise kept her voice level. He didn't miss the pointed sharpness of her gaze - he figured she blamed him for Coach's actions. She wasn't, after all, completely inaccurate.

Neither of them needed to see what was to come.

"Ellis," she prompted softly, turning her gaze toward the Georgian. He straightened up, expression falling slightly. He knew what she was about to say. "Let's go outside, okay? It'll be better off if we're not in the way."

He floundered where he kneeled, looking baffled as his gaze jumped sharply from Nick to Rochelle. He was hoping for some kind of reassurance, hoping they'd change their mind. "W-But - whut if y'all need -"
He faltered when Rochelle merely blinked at him and Nick shook his head minutely.

Ellis' shoulders lowered gently as he dropped his voice to match, a certain pained plea touching his voice. "I don't want tuh leave it up tuh Coach'n'Nick.. I don't want y'all tuh do it alone."

"We can handle it." Coach asserted, stopping to stand just before the Spaniard's sprawled feet. He gazed at the unconscious man's form, rounded, stubbled jaw tightening. Ellis frowned even deeper, peering up at him with a helpless exhale. "Y'all just keep an eye on things outside."

The Georgian started to protest, looking absolutely desperate - and then Nick let his weight shift faintly, intentionally, so his knee would press into Ellis'. Nick watched crestfallen and hurt resignation pass over the Georgian's face as the subtle gesture quieted him.

"It's going to be messy and disgusting, and we don't need you two losing it halfway through. Or the extra help." Nick curtly added, tone stiff with a kind of agitated dismissal, even though Ellis' posturing had already made it clear he'd acquiesce.

"Okay," the Southerner sighed. After a tiny scan of his eyes over hands, furtively, he forced this chuckled breath and smiled, lifting up his face again. "If y'all can handle it.. guess somebody's gotta watch out fer zombies'n'such.. Ro'n'I can do that."

"S'right, son. Good." Coach practically praised, voice growing deeper as he lifted up his hands to rub their heels into his eyes. He gave a gruff smile of encouragement at Ellis, sideways, nodding him on. Ellis returned it only weakly, though he softened at the welcome kindness.

Rochelle lifted up her hand to offer it toward Ellis across the room, fingers spread, and the gesture coaxed Ellis up off his knees quickly. He gave a small pause in order to rest a touch on Nick's shoulder, supportively, and scooted shortly into a trot toward Rochelle.

The gambler didn't bother watching him leave. He just examined the machete where it nestled inside the grill, noting a subtle glow starting to hum about the thinner edges of the metal.

Ellis' fingers twined with Rochelle's as he took her offered hand, a stronger smile touching his face when she squeezed his palm. She returned it. With only a small glance over her shoulder, she murmured, "We'll be just outside if anything happens."

He wanted to linger, or meet Nick's gaze one more time just to make absolutely sure the older man really wanted him to leave. Or maybe just walk back entirely and refuse to go at all… but when Rochelle pulled him along, he followed.

The air outside was damp with the moldy residue from the night's storm, the sky a dead gray to greet them as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. If there were any infected nearby, Ellis couldn't see them. Maybe they'd all been attracted to the other part of the city, where he and Nick had set off the Boomer.

Rochelle let go of his hand as the door settled shut behind them - though 'shut' was arguable, considering the large hole put through the center of it. Pulling her rifle off her shoulder and into her hands, the woman moved to gently lean against the brick side of the pawnshop, sighing. It was a heavy and slow breath, and Ellis peeked at her face, shyly.

She was upset beyond what she let on, and he could tell.

He didn't want to outright confront her on it, but he wanted to help. Biting at his lower lip for a moment, the Georgian somewhat tentatively moved to step up beside her. He mimicked her posture, leaning against the face of the building, his shoulder touching hers.
He wasn't sure if she'd notice, at first - but after a moment, her head tilted and he found her resting it against his shoulder in silence. He smiled, softening to the contact, and let his eyes close with a fluttered little sigh. "It'll be alright, Ro'." he promised. "Nick knows whut he's doin'."

Rochelle's soft laugh back betrayed her doubt, but she nodded her head. She didn't let her eyes close despite the urge to, a small swell of affection tightening her throat as she more thoroughly leaned into Ellis' side, feeling his cheek touch warmly against the top of her head.

"Thanks, sweetie. I just .. want this all to be over."

It took more effort than she expected to keep her voice level.
Chapter 107

tap clatter roll

The staccato noise of pebbles striking the road was enough to drive Rochelle insane. Seated beside her against the pawnshop wall, Ellis quietly plucked up bits of brick and concrete from the sidewalk around him and threw them into the street, squinting and aiming at little goals he drew out in his head.

tap tap clatter

Silence was nerve-wracking enough, sure, but Rochelle was pretty sure she was going to snap if he didn't stop soon. The sound was like a leaky faucet in the middle of the night, and her nerves were fraying. She bit her lower lip, eyes closed, reminding herself over and over that Ellis was just as worried as she was -

- that he didn't need the chiding -

- that he was just trying to distract himself -

thunk clatter

"Ellis, will you -" burst out of her in a mutter, teeth gritted. She immediately regretted the outburst, watching somewhat helplessly as Ellis jolted, snuck a tiny glance at her underneath the bill of his trucker cap, and lowered his hand to his knee. He seemed embarrassed, shyly rubbing at his leg.

"Uh.. oh." mumbled out of him, drawled voice lowered with a tender apology. Shifting his weight, the kid settled his forearms against his thighs, more fully turning his face toward her. "I was just passin' time. Didn't mean tuh bug you or nothin'."

The sigh that escaped Rochelle was almost frustrated, lifting up a hand to rub her fingertips into her eyes, full-bowed lips pulling into a grimace. She shook her head, slowly, voice a weak facsimile of reassurance. "No, no, it's.. okay. I'm sorry, okay? I'm just on edge, it wasn't your fault."

Ellis seemed a little surprised by the apology, his head straightening out to get his eyes better locked on Rochelle's face. A cocked grin peeked into life on his face as a small snort escaped him. He tried to lighten things with a tease, brows knotting over clouded, tired blue eyes. "Well, shit, Ro'. Don't make up yer mind or nothin'."

It didn't really land well.

Rochelle spared a sharply annoyed glance toward his face, one that distinctly chided him and very successfully made him shy away, lips drawing into an 'o' of realization. He fell into a moment of silence, darting eyes toward the toes of his boots with a shy gulp.

He genuinely hadn't meant to sour her mood even worse. He'd grown too used to the mocking back-and-forth he had with Nick.

Ellis did know how to do one thing, though: apologize.

"... man, I'm sorry, Ro'." His voice was softened with the light regret of the badly-placed comment. He leaned himself closer to her, letting their shoulders touch with a warm and hesitant contact. When Rochelle seemed to soften, he included, "I ain't thinkin' real straight, I guess."
She smiled faintly at him, dropping her chin to hang her head. A deep sigh rustled past over-dry lips, taut with stress. "I'm just worried. I don't -" She bit her lower lip, teeth capturing abused skin and nipping till pale little indentations were left behind. Ellis was quiet, pinching his coveralls between fingertips idly. "...I don't know what to do."

Crossing her arms, Rochelle drew her knees up toward her chest and hugged them between her elbows. Sighing, she gripped onto her forearm with one hand and forced her head back to rest against the brick wall, squeezing her eyes shut.

"I feel responsible. I'm the one who ran into the Witch in the first place - if.. I'd been more careful, if I'd listened more closely, it wouldn't have been chasing us... And if I'd stopped him from leaving in the first place... God, I just.. I feel like I did this."

The more she spoke, the more her voice grew strained, something almost tortured to the way she gritted out words. Emotion tickled at the edges of her tone, threatening to break through some wall she was trying to build up, and Ellis could only nod.

"The way he screamed..." Reluctantly, slowly, she shook her head, forehead screwing up as she wrenched her eyes shut tighter. Her words made Ellis' mouth take a sharp downward tilt. "I've never heard anyone scream like that.. it's not like the zombies, Ellis, it's..."

Ellis' chin lowered, and something tightened in his chest. Deep down in the back of his mind, stirring with an intensity that halted his breath like mud, came images he'd tried to push out of his mind.

Jerry's face, blown to bits of raw bone and gushing blood. The blood bubbling between his fingers, white froth trickling down his beard like thick saliva. The way his teeth gleamed red and white as he lunged - snarling - for Ellis.

The raging, animalistic sounds that left him... and the pain, low and whining, behind every breath. Agonized. Like his life were trickling past his lips in muted screams.

Quietly, he muttered, "I, uh... I know..."

It took Rochelle a moment. Like it had slipped her mind - and maybe it had. Ellis wouldn't have blamed her, though he found himself with a little bit of a frown in the beat of silence afterwards. He sunk his chin an inch, embarrassed with himself for bringing it up.

With a slow hesitance, Rochelle forced her eyes over to examine Ellis' expression, lips pinching tightly. "Ah, sweetie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - ... I kind of forgot about... Jerry."

Flustered slightly, the Georgian reached up to catch fingertips on the brim of his trucker cap and nudge it down low over his eyes. "I shouldn't'uv brought it up." he uttered, regretfully. There was a moment of thought between them. Insecurity, maybe. A burgeoning moment of awkwardness, cut short when Rochelle's hand settled softly on Ellis' shoulder.
He lifted his head, and their gazes gently met.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Rochelle smiled softly as Ellis raised his head, but the expression on his face was one of faint distress. Like he had a secret he couldn't share, but needed desperately off his chest - features tensed in a terrible mimicry of a half-smile.

Ellis looked small. "'M fine."

She pressed. It reminded her of the time they'd sat on the truck outside Carmine's house… only ghastlier. Colder. Ellis was withholding emotions that burned at him, ached, and Rochelle didn't quite know how to soothe him. "Are you sure..?"

He nodded his head gently, eyes lowering. When his fingers twitched toward a fragment of brick to scoop it up and bounce it in his palm, Rochelle relented to the idea that he'd be better off, for the moment, if she let it go. He'd come to her eventually.

She hoped.

Pointing, Rochelle indicated a grate across the street, inlaid into the gutter of the street and half-clogged with trash. A smile forced its way onto her face as she challenged, "Bet you can't make it into the sewers with that."

The last thing she expected was him to rebuff her. Ellis was always a snap to distract - but not this time.

Sighing, gently, Ellis draped his elbows on his knees and half-curled his fingers into fists. The bit of brick grasped between his thumb and middle finger fell, cracking into pieces against the sidewalk and scattering. He shrugged his shoulders as he brushed his dusty fingertips against one another.

"S'okay, Ro'." He smiled… or tried to, face stifled with bleary uncertainty. "Don't gotta do that fer me."

She frowned at the youth's response, lowering her voice and letting her gaze drop to her sleek, dirty boots. Rochelle leaned forward and hugged her knees, muttering, like it were an afterthought. "Think that was more for me, sweetheart. Jesus, it's weird seeing you upset."

Burying his mouth against his bicep, Ellis closed his eyes.

"Got bigger things tuh worry 'bout." he reaffirmed - as bravely as he could.
Chapter 108

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The grill, thrumming with the flames broiling in its belly, had raised the temperature in the room to a muggy high. Sweat was even thicker in the air than blood. Nick could feel the warm cling of his dress shirt hugging the small of his back, damp with perspiration. The unpleasant sensation put his teeth on edge, breath snorting through his nostrils.

His brain was cottony and thick. A certain dizziness played at the edges of his mind, and he fought it off by pure force of will. He was almost certain he had a fever, but there was no sense in bringing it up. Chances were good his shoulder was infected. *Guess taking a gore-covered sword to the shoulder wasn't the best way to stay healthy.*

But Nick losing it was the last thing they needed right now.

In all fairness, Coach had it just as bad: he was sweating straight through his shirt, dark stains etching down from his neck and armpits. It beaded up on his face, and he had this grim look of weary frustration all over his expression, but said nothing.

The ex-football player's shirtfront was already soaked through with blood, crusted overnight, and it had to be miserable sitting there.

*He's tough, I'll give him that.*

The machete had grown too hot to touch. Though it was mainly rubber on the grip, a strip of metal arching down at either side of the handle soaked up the heat and burned. Nick had taken the sleeve of his waist-tied suit jacket and wrapped it around the grip to protect his hand.

Although the flames were only little licking tongues, they burned hot on propane, and the steel blade was glowing a vibrant shade of red-orange. It stung at Nick's eyes just looking at it, and his knuckles felt singed by the proximity.

The atmosphere was tense within the pawnshop, silent and distended with uncertainty. Moving with all the tenderness he could, Coach carefully started to unwind the blood-soggy bandages from Chris' shoulder.

Red seeped from the fabric and painted his fingers crimson shades, but he kept at it, stiffening his jaw firmly. Wrapping his wound had staunched the bleeding, but removing the bandages would take away that security. They'd have to work fast.

Coach's belt was still strapped around the base of Chris' shoulder, chafing reddened flesh along the edges of the skintight leather, but Coach left it where it was. What little good it was doing to stop the worst of the bleeding was, at least, something.

Nick watched sideways, his wrist rotating slowly to turn the machete and lay it even closer to the flames. Chris' shoulder was not looking good. Between the raw skin inflamed around the makeshift tourniquet and the blood and discharge built up underneath the bandages, it drew Nick's brows together in disdain.

That was hardly the worst of it, even.
When Coach peeled away the last layer of bandages, the gambler felt a surge of nausea stiffen his body. It was raw flesh there, meat and muscle bared to the air and threaded with veins and fatty bubbles. Blood leaked sluggishly amidst congealing pus.

The Spaniard's anatomy was spliced open, like some slab of animal displayed on a store counter - and perhaps worst was the shattered flecks of bone jutting from his shoulder socket where the last fragments of his humerus remained.

Mesmerized for a horrible instant, Nick forced his gaze away, nostrils flaring in disgust as a slightly gagged cough escaped him. Coach reacted much the same - more to the smell, a flood of gore, than the sight.

"Holy fuck." he muttered, flicking his tongue out to wet his lips. "No offense, Coach, but - holy fuck. I don't know if we're gonna make this one." It wasn't anything he'd have said in front of the other two, and he was suddenly glad they'd left. At least he could be blunt.

Coach sighed, wearily, frowning as he examined Chris' face. If Nick could read his body language at all, he didn't seem to have much more confidence. "Gotta try, Nick. You're the one who reminded us."

The gambler snorted, shaking his head subtly, his gaze moving to the machete in his hand. Releasing it, he shook out his wrist, flexing singed fingers. "Yeah, yeah." he muttered shortly. "I'm just Mr. Positive."

Coach didn't even react.

"If we're doing this, we should do it quick. First thing's cleaning up a little." Nick's expression was drawn with a certain fierceness as he examined the leaking stump. "Lean him forward, away from the wall."

Coach moved to settle on the other side of Chris, getting an arm behind him and one in front of him to gently pull him away from the store counter. Nick focused on setting up as the eldest survivor got into an uncomfortable kneel.

They'd used nearly all the bandages they'd found trying to stop the bleeding overnight, as Nick discovered upon opening the main zipper of the backpack. There was one roll and a handful of square gauze patches stuffed inside, along with a second bottle of alcohol and a couple bottles of pills.

The labels on the front meant little to him, the generic names for drugs he didn't know. He did recognize one - oxycodone - and knew full well what '-cillin' indicated. Nick eyed them, judgingly, and gave one a slight rattle. He was pleased to feel them fairly full.

There were names printed on each one, but Nick made a deliberate effort not to pay them any mind. Wouldn't be the first or the last time they stole from the dead.

Coach must have been watching him, because he spoke up with an unprompted explanation, distracting him. "Know somethin' 'bout medication from my work at school. Had to work with the nurses, keep pills locked up an' dispense 'em. Recognized the labels."

Nick grunted, faintly, tossing the bottles back in the pack and plucking up one of the square gauze pads instead. Shifting back to kneel beside Chris, the gambler shrugged his good shoulder.

"Surprised someone didn't clear out all the drugs."

"Yeah, well. Any ransackin' they did was on the front, snatchin' things off shelves. Didn't spend
time breakin' into the pharmacy." Coach gestured lightly toward the backpack with his head, gazing over Chris' head where the Spaniard had slumped against his chest. "Didn't do us much good on bandages, but those pills'll help."

Forcing out a sigh, Nick let his eyes fall half-lidded. "You realize, even if we get him through this, we're gonna be draining a lot of supplies keeping him alive? If things were desperate before..." There was a few inches of alcohol left in the first container they'd opened up, and he scooped it up, folding the gauze up in his hand and pressing it to the bottle's mouth. "It's gonna be hell trying to take care of him."

Coach's face was drawn in a frown, though it didn't really deepen or soften at Nick's words. He'd considered the idea before. "Yeah. Ain't got no other option."

Tipping the flask, Nick let the alcohol dampen the fabric for a moment, though not too much. He pushed the bottle back to the hardwood floor before leaning forward, gaze lowering to the bloodied mess of Chris' shoulder. "Fucker better earn it."

The thick layer of blood and pus needed to be taken care of before they took the blade to it. Sealing in infection would only kill him faster. The real procedure involved cutting out infected flesh - but for Chris, there wasn't much flesh to take. It was so high on his shoulder, any more cutting would only do more damage.

"... This ain't gonna be pretty." the gambler warned. Coach turned his gaze away slightly, but said nothing.

Using the damp gauze like one might use a napkin, fingertips pressing into the center and ignoring the burn as the liquid stung at nicks and scrapes, Nick cleaned at the gore built up on Chris' open wound. He flexed his jaw, trying not to lean his face too close.

"... This ain't gonna be pretty." the gambler warned. Coach turned his gaze away slightly, but said nothing.

Using the damp gauze like one might use a napkin, fingertips pressing into the center and ignoring the burn as the liquid stung at nicks and scrapes, Nick cleaned at the gore built up on Chris' open wound. He flexed his jaw, trying not to lean his face too close. Jesus.

The mixed grime of blood and pus came off in a clotted mess. The more a view of the Spaniard's shoulder Nick got, the more he regretted cleaning it off at all. As solidly as he held his expression, the gambler's stomach roiled and stiffened, an acrid taste in the back of his throat.

It was lucky they'd left the belt where it was; the spill of blood was bad enough with it there. As Nick moved in a careful circle, avoiding the fractured bone in the center for the moment, fresh blood came trickling out like the run-off of a squeezed sponge. It stained down Chris' side - half-bare, his shirt split open along his ribs - and speckled on Nick's pantlegs.

Not that now was the time to bemoan his clothing.

Tossing the gauze, now crimson and yellow with gore, to the hardwood flooring by his knee, Nick moved onto the next unpleasant task. Using his index and thumb like careful pinchers, he plucked the stray fragments of bone from the center of Chris' shoulder. It had already been sundered by the Witch, so it was just a matter of peeling the shards away from flesh.

The squelching sounds were awful, making Coach cringe and turn his chin away another few degrees. He muttered a gruff, "Sweet Jesus.", holding Chris slightly tighter. The Spaniard's breath was shallowing out, but he didn't seem to be stirring. Thank Christ.

Nick's fingertips grazed flesh, despite his attempts to keep them from touching, and a wet, bloody heat clung to his skin tighter than sweat. The bone was eerily slippery underneath his fingertips, and he tossed the flecked pieces aside with a thick huff.

“I've done some nasty stuff, but this... this takes the cake.” Nick managed with a heavy sheen of
distaste, shaking his head in a quick motion. “Or the arm, I guess.” He laughed, sharp and harsh, and Coach seemed to glance at him, judgingly.

Like Nick going insane was a very real possibility.

“Man, no one can take a joke anymore.” the conman muttered.

Reaching back behind himself, Nick pulled another square of gauze from the pack, shaking it free from its siblings. He took a deep inhale (regretting the action when he tasted blood) and reached out to press it against Chris' shoulder, palming over the open wound.

He put harsh pressure against it for a moment, feeling hot blood leeching onto his hand. Coach forced himself to watch, tightening his grip on Chris' torso, but not before he gazed at the Spaniard's face. Pale and sweaty, features drawn in a faint look of distress, he looked, honestly, inches from death.

But still breathing.

“Okay.” Nick spoke, voice steady but growled with tension. “I'm gonna throw the rest of the alcohol on there, and then it's barbeque time. You good, Coach? It's gonna smell like hell. If you wanna back out, now's the time.”

The heavyset man just shook his head, simply. “Do it.” Nick supposed he must trust him, at least to some degree, though it was perhaps more out of a lack of alternatives than real confidence. *I don't think he's ever really gonna trust me.*

*Smart guy.*

Moving as if he'd practiced the gestures a hundred times over, Nick tossed the gauze aside and snatched up the near-empty alcohol bottle. He poured the remnants over Chris' open wound, wincing in silent sympathy, as his other hand snagged fingers in his suit jacket sleeve.

Getting it wrapped in his fingers, he gripped the handle of the machete, jutting out of the grill. Hefting the cherry-red sword, he growled slightly, finding his heart-rate uncharacteristically high.

*Breathe, man. You got this.*

If he didn't move fast, he'd lose his nerve. Nick couldn't let that happen. Not in front of Coach; not in front of anyone. *Never.*

Sweeping his wrist firmly, Nick settled the blade in line with Chris' severed arm, flattening it. Gritting his teeth, the gambler tightened his fingers on the handle, shifting his weight. One breath - drawn in past clenched teeth - and then he pushed forward till the steel surface flattened against Chris' skin.

The first sound Nick heard was hissing. Sizzling, like the sound of bacon slapped onto an oiled skillet. The stench of charring flesh stabbed sharp in his senses, making his head recoil and his eyes water. Coach let off a disgusted sound, a thick curse, but held tight onto the Spaniard.

And then Chris *screamed.*

It was a fierce, shrill sound - raking and cracking, pure, unfettered agony. He screamed, arching up with such a sudden jolt that it took Coach a moment to get his grip again. "Shit!" Coach swore, starting to get a hand up to clamp over the youth's mouth and stifle the noise.
"Don't!" Nick snarled, retracting the blade almost as soon as he'd touched it down. It crackled even after the contact ended, skin plucked off and stuck to the steel, burning in hissing speckles. The wound was blaring red, agitated and inflamed, blood popping before Nick's eyes. They weren't near done. "If he vomits, he'll choke. Just hold him!"

Coach cursed, but obeyed, leaning his face closer to Chris' ear so he could whisper. Nick couldn't catch a word, but neither, it seemed, could Chris. The youth let out these miserable gasps, keening, his chest surging in heaving breaths. His eyes rolled back, whites fluttering under his lids, sweat - and now tears - pouring down his face.

When Nick pressed the blade against his wound a second time, Chris vaulted right back into screaming. It was an awful noise, like nothing he'd ever heard before. Like dying. It echoed and rebounded, heightening, sharpening...

"Nick!" Rochelle was shouting, suddenly, voice echoing behind them from the doorway. There were tears to her voice, spat sorrow, and Nick growled.

He pulled the blade away again, narrowing his gaze tightly. Blood trickled from the meaty wound, but slower. Stuttered, almost, as some of the smaller veins burned closed under the blade. "We're not fucking stopping, Ro', it's too late. Get the fuck back outsi-"

"We've got incoming." she interrupted, voice sharp with a certain ferocity. Nick glanced back just long enough to see her face. If she was crying, she hid it well. "He's attracting a horde."

"Fucking Christ." Nick hissed, sharply, tightening his grip on the machete handle for a moment. His mind whirled for an instant, sparking - of course the horde would jump at screams. The sound of pain, directing them toward prey. "Just what we need."

Coach snapped a hand up to gesture for the door, bloody fingers circling. His voice was rough baritone, demanding. "Y'all set up at the door. Bottleneck them, safest way. Keep tight an' don't let them in!"

Rochelle nodded sharply, already turning at the heel to bolt back out and get Ellis. Nick lifted his head, glancing sideways at the football coach, jaw tightening. He didn't want to say it - the idea of doing this on his own was unpleasant, trying to hold down a screaming, writhing man... but he did anyway. "Do you want to -?"

"No." Coach grunted, firmly grappling Chris against his chest. Deepset eyes flicked up, examining Nick for a second before he uttered, "Yo' ass needs me." There was a little snark to the statement, weighty humor, and it left an ironic twang in Nick's mouth.

He snorted, closing his eyes for just one transient moment, one instant of focus.

"Yeah, well."

Blade touched flesh, and Chris' torn screams exploded free, in tune to the rising noises of the oncoming horde.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO red-north on tumblr - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE*
I’ve done some pretty nasty stuff... but this...

this... takes the cake...

or the aim, I guess...

Man, no one can take a joke anymore...
Infected swarmed the pawnshop like maggots spawning on rotten meat, squirming and writhing, all mindless hunger and a unified need to *kill*. Their bodies struck the walls in thudding harmony. Screams wracked the air as they clawed at the brick sides of the squat store, fingertips blunted to bleeding stubs against the rough stone.

Some managed to climb to the roof, clambering up a sturdy gutter system and using each other for leverage. They were too blinded by rage and fever to find the front door at first. The horde's footsteps were like thunder, shaking the very foundations of the building underneath them.

Ellis wanted so badly to just close his eyes as their screaming peaked around them.

The high privacy windows built into the shop walls rattled, and cracking sounds filled the air as a few of the infected beat upon the glass with their palms. They barely withstood the onslaught, shatters touching the clear surface amidst splatters of blood and blackened grime.

It was like being in the maw of a hurricane. Too much noise, too much vibration, his heartbeat joining the chorus as it hammered against his ribcage in furious tempo. Rochelle was gripping his hand in the open air between them, crouched on either side of the broken door, their fingers tangled in white-knuckled comfort.

She had Coach's double-barreled shotgun braced against her thigh, at the ready, and Ellis held his own against his shoulder. The moment the horde converged before the door, they'd be prepared. Or so went the unspoken plan.

But Ellis was scared. And *being scared* scared him more than anything the apocalypse could have ever thrown at him.

Christophe screamed behind them, the putrid scent of sizzling flesh wafting through the air. His voice broke with agony, incomprehensible gasps and half-sobs laced into every keen. The smell, the sound... it was impossible to pinpoint which was worse. It was all a kind of horror that jarred Ellis from his body, numbing his limbs and glazing over his expression.

Rochelle was so pale she seemed a breath away from fainting, but the stubborn set to her jaw said otherwise. Her eyes, a warm black with shades of creamy brown that reflected in the light, darted sideways to catch onto Ellis' face.

"You okay, sweet-?" she started to whisper.

Maybe it was her voice, so close to the door, that finally did it. A shriek overhead sounded an instant before a body flashed into sight, a male zombie in dirtied swimshorts flinging itself off the edge of the roof straight in front of them. It hit the sidewalk face-first, and the collision snapped its neck in a gush of red against the grey cement.

The horde followed after.

Bodies poured like liquid off the roof, exploding with ferocious energy toward the doorway. All Ellis could see was glowing eyes and blurred movement, and his fingers broke away from Rochelle's in a panic. He jammed his shotgun into a firm line from his chest, pump settled in his palm, and blasted into the mess.

Blood splattered as his bullets tore through the first layer of infected, throwing them back into the
The injured were torn apart before his very eyes, the zombies behind them clawing into their backs and trampling them to the floor like they became nothing more than obstacles.

Gritting his teeth, Ellis whined faintly - *shit*, did the recoil from his shotgun hurt. He'd thought he would be so familiar with the gun that it wouldn't be an issue, yet with his injured rib, the blast shook his whole frame.

It quite nearly knocked the wind entirely out of him. Even as he forced himself to pull back the pump, shell casings flicking off by his elbow as new bullets loaded into the chamber, he found his lungs locking up in his gut and making it difficult to breathe. Stars sparked behind his eyes, balking him with a certain dizziness, and it was fortunate he wasn't alone.

Rochelle fell back onto her heel for support, Coach's shotgun making a thunderous noise as she shot the encroaching infected just as the closest vaulted through the doorway. The horde stomped on the fallen bodies reduced to bloodied shambles beneath its feet. There was a shriek of pain, and Ellis saw a bleeding forearm tumble to the floor in front of him, torn from its near-rotten moorings.

The infected hit dead-on by the blast were blown back, crushing those behind them with the force of the collision... but the horde recovered like wiggling gelatin. Bodies crammed closer, shrieking mouths and yellowed eyes surging forward.

"Get it together, Ellis!" Rochelle snapped, tone suddenly miles harsher than Ellis expected. "I can't do this on my own!" The frustration in her voice stabbed a tiny splinter of hurt in the Georgian's heart, but he obeyed swiftly, snapping his teeth together, hard.

She was right.

Sliding closer to her, Ellis took up a stiff stance, breathing shallowly through his nostrils. They picked up a rhythm back and forth, trading shots to keep the horde at bay. Every shot thickened the number of dead at the doorway, every new body making it a little harder for the infected to get through.

The screams never ended. Ellis couldn't tell what was infected and what was Chris; rage and pain mixed in the air, musky and thick. He could still distinctly smell burning flesh, even with the intense stench of entrails and decay in front of him.

The sound of a shattering window echoed behind him, glass tinkling like crystallized rain down on the pawn shop floor. Ellis shot a cursory glance back toward it, but the fallen glass was far enough away from Coach and Nick, and there were no infected trying to shove itself inside through the new opening. He returned his focus forward -

- just in time to see one of the infected trampled underfoot was still alive. It crawled its body forward on shaking, clawing hands, trying to pull itself out from under the weight of several corpses atop it.

Ellis let off a "Ro!" in warning, but he'd barely even said her name before Rochelle shifted her weight, throwing her balance onto the ball of her left foot. Swinging her leg with a fierce snap of her knee, she kicked the toe of her boot straight into the zombie's face.

A loud crack said something broke, and it thudded flat against the hardwood floor. Its fingers twitched in strange, grasping patterns for what seemed like an eternity, even after its death.

It never even got its legs free.
Stepping back onto both feet, Rochelle took a potshot at the horde, barely even sparing a moment to aim. "Thanks." Although several infected fell under her gun, going down hard as the spray of bullets tore through their fragile insides, one zombie stumbled just in time to dodge out of the line of fire.

It lunged toward Ellis as it got its balance, snarling furiously with quickly-raising hands. The Georgian shoved his gun up to shoot, but as he pulled the trigger, the zombie grabbed the gun in a blind claw.

The barrel jolted down as the staggering infected's weight leaned on it, and when it went off, the bullets buried half in the ground and half in the zombie's legs. Undeterred by the damage done, it clawed toward him, shoving the gun out of the way.

Any other day, the fiery Southerner could've shoved the zombie back at least enough to get some breathing room - but his rib gave a fierce, stabbing throb that stole his breath when he tried to push it away. Rochelle's voice called his name, but his vision flickered in agony as the infected tackled him backwards.

They hit the wood floor in a tangle, Ellis losing his grip on his shotgun as the thud made him cry out. She squirmed on top of him, narrowly missing his crotch with an errant knee, nostrils flaring like an animal as she lurched her mouth toward his face.

Blearily, Ellis had enough sense to get his hands up, and he grabbed for the woman's scraggly red hair. He buried his fingers in the oily strands and locked his elbows straight to keep her gnashing teeth away.

She snarled with bulging yellow eyes, her hands clawing at his wrists first, leaving scrapes from her broken nails - and then beating against his chest and face. She struck at whatever she could reach. It was like being stomped on all over again, the pain throbbing in his sternum and along the frame of his ribcage.

"Shit!" he stuttered, twisting his face away when one of the flailing claws caught him in the jaw, ragged nail cutting skin. "Shit-"

"Ellis -" Rochelle's voice warned, reaching a frantic pitch. "I can't..!" She couldn't stop shooting long enough to help him, her shotgun blasts barely enough to keep the horde at bay without Ellis at her side. She struggled alone, using the already-bloodied toe of her boot to kick the feet out from under the zombie facing her down. She took advantage of the seconds it earned her to reload.

Grinding his teeth, Ellis let go of the zombie's hair just long enough to curl the fingers of his right hand into a fist and wind his arm back. All his scattered instinct honed in on coiling the muscle in his arm, bicep and shoulder tightening, and he swung with wrenched desperation to slug her across the face.

Her head snapped back, mouth gaping widely as blood gushed down her upper lip. It earned him a respite from the strikes of her hands - but only a momentary one. The blow didn't faze her, didn't disorient her like it would a normal human.

She gasped, snarled, and refocused down on him the moment her head completed its recoil.

Ellis braced himself to wrestle with her again, tensing up at the sight of blood- and dirt-flecked teeth... and then a hole, messily driven through her flesh by the heat of a bullet, appeared in the center of her face. Her skin shuddered with split-second impact, cartilage and bone shattered with a soft crack, denting in her features and blowing out flesh.
The distinct, thunderous gunshot came from behind Ellis, nothing like the heavily recoiled blast of Rochelle's double-barrel, repeating over and over as the woman fought the horde back.

The infected half-straddling Ellis to the ground collapsed forward on top of him, dead.

A strangled noise left the Georgian, blood spattering onto his face from the leaking opening in her face. He roughly pushed her body off of his before her head could loll onto his shoulder, squirming up onto an elbow and palming the blood off of his face in disgust.

He shot a glance over his shoulder, and the sight sent a shiver up his spine.

Nick was twisted around on a knee, steely green eyes sharp as broken glass, his Magnum leveled upon Ellis with a straight arm and steadied with his other hand cupped over the grip. His teeth bared in a slim line between his lips, a haunted shadow over the planes of his face. There was so much coiled anger, fractured emotion, in the tension of his pose.

Ellis' mind wandered for just a split second. *Kinda badass.*

Breaking through the dizzied, pained glaze humming over the Georgian's consciousness, the gambler's mouth moved - and then the words formed, delayed in Ellis' comprehension.

"Get up, dumbshit!"

Shaking his head furiously, as though the gesture might clear his mind, Ellis kicked the infected woman entirely off his body, gritting his teeth through the pain. Nick turned back toward Chris the moment the other man started to move, sliding his gun back into the holster attached at his thigh.

If Ellis just breathed shallowly, the pain wasn't overbearing.

Scrambling to pick up his dropped shotgun and get it back into his hands, Ellis scooted a knee under himself and took a kneel. He started to raise it up, steadying to aim for the door and help Rochelle, but a shadow flashed in the corner of his eye before he entirely looked away.

For an instant, he thought it was just an imagined flash in his vision - but when he twisted his head back, hunting it out, his gaze caught onto the spiderlike shape of a Hunter. It was bundled up in a dark sweatshirt, crawling a lithe body through the window previously broken open.

It moved almost tenderly, body coiled up in a tiny spring, timing its squirming motions to the blasts of Rochelle's shotgun as if in a conscious, sapient attempt at stealth. The Hunter growled eagerly, head cocking up in interest as Christophe screamed for what felt like the hundredth time.

The Spaniard barely even sounded human anymore. His voice was so rough it was like cracking, splintering wood.

The Georgian moved faster than he thought he could, adrenaline numbing the pains in his body. He shot once at the doorway to support Rochelle, body shuddering with the blast - then spun on his knee to face the window, pumping his shotgun in the same motion, taking careful aim at the coiled Hunter.

The Hunter gave a fierce cry, seizing with the strike of bullets through its body. It lashed out at the air before it jerked violently and fell limp, hooked over the edge of the window like a draped towel. The sound made Coach and Nick both startle, the gambler snapping his gaze up toward the window.

Nick glared almost accusatorially at the Hunter's corpse, lips moving faintly in some kind of
muttered curse as he comprehended the situation. He slipped a glance back toward Ellis as he angled the machete into the grill to let it regain some heat, begrudgingly squinting at the youth in acknowledgement.

"We're even, brother!" Ellis laughed, breathless with pain as he blinked through sweat. Even injured and rattled, his hands shaking harshly on his shotgun, he managed to pull a smile. He turned to join Rochelle, moving with a limp. Nick couldn't help but grunt under his breath, aware of the kid's suffering.

But there was no time to think about him - a headache was burning in Nick's temples, the gunfire stabbing pins into the base of his skull, fracturing his focus. It was all he could do to keep his attention on Chris, and the Spaniard, unfortunately, needed it.

Nick fought a ragged frown, brow fierce over his eyes, examining Chris where the Spaniard shivered against Coach's chest. He looked like hell, eye sockets sunken and skin a clammy yellow. Sweat glistened on his skin, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth where he'd bitten his tongue.

His eyes were half-open, just paled white visible between his lids. He didn't react to anything - not the gunshots, not Nick's gaze, not Coach's touch - except the pain. Shudders touched the tendons in his neck as if, in his subconscious, he were flexing every muscle in his lost arm.

His shoulder was a sight Nick could've gone his life without experiencing. The flesh was burnt to a tinted grey-brown, blisters and wrinkled patches of burnt skin stemming the flow of blood from the open wound. The cauterization seemed to have worked, even if 'worked' was relative.

Nick didn't bother to look when the gunshots seemed to peter out, twisting his body to reach for the backpack on the floor beside him. The horde was reaching its end and it was long overdue - bodies lined the street in front of the pawnshop and bloated the doorway, fallen atop each other like a pile of dirty laundry.

The smell didn't even faze him, his senses already too overloaded to process any more. Digging through the backpack, Nick growled slightly, speaking over the last few gunshots that rang out as Rochelle and Ellis finished off the stragglers. "No cream or anything?"

Coach shook his head. The eldest had an expression stonier than Nick had ever seen, craning his neck to rub his sweat-doused cheek off on his shoulder. "Didn't find shit. We got pills, but I dunno how you wanna make him take'em. Used up most our bandages wrappin' him the first time."

Sighing in frustration, Nick gazed at Chris' wrecked shoulder. They'd need to get it covered... and change it later... and they needed some extra in case anyone else got hurt... and there was no way that they'd have enough, Nick knew that much already.

The gambler's hands were unsteady and it agitated him.

"... Fine."

Moving almost angrily, Nick reached down, untying his suit jacket from around his waist. The wrinkled, beaten fabric felt thin in his hands, defeated - and Nick shook it out, getting a grip on one side and fisting his fingers in the cloth.

Coach opened his mouth, but couldn't get words out before Nick violently tore his hands apart. Tearing along scratches and holes already marring the jacket's fabric, he ripped a jagged strip from the bottom of the jacket's torso. His shoulder protested, but the pain only made him angrier and
pull harder.

Draping the makeshift bandage over his shoulder, Nick got his grip on the next few inches and tore another lengthy piece off. If the jacket resisted him, he grabbed up the still-hot machete and hacked a line through it before continuing to tear it apart.

Maybe it was the fact that Rochelle and Ellis had finally stopped shooting, or that the horde had fallen quiet, or that Chris wasn't screaming anymore -

- but the silence in the pawnshop was so deafening, all anyone heard for the long few moments afterward was the sound of fabric tearing.
"We shouldn't really try to move him." Rochelle stood, askance, eyes roving quietly over the slumped form of the Spaniard leaned up against the pawn shop counter. The youth had fallen back into unconsciousness... not that, beyond screaming and struggling, he'd really woken up at all.

She crossed her arms tightly, a frown etched onto her features as she cupped her palm over a freshly-bleeding cut on her forearm. "I don't want to stay here another night, but...

Nick said nothing. His head was pounding in these wet, burning pulses, and the last thing he wanted to do was think. He focused on wrapping Chris' shoulder, expression frozen in a cold frown as he wound the ragged fabric that had once been his suit jacket. There was little left - just the collar, and strips of the torso and shoulders.

Unrecognizable.

Nick had rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up past his elbows to spare them a little mess, and his hands and forearms were tacky with blood and sweat. His fingers stuck together as he wrapped Chris' shoulder.

A trickle of blood escaped the corner of the Spaniard's mouth, and the frothing green-yellow faintly bubbled down his chin betrayed that he'd choked up vomit at some point in the process.

"Jesus, he looks..." Rochelle muttered, rubbing her arms as if she were freezing.

"Like he's dying." Nick finished for her, perfectly aware of the way it made her flinch. He didn't really care, but with something of an agitated shake of his head, he added dubiously. "He's not bleeding anymore. Whatever chance we can give him, we did." Despite his words, Nick couldn't fight the stirring thought that he'd done more harm than good - but there was no time for self-doubt.

He couldn't take it back, not even if he wanted to.

A pained "ah- hah..." and sudden thud from behind them caught Nick's attention in a flash, head perking. Coach and Ellis had been working together to drag the infected corpses out of the pawnshop, taking them one at a time by their legs and arms and tossing them into the street.

It wouldn't necessarily make the smell go away, but they couldn't very well leave them where they were if they did end up staying overnight. The pawnshop was unpleasant enough already.

Ellis had abandoned his grip on his half of the corpse, and stood with his hands clutched at his side, pain stricken over his expression and lips drawn in a heavy grimace.

"A'ight, son?" Coach uttered, concern tightening his brow. The heavyset football coach dropped his half of the corpse rather unceremoniously, hurrying to step over to Ellis' side and setting a hand on the small of his back.

The youth quickly nodded his head, gasping softly as his wince thickened and his body slouched to lean against Coach's support. "Yeah.. Yeah! I'm good, man..

But his reassurance was pushed aside immediately, Coach gesturing at the mechanic's side with one hand. He lifted his head, looking toward Nick and Rochelle with a slightly tense frown. "Y'all, with his rib the way it is, he should be restin'. He pushes himself too much, we'll have a real issue on our hands."
Ellis tried to protest, shrugging his posture straight to hide his discomfort. He'd probably have
gotten a few words in had Rochelle not snapped.

She rounded on the Georgian, expression going suddenly and vibrantly infuriated. Ellis wilted
slightly under her anger, eyes widening slightly as she started in on him. "What the hell! Ellis, you
knew you were injured! Why didn't you say something?!!"

He could do little more than gawp. Nick silently returned to wrapping Chris' arm, jaw twitching
with subdued irritation.

Rochelle clasped her hand on her forehead, digging her nails gently into her temples in frustration.
"We can't keep track of you every second, Ellis! You're not invincible! What if you'd broken your
rib all the way? We don't have the skills to handle that kind of thing."

Meekly, Ellis forced his head down, shrugging his shoulders gingerly and lowering his voice to a
chastised mumble. "Well... shit, Ro', I know that... I just - didn't wanna complain. It ain't like we
got much time tuh be restin'. I gotta pull muh weight, especially right now..."

Sighing tightly, Rochelle crossed her hands - then uncrossed them, buzzing with agitation. Her gaze
flickered to Coach, but the big man held a stony expression that didn't offer much advice. She
reached up a hand, snapping sharply toward the squat table behind Ellis in demand. "Sit."

Ears burning slightly, Ellis touched a hand onto his injured rib and backed up with a plodding
apology, carefully hoisting himself up to sit on the edge of the table. He frowned in silence.

"We have a lot to worry about right now." Rochelle muttered, still fuming. "Don't need to add you
breaking something because you're too damn s-"

She stopped herself. A frustrated hum escaped her in place of the word, and she did a half-turn on
her heel, dragging her palm over the top of her head to push down stray hair frizzes. Her eyes went
lidded, sucking in air like she could inhale the sentence back into her lungs.

Ellis' frown deepened, lips quickly wetted by his tongue. He lifted a hand to wipe at his jawline
with his palm, eyes adjusting downward in a humiliated motion as he mumbled, "Stupid?", tone
dulled with a rare hurt.

Rochelle's anger deflated sharply, crushed underfoot.

There was silence for a pregnant moment... and then a sudden burst of motion.

"Ellis.. I didn't -" Rochelle started, almost panicked, stretching a hand out to Ellis' shoulder. Coach
reached out as if to grasp her shoulder, poised to speak, but it was Nick that silenced all of them.
He didn't even stand up or swivel his head - not at first. He just spoke, and his voice cut with such
sharp venom.

"What the fuck exactly do you expect him to do?"

Only when nobody said a word did he move. Folding an edge of the makeshift bandage underneath
itself to tie it off, Nick pushed into a crouch, then straightened to his feet, eyes shadowed under
low-cut brows. He let himself gaze once over Chris' limp frame, then turned to face his team.

Three sets of eyes were on him.

"This isn't a game, kids. He can't sit out because he's got a boo-boo, none of us can. If he's got a
cracked rib - guess what? He pushes through it. If you've got a cut arm - guess what? You push
through it. If I've got a fucked up shoulder - guess what?" He violently tossed up his chin, narrowing his gaze. "I push through it."

"Nick -" Ellis mumbled, rubbing at his forehead with his knuckles. His posture was still injured, but his voice was a pleading and soothing tone. He didn't want more fighting, least of all caused by him.

Coach fiercely interrupted him, deep bass unflinching as the ex-football player crossed his arms tightly over his barrel-framed chest. "You quit yellin', boy. Don't need yo' shit added on to this."

"Right, so you can get back to yelling at Ellis?" Nick jabbed a finger at Rochelle, scowl heightening. "We've got an extra person's worth of dead weight now. You think we can handle any more? You think we can handle carrying around two useless kids? This stupid hick is the only one actually making sense here. He can't back off because he's hurt. The apocalypse doesn't take doctor's notes."

"I didn't mean -" Rochelle tried, her voice tight with emotion. But she shook it off, curling her hands into fists. "Who the hell are you to defend him like this? You knock him down more than any of us!"

"That ain't fair!" Ellis pushed in with sudden energy, slipping off the table with a thud to stand as tall as he could on the balls of his feet, gritting his teeth against the pain throbbing down his side. "Everybody calm down, this ain't no time tuh be fightin' like this!"

"We been fightin' since the start." Coach gruffed, distaste creeping into the downward curl of his mouth. "All you do, Nick. Pick fights an' mock us like you know better."

"Guys -" Ellis was pleading, hapless.

"I'm getting the feeling I do." Nick snapped back, a growl at the edge of his voice. He could feel his heart pounding, blood pressure heating his skin even more than his fever already had. "Half the time I swear you guys don't even understand where we are. The goddamn world is ending. We can't even trust half the people we meet these days. We're alone. We're all we have. When will you get that? If we fall down, no one is going to pick us up. It's push through or die."

Rochelle's cringing jaw spoke to more emotion than her shielded eyes did.

Enunciating each syllable with a taut voice and spreading fingers as he uttered "We. Are. Alone." in a condescendingly slow manner, Nick took a sudden step forward. It was that motion that flipped his vision upside-down, and with a hot shudder of dizziness over his brain, he stumbled.

The disorientation in that momentary spell felt a lot like drowning in the river. Like he forgot which way the ground was and gravity released him to wobble aimlessly on fragile legs. He barely managed to get his feet back under himself in time to avoid falling, but it was far too late to hide the falter.

Rochelle immediately surged forward, argument pushed aside in a flash, to grab ahold of his elbows and try to support him. Unfortunately, reflex had him rejecting the help, and dizziness had him thoughtless. He pushed her away - too hard. He shoved with flat palms, almost a strike.

There was a very thick tension in the air as Rochelle lost her footing and crashed down to an awkward, startled sit on the ground, her mouth falling open in surprise.

Silence.
Dreadful, thick silence, broken only by Nick's ragged breathing and the buzz of flies gathering just outside the doorway.

Nobody seemed able to speak. Coach stood in this half-threatening posture as if he intended to charge across the room and belt Nick straight across the face. Ellis stood in utter shock, mouth open, eyes wide. Nick stood half-hunched, panting and low-lidded as he pieced together his own actions -

And then Rochelle laughed.

It was a weak noise, with a kind of sad humor.

"Sweet Lincoln's mullet. Look at us... we're a mess." She shifted forward until she could set her hands on her knees, bowing her head slowly. "We're lucky enough to have each other in all this - and all we can do is argue like a bunch of jerks every time something goes wrong. God.."

Ellis chuckled faintly, lowering his chin and raising a hand to rub at the back of his neck, almost shyly. "Guess we're all a lil' worked up." Coach's hostility bled slowly out like a deflating balloon, and he fell to a faint grunt, dark eyes moving to glance toward his shoes.

"No one's behavin' real adult today." the heavyset man admitted.

Catching his breath, Nick swallowed. A certain doubt laced itself into his brows, but he forced himself to loosen his stance. Even as his gaze darted to the side, dodging anyone else's, he cleared his throat and muttered, "... I - didn't mean to push that hard."

"I know." she sighed with a half-smile. The woman shifted her limbs to crawl back up to her feet, brushing her rear off with flat palms and a short pat. Nick had intended to offer her a hand - but she was already up, so he just tightened his arms at his sides. "A lot of stuff just happened nobody meant."

Ellis frowned cautiously, cuffing his nose with a knuckle. He spoke with a meek kind of apology, releasing a sigh in a frustrated puff as his stance relaxed back on his heels. His body slumped to take some pressure off his sides. "I'm sorry, y'all.. feel like I've been screwin' shit up lately.."

Coach moved over to his side easily, setting a hand on his shoulder with a reassuring clap. "Now don't you start up on that." The younger man smiled a little at him, but still seemed tense. "Ain't yo' fault, son. We're all losin' our heads, you didn't do shit. We just don't want you breakin' that rib all the way, that's all."

"I ain't gonna." Ellis promised. He tenderly pushed his hands into the pockets of his coveralls, almost shyly turning his head to nod toward Nick, eager to get the focus off himself - and genuinely concerned. "You okay, though, man? You ain't been lookin' too hot since this mornin'. Thought you were gonna pass out just then."

Nick snorted at the question. There wasn't enough sarcasm in the world thick enough to express his disdain, but he was perfectly willing to give it a shot - until Coach took the chance away from him.

Closing the gap between them in one broad step, Nick was silenced by the thoughtful press of a set of knuckles to his cheek. He didn't expect the contact, least of all from Coach, and he froze in disbelief long enough for Coach to get halfway to his forehead before he shoved back a step.

"Hey!" the gambler snapped, angrily wiping his cheek off with his palm. Coach's expression was impassive, one brow just dubiously lifting up, and Ellis couldn't fight a small grin even as he bit at his tongue to stifle it. "What the hell's up with the touchy-feely?"
"You got a fever, my man." Coach clarified, sighing wearily. "Bad one. Burnin' up like I ain't seen since my daughter got Lyme disease."

"I'm f-" Nick started, about two seconds before both Rochelle and Ellis suddenly advanced on him. She already had her hand up, prepped to feel at his face with a concerned look all over her expression, and Ellis looked primed to do the same.

The gambler immediately retreated a good few feet, defensively lifting up his good arm to keep them at bay. "I don't need any more sweaty hands on my face, goddamnit! I'm fine!"

Ellis stopped mid-step, but Rochelle wasn't so easily swayed. She gave a sigh and snapped a hand onto her hip, arching a brow up and lowering her voice. "Do you want me to get serious about this, Nick? You get back here before I beat your white-boy ass."

Nick thought about that for a moment.

"... Look, it's just a fever, alright?" he breathed out, agitated. The resistance faded from his posture, but the frustration didn't. Nick lifted a hand to rub the heel of his hand against his temple, blood smearing on his skin in a pale patch. "I'll take some of the antibiotics you guys got, get some rest, whatever. It's not the end of the damn world."

He couldn't resist the sarcasm.

Releasing a tired sigh, Rochelle lowered her shoulders, half-closing her eyes. She looked exhausted suddenly, pinching at the bridge of her nose with slender knuckles. "Your shoulder's probably infected... damnit. Do we have enough bandages left to -?"

"No." Nick immediately negated. "We're not using any on me when we've got a kid with his arm lopped off."

"Turnin' a new selfless leaf, Nick?" Coach questioned with a bit of a chuckle, one that Nick sardonically returned in a 'ha-ha.' Crossing her arms tightly, pressing a palm over a wet cut down her forearm to staunch the trickled bleeding, Rochelle shook her head at the both of them. Lifting her chin, she met gazes with Ellis, cocking a brow.

"Can you take a look at his shoulder, sweetheart?" Ellis nodded immediately, although Nick took on a bit of a scowl. "Just try not to ruin the bandages so you can re-wrap it, but get him cleaned up a little. Whatever we can do, we should."

Reaching up to scratch nails against his jawline, Nick muttered in slight agitation, "I said I was fine.." However, he didn't seem inclined to argue much further, his resignation highlighted by the fact he reluctantly started to undo the top couple buttons of his dress shirt.

Ellis obediently moved to Nick's side, keeping his eyes down rather than look as Nick slumped his shirt down to bare his bandaged shoulder. A faint smile traced at Ellis' lips quietly. He was happy to take care of the gambler, but even more than that, he was happy to have the group back at some kind of peace.

Rochelle and Coach resumed the task of trying to clear the bodies from the doorway, and though her injured forearm crippled her slightly, she powered through. They made good progress - but whether they managed to clean up the remnants of the horde or not, the pawnshop was hardly ideal as a place to hole up.

Then again, Christophe surviving a move was even less likely than him surviving the night. The Spaniard was trembling and sweaty from the physical trauma, hardly settled even now that they'd
stopped touching him.

*Kinda think it'd've been better if you'd just died, kid.*

But Nick wouldn't say that out loud.
Despite their best attempts to clear the corpses from the pawn shop, it was just as unpleasant as it had been before. The harsh aroma of seared skin, gunpowder, and blood burned at Nick's eyes and clung to his throat in a gritty mix. Growling, the gambler rubbed at his eyes with his free hand, his other hanging limp at his side.

Between the stench and the pain of his shoulder, Nick was fast losing the will to live.

"Jesus Christ, kid."

Hissing quietly between clenched teeth, Nick slitted eyes to glare across the room as the Georgian chided him in return. "Quit squirmin', man..." Ellis' hands were warm and careful against his skin, but the touches were anything but pleasant. “Shit, it sure don't look happy.” he chuffed with a sigh, leaning in a little.

Nick had hopped up on the edge of a table near the wall so he could slump forward and moodily surrender to the attentions, and Ellis hovered beside him, shifting from heel to heel tiredly. He tried to be as gentle as he could, using a handful of fabric from what remained of Nick's suit jacket to swab blood and sweat away from the wound, but the skin was so inflamed every touch made Nick tense.

Plus, Ellis had dampened it with some alcohol, and it *stung* like hell.

“I know how it feels.” the older man muttered.

Licking his cracking lower lip quickly, Ellis reached up his other hand to dig fingers into his curls, scratching messily at his scalp. His eyes lifted, matching Nick's clouded greens. “We gotta get'cha cleaned up, 'fore you get worse. Thing is, I don't even know if we got any water left...”

“We don't got more than a bottle.” Coach interrupted from the doorway before the thought could go any further. He gazed out into the street, dark eyes squinted, body uncomfortably stiff as he stewed in sweat- and blood-stained clothing. He held his shotgun, on alert. “Bathroom in the back ain't workin’."

Nick gave an absolutely miserable sigh, frustration sending his hand shooting up to scratch at his browline. “Goddamnit.” escaped him in a small growl. He could feel the despondence of the situation clawing at his composure. No water, bare medical supplies, not even the security of a door. “Could this fucking day get worse?”

His glare found Rochelle as she walked past him, gripping a sofa cushion underneath either arm. She looked exhausted, though not so much so that she couldn't spare a moment to mutter, "Yes." before continuing forward. He watched her kneel down beside Chris, wearily setting the cushions down at either side of her.

The woman set to trying to arrange the two sofa cushions in a makeshift bed - her displeasure with her own work showing clear on her face - and then trying to get Chris laid down on it. The Spaniard was dead weight in her hands as she rolled him onto the cushions and off the hardwood floor, and she had to go slow and careful to avoid letting him slip.

Any other day Coach would have been at her side to help, both for Rochelle's sake and Chris', but a strained, quiet giggling had started to echo in the street. He stood in the doorway instead, shotgun ready for the hobbled creature that seemed intent on taunting them. Its laughter wheezed at the
edge of perception, fading in and out as gasps that might not even have been real at all.

The scowl on Coach's face hinted at his very, very frayed nerves. "Thang's drivin' me nuts." he muttered under his breath, scanning the streets without any luck. A slight sigh drove his chin to the side, glancing over his shoulder toward Nick. "Least you still got all your limbs, boy. Be grateful."

The death glare that Nick sent him was enough to scald. The big man would have continued, only to stall into silence when the Jockey squealed a little sob as if in answer. It was so close, so excited, that Coach jumped slightly, prepared to hoist his shotgun up and shoot.

It stayed hidden.

Rochelle sighed, leaning back on her heels quietly to examine Chris somberly. He slumped limply on his back, upper body supported by one lounge cushion and the rest of him curled on the other. The rudimentary bed didn't seem comfortable, not that the unconscious survivor could complain.

His expression was devoid of emotion and his pallor was a sickly green. His eyelids flickered rapidly back and forth, rolling fitfully in their sockets, and tiny gasps escaped pallid lips with irregular rhythm. When she reached out to brush a knuckle over the sweaty plane of his brow, he flinched.

"We're not going to make it without supplies." she murmured, almost mournfully, slumping down so she could rub her temples harshly with fingertips. "He won't last the night without water."

"Gotta agree." came rather bluntly from Coach.

Reluctantly, Ellis pulled back, glancing up at Nick's face with a morosely serious look in his eyes. The passing days had left his jawline dusted with gold-brown hairs; it was nothing that went very far past peach-fuzz, but it was enough to put an odd scruffiness on generally sweet features.

A sort of clumsy mess that wasn't, Nick begrudgingly noted as he returned the glance, all that unattractive.

"Well, shit. Wish we could do more, Nick. 'M sorry." he mumbled, eyes genuinely apologetic even as Nick shrugged the words off with his good shoulder. Ellis set the small handful of Nick's suit-turned-bandage-material down on the table, sighing. "You should really take some meds, though, man."

"Whatever. If there's extra, maybe." Nick glanced down at his injured shoulder, examining the bared, inflamed skin. It throbbed in uncomfortable pulses along the slitted wound, making his jaw tense and putting a kind of huff to his sigh. "If we don't have water, we're fucked, period. Let alone food. We're all thirsty and hungry right now - and like Ro' said. Our patient needs fluids."

"Ain't right, us goin' on barely a meal a day." Coach muttered from the doorway. "Doin' too much runnin' an' stressin' to be eatin' this little - and bad. Biggest meal we had was back at the Burgertank. Lucky we ain't getting sick, this rate."

A weak sigh pulled Ellis' lips downward, licking quickly at them, his tongue flattening over the cracked shape of the lower one. "Can't argue with yuh, Coach. But..."

Rochelle turned as she stood up, surreptitiously nudging a palm against the edge of her left eye in a gesture that betrayed emotion she was fighting to bury. "But, last time we split up to hunt supplies, all this happened." she pointed out firmly, lifting her head to meet Nick's gaze, expression stoic. "I don't want to do that again."
"So what are you saying?" Nick retorted flatly, sarcasm thick in his voice. He adjusted his posture on the edge of the table, reaching up a hand to start flattening his bandages back into place. When he struggled to manage it one-handed, Ellis was at his side in an instant, quietly taking the job over. "We leave the kid, hope the zombies don't find him while we're gone?"

Rochelle frowned tightly, letting her arms cross and her head turn slightly to glance toward the crumpled youth. "You know we couldn't take that risk."

"Sure. Unfortunately.." Nick sucked in a slight breath as Ellis' hand palmed the bandages against his wound, but he shook off any apology the Georgian offered. ". when you turn down an option, you kinda have to come up with a new one. It's this stupid thing called 'decision-making.' Sucks, right?"

Rochelle was shaken - not so much by Nick's jibes as the truth behind them. They had to make a decision, and there was very little time and very little room for error.

"One way or another, we need supplies." Nick stated flatly, setting a hand on his knee. "If -"

The low baritone of Coach's voice interrupted, simply, "I'll stay. You three go out."

Immediately, arguments exploded in the air. Rochelle burst out with "We can't leave you here alone! What if something happens?" and Ellis leapt suddenly to a "No, Coach, I should! I ain't gonna be much help, anyway..", only to have Nick snap at him with a harsh, "Don't be stupid. No one is -"

Coach quietly raised his hands up in a hushing motion, and all three fell silent, obedient but restless.

"I know y'all don't like it, an' I appreciate that. Fact is, it's the only way. Can't leave Chris all by himself - so someone's gotta stay. My knee ain't actin' right, think I bummed it out runnin' from that Witch. I'd slow y'all down. Need Ro' to go, she's the least hurt. But she can't go alone - and if somethin' happens to one of y'all, she ain't gonna be able to get you back by herself. Only way it works out."

Ellis fell to a full-lipped frown, grasping his hands into fists as he finished with Nick's shoulder. He mirrored the discontent on Rochelle's face, glancing quickly between her and Nick, worriedly. "Whut if another horde shows up? Took Ro' and me to hold the door."

Coach shook his head, shortly. "Only got a horde 'cause Chris was screamin'. He's out cold."

"What happens if you get jumped by something?" Nick muttered, closing his eyes as he gently pulled his shirt back into place, fingers weak, re-buttoning his dress shirt with slow determination. "If a Hunter or a Charger or something gets in here, you're dead meat."

"Ain't no different from y'all goin' out and riskin' the same thing." Coach wasn't budging. His face was stoic in calm decision, patiently shaking his head in a slow bobbing motion. He'd entertain the argument as long as was needed - he'd already made his choice.

Rochelle gave a fierce sigh, letting her chin fall and lifting her hands to rub over her face. "God, I hate it when you're right." she groaned softly, her shoulders shaking softly with a mix of frustration and exhaustion. The eldest cracked a grin.

"I'll be a'ight, baby girl. Ain't no wimp-ass zombie gettin' one up on Coach."

The Jockey outside cackled fiercely, voice whined with a reedy stutter and echoed about the street
til it was nigh-on impossible to pin down. Coach scowled over his shoulder, glaring out into the late afternoon with a real anger as he hissed out in frustration, "'Specially not one of them leapin'-on-yo'-back-bitches!"

Ellis couldn't not laugh, stifling his mouth against an open palm as his shoulders hunched with his muffled chuckling.

Sighing, Nick eyed the Georgian for a beat before shifting his gaze over toward Rochelle. Their gazes met with a quiet discontent passed between them. Neither of them could quite find the same humor, nor relax quite like Ellis did. Leaving Coach to fend for himself was an incredibly unpleasant concept.

Of course, lately - *everything* had become unpleasant.
"Holy fuck, it's hot." he groused flatly, leading the foursome out onto the sidewalk. He could still feel chalky medication at the back of his tongue, unable to drink anything to rid himself of the aftertaste. They only had one bottle left, and that was reserved for Coach and Chris while they were gone.

The team wasn't going to leave him alone unless he took some antibiotics, so he'd relented. He could already feel his stomach complaining.

"All the rain last night's gone straight to hu-mi-di-ty," Ellis unhelpfully explained, wiping a wrist at his sweaty forehead. He darted a glance along the street, scanning for danger - but there were only a few infected on the street, too far away to take notice of them quite yet. "This sun's gonna cook us faster'n greased-up bacon."

Coach gave a quiet, stifled groan at the poorly chosen metaphor, considering the air still stunk like Chris' burning flesh. Ellis only had a few seconds to look chagrined before Nick turned around and offered his hand out to the frowning ex-football player. Coach blinked, surprised - but matched the gesture.

"We're not gonna be long."

Nick and Coach clasped hands harshly between them, faint awkwardness passed between the two men as their grips tightened. The eldest gave a small grin, nodding his head slowly, speaking lowly back. "Sayin' you'll miss me, Nick?"

The gambler smirked. "Desperately."

Coach chuckled quietly, lifting his other hand to gently clap Nick on his uninjured shoulder. The gesture still made Nick wince, but he bit his tongue rather than complain, taking it with a stiff jaw. "Good man. You keep 'em safe fo' me, Nick."

The Jockey still hiding from sight gave a wheezed, faint giggle, mockingly. They ignored it.

"No promises. They're one big accident waiting to happen." Nick shot back, pulling his hand out from the handshake they'd started. He wiped his palm on the side of his shirt, a gesture Coach likely would've taken more offense to had their hands not been caked with sweat and bodily fluids no one wanted to think about.

Nick backed away, taking a watchful stance at the edge of the road, as Ellis and Rochelle crowded up to the ex-football player. They both looked exhausted with emotion, and Coach had to take a stumbled half-step back as he was swept up in a clumsy and rushed hug from the two, one pushed under each arm.

They clung to him like clustered children, faces ducked down rather than admit the emotion struggling over their faces. The embrace was sweaty and unpleasant - and none of them cared. Rochelle's voice was strained when she muttered, "I really don't like this."

A frown dropped the edges of his mouth, and he sighed, closing his eyes as he settled a hand on
their backs. "Y'all shouldn't worry 'bout me." Coach rumbled gently down at them, a kind of paternal tolerance slowing his tone. "We got more important shit on our plate."

Though reluctant, Ellis was the first to pull away. He shuffled back a few steps and pushed his hands into the pockets of his coveralls, turning his chin to the side, embarrassed. He had their backpack strapped to his shoulders, emptied of what medical supplies they had left in case Chris needed any care. "Just wish it didn't have tuh be like this. If I hadn't gotten muhself hurt so bad..."

"Ain't yo' fault." Coach asserted, quietly. Ellis didn't look convinced, dropping his chin as the cackling zombie seemed to encourage his self-doubt with a giggle.

He frowned harder.

"We'll be back before you can say 'violently eviscerated by a horde of zombies."

"With supplies in tow, hopefully. If we don't find some water, at least, we may as well get offed. Be quicker."

Rochelle, still hugging around Coach's broad midsection, shook her head sharply and lifted her chin to glance up at him. "We'll find something, we'll make it work. I know we will. I just want you safe while we're gone."

He gently set his other hand against her cheek, pawed comfortingly against the slope of her jaw. "This place ain't bad. Strong walls, no back door... I'll be a'ight. Anythin' happens, I'll get Chris in the bathroom and hole up in the doorway. Y'all ain't got nothin' to worry 'bout."

Judging by the tremble to her jaw, she nearly teared up - but held it back at the last second, pushing up to plant a kiss on his cheek. "We have a lot to worry about." she corrected in a mutter, dropping her gaze to the ground as she pulled away.

Coach smiled. He sighed in a weary exhale - but smiled, real and thick.

Dark brown eyes lifted to gaze between his teammates, and the heavyset man lifted up a hand to wave them off in a short motion. His voice was gruff with stoic impassivity, visibly holding his spine straight and his face blank. "Y'all best get movin'. Daylight don't last forever."

Flustered, Rochelle nodded, pulling her rifle into her hands and resting the stock onto her hip. "If we don't leave now, I'll lose my nerve." she mumbled, shrugging her shoulder in a rolling motion. Coach chuckled quietly, backing up to rest against the threshold of the door, watching them as they started to leave.

Ellis slipped up beside Rochelle, nudging his chin up in a reassuring gesture. He smiled, even when she couldn't quite return it. They both turned at the hip to wave goodbye, calling back their farewells in forcedly hushed tones.

"Bye, Coach!"

"Be careful!"

Nick tightened his grip on his rifle, refusing to look back. Refusing to think, lest his mind travel unpleasant roads... like stress. Or worry. Or - worst of all - fear. Try as he might to shake off a feeling of tension, his hands were shaking and he knew it.

The Jockey laughed at him, shrieking out a cackle that sounded so close, Nick jumped out of his skin. He jerked his gun up, swivelng at the waist to follow the noise as it echoed around him, but the creature didn't appear.
"Fucking creep." he growled. *I need a drink.*

Mumbling sadly, Ellis sounded near-heartbroken as he gazed over his shoulder long after they'd turned a corner and lost sight of the pawnshop. "I hope he's gonna be okay." Quiet and quick, the Georgian reached out with his other hand. He had a thick black permanent marker they'd found behind the pawnshop counter gripped in his fingers.

In a swift series of flicks, he drew out a black arrow pointing behind them on the side of a building. They weren't going to risk getting lost this time, not with so much at stake.

"There's nothing we can do." Nick asserted, flatly, knowing Ellis was probably falling into an even deeper frown behind him. "Just keep focused."

He stayed several paces ahead of Ellis and Ro', silently raising his gun when he spotted a zombie hunched over against a wall. He took a breath, steadying his weakened aim before he fired. The bullet missed its skull - but hit the base of its neck, and it went down just as hard.

The gunshot attracted the attention of several infected huddled along the street, bolting up to their feet and shrieking as they wheeled around to sprint toward the survivors. "Stay close!" Rochelle shouted, side-stepping to Nick's side as she cocked her head to rest her cheek onto the stock of her gun and set her gaze into the scope.

Ellis swiveled into place at her back - but it took effort not to leave space for Coach in the formation. Suddenly, the three felt strangely small.

Their movements had become second nature, their bodies trained to trust in each other's presence - a bond built of fear and isolation as much as respect and affection. There was a singularity in how they moved, an immense unity strengthened by necessity and manifesting itself in subtle ways.

Like how their footsteps timed effortlessly, from Ellis' limping gait to Rochelle's light side-step to Nick's hollow swagger. Or how they'd trade coordinated shots, never caught with everyone reloading at once. Or how even the quietest commands and warnings were understood, a monosyllabic language that saved precious breath, time, and focus.

Or how they felt Coach's absence weighing on their nerves like lead.

The moment they started to fire, downing the infected before they could reach them, the numbers multiplied. Like a sleeping flock of crows roused from a tree, infected came shrieking out of the woodwork, enraged by the disturbance. They crawled out from under cars, broke through the windows and doors of streetside condos, and bolted out of alleyways, covered in blood and grime.

An infected sprinted in from an alley, moving fast and low, black spittle trailing from its mouth in rage. It moved in silence, like a wolf on the hunt, and it was that silence that let it slip in under Nick's radar.

He was too busy getting a bead on another infected, not noticing as it snuck up on his right. Rochelle only needed to ghost a soft "Nick -" to catch his focus, and his rifle was turned and firing in an instant.

Only, he missed.

"Fuck!" Nick snarled, shooting a second time. That one struck home, knocking the infected straight off its feet, though Rochelle found herself frowning. Nick was an incredible shot, compared to the rest of them. Coach had barely any experience before the apocalypse; Ellis was good, but his shotgun couldn't get near Nick's accuracy; Rochelle would have been mostly lost without the scope
on her rifle.

Seeing him so unsteady was strange. She knew why, but it didn't make her any less concerned.

He was even more stubborn than Ellis was. "You okay, Nick?" she questioned, lifting her rifle quickly to re-focus her attention on the infected that remained. She didn't get a response, only a short growl that seemed to chastise her for even asking. "... Just be careful."

She downed two zombies in one shot, the bullet piercing straight through one and catching them both in the torso. While their snarls and struggles as they collapsed to the ground suggested they hadn't been direct strikes to the heart, they died fast enough to suggest they had definitely hit something vital.

It was a little discomfiting to think about them having anything vital. Rochelle would have preferred shooting zombified corpses, not live - infected or not - people.

A sharp squeal from overhead put prickles up their spines, and Ellis shouted, "Loogie dude!" Immediately, all three bolted, a brisk sprint sending them running down the road in an organized line. Rochelle pivoted as she ran, hunting the area around them for the neon green spittle that would betray the acidic infected's presence.

She spotted it on a rooftop a little too late, and it threw back its head with a squealing wail to shoot a glistening, fleshy orb from the melted cavern that had once been a mouth. The effort seemed to shock it, gasping for air as blood and acid streaked down its chin, and Rochelle was able to snipe it in the stomach before it could recover.

It didn't die, but the hole that exploded into its gut sent bubbling acid bleeding down its skin. Judging by the screaming and squealing that echoed out, it wasn't immune to its own goo. It disappeared behind the slope of the roof, still shrieking,

The survivors were forced to scatter, leaping out of harm's way as the acid bubble hit the ground and exploded, sending hissing green liquid splattering out in a wide puddle. Rochelle literally leapt, throwing herself to the sidewalk to avoid the splash after having waited just a little too long getting the shot off. She hit the ground with her palms, rolling quickly onto her side rather than risk injuring the bones in her wrists.

Three infected had still been alive before the Spitter had chased them away, and they eagerly bolted forward to take advantage of the scattered team. Rochelle tried to scramble to get her gun back into her hands and take them out - only they never made it.

Instantly, the acid started to soak into their skin. They were all barefoot or close to it, so the bottoms of their feet and their toes melted like heated butter, sending them off-balance as they gave way underneath their weight.

It was something between pathetic and horrifying to watch them trip and knock each other over, ending up on the ground and shrieking, more in rage than pain. Anywhere the acid touched them, it sizzled and crackled, eating away at sickly flesh... and the longer they were in it, the harsher it burned.

Nick could feel his calf twinging, painfully, memory bringing back the agony.

"Holy shit." Ellis uttered, frozen in place. There was a kind of fascination on his face, but his nostrils flared in disgust, watching one zombie claw a hand up at him, snarling - her fingers showing muscle underneath blotches of sizzling flesh. "They ain't -? I didn't think they'd get hurt by
Nick swiftly crossed the distance between him and Rochelle, reaching down to pull her up to her feet with his good arm. It didn't startle her as much as it usually did, and she gratefully grasped his arm, catching her balance as they detached. "I guess they do." she muttered, warily sideglancing the infected.

The acid sizzled out, calming, but the damage had been done. They clawed at each other with melted fingers, trapped in a pile and crippled into stiff rolls, unable to get up with their muscles burned beyond function. Their eyes glowed bleary yellow, unwavering in their focus on the survivors, like they still believed they could get at them.

"That shit does a lot of damage." Nick growled quietly, lifting his hand to flick his index and middle finger in a near-militaristic gesture, ordering them forward. "Let's not join 'em."

He started to stalk forward - only to sense, instantly, that he wasn't being followed. Whipping sharply around, eyes narrowing, he found both Ellis and Rochelle stuck in awkward stares on the downed and snarling infected. Ellis mumbled, "Feel kinda bad...", looking slightly lost as he toed his boot into the asphalt. "Leavin' 'em like this..

*Oh for fuck's -* A heavy sigh touched Nick's breath, lifting up his gun in one tired motion. *It's like herding fucking cats.*

Ellis jumped out of his skin at the first shot, nearly stumbling over himself to get back as one of the zombie's heads exploded. "Je-" Nick, however, didn't so much as pause. A second - and then third shot ended the struggles of the mostly-melted infected, a mix of blood and now-inert goo covering their bodies.

The silence afterwards was stark and thick, Nick quietly lowering his gun.

Rochelle shot him a look in horror. Ellis swiveled his head to blink at Nick, more surprised than upset. Nick stared them down, completely unwavering and fiercely expectant. He reached into his slacks pocket, pulling out ammo and reloading his rifle.

"Congratulations, we wasted bullets. Can we go now?"

Shamed, Ellis nodded, reaching out to pat Rochelle's elbow and encourage her forward. She slipped him a glance but nodded, moving to follow after the gambler with Ellis close at her heels. "Uh.. yeah. Sorry, man, just sorta hard tuh watch sometimes."

As much as she didn't want to push Nick any further, that didn't stop Rochelle from tipping her head and murmuring to Ellis. "I'm shocked they aren't immune to their own acid... I mean, it's like our own spit burning us - it doesn't make any sense..."

Fortunately, other than a short roll of his eyes, Nick didn't argue. They were following him, and that's all he cared about.

"Shucks, I dunno, Ro'." Ellis shook his head, shrugging his shoulders in the same motion. "Them Boomer things? They affect zombies, too. Nick'n'me, we ran intuh one while we was lookin' fer you guys. Tried tuh get us, but we jumped outta the way fast enough - 'n'the zombies behind us, they got caught in the blast." Rochelle looked shocked, glancing over his face intently. "Next thing we know, they're tearin' each other apart. Didn't even spare a look at us."

"Really?" she hummed, unable to fight the thoughtful frown encroaching on her face. "That's..."
"Weird, h'uh?" Ellis blithely chuckled a little, cocking his head to one side. "Man, ain't seen nothin' like it. They just went nuts. Kinda reminds me'uh this one time when Keith was tryin' tuh trap raccoons, 'cause he was gonna start up this zoo in his mama's backyard'n'she told him he weren't allowed tuh catch cats or nothin'... well, he got this one caught in a trashcan, only he didn't have no real plan fer gettin' it out, so like the instant he opened it up that thing was on his face, clawin' and bitin' him all tuh hell. You ain't heard nothin' 'til you hear Keith screamin' over a pissed-off raccoon. Man, he had clawmarks over like ninety-five per-

Nick halted mid-step, and Ellis almost reflexively snapped his mouth shut, expecting Nick to whirl on him and demand he quiet.

He didn't.

"Do you hear that?" Nick questioned, hissing through clenched teeth, his head slowly turning from one side to the other, green eyes lowly scanning the street. Ellis and Rochelle blinked, mimicking him for a quiet moment. There was silence, broken only by their own heavy breathing.

Nervously, Rochelle shook her head. When Ellis joined in, Nick lifted his rifle warily and spat out a sharp, "Exactly."

The Jockey had fallen silent.
Slamming the butt of her rifle into the glass, Rochelle not-so-gingerly broke in the window before her, knocking out the rapidly falling shards with a few more swings. She stepped back to avoid the spray of glass, wincing slightly at the noise.

Nick sighed behind her, a hand fisted on his hip in an annoyed gesture as he watched her lean in, peering into the innards of the store they'd found. "I was going to do that." he muttered defensively.

Rochelle bit back a laugh, shaking her head. "Sure. You totally weren't going to waste time trying to pick the lock." She reached to grab the flashlight from its place at her hip, unhooking it from her jeans' beltloop, and raised it up to direct it into the store. It flickered weakly as it reached the end of its battery life, but the glow was enough to make out the cluttered insides of a gift shop.

She felt a tug of disappointment, sighing as her gaze roved shelves of gaudy snowglobes, keychains, shotglasses, clothes, and assorted objects.

"Nothing. Just stupid souvenirs. Third one we've found." She frowned, clicking off her flashlight and backing away with a tired slump. Ellis sighed with her, stepping up to the wall to etch out another arrow to direct them backwards. The plastic paneling was, fortunately, easy to write on, and the writing gleamed black under the bright sun, beckoning.

"Wonder if they got Jimmy Gibbs Jr. shirts." he chirped, a little wistfully.

"Who - … Actually, nevermind." Nick, though initially deadpanned, perked up slightly and leaned in with a cocked brow. "Might have smokes." he hummed in an introspective way that didn't even seem directed at the other two.

Rochelle rolled her eyes hard, immediately turning around and stalking past him. She snagged a hand on his dress shirt sleeve as she passed to drag him with her, chastisingly - accidentally choosing his bad arm, not that she felt guilty for it.

"Ow! Fuck!" he hissed, submitting to the pull just to take pressure off his injured shoulder. He complained sharply in a growl, pushing her grip away with his other hand even as Ellis broke into a stifled laugh. "Cheap shot."

"You're the one hurrying us along, Nick. We don't have time for cigarettes," Rochelle shook her head, smiling a little as Nick's jaw stiffened, clearly offended by the chiding. He jerked his chin up and lengthened his stride to regain his position at the front, swiftly checking his gun's ammo. He turned his back to them, defensively shaking his head.

"Can't even have one fuckin' thing." he groused.

Ellis scuttled after him, hopping to catch up, and nudged his arm with his elbow a bit playfully. He had a wide grin on his face that didn't exactly scream pity, even as he tried to offer up a sympathetic, "Aw, Nick. It'll be okay. If I see any, I'll grab 'em fer you!"

Nick glared sideways, exhaling sharply. "Find me some goddamn duct-tape first."

Obliviously, Ellis cocked his head, confused when Rochelle started laughing. He looked between the two, hoping for some kind of explanation. When neither gave one, he just kind of puffed and adjusted his cap on his head, dropping the bill over his eyes in embarrassment.
Moving along in a tight line, the three survivors kept to the sidewalk, quiet and swift. As much as the Jockey's disappearance unnerved them, it was also a slight relief. Their guard didn't necessarily drop, but having the giggling creature lose their trail was some burden off their shoulders - a reason to relax just a little.

As haunting as the thing was, at least it made its presence known, so they knew when it was gone. Its absence let them focus on the real problem: their search was proving fruitless.

"Fucking piece of shit town - where's the fucking tourist mall? Something?"

Nick's tight-lipped focus had rapidly started to falter. Be it his fever loosening his composure, or dehydration mixed with over-exertion, he'd gained a fractured dart to green eyes, growing more and more frustrated with every useless building they passed by. Ellis and Rochelle both noticed it, though neither said a word.

"We're stuck in housing I think." Rochelle noted, lifting her chin to scan their surroundings with a growing frown. "Beach houses and apartments and things like that. Maybe if we cross over, find a bigger street, we can find a store."

Lifting her free hand, she pointed across the road, gesturing at the mouth of a side street between two yarded rental houses. Nick nodded thinly, leading with his gun as they moved across the asphalt.

Tybee was a shell of something that had once teemed with life. A ghost town. It was cruel mockery that left the infected - shells in their own right - wandering the streets, like twisted shadows. Nick was left with an unpleasant thought stewing in his gut: weren't they just shadows, too? Struggling to survive with no real idea of what they were surviving for?

Moving forward only because the alternative was laying down and dying?

He needed a drink - something hard.

"Don't think any'uh these houses might have somethin'?" Ellis questioned in a lowered voice, only falling behind temporarily to mark their path. "I mean, it'd take awhile tuh search 'em all, but..."

Ellis fell silent quickly when Nick shook his head, shooting the Georgian down off-hand. "Even if they had anything - which I'd be surprised, piece of shit tourist town - the power's out. The fridges would be dead and whatever was in 'em rotten. That, and we need non-perishables, and the only place we're getting those is a store. You don't stock beachhouses with canned food."

"I don't want to spend all that time, anyway.. We need to get back to Coach." Rochelle mumbled, raising her rifle to take aim at an infected hunched over at the end of the crossroad. It was in the throes of illness, retching against cupped hands in a very humanlike shudder of pain, when she fired a round into its back.

It went down in silence, dead on impact, and Rochelle lowered her gun as it did.

The faint sound of a grunted moan was the only warning before a hulking Charger took a weak step out into the street, body slumped with the immense weight of its bloated side. It needed barely a second to orient its piggish, sunken eyes on the clustered threesome - and then it was in motion.

The thundering Charger barreled down the road, the distance between them disappearing almost faster than they had time to react. Instinct kicked in, and Nick reached out, shoving Rochelle out of the way with his forearm. He swung his rifle up and fired several shots in fast succession.
One of them struck the Charger's rock-hard shoulder with little more than a dent left behind, but the other grazed its skull and the last buried straight in its neck. The infected roared like an enraged animal, its charge suddenly going askew as its focus seemed blurred by the injuries.

Ellis had barely enough to hiss "Oh shi-!" before the Charger slammed straight into a car parked next to the sidewalk.

Vision immediately turning to stars, Nick clutched at his forehead as the car alarm squealed to life, heightened as the Charger crumpled the roof underneath its crashing weight. He barely registered Rochelle running back up to him, grabbing at his arm urgently.

She said something, but fuck if Nick could hear her over the alarm. He saw the yellow blur of Ellis' shirt, and - blinking fast to clear his vision - lifted his head to see Ellis bolt up toward the car. Although Nick first thought Ellis was going to disarm the car alarm like he'd done before, the Georgian surprised him.

One shotgun blast to the Charger's head ended its life before it could regain its balance, and another shot through the hood of the car abruptly silenced the shrieking alarm. Only the echoes of the ear-splitting noise and the sound of shattering glass lingered on the air.

That was, until the oncoming horde grew audible around them.

"We gotta get inside or somethin'!" Ellis huffed as he galloped back toward them, spinning his head to try and pinpoint where the infected would start to pour from. "They're gonna surround us out here!"

Disinclined to argue, Nick pointed to the nearest doorway from where they stood - a one-car garage, the silvery door pulled down to the concrete. Rochelle was the first one to it, and she dropped down to one knee, grabbing hold of the metal handles and hauling it up with a loud rattle. The three of them scrambled underneath the door the moment there was enough room.

As she rolled underneath the thick metal, Rochelle yanked her flashlight from her belt, quickly scanning the garage's depths. Shadows spasmed across her vision, figures and shapes sending her heart rate through the roof, but the garage proved empty of infected. A portly grey sedan sat quietly in the center of the room, abandoned.

Ellis started moving to slam the garage door shut behind them - and then stopped.

Before Nick could react, Ellis darted to his side, pawing a hand into the pocket at the breast of his dress shirt. He'd forgotten he'd tucked the matches away there until Ellis pried them free, flashing Nick an inspired look.

Nick did not like it.

Backing away, the Georgian lifted up his hand. "Ro'! Gimme yer rifle!" Rochelle seemed startled, but shrugged her rifle off her shoulder and tossed it to him. Ellis caught it one-handed, going down to his knees and ducking his torso underneath the garage door.

Pushing the stock against his shoulder, he tipped his head to peer through the scope. The car that the Charger had originally set off, crushed and ruined, sat just down the road. Holding his breath, he took aim several inches underneath the gas cap. The Georgian fired, wincing at the recoil as he peppered a few shots onto the metal.

Clear, shiny gasoline sputtered from the holes, spilling out - slow at first, then faster. Ellis smoothly drew a match from the book, lighting it with a swipe, and nudged further out into the
street so he could toss the match toward the gasoline.

It caught fire in a flash, and as more spilled out from the car, the fire intensified. Burning gas spread in a thin layer over the road, catching the litter and refuse scattered on the ground and gaining momentum.

He saw the first of the horde come scrambling out onto the street a few seconds before Nick grabbed his shirt and yanked him back into the garage. Rochelle slammed the garage door shut with a foot braced against the handle, plunging them into darkness but for the beam of light from her flashlight.

Ellis blinked, starting to get up off the concrete floor - only to have Nick practically drag him up to his feet, grabbing his shirtfront in a fisted hand and snarling at him. Ro's flashlight darted into their faces, the dimmed glow making Ellis squint. "Are you fucking insane? Do you want to burn the fucking town down?!

"Hey, hey!" Ellis eased, lifting his free hand to grab at Nick's forearm. He was more startled than anything else, pushing the gambler's grip loose. "Ain't nothin' burnin' down! I was just tryin' tuh stop the zombies!

"Yeah, and us!" Nick let go, growling sharply as he turned away, scratching at his forehead with an angry series of gestures. He shook his head swiftly, shoulders stiff. "Jesus, you're the most reckless son of a bitch."

Catching his footing after Nick released him, Ellis couldn't help but mutter a small "Jeez.", pawing his shirt flat on his chest. He peered toward Rochelle, unable to see her face in the dark. He heard her sigh, sounding tired, but he didn't have time to say anything before a body slammed against the garage door, startling them all.

The infected screamed, beating its hands against the metallic plating. The smell of burning skin sunk into the garage, nose-wrinklingly pungent, heightening as several more crashed into the garage, beating on it for a few seconds before seeming to collapse against it. "See?" Ellis pointed out, voice lightening as he passed Rochelle's rifle to her. "It's all good."

"Let's not stick around, either way." Rochelle pushed the rifle back onto her shoulder, gesturing at the car. "Do you guys think this thing's key is here?"

Ellis scratched at his head, curiously, bobbing his chin. He reached out with one hand to gesture for the flashlight, and Rochelle passed it over, following close behind him as he started to poke his way back into the garage. "Sure would make movin' Chris easier, and gettin' supplies back."

Nick turned to face the garage door, narrowing his eyes at the smoke creeping in through the edges where tiny shafts of light gleamed. It was faint, but there - and he could hear the crackle of fire and feel the heat as the infected outside burned.

"Yeah, well, you guys better figure it out quick." Nick muttered, lifting his rifle to rest the back against his shoulder, keeping the barrel pointed at the ceiling. He stayed where he was, uncomfortably still in the dark. "I say we get out before this house turns into a torch."

Ellis tossed up a soothing wave over his shoulder, using the flashlight to scan over the cluttered garage countertops, hunting for keys. He found a pocketknife in the process, curiously flicking it open and then closed before pushing it into his pocket. "You worry too much, Nick. Everything's too wet tuh spread much, after all that rain. It'll burn out the fuel'n'that'll be that."
Nick didn't bother to argue. He wasn't interested in literally playing with fire - even if the reality was, Ellis' decision had probably saved them a lot of pain. That was the unfortunate thing with the Georgian's recklessness; nine times out of ten, he was actually right.

"Just look for the damn keys."

Laughing slightly, Ellis shook his head, pushing a small toolbox to the side - and letting off a pleased "ah!" as he did. He scooped up the heavy set of keys lying on the table, bulging with chained trinkets and reward cards from a handful of stores and gas stations. He bounced it in his palm, shining the flashlight on the sedan. "Lookin' good."

"Awesome, sweetheart. Let's get this thing going." Rochelle patted his bicep, taking the keys from him in a swift motion and darting forward to the driver's side door. Ellis' small "'ey-!" clearly protested having them stolen, but he just doggedly followed after her, lighting the way with the flashlight in his hand.

Sighing slightly, Nick shook his head, eyeing his teammates' forms in the barely-illuminated darkness. As much as the prospect of another vehicle relieved him, celebration was the last thing on his mind. He slid his rifle's strap onto his shoulder, drawing his Magnum from his thigh holster.

"Hey, killer." he ordered, simply. The Georgian's head perked, and Ellis passed Rochelle the flashlight before loping the few steps to join Nick at the garage door. He nearly tripped over a half-broken cardboard box on the floor, but did this wobbled limp that kept him on his feet.

Ellis stopped before Nick with curious obedience.

"Yeah?"

Nick could only faintly see him, mostly shadowed in the darkness, though his eyes had grown a little used to the lack of light. He could see Ellis' smile, teeth gleaming, stupidly tickled. "Let's make sure your plan worked." Ellis' head immediately bobbed, pulling his shotgun up properly into his hands.

Turning back toward the garage door, Nick bent down tenderly, finding the handle. His rings clanked softly against the steel as he gripped it, letting his other hand smoothly draw his Magnum into an offensive aim toward the bottom of the door.

Perfectly in time with the tired growl of the sedan starting up under Rochelle's careful hands, Nick yanked the garage door open. It rattled on smooth tracks, slamming up into the roof as it coiled out of sight, and Nick and Ellis quickly turned to take opposite sides, scanning the road.

Fire still burned in puddles of gasoline here and there, and the heat struck Nick's face in a gust. The corpses just in front of the garage door smoldered, the smell enough to send his stomach rolling. The Charger-crushed car sat in a quiet inferno, fire licking at the chassis as it fed off the seats and carpeting inside. Somewhat to Nick's surprise, the fire hadn't spread much beyond that.

The horde was reduced to burnt bodies on the road, having run themselves straight through the fire and not lasted much longer after that. Zombies or no, they were hardly immune to flames.

"Well." Ellis started to say, pride clearly bleeding through his drawl as he turned toward Nick. "Sure looks like it worked out, huh?" He was grinning a little and Nick wheeled on him, perfectly ready to argue about risk versus reward when it came to lighting their surroundings on fire.

He would have, anyway, had a zombie not come sprinting from behind the Georgian, arms up and gloved hands clawing. Bright yellow covered it from head to toe, a hazmat suit swaddling its body.
The only signs that it had even come close to the fire was a small singe mark at its shoulder.

Nick reached out sharply, snaking his arm around Ellis' waist and yanking him to his side. Ellis jumped out of his skin at the unexpected contact, crashing into Nick's side as the gambler practically hugged him to his hip. Swinging his Magnum up, Nick fired off a shot, striking the infected directly in the center of its plastic facemask.

Gore splattered as it exploded within its own suit, and it collapsed rapidly on its own still-kicking legs, hitting the ground with a hissing whine as air escaped its previously air-tight suit.

Slowly lowering his still-smoking gun, Nick glared tightly at the fallen infected, his gaze latching onto the CEDA logo written in bold print over the back of the hazmat suit. "... Jesus." he uttered, quietly - forgetting for a moment that he was still holding Ellis tight to his side. Contact between them was starting to feel entirely too natural.

The Georgian reminded him with a tiny "Uh-", at which point Nick shoved him off unceremoniously.

"Are you guys okay?!!" Rochelle shouted out from the car, and Ellis quickly turned around, red in the face.

"Yeah, we're fine, Ro'!!" His voice only betrayed the slightest embarrassment, and he darted a small look toward Nick - who dodged it, pretending not to notice the discomfort. "There was just this zombie out here. He's in one'uh them… quarantine suit things. Guess it kept him from gettin' burnt up."

Nick took a small step toward the infected, reaching out with his shoe to nudge the thing with his toe. It didn't stir; just sounded a wavering whine as the contact pushed more air out of the broken seal around the creature's ruined neck. "Didn't stop him from getting sick. No wonder they all fuckin' died - if CEDA workers got infected, things must've been chaos."

Rubbing at his forehead, Ellis backed up slightly, waving to usher Rochelle on. "Go ahead'n'pull the car out, Ro'. We should get outta here. We're on a big road now - so long as we don't take no turns, we'll find our way back to the marker trail real easy-like."

The car door shut as Rochelle retreated back into it, and both men moved out of the way as she reversed the car out of the garage. It bounced as she rolled it over burnt corpses, a disgusting kind of squelch and snap sounding as bones broke and organs split underneath the weight of the car. Nick felt his nose wrinkle.

He sighed, approaching as the car halted half on the street. "Got gas?" he questioned, relieved when Rochelle nodded. Pulling open the passenger side door, Nick ducked inside, settling into the seat with a judging crinkle of his nose. The car was cluttered with old fast food bags and the smell of grease was thick and tacky. It would've made him ill, had it also not kind of made him hungry.

The gambler lifted his head, noticing instantly that Ellis wasn't immediately on his tail. He hadn't shut the door, so he craned his neck back out into the humid air, finding Ellis within a few seconds - lingering next to the dead CEDA worker.

"Kid, the fuck? Come get in the damn car."

But Ellis ignored him this time, bending down. He pawed at something on the CEDA worker's body, seeming strangely intent, and Nick raised his voice. He didn't like being ignored, let alone when the Georgian was holding them up from leaving. "Ellis!"
"Ellis, what are you doing?" Rochelle questioned, gentler than Nick. She put her forearm against the car's steering wheel, leaning in to get a better line of sight on their youngest teammate.

The Georgian straightened back up. He had something in his hand, and stared down curiously at it before turning around, raising it up. It was a huge plastic vial, marked all over with signs and labels, like an over-sized prescription tube. Only it was clear and filled with something putrid green, sloshing thickly against the jar's sides as it trembled in Ellis' grip.

"Um... Whut's this?"

Suddenly interested, Nick leaned out of the car. He gestured Ellis over, and the kid loped to close the distance between them, gently offering the tube out toward the older man. Although Nick didn't take it - no way was he putting his hands on it before he knew what it was - he did lean in, gazing over the tube skeptically.

"CEDA Sample 0643. Boomer excretion." he read, mechanically, the realization hitting him about two seconds later. "... It's fucking puke."

It was probably lucky Nick hadn't taken the jar, because more than likely, that knowledge would have had him violently throwing the thing away. As it was, he recoiled strongly, leaning away from the jar like it might burn him. "Are -?" Rochelle blurted, startled. "Are you serious?"

Ellis looked almost ready to start laughing, taking a step back and raising the jar to his face. He wiggled it curiously, examining the sloshing liquid with a wide-eyed look. "Boomer puke? They were puttin' puke in jars? Man, whut the hell! A jar is no place fer bodily functions! Just ask Keith! This one time -"

Nick waved his hands sharply, silencing Ellis before he could even begin. "No, no. Don't. Wherever that is going. Just... no."

A little chagrined, Ellis scuffed his boot against the concrete, gesturing with the jar exuberantly. It sloshed rather chunkily, and Nick very nearly flung himself across the car's inside to get away from its likely trajectory. It was only ego that kept him still. "... Well, I'm just sayin'. Them CEDA folks've gotta be nuts."

Rochelle was quiet when she stated, "Maybe they were trying to study it. You were talking about how it set the infected against each other, remember? Maybe CEDA was trying to weaponize it." There was a kind of seriousness to the way she said it, a grim nod touching her chin. "Something that attracts infected and makes them kill each other?"

Suddenly, Ellis looked fascinated.

"Damn, Ro'." Nick uttered, resting back into the carseat. His brows lifted, gaze narrowing as he moved it toward the dashboard, settling on a bobble-head hula girl glued onto the dash. "You're right. If you could use that shit against them... large-scale, it could be a real weapon. You'd have to collect it, though. You think they were trapping Boomers or some fucked-up shit?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Rochelle couldn't help but sigh. "I don't know. Sounds crazy to me, but you guys are the ones who saw them turn on each other. You'd know better."

Shaking his head, Nick pulled his legs back into the car, resting a hand on his knee. "It doesn't matter much anymore. Whatever they were doing, it didn't exactly stop them from falling apart. C'mon, Ellis, let's go." With that, he shut the car door, resting his forearm against the window.

The Georgian sidestepped back to the back door, opening it up and starting to clamber in - and
Nick didn't miss that he still had the jar in his hand. "Ellis." he growled, keeping a sharp eye on the youth through the sideview mirror. Ellis' face twitched into a frown, half in the car.

"But Nick, whut if -" 

"You are not taking a jar of puke with us." Ellis opened his mouth again, ready to argue more. "No way." Nick said, fiercely, before he could.

The last thing Nick expected was for Rochelle to reach over and smack him on the arm, lightly. "Let him keep it, Nick." she murmured flatly. Nick started to stiffen, eyes narrowing, but Rochelle overrode him. "That stuff saved you guys, right? There's nothing saying it's not going to come in handy. Ellis knows what he's doing, and if anyone should have something like that, it should be him."

Agitated, Nick sunk down in his seat, eyes flickering out the window. "Fine." he muttered. "But if that thing cracks, I'm leaving you to the zombies, Fireball."

Bouncing with satisfaction, Ellis dropped down into the backseat and shut the door behind himself. "Thanks Ro'!" He grinned rather proudly, settling his shotgun beside himself and focusing on attaching the jar to the shoulderstrap of his gun with a loose lace of leather. Ellis kicked his boot up against the back of Nick's seat, slouching comfortably.

As Rochelle carefully reversed the car out onto the road, the gambler reached down to find the small lever that controlled his seat back's angle. Calmly cranking it, he heard Ellis yelp in pain and protest as the chair jerked backwards, pushing his crooked knee into his cheek.

"Feet on the floor, dumbshit."
Chapter 114

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quietly, a sigh escaped Coach's lips, grunting a bit at the end. He shifted his body, slowly, relaxing into the pillow cushioning him against the front of the store counter. He'd made himself comfortable, grabbing the pillow off a beaten-up chair, and settled down beside Christophe.

The Spaniard hadn't shown any signs of stirring. The constant shiver and heavy breaths that escaped him had begun to turn into white noise to the eldest's hearing, and Coach had come to ignore it. The man would wake up on his own time - or not.

His body was weighted strangely with the loss of his arm, and Coach hadn't been able to get him sitting straight. He slumped, favoring his heavier half, chin pressed into his chest in an exhausted gesture as his body rested into the pillows behind his back.

Lifting his shotgun up from his lap, Coach set it aside, digging his bottle of water out from its snug position between two cushions. Cracking it open, the eldest took a heavy draught - but he didn't close it back up.

Swallowing the lukewarm liquid to ease a dry throat, Coach turned a bit on his seat, leaning in toward Chris. "I ain't a selfish man." he explained to the unconscious Spaniard, nudging one hand underneath the youth's chin.

Tipping his face up, Coach let his thumb push his jaw a little slack, mouth opening softly. The part gave Coach an opportunity to press the nose of the bottle against his lower lip, gently pouring just a trickle of water into his upturned mouth.

Coach grazed his knuckles down the Spaniard's throat, encouraging the flexion of muscles that drew the unconscious youth into the faintest of swallows. He muttered a soft few syllables as his mouth gasped open after the gulp, and though Coach initially thought it was nonsense - he realized, belatedly, it was Spanish.

Leaning in, Coach frowned, examining his face for signs the youth might stir... signs that never came, past a fevered shudder of his body, like a cringe from head to toe. The only word he recognized was "madre," and sympathy welled up in the football coach's brow.

The big man sighed, leaning back. Dark eyes gazed a little mournfully at the injured boy, shaking his head. "Remind me of my old team." He chuckled, relaxing back into his cushions, turning the bottle of water in his hand and examining the liquid. "Our runnin'-back was this kid. Family was from Mexico, but he'd never gone too far outta Georgia in his life, don't think. He was scrawny, wasn't too far from half my size, but he was damn fast."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Coach wearily rested the back of his head against the front of the store counter, eyes half-closing. His attention shifted toward the door and the couch that blockaded it, streams of light shining in past its shape.

"Real good friends, me an' him, two boys in a white school. We got snubbed fo' our skin color. Our coach didn't say nothin', but we never got put in the front of photos. Couldn't even see my friend half the time, gettin' stuck in the back, 'cause he was so tiny." He chuckled, stretching a hand down to scratch at his belly. He'd lost a little weight - it was strange, suddenly starting to lose the gut he'd
maintained for nearly a decade.

"I hoisted him up on my shoulders, one time. Should'a seen him grinnin', finally gettin' to be the tallest in the lineup."

The memory made Coach smile, eyes crinkling at the edges. He withheld a sigh, shaking his head, patting just beneath his breastbone as his voice grew a little thoughtful - maybe even a little somber. "Lost touch after I busted my knee. He went places, I think. Saw him in the papers sometimes - and then on the TV."

Suddenly, the ex-football player chuckled, shaking his head as his eyes drifted back toward the unconscious Spaniard. "... Look at me, talkin' up a storm like Ellis. And to someone who ain't even listenin'." The tight exhale that left him then was almost apologetic.

He shifted his hands, drawing his shotgun back into his lap. He grasped a handful of his shirt, using the fabric to clean along the barrel of the gun, head continuing to shake as he wiped grime and dirt off the metal. "Ain't gonna lie. You're causin' us some real shit, boy." One brow lifted a little, forehead crinkling.

"But we ain't lettin' you go easy. Ain't like that. If the world's fallin' apart, all it is is more reason fo' good people to stay strong. We let you go, we're givin' up on bein' people. Bein' human. Can't condone that." Coach settled his shotgun down on his lap again, eyes closing. "Don't know if we can save you. If I gotta be honest, I don't think we can. But you hold on, a'ight, son? You hold on."

He wasn't sure why he talked to him. Maybe he thought he could reach him, or maybe he just needed to break the silence. The quiet after he stopped was even heavier than before, though he felt better.

In the moment, he lowered his chin and mumbled to himself, voice calm.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Chapter End Notes

*!!spoilers for future chapters in the comments!!*
Chapter 115

The sedan's wheels crushed bits of debris into dust as it rolled easily to a stop in the middle of the road. Rochelle's fingers tightened on the steering wheel, then loosened. No one broke the silence for a few moments, all three sets of eyes focused forward in wordless tension, peering through the dirtied windshield at the grocery store before them.

The store sign had been toppled, neon-edged letters misted over, but more important were the words scrawled across the front of the building in yellow spraypaint.

'LOOTERS WILL BE SHOT'

Clearing his throat softly, Ellis cautiously leaned forward in his seat, chin grazing against Nick's shoulder as he poked his head into the front of the cabin. "Well, uh... Y'all think that means there's someone here?"

"Let's hope not," Nick muttered, lifting his hand to wipe his palm across his mouth, a sour taste rising on the back of his tongue. Ellis slipped him a slightly nervous glance, one of his hands gripping on the headrest of Nick's seat, fingertips digging into the fabric. "I've had my fill of crazy."

Frowning, Rochelle lifted her hand, rubbing a knuckle underneath her nose in thought as her other hand reluctantly pulled the gearshift into park. "I don't know, guys. I'm scared to risk it, but this is the best thing we've found in a while. I don't want to pass it up..." She tipped her head, glancing seriously at Nick's face. He met her gaze, but only sidelong. "How do you want to handle it?"

Shrugging his good shoulder, Nick reached out, opening the car door with a cautious quiet. He slid a leg out, pulling his rifle off of his shoulder and checking it over. "You're not gonna like it. Rochelle gave him a dull look, as if that was a given. "Ellis and I go in, you keep the car running in case things go south."

She was quiet at first - then she sighed. A skeptical kind of distaste arched her brows up. Though her tone was scoffing, there was an edge of sincerity. "Seriously? Leave the woman in the car? Why don't we all go?"

Nick's voice lowered to a growl, green eyes rolling upward faintly. "It's not like that. I trust your driving a million times more than I trust Ellis' -" He ignored the Georgian's protesting frown. "- and there's no way I'm doing any getaway driving with my shoulder like this. If there is someone in there, we might need to bolt."

Thrusting up a hand in a pointed gesture, he stated, "I'm not sayin' it because you're the weaker one here, I'm sayin' it because you're the strongest one." That statement significantly changed her posture. Before her grin could widen too far, he asserted, "In this situation."

A laugh escaped her, resting her hands on her lap with a tight sigh. She shook her head, then nodded in compliance. "Okay, Nick. We'll play it your way. But only if you guys promise me that if anything feels even a little off, you're out of there."

Nick smirked, letting off a chuckle. He reached down his thigh to get ahold of his Magnum, tugging it once to make sure it was solidly holstered. "Sweetheart, I'm not gonna spend one extra second anywhere I don't gotta be."
Rochelle rolled her eyes softly, leaning back against her seat and settling her forearm against the inside of her thigh. She tipped her head to the side, glancing back toward Ellis. As Nick slid out of the car and got to his feet to stretch out his body, she whispered back at him, "Hey uh - Ellis?"

He blinked, raising his head and giving her a curious look.

"This is um.. kind of weird to ask you, but -" Clearly hesitant to put the words together, Rochelle sighed, rolling her eyes upwards. "Asking Nick would be even weirder. Asshole."

Ellis bobbed his head in gentle understanding… even though he didn't understand at all. He flashed her a smile, half questioning and half supportive. "What'cha need, girl? I got yer back."

The woman waved her hand a little to encourage him closer, and he grabbed ahold of the back of the seat in front of him to lean forward, cocking his head to offer his ear. He glanced down in focus as she met him halfway, pressing her mouth close to his ear to whisper to him.

"Well - if there's a pharmacy section or something, see if they've got some tampons or something?" She sighed even louder, adjusting her place in her seat before explaining. "It's not urgent or anything, I just really don't want to be caught without. All this stress has me worried I'll be early, and that's the last thing -"

Ellis hadn't said a word, and she trailed off as she noticed his utter silence.

Leaning back a little, Rochelle lifted up a brow and got a look at his face. Panic wasn't really the word, but the horrified 'oh' plastered all over his features spoke to something pretty close.

The moment he realized she'd noticed, Ellis scrambled to cover it up, struggling not to choke as he swallowed and inhaled at the same time. His embarrassment was vibrant and obvious, voice practically cracking with the force he put behind it. "U-uh! I mean - yeah.. sure, Ro', I uh.."

She gazed at him with some amount of sympathy, though that didn't stop her from laughing as he fumbled.

"I'll get 'em! I-it ain't no problem, if you need it, I just, uh -" He was rapidly reddening, and Rochelle shook her head quietly, settling back straight in her seat. "I'll, um -"

She interrupted him, mostly out of pity. "... Thanks, sweetheart."

"Yeah!" Eager to escape before he made more of a fool out of himself, Ellis cracked his door open and scrambled out with his shotgun held tight to his chest - quite nearly forgetting the supply backpack entirely.

Ellis huffed as he reversed to grab it from where Rochelle had tossed it to the floorboard, snatching it up. He quickly rolled himself back out of the car before their eyes could meet.

He heard her trying not to laugh at his discomfort, and he shuffled his feet as he got the bag onto his shoulder and gripped his shotgun carefully to his hip. The bile jar remained where he'd put it, dangling from his gun's strap, one of the fasteners looped around its circumference.

Thankfully, Nick hadn't been paying much attention to them. He glanced at Ellis as the Georgian came out to stand next to him, arching a brow slightly at his reddened face. The question was implicit in his eyes, but Ellis wasn't about to explain.

When he shook his head and averted his gaze, Nick dismissed it out of hand.
"If you get in trouble, don't honk." the gambler ordered with a rather faux-charming smirk, leaning down to peer into the car at their female teammate. Rochelle rolled her eyes, reaching down to flick the button on the armrest of the car door and close the window in his face.

It ever-so-slowly rolled up, squeaking as it went.

He laughed, stepping back, and crooked a finger to motion Ellis after him. The Georgian obediently stepped up, shrugging the bag a little higher on his shoulder. "Let's go, kid." Ellis nodded.

Turning toward the store, raising his rifle up to rest the stock into his good shoulder, Nick moved with a careful gait. One foot placed lightly in front of the other as he advanced toward the door. Ellis mimicked him as closely as he could, lingering just behind him and letting his head swivel back to make sure the street was still clear.

They carefully walked up to the grocery store's glass double doors, and Nick leaned in to squint into the building. Although the lights were out, light filtered in from the doors and wide windows, and it wasn't hard to get a look inside now that they were close.

'Messy' would've been an understatement. Most of the shelving in the front had been flipped over, their contents knocked to the ground. Glass was shattered, plastic was torn open, and puddles of mixing liquid was in various states of drying out across the tile.

Nick immediately seemed to stiffen in disappointment, but Ellis nudged him with an elbow and pointed. "It ain't all wrecked, Nick! There's stuff in the back."

Releasing a grunt, the gambler reached out, touching a hand onto the closed doors. He squinted along the threshold, examining the doorway, like he half expected some sort of tripwire. "We'll see." he muttered, stepping into the center and digging his fingertips into the separation between the two sliding doors.

Pushing with a small growl, ignoring the pain in his shoulder as he flexed it, Nick pried the doors open. They rattled quietly, rolling back into their tracks a few stiff inches, and he was quick to get his gun back into his hands. Stepping cautiously through the doorway, Nick grimaced at the ruined floor. "'Looters will be shot' my ass. Barely anything left to loot."

"You want me to go in first, find us a mop?" Ellis hummed behind him, fighting a grin as his humor bled through. Nick cocked a brow over his shoulder, eyes narrowing. "I can clean up real quick, so you don't get nothin' on yer shoes."

"Ha, ha." the gambler snapped, annoyance rolling his eyes and dragging the corner of his mouth down. Nick cocked a brow over his shoulder, eyes narrowing. "I can clean up real quick, so you don't get nothin' on yer shoes."

"Ha, ha." the gambler snapped, annoyance rolling his eyes and dragging the corner of his mouth down. He pushed into the store, leading with the muzzle of his rifle, and Ellis chuckled pleasantly as he followed after. "Shut up and look around, dumbshit."

Ellis peered inside the store. It was dim, but not too dark, and his eyes rapidly adjusted to the change in light. There were signs at the entrance of each aisle, and though the toppled ones in the middle were buried under fallen and ruined goods, the ones in the back and to either side were still up and legible.

On the far left, he spied a medicinal section - at about the same time Nick did.

They both raised hands to point toward it, but Ellis blustered out words first. "Uh, I'll go look fer bandages'n'stuff. You can - look around. See whut food they got left, I mean." Nick gave him a solid stare for a moment, arching a brow at his clear insistence. "..if yer okay with that." Ellis held
as straight a face as he could, trying not to look as nervous as he felt.

Turning away, Nick focused on picking his way through the mess on the floor. "... Alright, whatever. Don't let your guard down."

Ellis was left huffing a sigh, extremely relieved that he hadn't argued. He'd rather not explain the situation - not to mention, Rochelle would probably kill him if he did. The chance of Nick resisting the urge to mock her over it was next to none.

As embarrassed as the request had made Ellis, he wasn't going to let Nick make fun of her.

Shaking his head weightily, Ellis crossed down the tile floor, weight moving tenderly on his bootiveles. He maintained a tight grip on the shotgun in his hands. Even though the store was seemingly quiet, he kept Nick's command in mind.

Blue eyes darted to scan down each small aisle as he passed them, searching the darkness for anything suspicious. There was nothing but mostly-empty shelves and broken piles of goods in most, though a corpse lay down one aisle.

Ellis froze at first - but a second look revealed its head was blown to pieces. He couldn't discern much of the features, but its skin was a dull grey, most likely an infected. He exhaled, soothing himself before he continued along the width of the store.

The medicinal section opened up before him, and he halted in front of it with a blink and a frustrated sigh.

It was ransacked more thoroughly than any of the other aisles he'd passed by. It shouldn't have surprised him, but it did disappoint him. Everything was tossed to the floor in a wild river of empty boxes and torn plastic. His heart fell a little at the sight, and he pushed his arm through the shoulder-strap of his shotgun, shrugging it onto his back.

Carefully advancing down the aisle floor, Ellis let his gaze scan from side to side just in front of his feet, trying to decide if there was anything left. After Rochelle and Coach's success at the pharmacy they didn't need medication; it was bandage material they desperately needed.

It was a few more feet, kicking through empty boxes with the toe of his boot, til he found anything helpful. Buried underneath a small clump of torn packaging was a multi-pack of four gauze rolls, bound in tight plastic. Excited, Ellis dropped down to his knees to scoop it up, shoving it into the backpack and taking more time to look around in that area, hopeful there might be more of the same.

Ellis snatched up a yellow-edged box, eagerly turning it around to scan the front... and was faced by the brightly smiling face of a model, juxtaposed next to the bold image of a white tampon. He didn't know what freaked him out more - the cottony, phallic shape, or the fact there was a halo-esque glow around its edges.

He nearly dropped the box outright.

"Aw, man..." he mumbled, mortified. He tried to grip it as lightly as possible, just barely using his fingertips against the cardboard. Wincing slightly as he nervously - but curiously - scanned over the label, he couldn't help but redden. A distinctly awkward chill raised the hair on the back of his neck.

"The hell does 'super-ultra' mean...?"
The Georgian had never had cause to investigate the intimate details of feminine hygiene. His mother had certainly never brought it up, and it had never come up with the girlfriends he'd had in the past. He knew about it - but he'd certainly never had to purchase anything for them.

His longest-running girlfriend had suffered awful pain every month. More than once had they sat together on the couch watching a movie, her in his lap, a heating pad burning against her abdomen until they were both sweating from the cloying warmth.

Unfortunately, supplying heat and chocolate was the extent of his mechanical knowledge on the subject.

Squinting at the box, Ellis frowned, trying to find some guidance on the yellow-and-green cardboard. He looked from it to the few empty, torn boxes nearby, noticing the differences. They were color-coded and labeled, and the idea of choosing between them only worsened his anxiety.

"'Normal,' 'Ultra,'... Maybe it's like.. uhh.. super-ultra good? Uh.."

When he noticed the tag that exclaimed 'Insertion instructions inside!', he knew he needed to stop looking.

He sighed, straightening up and shoving the box deep into their supply pack. He'd make sure he had the chance to give it to her privately before anyone else got their hands on the satchel - but as it was, he had other priorities.

The longer he lingered, the higher the chance of Nick wandering over.

"Ro', girl, you owe me."
Chapter 116

Ellis took his search in slow steps, kicking his boot cautiously through the clutter on the tile. Whenever he spotted an unopened box, he'd duck down and scoop it up. Uncertainly, he read through the labels, scratching at the back of his neck as he determined if they were of any use.

Most of it was cold medication and antihistamines (a phrase he wasn't entirely confident about until he investigated the explanation on the back), and only hesitantly did he tuck a bottle of the former - a dark red liquid - into the bag. If nothing else, it was a sleep aid, and maybe it would come in handy.

He earned a few boxes of normal bandaids, several gauze and bandage rolls of varying sizes, and two thick tubes of antibiotic cream. One of the bandaid sets was styled with cartoon characters, and he couldn't resist a laugh. He'd trick Nick into using one if it killed him.

Which, upon consideration, Nick might.

A slight smile chanced on his lips. The haul wasn't exactly a jackpot, but the backpack was significantly heavier when he finished packing it. The gauze in particular was valuable, though Ellis wondered if Chris wouldn't need much more by the end of it all.

"Hey, Overalls." Nick called, voice a slight growl as he tried to keep it low, and echoing faintly in the cold, dim store. He sounded tense but not urgent, so Ellis merely lifted up his head and called back.

"Yeah?"

There was silence for a beat, and then Nick spoke in an almost brusque manner. "… Nothing. Just makin' sure." Ellis couldn't help but chuckle, raising a hand to scratch at his cheek, fingertips catching on the scabbed-over cut on his cheekbone from the gun he'd taken to the face several days ago.

"Okay." Starting to get up to his feet, Ellis zipped the backpack up. "'Ey, Nick, I found some shit. If yer findin' food, maybe we should make a few trips tuh the car, really stock up... ain't no sense leavin' without takin' advantage. I'll -"

His voice halted in his throat.

Half-straightened up but still on one knee, Ellis stared straight into the shelf just before his face. Perched in a messy little row, nestled against the feminine hygiene section, was the contraceptive section. Two boxes of condoms sat a few inches from each other - ribbed, according to the bold font on the front.

But they weren't the primary object of his shock, and weren't the cause of the goosebumps that shot up his arms - that was the white and blue box labeled 'K-Y' that froze him in place.

He knew perfectly well what it was, and his face went shock-red. Startled, Ellis blurted a strangled "Uh -" He regretted the outburst the moment it escaped him, hearing Nick's quick footsteps suddenly turn and approach, dress shoes making staccato noises against the tile.

"What?" the gambler demanded, voice sharp.

Ellis wheeled around, backing up so suddenly that he bumped into the opposite shelf, having to
quickly grab at the metal to balance himself. "N-Nothin' - I'm fine!" He tried to sound reassuring, but Nick didn't listen. The conman came around the corner with a swift turn on his heel, hands on his rifle, halting when he saw there was no visible danger.

Nick examined Ellis' face... and then the cluttered aisle floor... and then his face again, more intently, scanning over those red cheeks and slightly panicked eyes. His expression was stony as he read that embarrassment - judged it, weighed it. Finally, with a drop of his brows, he swiveled his head to examine the shelf in front of Ellis.

Ellis felt his face burning with mortification, unable to stop staring at Nick. He hadn't meant to call the gambler over - at least not until he'd gotten what he'd say settled in his head. He didn't know what he would have said, exactly, but he knew it would have been a whole lot better than the ashamed stammering that proceeded to escape him.

"I-I - I was just lookin'! I mean, I wasn't lookin' - fer that - I was lookin' fer stuff'n'I just turned around'n' -" He palmed his hand down his face, roughly, groaning with a horrified shake of his head. "O-oh, man, this's gotta be the most embarrassin' thing... I swear, I -"

He silenced when Nick wordlessly stepped forward.

Shock popped Ellis' jaw open, watching in stupefaction as Nick rather calmly plucked up the box of KY and cracked it open, tucking the tube into his slacks' pocket. Without the slightest sign of concern, arching a brow like he were perusing a magazine, the gambler gripped fingertips on the edge of one of the box of condoms and twisted it around so he could examine the labels on the back.

Ellis couldn't begin to find words. He just stared.

"Eh. Too small." Nick casually dismissed, switching his gaze to the second box. A few seconds later, he picked it up, turning around to bounce it in his palm once. Ellis could hear the soft rustle of the foil contents, mesmerized by the calm lechery pooled over the older man's features. "This'll work, though."

Without another word, Nick tossed it at him. The Georgian was so startled he practically fell over himself trying to catch it, losing his grip on it once but re-catching it a little lower. He stared at the box in a daze before lifting his gaze back up to gawp at Nick's face.

The gambler smirked faintly, then turned away, patting his hand over his slacks' pocket. Past the small limp that showed itself in his Spitter-scarred leg, he swaggered confidently with a humored roll of his eyes. "Let's get the car loaded up."

The Georgian stuttered, bewildered and flustered. "J-Jesus, Nick.. you ain't got no shame, man.."

Nick just chuckled, low and seductive. "You aren't stopping me."

Ellis didn't rise to that, silently fighting to calm his heartrate. He tenderly opened the small box with a thumb and crammed a coil of foil packets into the spacious pocket of his coveralls. Hiding them away surreptitiously, he galloped after Nick, flustered into a light sweat.

The gambler led him a bit deeper into the store, where Nick had gathered up a fairly considerable pile of food supplies. Ellis couldn't help but notice that he'd found a surprising amount of **real food** - he'd gathered together some bags of granola, trail mix, nuts, cans of soup and vegetables.. and water, though it was only a few loose bottles.

"Man, you found all this?" Ellis questioned, a mix of shocked and impressed, leaning around Nick
to size up the stash. "Barely scrounged up anythin' over there."

The conman let off a chuckle, shrugging his shoulders and gesturing toward the back. "They cleared out most of it, but I think they were focused on sweets. Kinda like us, back at the 7-Eleven... dumbasses."

That made Ellis laugh, scrubbing at his jaw. He dropped down into a careful crouch, body tilted to stop his shotgun and backpack from falling off his shoulder, and started to gather up an armful. He wasn't going to get too much, minding his injured torso.

It was when Nick shifted away a step, then came back, that Ellis stopped to glance at him. The gambler held out a small dollar bag of blue gummy sharks. They were all swaddled up against each other at the bottom of the clear plastic pack, tails and fins and tiny imprinted faces smushed together. Nick didn't quite look at him, just spoke, shortly. "They didn't get all of that, either."

Ellis felt a rush of heat touch his face, and he ducked his chin slightly to hide his grin under the shadow of his cap's bill. Quietly, as Nick grew visibly impatient, Ellis tugged the candy from his hand and pushed it into the side pocket of the backpack hooked on his shoulder. "Thanks," he murmured, gratefully.

It was such a small gesture - but maybe it was that very quality that made it feel meaningful.

Nick didn't really directly respond, just stepped forward to bend down and start picking up a few things himself. "I was looking for some smokes. I should be so lucky."

Chuckling, Ellis straightened, adjusting his grip on the pile of foodstuffs he held in his arms. He nudged Nick's hip with his own, laughing more when the gambler shot him a dark look at the jostle. "We'll find some, man. but the 'pocalypse ain't a bad time to quit, y'know."

The conman rolled his eyes, looking about as skeptical as ever. Straightening up with an armful of cans and a bag of trail mix under one arm, Nick snorted. He muttered under his breath as the two men turned to start making their way back to the door.

"Kid, that's the worst time."

Ellis could only laugh in response to that, head shaking softly as he ducked through the store doors. They split up, Ellis moving toward the back of the sedan and Nick making a beeline for the passenger side door.

Slapping his palm against the trunk of the car, Ellis waited until he heard the distinct click of the vehicle unlocking. He got a grip on the trunk door handle and hauled it open, awkwardly managing it around his load. He beamed a grin at Ro' through the rear window, but she wasn't looking at him.

"Tell'er whut we got, Nick!" Ellis chirped, pleased, bending in to start piling his armful of foodstuffs into the bed of the trunk.

Nick bent in toward the car window, tapping a knuckle against it as he held his load of cans under one arm. She rolled it down for him, the glass sliding into the door with a soft buzz. Rochelle had let the AC run, so the air that flooded against Nick's face was distinctly chilled, sending goosebumps straight down his neck.

Almost shivering, he quickly reached up to get a grip on his dress shirt collar, tugging it away from his breastbone so the airflow could run down his torso, blissful relief against a furred chest.
"Well, fuck..." the gambler moaned, a little jealous and very lustily. He leaned his face into the vehicle, melting as the cold air soothed against his skin. Even just a short dalliance into the hot day's air was enough to make him sweat, especially considering he had a fever to contend with already. "Now I know why you gave in to staying in the car so fast. Conniving little b-

"eautiful, intelligent lady?" Rochelle rather cheerfully suggested, reaching out her hand to grip fingertips on the vent that was aimed closest to Nick. Swiveling it around to face her instead, she grinned innocently into his scowl. Before he could respond to that, she prompted, "Well? What'd you guys find?

Nick sighed, straightening up and away from the window. He squinted one eye, glancing along the street thoughtfully as he let his head shake. "Food, mostly. Which is good. Ellis pulled together enough gauze to cover us for a bit, but it ain't like we're home free. Chris'll need a lot of bandages if we're gonna keep that shoulder clean."

Rochelle frowned a little, nodding.

He added, voice lowering in vague lechery, "We might have to sacrifice more clothing by the end. Guess you should go ahead and lose the shirt again, huh, sweetheart?"

"Oh, you wish." Rochelle turned around in her seat, glancing toward the rear window and -though she couldn't directly see him past the open trunk - Ellis. "No sign of trouble inside? Think whoever was holed up in there cleared out?"

Nick snorted, smoothly turning around to rest his back against the side of the car. He crossed his legs stiffly, trying to play off his limp left, and shook his head. Although his whole body felt sore, temples throbbing softly with the pounding of a tired headache, his leg and his shoulder in particular were lit up like fire.

He glanced down, eyeballing his own leg with a thoughtful stare. It only hurt when he overextended himself, and the limp only won out when he was tired, but he could feel the thick layer of scabbing every time he flexed it. Guess it could've been worse, but fuck.

"I don't know. We didn't see shit, though. Whether he skipped town or got killed, he ain't here."

Sighing, Rochelle started to speak, but Ellis suddenly loped around from the back and interrupted her. "I'll take yer stuff, Nick." he chirped obligingly. Nick merely turned at the waist to face Ellis, letting the kid take the supplies off his hands.

The Georgian smiled at him as he did, turning about and doggedly walking back to the trunk. Nick gazed after him, crossing his arms loosely - snapped out of it when Rochelle murmured to him through the car window.

"You make him happy."

Almost violently, Nick swiveled his head to stare her down, spine prickling at the statement. He curled his upper lip, preparing to tear into her, but she didn't give him the chance. Her gaze was low and voice lower, and she spoke with a solid kind of confidence that didn't allow for much argument.

"He's scared, Nick. I don't know that he's ever really been scared until now. People are dying. In his mind, he killed Jerry - and Christophe is dying in front of us. He looks up to you, and he needs that right now. Keep him going, okay?"

Nick wanted to argue. Protest. Dismiss the sentiment. He wanted to say something, but at the same
time, he balked. Caught off-guard, he was unsure of how to speak such that he wouldn't really say anything at all.

So he did the next best thing: he shook his head and walked away.

"Whatever."

Almost angrily, Nick limped back to meet up with Ellis at the flank of the car. The Georgian blinked at him sideways, seeming to notice the foul expression on his face, but he visibly decided against mentioning it.

"Wanna get the rest?" Ellis prompted, thumbing over his shoulder with a lopsided smile.

Nick nodded, shortly, and slipped past him to lead the way back into the store.

Rochelle couldn't help but tip her head, watching after them. A sigh left her lips, body slumping softly into the car seat. She raised her hand up, pressing her wrist into her forehead, smiling as she closed her eyes into the air blowing against her face.

It would never cease to make her curious, thinking about those two men as a couple. They were utter opposites, two men that she'd watched get into fights over and over again. But in the same way, it made sense: maybe Ellis and his puppy-dog loyalty snuck right in under Nick's radar, got in deep under the gambler's shell.

It was kind of sweet.

*Just hope Nick knows I'd deck him in his pretty face if he hurts that boy.*

She had to laugh - really laugh for a moment, shaking her head into the palm of her hand. Resting the pad of her thumb against the bridge of her nose, she rubbed, chasing away a headache before it began. She wished she was a little more confident he wouldn't hurt Ellis, even if she was beginning to believe he wouldn't want to.

Rochelle could still see the hollow loss that had numbed Nick's expression to stone during the spare breadth of time where they'd believed Ellis dead.

It would be lying to say she wasn't eager to get them out in the open, so they could really talk - but that wasn't her call to make. Definitely not then, not with everything else they had to deal with.

Sighing gently, Rochelle made a determined effort not to let her mind wander back to the amputee they were currently responsible for. She couldn't let her guilt control her, not then. *We're doing our best. That's all we can do.*

Tiredly, Rochelle turned her head -

- and froze when the muzzle of an assault rifle clinked gently into the car window just before her face, steel glinting in the sun. Her eyes darted up, and she could see the silhouette of the woman standing just outside the car, finger on the trigger and head kept low.

Brenda's teeth bared in a grin past bloodied and cracked lips, one finger pressing over them in a hushing motion.
Laughter escaped Ellis' lips as he bent down, head shaking slowly in a fairly bemused gesture. Blue eyes darted a glance over his shoulder, scanning toward where the gambler had wandered behind the store counter. "Nick, are you lookin' fer smokes again?"

"A guy can dream." the older man shot back, his sigh audible even across the room. He pulled open the drawers underneath the counter, peering inside, but his search clearly proved fruitless when he slammed them shut with his palm in frustration. "Damnit. Not even any stashed away for the fucking employees..."

Chuckling as he started making a pile of bags in his crooked right arm, Ellis listened as Nick slammed another drawer and growled under his breath. There was, however, a frenetic energy to his behaviour that dampened some of Ellis' amusement, turning it into sympathy instead.

"Damn, Nick. It's only been like, two days, since you had some. Don't it suck bein' hooked on that stuff?"

Annoyed, the conman pushed his hands flat on the counter, letting his body weight relax onto it with a sigh. He bit at his lower lip, shaking his head - and when he spoke, it was with an edge of sarcasm. "I'd blame the apocalypse, but honestly, divorce put me back on the carton. I only smoked in bars before that shit went down."

Raising his head, Ellis glanced toward the older man. Honest apology streaked across his features, regretful of stepping on that raw nerve again. "Aw, man.. I'm sorry. Didn't mean tuh bring that up."

Nick shrugged. "You didn't. I did." Giving up his hunt, he stepped out from behind the counter, approaching Ellis with a wide gesture of a hand. "It's not that big of a deal. Honestly, it probably doesn't matter at all. Bitch is probably dead, turned into one of those Witches. Good riddance."

Ellis instantly frowned, lowering his arms. He nearly outright set his load back down on the ground, a certain upset turning his brows scrunched. The gambler arched up a brow, not having expected such a sharp response. "Nick - you can't mean that. Ain't nobody who deserves that."

"You didn't know her." Nick muttered, bending down. Reaching for some of the food, he only halted when Ellis suddenly closed a hand over his wrist. Narrowing his eyes with readied agitation, he glanced up - but Ellis' expression was distressed, not accusatory.

Soulful blue eyes searched his, slowly, and Nick sighed in a heavy bluster.

"Look, I'm just blowing off steam. Okay? I got some unresolved issues here, cut me some slack."

The Georgian dubiously held onto him for just a moment longer, but let go after a small shake of his head and a softly repeated "Ain't nobody who deserves that." as he started roughly tucking packages away into his arms. He closed off with a sudden huff, turning his gaze entirely away from Nick, and the gambler was left eyeing him in silence.

Ellis wasn't really talking about him anymore, Nick could tell. He could see it in the way Ellis' shoulders lowered with guilt - not disappointment. Nick wasn't the only one with unresolved issues, and he abruptly regretted allowing his spite to bleed through.

He opened his mouth, trying to curl his tongue around words to say… but shut it eventually, snorting quietly to himself. He didn't like the uncertainty he felt. Admitting his involvement in
Jerry's death wasn't likely to go over very well, but it also didn't seem that the issue was resolving itself.

Nick struggled slightly to get his arm crooked properly to cradle the three loose waterbottles he'd found, his shoulder stinging as he moved it. Ellis managed much easier despite his cracked rib, straightening up and turning away. Heavy quiet hung in the air, discomfiting, but neither man broke it.

The gambler didn't even look when Ellis stepped away from him, starting back toward the front of the store, carrying his load in carefully folded arms.

*He'll snap out of it once we're in the car.* Nick assured himself. He wished he was less unsettled by Rochelle's words earlier. When had it become his responsibility to mind the kid's wellbeing? And when - more importantly - had *Rochelle* caught onto that?

Sighing with a shake of his head, Nick didn't notice when Ellis halted.

Or when he craned his head, seeming bewildered.

Or when he took a slow and intimidated step backward.

It was only when Ellis' arms dropped in one smooth motion, his entire armload falling to the ground. A can broke open on the tile around his feet, spilling greasy pasta sauce over one of his boots, and the noise made Nick jump straight out of his skin.

"Fucking -!" Immediately, Nick swiveled up to his feet. He barely had time to look the frozen Georgian over before Ellis bolted forward, shoving himself through the open store doors. "Ellis, what the -"

And then Nick realized what he'd seen - or rather, not seen.

The car was gone.

"Ro'?! Ro'!" Ellis started yelling at the top of his lungs, voice tremoring. He spun from foot to foot on the sidewalk, putting his hands up at either side of his mouth, not seeming to comprehend the empty road stretching in front of him. "Rochelle!"

Nick had to run to grab his arm before he started sprinting wildly down the street. He pulled the panicking Georgian to stand still on the sidewalk with a snarl. "Ellis! Calm the fuck down!"

Ellis fought him, whipping around to grab at his arm, eyes wide and breath heaving. Nick grimaced when the kid's fierce hold on his forearm ached, panic digging fingertips into his skin through his dress shirt. "Ro's gone! R- The car's gone! I don't..! She wouldn't'uv left us here! Why would she leave?!"

"I don't know!" Nick hissed back, raising his head sharply to glare around at the road. There were cars scattered here and there along the sidewalk, but none of them was their grey sedan. It was like Rochelle had just disappeared. "Maybe she's fucking with us... Just - calm down! You're going to get us -"

Ellis wasn't listening.

He half-spun around, and the pleading "ROCHELLE!" that bellowed out of him echoed above their heads, voice breaking in half. He sounded so miserable, so terrified. Nick felt a twinge in his chest... but not before a scowl started on his face.
Grabbing at the back of his neck, Nick sharply planted his other hand over Ellis' mouth. The Georgian instantly struggled, trying to elbow him in the side to get free, but he couldn't get leverage. Nick dragged him into a tight embrace against his body, pushing his face into the side of Ellis' and hissing against his cheek.

"Ellis, calm the fuck down. I don't need you losing your shit right now - I need you to fucking breathe so we can figure this out. You are helping nobody by screaming." He could feel Ellis' struggle halt, feel the Georgian leaning into him instead, their bodies bracing against each other.

"Just fucking breathe. Chances are, she's just around the corner, okay? We are going to find her. But you need.. to shut.. up.. before you set a goddamn horde on us."

Ellis stopped fighting, limp in the older man's embrace. And when Nick slowly, cautiously, removed the hand over his mouth, Ellis gasped in a breath and blustered out a shaky "S-sorry.." Nick shook his head in a small dismissive gesture, letting his other hand linger on the back of Ellis' neck even as he pulled away.

The touch made Ellis relax. He huffed, unsteadily, shaking his head repetitively. "If somethin' happened, Nick, I... what if somethin' happened -"

The kid was terrified. Nick had to steel himself, speaking calmly, intent on maintaining a level head. Far lighter than before, he uttered, "Let's just start down the road, alright? We'll re-trace our steps. Whatever happened, the best option is to head back toward Coach. Let's just go back."

Nodding, slowly, Ellis gazed firmly at Nick's face for just a moment before turning his gaze down. "Okay. So long as we just.. let's go slow, Nick. I wanna make sure we keep an eye out. I don't wanna risk walkin' past her or somethin'...

"Okay." Nick agreed, almost coaxingly. Relieved the Georgian had regained his senses, Nick focused on the next problem: his own gut was twisting around itself in painful, hot clenches. There's absolutely no fucking reason why Rochelle would leave. None. What the fuck happened?

Settling a hand on Ellis' shoulder, Nick gently directed him to turn around. He tugged the waterbottles from under his arm and unzipped the backpack just enough to shove them inside. "I'm sure she's fine. Just relax, okay, kiddo?"

Obediently waiting there until Nick had finished, Ellis tugged his shotgun back into his hands. "Yeah." the Georgian responded, quietly, sounding small and unconvinced. He palmed over the barrel, sweat leaving a greasy shine down the old metal.

"Let's go." Nick uttered, and Ellis wasted no time. He didn't bolt, but there was a frantic energy to the way he walked, head swiveling on a constant rotation to examine their surroundings. Nick pulled behind him as he started to walk down the road, keeping in line with his footsteps.

He rested the stock of his rifle against his shoulder, aiming it to the side as he thumbed off the safety. It didn't surprise Nick in the slightest when Ellis started nervously mumbling, voice unsteady.

"H-heh - Y'know, this.. sorta reminds me'uh this one time... Keith'n'I were.. campin' out in the woods. Guess he got up tuh piss in the night, 'cause when I woke up, I couldn't find him. I didn't get nervous till he was gone fer like'uh whole hour. Ended up.. findin' him up this tree.. Never did tell me whut happened, h-heh.. but.. he had claw marks all in the wrong places, man."

"Yeah?" Nick encouraged, voice light, keeping his steps even lighter as they moved down the
street. Allowing the kid to talk - *quietly* - was the least he could do, even if it grated on his nerves. "You let him off easy on that?"

Ellis shook his head a little, chin lowering. He never stopped looking around, scanning the street, gaze darting to either side. His eyes sought for any sign of their lost partner. "Figured somethin' takin' a bite outta his junk was enough."

Cocking his head, Nick let his eye press into the scope of his rifle. Gazing down the sights, he examined even further ahead, though his attention was more on looking for infected than Rochelle. The last thing they needed was to get jumped. "Whatever stops that guy from breeding is fine with me."

Ellis wanted to laugh. Nick could hear it, this choke to his voice as if a chuckle started to escape him - and then collapsed in on itself before it passed his lips. He cleared his throat instead, mumbling a soft, "He don't want kids, anyway."

The stumbling shape of an infected caught Nick's eye wandering out of a building, and he immediately moved the scope to focus in on it. He kept moving, holding his pace, aligning the crosshair carefully over the infected's face. He waited - holding his breath -

And then slammed into Ellis from behind as the Georgian stopped.

The backpack cushioned most of the blow, and Nick's rifle went off, his surprise sending the gun shooting upward as it fired. Nick snarled at the completely missed shot, jerking his head back from the scope, immediately taking a step back to steady himself. "Ellis?!"

Nick could feel his nerves practically snap when Ellis started quick-stepping down the alleyway they'd just come parallel to. Growling, Nick shoved his rifle back onto his shoulder and snatched his Magnum from its holster, changing guns with slick ease. "Ellis, for fuck's sake, talk to me first, will ya?"

He felt his heartrate pick up when Ellis didn't respond, halting just a few feet into the dim alleyway. The asphalt was cracked under his feet, and even in the shadowed stretch between the two buildings at either side of them, Nick saw the dark pool of blood that Ellis stepped straight into.

The tacky red puddle thickened and quavered around the Georgian's boot treads, and Ellis' head drooped low on his neck, silent. Completely silent. Nick could see the shiver start up his body, the shaking - and suddenly every ounce of agitation drained from his body, along with the blood from his face.

"Ellis?!" Nick felt a kind of panic stir in his chest, suffocating him. Something in the very center of him went cold, brittle. He couldn't see past the Georgian. Just the blood.

If Rochelle was laying there, he didn't know what he'd do.

"E-Ellis - " Nick repeated, whispering, voice going throaty with fear. He reached out, ready to shove the youth to the side, desperate to see in the same moment he didn't want to. He so... so didn't want to. He wanted to turn around and never come back, because that was easier.

But Ellis was already stepping out of the way.

When Nick's gaze alighted on the corpse from which the blood had spilt, he recognized two facts. First - after a painful lurch of his heart - he realized that it wasn't Rochelle. A single breath of relief sucked life back into Nick's body, goosebumps tickling up his arms and a real, honest shiver
making his body cringe.

"J-..Jesus ass Christ, kid.. I.. thought..."

And then, belatedly, he recognized the second fact.

The zombie had been hewn messily in half from shoulder to bellybutton with only fleshy membranes, shattered bones, and the mess of its innards holding it together where it had bled profusely on the asphalt. Although the pool was still, it was fresh.

A recent kill, from what could only be a blade. A strong, sharp one.

One much like the one Nick could still remember piercing him straight through the shoulder.

The realization hit hard. He could see it still sinking in on Ellis' face - see the real, fierce terror. Terror like he'd never seen on the youth's features, like he'd have hoped never to see. Nick's hands started shaking, and all in one, slow breath, inhaling the gore splattered before their feet, he felt anger flood his veins.

Like fire. Like lava. Like liquefied intent.

"She came back." Ellis ghosted out, almost shocked. He sounded empty - until he turned his chin, blue eyes meeting green, and fear flooded his voice in a wave. "Ro'.. C-Coach.. She came back!"

And she won't fucking live to regret it.

Nick grabbed Ellis' wrist and he ran, pulling the Georgian back out into the street before either of them could say another word. There were no words to say; none that would help, anyway. Nick tasted blood in the back of his throat and he ground his teeth against the copper twang and swallowed.

When Ellis' hand slid to twine fingers with his, sweat slick between their skin, Nick let it happen. They gripped so hard their fingertips left bruises where they dug, Nick dragging Ellis as much as Ellis dragged Nick.

Glistening black arrows guided them backwards - but fear made them run.
Chapter 118

Rochelle's fingers bit into the leather steering wheel until her knuckles ached. She kept her eyes on the road, jawline so tense it twitched, refusing to look at the gun hovering just beside her face. She locked her fear away behind tightly clenched teeth, breath coming fast through flared nostrils.

The car rolled down the street, crackling glass and littered paper under its wheels, every noise amplified by the thick silence. Every time Rochelle moved her hands on the wheel, she heard the gun shift beside her face, and her chest clenched - but the shot never came.

Calmly sprawled in the passenger side seat, Brenda rested her arm against the door of the car. Her body was turned so she could face Rochelle and her free arm was raised up to keep the gun pointed at her face.

She'd fallen far from the last time Rochelle had seen her. Her purple blouse was torn, baring the black curve of her bra. Claw marks and slices of torn flesh lined her frame from head to toe. Blood streaked down her body, half of it dried and half of it fresh - and most of it probably hers.

Her nearly-black hair was matted against her scalp, a wild bareness to her bruised face as she'd pushed her hair back and blood had greased it behind her ears. Her stark, strong jawline was taut with quiet anger. But even worse - maybe worst of all - were her eyes.

They were empty.

Brown was stained with greens and yellows into a fierce hazel, their whites bloodshot into an almost damp haze. They were empty, like she couldn't see. Sitting slitted on Rochelle's face, they were nearly unblinking as they stared intently. The emotionless vapidity sent chills along Rochelle's skin, goosebumps betraying her discomfort.

Tremulously, whispering, Rochelle tried to break the silence for the first time. "Y-You're bleeding." Her voice cracked.

Although Brenda didn't react, not even twitching a brow or shifting her gaze, she didn't threaten Rochelle into silence, either. The woman merely stared, by all appearances not even hearing the statement.

So she tried again.

"You should get help for those... if - if we go back - we have medical supplies, we can - "

"Do I look stupid?" Brenda suddenly uttered. Her voice was rough, the sound almost flaking off at the edges, a tremor to it that spoke to restraint... not fear or pain. She flicked with the muzzle of the gun, nudging it closer to her captive's face. "Keep driving."

Rochelle tensed her hands on the steering wheel, forcing her attention to stay on the road. She waited, huffing slow breaths to try and keep herself calm, only a few moments before trying to press it again.

"You're not stupid. At all. So you have to know this is going to end badly for everyone." She spoke as carefully as she could, coaxing, slowly easing her foot off the gas to try and slow the car down without alerting Brenda. *If I can just delay us until the boys realize something's wrong..." Too many people have died already. Just stop."
The woman laughed. Just once - a humored noise that stifled in her throat.

"We can talk this all out. I promise. Nobody wants anyone else hurt."

Brenda's head shook, her gaze taking on an almost sympathetic sheen, like Rochelle were a child. "I know Chris met back up with you." The gun lowered just an inch, and Rochelle took in a real breath for the first time in what felt like ages... but Brenda's voice grew harsh, anger spilling into it, even as it failed to reach her deadened eyes. "Fucking traitors."

"He had a choice. Just like you do - to make it right." Rochelle tried to keep her voice soft, reassuring. "We can make this right. There's always another chance."

Brenda shot back, in a soft growl - though something about the way her voice faded, her lips parted... it was like she wasn't quite talking to Rochelle. "He left me. Like I was nothing to him. Like the Angels were nothing to him."

Rochelle responded anyway. "They are nothing. We're all we have anymore, Brenda, we're just people."

The woman lunged at her, snakelike. Ferocity sent her lips peeling back from her teeth, bloody whites glinting between her chapping lips. Her free hand grabbed Rochelle's shirt, wrenching her closer as she jammed the muzzle of the gun against her cheek.

Rochelle had to slam her foot on the brakes, the car jolting, eyes widening as Brenda pressed her face close to hers. She stank of sweat and blood - and vomit.

"Shut up." she hissed. "That's not fucking true."

But, forcing air through her nose, Rochelle didn't. She whispered back, voice gaining a sudden bite. "You're just a person, Brenda. What the hell else do you think you are?"

Brenda shoved her back into her seat, hard. "Better." Rochelle winced at the impact of her head against the leather cushion, regaining her bearings with a fierce shake of her head. Brenda retreated against the passenger side door again, putting both hands on her assault rifle and jerking it up in a twitch, commandingly. "Keep driving, before I shoot you."

Warily, Rochelle obeyed, placing her hands lightly on the wheel and letting her foot ease off the brakes. She thought - hoped, maybe - that Brenda would hold silent as the car started moving again, but the woman muttered under her breath.

"I should have listened to him... that idiot. We should have killed you from the start. I wish we'd just killed you."

Chills rolled up Rochelle's spine in curdled distress, drawing her brows tight over her eyes as she squeezed at the steering wheel. Her mind roiled in her head, desperate. Brenda already knew about the arrows, so there was no way she could mislead her.

Maybe she could catch her off-guard, get the gun out of her hands... the woman was a loose cannon. If she could make her snap again and grab the rifle...  

Brenda's head turned, gaze moving toward the windshield, attention wavering off into the distance for a moment. "I'm not letting him leave. I'm not letting any of you leave." escaped her in a growl, and Rochelle felt her heart rate spike. She was distracted. Would there be a better time?

Instinct went before reason, and Rochelle snapped her hand up to grab for the gun. Her palm struck
the barrel before she wrapped fingers around it, jerking the muzzle away from her head - and good thing she did.

Brenda immediately pulled the trigger, and the explosive gunfire deafened both of them in the contained space. Bullets pelleted the roof of the car, metal snapping like paper. The struggle sent the car veering off to the right as Rochelle leaned in to grab for the stock of the gun, trying to wrest it out of the other woman's grip, and Brenda clawed for her face.

The sound drowned out their yells, and it only took a second for Brenda to stop, the shots ringing in their ears like a far-off alarm.

The car hit the curb, bouncing heavily as the wheels struck the cement. Brenda's hand pushed Rochelle's chin up, but the pain didn't stop her from shoving all her weight forward. The butt of the gun snapped into Brenda's face, an audible crack sounding out as it collided with her cheekbone.

"Bitch!" she shrieked, and Rochelle barely had time to react before the dark haired woman returned the gesture. The muzzle of the gun cracked against the side of Rochelle's face, hitting her temple. The collision snapped her head to the side so sharply she felt herself come just to the precipice of blackout.

Going limp, Rochelle - out of purely reflexive self-preservation - retreated as quickly as she could, almost curling back against the door to get away from the other woman's grasp. Although Brenda seemed primed to keep after her, something stopped her.

The car grinded into the side of a building, glass breaking softly as it crushed its right headlight into the wood and scraped off the side mirror entirely. It eased to a stop there, momentum entirely gone, and there was nothing but the creaking of offended wood and the two women's heaving breaths.

Slowly, blinking through a splatter of blood from her struck cheek, Brenda raised her gun to aim it precisely at Rochelle's half-curled body. Rochelle could only half see, vision dark and head throbbing, but she struggled to straighten up in her seat, jaw set fiercely.

"...Drive. The. Fucking. Car." Brenda hissed, each word slow and harsh, spoken with more teeth than lips.

Rochelle didn't have to wonder why she wasn't killed. She was a hostage - a bargaining chip. The best way for Brenda to wiggle her way in until she had the opportunity to kill them all... and there was no doubt in Rochelle's mind that she would.

There was nothing but vengeance in those eyes.

Nothing at all, and especially not humanity.

Slowly, shaking, Rochelle reached down to pull the car into reverse and ease it back away from the house. Brenda's eyes locked back onto her face, and that terrible, deadened focus returned to her expression. Her fingertip played on the trigger, stroking it.

Breathing became difficult again.
"Turn off the car."

Rochelle obeyed stiffly. Her jaw was gritted so tight that her teeth ground together, a small bit of her tongue caught between her molars. It was pinched underneath the pressure - and it had been there so long she couldn't even feel the pain anymore.

Shifting the car into park with slow movements, cranking the gear shift with her right hand and then cautiously reaching up toward the car keys, Rochelle twisted them until the car sputtered and died. The silence in the moments following was thick, leaving only the soft bubbling of the engine as it cooled off.

Brenda kept the gun aimed at her, leaning in to snatch the keys from the ignition. They were bulky with keychains and tags, so she merely tucked the car keys in her jeans pocket and let the rest dangle against her hip.

Rochelle's struck cheek had started to swell, blood filling the thick bruise, and it left the lower lid of her right eye swollen and impeding her vision. She could only see the unclear blur of her captor, unwilling to turn her face toward the assault rifle directed at her head.

"Stay." The order came like one might snap off directions to a dog, and Rochelle felt her ears burn. She didn't move; didn't speak. Just listened to the creak of leather as Brenda straightened in her seat and the crackle of plastic and grating of metal as the woman opened up the car door. They were a few blocks away from the pawn shop and Rochelle felt her heart rate going wild in her throat.

Growling softly, the woman pushed herself out of the car, standing up on the asphalt. She drew the assault rifle against her hip and shrugged her sniper rifle higher on her shoulder. Brenda grabbed hold of the car door as she stepped to the side, gently pushing it until it was almost closed, resting against the locking mechanisms inside.

Alone in the car, Rochelle panicked in silence. Options, options - she had none.

She could hit the car horn. It would maybe give Coach a chance to realize something was wrong.. but it was also liable to bring a horde down on their heads. Brenda would throw her out of the car and let the infected do her work for her.

Her captor had thrown her hunting rifle into the backseat - but even if Rochelle got it, she didn't know if she could get the gun.. aim it.. and shoot before the Angel did. All it would take was one pull of the trigger and her enemy's assault rifle would have her full of holes.

*The boys would come up with something.* she self-berated angrily. *Nick would have a plan already. He would've had a plan the second this bitch shoved her gun in his face. I'm just -* But she didn't have time to waste on frustration, didn't get to indulge in hating herself for being caught off-guard. She had to start thinking clearly and quickly.

Brenda's shadow passed in front of the car, black melted over the glass as the shimmering air outside blurred her edges. She moved like a ghost, a flitting, stilted shape that darted around the hood and came to hunch by the driver's door.

Assault rifle casually placed against the glass, she reached down to the handle, opening it just as slowly as she'd closed her own. She twitched the gun to gesture Rochelle to get out, hissing with
slurred urgency, "Watch it. It's not too late to get yourself put down."

Dull eyes glinted above bared teeth, and Rochelle felt a chill dart up her spine. That half-dead, animalistic intent was getting very, very familiar.

Brenda looked more zombie than human.

Tensing her shoulders, Rochelle carefully slid her left leg out of the car... then her right... and then the rest of her body, not moving more than one limb at a time lest she set off the unhinged female just a few inches in front of her. She tried to draw herself in as small as she could as she got up to her feet, keeping both hands at her sides.

"What are you going to -" she started, quietly, but Brenda hissed her into silence. The Angel reached up with her free hand, drawing her katana out of its holster on her hip. The metal was almost black with gore, caked and smeared on the edges.

She raised it on a stiff arm, pointing toward the brick pawn shop just down the road from them. "You first." she uttered, half-threateningly, her tongue sweeping over the flaking shape of her lower lip as hazel eyes darted over Rochelle's body.

Inhaling sharply, Rochelle moved to step forward, turning her eyes toward the shop with a tense jaw - when Brenda added, harder, "Slow. Be a good girl." A subtle scowl touched the producer's brows, bitterly fisting her hands at her thighs. The condescension bit at her, an offense that stirred her out of fear and into anger.

Brenda didn't say more. She let her katana swivel to graze its tip down Rochelle's back, dirty steel playing at the grey fabric with caressing threat. She understood the message clear enough: one wrong move, and the sword would slide between her vertebrae.

Footsteps matched in perfect time by the brunette behind her, Rochelle moved carefully to step up on the sidewalk. The blade pressed into the small of her back never wavered, only pressed closer… so close she felt the fabric of her shirt giving way.

For the first time in her life, Rochelle wished they would run into infected. She'd have given anything - anything - for a Smoker or a Hunter to crawl out from some dark hole and snatch Brenda up, or at least force her to use a gun and alert Coach.

Unfortunately, she wasn't that lucky. The horde they'd withstood while saving Christophe had cleared most of the infected near the pawnshop. The street was empty and Rochelle hated it.

Staring down the road toward the blockaded pawnshop that was fast approaching, Rochelle nervously tightened her fingers against her thighs. If she was going to be a hostage, then she damn well wasn't going to be a complacent one.

The words she said to Coach were her best weapon - just a handful of words she had to choose in seconds, with the power to sway the advantage their way. If Coach knew something was wrong, he'd come out armed and aware.

If he didn't...

What was she supposed to say? If Brenda sensed trouble she'd snap, and Rochelle wasn't looking to get any more intimate with that katana than she already was. It had to be casual and subtle but mean something…

But she was panicking. Her heart was beating like a hummingbird's, face numb with heat. How was
she supposed to get across her situation without her captor realizing the trick? Anger surged in her veins at just how helpless she felt - and then Brenda suddenly hissed behind her, "Far enough."

They were just at the edge of the pawnshop's block. The building rose up, all musty brick, just feet before them. Rochelle could see the door, blocked up by a tall dresser pressed tight to the doorframe. There was little time left and certainly not enough to come up with a plan.

Brenda leaned in, hot breath leaving a clammy wetness on Rochelle's ear, to growl, "Call them out. Don't do anything you know you'll regret."

It struck Rochelle like a punch straight to the gut - 'them.' Brenda didn't know. She didn't know Chris was near death. She hadn't seen the Witch attack, or heard him screaming and realized he was so badly injured. She thought Chris was fine, and just hiding away with them.

Steadying herself with a shuddered breath and a dry swallow, Rochelle felt something very near a laugh crush her tongue against the roof of her mouth. She felt manic, terrified, riding on adrenaline and fear. That was her chance.

"Coach!" she shouted, inwardly shocked at how level her voice was. "You in there?"

The heavy noise of her own heart filled the seconds before Coach responded. His low tones were burdened with exhaustion, but there was a quiet relief behind them. "Babygirl! Y'all made it back. I was startin' to get worried."

As much as hearing his voice sent warmth tingling down her body, it also sent a large measure of tension through her.

"Yeah," she uttered with a stunted laugh, quickly continuing, every word bringing her closer and closer to the ones that really mattered. Please, Coach. Please play it smart. If you walk out here without a gun... "We found a nice stash, it should get us through a while. The boys are just unloading, uh..."

Her tongue felt like cotton in her mouth; her voice was tense, stifled.

"You wanna get Chris - out here?" She was terrified to push it, but what if that wasn't enough? She had to make it clear. "I know he's sleeping, but Ellis really did a number on himself and we could use the help carrying some things in."

Rochelle knew the words didn't sit well when Coach went quiet.

She was left hanging on air, her whole body shaking with nerves. In her mind, his voice played over and over - "Girl, what're you talkin' 'bout?" - with severe finality. She could hear it clear as day... all the phrases he could say and tones he could use. A million ways to doom her; maybe both of them.

When he spoke, Coach spoke with clarity. Short, simple, like he were just testing the waters.

"Where the boys at?"

She could have snapped in half from the tension. He was suspicious, and that was the best news she'd heard in hours. Keeping her voice casual was the hardest thing she'd done in her life. "I told you, Coach, they're starting to unload the car. You and Chris come on out."

Brenda was getting nervous. Shifting. Rochelle felt it in the way the katana nudged against her, and she knew the woman's patience was paper-thin.
Rochelle startled when the dresser suddenly shook, realizing Coach was moving it out of the way. She didn't have time to exhale before Brenda's arm suddenly snatched around her head, forearm clamping messily over her mouth and her other arm sliding to bring her katana in a press against Rochelle's throat. She held the grip backwards in her palm, blade pointing downward, dirty steel cold against the other woman's neck.

She huffed against Brenda's forearm as the smell of sweat and dirt made her head reel. The urge to struggle was overwhelming, but the metal digging into her skin forced her to hold still. All she could do was grit her teeth and straighten her spine, trying to ignore how Brenda eased flat to her back, breasts pressing against her shoulderblades and pelvis flush with hers.

It was enough to bring bile to the back of her dry throat - the contact and the stench. The pressure of Brenda's stifling arm made the urge to bite her rise, violently, but the blade against her neck dissuaded that line of thinking.

A sense of resignation threatened to sink in when the dresser screeched feet against the wood floor inside, easing out of the doorway... only to switch places with a flood of relief when the first thing she saw was the twin barrels of Coach's shotgun.

He isn't unarmed, thank God.

Coach came out left foot first, easing around the corner of the doorway cautiously. His eyes flicked sideways, quickly followed by his gun. It took him just a second to comprehend what was in front of him. When he did, he froze, nostrils flared wide.

Brenda's voice was tense when she barked, "Both of you. Out." Suddenly, she wasn't so amused.

Anger filled Coach slowly. Not just in his eyes - his whole body rose until he seemed huge, chest inflating and shoulders lifting, fingers crushingly tight on his shotgun. He'd never before looked quite that fearsome.

He didn't waste time asking her if she was okay. He knew she wasn't. "Let her go." he demanded, raising his shotgun till it was level with his shoulders, finger twitching toward the trigger but not quite curling over it. "You don't wanna do this, girl."

Brenda didn't laugh. She hissed, spit dusting Rochelle's ear with every harsh syllable. "Or what? You'll shoot me? I'm sure it'd go right through your babygirl, if you wanna take her as collateral."

Coach's fingers tightened.

"Where's Christophe?" the brunette demanded, broken eyes darting toward the doorway as her teeth caught against her lower lip. She raised her voice, tone sharpening with a taunting edge. "There's no back door, I know that. Is the coward hiding? From me?"

Eyes darkening, Coach seemed to shift. He jerked his shotgun upward, stiffly shaking his head. "No. Boy was checkin' out the houses around here when y'all showed up. You might wanna watch it." That panicked her, and she darted a glance around the street. "He took a huntin' rifle, an' if he don't already got a bead on yo' ass, he sure will real soon. You wanna talk, girl?"

Abruptly, Brenda stopped.

A grin tugged the edge of her mouth up, and she cocked her head, re-foocusing her eyes on the football coach. Turning her chin, she murmured into Rochelle's ear with a suddenly husky tone. "You should teach him how to lie."
Lifting her head, she asserted, louder, "See, what's funny about that.. is I happen to know just how many hunting rifles you have. Two. She had one -" she shrugged her shoulder to jostle Rochelle. "- and that asshole in the suit has the other."

Her smile widened, pleased. "Which leaves you high and dry."

She twitched the katana so fast Rochelle almost didn't realize she'd been cut before Coach shouted a booming "NO!", body lurching forward a step. A sharp pain etched along the side of her neck, and for a delirious moment, Rochelle had no idea how deep or serious it was. Maybe the blade had slid through her jugular and she'd simply not recognized it yet.

She surged back against Brenda's front in reflex, trying to get away from the blade, breath shallowed to a hiccupped rate - but the hot blood that snuck down the side of her neck was just a small trickle. She was left dizzied, but relieved.

"Don't fuck with me." Brenda stated flatly. "Where. Is. He?"

There was just a long enough silence between the three for Coach to reluctantly drag his gaze back toward the Angel, teeth gritted. The eldest jerked his head toward the pawnshop. "In there." he muttered, voice loaded with withheld anger. "Ain't doin' good."

Brenda chewed her teeth together, shifting her eyes over his face judgingly. "What's that supposed to -" Rochelle interrupted her, grunting in frustration against her forearm. The brunette narrowed her eyes before peeling her arm away.

Clenching her jaw against the urge to spit, Rochelle spoke with a rough voice. "He saved us from a Witch. It hurt him, he.. lost his left arm. The whole thing."

She could see that crack again; the break that sundered Brenda's whole self in two like wet paper, clear as day in the lifeless gleam of hazel eyes and pale sweat of her skin. The woman stared at her - then up at Coach, whose expression was grim - then hissed, low and sharp and demanding. "No. You're lying. You're lying to me again."

Rochelle tried to shake her head without moving against the blade to her throat. “I-I’m not. I’m sorry. I don’t know if he’s going to survi-"

“You killed him.” Brenda uttered, hollow. Rochelle tried to open her mouth, but the woman was already off, digging the blade tighter against her throat. The pressure made her squirm, tensing, breath halting. She was afraid to swallow, lest the bob of her neck slit it open against the steel. “You killed him, you fucking cunt.”

Coach lifted his left hand, palm flat, tone urgent but more level now. “Boy ain’t dead yet. Don’t be jumpin’ the gun here. He ain’t dead, an’ you still got a chance to turn this ‘round, girl.”

A frantic laugh escaped Brenda, lifting her other hand to point her assault rifle sharply at Coach. The sword eased away from its tight press on Rochelle’s throat again, sliding to cross diagonally over her chest instead. “Get him out here.” she hissed.

Hesitating, the big man shook his head slowly from side to side. He spoke honestly and carefully, eyes darting between the two women - and then past them, for just a split second. “I…” His posture stiffened, speaking a little quicker. “We can’t be movin’ him. He’s gotta stay stable if he’s gonna get better. You wanna go in, let’s go in.”

The Angel laughed again, harsher this time, her eyes narrowing with threat. Her voice trembled as she spoke, and something in it read like fear. “I’m not asking you. I’m telling you. Get him out
here, or I will cut her throat. I’m not letting you kill him, like you killed Jerry.”

The sharp Northern voice that came from behind them sent both women jumping out of their skins - though for different reasons. Coach’s expression held strong with thinly veiled anger.

“I’ll take credit for that one, actually.”
Chapter 120

Sharp shock distorted Brenda’s features into a scowl. She spun on her heel, violently taking Rochelle with her. Both of them stumbled as she dragged her backwards, retreating more into the road as the brunette choked out a laugh and flicked a glance down the street.

“Looks like the whole family’s here.”

Rochelle struggled to breathe with the katana pinned so close to her throat, eyes widening as she took in the two men approaching slowly. Nick and Ellis stood side by side, drenched in sweat and clearly winded.

Nick was wheezing softly under his breath, expression masked with a hateful veneer, and Ellis was hunched over his injured ribs. They’d run hard and suffered for it - not that exhaustion stopped the conman from drawing into a cocky smirk.

"Only thing I regret is not getting the chance to actually see him go down." He ignored the way Ellis tilted a confused look toward him, and ignored the slow way his words processed. The Georgian didn't say anything - just frowned, a frown which only grew in the moments that followed. "Your boyfriend was a huge jackass."

The Angel quickly drew into just the right position to keep Rochelle between her and the three men now opposing her. Coach’s expression had fallen to something blatantly furious, and he kept his shotgun pointed at the two women even as he glanced toward Nick and Ellis.

Brenda met Nick’s gaze dead-on. “You trying to be funny, asshole? I’m not in the mood.” She was more than happy to illustrate her point with a nudge of her cheek against Rochelle’s ear, making the shorter woman cringe, unable to pull away.

As much as the sight of the two men was a huge relief, it also struck her oddly.

Nick was holding a hunting rifle, Brenda had been right about that. They could have snuck up from an alleyway, and one bullet to her skull would have been enough. Then again… Nick's been missing shots all morning. If he wasn't willing to risk it, he'd never make Ellis do it.

Suddenly, doubt flooded her. They have a plan... don't they?

"You kidding? I am so in the mood." Nick shot back, cocking his head to one side as a grin cracked over one side of his mouth. "You're one big joke, sweetheart, and the punchline's got something to do with a padded room."

Brenda clenched her hand on the grip of her sword, darting a glance back toward Coach. The big man hadn't moved. He wasn't daring enough to try anything, not with Rochelle hanging in the balance, but there was frustration painted all over his face. He was pissed, and the sight made Angel's lips twitch into a grin.

Ellis cleared his throat, finally breaking into the conversation before Nick could ratchet the conflict up any more. There was a strained huff to his voice as he and Nick advanced slowly. "Listen, y'all, we can talk this out. Okay?" He turned his shotgun in his hands, dragging the strap off his shoulder and holding the gun out on flat palms in a subservient gesture. "Ain't nobody gotta get hurt."

Nick struggled to stifle a scowl, shooting a glance at the Georgian beside him before angrily releasing his hold on the trigger of his rifle. He flipped it, holding it by the barrel, expression stuck
in disgust. He wasn't happy, either, and hid it about as well as Coach did.

When Brenda flicked her gaze back toward Nick and Ellis, it was the younger man she focused on. A little glint touched her eyes, and her gaze scanned over his face slowly, examining his features and lingering with a tight squint as if to find a weakness.

He flinched, just a little.

"Far enough, you two," she spat.

They both halted a yard or two away, guns held in front of them. Coach couldn't hold himself in any longer, hissing angrily, "What the hell are you boys thinkin'?!" Neither responded, though Nick's expression was one of dull agreement.

Brenda held back laughter, a restrained little giggle hitching in the back of her throat. She bent her head down, pressing her mouth near Rochelle's ear to whisper with a mocking purr at the edge of her voice. "There's your cavalry, princess."

Rochelle jerked her head away from the touch of cold lips, biting hard at the inside of her cheek as her eyes started stinging and muttering a defiant, "Fuck you." She refused to believe her teammates were laying down their arms without a plan… but her hope was flagging.

"You people." Brenda's head shook slowly, a kind of serene lift to her mouth. "You're incredible. How are you even still alive?"

Nick gave a hollow smirk, raising his voice to retort. He ignored Ellis' furtive little glance, trying to urge him to stop the antagonizing. "You should really be taking notes, considering all the rest of your team is sorta... y'know. Dead or dying. Guess that whole 'chosen ones' thing didn't work out too great."

The brunette stared him down, smile gone. Her expression went vapid - then furious.

Nick, however, wasn't one to flinch.

"Let's get those weapons off you." Brenda pulled her arm from where it was draped over Rochelle's shoulder, re-adjusting her grip on her assault rifle. She slid her finger against the trigger, straightening out her arm and raising the weapon so she could gesture with it. "All of you. So we can talk."

When Ellis took a step forward, Rochelle broke. She jerked hard against Brenda's grip, feeling the katana's edge press into her neck as she shouted out, "You can't -!"

Overpowering her immediately, the taller woman had Rochelle wrestled back into silence within an instant. She could only fight so hard when that dirty blade was one swift slide from slitting her throat, and the way Brenda jerked it tighter against her skin had her gasping for air. "Shh, shh," was crooned against her ear, taunting. "Let's play nice."

Once the woman stilled in her arms, angrily panting, Brenda gestured with her M-16 again. She grinned slyly at Ellis, cocking her head with a cursory glance down his body. "C'mere, cutie. And bring your friends' guns, too. Both of them."

The mechanic gulped, head bobbing as he darted a glance between Nick and Coach. He was faced by anger and disappointment, Coach shaking his head fiercely back and forth while Nick gritted his jaw in a far subtler but no less furious gesture.
He might have lost his nerve had Nick not jerked his wrist, offering the gun out to him. Green eyes refused to match his, but there was something in the small movement that, if nothing else, resigned control to the younger man.

It was that tiny sense of encouragement that pushed Ellis to move. He tucked his shotgun underneath his arm, lowering his eyes slightly as his left hand grasped around the hunting rifle's stock and peeled it away from Nick's hand. Tucking his arm into the shoulder strap, Ellis bit his lip, beginning to step away and lift his eyes toward Coach -

- but Brenda uttered, "His pistol, too." and Ellis had to stop.

Nick had the most impassive look glazed over the agitated downward tilt to his mouth. It almost seemed like he might try to argue - however, it was only after a split-second of thought that he growled. He reached a hand back to tug his dress shirt up out from its tuck under his belted slacks, baring the Magnum nestled against his lower back and holstered in by his belt.

The gambler yanked it out by the grip and stuck that out toward Ellis, too. Chewing at his lower lip, shamefaced, Ellis took it.

There was a cruel kind of enjoyment plastered all across Brenda's face, practically tasting the discontent in the air as Ellis made the agonizingly long walk to Coach's side. The entire time, the ex-football player's head was shaking like a jostled bobblehead, rounded jawline getting tighter as Ellis grew closer.

Ellis' mouth started to open, eyes squinting faintly in a look that came close to pain, but Coach never let him talk.

Unlike Nick, he looked Ellis right in the face as he angrily jammed his double-barreled shotgun out toward the younger man. It was the fiercest Ellis could ever remember him looking. Disappointed. Hurt sent his shoulders drooping even as he silently took the gun from the other man's hands and tucked it to his chest.

Inhaling a deep breath, calming, Ellis turned around, facing Brenda. He swallowed hard and started slowly walking a straight line toward her. All four guns were carefully held in non-threatening positions: his shotgun under his arm, Nick's rifle slung over his shoulder, his Magnum and Coach's shotgun in either hand but with his fingers away from the triggers.

"I didn't expect you to be the sellout here." Brenda mused with a wild grin, watching Ellis slowly step toward her. He tightened his jaw against the jibe, ears reddening, in silence. "No more sugar, huh? Guess you're a one trick pony. Too bad."

The youth stopped just in front of her, Rochelle trapped between them. He chanced the smallest look toward her face, but there was such abject despair on her features that he couldn't stand it.

"Go on. Drop 'em."

Slowly, Ellis lowered into a half-crouch, lips drawing into a frustrated line. Brenda noticed, smirking slightly and running her tongue over her upper lip. She couldn't resist continuing to rile him, a gleeful hum to her voice. "And my girl here thought you'd come save her. That's what you get for trusting people."

As Ellis gently placed the weapons down in a pile on the road, one after the other, he didn't expect Rochelle to say anything. Her voice was strained, and there was a layer of rawness to it that made his gaze lift.
"... Don't listen to her." Their eyes met, then broke away again, and Ellis was left with the faint image of Rochelle's eyes growing wet as she forced out words. "It's.. it's okay, Ellis." His brow knotted softly, heart aching in his chest. "You did the right thing."

His hands slowly flattened over the shape of his shotgun as he placed it at the top of the pile, blue eyes lifting up to glance out from underneath the bill of his cap. He didn't look at Rochelle - he looked straight at Brenda, matching her gaze solidly.

"You came back fer Chris."

The woman snorted, running her thumb along the hilt of her katana in thought. The sword was heavy, and with all the weapons now in her control, Brenda let her wrist relax. The blade settled against Rochelle's shoulder; it was still a threat, but one that allowed her to breathe. She slumped faintly, eyes lowering, entrenched in a stinging sense of shock.

Had they really given in - just like that?

There was no one else coming, no one else to save them. Brenda could shoot them all down where they stood and there was nothing to stop her. Surely they knew that? Surely Nick, at least, knew that?

"Nah. She came back 'cause she missed us. Adorable, really." the Northerner muttered, humor grating in his voice. He received a fierce glance from the katana-wielding brunette, so genuinely threatening that he couldn't bite back a small grin of victory.

"Shut up, Nick." Coach growled from where he stood, fists clenched at his sides. The gambler barely reacted, shooting a small glance toward the eldest before shaking his head. Coach took a small step forward, an aggressive tension in his shoulders. "This funny to you?"

Nick's grin disappeared, replaced with the minute quirk of a frown at the edges of his lips. "Yeah, sure. Hilarious." He almost leisurely dragged his gaze toward Rochelle, brow twitching upward. "I find this whole situation hilarious."

The look suddenly caught Rochelle's attention. There was something... something beneath the surface. A feeling, an inkling, that surged hesitant hope through her veins that they might actually be playing Brenda after all. Rochelle blinked past watery eyes and started watching.

What am I missing..? Shit..

"How about all of you shut up?" Brenda hissed, lifting her assault rifle to point it straight into Ellis' face. The Southerner stared down the muzzle of the gun, no real panic in his eyes, but the rest of the group tensed - including Nick, who tightened his fingers into a curl until his nails dug into his palm.

"Bring Christophe out."

Ellis cleared his throat, slowly standing back up from where he'd bent down to pile the guns together. Brenda followed his face with the nose of her assault rifle but didn't seem to fear his movement. As he reached his feet, he gestured flatly with both hands. "No."

Brenda's sharp jaw set forward, humming under her breath as she licked at her teeth. She glared, shaking her head, fury rising at the refusal. "No? When will you traitors understand - I'm not asking." she spat out. "Get him and put him in the car."

"We can't." Ellis explained, voice as coaxing as possible. "It really ain't a good idea. If we move
him, he might not make it." Blue eyes darted to Rochelle's face as he took a gentle step backward, matching her gaze with a strange fierceness before returning his to Brenda's. "He ain't strong enough."

The Angel tightened her finger on the trigger, mimicking Ellis' step with one of her own to keep in line with him. Rochelle was forced to stumble forward with her, foot kicking out to balance herself. The motion collided the toe of her boot with the end of Nick's hunting rifle, laying on the ground, in a clank of metal and wood.

It was there that Rochelle pieced it together, and her relief was tempered by panic.

They had a plan, and it was her.

Nick couldn't have shot Brenda with Rochelle so close. It was too likely to miss - or Ellis wasn't willing to let him. Instead, they surrendered the guns... placing them just in front of Rochelle... and lulled the Angel into a false sense of security. It had worked, after all; the woman's katana was limp and relaxed against her shoulder, like Ro' were the least of her concerns.

Brenda had a height advantage, but Rochelle had the element of surprise, now. If she could just drop to her knees, she could get a gun and turn the tables. This close-range, there'd be no aiming involved.

*Drop, grab a gun, turn, pull the trigger. Shoot her.*

The realization must have shown on her face, because when she looked back up, Nick's eyes were cold as ice on hers.

"I don't think he'll make it, period, if I'm honest." he interjected, tone humorless. He was buying her time, and keeping Brenda's focus. "Witches are like a woodchipper on legs. Or a giant pair of weepy hedge trimmers." The Angel stared at him, and he kept going, eyes slitting in a self-satisfied squint. "If you came back to kill the guy, he's half there already. Not even worth the bullet."

Brenda's eyes widened, hazel going taut with fury. "I'm not here to kill him, you idiot. I'm here to get him back." the woman hissed, the frills on the chest of her purple blouse taking a gentle heave as her breath shallowed. Something bled through her voice - something desperate. "He doesn't belong with you."

Raising his hands in a plaintive gesture, Ellis tried to reason with her, voice as soft as he could manage. "If you care 'bout him... this ain't the way tuh save him."

Something in Brenda's posture went tight, but it was a disdainful laugh that escaped her, and a suddenly wistful fury that crossed her expression. "So I should leave him with you? Jerry's dead because of you - Christophe is all I have. I'm not letting you keep him."

Nick snorted, cocking his head, arms frigidly lifting to cross over his chest. He moved confidently but slowly, like sudden movements might startle Brenda. "What happened to 'no friends, no family'? Can't hack it alone?"

The Angel snarled her lips back from her teeth, bristling. She jerked another step forward, raising the muzzle of her assault rifle to point instead at Nick. Rochelle was forced to follow again, pushed by Brenda's body against her back - she was within arms' reach of the pile of guns, now.

"Don't push it. The only reason you're still breathing is because Chris would -"

She froze. Something flickered in her eyes, like visible thought, and whatever emotion was left on
her face drained into cold realization. "If he's so injured… he won't even know what happened."
Brenda muttered, as if the fact hadn't occurred to her until that moment. "I can just tell him the
zombies got you."

She laughed, voice crystal clear, the sweet sound so disparate from her wild countenance… and
then she braced her elbow, finger tightening on the trigger.

There was no time left to consider the consequences.

Rochelle lurched, thrusting her palm against the grip of Brenda's assault rifle, sending it wildly
askew. When the trigger pulled, it spat a violent spray of bullets, the explosive pops sending stabs
of pain through her eardrums. They peppered the road, puffs of black asphalt following in their
wake.

The producer caught a flash of blue and yellow: Nick and Ellis throwing themselves to the ground
to get away from the gunfire. She couldn't tell if they'd taken hits, and there wasn't time to look or
let the thought terrify her. She had to focus.

She kept her hand fisted over Brenda's, forcing the Angel's finger to remain stuck on the trigger,
rapidly expending the magazine. It was more reflex than conscious thought, arm locked and
muscles clenched to force the assault rifle as far to the side as possible.

Too far, in fact. Her weight pushed the gun to the side until bullets flecked onto their sedan's nose
where it sat down the street. Dull metallic thunks sounded as they struck the grille and vanity plate
in a wide spread, along with a pop and the fierce whining sound of air escaping a tire.

Brenda's voice roared in her ear, distant and muffled, and the katana jerked up from her shoulder as
if to slash for her throat. Reflex sent Rochelle's other hand up, and before she could think, she
clasped her palm over the blade to stop it.

Pain split down her nerves as the blade slid against her flesh. She didn't know how bad it was - all
she could do was shove with her hand, holding the sword at bay. Most of the leverage was at
Brenda's wrist, twisted awkwardly. It wasn't hard to contest her force, but if the Angel wised up and
yanked the blade vertically… it might just slit through her hand entirely.

She had to do something else.

Rochelle was aware of her own voice yelling incoherently, and before Brenda could react, she
lifted a leg and stomped her heel back blindly. It collided with something, and there was a dull
cracking sound and a heightened snarl of fury - of pain.

All she knew was the Angel pulled away from her, staggering, and she could hear the clatter as
Brenda threw her spent rifle to the ground. She seized the opportunity to lunge down to her knees,
and grab at Nick's hunting rifle. Blood smeared along the grip as her sliced palm gushed against it.
The slickened wood almost dropped from her hands, and the pain almost made her flinch and let
go… but she gritted her teeth and held on.

Rochelle didn't twist around so much as throw herself onto her back, rolling, dodging away in the
fear that Brenda had advanced on her in the time it took to collect the gun. She landed past the pile
of surrendered weaponry, thudding flat on her back and catching her knees in a bend, the gun aimed
up from her prone position.

The Angel's katana stopped mere inches from the barrel of the rifle, Brenda barely skidding to a
stop where she'd lunged to impale it through the producer's body. She was unsteady, stance
wobbled; her weight was balanced mostly on one leg in a way that betrayed how Rochelle's kick had damaged her other knee.

They both froze. There was a moment of silence, only broached by the rustled sound of Nick and Ellis picking themselves off the ground, and Coach advancing cautiously.

Rochelle's finger was on the trigger, hunting rifle aimed right at Brenda's navel. She trembled, holding still - she didn't want to shoot. Didn't know how. Her muscles protested, the rifle suddenly heavy as lead in her hands. Heavy and hot, like it were burning her skin.

*Oh God. I can't -*

Gazing from the muzzle of the rifle to Rochelle's face in a slow drag, a sickly smile baring her teeth, the Angel chuckled. It was an almost airless sound, more a shrug of her body than an actual noise. Maybe she saw the hesitance, and figured the other woman wouldn't shoot.

Maybe she didn't care.

Something spiteful touched her eyes, right before she flipped her grip on the katana and hefted it, like she meant to drive it down through Rochelle's abdomen. Like it was a poker, and she was merely collecting litter on the roadside. Brenda took a step forward, haggard from her injured knee, and her arm raised.

Rochelle wished she could say she didn't register pulling the trigger. She wanted to have the gun just go off in her hands. She wanted to have it be a blur of adrenaline and motion, something she'd forget. Something transient and far-off. Like a dream, with her mind losing its grasp on more and more details with each passing second.

That wasn't what happened.

She felt every muscle in her hand and her arm as she pulled it. She knew with clarity the instant where her body shifted, the instant where she decided to do it. It was with full awareness that she pulled her index finger into a curl. It was with conscious choice that she felt the trigger resist, catching - and pulled harder.

She didn't even aim, but Brenda was so close it didn't matter.

The bullet pierced her midsection, and it did so almost unceremoniously. The shot had gone askew from her core, hitting just between her navel and waist. There was no blast or force. She didn't stagger. It almost didn't stop her at all - and then dark red blood pooled up through the purple fabric of her blouse where it stretched over her hip.

Then she did stumble.

The Angel wobbled forward, then went lurching unsteadily backwards until her heel hit the edge of the sidewalk and she went down. A keen left her, enraged, landing hard atop her sniper rifle and dropping her sword in favour of clasping both hands over the growing spot of blood.

"Fuck -" escaped her lips, gasped. "You - bitch -"

Rochelle didn't realize her teammates had started running until there were suddenly three sets of hands on her. Coach grabbed around her waist, and nearly picked her up entirely. Ellis' hands landed on her shoulders, ghosting a touch.

"Ro’… Christ. You a'ight?" Coach's voice was drawn in something very near agony, tone short and
pained. He tried to meet her gaze, but she couldn't look away from Brenda. From the blood blossoming in the fabric of her blouse.

_I... did it._

Nick's hand touched her waist - but only to push underneath her, grabbing his Magnum from the ground. He straightened and stepped past her, drawing close to Brenda, silent at first. His expression was impassive as he watched the blood dampen and then trickle around her clutching fingers.

It was almost casually that he raised his pistol and trained it on her, and his tone was conversational when he spoke. "You made the wrong choice. Should've kidnapped Ellis - he probably wouldn't have shot you."

Brenda's head lolled back, hitting the concrete, and she laughed. It was a sleepy and drunken sound, honest amusement at the wings of her wheezed breathing. "Should've killed you... first thing."

Nick grunted, like affable agreement.

Though Rochelle's fingers were numb as Ellis pried the rifle out of them, they dumbly relented and loosened. He handled the gun almost squeamishly, avoiding the huge smear of bright red blood from her palm. "Yer hurt..." he mumbled, and it was the frightened tremble to his voice that shocked her into sense.

Rochelle forced her eyes to leap toward Ellis' face, distantly aware of the wetness falling down her cheeks. They didn't feel like tears - but there was nothing else they could be, she supposed. "I'm okay." Her voice sounded far away, like her ears were stuffed with cotton.

The mechanic set the rifle down, hand sliding to cradle under her slit palm. Blood was welling up fast, painting her skin a ruby colour, but the pain was almost an afterthought. Her nerves buzzed with something else, and she felt like she was floating a few feet above her body.

_Am I?_

"I'm sorry, Ro' - I didn't want... I didn't..." Ellis was mumbling under his breath, shaking his head, jaw going tight as he clenched his teeth against a wave of emotion. "I didn't mean tuh make you -"

There, coldness leeched into her body. Her senses snapped into sharp focus as if her body only then recognized what it had done. It was like jolting awake, forced to contest the strong feeling that she'd been dropped from a height - and there was nothing but dread and pain in the pit of her stomach. "You didn't."

She shifted as if to get up, but both men held her down, wordless sounds of protest escaping them in unison. Rochelle inhaled, eyes snapping shut. She didn't want to relent; she wanted to get up, walk it off, escape the sick feeling tugging and cutting at her insides. "She did."

Brenda tried to laugh again, but the attempt turned into a sputter, seizing up the muscles of her midsection. Nick took advantage of the moment to bend down, Magnum still trained toward her face. He grabbed the barrel of her sniper rifle and tore it off her shoulder, yanking the strap down her arm.

The jostling drew a snarl of pain from her, and she rolled slightly onto her side. "You're kidding you...rselves." The bleeding accelerated with the twist, staining to her waistline as she turned. Her words were taut and strained with agony, but she spat them out with force. "This - this is all there is
It had seemed, at least for the moment, Nick was fairly calm - like the mortal wound she was suffering had defused his anger. However, with a flash-fire of resentment, he lifted his bad leg and kicked the toe of his dress shoe into the backs of her clutching hands.

It was barely more than a loose swing, driven purely by the momentum of his leg, but even that was enough to send Brenda curling around her midsection. She let out a howl of anguish as her body spasmed around the gunshot.

"Nick -" escaped Ellis, tone fractured around the name. "Don't…" It was more a plea than a chastisement, but it was enough. The gambler let his weight slump back onto both heels, brow arching up in a sarcastic and hollow facsimile of innocence.

"You wanna hear her talk?" he muttered, disbelieving, expression falling into idle disinterest. He plucked at his dress shirt, peeling the sweat-stained fabric away from his body with his free hand. "I'm pretty done, myself."

When Rochelle pushed as if to stand again, her teammates let her. With a hand steadying behind her back, Coach helped her catch her footing, even as Ellis mimicked her posture the whole way to stay at her side. His hand was still clutched under hers, but she gently pried it free, curling her fingers and holding her arm to her chest instead.

Steadying, initially afraid her knees might buckle, Rochelle lifted her gaze toward Brenda. She took a few steps, drawing away from Coach and Ellis. "Why?"

Nick crossed one arm over his chest, leaving the other to maintain his Magnum's threat on the prone woman. His expression moved into something disgruntled, but he didn't say anything.

Brenda barely acknowledged Rochelle at first, too focused on cradling around her wound. "I thought you came back for revenge." Exhaustion was settling in as the adrenaline drained, and Rochelle found her hand pulsing with jagged pain. It was hard to keep her fingers from twitching, and every flex sent fire over burst skin. "But you weren't even going to kill us, not until you realized Chris might not find out."

That was enough to catch the Angel's attention, and she struggled in a gasp, lowering her chin to slant a glare toward Rochelle. Her eyes were dull - resigned. The dying woman didn't look like a wounded animal like she expected. The wild energy was gone.

That was a little worse.

"Things -" Brenda began, but then blood fell from her lips. The sensation seemed to startle her, chin lowering, but she merely ran her tongue over her mouth to lick away the crimson trickle. She swallowed. "I used to understand. It used to… make sense."

For all the world, she sounded lost.

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Rochelle twitched a brow, sliding her hands to clasp together. It only ground the pain in and squelched blood between her palms, but she interlaced her fingers and applied pressure, gritting through it. "What did?"

The Angel shifted a hand away from her wound, reaching down to her thigh. Nick tensed, but only a little. She had no weapons, even if she had the strength left to wield them, so her movements held little threat to him. "Hey -" he uttered, shifting faintly to nudge his Magnum in the air.
Her fingers were stained red when she grasped at the keys hooked into her pocket. It wasn't until she circled trembling digits around the fob buried amidst the keychain that anyone might've realized her intent - and that was far too late.

Brenda grinned a little, right before her thumb depressed the panic button.

"Survival."
The sedan whooped into a spiraling cry, chirps turning into wheedled shrieks. Nick shouted out in incoherent anger, dropping down to a crouch to wrest the keys from her. He shoved his Magnum against her cheek, but the Angel didn't even fight him, fingers going limp on the keychain.

She tried to laugh but only choked up more blood.

Coach charged back to the gun pile, scooping up their weaponry without more than a gruff "Shit." He grabbed up his shotgun in one hand, Ellis' in the other. The youngest survivor took it from him, head swiveling up to glance frantically about their surroundings as the car alarm echoed along the street.

"We're gonna have company if we don't shut that off!" he hollered, voice going taut.

Brenda fisted her other hand in the bottom of Nick's shirt as he yanked the keychain from her fingers, smearing blood into the fabric in a limp grasp. She whispered to him, the car alarm wailing over her words, and only he caught the fractured and breathy sentence.

"Tell Chris… I did it. I did Sean."

The gambler grimaced, shrugging violently away from her grip before the woman could make more of a mess of his shirt. It took a second or two longer than he wanted to hit the panic switch again, and the car quieted with a plaintive chirrup.

There was silence for a moment, except for the faint wheedle of Brenda's worsening exhale and inhale. The whole team froze, listening to the muddled breeze that whistled through the air. None of them spoke… like if they held their breath, the calm might maintain itself.

They were not so lucky.

The din rose up, far-off screams inciting more and more to rally. Although they had killed so many in their surroundings, it seemed there was no end to the infected. They had some breathing room before the horde hit them this time, at least.

"Fuck." escaped Nick, shoving the keys into his slacks' pocket. He shoulderred Brenda's sniper, slipping his arm through the strap and letting it slap against his spine. Straightening, it seemed for a moment like he might kick the prone woman again - but she ranked low on his list of priorities, suddenly.

Instead, he leaned down to swipe up her katana from the concrete, holstering his Magnum so he could grip it with both hands. He weighed it, tested his grip - it was heavy, but not cumbersome. Still, he wasn't in a rush to use it with his injured shoulder. "We got a problem. Plan?"

He carefully gripped the sword, sliding it between his belt and his slacks so it laid flat against his outer thigh. Brenda merely watched him claim her things, almost disinterested. She was quieter now, focus faltering and her eyes gaining a pale sheen.

Coach pulled his shotgun to his shoulder, aiming it down toward the ground with a fierce shake of his head. "Bunker in the shop again. We took a horde before, we can take another one. We hold strong and clean up."

Nodding her head, Rochelle started to move back, crouching to pick up Nick's hunting rifle from
the ground. "What do we… do with her?" As she took the gun and straightened, however, Coach was grabbing at her arm to catch her attention.

"Babygirl, you just hang tight on that. You don't need to be shootin' wit' that hand. Just keep pressure on it." He saw the protest stirring on her face, shaking his head with quick reassurance. They'd had this argument too recently to re-hash it. "I know, I know. If we need it, you can help. Just don't be the frontline."

Rochelle didn't have the energy to fight. She shrugged the rifle onto her shoulder and wrapped her hand back around her split palm, thumb bracing over the wound, trying to staunch the bleeding.

As she relented, Nick shook his head, thumbing back toward Brenda. "If you ask me, this is a blessing. We hole up. Let the horde take care of her. Get her off our case, she gets fucked by her own horde, and nobody has to put her down."

The Angel snarled a little at the statement, and she curled around her midsection, body gaining a tremble to it. Pain or shock - or both. She held her tongue, however, and her expression darkened to something hollow.

Ellis frowned, shaking his head a little, reluctance creeping onto his expression. He gazed at Nick, teeth catching at his lip. The Georgian seemed uncertain. "I.. dunno, I -"

"Would you rather I shoot her?" Nick slid a hand onto his injured shoulder, palm soothing into his throbbing clavicle. His voice harshened, and Ellis didn't quite meet his gaze, frown deepening. "Because she's dying, one way or the other."

He meant, of course, to refer to the bullet wound in her gut. Coughing up blood meant it had nicked an organ; her stomach had most likely been punctured. Blood loss or septic shock would set in sooner than later. Even if they wanted to try and save her - which he definitely did not - it was almost less likely than saving Christophe.

Something trickled onto Ellis' expression, though. It was a little confusion, and a little shock. He turned to face Nick entirely, fingers tightening on his shotgun. His voice grew the slightest bit husky, and forceful. "... I don't want us tuh be murderers, Nick. I ain't gonna just… shoot her, when she can't do nothin' anymore. She's hurt."

Ellis' behaviour startled Nick in return, catching him off-guard before he could rein in his expression. He flickered his eyes over the Georgian's face, but couldn't quite discern the emotion there. Did Ellis think him a murderer, now? Compared to Brenda, of all people, who had repeatedly and actively tried to kill them? Who had just set a horde on them?

Are you really surprised, Nicolas? He knows you did something to Jerry, now. Only a matter of time before he starts asking questions.

A brow flinched up - then smoothed, and he pointed a finger toward the prone brunette. He spoke coldly, other arm going tight to his side in a defensive shrug. "Okay. So we leave her outside and the zombies finish her."

When Ellis' mouth popped open, brows crunching in obvious protest, Nick took a step forward. He spoke at a quickening pace, aware of the rising sounds of the horde approaching and gathering in their rush toward them, only minutes away.

"Those are the fucking options, Ellis." He didn't mean to snarl, but that was what escaped him, and the tone seemed to shock the younger man. Those blue eyes suddenly hooded underneath his
"We kill her now, or we let the zombies she fucking called on us kill her - because that stomach shot will kill her no matter what. There's no third fucking choice."

Ellis was staring at his steel-toed boots, shoulders a little high, hands almost trembling. The posture stabbed something like guilt into Nick's chest - but also frustration. "This isn't me making a call. This is reality." He darted a glance toward the other two survivors, hunting for backup.

The older man was looking down the street, holding a vaguely perturbed clench to his jaw. Rochelle was turned away as well, staring down toward her bleeding hand. Neither, it seemed, were primed to get involved. Nick's jaw flinched into an agitated clench, prepared to continue.

Brenda laughed from her place on the ground, suddenly. "Still weak." She'd slumped entirely to the sidewalk, and the sounds that escaped her were wet and tacky. The blood was starting to puddle around her body, viscous red dripping onto the concrete.

The mockery bristled Nick's shoulders, spinning on a heel. He drew Brenda's military-grade sniper rifle off his shoulder, snatching it into his hands. "You made your goddamn bed without any help from us." He checked it over with an aggressive fury that masked whatever uncomfortable sensation was brewing in his stomach. It was loaded, and high caliber.

"I'm going into the goddamn pawn shop. If you want to stand out here and defend this bitch, be my guest."

Coach turned, silent, stepping toward Rochelle and circling an arm against the small of her back. He led her toward the pawnshop at a quick walk, and she relented with a small, sweeping glance toward Ellis. Her eyes were cold and numb… but a little sad, too.

"Let's go, sweetie. We gotta go." she called back at him, and his head twitched. It wasn't quite agreement at first, but after a beat Ellis' head raised, gaze flicking toward Nick.

Nick didn't meet it, but his periphery gave him enough of a look to know Ellis was still frowning. It was softer now, though, full of grief rather than doubt. The Georgian nodded in silence and turned, making to jog tenderly toward the pawnshop.

If Nick looked down the street, he could see infected now, though there was still some distance to go. They were flocking onto the road, turning rapidly into a clot of bodies that merged into one fluctuating unit. A frown twitched at the corner of his mouth, and he turned, sparing a last glance for Brenda.

She was grinning, teeth stained red by her own blood.

He might have dismissed it as meaningless. He almost did; sorted it away as just the manic grin of a dying psychotic. Something made him stop, however. Intuition or some gut instinct, or maybe just paranoia. He turned and stared back at the cityscape, even as infected came sprinting out from between condos and fences.

Beneath the wave of screams, there was something else. Something growing louder. It was indeterminate from the sounds of approaching infected at first, but then grew apart. A thudding, crashing sound, unsteady and intermittent, but coming in pairs of two.

He knew that sound.

"No fucking w-"

A square of shingles on the roof of a condo some ways down the road suddenly crumpled under a
fatty, wide hand, slapping down and gripping onto the very peak of it. A body dragged itself up into sight shortly thereafter, bloated muscles flexing to carry the weight of its squat lower body.

It seemed to squint in their direction - and then it roared, bulky arms throwing up in an enraged wave.

"Tank!" escaped him in a shout, body suddenly frozen in indecision. Half of him wanted to run for the shop, and half wanted to run for the sedan. They'd tried to escape a Tank by vehicle once before, and they'd almost lost Coach for the error - but he didn't know if they had the firepower to take it down alongside the horde. Blocking themselves in the pawn shop seemed like a very risky decision.

The two halves may as well have cleft him in twain and gone running in either direction.

Nick did the first thing that came to mind, instead. He grabbed Brenda's sniper rifle off his shoulder and swung it around, bracing it into his chest and tilting his head to look down the sight. It was a tactical scope with a measured reticle, and it took him a moment to get his bearings with it.

The magnification snapped the infected wave into sudden focus, and his vision was flooded with sprinting targets. He took shots, barely needing to aim. The bullets found their way into a zombie one way or another, blasts of blood and chunks of meat flying apart with each pull of the trigger.

Before he had the presence of mind to wonder where his teammates were, he found Coach very suddenly at his elbow. "Shit. Shit!" The ex-football player shouted, a hand going to his temple in disbelief and frustration. "We gotta get in the car!"

"Bad idea!" Nick uttered, even as he shifted his weight to jut his hip forward, pulling the trigger in rapid succession. It was a terrible idea, in fact, but he didn't have a better one. He could see his bullets penetrating through several infected with each blast, gore flashing in his scope - but he could also see the Tank making its clumsy way off the roof.

They had a little time, but not very much. "Pocket."

Not needing more than that for explanation, Coach dove a hand into the offered pocket of Nick's slacks. If they survived, Nick would take the time to thank God he had the presence of mind not to toss the keys into the same slacks pocket that currently had a tube of KY jelly secreted away.

The eldest survivor dragged the keys out with a tug, and bolted for the sedan. "Y'all go get Chris - I'll pull up. We got to get outta here!"

Unable to fight a grimace, the gambler nodded his head. He flung his new sniper rifle back against his shoulder, turning to bolt for the pawn shop. As his body swung into the motion, his eyes cut across the air to look at the brunette prostrated on the sidewalk.

Brenda wasn't moving anymore.

Nick didn't see Ellis or Rochelle until he passed through the threshold of the pawnshop. She'd taken the backpack from him and gathered up the supplies they'd left with Coach, and he was getting his arms under Chris' form in preparation to hoist him up. He was struggling, face drawn in pain.

The gambler crossed the pawnshop in a fierce few strides, lurching down to a crouch to join Ellis at the other side of the unconscious Spaniard. He didn't meet the kid's gaze, just silently jammed one arm against Chris' back and the other under his knees.
"Go." Nick uttered, and they lifted in one swift motion. Ellis was on his amputated side, and gave his stumped shoulder a berth as if afraid to touch it. The disparity put Chris in a lean against Nick's chest, taking more of the weight, but that was fine with him. He wasn't heavy, relatively.

One limb less heavy, at least.

Moving in a swift strafe, they carried the slight Spaniard toward the door. Rochelle darted around them with the backpack cradled in her arms, taking the lead. "Hurry! I'll get the door -"

Coach was pulling the sedan up as they re-exited, brakes creaking as it jolted to a stop, but something was immediately wrong. There was a wheedled squeal, heightening as he accelerated and tapering off as he braked, and the whuf-whuf-whuf of rubber hitting the asphalt. It took Nick a second to recognize the problem: the front right tire was deflated, shot in the conflict with Brenda.

He re-considered, and maybe God and him were even.

"Can it drive?" He directed it toward Ellis, even as his neck craned up to glare down the road. The bulk of the horde was still a few blocks away, but the Tank had gained a lot of ground in the interim. After making its way off the roof, it had started sprinting along the road, throwing itself with gorilla-like jabs of its fists against the asphalt.

The fact it hadn't stopped to throw something was a small mercy.

Ellis nodded, and they bolted the distance between them and the sedan. Rochelle reached it first to throw open the back door, and Nick got in, carrying Christophe with him. He clambered backwards into the seat, keeping a grip on the Spaniard, snarling when a blind swing of his leg smacked his bad calf into the edge of the car door.

The moment he landed, Nick slid himself across the seat, dragging Chris horizontal until he was sprawled on his lap. The sniper rifle jabbed into his back and the katana hilt jabbed into his hip, and he used his elbow to shove the latter through his belt, letting it clatter to the floorboards instead before he stabbed himself with it.

Nick lifted his head, expecting Ellis to cram into the seat under Chris' legs - but Ellis stepped away, instead, swinging his shotgun into his hands. Their eyes met for an impermanent beat of time, and the faintest of apologetic scrunches touched Ellis' nose. Reluctant, somehow.

"If this don't work, y'all don't wait fer me!"

Then he shut the car door, slamming it with a flat palm, and bolted down the road.

It was all Nick could do not to lunge after him, but he was trapped under Chris' dead weight and laying on the awkward bulk of Brenda's sniper rifle. "Overalls!" Getting his body turned around to get the other car door open would have involved throwing the Spaniard off, and he had to remind himself to be gentle.

It wasn't so much care. He didn't care about Christophe; he barely trusted him. However, he cared for the time and supplies and energy they'd put (and were going to put) into treating him, and he wasn't about to throw it all away by manhandling the guy to death.

Instead, he twisted at the waist, bracing his bicep against the back of the carseat and looking through the back window. The kid was running toward the horde, one hand on his shotgun and the other on his cap. "What the hell is he doing?!"

Nick hadn't even finished before Rochelle was joining him, shouting after the youngest survivor.
She'd almost gotten herself thrown into the passenger side seat, but now jolted back out, stepping onto the rim of the door and hauling an elbow on top of the car to lean up past it. "Ellis! Come back!"

The Tank was gaining ground on the bulk of the horde, smashing through them with a roar, but there were a scattered few zombies that had come from the nearby surroundings and reached the team first. Ellis didn't stop running, using his shotgun to take low shots, blasting their legs out from under them before they could reach him.

Nick heard Rochelle utter a strangled "Fuck.", and glanced her way as she drew the hunting rifle off her shoulder and laid it over the top of the car.

Pressing herself flat to the roof, she fisted her cut hand against the rifle to steady it as she aimed, awkwardly using her left hand to pull the trigger. She took out two zombies bolting toward them from across the street, body stuttering with the blasts and a hiss leaving her each time.

A Smoker's lanky, bloated form leaned out from behind a paneled house, its tongue-tendril dangling and squirming from its mouth. It seemed to twist to face Ellis, but Rochelle was faster. It took her a few shots to hit it, but it only took one to the tumorous growth that was its upper body to down it.

The creature exploded into a gaseous cloud of grey smoke, a hacking scream escaping it.

"What the shit…" Coach said it in a near-growl, and gripped his hands tight on the wheel, cranking it even while his foot was still pressed on the brake. As he rotated it, he tipped his head and shouted across the car, "Get in, babygirl."

Rochelle obeyed after one more shot, taking out a zombie who was bee-lining for Ellis. She gripped her arm against the roof of the car and dropped herself into the seat, stashing her rifle against her chest and slamming the door shut. The instant it closed, Coach gassed it. The car lurched on its flat tire, that squeal announcing the way the rim ground into the asphalt with every rotation.

Nobody had to say it: they weren't leaving Ellis, even if it meant driving right into a horde-bolstered Tank.

There was simply no other option.

Nick looped an arm around Chris' midsection, bracing the unconscious youth flat against his lap as the car swung into a sharp U-turn on the road. The Spaniard almost slid away, but Nick tightened his grip and kept him close. "Fucking idiot."

As the sedan straightened out sloppily on the round, unsteadied on its tires, Ellis came into clear view within the windshield. The road past him was flooded with the infected, and the Tank was surging closer, throaty voice roaring angrily. The ground was shaking - and even through the vehicle, Nick swore he felt the impact of each step the creature took.

Ellis looked tremendously small, set in profile against the approaching danger.

Something sharp and cold pierced into Nick's core, hollowed him out. He should have been used to it by now - they were all in danger of dying, every day, every second. After all, hadn't Brenda made just a little bit of sense, deep down? The world was reduced to killing and dying, fear and survival, torn down to some primal reality. Nothing was constant. Nothing was sure.

Nothing was the same anymore.
Why, then, did the sight so badly terrify him?

Ellis' shotgun was no longer raised. He hunched over it, hands moving. After a soft jerk of his shoulders, he lifted an arm over his head. The sun caught on the object clutched between his fingers with a putrid green glint: the CEDA canister he'd strapped to his gun.

He wound his arm back, whole body hopping weight on one foot - then threw it, putting all his energy into the swing. He threw so fiercely that he stumbled as he released it.

The canister spiraled through the air, arcing up as it flew down the street. It might have missed, had the Tank had the sense to step to the side or even just stop a beat. As it charged forward, however, the glass canister collided into its brawny shoulder and shattered.

Vile green liquid splattered, mixing with shards of glass, some stabbing into the Tank's skin and some scattering to the asphalt. It almost seemed to explode as the liquid made contact with air, darkening and exuding this flash of dark green smoke, like a struck match on a cloud of gasoline fumes.

For just a moment, nothing changed. The horde continued forward at the Tank's sides, and it continued in its charge.

Then - all in silent unison - the flow of the horde shifted.

Like running water, all the infected running with the Tank suddenly ran into it. They merged on either side, crashing bodies against it, clawing at its arms and throwing themselves into its back. The Tank howled in fury, swinging a muscle-bound arm out to throw a wave of them back. The strike crushed some, sending one female infected up off her feet and flying bodily across the street.

The horde closed to fill in the gap as quickly as the Tank had dispersed them.

"Lord Almighty." escaped Coach in something a little awed. Even the infected which had come from a different direction now focused their attentions on the Tank, running past Ellis with not even a snarl or a glance spared for him. Like everything had ceased to exist, except for the Tank.

The kid's arms went up, hauling his shotgun over his head with a wild shout of triumph - but the Tank itself was not fully distracted.

It released a thunderous bellow, trying to advance, and its forward momentum startled Ellis into a step back. Another bikini-clad female zombie leapt, tackling into the huge infected's torso and taking a swinging claw at the Tank's face. The monstrous creature shook itself violently until it had knocked the zombie free, taking a meaty chunk of the Tank's cheek with it.

Sense won out over his excitement, and Ellis turned and started running back toward the sedan, shotgun clutched to his chest and a hand clamped over his side. His expression was pained and shocked and exhilarated. His mouth was moving, but his words were inaudible shouts through the car.

Coach wasted no time in slamming his foot on the gas pedal. The car rolled forward with a painful squeal, swerving a little to avoid Ellis as he met the mechanic halfway.

As Ellis made it to the back door, he scrambled to open it and leapt inside. He pressed himself against the back of Rochelle's seat, barely balanced on the stretch of seat left in front of Chris' legs. "Go!" he gasped out, wheezed. "I don't think - it's gonna - die!"

Even as Coach floored it, Ellis slamming the car door shut behind himself, the Tank was still
struggling its way forward. With each step, it swung either fist out in desperate attempts to beat away the horde that had turned against it.

Every time it turned one way, its exposed back was flooded with bodies and teeth and claws. No one infected could make a dent, but unified, they tore fistfuls of flesh away bit by bit, wearing it down.

It was still roaring as Coach sped them into a turn and down a side street, flat tire screeching against the asphalt.
"Stop. Stop the car. Please."

Rochelle was the one to break the silence. They'd finally driven far enough or long enough to stop hearing the Tank's roars. There was no way of knowing whether the Tank had killed the horde, or vice versa; either way, neither reappeared.

Tense wasn't the word for the atmosphere in the sedan before her words, just loaded.

Heavy.

Obeying immediately, Coach braced one hand against the steering wheel and the other on his thigh as he applied the brakes. She moved before the car had even fully stopped, opening the door and swinging a leg out. Her boot skidded across the asphalt for a beat before they came to a halt. Without much more warning, Rochelle was hunched out of the car, body shuddering as she heaved onto the sidewalk.

Little came up but bile, and she spat out threads of yellow saliva, huffing in hard through her nose. "S-sorry -"

Coach exhaled a little, glancing over his shoulder to check on the three in the backseat. Nick met his gaze, nodding toward her pointedly, and the eldest survivor took the cue and cranked the gearshift into park.

Twisting the keys to shut off the engine, Coach opened the car door and stepped out. An infected had been attracted out from a nearby house by the squealing of the sedan's ruined tire, and the loud blast of Coach's shotgun announced him putting it down in short order.

Nick held his silence as the ex-football player circled the car, drawing up to kneel next to Rochelle. His hand landed on her shoulder, rubbing soothingly, and he spoke to her quietly. "It's a'ight. You okay, Ro'."

She coughed, dragging her uninjured hand against her forehead. "Stupid... I'm being stupid."

Leaning forward a little, trying to bend his head around the headrest of her seat, Ellis seemed primed to speak up. He stopped, though, when Nick spared him a fierce shake of his head - and the Georgian slumped back instead, glancing down toward Chris.

Nick had drawn the unconscious Spaniard against his side, allowing Ellis room to sit on the carseat past his bloodied Vans. The sneakers had once been blue and white, but they'd long since stained into a murky, blackened shade. Ellis propped them up on his thigh, one hand bracing on his ankles.

They still weren't really looking at each other.

Admitting his involvement in Jerry's death hadn't been accidental, but a foolish part of him had hoped there'd be enough to distract from it. He'd get it off his chest, Ellis would learn the guy dying had been his fault rather than Ellis', and that would be that. No further conversation necessary.

Yet...

There was another part of him that had always known it wouldn't be that simple. Even that part
didn't think Ellis would look at him the way he had back there, *doubting*, as they stood over Brenda and argued.

Like something tremendous had shifted under his feet.

Like maybe he wasn't *sure* anymore.

*I'm not going to fucking apologize for -*

"Are you mad?" the younger man mumbled, sideways, almost under his breath. Slanting a glance his way, Nick couldn't help the sharp twitch to his brow, uncomprehending. Although the Georgian didn't see the gesture with his eyes averted, the silence said enough, and he elaborated.

"... I only ran off 'cause I knew we weren't gonna make it out unless I did somethin'. We tried out-runnin' a Tank before."

That made Nick snort, tipping himself so he could look between the seats and catch a glimpse of Coach and Rochelle. They weren't speaking, even as Coach's hand had slipped to massage the back of her neck. He just kneeled there, soothing her through the wave of nausea.

"No."

Ellis did look toward him there, though only tilted under his capbill. He seemed to expect more - but Nick held his silence as a kind of stilted insecurity washed over the younger man's face. He supposed Ellis had *expected* him to be angry, maybe wanted him to be, because at least that was something normal.

Nick meant to say something else, but couldn't settle on what to say in time.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." Rochelle drew back up from her hunch, licking at her teeth with a disgusted crinkle before giving a shuddered spit toward the asphalt. "I'm okay. It just... it snuck up on me. I'm okay now."

Coach let his head shake. "Nothin' to apologize fo'." He stopped a moment, and raised his hand up to catch a knuckle under her jaw. She met his gaze, but only reluctantly. "It ain't supposed to be easy. That's what separates us from animals. And the zombies."

That made her nod, softly, a hollow smile twitching at the corner of her mouth.

Nick saw Ellis' head lower, faintly, and he could only imagine what was going through his head. He could hear it, almost; *"How was it so easy fer you? How could you?"* But he said nothing, and Nick felt something angry coil in him. He couldn't focus, past a simultaneously calm and fractured feeling of paranoia.

A need to know what Ellis was thinking and, just as quickly, an aversion to that need.

Reaching toward the backpack by her foot, Coach hauled it into her lap. He unzipped it, dragging out Chris' machete and tossing the blade down to the floorboard. The eldest survivor pawed through the satchel to find one of the thin strips of Nick's jacket. He grabbed up their remaining bottle of alcohol, as well, exhaling.

"One of y'all come out and watch my back. I'm gonna wrap her hand while we got a minute."

A look was passed between the two men in the backseat. Ellis was the obvious choice, with Nick having taken most of Chris' upper body against his side, so the Georgian pushed the car door open
and slid out. He tapped his shotgun into his hands, leaving the car door hanging open and going to stand at Coach's flank.

Ellis looked on hesitantly, watching as Coach cracked open the bottle of alcohol and grasped Rochelle's injured hand at the wrist. She forced her fingers to straighten out, though they twitched with pain as she did.

The slash across her palm made him frown, guilt tugging at his features. "Is it gonna be okay..?"

"O-ow." escaped her in a hiss as Coach touched a fingertip against her flesh, examining the extent of the wound. "I think so, sweetie. It's not too deep, right, Coach?" He shook his head in silence, raising the bottle in a warning gesture.

Rochelle inhaled a quick breath, then waved him on with a nudge of her chin. He dribbled only a small splash of the liquid, but it was enough to make her body flinch with pain. Only the vicelike grip he had around her wrist kept her hand still, and as the liquid washed away the blood and the gore left behind from Brenda's dirty blade, he set the bottle down between his shoes.

"You gonna cry over a big papercut, girl?" he uttered, a playful crunch to the edges of his eyes. Allowing her just a moment to huff out a pained laugh, Coach draped the strip of fabric flat over her palm and set to tying it against the back of her hand. "Best go easy on this hand, though. May be better if we get you a weapon you can hold in yo' left."

Ellis pushed the stock of his shotgun against his shoulder, hesitantly turning to examine the surrounding streets, eyes alert for signs of infected. 'I'm... real sorry, Ro'. It was all we could think to do - Nick wasn't sure he could hit her, 'n'I thought if yuh caught her off-guard, she'd give up."

Nick snorted, quietly, to himself. He hadn't been so sure.

"Yeah." Rochelle forced out, teeth gritted just a little. Ellis glanced her way, fearing he'd upset her... but she was looking squarely at her hand as Coach wrapped it, and the pain on her features was actual pain. "I wish she had."

Drawing the fabric into a tight knot, Coach glanced over his shoulder, eyes catching on Ellis and then slanting through the car toward Nick. "Sorry fo' yellin' at you two back there. Didn't mean it." The statement surprised Ellis, and he turned his head, cocking it. "I knew you boys had somethin' in mind, but I figured playin' along was the best call."

"You did?" Ellis uttered, flexing his fingers against his shotgun. Something hesitant flickered over his features, unconfident and a little fragile. "You looked so mad, though..."

That drew a smile onto Coach's face, and he gave a reassuring nod toward the younger Georgian. If he noticed the uncharacteristic delicacy on Ellis' expression, he didn't say anything to indicate it - but his voice was even gentler now. "I was. Not at y'all, though. I wasn't sure what yo' plan was, but I figured playin' along was the best call."

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"That's a switch." Snorting slightly, the gambler merely shook his head, raising his voice a little to carry through the car. "I guess I'm so used to being on your shit list, I can't tell the difference."

Coach exhaled a sigh, curling his fingers around Rochelle's to get her to clutch them against the bandage. She obeyed, leaning back against her seat carefully and giving him a small smile. "Don't be smart, Nick." he uttered dryly, but tolerantly.

"That's a lot to ask." Nick reached up a hand to tuck his knuckles against Christophe's head, tipping it away from his shoulder like the unconscious man might drool on him. The Spaniard slumped
with the gesture, limply, uttering only a faint huff of air.

The movement attracted Coach's attention, and he leaned up, speaking as though Nick hadn't. "Just wish it hadn't come down to Ro' shootin' her." Draping his forearm over the roof of the car over Rochelle's seat and bending down, his head tilted into the car's interior. "How's the boy?"

Trying to shrug without moving either shoulder, unwilling to jostle his injured shoulder or Chris, Nick felt his voice fall into low irritation. "How did I get volunteered for nurse duty? Is this the thing where you assclowns bring home a pet, and I have to take care of it?"

That didn't amuse Rochelle, and she sent a cutting look over her shoulder, exasperation creeping onto her face. It was better than the hollow nausea previously residing there, at least, but only just.

He didn't want to feel guilty - but the feeling was there. If you hadn't gotten your arm fucked up... you could have taken that shot, instead of making Rochelle do it for you. He'd now made Rochelle kill someone in his place, and made Ellis watch a man die by his actions. Two for two, asshole.

"He's still breathing, that's all I know." Nick glanced sideways, scanning over the Spaniard's slumped frame and then up through the car at Coach. "I'm more worried about us. I dunno about you guys, but I am starving."

Coach nodded at that, agreement flooding his expression. "We can't go far in this car, anyway, not 'til we fix the wheel." He straightened again, putting a hand over his brow and gazing up over their surroundings. "Let's clear out one of these beachhouses. Need to be thinkin' long-term here for a bit, find somethin' we can hunker down in for a while."

Nick laughed, almost despite himself, head lolling back against the seatrest. "Long-term my ass. I don't think we've had a single plan work out for more than a few hours at a time."

More reluctant with his nod this time, Coach shrugged a shoulder and scratched at his jawline. His facial hair was turning dense, and it rustled with the gesture. "You ain't wrong, but if Chris is gonna recover, he's gotta get horizontal - and stay that way. We ain't doin' him a favour, cartin' him around like this."

"Nick found us food while we were out." Ellis supplied, helpfully, and his voice lightened a little as he grasped onto his own optimism. He let his shotgun droop at his side, cradling a forearm against his side and exhaling a soft and tired breath. "And a few bottles'uv water, but..."

Rochelle shook her head hesitantly, more in thoughtfulness than negation. "That's not gonna be enough, but let's just... take this one thing at a time. Shelter's first."

"Agreed." Coach took a steadying breath, leaning his shoulders back and placing the flat of his hand against the base of his spine in a sore gesture. He nodded at Ellis to get back in the car, and turned to circle back to the driver's seat and clamber in.

Ellis mimicked him, placing his shotgun on the floorboard and scooping an arm under Christophe's ankles. He carefully lifted them up so he could slide underneath, replacing himself on his seat with an exhale. His eyes darted surreptitiously toward Nick, but the gambler had situated his gaze forward and wasn't about to adjust it.

As Coach re-entered the cabin, he appended with a cautious gentleness, "Think some of us could use a breather." His eyes very intently avoided directing themselves at any one of his teammates, a non-confrontational kind of sympathy. He could have been talking about himself as easily as any of them.
"We're at the beach, right?" Nick muttered, tone scathing. He closed his eyes as all three car doors shut in staggered unison. "Who votes we go sunbathe until this whole thing boils over?" A soft snort escaped Rochelle at his suggestion, head tilting a little to look up toward the roof of the sedan.

It was a hesitant noise, ultimately hollow - but humored all the same.

Nick called that a victory.
Chapter 123

It was with due caution that they didn't drive far, even as they hunted for a defensible building. With the tire blown out, driving much more than they already had was liable to damage the metal wheel and bearings. Ellis had already urged Coach to drive slow - but the wheeled squeal and the slapping of the ruined tire was attracting attention, and Coach had to speed up to keep his distance from the infected chasing along behind them.

It wasn't quite a horde-sized crowd of zombies, but it added a new reason to stop.

Rochelle looked over her shoulder, squinting through the rear window at the collection of infected scrambling along behind them. "If we keep collecting tag-alongs, we'll have a rough time when we do pull over." She had her hands clasped in her lap, palms pressed to keep pressure on her wound. "We need to stop."

Grunting in acknowledgement, Coach took a hand off the wheel to gesture down the road. "Ain't sho' we'll find much better than that, anyway."

The condo he indicated was encircled by a sturdy wood fence, gated and enclosed. The building itself sat on stilts, stairs crawling up on either side of a squat single-car garage. The garage door was drawn open and revealed it as empty. One of the staircases led to a raised front door, while the other circled back to what might've been a back porch.

"More than one way out. Fenced in. Ain't got too many windows." Nobody argued, so Coach put his hand on the gearshift, readying with a breath. He kept the car rolling forward, preparing for the moment when they'd come parallel to the house. "Nick, can you get out? Gonna need to clear these bitches."

Nick passed a glance toward Ellis, removing his grip on Chris to relinquish him. "Take him." The younger man scooched to the side so he could get an arm around Christophe's waist and draw the Spaniard forward into a slump away from Nick. Catching his weight against his shoulder, Ellis held him there for a beat of time, seeming unsure how to best rearrange him.

"Um -"

Wordless, Nick got a grip on Chris' cargo shorts and gently dragged his legs over the edge of the seat so he was almost sitting up. He would have lolled forward at the waist had Ellis not quickly took his weight, hugging the man into a weak slump against him, hand hooked on his hip.

All the jostling forced a plaintive mutter from Chris' lips, an incoherent slur of syllables. Ellis froze, hesitant - but the man failed to stir.

Nick rolled his shoulder a little with his newfound freedom, straightening up in his seat. He quickly shrugged out of his sniper rifle's strap, reaching instead to snatch up Ellis' shotgun from where it lay on the floorboard. "Loaded?" he queried shortly, and Ellis nodded.

Flipping the shotgun into his hands, stock braced against his hip, Nick glanced up into the rearview mirror. His eyes met Coach's and, without a word, the car came to a sudden stop.

Nick threw the door open, catching a heel on the ground to lunge out, facing backwards. The small cloud of infected - ten or eleven, maybe - quickly caught up with the car. He blasted the shotgun off at hip-level as they approached, shooting into the core of the group. The recoil sent pain through his shoulder, but he ground his teeth through it.
Two went down, staggered by the shot and quickly shoved to the ground by the infected behind them. They might have gotten back up eventually, had their fellows not trampled them underfoot.

He aimed another blast higher this time, and Nick had the pleasure of watching one of them lose the bulk of their face under the shot. The pellets tore through flesh in a cloud of gore, and the male infected toppled backward as dead weight.

Coach was abruptly at his elbow, double-barrel shotgun in his hands. Between the two of them, it only took a few seconds of concentrated fire to down the infected, and the noise of their unified shots was deafening. The zombies stood little chance.

As the last one stopped moving, Nick lowered Ellis' pump-action. He turned his head to glance toward Coach, cocking a brow as he did. His mouth opened, readying to speak, but the clattering sound of something metallic falling to the ground nearby silenced him.

The two men jolted back-to-back reflexively.

"Shit. You hear that?"

Nick swiveled his gaze around the street, searching for signs of the noise's origin. Nothing immediately made itself apparent, and for a beat, there was silence - but he wasn't about to let his guard down. "Yeah… maybe just another infected. Keep a -"

Footsteps thudded in a stagger, and he saw a shadow flash into view from around the corner of a building: a bulky, lopsided figure, stumbling with the strange distortion of its own mass. The Charger seemed confused for an instant, gazing at the sedan. It was as if it almost recognized the shape of people inside, but couldn't connect the dots fast enough.

Oh, fuck.

If it targeted the car, they'd lose their ride… and who knew how much damage it could do to the chassis. It might merely crumple the metal in, or it might crush and injure any number of the car's passengers. He couldn't let it charge. They weren't going to survive a Tank only to lose people to a Charger.

Before Nick could so much as consider a course of action, Coach was lunging around him, shoulders tucked forward into a hunch. The moment he moved, he caught the Charger's attention; the creature roared in raw fury, stamping one bulky foot against the ground to launch itself into a barreling sprint.

For an instant, Nick thought it was still bound to hit the sedan - but Coach was running perpendicular to the car, and the Charger's trajectory curved to follow. The creature only had so much control now that it had launched its mass into a run, like its own momentum carried it more than any kind of conscious thought. The eldest survivor was, however, only so fast.

The Charger's course-correction kept them in line with each other.

A protesting shout escaped Nick, eyes snapping wide. More panic than he'd have liked to admit coursed through him, and the feeling sent his heartrate up. They'd as-of-yet avoided taking a direct hit from a Charger. He had no idea how much damage it would cause, nor how much Coach could take.

He snapped his borrowed shotgun up, taking a shot, the muzzle of the gun tracking the Charger's movement. The blast struck it, but had no visible effect. The infected ran with its bulky shoulder pushed forward, and it might as well have been a shield with its rocky and blistered surface. Flesh
chipped away like frozen callus, not even bleeding.

He went for a second shot and came up empty. "Fuck -"

The Charger collided with Coach… or so Nick thought, for a beat of time. However, it was as the infected came within arms' reach that the man threw his weight, taking himself into a bodily spin around it. The Charger's shoulder struck his, but the impact contributed to his rotation and threw him to the side rather than carrying him with.

The infected continued past, roaring an almost infuriated denial, and Coach hit the ground rolling. He gave a shout as he did, body going a few feet across the asphalt in a messy tumble. He did not land gracefully, and Nick vaulted across the asphalt after him, only sparing a glance to ensure the Charger was still running in the other direction.

Nick dropped to a crouch beside him where the older man had stopped. Coach's jaw was drawn in pain, and his hand was clasped below his knee in a bracing gesture.

*Shit.*

He was aware of the car door opening and Rochelle's voice. "Coach?! Nick! Is he okay?!

Without saying anything, Nick set Ellis' shotgun down and took the double-barrel instead. With the hand that wasn't covering his knee, Coach fished two shells out of his pocket and handed them over, expression grim. "In case." he uttered, voice strained.

Snapping the shotgun open and confirming it was already loaded, Nick straightened, pocketing the shells and turning on his heel to bolt down the street.

The Charger was skidding to a stop, momentum taking it several yards as if it couldn't get itself to slow. It hit a metal garbage can with a tremendous clatter, stumbling over the object and almost going to a knee. The infected shook itself, doglike, regaining balance and focus. When it turned, sunken eyes alighted on Nick.

He readied for it to charge again, shotgun raising, but it didn't. With an angry chuffle, the infected instead approached him at something like a jog, bulked arm swinging in a threatening gesture.

Its face was ghoulis - much like its almost vestigial off-arm, it was like every ounce of fat and flesh had been suctioned off to fill the mass collected in its main arm. The result was blackened skin stretched flat over the bones of its skull in a taut and menacing mask.

Nick raised Coach's shotgun, aiming directly for that face as it drew close.

"Eat me, assclown."

As if aware of the danger, the Charger suddenly lunged, swinging all its weight in a punch. Nick pulled his fingers, and both barrels exploded in a thunderous clap. The recoil was vastly stronger than he anticipated, and the shotgun nearly reared up in his hands, stock slamming dangerously toward his face.

The blast made him stumble back, and it was only that step that kept the Charger's massive hand from boxing straight into his ear. It collided with his cheek instead, and even as the infected went limp - only gore and shattered bone left behind between its shoulders - the strike still snapped Nick's head to one side.

Stars sparked, and then black, and Nick wasn't entirely present during the time it took him to fall to
He blinked, vision only belatedly rearranging into shapes that made sense. He pulled a hand from off the shotgun, dragging his palm over his face, rooting himself with the gesture. Pain thrummed up his leg from where he'd landed on it, but it was a dull ache compared to the stinging of his cheek and lower face.

He hadn't clenched his teeth before the collision, and it had jostled his jaw. He rolled it, groaning, trying to shake his head to shake off the pain in the joint, along with the pain from the Charger's craggy skin scraping at his flesh. "Son of a..." came out, half-slurred, and Nick managed to drag himself into a lean to look back down the road.

Rochelle was kneeled next to Coach, wounded hand curled against her stomach while her other hand laid on his shoulder. His face was frozen into a stubborn, gruff look, but his brows were wrenched together in a way that betrayed his pain. He nodded toward Nick, and Rochelle followed the gesture with her eyes.

She started to get up, but Nick thrust up a hand to stop her. "I'm fine." he uttered loud enough to carry, and she gave a dubious frown - but stopped. Sparing a glance for the sedan, Nick noted Ellis pressing his face against the glass, nose smushed with the intensity of his worried squinting.

It was enough to make Nick chuckle under his breath. At least he stayed in the car.

Rochelle glanced toward Coach, eyes dark with worry. "Can you stand?" He nodded, pressing both hands onto his knee and holding them there for a moment, seeming to feel at his knee with his fingertips. He took in a sharp breath - then exhaled, speaking low to her.

"Knee an' me ain't agreein'. It ain't no thang."

She didn't seem encouraged by his dismissal, but merely watched as he shifted his weight to dig the heel of his injured leg into the ground, using his other leg and a palm set against the ground to get to his feet. As he moved, Rochelle scooped a hand under his elbow and tried to support him as much as she could.

Nick felt sturdy enough to follow suit. He crawled up to his feet, palm still rubbing at his cheek like he could massage out the bruise undoubtedly forming there. "You trying to relive your football glory days, there, Sam?" he tossed out sarcastically, grasping Coach's shotgun with his free hand as he straightened.

Rochelle's eyes narrowed in his directions in warning, but Coach chuckled - even if the sound was a little wheezed. She relaxed at his signal, bending to retrieve Ellis' shotgun and tuck her arm into the strap.

"That's 'bout the kinda shit that got me my bum knee the first go 'round, so yeah. Guess so."

Hooking an arm over Rochelle's shoulders, Coach nodded his head. "Yeah, boy. You just sit tight a minute." He didn't put much weight on her at all, and the gesture may have been more for her benefit than his. He slipped a glance toward Nick. "Can you go get that gate open? We gotta get
Nick acquiesced with a grunt, reaching into his pocket and grabbing the shells he'd stowed away. He snapped the shotgun open, slipping a shell into either chamber before flipping it shut. "Let Ro' drive." he advised, striding past them and cutting in front of the sedan to step over to the condo's gate.

It was a good seven foot privacy wall made of pointed planks of wood, a simple metal hook acting as the latch. It was, however, undone, and the gate had simply swung to sit shut. Grasping a hand on the edge of the gate and walking it open, Nick waited there for the car to pull through.

The moment gave him a chance to rub at his neck and jaw, closing his eyes under the dull hum of pain through his whole body.

Sometimes he wondered. If he took the time to think, if he stopped long enough to consider it, would his body just fail - just collapse to ash and dust right there? Was it strength that kept him going... kept all of them going... or simply denial?

"You a'ight, Nicky?"

Coach's voice startled him, hobbling close, and his eyes reopened with a blink. Rochelle was sliding into the car, closing the door. Nick's expression must have given away his confusion, because Coach gave him a tired chuckle and shook his head. "If I get in the car, I ain't gettin' back out."

Grunting in faint acknowledgement, Nick watched silently as Rochelle shifted the car back into drive and turned the wheel, cranking it hard with only one hand dedicated to the task. The sedan rolled into a turn, limping forward through the open gate and rolling up to the garage.

"Next time, don't pull both triggers."

Nick wasn't in the mood for chatter, but he couldn't help his head from turning, gaze making to land on Coach's face. When he didn't seem to comprehend, Coach reached up, catching a fingertip against the double-barrel shotgun still grasped in Nick's hands. He forced it to tilt, and tapped on the bottom.

Sure enough, Nick glanced down and noticed the trigger was split in two. He'd barely noticed - just shoved his fingers in place and yanked. He'd never had to wield the thing past when they'd originally found it on a dead survivor at the roadside, and he'd not done a very thorough examination back then before handing it to Coach.

"You gonna take your arm off, shootin' both like that. Pull one, then the other."

Nick glanced up, unable to resist a twitch of his brow at the instructions. Instinct told him to snap at being ordered around, but instead, his voice went dull with loose humor. "That explains the fucking earthquake when this thing went off."

Coach's attention on him was weary, and pained - and sincere. He was looking at him with that same paternal tolerance he typically reserved for the two younger survivors. "If you gotta use both, hold it at hip-level, so the recoil don't make you brain yo'self."

Taking the shotgun under his arm, Nick freed a hand to reach up and scratch at the back of his neck. The gesture came off uncomfortable, he realized quickly, and he tried to play it off with a snide and tilted smirk. "Thanks, dad. Maybe next, you can teach me how to ride a bike."
Coach chuckled, and Nick felt a vague and disgruntled unease as the older man weakly stepped through the gate after the sedan. He was barely putting any weight on his injured leg at all - and what weight he did place on it seemed liable to crumple it.

Mouthing a silent curse, Nick grabbed again at the gate and walked it shut. He took the time to latch it before quick-stepping up to come to Coach's side, flanking his injured half. Without waiting for permission, he grabbed the big man's arm and dragged it up over his shoulders, muffling a wince of his own.

Coach tensed - then relented.

They walked in hobbled tandem to rejoin the rest of the team inside the garage. Every other step, Coach put weight on Nick like a crutch so his crippled knee could just swing forward with as little flexion as possible. Every time, it sent pain through Nick's injured shoulder, but he bore it with a faint grimace.

Neither man said a word.
Carrying someone up a flight of stairs would have been difficult on a good day - but Christophe was dead weight, and his amputated shoulder removed an entire quadrant of his body for Nick to grab. He made do, one arm caught under the man's other armpit and his other hand gripped into the belt of his cargo shorts, holding him up.

"We better stay here a while. I'm fuckin' done hauling this guy around."

Ellis slipped him a faintly chastising glance, but didn't say anything. He was a few steps down from Nick, taking the staircase sideways. His left arm was cradled under Chris' thighs and his right arm looped over his knees, bracing him into his gut. Between the two of them, they kept him fairly level, taking it carefully and slowly, step-by-step.

In the same way the rest of the building had been left open - like the owners had been in a hurry to leave - the door had been unlocked. It was a relief, mostly because Nick didn't know if he had the strength to kick the door down.

Rochelle was ahead of them, holding it open with her hip. "I just hope we haven't hurt him. If I hadn't let her get those keys, I -"

"Ain't nobody's fault what that crazy bitch did." Coach interjected before she got any further. "Beatin' yo'self up about it don't change nothin', just makes it easier on the Devil." He stood at the bottom of the stairs, hands clasping the railing, examining the steps with a tired trepidation. The ex-football player had looked intimidated before, but it was almost always in the face of some mortal danger, or approaching horde, or something.

Not a staircase.

"Well, stayin' here will be better than stayin' at that pawnshop. Right?" Ellis offered, trying for a helpful tone. He sounded hesitant instead. "Ain't all bad that we had tuh leave." A slight grunt escaped him as they reached the turn in the staircase. Trying to keep Chris level as Nick suddenly advanced a step in the new direction made Ellis' hip bump into the railing.

"Careful." Nick snapped, caustic, and Ellis couldn't help a frown from sprouting at the chiding.

"I am bein' careful.."

Stepping a little further out of the way, pressing herself flat against the door so they could pass by, Rochelle glanced into the house. "It seems quiet. There's a bedroom right here… we can put Chris down, and then make sure everything else is clear."

Nick wordlessly hummed agreement, head twisting around to watch his own steps as he drew up the final few stairs. He and Ellis tracked into the condo, footsteps matching as they pivoted carefully, Chris held between them.

The first floor opened into a cramped hallway, a small square of linoleum making up the entranceway before it quickly flipped to a faint grey carpeting. The hallway stretched out to span three separate doorways, the nearest of which was open to reveal a room only dimly lit from the open front door.

Rochelle was right, though, and the foot of a bed was visible through the shadows.
The furthest door was also cracked open, and Nick noted the metal edge of a washing machine through the slat of light. A utility room, then - so the third room was either a bathroom, or another bedroom. A stairwell stretched up the rightmost wall, leading up into a second floor that looked much more open.

Although Nick was eager to get Chris out of his arms, he wasn't eager to walk into a dark room, unequipped to defend himself. Rochelle must have sensed his hesitation, or seen the dubious way he glanced into the bedroom. "Hold on…"

Turning slightly, she leaned out through the doorway and peered tentatively down at Coach. He was making his way up the stairs, almost all his weight against the railing, and he didn't miss her attention. Waving quickly with his free hand, he urged her on.

"Go on, girl, I'm comin'. Don't fuss."

Rochelle's lips quirked in a displeased gesture, but she obeyed. Tucking her injured hand against her thigh, she slipped to stand next to Nick. Reaching down, she grabbed his Magnum from its thigh holster with her good hand. She had to cross over his body to do so, and her forearm made contact a little higher on his leg than she meant.

The touch surprised him, but not enough that he couldn't pull together a sly smirk. He cocked his head to look past Chris' slumped head where it lay against his shoulder. "Damn, doll. Buy me dinner first."

She wasn't fazed, carefully gripping his pistol and advancing toward the bedroom. "Come on, Nick, don't pretend you aren't easy." Her retort was a little gratifying, if only as a sign that she was returning to some kind of normalcy. He might have laughed, even, had he not slanted a glance at Ellis.

The kid's brows were up, and if Nick wasn't mistaken, there was a distinct 'Well, yeah.' hidden there. Nick narrowed his eyes dangerously, startled by the look. Ellis choked back a laugh that quickly simmered into an entertained half-smile, averting his eyes.

The moment was short-lived, however, and a kind of unease returned onto the kid's face and took his smile to a faded distance.

Nick's nostrils flared with a silent exhale, frustrated. They'd have to talk about Jerry eventually, no doubt. But not now. Ensuring the interaction passed under Rochelle's notice, Nick raised his voice a little, tone going harsh. "Watch the recoil on that thing. And if there's a Hunter in there or something, I'm not afraid to throw this asshole as bait and run. Just so you know."

Entering the bedroom in a slow strafe, Rochelle carefully scanned the room, borrowed Magnum following the lead of her roving eyes. "And have ruined your jacket for nothing…? Real shame."

As the door opened, more light flooded in. The room was furnished with a dresser, bed, and two nightstands. A large TV sat atop the dresser, knocked slightly askew.

"Ugh." Nick muttered in disgust. "Don't remind me."

The bed was a queen, stripped down to just the mattress. The sight was a little surprising; if the residents had been in such a rush to leave, it seemed odd to take the time to strip the bed.

Shaking that thought off, Rochelle swept to the left, following the room as it opened. There was a door at the far corner, and she approached it carefully. She didn't want to use her injured hand, but the door was closed - so she gently reached out her bandaged right hand and circled fingers around
the knob, twisting and pushing it open.

She blinked her eyes wide as it squeaked on its hinges. The light streaming in from the front door was reaching its limits, and the room revealed was only dimly illuminated. The darkness forced her to strain to see in, and a sense of anxiety rose.

It was just a bathroom, however, squat and cramped. Seashells lined the counter in a messy attempt at cute decoration, and there was a small pile of paper cups on the counter, like one might use for mouthwash. Though the shower curtains were drawn, they were a faintly yellow transparent colour and she could tell nothing hid behind them.

Exhaling a little, Rochelle lowered Nick's Magnum and turned. "Okay. We're good."

Not needing more assurance than that, Nick came backing up into view, striding to the edge of the bed. Ellis kept in step with him, and they eased Christophe down onto the mattress. Nick didn't drop him - but he backed away the moment the guy was flat on the bed, leaving Ellis to fuss his three remaining limbs into something approximating a comfortable sprawl.

Growling faintly, Nick raised a hand to massage his injured shoulder, grinding away the pain by force. He'd way over-taxed it… though the entire team was over-taxing wounds of their own at the moment, and he really shouldn't have been complaining. Nick was, however, not one to pass up self-pity.

"Think we've got another amputation in us? My arm is killing me. I could probably stand to lose a few pounds, anyway."

The joke missed its mark: Ellis didn't even look at him, and Rochelle spared him only a sharp look of annoyance.

Tossing his eyes into a roll, he wearily dragged Coach's shotgun off his shoulder and tapped it into his hands. If he wasn't mistaken, the room's temperature had dropped a couple degrees. He wasn't about to linger and take the abuse. "Ookay. Hint taken. I'm gonna go check on the big guy and clear the rest of the rooms."

He retreated back into the hallway, and Ellis risked a glance after him, frown growing on his lips. Conflict rose on his expression when he couldn't identify the strangled bundle of emotions that built in his chest.

Ellis mindlessly thumbed at Chris' bloodied cargo shorts as a sigh escaped his throat. He didn't realize he'd done it aloud until Rochelle looked at him, eyes alighting on his face with a sympathetic edge. She advanced - but her attention went to Chris.

Laying still where he was, the Spaniard had taken to trembling. It was a constant shiver that twitched at his muscles, and there was a sheen of sweat on his skin that made it hard to tell if he was shivering from cold or fever. Maybe both. He still held a ghastly white pallor. The blood loss was still taking its toll, and if they didn't get hydration and nutrients into him, soon…

Ellis made room for Rochelle as she slipped to stand beside the bed. She set Nick's Magnum down, freeing her uninjured hand to idly untie the Spaniard's shoes. She was clumsy one-handed, but persisted. "You okay?" she murmured, voice tender. "You and Nick seem… off."

Ellis shifted his gaze to his hands. He chewed on that question for a minute, wishing he knew better how to respond. Was he angry with Nick? Or something else?

Knowing that somebody had died because of him was hard. Even if he'd been a cruel man, even if
he'd been attacking him, even knowing what might have happened if Jerry hadn't died… Ellis didn't want to begin to guess at that. Didn't want to think what his intentions had been.

Even under those circumstances, he never wanted to be the reason behind someone's death. The idea that his actions had forced Nick's hand, forced him to kill someone… He felt too many things to rifle through them. He felt angry, but not at Nick. Maybe he felt angry at himself.

Though a part of him didn't want to talk about it - another part was already speaking, low and tremulous. "Did y'all know?"

Rochelle tilted her head without looking at him. She drew Chris' bloodied sneakers free of his feet, one after the other, tossing them to the ground. "Know what?" There was something in her voice, though. A hesitance. A gentled tremor.

She did, he was sure.

"Jerry." Ellis darted his eyes up, catching them on Rochelle's face. He could feel the tension in his voice, even as he tried to soften it out. "Whut did he do? Did he… do somethin' tuh make the gun backfire? Happened tuh Keith once, but it was 'cause the gun was real old, 'n' -"

He knew he'd been right when she stiffened, and his jaw went tense with the confirmation that they'd kept him in the dark. Anger flared up in his voice, then, before he could stop it.

"You knew - I thought it was an accident, and y'all didn't tell me?"

That made her turn, and she met his gaze fully. Her expression fractured into frustrated upset, and the anger was gone as fast as it had arrived, his body cowing instead. He shouldn't have been getting angry with Rochelle, and least of all right now.

"I -" she started, almost blustering… then pulled herself back, inhaling shakily and starting again in a calmer whisper. Rochelle clenched her fingers around the wrist of her injured hand, soothingly, because she'd almost angrily fisted it and the pain was clear in her eyes. "I wanted to, so you didn't blame yourself for it. He didn't want to bring it up again."

Ellis mostly struggled with a sense of raw shame, now, lowering his gaze. He hadn't meant to upset her, not after what happened, not when she was just recovering from having to kill Brenda. Not when he considered that his fault, too.

Rochelle's mouth drew into a frown, raising her left hand to smooth her palm over the top of her head. She examined him for a beat, and the collapse of his anger seemed to turn her own frustration muted and mild. "Are you upset with him?"

The words didn't match what he felt. He wasn't angry at Nick for killing Jerry. It wasn't the thought of Nick doing it that surged uncomfortable tension through him. It was the thought that Nick had had to do it - because of him. He'd put him in that position. He'd forced his hand.

If he'd only gone with them…

Maybe Ellis should have been angry. After all, if the decision had come down to Nick being there and pulling the trigger to save him, there would have been no question - but Nick had set a trap, without telling him, and left it to chance. Something that would have killed Jerry, whether the man had done anything wrong or not.

All Ellis managed to say was a strangled, "I dunno."
Her eyes skated over his face, and he didn't know how much of his thought was visible. Reluctantly, she shook her head and averted her eyes. "I wish it hadn't happened like that. But you know he was just trying to protect you, and I'm glad he did." A taut sincerity seeped into her voice. "Anyway, you should talk to him about this."

"I'm gonna. I just..." He shook his head, tucking his lower lip between his teeth and worrying at it. His jaw tightened - and tightened more, even as pain snuck in to the clench of his teeth on the flesh of his lip. If he bit down, he might stop the heavy weight behind his eyes, the rising feeling of tension and wetness. Something cold wormed in his gut. Something piercing.

Something like guilt.

He felt like he'd forced Rochelle to kill Brenda... and now, to find out he'd forced Nick to kill Jerry?

She noticed his visible struggle with a start, and her eyes softened. Rochelle turned her body to face him, reaching out her uninjured hand to place it against his chest. Her fingertips soothed there, brushing against his sternum. "Baby...?" The gesture made him inhale, shakily, and he reached up to grasp her hand softly with his.

He couldn't put this on Rochelle. He had to be strong.

Ellis prepared to reassure her, to lie and say he was okay - but before he could get the words out, a rough "Aw, hell nah." sounded from the hallway.

They both startled faintly, and Rochelle squeezed her fingers against his chest before stepping around him and moving toward the doorway. "Coach?" Her voice was questioning, and maybe a little fragile. Ellis took advantage of her distraction to put the heels of his hands against his eyes, taking a few short breaths to calm himself.

"Come on, man." he muttered, softly, just to himself. "Keep it together."

Coach stood in the hallway, gazing up at the stairwell, brows drawn over his eyes. His body was slumped, hunched until he could grasp a hand over his injured knee. He glanced at her as she came into his view, wearily. "I ain't goin' up more damn stairs."

A sympathetic frown touched her lips, and she started forward. As she reached him, tucking herself around to his other side so she could curl her left arm behind his back, Nick's voice floated in from down the hall.

"No need. Beds in here. Single and a bunk-bed."

Rochelle blinked, glancing toward his voice, and finding the second door in the hallway was now open. The dark-haired Northerner reappeared through the threshold, Coach's shotgun braced over his forearm and a lazy kind of disinterest in his stride.

"Take a load off, Tons of Fun."

Coach sighed, and had he not looked so relieved, he might've taken the time to be annoyed. He tucked a hand onto Rochelle's shoulder, allowing himself to lean against her a little. "Sounds like a plan." he gruffed wearily. "Need to get off this knee."

Lacing her fingers against his shirt, minding the stitched-up tear between his shoulderblades, Rochelle stiffened to take some of his weight. It had started to come undone, she noticed - just little gaps forming amidst the threads. A wry part of her couldn't help but think Carmine had done a
good job for it to have lasted over all the exertion and trauma they'd been through.

Pushing him to start moving, Rochelle spared a glance for the gambler. It was all she could do to keep herself from glaring, but she honestly tried. For Ellis' sake, if nothing else. She had to let them work it out on their own. "Thanks, Nick. Can you check upstairs?"

"Workin' on it." he responded, distantly, skirting around them and moving toward the stairs without even glancing at her. She half swore that she could have outright stuck her tongue out at him and he wouldn't have noticed.

Now she wished she'd taken the chance.

Bracing the shotgun against his hip, Nick took the stairs carefully. He felt confident the condo was empty of danger, but he wasn't about to let his guard down. They were at the limits of their capacity for bad news, and there was simply no room for error. They needed a safehouse like nothing else, and definitely didn't need him getting hurt by some rogue zombie hidden away in some side room.

He breached into the upper floor with a cautious tension. It was more like a loft, almost the entirety of the space open, topped by a vaulted ceiling that stretched into darkness. Through the stair railing, to the far left, there was a small kitchen with an L-shaped set of counters closed in by a diagonally cut island.

Two stools sat against the back of the island, like a bar. The center of the room was dominated by a fat and lumpy couch and two loveseats in a symmetrical curl around a short coffee table. His focus, however, was drawn upwards.

He wouldn't have been able to see at all, likely, had light not filtered out from behind a set of curtains on the opposite wall. They were massive curtains, draping a good seven feet up the wall and crossing over nearly the entire width of the room. They were thick and only allowed slats of light in at the very edges.

Nick stood there a moment, allowing himself to scan the room carefully. There was no movement, no signs of life. There was, however, another door - above the entryway and behind the staircase, a corner of the condo was walled in. He could tell instantly it was too small to be another bedroom, but he still had to look.

Alert, Nick stepped up to sidle along the railing, making for the doorway. He took it like he'd taken the door downstairs; he pressed the muzzle of Coach's shotgun against the space between the door and the threshold, letting it push forward as he turned the knob and opened the door.

Anything unlucky enough to be there would get a face-full of lead.

*Just one trigger this time.*

But the bathroom was empty. It was merely a powder room, just large enough for a toilet and a clamshell sink. He grunted a little, dropping the shotgun to rest against his thigh and retreating. "Looks like we're good." he called idly downstairs, only a little annoyed when he received no response.

Truthfully, he was fine with the distance. The alone time was soothing.

Raising his eyes back to the curtains, he let his head cock. He'd figured the other staircase attached to the house led to a porch, but hadn't really considered the consequences beyond that. In pre-apocalypse life, a beachhouse balcony was appealing - now, all he could think was how a Smoker
could yank him off it, or a Hunter could crawl up onto it.

If he'd had the time, he might have felt a little melancholic about that shift in mindset. As it was, he crossed the loft, carefully shuffling between the seating that centered the whole room. He approached the curtains, settling back on his heels before reaching out.

A hum touched his throat as he caught fingertips in the curtains and tossed them aside. They slid easily on the rails, metal connectors rattling as they dragged along. Nick blinked through the flash as sunlight exploded into the room behind them.

Through the set of glass doors and a long panel of glass above them, he gazed out over a thin stretch of porch. It was bare, no chairs or tables, just wide enough to stand in and extending off to the right where it no doubt looped around to the second staircase.

Beyond it, through a tall railing, his eyes locked onto something of far more interest.

He couldn't resist taking a step forward, palm sliding flat onto the glass door. The two-story condo was tall enough to allow his sight to slant over the few lines of houses and buildings that separated them from the shoreline. Tall enough to see over and past them, just a little. Just enough.

The horizon stretched out to seeming infinity, a thin sheet of blue betraying the ocean that was so nearby. It wavered and flowed, dark shades mixing with the white crests of waves, only barely discernable. He'd tasted the salt in the air, but now, it was truly before him. They'd been driving toward the shore for so long…

Nick felt something, but he wasn't sure what.

It sure as hell didn't feel like looking at salvation.
Chapter 125

To Ellis' considerable relief, Nick was avoiding them. He'd made some noise about unloading the car alone, but when Rochelle offered to help she was dismissed off-hand. She hadn't been in the mood to argue with him, so instead, Ellis and Rochelle had settled in to take care of Christophe.

The gambler had tossed the supplies backpack at them, made a few quiet passes up and down the stairs as he carried things in from the sedan… then disappeared after his last trip, climbing the stairs and not coming back down. It was for the best, even if it frustrated Ellis a little to feel like he was somehow in trouble.

Regardless, he needed to figure out what he even wanted to say when they did talk.

He had shucked his steel-toed boots, sitting crosslegged on the bed next to the foreigner. It bowed under their combined weight, enough to draw the unconscious man closer so his thigh and waistline pressed against either of Ellis' knees. He'd positioned himself on the left side, gazing down at the stump that remained of Chris' left arm.

It was still surreal. Almost nervously, he glanced at both of his own arms. He struggled to imagine what it would be like, losing one, losing part of himself. His eyes drifted onto Chris' face, and a mulled sympathy swarmed onto his features.

"I know we didn't mean to or nothin', but… Feels like we took.. everythin' from him."

Rochelle looked up from where she kneeled beside the bed, movements pausing. She tried to keep her injured hand against her tummy, arm posed as if it were in a sling against her side. Her other hand was in the midst of poking through their supplies backpack. "…Yeah."

There was a window on the bedroom wall, but it had been tightly shuttered, blocking out any light. Once they were opened, a yellow glow had flooded the room, lighting their surroundings. However, it was getting late and they didn't have any candles; the night would be dark, so they had to work fast.

Exhaling softly, she returned to her work, taking out one of the antibiotic tubes and tossing it onto the bed. "His arm and his team's gone now. I… don't know how close they were, but I can't imagine being alone in all this." Next, she grabbed up the pack of gauze Ellis had found, looking it over a little thoughtfully. "I can understand why she was so desperate to get him back."

Ellis glanced up toward her, dropping his arms slightly. She seemed more stable now that she had something constructive to do. Maybe dedicating her attention to tending to Chris was good for her - for both of them. He was feeling more solid, too.

"He ain't alone now. We'll take care of him."

That made her smile, softly, and she spared a grateful look up toward him. "I'm glad you feel that way. I just - after everything, I just… I couldn't forgive myself if we didn't try." Placing the gauze next to the antibiotics, she reached back in, digging through the contents. "I know Nick doesn't really trust him, and I don't know how much you saw of what happened at the gunstore…"

Ellis shrugged, just a little. "Plenty, I reckon, and y'all mostly filled in the blanks... I saw them scufflin' over the gun when I showed up."

"Yeah." She scooped up one of the waterbottles Nick had stowed in there, holding it up to Ellis. He
took it, wobbling it in his hand idly so it sloshed. "She signaled Jerry to kill you, and he was really upset. It really didn't seem like their plan was to kill us the whole time - or at least, he didn't know it was. If he hadn't fought back, you might've been too late."

There was more, of course, but Rochelle still didn't know how to broach the subject of Brenda's fear of the military. They'd have to talk about it eventually, but at this point, part of her wanted to see if they could talk to Chris and get some kind of clarity before bringing Ellis into it.

The last thing she wanted to do was unnecessarily rouse fear in him that their search for rescue might just fall through.

Ellis seemed to consider her words, eyes darting back to Christophe's face. "Huh." The idea that she was hiding anything went right over his head. "Maybe he just got stuck with 'em. Heck, Nick didn't wanna stay with us at first - but, like you said. It's real dangerous goin' solo."

"Maybe." she uttered, softly. Grasping up their pillbottle of antibiotics, she finally pushed to her feet. "Can you lean him up? I really want to get him to take one of these. Figure we'll just… flush it with water, try and make him swallow."

Blinking, Ellis nodded his head and set down the waterbottle beside his hip. "Okay…" He carefully scooped a hand under Chris' neck, bracing him, and leaned him up off the mattress. He scooched until he could get himself between Chris and the headboard, slipping crossed legs underneath his shoulders to hold him up.

Ellis moved slowly, taking as much care as he could not to touch his stumped shoulder. The last thing he wanted to do was bump or scrape it.

Leaving his hand where it was, he tilted the Spaniard's head up, holding it there. His skin was clammy, cold yet doused in warm sweat, and as Ellis settled underneath him he uttered a few strained breaths. It was only hesitantly that he recognized them as coherent words.

"¿Vale?… Phil."

Ellis quirked his head so he could gaze over the man's face, but it was just more muttering with no signs of coming to actual awareness. "Sean… escasamente, para… " The Spanish escaped him, but the names caught his attention. He mused on it - and when he looked up, Rochelle's expression betrayed thought of her own.

She seemed slightly frustrated, though, so Ellis forced a smile to try and catch her attention. "Him talkin' is a good sign, though, right? Even if he ain't really wakin' up."

Rochelle half-nodded, focusing her eyes downwards. She reached out her left hand to scoop up the bottle of antibiotics, tucking it under her bicep to brace it. "I guess. Better than nothing, at least." Her expression scrunched slightly as she squeezed her arm to hold it still as she pushed against the child lock and twisted, trying to crack it open.

Hesitantly, Ellis suggested, "Maybe we should try tuh give him painkillers, too. I mean… he's gonna wake up sometime. Probably be in a bunch'uh pain if we don't, and we don't want him hollerin' again."

"Let's see if we can even get him to take this." Managing to get the pillbottle open and sliding her hand to grasp it with the cap stowed between it and her palm, Rochelle offered it out to Ellis, tilting it a little in an expectant gesture. He cupped his free hand under it, watching as she tapped one out onto his palm.
It was a little dual-coloured capsule, red on one end and yellow on the other. He bounced it thoughtfully, glancing back to Chris as Rochelle carefully replaced the pills under her arm and recapped it.

"Okay." she sighed, leaning over the Spaniard's body to retrieve the waterbottle Ellis had placed down. She opened it much like she had the pills, though it went better with no child lock to frustrate her progress. Thumbing the cap off to let it fall to the bed, she sat on the edge of the mattress, leaning in toward Chris.

Rochelle tucked the waterbottle between her thighs, readying herself with an inhale. She grasped her knuckles under Chris' chin, drawing his jaw open with a firm pressure. "Give me the pill and grab him here, I'll -"

"Wait." Ellis suddenly spoke, gazing at the unconscious Spaniard. She froze a little, expression darting into something nervous, like she'd done something wrong. "I ever tell you 'bout this one time, when Keith was bite-sized, one'uh his wisdom teeth got like… lopsided? It ain't like he did anything tuh cause it, it just - happens sometimes. Anyway, they -"

"… Ellis, I love you, but what's this got to do with what we're doing?" Her brows were wrenched up, gaze intent on his with something trapped between disbelief and humor.

He couldn't help a slightly put-out look. It wasn't like he didn't know he had a tendency to ramble, and that his stories generally weren't particularly relevant - but he did have a salient point this time. Rather than say so, Ellis simply exhaled, continuing a little more hurriedly.

"He got it pulled, but he had tuh take meds like this fer a while." Bouncing the pill in his hand to make his point, Ellis bobbed his head. "His mama couldn't get him tuh swallow 'em fer shit, so his pa just cracked 'em open and mixed it in juice. It tasted real awful, but his pa pretty much said he'd either drink it or get whooped, so…"

Rochelle was still staring at him blankly right up until the very end of the story. As he trailed off, her eyes brightened, and she glanced down at the water in her hand in realization.

"Shit. That's a really good idea. The painkillers are tablets, but we could crush them, mix it in water…" A laugh escaped her, almost tickled, and she dropped her hand to her thigh. "Here I am, getting ready to cram my hand down his throat… You're a smart cookie, Ellis."

He couldn't resist a grin, thumbing the pill against his palm so he could scratch bashfully at the back of his neck with his other fingers. "Aw, that ain't true. I just remembered it, is all." Glancing toward the door, Ellis nipped at his tongue. "Maybe there's a cup in the kitchen or somethin'."

"Actually…" Rochelle placed the waterbottle on the nightstand to get it out of her hands. She slipped off the bed, taking the few steps between her and the bathroom. Her eyes caught on that pile of paper cups she'd seen earlier, and she snatched one up, yanking it off the rest. "Yeah. Here."

Returning to the bed, Rochelle held up the cup. "Might need you to handle this. Not sure I can do this with one hand."

Ellis gave her trophy a practically excited once-over, grinning a little as his idea came to fruition. "I got'cha." He pulled his hand away from Chris' neck, letting his head settle back down, and grabbed the cup from her. He placed it on his knee, balancing it there, and grasped the antibiotic capsule between his fingertips.

The two halves of the pill started to move when he twisted either end opposite its partner, though it
took a careful wiggling motion to get them to slide completely apart. With a squinted attention, he poured out the dusty white contents into the cup.

As he worked, Rochelle reached back into the backpack and retrieved the painkillers. She was forced to struggle it open again, visibly having to stop herself from using her bandaged hand. "Sweet Jesus, I'm gonna lose it with this... It just had to be my right hand." escaped her in a frustrated mutter.

Ellis gave a slight laugh, though it was muted with sympathy. He grasped the cup, holding it carefully in his hand and squinting down at the powder now resting inside. "Sorry, girl. You were a real badass back there, though. Saved our hides."

She gave him a smile - and it was genuine, nose scrunching a little along the bridge. "I'd never let anyone hurt you," Cracking open the painkillers, she offered it out to Ellis again. This time, she tapped out two tan tablets onto his palm. As she did, she tipped her head slightly. "We do have to figure out a way to grind them up."

Something like mischief flared when Ellis grinned at her. "I got an idea." He dove a hand into the left pocket of his coveralls, snatching out the steel pocket knife he'd nicked from the same garage they'd found their car in. He waggled it, and twisted himself a little, leaning back so he could place the pills on the nightstand behind him.

Grasping the folded pocket knife in a fist, the end sticking out from his curled fingers, Ellis circled his other hand around the pills. Using it like a barrier to keep the contents inside, he carefully pressed the end of his pocket knife against one of the pills and pushed, hard.

It snapped the pill in half, and he did the same to the other. Then again - and again. It took a little while to break them down into anything resembling a powder, and even then, there were some chunks amidst the pile. Eventually satisfied with his work, Ellis blindly reached back and held out his hand for the cup.

Smiling in a mild way, eyes soft on him, Rochelle placed the paper cup between his fingers. He carefully accepted it and pressed it to the corner of the nightstand, using his pinky to gently and meticulously scrape the powder off the edge and into the cup.

Lifting the cup with a thoroughly pleased expression, Ellis stuck it out to her. "There! That ain't half bad. It'll taste gnarly, but better than him chokin' on pills, right?"

"Good job, cutie." In one swift motion, Rochelle knuckled against his cheek in a teasingly affectionate brush and took the cup from him. He ducked his head, shading his eyes under the bill of his cap, watching her turn at the waist and grasp the waterbottle loosely with her injured hand.

She carefully poured out a splash of water into the cup - not too much, maybe two-thirds of the height of the paper vessel. The woman tucked the waterbottle under her arm, tilted up, and returned to sitting on the bed. "This should work." she agreed, exhaling a softly relieved sound, and dipped an index finger into the cup to swirl it around, mixing it carefully.

The contents didn't completely dissolve, but the water turned almost milky in colour as it swirled up and mixed together. It smelled like tacky, sour glue, but it was better than nothing.

Moving more confidently, Rochelle tucked the thumb of her injured hand against Chris' chin and forced his mouth open, pressing the paper cup against his lips and tipping its contents. She quickly grabbed the water again, following the pill mixture up with a little more water - but not too much.
Chris did cough a little, head twitching, and Ellis tensed nervously - but the cough turned into a tired clank of his teeth, jaw shifting. His throat clenched as his body seemed to reflexively swallow, and Rochelle visibly relaxed.

"Thank God."

Ellis and her traded smiles, relief and pride blatant in the gesture. Rochelle placed the cup and waterbottle on the nightstand, thoughtfully tucking her hands together and brushing her thumb over her knuckles. "We should change his bandages, and use this cream you found."

Glancing over the Spaniard, Ellis thoughtfully lifted a hand to brush a hand over the bandages that crossed over Chris' chest, bracing on his shoulder and looping over his neck. They were mostly made up of the cannibalized strips of Nick's suit jacket, and he mused with a nip on his lips. "Reckon we got enough?"

Rochelle settled her palm over the multipack of gauze, tapping fingertips against it. "No." Despite the word, she flashed a smile at him. "It'll be okay, though. Let's just loosen his bandages, and we can put some cream on and then pack in a layer against his shoulder. Like we did for your forearm that one time."

Ellis hummed in understanding, nodding his head in easy agreement. Following her cue, he started to work on undoing the bandages just enough to draw them away from Christophe's stumped arm. "Least he ain't been bleedin' too much."

As he said it, though, he peeled away some of the bandages, and his eyes caught on the underside of them. While there was a little red leeched into the fabric, Ellis' attention was more captured by a clear liquid that had wept out into it. He frowned, but merely continued to nudge the bandages away.

The ragged surface of his amputated arm had browned around the edges, more of a burnt pink in the center. It was somewhere between a burn and a scab, though there were cracks lacing it here and there, forming split-off chunks that followed the alternating depths of the ragged wound.

A curious edge touched the quirk to Ellis' brow, and he couldn't help tentatively dusting fingertips against the injury. He'd have to, anyway, to apply the cream. The contact sent shivers of pain down Chris' body, muscles flexing in protest at his shoulder.

The pink flesh had a feel like wet paper, tacky and slick with that weeping fluid, but the more brown it was the harder it became until it was sheathed in a rough scab. The spiderweb of cracks on the hard surface made him frown more - if he pressed on one of the sections, even gently, they almost felt like they might shift. The last thing they needed was chunks of the wound falling off.

"Here." Rochelle prompted, and when Ellis lifted his head, he saw she'd gotten the antibiotic opened up and torn off the small seal over the nozzle. "It.. doesn't look great, but I kinda thought it'd look worse…"

He didn't utter his concerns, flashing her a smile and taking the tube from her hand. "Y'know, Keith almost lost a limb once. He was tryin' tuh climb over this barb-wire fence, 'cause he'n'I found this real big warehouse in the middle'uh nowhere 'n' he got convinced it was some Area 61 shit or somethin'."

Rochelle stilled with a calm quiet as she listened, head tilted, and watched as Ellis squeezed out a careful line of the clear gel onto his index finger.
"Only thing was, he got all the way to the top, and then lost his grip. Man, he fell real bad, got a leg twisted up in the wires - he was *screamin*, 'cause he couldn't grab nothin', so he was just hangin' by his leg 'n' his weight was makin' it get tighter. Every time he moved, man, it got worse."

Horror started to blossom on her expression, so Ellis shook his head with quick reassurance. "He ended up fine. It was real scary, at the time, though."

She relaxed a little, seeming a touch disbelieving at that, and lowered her eyes as Ellis lowered his head. He started to carefully apply the antibiotics, paying special attention to the cracks in the skin where the flesh was threatening to fall apart. She gently probed as he did. "What happened?"

"Well, I couldn't get him free fer nothin', so we had tuh call like an ambulance'n'some firefighters'n'shit. They cut him down, but the wires were like *dug in*, and between the cuts 'n' it cuttin' off his blood flow, the doctors were real worried he'd have tuh lose it. It took a long while before they told us it was gonna be a'ight."

"Damn." escaped Rochelle, some twisted humor flicking over her expression. She couldn't help a soft flutter of sorrow at that - if Christophe had only had the benefit of a doctor… "I can never tell if that boy is that crazy, or if you're just exaggerating."

Ellis snorted, gently, flashing her the smallest of confused glances. "I ain't lyin'. Well, 'cept fer the shit I wasn't there for, I guess… Keith might make some stuff up. But I'm usually there!" When he ran out of antibiotics on his finger, leaving only a greasy layer he couldn't get off, he went to squeeze out some more.

He wasn't inclined to be too sparing. The first few days, he figured, were most important.

When Rochelle merely laughed, softly, Ellis changed the subject. "Do you think we should give Coach some'uh those painkillers?" he suggested idly as he worked, painting the traumatized flesh with his finger. "His knee wasn't lookin' so good."

Rochelle nodded, eyes darting up to gaze at the wall that separated the two bedrooms. Worry wrote a line between her brows. 'I've never seen him that bad. It's always been aching him, but I think he really did a number on it…" A faint pinch touched her lips, reluctant.

Ellis glanced at her, only examining her expression for a moment before looking down again. He smeared one last measure of gel over the surface of Chris' wound, pulling his hand away and letting it hang in the air for a moment. "Okay. Let's bandage him up."

After a beat of uncertainty, eyeballing the grease layering his hand, Ellis just shrugged his shoulders and moved to wipe it against his forearm. He had plenty of cuts and abrasions from who-knew-when, and he flashed Rochelle a bit of a goofy smile as he treated the gel like it were lotion.

She snorted at him, shaking her head faintly - but as he got the cream off his hand and reached out toward the bandages, she beat him to it. Grabbing up the pack loosely in her injured hand, she used the nail of her thumb to start cutting into the plastic. "I'll finish up. How about you go bring Coach some water and the painkillers, and go check on Nick?"

Ellis was nodding along - though the last bit made him blanch, just softly. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to Nick, but the way that the gambler was actively trying to keep his distance made him nervous. He'd been planning to respect his space, and wait until night rolled around when they'd have some privacy.

And maybe he was procrastinating a little.
Rochelle didn't seem to notice his reaction. Trying to avoid bending her hand too much lest she agitate her cut palm, she busied herself with working out one of the gauze rolls and examining it.

"Oh.. uh.. You sure? I can stay 'n' help out..." At his words, a little smile twitched at her lips, and she passed him a knowing look. He blurted reflexively: 'I-I ain't avoidin' him or nothin'. I just don't wanna let'cha hurt yer hand..."

So much for not noticing.

Humming in faint dismissal, she scraped fingernails against the gauze to start dragging it undone. "Just leave that penknife so I can cut this. Coach is down for the count and I'll be busy with this, so go talk to Nick, okay?"

Before Ellis could respond - or even hesitate to respond - Rochelle dropped her uninjured hand to seek out his, curling fingers around his palm. "You'll feel better once you do, I bet." He squeezed back reflexively and fell to a smile despite himself. "And if he's mean, just tell me, and I'll go kick his ass."

He sighed, pressing his thumb against her knuckles and rubbing a little, soaking in the affection of the gesture. "You're right. Me beatin' around the bush ain't helpin' none." Ellis curled his tongue against his cheek before lowering his voice, not meeting her gaze. "I… I ain't sure if I said this before, but… I'm real glad yuh found out. Thanks fer - y'know. Bein' here."

Ellis couldn't help the heat that touched his cheeks as he got the words out. A grin threatened at Rochelle's lips, but she muted it with a pinched jaw, aware of his embarrassment.

"Anytime, sweetie." was all she said.

Returning her attention to the gauze and releasing his hand, Rochelle carefully dragged out a section of it and flattened it against her thigh. Ellis quickly shook himself back into action and grabbed his stolen pocketknife from the nightstand, leaning over Chris' supine form to place it on the bed next to her.

As she scooped it up and thumbed the knife out, only struggling slightly with her injured hand, Ellis slipped off the bed. He had to worm himself out from Chris' weight, being careful not to jostle him, before he could stand. It was quietly that Ellis made to retrieve the bottle of painkillers and the bottle of water they'd already opened.

Rochelle spared him a supportive glance, nose crinkling, as he moved out of the room. He tried to hold onto that feeling as he crossed the hallway, tenderly peeking into the bedroom Coach had claimed.

The room was more cramped than the other bedroom, only a small stretch of carpet between the bunk-bed and the bed. There wasn't room for anything else except a tiny chest of drawers at the foot of the single bed and a closet built into the wall on the right. The shuttered door closing it off had been opened, probably by Nick, and it was full of linens and towels.

Ellis noted the discovery, reminding himself to grab something later so they could cover Chris - but he focused back on the task at hand, looking toward the bed.

Coach was flat on his back. Like the other bedroom, the beds had been stripped, and Coach had laid down on the bare mattress without much ceremony. He or Rochelle had taken a towel from the closet and bundled it up, tucking it beneath his injured knee, so it was elevated a little. Ellis examined the man's injured leg thoughtfully as he approached.
His jaw popped open, ready to speak, but as he came up level with Coach… he realized the man was asleep. He closed his lips as quick as they had parted.

Gazing uncertainly from the pills in his hand to Coach's reclined posture, Ellis struggled for a dragging instant. He didn't want to wake the ex-football player, but the sooner he took some meds the sooner they would kick in… but - then again - if he got some sleep, maybe his knee would feel better by the time he awoke.

The indecision chewed at Ellis' gut, and it was a fiercer sensation than it should have been. Like making a choice at all frightened him. That feeling of instability threatened at him again in a rush, unexpected, and he had to take a breath to stop that piercing cold from returning. It took him a moment to realize his hands were trembling.

He felt… broken, somehow, and he'd never felt that way before. Never felt so rickety, way down in the very core of himself.

Huffing, shaking his head, Ellis reached to set both the water and the pillbottle on the windowsill between the two beds, in the center of the far wall. He backed up, moving quick on his socked feet, escaping the room in more of a rush than he meant.

Why did he feel so afraid?
Chapter 126

Nick braced the katana against the coffee table, a wad of paper towel grasped in his fist. It was with delicate care that he swiped at the blade, working away the gore from the steel. There were a few layers of it, some fresh and some new, and underneath some of the worst was patches of rust that made his upper lip curl.

He wasn't exactly an expert on swords, but it was easy to tell it hadn't been very well taken care of. It was, he supposed, irrelevant - it was still sharp enough to cut, and that mattered more.

*Not gonna kill a zombie with tetanus.*

The thought made him snort, even as he focused on the motions of his hand. He kept his fingers well away from the edge of the sword, cleaning it in cautious and slow swipes to ensure he wouldn't slip. However, his focus wasn't so intense that he didn't hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

It sounded too soft to be Ellis, lacking the heavy noise of his boots. He wasn't particularly interested in talking to Rochelle, either, so he actively decided against acknowledging the footsteps at all. Keeping his head down, he twisted the blade to start tending to the other side.

The steps stopped at the top of the stairs, for a moment leaving only the soft sound of Nick's swipes against the blade.

Then: "... Wow."

Ellis' voice did startle him, inwardly, though Nick didn't do more than twitch. He riveted his eyes on the blade, aware of Ellis slipping into his periphery. He'd left the curtains half open for light, and the Georgian wandered close to gaze through them, seeing much the same view as Nick had earlier.

As he passed the circle of seating, Nick allowed himself a glance upward, with Ellis' back now facing him. The kid had taken his boots off, he noted, but more important was the faint weakness he perceived in his posture. It wasn't any one thing in particular that tipped Nick off - just a slump and a weariness, his usual energy sapped out of him.

It was just softly that he smiled, a gesture Nick could only spot through the reflection on the balcony doors. "We done made it. Pretty cool, huh?"

Nick lowered his eyes before the mechanic could turn back around. He pressed his thumbnail against the papertowel and braced his other fingertips against the dull back of the blade so he could get leverage to cautiously scrub at a caked-on smear of viscera. "Half the battle, kiddo. Ocean ain't gonna save us."

Maybe no one will.

Ellis did turn around, leaning his shoulders against the glass door and allowing his body to flatten there. His gaze settled on the older man, and he was quiet, fingertips stretching backwards to tap against the glass in a soft pattern.

Nick merely continued his work, intentionally keeping his body loose, lest his rising tension make him slip up and cut himself. He wanted to be angry, to *recoil*, at the idea of Ellis being upset with him. What right did the kid have to judge him? Or worse, doubt him?
He was also tempted to just come right out with it, tell him in no uncertain terms: *I killed Jerry and I'd have done it with my bare hands if I'd had the chance.* If Ellis disliked that, fine, but it was the truth. If that broke something between them, hadn't it been a long time coming?

He kept silent, instead.

Slowly, Ellis' tapping came to a stop. His fingers halted gradually, aborting the rhythm one note at a time until the last digit gave a vague pat against the glass and then stilled. Only then did he speak again, voice soft - though not so much gentle as it was faint. "Weren't a bad idea, takin' that ninja sword. I always wanted one'uv those. Well… not that I wanted tuh get it like this, anyway."

Nick grunted, non-committal.

The sound seemed to daunt Ellis, his head tilting softly. The motion scraped the back of his cap against the glass, the plastic of the fastener making a whispered rasping sound. After a beat, he lowered his chin, and it was almost a gesture of defeat.

"… you mind if we talk?"

Placing the sword flat on the table, Nick retracted his hands in short order. He folded the paper towel in on itself, using a clean edge to scrub away a few idle splotches of red and black that had gotten on his fingers. "Sure. Weather's nice today." he uttered, voice rolling with harsh sarcasm.

Unexpectedly - the tone seemed to relieve Ellis' tension just a little. It was better than outright aggression, and the Georgian gently pushed away from the door. He moved with caution, approaching a few steps like he were coming up on a wild animal, then stopped at the corner of one of the loveseats.

He pushed his hip against the arm, settling down. Despite the initial reaction to Nick's mockery, he did exhale a faintly frustrated sigh and lower his voice. "I ain't jokin', Nick. I wanna know what happened, and why - why'd you wait so long tuh tell me?"

Once his fingers were clean, Nick tossed the paper towel to the table, leaning back on the sofa. He put his left arm over the back, allowing his injured right arm to drape limply against his side. His eyes settled coolly on Ellis in examination.

Was the kid angry? He didn't seem it, suddenly, and not being able to read that soft face was a strange feeling. Ellis was normally an open book, but Nick couldn't pierce through his tension or get anything more from him than a wavering discontent.

"Fine." Nick stated, voice taut but smooth. "Before we left that morning, I blocked his gun up so it would explode if he shot it. And apparently he *did.*" His diction went harsh there at the end, pointedly; after all, Ellis had been his target. "I figured it would hurt him, maybe kill him, if I got lucky. And I didn't tell you at first because I -"

Because he'd not wanted to know how Ellis would react? Because dodging the confession was easier, until it became a choice between hiding his hand in it and letting Ellis think he'd somehow caused it?

Nick wasn't entirely sure, so he smoothed over it before the fumble could grow obvious.

"It didn't matter. He's dead, and we had bigger things to worry about."

A frown touched the Georgian's lips. His eyes drifted, and try as Nick might, he just couldn't discern what the glaze over them meant. "Whut if he'd just been shootin' zombies or somethin'?"
You didn't know he'd try tuh - I mean..."

It was all Nick could do not to let his eyes roll. He snorted instead, nostrils flaring faintly at the statement. "I know his type. I knew there was a chance." Ellis' brows twitched, like he were unsatisfied with that response, and Nick shook his head. "Yeah, I wasn't sure - but I was right, so what the fuck do you want?"

Frowning softly, Ellis lowered his head. His hands laced together over his knee, tightening fingers against the fabric of his coveralls. "It don't… bother you?"

Nick shrugged up his left shoulder with a defensive kind of frustration. "Why? Because I might have killed him before he got the chance to turn on us? I'm crippled with guilt. Really." Ellis seemed to absorb that, slowly, and Nick expected him to get angry. Expected those eyes to turn on him with muddled accusation.

Rather than give him the chance, the older man threw his head back and closed his eyes, the crown of his head resting against the cushy top of the sofa. "I'm not in the goddamn mood for this, Ellis. The fucker deserved what he got and I'm not going to be sorry for it, so either get over it, or come out and say what you mean."

Fabric shifted as Ellis stood, suddenly sliding off the couch arm. The motion was so abrupt, Nick's eyes flickered back open despite himself to land on the Georgian. Ellis dropped his hands to fists at his sides, and fuck if he didn't look… miserable?

"I ain't -" He hesitated, and when he turned his chin to look away, the light from the glass doors caught across his face. His eyes were brighter than they should have been, glinting, and it took Nick a moment to realize why.

"I ain't mad. I thought I was, but…"

They were damp.

Shaking his head, almost reluctant, Ellis raised his hands and pressed his palms against his face. His body slumped forward with the gesture, shoulders deflating, and that misery peaked. "I… didn't mean tuh make you kill somebody. I didn't mean tuh make Ro' kill anybody."

Something tensed in Nick's chest - surprise? Guilt? Had he been misreading Ellis this entire time? Unthinking, he stood from the couch, as if his body violently refused to stay seated. His frame went tight and poised as if he'd come under threat.

"What are you -" Is that what this was? Ellis was upset that he'd forced Nick to do something grisly, rather than upset at the act itself? "Kid, you didn't make anybody do anything. You -" He had little time to react when Ellis suddenly approached.

All he knew was one moment they were both still, and the next moment the younger man was crossing the distance between them. Ellis didn't embrace him, just stepped to stand before him. His head turned to bury his cheek against Nick's shoulder, but the rest of his body hovered a half-inch away as if afraid to close the distance more than he already had.

The contact with Nick's wounded shoulder ached, but he held his tongue.

Ellis got the words out in hurried chunks, every syllable increasing the tremble that started in his body. "If I hadn't slept in - 'n'if I - if I'd been watchin' Ro', I… I could'uh stopped her gettin' kidnapped - if I just - you guys had tuh kill people - I made you kill him -" He was shaking, almost shivering. "If I hadn't gotten hurt, we could'uh - if we were there, when Chris came back, 'n' -
Nick froze as his brain tenderly found its way around this new revelation. That doubt he'd witnessed, and that insecurity - those faint glances and those averted eyes. Ellis hadn't been wrestling with judgment; he'd been wrestling with guilt.

Christ. Ro' was right. Dumb hick's taking all of this on his shoulders, isn't he?

Not just Jerry - but Brenda and Chris, as well.

"Hey." Nick uttered, tone quiet and rougher than he meant. It came out chiding, and he couldn't force it to soften or dull the edge of it. "Ellis." The words rasped out of him, and he felt his throat go raw when he spoke. "We didn't have any choice. They didn't give us one. They brought this shit down on themselves. It just happened. Sometimes - shit just happens."

He could tell he wasn't soothing the trembling, and that his words weren't easing the younger man. If he'd anticipated this, maybe he could have come up with something better to say. Something reassuring. He'd been so busy shoring up his defenses, preparing for a fight…

Fuck… Nick bit on the inside of his cheek before slowly sliding his hands up, grasping palms flat onto either of Ellis' biceps. He moved testingly, gaugingly, like he might scare Ellis off if he moved too suddenly - and like he wasn't completely sure of how the contact might be received.

The trembling slowed under his fingertips.

Nick spared a glance for the staircase, hesitant. It was only with the knowledge that he'd hear anyone approach up the stairs that he let his arms slip around the younger man. They enclosed him in an embrace, palms settled against his back and biceps framing his sides. He pulled, and the kid followed in a stagger, taking the half-step left between them so their forms pressed flat together.

The trembling slowed further… stopped… and then began anew, but gentler this time. Softer, and different. Less like anxiety and pain. Nick allowed his head to dip so he could brush his cheek against Ellis' curly hair.

Although he couldn't see Ellis' face now, he felt the warmth of the younger man's cheek against his shoulder. "You didn't want anyone to get hurt. You told me, remember? At the hotel." Ellis was silent, but his head twitched in something like confirmation. "If you'd had a say, nobody would have. You're a fucking idiot like that."

The Georgian didn't react audibly, but his shivering frame softened a little, easing further into the embrace. He saw through the sarcasm like he always did, paying attention to the meaning behind it. The faith in Ellis' good intentions, because fuck if he ever had anything else.

"But you didn't. You didn't have any choice, you didn't have any control, and the people who did tried to kill you. Kill Rochelle. So we reacted. I reacted. That's it; end of story. Chris made his own call, and took a lick for it. But you didn't do anything to anyone."

Softly, that warmth against his shoulder increased as Ellis pressed into his dress shirt. Nick only slowly realized that it had turned into a wet warmth somewhere along the line. When he did, he felt a far-off kind of twinge in his chest - but didn't acknowledge the tears aloud.

"So stop being stupid about it."

There, Ellis did respond. He snorted through a stuffed nose, wet and quiet. Nick might have thought the sound unappreciative had Ellis not also pressed into him hard enough to unbalance
him, just a little. He wasn't entirely sure if the kid meant it as a plea for more contact, or just a
chastising shove.

He took a chance on it being the former.

Nick gripped his fingers on his shirt and slid back to sit onto the couch. Ellis came with him,
clumsily, and the shift of their bodies ended up pulling the Georgian into a perch on Nick's thigh.
He hadn't really intended them to end up that way - but it suited him fine, and he slipped an arm
around Ellis' waistline.

The mechanic stiffened, seeming unsure of how to posture himself at first, and a faintly surprised
inhale made his frame stutter. Nick smoothed a palm against his thigh in a silent attempt to calm
him. That warmed him to the contact, and Ellis' arms draped uselessly against his lap as he
slumped into the curl of Nick's arm.

Their faces were level now, and he could see under the brim of Ellis' cap. Wetness had smeared its
way down his cheeks, glistening. His eyes were bleary, but he wasn't crying anymore. When was
the last time he cried? …when Coach almost died, maybe?

Pushing the thought away, forcibly,
Nick allowed his eyes to close rather than examine Ellis any closer.

Rather than linger on the fact that the contact between them was pure comfort.

He could feel Ellis' gaze shift to his face, roving. "'M sorry." escaped him in a whisper. There was
more brimming at the edges, so Nick held his silence, allowing his fingers to work against Ellis'
thigh in a soft crawl over the seam of his coveralls. "… just… this ain't how it was s'posed to be.
We ain't supposed tuh.."

His voice caught, and Nick didn't need to open his eyes to reach out and catch a hand against Ellis'
neck. He drew him down, forcing him into a slump, until he was half-curled into his chest. Nick's
chin found the top of his head easily, pressing into the cloth of his cap, helped along when the
younger man hunched to bury against his neck.

There was little space between them, now, and Nick inhaled. Now-familiar husky sweat and grime
filled his nose, but the flood of oxygen calmed him, eased out the tension in his limbs. "People die.
It's the zombie apocalypse." Ellis’ head began to shake, and Nick tipped his head to stop the gesture
by force, cheek pressing down on the Georgian's scalp.

"There was nothing you could've done, Ellis. It isn't like the movies. You can't save everyone, let
alone a pair of murderous assclowns." He felt the younger man's laugh more than he heard it, a
puff of air traveling against the triangle of skin revealed by the undone button of his dress shirt.
"Do you really think you could have stopped anything? The only other way this played out is with
us dead instead of them."

When Ellis was silent, Nick shifted the hand on his neck, fingertips seeking their way to touch the
Georgian's cheek. As they anchored there, he used his palm to wipe away the wetness smeared
along Ellis' skin.

He hesitated - then took the risk, lowering his voice. "You okay, kid?"

Wordless at first, Ellis' arms slid up out of his lap, hands leading them to loop around Nick's neck.
His body draped against him, warily. Nick allowed it to happen with the slightest of distant
frowns, only shifting subtly to make the posture more comfortable.

"Yeah." he uttered, then, softly. While his arms tightened around Nick's neck, his head lifted,
glancing out from under the bill of his cap to slant a glance at the older man's face. His eyes were clearer now, but his expression still seemed weak. Soft. His face was still cradled against Nick's palm. "Just tired, man…"

Nick got the feeling it wasn't really exhaustion that he referred to.

"'M sorry if you… thought I was angry. I-I ain't… I know you were just tryin' tuh -"

Protect him? Keep him safe?

Nick didn't know what he was going to say, but he knew he didn't want to hear it. It only took a small shift to lean in and capture his lips, the Georgian's capbill pressing into his forehead and sliding the cap up and out of the way. The motion happened before Nick really considered it, like it were mere reflex, but the moment he'd done it it seemed… right.

It was easier than talking, at least, and he'd done enough - too much? - of that.

The kiss didn't truly surprise Ellis. He leaned into it instantly, shifting to tenderly press close. His place on Nick's lap didn't allow for their bodies to really align, but the warmth of his seat against the gambler's thigh was pleasant relief.

He slid a hand onto the younger man's waist, gripping instinctively as his other hand framed the side of Ellis' face and trapped him in the kiss for a moment, silencing him. The link of their lips was soothing, washing away that rising tension threatening at him the longer they sat there.

It was Ellis who parted his lips with a heavy sigh, and Nick who had to draw back. The silky press of his mouth surged a rush of easy arousal through him, but sense override desire. As much as he'd have liked to take advantage of the moment, to flip them over and turn the contact into something carnal, and as much as he felt like Ellis might just have submitted…

… and as enticing as that thought was…

It wasn't exactly the time or place.

Dragging his hand up from his partner's cheek, Nick used the heel of his hand to straighten the younger man's hat out on his head. Ellis blinked, lips sealing with a soft pinch, and the look on his face was vaguely disappointed. He slipped into a faintly apologetic smile, like he were having similar thoughts.

Nick inhaled forcibly, calming himself when that visible disappointment took yet another chunk out of his self-control. On the exhale, he spoke. "Forget it. Okay? It's over."

Lowering his chin, the younger man flickered eyes over Nick's face in a swift muse. Nick could almost watch him put himself back together, breath now shallow. "It really don't bother you…?"

This time, Nick read it clearer. It wasn't accusatory - Ellis was genuinely worried. A faint frown tugged at his lips, and it was all Nick could do not to laugh.

Of all the things he'd expected, it wasn't Ellis fearing for his conscience.

Firm but slow, Nick slid his body to one side, moving himself out from under Ellis. The Georgian acquiesced in silence, crawling himself to sit on the couch instead, with only subtle hesitance. He leaned against the back of the sofa, sliding a palm to brace over his side, smoothing over that sore rib.

"You're not upset by killing who-the-fuck-knows how many infected every day?" Nick returned,
somewhat wryly, even as he recognized it was dodging the question. He took a moment to palm
down his face, collecting something like composure, body leaned forward to rest elbows on his
knees. "Not like we were sitting on a low body count before now."

He was aware of Ellis watching him, still, and merely pressed fingertips against his eyes and
rubbed. "It ain't the same." escaped the Georgian in a soft tone, much closer to thoughtful than it
had been. "They're zombies… you can't reason with 'em."

A snort left Nick at that, and he gripped on the edge of the couch to drag himself to his feet. "Yeah,
yeah. I don't think there was a lot to reason with here, either, but sure." He stepped away, sliding
between the coffee table and the couch to move toward the kitchen.

Nick snuck a glance backwards as he moved, noting Ellis' hand still lingering at his side. "How's
the rib?" he queried, more interested in distracting from the subject than anything else. Distance
applied to him, abruptly - physically and verbally.

"Ah -" Self-conscious, Ellis pulled his hand away and glanced down at his torso. He released a
faint sigh, tone shifting to something confiding and body slipping to lay horizontally on the sofa.
He braced his shoulders on the arm so he could still see Nick. "It wasn't too bad, before, but it's
startin' tuh catch up on me. Think I'm just… plumb tuckered out."

Brushing a thumb against his temple, Nick approached the island that cut across the kitchen, where
he'd placed the supplies from the car. "Adrenaline wore off. Pretty sure we're all surviving off
momentum at this point." He scooped up the family-size pack of trail mix, somewhere around two
or three pounds of nuts, raisins, and chocolate pieces.

He eyed it, then eyed the collection of cans they'd put together. They were nothing he was eager to
eat cold, but gorging themselves on salty trail mix was a sure way to get dehydrated. They didn't
have enough water to last them, as much as the idea of going out supply-hunting again put
something sour in the back of his throat.

As much as it grated on him, he felt something protective stir. If the team could just rest - together
- for just a little while… maybe he'd feel less god-awful. Is that really that much to fuckin' ask…?

"I'm gonna go make Ro' eat something." Idly, Nick grabbed one of the boxes of granola bars,
shrugging it under his arm. He turned back, returning to stand at the back of the sofa, tossing the
bag of trail mix down in Ellis' prone lap. "You, too. Not like we're going anywhere anytime soon,
so you may as well put your feet up."

The Georgian seemed a little startled when the bag landed, but his expression quickly fell to a faint
gratification. He set a hand over the bag and nodded his head in a gentle gesture. "'Kay…" he
murmured, carefully prying the pull-tab apart to open the bag.

Satisfied with that, Nick drew away, starting toward the staircase. It was with a weary sigh that he
made his way down, resting a hand on the railing to balance himself as he allowed his body to
slump. However, he hadn't crossed below the second floor before Ellis spoke.

"Hey - Nick?"

The gambler stopped, glancing back upwards. His gaze was only a foot above the second floor
now, so he couldn't see past the back of the sofa. Ellis was still fiddling to open the bag, and he
could hear it crinkling. "Yeah?"

"Thanks." Ellis' voice was gentle. "I wish it - hadn't happened… But I dunno if I'd be here if you
hadn't done what'cha did."

Nick fought a momentary feeling of surprise. He blinked, and it showed on his face, relaxed in the privacy he had where he stood. A subtle discomfort edged its way into his voice, shifting on his heels, in the same moment that he felt something… pleased. It wasn't that he'd wanted Ellis' approval, but -

He moved to continue down the stairs before he had any time to wrestle with that thought.

"Sure, kiddo."
Chapter 127

Nick stepped into the downstairs bedroom, expression arranged in something disinterested. He'd intended to give Rochelle the cold shoulder, but didn't get the chance. She didn't even notice his entrance, much to his disappointment.

The rise and fall of Christophe's chest had grown deeper and slower. He laid flat on his back, lower body covered over with a thin sheet, and Rochelle was kneeled on the mattress with her injured hand curled against her side while her other one grasped onto a pillow.

She was in the process of attempting to slide it under his head, but her progress was frustrated by her one-handedness. Her movements were growing frustrated, shoulders high with irritation.

With an airless sigh, Nick strode across the carpet, crossing to the other side of the bed. Rochelle seemed to notice him only as he crossed into her vision, brows going up, but she didn't get anything more than an "Um -" out before Nick was leaning in.

Though his left arm was tucked over the box of granola bars, he used his right hand to grasp under Chris' neck and lift his head up from the bed. Rochelle watched him move, and it took a second for her to understand his intention. When she did, she jolted to take advantage of the space he'd opened for her.

After she slipped the pillow under Chris' head, Nick eased him back down.

As the Spaniard limply settled, Rochelle leaned back. Her body slumped, legs curling underneath herself, and she released a relieved sigh. "Thanks. I guess I shouldn't be complaining about not being able to use one of my hands, huh?" Her voice was dry, eyes catching on the bandaged shape of Chris' left arm.

"I'm always pro-complaint." Nick returned, and he was quick to feel a touch insulted when she laughed far too loudly. A frown twitched at his lips, grabbing the box out from under his arm. He dug into it, tearing open the flaps to retrieve a bar so he could shove it under her nose.

"... Eat, before I change my mind and let you starve."

Rochelle allowed herself a faint grin at that, reaching up to take the bar from him. "You said it, not me, dick." she uttered innocently, gripping the granola bar and biting at the package with her teeth. A twist of her neck split the plastic, and she worked an end of it free so she could take a substantial bite out of it.

Grumbling under his breath, Nick retrieved a bar for himself, dropping the box onto the mattress. He tore and peeled the packaging away, revealing the rectangle of tight-packed granola and oats. Taking a delicate nip off one corner, Nick chewed thoughtfully, disliking the way it stuck to his teeth.

It had a kind of honeyed salt to it, and it wasn't overtly offensive - just subtly so. However, his stomach twisted with hunger, and he buried his pride to take a larger mouthful.

"Looks like you guys managed with him." he noted after a swallow, gaze going distant as he examined the sleeping foreigner. Although his breathing had steadied, the sallow complexion and deepset circles under his eyes weren't comforting. "Still pretty much looks like death, though."

She hummed in agreement, closing her eyes in a savouring gesture as she worked her jaw against
the dense nutrient bar. "Yeah. But his bandages are fresh now, we got meds in him, and some water..." Rochelle rattled their progress off, and it sounded like a list she'd worked out well before that moment. "I just... wish he'd wake up so we can get him to eat."

Nick had to snort, sparing a glance toward her in the time her eyes were closed. He scanned her expression, musing; she seemed better, but was it merely by force of will? Between Chris' condition and shooting Brenda... *Maybe I should talk to her -*

When he caught himself in the thought, frustration flooded him. *Since when is it my job to make the rounds on everyone's mood?* Fuck. He merely grunted, but the sound was apparently enough to prompt Rochelle to speak again.

"He was talking a little, earlier. Wasn't conscious, but - it was clearer than earlier." That drew Nick's brow up, and she must have anticipated his surprise, because she elaborated shortly without opening her eyes. "Pretty sure he said some names. Phil, Sean... Not really sure."

The gambler kept his silence for a moment, raising his free hand to scratch at his jawline. He mulled over his response as he did, fingertips lingering. Brenda's whispered words to him came to mind - but he had considered simply keeping them to himself until he could get some grasp on what they meant.

Rochelle noticed his reticence, head tilting. Before she could question him, he shrugged a shoulder.

"Not the first thing I'm gonna be asking him about when he -"

He might have finished his sentence, had a shape not passed into the threshold of the bedroom. It took him a beat to realize it was Ellis, limping in, and a frown took root on his lips. Nick hadn't heard him on the stairs... maybe the kid had crept down, even. "Overalls, are you actually incapable of sitting still?"

Ellis had the bag of trail mix cradled in one arm, and he was actively chewing on a mouthful. His brows cocked in hurt, words a bit muffled as he spoke. "Wh- I didn' wanna sit up there, by muhself!" Nick followed his movements with slitted eyes, shallow irritation behind his glare, but the younger man was undaunted. "'Sides, I was thirsty."

Rochelle took the hint, leaning off the bed to reach into the backpack sitting on the floor and grabbing one of the two yet-unopened waterbottles they had left. She offered it out to him, limply, and he crossed to take it with a grateful nod.

"Sit." Nick ordered after he had, tone short, pointing a stickt toward the edge of the bed.

Offering a stuck-out tongue in defiance, Ellis sidled instead over to the wall next to the TV-topped dresser and delicately slid himself down to sit on the floor. He worked his legs into a vague sprawl, slumping against the wall with a content sigh as he snapped the waterbottle open and took a measured sip.

Nick allowed his arms to cross, granola bar fisted against his forearm. His eyes narrowed intently. Ellis caught it, and if the faint reddening of his cheeks said anything - he successfully read the fierce threat behind the look. He swallowed thickly, piping up. "Anyhow... I was thinkin' about that."

"About what?" the producer prompted, turning herself on the bed so she could better see both of them at the same time. She set her bar of granola down against her thigh, resting her arms in her lap and turning an open look toward the Georgian.
At that, Ellis bobbed his head. "Well… Y'all were talkin' about whut Chris said, right? The names."

Once Rochelle acknowledged him with a tip of her head, hecontinued, though it was with a faint worrying of the inside of his cheek with his teeth. "Jerry said one'uv 'em, too, when… The other day."

A reluctant tilt touched Nick's head, and he and Rochelle passed the slimmest of glances between them. Ellis had yet to really give details about what had occurred at the hotel, not that Nick was eager to know, and this marked the closest he'd come.

"He was tellin' me - well, he mentioned someone named Phil, 'n..." Ellis reached somewhat hesitantly into the trail mix bag, drawing out a piece of chocolate candy and pinching it between his fingers. The candied shell crackled a little, breaking, and he popped it into his mouth before it fell apart.

"I ain't real sure or nothin', but it sounded like he'd done somethin' bad to 'im."

Stepping back to lean against the wall behind the bed, Nick drew his legs into a lazy cross, good one over his bad one. He let his eyes half-close, momentarily slanting a glance at Ellis. The Georgian seemed moderately calm as he spoke - even if his description clearly left out some information.

Nick gave a mocking huff of air. "Really? That goes against all my fond memories of the guy."

Ellis snorted, screwing up his nose in a reluctant gesture, even as he mostly ignored the gambler's sarcasm. "Do y'all think... I dunno. Maybe there was more of 'em? The Angels, I mean."

"Yeah. I know there was, actually." Rochelle shifted, like she might get up - but she merely slid herself to sit on the edge of the bed, legs dangling off, grabbing her granola bar up to fiddle fingernails against the plastic. Ellis blinked at her, curiously, and Nick matched the sentiment with an arched brow.

She explained with a shake of her head, speaking slow and precisely. "Before things kicked off in the gunstore... Chris told me they used to have a different leader, but he died to a Hunter. It was a different name, though... B-something. The way he talked made it sound like things got... worse, after that. Like they weren't so aggressive before."

Nick was tempted to scoff, but merely tilted his head instead. "I didn't think those three made that great of a team." His voice dropped, hitting a weary lull. "I just figured they were lying about exactly how good they'd been doing, but having had more members would make sense, too. Guess they were fallin' apart even before we showed up."

Ellis' eyes blinked between them repeatedly, absorbing the words.

"Maybe, maybe not. They certainly didn't seem to be struggling, either." Rochelle shrugged up her shoulders in idle thought, breaking off a piece of her granola bar and eyeing it distantly as she spoke. "Anyway, it does explain something." Tossing the hunk of oats in her mouth, she chewed at the sticky substance, nostrils flaring.

Leaning forward so he could brace an elbow against his knee, Ellis cocked his head her way. "Whut?" he prompted, eyes alert on her every motion.

Rochelle only hesitantly swallowed, drawing her tongue against her teeth before leaning in to match him. "Remember back when we first drove in here? There were those... kill-counts?" Her eyes drifted between them, only continuing after getting a quick nod from Nick and a slower, more
thoughtful one from Ellis. "They came in fours. I didn't really think too much about it, but it did surprise me when we only met three people."

Nick chewed on that, suddenly. *How the fuck did I miss that?* A trickle of unease made its way down his back - there were a few potential implications behind that information, and none of them appealed to him.

Startled into an easy widening of his eyes, Ellis dropped his gaze to glance over the carpet just in front of him. "I didn't pay no mind, I guess..." A frown touched his lips, then, just faintly. "But... we caught up to 'em real quick, if I remember right, 'cause the zombies was all pretty fresh-killed. Couldn't'uh been more than like a half-hour behind."

Rochelle nodded at that, though it was with a soft and almost guarded sigh. "Yeah. Which either means they lost somebody right before we met them, or -"

*There's a fourth still out there somewhere.*

"Look." Nick interrupted before she could finish the sentence, raising the hand that wasn't holding his food. He startled both of them. "We don't know anything, and we're not gonna get anywhere like this except straight into a Grade A paranoid episode. How about we put it on ice for now, and wait to just *ask* the member of that group that we currently have with us?"

Although she frowned a little, Rochelle tilted her head in a relenting gesture. Ellis darted a glance between them, not as quick to agree. A kind of nervousness crept into his expression, like a spark flaring on a bare cable. "But..."

Shifting his gaze to cut across the room and met Ellis', Nick held it with a tense pressure. His voice rode the line between firm and curt, though only through effort. "If there was anyone else, we'd have heard from 'em by now. That crazy bitch made it pretty clear Chris is the only other Angel left - so if there *was* another of those assholes, they're either dead or they split up. Either way, we're in the clear."

Nick was mostly confident he was telling the truth.

With some reluctance, Ellis nodded his head. He took a sip from the waterbottle, holding a mouthful on his tongue for a second or two before swallowing. When he did, he forced a smile. It started thin, then grew into something almost embarrassed.

"Yeah... Yeah, yer right. Sorry."

Nick shrugged a shoulder to dismiss the apology, leaning harder against the wall and letting his eyes close. *Not fair to expect him to go back to normal that fast,* he reminded himself, taking a calming inhale. *Kid's still a raw nerve.*

Ellis raised the waterbottle to his lips, looking between Nick and Rochelle. "Once Chris wakes up, we'll just ask him about it." His smile lingered even then, though it was soft in a fashion that indicated some hesitance... like maybe he knew that wasn't a certainty, even if he didn't say it outright.

That made Rochelle sigh, turning her head to gaze at the Spaniard.

"I've got a lot to ask."
They remained downstairs, not settled so much as stagnated. Though upstairs would have been more comfortable, Rochelle seemed wordlessly intent on staying at Chris' side… Ellis felt a need to keep her company… and Nick looked mainly too tired to move from where he'd positioned himself.

Or, at least, that was what he projected.

The cessation of Coach's snoring announced when he awoke. It had been somewhere around an hour since he'd laid down - not that they had a way to know for sure - and Ellis perked at the abrupt silence.

He spared a glance for Nick and Rochelle, the gambler still leaned tiredly against the far wall and Rochelle having slid to the floor and seated herself in a snug slump against the side of the bed. Neither of them noticed as quickly as he did, so he pressed an elbow into the wall behind him and pushed himself to his feet.

Nick arched a questioning brow at his motion, and Ellis thumbed over his shoulder. "Gonna check on Coach. Think he woke up." At that, the older man merely nodded.

"I'll come." Rochelle stood, using her elbows to hook onto the edge of the bed and get herself standing. Her eyes darted toward Nick, a plaintive note touching her voice. "Watch him, please? I'm afraid to leave him alone in case something happens."

Dismissively shrugging a shoulder, Nick leaned his body toward the window in the wall. "Nothing better to do but babysit." He flicked a finger against the slanted blinds so he could look out, though the view was nothing but the top of the privacy fencing and the faces of the buildings across the road. If he leaned in and looked down, he could just see the scraggly, sandy lawn below.

Rochelle glossed over the insincerity in his voice, merely offering an easy, "Thanks." She reached to the box of granola bars Nick had left on a corner of the bed, picking one out and nipping an edge of the package between her teeth. She moved to Ellis' side with it dangling from her lips playfully.

He gave her a smile as she looped her left arm in his, tugging their shoulders into a bump. They stepped out into the hallway - but it was a tired walk, leaning against each other like they might otherwise stumble.

Stepping down the hallway, there was only a few feet between the two bedrooms. Rochelle's eyes slanted to Ellis' face, and their gazes met. Without enough privacy to talk and a granola bar in her mouth, she merely bared her teeth in a loaded and questioning smile. Her eyes flicked over her shoulder to indicate toward Nick.

He returned the smile hesitantly, and nodded. That relieved her, visibly. She squeezed his elbow with the arm looped over it, and they advanced into the other bedroom together.

Coach was, in fact, up. He was still laying down, but he'd dragged himself backwards to prop his shoulders against the squat headboard. Ellis noticed the water and painkillers he'd left were gone from the windowsill. They sat instead on the floor next to one of the bed's legs; he must've stirred at some point and taken some.

"Hey, papa bear," the producer uttered, voice stifled as she kept her teeth gritted on the granola bar. Coach's attention centered on them as they entered the room, his eyes wearily raising. He nodded
his head to return the greeting, and Rochelle lifted a hand to grab the granola bar out of her mouth. "Feeling any better?"

He sighed gruffly at the question, tipping his chin toward his chest. Dark eyes slid to examine his own leg, seeming bemused. "Mm. Just bruised up my pride is all."

Extricating her arm from around Ellis', Rochelle advanced to close the distance and stand at the bedside. She reached out a hand to hover over his injured knee where it lay propped up on a bundled towel, indicating it sympathetically. "Hurt more than that."

When he chuckled, she offered out the granola bar to him, tilting her head in affectionate question. Although Coach hesitated at first, he did take it, fisting a hand around the bar so he could rip open an end and peel it down. As he took a massive bite, Rochelle took a step back to sit on the bottom bunk of the bunk-bed on the opposite wall.

It was fairly small, perhaps meant for children rather than grown adults, so her seat on it left her head awkwardly pressed against the bottom of the top bunk. Her eyes widened a bit as if she hadn't expected the cramped space until she was in it, but she recovered quickly, playfully patting the space beside her with a look toward Ellis. "C'mere."

The mechanic laughed at the sight, nose crinkling a little, but went to join her. The hunch required to sit up straight on the edge of the bed made his rib ache, so he instead leaned back to arrange himself against the wall, body crammed down to fit. He gave a contented sigh, removing his hat to place it on his belly.

Rochelle rested her hands together on her lap, sparing Ellis an amused shake of her head. Lifting her chin, she glanced over at Coach, eyes soft.

He'd worked through nearly half the granola bar already, barely chewing between swallows. Though it seemed like hunger at first, the faintly displeased squint to his eyes suggested it was more like choking down something unpleasant.

She noticed, tilting her head. "No good?"

The attention half-startled him, like he hadn't realized his expression had been so transparent. He slowed to chew a few times, working on the dense granola-and-oats mixture before he swallowed thickly.

"Nah, babygirl. It's fine. Just too many days of eatin' this shit back in my ball days." Ellis gave a curious blink in his direction at the statement, and Coach shrugged faintly. "Too much trainin', too many long days, an' not enough money."

He eyed the granola bar, then took a somewhat bitter bite, even as he flashed them a look of tired humor. "Better than goin' hungry. Barely."

At that, Rochelle leaned in. She seemed leery of speaking at first, but fought through it. "Speaking of football. Your knee… Has that kind of thing happened before?" His eyes went a little guarded at the question, examining her expression. "I know it goes bad on you sometimes, but it's never gone that bad. You were barely standing…"

For a moment, it seemed Coach might not answer her. He shifted his weight on the bed, and his shoulders crunched up in something hesitant and defensive. It was slowly that the energy drained back out of him. He was left looking near-exhausted.

"Honest? It ain't, in a while." Grunting faintly, he shifted to paw at the top of his head, fingers
scratching at the grey-speckled stubble there. It had started to grow in, slowly, encroaching over
his scalp in the same way his jawline had become dense with the beginnings of a beard. "But I
knew takin' a dive was risky."

Rochelle and Ellis merely gazed at him, heads tilted in unison, and their loyal attention got a mild
chuckle out of him. He humored them, and kept going.

"Bummin' my knee was what took me out of the game, way back when, y'know. Got tackled, and
the boy stepped on my leg in the fall." He reached down a hand, delicately grabbing onto the side
of his knee, tapping at his kneecap with a thumb. "Did some damage, an' it ain't been the same
since. When it's real bad, my kneecap - well, it shifts out." Coach paused, giving a thoughtful
noise, then amended, "Subluxates, if y'all wanna get fancy."

Ellis piped up, shifting so he could stretch up a hand and scratch at his ear. His expression drew
into sympathy, voice lowering. "Damn. That don't sound good. Reminds me'uh Keith's dog, Dusty.
He was kinda old, 'n'his back leg went bad… they had tile floorin', and man, he'd just skid, 'n' -"

Coach's attention had turned on him, dull and unamused. It took Ellis a moment to realize why, and
he quickly gawped.

"Uh, oh, I didn't mean -"

Interrupting him before he could dig himself into a deeper hole, Rochelle leaned forward. "Do
we… need to do something for it? Or… put it back?" Her leg made to bounce a little on the ball of
her foot, an anxious and twitchy gesture, as if the thought of his injury made her knee
uncomfortable. She put her bandaged hand against her thigh, loosely curling fingers.

The eldest shook his head, quickly, his chiding expression fading. He removed his hand from his
knee, relaxing back down against the bed. "Nah." he assured her. "It ain't like a dislocation. Shit
fixed itself already walkin' in here, just hurts somethin' fierce 'til the swelling simmers down."

She nodded warily, and there was heavy thought lingering within her expression. "Okay. At least
we have painkillers." A breath left her, strained. Her words were composed, but something frenetic
played at the edge of her voice. "Do you think it'll happen again? Maybe we should get some
bindings or something."

There was an odd energy in her that both Ellis and Coach seemed to notice, their eyes meeting
across the room. It wasn't fear… or stress… but it was something. Her tone came across almost
compulsive, taut, like she couldn't quite slow herself down.

Her eyes wandered, distantly. "Or a wrap, so we can brace it. Maybe if we -"

Crossing his arms over his chest, Coach caught her gaze, and the intensity of his stare caused her
words to falter in her throat. She seemed startled, for a moment, but he spoke before she could, firm
but not chastising. "Babygirl, I told you not to fuss. It ain't a big deal."

That made her draw herself back, hesitantly, seeming unsure for a moment. "I'm not trying to -"

The crown of her head pressed against the frame of the top bunk-bed, allowing her eyes to fall to
her hands. She shrugged, then, tiredly. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

Shifting his leg, Ellis let his knee bump hers. She glanced at him at the gesture, forcing a smile that
gentled with effort, and he tipped his head. "You okay, Ro'?"

"Yeah. Sorry." Rochelle exhaled, raising her left hand up to wipe fingertips across her forehead. It
was almost a ticlike gesture, that fraught energy still lingering. "I think I'm just… I just want to do
everything I can, you know? If there's a way we can help you, I…" Her eyes lifted again, meeting Coach's apologetically, and his expression softened. "I guess I'm being over-protective."

"Nah." Coach quickly inserted, eyes closing sedately. Her lips twitched into a faint smile at his words, chin lowering. "You a'ight. Knee's gonna be weak now, might pop again if I ain't careful. Brace ain't a half-bad idea, assumin' we can find one." His eyes reopened, then, and he spoke seriously.

"Ain't havin' us go out just for that, though."

Rochelle nodded at the compromise, relaxing just softly, even if she hadn't truly shaken off that strange driving force. "Okay. We'll have to hunt for water soon, anyway. Maybe we can circle back by that pharmacy we found and see if there's anything left."

Ellis reached to grasp his hat, fingers flexing against the fabric, offering up cautiously, "If we get the wheel changed on the car - Nick'n'me left some stuff at the grocery store we found, too, since we didn't get it all loaded. I don't remember seein' no braces or nothin', but it was real messy. Could'uh been hidin' somewhere."

Although he nodded, Coach slid his hands to tuck them under his armpits, tightening his arms' cross over his chest. "A'ight." His eyes were growing low-lidded the longer they spoke, and just a little hazy. The painkillers were likely setting in. "How's everyone else?"

Rochelle glanced toward Ellis, then shrugged her shoulders delicately. "Okay, I think. Chris is resting, and Ellis helped me get his meds down." She slipped him a wink over her shoulder, and the brunette tucked his head down in a quick and bashful gesture. "The rest of us just need some sleep."

Coach grunted in weary agreement, and Rochelle slid up to her feet at the sound. She scratched at the back of her neck with her left hand, nails itching at the skin there. "And, on that note - how about you two get some rest in here? I'll take first watch, and trade with Nick. You guys seem exhausted."

Ellis blinked, mouth opening to protest, but Coach overrode him.

"Sounds like a plan."

The younger man pouted out his lower lip as if he'd been betrayed, receiving an idle chuckle from Coach. "You had a long day, son, we all did. Get some rest." He shrugged himself down on the bed, shuffling to lay back down flat with a tired sigh.

Rochelle leaned down a bit to reach and pat Ellis' knee. She smiled reassuringly, catching his gaze. "I'm wired, anyway, honey. Better me than you, if I'm gonna be awake no matter what." He relented at that, but only reluctantly, sliding himself along the wall to flop down on the bunk.

Relieved at his acquiescence, Rochelle stepped away. She approached the linen closet, carefully grabbing two blankets and two pillows one at a time with her uninjured hand and tucking them under her arm. "Could be worse, right? It's actually not a half-bad condo. Kinda small, but it's clean. You could almost forget what's going on out there for a second."

Ellis watched her move, head tipping against the mattress. The moment he was horizontal, his eyes grew heavy, unable to mask his exhaustion any longer. "Maybe we'll go on the beach." he murmured, almost wistfully, and she couldn't help but smile - in the same moment the idea was almost preposterous, it warmed her, somehow.
"Maybe."

Ellis grasped for his hat, reaching out to set it on the windowsill between the two beds. His lips quirked up, idly. "We ain't got much tuh do aside from findin' a way to signal somebody, anyway, right?"

That shook her, though she masked it with a lowered chin as she looked into the linen closet. It was with wary reticence that she said nothing.

Rochelle stepped back to their bedsides, hovering in the space between them. She offered Coach his linens first, and he wearily tucked the pillow under his bed and threw the blanket loosely over his body. He gave her a grateful look, adjusting his leg sorely where it still lay propped up a folded towel, and she turned to face Ellis.

"Maybe we can finally teach Nick how to swim." She leaned down, pushing the pillow across the mattress until it forced Ellis to raise his head so she could slide it under. He seemed surprised, faintly, reaching out to take the blanket from her. She merely grasped it carefully at the edges and laid it over him. "You think we could find some of those armband floaties?"

As she tucked him in, Ellis laughed with a series of snorts, looking tremendously entertained and mortified all in the same instant. The entertainment won out when Coach chuckled, too.

"I'd pay real good money to see that."
Chapter 129

The sun fell before long. With the power out in the area, there were no streetlights on to illuminate the outdoors, and there were no candles in the condo to light. As the day faded into night, the house delved into a soft, velvet darkness.

Rochelle curled herself against the wall, arms drawn into her lap. She'd kept Nick's Magnum - as it was the only one-handed gun they had with them - and had it set beside her on the carpet. She didn't anticipate needing it, but having it nearby was a relief.

Although it had been quiet, a part of her felt… tense. Like her hackles were up and she couldn't get them to lower.

With a tall, fenced perimeter, the condo was likely the safest of any of their previous homes - second only, perhaps, to the hotel… but going back to that place was hardly desireable. It would be going backwards, and was filled with the too-raw memory of what might have happened to Ellis.

She frowned, a little, glancing down at her bandaged hand and the blood that had dampened the fabric in a strip. The flesh of her split palm was too flexible and she'd been using it too much for the wound to really clot up. It hurt, on and off, but she had an almost spiteful surge of will to feel nothing.

It was the least of their suffering, wasn't it?

Tipping her head back to rest it on the wall, Rochelle closed her eyes. She couldn't shake the image of Ellis' smile, talking about frolicking on the beach, playing in the waves - waiting for rescue. Nobody had told him yet, not that she really knew what they might tell him.

All they knew was something had happened. The military had killed people. How many, who knew. Why, who knew. Rochelle wanted to believe it was just some panic-fueled mistake, maybe some frightened soldiers dealing with an outbreak they didn't understand. A misunderstanding. A horrible misunderstanding.

Whatever the truth was, it had been enough to strike fear into Brenda where nothing else did. Nothing except, Rochelle supposed, being alone. Losing Chris, her last compatriot, whether because he'd abandoned her or died.

That had driven her to -

What? Suicide? That didn't seem right, but neither did the way Brenda had approached her in that last moment, eyes cold and resigned. Like she'd accepted the chance Rochelle might actually pull the trigger - weighed her options and chose to advance anyway. Calmly.

The thought crossed her mind, then: would Chris blame her? They must've had some bond, she was sure, for him to follow her out of the gunstore after all that had happened. How upset would he be to learn of her death - and that Rochelle had killed her?

Maybe he'd hate her.

Maybe -

Rochelle dragged her left hand to pinch along the bridge of her nose, soothingly, exhaling out a breath before she could upset herself. Her fingers were trembling and that, more than anything,
irritated her. She stood suddenly, pushing off the wall. Her hand reached down and pried the flash- light from where she'd clipped it to her hip, pressing the switch to illuminate her way.

They didn't have the information they needed. There were things they didn't know, and without knowledge, how could they make any kind of decision? If the military was dangerous... they needed to know. If finding a way to signal them wasn't the right choice, what was?

Crossing the bedroom, fingertips brushing against her thighs, Rochelle bent down to kneel beside the backpack where it lay on the floor. She reached to unzip the smaller, thinner pocket closer to the front. Her hand slipped inside, and she extricated the contents.

A spiral-ring notebook, bound by dark plastic: the journal she and Nick had found in an attic, alongside a man's corpse and a zombie. Rochelle gazed at it hesitantly, balancing it on her left hand. She hadn't looked at it since she'd secreted it away there in the unused satchel pocket.

It had been impulsive, maybe, but she couldn't resist it. He'd left it intentionally, hadn't he? A note for someone to find, a record of events. It wasn't truly invading someone's privacy to read something they wanted read. It wasn't like it was a diary.

Slipping down to sit on the edge of the bed, Rochelle spared a glance toward Christophe where he lay. Reassured that he was unmoving, she gently placed the notebook on her lap. Bracing the flashlight on her shoulder and turning her head to hold it there with her cheek like one might a phone, Rochelle bent her body so the beam of light drooped down and lit the notebook's surface.

The flashlight was fading; the batteries wouldn't last forever. Fighting a sense of nervousness, Rochelle flicked the notebook open, fingertips grasping the paper as her eyes alighted on the text written there.

She had to skim, at first. The bulk of it was nonsense, scattered notes and numbers and lists. Groceries and tasks and chores. Scrawled phrases that might have made sense to the person who wrote them, but now sat smudged and unclear. The contents of a notebook tossed in some forgotten drawer, used only rarely.

Pencilmarks mixed with penmarks of varying colours, varied between hard lines and idle scrawls. A few different handwritings, if Rochelle wasn't mistaken. She frowned, but sped her fingers to flick forward.

Then, blank pages.

Her heartrate increased slightly, thumbing through the emptiness until she found the entries again. They started suddenly and with no warning, as though he'd grabbed the notebook, thrown it blindly open, and started writing.

It was calm, at first, like a diary.

'We missed the evac. I tried to get us out, but there were so many of them outside. Caitlyn was so terrified and all I have is this revolver. We just hid up here in the attic. We've got supplies but I don't know how long it'll last. I don't know how long we have to wait. I want to tell her it'll be okay, but how can I say that when I don't know?

I'm so sorry Maria. God I hope you're okay.'

Rochelle frowned. She didn't want this - didn't want to read these details, these feelings. Didn't want to pry into someone's last days. She tried to skim, but she was afraid to miss something important, and every time she skipped a line she'd feel a rising tension until she returned and read
I think Caitlyn is starting to realize this is real. She's gotten quiet and I wish I knew how to make her feel better. She's been crying, and I don't think the radio is helping, but what if they come back? They might come back. I have to keep listening.'

'I'm afraid to get her hopes up but I keep looking out the window and waiting for the military. They'll come back and fix this. This can't be the end. We can't be alone.'

There was one that startled her into a blink, eyes slowing on the words.

'I just wanted to be a good father. I just wanted to reconnect with her. The separation was so hard on her. I didn't want this to happen. I wish I'd never invited her. She was always better off without me.'

She wished she felt something more like satisfaction that Nick had, in fact, been wrong about the inhabitants of the attic. Instead, she mostly just felt a kind of wistfulness.

As the entries progressed, they faltered, handwriting turning scratchy as if from a trembling hand. Sometimes it was a paragraph, sometimes an idle sentence, penned in a flurry. The pressure applied and the angle of the text betrayed the way they were built over time, like he'd snuck in text when he could.

Shifting her head against the flashlight as it began to dig into her cheek, Rochelle turned the page. She anticipated more of the same, but that wasn't what she got.

'Something got on the roof. I went to kill it, climbed up through the window. We're running low on bullets, and I saw the boat again.'

Rochelle drew her brows into a wrench, unsure, fingertip grazing under that sentence. That word. Unfortunately, the intensity of her stare didn't change the text before her. It remained vague and unassuming, and all she could do was look for more.

'I want to go to the shore and try to flag them down, but I can't leave her. What if that's our only hope? What if we die because I wasn't'

It cut off, leaving Rochelle to exhale a frustrated noise. She flicked to the next page, urgently scanning for more - but that was it. There was no more mention of a boat, no elaboration on the subject. The journal quickly fell apart as, it seemed, the man's daughter began to fall ill.

'She's getting a fever. It's the stress, I know it is.'

'The radio keeps repeating that fucking message over and over. Talking about symptoms. She's scared. I'm scared. I can't do this.'

'She's fine. She has to be fine. They haven't touched her. Why would I be fine if she isn't'

'Maria, you've got to know - I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen.'

She stopped. It went downhill from there, and she'd already read - and seen - where it ended. A frown lingered on her lips, fingertips brushing over the pages as she flipped back to that entry. A boat, that had passed by multiple times. Was it another survivor, or could it have been a military ship?
Maybe that was reading too much into it. For all she knew, it was just someone on a motorboat. Maybe they'd already left and wouldn't return. The journal hadn't provided much to go on.

Drawing her lower lip into a bite, she flickered her hand up to dog-ear the page before she flipped the notebook closed. It was wearily that she took the flashlight off her shoulder and turned it off, leaning back a little on the edge of the bed and letting her legs stretch forward, toes digging into the carpet and knees cracking pleasantly.

"I was kind of hoping for something a little more helpful." she admitted aloud, slanting her gaze toward Chris' face where it lay half-buried against the pillow. Not expecting a response, naturally, she turned herself until she could lean her hip against the footboard, eyes closing. "Like, 'hey - the military definitely isn't killing everyone! Yay…'"

A sigh escaped her in the silence that followed.

Her hand still rested on the notebook, now thoughtfully plucking nails against the edge. Was it even worth bringing up to the team? They did have a balcony, and though the view wasn't perfect, it was certainly enough to see a passing boat if it was large enough. If she mentioned it, they could all keep an eye out, at least.

Even if she wanted to temper her expectations, it was easy to get her hopes up - but who was to say it even meant anything?

Plus, part of her wanted to make sure someone was with Chris consistently, and keeping watch on the balcony was too far for her comfort. If something happened, or he woke up, and no one was there… she'd never forgive herself.

Sighing forcibly, Rochelle reached up her good hand, rubbing against her eyes. The only thing she could think that was worse than Christophe not making it at all, was him waking up alone to discover his missing arm. She couldn't begin to imagine how hard it would be on him, and couldn't begin to think of how they'd help.

But, again - she had to temper expectations. Him surviving was the first step.

Standing in the dark, leaving the notebook and flashlight behind, Rochelle followed the edges of the bed with her knee. Stepping cautiously back to the window, she reached up, turning the slats of the shutters to look outside. She couldn't see much, just the top of the privacy fence in the lawn below and the dull rows of buildings that surrounded them, shrouded in darkness.

"This sucks."
Chapter 130

Fear sent Ellis jolting awake. It was like choking, at first, and the physical sensation lurched him up off the bed. His hands shot out to seek purchase on something - anything. His body didn't recognize his surroundings, and his spine straightened, launching his forehead directly into the framing of the too-low upper bunk.

The collision startled him more than hurt, but he reflexively hissed, reaching a hand up to palm over where he'd struck the wood. He blinked in the darkness, breath shallow behind his lips, fingertips trembling against his skin.

A disgruntled noise sounded above him, and he was forced to hold his breath, even as the feeling surged fresh panic in his chest. His eyes went up, blindly, staring at the bottom of the bunk. Rochelle's voice gave a faint sigh, and the top bunk bowed faintly as she rolled her body into a disturbed flop. Ellis waited for her to wake, but she didn't.

The bed stilled, and he let out a shaky exhale of relief, the sound masked under the gruff and rhythmic sound of Coach's snoring. He hadn't even been aware of when she'd come in and climbed into the top bunk.

The nightmare trickled away like sand with every passing second, leaving little but vague images and a deep and unsettled sweat on his skin. There'd been - something. Someone. A face collapsed amongst blood and bone, surging toward him, foaming and slathering. Digits circled his neck and tightened until he could barely breathe.

The body rode him to the ground, and crushed him flat, and he could still remember the feeling of his spine giving way under the pressure. He could still hear it. His skin crawled, and his vision blurred with the after-image of that face.

He thought it was Jerry - but it wasn't.

It was Nick.

Ellis crawled his body out from under the blankets, kicking their cloying weight off, and slid himself back down against the mattress. He tangled fingers in his shirt, palm over his heart, feeling it pounding through his ribcage. It wasn't the first bad dream he'd had since the outbreak, but they had never clung to him so strongly.

They'd never been so specific, so vivid, nor involved anything but faceless zombies in overwhelming numbers. He had to touch his neck to assure himself it wasn't ringed with bruises. As he felt along his jugular, the pads of his fingers found his thudding heartbeat there, too.

The more he heard it pumping, the faster it seemed to go. He tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't manage it before his jaw trembled and an exhale forced its way out of him. He needed, more than anything, to get out from the claustrophobic space of his bunk that felt like it might collapse in on him at any moment.

It was carefully that he rolled off the bed, trying not to jostle it or make noise. His legs almost threatened to give way when he finally got them under himself. He had to grab onto the wall, fingers catching against the edge of the window, to balance his weight. Ellis gritted his jaw, closing his eyes for just a moment - trying to calm himself.

It was just a dream. He didn't want the panic to win out. The feeling frightened him; his instability
frightened him. He didn't know how to soothe his heartbeat, didn't know how he'd begin to fall back asleep.

So, he did the only thing he could think of.

Slowly, cautiously, Ellis stepped away from the wall. He moved with delicacy, timing his steps to Coach's snoring breath. The house was dark and the shuttered window provided little help, but his eyes had adjusted enough to note outlines. He was able to align himself toward the door, and he let a hand protrude out, flat-palmed, so he'd feel it before he reached it.

As his fingertips grazed the closed door, he searched out the doorknob and twisted it with a trembling gentleness, sliding himself through the opening easily.

The hallway was only just slightly more lit. He glanced around as he drew the door closed behind himself, hesitantly examining the staircase. If Rochelle and Coach were asleep, Nick must have been on watch, either upstairs or downstairs with Chris.

Ellis hesitated there, uncertainty winding itself into a coil until he struggled to swallow. He needed to find him. If he could just talk to him... see his face... the fear would fade. The images, more importantly, would fade.

A beam of dim and honeyed yellow light suddenly flashed into the hallway from Chris' bedroom. Ellis startled despite himself, turning to squint into the flashlight's glare. As he did, Nick lowered the flashlight to point to the floor instead, and the light scattered and bounced off the walls.

It illuminated up over the both of them, lifting craggy shadows over the bemused shape of Nick's expression. His face was intact and unbloodied, but for faint cuts and scrapes and the fresh bruise blossoming over his jawline. "Kid?" he uttered in something like a whisper, voice low and eyes cutting toward the bedroom door before returning to Ellis' face.

Ellis' mouth opened, but the fear must have been lingering on his face, because he couldn't get anything out before Nick advanced. The gambler's brow arched, head cocking in the midst of his stride, and his eyes made a slow patrol over Ellis' features.

He couldn't speak under the examination. It pinned him there and cracked him open, and he felt insecure and fragile.

Without speaking, Nick straightened his head. He twisted his wrist to clip the flashlight onto the waist of his slacks, and Ellis only then noticed he was wielding the katana loosely beside his leg. It was lazily that Nick braced his hand on the hilt, then stepped forward and around him.

Nick's chin jerked in a faint motion to urge him to come with.

Hesitantly turning to track his movements, Ellis watched him start to scale the staircase. He felt his lips tug into a faint and thoughtful frown, unsure, but followed. He knew talking downstairs where they could potentially awaken their teammates wasn't an option, but the silence made him nervous, anyway.

Equal parts of him wanted to tell Nick about the nightmare, and didn't. His heart was still going hard in his chest, but what would he say? He'd lost most of the details already as his waking brain worked to reject the images, and the little he did remember didn't make much sense.

It was just a dream. It didn't mean anything; it was just stress mashing images together behind his eyelids. There was no reason to let it bother him any longer than it had to. It wasn't like he was afraid of Nick, and he'd already forgiven him - bringing it up again wouldn't do any good.
As Ellis reached the top of the stairs, he inhaled, steadying his voice. He'd just be honest, or mostly honest. "'M sorry… I can't sleep none. I can take watch, if yuh wanna get some rest… or -"

That was all he managed.

The moment they'd reached the second floor and taken a few steps in from the stairs, the older man turned. Ellis jumped faintly as Nick's thumb caught on his hip, and he was suddenly being walked back until he flattened against the wall. The startled sound that left him was quickly muffled by lips pressing into his.

Nick slid his knee between the younger man's thighs, the pressure easing them to slide apart, at the same time his tongue grazed at the plush of Ellis' lower lips. The simultaneous attentions had the Georgian slumping into the wall, goosebumps flustering up his arms, and he couldn't help but close his eyes and submit.

As their mouths linked, Nick's tongue slid against his and a heated breath passed between them. The conman's thigh pressed up into him, grinding faintly there, and the contact flooded warmth up his spine.

Nick's leg pushed harder until Ellis was almost straddled against it, weight carried in a cradle between the wall and the older man's thigh. He squirmed before he could stop himself, breath hiccupping in his chest when all that did was cause friction.

His heart jumped into his throat, but where it had been a panicked and painful feeling before, now it was softened by familiar affection. He leaned into the kiss, muffling a sigh when his advance was met with Nick nipping teeth on his upper lip. Nick's hand lingered on his hip, still - then sunk lower, gripping just at the base of his thigh through his thick coveralls.

Ellis lifted his hands, letting his fingertips skate along Nick's waistline until they could stretch up and grasp at his back. His fingertips pressed into his shoulderblades and his arms embraced his midsection. The touches made the gambler purr a pleasant hum against his lips, and Ellis was shortly rewarded with a languid grind of the thigh slotted between his legs.

A huff left him, forcibly, at the sensation. The harder Nick leaned into him, the further he rose almost onto his toes, and a heat built in the space where they touched. He should have felt trapped, but all he felt was warmth - a bracing, clenching warmth, heightened with a sort of exhausted relief as his body responded.

He just… wanted. Wanted Nick, more than anything. He wanted away from the panic and the uncertainty that had been brewing in his chest. He wanted something to make sense again.

Ellis broke the kiss with some hesitance, tilting his chin, and Nick relented. He could, however, only go so far; the gambler lingered close, mouth grazing at the edge of his with sharp stubble prickling at the perimeter of the touch. The closeness left him caught in a whisper.

"Nick -" Hearing his name brought a faint smirk to his lips, and Ellis felt its curve, but outright tension bristled in Nick's body when he continued. "- I don't wanna think no more. Please."

He drew back, at that. Although the flashlight on his hip was pointed downward, the light bounced off the wall and up over them in a muggy haze, illuminating enough for Nick to scan his expression. Some surprise lingered on Nick's face, notable in the odd flatness that suddenly overtook his features.

Then he took a step back, releasing Ellis to slip back completely flat on his feet. "Me either."
The distance might have given Ellis time to grow embarrassed, but it didn't last long. Nick relinquished his grip on the katana, setting its tip against the carpet and leaning it against the wall, and then both his hands were suddenly sliding onto Ellis' waist. Gripping there, Nick pulled him forward and across the carpet.

They moved in graceless unison, walking until Nick backed into the sofa and could make his way around it, guiding himself mostly blindly. He recaptured the younger man in a kiss as they went, biting and dragging teeth against Ellis' lower lip. The kiss stayed shallow enough to tease him and keep him breathless, leading him around to the front of the couch.

Nick's voice lowered to a growl, one hand crawling fingertips to brace on Ellis' lower back. "Lay down." he commanded - but when Ellis started to shift his body back so he could lay on the sofa, he was halted almost immediately. "Not like that..."

After he startled, confused, Nick pulled him by the waist to turn around so he faced the couch instead. "On your stomach." Nick's breath grazed against his ear, spine going stock-straight at the sensation and the almost predatory way the taller man leaned into him.

Ellis could hear the edge of amusement in his voice, and it made him redden. The lurid nature of the request did not escape him.

He managed a faint "Oh.", gut twisting into knots in either mortification or thrill - he couldn't entirely tell. Nick was uncharacteristically patient as Ellis worked through his hesitance, though something in the low-lidded attention his eyes kept on the younger survivor's every move said it was more like savouring.

Getting one knee up on the cushions, Ellis eased himself onto hands and knees on the couch, then flattened down on his belly. His cheeks burned with the awareness of being watched as he did. The sofa was just long enough for his full height, though his socked feet were balanced up on the arm, toes curled.

Uttering a pleased hum, Nick leaned to set the flashlight on the coffee table, angling it so it pointed toward the end of the couch. "Good." The gambler braced his right leg with a knee on the edge of the couch, resting most of his weight there to give his burned left leg a break. He leaned down, hooking fingers in Ellis' coveralls and working them down off his hips.

The older man's knuckles grazed against him as they pulled, and it put a tremble up his spine. Unable to help squirming, Ellis hitched his lower body up a little off the cushions to ease Nick's efforts.

His eager movement drew a growl out of the gambler. He wasn't completely sure why until one of Nick's hands suddenly moved, cupping over the half-bared slope of his rump through his boxers, where his hips were now lifted up. The contact made him jolt, and if he hadn't been red before - he was now.

A faint whine escaped his lips, almost protesting, as the older man's fingers squeezed on the flesh against his palm. His body moved before he could stop it, pushing harder up against the touch, and Nick gave the softest of snorts. It was almost mocking, and Ellis might've really protested had the gambler not used the hand still gripped on his coveralls to yank them down further.

"Easy, Fireball." Nick murmured with a husky tone that dragged his voice into something hoarse. His other hand somewhat reluctantly lifted from the younger man's rear, grazing instead to place it flat on Ellis' lower back. He pushed, forcing him back down against the cushions. "Not trying to fuck that rib up. Just stay still."
Ellis relented with a small wriggle of his shoulders, relaxing down into the sofa, huffing out a tense sigh. The sound made Nick laugh, breathless, and he slid his hand back to regain a grip on Ellis' coveralls. He worked them down to the kid's knees, and after he got them settled, he let his fingertips skate up Ellis' now-bare thighs.

"I think I'm a bad influence on you."

Goosebumps followed their path, along with a tingling arousal. The Georgian flexed his toes, lips parting as Nick's fingers slid against the edges of his boxers - and a little underneath. His thighs trembled, and he pushed his hands up so he could fist them against the armrest pressed into his forehead. "Quit makin' fun'uh me..." escaped him in a groan.

Nick chuckled, lowly. "Just being honest. You're the one who hunted me down in the middle of the night." Catching fingertips on Ellis' boxers, he tugged them down to join his coveralls, and he couldn't resist slipping a palm onto the Georgian's revealed rump.

Ellis had to bury his face against the couch cushion to muffle the noise that left him, only half embarrassed.

The other half was wanting.

"I wasn't - yer the one who got ideas! I was just gonna trade watch, 'n' -" He broke off when Nick shifted, and he tensed faintly as the older man slid more of his weight on the knee braced against the couch. It bowed under him as he swung his other leg over, gently straddling Ellis' legs, and settled to sit just above his knees.

His weight was flustering, especially with the way it trapped Ellis against the couch. He tried to squirm his weight a little, biting at his tongue when all the motion did was rub his thighs against Nick's and his lower body against the plush couch. Both sensations made him shudder.

Nick leaned to the side, resting his left shoulder against the back of the couch. His smirk was audible in his voice. "Oh, yeah? So you wouldn't mind if I just went to bed?"

Ellis huffed a breath vaguely, closing his eyes - but Nick didn't move, the lingering silence making it clear he intended to get an answer. The Georgian could only imagine the smug look being directed down toward him, and it made his ears burn.

"... No."

The smirk worsened, and though he began to move again, he didn't relent. "No? 'No' I shouldn't go to bed, or 'no' you wouldn't mind if I did?" His left arm folded, hand slipping to settle on Ellis' waist and play at the fabric of his shirt.

Hyper-aware of how Nick's body shifted against his legs as the gambler slid a hand into his slacks pocket, Ellis couldn't help but twist his head, peering over his shoulder. "Nick..." escaped him in a disgruntled whine as his eyes caught on the gambler's movements.

That made him laugh, and Nick drew the tube of KY from his trousers' pocket, rolling it between his fingers. "Come on, kid. Bit late to play hard to get." He popped it open with his thumb - but merely held it, grunting faintly as he allowed his shoulder to slide down the couch.

His elbow wedged between the cushions on the seat and the back, balancing himself there, now leaned dangerously low over Ellis' body. He dipped his head, nudging close enough to brush his mouth against Ellis' ear. "I have a few promises to make good on."
It took Ellis a moment to remember, but he did. The last time they'd been intimate - and the things Nick had said to him, huddled there on a kitchen counter. Filthy, shocking words, growled into the space between them, hazy with arousal. Remembering them under more coherent circumstances surged embarrassment through him.

He exhaled a flustered breath when Nick nipped at the whorl of his ear, catching skin between teeth and then flicking the tip of his tongue there. "W- …we gotta keep quiet. Coach'n'Ro'…” he uttered, almost plaintively.

The mouth against his ear suddenly grinned.

"Sounds like a challenge."

Nick tilted his body to make more room, leaning against the back of the couch. Ellis pressed his forehead against the arm of the couch, burying his face, as a dribble of lukewarm liquid suddenly pattered against the flesh of his rear. He huffed, biting his tongue as Nick set the lube bottle back down on the couch, and then slid a digit against his entrance.

The contact was tremendously slick, turning his breath into a stutter as the gambler massaged against the muscles there. Ellis couldn't help but gasp, shoulders rising as a fingertip slipped into him easily, gliding on lubricants.

"Sh-shit." escaped him, mumbled, voice hitching as Nick leisurely circled pressure against the tension around his digit and hungrily smoothed his other hand over Ellis' waist. Nerves tingled with the lack of friction, even slicker than Vaseline had been. Only the pleasant pressure of penetration remained, and his body reacted to it with a spine-tingling kind of relaxation.

"Good?" Lips brushed his ear again, and rather than respond, Ellis twisted his chin to clumsily bump into Nick until their mouths linked. The angle was awkward, but the kiss no less intense for it. Nick wasted little time, pushing hard to part Ellis' lips and deepen the kiss. His hand moved at the same time, thrusting his digit in time with his tongue.

Between the two motions, Ellis felt a shudder of arousal make its way up his body. His thighs tried to slide apart, mostly trapped under Nick's weight, and the gambler nipped at his tongue in an appreciative gesture.

Every push drove that humming arousal higher, causing his hips to take a needy cant against Nick's hand. He whimpered under his breath, unable to quite vocalize the sound with his lips caught in the midst of a heavy kiss. Nick didn't miss the motion, though, breaking the kiss with a faint growl of interest.

Ellis was left to huff, swallowing wetly, a strained whine at the edges of his breathing. Nick drew his finger almost entirely free - then thrust to his last knuckle. A smirk tilted at his lips as the motion fluttered the younger man's eyes closed and drew a sugar-sweet whimper out of him.

"Fuck. Like that." Nick uttered with a rough tone, voice so low it was almost a murmur. "Christ, you drive me nuts, kid." He shifted enough to press his face into the space between Ellis' neck and shoulder, brushing stubble and nipping teeth in a grazing swathe over the flesh there.

Forcing out an embarrassed breath, Ellis tilted his head to shy away, burying his face back against the armrest until his voice muffled. "I-I ain't tryin' to…” That made Nick draw back, though by only barely an inch. A smirk drifted across his lips, even as he slipped a bent second digit against Ellis' entrance, slicking it with a stroking gesture.
A snort left him that was almost musing, almost wistful.

Ellis didn't have any time to question it before the other man was suddenly thrusting into him with both fingers, spreading him open and drawing a hitched moan out of the Georgian. His digits spread against the muscles there, taking advantage of the slickness. It was all Ellis could do not to rock back on him.

For all the teasing and spreading, he seemed to be making conscious effort not to crook a finger and hunt out that sweet spot. It didn't escape Ellis' notice, and he squirmed his hips in a faintly frustrated gesture, gasping against the cloth of the sofa. The only relief he achieved was shifting his hardening erection against the cushions, but the action flustered him more than anything.

"Nick -" he gasped out, shivering subtly at a particularly wide scissor of the fingers inside him. Pleasure hummed at the base of his spine with every slick motion of them, but with it came this rising desperation. It was thicker than lust - softer than frustration. It clenched at his chest and clawed at his skin and he needed more. "Quit teasin' -"

It came out in his voice, hoarse and melted in the center, and Nick's digits paused a moment. It was as if Ellis had startled him, and when the older man spoke, it was with a low, eager tone of voice.

"Yeah... Yeah."

Drawing his fingers free, slowly, Nick pushed against the back of the couch to slide back upright, kneeling on Ellis' legs. He hesitated just a beat, releasing a hissed breath and uttering, "Shit. Condoms?" There was a reluctance there - like the idea of getting up to go retrieve them grated on him.

Ellis stretched a hand down to gesture toward the coveralls bunched at his knees, shyly pointing without speaking. He felt Nick shifting, and then a hand wormed its way into the tangled fabric and started digging for his pocket. Ellis took a breath and tried to ignore the uncomfortable emptiness now aching at him.

Nick growled in impatience as he tore out the folded-up coil of condoms and ripped one off. He tossed the coil onto the coffee table, focusing on tearing open the packet and retrieving its contents. "You've got no clue how much I've been looking forward to this."

Embarrassed warmth snuck onto Ellis' face again, distinct from the heated arousal lingering there. He tilted his chin so he could get a gasp of fresh air, rather than the huffing he'd taken up against the armrest of the sofa. His eyes averted - but he still caught a glimpse of Nick unzipping his slacks and dragging them down just enough to free himself.

Ellis closed his eyes, cheek pressed into the armrest and lips parted to gasp in air. He could hear the faint and slick sounds of Nick sliding the condom over his erection, and the snap of the lube cap as he applied more of it. It was almost leisurely that Nick slid forward, leaning to brace a hand on the armrest just an inch above Ellis' head.

Straddling his thighs, now, Nick's hips rocked - and with a hand to hold it steady, slid his cock between the cheeks of Ellis' rump and against his entrance. "Fuck." he uttered hoarsely, fingers tightening against the armrest at the slick glide. The younger man pushed against his knees, nudging his hips up against the warm shaft pressed tight to him, gasping in a thick breath.

The movement snapped whatever was left of Nick's self-control.

Even as he hissed, "Stay still.", Nick canted his hips to align himself, grasping a hand at the base of
his erection to guide it. It was with firm, slow pressure that he pushed in, exhaling a shuddered sigh as he breached into that spine-numbingly tight warmth. The motion was slick and easy, but he maintained that calm pace, torturously slow as he worked himself in.

Ellis tried to hold still - but he couldn't stop his body from squirming, toes curling fiercely and breath heightening to a whine with every added bit of length sliding into him. Pleasure followed the warm stretch, like the pleasant burn after exercise. Breathlessly, he buried his mouth against the armrest rather than surrender to the noises threatening to leave his lips.

His fingers clawed into the couch cushions, body trembling despite himself alongside the slick penetration. He heard the gambler's breath shallow out the deeper he went, a graveled kind of growl touching it when Ellis' body eagerly clenched around him.

Nick didn't stop until he'd sunk all his length, pressed flush against his partner. The intense fullness emanated hot pleasure through his body, nerves singing around the intrusion. Ellis could feel the parted V of Nick's undone slacks pressing into his flesh as he ground against his rump, hips circling just faintly as if loathe to stop moving.

His other hand now free, Nick took a moment to wipe his palm clean of lube on Ellis lower back - a gesture he might have protested had he not been preoccupied - and then braced it next to his other hand on the armrest. The posture slumped him comfortably, resting his weight against the couch rather than Ellis, and he gripped his fingers in a knead on the cloth.

"Goddamn, El." he murmured down to the younger man, voice thrumming with a throaty lust. Nick drew back just an inch - then pushed back in, slow and languid, back buckling faintly in time with Ellis' hitched, muffled moan.

He shuddered as he regained the depth, questioning in a growl, "Okay?"

Even as he tried to spread his thighs a little, body eager for movement, Ellis pried his mouth away from the couch long enough to talk, though he quickly regretted doing so. "Yeah… yeah." His voice was caught in this longing and thready moan, trembling. "S'good…"

Nick held there for just a moment - then rolled his hips back far enough that he could snap them forward. The collision was a rut, driving in deep, and Ellis choked out a moan that broke a little at the pulsing pleasure it drew out of him. He buried his face against the armrest when Nick's hips retreated again, further this time, skin gliding.

The next thrust was angled a little, and Ellis writhed with it, gasping breaths past the cloth pressed into his lips. As Nick's pace increased, gaining a steady rhythm, the rustling impact of his hips only jostled him slightly as if Nick were consciously holding back on the apex of each thrust.

His restraint didn't temper his lust, though - if anything, it heightened it, a straining eagerness tightening his voice to something urgent. A huff or a growl escaped him with each movement, and Ellis could feel the older man's knees tighten against him where Nick straddled his hips. The weight and the contact, the silken slide of penetration, driving into him quicker and firmer -

Ellis shoved a hand down, squirming fingers between his belly and the sofa cushion. He cradled a palm under his erection, fingers curling. He only meant to shield it from rubbing against the cushions, but reflex made him give a clutching squeeze on his hardened flesh, unable to resist the slight relief.

Nick noticed.
In a swift motion, he folded his elbows and draped his body down, mouth finding Ellis' ear. The shift in posture turned his thrusts shallower, but the pace maintained, and he ground his hips in eager motions as his teeth nipped along the younger man's ear. "Fuck..." he hissed, only to thrust again - harder. "Shit, yeah, kid."

Ellis turned his chin, begging for a kiss, but Nick retracted before he could. Only a bit of dull light illuminated the breathless smirk that cut across his face... right before he drove into a fierce set of thrusts, hips rocking with animalistic urgency. Even with the little leverage he had, he used the grip he had on the armrest to push and pull his body, fucking the younger man in earnest.

Caught unmuffled, the desperate sound that left Ellis was half-moan, half-yelp, and thick with drawled pleasure even as he tried to bite it back. The sound dragged a gratified chuckle from Nick, before he jolted forward to muffle it with a shallow kiss, however reluctantly. He grazed his mouth over Ellis', hungrily, only pulling back once the other man's noise had faded back to huffing.

"Christ. I wish." the older man muttered, though it was faintly amused alongside his lust. Nick shifted his weight on one arm, letting the other dart down to grab ahold of Ellis' hip. He dug fingertips against his skin to brace him, thrusts going ragged but no less harsh.

As Ellis buried his face against the armrest, moaning against the fabric and squeezing at his erection with fractured need, the gambler smoothed his motions into a constant rock. The pleasure built, tightened, and Ellis clutched with the hand that had Nick's wrist, digging nails into his skin. Nick's fingers slid between Ellis' hip and his bent thigh, and the Georgian gasped faintly, hips canting up to make room for him when Nick's hand dove underneath his body. "Come on, Ellis." Suddenly Nick's fingers were against his, wrapped around his erection. Every time Nick's hips collided with his, it increased the friction between their digits.

As if the growled command egged it on, orgasm came like a wave. It struck, a bliss-edged clench stealing through his whole body, with such fierce heat that Ellis writhed as if to escape it. The feelings pulsed and fluttered through him, jagged, and the gambler's hand fisted loosely over the head of his cock to capture his release before it could spill onto the couch.

He shuddered, open-mouthed gasps muffled into the armrest, as Nick's thrusts only drove the pleasure higher. A limpness entered his muscles as he found his climax, eyes closing as he surrendered to it, over-worked nerves sparking pleasantly when Nick continued to work in and out of him.

It was almost distantly that he felt Nick leaning up, straightening, his movements growing stuttered as he found his own release. He exhaled a lengthy and honeyed sigh with it, hips jerking to bury himself deep. A heavy shudder filtered to a casual slump, head rolling back on his shoulders.

His sullied hand remained where it was, looped underneath Ellis' body, but his other hand relinquished its grip on the armrest to slide against the back of the younger man's head, curling in his hair. Rubbing at his scalp in an idle scratch, Nick lethargically shifted on his knees. "Goddamn." escaped him with purred satisfaction.

Ellis couldn't resist a laugh, though it came out in sleepy embarrassment. The touches to his head made his body turn even more liquid than it had been, turning his cheek to press it against the armrest. He took a leveling breath, eyes low-lidded, fidgeting his hips where Nick still had him pinned, seated warmly inside him.

"Felt real nice..."
Leisurely, Nick released Ellis' hair, hand slipping to grab the back of the couch instead. He pulled his hips back with a faintly groaned exhale, slipping free of Ellis' body. "The joy of lube, kid. That find was gold." Ellis couldn't resist a shiver at the feeling of his withdrawal, sneaking a glance over his shoulder to watch Nick.

The older man slowly drew to stand, not bothering to stow himself away as he climbed off Ellis and got to his feet next to the couch. "I fucking needed that." he uttered, tone contented as he rolled his shoulders and stretched out his spine.

It was tentatively that Ellis pushed his cheek harder against the armrest, chin lowering, and agreed. "Y-yeah… me too." As the words escaped him, Ellis knew with self-conscious certainty: it wasn't the sex he meant. He needed Nick. The sex and the physical release was grounding, but more than that, he needed the intimacy and the comfort that came with it.

Some tiny piece of him wondered which Nick meant, but he couldn't summon the courage to ask.

Nick's fingertips brushed against his curls again as he moved to step away, stride loose with tired pleasure. "Don't move. I'll get something to clean up. Can't leave a mess if we're gonna stay here." Ellis hummed his assent, closing his eyes. He smiled a little, despite himself, focusing on the lingering warmth tracing his body.

The panic and fear that had catapulted him from his bed was a faded memory - still within his reach, but disconnected from him, now. He felt better, even beyond the afterglow humming through him.

The gambler wasn't long, returning to his side with a paper towel roll gripped in his hand. He tore off a sheet, offering it down to Ellis. Once he'd taken it with a grateful smile, Nick ripped one free for himself, tossing the roll to the coffee table.

Ellis tiredly fisted it in his hand, peeking self-consciously over toward Nick before he acted. The older man was busying himself with removing his condom, so Ellis took the time to clean the slick lube from his rump, face going a little red with the indecency.

Considering what they'd been doing mere moments ago, his embarrassment was a little silly - but he felt it all the same.

"Not that I'm complaining -" Nick took the time to daub off his softened length, tugging his boxers back into place and bunching the condom up in the papertowel after he'd done so. He wiped his hand off, turning away rather than look toward Ellis. His voice was conversational, if still caught in something of a thickly pleased hum. "- but what was this about, anyway?"

The question surprised Ellis a little, looking up toward his back and quietly examining the older man. He hadn't expected Nick to ask, though the fact he did brought a smile to his lips. "It weren't nothin'… just a bad dream. I didn't wanna wake Coach'n'Ro', so…"

Wadding the papertowel up and tossing it to the coffee table after cleaning off his hands, Ellis started to reach down toward his coveralls and boxers. He strained to drag them up his legs, huffing a little at the awkward angle and the exhausted, jelly-like weakness of his arms.

Nick grunted at that, tossing his papertowel on the coffee table. He turned, witnessing Ellis' struggle, and uttered a faint sigh before he leaned down. He grasped onto the Georgian's coveralls and boxers, pulling them upward. Ellis shyly pushed up his hips to help, reddening when Nick took careful and lewd attention to drag his clothes up over his rump.
"If that's how you cope, works for me." the gambler stated dryly, aware of Ellis' shoulders rising to protest, embarrassed - but he didn't give him the chance to speak. "Anything specific?"

With only a little crinkle of his nose, Nick gathered together their soiled paper towels in one hand. The other snatched the KY from the couch, shoving it in his slacks pocket, then grabbed the flashlight from the table. He casually turned to walk away again.

Ellis lowered his eyes to the ground as the light flashed away, leaving him in moderate darkness. Nick walked behind the couch, disappearing, but Ellis could still hear his footsteps. He chewed idly at his lower lip, eventually settling on saying, "It don't matter. It was just a dumb dream."

He heard a faint hum, though Nick didn't respond outright for a moment or two. When he did, it was dismissively. "It's the goddamn apocalypse, kid. We're literally living a nightmare. Shocked we sleep at all." That made Ellis laugh a little, pushing against the sofa to carefully slide his legs off the edge, seating himself on the couch.

Sitting flat brought a pleasant ache to his rear, and he had to resist the urge to squirm against the cushion. "I guess." he admitted, looking up as Nick circled back toward him. He wasn't sure what he'd done with the trash, but his hands were empty when he returned. "I feel better now, anyhow."

The older man held the flashlight at waist-height, halting at the end of the couch rather than step back in front of it. "I should hope so." He leaned against the arm, casually, slacks still undone in a way that let a tantalizing slip of his boxers peek through.

Ellis tried not to look.

"But, I should get back to Zorro down there. If Ro' finds out I left him alone, she'd blow a gasket. Last thing I need." Nick shrugged up a shoulder idly, thumbing toward the stairs. "You should get back to bed, before someone notices."

Although part of him wanted to argue, the rest of him felt a clinging, lazy kind of tiredness creeping up his spine. He nodded sleepily, reaching out to retrieve the coil of condoms and pocket them again. "Okay… Don't stay up too long, though. I can take watch."

He lifted his chin, looking up toward Nick. His eyes widened a little when Nick leaned in, and the older man gripped him by the chin, turning his face up. The gambler's eyes flickered over his features in the low light, lingering on his lips before closing the distance to kiss him. It was slow and lazy, lips pressing together in a shallow merge.

Ellis' eyes closed in the midst of it, warmth stirring in his chest as he melted against Nick's cradling hand. He could have stayed like that all night.

But Nick straightened before long, releasing him. His knuckles cuffed Ellis' chin, lips quirked in a sharp smirk, and he turned to step toward the staircase. Ellis had no choice but to follow, or be left in the dark. He clambered off the couch and moved behind Nick, eyes averted as the gambler retrieved his katana from the wall and started down the stairs.

They both moved cautiously, footsteps light as they descended. Once they'd hit the main floor, Nick strode back toward Chris' room, body casual and relaxed. "Night, Ace." he uttered without looking back at his younger teammate.

Ellis made to mimic him, turning toward the bedroom where Coach and Rochelle were asleep. A smile threatened at his lips as he whispered back, "G'night.**, feeling a distinct and heavy warmth in his chest.
It was hesitantly that Ellis stopped halfway there, turning his chin to glance toward the older man. Something surged up; a desire threatened at him, raw and soft. He didn't know how to distill his affection down, communicate the feelings he had. What would Nick even say if he tried? What would Nick say if he said 'I love you'?

That was what he felt, wasn't it?

The chance passed when Nick slipped through the doorway, disappearing into the bedroom. Ellis couldn't help but gaze after him, head tilting in the silence, but rather than feel disappointment - he mostly felt relieved. A little laugh escaped him, rubbing the heel of his hand into his forehead.

Taking that step frightened him a little, anyway. He was too tired to think clearly, and he needed to think very clearly when he tried to make that confession.

Pawing over his clothes, ensuring everything was back in place, Ellis slipped against the bedroom door and carefully let himself back in. Although he couldn't see much, Coach was still snoring, and if he squinted he could make out the slumped silhouette of Rochelle curled up on the top bunk.

A little sigh of relief passed his lips, tiptoeing up to the bunkbed. He made to start crawling back under the covers, rolling his body so he didn't cause too much disturbance to the frame of the bunkbed. He got himself under the covers and pressed his head to the pillow, just starting to close his eyes.

As quiet as he thought he was being, his body stiffened in surprise when Rochelle's voice murmured down to him. "You okay?"

Ellis did his best not to redden, even though nobody would see it in the dark. He wasn't sure how long she'd been awake, though her voice was sleepily drawled in a way that made him think she'd just stirred. He cut a glance up toward the bottom of the bunkbed, whispering back sincerely, "'M fine. Sorry."

A relenting huff sounded from above him, and movement caught his eye in the darkness. He blinked, worming his body flat and drawing the covers over his body, trying to squint to pick it out.

He realized belatedly it was her hand, reaching limply down off the edge of the bed. A smile lifted at his lips, and he reached out his own to clumsily find hers, twining fingers together to hold her hand where it dangled.

"Okay." Rochelle mumbled back.

He felt her fingers limpen slowly as she drifted back to sleep, but he kept a hold on her hand, closing his eyes. They'd slip apart as he fell asleep, too, but he'd keep the grip as long as he could.
Chapter 131

Shouting awoke Nick. He laid flat on the couch, arms crossed over his chest and legs crossed at the ankles, and instinct and reflex awoke long before the conscious part of his brain did. He barely knew what was going on until he'd already lurched off the couch, hand snatching underneath to grab the katana stowed on the floor.

He came to on his feet, both hands braced on the blade's handle, adrenaline thundering. He'd passed watch to Ellis and went back upstairs to crash on the sofa, the idea of him crawling into the bunkbed laughable. Between the sex and the late hour, he'd fallen asleep fairly easily. There was light streaming in from the glass door, now, though faint and pink like early sunrise.

Then another shout came from downstairs, and he was running.

The stairs were almost the end of him, socked foot slipping off the edge of a step, but he managed to grasp the railing on his way down to keep himself upright. As he hit the main floor, the shouts coalesced into words.

"-ey! Hey! Yer okay! Man, yer okay!"

Nick followed Ellis' frantic voice into the main bedroom, barely acknowledging the door to the second bedroom opening as he crossed the hallway. He slipped through the doorway, instantly scanning for trouble.

What he found was Ellis, knee braced on the edge of the bed, both hands holding Chris down as he seemed to be trying, insistently, to surge up. "N-no... ¡No me toques!" The Spaniard reached up with his remaining arm, scrabbling at Ellis' forearm - then shoving, flat-palmed, at his chest.

It hurt, if Ellis' expression was any indication. He released the other man, retreating from the contact, and Nick's jaw went tight with fury at the sight. His fingers flexed on the katana hilt, lurching to stride to the side of the bed. "What the fuck." Ellis' eyes darted up, startled.

"Nick -"

Although Nick wasn't sure what he intended to do to a man in Chris' condition, he would've gotten creative - had Ellis not surged out a hand, flat in a pleading gesture. "Nick, don't. He's just scared."

In the interim, Chris had barely moved. His chest was heaving and his hand was clutched on the sheets draped over his body, but there was something nauseated and distant in his expression. His eyes were glossy, unfocused. He seemed barely aware.

With a reluctant grunt, Nick drew to simply stand where he was, tapping a thumb against the hilt of the katana. It was then that Rochelle hurried into the room, pure motion, darting past Nick to get to the bed. "Oh, God - what happened?"

When her eyes alighted on Christophe and saw he was awake, her body stuttered. She froze for a beat, then suddenly moved with a calm and measured pace, sliding to sit on the edge of the mattress. "Okay." she uttered, almost to herself. "Okay."

Rochelle rested her good hand against the bed, leaning in just a little. Even as she came closer, Chris gave no acknowledgement of her, eyes caught on some far-off point. "Chris. You're here. You're fine."
The Spaniard tried to raise his head with some confusion, digits trembling numbly. However, once he'd lifted his head more than a few inches, a startled shudder traced through his body. He collapsed back down quickly, lips parting into a strangled exhale. "¿Por qué - s-sufri..?"

"Don't move." she urged, pushing herself a little closer on the bed. She cautiously grabbed the sheet covering him, softly trying to pull it up to his shoulders, like she could hide his injuries from him. Her eyes darted up toward Ellis, catching on the frightened shape of his features.

"Ellis." She spoke sharply enough to get his attention, startling him into meeting her gaze. "Run upstairs and get some soup. If we can get him to eat, we have to, while he's awake." The Georgian nodded, and he was gone in a flurry, disappearing up the stairs in a thunderous clamber.

Nick quietly stepped toward the foot of the bed, tipping his head to watch as Rochelle drew her legs into a curl on the mattress, placing her uninjured hand against Chris' jawline. He barely reacted, eyes now on the ceiling, gasping and huffing out air through a gaped mouth. He'd at least stopped struggling, but it seemed more like he'd been frozen by pain than calmed any.

"I don't think he's completely with us." Nick observed distantly, tone dry. Rochelle slipped him a glance, shaking her head.

"What do you expect…?" Returning her attention to the foreigner, Rochelle carefully stroked his cheek with the pad of her thumb, trying to shift herself to lean into his line of sight. "It's Rochelle. I need you to focus, Christophe. Okay? Can you hear me?"

Almost by force, the Spaniard's warm brown eyes - now cold and dim - shifted warily to her face. He gazed at her, shaking, but there was no recognition on his face. The only thing besides pain that showed in his expression was a bracing exhaustion. "Por favor, s-socorro…" he whispered, faintly, gritting his jaw with the words.

Seeming frustrated, Rochelle drew her hand back, sighing tautly. "Nick - can you… I dunno, talk to him?"

That caught Nick off-guard, taking a half step back and thrusting up a hand defensively. "I didn't say I was fucking fluent! Unless you want me to yell at him or start throwing out pickup lines, I'm not your guy."

The sudden movement caught Chris' attention - or so Nick thought. It took him a moment to realize where the Spaniard's gaze was riveted, and when he did, a wave of distinct tension washed over him.

Chris was staring at the blade in his hand.

Before Nick could drop it, Rochelle noticed, too. Her eyes darted from Chris' face to the weapon, and understanding dawned on her face at the same time a brash horror did. "Oh - Nick! For Christ's sake -" She surged up her bandaged hand, pointing toward the door. "Get that out! That's the last thing he needs to see!"

He retreated, one hand going in a flat gesture in front of his chest and the other sweeping the katana behind his back. He backed up toward the bedroom door, even as Chris' eyes silently followed him, expression caught in dizzied pain.

"Jesus, I'm going!" Nick leaned out into the hallway to tuck the katana against the wall outside the bedroom. When he walked back in, it was with his hands up as if in surrender, displaying his empty palms. "There. Better?"
Frowning, Rochelle glanced back at the Spaniard, fingertips reaching up to brush a few short strands of dark hair off his sweaty forehead. His eyes remained on the doorway, unmoving even when Nick returned to the foot of the bed. Something wrought and tired entered his expression, slowly, and it sobered the glassy sheen over his eyes.

"Chris?" she questioned, cautiously, examining his face slowly.

He did react this time - just a little. His eyes flickered to hers, and there was acknowledgement there before a groan left his lips. His head lolled back against the pillow, eyes closing. The slump startled Rochelle, quickly grabbing a hand underneath his neck to brace him. "Hey, hey. Chris, you gotta stay with us, okay?"

Although his eyes remained closed, his lips parted, uttering a faint breath. It was an attempt at a word that didn't quite form. Shifting her weight, Rochelle nervously shook her head. "Please, just a little longer, and then you can rest. You're gonna be alright, but you've gotta eat something."

Crossing his arms warily, Nick wasn't quite able to resist a snide mutter. "Because not eating your Wheaties is definitely the problem here."

Lacking the presence of mind to even pay attention to the Northerner, Rochelle started to slide to sit with her legs tucked under herself. "Nick, help me lean him up, please." He obeyed with a reluctant grumble, stepping over to the opposite side of the bed.

He pushed a hand under Chris' waistline, his other hand grasping behind his head, and together they lifted him up enough that Rochelle could slip underneath him. The foreigner groaned as they did, voice hitching with pain, but went quiet as he settled into a slump against her thigh, head cradled in her lap.

"Can you check on -"

Before she could finish, Ellis' clumsy footsteps sounded down the stairs, slower than the first time. "Sorry - sorry. 'M here. Had tuh open the can." He bustled in, cradling a bowl in his hands, half-full. It was mostly yellow liquid, but drifting amidst it was some rice and chunks of vegetables, maybe carrots and celery. "It ain't warm or nothin'…"

Nick shrugged up his shoulders, drawing back to lean against the wall. He crossed his arms reluctantly. "Beggars, choosers - or whatever the fuck."

Rochelle gestured beside her on the mattress, shaking her head. "It's fine. Come here." As Ellis moved to carefully sit himself on the mattress, balancing the bowl in his fingers, she turned her eyes back onto the man leaned in her lap. "Chris. You need to eat, okay? Can you do that for me?"

His lids flickered, momentarily, before his eyes opened. The pain and exhaustion had drained out of him, leaving an emptiness to his expression that was almost harder to look upon. His pale and clammy cheeks went paler, glancing blearily toward Ellis and the bowl he held.

"Tengo… tengo náuseas…" escaped him in a fractured tone of voice.

Rochelle nodded her head hesitantly, chewing on her lower lip. "It's okay… Just try." When Chris gave a vague and stuttered nod, tremulously breathing out, Rochelle gestured Ellis forward. "Give him some."

Hesitant and careful, Ellis scooted closer, bringing the bowl up toward Chris' face. The foreigner recoiled a little, reflexively, and Ellis froze with an apologetic frown. He held tentatively still, eyes flickering to Chris'. "Yuh gotta eat somethin', man." he uttered, tone gaining a note of plea. "I
know it ain't good, but…"

Christophe's jaw flinched, and his eyes went dull and resigned. He forced a jagged inhale before tipping his chin in acquiescence, allowing Ellis to raise the bowl and push the rim against his lips. He tilted it up cautiously, until the liquid breached the edge.

Sipping from it sent visible shudders through the Spaniard, like the very act pained him. He took a small mouthful before drawing his head back an inch, and Ellis righted the bowl in his hands. He worriedly watched Chris take a choking swallow, jawline shuddering.

His face drew into a grimace, and it lingered even after he forced the soup down. The way his breathing shallowed out made it seem almost like he might heave it right back up.

Noticing, Rochelle gently slid her fingertips to rub at the back of his neck, curling nails into the hair at the base of his skull. It was a soothing gesture, and between it and a set of gradually deepening breaths, the man seemed to regain control. He bared his teeth faintly in a mindless gesture of disgust, reluctantly sliding his gaze back to Ellis.

"You a'ight, man?" Ellis questioned, tone half-nervous, raising the bowl again, pointedly. "Should try fer more… Them meds ain't easy on your stomach, either…"

The Spaniard parted his lips limply in acquiescence, and Ellis leaned in to press the soup bowl against his mouth again. Chris took a larger mouthful the second time, though it fought him about as hard.

Over the course of a few strained and tense moments, Christophe got through a little over half the bowl before he gave up. A final swallow made him nearly convulse, recoiling back against Rochelle's hand with a weak grunt, shaking his head in a pleading gesture.

"Okay, okay. You did good, Chris." She flicked her head at Ellis, pointedly, and he retreated with the bowl held carefully in his hand. A frown lingered on his lips, but it was faint and thoughtful. He snuck a glance up toward Nick, who silently canted his head with a dull expression.

"You can rest now, sweetie. You did really good."

The Spaniard limped against Rochelle's lap, eyelids drooping with a blink before they closed entirely. There was a strangled pain over his face, frame shivering faintly, and Rochelle relaxed her body gently against the headboard. Her fingertips stretched up carefully to card through his hair, a relieved sigh escaping her as her own eyes threatened to close.

She lifted her head instead, glancing between Nick and Ellis, a tired frown quirking her mouth. She kept her voice low, fingers slowing in their comforting motion against his scalp. "Can you guys go let Coach know? I'm gonna… sit here a little while, I think. Until he goes back to sleep, at least."

Ellis nodded his head cautiously, backing up toward the door. "Okay." He passed her a reassuring smile, circling the bowl against his chest with a forearm. "If you need anythin'…"

"We'll be down the hall." Nick finished rather curtly, pushing away from the wall to stalk across the room. He slipped around Ellis as he exited, the motion causing the younger man to swirl as if caught in a current, though Nick didn't so much as brush him.

Flashing a quick smile over his shoulder, Ellis followed in Nick's footsteps, taking the time to close the bedroom door carefully behind himself. He blinked, looking up to find Nick already halfway to the other bedroom.
"Nick -" Ellis hissed through clenched teeth before he could get any further. The gambler halted at the sound, looking over his shoulder with a raised brow, expectantly. Cautiously moving to close the gap between them, Ellis lowered his voice to a whisper. "Um… Can I ask somethin'?"

Nick gazed rather thinly at him, a sarcastic twitch to his jaw, merely waiting rather than responding to that.

"Do you…" He hesitated, shifting on his feet, seeming to chew on his tongue in thought. His voice went even lower. "… You don't think Ro' uh… likes him, do you? I mean… likes him?" Nick's brow flattened out, but his expression failed to look particularly surprised. He sent a look, askance, toward the now-closed bedroom door.

Ellis waved his empty hand in front of himself, dismissively, almost walking back his own words as soon as he'd said them. His face floundered into something apologetic. "I ain't tryin' tuh suggest nothin' or nothin' but… it's just… I mean we all want him tuh get better. But…" He sighed, then, eyes dropping to the floor, half-ashamed. "I'm bein' nosy, ain't I…?"

Nick allowed himself a shrug, speaking in an honest murmur. "She thinks he saved her. Twice. Tends to drop panties, even without lopping an arm off in the process."

That horrified Ellis, reaching out to shove at Nick's bicep. The gesture made the gambler smirk, even though he had to brace against it to keep himself unmoving. "Nick! That ain't polite… She's got a boyfriend!" Ellis hissed, mortified.

Rather than laugh, Nick placed a hand on the younger man's elbow and pushed him to start walking. "It's none of our business, Overalls." he chided, hollowly, fully aware he had no intention of leaving it alone. "Forget about it, if you know what's good for you."

Ellis resisted for a beat, taking only one step before digging in his heels. Nick wasn't going to drag him, merely watching as Ellis frowned a bit, sideways, then questioned abruptly, "Ro' said you don't trust him."

"I don't." Nick responded easily, eyes narrowing subtly. Ellis looked surprised, head tilting in confusion, so the gambler shrugged. "Look kid, best case scenario is he's an okay guy. Right?"

The younger man nodded, hesitantly.

"Then he's an okay guy who drank the Kool-Aid when the chips were down." The gambler thrust up a hand, fingers splayed. "That's almost as bad as a straight-up asshole. At least you can anticipate an asshole being an asshole - you take an okay guy who could do anything under the right circumstances, and that makes me nervous."

There was a frown on Ellis' lips as he spoke, but the younger man didn't argue aloud at first. He seemed more thoughtful than anything, mulling over the words. When Nick pushed on his elbow again, Ellis obeyed.

However, as they reached the other bedroom door, Ellis did speak up. His tone was non-confrontational, but pointed. "I think the chips were down in that gunstore, 'n' he didn't shoot y'all." Nick grunted, disinclined to argue. He let Ellis slip through the doorway, lingering in the threshold with his shoulder pressed against it rather than follow.

Coach was awake and alert, expression disgruntled where he lay on the bed. He glanced over the two of them, eyes vaguely frustrated. "Everythin' a'right?"

"Yeah." Ellis assured him, stepping to stand near the bed. He pushed his hands together, wiggling
his fingers into a nervous twine. "Chris woke up - kinda. He weren't real talkative, but we got him
tuh eat some. Ro's sittin' with him."

The football coach grunted, relief replacing his frustration.

Nick set a hand against his hip, thumbing at his belt idly. "Wasn't conscious enough to notice his
arm, so we've still got that wonderful news to share. Plus, he… may have seen we have Brenda's
sword. Not really sure how that'll go over."

Seeming resigned, Coach shrugged a shoulder. His eyes closed, relaxing back against the
headboard. "Had to happen sometime. He seem angry?"

"No... but I don't think the guy had the energy to be, even if he wanted to." Nick raised a hand to
thumb at his jawline, turning his body to glance into the hallway. He stretched his body slowly,
working a few kinks out of his spine. The adrenaline of his awakening had worn off, and he mostly
felt drowsy again.

Ellis shifted on his feet, glancing between them with a thoughtful pinch of his lips. "Least he's up,
right?"

Coach nodded wearily, passing him a calm smile. "That, and y'all gettin' him food is real good. We
just gotta keep workin' at it." His praise bolstered Ellis' confidence, a little brightness coming onto
his face.

"Yeah." the youngest survivor agreed, eagerly. He reached up a hand, flattening his palm over the
crown of his head to scratch fingernails on his scalp. His weight bounced on his heels, tone turning
hopeful. "Maybe we're gettin' over the hump. I mean, if he's made it this far."

Nick's expression turned dubious, but he held his tongue. Coach merely grunted in agreement,
turning his body to slip his legs off the edge of the bed, coming to a sitting position. Ellis jolted at
the motion, taking a step closer and raising his empty hand, worriedly.

"You sure you're ready -"

Coach gave him a displeased look, brows raising. "Yeah, boy. I ain't 'bout to sit on my ass all day."
The look faded as Ellis relented with a couple steps back, bashfully, and a gruff smile replaced it.
The big man stood, and his posture was sturdy when he did. "Besides, you an' me got a car to fix
up, don't we?"

Ellis looked thrilled at the suggestion, and he practically beamed when Coach's hand raised and
ruffled his hair.

"Hell yeah!"
Chapter 132

Coach and Ellis exited the house, descending the stairs to the ground floor. Despite the eldest survivor's assurance he was fine, Ellis snuck surreptitious glances at him the entire way down, ensuring he didn't trip. And, although he moved stiffly, Coach seemed almost back to normal. It was relieving to see, to say the least.

The sun had risen over them, and though it was still shrouded behind a mass of clouds, the light was enough to begin layering a hazy yellow over the city. The temperature rose as the sun did, though a breeze whistled in from the shoreline and moderated the warmth in inconsistent gusts.

Shouldering his shotgun, Ellis bounced the car keys in his palm. He spoke idly as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "So, first thing I wanna check is the trunk. If we're real lucky -"

"When are we lucky?"

Nick's voice startled him, and Ellis turned around and canted his head to peer up the stairs. The gambler stood in the doorway, and as he watched, Nick slipped entirely out with Brenda's sniper rifle in his hands. Rather than look at either of them, he started to scan their surroundings from his vantage point on the small landing just in front of the door.

"You comin' out to help, Nick?" Coach questioned, tone edging toward surprise... but mostly humor, like he knew the answer he'd get. The football coach continued down to join Ellis on the ground, grasping at his waistband and tugging his khakis up a little as he moved.

The Northerner laughed outright, shrugging with his sniper to indicate it. "You guys got the manual labour covered, I think. Just gonna make sure nothing sneaks up on you."

With a glance slipped to Ellis, half-amused, Coach offered over his shoulder, "A'ight. Just keep that door cracked in case Ro' hollers." When Nick dismissed them with a flap of his hand, shifting a foot back to kick the door open a few inches, Coach moved on toward the garage.

Ellis lingered, tipping his head a bit. His gaze slanted up the stairs to watch as Nick meticulously set the sniper rifle against the railing of the landing, using it as a brace and leaning in to look through the scope. He started scouting out the road on either side of them, swiveling slowly.

Nick didn't so much as spare him a look, so Ellis merely quirked his mouth and moved to catch up with Coach.

As they entered the garage, dimly lit from the open door and the slatted windows in the garage door, Ellis took hold of the keychain in his hands, flipping through to find the fob for the car. He grabbed it - then froze, staring a moment at the blood that encrusted it, congealed to a dark rust colour.

He could almost pick out the fingerprint Brenda had left smudged on the panic button. He examined it quietly, feeling some lingering and wistful regret.

"You were talkin'?" Coach prompted, and Ellis bobbed his head, shaking himself back to attention. He flashed the older man a smile, unlocking the sedan's trunk with a quick button-press. It popped
open audibly, the car's headlamps giving a short blink in recognition.

Walking toward it, Ellis shrugged a shoulder. "Usually you get a spare under the trunk, y'know. Might even have a jack'n'lug wrench under there, too." He sidled back toward the back of the sedan, pursing his lips to whistle quietly, thoughtfully. "If we're lucky," he repeated. "Sometimes folks use 'em and never replace it."

Coach nodded, leaving the door open behind himself. He moved to lean against the side of the car, crossing his arms. His eyes darted around the inside of the garage - it was completely empty, just concrete flooring and wood-panel walls, but the back wall had a breakerbox hooked into the center.

He eyed it, but turned back to face Ellis instead of investigating further. He gestured him on with a hand, nodding. "A'ight. Let's see."

Inhaling a little, Ellis pushed the keys into his pocket and opened the trunk door. He squinted faintly to see inside, reaching down to palm along the floor of the trunk. "Should be - yeah." He gripped on a loose flap of upholstery folded up along the edge, and peeled up a section of the trunk's bottom, revealing the compartment stowed away underneath.

Inside, tucked into carefully molded pockets, was exactly what he'd hoped to see: a temporary tire, with a lug wrench set to one side and a folded black scissor jack tucked inside the tire's middle rim.

A grin snuck up on him, nodding his head as he ran his fingers over the metal. "Hell yeah. S'just a donut, but it'll do us fine. Though, handlin'll be iffy, iffin we get intuh trouble. Won't be doin' no stunt drivin' on this." Ellis carefully reached in to grab up the jack, hauling it out of the trunk and taking a step back.

He babbled, idly, some distant kind of calm entering him as he did. "Won't be doin' the differential no favours, either." He'd forgotten how good it felt to be in his element - though a part of him expected to turn and see Keith. "But it'll do us."

Coach approached around the car, looking faintly relieved. "I got the tire." Ellis gave him room, watching as the older man leaned into the trunk, grabbing ahold of the temporary tire and lifting it from its compartment. He only strained a little, bracing it against his belly as he took it over to the side of the car. "Be too much effort to get a wheel from another car or somethin'?"

Ellis shrugged a little, taking the jack against his hip and under his arm so he could lean in and grab the lug wrench, too. "I mean, we could, but it ain't like we're gonna do any road-trippin'. We'd have tuh find matchin' sizes'n'shit. Heck, if we do that, may's well just go find us a new ride."

A grunt escaped Coach, and a frown touched his face. He lowered the tire next to their flat, leaning it against the side of the car and setting a hand on his hip. "Right..." he said, some hesitation working its way into his voice. "Road-trippin'. About that, Elli-"

"Oh, hold up!" Ellis interrupted, eagerly, abruptly moving to set the wrench and jack on the roof of the car. "I gotta check if this baby is front or rear drive. May have tuh swap the flat out with one'uh the back tires, put the donut on the back, instead."

Coach arched a brow at the interruption, tapping his thumb against his hip with cautious thought. "A'ight." He wanted to broach the subject of the doubts that had been raised about their rescue. As much as he didn't want to believe it, he'd been thinking: didn't Ellis deserve to know?

He was as much a part of the team as any of them, and keeping it from him was growing
uncomfortable. Coach knew Rochelle didn't like it, but was afraid to scare the young survivor. Nick was undoubtedly waiting to confirm things with Christophe before circling Ellis in.

They were both fair and reasonable choices - but Ellis was grown, and deserved to be part of their decision. It wouldn't be pleasant, but Coach would take the burden of having the conversation.

"Sorry, though. Whut were you sayin'?"

As the mechanic moved around the car to open the driver's side door, leaning in to pull the latch that popped the hood, Coach crossed his arms. "There's somethin' we should talk about. We didn't wanna worry you, so we been lettin' it alone. But I been thinkin', you should hear it from us."

Ellis crinkled a brow at the words, pausing a moment to slant a look back at the older man. His expression went hesitant, curling his tongue against his teeth in reluctant thought. A faint embarrassment crept into his voice. "Um... this ain't about Jerry, is it...? 'Cause I talked with Nick, 'n' we're okay..."

Shaking his head, Coach dragged his arms into a cross. "Nah. Nobody's told you why shit went bad in the gunstore, right?" Ellis shook his head, continuing to the nose of the car. He grasped fingertips under the hood, pulling it upright. "Well... there was an argument. Now, we don't really know what it means, so I don't want you puttin' stock in nothin'. Just think you should know."

An outright frown spawned on his Ellis' lips, movement slowing a little. He grasped the steel rod that was tucked into the corner, pulling it out and setting the tip in the notch on the hood's roof to hold it open. "Well... I appreciate that. But... whut're you sayin'? Did somethin' happen?"

At that, Coach sighed. He rested back against the sedan, a reluctant sort of weariness dragging at his features. He watched Ellis lean over the engine compartment, hand slipping over the internal mechanics. "Sorta. We got to talkin' wit' Brenda about our plans. When we mentioned contactin' the military, she..."

He halted when his younger teammate leaned suddenly to the side, drawing his left hand up in front of his face. Something shiny and dark glistened on his fingers, with a ruddy brown tint. "Uh... shit."

Startled, Coach pushed off the car and approached, eyes darting from the youth's hand into the engine's innards. "Shit what?" he questioned, voice a little strained. "Somethin' broke?"

Ellis raised up his undirtied hand, taking his cap and turning it around so the bill jutted out behind his head. He leaned in, resting an elbow against the edge of the engine compartment, fingers catching on a piping system hooked up to a tank on the far left wall. "Looks like a bullet got in here through the grille.. Lucky it didn't hit nothin' vital."

Coach tilted his head to follow Ellis' motions, eyes going slightly narrowed with concern. He didn't miss the careful wording. "But it hit somethin'."

"Yeah." Ellis nodded, reluctantly. His fingers grasped around the pipe, sliding along its length in a probing gesture, and when he retracted his hand it was dark with the same fluid. It had a kind of burnt smell to it, and he shook his hand out with a glance toward Coach. "Nicked the power steerin' fluid line. It ain't a big hole, but it must'uh been leakin' all yesterday'n'all night."

Sighing faintly, Coach re-crossed his arms. He allowed a hand to wrest itself from under his bicep, though, pointing toward the engine. "Is it still a'ight to drive?"

That made the younger man's lips draw into a quirked frown, eyeing his stained digits in thought.
"Sorta. The pump'll burn out, though, and it'll be real rough tuh handle. Between this, 'n' drivin' on the donut, turnin's gonna be heck... and if we get intuh any kind'uh zombie trouble, we'll be fish in a damn barrel."

Frustration rose up, Ellis abruptly shaking his head. "I don't think it's a good idea. We'd need some patch tape 'n' tuh find some more fluid... ain't likely, unless we spot a hardware store or somethin'. Thinkin' we better just get a new -"

Before he could continue, a shot rang out, cracking in the air like a firework. It made both of them jump, and Coach bolted almost as quickly as Ellis did. The younger Georgian reached the door first, bursting through the threshold. "Nick?!"

Although his fear was abated slightly when he saw the gambler still posted at the top of the stairs, that didn't stop his head from swiveling to examine the fenced-in yard. He didn't see any obvious threats, but the privacy wall blocked his view. Nick, on the other hand, could see over it.

Mindlessly pawing at his cheek - only belatedly realizing he'd done so with his dirty hand and streaked his flesh with red-brown liquid - Ellis cocked a look up toward the scouting survivor. "What's goin' on?"

"Hunter." Nick explained coolly, voice low. He kept his face against the scope, scanning carefully in sweeping passes. "Poked up over the fence. This shit isn't zombie-proof, if anyone was wondering - and we've got some infected down the road. That shot just caught their attention, but they don't know where we are yet. So hurry up and do what you're doing."

Ellis' mouth opened, prepared to share the bad news - but Coach nudged him, elbow to his bicep.

The younger man blinked, curiously, when the ex-football player turned to walk back into the garage. It was with hesitation that he followed, watching Coach duck through the doorway and retake his position, arms-crossed, at the nose of the car.

He padded up to join the older man, head cocked expectantly. "If we're givin' up on the car, shouldn't we get back inside?"

Coach merely nodded with his chin. "Sure, son. In a second... Wanna finish what I was sayin' earlier before we do." Ellis gave a small 'oh,' shifting onto the heels of his boots, turning his chin up to give the man his full attention. He'd genuinely forgotten for a moment, bounced off-topic.

"What set shit off was us tellin' them we meant to call in the gov'ment. Chris and Brenda talked like the military had done some nasty shit. They were scared of us callin' them in, like we'd get killed, an' them too. That was why they turned on us."

The revelation came slowly over Ellis' face, thought ticking over his features in a hesitant wave. Coach let him think on it, waiting patiently for him to absorb the new information, with only a calm and reassuring injection of, "We don't know no more than that. They didn't explain it. We're hopin' Chris will."

Slowly, Ellis turned on his heel, averting his eyes toward the garage door. His lips drew tight against each other, almost frowning - but not quite.

A hard clench of frustration set itself into place in his chest. First he discovered the group hid the cause of Jerry's death from him, and now that they'd been hiding even more? Did they not think he could handle the news, or had his near-death experience suddenly shaken their faith in him?

Did they think he was weak - or just stupid?
"... Whut kinda stuff did they say they did?" he questioned, tentatively, maintaining an even tone as he spoke. He tried to shake off the thought, tried to focus - but it upset him more piercingly than what Coach was trying to tell him. "Like blowin' that bridge we found? Or...?"

The eldest survivor shook his head firmly, closing his eyes. He scratched carefully at the inside of his bicep, seeming reluctant even as he spoke. "Said they were shootin' people. Like survivors. But we didn't get to discuss it - we're hopin' it's a misunderstandin'."

Ellis' mouth warped into the frown he'd been trying to mask, lowering his gaze to examine the toes of his boots. Coach noticed the gesture, stepping close enough to reach out a hand and set it on his shoulder, comfortingly.

"You mad we didn't tell you earlier?"

Part of him wanted to step out from the older man's grip, but he forced himself to stay rooted, fighting against the instinct. The last thing he wanted to do was lash out. He was trying to find an even keel after his breakdown the day before, not collapse even further. "... I just don't get why y'all are hidin' things from me all'uv a sudden."

Try as he might, his voice did escape him in a bitter grit. The words - or the tone, or both - startled Coach, and the hand on Ellis' shoulder faltered, lifting away just slightly. Ellis bowed his chin to avoid looking at him, feeling petty, and small.

Before Coach could say anything, a surge of self-conscious energy had Ellis shaking his head.

"Man... sorry. I just... I'm havin' trouble gettin' over shit right now, I guess. I ain't normally this quick tuh rile... s'just been a long few days." He huffed out a breath, raising a hand to scuff the back of his hand against the wet splotch on his cheek. "I just hate feelin' like y'all don't trust me. Nick don't think I can handle knowin' shit, y'all don't think I can handle knowin' shit... when did we... when did I..."

He trailed off, then jumped when Coach abruptly grabbed him by the elbow.

The sudden contact startled him into an outright yip, but could do nothing but be scooted along by the heavyset survivor. Coach guided him effortlessly back out the garage door, grip firm.

"W-whut-!" escaped Ellis, half-convinced he was in trouble. The eldest team member didn't respond, dragging him along as he made it back to the staircase. Nick was still at the top, and he curiously glanced down at the sight, sliding his sniper rifle against his chest so he could make room for them.

"The fuck is going on?" he questioned, sounding genuinely baffled, particularly when his eyes caught on Ellis' stricken expression.

Coach pulled the mechanic up the stairs by force, going just slow enough to allow him to catch his balance on the steps. "Team huddle-up." he announced calmly, tipping his head to indicate Nick should retreat inside. The gambler did so with a suspicious look, backing up rather than turning around, keeping an eye on his teammates.

"The fuck is going on?" he questioned, sounding genuinely baffled, particularly when his eyes caught on Ellis' stricken expression.

Once he'd dragged Ellis into the hallway, Coach finally released him. He didn't give the younger man any time to protest before he stepped away, walking to the closed bedroom door. Cracking it open, he poked his head in.
"Need you, babygirl." There was a beat of silence, and Rochelle must have given him a face from the bed or whispered something too quiet for Ellis to hear, because a soft, gruff chuckle escaped him. "Don't look at me like that. It's important. He ain't gonna keel over in the next few minutes."

Nick closed the front door before he sidled up to the wall next to the stairwell, eyes scanning between his teammates. His eyes were narrow and guarded at first - but as Coach stepped away from the door, dry amusement touched his face.

"Can't drag her away?" he murmured, lowly, just barely loud enough for even Ellis to catch.

Sparing him a half-distressed, half-chiding look, Ellis pushed his hands against his coveralls, cleaning his fingers of the staining they'd collected inside the engine. "Coach, whut's this about? I didn't mean tuh... I mean, I didn't want tuh cause a ruckus. I was just ventin' is all -"

Coach waved him off easily, slipping his arms into a cross over his chest. He gave the kid a fond smile, lids lowering to a lazy half-close as his voice slipped into a rumble. "Overdue fo' this, anyway."

Ellis frowned, tautly, reaching up a hand. He meant to push his capbill down over his eyes, but he'd spun his cap around - so his fingers pawed uselessly at the air before he realized his mistake. A mocking snort escaped the gambler, leaned against the wall at his flank.

The look Ellis spared him that time was all distressed.

As Rochelle tentatively stepped out of the bedroom door, hand on the knob to draw it almost closed behind her, she prompted, "Overdue for what?" She blinked a little at the sight of all three of her male compatriots circled around her, and for a beat, her face flashed to something about as suspicious as Nick's.

In that moment of silence, Coach released a weary sigh. He closed his eyes outright, lifting a hand to gesture toward Ellis. "... He knows. I told him 'bout the gov'ment. Or, what the Angels told us 'bout them, anyway."

Ellis' heart started a clamour in his chest, thick and heavy. This was hardly what he'd intended to happen, and all he could do was shuffle his body into a slump, non-confrontational. Like he could hide himself if he just lowered his head enough.

Both Nick and Rochelle stiffened - though he averted his gaze toward the front door, while she darted her eyes straight to Ellis' face. Her lips parted, concern drawing a line between her eyebrows, but Nick was faster.

"... I thought we agreed..." His voice was clipped, and a little frustrated.

Coach shook his head before the gambler could continue, flexing his shoulders into a roll that was only tangentially a shrug. "We were wrong. Ain't we had this conversation before? We gotta make decisions, as a team. Together. All four of us. It ain't fair any other way. If we want the truth, we gotta tell the truth."

Rochelle's eyes lowered to the ground, suddenly dragging an arm over her midsection. She held her elbow, forearm almost hugging herself, biting at her lower lip at the words. "Yeah..." she agreed, if a little weakly, guilt catching in her voice.

Nick thrust the sniper rifle down to lean against the wall and slid a hand into his slack's pocket. He exhaled, raising his eyes to the ceiling with the motion. "I was going to, the minute we knew what we were actually talking about."
Reluctantly, Ellis shifted on his heels, shaking his head gently. His posture was a little strained with embarrassment, ears burning faintly at the feeling of causing friction. He wished he'd merely kept his mouth shut.

"What matters -" With a nod of his head toward Ellis, Coach lowered his voice to something gentler. "- is he thinks we don't trust him."

That dropped Ellis' jaw. He instinctively looked up at the eldest survivor, eyes wide, like he'd been outright betrayed. Coach met his gaze with a tolerant warmth, stoic, and it was all Ellis could do not to babble. "I - That ain't - Why would you - Coach -"

"Oh, gosh." Rochelle uttered, stepping to close the gap between her and Ellis. She reached out, grasping onto his bicep with her good hand. Her gaze tried to meet his, and he couldn't get himself to look right at her, abashed. "Is that true?"

"N-no... I mean, kinda, I guess." He huffed, managing to lean back a little on his heels. He could feel his face heating up, unsure if it was mortification or just unease at the attention. He had to work the words out, like they were stuck behind his teeth. "I just... don't get why y'all would keep me outta this. We're s'posed to be a team... 'n' I thought..."

He shrugged his shoulders, slumping just a little more - and Rochelle collapsed into a frown.

Moving quickly, she slid forward, drawing her arms around him and tugging him into an embrace. Her cheek settled against his shoulder, and even as he reddened, he tentatively returned the hug with an arm looped around her waist.

"Sweetie, that's not it at all." Her left hand brushed up his back, smoothing a circle between his shoulderblades. "We just didn't know what it meant, and you were hurt - and things just kept getting worse. We didn't want to ruin your hope and then find out we did it for no reason."

Ellis frowned a little. Although he did so gently, he did extricate himself from the hug to take a step back, shaking his head with a quiet sigh. "I ain't a kid..." That made Rochelle's frown deepen, chin lowering. "I know y'all meant well, it's just -" His eyes averted to the side, a pinch touching between his eyebrows.

"Sorry."

Coach shook his head, exhaling a weighty breath. "Don't be sorry, son. We shouldn't be keepin' things like this from each other. Ain't even just 'bout you feelin' hurt - if we gotta make choices, if we gotta decide... we gotta do it together." His brows dropped over his eyes, shading them, and his voice gained a low edge. "Even if it ain't pretty."

From his place against the wall, Nick slanted his head, cutting a look lengthwise across the three of them. He huffed something like a laugh, taut and cool. "Yeah. 'Cause there are so many options available to us."

Ellis turned on a heel to look toward him, mouth slipping into a faint quirk downward. "If we can't trust the military... whut are we gonna do?" It was with a subtle angle that Nick met his gaze, expression going flat as he gazed over the younger man's features.

He seemed... calm. Thoughtful, though worried. Nick had expected panic and disbelief, but there was none. Was he finally growing used to the idea of not trusting people? Had the sting of it finally faded, and it was becoming something he could wrap his head around?

That thought bothered Nick a little more than he liked.
"Not worth talking about until we can get our one-armed friend in there to give us a better explanation." He freed his hand from his pocket, flattening it in the air, palm-up. "I'm the first one on deck to vote for not trusting the government - who, by the way, couldn't stop the outbreak in the first place - but let's not start planning our life out here in this shitfest before we know for sure."

Rochelle couldn't resist a snort at that, squinting faintly in Nick's direction before her eyes rolled. "You kidding? Shoot, it's practically paradise, I'd love to live like this forever. Who needs rescue? Let's just stay out here."

He summoned up a smirk, flashing a strip of teeth in a grin. "Careful. Talk like that, and we'll have to start thinking about the future of the human race."

Rochelle gave a scoffing sound, dismissing that comment off-handedly, returning her gaze to Ellis. Though he'd retreated a step back, he was still within reach, so she stretched out her left hand to grasp his wrist. Squeezing comfortingly, she gave him a hesitant smile. "He's right, though. Let's just try not to worry too much until we know what we're dealing with."

Considering that for a moment, Ellis eventually nodded. "Yeah. Okay. That makes sense." His eyes darted, flicking between his teammates with a hesitant energy, splitting his gaze equally, firm but gentle. "I ain't mad. I just don't want us keepin' things from each other is all. I keep almost -"

He'd been so sturdy, it was almost startlingly sudden when that composure broke a little. His gaze dropped, chin trembling just faintly before he sighed. "We keep almost losin' each other. Last thing we need is tuh start hidin' shit."

Rochelle sighed, pinching her lips into a purse hesitantly as her eyes flickered over his face - but she didn't get the chance to speak before Coach was suddenly stepping forward. His arms swept around her and Ellis, drawing them suddenly in a hug that made Rochelle outright squeak in surprise.

"Group hug." Coach announced, gruffly.

His grip squashed them together and against his gut, gathering the two younger survivors together with all the atmosphere of a hen tucking chicks under its feathers. He jostled them just a little, a hand going to brace on either of their shoulders, and Ellis couldn't resist a tickled laugh. "Coach - he gasped out with a snort.

Unable to resist a laugh of her own, Rochelle twisted in Coach's grip to look toward Nick, voice growing a taunting edge. She spoke with careful intonation, slowly, drawing the words out: "He said group." Ellis laughed at the words, eyes going a little wide with the realization of her meaning.

The only description for the look that crossed Nick's face was horror.

With little more than a sly glance passed between the three of them, they scuttled toward him without breaking contact with each other. Coach's arms spread invitingly, at the same time Nick started backing up, pushing himself into the wall and raising a threatening finger. "Don't even fucking think about it."

Ellis' laughter heightened, turning into snorts, and Coach couldn't resist chuckling along. Rochelle merely grinned, cuttingly, dropping her voice to a monotone as she thrust up a hand in a grabbing gesture. "One of us - one of us..."

Their approach backed Nick into the corner, up against the door, and maybe it was the outright aggression that sparked up on his features that made them relent. Still laughing, Ellis ducked away
from Coach, reaching up to slide his cap back around on his head. "We best let him be, y'all..."

"Says you. I vote for making him squirm." Rochelle snorted, amusement flickering over her face at the slow way Nick's hackles lowered, eyes still on them suspiciously. She grinned, slipping her arms into a loose cross over her chest, Coach's arm draped over her shoulders.

The big man gave a chuckle, tilting his head to one side. "Losin' our lives ain't my idea of a good team-buildin' exercise, anyway."

Nick exhaled a breath through his nostrils, huffing, and dragged his hands to a loose grip on his hips. Keeping his eyes narrowed, he slipped away from the wall, making to circle around them to reach the staircase. "Well, if we're done with the warm-fuzzies... I'm gonna go eat something."

Before he could place a foot on the first step, Rochelle's expression drained out to a slight frown. She glanced downward, and something in her posture must've tensed, because Coach slipped a glance at her curiously from an angle. "Babygirl?"

Nick heard his tone and halted, turning his head with a curious tilt.

They were coming clean, weren't they? The notebook and its contents - as questionable as they were, and as uncertain as she was of what to take from it - fought at her conscience. The last thing she wanted was to give Ellis more of a reason to think they were keeping things from him. And, honestly, she wanted their opinion.

They were a team, after all.

Sighing softly, the woman shook her head.

"... We aren't done. There's something else."
Chapter 133

Sunlight wheedled unenthusiastically through the glass doors, casting a glare over the surface. Nick was quick to take up a position against it, tilting his head to focus outside rather than pay much attention to his teammates as they came up the stairs. He'd taken the sniper rifle back into his hands, aiming it down at the carpet with a leisurely angle.

"This shit feels like an intervention." he commented idly, moving one hand to rub at the concave of his neck, just below his jaw. His statement made him examine his fingers in a side-eye, not missing the tremor still affecting his knuckles. "And I haven't even smoked in days."

Ellis slipped around to the front of the sofa, moving to sit down on it. As he started to lower himself onto the seat, he couldn't help but peek down over the cushions nervously. He didn't know if he expected to see stains, or some huge sign that announced that they'd had sex on it just some hours previous...

The thought made it entirely too uncomfortable when Coach moved to join him, dropping onto the couch with a grunt. He closed his eyes wearily. "She's comin'. Keep yo' pants on."

Looking up when Nick gave a noncommittal noise, Ellis was startled to find the gambler's head tilted, just enough to slip a glance at him. There was a smirk on his lips, and the Georgian could only silently redden. The source of his humor was, undoubtedly, the same as the source of Ellis' embarrassment.

Ellis swore Nick took pleasure in his mortification, and it was that floundering embarrassment that made Ellis' gaze dart down, averting it to the ground. Panic promptly flooded through him.

Just beside the coffee table leg, almost hidden in the shadow of the table's surface, was the split square of a foil condom wrapper. It must have fallen, and they'd missed it while cleaning up in the dark. He froze for a solid few seconds, horrified at the sight, not even a breath passing his lips.

When he did move, it was almost frantically, jolting out his foot to catch the toe of his boot atop the wrapper and shove it completely underneath the coffee table and out of sight. Coach noticed the gesture when it shook the couch, opening his eyes with a confused raise to one brow. Ellis was terrified to open his mouth for the lack of excuse he had.

Rochelle's approach up the stairs provided a blessed distraction.

She came up the stairs on soft footsteps. She held her hands behind her back, something hesitant in her eyes as she stepped up onto the second floor and turned toward the three men across the room. "Sorry... I'm here." Coach turned to look toward her, giving a comforting nod.

In the absence of his attention, Ellis practically huffed out a relieved breath, sliding a hand onto his sternum. He had to force his heartrate down a notch, rearranging his face into some semblance of normality.

With a small smile back toward Coach, the producer slipped over to the rightmost loveseat. Rather than sit on the cushions, she hopped up onto the armrest. She drew one leg into a cross under herself, foot tucked behind her other knee. It was then that she sighed, exhalng in a way that seemed to deflate her body.

"Okay."
Her left arm swept from behind herself, holding up her hand limply. Gripped tightly in her hand was the spiral notebook. Her fingers cradled it delicately, like it were liable to explode. "I -"

She couldn't get any further before Nick was reacting, shoulders drawing in something more like confusion than irritation. "Is that what I think it is? Why - when did you even take it?" He palmed against the crown of his head, shifting on his heels, even as she slipped him a faintly annoyed glance.

"After you left. And I don't know. I just did." she admitted, honestly, sighing faintly despite herself. Turning the notebook around, she flattened it on her lap and shrugged her shoulders up gently. "I was hoping it'd have something useful in it, I guess. Or maybe I was just curious."

Lifting a hand to rub self-consciously at his cheek, as if the lingering heat there was a smudge he could wipe away, Ellis drew his face into a confused pinch. His head flipped back and forth to look between Nick and Rochelle. "Whut's that?"

Dropping into a further slump on the sofa, grunting as he shifted his weight, Coach draped an arm over the back of the soda. "That's the journal from the attic, ain't it?" Rochelle seemed distantly surprised at his words, not knowing he knew of it, but nodded. Her eyes shifted to focus on Ellis, tapping the notebook against her thighs.

"Remember when Nick went up into the attic?" The kid nodded, a touch warily, so Rochelle gave him a reassuring smile. "We found some stuff. A guy who'd killed himself and a zombie... and this. He wrote some stuff in a notebook. Kind of a journal, and a suicide note."

He blinked gently, jutting his jaw forward in a thoughtful gesture. "Okay... So you kept it?"

Slowly drawing her fingertips against the notebook, Rochelle opened the notebook, working to hesitantly open it to the page she'd dog-eared the night previous. "Yeah. Nick only glanced at it, and I guess I just..." Her eyes softened before she shook her head to re-focus. "I dunno. It doesn't matter. But - I think I found something."

Curiosity drove Nick to step away from the glass door. Rather than approach her directly, he took to circling the couches in the center of the room, moving at a casual pace to ring them. "Something aside from more crazy? Because what I remember was less than reassuring, if we're talking about taking advice from some dead guy."

Rochelle mostly glossed over him, tapping her pinky against the edge of the notebook with a clicking sound. "It's mostly just... talking. But there's this bit in the middle... Let me just read it." As she came to the bookmarked page, her lips tightened a bit against each other. Ellis leaned in subtly toward her, eyes attentive and half-narrowed.

She read it carefully, intonation flat. "Something got on the roof. I went to kill it. Climbed up through the window. We're running low on bullets, and I saw the boat again. I want to go to the shore and try to flag them down."

As the words left her, the other three passed glimpses between them. There was a thoughtful kind of pause in the seconds that followed, with Nick continuing his pace around the room, though it slowed a little. Coach raised a hand to rub at his chin, fingertips rustling on the dense stubble accruing on his features.

"A boat." he repeated, thoughtfully.

Rochelle nodded her head, tentatively, balancing the notebook against her thigh. "Making passes, it
seems like. At the very least, it showed up twice. He doesn't mention it again, doesn't describe it, so... for all I know, it's some kid on a motorboat, just trying to make it, like us... Or..." She trailed off a little, raising her hands into a vague gesture. "Maybe even a military ship."

Slipping his free hand into his pocket, Nick drew his chin down, tongue flicking at the corner of his mouth before he sighed. "Passing ship or helicopter is pretty much our only shot for getting someone to notice us."

Bouncing up slightly from his seat, Ellis tilted his head. "If we're not sure if the military is gonna help us... maybe we don't wanna get their attention." he uttered, thoughtfully. The words did draw a frown on his face, but it was faint.

"We can't be makin' no call on that yet." Coach inserted, hand still scratching into his jawline. "Not 'til we get Chris to talk to us. We call it quits on the military, we ain't got no plan B. So ain't no one gonna be hasty 'bout that shit."

Ellis' mouth pursed, sedately, acknowledging the thought with a faint nod. "So... fer now... guess we just keep an eye out? We got a pretty good view out the window if it's some big tanker or somethin'."

Nick slid to stand behind Rochelle, halting his pacing. "Maybe." He leaned in, looking over her shoulder, and she raised the notebook to show him the entries. He let his eyes scan the words, though it didn't reveal any more information than Rochelle had already shared. "If it's not military, we may as well just start scouting out for our own boat. Go sailing. Who wants to be pirates?"

That made Rochelle snort, despite herself, sneaking a surreptitious glance sideways at his too-close face. "Why am I not surprised that your first thought is pirating?"

At that, Ellis responded quite seriously: "That's 'cause pirates are awesome. Almost as awesome as ninjas." His head nodded in easy decision, reaching up a hand to grasp onto the top of his hat and rub it against his scalp in a gentle motion.

The gambler couldn't bite back a sharp laugh, flashing the Georgian a vaguely baffled look before returning his gaze to the notebook. "Christ, you're five."

A chuckle left Coach - but he cleared his throat shortly, dropping his hand to his lap. He changed the subject before Ellis could protest, a grim note to his voice. "Speakin' of scoutin'... we should tell y'all. The car ain't fixable."

Nick's eyes darted up fully at the admittance, a flat groan escaping his lips. "Really? Fuck." He retreated from Rochelle's side, reaching up to palm against his forehead in a frustrated gesture. "I thought it was just a flat?"

Ellis shook his head, leaning forward a little bit from the couch. "Thought so too. But when it got shot up, it messed with some internals. It'd drive, but if we got caught in anythin' dangerous, like a horde or a Tank... we'd have a real rough time escapin'. Heck, be better off on foot."

Exhaling a long and weighty sigh that fluttered into agitation, Nick turned away. "We've got - one bottle of water left?" Rochelle nodded, and though he didn't see the gesture, the silence was enough of a confirmation. "I hate to say it... but we can't wait this out."

The ex-football player frowned, dark eyes slipping to a squint as he adjusted his seat on the couch. "Can't hotwire another car?"

Sliding a hand onto his shoulder and massaging into his sore and aching shoulderblade, pain
twinging with the touch, Nick shook his head. "Okay, boy scout. It doesn't work like that. We got lucky with that shitty truck I hotwired back then - anything modern's got failsafes. Keys or bust, unless we happen across another junker."

Ellis nodded in confirmation, lips drawn in a faintly musing pout. He stretched his legs out, the heels of his boots digging into the carpet. "If we gotta find water'n'shit... really be nice tuh have the storage. Ain't like the zombies'll be polite 'cause we got our arms full."

"Yeah." Rochelle agreed with a sigh, drooping her chin almost to her chest. "No way to do this without splitting up again, either. Not like Chris can come with us... and he's not conscious enough so far to defend himself."

Frowning deeper at the concept, Ellis scattered a glance over his team, drawing his lower lip into a slim bite. Something bad had happened every time they'd split up of late: at the hotel... when Chris returned... when Brenda attacked... Could they really do it again?

An aching feeling grew in his chest; if he took his eyes off his friends, even for a moment, they might just disappear.

"I don't wanna." he admitted, just a mumble, before he could stop it. His eyes fell to his knees, only barely registering when Coach stretched his hand over to rest on his shoulder. It was only forcibly that he tilted his head a little to acknowledge the contact.

Nick dragged himself into a turn, gazing reluctantly toward the youth. His posture adjusted, leaning back on a heel to slump his body tiredly. "No other choice. Can't go without water, and the sooner we find some more supplies, the better." When Ellis' head dropped faintly, Nick shrugged a shoulder, looking instead up at Coach. "Buddy system? So we've all got back-up."

The eldest survivor nodded his head in agreement, just once. "Ro' ain't in shootin' condition wit' her hand. I ain't in runnin' condition wit' my knee. Y'all boys should go." He glanced at Ellis' face, where the younger man was still caught in a frown. "Your rib a'ight?"

Ellis met his gaze, nodding. His eyes melted to something somber, but there was some resignation at the edge of his voice - even as it faltered with a tentative murmur. "I'll be okay."

Coach gripped his shoulder with a squeeze, head nodding. "We will, too. Don't worry 'bout it, son." He looked up, exhaling softly. "How 'bout we eat, then get a plan together? All we know, one of these condos 'round us has got a car with keys, make this easy."

Nick huffed a laugh, slitting his eyes faintly. He shook his head, sidestepping to make his way over to the kitchen and claim a granola bar from the box they'd relocated back to the counter. "Life making it easy on us? Come on, Sammy. You got more sense than that."

The big man snorted at that, closing his eyes tiredly.

"Get me somethin' to eat and shut yo' mouth, Nicky."
Nick chewed idly on his cheek, leaned in the threshold of the front door. His injured right shoulder was radiating a quiet pain through his torso, enough to make him sigh out a breath. He’d need to tend to it sooner than later; if they got enough water, he could at least wash it off.

Mild surprise did creep up on him when he passed the back of his hand against his forehead and found his skin fairly cooled. The antibiotics should have taken longer to kick in than that - not that he was going to complain about the fever passing. Small mercies, I guess.

His fingers were still trembling, but that much he attributed to a lack of cigarettes. The need wasn't fading so much as becoming blurred with an array of other aches and pains, to where he could almost cope with it. While that spoke poorly for his general condition, he'd take what he could get.

Plus, getting off helped.

At that, Nick wasn't able to stifle a small grin. Just privately - just for himself. The only thing better than screwing Ellis into the couch was watching Ellis have to sit on that same couch and keep a straight face.

He'd long since come to terms with his sadistic streak, and as much as the idea of anyone finding out haunted him - he also couldn't deny the thrill of fucking the kid under his team's nose.

He'd shouldered the sniper rifle, and in his hands was the katana. They were running low on ammunition, and the last thing they needed was to end up defenseless. Gripping it carefully with both hands, he thoughtfully spun it, testing his shoulder. The pain didn't really get any worse or better as he flexed it.

The real test would come when he swung the thing at a zombie, but at least it was feasible.

Ellis came down the stairs, boots tromping against the carpet. His approach drew Nick's gaze, a brow faintly raising. The Georgian was still looking about as thrilled as a kicked dog, mouth caught in a permanent frown. He'd drawn his shotgun into his arms, hugging it into his side, and he practically sulked his way down the steps.

He spared a frown in Nick's direction before stepping up to him, shoulders low. "Guess we better go."

"Jeez, Overalls." he returned, allowing the katana to drop and rest against the ground, hooking a thumb in his slacks pocket instead. "Spare me the death row look. Ro' and Coach are going to be tucked in safe here. You should be worried about us - we're the ones about to get fucked."

A gentled sigh escaped the younger man, eyebrows wringing into a discontent knot. He nodded his head in a sour gesture, Nick's humor going entirely over his head. The gambler felt a little disgruntled at that; he'd expected at least a scrunched-up nose, maybe a snort. Even a reluctant one.

Ellis merely trodded around him, slipping out the door and starting to make his way down the stairs.

Lazily, Nick followed, pausing only momentarily to close the door behind him. He shot a glance up toward the sky, eyeing the cloudless expanse of blue - though what it lacked in cloud cover it made up for in plumes of smoke, drifting sleepily from one direction or the other. "What are you worrying about, anyway?"
As he reached the ground floor, Ellis stepped to the side, kicking a heel against the scraggly and sandy earth that filled in around the driveway and edging sidewalk. "I just hate us splittin' up. We ain't had nothin' but bad shit happen every time we do. If somethin' happens to them while we're gone, I..."

He trailed off, shoulders raising a little bit, shaking his head in something almost mournful. "I'm gonna go crazy, man."

The gambler took the stairs in a slow glide, eyes rooted firmly on his younger teammate, narrowed to a suspicious slit. Ellis' composure had been failing him in this consistent degradation, like the stress had finally built to some critical mass. He hadn't expected a quick fuck to solve things, but that left him at a loss.

Ellis was drifting. He needed comfort, needed something to root him, so he felt less like he might lose everything at a moment's notice. Needed assurance. He needed something to trust in.

Nick didn't know how to offer that.

Sure as fuck ain't me.

"Look, kid." He'd at least try. "You realize the whole reason we're alive is Rochelle? If I'd be worried about anything, I'd be worried about whatever - or whoever - tries to get in this house while we're gone. She's past fucking around. Pretty sure she'd disassemble them by hand."

It was a shot in the dark, but it struck. Ellis let out a stifled laugh, turning a little to glance at Nick, tentative amusement flickering over those stony blue eyes. "She'd flip if she heard you talkin' nice about her like that."

The Northerner allowed a flash of teeth to show just before he strode forward, cautiously swinging his katana up to brace the dull back against his shoulder. "Don't tell her. Gotta keep her humble."

Ellis followed after him, moving with a little more energy as he caught up with, and came to flank, the older man. He snorted faintly, then shook his head. "I guess yer right. Plus, ain't like we got any bad folks tuh worry about, right? Even if there is another Angel or somethin' out there, they don't know us."

Nodding idly, Nick approached the gate to the privacy fence. He carefully tucked a digit under the latch, pulling it up to release the lock. "Yeppers." he agreed distantly, mostly focused on opening the gate just a crack. He tilted his head to peer out into the street.

The space in front of the condo was clear, it seemed. The roads collapsed down into low asphalt, dusted over with blown sand, and the houses set up on either side of it all had yards of varying sizes and clutter. Some had no fences - some just picket fences - some were so overgrown with unkempt shrubbery it was hard to see clear to the building itself.

He leaned through the gateway, allowing the door to swing open ahead of him, and got a look in either direction. A handful of infected were visible, stumbling along the roadway or leaning against cars and fences. He got the feeling there were more under the surface, though - some wandered in and out of his vision, clambering behind shrubs and buildings.

Disturbing them might bring a fair number down on them. It was their goal to avoid such conflict.

Ellis nudged up against his side, peering out alongside him and sliding his shotgun into his hands. His chin hovered just above Nick's shoulder, voice dropped to a whisper. "We can just sidle 'long the fence, get tuh the next house. We gotta check these garages fer some new wheels."
A nod touched Nick's head, even as he slid through the gate. He pushed himself against the fence, scanning their surroundings, keeping an eye on the infected wandering around, just in case. The Georgian carefully closed the gate behind them, latching it quietly before following in Nick's footsteps.

The two men moved at a tender walk, sliding the length of the privacy fence. As Nick drew up to the edge of it, he tipped his body to peek around the corner.

The house next to theirs was much shorter. It was on stilts, as well, but only a single floor made up the structure above the gap. Between the thick beams making up its legs was a shaded parking space, but there was no vehicle there.

A male zombie stood in an idle slump just a few feet away, hands up and clawing at its own face, back to Nick. Little agitated snarls left it, on and off, weight wavering forward and backward until it seemed it might stumble - or fall flat to the ground. Exactly what it was doing was hard to tell from behind, though a sickening squelch didn't speak to anything pleasant.

Nick craned his head to confirm it seemed isolated - then held up a hand carefully, indicating Ellis should stay. He didn't wait for confirmation, just grasped his katana with both hands and started moving. His footsteps were muffled on the scrubby lawn and even as he crept close, the infected remained focused on its work.

It pulled a hand away from its face with a jerk, and Nick just barely glimpsed a fleshy, grey-black mess of flesh gripped in its fingers before he acted. Swiveling his wrist, he ground his teeth together to focus, letting the katana shift back - then arc forward, driven by a step that put his body-weight into it.

The blade barely stuttered as it struck just beneath the zombie's hairline. It sliced effortlessly into - through - and then out of the creature's neck, separating it from its body entirely. The infected jolted with the impact, but it was dead before it could do more than inhale to growl. Its body shuddered, then collapsed slowly to its knees, head toppling to the dirt.

Nick raised his brows and drew the blade vertical in front of himself, gazing over the now-gory edge, moderately impressed. He'd seen Brenda work with it, but it was different handling it himself.

"Pretty big improvement from a crowbar." he admitted in a low voice, lowering the katana and turning to glance back at Ellis. The Georgian was peering around the corner of the fence at him, and his expression was oddly pinched. If it hadn't been for the faint redness creeping up his face, Nick might've not decrypted the look.

Huh. Kid's checking me out.

A smirk crossed his lips at the realization, swinging the katana at his side thoughtfully. He shouldn't have been shocked the kid would be fascinated by the blade, but it came as a surprise to discover his wielding it would bring such a reaction.

Ellis darted to join him, gaze swiveling up to look for any more danger in the yard, still holding tight to his shotgun. He cleared his throat a little, shaking his head as if he could shake off his embarrassment. "Yeah... Ain't no car here, though. Should we look inside?"

Still smirking, head now adopting a tilt, Nick had to carefully mull over whether or not to let his discovery pass without comment. He settled for reaching up a hand, thumbing against the neck of his dress shirt to ensure the opening of his undone buttons was sprawled just right over his chest.
"No car probably means nobody was here, or they took everything and left. If we scout all these buildings, we'll be hours." Despite the intense self-satisfaction purring to life in his chest, Nick allowed his face to level out, eyes lifting to scan around them. "I don't think we're gonna find supplies here. Better off looking for a car and driving around, look for a store."

Frowning just a little, Ellis glanced up toward the house they'd come in front of. "Okay... if yuh say so."

Nick couldn't help a brow from arching, shifting his katana into his other hand so he could reach out and slip a palm against Ellis' waist. The kid jumped at the touch, blinking as the gambler guided him to turn around. "Your confidence astounds me."

The younger man's lips parted, and he might've had a response had a strange and heightened squall not wailed out from somewhere down the road. Its source was hard to pick out, echoing a bit amongst the buildings surrounding them, though Nick felt confident it was originating from off to the right.

Ellis must have had a similar sense, because they jolted in unison to flatten against the side of the privacy fence.

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It was cautiously that Nick passed Ellis the katana. The Southerner took it quickly, though with a confused glance. His unvoiced question was answered when Nick drew the sniper rifle off his shoulder and into his hands. He passed carefully around Ellis, keeping close to the barrier that protected them from the Spitter, stepping back up against the corner.

Nick got himself aligned with the edge, straightening the sniper rifle and bracing it on his shoulder. He took a deep breath, focused, before sliding himself a half-step to the side. He turned his body enough to look back down the road, eyes darting around to hunt for that neon green splatter.

All he saw was regular infected, stumbling around in dizzy staggers.

A frown touched his lips, shifting his hands on his rifle. "Don't see it." he hissed out of the corner of his mouth, feeling Ellis slide up close to his back and come close to hear his lowered voice. "Let's cross the yard. Next house has a garage."

"Okay." was whispered near his ear, and they slipped away from the fence, moving low across the ground to make it to the other side of the lawn.

The next house was a duplex, split straight down the center. The building was wide enough for a single-car garage on either side, squat stairs leading up to a door that was mirrored on either end. The two lawns were separated by a squat line of grassy bushes, and the two men slipped over them with lengthened steps.

The garage doors had paneled windows in the center, and Ellis carefully slunk up toward them, pushing his arm into the strap of his shotgun so he could get both hands on the katana. He drew onto his toes to peer in through the plastic panel, surveying the inside of the garage.

Nick swiveled on his heels slowly, still attentive for signs of the Spitter creeping up on them. "Anything?" he murmured over his shoulder, eyeing an infected that shambled out from behind a building across the street. It stumbled down to a knee, bloodying its skin on the asphalt, but shortly crawled back to its feet.

It might have seen them had it not turned, wandering down the street with a tired and boneless loll
of its head. The gesture upset its balance, sending it staggering again. Its arms surged forward in a weak attempt to counter the movement, hands bereft of a few fingers, leaving only congealed stumps.

There was such variance in their behaviour. Sometimes Nick felt they were being hunted - yet other times, the infected seemed almost oblivious. Like if they weren't riled, they just... deteriorated.

"Nah." Ellis negated in a whisper, padding to do the same to the other garage door. "I thi--"

As his face slipped up to peer through the slatted window, something slammed into the garage door. It rattled and shuddered, furiously, and a muffled shrieking echoed from inside. Ellis outright jumped, scrambling back a foot or two, but he managed to only vocalize a stifled gasp of surprise.

The sounds the trapped infected made were enough, though, and Nick's head perked at the sounds of growls and snarls from their surroundings. A few came from down the road, but a few came from around the back of the house. They were inquisitive, but not quite enraged yet. "Shit. C'mon."

The gambler bolted for the next block, pulling his rifle against his hip. Ellis was quick on his heels, and they ran across the lawn, slipping past a dark purple butterfly bush that separated the two properties. They slid behind it, pressing up against the thin branches and delicate blooms protruding in conelike clusters.

While Nick leaned his head to look back and watch as a couple infected sprinted into the lawn behind them, attracted to the garage door, a frown touched his lips. They gathered around the door, snarling as the trapped infected gave another frustrated shriek from inside.

One of them stepped up and started beating against the metallic surface, thundering palms and knees against the door as if they could break it down. It seemed less like an attempt to rescue the infected locked in the garage, and more just mindless rage at the disturbance, vented at anything nearby.

"We're gonna have to deal with 'em on the way back." Ellis whispered to him, hesitantly.

Nick sighed under his breath, turning his head to glance at the kid. "Yeah." Between the two of them, they had about twenty shots. It was far from ideal, but as long as they didn't run into a horde, it would do. "Let's keep moving, Ace."

He shouldered his sniper rifle again, reaching out to pry the katana from Ellis' fingers. The younger man faintly put out his lower lip - but relinquished it, and they carefully advanced along the lawn.

The house directly next to them was another with no closed garage, and no car. The lawn was mostly cracked concrete, weeds growing up between the slabs and from the breaks in the material. They made it halfway across before an infected wandered out from behind the building, snarling. Its yellowed eyes latched onto them, and it gave a throaty shriek.

As its arms flashed out, fingers in claws, and it sprinted toward them, Nick readied the sword. He held it more like a baseball bat than a proper sword, flexing his fingers to ensure a tight grip. "C'mere, bitch." he spat out as the infected came within reach.

One downward slash across its center sheared it in half from clavicle to mid-chest. Its momentum continued carrying it forward, almost sliding along the blade, slamming into the blade guard and then collapsing. The weight suddenly forced on him sent a spasm through his shoulder, and he growled at the pain, withdrawing a step as the infected tumbled to the ground in front of him.
It wasn't quite dead - not for a few seconds, still flinching and twitching despite that the wound had revealed the innards of its chest, all the way to its spine. Nick let his injured shoulder roll to shake off the pain, turning away to scan behind them.

He could still hear the infected scrabbling and snarling at the garage door, and nothing came running.

Ellis peered down at the zombie as it sputtered out blackened blood from its mouth, stilling with a struggling seize of its body. "Man, that's nasty." That made Nick snort faintly, glancing at his expression. It seemed more like morbid curiosity than anything else.

"Zombies - meet sword, get fucked. At least something good came out of this whole shitty situation." He swung the blade thoughtfully, wrist twisting a little to sling off some of the viscera stuck to the metal. As he spoke, his eyes darted up, scanning ahead of them. "Y'know, aside from all my debts getting wiped out, I guess."

The younger man blinked up to him, face flashing into something subtly embarrassed. He smiled a little, reaching up to thumb at his forehead, scratching his hairline. When he spoke, it was with the tiniest crack to his voice. "I, uh... I dunno. There're some other good things."

Nick wasn't paying attention.

His eyes caught on a dark, mossy green sedan parked messily on the sidewalk down the street - though 'parked' was a relative term. Its nose was pressed tight to a streetsign, grille crumpled and the sign bent forward. The collision must have been fairly low-speed, as the damage was minimal. More importantly, there was a corpse in the driver's seat, slumped against the steering wheel.

"Check that out." He lifted the katana, pointing toward the car. "Driver means keys."

Ellis startled a little, quickly looking up to see what he'd indicated. He nodded his head a little harder than necessary, hand lifting to grasp his capbill and lower it a bit over his eyes. "Uh - yeah. Hope they turned it off, though. Ain't got an easy way tuh get gas, or jump it. I mean, we could, I guess, but..."

He was babbling, voice over-energetic, and it was that odd reaction that made Nick halt a moment. He reversed his attention, musing over Ellis' words, and the bashfully gentle way they'd left him. Too gentle. Sincere.

Had that been flirtation? Had Ellis meant them? Sexual interest he could take, but this was different, and Nick wasn't sure how to react to it.

So he buried it.

"Yeah, because fate has been so fuckin' kind to us. Lady Luck's just sucking my dick lately."

Lashing the katana to hang at his side, Nick moved to stalk across the concrete, sending a glance down either direction on the road. "Let's keep moving, Overalls." There was a few infected scrambling around within eyesight, but more important was the lanky, bloated shape creeping across the street.

Flashes of acidic green dripped from its split maw, just a melted gash across its face, visible in profile as it was in the midst of turning away. Its arms and legs were too long and too thin, midsection bloated underneath the ragged remnants of what might have been a shirt, but was now soaked in congealed blood and plastered tight to its waxy skin.

It gave an almost thoughtful set of chirped squeals, crackling and whining. Its head moved in a
birdlike fashion, scanning the street with a tilt and shift of its nearly boneless neck.

The creature was definitely hunting.

Before Ellis could even attempt to speak, Nick thrust up a hand, fingers flat in a halting gesture. The sounds tipped the younger man off even before the gesture, and he silently stepped to Nick's side, spying the Spitter with a wary expression. Wordlessly, the gambler reached back to grab Ellis' wrist, dragging him into motion.

They quick-stepped across the street, angling for the car. Ellis wrested his arm free and ducked around Nick, darting up to the driver's side door with cautious urgency. The older man turned as he did, resting the katana on the roof of the car so he could free his hands up to sling the sniper rifle into his hands.

He pressed the stock into his shoulder, tilting his head to look through the scope. He got the sights aimed squarely on the Spitter, aiming for its core. It was cautiously moving down the road, swaying left and right, and he followed it. He wasn't eager to shoot, leery of drawing more infected attention - but he was about as fond of Spitters as he was of Witches.

"Hurry up and check it out." he hissed lowly over his shoulder, harsher than he meant.

Ellis didn't respond initially, but he heard the gentle sound of the door latch clicking ineffectually, and a faintly cussed, "Shit." It was locked, Nick figured, and he was just about to take a step back and suggest they just move on, when something snarled.

Reflexively, Nick spun on a heel, just in time to see the look of horror on Ellis' face as the corpse inside the car jolted upright. Its eyes turned on them, blackened teeth bared and gnashing, and it was with a ferocious movement that it went face-first into the window.

Ellis and Nick both jolted back, startled, but the impact did nothing but smear viscous liquid on the glass. The infected seemed enraged by the discovery, lashing out a hand to grasp onto the steering wheel so it could throw more of its weight into its next slam. It did not grab the outer rim.

Its hand landed flat in the center of the steering wheel instead.

The horn started blaring, hollering on and off as the infected leaned more or less weight against it as it beat its face against the glass. The car's hooting was only just louder than the screams that rose up from the surrounding area, and the heightened, gurgling squeal of the alerted Spitter.

*Lady Luck can actually suck my dick.*
The Spitter spun around at the intermittent honking, arms splaying out in an aggressive posture. It screeched, voice gargling as its jaw worked limply. A shudder advanced up its body, rearing back, acrid green liquid gathering and foaming at its melted and disfigured maw.

It didn't get much further in the process when a blast penetrated through its torso, forging a messy hole through the slumped shape of its left breast. Green leached out as much as grey-black blood did, sizzling and crackling, and the agonized scream that left it was muffled by a hoarking spit.

The wound staggered it, and it ended up spewing acid only a few feet in front of itself, wheezing messily. The bullet must have breached its lung, because the very act of breathing sputtered bubbles through the hole in its chest.

A second shot punched through its neck, sending its head toppling to the side on the moorings of just a few inches of flesh. The Spitter collapsed, gouts of black and green liquids spurting from the orifices of its body - natural and newly-torn alike.

Nick couldn't resist a smirk.

His pleasure was shortlived, as infected came sprinting onto the street from all around. The group that had surrounded the garage door came en masse, and Nick quickly rotated to fire on them. He aimed for center mass, not quite trusting his aim - and limited bullets - to try for their heads.

The car horn gave one more bleating cry, extended and strained, before Nick heard breaking glass. The zombie's snarl suddenly came to a clearly audible level... then slip into a gargle, suddenly cut-off. Nick spared a quick look over his shoulder, ensuring the younger man had it under control.

Ellis had busted the window - likely with the butt of his shotgun - and was in the process of removing the katana from the infected's skull, unsheathing it from its head with a grimace. The zombie slumped forward, collapsing into the now-open window, eyes going glassy.

"We gotta get the goddamn car moving, or take these assholes out!" Nick shouted, returning his attention to his sniper rifle. "I'm gonna fucking need you in a sec'!" He quickly swung the other way, catching a zombie as it bolted across the road at them. His aim went awry from its chest.

"Yeah!" Ellis shoved a hand inside the broken window, reaching underneath the zombie's body and flicking the unlock switch on the door. A dull chu-chunk announced the doors unlocking, and the Georgian threw open the door.

The dead zombie slumped with it - but not all the way out, just sagged limply to one side. Ellis had to grab it by the wrist and yank it from the driver's seat, dragging it to the concrete. It hit face-first, the collision cracking unpleasantly and drafting a putrid scent up on the air.

Ellis flung himself into the car, shotgun clattering on his shoulder and katana tugged across his lap. He slapped a hand on the ignition, violent relief surging through him as he found the keys dangling there, and in the off position.

He inhaled, hard, holding his breath - and twisted.

The car chugged... stuttered... then grumbled to life. The gas meter read just a sliver, barely
halfway between a quarter and empty, but it would get them out. "Nick!" he shouted, sliding the katana into the passenger seat so he could slam his door shut behind him. Broken glass tinkled with the gesture, and a slash of icy pain on his arm said it earned him a cut on his tricep.

He ignored it easily, grabbing the seatbelt and strapping it over his chest and pelvis, snapping the buckle into the latch.

The gunfire stopped, and Nick was abruptly opening the door and cramming into the backseat, throwing himself in with a hiss of pain. "Go!" he snarled, before he'd even fully yanked the door shut. Ellis spared a look into the rear view mirror, but it was set for someone shorter than him, and all he could see was Nick's half-furious expression.

He pushed on the brake and shifted the car into reverse, quickly gassing it, just a little too hard. The car fishtailed just a bit as it jerked back away from the sign, and Ellis thrust his head through the broken window to squint back and aim the car, palm to the top of the steering wheel.

The sedan jolted back, turning just a little to swing the nose to point more directly at the road. Ellis slammed on the brakes, roughly jerking it into drive, and he could hear Nick swear a split-second before something hit the back of his seat. It jostled with the impact, making him blink.

Judging by the grunt, that 'something' was Nick.

"Sorry!"

Ellis grasped the wheel with both hands, stomping on the gas. An infected collided with the back of the car, hands bashing against the trunk in the moment that the tires burnt rubber against the road, screaming ineffectually.

Then they caught traction, and the car jumped into motion. They roared down the street, catching a few infected in the middle of the road. Ellis crashed the car into them, rolling them over the hood with a set of meaty thuds. He flinched just a little, pushing his lips into a relived ‘o’.

If he glanced back through the open window, he could see infected still chasing after them, but the car easily outpaced them.

"You okay, Nick?" he asked over his shoulder, faintly abashed. The gambler grunted noncommittally, but his tone was distinctly agitated, so Ellis put on an apologetic tone. "Didn't mean tuh -"

Abruptly, Nick reached out and grasped the shoulder of his seat, leaning in to hover his face into the front cabin of the car. "I'm fine. Focus." he chided, dryly, raising his other hand to point ahead. There was a side road that cut between two condos. "Take a right. We've got to backtrack to the main road, find a store."

Ellis obeyed, cranking the wheel into the turn and then allowing his palms to rasp against the steering wheel's leather as it returned to its original position. The sedan took the turn a little fast, forcing him to tap the brake as they drew onto the thin strip of asphalt that led them onto the next block in the sprawling grid of condos.

"Okay. We gotta be careful not tuh get lost, though."

The gambler shrugged a shoulder limply, leaning in closer to stare through the windshield. "Just keep going straight. I'll watch road signs." His eyes ticked along the road, watching carefully as they broached through the sidestreet and came to the next road. A few new infected sprouted from their surroundings, sprinting toward them, but Ellis merely turned onto the road and gunned it to
escape them.

He slowed upon straightening the car out, left foot nervously tapping against the floorboards. They rumbled on down the road, Ellis steering them carefully around some clutter spread on the ground, mostly scattered fencing where something had broken down a picket fence. "Ain't got too much gas. Maybe we can siphon from the car back home."

Nick hummed his assent, though distantly. "Worry about it later, Overalls." He shifted on the seat, leaning forward so he could rest his entire elbow on Ellis' seatback, draping himself against it.

Nodding, Ellis nipped at his tongue, sneaking a glance at Nick out of the corner of his eye. A frown threatened at his lips, faintly. Was Nick being short with him, or was it his imagination? Nick was so often curt it was hard to tell the difference, and hard to tell when it was his fault.

Had it started with what he'd said earlier, or was he over-thinking?

A thin shape slammed onto the hood of the car, coiled on all fours. It startled Ellis so strongly that he jerked the wheel, swerving them to the right just a few feet before he righted them. Through the windshield, the crouched infected lifted its head to gaze right at him, sharp teeth glinting between abused lips. He couldn't hear the snarl through the windshield, but he saw its mouth move.

Darting one hand over his shoulder to grab firmly onto Nick's shirt, fingers coiling in the collar, Ellis braced him there and slammed on the brakes.

The gambler might've toppled again were it not for Ellis' grasp, and even with it, he was forced to latch one hand onto the seat and the other on Ellis' wrist. The sudden stop sent the Hunter rolling forward off the hood, hitting the ground like so much dead weight.

It rolled far enough ahead to be visible on the road, and it flipped itself back onto all fours in a catlike twist. If it had been damaged in the impact with the street, it didn't let on. The Hunter jerked its chin up to stare at them, coiling up as if preparing to leap.

So Ellis gassed it.

The infected tried to jump away, but all the gesture did was turn it to the side. When the sedan's nose struck it, it rolled easily under the wheel. The car jolted with a wet kind of impact as the Hunter was crushed into the concrete. Ellis couldn't help but stick his head out of the window, peeking back at it.

The corpse didn't show any signs of moving. "Damn, that was -"

"Eyes on the road." Nick grunted faintly, pushing palms against the back of Ellis' seat so he could yank himself free of the younger man's grip. He slid into the backseat, perched in the center, legs splayed to either side in a sprawl. "Can we not monster truck this thing around? I'd like to not break it within five goddamn minutes of finding it. Or me."

Jutting out his lower lip a little, Ellis refocused forward. He let Nick go without a fight, instead lifting that hand up to straighten the rearview mirror so he could see out of the back window. "Well, shit, Nick. Yer welcome tuh drive. That, or put yer dang seatbelt on."

The gambler gave a vaguely dismissive exhale, adjusting himself so the sniper rifle wasn't pressing into his back. "Or you can just avoid Tokyo Drifting us into a fucking wall."

Frowning thoroughly now, Ellis gripped his fingers on the steering wheel, eyes squinting a little as he kept his eyes on the road. "I didn't do nothin' like that." He didn't know why they were arguing -
but worse than that was how he couldn't stop himself. " Anyway, we're fine, ain't we? You rather I let that Hunter crawl on in here?"

"God, please." Nick muttered, sarcastically, and it was all Ellis could do not to hit the brakes and round on him.

Instead, he just slumped down an inch in his seat, brows wringing into a knot. He chewed at the inside of his cheek, working together a retort, but didn't quite make it before the older man was abruptly sighing. It was long-suffering and almost rasped out.

Ellis flicked a glance up in the rearview mirror. Nick's face was just visible as he flung his head back against the seat, closing his eyes. There was a strangled frustration there, and Ellis quickly looked away before the gambler caught him looking.

"Just tired, kid. Can we focus on what we're doing?"

The Georgian's frown turned thoughtful, dropping one arm to his lap, hand just grasped onto the bottom of the steering wheel. It wasn't quite an apology, but Nick wasn't very good at those. As much as Ellis wanted to believe the sudden shift in mood hadn't been related to him, it wasn't like they'd expected their mission to go smoothly.

And, for the most part, it actually had - they'd found a car and gotten on the road with relative ease.

That just left him and what he'd said, and the thought of that was worrisome enough that he outright shook it off. A thin inhale steadied him, and he nodded his head, despite the fact Nick probably wasn't looking. "Alright." he agreed, tone catching toward something a little contrite, falling silent afterwards.

He'd give Nick the benefit of the doubt. He was likely just being insecure; it wasn't like he'd been very emotionally stable the last few days. The last thing he wanted to do was overreact and start a fight where there wasn't one.

He could only hope there wasn't one.
Chapter 136

Following the road down until it hit a main roadway fed them straight into the arms of a small shopping complex. It was a squat L-shaped structure, split into segments but all snug under a contiguous, grey-green slatted roof. Ellis carefully applied the brakes, squinting through the windshield at the parking lot in the center.

It was almost empty - of cars, anyway. One Jeep sat in the middle of the lines, angled awkwardly, collapsed on slashed tires.

Zombies, on the other hand, littered it liberally.

Most of them were sitting or laying prone on the ground, but a number were wandering around, slumped and staggered. At a glance, there was over a dozen, maybe fifteen. There were probably more just out of sight, like cockroaches.

Risking a glance over his shoulder, Ellis watched as Nick leaned forward, hovering between the two front seats again. They'd been mostly silent since tension had broken out, so it took a faint clear of his throat to coax himself to speak. "Uh - you wanna take the sword back? You lead, I'll get yer back with muh shotgun. Save shots, if we can."

The gambler nodded, reaching around the seat to grab the katana from where it sat in the passenger seat. He dragged it into his lap, gripping the handle with one hand, and shrugged out of the strap of the sniper rifle so it slid down onto the seat next to him. With it safely leaned against the far door, he opened the door next to him and stepped out.

Ellis shifted the car into park, turning the ignition and retrieving the keys. He shoved them into the left pocket of his coveralls, alongside his pocketknife and - though he tried not to think on it - the coil of condoms. His right pocket was reserved for the shotgun shells he had left, though their number was thinning.

He exited the car after Nick, wielding his shotgun low, and the two men took up a careful stance. With Nick in front and Ellis a few steps back from him, they jogged over the sidewalk that separated them from the parking lot. The Northerner got his hands on the katana, swirling the blade in the air with careful torque.

Their approach got noticed by one singular infected. It lurched off the ground from where it had been sitting almost cross-legged, a ferocious anger distorting its sallow features, and shrieked. The noise roused up the other infected in something of a wave, awareness spreading like a contagion. They sprinted across the parking lot, fury and rage packed tight into the bloodied, greying bodies of what had once been humans.

Nick was ready.

The first few infected came at him, and he drew the katana in a weighty slash at chest-height, meeting two of them as they lurched forward. The blade cut neatly through the first infected, splitting ribs, but as it struck the second, it caught. He'd lost momentum, and the zombie's sternum halted the blade with a raspy crunching sound.

The infected itself was shortly dead regardless, but Nick had to put up a foot and kick its body off the blade, snarling as he wrenched it free. It took enough time and effort to allow more infected to reach them, and Ellis stepped around Nick, shotgun set against his hip.
He blasted the nearest in the gut, punching a hole through its midsection in a way that crumpled it and sent it staggering backwards, as if it had been kicked in the stomach. He raised the shotgun for the next one, catching it right in the face, and the blast ruptured the top half of its head like a rotted-out watermelon.

Nick surged back upright, extending the katana forward to meet an infected as it raced for him. The blade slid through its body, seated in deep by the zombie's own momentum, but it barely even reacted to the wound. The infected came closer, sliding itself along the blade, arms outstretched and teeth working on spittle-soaked air.

It was with a growl that Nick jerked the blade, yanking hard to one side. It burst through the zombie's body in a lateral swipe, tearing out the fleshy remnants of black and wilted organs as it went, and that was enough to send the infected sagging backwards, dead.

Nick kept the movement going, twisting to capture the momentum and circle it back, striking the next infected just below the chin. Its head lopped off with little ceremony, body continuing to walk a few steps before it went limp and tumbled to the asphalt. The gambler had to retreat a step or two to avoid the guttering spray from its neck.


The infected started coming too quickly for Nick to cut them down one-by-one. It became a matter of lunging forward and slashing with the blade, lopping off whatever limb was nearest to him - then dodging back, ducking his body away to give Ellis room to shoot ahead of him.

Though it required a constant walk backwards to keep in line with each other, the tactic chewed through the infected with relative ease. The zombies went down as fast as they approached, and it wasn't long until they'd reduced the cluster to a sprawled mess on the concrete, staining the parking lot.

Rolling his shoulders, loosening up the tension building up there, Nick couldn't resist slanting a glance toward his partner. He cut the smallest of smirks, raising the katana with a taut wrist. "Not too shabby, kid. It's almost like we've been doing this awhile."

Ellis didn't really respond, turning away with a lift of his chin. He lifted a hand up to shade his eyes - not seeming to recognize the ridiculous nature of doing so with a capbill already covering his face - and glanced around at the shopping complex.

Signs hooked up to the awnings announced the store underneath, and the mechanic read them carefully, lips pursing into a thoughtful pout. Beyond one or two spaces up for lease, there was a salon, an electronics store, a squat local post office, and two restaurants, a Chinese takeout place and a diner.

"Them food places might have some water." Ellis questioned, lifting a hand to indicate them. "Sometimes they got bottled water fer folk, right?"

The gambler gave a vague nod, leaning back on his heels and allowing a hand to stroke along his jawline. "Worth a shot. Some other fuck probably had the same idea, but hey. We're here anyway." When the Georgian merely nodded his head and started trotting across the parking lot, making his way toward the diner first, Nick had to tilt his head.

He was the one who'd asked to focus on their work, yet he hadn't really expected Ellis to stick to it. It didn't really feel like the cold shoulder, but close to it. He'd hurt the kid's feelings, it seemed. He'd have to deal with it eventually, but part of him was tempted to wait it out.
Nick exhaled silently, and followed, lengthening his stride to catch up. Ellis was walking ahead of him at a pace that led Nick to believe he wasn't in the mood to wait for him.

It frustrated him - but it also stirred a little amusement somewhere.

*I've got a thing for the stubborn type, apparently.*

They crossed the parking lot, stepping up onto the concrete that lined the structure's inner edge. The diner had chintzy plaid curtains inlaid on the windows, blocking their view inside, but the door was cracked half-open on a wedged doorstop. Ellis approached it warily, shotgun held low, using the heel of his boot to kick the door open all the way.

The door dragged the doorstop along with a rubbery scuffing sound, halting at a wide swung angle. Sunlight streaked in through the doorway, lighting the way into the restaurant, and Ellis froze with a visible stiffening. He didn't, however, move to raise his weapon, or lunge back - so Nick merely stepped up close behind the Georgian, tilting to look over his shoulder.

The diner was lined with booths on either side, a cheery vintage aesthetic layering the place with a gaudy red-and-white colour scheme. Subway tiles lined the floor, and a strip of smaller ones encircled the room at chest-height. It would have felt claustrophobic and cramped on a regular day.

That day, the feeling was heightened by the gut-wrenching smell of blood.

In the center of the room, piled like so much garbage, was a clump of corpses. Arms and legs were sprawled out, bodies lying atop each other in a messy array like they'd been thrown, one by one. They were not zombies, that much was clear; though they'd begun to rot and bloat, the greying skin, feral yellow eyes, and grey-black tint to their blood was missing.

They also hadn't been killed by zombies. Though there was rust-red blood smeared over most of them, the stark holes through torsos and limbs made the passage of bullets easy to note.

None of that was the worst of it.

The worst of it was the foot or hand jutting out from the pile, here or there, mixed in amidst the others. Tiny, fragile limbs. Hands barely bigger than Nick's palm. Feet shoed in small sneakers. A little face caught in the light, cheeks shallow, eyes open and glassy.

Nick's spine felt like ice - like he'd frozen from the neck down, and if he moved he might shatter.

He moved anyway, though it almost hurt to force his joints into motion. He slipped a hand up, crooking it around Ellis' face until he could catch fingers on his jaw, and pulled. He drew Ellis into a turn to face away from the sight - to face him, instead.

There was pain on the Georgian's features, and shock, frozen there. Nausea, maybe, and his gaze was distant like he couldn't see past the image printed on his eyes. Nick held his hand there, silent, until Ellis' eyes slowly met his. The younger man's blues flickered over his face, and something in the way they softened told Nick that his expression betrayed him.

"Let's leave," he uttered, carefully, speaking through gritted teeth because the alternative was letting his jaw relax - and if he had, he might have retched. "Not worth it."

Slowly, the gesture stuttered, Ellis nodded against Nick's palm. He started to walk away, but when the step was so limp that he almost stumbled, Nick dropped his hand and let his arm slip over Ellis' shoulders. The gesture pulled him close, and the younger man leaned into the embrace, eyes low.
They didn't speak, walking past the diner, and past an empty for-lease section.

It wasn't until they'd stepped in front of the electronics store that Ellis broke the silence. He did so quietly, just a mumble, confusion seeping into his voice to overtake the unsteady fear. "... Whut do you think - ... Who shot 'em?"

Nick allowed his arm to slip away, fingers just brushing down the younger man's back, palm lingering over the bunch of his coveralls at the base of his spine. He kept a frown from sprouting on his face - choosing, rather, to look ahead of them, gaze scanning around as if to hunt for danger.

"I don't know." he stated, flatly, because he didn't.

He didn't want know what kind of person would gun down a crowd of people - adults and kids alike - and stack them up like junk. Even amongst all the types of people he'd known, the drifters and deadbeats, the robbers and grifters, the cheats and murderers...

Did it even ring like the Angels? Jerry, sure. Maybe even Brenda. Chris? He wasn't so sure.

Ellis' head shook, and pain entered his voice, tone trembling. "There were kids, Nick. They was just lil' ones." Nick slipped a glance back at Ellis' face, and the brunette was frowning, eyes mostly hidden under his capbill. It wasn't like he didn't understand - he did. There was a thorn of nausea implanted at the base of his skull.

He wanted a cigarette and a few fingers of whiskey and wanted, more than anything, out of the fucking mess that had become of what used to be reality. Wanted to wake up and find out it was all a dream, and he could go back to his life, go back to something normal.

"Don't think about it, Ellis." Drawing a step away and relinquishing his grip on Ellis' coveralls, Nick tightened his fingers instead on the handle of his katana, letting an inhale swell his chest. "We didn't do it. There's nothing we can do now. Alright?"

The Georgian's chin lowered, gazing almost down to his boots.

"Plenty of people have died. Seeing it or not seeing it doesn't change it. We've just gotta keep moving." Nick wasn't sure if he was saying it for Ellis' benefit, or his own.

Something trembled up Ellis' body, like a shudder - but when he raised his head again, there was only dull sadness in his eyes. He mumbled, "'M sorry."

That made Nick's brow raise, but he stepped ahead, turning his gaze on the electronics store. The front door was closed, but the glass had been entirely busted out, shattered on the ground. He stepped carefully up to it, reaching out a hand to grasp the handle. "Why? It's fucked up. Don't blame you for getting -"

His hand didn't make it.

"That ain't whut I'm apologizin' for." Ellis' surged out to grab his wrist, thumb catching on the sleeve of his blue dress shirt. His voice was faint, and when Nick darted a surprised look toward him, his expression was melted into a forlorn distance. Something fragile leeched into his stone-blue irises, desperate. "... 'm sorry if - I... 'M sorry fer fightin' earlier. Can we be okay?"

God, those eyes kill me.

"I just... I want us tuh be okay." Ellis mumbled, releasing the other man's wrist as quickly as he'd grabbed it.
Nick looked away, because the alternative was to keep meeting Ellis' gaze, and he felt like if he did - he'd do something stupid. He'd been on the receiving end of looks like that, begging and pleading. They were usually hollow. His wasn't.

Sometimes he didn't know what to do with Ellis' sincerity, other than take advantage of it.

"Yeah, kid, we're fine." was what he said, gaze cut far to the left. "I'm not angry. I'm just an asshole, remember?"

Nick didn't expect it, but Ellis laughed. It was a snorted sound, barely exhaled, and it left an echo of a smile on his lips that was a strange companion to the sadness lowering his eyes. The younger man cocked his head - then nodded it, a little tiredly. "...Okay." His eyes forced themselves back up, gazing toward the electronics store reluctantly.

"I don't wanna hang 'round here anymore. Maybe we should just - find someplace else."

Nodding tautly, Nick released a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Agreed. But I want to see if they have batteries in here for the flashlight. Last thing we need is to get left in the dark." When Ellis looked hesitant, the gambler assured him, "Just be a second."

Ellis assented with a blink, watching Nick reach again for the door handle and tug it open. Glass escaped the frame where it had shattered but hadn't quite been shaken loose, hitting the ground and splitting into fragments that sparkled in the sunlight like droplets of water. Nick stepped carefully over them, entering the store with his sword at the ready.

The store was dimly lit. The counter in the far corner had once held a cash register and a few small displays lined with trinkets and phone chargers, but it had all been tossed to the floor and left in piles. A corpse was bent over the counter in their place, a bullet hole splitting its face into messy fragments around what used to be a nose.

It, at least, was grey and warped with infection.

The walls were covered in racks, hooks jutting out. There were boxes of varying shapes and sizes hanging from them, all small - cellphone accessories and cables. The center of the store was taken up by stand-up racks, and they were mostly empty, stock tossed to the ground. It didn't surprise him to think people had ransacked it.

Nick inhaled sharply, a breath that soothed him. He lowered his voice to something sarcastic, stepping into the store to try and hunt for his prize. "Looters always go for the tech. Because flat-screen TVs and cellphones definitely come in handy in the fucking apocalypse." He heard a soft noise of acknowledgement from Ellis over his shoulder, and for a second, he wasn't sure if the Georgian would rise to the challenge of chatter.

He shouldn't have doubted Ellis.

"Yeah... I guess." It started slow, and remained a strange kind of tempered even as he gained momentum - but Nick felt a certain satisfaction, regardless. "Y'know... I ever tell you - this one time, Keith went tuh visit a buddy of his, who'd gone tuh college outta state..."

There was a knocked-over rack in the corner, and Nick bent down into a crouch, reaching underneath it to start dragging out boxes and examining their contents. "Someone you knew went to college?" he retorted, dryly, unable to resist.

He wasn't sure if Ellis ignored the sarcasm, or didn't catch it.
Yeah... name was - uh - Carl, I think. Anyhow... they had a football game or somethin', 'n' the home team lost. Big riot started. Keith came home with this big stereo set, and a concussion. The Georgian quietly stepped up to one of the walls, glancing through the items still left dangling from hooks. "Not from fightin' or nothin'... He was tryin' tuh get it in his truck, I guess, but it was real heavy. Fell right on him. I'm pretty sure he like, fractured his skull or somethin', but he never did get looked at. Guess he's okay, so..."

A little snort left him, faintly thoughtful. "Sucked extra bad 'cause he couldn't even fit the dang thing in his bedroom. Kinda weird watchin' TV 'n' playin' games with the audio playin' in the hall, but he's stubborn as a mule."

Nick caught a hand on a blister pack, turning it around. A set of tightly sealed D batteries stared back at him, and he couldn't resist a sigh. "Fuck yeah. Let there be light." Grasping the pack tightly, he pushed up to his feet, turning back to glance at Ellis. "Am I supposed to be shocked the guy has had a head wound?"

The younger man passed him a slightly crinkled look, head shaking. "Don't be mean, Nick."

Although he was tempted to rise to that, a faint smirk touching his lips, Nick was distracted by the way Ellis looked back at the wall and the box hanging just before his face. If he'd learned anything over their time together, it was what the Georgian looked like when he was thinking. Wheels ticked behind those eyes, but it was clouded this time.

Uncertain. Unconfident.

The smirk disappeared, and he approached. His voice tipped into a coaxing tone, a little low. "Got something?" Without waiting for a response, Nick let his gaze tick toward the box, narrowing eyes on it as he came close enough to read the text on the front.

It was a set of two-way radios.

Ellis glanced at him as he approached, brow quirked. "Is it a dumb idea? ... I know I'm bein' paranoid, I just... if we could contact each other, I..."

"Hell no." And Nick meant it, closing the distance between them and grabbing the box. He tore it off the hook, flipping it to examine the back. "That's a fucking great idea." Ellis brightened a little, scuffing the heel of his boot against the carpet. "Batteries included. 30 mile radius -"

"That probably ain't real true." Ellis interjected quietly, sliding one hand into the pocket of his coveralls. "Keith'n'I used these all the time when we were bite-sized... Never get the range they say."

Nodding, the gambler tucked the box under his arm, slipping a glance up toward the Georgian's face. Ellis was smiling a little now, seeming gratified, and Nick tipped his head to one side. "We'll test 'em out when we get back. Good catch, kid."

With his now-free hand, he reached up, setting his palm against the top of Ellis' head and pushing his cap down over his face. The younger man protested with a huff, but as he staggered a step away and reached up to straighten it back, he was almost grinning.

Almost.

"Let's get out of here." Nick suggested, and much as it might have been for Ellis' sake, he was just as glad to get some distance between them and the diner.
There was no comfort to be found in thinking that they'd all likely have died either way.
Chapter 137

As they stepped out from the electronics store, Nick forced in a breath. He glanced up toward the sky, squinting into the sharp light of the sun as it leaned out from behind a thick and spiraling plume of smoke. The temperature was rising, and he took a moment to unbutton and roll his sleeves up, baring his forearms.

It didn't really cool him off any, but it was the best he could do.

Ellis' footsteps crinkled over the glass at his flank, and Nick spoke without looking at him. "Let's go down the road. Pretty confident this is the same street that general store is on we went to earlier - we can get the shit we left behind."

"Okay." the other man agreed, quietly, advancing around him. He stepped off the sidewalk, a glance spared nervously toward the diner - but with a shake of his head, he focused ahead. "We gotta keep an eye out fer another store or somethin', though. Need water real bad."

Nick flipped his grip on the katana, holding it behind himself as he followed after Ellis. "Yeah. Just need something that hasn't been looted clean already." He exhaled a sigh, turning his head to squint down the road, measuring the danger posed by the scattered infected wandering the street - and looking for signs of a gas station or another shopping centre.

There was a clothing store a few blocks down, likely packed with swimming gear and tacky souvenirs. Hardly what they were looking for, but it wasn't impossible to think they'd have a beverage cooler near checkout. He hesitated to spend all day scrounging, but they needed to come back with something.

Got five people to keep sated now. If only the fucking power wasn't out...

As they approached the Jeep sitting in the center of the parking lot, Nick was startled out of his thoughts by movement. A lanky figure lurched up from where it had been hiding behind the car, crawling suddenly atop the cagelike structure of the Jeep's roof and giving a wet and rattled cough. Moving as if to retch, there was barely time to react before the Smoker lurched its upper body forward, and the fleshy tendril of its tongue came flying toward them. The sound it made as the tentacle unspooled from its gut was fleshy and slick and vile. It was aimed at Nick, shooting through the air with a strange rigid quality, like a spear.

In one reflexive movement, Ellis shoved out his arms, pushing Nick hard to the left and using the momentum of the force to throw himself to the right.

Nick stumbled hard, catching his weight just before he outright fell. The agitation at being knocked away was minor underneath the surge of relief as the tentacle shot past the both of them, extending a few more feet before suddenly tugging taut. It collapsed, losing whatever muscular force was keeping it aloft, and slapped to the concrete like so much tenderized meat.

The gambler looked up, raising a hand to point at the Smoker and opening his mouth to yell for his partner to shoot it.

He only got out, "El-", when the tongue suddenly jerked. It moved with snakelike accuracy, suddenly flopping itself against the concrete, swinging blindly to one side. It hit Ellis' boot, and started wrapping around his ankle with slick and constricting ease.
The Georgian tried to lift his gun and shoot, a startled yelp escaping him, but the infected was faster. It yanked, hard, the Smoker jerking backwards with the motion like it were reeling up a fish. It pulled Ellis' leg out from under him, sending him flipping end over end. When his leg thrust forward, his upper body counterbalanced backwards, and hit the ground first.

Skull met concrete, only buffered somewhat by his shoulders joining the collision. He might've had time to shout at the pain had the tongue not immediately started dragging him toward the Jeep, body skidding across the concrete.

Nick lunged forward, aware of the walkie-talkie box slipping out from under his arm. He spared just a beat to hope the sound of it clattering to the floor wasn't also the sound of them breaking - then sprinted along with the younger man, getting both hands on the handle of the katana and raising it to his shoulder.

He could only just keep up with Ellis as he was dragged across the parking lot, but Ellis wasn't his target. Narrowing his eyes, Nick aimed for the tongue where it lay taut against the edge of the Jeep's open-air roof, hefting the katana with a snarl.

The blade chopped through the tendril nearly clean. The few strands that remained snapped on their own, a thick mucous spilling from the rent flesh. Ellis skidded to a stop as the tongue was separated from its owner, halting just a few inches from slamming into the Jeep's belly.

The Smoker screamed, raspy and wheezed, fury launching its body across the Jeep's cage. The ruined end of its tongue flapped against its chin, a gaping mouth stuck wide open, and it lashed out grasping hands to claw toward Nick.

He swiped the sword through the air, retreating a step, and lopped off one of those arms at the elbow.

Although he'd thought the Smoker couldn't scream any louder, it did. It roared, wisps of foul-smelling smoke escaping on its breath along with a rotten scent, and suddenly the creature was throwing itself off the Jeep and running. The massive tumor that ballooned its head and shoulder turned its flee into a stagger, hobbling away, but its long stride helped it sprint away.

Nick was tempted to chase it, but a groan from the concrete distracted him. His gaze darted down to Ellis, where the younger man was laying flat, leg still wrapped up in the faintly twitching tongue. "Shit. You okay?"

Bending down to drop to a crouch, Nick reached down, grasping a hand against Ellis' cheek. The kid's expression was a little dizzied, but the touch made his eyes blink, and he looked up to meet Nick's gaze. "Y-yeah... Bumped muh head is all." He tenderly raised a hand, fingers spread, for a hand up.

Nick humored him, clasping hands and dragging the younger man to his feet. They both grunted with the effort, struggling a little as they came to standing. Nick caught the sight of red as he started to release Ellis' hand, and rather than let go, he torqued the younger man's arm to get a look at the other side.

He'd scuffed his elbow and tricep up, blood welling up from the abrasions on his skin from sliding along the concrete. The gambler frowned, circling to stand behind Ellis before the kid could do more than redder in discomfort at the attention, leaning down. His other arm had come out similarly wounded.

"Uh - Nick... 'm... okay, s'just a -"
It wasn't bad, but it drew an agitated breath out of Nick.

Ignoring Ellis' protest entirely, he grasped a hand on the mechanic's shirt, tugging it up. The scrapes to his back were much shallower, mostly protected by his shirt, but they were still there. Ellis practically yelped as the shirt was tugged halfway up his torso, quickly grabbing the front of it to yank it down. "Nick -"

Undeterred, Nick merely let go and refocused on his head. Reaching up to grasp a hand against the back of Ellis' neck, he pushed the younger man's cap up a little. He palmed against the crown of the kid's head, feeling there, and the Georgian hissed in pain at the contact. When Ellis recoiled, lurching forward to escape, Nick glanced at his palm.

There was a little blood there. Not much, for a wound to the scalp, but it was enough to grind in that sense of frustration. "Goddamnit. Fucking asshole," he muttered, wiping his palm against his hip. His dress shirt was stained to hell already, anyway. "Because you getting a concussion is definitely what we need."

Ellis lowered his chin faintly, but gave a hesitant half-smile - because Nick was glaring off in the direction of where the Smoker had disappeared to, and not at him. "I-I'm okay. I don't think it did no harm. Just hurt, is all." He lowered his gaze, startling a little as he noticed the tongue was still wrapped loosely around his leg.

He shook his foot, tossing it off with a grimace and taking a half-step away from it when it flopped weakly to the floor. "Let's just keep goin'. I can get cleaned up if we find some water."

It was with a weary sigh that Nick relented, turning to start back to the car with a certain irritation lining his posture. It was as he crossed near the flank of the Jeep that something caught his eye - he almost ignored it, but a whim had him stop and crane his head up.

There was a satchel in the back of the car, tucked in close to the seat. The car had likely been there through the storm the other night, but the satchel was a sleek canvas material and seemed to have survived mostly unscathed. A quirk touched Nick's brow, curious.

"... Hold up." he uttered, sliding back a step. He lifted a leg, catching a foot against the bumper of the car, and hauled himself up to stand. He bent himself into the cabin of the Jeep, scrabbling for a grasp on the satchel. His fingers found a handle sewn into the top, and he dragged it up - immediately startled at the weight.

When he buckled slightly, having made the bad choice to grab onto it with his bad shoulder, Ellis was suddenly beside him. They both hauled the satchel up and out of the car, grunting in unison as they carried it to the ground.

"What the heck..." Ellis muttered, confusion creeping into his voice. "Whut's in here?"

Nick shrugged, dropping to a crouch. He grasped the zipper set along the midline of the satchel, yanking it open. It caught halfway, but he forced it to open the rest of the way with an irritated jerk. Prying the satchel open, Nick leaned in to glance inside. The contents made him laugh - outright, really laugh, raising a hand to palm over his forehead.

Ellis leaned in, startled at his reaction, to get a look for himself. The satchel was filled mostly with a set of dumbbells, black metal gleaming dully in the sun. Trapped between two of the smaller ones, however, was a grey-black handgun. It'd been tossed in with little care.

Between rasps of laughter, the gambler buried his face into his hand, unable to wipe the grin off...
his face. "Holy fuck. I can't tell if this is Deep South shit, or New York mob shit." He watched Ellis reach in and take up the gun, tilting it, eyes a little wide. "What the hell kind of -"

"Shit's loaded." Ellis observed, choking back a snort - then breaking into startled giggling. He couldn't help it; Nick's laughter was contagious, if only by virtue of the fact it was so rare. They both laughed with a kind of tension, high-strung and giddy with a stupid sort of release. "Who takes a loaded gun tuh the gym?"

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, laughter trailing into sigh, Nick shook his head heavily. "Kid, I wish I knew. Works for us though. Is there any ammo?"

At that, Ellis reached back into the satchel, pawing around. Though he initially shook his head, there was a side pocket zipped shut, and he crouched down to open it up. "Li'l bit, in here." he confirmed as he pulled out a palm-sized plastic case, tightly filled with bullets that fit into little holstering notches molded into the plastic.

"Neato." The gambler reached out to take the handgun, double-checking the safety before sliding it into his thigh holster. "Finally get my Magnum back from Ro'."

The Georgian pocketed the bullets, tilting his head gently, a soft grin lingering at the edges of his lips. "We could take the weights, too. Bash some zombies with 'em and get all buff at the same time." He lifted his arm, flexing a bicep playfully - only to regret it when the motion sent a sting of pain over the scrapes along the backs of his arms. "... ow."

Nick snorted at him, straightening up. He gave the other man a dubious look, turning on a heel to walk over and retrieve the box of two-way radios from where it'd fallen. He gave the box a once-over, and it seemed to have survived the fall without more than a scuffed corner.

"Come on, kid. Let's split before that Smoker comes back."

He turned away, and Ellis was quick at his heels, plodding on with his shotgun cradled in his arm. The kid pressed a hand to the back of his head, feeling at the wound there with a wince. "Yeah. Jerk." he muttered, sounding legitimately spiteful of the creature.

Nick had to laugh.
Chapter 138

The drive back toward the general store was calm, relatively. Zombies couldn't keep up, and the roads were clear enough that it wasn't hard to swerve around the occasional wreck or toppled streetlamp that attempted to impede them.

Nick had taken over driving to let Ellis rest in the passenger seat. Whether Ellis thought he was fine or not, Nick wasn't about to give the wheel over to someone who might have had a concussion. Or, at the very least, was gently bleeding from the head and numerous patches of scuffed skin.

The Georgian had sulked for approximately two minutes, and then buried himself in examining the walkie-talkies. He'd gotten them out of the box, and was carefully turning one over in his hands. It was black plastic, with a tiny square readout on the face, a few buttons and a knob on the side.

It was hard for Nick to resist amusement when he spotted a Boomer in his sideview mirror - it came from behind a building, staring after them with an enraged kind of shudder, not even attempting to chase them down. "That's it, fatty. Take a load off."

He flicked a glance toward Ellis, but focused his gaze on the road shortly afterwards. The younger man seemed alright, though he was paying very close attention to the radios in an unusually quiet way. *I expected him to start babbling about how he and Keith chatted on them while doing their nails.*

An exhale parted his lips, shrugging back against his seat. Normally, silence wouldn't bother him.

Right then, he was actively trying not to let his mind's eye resurrect images of that tiny, delicate face. He supposed they'd been lucky not to run across dead kids up until now, but it didn't make it any easier. Part of him felt hatred of whoever had shot them down.

Another part felt self-hatred.

*Why do shithags like me get to make it, while some little kid gets gunned down? While all these fuckers turn? Why me at all? Why any of us?*

Despite himself, his fingers were tightening on the steering wheel. He took in a heavy breath, holding the oxygen in his lungs until it burned a little. He wished Ellis would just start talking, so he didn't have to say something, or admit he needed a distraction - but he wasn't, so Nick took it into his own hands.

"Ever wonder why we aren't sick?"

The Georgian lifted his head, blinking gently. He turned his chin up to examine the older man, lower lip jutting just a little. "Ro' said CEDA wasn't real sure, remember? And it don't really matter, I guess. We ain't, so..."

Nick shook his head, sighing faintly. "I get that. I mean, why? Because we ate our veggies? Drank enough milk?"

That made Ellis frown a little, though more thoughtful than anything else. He set the walkie-talkies down on his lap, shrugging his shoulders. "I dunno. I mean, it ain't like you get sick every time you get exposed tuh viruses, right? Sometimes yer body fights it off. Maybe it's like that - maybe we fought it off, so we're immune."
"Us out of hundreds of thousands of people? Maybe more, for all we know?" Nick tightened his grip on the steering wheel, flexing his knuckles as he did, eyes drifting along the road ahead of them. Infected screamed at the car as they passed by, giving chase, but it didn't take long for them to lose sight of the car and give up.

"Why us, and not these fucks?"

Ellis' frown deepened softly, and he shifted in his seat. A wince touched his face as the motion ground his injuries against the fabric of the cloth seats, but he got himself straightened up from his previous slump. "... I ain't sure, Nick. Just is."

The gambler exhaled, with some reluctance. He released one hand from the steering wheel, letting it fall to set on his thigh, tapping out a frustrated pattern against his slacks. He wanted to relax, wanted to feel less - or at least just feel angry, instead of the convoluted set of emotions in his chest. "Yeah. I know."

Reaching out a hand, Ellis slowly and delicately touched fingertips onto the older man's wrist. It was just a tap, just a brush, but it lingered a moment. "You okay?" Nick didn't pull back, and that startled Ellis. He frowned softly, starting to settle his hand more completely down onto the older man's forearm.

He didn't quite get the chance.

"What the fuck?"

Nick braked, suddenly, and the car jolted with the abrupt motion. Ellis instead thrustet that hand forward to catch himself on the dash, blinking rapidly, gaze flinging forward. He didn't see what Nick was referring to at first - then he did. There was a slumped shape in the roadway, like a pile of meat, fleshy and pink.

The damage to it was visible even from the distance they were at. It had been ripped into, hunks of flesh taken out of it until bone was visible through its skin. It was damage that Ellis knew, and remembered. He could tell, even from there.

"... Whoa. It - That's that Tank from earlier... from the pawn shop." Ellis leaned forward, staring through the windshield, eyes going wide. "Whut's it doin' out here?"

"Maybe it was just wandering, and bled out?" Nick slowly returned both his hands to the steering wheel, allowing his foot to ease off the brake. He rolled the car forward, easing them along the road. As they approached the corpse, Nick turned himself to lean out of the window, gazing at the fallen Tank as it passed.

He couldn't help but notice a few bullet holes through what remained of its broad back. Had he shot it? He couldn't remember actively aiming at it, but he'd been firing half-blind into the horde. A stray bullet or two could've reached it.

He dismissed the observation.

"Whatever... At least we know it's dead." He shifted his foot to the accelerator, pulling away and continuing along the road. "Tempts me to drive over to the pawn shop and go spit on that bitch's body." Ellis shot him a glance, mouth quirking in a displeased gesture. Nick had to quickly wave fingers up off the steering wheel to assuage him. "I'm kidding. Christ."

His eyes squinted, narrowly. Mostly.
"I don't wanna go back there." Ellis softly leaned back against his seat, eyes blinking as he gazed ahead. "Ain't that the store?" he questioned, raising a hand to point. Nick followed his indication, and sure enough, he could pick out the yellow spraypainted warning that sprawled over the front of the general store they'd ransacked the previous day.

"Yeah." Nick grabbed the bottom of the wheel, directing the car to sidle up against the sidewalk. His eyes flickered to the rearview mirror, noting a few infected straggling along behind them, sprinting down the street. "Got a few fans on our ass. You ready?"

A noise of assent left Ellis. He pushed the radios onto the center console between his chair and Nick's, and retrieved his shotgun from the floorboard, clapping his palm against the pump. If the gesture hurt him, he disguised it. "Let's do it."

The sedan pulled to align with the general store, and Nick threw the shift into park and yanked the keys out in a swift motion. Ellis was already leaping out of the car by the time Nick joined him, and the gambler swept his blade into a readied stance, stalking back along the length of the car.

The infected came in a scattered line, some splitting off to charge at Nick, a few making a run for Ellis.

"I got you fuckers." With a heavy step, Nick met the first one with a quick cut to the neck, splitting it off just above the shoulders. He dodged the body as it fell toward him, wincing as something warm and wet hit his cheek despite his efforts, but he didn't have time to dwell before the next one was on him. "Watch it, Ellis!"

The Georgian was ready for his, blasting straight at hip-level. The spray struck two at once, sending them to the ground, gargling - but they weren't dead. They clawed and scratched at the ground, trying to get leverage to get back to their feet despite the guts spilling out of their midsections.

He backed up rather than spend the time to deal with them, as a third came sprinting toward him, stomping straight over its fallen fellows. Its heel went right against the left one's skull, crushing it down into the concrete, and it stopped moving.

Ellis greeted it with a blast to the face, and it flew back, flattening to the ground with the force applied to its upper body. He blinked a little, taking a step back, looking down as the corpse landed atop the remaining infected.

It shrieked, surging against the weight, furiously.

His head tilted, watching Nick gut the last infected on his side with a swipe to the midsection. The gambler gave a wrinkle of his nose at the gore, turning his chin away, and shook the katana off idly at his side.

"Nick, can you -?" Ellis gestured down to the trapped zombie with the nose of his shotgun. The older man looked over - then down, eyeballing the infected trying to crawl its way out from under the zombie that had landed on it, scraping its own wounds even wider.

A snort left Nick, turning to step over. He barely glanced down to aim his sword before catching it against the back of the zombie's neck and pushing, hard... but he didn't look as he did it. His eyes cut to Ellis' face, catching his gaze. "Gotta do your dirty work, huh?"

Ellis crinkled his nose at him, bewildered - and by the time he pulled together a vaguely baffled, "I didn't wanna waste shots!", he realized Nick had already ended the infected. Putting them down
like that was never really the same as killing them in the heat of battle. Maybe Nick had intentionally kept his attention.

The gambler chuckled under his breath, drawing his blade back up and turning away. He reached his free hand into his pocket, retrieving the keys for the car. "Let's get ready to get the rest of the supplies."

He stepped around the sedan, aligning himself with the trunk. He'd open it and clear it of any clutter so they could come back with their arms full. Pushing the key into the lock, he twisted, palming against the metal to shove the trunk door open. His eyes flicked down to examine the compartment.

"I wanna look over in that medicine section." Ellis prompted, stepping up to the side of the car and leaning against it slightly. "We're hopin' tuh find a brace fer Coach's knee, or somethin'... I don't remember seein' nothin' but -"

Nick wasn't paying the slightest attention to him. His eyes were riveted on the contents of the trunk.

It was an ice box. Blue hard plastic, ribbed along the edges, with a handle folded down near the belly. It was sizeable, like one might take on a vacation - pack it with ice and drinks and not worry.

He held his breath, tongue pressed flat to the roof of his mouth, afraid to even inhale lest he jinx himself. It was with unsteady fingers that he reached out and palmed against the front of it. He pushed, just delicately, testing the weight.

It fought him, and the slight nudge he gave it caused a sloshing sound.

"Holy shit." he uttered, voice going raw with disbelief. Ellis startled at his outburst, blinking, but it took him a moment to round the distance between them and take in what Nick had found. In the meantime, Nick grasped a thumb under the lid, pushing it open.

The cooler was dangerously close to overflowing, every bit of ice having long since melted. Floating in the clear water was a jumbled up mess of cans and bottles, sodas and bottled water alike. At a rough glance, he'd have estimated fifteen or so of either type.

Ellis' jaw dropped as he stepped to Nick's side, but he didn't get so much as a word in before Nick lunged for him.

He didn't even know why. Maybe he just felt so fucking relieved - like they'd come off the brink of something disastrous - or maybe it was just the final release of that tension he'd felt since the diner. He moved without considering his actions, grabbing a hand under Ellis' chin and tugging him into a kiss.

It wasn't soft. Nick nipped at the younger man's lips, plying them apart so he could link their mouths deeply. He ravished that warm mouth, catching Ellis so off-guard he felt a startled snort of air leave his nostrils, puffing against his face.

Ellis reacted before long - he leaned into it, pushing back, teeth catching in a gentle bite on Nick's tongue. The scrape of teeth drew a growl out of the Northerner, appreciative.

It was with a lengthy and slow suction that Nick drew back, parting from him. He let his eyes flicker over the Georgian's face, and he wished he could have taken a picture of that lost look and warm redness all over the other man's expression. A smirk darted over his lips, dropping his hand from Ellis' chin.
Ellis looked up at him with a kind of melted, hazy interest. "... h'uh?" he queried, almost bemused, and Nick couldn't resist widening that smirk. The kid wasn't parsing a word, and if that didn't stroke his ego...

"O-oh. Yeah." It clicked, then, and Ellis twisted his head to glance down in a nearly shy gesture, lips twitching in and out of a smile. He babbled softly. "Man, that's real lucky. Even got all that melted ice tuh drink, too, 'n' use fer cleanin' stuff. Sure am glad we found this car."

The older man chuckled, turning back toward the trunk. He kept an eye on Ellis' face, enjoying the way the other man had to put himself back together - but the rest of his attention was focused on re-sealing the icebox, snapping the lid back on tightly. He placed a palm against it, pushing, nudging it tight in a corner of the trunk to free up space.

"Shit, I shouldn't be this thrilled about a goddamn icebox." he muttered, head shaking faintly. He stepped back from the trunk, gesturing with the katana toward the general store. "Let's pack up what's left in the store and get the fuck back home."

Ellis nodded his head, slowly patting a hand down his front. He slung his shotgun onto his shoulder, walking across the sidewalk to step up to the doors of the grocery store. "How 'bout you get the shit we left, 'n' I'll go look fer a brace fer Coach?" He heard the gambler's footsteps behind him, and a faint snort sound out.

"I'll help carry stuff in a minute! S'just I really wanna find somethin' for him." Slipping through the general store's doors, Ellis turned at the waist to glance over toward the medicinal section. "Maybe -"

A hand grabbed the collar of his shirt, so sudden and tight that he choked when the front of it was jerked taut against his throat. He quickly staggered back into the tug, nearly stumbling straight into Nick. "Gah -" he forced out, bewildered. "Whut the -"

Nick let go of his shirt collar in favour of hooking a hand on his waist, stopping him and holding him there, just a foot between them. His other hand raised the katana, pointing its tip slowly toward the tile just in front of the doors.

Slowly blinking, Ellis lowered his gaze to follow the direction it indicated. It took him a moment to recognize what he was looking at.

When they'd realized Rochelle had disappeared, he'd dropped an armful of supplies to the ground, including a can of spaghetti. It had split in the fall, spilling spaghetti sauce over the floor. It was still there, having leached out as it sat there, puddling orange-red liquid around the broken can.

The puddle of sauce had dried, tacky and bubbled, around the shape of shoeprints.

They tracked into the building, wandering, fading out into vague outlines as they went deeper into the store. Ellis felt a strike of cold surge through him - almost more like nausea than fear, though there was plenty of that, too.

"...maybe a zombie walked in here or somethin'. Maybe.. it's just..."

"Ellis. The supplies are gone." The Georgian let his eyes flicker up, examining. Not only should there have been other supplies where he'd dropped them at the doorway, but the supplies that Nick had dropped - the supplies that should have been left in the middle of the store -
It was all gone.

"Zombies don't fucking take shit." Nick's voice was cold, sharp. Ellis slowly turned his chin so he could gaze at his face, and it was extraordinarily flat. Empty, in a way that Ellis had become familiar with. He was thinking, weighing options. "Someone's been here. Someone killed that Tank."

Fright threatened at Ellis, but he took in a breath, forcing air into his lungs despite their protesting. He shook his head, returning his gaze forward, warily examining the store. "Why... We... We shouldn't panic. Right? Maybe it's just another survivor, like us. We don't got no reason to think they ain't friendly."

The gambler's hand tightened on his waist, voice lowering to something rough. "Do we want to take that risk? After all the shit we've been through?"

Ellis wasn't sure how he felt about the fact that his instinct was to say no - that he felt like he had no trust left.

He just turned his head and stared at Nick and it must have been all over his face, because the hard angle of Nick's brow softened just a twitch. Releasing him and taking a step back, Nick shook his head, flexing his fingers on the handle of his katana. "We go home. Now. We got water, anyway."

Although Ellis tried to exhale smoothly, it came out stuttered and hitched. He nodded softly, already moving to retreat to the car at a jog, and Nick was close on his heels.

*Whoever you are... you mess with them, I'll fucking make you regret it.*
Coach leaned wearily against the staircase railing, seated with one leg bent onto the stair he sat on, and the other draped down to rest extended against the stairs below him. If he closed his eyes and focused, he could hear the sounds of infected snarling and growling just outside the condo's fencing.

Whatever had happened when Nick and Ellis left stirred them up like throwing a rock at a hornet's nest. There'd been the sound of faint honking from up the road, and though the ruckus afterwards didn't sound like a true horde, it had caused enough disturbance to rile the infected in the surrounding area.

It had been some time now. Though they had no way of knowing how long, exactly, it felt like an hour.

Pressing his knuckles into his palms, Coach cracked them in a series of snaps. He watched with dull interest as Rochelle paced from the wall to the bedroom door. Every time she reached the threshold, she'd tilt her head to peek in on Chris, like his condition might have changed in the few seconds it'd been since the last time she looked.

"Do you think they're okay?" Rochelle murmured, body tense. "We don't even know - what if that honking got them swarmed and they didn't even make it down the road? Shouldn't we -"

Coach sighed, gently, shaking his head. He kept his voice reassuring and slow. "I'm worried too, babygirl, but we gotta stick to the plan. If they needed help, they'd have run their asses back here. Best thing we can do is stay put. They'll be back by the time it starts gettin' dark, with or without water, like we agreed."

Rochelle's arms thrust out in a helpless gesture, before swinging her left hand to cross against her chest. Reaching her hand up to catch fingertips against her lower lip, she nervously plucked at a scab there, prying it off with her nails. "So stupid. So stupid. Ellis was right. Splitting up is such a stupid idea. All it takes is a horde, or even just a Hunter and a Smoker at the same time -"

Although part of him was tempted to let her vent it out, he ended up glancing at her with a tired frown and interrupting. "Nobody's happy 'bout this. But it was this, or leave Chris alone. Like Nick said - least we all got a partner."

"I don't want it to be like this." Her voice was faintly muffled by the press of her fingers against her lip, picking at the roughness and split skin caused by dehydration. "I just want them to be safe. If they get hurt out there... God, Coach. How are you calm about this?"

He put his lips together, whistling softly, like a sharp exhale. His head shook, chin lowering. "Ain't. Just know there's nothin' to do."

"Oh, well. Nothing to do. Okay." A laugh escaped Rochelle, tight and high. "That just makes it all okay." She turned on a heel, walking across the carpet in a nervous gesture, and as she reached just in front of Coach - he suddenly reached up a hand to grasp onto her elbow.

She blinked, glancing at him, and his eyes were dark and worried on her face.

"Yo' lip is bleedin'."

That made her stop, and she slowly pulled her hand away from her mouth. The sight of blood on
her nails startled her, and she touched fingertips to her lower lip, realizing she'd torn it to bleeding when she felt a cool and viscous wetness there. "Shit..."

Pressing her palm against her lower lip to wipe off the blood, she allowed Coach to gently pull her to sit on the stairs beneath him. His hand shifted to place on her shoulder, tenderly squeezing there, thumb rolling in a vague massaging gesture.

She exhaled in frustration, peeling her hand away and sucking her injured lip into her mouth, nursing it with her tongue. The copper taste of blood was heavy as it trickled down her throat when she swallowed.

"You wanna talk, Ro'?" Coach urged, voice low and patient as his thumb rolled against her spine, soothingly. "You been actin' on edge a while now."

Her eyes lowered, and she slowly wiped the blood off her palm against her thigh, staring instead at the blood now quickly drying on her fingernails. She allowed her lip to escape the suction, responding as a vague stinging pain finally rose up from the abused flesh. "Just... everything. I feel like I'm losing it, y'know?"

Coach let his eyes close, leaning his head back against the railing, letting his hand drift to place flat against her spine so he could press fingertips against her shoulderblades. She slumped under the comforting touch, head leaning forward with a sigh.

"I'm trying to keep it together, because I know Ellis is feeling the same way... it's just everything's building up. I had a dream last night about shooting Brenda. I can still... I can still remember every single -" She pressed a thumb between her eyebrows, rubbing there. "I wanted to be stronger than this."

The eldest survivor opened his eyes with a gentle chuckle, sympathetic and unhumoured. "May be selfish, but I'm glad you ain't." She tilted her head to shoot him a glance, almost annoyed, but he lifted his hand from her back to tuck a knuckle against her jawline instead. "The last thing I want is us gettin' hard. So I think it's real healthy fo' you to be upset."

Her eyes softened a little, averting downwards, even as her cheek moved to press into his hand. "I know."

Coach allowed himself a faint smile, grasping her shoulder again. This time, he tugged her to lean back, and she settled down with her head against his stomach. He draped his arm comfortably over her chest, forearm tucked beneath her chin and hand braced on her shoulder.

"What're you really worried about? You know we don't blame you. You know you had to do it. What's goin' on?"

Shaking her head, Rochelle let her eyes closed, succumbing to the warmth his embrace offered. When she exhaled, it was thin and hesitant. "I'm not - I know it was the right thing to do... I'm just... scared. Of what Chris will think. What if we get him up, and then he hates us?"

Her voice fell to something small.

"Hates me?"

Coach closed his eyes again, rumbling a breath in his chest, tongue pushing up against the roof of his mouth in a thoughtful gesture. "You don't think he knew leavin' her alone might kill her? You abandon someone out here, they ain't gonna make it. He made that choice already. Chose us."
Rochelle's lips drew into a frown, though the tension made her wince as it drew torn flesh taut. She sucked on her lower lip again, flattening her tongue against the spark of pain, the wet warmth soothing. "I... guess I didn't think about it like that." she admitted, slurred by her caught lip.

"Ain't worth fussin' over now, anyway." Coach's shoulders shrugged, jostling her gently. "We'll tell him what happened. Boy'll understand. Even if he don't, then he can be on his way - ain't like that'd change our minds on helpin' him now, right?"

She crinkled her brow, quickly shaking her head. "Of course not."

"That's that, then. We just keep doin' what we doin'." With a weary hum, Coach relaxed into the stairway railing. "We got enough shit on our plate without addin' to it."

That made Rochelle laugh a little, tentatively. She reached up her left hand to grasp his forearm, squeezing in an affectionate gesture. "I don't know how you do it - how you keep so level-headed in all this."

Coach chuckled softly, raising his free hand to rub fingertips along his jaw, scratching with stubby - but growing - nails. "I'm the old buck of this group. You think I got time to be bawlin'? Make you kids take over while I have myself a big ol' pity party?"

Frowning a little, Rochelle tipped her head. She pushed against his arm, straightening up, and he let her go. She twisted at the waist to look at him, leaning an elbow on her knee. "That's hardly fair. I don't want you to feel like you have to hold things in. That's how we ended up in trouble after your concussion, remember? I want to be here for you, too."

He gave her a soft grin, warm, though hesitant. "You are. Y'all keep me goin'. Keep me focused."

She reached out to set a hand on his knee, lingering there gently. "Still. How are you feeling about everything? About the military, Chris... where's your head? I've been so locked up in mine, I haven't asked how you're doing..."

Coach examined her expression thoughtfully, lips drawing into a tired line. His voice was reluctant as he shrugged up a shoulder. "I'm a'ight." Rochelle seemed to sense more or expect more, so she merely tipped her head, patiently, and he had no choice but to continue. "... Just worryin'."

"About what?" she prompted, openly. When he glanced at her tentatively, she forced a smile. "I'm not gonna let you go without talking about it."

He sighed, the exhale slumping his body into a limp posture. His reticence faded, replaced with a weary tension. "If we find out the military ain't keepin' shit together... if CEDA fell apart... If there ain't nobody helpin' us, who helped my little girl? Who's keepin' her safe?"

Rochelle couldn't stop herself from lifting a hand to cover her mouth, like she could stifle her breath or stop a gasp. She felt tremendously selfish for almost forgetting, letting it slip her mind. They all had people to worry about... except Nick, she supposed... but Coach had an eight year old daughter.

An eight year old in all this?

"My wife -" He caught himself; course-corrected. "My ex, she got married to this accountant - this scrawny mixed boy, barely grown." Coach tried - genuinely, visibly tried to maintain a neutral tone, even when his eyes darkened with something between jealousy and frustration. "'Tasha liked him fine. I was glad. But is he keepin' them safe? Is he gettin' the job done? My ex is diabetic. Is he takin' care of her?"
She could only slip her hand to grab his, and he humored her, grasping their hands together. He shrugged his shoulders, and the motion was suddenly weak. Subtle."... I ain't sho'. Maybe I'm underestimatin' them. Just hope everythin' is easier fo' them, an' they ain't havin' the time we are. If my li'l girl is out here, sufferin', or..."

His eyes went distant, and Rochelle knew how to fill in the silence.

Or dead.

He looked back down at her, head tilting, and the smile he gave her was excruciatingly exhausted. And, maybe, angry. "You see why I ain't 'bout to stress on this? I ain't got no way to know shit. Ain't nothin' I can do. So you let me keep you up, 'cause that's all I got. You, Nick, an' Ellis - you're all I got. All I can do is keep y'all safe."

Rochelle's eyes were watering before she could stop it. Her features screwed up despite herself, and she surged forward to loop arms around him. He gave a faint sound of surprise, then gently embraced her with his arms, a chuckle rumbling through his chest.

He blinked back a gentle tingle of wetness at his eyes, tilting his chin up to stare at the ceiling and will it away, glad when she buried her face against his chest rather than look at him. The chuckle turned into a laugh, and he shifted a hand to place it at the back of her neck, holding her there.

"Sorry, babygirl. Didn't mean to upset you."

She shook her head without lifting it from his chest, exhaling heavily. "Y-You didn't. I'm just... I'm sorry. I can't imagine how hard it must be."

Coach raised a brow at that with a faintly dubious look. Blinking a few more times to ensure he'd gotten himself back under control, he turned his face, gazing down toward her. "That ain't true. You got yo' man to worry about."

"It's different." she murmured, just softly. Her head turned, putting her cheek against his chest, a frown tugging at her lips. "Besides..." Something stopped her, breath hitching into something faintly upset. She shook her head, falling to silence; that caught his attention, and he tightened his arms, confusion entering his expression.

"Sides what?"

"Honestly, Coach, I... I'm not really sure. Maybe I'm -" Rochelle couldn't stop from slipping her lower lip between her teeth, worrying against the tender spot where it had bled earlier. "Maybe I'm being stupid. It's just... before I left home, we -"

Screams rose up from outside, startling them both.

They came in equal time with gunshots, and Rochelle launched to her feet, shoving her wrist against her eyes. "Oh, my God. That must be the boys! They're back, thank Christ..." She glanced back at Coach, desperation rising in her posture.

He grunted, exhaling, and grasped one of the spindles of the stairway's railing. Hauling himself to his feet, Coach reached for his double-barrel shotgun where he'd placed it on a stair above him, stepping down to join her. "Let's go greet 'em. We're gonna finish this talk later, though."

Rochelle averted her eyes just a little, the edge of her mouth downturnring, but nodded.

Together, they surged for the front door. Coach led, throwing the door open and stepping out onto
the landing. He warily put a hand over his eyes, gazing out onto the street, and Rochelle pushed close to his elbow to join him.

The infected that had gathered around the house were clotting up, running up the street, arms flailing. Coach followed their path, pinning down the direction of the disturbance.

A dark green sedan sat angled on the road, and just in front of its nose stood Nick, katana in his hands. Ellis was flanking him, shotgun readied, and the two men took on the oncoming infected with practiced ease - and something else. Fury?

Nick swung the blade too hard, too ferocious, and Ellis was huddled down where he stood. Coach read the fright in his posture. They were too far to quite pick out their expressions, but Coach sensed something was wrong as naturally as if it had been printed out on them like nametags.

He didn't know if Rochelle saw it. He kept his mouth shut, and hoped he was misreading.

"C'mon. Let's go back 'em up."
Chapter 140

Nick sheathed his blade into a zombie's head, snarling as he threw his weight forward. The sword stuck, dragging the instantly dead infected along with him when he stepped back, and he had to kick it off, tilting the blade up so the zombie slid limply off the blade.

He got it back up in time to fend off another as it lunged for him, slashing across its chest. The blade skittered off its ribs, not quite enough force in the blow to break through - and although its chest poured out blood from the slash, it wasn't daunted in the slightest. It snarled, clawing for him, and he had to jump backwards to avoid it.

Ellis shot it through the side, shotgun blasting loudly, and it went down like so much meat.

The Georgian lifted his head to examine the next zombie in the line of infected rushing at them, but his eyes darted off target. "Hoh - Guys!" he shouted, voice unsteady with relief, and Nick's gaze blinked up to confirm his outburst.

The big man was barreling through the gate, shotgun at the ready, expression grim. Rochelle was on his heels, Nick's Magnum gripped in her good hand.

Ellis almost bolted, but Nick was expecting it. He lunged, hooking one hand on the kid's shirtsleeve while the other lifted up his katana to meet an infected as it reached them. The infected ran itself onto the blade, making Nick's grip on it shudder, and the blade must've sheared through its spine because the creature went ragdoll, gargling faintly.

"Zombies first, girl time second." he growled, firm.

The tone successfully hid the relief coursing through his veins.

Ellis made the faintest grunting sound of displeasure, clearly eager to reunite with their team. He relented despite it, though with an audible whine. "Okay, okay..." Where Nick's relief allowed him to focus more thoroughly on attacking the infected, Ellis visibly strained to stay attentive, like a dog at the end of a leash keeping him from his goal.

The Georgian switched his grip on his shotgun and used the butt to bash into the face of an oncoming infected. It staggered, swiping at him, and its nails caught on his wrist before it was jerked backwards by the blow. He gave a thin sound of pain, taking the time to allow the zombie to straighten back up so he could shoot it directly in the face.

While it fell to the ground, spitting and growling from a broken face, Nick swung low at the next zombie to reach them. The blade sliced through its leg, just below the knee. The flesh separated easily, bone fragile and fractured, as if it had previously injured it.

The creature took a step on its other leg, then swung its freshly disconnected thigh forward. It tried to put weight down on its now-severed foot, and went crashing to the ground for the error. With the breathing room now available, Nick lifted his head, watching Coach and Rochelle charge up from behind the cluster of infected.

She kept at his side, bracing her left hand on her forearm, head twisting to scan around as if to watch his back. Coach advanced with his shotgun, and when he fired, the blast hit two infected at once, downing them effortlessly.

Between the three of them, it took no time at all to finish off the remaining zombies. They cleaned
up neatly, compressing on the road until they'd reached each other, corpses lining the ground on either side. There was a moment where they all looked around, examining the bodies for movement and the surrounding area for stragglers.

Then Ellis moved, launching himself at Coach and Rochelle. His shotgun dangled from his elbow, throwing his arms messily around both of them, jaw trembling as he spoke. A shudder made its way into his voice. "Oh muh - Lord am I glad you two're okay! I was so dang worried!"

Rochelle quirked her head to one side, a lost sort of frown replacing the relieved happiness that had started to grow on her features. "Us...? I - Why were you worried about us? You guys were the ones out there alone!" She looked up toward Nick, confusion lighting in her eyes, even as she slid an arm around Ellis to reciprocate the hug.

The movement gave Coach room to worm his way out of the hug, stepping away with a comforting pat to Ellis' shoulder and letting him drape himself entirely against Rochelle. "... Y'all okay?" he murmured, guarded. Nick met his gaze rather than Ellis', and a faint blink was shared between them.

Nick's eyes gave a simple allowance to him: something was, in fact, wrong.

Ellis squeezed his arms around Rochelle tightly, huffing out an exhale. "We're.. We're fine, really. 'N' we found some supplies... s'just - While we was -"

As she looked down on him, the news producer glimpsed the rough abrasions on the backs of his arms. She gasped softly, pulling her arms suddenly back as if afraid to hurt him. "Ellis, what happened?! Your arms!" She pushed him away gently so she could grab for his wrist, turning his arm around and getting a look at the scrapes.

He gawped his lips faintly, growing a little abashed. "Uh... Nothin'... I got drug by a Smoker is all." Ellis scuffed his heel softly, ducking his chin. "It ain't bad... just stings. Ain't near as bad as when Keith was surfin' on the back'uh this truck, 'n' fell, but he got his foot caught -"

"He hit his head, too." Nick muttered in dull interruption, but before Rochelle could gasp at the statement and go to reach for Ellis' face like she meant to turn him around and get a look, he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the car. "Look, can we get inside before we do this? Right now, being out here is not a good idea."

Coach frowned - but nodded, warily. "Agreed. Pull up to the gate, I'll let you in."

Nick shoved a hand into the pocket of his slacks in a dismissive gesture. He slouched his shoulders faintly as he turned on a heel and quick-walked back to the car, katana held at his side. He noticed - and did not like - the similarity between his reaction to Ellis' wounds, and Rochelle's reaction.

A scowl touched his brow, and he decided against thinking critically on the fact.

Rochelle circled an arm behind Ellis with delicate care, shooing him into turning around. "C'mon, Ellis. Let's get inside the fence, okay?" He scattered a glance back at Nick, wary of separating from him - but followed her push rather than argue.

"Uh.. Okay." he murmured.

The three of them walked back to the gate, Nick getting into the sedan and rolling up along behind their path. Coach grabbed the fence gate and dragged it open wide enough to allow for the car. After Ellis and Rochelle had passed through and stepped out of the way, Nick turned the sedan carefully in through the entrance.
With their broken-down car in the garage, he merely parked it in front of the garage door, the sedan shutting off with a guttered sigh. Coach closed the fence gate behind him, latching it, and turned to rejoin them.

Nick didn't wait for him. He got out of the car, keys fisted in a hand, and stalked toward the stairs to re-enter the house without allowing for any argument. He was eager to get a roof over his head and a door between him and the outside... and whoever else was out there.

Rochelle passed Coach a hesitant look before following, and Ellis went with her. The survivors made their way up the staircase in a loose line, footsteps mixing into staccato and dull thudding as they ascended it.

By the time the other three entered the condo, Nick was settled on the stairs to the second floor.

He had his legs spread, katana balanced against his knees, not seeming overly perturbed when the placement smeared blood on the knee of his slacks. His cold green gaze observed them quietly as they slipped in. Coach was the last to enter, closing the door behind him.

As the eldest survivor moved to lean against the wall, placing his shotgun down, Nick exhaled. "Good news or bad news?" he prompted, dryly, and though his tone was one of sarcastic humour, his eyes spoke to anything but. "Your call."

Ellis broke away from Rochelle with a touch to her wrist, slipping over to the wall to join Coach. The younger man dropped down to sit, tiredly splaying his legs ahead of him and drawing his arms into his lap. He squinted at the abrasions on them, a frown twitching at his lips.

Rochelle watched him move, brows flat, trying to ignore the way Coach looked to her expectantly. He tipped his head, surrendering the choice to her.

It was slowly that she answered, "Bad news."

The gambler closed his eyes, sliding a hand up to rub down his neck, fingertips scratching at the stubble growing there. His voice dulled. "... Someone's out there. We don't know who. We didn't see them. But they cleared out the store before we could get there."

Rochelle's eyes widened, flashing with fear, and she took just a half-step back. "O-oh. You're... sure?" she uttered, voice ghosting from her lips. "But you didn't see them?" Nick shook his head once in confirmation. "So... for all we know, they took supplies and just left, right? We don't know they're still around."

Coach's reaction was muted and thoughtful. He tilted his head mildly, eyes narrowing, and it was with a patient tone that he spoke. "All we know, they could be friendly."

Raising his hand in a flat gesture, Nick narrowed his eyes right back. "Sure, sure. Because we've been rolling around in friendly survivors lately." Coach's lips twitched into a frown at that. "And maybe they left. To fucking where? I remember the map of Tybee. There ain't that much real estate, and there's only one way out. And we had to go through the swamps because that way is a bridge the fucking military blew!"

Slowly shaking her head, Rochelle raised an unsteady hand to her lips, feeling fingertips against the roughened and tender section she'd worried to bleeding earlier. "Isn't it jumping to conclusions to think they're dangerous? ...What if they're like us, just trying to find rescue?"

It was Ellis who spoke up, voice wary and soft. "If we'd jumped tuh conclusions faster, maybe the Angels wouldn't'uh ended up hurtin' us." His eyes were hesitant when they slipped up, like he
wasn't confident with his own words.

Outright surprise darted over Rochelle's face, turning to face the younger survivor. Her face went a little slack, startled, eyes smoothing over his tense and pinched expression. Was he really that afraid? Ellis, of all of them, on the side of not trusting someone - Ellis withholding good faith?

A cruel part of her wondered if it was Nick's fault, his influence. She regretted the thought as soon as she'd had it, but couldn't shake it off.

Coach's voice was weary as he interjected, head shaking. "What are you thinkin' we do 'bout it, Nick?" Although the words seemed confrontational, his tone was level. Nick glanced at him, and noted the honest question in his eyes.

So he shrugged casually, body lazing back against the stairs. "Nothing. Not anything active. I'm not saying we hunt them down or some shit, for fuck's sake, but you guys had to know. Trying to be a 'team player.'" He thrust up his hands to pull air quotes around the phrase as he said it, a brow arching. "I thought you'd be proud."

Coach snorted faintly, turning to glance at Rochelle, then Ellis. "If y'all ain't opposed, I got a suggestion." He waited for a nod from both before he continued. "We don't know them. Don't know their intentions. How 'bout we just agree to play it by ear? If we meet 'em, we take stock. Then we vote on what we do."

His eyes continued scanning them, hunting for agreement. "Ain't no use discussin' it now, when all we know is there might be someone who might run into us."

A nod touched Ellis' head, less reluctant this time. Rochelle slowly drew her arms into a cross over her chest, faintly frowning. She nodded in mimicry, but spoke with a wary tone. "Agreed. As long as we talk to each other. I don't want... I don't want the Angels to change us."

"I - I ain't tryin' tuh be - ... I don't wanna think they're bad, either." His eyes averted, lowering to gaze at his boots. A soft sigh left him, reluctant and fragile. "But after everythin'... if there's someone out there, I just... wanna know fer sure they ain't gonna hurt us. I want us tuh be careful, that's all."

Rochelle's frown softened, eyes doing the same. Guilt tugged at her, gently; it wasn't his fault that his optimism had been shaken. Nor, she reminded herself forcefully, was it Nick's. "... I know, baby. It'll be okay. We'll be careful about it. Maybe they're gone and none of this will even matter."

Coach put a hand on his hip, sighing weightily with a droop of his chin. Some chastisement entered his tone, wryly, as he shifted his weight to place his hand on the top of Ellis' head. The younger man blinked up, startled at the touch. "You did say yo' ass had good news, right?"

At that, Nick's head lifted, gazing at him for a beat. His expression was flat and cool, but the ice melted away from it, slowly. A grin started to form on his lips, baring a strip of teeth in an expression that was almost intimidatingly amused.

"Sweetheart, you're gonna love me after this."
"Holy shit, I could kiss you right now."

Rochelle hovered a hand over the open icebox, eyes locked tightly on the water pooled within, and the bottles and cans floating in the faintly warmed liquid. A grin crossed Nick’s lips at the words, and he leaned in to rest an elbow against the kitchen counter, meeting her gaze with a luridly slow blink.

"Promise?" he questioned, voice silky-smooth.

She could only crinkle her brow at him, seeming disbelieving - and maybe a touch chastising. "Don't push it, suit." Reaching tentatively into the box with her left hand, Rochelle scooped out the drinks one-by-one, lifting them out of the water and letting them drip a little before setting them on the counter. She did her best not to touch the water any more than necessary. "We should be careful with the water in here. Keep it clean… so we can drink it or use it."

Coach nodded his head at the comment, letting an arm slip behind his back, scratching idly at his spine. "Least it gives us some breathin' room. Y'all did good." He turned his head, glancing at Ellis. The younger Georgian had his arms looped under the box of walkie-talkies, and balanced atop was the blisterpack of batteries that Nick had found. "Why don't you set that down, let Ro' clean you up?"

Eyes widening in a gentle blink, Ellis approached a step to sidle up against the kitchen island. He slid the box carefully onto the counter, freeing his hands so he could twist them palm-up and gaze at the abrasions up his forearm. "Uh… it ain't worth all that, really. Barely hurts anymore."

Rochelle snorted with a patient roll of her eyes, stepping further into the kitchen. She reached up into the elevated cabinets over the main cabinet, opening them one by one, eyes scanning the mostly empty shelving. "Honey, you say that every time you get hurt. Just sit."

His lower lip stuck out faintly, but he relented, sliding to the side so he could crawl up and sit on one of the barstools set on the other side of the island. The sulking limpness in his posture made Nick snort, and the gambler straightened off the counter, striding toward the balcony’s doors. He leaned against the glass, looking out with half-closed eyes.

"Got batteries at a shop." he stated lazily. "Since the flashlight was dying."

That prompted Ellis into a smile, perking up faintly. He watched Rochelle locate a bowl, glancing it over to ensure it was clean before carrying it back. "We found somethin' cool, too." She gave him a curious look, taking the bowl and dipping it into the icebox, scooping out just a little bit of water.

Placing the bowl down next to Ellis, the water sloshing faintly, Rochelle snatched up the paper towel roll from where it sat on the counter and tore off a strip. She circled around the island, hopping up to sit on the stool next to him.

As she folded the paper towel up, dipping a corner into the water to let the water soak into the spiral-patterned fibre, Rochelle slanted her gaze down to his arms. "Arms out." she ordered, and firmly, and he could do nothing but obey, flattening his arms against the counter, twisted to bare the scrapes up his arms. Rochelle slipped him a smile. "Go ahead."

Ellis did his best not to wince as she started to clean off his wounds. Skating across the parking lot
had rubbed dirt and fragments of asphalt into his skin, and she took care to daub with the wet towel and clean the scrapes off. Rather than succumb to the stings of pain, he focused his energy on talking, nodding his head toward the box of two-way radios.

"Well, we found some uh - y'know, walkie-talkies? - 'n' I thought if we have tuh split up again, we can keep in touch. I don't wanna get separated'n'lose each other again." Rochelle widened her eyes a bit in surprise as she listened. "Least we'll be able tuh talk, make sure everyone's okay."

Her movements slowed as she scrubbed some debris off his elbow, glancing at the now faintly pink surface of the paper towel. "That sounds… great, actually." she admitted, shooting a longing glance toward the box he indicated. "I can't begin to count all the times that would've saved us. It takes batteries, though, right?"

"Yeah, but they came with some. 'N' if we just use it fer emergencies, it'll last a long while." Ellis assured her, peeking down at his arms, allowing himself a small pout of pain while she was distracted. He tentatively poked a fingertip at his elbow, plucking out a sliver of concrete, appearing a little fascinated.

Rochelle tilted her head, a pleased grin crossing her face. "Sounds perfect." The smile wavered into a wary look before she continued, eyes and attention re-focusing onto Ellis' wounds, shooing his hands away with a wave of her left hand. "I have to be honest, I was... worried. We've all been through a lot lately, so some peace of mind if we have to separate again... I'm not sure if I'm happier about the water, or that."

A chuckle escaped Coach at the statement, approaching to grasp the box. He tilted it, allowing the replacement flashlight batteries to slide off, and popped the top flap open. "Gotta agree. Should be able to stay put a while now, with water an' food, but be smart to plan fo' the worst." The football coach removed the two-way radios, looking them over.

"Let's set one next to Chris." Nick dully interjected without bothering to shift his gaze from the glass doors. "Baby monitors, zombie apocalypse style."

Shooting him a displeased look, Rochelle let her eyes drift to meet Ellis'. They traded a commiserating look, smiles sneaking their way into the expression, and Rochelle shifted to tend to his other arm. She folded the paper towel around itself, dipping it in the water to get it freshly damp.

"Only baby we gotta monitor is yo' whiny ass." Coach returned, just about as dully. Nick reared his head around to direct a sneer his way, lip curling up from his teeth, and the eldest survivor gave a self-satisfied chuckle. He pulled the plastic tabs out from the battery compartment on either radio, unblocking the batteries, and powered them on with a button press.

They blinked on, small digital screens displaying the same default channel number. Coach tapped the call button on the one in his right hand - and the left one chirped merrily.

Satisfied, he turned them both back off and set them down on the counter. "We good. Be real glad to have this next time we go out." Coach turned away, raising a hand to palm against the back of his neck in a rub. "Gonna go sit wit' the boy. Holler if y'all need anything."

Rochelle hummed in assent, glancing to watch him approach and descend the stairs to the first floor. She somewhat thoughtfully retracted her hands from Ellis' arms, eyes distant with a soft quirk to her mouth.

She worried after him.
He lifted his hands up and twisted them to gaze over his forearms, assessing his wounds with a smile. "Thanks, girl. Feels loads better." Ellis looked up to her face - only to find her attention averted, staring after Coach with a faintly strained expression on her features. "Uh... Ro'?

The woman blinked her gaze back, quickly smoothing into a vaguely pinched smile. "Sorry. Nothing." Her left hand grabbed his, turning it around to bare the clawed gouge one of the infected had made on the side of his wrist. He held it there obediently as Rochelle placed the paper towel against the injury, applying gentle pressure on it. "Just think Coach needs some rest."

Ellis cocked his head at the statement, frowning a little. "Is somethin' up? He seemed okay tuh me...?"

"Says you. Guy's been halfway civil to me lately. It's giving me the creeps." The gambler thrust up a hand, idly, blustering an exhale. His voice was almost amused, though too bored to truly count as humor. Before either of them could do more than look over at him, Nick turned to press his back against the glass. "Besides, not like we have anything to do but rest. We're stuck waiting for the prick downstairs."

Nodding idly, Rochelle peeled the paper towel away from Ellis' wrist, examining the slice there. "It's for the best. Not like we can work on signaling anybody until we even know we want to." She scrubbed at the wound a few times, ignoring the way Ellis squirmed in her grip, eyes screwing up in discomfort. "And talking to Chris is a big part of that. I'm pretty sure he knows whatever Brenda knew."

"Judging by the way they argued in the gunstore? Yeah. Safe bet." Nick returned with a heavy lull to his voice, shaking his head. His eyes closed, and he moved his hand to rub at his jawline. The Charger's punch had coalesced into a heavy purpled bruise, though it was partially disguised amidst his stubble. "Nobody else annoyed at the fact we're making choices based off those assclowns? They're two-thirds dead and one-third dismembered. Not great odds."

A snort escaped Ellis, squinting curiously over his shoulder at the older man. "You were rootin' fer not trustin' the military since like... day one, man. Thought you'd be doin' a victory dance over there." He turned around entirely to face when Rochelle released him, tilting his head at Nick.

The gambler shot him a vague look of annoyance, shrugging a shoulder. "I'm changeable."

Rochelle crinkled her nose in amusement, setting the paper towel down on the couch and drying her hands against her thighs. "That's one word." He rounded his gaze on her, narrowing his eyes, but she was already turning her back on him and putting her elbows on the counter to slump forward. "Besides, we don't have room to talk. We're one-fourth huge asshole."

"And one-fourth bitch, and two-fourth Georgia redneck." Nick retorted harshly, shoulders prickling, flaring into legitimate aggression. When Rochelle merely graced him with a laugh, not even looking at him, he didn't have much of a choice other than to let the agitation defuse. A faint scowl placed itself on his face.

"... Whatever. For the record, I'm not gonna do any victory anything if we find out we've got no rescue coming."

Ellis hummed softly, popping his lips in idle thought. He eventually slid himself off the stool, sidling over to the couches so he could plop down onto a loveseat. His body tiredly sprawled over the length of it, and he pawed his cap onto his face to cover his eyes with it. "Least we got each other, right?" he uttered, a little hesitance amidst the words. "We'll be okay."
Unable to resist a short laugh, brimming with doubt, Nick moved to lean against the glass doors. He shook his head. "Oh yeah, kid. The power of friendship is the best weapon against a fucking zombie apocalypse, as we all know."

Rochelle crooked an arm against the counter, resting her head down against her forearm. Her eyes drooped a little as she settled down, tsing her tongue gently against the roof of her mouth. "Don't listen to him, Ellis. We're gonna be fine, one way or the other."

Although it was hidden under his capbill and saved just for himself, Ellis smiled a little. "S'okay. Ro'. He's just bein' nasty. Least he thinks we're his friends."

Nick recoiled instantly, jabbing a finger in his direction. A convoluted kind of protest crossed his features, body cocking to put his weight on one leg. His eyes narrowed fiercely, trapped by his own words. "That's not what I -"

He didn't get much further before Rochelle cooed a tired, "Awww.", drawing the noise out just enough to really ratchet up Nick's agitation. He rose to a fever pitch of annoyance, more at being the center of a joke than at his slip itself - because they were, he supposed, and the thought didn't bother him as much as it used to.

Not that that stopped him from snarling out, "That's not what I meant!"
Although there were plenty of other things to worry about, having a supply of water eased a tension in the four survivors that had been reaching a stifling degree. It was a relief - a small point of light in an otherwise dark situation. Nick hadn't really felt like they had a grip on things in recent days, so the stability and security came as blissful solace.

Solace that lasted, unsurprisingly, a very short time.

"Man, I wish we had a radio or somethin'. ... well, that'n'some radio stations that were still workin'. I could use some music." Ellis drawled it out innocuously, half-asleep on the loveseat. His body was comically draped, one leg hanging off the edge to rest a foot on the ground.

Nick snorted, despite himself. "Bored already? We can go outside and fight some zombies if that'll help." He'd taken up a sprawl on the loveseat opposite Ellis, crooking an arm behind his head and resting the ankle of his burnt leg on his other knee. He tugged his slacks up, touching fingertips on the scarring flesh.

He'd have gladly offered a different and far more enticing suggestion for how to spend their time - but Coach had returned, trading places with Rochelle, and was trying unsuccessfully to doze on the couch. So, Nick merely distracted himself, examining his calf.

The flesh was warped and taut in a blotchy pattern, pink as it healed over, and mostly bare of hair. It displeased him more the longer he examined it. A faint limp he could deal with, fight against - mask. The scarring, on the other hand, wasn't something he could so easily hide away. It was ugly, and grated at his pride.

"Could've been in a worse place, I guess. Like my face.

"Naw." Ellis returned, sincerely, like Nick hadn't been joking. "Just wish there was somethin' tuh do."

Exhaling a little, tiredly, Coach's eyes reopened. He tipped his head to glance at Ellis, something resigned in his attention - he knew full well he wasn't going to get any rest. When he spoke, however, it was affectionate at its core. "What music you like, Ellis?"

That piqued Ellis' attention. He reached up, pawing his cap up off his face enough to blink his eyes toward Coach, then break into a slight smile. "Oah, plenty! Classic rock, country... Long's it's got a tune tuh sing to. I mean, I don't mind pop or nothin', but..."

Coach nodded in slow agreement, giving a thoughtful pinch of his jaw. "When I was a young'un, snuck out to just 'bout every rock concert there was. Back at my house, got a whole bookshelf fo' CDs. My little girl'd go through 'em on my old Walkman." A quiet kind of smile crinkled at his eyes, reserved and private.

Nick noticed it, but said nothing. He'd settled on keeping an eye on Coach after Rochelle's odd behaviour toward him, but the big man seemed fine to his eye. More important to Nick was the beginnings of a conversation he was witnessing take root.

He hated those, particularly when they would inevitably circle to him.
"Aw, yeah." Ellis pushed against the couch, twisting himself to lay on his side and face Coach more thoroughly. His smile flickered to a sideways grin, though a little bashful. "Muh dad left some music behind. Always loved listenin'." He cocked his head into the cushions, curiously. "Whut bands? Who's yer favourite?"

Chuckling faintly at the question, Coach shook his head. "Ah, hm." He seemed to chew on that for a beat, cocking his head, eventually allowing, "Midnight Riders. Used to be my favourite, but they ain't real good no more. Still got all their albums, though."

Ellis launched up on the couch, practically scrambling to sit up, both feet hitting the ground in an eager patter. "Really?!" His voice pitched to an eager tone, and Coach settled into an easy smile as he watched the kid grow animated. "Oh, man, they're the best! They've saved my life like three times. I ever tell y'all 'bout the time Keith went tuh a concert'uh theirs over in Texas?"

Although Nick started to grimace and say something to dissuade the story, Coach caught him with a nearly threatening look. The eldest survivor shook his head at Ellis, encouragingly.

"He was tryin' tuh crowd surf, I guess, but he just kinda climbed up a fence and jumped on folk. He landed on this one guy who had these - y'know them big spiky shoulderpads, whut bikers wear sometimes? Man, Keith landed like, real hard. You'd think they'd be, like, aluminum or somethin', right? Nah - these were solid steel. Went right through his -"

Thrusting up a hand in a halting gesture, fingers flattened, Nick let one eye shut in a vague expression of disgust. "Your friend is a hazard."

That pushed Ellis' lower lip out, tilting his head faintly to the side. "Well... tuh be fair. Them spikes was the hazard." He shook his head as if to refocus, grinning at Coach. "Man. Riders got the best concerts ever. Me'n'Keith, we'd come back hoarse. Singed sometimes! Lost muh eyebrows once." He tapped his brow with a pinky pointedly.

"Best pyrotechnics in the business." Coach agreed, heartily, scratching at his forearm idly. "Even after they set that town on fire an' had to tone that shit down."

Carding fingers through his hair, smoothing digits just behind his ear to brush back hair that was growing unruly, Nick snorted a faint breath. "Sounds like some serious cock rock shit. Should have expected that kind of taste from you two." He should have stayed out of it - but couldn't resist the opportunity to make a jab.

"You ain't even heard 'em!" Ellis protested, blue eyes blinking toward Nick and nose crinkling. In the same instant that he seemed genuinely offended - he flickered into a teasing curiosity. "Whut kinda music do you listen to, then, Mr. Gamblin' Man?"

Nick laughed that off, giving a noncommittal shrug. "Better shit than you, apparently."

Leaning forward a little, Ellis placed his hands on his knees, a smile spreading across his lips. "Aw, don't be like that. 'M just curious." His eyes warmed to something affectionate, and it was beyond Nick why. He relented, though, looking back at Coach. "Man. I miss just hangin' out, jammin'. Keith'n'me used tuh just drive around, listenin' tuh music. He'd belt shit out so loud'n'crazy, we'd get pulled over 'cause they thought he was drunk."

Coach grinned at that, eyes lighting up gently. His voice turned to something conspiratorial, winking easily. "Who says you gotta miss it?"

The youngest survivor's head cocked, mouth gawping in hesitant excitement, at the same time
Nick's eyes narrowed dangerously. He had a fairly good idea where this was going, and every fibre of him hated it. "Please tell me -"

Coach's voice became a hearty baritone when he sang, hands lacing over his gut to tap the rhythm out there. The joy that entered his tone was second only to the joy that blossomed over Ellis' face, like Christmas had come early. "Save me some sugar, this won't take long..."

"Oh, God." was all Nick could manage, horrified.

It didn't stop Coach, and Ellis joined in, their voices mixing with a giddy energy that molded into a rough duet that wasn't far from pleasant: "Don't give me too much - I won't be there when you fall..."

Ellis broke out with an eager croon, "Save me some sugar - that's all you've got to do...", beaming hugely when Coach tagged on: "Anything left over, I'll take that, too..."

Nick was up and off the loveseat in an instant, clamping hands over his ears and shaking his head furiously. "Nope. Nope. I'm not dealing with idiot karaoke!" he practically snarled, stepping between the loveseat and the couch and retreating toward the stairs. "The fuck did I do to deserve getting stuck with -"

He couldn't even get the rest of it out, because Ellis was up on his feet and singing over him. The mechanic gripped a fist in front of his mouth as if holding a microphone, eagerly bursting out with, "I'll ask one thing -"

Coach's bass came in as a hummed back-up. "I'll ask one thing -"

"Not that you'll be true -"

"Not that you'll be true -"

Nick practically flung himself down the stairs, fleeing on the wings of Ellis belting out, "The one thing I'm asking of you -" and the two of them joyously singing together: "Save me some sugar -"

The gambler couldn't escape fast enough, taking long strides to flee into the main bedroom. As much as he had no interest in staying around while they sang, even worse than their singing was the fact that he had to admit that Ellis' rich drawl didn't sound half bad. Or how it was the happiest he'd seen Ellis in a while.

He shoved his shoulder against the bedroom door to force it open from its cracked state, and dodged inside, face drawn in a grimace. His abrupt appearance didn't really startle Rochelle; she must've heard their argument, or heard him descending the stairs.

She grinned at him from where she sat on the foot of the bed, head cocking as the singing from upstairs floated down, still just audible. "Party-pooper."

"Are you kidding?" he groaned, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. He approached her slowly, green eyes gone dramatically distant. "It's hell up there. Please tell me I can get some peace and quiet down here, at least."

Rochelle shrugged her shoulders, nodding toward Christophe where he lay on the bed. The Spaniard had flipped in his sleep, laying on his right side, stumped shoulder up in the air. His face was half-buried in the pillow, jaw slack. The breathing that expanded and collapsed his chest in a slow rhythm had turned a little more steady. Less wheedled, and far quieter.
"He's not about to start singing." Brushing a thumb against her temple, she gave him a faint smile. "And I'm not really a rock girl. Give me some electronica and synth-pop any day."

Nick grunted idly. He took a side-step, then sat down beside her on the edge of the bed. The gesture startled her, blinking curiously sideways at him - but he'd already settled and closed his eyes, arms crossing over his chest.

They sat there, for just a moment, and Rochelle weighed her options in the silence. He'd asked for peace and quiet, but sitting down next to her, rather than going to a wall and leaning distantly against it like he always did...? Maybe she was reading into it, or maybe he did want to talk.

She had learned quickly that forcing her way into Nick's personal space, prying, rarely went over well. Better to skirt the conversation - if there was one to be had at all.

"I'm glad they're having fun." she offered gently, innocuously.

Nick snorted, head shaking. "If that's their idea of fun, I'm happy to be left out of it. There's a reason people get drunk before they do karaoke; it's awful. I get my kicks in ways that don't involve screeching out the greatest hits of 90s rock."

Rochelle laughed softly, putting her hands in her lap. She let her eyes drop, carefully touching a thumbtip against the pink nail polish that still stained her nails. It had chipped and cracked and faded, pulling away from her cuticle as her nails grew it out, but there was some colour left.

"Maybe. They need it, though."

Shrugging his shoulders, Nick's eyes reopened. He glanced at her fidgeting hands - then, abruptly, he lowered his arms from their cross. One of his hands reached out and circled the wrist of her injured hand, dragging it up. Rochelle could only blink as he flipped it, examining the bandage wrapped over her palm.

She'd changed it, and he looked it over with a dubious eye. "You acted like Coach was upset, earlier." he stated, not meeting her gaze. He flicked a thumb underneath the bandage, lifting it away just enough to get a look at her wounded palm.

Much despite herself, Rochelle felt a warmth light up her spine when she glanced at his features, so near and so laser-focused on her injury. Nick was nothing if not handsome. And I really want to take a cheese grater to my face for thinking that.

She focused, sobered a little once she'd considered the question. Her head shook, curling her tongue against her teeth - she was a little leery of breaking confidence with Coach, but it wasn't like Nick was going to talk to him about it. And it wasn't like his family was a secret. "He misses his daughter, is all."

Nick gave little more than a grunt, so Rochelle shrugged a shoulder, continuing. "The less sure I am about whether the military has their shit together, the more -" She hesitated, chin lowering a little. "The more I'm wondering if our families are even okay. Even if they got to an evac... what if everything fell apart? What if nobody's safe?"

She knew her voice was weakening as she went, lowering to something confiding - and maybe a little afraid. Nick was the only one she could speak to brazenly; the only one she wasn't afraid to hurt or scare with the talk, because it wasn't like he had someone to worry about.

If anything, he'd likely been thinking the same things for a long time.
His muted reaction said as much.

"That really change anything?" he returned, dryly. "Even if everybody's dead. What does it matter? We just gonna give up?" He let her hand go, leaning his weight back to rest a palm against the bed, eyes going low-lidded. "We didn't fight this long for them. We fight because it's better than dying. So we keep fighting."

Rochelle drew her hands back together, a frown pulling her lips down. She let her eyes close entirely, sighing, and wishing the words comforted her more.

Nick must've caught her reticence, because he sighed, too. It was more frustrated than hers, and he shrugged. "Dunno what to tell you, doll." His gaze cut over to her, curious. He sucked in a breath, holding it - then released it, along with words. His lips shifted into a small sneer. "Worried about your boyfriend?"

He knew he'd hit on something when she flinched. Her chin dropped, turning her face away, and he practically thrust his hands up in a defensive gesture. "Whoa, hey. I know that look." Pushing up off the bed, Nick started to walk away, aiming for the window. "Forget I said anything."

Rochelle didn't stop him, frown deepening as she shook her head. "... Sorry. Just... it's complicated. Half of me is worried he's... dead, half of me -" She raised her uninjured hand, palming against her forehead with a sigh. "It's complicated." she repeated, softer. "You don't want to hear about it."

Sidling up against the window, Nick leaned on the wall, crossing his legs and slumping into a comfortable pose. He shrugged distantly, eyes lingering more fully on her now that he was behind her and out of her view. "Depends." he answered, voice dull.

Hand sliding down the frame of her face, Rochelle let her hand linger on her cheek. Her eyes went a little distant, gazing off toward a point that wasn't anywhere near. "Then let's say I don't want to talk about it, okay? Thought you wanted peace and quiet, anyway."

Nick laughed, just a little, amusement creeping in. "If you insist."

Rochelle turned, drawing her legs up onto the bed and allowing her lower back to rest against the footboard. Her eyes flicked up to the ceiling, head tilting back, and she gazed at a small circle of spackle that filled in a hole made long ago. She smiled, though, because Nick had practically acted like he cared.

The two men upstairs had moved on to singing an enthusiastic - and faintly off-key - rendition of 'One Bad Man.'

Chapter End Notes

The song Coach and Ellis were singing: https://youtu.be/cOU3d5f5Kek
Chapter 143

When Chris awoke, it was so quietly that Rochelle took a moment to notice. She sat on the edge of the bed, watching with no small interest as Nick took his Magnum apart and cleaned it as best he could with a toothbrush he'd nicked out of the bathroom. Judging by the displeased look on his face, it wasn't optimal, but he didn't grousel aloud.

Her gaze followed his hands as he worked, and it was only faintly that she registered a slight movement from the body laid out behind her. She ignored it, at first - but then it happened again, and she turned her head to glance at Chris. He'd attempted to roll over before, and she'd had to stop him from rolling onto his stumped shoulder.

This time, however, his eyes were open and rolling slowly in their sockets to look around the bedroom. There was pain in them, but clarity.

"Chris? Hey - hey." Rochelle slid herself quickly up the edge of the mattress, leaning in to hover over him. His eyes snapped to her face, warm brown latching onto the dark chocolate of hers. She heard Nick getting to his feet, but didn't pay him any mind. "Can you hear me?"

A flicker down focused his attention on her lips, as if their motion surprised him. His own parted with a tremble, and his voice came out in a cracked and exhausted tone. "Sí." A cough escaped the Spaniard like the word had caught in his throat. He grimaced as the gesture jostled him, pained him, and uttered in quiet plea, "¿Agua?"

Relief flooded her, too harshly, taking in a breath to steel herself. Rochelle nodded eagerly, reaching to the nightstand to retrieve the bottled water she'd left there. Opening it took too much time, her fingers trembling. She leaned in to press it against his mouth, tipping it so he could drink.

Nick approached, arms crossed. The Spaniard managed a desperate gulp, only just avoiding choking on the liquid as he swallowed it flat on his back. The Northerner observed with a dubious stare, head gently cocking to one side.

As Chris ran his tongue across his lower lip, tilting his face away, Rochelle replaced the bottle on the nightstand. "Me duele ... brazo... - ¿por qué duele tanto?" he muttered, almost to himself, eyes fluttering up toward the ceiling and narrowing into a squint. His body shuddered, one leg bending slowly, heel pressing into the mattress with the motion.

It didn't look like he intended to straighten, but Rochelle surged back anyway, placing a hand flat on his chest to keep him down. "I'm sorry, Chris, I know you're tired, but - I don't... I can't..."

She trailed off, but he nodded vaguely in understanding, closing his eyes entirely. It was with a low and flattened tone that he swapped to English, accent much thicker than it had been previously. "Hurts. The arm. Why no -?" He seemed to frustrate himself, jaw tensing, and it took a moment for Rochelle to realize why.

Beneath the sheets bunched tightly around his shoulders, the stumped remnant of his left arm was twitching, the muscles in his neck tautly flexed. Like his body was straining to lift a limb that no longer existed. As if it were merely weighted down, numbed, and if he could try hard enough he could lift it off the mattress.

Rochelle didn't know what was worse: the sight of him struggling, or the idea of having to explain what had happened to him.
She'd just raised her bandaged hand to cover her mouth, brows pinching, and started to work
together a response when Chris' eyes suddenly snapped open. Terror flooded his expression all at
once, and it was a breathless babble that escaped him. "B - B is coming. Vine a avisaros - come to
warn..."

This time he did struggle as if to rise, even when pain stuttered over his face at the motion, and
Rochelle had to grab firmly onto his torso, holding him down. He must have forgotten seeing her
katana in Nick's grip - didn't know she was dead. "It's okay, Chris, it's okay. She - she came, while
you were out." That startled him, faintly, limpening to surrender to her force. "We're fine."

His eyes searched hers, growing faintly confused when she avoided his gaze. Guilt crept over her
features, drawing her lower lip between her teeth and worrying it. There was no delicate way to tell
him, no way to make it less painful.

Nick's gaze bored into her, silent, and she could only guess at what he was thinking. Maybe urging
her to not tell him. Why add the complication, after all?

She couldn't do that. Her conscience wouldn't allow for it, on top of everything else.

"She attacked us. We had to - ... She didn't give us much choice." Awareness lit on Chris' face, not
so much shock as a kind of resigned acceptance. His eyes lowered, growing distant, and a pain
struck through Rochelle's gut. She removed her hands from his chest, leaning away. "I'm sorry."

Voice thick with sarcasm, Nick inputted harshly, 'I'm not. Your friends were fucking psychos.
Both of them deserved what they got."

Horror jolted Rochelle's spine straight, twisting to shoot a furious look at him. She knew he
thought it - and didn't really disagree, when it came down to it - but to say it, aloud? It was beyond
blunt. Heartless. "Nick!"

Her fury only encouraged him. Nick put a hand on his waist, fingers curled in his dress shirt, voice
lowering to an aggressive tone as his gaze cut past her to focus tightly on Chris' face. "If I even
choose to believe you had any interest in helping us, and this whole thing wasn't some fucked-up
ploy gone sideways, then you got a lot of fucking answers to give. Pronto."

Rochelle wanted to argue, wanted to leap up and chase him out, but Christophe was already
speaking. His voice came out vague and confused. "Ploy? No entiendo..." His eyes traveled a rough
and wavering route up to lock onto Nick's face, becoming guarded, hazy.

run in, catch us unaware, she follows up to clean house. Too bad you assholes didn't think of Wi-"

She did get up, then, thrusting to her feet. "Jesus, Nick!" He glared starkly at her, posture shifting
with angry energy. "I'm completely goddamn aware of how you feel, but after everything he's been
through? After saving Coach and me? Give him some breathing room, for Christ's sake!"

Oddly - Nick relented. Maybe her voice was more furious than she meant it to be, or maybe she'd
simply gotten through to him. Either way, he thrust a hand up, turning half away from her with a
curt utterance. "Whatever."

Footsteps sounded down the stairs, hurried. Coach and Ellis must have heard her raised voice, and
were coming to investigate. Hands trembling at her sides, Rochelle forced in a lungful of air like it
might clear her head. The last thing she wanted was a room of people surrounding him - or, worse,
questioning him.
"... Sorry. This is ... stressful." Nick didn't register the apology with more than a jerk of his chin, almost angrily dismissive. "Please go outside, Nick. Let them know he's awake. I'm going to talk to him."

She added a little forcefully: "Alone."

Rochelle watched Nick stride over to the door, dragging it open and slipping out. Ellis' concerned face leapt into view just before Nick shut it behind him, and their voices became a low murmur on the other side. They talked for a spare few moments, maybe arguing just a little.

She waited, unmoving, until she heard footsteps ascending the stairs again.

In the silence that followed, she warily turned, facing Chris but not quite meeting his gaze. She slowly drew her hands into a clasp in front of herself, thumb pressing into the bandaged wound across her palm. "I'm sorry. He's just angry."

Christophe's head was tilted into the pillow, eyes low-lidded as he gazed at her. A hollow edge touched his voice when he murmured, "You agree?"

A frown touched her lips, and she slowly drew to sit on the mattress again - but lower this time, further away. "No. I don't. I don't know what happened, but you came to save us, right? To come join us." Her hands slipped into her lap, chin drifting downward slowly. "You threw yourself on a Witch for us. Nick just... He wasn't there. He doesn't trust easy."

Distant confusion wrought Chris' thin brows together, eyes flickering up in faint thought. "... Witch? ... I don't... remember."

Rochelle closed her eyes, tensing them against a wave of emotion as she nodded her head. "You remember coming to find us? It was raining, hard." That sparked something in his eyes, slowly nodding his head. "A Witch was trying to kill Coach and me. You grabbed it. It -"

She choked on the words, turning her head away rather than come even close to looking at him. She didn't want to be the one to tell him, but it was her responsibility. He deserved to hear it from her, not Nick.

It was softly that Chris' right arm pushed under the covers, crawling over the mattress, the motion slow and tortured like even that small movement pained him. His fingertips just touched the side of her leg, the sheets a barrier between them. "Rochelle?"

A kind of strained and miserable laugh escaped her, shaking her head. "I don't understand how you can't tell... It - it took your arm, Chris. You were fighting it, and I hesitated, and it - your other arm is gone." Her voice was breaking, composure crumbling. There would never be a good way to tell him. "I'm so sorry. We couldn't do anything."

He didn't understand. She could tell, even without looking directly at him. His gaze riveted on her, staring, just a faint utterance of a breath escaping his lips.

Something disbelieving laced the way he retracted his hand - and something hesitant in the way he turned his head, gazing toward the space beside him. Silence reined as he examined the place where his arm should have lain, taking in how the blanket flattened where it should have been raised over his limb.

He strained, then, trying to move it. When nothing happened, panic flooded over his expression. It was slow at first, but soon overtook him. His composure fractured, abruptly thrusting his hand up, jerking with the motion to push the sheets off his body. "N-no - I do not... I can... ¡Puedo sentirlo!"
Chin lowering, his eyes alighted on the bandaged stump of his left arm as the sheets drew messily away. "It - it is -" Rochelle had no choice but to watch as the realization clicked into place, suffocating on the desire to take it all back.

"No lo… creo..." he whispered, ghosting the words, voice so rough with pain and fear it hurt to hear. Rochelle reached out trembling hands, like she could soothe him - but he surged away, flinching frightfully, and she stopped. "¿Cómo es posible? ¿Cómo es que sigo vivo...?"

Agony wrenched at her stomach, guilt clawing its way up her spine with nails of icy, bitter regret. The meaning of most of his words escaped her, but the tone did not. She shook her head, trying hard to keep the tears at bay; they threatened more and more with every word she forced out. "I'm so... so sorry. If I could have -"

No. Don't focus on you.

"... You'll be okay. I promise. I swear, we're going to keep you safe. You didn't deserve this."

If Chris parsed her words, he gave no indication of such. A sort of frantic mumble left him, raggedly, his shaking hand raising to reach toward his stumped shoulder. "I am... estoy soñando..."
He grasped just above his clavicle, squeezing. "Claro..."

Rochelle buried her face in her hands, pressing fingertips against her eyes forcefully. "I know it's... hard. Please, Chris, just -"

As if he'd abruptly been reminded of her presence, Chris gazed sharply up toward her. It was with a faintly broken shudder that he grasped the sheets, tugging them back into place over his shoulders, gasping in pain at the gesture. He blurted out, "P-por favor. D… déjame solo, por favor."

Looking back up at him, Rochelle gave a stuttered exhale of frustration. His expression was earnest and pleading, but he was speaking too quickly and she didn't understand a thing except for 'please.' "W... what? I'm sorry, I -"

He shook his head, frantically. His body moved in slow motion, every shift met with a shudder of pain, until he'd slowly crawled himself against the headboard. "Leave me. Please." His posture collapsed into something almost fetal, curling in on himself and drawing his forearm over his eyes to hide them.

"I... I don't know if that's a good idea." Rochelle hesitantly placed a hand on the bed, trying to keep her voice steady despite the hitch that threatened it. The Spaniard looked miserable, and small, and her gut was wringing itself into knots. "I know you're scared, sweetie, but I - I don't think you should be alone. We're all - ... I'm here for yo-"

"¡N-no quería que me vieras así...! No lo soporto..." His tone was close to desperate, and harsh breathing wracked his frame, picking up speed and shallowing until it approached hyperventilation. His legs drew into a curl, bundling under the sheets. "Go. Please."

Startled, almost, Rochelle stood off the bed - and as soon as she'd risen, so too did a wave of wetness over her eyes. She turned herself away in a stumble, palming over her eyes to stop the tears from scattering down her cheeks. Chris wanted her gone, and while part of her had expected such - Another part was injured, cut by it.

What could she have done to make him feel better, anyway?

Rochelle's body moved of its own volition, hurrying across the carpet and to the bedroom door.
She tried not to run, but found herself doing so before she could stop. She ducked out into the hallway, closing the door and leaning her body against it, bowing down into a hunch.

She felt sick, almost. Nauseated. Disappointed, and mostly in herself. "Stupid." she muttered, eyes tightly closing, anger suddenly rising at the feeling of wetness that trickled down her face as they did. "Stupid, stupid. Couldn't have handled that worse." She tried to wipe at her cheeks, but her hand didn't make it all the way there.

"Eh, I dunno." Nick's curt and matter-of-fact tone shocked her into a gasp. "Always further down to go."

He was leaned against the wall just to her left, body posed casually. The look on his face was almost demurely disinterested, as if he was just a stranger observing her at a distance. Rochelle had only moments to feel furious that he'd eavesdropped - then she just felt hollow.

"Breathing room, right?" At his words, she looked up at him. "Go upstairs. I'll make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

A crease twitched at her brow, slowly moving to wipe her knuckles beneath her eyes. "Don't grill him. He needs time. Please, Nick." She didn't mean it to come out harshly, but she couldn't tell what her voice was doing anymore.

Nick gave her a limp eye-roll. "Promise." he retorted, sarcasm bloating the word. His body shifted, moving a few inches closer before resettling against the wall. "Won't even talk to the guy. Just keep an ear on him from here, make sure he stays down." When her gaze remained dubiously, unsteadily, on him - he sighed.

"We doin' pinky-promises now or something?"

Rochelle shook her head faintly, turning her chin away. Her lips dragged into a frown, and her voice was soft as she pushed away from the door and approached the stairway. "We can't fix this one, Nick. This doesn't get better."

The gambler watched her go, head tracking her movements as she ascended the stairs. His mouth remained a rigidly flat line, some amount of tension in his low-lidded green eyes. It was better to shove her off on Coach and Ellis than try to comfort her himself; he didn't know where to begin. They were better at that.

Slowly, after she'd disappeared up to the second floor, his eyes cut sideways to examine the bedroom door.

When had he ever made good on a promise?
Chapter 144

Christophe was drawn into a ball against the headboard by the time Nick pushed his way quietly into the bedroom. He closed the door gently, using the palm of his hand to guide it shut, knob held twisted so he could slowly release it and close the latch without much noise. It was his first footstep that drew the Spaniard's attention, though he barely acknowledged him.

Taking the distance between him and the end of the bed, Nick drew his arms into a cross over his chest. He gazed critically down at the slumped man, head ticking into a tilt. He waited - just long enough for Chris' head to shift, one eye staring dully out at him from over his forearm.

Nick didn't bother to see if he'd say anything.

"She doesn't want me to talk to you, so count yourself lucky when I keep this short." Slowly, Nick leaned forward until he could place a hand on the footboard of the bed, hunched in. His other hand slid into the pocket of his slacks, sprawling his body in a posture that was simultaneously casual and aggressively broad. "I have a question. You're going to answer it."

The foreigner gazed at him, eyes so thinly focused that Nick wasn't entirely certain he was being understood. "... Why?" A slight snarl touched the edge of Nick's mouth, anger stirring at the seeming refusal - but Chris continued, voice quieting to something rough and hollow. "Why am - why did you help me? Intúil.. I am... no use."

That made Nick snort, snarl flashing into a flat expression as he absorbed the man's words. He felt only a vague annoyance where a better man might have felt sympathy, shaking his head. "I'm not the person to ask that. I didn't have that much of a say." Chris' face lowered softly, burying back against his forearm, and Nick shrugged a shoulder. "Unfortunately for both of us, I'm surrounded by bleeding hearts."

When Chris failed to respond, body adopting the slowest of tremors, Nick bit hard on the inside of his cheek. As much as he wanted to get furious, he wanted answers more. So he leaned in, voice dropping to a simple mutter. "Look, asshole, if you wanted pity, you shouldn't have chased Ro' ou-"

The Spaniard's head lifted, sharply - too sharply. Pain fluctuated over his face with the motion, but he spoke anyway, suttered. "¡Mirame!" His eyes softened after the outburst, dropping, and he gazed down at his bandaged shoulder with an empty frown. "I do not... I cannot -" His jaw moved for a beat, thinking, before settling on: "I cannot see her." Chris closed his eyes, exhaustion sweeping over his features until they became almost sunken, sallow. His voice was almost faint when he questioned, "... I upset her?"

"Do I look like I'm here to talk about this?" Nick returned, agitation twitching at his brow. The Spaniard didn't flinch at his anger, but his chin lowered in silent acknowledgement. "Are you going to answer my goddamn question, or aren't you?"

Chris' eyes did not open, and it was just softly that he acquiesced. "Sí."

The gambler stepped to lean a hip against the footboard, exhaling in a slow stream, like one might blow out smoke. It was on the final moment of exhale that he spoke, green eyes ferociously attentive on Chris. If he lied, Nick intended on catching it. "The Angels. There were more of you."

Chris nodded, just once, simple. "How many?"
Sighing softly, Chris' head slumped. He slowly tightened his arm, drawing it around his legs and tightening it to hug his knees. "... ¿Antes? ... nueve." That startled Nick outright, not that he let it show on his face. Nine? He hadn't expected nearly so many people. "We... there was... un incidente. We separated."

Nick let the hand that wasn't in his pocket drift up, catching his palm against his jaw and rubbing there. "So it was you, and the two assholes you were with?"

Negation flickered in the sigh that escaped Chris, lips tugging downward. "Two more."

At that, Nick exhaled lengthily. He chewed on the correction, weighed it - and noted the part of him that experienced a vaguely pleased sensation. He'd figured there were more already, keeping in mind Rochelle's observation of the kill scores at the entrance of Tybee... but knowing Chris was openly admitting it helped him relax. Just a little.

He hadn't legitimately suspected that Chris had been working with Brenda previously, but that was a far cry from actually trusting him. There was a test inlaid in his words, and Nick's reaction hinged on his success or failure. So far, he was passing. The next step was who those other two members were, and he took a gamble. An educated guess.

"Phil and Sean?"

Nick knew he'd struck home when Chris jolted against the headboard, eyes flashing open to stare at the Northerner, lips faintly parting. Shock mixed with confusion on his features, and Nick couldn't resist the smallest and most hollow of smirks. Rather than explain, he merely continued.

"What are the chances they're around?"

Slowly and forcibly shaking out of his surprise, Chris managed to respond, wetting his lips with a vague pass of his tongue. "¿Aquí...? No... no. No lo creo. Sean está... muerto." A distant pain twitched at his eyelid, something Nick might've missed had he been paying less critical attention. "Phil... left. Why...?"

Eyes narrowing, Nick carded fingers through his hair, dragging his fingers across his scalp until they reached the back of his neck. He scratched there, frustrated, voice tightening. More news part of him expected. "Left where? When? We know you had a fourth member here in Tybee. Is he still here?"

Some panic entered Chris' posturing, shifting, though it clearly hurt to move. Distress and confusion made him shake his head, inhaling with a short stutter of air. "How do you -" Nick kept a close eye on the man's behaviour.

Was he merely upset and confused at Nick's knowledge, or was he hiding something? It became difficult to tell what was merely erratic, and what was suspicious.

"My questions, your answers, buddy." Nick half-growled, tension making his fingers curl into fists. "You know they blew the bridge into Tybee, right? If he was here with you, then he's probably still here." Chris' head was still shaking, and Nick could see the composure cracking, breaking.

Though it frustrated him, a part of him recognized that he could only push the guy so far. He was exhausted and in pain, among other things.

Nick inhaled - then exhaled, working his voice into something flatter than it previously was. "If you actually came to fucking warn us, help us, then consider this phase two." That was enough to jog Chris into some kind of sense, and though his body was still trembling, he nodded. His eyes
had gained some amount of energy since they'd started talking, but they became vaguely deadened after that.

"You have a habit of picking bad friends, so what kind of friend was this?"

Slowly, Chris let his chin lower til it almost touched his chest. He chewed at his lower lip, either thinking on the question - or just trying to piece together the words to express his answer. "... Phil was... not like them. He - we did not kill people. Not until..." The foreigner gestured with his fingers, flatly, indicating outward.

"You didn't turn into murderers - attempted, thank fuck - until you did." Nick grimaced, closing his eyes with a tired breath. "Great. Perfect. Model citizens, right up to when you go Lord of the Flies."

Christophe leaned against the headboard, slipping down a few inches to curl tightly against it with a pained hitch to his voice. "No... We.. stole. Pues - hemos... perseguí- em..." he rambled, distantly, and Nick could tell his focus was waning. "Attacked people. Did not like it, but - it is... how it is now, no? B always said..." He trailed off, eyelids drooping, a limpness touching his body.

A snort escaped Nick, shaking his head. "Drank the Kool-Aid, kid." he muttered mostly to himself, almost resigned, looking away for a beat. It wasn't sympathy he felt, he was sure. He was just tired. Exhausted, suddenly, and why was it that all he could think of was that goddamn diner full of bodies?

Wasn't it possible, if he'd met someone else... if he hadn't ended up with his current team... that Nick could have become warped? Hadn't they kept him straight, kept him focused? Kept him from doing things he would have - might have - regretted?

Disasters made monsters out of even good people, and Nick wasn't a good person. If he'd had to choose between being alone in the apocalypse or siding with those around him, good or not, would he really have chosen the former? It wouldn't be the first time he'd gotten into the wrong circles, and done bad things.

The thought left a sour taste in his mouth. His lip curled up from his teeth, agitated, and he was prepared to spit out something harsh - but Chris was already speaking, "If... he is here, no fear. Phil is good. He left... upset. No gusta Jerry." His tone was muted, exhausted. A slur entered it, and Nick was left to watch as his head twitched in and out of a slump, like a doze.

The gambler slid his arms to hang limp at his sides. It wasn't really a satisfactory answer, but it was enough. If the stranger they'd found evidence of had to be somebody, he'd accept somebody who hated Jerry. That was, at least, a start.

He shrugged, heavily, relenting with a taut sigh. "Fine. That's enough." He'd already driven Chris close enough to a breaking point; the last thing he needed was Rochelle catching on, or coming back downstairs. "I'll leave you alone, for now."

Cuffing knuckles against his chin, Nick cocked his head, letting the gesture guide his body into a swivel. "Don't tell anyone we talked. I don't need a new reason to want your ass gone." He spun on his heel, walking toward the bedroom door.

Christophe weakly slid down the headboard, a groan of pain escaping him as he worked his way to curl flat on his side, head tucked low and weight resting on his good shoulder. His eyes flickered shut, exhausted, and the faintest mutter escaped him.

It took Nick a moment to register it as "Gracias."
He halted, arm in the middle of extending out to reach for the doorknob. Confusion worked into the twitch of his brow, turning his head enough to glance back at the Spaniard. What he could see of the man's expression was distant and hazy enough to blame the words on exhaustion, but Nick couldn't resist asking. "... the fuck for?"

Although his voice was thick with a distant pain, there was an edge of something almost like humor. Cold, fractured humor. "No sientes lástima por mí."

Nick's jaw gritted faintly. It took a second to parse the words, working backwards to unravel the sentence and then put it back together until he arrived at the translation: *You don’t feel pity for me.* He thought the words before the meaning settled in, and with it came frustration.

He left rather than say anything, because a part of him could understand that sentiment.

Pity was for broken men.
Rochelle's eyes were closed where she laid on her side, resting her head on Ellis' lap. He had his arms draped over the back of the sofa so his body sprawled out, thoughtfully tapping a foot, eyes low to gaze on her face. She hadn't said much, other than that Chris was awake and had learned of his missing arm - but it was difficult not to notice that she'd been crying.

He waffled between saying something, and respecting her space. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her further, but the silence in the room was setting his nerves off.

Ellis rolled his lips against one another, sneaking a glance up at Coach. The older man was already looking his way, and gave a slowly deliberate blink down at Rochelle. The communication was clear, and Ellis couldn't resist a slight widen of his eyes.

He carefully raised a hand from the back of the couch, gesturing at Coach, insistently. The ex-football player gave a hapless shrug and a shake of his head, and Ellis couldn't stop a strained expression from tilting at his lips.

‘What do we do?’ he mouthed, intently.

A grim kind of clench touched Coach's jaw, putting his hands up. One mimed talking while the other pointed at their female teammate, and Ellis gave a bewildered shake of his head. If Coach didn't know what to say, how was he supposed to?

"Okay, boys." Rochelle muttered, voice low and just faintly amused. She didn't bother to open her eyes. "You don't have to tiptoe around like I bite. I'm fine."

Ellis immediately startled, shooting her a glance, abashed and wary. "Uh, we weren't - I was just -"

Coach, on the other hand, slipped his arms into a calm cross. He shook his head with a subtle roll of his neck, quieting Ellis. "You ain't gotta be fine, babygirl. If somethin's botherin' you, tell us."

The low-lidded ease of his gaze settled on her, and she blinked her eyes open to return the look, though hesitantly.

Her lower lip slipped between her teeth, tongue running over the rough patch of freshly healed flesh where she's nervously torn into it earlier. The abused texture bothered her, and it took active effort not to slip a hand up and attack the beginnings of a scab. "Just wondering what we can do for him. I've never... it's not like losing an arm is something you just get over. I'm almost more worried for how he's going to feel than if he's going to live at this point…"

The eldest survivor grunted out a rumbled breath, shrugging up a shoulder. "Ain't outta the woods yet on that, but I take yo' point."

Frowning softly, Ellis cocked his head. "Well... Y'know, back when I thought Keith might lose his leg, I did do some research on shit. Y-" Coach shot him a confused look, brows up in bewilderment, and the mechanic's frown switched to a bashful half-grin. "Oh, uh, yeah. I ain't told you, Coach. So, this one time, me'n'Keith were tryin' tuh climb this barb-wire -"

With the slightest of strained tones, Rochelle broke in, interrupting him smoothly. "Keith did Keith stuff and almost lost a leg." A soft snort escaped Coach at that, a twinkle of humor entering his eyes when Ellis looked just a little put out at being railroaded.

"... Well, yeah. Guess that covers it." he admitted, jaw shifting forward a half-inch, releasing a
laugh to cover the fact his feelings got just a little bruised. "So I was thinkin', y'know, best if I learned what tuh expect. Just in case it happened. Read a book on it."

Nick's voice came from the stairs, droll and mock-surprised. "You can read?"

Ellis' pout went even more thoroughly injured, craning his head around to peek at the older man as he came up the stairs. "That ain't nice, Nick…"

Hearing the Northerner made Rochelle jolt upright, pushing hands against Ellis' thigh to straighten on the couch. She turned, eyes darting to Nick's, a question inherent in their attention. Nick gave her an annoyed scrunch of his brow.

"He's asleep. Do you want me to tuck him in, too?"

She sighed, just softly, shaking her head. "Okay… thank you." She shifted, pushing away to sit upright on the sofa, a leg curling underneath her. Looking back at Ellis, she forced her expression to smooth out of the worried pinch it's gained. Instead, she offered him a faintly encouraging smile. "Go ahead, Ellis."

Ellis' sulking look didn't completely disappear, but he focused on the conversation at hand, shrugging up his shoulders. "I don't remember everythin', but… I mean, folks go through therapy'n'stuff. Like not just seein' a shrink or nothin', but physical stuff, too. You gotta like… recover. Guess it's better than a leg, seein' as he can still walk."

It was almost subconsciously that he flexed the hand of his left arm, and Rochelle noticed. She wasn't the only one having sympathy pains. "But, y'know. If he don't got an arm, then like - his shoulder joint's gonna get weak, since it ain't gettin' used."

Coach nodded slowly, some thought in the way he laced his hands over his gut and tapped his thumbs on his shirt. "Had a boy get hurt in a game once or twice. Did some PT with 'em. Don't know if it applies, but we can try."

Ellis nodded eagerly, sucking on his teeth with a blink. "Ain't gonna hurt. Ro's right, though. I wouldn't blame him none fer bein' upset, but - y'know. Folk get depressed'n'shit." The Georgian lifted his arm from the back of the sofa, scratching at his cheek. "I ain't never seen Keith like how he was when he thought they were gonna take his leg. Like, after, he was all jokin' that he wished they had, so he could get a pegleg - but while it was happenin'... Man. I was worried."

"I can't believe you assclowns." Nick muttered, somehow simultaneously scathing and bored. He stepped across the loft, ducking past the seating, and moved to the glass door. The gambler hooked a finger on the lock, undoing it, and pulled the door open just a crack. The air that drifted in was crisp and refreshing, with a scattered sense of salt woven into the breeze.

Nick rested a forearm against the wall just beside the door, gazing out over the balcony. "All the guy's put us through, and you're sitting here worrying about his feelings. Should we go find some flowers? Some chocolates? Maybe write him a nice 'Get Well Soon' card?"

Rochelle gave a scoffing sigh, shaking her head. She allowed her eyes to close, a vague frustration running up her spine. "Nick, can you just shelve the dick routine for five minutes? It gets really old sometimes." Ellis' mouth gawped as he blinked between them, caught off-guard by the tension suddenly bursting to life as Nick cut a glare over his shoulder at her. "How would you feel if you lost a limb?"

Dusting a hand against his dress shirt, palm brushing over the dried-out bloodstain where Brenda
had grabbed at the fabric, Nick honed his voice to a point. "In the apocalypse? I'd probably shoot myself in the head."

A startle went through all three of his teammates, though the surprise was tinged differently in each of them. Coach, disapproving, like he was picking a fight. Rochelle, offended, like he was mocking her. Ellis, horrified, and Nick didn't bother to wonder precisely why.

"My point - yeah, shocker, I have one - is that doing the whole love and caring, touchy-feely shit might not do it for this. You ask me, we get him doing something productive, and fucking soon, instead of laying there like a goddamn invalid. He's no good to us like that, anyway."

Rochelle strained to get a response together, struggling, and her eyes gave away the shift in her surprise - because Nick was offering an actual suggestion, one that almost passed as helpful. Almost. "He... is! He's the literal definition of an invalid. I'm not gonna throw a gun in his hand and kick him out to fight!"

Nick couldn't resist putting his mouth into a purse, exaggerating it with a faux-musing tone. "Mmm... Gun's probably a bad idea. Kinda hard to reload with one hand." When he made the effort of mockingly tucking his left arm behind his back - miming a gun in his other hand and twisting it around with a bemused look on his face like he were puzzling out the mechanics - Coach sighed. "Hate to say it, but Nick ain't wrong." As Rochelle shot him a betrayed look, Coach shook his head. "Babygirl, I ain't sayin' now. But... y'all didn't miss that messed up, survival-of-the-fittest shit them Angels were spoutin', did you? Seems to me, worst thing we can do is let him think he can't help out... that he's helpless. Not 'cause we agree, but just fo' his sake."

Keeping utterly silent, merely cocking his head and turning back away to distance himself from the conversation, Nick felt the vaguest self-satisfaction. He'd set the conversation in motion without tipping his hand more than necessary. He didn't want to appear like he was looking out for the guy. He was looking out for himself. The last thing he wanted was to draw this process out any longer, and he definitely didn't want dead weight on the team. As far as he was concerned, Chris had a long way to go before he earned his place.

"I guess." Rochelle allowed, hesitant. "I don't think we should push him, either, though. Getting him on his feet is fine, but fighting? ... He's gonna need to recuperate. I don't even know if he'll be able to fight like this."

Coach eyed her distantly, dark eyes thoughtful and mouth quirking a little. She didn't miss the look, giving a confused one back at him.

He sighed quietly, shaking his head. "Probably the sort of thing he shouldn't hear right now."

Some surprise darted over her expression, along with a faint edge of self-defense. "I wouldn't - say that to his face. I'm just trying to be realistic." Rochelle tucked her hands in her lap, scratching at her thigh through her jeans. "Do you guys really think, even if he gets mobile, he's going to be in fighting condition?"

Ellis couldn't help but bounce his leg, springing his weight on the ball of his foot so his heel struck out a rhythm on the floor. "Well, don't take two arms tuh swing a machete..." When Rochelle turned on him with something very close to a glare, he slunk down in his seat.

"And when it gets stuck in something?"

Despite his visible trepidation, Ellis did lift a hand, one finger raised in a leery gesture. "It ain't like
he's gonna be fightin' alone. Any one of us couldn't manage by ourselves out there fer long. I only mean, if he has to... it ain't impossible."

Rochelle exhaled out a frustrated noise, relenting with a shake of her head. "Look, I get it. We'll do what we have to do. I've seen all the same things you guys have; I know we can't always choose whether or not we get to rest. I just think we're getting ahead of ourselves."

"We're so fucking far behind at this point, it's not exactly hard to do." Nick shot over his shoulder without looking. His eyes caught onto a shape crawling up on a roof some distance away, narrowing, but he couldn't quite decide what it was. He reached to grab the door handle, shutting it. The fresh air was nice, but avoiding infected attention was better.

Ellis blinked in his direction, pinching his lips together - then blustering out a sigh that popped them faintly. "At least if he's wakin' up, maybe we can talk 'bout everythin' soon. I'm almost lookin' forward tuh him gettin' better... he seemed pretty nice." A hesitant smile crossed his face, glancing between his teammates, searching for assurance. "It'll be cool, havin' a new friend, right?"

"Talk about getting ahead of yourself." Nick muttered, sardonically.

Coach squinted in his direction, and though Nick was turned away, the smirk on his face said he felt it. "That's the spirit, Ellis." The eldest survivor leaned back, eyes closed, voice going firm. "All this shit aside, we're all here. We're together. Ain't sho' there's much we can't handle. Gettin' Chris through this is just another trial. We gonn' tackle it like anythin' else."

Where Rochelle nodded, despite herself, and Ellis broke into a grin - Nick outright laughed. It was a short sound, high in his throat, almost nasal. There was this almost tangible bracing between the three of them, anticipating his usual pessimism. Something critical and negative, to dismiss the sentiment.

Instead, he stated with dry humor: "Tackle? That's a little on the nose, Coach."

Ellis was the first to laugh. Rochelle couldn't resist a snort, covering her mouth with a hand, and Coach gave a tolerant roll of his eyes. "Like yo' ass has any room to talk. I hear one more gamblin' or card game metaphor from you, I'll lose my damn mind."

Nick was nothing if not quick on the uptake.

"You wanna bet?"

Between his response and Coach's over-exaggerated sour look, Rochelle and Ellis were lost, breaking into giggles where they sat on the sofa. Nick so rarely played along, let alone amicably, and let alone at a joke mostly at his expense.

He smirked anyway, and it was just a little self-satisfied.
Chapter 146

Something had gotten into the fencing. Snarls andgrowls sounded through the walls as it wandered the yard, seeming almost infuriated - like it had made its way in, and was now lost as to how to escape. Nick scowled as he listened to it, standing close to the wall.

He could track it as it moved around, though there were no windows on the street-facing side of the loft, so he couldn't see it. It circled the house a few times - then went quiet.

He'd just been about to relax, when the abrupt sound of metallic clanging announced it beating on the garage door. Fury clenched at his jaw. "I'm gonna fucking kill this thing." Nick stepped away, reaching to grab his katana where he'd left it leaned against the back of the sofa.

Coach eyed him as he moved, grunting softly. "I'll come with. Watch yo' back."

A snort escaped Nick, swinging his katana on a swiveling wrist. He turned, stepping toward the stairs. "It's one zombie." he stated, scathingly. It wasn't an outright rejection, so Coach pushed up off the couch and went to follow after him. Nick didn't argue, leading the way down to the first floor, dress shoes landing hard on the carpeted stairs.

"Be carefu-" Rochelle started to call down after them, but cut off with a noise of confusion as Ellis yelped, "Wait, wait, wait!" The kid's footsteps suddenly thundered across the second floor, scrambling excitedly for something.

Nick halted at the bottom of the stairs. His expression was mildly tortured, eyes closing, and Coach laughed under his breath - a sound that only contributed to Nick's frustration.

It was with a loping gait that Ellis threw himself down the stairs, his prize held in one hand while his other hand latched onto the railing to keep himself from falling: one of the handheld radios. He stuck it out toward Nick with a grin big enough to blind.

Nick avoided looking at it when he snatched the walkie-talkie away, turning it in his hand a few times. He'd forgotten how long it had been since Ellis had looked that... kiddish. Proud. Giddy and unburdened. Let alone in a look directed at him; part of him wanted to take it in for a moment.

"Really?" His voice had different ideas, going harsh of its own accord. It was reflex to snap, like the slinging of a rubberband drawn taut. His emotions and his thoughts had pulled too close to something affectionate, and if he didn't right himself, it just might show. He could never quite tell when that turned into an over-correction. "We're literally going into the fucking yard for two minutes, tops, you moron."

Ellis was undaunted, fisting a hand and setting it on his hip. His posture sagged into something chastising. "We got 'em fer splittin' up, man. If you don't take 'em when we split up, whut's the point?" He pointed at the radio in Nick's hand insistently, pinched mouth and screwed-up brows clear in their lack of compromise. "You never know what'll happen."

The gambler rolled his eyes, exhaling. He clipped the radio onto the waist of his slacks, angrily, freeing his hand to dismissively wave it in the air. "Christ. Fine, Mom." Nick said it as he turned on his heel, and had just enough time to witness the awkward blink that crossed Ellis' face. The faint pinch, like he was trying not to laugh.

It was weird.
It was weird of him to say, and he felt it.

Rather than confront the awkward utterance, Nick slid his katana-wielding hand up, holding it vertically at his side - and strode to the front door, thrusting it open to escape. If Coach noticed anything off, he didn't say anything, merely following along behind with a reassuring phrase thrown over his shoulder.

"We'll be right back, son."

As the Northerner stalked out onto the porch, he couldn't help a mental self-berating. Of all the shit to say... What am I, flustered? By some stupid Georgia hick? The thought sent a weird emotion through him. Something warm and almost unfamiliar - painful, nearly.

Like stretching a long-unused muscle. I don't fucking get flustered.

Snarling under his breath, Nick swung the katana up so he could grab it two-handed. The moment he began to descend the stairs, he heard the infected's snarling raise in pitch, swiveling, as the thing heard his footsteps. It wasn't until he got halfway down that he saw the creature.

It was a woman, garbed in thick jeans and a dirty white cami, heavy-soled boots on her feet. A backpack was strapped tight to her shoulders, full and jangling, and an empty holster on her hip indicated the place where a gun had once hung. He might've mistaken her for alive, had her skin not carried that corpse-grey tinge, and her face not had a hole blown through its jaw, taking out part of her mandible.

It looked like a wound that would've killed her, had her blood not clotted up furiously, scabbing in gritty clumps along the surface of the injury. The gaping hole made her snarls louder, sounding out even when she closed what remained of her mouth to bare the few teeth left.

Just a regular infected. Suits me fine.

Nick didn't have much time to react before she charged, arms flying up to claw fingers at the air, furious. Spittle drained through the hole in her jaw, turning rusty brown from the dried blood there, and she gargled out a sound of rage as she took the distance between them in huge strides. Coach shouted an alert, but Nick didn't need any encouragement.

He lifted his blade, waiting where he was rather than advancing and giving up the higher ground. She didn't seem to consider the tactics, throwing herself onto and up the porch steps, barely reaching when her hip collided so hard with the railing there was an audible crack. The lunge put her within reach, and Nick lashed out the blade.

He was aiming for her neck, but the angle was wrong and it hit to the side, hewing through her shoulder just above her clavicle. The blow struck, hard, and a shriek escaped her as blood sputtered up from the rent flesh. Nick prepared to saw down, to commit his weight to the attack and cut into her torso, but something stopped him.

Where infected usually ran at him, brainlessly, even when that meant impaling itself on a blade or worsening the damage already done, this infected stopped. She skidded on her heels, boots grinding into the sandy earth and body stuttering with the strike. The infected flashed its gaze to the sword, yellow-glazed eyes widening.

If Nick didn't know better, he might have said it looked afraid.

Before he could collect himself from the shock, the infected reached out, shoving hands against the sword blindly. She screamed, high-pitched and frantic, as the gesture freed the katana blade from
her shoulder. Her hands were damaged in the process, deep gouges cut into the taut skin of her palms, but that didn't stop her from bolting backwards.

As she spun into a turn, scrambling away, Nick couldn't help but stare. *It's... running? What the hell?* His shock was such that he couldn't will himself to move, watching as she took a running leap, slamming into the fencing.

Her injured arm was limp, like he'd broken the structure of it too severely for it to move, but she got her other hand hooked on the top of the fence, dangling her weight there. She screamed, snarling, trying and failing to drag herself up with one arm, boots kicking and skidding wildly against the fence.

It bowed, complaining with a creak of wood, and realizing that she might damage it startled him into action. He reached down, grabbing the pistol they'd found in the Jeep - and he had yet to give to Rochelle - and yanking it free from his thigh holster. His thumb flicked off the safety as he raised it, bracing his knuckles against the wrist of his other hand, closed one eye to center the sights, and aimed.

The shot struck home by a razor-thin margin, just zipping through the edge of the zombie's skull. It splattered gore against the fencing, red and grey and black, and she dropped from her dangle like so much dead weight. Her body crumpled onto the ground, landing on her satchel with a *whumpf*. Nick couldn't resist staring, even as Coach slowly descended the stairs to flank him.

"... Lord Almighty," the older man practically sighed, sounding faintly bemused. "Ain't seen them common zombies run away like that. Too dumb."

Nick nodded in agreement, still moving slowly, shaking off the strange sensation clinging at the wings of his awareness. "I didn't think they had it in them. Seen a Jockey run away, Spitter, Smoker… hell, I swear they *think*. Plan, sometimes." When Coach shot him a fairly disbelieving look, Nick forced himself to shrug.

He wasn't about to relay the story of a Jockey nearly tricking him into killing Ellis in the swamp, so instead, he exhaled harshly. "You can't tell me you haven't gotten that feeling too. Sometimes their timing, their attack, it's almost… coordinated."

Coach tilted his head, absorbing that. "Guess so. Like them tongue-zombies an' Hunters pickin' the weaker of us, or them Jockeys splittin' people off an' draggin' us into danger. Ain't much thought about it." The eldest survivor rubbed at his jawline, scruffy stubble rustling under the touch. "Maybe it's whatever mutated to make 'em different, makin' them smarter, too. Or... less stupid."

"Maybe." Nick gave a dismissive shrug. "What about this bitch, though? She's normal, not mutated. Not a Smoker, or a Hunter. She's just... a person. Looks like she survived a little while before getting infected. Long enough to get equipped, anyway." He grimaced at his own words. "We're not going to have to deal with smarter commons, are we? If they start getting smart, and coming in hordes, I -"

Before he could finish the sentence, the radio at his hip gave a chirrup, and a mechanized voice came through. It was full of concern. "*Ey, _Nick_, ev'rythin' olay? Y'awl? -"*

Shoving his gun back into its holster, thumb flicking the safety as he did, the gambler snatched a hand around the radio and flicked the power button. Ellis' voice cut off with a fuzz of static. A certain relief flickered over Nick's face, grimacing over his shoulder at Coach.

The ex-football player didn't look particularly sympathetic, but grinned lightly, anyway. "You
should be nicer to that boy. He means well."

"We're so close, I can practically hear him from inside the house! Him and his stupid radios." Nick muttered with an agitated energy, swinging his katana as he took the steps left to reach the bottom of the stairs. "Besides. Being nice to him was not abandoning him to die the instant I met him."

Coach watched him move for a moment, head cocking, then stepped to follow. The big man's head went on a swivel, examining their surroundings; though he couldn't see through or over the fencing, he listened for sounds of infected that might've been attracted by the gunshot. It wasn't as loud as a shotgun or a rifle, but it still echoed across the town surrounding them.

"How did y'all meet, anyway? Ro' and I met on the street. She saved me from runnin' straight into that first Tank we dealt with back then."

Nick approached the infected where she'd crumpled to the ground, upper lip peeling back in a disgusted expression at the heavy smell wafting up from the body. "Overalls? Eh. Not that much earlier than we met you two."

He knelt down, tilting his head to examine the body. The backpack intrigued him. It was full of something, though whether it was something useful remained to be seen. "I was walking into town and he blew past me in a decked-out, ugly monster truck. Nearly ran me over."

Coach laughed, just a gruff chuckle, but quieted when a voice yelped from above them.

"Whut?!"

There was a window just at the end of the stairs on the first floor of the condo, and Ellis had pried it open just a few inches, so quietly and carefully Nick hadn't caught the sound of the glass panel sliding upward. His face was pressed into the glass, and he urgently shoved the window up even higher, nose now pressed into the mesh wiring that separated him from the outside. "I did not!"

Nick turned without standing, an elbow resting on his thigh. He slanted his head to look up at the window, eyes rolling with the gesture. "Yeah, you did. Just outside Savannah. Yelling like a dumbshit the whole time - what were you goin', like ninety?" From what he could see of Ellis' face, the kid was shocked, eyes gone wide.

The gambler twisted his voice into drawled mockery, nasal with his Northern accent. "Didn't'ch'yer mama teach you how tuh drive?"

That startled Ellis out of his dumbfounded look, breaking into laughter, tickled. Nick wasn't sure if it was his mocking imitation or the revelation that amused him more. "Oh.. man. I'm sorry, I don't even think I saw you, or I'd'uh stopped! Guess it's a good thing I crashed, or we wouldn't'uh met, h'uh?"

"If that's the case, then when I write my memoirs, you crashing your car will be Chapter Twenty: The Worst Thing That Ever Happened To Me." Nick returned his attention to the corpse, fully aware of the fact that the words made Ellis' eyes soften a little, in that 'you don't mean that' sort of way. He hated that look, because maybe he did mean it.

Or maybe it was the worst thing that ever happened to Ellis.

He didn't want to follow that train of thought, so he reached to grab ahold of the infected's satchel, yanking it upwards.

With a grunt, he flipped the zombie over so he could access the backpack, unzipping its main
compartment so he could look inside. There was clothing, a pack of handgun bullets - the wrong caliber for either his Magnum or the new pistol, he noted with a small irritation, and the gun itself was nowhere to be found.

Digging in, there was little else beyond a few rolls of bandages and a box of gauze patches packed into a plastic Ziploc. He grabbed it, holding it up in the air to show it off. "Delivery for us, apparently." he uttered, with a grin.

... a grin that vanished upon looking down at the space where the bag had sat within the backpack, and seeing what was underneath. "... Holy shit." For a moment, that was all he could say. "Holy shit. Holy shit!" He dropped the Ziploc outright, drawing a bit of a frustrated sound from Coach, who strode forward to retrieve it, brushing the outside off gently.

"Lordy, Nick. Breathe. What you got?" the football coach gruffed, stepping closer to get a look for himself.

The sound of the window wire mesh straining with the pressure of Ellis leaning into it - as if he could see from that distance - was almost audible. "Whut is it?! Somethin' good?" His voice went a little impatient, suddenly darting from the window to instead push open the front door. He'd just stepped out onto the porch landing when Nick straightened, his find held in one hand.

A box of cigarettes, and a lighter, clasped in a fist. "Holy shit, there is a God."

Coach's groan threw his head back, and Ellis stood there, frozen and blinking in disbelief as Nick tore open the box, almost laughing as he discovered it full, minus one or two cigarettes. He shook the lighter - red with a checker-print across the middle - and it sloshed delicately with fuel.

"I take it all back, Sam. You were right, this whole time. God is real and I love him." When Nick lifted his head, a slanted grin stuck on his face, his good humor was thoroughly undaunted by the vexed exasperation lining the postures of the two men staring him down.

"What?"
"No, no, no."

Rochelle had her hands on her hips, leaned in, head shaking furiously even as she spoke. Her face was lost between shock and offense, jaw cocked faintly forward. "Absolutely not. You are not smoking in here. We have to stay here for who knows how long - I am not going to sit around in cigarette smoke. It reeks."

Flicking his thumbtip against the lighter's trigger, Nick arched a brow at her. There was defiance there, like he was daring someone to try and take it away from him.

"I'll crack a window." he returned, dismissively, only to have her headshaking increase in pace. Nick raised his voice in mock-outrage, even though he could barely even muster enough energy to be irritated. Even just holding a box of cigarettes was soothing his heartrate to a calm beat. "What? You want me to go outside? I'll get jumped by a zombie or something, you heartless -"

"Just go on the balcony." Coach advised, with a sort of put-upon weariness... though also a sharpness, as if warning Nick not to finish that sentence. "You outnumbered, boy."

Narrowing his eyes faintly, Nick only spared a moment to glance around the loft, standing there at the end of one of the loveseats. Ellis was standing near the kitchen island, and his slightly abashed expression made it painfully clear he didn't intend on defending the older man.

Nick made sure to make enough eye contact to get across the message that Ellis would pay for the disloyalty - right before he broke into a sly grin, waggling the lighter. "Fine. Whatever. You assclowns can literally not piss me off right now. I am on cloud nine."

He practically swaggered to the glass doors that opened onto the balcony, sliding the door open and escaping onto the porch, closing it behind himself. There was just enough room for him to lounge against the railing, legs crossing, busying himself with his cigarettes.

Rochelle sighed, though the sound was half-amused. She crossed her arms, glancing toward Coach, eyes narrowing at his hapless shrug. "You guys were gone for two minutes. How the hell did he find cigarettes, and why did you let him?"

"That zombie out there had a backpack." Coach shook his head as he lifted up the bandage material they'd found, packed up in a plastic bag. "This, and cigarettes. Not much else." He did grin a little, warily. "Least he's in a good mood."

She gave a reluctant laugh, squinting slightly. "What are the chances..." Rochelle thrust her hands up flatly, the gesture a little bewildered, before approaching to take the Ziploc from him and examine its contents. "You're probably right, though. Whatever gets his panties out of their permanent twist."

Ellis blinked out through the glass doors, watching Nick place a cigarette between his lips and light it. The look on his face was practically blissful, and there was a heat in how he hunched forward and inhaled from it.

Between that and the savouring way the gambler held the smoke in his lungs, his exhale billowing out smoke and draining the tension from his body until he was slumped... Ellis felt stupid for feeling embarrassed, for having a heat rise up to his face. He hadn't seen Nick look that pleased and relaxed since -
Since the previous night, actually.

That thought only served to embarrass him more.

"Zombie with a backpack, huh? Wish more of them had supplies." She tucked the bag under her arm, smiling gently, even as a faint tension touched her brow. "Especially medical supplies. We should change Chris' bandages with this. Good timing, since we have water to clean it up, too."

Prying his attention away from Nick, Ellis hopped faintly onto the balls of his feet. He scratched at his waist, peering down at his clothing. As much as a mess didn't bother him, his clothing was starting to turn a little unrecognizable.

Blood and sweat and who-knew-what was building up, and he was sure he stunk. It was hard to tell how much of it was him, and how much of it was the gore and decomposition permeating the air almost permanently. "Man... I wish we had more water. Sure could use a wash myself."

Coach chuckled, spreading his arms in a slight shrug. He half-turned, looking back over his shoulder, eyes straining to look at the failing stitches that just barely held his shirt together across his spine. He wasn't looking much better than Ellis, especially after taking the brunt of the mess during Chris' amputation. "Shower, and some new clothes."

"Maybe we can find a clothing store at some point. We cut Chris' shirt up, too..." Rochelle sighed a little with the words, pouting out her lower lip. She hooked her arm around the baggie of medical supplies, freeing her other hand to gesture at her clothing. "And I wouldn't mind a change. Get out of these stupid jeans..."

That made Ellis laugh, crinkling his brow. "Yeah. I mean, these coveralls are comfy'n'all, but it'd be nice tuh have real pants. Not sure they'd have anythin' Nick would wear, though."

The reporter shrugged her shoulders, russet-coloured eyes narrowing with amusement. "Doubtful they have a suit shop out here, but who knows. I'd get a kick out of seeing him in some beachwear. Anyway, we'll see when we get there, I guess." She thumbed toward the kitchen. "If you guys want, I think there's some washcloths in there. We could at least wet them, do a scrub-down."

Ellis spared a faintly worried look at her, head cocking. "You think we should use up water like that...? Whut if we don't find no more?"

She sighed, pushing her tongue between her teeth, breath whistling softly with the gesture. "Honestly, you can do what you want. I'm going to spend the cup of water it'll take to feel a little less gross. I feel like I've earned it."

He quickly flickered to an apologetic look, like she was saying he'd implied otherwise - so she smiled at him, tiredly. "Later, though. I'm gonna get some food together. Chris should really take some more meds, keep the painkillers in his system. Especially for when we go to clean his shoulder...."

When Rochelle turned to step toward the kitchen, Ellis followed at her heels. "I'll help." he chirped, eagerly, and she disguised her relief behind a vague nod. After how the first time went... she wasn't about to go back to Chris alone. And if anyone could cheer him up, it would be Ellis. "You think more soup? Maybe he could handle some granola or somethin'. He's gonna waste away, at this rate."

"He ain't the only one." Coach groused quietly to himself, and Ellis gave a laugh, turning to sneak a grin at the older man as Coach made his way to the sofa to sit down.
Coach grasped at his bum knee, rubbing fingers on either side of his kneecap, exhaling tautly. His expression flickered through a few emotions before settling on curiosity, voice lowering to a questioning tone. "Hey, you two. You ever think about zombies bein' smart?"

As Rochelle mulled over their food stores, trying to decide on what was best to bring to Christophe, Ellis turned entirely to face Coach. He quirked a brow in interest, shrugging. "Smart? Dunno. They run intuh fire, and they get tricked by them puke bombs. Don't seem too smart to me. Heck, *animals* know not tuh run toward fire. Well.. mostly. I ever tell y'all 'bout the zoo Keith was tryin' tuh make?"

Both Rochelle and Coach shook their heads in slow unison, less because they thought that was the case - and more because there was little stopping him, even had they wanted to. Ellis brightened instantly, grabbing the edge of the kitchen island and thrusting his other hand up in a vague gesticulation.

"He tried tuh teach this squirrel how tuh jump through fire, like in them circuses with lions, but well... I guess it got scared, 'cause it just jumped right in. Lit up *instantly*. Then - I dunno if it was angry, or scared, or *whut*, but it ran right at Keith! Got up his pantleg, still burnin' - man, between him screamin' and the squirrel screamin' and me screamin'... well. Mama pretty much put a stop tuh the zoo thing after that."

Grabbing a small bag of granola, squeezing it and finding it a softer, oat-baked variety, Rochelle tucked the pack under her arm to join the medical supplies. "I don't blame the squirrel for that one. Poor thing." Her eyes cut back to Coach, crinkling the bridge of her nose. "As for zombies... I just think about when we were in the swamp, and that Jockey and Smoker attacked at the same time. Seemed like a weird coincidence. Felt like they split us off on purpose."

"Mn. Can't say Chargers seem real smart, though." He rubbed underneath his chin, musingly, only to look up and shrug them off. "I ain't got no point. Just thinkin' on things. Y'all go on and tend to the boy. Need somethin', holler, and I'll come down."

Rochelle didn't seem completely convinced, but flashed him a smile anyway. He seemed merely thoughtful, calmly so, so she let it go and crossed the loft to reach the stairs. "Okay. Let us know if something's up. C'mon, Ellis."

She canted her head to urge him to follow, descending the steps as he came up to her side.

They moved in an easy shoulder-to-shoulder line, steps matching as they went. She waited to speak until they'd gotten halfway down, sure Coach couldn't hear her anymore. Her voice lowered as they went down together, eyes closely watching the movements of her own feet. "Can you do me a favour?"

The Georgian blinked at her sideways, a grin touching his lightly stubbled face. "Course."

"You probably figured out Chris wasn't in the .. best of moods earlier. I don't really blame him." Her eyes softened, gaze averting with something like guilt. "I don't think I'm really who he wants to talk to right now. Could you kinda... take point on that? I'll get the meds and stuff ready, but I think he needs to talk to someone who isn't the reason he lost his arm."

Ellis was outright startled, fighting the urge to stop where he was. His body only partially obeyed, resulting in a faint stumble as he landed his foot half-off the next step. They were already at the bottom, so he only staggered down one stair before he'd recaptured his balance on the ground floor. "Uh... shit, Ro'. Why would you think that? The Witch took his arm, not you!"
His slightly raised tone made her eyes narrow, darting a glance back up the stairs - but Coach didn't react, whether by ignorance or intent. "I hesitated. If I'd shot faster..." She shook her head, though, before he could do more than pop his mouth open in protest. "It doesn't matter. I just know he didn't want me in there earlier, so... just talk to him, okay? Like everything's fine."

The younger man was still frowning, but nodded his head. He reached up to grasp a hand on his trucker cap, screwing it a little tighter on his head, determination seeping into his posture. "I can do that."

Rochelle gave him a grateful look, some amount of tension relieved. He smiled back, deciding against pressing her on the subject of her guilt. He understood how that felt: the weight of feeling like he'd done something to hurt someone else. Even unintentionally, even accidentally. He merely secreted the knowledge away. She didn't want to talk about it, or wasn't ready yet.

He'd just be open, and wait.

Ellis took the lead as they approached the bedroom door, carefully opening it up, butting his shoulder against the door as it swung open. He padded in far enough to get a look at Chris, tongue pressing into the roof of his mouth in a faintly nervous gesture as he noted the Spaniard was asleep. He had not slept well, it seemed.

Somehow, he'd ended up flipped, head near the footboard. He was curled on his side, stumped shoulder in the air, and the sheets were strangled around half of him, baring his naked upper body but wrapped tight around his legs. His bandages were misaligned, almost dragged off of his injury, though Ellis couldn't quite tell if he'd been actively fussing with them - or if they'd merely loosened as he'd restlessly moved on the bed.

Ellis couldn't help but notice the swollen flush around his eyes, stark against his otherwise bloodless, tawny skin. He'd been crying, not that Ellis blamed him. Still, sympathy stirred up in his chest at the sight, and he approached the bed at a cautious step.

Keeping her head low, Rochelle ducked across the room to reach the nightstand where they'd left the pills and a half-empty bottle of water. She set the food and medical supplies down, nerves tangible in the way she very carefully arranged it all out and started to crack open the pill bottles, moving gently with her injured hand.

As she did, Ellis carefully slipped to sit on the edge of the bed, cocking his head to align it with the angle of Christophe's. He stayed leaned away, trying to offer what little privacy he could, and uttered a gentle, "'Ey... Chris. Wake up, buddy."

When the foreigner failed to stir, Ellis pinched his lips, settling on reaching out and touching a hand to the man's waist. He jolted, hard, and Ellis recoiled. There was raw fear on his face, and for a moment, Ellis thought he might outright panic - but the moment Chris' eyes alighted on his, it dissipated.

In its place came a quiet pain, and he slowly pushed back down against the mattress, grimacing. "¿Tío..?" he whispered, voice strained.

Ellis' head cocked a little further, gradually returning his body to its previous posturing. "Hey, bud. I bet you don't feel nice right now, but we're gonna have you take some more meds, okay? 'N'eat somethin'. You'll feel better, I bet."

When Chris gave a bleary nod of his head, the movement staggered as if even it hurt to manage, Ellis flattened a hand out in a soothing gesture. "You don't gotta get up, but we should lean you
upright a li'l. I'll put the pillow up on here -" He patted his palm against the footboard. "- and we can get you set. Okay?"

His voice was soothing, drawled with a casual tenderness, slow and clear. Christophe followed it with a fractured attention, the vague twitching of his brow indicating some difficulty - but he seemed to understand, lowering his eyes. "Vale." His arm shifted, pressing his elbow into the mattress, and he waited with a wince.

Ellis quickly leaned back, snatching up the pillow from the bed so he could set it up on the bed's footboard. He started to brace himself, reaching to get hands on Chris and help him shift, but the foreigner flinched in a way that made Ellis hesitate.

An urgent, quiet utterance left the Spaniard, shaking his head in clear negation. "I can..."

The Georgian blinked, hesitantly pulling his hands back. He could only think of Coach's instruction; that they shouldn't make him feel helpless. He struggled with it, something in his very core protesting the idea of sitting by and letting Chris potentially hurt himself, and couldn't help but frown. He didn't know what was the right choice.

It was more indecision than anything else that made him watch as Chris leveraged with his elbow, pushing against the bed and dragging his body closer to the footboard. The agony was visible in the lines of his face, jaw clenching, and it was all Ellis could do to keep himself from lurching forward and helping.

Chris slowly pressed his face into the pillow, body and remaining arm trembling strongly - then eased down, exhaling with the effort. Sweat beaded up on his skin, and he closed his eyes, lips parted in a faint gasp. His voice was reedy when he spoke. "Arm.. hurts..."

"I bet." Ellis practically crooned, turning himself a little on the bed so he could better face Chris. The Spaniard panted gently, eyes slipping past him, vantage now such that he could see Rochelle standing at the nightstand. His expression darkened just a little.  "S'why we're gonna give you some more painkillers, a'ight? You think you can take some pills?"

"Sí." Chris whispered, gaze thoroughly rooted on Rochelle.

He didn't seem angry. If anything, he seemed conflicted - ashamed, maybe. The Georgian squinted slightly at the other man, mouth pursing, before casually raising his voice. "'Ey, Ro'. You think you can run upstairs and get some water? Figure we'll need it later anyway. That, 'n'Nick needs tuh take another pill. While you got 'em open and he's in a good mood."

When she turned to glance at him, he got the distinct sense she knew what he was doing. The idea was only cemented by the obedient way she nodded, plucking up and palming one antibiotic capsule and turning to leave the room, a little quicker than was really necessary. She didn't close the door behind herself, but her hip brushed it as she passed, drawing it into slipping half-closed on its own.

Ellis glanced back at Christophe, watching as some of that darkness faded, leaving him mostly just weary-looking. The Georgian clenched his jaw, thoughtfully, chewing on his tongue. He settled on slipping away, standing up and moving over to the nightstand. He gathered up an antibiotic capsule and two painkillers, holding them in one hand and grabbing the waterbottle with the other.

"I'm real glad yer okay." he uttered, conversationally, tone light. "You saved Coach'n'Ro, y'know. They'd probably be dead if you hadn't come back."
Chris watched him as he approached, eyes dull. "I remember, a little." Although his voice had a raspy edge to it, some amount of humor developed as he spoke. "Did not mean, so literal, to... em... para expiar." When Ellis cocked his head, uncomprehending, the other man sighed softly, eyes half-closing. "... Lo siento. Hard to... focus."

"That's alright." Ellis assured him, giving a little smile. "Sorry I don't understand none. Y'know, Nick knows some Spanish. Maybe y'all can talk."

A faint kind of smile touched the Spaniard's lips, and Ellis couldn't help his expression from shifting into a grin in eager response. He took a chance on the moment, stepping to retake his seat on the edge of the bed. Chris' eyes lowered to observe him as he did, the smile only slightly fading.

"You okay, man? You seem kinda weird... when Ro' was in here, I mean." When that faded the smile entirely, Ellis splayed the fingers of his right hand, still holding the waterbottle between his thumb and palm. "I ain't tryin' tuh be nosy, s'just... she's kinda upset."

Chris gazed at him, jawline tensing. "I am... I do not wish to upset her. It is ... hard." His eyes closed entirely, and a sadness lined his features amidst the lingering pain. "You would not want el traje to see you like this, ¿no?"

Ellis froze, breath catching in his throat. Denial struck first - because surely he just misunderstood, or misheard. He wasn't sure what 'traje' meant, but he knew Chris had called Nick that once before. There was only one conclusion to draw from that, and it startled him into wordless horror.

With his eyes closed, Chris didn't seem to take notice. He continued, voice lowering to something almost mournful. "It is worse, to see her, I think. Even you... look at me, and I..." He blinked his eyes open hesitantly, and when his gaze alighted on Ellis, his sentence abruptly cut short.

The Georgian was white as a sheet, staring back at Christophe.

"Ay... ¿Tío...?"

Ellis might have started babbling, unsure if he meant to deny his and Nick's relationship or merely question how Chris knew - had the sudden ratatatat of gunfire not sounded out. Ellis had no idea how far off it was. It was muffled, but sharp enough to pierce the walls. A few blocks off? A few streets?

All he knew was none of them had an automatic.
Nick hit the front door shoulder-first, rifle gripped in his hands. He lunged out onto the porch, cigarette still held between his lips. He shoved the rifle up to his shoulder to scan their surroundings through the scope. The moment the gunfire had started, he'd wordlessly charged through the condo, ignoring the outbursts of his teammates.

Rochelle had yelped, and Coach had hollered a fierce "Shit." He hadn't stopped to say anything, and he heard them running after him. Ellis was roused from the bedroom, shoving himself clumsily through the door with as much grace as he usually carried. That being very little.

Nick's eyes kept catching on figures - but they were just infected, roused by the gunfire. The zombies seemed as unsure as him of quite where it had originated, as they prowled in varied directions, filtering down the road and around houses.

It was less like a horde and more like the slow shifting of attention, drawing away the same zombies that his gunshot earlier had attracted.

More gunfire sounded, and this time, Nick got a better sense for where it came from. It was definitely off to the right, echoing from the direction of the pawnshop and general store. That was not comforting; they hadn't taken the supplies and left. They were lingering, not that he knew why.

Even worse, they'd likely heard him and Ellis fighting infected while they were hunting for supplies earlier. It was likely that whoever they were, they knew the team was nearby... and if they hadn't already left, they clearly weren't concerned about running into them. That could mean a number of things, and Nick didn't like any of them.

Nick lowered the rifle, slowly, just as Rochelle suddenly pressed against his side. "Where -" she hissed, voice gone wild with something a lot like fear. He didn't know if she was wrong or right to feel that way.

"Few streets off, at least. Back around the pawnshop," he stated, voice bristled with an oddly calm kind of anger. He used his tongue to roll his cigarette to the corner of his mouth, inhaling sharply. Maybe it was the nicotine, but he mostly felt focused. "Fighting infected. Maybe we'll get lucky and the zombies will take care of them for us."

Coach's gruff tone came from behind him, at a slight distance. He hung back rather than crowd into the doorway, but worry baked into his tone with a certain tension. It deepened when more gunfire came thundering sharply through the air, though quieter this time - like they were moving further away. "What if they ain't hostile? Y'all don't think we should consider goin' to help them?"

"Whut if they are?" Ellis' voice was quiet, hesitant. He approached, stepping up behind Rochelle. She turned to glance at him, eyes flinching toward a concerned pinch; hearing him so suspicious was still strange, even if she didn't disagree. "If they got guns - whut if they just start shootin' at us? That sounds like a machine gun or somethin'."

Nick turned slightly, pressing back against Rochelle. His sudden turn made her stumble a little, and the gambler herded both her and Ellis into the condo. They obeyed with a wary scatter to get out of his way, and he stood in the doorway, stance wide.

Protective, almost, as he blocked the open threshold.

"There's no reason to go looking for them. If they're in trouble, it's their own problem, and we've
got too much to lose going out on a limb for some fucker we don't know."

Rochelle's lips quirked downward, head tilting to follow. She slowly grasped at her bicep, squeezing there with her injured hand. "I know you're right, Nick, I just - if that was us... and someone could've helped but didn't..."

He shrugged, reaching up to pinch fingertips on his cigarette filter and pull it free from his lips so he could blow out a breath from the corner of his mouth. He'd already taken it down to a stub, voice gone a little raspy from the smoke.

It was a pack of menthols, and while he'd typically have hated the cool burn left behind, he couldn't begin to care. Being picky had stopped being an option a long time ago.

"Think of how many people are dead, Ro'. Anyone alive is either lucky as shit, or the type to thrive in a warzone. I think we've soaked up all the luck around here, so let's assume they're the latter - and I've had enough of that bullshit for one apocalypse. The slim chance they're friendly... is it worth it?"

Rochelle's expression turned to reluctant understanding, and she shook her head.

Nick replaced the cigarette in his mouth, taking one last deep drag. He held the smoke in his lungs, feeling the cold burn travel down his throat and eke its way up through his nostrils... and then he took a step back, smashing the cigarette out on the porch railing. He left it there, gazing in at the others where they stood.

"Anybody disagree?" As bluntly harsh as he asked it, he waited genuinely for responses, guarded green eyes flicking from Rochelle - to Ellis - to Coach. They shook their heads on cue, though none of them did so enthusiastically. Satisfied, Nick carefully stepped inside and closed the door behind himself. The sound as he locked the knob and the deadbolt was strangely loud.

Two snap-thunks, met with a now-muffled spit of gunfire from outside.

"Whoever's on watch should be lookin' out fo' them, too." Coach slid his arms into a cross over his chest, eyes drawn with hesitant concern. "Don't want us gettin' snuck up on. If they mean us harm, they ain't gonna announce themselves like a zombie bangin' on the door."

Nick nodded his head, wiping a hand idly on his hip. "Keep the windows shuttered, too. And no more gunshots. Not until we feel like they're gone." He started to step away, leading with his shoulder as if to brush past Rochelle and walk up toward the staircase.

He stopped, abruptly, when Chris' voice came thinly from the bedroom, straining to be heard. "¿Qué -? What is... going on?"

Nick's brow arched, but Coach spoke for him, head tilting and arms dropping from their cross on his chest. "He's up an' talkin'? When Ellis nodded, hesitantly, eyes averting, Coach shrugged a shoulder and gestured toward the bedroom. "You think he's ready fo' some questions? Ain't trying to push him."

"Uh..." Ellis curled his hands into fists, sucking his lower lip between his teeth. He'd barely had enough time to react to the idea that Chris might know about him and Nick, let alone decide how to handle it. What if Chris knew - somehow - and said something in front of everyone else? He'd seemed almost confused at Ellis' shock, like he hadn't expected it.

Or maybe Ellis was merely overthinking. All Chris had really said was that he wouldn't want Nick to see him injured. That didn't necessarily mean anything. It certainly hadn't inherently implied a
relationship between them. Maybe he'd even misspoken; after all, his English was suffering from his exhausted and pained state.

He was being paranoid. How would Chris have even found out? Still, if he could just get a moment with him - just to make sure...

"Yeah... I think so. Just, we was givin' him pills, so... y'know." It came out stilted, forced, and Rochelle noticed. She flashed him a faint look of confusion, brow twitching. He could do little more than widen his eyes at her in a plea for backup, hoping she'd catch on and help him. "Give us a minute...?"

Rochelle didn't react fast enough, though, and Ellis could only watch as Nick dismissively waved a hand. "Sure, sure." The gambler strode toward the bedroom, shoving his way past the door and slipping inside. Coach followed suit with a faintly grumbled breath, quick-stepping to stay close as if to keep an eye on him.

When they entered, Coach was quick to speak, voice softened. "Hi there, son. Good to see you up an' movin'." Chris responded quietly, but Ellis couldn't hear what he said. He was too busy shooting Rochelle a frantic glance. She frowned, stepping close and cocking her head with a curious look.

Ellis pushed his mouth against her ear, cupping a hand against her temple to muffle his voice. He knew it trembled a little, strained with uncertainty, and he couldn't stop a bashful tone from hushing the words. "Is... there any way he - Chris knows? 'Bout... me'n'Nick?"

She startled in such a blatant way, practically leaning away from him, that he grew immediately certain she certainly hadn't told Chris. "What - no way! I didn't say anything...!" Rochelle blurted out, too loud, and Ellis quickly reached out to put hands against her arm, soothingly.

The gesture made her quiet, gaze flickering toward the bedroom doorway. Strained confusion wrought her brows into a quirked shape, teeth sneaking a nip onto her lower lip. "There's no way. What makes you think -"

"Come on, ladies." Nick drawled from inside the bedroom, impatiently and a little snidely. "This is a group activity."

Rochelle's eyes rolled at the Northerner, expression hesitantly flattening out to something cool. She reached to grab Ellis' hand, cautiously meeting his gaze and holding it. "We'll deal with it. Don't worry. Okay?" He only barely nodded, unconvinced, but followed when she tugged him along.

They padded into the bedroom, their behaviour earning them a dubious look from Nick. "Gossip?" he questioned, languidly stretching his shoulders where he leaned against the wall next to the dresser. Rochelle flashed him a low smile, blithely, before turning her eyes toward Christophe.

The gambler grinned to himself, eyes half-closing and weight settling more firmly against the wall. It was pure luck that he didn't glance toward Ellis; the Georgian wasn't nearly as good at keeping on a poker face.

Christophe had sat himself up, legs drawn into a messy curl under his body and hand braced against the mattress to hold his weight up. There was pain on his features, but he stifled it with a clenched jaw. It was mostly the winded tone to his voice that gave him away.

"Aquí estás..." he uttered, with something like a laugh hiding somewhere in the phrase.

His eyes then went vague, and maybe saddened.
"Chris." Coach approached the bed from the other side, allowing himself to drop down to sit on the edge of the mattress. His weight made it bow just a little, and the shift in balance jostled Christophe just enough to make him panic vaguely, gripping fingers against the bed to steady himself.

His ruined shoulder twitched, the muscles in his neck going tense, and the way he glanced numbly at the footboard made Ellis think he'd reflexively tried to grab it with a hand that no longer existed.

"You mind talkin' to us for a minute? We been hopin' you could... clear up some things." The eldest survivor placed his hands together, lacing his fingers, as if very carefully mulling over his words. Chris turned his head, sluggishly, gazing at him. "I wouldn't be botherin' you if it weren't important."

Slowly, the Spaniard averted his eyes down to his knees. "I do not know if I can help..." He didn't sound convinced, chewing at the inside of his cheek, but nodded regardless. "But... Sí."

Ellis approached tenderly, gathering back up the pills and water from where he'd practically thrown them onto the nightstand. He slid to sit next to Chris, holding the pills up on a flat palm. The foreigner cautiously gave up his grip on the bed to take them, fingertips trembling a little as he scooped up the three pills from Ellis' hand.

He slid them into his mouth all at once, dully, holding them on his tongue. Ellis quickly offered the waterbottle out, watching as Chris took the bottle and gulped heavily from it, downing the pills with only a faint strain. He recovered quickly, lowering the bottle to his lap with a tense few inhales and darting his tongue out to flick over his lower lip.

His eyes slid to gaze toward Rochelle, shaded under his brows with a dropped chin. "If you need, I do it. Anything."

There was some desperation there, and Ellis couldn't completely tell why. The younger man fell to looking between all of them in a slow circle, and there was something vulnerable in his posturing. Insecure in a way that was heightened, even from minutes earlier.

"A'ight." Coach allowed, gently, shifting on the bed. He settled his laced hands over his knee, gripping there, a weary energy touching his eyes. The big man glanced at Nick, but the gambler merely canted his head as if in surrender, and Coach continued. "You remember the fight we had in the gunstore? When Brenda went wild?"

Chris nodded, tautly, attention darting toward Ellis. "Sí. And... I'm sorry, hermano... I did not know they meant to hurt you, te juro - I swear."

Although it came a little strained, Ellis flashed a reassuring smile at him, nodding in a slow and soothing way. Absorbing the forgiveness in that gesture for a weary beat, the Spaniard seemed just the faintest bit surprised. It took him a moment, but eventually, he glanced back at Coach. "... y, ¿qué?"

"Us bringing up the military set her off." Nick leaned forward slightly, eyes slitting vaguely, tone placid. "Why?"

With a hesitant look, Chris stowed the waterbottle between his thigh and calf and raised his hand to touch his jawline, brushing fingertips against the scruffy facial hair there. His eyes flickered roughly between the survivors, slumping just slightly down where he sat. "Em. Coño. Yes. It is... hard to say."
Nick's calm tone turned a little irritated, head tilting. "Try."

Rochelle put her hands on her hips, fingers squeezing tenderly, agitation drawing her brow into a pinch. "Nick. Don't be a dick." The gambler slid her an unamused look, making her eyes narrow. "He's trying. It's okay, Chris, I know you're having a hard time with English right now... We -"

The foreigner's expression went dim, eyes half-closing as he inhaled. "No, no... not... language. I mean I do not know much." He shook his head, missing the slightly apologetic look that crossed Rochelle's face. "I did not see it - pues - de primera... First-hand?" Chris' eyes flashed around, questioningly, only continuing after a small nod from Nick.

"I only know what B told us." He grasped his hand around the waterbottle but did not lift it, a soft frown edging his features. Exhaustion heightened the lisp at the edge of his accent. "She went to evac, at the beginning. There was - habían entrado en pánico. They shot many people, because a woman was a Carrier, and the crowd... they panicked. They test, ¿sí?"

To illustrate his point, he raised his hand, two fingers extended, as if to tap at the inside of his other elbow. It was only when his fingertips made contact with air that he seemed to realize his mistake. Some amount of shame touched his jaw, as well as the too-quick way he lowered his hand again.

Ellis shook his head quickly, mouth screwing up in confusion. "Carrier? You mean, like -"

Nick pulled off the wall, stalking carefully to stand more directly in front of Christophe. He interrupted Ellis easily, eyes narrowing. "Brenda used that term, too. Please tell me that doesn't mean what I think it does, because -"

"You do not know?" Chris' eyes widened faintly, head twitching back on his neck, interrupting Nick with the same ease. He looked between the survivors with a growing kind of horror, lips hanging in a vague part. "... How?"

When a kind of fury twitched at Nick's lips, Chris quickly raised his hand, stuttering out a fast few words. "I-it just.. I am surprised. I thought..." Coach placed a palm against his back, half-soothing and half-bracing - and the younger man slowly shook his head. "The infection, it does not make you one of them. It stays in you, and you make others sick."

Understanding hit all of them in unison. Coach's hand drew back in a snap, eyes going dull. Nick reacted sluggishly, slowly stepping his weight forward and beginning a quick pace on the carpet. Ellis froze, reflexively looking around, as if unsure how to react at first.

"Oh.. God." left Rochelle in a vague breath, leaning back on her heels. "Fuck." Her eyes flashed wide, suddenly lifting a hand to clamp it over her mouth. It was with some horror that she turned, staring at Nick. He returned her stare, but uncomprehendingly at first.

"Nick..." She just whispered the words, muffled past her fingers. "Carmine."

The gambler's footsteps halted, fingers halfway through carding through his hair. It wasn't really shock or realization that appeared on his features, more a distant resignation. He lowered his hand, letting his thumb brush along the curve of his thin lower lip.

"Honey..." Rochelle uttered, reaching a hand out - but Nick stepped to dodge it without a sound, moving instead to approach the side of the bed, eyes slitted dangerously.

The Northerner slipped a hand into the pocket of his slacks, rolling his head on his neck, matching gazes with Christophe solidly. The foreigner didn't flinch outright, but he did lower his posture slightly, slumping vaguely as if in submission. "How do we know? You said there's a test. Like a
blood test? Is that the only way to know?"

Chris shook his head slowly, putting some suction on his lower lip and letting his teeth press against it. "Do not know. But if you have not fallen ill, then... que yo sepa, you are Carriers." He spoke warily, nervously, seeming aware of the tension his words sent rippling through the gambler's body. "Some talk of... Immune. I do not think there are any. Just infected, uninfected, y Carriers."

Quietly, Coach spoke, arms drawing into something of a hug across his torso. His tone was gently questioning, but riddled with tension that made his voice rough and raw. "Are you a Carrier?"

"Que yo sepa." Chris repeated, nodding his head in slow confirmation.

There was silence, for just a few moments. Rochelle's hand kept almost lifting, like she were desperate to step close and touch Nick, but she repeatedly forced it to lower and held herself still. Ellis only gradually let his eyes settle onto Chris, brows drawn tight with worry.

"If... Do you think Brenda was right? Maybe she was right about bein' scared tuh call them in... Maybe we shouldn't. If they shot folk - if we're Carriers, and they were shootin' Carriers, I -"

That worry slowly shifted. Tightened. His tone went breathless with something frightened, and Rochelle's attention did a sharp turn, abruptly drawing close to the Georgian. She wrapped an arm around his back soothingly, and was close enough to hear his voice hitch when he spoke again.

"They ain't gonna shoot us. Right?"

Chris gazed at him, a frown plastered across his face, tired lines dragging at the corners of his eyes. "I... No se, tío. B saw these things in the beginning - there was fear. Panic. Maybe it has changed. But we have not seen the military since, or CEDA."

When Ellis turned half-away, not entirely disengaging from Rochelle in the motion, Chris was left to wince faintly. He averted his honey-brown eyes. A sigh escaped him. "... lo siento. I wish I could... say better things."

"It's not your fault." Rochelle murmured without looking at him, slipping her hand up. She braced her palm against Ellis' cheek, forcing him to meet her gaze. His stone-blue eyes were vague with a frantic energy. "Ellis, sweetie. It'll be okay. We'll figure it out."

Ellis stepped away from her, quickly raising a hand to tuck a knuckle on his billcap, dragging it low over his face. The shadow of it disguised the way his lips trembled, expression unconvinced. "I... hope so."

He drew no comfort from her words, and she sensed it.

Rochelle wasn't certain what shook her more: the revelations now sinking in fully, or just how much blunt fear was laced into Ellis' posture.
Chapter 149

Sitting on a lower step of the staircase, Nick slowly twirled his box of cigarettes in one hand. Every time it came vertical, he tapped it against the knuckles of his other hand, listening to the rustle as the paper sticks secreted away inside would jostle to one direction or the other. His eyes were aligned carefully with the window at the bottom of the stairs, the shutters slanted just right so he could see out.

Chris had begun telling the same story he'd told Nick, and the gambler had stuck around just long enough to ensure the foreigner didn't blow his cover - then escaped. He needed the quiet, and needed away from Rochelle's attention.

He wasn't upset. Upset wasn't the word for it. Did he care that it was likely he'd been responsible for a girl's death? Did it make his fingers shake a little, just a tremble, to know she'd turned into a Witch because of him? He wished he could say that, almost. That would have been the human reaction. To feel bad, to feel sympathy, to feel sorry.

Instead, he just felt angry.

Ain't that how it goes? Just when you think fate can't give you anything else, when you're tapped out, it finds a new way to kick you in the teeth. Turning into a zombie seemed preferable, almost. At least then he could've been saved the stress of thought. He glanced at his hand, staring down at the blue-green veins tracing lines underneath his skin. Shouldn't I feel something? Shouldn't it feel... like something?

A delirious part of him wanted to deny it. If he'd been infected, he'd have known. He'd have been able to tell if he were a ticking time bomb of a zombie virus. That isn't something that you just... don't notice.

The infected were mutated and wild and mad. Even the common zombies were vile, grey-skinned monsters, caught in fury and animal rage. How could that same virus be in his veins, silent? Harmless - except for, apparently, still being contagious? There was simply no way. He didn't know why he was putting such faith in Chris, anyway.

The so-called Angels of Death had done nothing but bring misery down on them. Why would this be any different?

His skin was crawling with some far-off disgusted sensation, and he decisively opened his cigarette pack, already yanking out another. At this rate, they wouldn't last him the day. He placed the stick between his lips, reaching for his pocket to search out his lighter, when the bedroom door opened. Ellis slipped out, head low and face masked under his cap.

Nick didn't say anything, but his hand stopped. He settled instead for rolling the cigarette back and forth with his tongue, eyes closing. He didn't want to talk, turning his chin away faintly, hoping Ellis might just pass him by. If the younger man needed comfort, he definitely wouldn't find it with Nick.

The gambler barely knew how to comfort himself.

He was kidding himself to think the Georgian might leave him alone, naturally, and Ellis drew cautiously close. However, as the Southerner pushed down to sit on the stair just below Nick's, he was silent. They sat there quietly, both unmoving except for the soft rustle as Nick toyed with his
cigarette and the low sound of Ellis fidgeting a thumb against the toe of his left workboot.

The quiet wore at Nick's patience. He became hyper-aware of Ellis' presence, and that small sound became gratingly loud. Where he should have felt a temptation to leave, or snap until Ellis left, he instead mostly felt an urge to break the silence. Hearing Ellis talk would be better than this, surely. At least it'd be a distraction.

It was only gradually that Nick allowed his head to straighten back out. He didn't open his eyes, but he did exhale, switching to bite his cigarette between his teeth.

"Sucks, huh?"

He knew that wasn't the thing to say when Ellis' head ducked a little, hanging low. The younger man's voice was muted when he agreed, "Yeah."

"Yeah."

and there was a hanging silence afterwards that made Nick think he might not speak again. It was with a faint sniff that Ellis sighed, rolling his head suddenly backwards, entire body following with the motion until he flopped back awkwardly across the stairs above him.

It was enough to make Nick laugh, had he been in a better mood.

"You think they got a cure or somethin'? I mean, if we're carryin' somethin' - whut if... we can't go back tuh normal? I don't wanna make no one sick, but...

That did make Nick laugh, short and harsh. "Go back to normal? That's a pipe dream and a half, even before we found out we're all apparently zombies." He tucked an arm against the wall, leaning on his elbow, staring blankly out of the window. As much as he posed himself as if on guard, his mind was on anything but the view outside. "It's actually kind of hilarious."

Ellis peeked at him, sideways, a faintly confused frown twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"C'mon, dumbshit. Surely even you can see the irony." Nick thrust up his free hand, taking his cigarette from his teeth and letting it sit between his index and middle fingers. He brandished it in a sweeping gesture. "All this fighting to stay alive, and we've been sick this whole time. The military's probably gonna line us up against a wall and shoot us, same as the zombies."

He shouldn't have said it. Shouldn't have even been talking - and he regretted the words before they'd even fully formed, but his mouth moved faster than his brain could. Ellis' eyes flashed wide, and a hand slid to grasp at his chest nervously. "Y-you - you don't mean that. They wouldn't."

"Ellis -" The temptation to light his cigarette came back full-force, but Nick merely stared at it. He bit hard onto his tongue, barely stopping himself before he could keep going. We all know what they were doing with blowing the bridge into here: containment. Why save people who are literally sick, and making other people sick? We're the kind of people they were trying to cut off.

Why was he taking this out on Ellis? It didn't make him feel better to see the rising fear strangling itself on Ellis' face. It just made him feel worse - but maybe that was exactly the point. Maybe he just wanted to languish in feeling terrible, and if that meant lashing out at someone who didn't deserve it, fine.

For some reason, he suddenly hated that about himself.

"I'm just prepping for the worst." His voice went vague, off-hand. He pushed suddenly to stand, shrugging a shoulder, unsure just where he intended to go - but desperate to leave. "You know me. You be the stupid optimist, I'll be the smart realist."
He didn't get far before Ellis snatched at his wrist, fingers tightening. Nick stiffened at the touch, instinctively glancing toward the bedroom door. It was that gesture that made Ellis release him as quickly as he'd grabbed him, and when Nick looked back at him - the younger man was peering down at his lap, embarrassment strong on his features.

"... are you scared?"

Nick stared at him, feeling an abruptly hollow sensation in his chest. There was some strained hope on Ellis' face, and the older man could read it as simply as if it were written out in plain writing on his forehead. The kid wanted to feel a little less alone. It was the same look he'd had the night before; a lost and lonely fear.

It should have intimidated him, because what kind of anchor was he? What kind of strange circumstance had led to those soulful blue eyes wrought with hope and fear, looking to him? Him, of all people? He didn't know where to even begin... especially not when half of him wanted to run and the other half wanted to scorch away whatever ties bound them, then and there, because that was easy.

He didn't know what made him turn around. All he knew was he was suddenly facing Ellis, and something like truth was tumbling from his lips. It did not feel easy. "Maybe."

Ellis looked surprised for just a beat, lips faintly parting with the warmest of puffs... and then he snorted, turning his head away, a little smile curling at his mouth. "Me too." he returned, almost affectionately. He raised a hand to rub it down his face, flatly, and Nick felt some wary sort of relief when that smile lingered.

He'd stumbled on the right thing to say. Or a right thing, anyway.

"Maybe Chris is wrong, and there's immune folk, too. Maybe we ain't even Carriers - but." Ellis slowly lifted a hand, pressing his palm against the crown of his head, fingertips rapping on his trucker cap. "Even if we are... do we really got any other choice? Findin' the military, or CEDA, is the best shot we got at findin' our families. We can't just stay out here."

Nick slid his free hand into his slacks pockets, letting his gaze avert. He inhaled, canting his head. "... Yeah. Much as I'm enjoying our time out here, starving, nearly dying... y'know. Having a ball."

When Ellis gave a snort of humor, Nick shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno, kid. I'm stuck between trusting one of those Angels and trusting the government. Rock and hard place."

Ellis gazed up at him, warmly - but a little worried, too. "What else is there tuh do?"

The gambler was saved from having to respond to that by Rochelle stepping out from the bedroom. She gazed carefully between them, eyes alighting on the half-smile lingering on Ellis' face. Nick drew his body into something taut and defensive, taking a step away as if to distance himself.

As Coach slipped around Rochelle to leave the bedroom, she lifted a hand into a tentative gesture. "Ellis... can you give me a hand in here? Chris is exhausted, but we've gotta change his bandages before he gets some more rest. The painkillers should be kicking in soon anyway."

The youngest survivor gave a slow nod, hesitant. He pushed up from the stairs, slanting a look at Nick. It was a look the gambler did not return, choosing instead to gaze at his cigarette, rolling it between his fingertips. He kept up his disinterest as Coach stepped beside him, and Rochelle and Ellis disappeared into the bedroom. The door closed behind them, gently.

"We'll be a'ight, Nicky." Coach murmured, just between them. Nick barely restrained a faint sneer
in his direction, an expression that turned muted when the ex-football player abruptly put a hand on
his shoulder, flat and comforting with a squeeze. "We in this together."

Nick didn't even have the energy to argue.

He just pulled out his lighter.
"Are we sure we shouldn't wait some more..?" Ellis questioned, tremulously. "Maybe the painkillers ain't kicked in real well yet."

The look on Chris' face was stricken with anxiety. He huffed out quiet breaths, panting between parted lips with his eyes shut tightly. They'd barely even begun, and he already looked miserable... but vague desperation fueled his voice when he uttered, "No. Please. Do it now."

Ellis and Rochelle sat on either side of him where he lay on his side, stumped shoulder facing upwards. Unwrapping the existing bandages from his shoulder had made him whimper with every pull and graze of fabric, sweat building up on his skin.

The Georgian had to bite back apologies as he worked, and now, there was nothing separating them from the worst of Chris' wound but the gauze packed flat against it.

"Don't look, okay?" Rochelle leaned in close to Chris' face, and raised a hand as if to place it atop his head, soothingly - but she halted and retracted it shortly after she'd started the motion. Ellis couldn't help but peek up to see the vague frustration over her features. "Just... let us handle this."

"It is very bad?" the younger man murmured back, voice trembling and breathless with a thick dread. He obeyed her direction and did not open his eyes, going so far as to turn his chin slightly and bury his face into the mattress.

Ellis carefully plucked at the gauze, drawing it up and off the ruined flesh. It stuck here and there, peeling away, and he could see the shudder that passed down Chris' spine with the sensation. "It's better." he said, because that was as close to the truth as he could get.

The wound's swelling had fallen a little, though it was still flared an angry red around the deepest parts of the sundered stump. The scabbing had spread, and the broken, cracking sections that Ellis had observed seemed to have sealed back together with time to sit under moist antibiotics. He reached out a hand, hovering it just at the edge of the damage.

The idea of manipulating it while Christophe was conscious made his heartrate go up. So he spoke, quietly, and a little nervously. "I'm gonna touch it, okay? If it... if it hurts too bad, just say somethin'. We can give it some more time."

Chris barely nodded, gritting his jaw.

Tenderly, Ellis thumbed against one of the worst of the welted, separated pieces, where the cauterization had left trauma. It felt softer, and didn't give so much when he applied pressure. His relief was short-lived when the contact also made Chris' entire body jolt.

"¡Joder!" he hissed through clenched teeth, tone more than clear enough that it was a swear. The Spaniard visibly tried to hold still, but had only minor success. Ellis quickly recoiled, and Chris gave a weary and shaky breath. "I am.. okay." he muttered.

Ellis struggled to believe him when he sounded like he might vomit.

They'd gotten a bowl of water and a washcloth, along with the whole of their medical supplies.
Ellis threw the gauze over his shoulder, grasping up the washcloth where it lay puddled in the bowl settled on the mattress next to him. The rough fabric was lukewarm as he wrung it out, water pouring out between his fingers and pattering back into the bowl.

"I'll be careful, but this ain't gonna feel nice." Cautiously, Ellis gripped the cloth in one hand, feeling a trickle of water dart down his forearm as he held it up. He waited only a beat before daubing the washcloth against the wound, taking small swipes, careful not to move against the worst of the scabbing.

The flesh was still weeping - but when he examined the surface of the cloth, he found it mostly clear rather than the browned yellow-green fluids that had escaped it earlier. A little pinch touched his lips, aware of the way every touch made Chris flinch, but unable to do anything but persist. They were making progress... If they let up now, who knew what might happen.

Chris' breath turned wheezed, tension rippling through him. Each brush seemed to catch him off-guard, pain flooding him anew, and Ellis tried to move quickly while still tenderly.

A benefit to Chris' bedridden status was that the wound had stayed relatively clean. Still, sweat and a mix of blood and discharge lined the flesh in a layer of grime. He delicately cleaned it, head cocking back and forth and tongue caught between his teeth.

Little muttered outbursts escaped the foreigner, an incoherent mix of languages and syllables. Ellis raised his head, poised to apologize, but stopped when his eyes caught on a sight over Chris' waist: the man's hand had jolted forward, crawling across the bed, and laced fingers with Rochelle's left hand. They squeezed on one another, his knuckles going pale with the force.

Ellis quickly averted his eyes, feeling a strangled sense of embarrassment, and focused on his fingers as they moved. It wasn't his place to wonder just what the gesture meant. Assuming it meant anything at all - if he were in Chris' position, he'd want to hold someone's hand, too.

Although he could have kept cleaning at the flesh, there was an intensity to the injured man's trembling that made him think he wasn't going to take much more. That, and his ministrations had welled up blood here and there, and he didn't want to make it worse. "Gotta put on some more gel, then we'll wrap you back up, okay?"

Christophe uttered a weak "Okay.", voice distant in a way that didn't imply much understanding.

Replacing the washcloth in the bowl - now sullied - Ellis started to wipe his hands on his shirt, but changed his mind at the last second and just shook them out in the air instead. His clothes were hardly clean, after all, and he still had to touch the wound.

His gaze risked a dart upwards as he snatched the tube of antibiotic gel from where he'd tossed it in his lap, opening it up and squeezing out a helping onto his thumb. He barely ghosted his fingertip against the wound as he spread the cream over it, dotting it here and there.

Chris' reactions were much more subtle this time. He breathed in slow and cautious patterns, only hitching here and there as Ellis worked.

"Hey, Chris?" Rochelle murmured, head tilting to get a better look at his face. He blinked up toward her, eyes gone hazy, but still attentive. "... Mind a question? I know it's bad timing, but you're probably gonna pass out after this, and... this needs... privacy."

Ellis panicked for a beat or two before he realized what she was referring to - namely, not the tension between her and Chris. Then, he panicked more.
When the Spaniard gave a tired nod of acquiescence, Rochelle visibly braced herself. "You know about him and Nick?" Her voice lowered carefully as she spoke, nodding her chin toward Ellis in explanation. Some confusion flickered in Chris' eyes, lips starting to work at a response airlessly, and Rochelle's nostrils flared with an exhale.

"Their relationship."

Ellis flustered at the abruptness of her clarification, jerking his hand away rather than risk fumbling and hurting Chris. "R-Ro'! I wasn't even sure if he - now yuh done and -" he babbled, ears warming, as she slipped him a faintly exasperated look. "Lordy, this is the last thing -"

"I was..." Chris' voice wavered a little, but regained some strength now that Ellis had stopped touching his wound. "Is this strange? I - ¿no deber-? Should I not know that you are a couple?"

That startled Ellis into a strangled noise, sealing his lips. He hadn't expected Chris to know - and not know it was a secret? Some tiny part of him was a little pleased, to think someone had looked on him and Nick and merely accepted them as being together. There was another part, though, that felt some melancholy.

Christophe thought they were a couple.

Ellis wished he could be as confident in the fact.

Rochelle gently withdrew her hand from Christophe's, lips pinching faintly, in favor of thumbing against her temple. He gripped his fingers vaguely on the dead air now between them, slowly drawing into a clenched fist as Rochelle sat there silently for a beat. Thought ticked wildly in her expression, but she eventually just tossed out the question: "How...? When did you even... find out?"

The Spaniard seemed to grow nervous, lids lowering a little and body hunching faintly down against the mattress. His gaze flicked between them in short darts, a slight insecurity fueling the motion. "I... At the hotel. Jerry said you shared rooms. Supongo, ¿si? Como... I assumed."

With Rochelle flashing him a look of vague surprise, Ellis could do little but stammer.

"I - it ain't like we did nothin', I only switched 'cause - Jerry spooked me, is all! He was stalkin' around and I thought - so I went tuh Nick's room 'cause I was scared -" He fizzled out when he witnessed the faintly affectionate crinkle to her nose, sensing he was only digging himself into a deeper hole. "Guess that explains how he knew tuh look fer me in Nick's room." the Georgian allowed, weakly. He hadn't considered that before: why Jerry hadn't kicked down his original hotel room door first.

He'd gone straight to Nick's.

The woman's smile faded a little at the reminder of the attack on him, and her attention returned to Christophe. Her expression grew serious - so much so that Chris flinched, staring up to meet her gaze. "Look. It's a secret, okay? We need you to not say anything. Especially not to Nick."

When the Spaniard's lips twitched into a slight frown, confusion lingering across the amber-brown of his eyes, she shook her head. Her tone was gentle but pressing, leaning in further and speaking with the faintest edge of plea. "You seriously can't say anything. It's ... kind of a delicate situation."

Some weary acknowledgement flickered on in his eyes, a vague nod of understanding twitching his head. "You are - ¿cómo se dice...? ¿Los armarioazos? In the closet?"
Ellis' first reaction was to protest, startled. "N-no - I mean... not really. It don't bother me, it's just that Nick ain't very - well... He's just kinda scared of havin' anyone know, I guess, so he is." He twisted his elbow and used his forearm to rub at his temple, pushing his hat up a little on his head, chewing nervously at the inside of his cheek. "If he knew Ro' found out... or you too, now... he'd flip."

A vague wrinkle placed itself between Chris' brows, but whatever he was thinking, he didn't say it. Some resignation made its way into his voice, and he lowered his head onto the mattress, eyes closing. "You do not need to worry."

With a small smile, Ellis bobbed his head. "Thanks. It means a lot... Y'know, don't mind Nick none. You're a swell guy." He busied himself with capping the antibiotics tube and getting out a square of fresh gauzepad from the backpack. Christophe gave a vague questioning noise, and Ellis couldn't resist a snort. "Oh, uh. Nice. Cool."

Although Chris kept his eyes closed and head down, he supplied in a small voice: "Guay. And you are, too, hermano."

The smile flashed to a grin, and Ellis couldn't help a slightly pleased duck of his head. He tore open the gauzepad's packaging, taking it out, and gently placed it flat over Chris' stump. The man shivered at the touch, spitting out a quiet, "Mierda... please... finish soon?"

Ellis quickly nodded his head, reaching for the rolls of bandage material. "We just gotta wrap you up." It was tenderly that he unrolled some of the material, laying it across the wound and down his chest. Rochelle shifted forward to slip one hand under Chris' neck and her other under his torso, slipping fingers between him and the mattress. He tried to assist, weakly, and with her help lifted his torso just enough to give Ellis some space. The Georgian moved cautiously, circling the bandage around his torso to anchor the gauze tightly against his ruined shoulder. He tried to wrap it tightly - but not too tightly, aware of the way the pressure made Chris tense and his breath go ragged.

Using a thumbnail to make a nick in the fabric, Ellis tore the roll off. He took the two ends and carefully tied the bandages off, exhaling faintly with some amount of relief. "Okay. That's that."

Nodding in agreement, Rochelle released her grip on Chris in favour of leaning to pick up the bag of granola she'd left on the nightstand. She opened it, tearing the plastic along the top edge and set it on the very corner of the nightstand where Chris could reach it. "The meds'll be rough on your stomach, and you need it, anyway. You've barely eaten anything since you got hurt."

A quiet murmur left the Spaniard, like soft acknowledgement. He barely spared a glance for the bag, however, instead watching Ellis come around the bed. The Georgian cradled the bowl and washcloth in an arm, passing him a smile as he made for the door. "Gonna clean up."

Rochelle inclined her head, starting to get up and follow after him - but as Ellis left, Chris' hand was suddenly up, fingers curling around her wrist. She startled at the touch much like she'd startled when he'd grabbed her hand the first time. Her body halted mid-stand, hovered awkwardly over the edge of the bed, and she looked at him.

He barely returned her gaze, eyes averting to some distant point. "I am... sorry." Confusion turned Rochelle's expression a little raw, breath caught in her throat. "For everything. No... quise... I did not want this."
She started to speak, brows twining a little, but he shook his head into the mattress and she quieted. Christophe did meet her gaze, then, and there was some resolve there that she could not quite understand. "Eres demasiado guapa para tener esa mirada tan triste." he breathed, almost to himself, so quick and short she could barely follow the words. His lids lowered, and he sighed. "... Don't worry for me. ¿Vale? Promise."

Rochelle tried to piece together a response, tongue curling around words, but she couldn't work out more than a forced breath at first. Maybe it was the intensity of the eye contact, or the strange and tepid resignation hiding in his tone. He seemed somehow fierce and miles away.

It made her balk, unsure.

"I... No. That's not something I can promise." She shook her head, feeling his fingers tighten just faintly on her wrist - just a squeeze. The touch darted warmth up her arm, and she drew her hand away. "But I can promise you'll get through this. So get some rest." He let go without more than a graze of his fingertips in protest.

Faster than she meant to, Rochelle slipped to her feet, flashing him a smile even as she moved to follow Ellis. He watched her leave, hand sliding to hang limp where she'd left it, slowly allowing his cheek to bury against the pillow where it lay tucked against the headboard.

Christophe closed his eyes, wearily, the vaguest of laughs escaping his lips. Something mournful lingered at the edges of his breath.

He made no motion to reach for the granola left on the nightstand.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO Courtney Hahn - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
Scattered gunshots littered the afternoon. They kept shifting in direction and location, sometimes sustained and sometimes only a few sharp snaps. It became something like torture, sending a lingering tension through the team every time - and every time, Nick became convinced they were getting closer or louder. He paced along the length of the entry hallway downstairs, only half-listening to the voices coming from the loft.

After they'd put Chris back to bed, Ellis and Rochelle had escaped upstairs and joined Coach. They'd been quiet, mostly, except for Ellis dispensing some story about Keith that Nick mostly parsed as white noise.

All his energy was focused on the gunfire, and fighting the urge to smoke another cigarette. He had to savour them, or he'd be out again as soon as he'd gotten them. The nicotine in his bloodstream was sweet relief, and he couldn't help but hold a hand out - just to enjoy the way his fingers didn't tremble anymore.

"We need to talk about this." Rochelle was in a better mood, it seemed. Her voice was stronger, more full and gentle. "How are you guys feeling?"

Nick snorted to himself, resisting the first response that came to mind.

"How am I supposed to feel? Great? Hurray, we're all half-zombies and destined to get put down by the government. It's my wildest dreams come true."

He knew she wasn't really talking to him, anyway, but he called drolly up the stairs: "Peachy-keen."

She didn't even respond to him, though he knew full well she could hear him. "I know it's - let's be honest. It's shitty. But one way or another, we aren't turned, anyway. And if Chris is right - and if more people are Carriers... the government's got to be working on a solution." Neither Ellis nor Coach responded at first, and her tone went insistent. "Either CEDA or the military has a plan or - they don't. But isn't giving up on them kind of... final?"

Gruffly, Coach spoke, sounding a few inches from beleaguered. "I ain't eager to say we got no shot. This ain't the sort of livin' you can stand for too long. Shit's gonna catch up to us, whether it's gettin' too hurt or too hungry or too sick."

"Whut do we do, then?" That new tone of Ellis' came back - not fearful but unsteady, treading on tender and unfamiliar ground. Nick wasn't sure how he felt about it. *Probably for the best. Kid needs some survival instincts.* "Maybe we should try tuh get in touch with 'em somehow.. So we can ask if they're plannin' on rescuin' us or... somethin' else."

It was there that Nick's body turned, making his way calmly up the stairs. While he'd have been happy to stay out of the conversation, he did have something of a vested interest in the outcome, and he wasn't about to let the discussion continue unchallenged. "Yes, that good ol' refrain - 'hey there, how ya doin'? So you guys gonna kill us or what?'" he muttered as he scaled the steps.

Coach and Ellis sat on one loveseat, comfortably scrunched hip to hip, while Rochelle had crawled up to perch on the back of the sofa with her heels braced on the seat cushion below her. All three spared him a glance, with varying enthusiasm. The Northerner strode up and took a stance in front of the railing, leaning his hip against the banister. "You guys wanna know what I think?"

"No." echoed between his teammates in unison - followed quickly by laughter, enough that Nick had to merely stand there and wait for it to settle.
A scowl perched on his features, and when he spoke, it was scathingly. "We supply up, find a boat, and sail somewhere. Literally anywhere else. Let's go find a goddamn island for all I care, live out our days, zombie-free." He didn't even know how much he really meant the words. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe not. All he knew was he wanted an answer that didn't necessitate trusting someone else.

Ellis' expression scrunched, equal parts amusement and confusion. "Nick... that ain't hardly likely. You get stranded on island, you don't go live on one. If we find some island, it'll probably suck or somethin'. And there ain't gonna be no food or shelter or nothin'. It ain't like they're all like Hawaii or somethin'."

"Well, Ellis, then maybe we just go to Hawaii." Nick gestured widely, voice thrumming with condescension. The younger man squinted at him, matching his sour tone with a sour look, lips pouting together at Nick's retort. "That's the joy of a boat. You can go anywhere."

"You can't swim, Nick." Coach inserted, pointedly. His dark eyes went mild with a certain entertainment, grin showing a strip of teeth before he laughed outright with his own words. "Why is yo' ass votin' we get on a boat? In the middle of the damn ocean?"

When Ellis inserted a "Yeah!" in agreement, Nick scowled with a quiet huff of air.

Rochelle lifted a hand, flatly, shaking her head. "Okay... yeah... no. The island thing is not gonna fly. And going somewhere else - look, who knows? Even if we could make it anywhere... which I doubt... if the Green Flu hasn't already made it around the world, do we really want to leave the U.S.? I'm not gonna be the smallpox blanket here."

That hurt, and whatever humor Nick might have felt disappeared in a swift moment. Her implication struck somewhere that Nick hadn't even known was injured, like the sudden pain from a cut that had gone unnoticed until it started to bleed.

Coach and Ellis both looked a little bemused at her words, but Nick was already speaking. He bared a faint snarl, putting his hands into fists as he shoved them into his pockets, locking his elbows to shrug up his shoulders so his body hunched. "Oh, that's nice. Thanks for that, Ro'." There was genuine agitation there, and Rochelle blinked slightly, uncertain.

Putting his jaw forward slightly, Ellis uttered a quiet, "Huh? What're y'all talkin' about?"

Nick waved him off, quickly, voice going dull with heavy scorn. "She's saying we'll infect and kill people if we try to go anywhere. You know, like the sudden pain from a cut that had gone unnoticed until it started to bleed.

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"Nick -" Rochelle surged straight-backed, eyes widening with the outburst. Regret struck a line between her brows, lips pinching and rolling inward as if she could just breathe back in the words she'd spoken. "I didn't - That's not what I meant. I - I'm sorry. I just meant -" The gambler turned away to squint toward the stairs, shrugging a shoulder with taut apathy, and her eyes lowered.

"We all did. It wasn't just you. That's the point, okay?" Rochelle's body shifted, visibly resisting the urge to stand and step to his side. "We're together in this. Whatever we... have. We have it together. So we need to stay together. Wherever we go, whatever we end up doing. Okay, Nick?"

The feeling in his chest faded, leaving just a quiet imprint of exhaustion. Maybe he did feel guilt, after all, self-pitying though it was. He'd done plenty to hurt the women he'd been with; taken advantage of them, cheated on them, dropped them once he was done. It was their own fault, wasn't it, for getting involved with a guy like him?
This was different. He'd killed her, one way or the other, whether by infecting her or allowing one of his teammates to. Maybe it was airborne, and she'd been doomed the moment they'd made contact. Or maybe it had been that kiss they'd shared before he'd gone to bed.

What if it was that fucking kiss -

"Yeah, sure. I'm not saying we don't. I'm just offering alternatives to running into the meatgrinder."

Rochelle's gaze on him lingered for longer than he'd have liked. Where had his composure gone; where had the wall between him and everyone else disappeared to? And when? He remembered meeting her for the first time, and feeling her try to read him. Look at him and gauge him.

He'd laughed, internally, because who was she to think she could?

She had his number, now. Her eyes cut through him almost as easily as Ellis' did, half the time.

"Ellis ain't got a bad point." Coach had drawn back against the sofa, stretching, and now threw an arm over the younger Georgian's shoulders. Ellis warmed to the embrace with an embarrassed half-grin, at the same time he looked just vaguely unsure. "Maybe we can get in touch with somebody. Military got radios, don't they?"

Rochelle shrugged up a shoulder, focusing her attention suddenly on the ceiling. "I'm not sure. Even if they do, it's not something we can just... tap into. We'd have to find a working military radio, and we haven't seen any military forces this whole time. How would we find that kind of thing?" Her question was met with silence, and she sighed softly.

"Questions, questions, and more questions. What I'd give for an answer or two..."

Nick slid his tongue against the corner of his mouth, still tasting the remnants of his last cigarette. He snorted, despite himself. "Wishful thinking, doll. Sometimes you just have to go all in, with nothing but gut instinct. And a gun."

Coach abruptly stood up from the loveseat, and reflex had Nick startling, posture going almost aggressive. One swift motion had the eldest survivor grabbing a pillow from against the armrest and chucking it across the room. It might have struck Nick in the face had he not swung up an arm to deflect it. The cushion went clumsily to the ground, and irritation was writ large over his expression.

"What the f-"

The ex-football player had a hand on his hip, overriding him. "What did I tell yo' ass about them gamblin' metaphors, boy?!" Nick wasn't able to get more than an agitated few syllables out before Ellis and Rochelle were bursting into laughter, and a scowl went rampant in his eyes as he threw up a hand and escaped back down the stairs to resume his post at the window.

As much as he'd have liked to know where they stood, a new part of him found some kind of comfort in knowing they would, at least, stand together.
Chapter 152

Nick wasn't sure what made him take first watch. Maybe it was just because he wasn't tired in the slightest, or maybe he wanted some time to think. Or, maybe, he simply knew he'd not get much rest with the knowledge that there was someone out in the streets. He had energy, and if he could put it to the task of defending the condo - why not?

As darkness fell, it became difficult to see. The moonlight cut awkward lines around the buildings and fencing and debris surrounding them. Between that and the thin spacing he allowed himself through the mostly-closed shutters, it was hard to tell what was the movement of infected, what was the wind brushing through foliage, and what might have been a human.

It didn't ultimately matter. He had his katana braced against his thigh and his sniper rifle leaned against the wall, and both the front door and the glass doors upstairs were locked. They might not have had the housekeys, but they could still lock themselves in safely. Nobody was getting in without causing a racket, and Nick would meet them with force.

He was being paranoid, perhaps, but it soothed him to be paranoid. At least it made sense, because none of what he knew about human nature indicated anything but the likelihood that the stranger was hostile.

Nick slid a hand to his mouth, thoughtfully running fingertips along the curve of his lips before sinking them into the growing stubble along his cheek. A section of his attention was spinning endlessly, like a quiet hum at the back of his skull. He had to deal with the reality of the situation one way or another: We're fucked.

He had no alternatives. What could they do? Even the few paths open to them - continuing to travel, to wander... or settling somewhere for good - seemed ludicrous. If they'd even been possible, they weren't real options. His teammates had people to reunite with. Families, relatives. Friends. They'd never go for an outcome that didn't involve finding them.

And he didn't really want to ask them to, even if he found himself doubting that anyone was still alive.

Nick was the only one who didn't really give a shit what they did, at that point. He'd prefer to find himself somewhere that was safe, a place where he didn't have to fight and scrabble every day just to make it through. The idea of rescue... he wasn't stupid. It sounded great - even if he didn't have anyone waiting for him, and his desire for safety and survival was a purely selfish endeavour.

I just don't think it's going to happen.

He'd had his doubts from the start that they were walking into anything but the mess left behind by CEDA's failure, and now to know they were not only abandoned but actively wanted dead? As much as Nick wanted to believe it wasn't true, his pessimism caught up with him, and he felt a deadened and quiet resignation. Of course it's true. It's the cherry-on-top of the wreck of my fucking life.

For some reason, his mind kept returning to the diner, and the pile of bodies he could still remember with such visceral clarity. He could have laughed, almost, because it suddenly made sense: they hadn't been saved their fate. Hadn't been saved the fate of the infected, either.

Maybe this was worse, even - because maybe everything they'd been through was all for nothing.
Maybe one day the virus in their blood would mutate and decide to infect them, too. Maybe the next time he felt a fever rising in his skin, it'd come with yellow eyes and grey skin. Or maybe some soldier would simply put a hole in his head.

He wanted alcohol. Wanted and needed to cut the emotions out of his chest, even if it took his bare hands to do it.

Unable to do that, Nick would have settled for dragging Ellis into some corner of the house and fucking him until he screamed, screw every last bit of sense out of them both. *Gonna go out, may as well go out with a bang.* That should have made him laugh.

It didn't.

Nick didn't recognize how long he'd been sitting in one position until he shifted, and something popped in his spine. It was a satisfying enough sensation that he rolled himself into a stretch, closing his eyes, a faint sigh escaping his lips. It was tempting, but waking the Georgian up would inevitably lead to talking, and the last thing he wanted to do was talk.

He just wanted to stew, and feel sorry for himself, and -

A quiet noise perked him up. He couldn't determine its origin at first; it was a scraping noise, like wood on wood. A frown instantly tugged on his lips, and he stood in a smooth surge, palming onto the hilt of his katana and grabbing it. His head cocked, looking toward the front door at first... but when another noise sounded, a flat and rustling thump, he realized where it was coming from.

Christophe's room.

Although he should have dropped it at that, suspicion made him move. He crept to the bedroom door, pleased to find it open just a crack. He shouldered against the door to very softly push it open, moving as if he had reason to sneak, though he wasn't even completely sure why.

It took a step inside the bedroom to get sights on the foreigner, moonlight from the window and a cloudless night the only reason Nick could see at all. Chris was laying on his belly, agony raw with a scarlet flush across his face, arm stretched out to grasp onto the nightstand. He'd knocked the granola bag Rochelle had left for him to the ground, and his fingers were sprawled against the nightstand surface, stretching with a tremoring energy to reach something.

Nick flicked a glance past his fingertips, and his gaze alighted on the bottle of painkillers Rochelle and Ellis had left behind.

His brain connected the dots easily enough: the guy had awoken, in pain, and was trying to self-medicate. While he didn't blame Chris, he also made a mental note to chastise the two for leaving medication in his reach. *Like giving a guy a morphine drip button. Bad fucking idea, since chances are good, he's gonna be in a lot of pain for a long time.*

"Hey." he uttered, finding his voice trapped in a strangely calm tone. "Shit's on a schedule, buddy."

He expected Chris to startle, but not to the degree he did. It was as if he'd struck him, and the Spaniard recoiled so violently he almost rolled over. The movement put weight on his stump, and the sound of pain that left him was something akin to a wounded dog, high and weighty and slurred.

Nick might've advanced, had Chris not immediately gone limp, rolling back away to push his weight on his good shoulder. The man's eyes went wet with pain, and he looked up to the gambler, brows going wrought with some emotion, simultaneously fragile and stone-solid. It took Nick a
moment to realize it was shame.

"L-lo siento."

Too much shame. Dirty, messy guilt, too harsh to fit the moment.

"I was -"

A sigh left Nick's lips, forcing the vaguest of eye-rolls. He shook off the excuses, disinterested. "Whatever. It's too early, but here." He pushed the katana under his arm, pressing the blade between his rib and bicep to hold it there. He approached and grabbed the pill bottle from the nightstand, aware of Chris' eyes on him. He palmed against the cap, pushing and twisting to open it up. "Just one. Last thing we need is you ODing."

Nick tapped one into his palm and held it out, but Christophe wasn't looking at it. His eyes were settled on the katana under Nick's arm, and his voice was rough and quiet when he spoke. "You killed her?"

It was hard to determine his tone beyond the slur to his voice, but there didn't seem to be accusation. Just a questioning, exhausted pain. Nick mulled over his response, curling his fingers around the pill - and it was only eventually that he responded, deciding on the truth. "No. She made Ro' do it. It was shoot her or let her gun us all down. And Ro' came out of it with that hurt hand for her trouble."

The Spaniard closed his eyes at that, and his jaw gritted so tightly that Nick heard the grinding of his teeth. He considered the idea that the truth had not been the correct choice, but there wasn't any taking it back. The foreigner would find out one way or another.

"Are you gonna take this, or -?"

"Nick. You must... do something. Please." The gambler's hand lowered slightly, eyes narrowing slightly and lip curling into a frown of vague irritation. He didn't appreciate either the interruption, or the idea of doing Chris any favours. "You are... Tú eres el único puedes ayudarme."

Rather than speak, he cocked his head. Chris reopened his eyes after a moment of that strained silence, glancing up to look toward him. Despite himself, Nick was unsettled by just how hollow those amber-browns were. It took him aback.

"You understand. I am no good to you. I am better - it is better to go. Please. You know, don't you? It.."

The dots rearranged themselves.

It hadn't been the desire for pain management that was making him go for the pills.

Nick wished the realization struck softer than it did, even though he couldn't say he was surprised. He moved slowly to replace the pill in the bottle, closing it, collecting his thoughts with the gesture. Hadn't he said it himself - if he'd been in Christophe's position, he'd have hunted for a way out, too. "Look. I get it. But -"

Chris' head shook, hand going to a fist where it hovered. "No. I am useless." His fist began a tremble, and the tremble made its way into his voice, going raw as he begged through clenched teeth. "I will die, from this, from los muertos - cualquier manera. Please. You know, don't you? It
is better to do this."

Anger flared, and Nick shoved the painkillers into his slacks pocket, freeing his hand to pull the katana from under his arm and lower it. The tip pressed into the carpet, balanced there, his palm sliding flat onto the end of the hilt. He didn't miss what Chris was getting at: he thought Nick was the only one of the group who might just let him do it. And why?

Because Nick was the heartless asshole who wouldn't care whether he lived or died?

"I am taking... using things. Medicine. It is... No tienes sentido." His hand gestured weakly at his bandaged stump without allowing his gaze to alight on it. Though he tried, Nick couldn't tear his eyes off Chris' face and the pleading misery there. "I cannot fight - please, déjame hacerlo. It is easier. I -"

"Easier?" What had been anger turned into fury. Nick took the step between him and the edge of the bed, forcing Chris to retreat, leaning in to place a fist against the mattress and balance his weight against his knuckles. "Easier for who? You'll fucking kill them, you realize that?"

Chris' lips parted - but for all the wary submission in the way he slumped down and away, he did not look afraid. "I..."

"You ask me, we should have just let you bleed out." His voice turned to a sheer hiss. "But no. These fucks spent all this time and all this effort keeping you alive, and you're gonna sit here and tell me it's easier to chew on a bullet? You think we've had it easy? You think it was easy, what you and your friends put them through?"

The Spaniard's head made for the faintest shake, but Nick wasn't about to stop.

Scorn filled the spat-out words, and something like disgust. "You'll hurt them worse than your friends ever did. You will ruin them, making Ro' come back in here and find your brains on the wall."

Nick knew he'd gone too far - felt it, the tactile sensation of tension that came with crossing a line - and Chris stared at him. The faint sheen of pained tears deepened and welled until the man's brown eyes watered. He made no effort to hold them back or brush them away. Tears trickled down his cheeks in a slow deluge.

"I cannot do this." was all he said, soft and fragile, like shattered glass just a touch away from collapsing into shards.

A snort escaped Nick, empty. He reached suddenly down, prying the handgun from his holster. As he got it into his hand, he was aware of Chris' eyes following his fingers, and there was fear there now.

"You know what? Honestly? You make the fucking call here. We're past coddling bullshit, and we're past dragging you."

He grasped the rack, snapping it back to chamber a round. The sound made Christophe flinch suddenly, fingers going into a fist. "Maybe you'll die today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe we'll all fucking die. But I'm not going to convince you of shit, because if you can't commit to living, you will get us killed. And you will die."

Nick gestured the loaded gun in a short flick, barrel pointed at the far wall. "It's not my choice, and I'm not going to sit here and argue with you over it. I can't make you want it." He stared Chris down, examining the way the man's attention was now riveted on the pistol. "It's the fucking
apocalypse. There's no time for this. You can either fight and claw and scrape by, or join all the poor fucks who made the same stupid decision as you. Just don't take that bullet and think you're doing anyone a favour except yourself."

Nick's thumb pushed the safety off, and he set the gun down on the edge of the nightstand, closest to Chris. It struck the wood with a metallic sound, scraping just slightly as Nick's fingertips lifted away from it. "But, if you don't think you can try - if you're giving up already - then that's the ballgame. It's over."

There was a hollow listlessness to the way Chris stared at the pistol. He said nothing, tears flowing in smooth tracks that showed no signs of stopping.

"So just fucking do it."

Nick turned, letting the katana fall until its tip dragged against the carpet as he walked away. He almost left it at that - but frustration stopped him just before he reached the door.

The Northerner turned on a heel, gazing back at Chris where he laid. He lifted his chin, so his gaze was slanted down the length of his nose, and spoke with abrupt flatness. "For the record - I don't give a shit. But those guys out there care. And if you stick with them... if you drop the fucking self-pity and the selfish bullshit and let them save you... you might just make it out of this."

The Spaniard moved, then, just enough to look up toward him, eyes glassy and flooded with tears. Nick didn't match the gaze, unwilling to meet it and take measure of the emotions there. Anger fueled his exit, knuckling the knob to drag the door shut behind him.

He barely parsed the distance between the bedroom door and the stairs, and suddenly he had his elbow braced on the wall, body slumped, staring through the slats of the window and out into the dark. *Fuck.* Nausea crept up on him, and his breath came shallowly, like panic.

Nick wasn't equipped for this. Couldn't deal with it. His own words came back to him in reverberating echoes, like a tide, and he could only run his tongue over his teeth and swallow away the sour taste in his mouth.

The silence of the house was jarring. Even his breath seemed too loud compared to the dead quiet, and it constricted in on him until he felt somehow suffocated. He should have done something other than stand there. He should have woken the others, or gone right back in and taken the gun back.

He didn't, because somewhere, he believed what he'd said - maybe he even thought the guy deserved that choice.

Nick shifted carefully, retaking his seat on the staircase. He didn't look out the window, staring at his knees instead. At least if it happened, he could get there first. Stop the others from running in on him. Spare them, at least, that. Even if he couldn't and wouldn't stop it.

He just sat there, shoulders raised and chin low, in silence - anticipating the gunshot.

Waiting for it.
At the soft utterance of his name and a touch on his shoulder, Nick awoke - and not gently. He startled, reflex surging his hand out, finding his fingers wrapping vicelike around someone's wrist. He squeezed and shoved to force it away from him, defensively. Rochelle yelped faintly, and the sound made him let go.

"Ow - Jesus." she hissed, complaint clear in the tone. The gambler cracked his eyes open, gaze landing on the woman where she knelt in front of him, rubbing at her wrist with fingertips like he'd bruised her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

When he shifted his body, moving to straighten, pain flooded him from end to end. His spine lit up like fire and he released a ferocious groan. It took a moment for him to recognize why; he'd passed out on the stairs, lower back pressed into the edge of the stair above him and shoulder pressed into the wall.

Slumped there, he honestly couldn't remember falling asleep. He could only remember sitting there, hanging on the silence. How long had he sat there, and how long had it been since he'd dozed against the wall?

How long since -

Gritting his jaw, Nick pushed forward into a slump, elbow sliding to brace his weight on his knee. His breath came out in stuttered pain, a stab of agony driven into his lower back where the step's edge had buried into it. "When..." he muttered, but his eyes were already flicking up toward the window, blearily.

It was the dim hours of early morning.

"It's okay. Nothing happened." Her words made him start, almost panicked - how had she found out about the situation? Had Chris told her... and how much? She'd be furious if she knew what had happened. His brain was already on overdrive to fabricate excuses, explanations, but: "Next time you start dozing on watch, come wake me up. Okay?"

He forced himself to breathe, inhaling.

Of course she wasn't referring to Christophe's suicide attempt. That didn't make sense.

He should have felt soothed by the vague and sympathetic smile on her lips, because surely that meant that nothing was amiss - but he felt no such comfort, pushing his palm against the wall to shove himself up.

Rochelle retreated to give him room to stand, lifting a hand as if she meant to help him. The Northerner dodged the gesture, moving mostly by momentum as he got to his feet and stalked across the first floor entryway.

Grasping the bedroom door knob, he shoved it open, leaning in. His eyes cut across the room, alighting on the curled shape of Christophe's body on the bed. He had dragged himself entirely under the sheets, collapsed into nothing more than a fetal shape.

The gun was still where Nick had left it.

The muscles in his jaw flickered, clenched. He felt angry, and he wasn't entirely sure at whom. It
was a helpless feeling that took some of the edge out of his emotions, leaving a weariness in its place. He hated the guy, just a little, for putting him in that position.

"Nick - he's sleeping, don't bother him..." Rochelle whispered furtively from the hallway, concern leeching into her tone. Nick moved before she could advance, stepping quietly to the nightstand to retrieve the pistol.

He popped the magazine free from the grip and held it between two fingers. With it tucked out of the way, he yanked the slide back, turning the gun to let the loaded round fall to the nightstand surface with a soft tinkle. He put the gun back together and flicked the safety on before retrieving the loose bullet, tucking it into the pocket at the breast of his dress shirt.

If Chris was awake or heard him, he did not show any sign. Nick might have questioned his health, had he not seen the faint rise and fall of breath in the curled shape of his waistline under the sheets. For better or for worse, the guy was still alive.

Rochelle was peering in after him, and he felt her disapproval without looking to confirm it on her face. Nick exhaled sharply, pushing the gun into the holster at his thigh with a small glance back at the Spaniard.

Guess you're in this after all. For now.

Relief found its way into his head, and he hated that, too.

Nick left the bedroom, sparing Rochelle a vague look of disinterest as he passed through the threshold. Her gaze started to move to his hands, perking to ask him what he'd been doing - so he distracted her with a snarky, "Whatever. I'll leave your new beau alone."

The woman squinted after him, tongue slowly sliding out to be bitten between her teeth. There was plenty she should have said, and nothing she could. A resigned sort of roll touched her eyes, and she closed the door behind him. "You could act a little apologetic for falling asleep on watch, you know."

He snorted, sliding a hand onto the railing of the staircase to balance himself as he stretched up onto his toes, trying to curl his spine backwards and crack out the pain there. "Thought you said nothing happened."

Her brow twitched in rising annoyance. "Well -"

Nick started up the stairs, body slumping into each step. His muscles groaned with the effort, complaining and creaking, and he'd never felt so old and worn-down. If he'd gotten any sleep, he couldn't tell. "Then what's there to be sorry for?" he muttered over his shoulder.

He could feel her exasperation, and he was almost surprised to find her following after him. Although he'd rathered avoid conversation, at least it wasn't Ellis. "I swear, Nick. Sometimes it feels like you're doing your best to be a dick."

That made him snort, vaguely, and he tilted his head to one side, rolling it in the joint of his neck. Something crackled, and he gave a puff of air. "And you do your best to cause me grief."

"I'm a delight." she protested, huffily, and Nick resisted a laugh. He settled on passing a smirk over his shoulder, eyes dark, and advanced up into the loft. "What? You are not one to talk, boy. You're lucky we keep you around. Every day, I wish we'd just taken Ellis and left you behind, you big grouch."
Nick made immediately for the sofa, slipping around it and dropping down onto the cushions. He collapsed against it, pressing his aching back into the soft surface. He stretched so ferociously, arms going up over his head and legs stretching out in front of him, that a breath left him in something of a whimper. "Me, too." he muttered, lowly.

She laughed in a short manner, shaking her head with a sigh. "Impossible." escaped her, just an idle utterance. Nick closed his eyes, hearing her footsteps as she circled the couch. "Where did your parents go wrong...?"

The Northerner might have had something to say about that - Letting my uncle babysit me every day was probably step one. - but Rochelle was abruptly dropping down next to him. He wouldn't have minded her presence terribly, except she turned to push her back against the armrest of the couch, and thrust her legs up onto the sofa to curl up.

The position put her feet against his thigh, and he snapped his eyes open at the contact. Considering how dirtied and bloodied his slacks were, he shouldn't have cared - but that didn't stop him from curling a lip up from his teeth. "Egh. Watch it!" he muttered scornfully, and Rochelle began to grin at him.

That grin vanished when Nick lowered his arms, grabbing at either of her calves, and dragged her legs out flat. It put them draped in a relaxed sprawl over his thighs, knees slightly bent to rest heels on the cushions on the other side of him. Her lips pinched in a vaguely embarrassed gesture, releasing a huff of air when Nick settled an arm over her knees and the other over her shins. "Um." was all she got out, as he idly rolled his head back to relax against the sofa.

Nick closed his eyes, and it was idly that his palm smoothed out her jeans just below her knee so he could get a grip to faintly rub at her shin, fingertips massaging in weary circles. Her eyes turned a little suspicious, watching the gesture - but the subtle pressure felt so nice, she couldn't help but burrow into the armrest and sigh softly.

"I'm pretty sure I'm gonna have shin splints for the rest of my life." she muttered, with a vague and distant chuckle, Nick focused a little more on the work. His other hand slid to join in, one hand on either of her shins. "... I meant to say thank you. I know we fight sometimes. But I'm really glad you're here, and... without you, I don't know if we'd all be alive still."

Some discontent lingered in the way his jaw flinched. Wonder if you'd feel that way, knowing what happened last night. He didn't say it aloud, but the thought soured his voice when he responded dismissively, "I'm just trying to make it to tomorrow. You fucks are an unhappy accident."

She almost laughed, but bit it back at the last second. Her eyes were on his face, and he could feel her attention even as he refused to open his eyes. "You seem upset. More than usual. Is it about the Flu...?"

Nick should have said yes. It wasn't entirely untrue, after all, it just wasn't the whole story. Instead, he cracked one eye, gazing sideways at her. She seemed surprised by his gaze, cocking her head. "And what about you? You seem pretty infatuated with our Spanish friend down there. Distance make the heart wander with you and your boyfriend?"

It worked precisely how he wanted, and he didn't feel particularly satisfied by that.

She huffed, shortly, eyes narrowing. "That's none of your - and I don't -" Rochelle started to pull herself away, curling her legs to escape him, and there was honest hurt across her face.
Nick didn't stop her, but he did lift his head and give a vague grimace. He hadn't really meant to injure her, though that excuse seemed flimsy considering the confrontation had been engineered to rile and distract her. "Past time to put on airs, sweetheart."

Her body halted, half-pulled away, gazing at him with a stark sort of vulnerability. Her eyes melted a little, like warmed chocolate, expressing a wary tension and the vaguest plea. The gambler relented, softening his tone. "I'm not judging, just figured you might want to talk about it." He closed his eyes again. It was manipulative, but when was he not?

Rochelle frowned slightly, giving him a significant once-over. Her body eased gradually back into place, and as she settled, Nick let his hands merely rest atop her knees. "... Okay. I know you're just dodging me, but sure."

He smirked, privately.

"Can I be honest?"

Nick didn't even bother responding to that, so Rochelle leaned her head back, staring up at the ceiling. "Jacob -" Her frown deepened, and she slowly raised her left hand. Using her other hand to pull away the bandages, Rochelle gazed at the soft and delicate scab that crossed her palm. "The last time I saw him, we had a fight."

Her eyes went vague, placing a thumb over her injured hand. "He didn't want me to go to Georgia. Said he had a bad feeling, and he wanted me to stay. Give up the opportunity to report on the outbreak - back when it was just an illness. I said something stupid... like he was jealous, or something. I don't even remember. I accused him of not wanting what was best for my career. He thought I didn't want what was best for us."

A sad twitch touched her brows. "He said I had to choose. Him or the story."

Shifting his arm slightly, Nick curled his hand under her knee, getting fingers between the underside of her leg and his thigh. He gripped there, arching a brow, and prompted flatly: "You left."

She nodded, head tilting until she could rest her cheek against the armrest. "Not the first time something like that happened with us... but it was the worst. We were always great together - except under pressure. Except when it counted, I guess."

"I guess a part of me just... figured it'd be the same as it always is. He gets mad, I get mad, we take a break..." She gave a softly wistful exhale, shoulders shrugging. "Now, I don't even know... he might not even want to see me again. He might not even be alive."

Nick didn't speak, gazing sideways at her, expression almost vapid as he listened.

"Everything we've been through..." Rochelle glanced at him, brows low. There was a tired fear lingering in her expression, and the more she said, the more of a wet sheen grew over her eyes. "What are the chances he's alive? Any of them are? Ellis talks about his mom, and Keith, and Coach talks about his daughter, and I just... really, Nick. My dad's diabetic... what are the chances...?"

"Hey." Nick murmured, quietly, leaning slightly toward her. He reached out, catching a hand against her cheek, and her composure fractured. A tremble passed over her features like she might truly start to cry. "Talk like that spreads. Last thing we need is to worry about that shit right now.
Not like it'd change anything, right?"

She tipped her head slightly, grabbing his wrist to pull it away from her face with an embarrassed shake of her head - but she held onto him, gripping at his forearm for a moment.

"Y-yeah. I know. I'm just scared, and... sometimes it feels like you're the only one I can talk to." When he shot her a confused look, she exhaled a shaky laugh. "I don't want to scare Ellis, and Coach... he only wants to protect me, but sometimes that just makes me feel even worse about telling him the truth."

Nick snorted, retracting his hand gently. He raised it to lay it across the back of the couch, eyes narrowing just a twitch. "So I'm your bad news confidant? I'm flattered."

She snorted, humor a little more sincere that time, scrunching her nose. "I don't mean it like that. But sure. And... if you need someone to talk to, too... I'm here." Before he could protest, she shook her head in a quick gesture. "I know you don't like opening up, but - a lot's happened. And I get the feeling a lot more will happen. I'm just saying I'm here for you."

The Northerner wasn't able to resist the urge to gaze at her, head tilting just a tick. She was looking at him softly, eyes wide and vulnerable, and if he hadn't known better he might have taken it as the look of a woman waiting for a kiss.

He slipped into a grin, and reflex had him leaning forward just slightly, pressing closer to her. "Look on the bright side." Rochelle blinked, questioningly. "If your boyfriend dropped the ball, I still have a shot."

Nick had approximately two seconds to enjoy himself before she suddenly had a grip on his ear, *twisting*. He barely stopped from bursting out into swears, body pivoting to follow her grasp as she rose from armrest and forced him away.

"We were having a moment, Nick." she stated, calm in her disappointment, speaking over the angry huff-snarls escaping him in a constant stream. "And you just had to ruin it."

It took everything he had not to shove her away, instead relenting to her force at the same time he pushed her legs off his lap and scooched away. "Goddamnit - let go, you harpy -" She did, but only reluctantly, crossing her arms and watching with satisfaction as he rubbed at his ear, now bright red from the abuse.

"I wanna be really clear here, Nick. You never had, and will never have, a shot."

Nick glared sideways at her, green eyes gone harsh with a sulking energy, and all she could do was laugh at him. He should've been angry, but he mostly found himself enjoying the sound of her laughter.

"Harpy." he repeated, because that was the only thing he could think to say.
Chapter 154

Ellis yawned, long and hearty, stumbling with the gesture as he padded up the stairs. He hadn't expected to sleep so long. Although there wasn't much to do, since they were mostly stuck where they were until Chris was fit to move, he'd expected to take watch at some point in the night. He found himself a little bemused... not that he regretted the sleep.

And it had come mostly undisturbed, except for the vague remnants of a nightmare he couldn't remember. The grease-slick fingers of the dream had lost their grip on his consciousness within a few minutes of awakening, though he'd tried to remember it.

It hadn't been Nick strangling him, at least.

Scratching at his ribs, he cocked his head, squinting around the loft as he came to the top of the staircase. At first, it seemed empty - but his eyes caught on the top of Nick's head atop the armrest of the sofa, the man clearly laid out across it. He wasn't moving.

Ellis carefully shifted onto the balls of his feet to quietly sneak over. He leaned up to peek over the sofa's back, unable to resist a smile.

Nick was dead asleep, arms crossed over his chest and hands tucked tightly beside his biceps. He didn't look particularly at peace; rather, he looked remarkably grouchy. His face was a little scrunched, brows taut and jaw tense in his sleep. It was strangely endearing, leaving Ellis to merely stand there and look him over.

He missed the few times he'd gotten to wake up to that irked, tired face. The likelihood of them getting to sleep together in the relatively small condo was low. Maybe now that Chris was awake and aware they could at least sneak more time together on watch, since nobody had to actively watch him... but even then.

Ellis wished it didn't have to be so hidden and awkward. His smile faded a little, more thoughtful than sad. With Chris knowing, there were now more people who knew than who didn't. If he could just tell Coach... and convince Nick to stop being afraid...

Wouldn't it be nice to stop hiding it? If they were open about it, he could just crawl onto the sofa right then and lay against Nick, and close his eyes, and rest -

"Morning."

Rochelle's voice startled him faintly, turning his head to spy her stepping out of the bathroom. She was making final tugs to set her clothing back in place, and the cleaned cuts and scrapes on her face and arms revealed she'd been making good on her decision to bathe. The bowl and washcloth circled in her arm just confirmed it.

Slipping over to approach her, keeping his voice low, Ellis smiled at her. "Hey. How you feelin' today?"

She laughed a little at the question, shaking her head. "Fine, sweetie." she assured him, walking into the kitchen. She gestured with her elbow, bouncing the bowl in her grip a little. "You want to wash up? There are some more washcloths, if you don't want to use the same one..."

"Oh, uh... Yeah, I guess." Following after her, Ellis slid a hand against his hip, idly squeezing there. "Maybe Chris'd like to, too. I had tuh help Keith take a spongebath this one time 'cause he
got stitches on his belly and couldn't take a shower. So... y'know."

Rochelle nodded her head, eyes low as she set the bowl down. Her left hand reached to pull open a drawer, grabbing up a washcloth and offering it out to him. "That'd be nice of you. Maybe you can talk to him a little, too." Ellis took the cloth from her, and she opened up the icebox of water and started to scoop up a little more water for him. "He seemed... off, earlier. Not that I blame him, but he could probably use some cheering up."

When Ellis' "Yeah..." was muffled, she glanced at him. He was in the process of taking his shirt off, the fabric tangled up around his head as he pulled it off, dragging his cap with it. Rochelle startled into a slight laugh, crinkling her nose, and he quickly squirmed the rest of the way out of his shirt at the sound.

Hair tousled and eyes wide, he blinked at her. "Whut -" Ellis glanced down at his bare upper body, reddening just a little. "Well - I'm just gonna... y'know..." Gesturing at his pits, he put his shirt and hat down on the kitchen counter, rubbing at his stomach with burgeoning embarrassment. "Didn't think it was worth goin' to the bathroom..."

Rochelle waved him off, still grinning a little with amusement. "Men." she uttered with an exasperated tone, setting the bowl down and closing the icebox. She retreated to the other side of the kitchen island, hopping up onto one of the bar stools and relaxing down against the counter. "Your chest looks better." she commented, closing her eyes.

"Yeah." he allowed, flashing a small grin as he grabbed the washcloth and soaked it. "I'll be back tuh normal real soon." As he fist the wet fabric between his fingers and scrubbed at his arms, taking care not to hurt the wounds that littered his skin, he sucked casually at his teeth. "I was thinkin' - we should deal with the car today. It ain't got a lot of gas, and if we need it in a pinch... gonna be kickin' ourselves."

"You're probably right. Think we can siphon out of the busted car?"

Ellis jutted his jaw thoughtfully, nodding at the same time he shrugged. He lowered his chin, moving to scrub gently at his torso, minding his still-sore rib. "Most like. They make 'em hard tuh siphon these days, but it's an older car, bet it'll be fine.. I'm more worried 'bout whut we're gonna put it in. Be real nice if we had an actual gas can, else it'll be tough gettin' it in the fuel tank."

"We'll figure it out." she reassured him, lifting her head back up. She watched as he took a few steps back and snatched the roll of paper towels off the kitchen counter, breaking a piece off to give a gentle rub over his skin, soaking up the worst of the wetness. "At least we have those radios now. Makes me feel better."
Ellis smiled, pleased, and nodded along. "Me, too. Long as Nick don't turn his off again."

The gambler gave a biting mutter from his place on the couch, voice rough with a sleepy edge. "Long as someone other than Ellis mans the other one." Ellis was half-startled and half-embarrassed, turning with a slight hop to peer toward the sofa. He carefully stepped to retrieve his shirt, slowly pulling it back on.

"Uh... sorry, Nick, did we wake you...?"

"Let me think." There was a rustle as Nick shifted, but he did not rise from the sofa, instead rolling half onto his side. Ellis could only see the bottoms of his feet from where he stood, hidden in black socks and tucked atop the armrest. "You two gabbing nonstop two feet away from me? Nah. That doesn't wake people up."

Ellis wanted to protest, popping his lower lip out a little, but Rochelle waved at him with a roll over her eyes. He quieted, ducking his head so he could push it through the neck of his ratty and bloodied Bullshifters T-shirt.

"Because you didn't get enough beauty sleep last night?" the woman murmured, practically a croon, full to the brim with sarcasm. "Y'know, while you were on watch...?"

Nick merely grunted.

She passed a grin toward Ellis, nodding slightly when he flashed her a confused look. That explained why he hadn't been woken to take watch - Nick had fallen asleep. The Southerner felt a strike of fear, thinking of the house unprotected... and then guilt, in equal measure. It wasn't fair to blame Nick. They were all exhausted.

"Well... Since yer up." The Georgian scuffed his toe against the grout of the kitchen tile, squinting slightly toward the sofa and its inhabitant. "Maybe I'll go see if Chris wants tuh clean up, then you'n'me can go deal with the car...? I was thinkin', we could go the other way down the road, see if any of the garages got a gas can or somethin'."

"Pass." escaped Nick in a mutter, short and scathing.

A flash of hurt made Ellis frown, grabbing his cap from the counter and screwing it down onto his head. He'd thought it a fine excuse to get some time alone with Nick, and the gambler himself being an obstacle wasn't something he'd anticipated. "We gotta gas the car up, Nick. Whut if we need it?"

"Besides." Rochelle inserted before Nick could do more than inhale. When Ellis slipped her a glance, she winked. "You got more than enough rest. You can help Ellis - or, I can always have you take over bathing Chris. I'm sure he'd love the attention."

Nick was up and off the sofa in a flash, bent over to retrieve his dress shoes from the coffee table and tuck them on his feet. A scowl lingered at the edge of his expression, glaring over at them. "Not a goddamn chance." Ellis had to stifle a laugh, tucking a fist against his mouth, at the mental image. He was aware of Nick turning that glare more fully on him, and quickly ducked his head.

"Good." Rochelle stated, a grin unabashed on her lips. She shrugged up a shoulder in Ellis' direction, tilting her head. "Why don't you guys do that now? I'll get Chris some breakfast and you can offer a wash to him when you get back."

Standing, Nick grabbed his thigh holster from the floor, pulling the pistol out. He tucked it under
his arm, taking a moment to strap the holster around his right thigh. "Fine." he muttered, lowly, setting the handgun down on the coffee table. "That's for you. Found it earlier, meant to give it to you. Where's my Mag?"

Rochelle blinked a little, straightening. She reached to point toward the ground to the left of the couch, and he cocked his head, leaning over. His Magnum was leaned against the foot of the sofa, and he retrieved it, giving it a small look-over before stowing it away.

As he did, Rochelle glanced back at Ellis. Her lips pursed faintly, and she nodded past him. "I gave Chris' machete a little clean-up, too. I figure if we're gonna try to be quiet, avoid gunfire, you both should have weapons." He crinkled his nose a little, and she put her hands up before he could protest. "I know, it's kinda gross. But it's a good blade. Besides, not like Nick's not using the sword that speared him through."

"It's catharsis." Nick slid a palm against his shoulder at the mention of the injury, thoughtfully massaging into the aching muscle. He strode toward the staircase, slanting a glance back over his shoulder but barely pausing as the made for the first floor. "Let's get this over with, then."

Ellis turned, reluctantly, and saw the machete sitting in the kitchen sink. He approached with some hesitance, grabbing the hilt of the blade and lifting it up. He turned it, examining the surface with a morbid fascination. There wasn't much sign of the macabre work it had been used for; he couldn't imagine Rochelle had enjoyed washing off the burnt-on flesh and blood.

He passed her a look over his shoulder, and her expression said as much. But she smiled, faintly, and he smiled back. Rochelle flapped a hand to usher him away, eyes warming a little. "Nick has a radio, I've got the other. Go on."

Getting a good grip on the machete, Ellis turned and scampered across the loft, hooking a hand on the railing as he passed it to spin himself onto the stairs. Nick was waiting impatiently by the front door, katana in one hand and sniper strapped to his back. His stubbled expression was trapped in a vague and distant irritation, and Ellis approached him with some wariness.

He lifted the machete, mouth opening to speak, but Nick was already turning. He unlocked the front door smoothly, calling out over his shoulder. "Lock the door behind us." Without waiting for a response from Rochelle, the gambler stepped out and made his way onto the porch.

Ellis frowned, following.

He wasn't really sure why the older man was in such a sour mood, but it was cowing him. He had to mentally reverse back through recent events - had he done something, intentionally or otherwise? Had anything happened to explain it?

Nick being grumpy was normal, but he hadn't expected to need Rochelle's help in threatening the other man into going with him. Maybe it had to do with whatever had caused him to mess up on watch the previous night, and it had nothing at all to do with him.

Or, Ellis was just being paranoid.

Closing the door behind himself, Ellis advanced up behind Nick, following as the Northerner quick-stepped down the stairs. He was looking around, eyes narrowed and attention focused. The neighborhood had quieted down as the stranger's path had attracted infected away from them, but that didn't stop the survivors from being on alert.

So, Ellis spoke quietly, both to keep a low profile and to avoid agitating the older man further.
"Let's look in on the broke car first... I gotta make sure we can get the hose in - they got these stoppers sometimes, y'know, fer keepin' folk from stealin' gas."

"Folk like us." Nick retorted, an edge of amusement touching his voice in a way that made Ellis grin a little.

Nick took a sharp turn at the bottom of the stairs, walking over to the garage door. He opened it up, craning his head in to glance around the interior. The sedan was where they'd left it, leaned awkwardly to one corner by its wrecked wheel, and the thick smell of leaked oil had only worsened over time.

He held it open for Ellis, gesturing with the hand that held his katana. "Ladies first." he prompted with a sly grin that showed a strip of teeth. It might've offended the younger man, had he not been a little distracted by the look on Nick's face.

All that irritation was gone, leaving only an oddly intense energy Ellis could only define as mischievous.

Scrunching a brow in a suspicious gesture, Ellis carefully stepped past him, keeping an eye on him as he entered the garage. "That ain't nice, Nick. And it ain't funny any other time you say that, either. I ain't a girl."

When the older man merely kept on with his grin, head cocking faintly, Ellis turned away with a faint huff. He stepped toward the gas port on the flank of the car, setting the machete on the roof and bending down to hook a finger on the cover and flip it open. He peeked in, but the light from the slats in the garage door and the open door behind them wasn't enough to get a good look.

"Ah.. shit. You ain't got a flashlight, do you? I -" The door shut, halving the light shining into the garage. It startled Ellis, and he gave a discontent noise. He started to push a finger into the fuel port, feeling for the anti-siphon flap of metal that would potentially frustrate their efforts. "Nick, don't. It's already dark enough. I can't see whether -"

Footsteps announced the gambler's approach just a beat before Nick's hands alighted on his hips. They slid down the fabric of his coveralls, crawling fingertips until they had a grip on the insides of his thighs, and the contact jolted Ellis backwards as if to escape the touch.

All that did was push him back against Nick, body flattening against the Northerner's, and a pleased hum vibrated against him. Nick dipped his head to tuck his mouth against Ellis' ear, hands quick to smooth upwards, coming dangerously close to the younger man's crotch as they delved thumbs into the crooks between hip and thigh.

Goosebumps flared up his arms, hips hitching, and Ellis let out a protesting huff of air. His knees threatened to wobble, his body's interest quick to pique at the touches. "N-Nick -" he managed, putting one hand against the car and darting the other down to grasp onto one of the gambler's forearms. "Whut're you doin'? We gotta..."

"We will. In a minute." Nick almost delicately nipped the younger man's ear between his teeth, biting along the edge of it. The warm pressure of his teeth was enough to make Ellis shiver, and Nick did not miss the gesture with how closely they were pressed. His voice lowered, turning to silk. "Maybe a few minutes."

Releasing a soft whine of protest, Ellis' fingers tightened on Nick's forearm, willing himself to push the other man away. "Nick," he uttered, a little more forcefully, allowing some frustration into his voice. The gambler relented, but only by holding still while Ellis spoke. "You didn't even wanna..."
A laugh brushed against his ear, and Nick cocked his head far enough to look the younger man in the face. Ellis pushed out his lower lip, scrunching his brows in an attempt to appear surly... but it was difficult to commit to anything but a vaguely wanting expression when Nick was so close. And his hands were so close to -

"Just covering our tracks, kid. Like she was gonna let me stay if I complained. She's got it out for me right now."

That made it a little easier to look surly. Ellis' expression faded, distracted by the sentiment - it wasn't the first time Nick had intentionally masked their relationship by making a show of acting irritated by him. It wasn't really that that bothered him; Nick was irritated by most things. It was just... another thing to think about. Another example of the strange quality of their situation.

He didn't want to have to cover their tracks anymore.

"What?" Nick pressed forward, tucking his head down to graze his mouth below Ellis' jaw. He nipped along the side of his neck, letting little exhales flutter along the wet skin he left behind. "Do I gotta apologize or somethin'? Since when are you so touchy...?"

The contact made Ellis reflexively stretch up onto his toes, turning his head, a wordless sigh escaping him. He squirmed a little, nudging backwards. "Wouldn't hurt." he muttered, voice raw.

A grin was quick to come to the Northerner's lips, voice turning almost soothing. He jumped on the break, eagerly. "I've got a better idea." Nick didn't waste any time, raising his hand far enough to dive it down the front of the younger man's coveralls. Ellis outright yelped, softly, hips hitching eagerly as fingers massaged him warmly through his boxers.

He could feel the tension pool in his stomach as his body responded, and he moaned gently, reaching back with both hands to grasp blindly at Nick. Ellis tangled fingers in his dress shirt, so tightly that it pried up and out of its tuck under his slacks. "Sh-shit." Ellis uttered, chin lowering, a flush rising to his cheeks. As much as his focus fuzzed under the warm pulses of pleasure, that didn't stop him from uttering a strained, "That ain't a proper apology..."

He felt the way Nick's body stiffened against him, and there was a graveled quality to his voice when he responded. "That a challenge?" he growled, softly, and Ellis found himself abruptly pushed against the side of the car, Nick's body pinning him there by force.

Without removing the hand from his coveralls, Nick darted the other one up, catching it against Ellis' jaw. He turned the younger man's face, meeting him halfway to steal his lips, biting his lower lip with a scrape of teeth and the vaguest suction.

Ellis might've had the mind to complain about the fact the cigarette taste had returned to his mouth - but there was an oddly minty sort of aftertaste, and it mostly just startled him.

He didn't have much time to focus, anyway, when Nick's hand slipped all the way into his boxers and gripped him firmly. The kiss was well-timed, because between the squeeze of fingers directly on his flesh and the way Nick ground his hips forward against him from behind, Ellis might've made an outburst louder than the groans he muffled into Nick's lips.

Unable to resist rocking back, Ellis tugged on Nick's shirt in wordless plea. The older man obeyed, movements increasing in urgency until there was a desperate and messy friction between them, grinding and shoving - trading kisses - Ellis' knees threatening to crumple with every dry stroke -
The radio chirruped from its place hooked onto Nick's belt.

Both men froze, the kiss turning into a numb press as they registered the noise. Nick pulled back, tongue flashing out to lick at his lower lip, and he muttered out a "Fuckshitgoddamnit." as he inhaled tightly. Ellis had to seal his lips by force, breathing out hard through his nose, because Nick didn't even remove his hand from where it sat wrapped around the younger man's length.

Rather, he merely took one step back with one foot to pivot away, snatching the radio off his hip. "Quiet." he ordered, curtly, and Ellis gave a timidly obedient nod.

That spawned a smirk on Nick's lip, and as he pressed the green talk button on the radio... his hand moved, giving Ellis just the slightest, teasing squeeze. "What?" Nick uttered into the walkie-talkie, voice full of casual disdain, like he wasn't gazing luridly down at Ellis struggling not to make a sound.

The Georgian quickly put a hand over his mouth, letting out a stifled whine as his hips hitched of their own accord.

It was Rochelle, voice made tinny by static.

"Are your guys still n egrby?"

Nick only half-paid attention, enraptured by Ellis' struggle, particularly when the younger man grabbed at his forearm with his free hand in a pleading, desperate gesture. He grinned subtly, aware that the pleading was for him to stop - so, naturally, he continued. "Yeah. Checking the car out. Why?"

The look on Ellis' face was nothing short of shocked, even as his body needily writhed into the touches. He gave up his grip on Nick, using both hands to stifle his mouth, now stuck staring at the radio in horror.

"Coach just woke up. His kne's sti ff, _and it'll do-him s ome good to get out _and walk. Yo_u guys mind if he comes with?"

Nick stopped dead. It was with outright fury that he yanked his hand free of Ellis' boxers, taking a half-step back to stare at the radio in his hand. The younger man had to collect himself with a shaky inhale, leaning against the sedan while his legs protested having to support his weight.

It took Nick a few moments to work through it. His mouth opened - then closed, more than once. Ellis could see any number of excuses and responses appear and then wither on his lips.

He came up empty.

"... Whatever." he managed, and all the frustration and outrage that he kept out of his voice was on full display in his eyes. He narrowed them at Ellis, waiting a beat to determine that Rochelle wasn't going to respond before he jammed the radio back onto his belt.

Ellis got himself straightened up, awkwardly and shyly brushing his wrist over his mouth and glancing down at his clothing. Nick had left it in disarray, coveralls low and cocked on his hips and shirt nudged up by the friction of his forearm. Carefully putting himself back into a presentable state, Ellis managed a weak, "Uh.. Sorry, Nick."

He peeked upwards, finding the older man very intently watching him. Nick didn't say a word, quietly reaching into his slacks to drag out his cigarettes and lighter. He popped the pack open, retrieving it and sliding one between his lips.
He slowly flicked the lighter and set the cigarette to burning. "She is fucking out to get me." he muttered, voice unsteady even as he inhaled. Smoke roiled harshly into his mouth and out of his nose, billowing up around his head like the furious emissions of a volcano.

Ellis couldn't help but glance up in the direction of the house and wonder if she wasn't.
Chapter 155

When Coach made it to the bottom of the stairwell, Nick and Ellis were standing in the yard. The gambler had his arms crossed, glaring off into the distance, and Ellis was carefully examining his own feet. Coach seemed to sense the tension from a yard off, a brow going up. He had his double-barrel shotgun against his shoulder, hand grasping the stock to keep it balanced. "You boys fightin' again?" he questioned, half-amused.

Barely withholding his disdain, Nick scowled in his direction. Swinging the katana at his side, the gambler muttered sharply. "Can we just fucking do this shit? I don't want to be out here any longer than I have to be."

Setting his free hand against his hip, Coach tilted his head, giving him a dull look and quickly turning his attention toward Ellis. The look on his face was one of patient disinterest, dismissing Nick out of hand and instead seeking an actual answer from Ellis. Passing Coach a wary smile, Ellis thumbed over his shoulder toward the garage.

"So.. uh. We checked the sedan, and I'm pretty sure we can get a hose down in there. Ain't really gonna know fer sure until we try, though."

Sighing softly, Coach dropped his shotgun into his hands and turned to start walking toward the fence gate. The other men followed behind him, collecting into a single file line. "A'ight. Guess we start checkin' houses for a hose?" Nick couldn't resist glancing down, giving Coach's gait a once-over.

He seemed stable enough. The last thing they needed was his knee going out again, though he didn't plan to go far from the house. If they got further than a few blocks, Nick would be urging them all to return.

There hadn't been any gunshots that day, but he was far from feeling safe.

"Yeah." Ellis agreed, flipping Chris' machete in his hand thoughtfully. Coach unlatched the fence gate, swinging it open carefully, and leaned out to gaze either way down the street. "A'ight. Guess we start checkin' houses for a hose?" Nick couldn't resist glancing down, giving Coach's gait a once-over.

He seemed stable enough. The last thing they needed was his knee going out again, though he didn't plan to go far from the house. If they got further than a few blocks, Nick would be urging them all to return.

There hadn't been any gunshots that day, but he was far from feeling safe.

"One problem at a time." he growled, quietly, striding to take point. He slid both hands to grasp the katana's hilt, stepping onto the sidewalk and advancing down the street. It was the opposite way they'd gone the last time, in search of a car - and toward the direction they'd been hearing shots.

He didn't like that, but they needed to get the car functional and trustworthy. Especially if these guys are sticking around.

Coach closed the gate behind them and he and Ellis were shortly on Nick's heels. Ellis held up the rear with Coach between them, less for his protection and more to keep the melee weapons on the outside. Using a gun was a last resort.

The infected were so listless and distracted, sleepily so, they probably could have snuck past without much trouble. However, Nick squinted at the four scattered zombies and glanced over his shoulder at his teammates. "Let's take 'em out. Rather not have infected between us and home if we
gotta book it.” Both the other survivors nodded, and Nick refocused ahead.

He put his lips together and let out a sharp, quiet whistle, just enough to catch the zombies' attention. The one laying on the ground snapped its head up, releasing a wild shriek and catapulting itself up off the asphalt into a stumbling sprint.

The other infected were alerted by the movement, and in one flash of rage, all four infected were on them. Nick and Ellis slipped to flank Coach, advancing a few steps to meet the zombies. The gambler struck first, lashing for the neck of the first infected to reach them, but the creature lurched at the last second and the katana sunk into its shoulder instead.

Nick snarled, kicking out at its knee. It collapsed, and he took it to the ground, ripping his katana free and stabbing it straight down through the zombie's face. He could feel bone protesting the blade's intrusion, rough and stuttered as it fractured through, and the infected went limp.

The time it took him to finish it off had the other three zombies too close for comfort, but Ellis was quick to sling himself forward. The machete had enough weight to apply itself easily into a swing, and he chopped it into the top of an infected's skull.

The zombie didn't immediately die. It collapsed, falling into something like a seizure on the ground, snarls coming in gurgled flutters. Ellis was startled into a slight step back, and Coach darted up to his side. He used his shotgun like a battering ram, smashing the stock into the chest of the next infected.

It flew back, striking the one behind it, sending them both to the ground as they grabbed and clawed at each other in reflexive rage. Nick advanced as they landed, and he pierced his blade down in a swift jab. He felt it hit concrete, and the two infected only worsened the wound by flailing and clawing.

They died quickly, and Nick retreated a step. "Anybody want zombie shish-kabob?" he offered, pulling the katana free and turning a grin on his companions.

They did not look amused.

"Man, still feels sorta weird usin' their weapons." Ellis murmured, shaking a bit of gore off his machete with a frown. "Wonder if we look as scary."

Coach snorted, turning away to glance at the condo next to theirs. His eyes scanned the yard for signs of a hose, to no avail. "No offense, Ellis, but you couldn't look scary if you tried." The younger man shot him a look as if trying to decide between being pleased and offended - and Coach grinned at him.

"It's a compliment. Rare man who can stay level in these times."

Ellis shrugged his shoulders, scratching at his neck with his free hand. "I guess." He followed as Nick and Coach kept moving down the road. "Goes fer all of us, though. Like... we got lucky, didn't we? Meetin' up? 'Cause we're all nice folks, so it ain't hard tuh keep... y'know. Sane, I guess."

"Maybe." the ex-football player grunted. A car sat straddling the curb, and they cut to the right, stepping up on the sidewalk to get around it. "Half the battle is havin' somethin' to keep you thinkin' straight, though, and you do a real good job of that. You an' Ro', too, but you help her the same."

The next condo had a fence just a little taller than eye-level, and Nick strode up to it, reaching up to grab a hand on the top. He didn't really climb it; just used it to balance himself as he gave a light
hop, catching a glimpse over into the yard. He could see across the lawn and into the open single-car garage.

"No go on the hose. There's a garage, but it's empty." he uttered as he landed, turning away. His voice rose with a touch of sarcasm as he interjected, "Ellis, the moral compass of the group."

"Amen." Coach uttered, humoured, as if he hadn't caught that Nick wasn't serious.

The youngest survivor crinkled his nose, swinging the machete alongside himself in an idle gesture. "That - that ain't hardly true. Y'all would be doin' just fine without me." He glanced between the two men at either side of him, a slight redness touching the tips of his ears, embarrassed at the line of thinking.

Nick upthrust a hand, taking care to step around a long-dead corpse lying on the sidewalk, grimacing at the strong smell of rot. "Oh, hell yeah. I'd be doing great. None of you to bother me, hold me back. I wish."

"I would'a strangled yo' ass." Coach retorted, dully, eyes lit with amusement. "If Ro' didn't do it first. And we'd probably all be dead anyway, a while back."

Ellis couldn't help blinking down toward his toes, caught off-guard and embarrassed at the words. Did they really think he was that integral? That important? That the group wouldn't exist, and wouldn't have lasted, without him?

It made him feel a strange kind of shame, and he wanted to argue - because they were the important ones. He couldn't imagine going through all they'd been through alone.

"Let's look in here." Nick suggested, as he came up to another tall fence. It was too tall to catch a peek over, so he reached for the gate. As he tugged on it, however, it refused to open. Something rattled on the other side with a dull sound and firm resistance. "... Damnit."

Ellis peeked up, shaking off his thoughts. He glanced over the fence, stepping up to a tiny hole in the grain. He shut one eye and reached up to flip his cap around so he could press his face up close to get a look through the hole.

Squirming left and right to scan across the view he had, he could see just enough. "There's a garage. Pretty big-lookin', might have somethin'... and there's a hose hooked up to the house." Pulling back, the mechanic shook his head a little, mouth crooked. "Can't tell if it's small enough from here."

Frustrated, Nick gave the gate a few yanks. It protested with a sturdy groan, barely shifting, so he gave up and released it. Instead, the gambler dropped to a crouch, cupping his hands together and bracing his forearm on the inside of his thigh. "... Let me haul you up. Don't jump over, just see what's closing this door, and if you can undo it if you got in there."

Coach immediately crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes. He shook his head firmly, discontent. "I don't like puttin' him on the other side of a fence from us. Might be somethin' in there."

Sparing a glare in his direction, Nick shrugged. He riled a little, irritated at the implication that he'd do so without thinking twice. "One, it's dead silent in there. Two, I literally just said don't jump over. Just take a look."

Ellis quickly advanced, waving a hand gently at Coach. "I'll just look, I promise." He stepped up beside Nick, resting a palm on his shoulder and scooting up a foot to place his boot on Nick's clasped palms. The gambler grimaced, disgust apparent on his features - and Ellis almost laughed.
Once he'd gotten his balance there, Nick counted out a muttered "One, two -" and Ellis shifted all his weight onto Nick's hands. The gambler straightened a little, not quite coming out of his crouch, and Ellis lifted up a hand to grip onto the top edge of the fencing as it came into reach.

"Little more." he prompted when it was still too tall to see over, receiving a nasty snarl from Nick, who straightened a few more inches.

Craning his head over the fence, Ellis peeked straight down, looking at the other side of the gate. The handle was a flat bar, and someone had wedged a slat of wood between it and the gate, locking it in place. "Oh, yeah. It's just blocked up. I can get it open."

"Anythin' hostile in there?" Coach questioned, dubiously. "Any zombies?"

Ellis did a quick scan of the lawn, shaking his head. There were a few lawn chairs sprawled out across the grass, and the remnants of some long-past grill party. The grill had long since gone out, and the charred shapes of what might have been hotdogs and hamburgers were burnt into the grating.

It made him hungry.

"Ain't nothin'. Just lemme hop over, I'll get the gate open." When Nick grunted in affirmation, Ellis dropped his machete on the other side of the fence, freeing his hands to grip it with both hands.

They both surged in unison, and Ellis kicked himself up onto the fence. Momentum did not carry him over, and he landed for a moment on the very top, buckled over it - and a vague cry of pain left his lips. He'd forgotten about his rib, and the fence jabbed up into his midsection.

He tipped over the fence in a clumsy surge, recoiling to get his weight off his injured rib. Stars sparked in his eyes, vision blurring amidst the pain. The next thing he knew he was flat on his back in the grass, eyes squinted shut.

"Ellis!" Coach called out, urgently, at the same time Nick hissed a sharp, "Overalls?"

It took Ellis a moment to regain his breath, inhaling sharply, eyes watering slowly. He forced himself up onto his elbows, blearily seeking out the machete and getting it back into his hands. "'M fine! Sorry! Just fell is all..."

"Christ." Nick's voice was a little muffled through the fence, moving as he approached the gate's other side. "That was about as graceful as I expected from you. You still in one fucking piece over there, or are we gonna have to put you back together, Humpty-Dumbshit?"

Coach pressed close to the fence, voice stern and concerned. "Ellis, open the gate up."

"Yeah, yeah..." Coughing softly, Ellis pushed himself up, curling an arm to press a hand against his ribs. He got his feet under himself, straightening, and turned to walk up to the fence gate. He got a grip on the plank of wood barring the gate, testing it with a wiggle.

It moved, but not much. "It's a li'l stuck, gimme a sec.'" He tucked the machete under his arm, grasping the plank with both hands. He put his weight into it, grimacing a little as he pulled - and the plank made a few squeaks of progress, but it was wedged tightly.

He frowned, vaguely. "Can you push on the door?"

The fence gate suddenly jerked, as Nick put weight on it from the other side. Ellis pulled on the plank again, but it moved even less than before. Blinking, he uttered, "Um... Pull?" There was an
annoyed growl right before the gate jolted again, this time yanking the opposite direction. When Ellis tugged, he found it just as stuck.

"Um... It ain't mov-" He hadn't finished the sentence before a light flickered on in his head. Ellis slowly looked toward the machete handle sticking out from under his arm as if seeing it for the first time. He laughed softly, then murmured, "Oh, I am dumb."

"What?" Nick and Coach uttered in unison, some panic shared between their tones.

"Step back, man. I'm 'bout to Voorhees this mother."

He heard their footsteps, stuttered as they retreated, and Ellis carefully pressed the edge of the machete against the plank, readying himself. He coiled his body behind the gesture, angling it, before taking a hearty chop out of the wood.

The machete sunk effortlessly into the board, sundering it halfway through. He let out a laugh, tickled with himself, and tore the blade free. He tapped the edge against the notch he'd made, letting the muscle memory of the swing sink in as he prepared for another chop.

He raised the blade right as something collided with his back.

A warm, wet giggle sounded in his ear, as a disfigured set of teeth suddenly pushed hard against the side of his head, smearing blood and saliva against his cheek, and a set of gnarled limbs latched around his shoulders and neck.

Ellis yelped as the weight slammed him forward, hitting the fence face-first. The strike made his vision go black, and as soon as he hit it, the Jockey was yanking backwards. He stumbled back a few steps, arms pinwheeling, barely having the presence of mind to keep a grip on the machete.

He could hear shouting from the other side of the fence, but couldn't respond before the Jockey slapped a sweaty palm over his mouth, fingernails digging into his cheek. He gave a muffled yell and halted, digging in his heels.

The Jockey leaned off him as dead weight, and all stopping did was make it topple him to the ground, landing hard on the grass.

Spiderlike, the creature crawled out from under him, clambering to sit on his chest. It landed either greasy foot on his upper arms, pinning them there, and leaned in greedily toward his face. He choked on the fetid air escaping its broken and elongated maw, and it wrapped knobbled fingers around his neck and squeezed.

The airflow through his throat stopped with an almost tangible compression, and he found himself instantly straining. He hadn't thought to take a breath - and even if he had, panic emptied his lungs.

All he could think was of Jerry, crushing his chest under his boot. Of the bloody and disfigured face of Nick, cracking his neck with his bare hands. His heart rate went wild, thundering, and an animal fear took over.

He struggled, bucking his body, trying to surge up the hand wielding the machete. He stabbed it toward the creature, and its edge found purchase on the Jockey's back and side. However, even as he could hear its papery flesh giving way and feel the splatter of blood against his fingers, it did not desist.

Although his vision began to fade, he could see past the Jockey's warped shoulder and to the fence gate. It shook, ferociously, like a blow had been applied to it - and though the plank threatened to
give, it didn't. Ellis could hear his companions yelling, and he choked out a few desperate syllables.

He tried to surge his arms up, but the Jockey tightened its grip, and the lack of oxygen was numbing his limbs. The Jockey laughed in his face, delirious, something in its bulging eyes speaking to utter terror.

Some tremendous force blew the gate open, hard enough to shatter the plank that he'd chopped half through, and the gate slammed on its hinges and cracked into the fence as it spun open. Through the blurring of his vision, Ellis saw it: Coach and Nick were shoulder to shoulder, recovering their balance from a joint kick.

The ex-football player had his arm around Nick's shoulders, and there was pain on his face.

Barely registering the motion as they charged forward, all Ellis knew was the weight was suddenly lifted off of him, and he sucked in a violent breath. The expansion of his chest hurt, and before he could stop, another breath came. And another. And his breath was stuttering, shaking, like he couldn't get ahold of it.

The Jockey wasn't even on him anymore, wasn't gripping his neck anymore, but he couldn't breathe.

"Son. Son. You a'ight." a voice whispered to him, and he barely felt it as he was pulled up into a seated position on the grass, arms wrapping around him. His face tilted, burying into Coach's chest, and he felt the hyperventilation of his lungs only slowly stop as the big man's hand smoothed in circles on his back.

Ellis didn't even realize he'd begun to cry until he forced an inhale through his nose, and it was wet and stuffy. Coach just held him, and the mechanic was only distantly aware of Nick standing in front of both of them, arms crossed and face drawn in an irritated frown.

He didn't even look up toward the gambler, because he was afraid to know who he was irritated at.

"You breathe fo' me, son."
Ellis sat on the edge of one of the lawn chairs, slumped, expression drawn into something a little miserable. "I'm fine, really!"

Coach shook his head, arms crossed over his chest tightly. "Son, I ain't tryin' to make you feel bad, but you ain't. We'll just head back, and you can stay with Ro'. Nick an' I can handle things." When Ellis became poised to argue, Coach shifted to carefully and tenderly kneel down.

Pain fluctuated over his features, but that didn't stop him from reaching out and grasping the back of Ellis' neck. "Ellis... it's a'ight. You don't gotta hide bein' upset." The younger man averted his eyes, embarrassed with the knowledge of how his eyes were still red and his face still flushed. "What is it? I ain't seen you panic like that."

"I-it's nothin'. I just couldn't breathe, is all, and my chest is still hurtin'." It wasn't a lie, after all. Just an omission of some details. "Is your knee okay...?"

He knew Coach saw through his weak attempt at distraction, and the big man gave him a weary look of disapproval. "It's fine, son. And if yo' chest is hurtin' that bad, just means even more reason to send you back home."

Nick came up from behind them, stepping lightly. He'd unhooked the hose from the faucet, and shoved it out where Ellis could see it. "Small enough?" he questioned, curt.

The mechanic pulled gently back from Coach's grip, looking nervously up toward the Northerner. His face was impassive, cold almost. Ellis wasn't sure if he should take comfort from the lack of active anger, or be unsettled. Maybe he merely meant to be angry later.

He tried to focus on the hose, reaching out to grasp it with a still-trembling hand, getting a feel for the diameter. "Uh... yeah, maybe, if we cut off the cap..." Ellis snuck a glance to meet Nick's gaze, and found himself looking into distant greens that gave no sign of emotion, merely frigid understanding. "I'm not... real sure, sorry."

Nick tilted his head, eyes darting for Coach. "Sam, we still need something to hold the gas. Not gonna do us any good to siphon it out without a can or something. And no offense, but if your knee goes out, I don't think I can get your fat ass back alone."

When Coach turned a frown up to the gambler, Ellis ducked his head slightly. At the same time he felt some gratification at Nick standing up for him, he didn't like them fighting - and especially not over him. "I can get my damn self back home, Nicolas. And if you'd listened to me and not had Ellis go over the fence, we wouldn't be in this mess."

That made Nick laugh, barking out an unhumoured noise and shaking his head. "He's a fucking grown adult. I didn't make him do anything."

Coach's jaw flinched, and he suddenly straightened, weight tilting off his bad leg and shoulders going stiff. Ellis' eyes widened at the sudden, unexpected flash of vitriol between them. "You know full well he'd do somethin' dumb, especially if you told him to."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Nick hissed, nostrils flaring and eyes gone narrowed. His posture tightened, and Coach matched him, the two men squaring off like they meant to fight.
"You wanna say something, Sam?"

"Hey!" Ellis yelled, anger flaring up and sending him to his feet. "I'm right the hell here!" He wobbled, but caught his balance to thrust himself between the two older survivors and physically block them from each other. "Nobody did nothin' dumb! It snuck up on me, and y'all saved me. We're fine. So quit fightin' over nothin'!

Coach was the first to relent, stepping back rather than fight Ellis' intrusion. Nick looked vaguely smug as he lowered his shoulders - like he'd won.

Scratching at his forearm, Coach uttered a grunted sigh. He turned away, looking toward the house's garage with lowered brows. Rather than apologize or acknowledge Ellis, he uttered, "Gonna check on if they got a container in there." He moved away, stepping tenderly on his weak leg.

Ellis gazed after him, frowning gently. He inhaled, sharply, curling his fingers into fists. His gut trembled, threatening nausea, and it only sharpened when Nick passed him a look sideways.

"Someone's pissy today." he commented, dryly.

Ellis exhaled and followed after Coach without responding. He wasn't upset at Nick, exactly, but couldn't they go a day without a communications breakdown? Every time he thought things had finally evolved past petty arguing - he was proven wrong.

He could barely keep himself together anymore. Why did they think he could keep them together?

"'Ey - Coach." he called, hurrying to catch up with the man. Coach was in the process of grabbing the handles to the garage door, and Ellis sidled up to join him in the effort. Together they pulled it up, the metal rattling as it coiled up and out of sight.

The garage was silent inside, a set of shelves and cabinets set up against the wall. Coach didn't spare Ellis a look as he ducked inside and started to pace along the shelving, looking through the assorted junk piled on the racks. The younger man followed at his heels, close enough to trip over him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean tuh yell - or get hurt." When Coach held his silence, Ellis reached to grab his arm. That stopped him in his tracks, and the ex-football player glanced his way, eyes betraying a vague surprise. "Don't be mad at him."

The big man actually chuckled, turning a bemused look on him. He drew his arm free with a shake, instead patting a hand on Ellis' shoulder. "Nicky just knows how to push my buttons, that's all. Just need to cool off."

Ellis smiled a little in return, nodding his head. He snuck a glance over his shoulder, checking to ensure that Nick wasn't paying attention. The gambler was standing with his back to them, out in the lawn, working on sawing the hose's endcap off with his katana. The non-serrated edge struggled just a little to chew through the webbed and netted layers of plastic.

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work half-completed, looping the hose up so he could put his arm through it and tuck it alongside his stowed sniper rifle. Shouldering the burden, he glanced back at his teammates. "If we're done fighting."


Together, Ellis and Coach retreated from the garage, returning to Nick's side. The younger man passed Nick a hesitant blink, gauging his expression - and the older man offered him the slightest squint back.

He was gauging him, too, so Ellis forced a smile.

Nick looked unconvinced as he shrugged the hose higher on his shoulder, walking toward the gate. "We'll try a few more houses, cut across the street, and go back. I don't want to go too far." There was no argument from his teammates, though Coach grunted faintly.

As they walked across the lawn, Ellis couldn't help but look down at the corpse of the Jockey. Nick had slit its throat deeply enough to almost sever it completely, and the creature lay in a tightly coiled fetal position, like a squashed bug. Its eyes stared sightlessly off into the distance, tears streaked down its waxy skin and tongue lolling between mutilated jaws.

He frowned, a little. "Weird thinkin' we got whatever them ugly things got..." he murmured, mostly to himself, but Coach turned to glance at him curiously.

"Hmm?" he questioned, tolerantly.

Ellis looked up to respond, but didn't get the chance.

Soft enough to be in the distance, but loud enough to be heard, came the thrum of an engine. They all startled, freezing, and Nick bolted to duck against the fence. Coach followed his cue, grabbing Ellis' elbow to drag him with, and the survivors ended up flattened against the fencing.

"Shit. Is that a car?" Nick hissed, craning his head out through the open gate. His hands shifted, sliding his katana under his belt to sheathe it, and pulling his sniper rifle into his grip instead. "If they heard us..." The motion caught Ellis' attention, and stoked a little fear in his chest. He didn't want things to turn violent.

Ellis shook his head, pushing forward against Coach to listen. The noise continued in a purring rhythm, heightening and pitching as it went, seeming to travel across the air. "N-no." he managed, anxiety quieting his voice. "I don't think so. Sounds like a bike. Can't be too far, either."

Wordlessly, Coach grabbed the radio off Nick's hip, eliciting a slight startle from the gambler. He raised the handheld to his mouth, voice hushed as he spoke. "Babygirl?"

She responded instantly, sounding tense - even through the radio. "I'm here. Is something wrong?"

"We're comin' back. We got company out here."

The engine was growing louder, if Ellis wasn't imagining things. Nick growled, turning and leaning in toward the radio. Coach hit the call button for him, offering the mic out toward his mouth. "If you hear gunshots, fucking stay inside."

It almost seemed like Rochelle might not respond, but just when Coach began to lower the radio, a crackle announced her response.
"As if."

Nick smirked, just faintly, then turned back toward the gate opening. He couldn't see any sign of the vehicle, but it couldn't have been more than a few blocks away, judging by the volume and echo of the sound. He murmured over his shoulder, voice firm and eyes coldly calculating. "What's our play?"

"Run. If they know where we are, ain't no sense sneakin'." Coach uttered, and when Ellis nodded his head, Nick snorted.

"Only if you can, old man." Rather than give Coach a chance to retort, Nick made a break for it. He cut hard to the left as his stride took him through the fence gate, and his teammates were close behind. Their footsteps pounded on the sidewalk as they charged to retrace their steps.

Ellis couldn't stop looking over his shoulder, terrified that each glance would reveal the source of that thrumming engine on their tail.
Rochelle paced carefully across the entryway hall, thumbing against the curve of her lower lip. She gazed at the radio in her hand, mind racing. She wanted to check in - but if they were in danger, her yelling in their ear was the last thing they needed.

It wasn't like they could have gone far in the time they'd been gone. As long as she didn't hear gunfire, she had to keep her calm. "They'll be back." she murmured, reassuringly, taking in a deep breath. "They'll definitely be back."

Releasing the breath in a bluster, she carefully turned, stepping back into the bedroom. She'd come in to bring Christophe something to eat and found him cloistered away under the sheets, so tightly it would have taken force to unwrap him. He hadn't stirred, and she'd been hesitant to wake him.

But if they were under attack, and God forbid they had to leave...

"Chris? I'm sorry, I need you to wake up." She approached the bed, urgently setting a knee against the edge of the mattress so she could lean in. "We might have to leave, so I need you to be awake."

He shifted, just softly, and his voice came thin and muffled through the draped sheets. "Leave?" he questioned, just a ghosted word.

She nodded, gently flexing her injured hand. "Hopefully not. But the boys are saying they've run into someone, and they may or may not be onto us. If it's... if it's your friend, Phil, then... I need you to be ready to talk to him. And if it's not, we need to be ready to leave."

When Christophe started to move, breath going pained and reedy, Rochelle reached out a hand to help drag the sheets out of their tight wrap around his body. He pushed his arm against the bed, shoving himself up toward a sitting position. He slumped there, shirtless body still crusted in shades of pink and red, face drawn in a tight grimace of agony.

"Sí." was all he said. His eyes were dull, and Rochelle couldn't resist a frown.

She understood the emptiness in his expression, but it hurt her to see. She didn't know how to make it easier, didn't know how to fix it. Everything that came to mind was some platitude or useless sentiment, and the last thing she wanted to do was say something that would only make him feel worse.

Reaching out, Rochelle gently touched his shoulder, aware of the way the touch made him flinch a little. She wasn't sure if it was pain, or something else, but she pressed on. "It'll be okay. We'll all be here for you, and we have a car - so you shouldn't have to go far, alright?"

Chris glanced up, looking her face over in a slow wander of attention, and the faintest slip of amusement touched his eyes. "You will have to carry me, I think, bonita."

Rochelle couldn't stop a smile from appearing on her lips, some warm and heavy relief seeping into her chest. He hadn't called her that in so long - she'd almost thought he never would again, and it was an odd comfort. And when she smiled, he returned it. It was small and fragile, but there.

"Get ready on the door." Coach's voice hummed out of the radio in her other hand, startling her.

She averted her eyes, clipping the radio back onto the pocket of her jeans, and took a quick inhal. Fresh relief flooded in at the idea her teammates were close by. "I - gotta go get them. Stay here..."
for now, okay? I'll come back and get you if we have to make a run for it."

Chris nodded, just once, and she turned and hurried back out into the entryway. Her boots hit hard against the carpet, and it was in somewhat of a scramble that she made it to the front door and undid the deadbolt and doorknob lock.

Carefully, reaching back to pull her pistol out from the waistband of her jeans, Rochelle drew it into her left hand. Maintaining it pointed downward, she turned the knob enough to open the door and used her shoulder to nudge it open. She gave herself enough of an opening to see, and her sightline cut straight across the yard to the fence gate.

Rochelle held her breath, and if she listened - she could hear something. It made her frown, leaning out slightly, processing the noise only slowly. An engine? A car of some sort, roaring and chugging somewhere nearby? That must have been what startled the others, and she couldn't blame them.

As much as she didn't want to be, she was afraid. The sound sent chills up her spine.

A soft startle made her jump when the fence gate shifted, creaking abruptly as it tipped open. Ellis was the first one through, and he shuffled to hold the gate open. The clutch of dread on her stomach, nonsensical, lasted until Coach and Nick followed behind him and he shut the gate.

Rochelle had been holding her breath, and it was only as she watched all three of them come running toward her did she release it.

"I'm glad you guys are okay!" she uttered, even as her hand flashed down to flip the power button on the radio. Coach followed suit as he started up the stairs, eyes darting to meet hers with a soothing blink. He quickly dove into the condo, sighing.

"You an' me both, babygirl."

Nick snorted, dismissively. He dumped the hose off his shoulder before he reached the staircase, thrusting up his hands. "Okay, and also fucking irritated. Waste of a trip. Couldn't find a gas can or anything before that fucking asshole started making noise. All we did was get a fucking garden hose, and help him hone in on where we are!"

"How 'bout you get in the house before you start yellin', Nick?" Ellis murmured, tone gently worried, and he stepped up to follow the gambler. Nick grasped his katana and ascended the stairs, grumbling under his breath. As he came up to Rochelle, Ellis slipped a hand to touch her elbow. "Sorry if we scared you."

Rochelle smiled hesitantly, fighting the urge to grab him up into an embrace. She put a hand against his back and ushered him inside, sparing one glance through the door before shutting it again. She turned, facing her teammates with a wary attention. "Do you think they saw you? Heard you?"

"Ain't real sure, babygirl." Coach dragged fingertips against his neck, eyes screwing up in thought with a weary sigh. "Sound like they were comin' toward us, but never saw 'em. They're real close by, though."

Ellis slipped his arms into a loose hug around his torso, squeezing fingers on the handle of Chris' machete. "I... I sorta messed up, so they might have heard us." Rochelle shot him a confused blink, eyes gone sympathetic. "Nick'n'Coach had tuh make a ruckus savin' my hide."

"Kid's a Jockey magnet." Nick stated, coolly.
Rochelle took a step toward Ellis, looping an arm around his. She looked him over, and her eyes caught on the bruises beginning around his neck. They were thin and tapered, mixed with the abrasions of nails. "I'm fine." he muttered before she could ask, eyes averting.

Her hand petted softly on his forearm, and she looked up toward Coach, expression fading to something serious - and slightly frightened. "Do we need to go?"

The football coach shook his head in slow negation, sighing. He looked down at the carpet rather than gaze on her features too long, flicking the tip of his thumb against his index finger. "Don't see no point. If they know we're here, and want a fight, they'll just follow us. If they don't, we ain't got no reason to shake things up. Be hard on Chris, anyway."

"And we didn't... actually get a way to fuel the car up." Ellis hesitantly interjected, eyes soft with regret. His voice went vaguely unsteady, insecure. "Like, if we pulled the cars up real close, maybe we could just... get the flow goin', stick the other end'uh the hose in the other gas tank...? They're kinda on a hill.. maybe it'd work..."

Gently, Rochelle nudged him with her shoulder, smiling in a soft and forced manner. "Look. Don't worry about it right now, okay? You haven't eaten today, and you sound a little faint. Go grab something, and we'll puzzle it out together, okay?"

He gave her a dubious look like he was wise to her less-than-opaque attempt to distract him, but nodded, echoing softly, "Okay." He extricated his arm from hers, turning to pad up the staircase, head vaguely low.

In his absence, Rochelle slipped her gaze toward Nick. Her voice lowered to nearly a murmur, eyes narrowing. "What happened?"

Nick shrugged his arms up, prepared to respond, but Coach overrode him. "He got pinned by a Jockey. Panicked. Ain't seen the boy that upset - ever." Rochelle's expression fell to some struggling emotion, and the closest definition of it might have been disappointment. In herself, maybe, or all of them. "Cryin', couldn't breathe, the whole nine yards."

"Damnit." she muttered, putting a hand over her mouth and turning half away. She tapped nails against her lips, closing her eyes for a few beats. "I knew he wasn't okay." It was with an inhale that Rochelle, eyes still closed, murmured. "Nick. Go talk to him."

The gambler thrust his arms out to either side, defensively. He took a step back, ragged irritation coming up over his features. "What the fuck? Why is it always me? I'm sorry, did I miss the part where somebody died and made me group therapist?"

Coach's hands slid to grasp at his hips, a frown alighting on his lips. "You don't think anyone other than Nick might help?"

With that, Nick's defense did a sudden and violent 180, and he turned a glare onto the football coach. "Oh, right, because I'm never helpful. I'm definitely not the reason one-arm in there is alive, or any of you fuckers are alive at any given point. Definitely haven't cleaned up your mess a few times."

Coach bristled gently, fingers curling into fists. "That ain't my point, Nick. My point is -"

Their voices were raising, and Rochelle reached out her free hand, grabbing Coach by the wrist. He snapped his eyes to hers, and she blinked slowly into his gaze. "Papa bear. Ellis doesn't need to hear this. Okay?" She didn't anticipate what happened next.
Of all the things she'd have expected, it wasn't what happened.

Coach's brows drew into a pinch, and he *glared* at her.

Flipping their grips, he abruptly took her hand and strode down the hallway. She had little choice but to follow, even as Nick looked after them with an almost bewildered posture. Nearly all the anger drained out of him in favour of confusion. "Wh-? Bye to you, too, assholes."

Gently guiding her into the second bedroom, Coach closed the door behind them solidly. He sighed, weightily, releasing her wrist with something like an apologetic shake of his head. She frowned, an insecurity tugging her shoulders down as she gazed at him in silence. He didn't look that angry often.

"Look, Ro'. I don't get in this mess, 'cause I know you and Ellis are close - but can you give me a damn clue here?" She gazed at him in vague shock, unsure, mouth gawping softly in silence. "The boy's real messed up 'bout somethin'. Why do you keep pushin' him on Nick when the man's just gonna be a horse's ass?"

Rochelle was at an utter loss for words.

That was the last thing she'd thought he had on his mind, and part of her immediately froze. She'd never told Coach anything about Nick and Ellis, never so much as hinted toward it. She'd wanted to, of course, but Ellis had entrusted her with the secret... unintentionally or no.

"I...", Rochelle tried to raise her hands, stop him, but he was already off.

"That boy is - impressionable. You tellin' me you don't think Nick's got a hand in him being so damn scared? Havin' Nick as a friend is *helpin'*? The man can't take two seconds to say somethin' nice half the time, and the rest of the time is doom and gloom, or bein' a hard-ass."

That frustrated Rochelle a little, jaw flinching, because she had her own doubts. She had her own fears, and her own concerns. She *knew* Nick cared for Ellis - but that wasn't the point, was it? That wasn't what mattered, when it came down to it.

"So help me out here, Ro'. Do you know somethin' I don't? It wasn't a big deal back when I thought Ellis was a'ight, but the boy cracked today." Coach reached out, and suddenly he had hands cradling her face, and there was a strained and tense worry drowning his dark eyes. "I ain't seen him act like that. He needs us. Why ain't you up there talkin' to him?"

Her jaw trembled, and she suddenly felt the intense desire to cry.

She didn't.

But she knew if she tried to argue, if she tried to tell him how she felt, she'd tip her hand. There was no way to discuss this halfway, so she closed her eyes and took a step back, sighing harshly. He seemed to catch on that something was wrong, and he released her, mouth tugging into a frown.
"Look, Coach. I understand, okay? I'll talk to him." she mumbled, softly. She raised a hand to pinch down the bridge of her nose, stressed. "I promise. But... don't think so badly of Nick. He does better with Ellis than you think, he just... doesn't let us see it. Pretty sure it wasn't Nick behind the breakdown he had today."

Sliding his arms into a cross, Coach cocked his head. He thumbed against the waistband of his slacks, exhaling. "Jerry?"

"Among everything else going on right now." She smiled, though it was hollow, slanting a glance up through her eyelashes to gaze over the older man's face. His expression faded into a tense and creased look of concern. "You really blame him?"

Coach turned away, palming flatly against his face. There was genuine anger in his voice when he muttered, "Damn this shit. I the only one who didn't think anythin' would break that boy?"

Tentatively, Rochelle stepped forward. She stowed the pistol under the waistband of her jeans, at the base of her spine, and freed her hands to reach out both arms. She slipped them around Coach's waistline, pulling him into a hug, and he was quick to return it.

"Sorry, girl. Long few days."

She sighed out a soft, "Yeah.", burying into the hug for a few moments. Rochelle would not turn down the warmth and the affection, even if only for a beat of time.

On the other side of the door, Nick delicately pulled away, a frown etched deeply into his brow. There was a subtle but vicious anger in his posture as he turned and made for the stairs, careful to mask his footsteps until he'd gotten far enough away.

*Always the bad guy, huh?*
Chapter 158

Fidgeting fingers against a granola bar, Ellis couldn't help but sigh. He was as far from hungry as he'd ever been, stomach twisting into knots and heart thudding out a frightened pattern in his chest.

Carefully, the Georgian pushed himself up onto the kitchen counter, dangling his legs limply. He set the bar down on his lap and raised a hand to gently palm against his neck. His skin was still moist from contact with the Jockey's hands, and it was a tacky and oily wetness.

Sweat, or saliva, or who knew what. He grimaced, reaching blindly for the roll of paper towels behind him. He ripped off a section and used it to scrub at his neck and cheek, where the Jockey had pushed its rotten-out teeth against his face. It wasn't really disgust that fueled him, but a desire to wipe away the tactile sensations left behind.

It didn't work.

Slowly, his motions lost energy, then stopped. He dropped his hand to his lap, closing his eyes, trying for a deep inhale and ending up with a stuttered hiccup instead. He didn't want to feel like this. He didn't want to teeter on the brink of something like panic. Try as he might, his heart rate would not slow.

"Hey, kiddo."

Nick's voice broke through his focus, and he startled faintly. The gambler took the last few steps up the stairs, expression a thin veneer of calm, and approached him at a slow pace. Ellis couldn't help gazing at him, trying to find some kind of center, and calm himself with those familiar features. That familiar voice.

At least his heart stopped trying to thunder its way through his ribcage.

Lowering his gaze slowly, Ellis exhaled out a puff of air. As Nick advanced close enough for him to mumble, he questioned, "They're talkin' about me, huh?" The other man seemed irritated, and the fact he was even trying to disguise it told Ellis it wasn't him he was mad at. That was a relief, but only a very small and tentative one.

"Nah." Nick lied, and Ellis had to smile a little, despite himself. "Why would they talk about a little dumbshit like you?"

Lacing his fingers together cautiously, Ellis gazed down at his knees, letting his legs swing where they dangled off the counter's edge. "I didn't mean tuh freak. Honest. It's just..." His head raised delicately when Nick slid to stand just beside his knee, one hand going to brace against the countertop. He looked up, hesitantly, finding Nick's face perilously close to his.

The gambler's eyes searched over his face, a frustrated glint to the green. "Mean to? You think they're mad at you because you got scared? They're not angry, Ace. They're worried. Big difference." He reached out, grasping, as if he meant to get a thumb under Ellis' jawline and nudge his chin up, examine the abrasions on his neck.

The gesture made Ellis flinch. He didn't want to, but couldn't stop it, and Nick noticed it. His hand dropped, abruptly.

"... What's going on, anyway?" There was a note of irritation in his voice, and Ellis lowered his
chin further, nearly embarrassed. "Only seen you come close to that upset once." He didn't say it, but there was tacit understanding: the hotel. When Ellis had burst through the door separating their rooms and broken down in his arms.

"Wasn't a Jockey that did it that time, though."

Ellis felt his face heat up, subtly, at the reminder. He turned his chin away slightly, only to find Nick leaning to keep within his vision. The older man's voice was taut, innocuous. The Southerner wanted to close his eyes, but he was almost sure he wouldn't like the images burned into the backs of his lids. "It's... nothin', Nick. I'm just -"

"Bullshit." Nick interjected calmly, a brow raising. "Try again."

His voice had become significantly less innocuous, and Ellis splayed out his fingers in a helpless gesture. "I-I just didn't see it comin'. Whut do you want me tuh say? I ain't supposed tuh be upset, gettin' jumped by that creepy sumbit-"

The gambler's head tilted, some frustration entering the posture as he shook his head right back, interrupting effortlessly. "Nope. Keep trying." The rejection stirred a tension that made Ellis utter a noise of agitation, leaning forward, and Nick reacted with a calculated disinterest.

He wasn't going to escape unscathed. Nick read him too well, and there was no way to play off the panic he'd experienced. The older man was stubborn, and not stupid.

"It - it just reminded me, that's all. Of Jerry, of ... that nightmare the other day, it just - it ain't sittin' well. Everything that's goin' on, I feel like I ain't got a handle on nothin' right now." Ellis glanced down at his hands, brows screwing up, and he was aware of Nick's silent attention on him.

It embarrassed him, somehow, and he hated how he felt in that moment. Nick's silence left him to flounder there alone, trapped in his own words, unable to do anything but forge through. Struggle past it.

"I'm just scared." blustered out of him, and it was with a sudden hunch that Ellis palmed against his eyes, hiding them behind spread fingers. "I don't wanna be, I just - I just am. Whut if these folk are crazy, too? Whut if they wanna hurt us? I can't - I can't do that again. I ain't got it in me, Nick."

Nick's eyes ticked to wordlessly watch the slow collapse of emotion in his posture, the cracks in his composure.

"I thought I wasn't gonna see y'all again." He was going to start crying, and he wanted so badly not to cry, but his lungs were collapsing in his chest and his voice was going high. He could feel the break coming. Tangible, and just around the corner. "He told me you were dead, and he was gonna hurt me - I didn't think we'd make it, Nick. I didn't think -"

Fingers suddenly snatched onto the side of his head, palm flat against his ear, fingertips pressing against his scalp. Nick's thumb got a grip against his cheek, and leveraged his face up, pulling it away from his hand. Their gazes met, and Nick's was simultaneously cold as ice and aflame.

"And now he's dead. I killed him, and we made it, because the bad guys lose and the good guys win."

Ellis stared at him through the vaguest veil of tears, slowly managing to shake his head within Nick's grip. "You don't think that's true. I know you, Nick, and you don't believe that." he mumbled, voice muffling to quiet when Nick's thumb traced down to press against the edge of his mouth.
"But you do. Or did, anyway." The older man leaned in, closer, and his lids lowered. The piercing quality of his gaze dulled with the gesture, voice growing vaguely distant. "When did that change, kid? And why'd you let it?"

The tears broke through, and Ellis reached up a trembling hand to close it over Nick's - but the gambler was already pulling away, turning on his heel, running fingers through his hair in a tense motion. The younger man was left with little recourse but allowing his hand to drop limply into his lap.

Nick ticked a nail against one of the rings on his fingers, inhaling and exhaling deeply, trying to calm himself. He was angry, and interacting with Ellis when he was angry had been a bad choice from the start. It would bleed through, one way or another - and what was the point?

If he was nothing but a bad influence, what was the point, anyway? Of any of it? He'd never meant for it to last this long, go this far. He'd learned long ago he couldn't be trusted with other people's well-being, and had spent so many years surrounding himself with awful men and women who couldn't have gotten any worse had he even tried...

Ellis was a genuinely good kid, and maybe it was too late, even if he left that very moment. Too late to undo whatever damage he'd already done, amongst all the damage the apocalypse and the Angels had done. He no longer had the comfort of knowing he would inevitably be just a bad memory of a misguided fling.

Nick had already ruined him.

He stiffened distantly when Ellis mumbled at his back. "I-I'm sorry."

Cocking his head, Nick glanced back over his shoulder, examining Ellis where he sat there, slumped and ashamed. His eyes widened for just an instant before a laugh escaped him, vague and unamused. Because of course Ellis would apologize, like he'd done something wrong.

"Christ." he muttered, voice wry. "Maybe you haven't fucking changed."

They stared each other down, trapped at a hesitant distance, something surging in the air like tension - but warmer than that. Like desire, or longing, drawn taut by stress and exhaustion. Ellis might have broken and tumbled off the counter, closed the gap, had Rochelle's voice not called gently from downstairs.

"Ellis. Can you come help me? Let's get Chris cleaned up. We've gotta be ready to go, just in case."

Nick averted his eyes, snorting, anger flaring despite himself. She was undoubtedly leveraging time with Ellis; to talk to him where he, apparently, couldn't be trusted. It irritated him, as much as he wanted to say it didn't - he didn't fail to comfort Ellis. It just wasn't his job to. It had never been, and wasn't supposed to be.

He wordlessly stepped away, moving toward the couch, clearing the path for Ellis to obey. He was aware of the younger man's eyes on him, but didn't return the gaze. "Go on." was all he said, low and muttered, and he listened to the quiet sound of Ellis getting up and walking past. The Southerner's footsteps paused just behind him, hesitating for a beat - only to continue on and down the stairs.

Nick sat on the couch and gazed out the glass doors, silent. It was some self-destructive whim that made him fish his wallet out from his slacks pocket, bouncing it on a palm, fingers catching on the
golden ring pressed tight against the leather from the inside.
Chapter 159

Convincing Chris to let them wash him did not, immediately, go over well. The foreigner's reaction amounted to horror.

"I-I would... rather no." Christophe's expression was drawn in fear, brown eyes latching onto Ellis' every move. The Georgian couldn't help slipping Rochelle an unsure glance, to which she shrugged. "It is necessary to ... do this?"

Gently seating himself on the edge of the bed, Ellis mustered together something like a soothing smile. He showed his empty hands in a reassuring gesture. "You got my word that it won't hurt none. But you're still pretty bloody, and it's messin' up the sheets, and it'll just make your bandages dirty again."

The Spaniard glanced down, a slight frown touching his lips as he wearily examined the red and pink staining in the sheets he'd left by contact with his skin. His anxiety at the suggestion of another bandage change was visible on his expression - and that was, apparently, plenty of incentive. "If you say so." he muttered, more of a whisper.

"I can leave, if you'd rather..." Rochelle suggested, lightly, but the man shook his head in a weak gesture.

"It would not be less ... violento." Chris uttered, pushing the sheets clumsily away from his body, hand trembling. When Ellis cocked his head, obvious confusion on his features, the Spaniard's movements stuttered. "Este... embarrassing? Mas o menos."

Ellis gave a slight laugh, leaning closer to delicately help tug the sheets away from him. "Well - we ain't gonna make you get naked or nothin'." Chris was sitting on bent legs, weight balanced onto his knees, and his hand went clenched, vicelike, on air. When the Spaniard managed a tilted grin, Ellis returned it, gladly.

Rochelle stood behind Ellis, a cloth and bowl of water in either hand. She offered them carefully out on flat hands, and the Georgian reached back to take the washcloth. He dunked it in the water and set to wringing it out, ensuring it was damp but not dripping. "Can I ask you somethin', Chris?"

Ellis wanted to talk for more than one reason. He intended to distract Chris, but he also wanted to distract himself. Silence threatened to bring that buzzing static anxiety back, and he'd much rather talk about something. Anything.

"Claro." the Spaniard murmured, his tone affirmative.

Folding the cloth up into a tight square, Ellis turned back around. He averted his gaze, leaning in to carefully start brushing the fabric against the worst of the stained and crusting blood over Chris' torso. He took care to stay away from his shoulder, and didn't let the wet cloth brush the bandages that crossed over his pecs to anchor the gauze.

"This guy, Phil. You talked like he was a pretty okay guy, right?" Chris nodded, tenderly, eyes half-closing. At first it was a fearful gesture, anticipating Ellis' touch - but then it smoothed out, relaxing at the edges, as he seemed to acclimate to the lukewarm coolness and the fact it wouldn't hurt. "If he up'n'left, why didn't you go with?"

Chris' lips dragged into a vague frown, mostly thoughtful. He worked the words out with a sort of reluctance, as if insecure of them. "Numbers, tío. Why trade dos for uno? We survive in numbers."
Ellis gently scrubbed at a spot of crusted-on something on the man's clavicle, putting his jaw out subtly. "Even if it meant stayin' with folk who are mean to yuh?" He did his best to ask it how he meant it: non-judgmentally. He was simply curious, and wanted to understand.

That made the foreigner laugh, just a short huff, mostly through his nose. "You think Phil is nice? I did not mean this. Only... that he was not like B and Jerry. There is a difference, ¿sí?"

Rochelle allowed herself a faint sigh, curling her tongue against the inside of her teeth. "I think what Ellis means is - why not go with the guy who seemed less likely to actively hurt you?" To illustrate her point, she reached up and brushed a fingertip against her own cheek, mirroring the sliced scab on his cheek where Jerry had taken a butcher's knife to it.

He gazed at her, expression fading into a sort of tired numbness. Chris tilted his head obediently when Ellis turned the cloth to wipe at his neck, closing his eyes to the touch. "I choose them, instead of death." he muttered, slowly, as if tasting the words anew. Something ticked over his face, like unpleasant realization.

Chris reopened his eyes with a blink, clarifying, "Brock and Sean, they both did not - listen. And died. Brock was arguing with Jerry. It was why we were distracted, and could not save him. Sean tried to stop B from stealing things from a group, and the strangers caught them, and shot him."

He almost shrugged, but halted the gesture at the last second, before he reflexively jostled his stump of an arm. A wince traced his features all the same, sparing a glance for the bandaged shape. "So, I listened."

Ellis let his free hand settle on the man's arm, steadying, as he carefully rinsed and re-wet the washcloth. It turned almost pink in the transfer, and the water left behind was just as sullied. "It ain't like you had much choice, seems like." he murmured, sympathetically. "And you made a better one when it came time."

Christophe gazed at him, suddenly, and the faintest shiver crossed his jaw. It was with a softly choked tone of voice that he murmured, "I hope.", raising his hand to gently offer it to Ellis. The Southerner took the cloth and washed the dried blood from his fingers and palm, slipping a hesitant glance toward Chris' face. He hadn't meant to upset him, unsure if it was a good or bad set of emotions flickering over the man's face - but he decided against mentioning it at all.

"I borrowed yer machete earlier. Pretty badass." he offered instead, feeling a distinct lightness when the words brought a quiet interest to Chris' eyes. "'Bout saved my skin, out there."

"¿Sí? I am glad. It always fought good for me." He smiled a little, some gratification sneaking into his expression, gaze lowering to watch Ellis cautiously wash off his forearm. Ellis didn't miss the past tense, halting his motions to look up and meet Chris' gaze firmly.

"We'll get you up and usin' it again before long, I bet. Yer a tough sucker."

Chris blinked back at him with a flinch of confusion touching his brow, right before he laughed, a gentle and faded sound. "You think so, hermano?" Ellis nodded meaningfully, returning his attention to his work with a soft smile, even as Christophe turned his gaze off toward the far wall. "Quizá..."

Rochelle couldn't help cocking her head, glancing between the two men. Looking at them there, huddled close and chatting in low tones, she was struck by how alike they seemed. She'd never thought to wonder how old Chris was, but seeing them interact made her suddenly think he
couldn't have been much past Ellis' age.

She couldn't tell if Ellis was putting up a strong front, or if the two were genuinely cheering each other up.

"Y'know..." Shifting to lean her hip against the edge of the bed, she craned her head forward, flashing a conspiratorial smile between the two younger men. "Since we've got a circle of trust in here." Ellis blinked at her, pausing the motion of his hands, uncomprehending at first. "Chris, what do you think of Nick and him, anyway?"

The Georgian's lips parted, and he looked vaguely betrayed and plenty mortified. He didn't, however, manage to get out a response before Christophe exhaled a subtle chuckle.

"I understand more now, that I know they are in the closet, why he is so... the son of a whore, ¿sí?" Rochelle could not hold back a burst of laughter, clapping a hand over her mouth and lifting her brows in something like surprise. Unperturbed, Chris turned a slightly tired eye onto Ellis. "He is not very kind to you. Debe estar follándote muy duro."

Ellis gawped at him, almost frightened to ask, and the man translated helpfully.

"The sex must be good, no?"

When he froze, jaw working at words with no sound escaping him except a stuttered whine low in his throat, Chris laughed a little. He reached out his hand, placing it on Ellis' knee in a pat of fingertips. "Los americanos, you are so -" Shaking his head when he couldn't seem to find the word, he offered instead, "Tímidos."

"It ain't none of y'all's business!" he protested, voice a bit of a hiss as he darted a look toward the closed door, heart rate going up at the prospect of Nick overhearing them. "Y'all shouldn't even... know at all, let alone - be askin' about that stuff! It's private! ...and embarrassin'!"

"To be fair..." Rochelle reached out and cuffed a knuckle teasingly against Ellis' cheek, grinning when the younger man leaned away, huffing. "That's also just Ellis' good Southern manners. We're not all that wound up."

Lowering his head with a flustered air, Ellis focused down hard on his hands, leaning to clean at Christophe's other shoulder. "I ain't wound up over nothin'... Jeez..." He gave his stump a wide berth, but even the act of going close seemed to tense the man's body, and his voice went a little faint even as he continued to talk.

"Lo siento, hermano. I am messing, ¿sí?" The foreigner tilted his gaze to nervously watch Ellis' movements, a shiver touching his frame. "He is a pendejo, but also - pues... Swell, no?" A faintly pleased grin touched his lips when the Georgian had to laugh. "And he must be in love with you."

That stopped Ellis outright, blinking gently, aware of a heat rising to his cheeks at the words. He slowly withdrew the cloth, getting both hands on it so he could roll fingertips against the fabric. "Uh... whut - whut makes you say that?"

"The gunstore. It was... romántico."

"The sex must be good, no?"

Glancing down, Christophe took stock of his body, running a palm lightly over his side. His skin wasn't pristine by any stretch, but they'd cleansed off the worst of the dried and stained blood, and the look on his face was vaguely pleased.

Ellis flashed Rochelle a look of confusion, brows wrenched together, and she shifted on her heels. A sort of awkward energy trickled into her posture. "Uh... huh. Did Nick never tell you...? Guess he wouldn't."
"Tell me what?" he questioned, growing nervous as his eyes darted between her and Chris. He straightened, unsure if the rise in his heart rate was anxiety, or excitement. He wasn't sure he could tell the difference anymore. "I mean, he was upset, thinkin' I was dead, right? You told me that..."

Rochelle began to respond, visibly rolling her jaw as if to mold her voice into something innocuous, but Christophe uttered a slight laugh that stopped her before she could do more than open her mouth.

"Upset? No, no, hermano. He became like a Charger." Rochelle lifted a hand as if to urge him to stop, unsure, but Chris didn't notice. "That is why his shoulder is hurt. B said you would die, and he ran at her, sin - with no weapons. Like a mad man." He took his hand and flattened it, gesturing as if to spear himself through the shoulder.

It was his stumped side, and the contact made him flinch, like he'd forgotten it was tender. He forced an exhale and faint smile. "Muy romántico, ¿si?"

Ellis stared at him for a moment, like it took him time to parse the words. He slowly averted his gaze, looking toward his hands - why did he feel so conflicted? His heart leapt at the idea, some shy joy stirred at the concept of Nick caring so much... but there was something else in his chest. Hard, cold guilt.

He knew he'd been partially responsible for Nick getting hurt. After all, if he hadn't stayed behind at the hotel, the situation could have worked out differently. But completely responsible? Nick had taken the news of his potential death so poorly, he'd run himself onto a sword? For him?

Rochelle's hand suddenly gripped his chin, turning his face toward her. The touch startled him into a flat blink, looking up at her, hesitant. Her eyes were on his, and narrowed with a knowing energy. "It's not your fault. I can see you blaming yourself."

Slowly chewing at the inside of his cheek, Ellis averted his eyes back down, trying to shake his head. "I-I ain't..." he tried, but knew it sounded flimsy.

When Chris spoke, it was nearly fragile. "...lo siento... did I... say something?" His tone was so close to frightened, both Ellis and Rochelle jolted, looking up at him in unison. There was a tenderness to the way his posture had wilted, leaning away. "I did not mean to -"

"No, no, you're fine." The producer raised her hand, palm flat, shifting over to set the bowl on the nightstand so she could free up her hands. "It's not your fault. I can see you blaming yourself."

"It's just... Ellis is having a rough day today, and he's taking it the wrong way."

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"No, no, you're fine." The producer raised her hand, palm flat, shifting over to set the bowl on the nightstand so she could free up her hands. "It's just... Ellis is having a rough day today, and he's taking it the wrong way."

"It is good, no? To sacrifice for someone you love?"

The mechanic looked up, blinking slowly at the words. A slight smile betrayed him, shaking his head. "I... yeah. I wish he didn't have tuh get hurt doin' it, but I - it is kinda sweet, huh?" Rochelle scrubbed her palm against the top of his head, screwing his cap down on his head, making him smile a little wider. "Like in the movies."

Rochelle couldn't resist an inward sigh as he looked up toward her, blue eyes seeking some sort of validation, a bit of reassurance.

"Yeah, sweetie." she murmured, silently praying it was the truth.
Chapter 160

Coach sighed, leaning against the front door heavily, hands sunk into the pockets of his khakis. He eyed the tile entryway under his feet, mind ticking along on an endless cycle.

The engine sounds hadn't approached much closer, and the vehicle had cut out shortly after they'd returned. There wasn't any more sign of it, nor any gunfire to warn them of the location of the intruders. Just silence, and the muted sound of conversation from the bedroom.

Rochelle had taken his advice, it seemed, and pulled Ellis into helping her with Chris. The sound of their voices comforted him, even if he stayed well enough away to avoid listening in. He hadn't meant to get upset, let alone upset enough to lecture Rochelle - but Ellis' intense panic had activated that parental instinct he tried to keep under wraps when he could.

He glanced upwards, eyes on the second floor staircase, a crease touching his brow. He couldn't help but run her words back over in his head.

Maybe he did give Nick too hard a time. After all, when a fence gate had separated them from Ellis, he'd had to bodily stop Nick from running his shoulder into it. It had taken a moment to convince him to work together to kick it down. There had been genuine panic in his eyes, wild and ferocious.

It was unfair to say he didn't care for the kid, same as they did. Unfair, too, to say he wouldn't do his best for the team when he'd proven it so many times.

Some internal reflex had never had an easy time trusting Nick. He put off airs of the fox in the hen house, and Coach never found it in him to do anything but take a man at his word. He wanted to, but Nick didn't make it any easier. Every time he thought they'd made progress -

But maybe that was his fault. Maybe he took for granted the idea that the gambler would change, kept expecting him to... though wasn't that unfair, too? He'd changed plenty, gone from a loner barely willing to stay with them, suffer them, to a man who'd step in front of a bullet - or a sword - for them.

A man who'd burn everything to the ground if it meant keeping the team safe. His dedication was different, harsher, but did that make it any less than Coach's?

It was on a withheld breath that Coach pulled away from the front door and stepped upstairs. He took them carefully, watching his bad knee as it bent, aware of the soft tactile snap in the joint with every motion as if in protest.

The loft was quiet and dark, as they'd drawn the curtains in fear of prying eyes, leaving only a strip through which they could just see the ocean.

Nick was on the couch, and barely acknowledged his presence with a glance over his shoulder. Coach twitched his jaw up, and when Nick silently returned his attention forward, he advanced. Surely the lack of comment meant Nick had cooled off, too, and the football coach took the chance.

"Hey, Nicky. You -"

He was wrong.
"Oh, sorry, are we talking now? I must have missed the memo." Nick's tone was halfway cruel, and sarcastic without an ounce of humor. He thrust up a hand, elbow braced on the back of the couch. "Unfortunately, I'm all booked up on 'be a huge asshole' today, so. Try again tomorrow."

Frowning slightly, Coach drew his arms into a cross. He sighed, tightly, and lowered his chin. "Alright, I deserved that. Let's start with an apology." He moved to circle the couch, reaching the arm and standing within Nick's peripheral. "Sorry. I'm takin' shit out on you."

A laugh escaped Nick, harshly, and he tipped his head. Pressing his index and middle finger against his temple to brace there, he gazed ahead at the window. He couldn't resist it. The opportunity was there, and he leapt on it, voice scathingly slow. "Why not, if I'm just being a horse's ass?"

If Coach was startled by the words - the same words he'd used to Rochelle - he didn't show it. He merely gazed at Nick, arms tightening in their cross. "You eavesdropped?"

"No, you talked shit about me behind my back. I caught you." Nick lounged his legs up, resting his heels against the coffee table. He spoke dismissively. "So you can drop the apology bullshit. I know how you feel, you clearly know me like the back of your hand. No further conversation needed."

A long and tired sigh left Coach. He shifted, rubbing down the planes of his face with a flat palm, pressing against his eyes. "I didn't mean -" The big man stopped, abruptly, dropping his hand. "...Naw. We're past bullshit, I guess. I meant it. But you really gonna tell me you're nice to that boy?"

Nick massaged the fingertips pressed to his temple in circles, staring toward the glass doors. "Ellis ain't used to this. Boy's damn scared, and are you really gonna look me in the eyes and say you're gonna take the time to be his friend? Talk it out with him? You ain't never been that guy. I didn't think you wanted to be. You spend all this time yellin' at him, yellin' at us askin' you to be his friend, and now you're angry at me for listenin'?"

He wasn't wrong - which made it all the more frustrating when Nick felt a flash of anger. If he hated anything, it was having his own words thrown in his face. He couldn't muster an argument that didn't make him sound pathetic.

Coach suddenly dropped, sitting on the armrest. Nick was in the center of the sofa, so there was still some distance between them. "Look, Nick. This ain't what I came up here for. I came up to apologize, fo' talkin' how I did. I know you ain't havin' any better of a time than us, and me gettin' angry at you ain't doin' nobody no favours."

Nick snorted, refusing to look over at him. He slipped his hand to grasp his own jawline, thumb pressed into the nook between his jaw and his ear, and inhaled. "Sorry you got mad, but not for what you said?" he mocked, lowly.

Shrugging, the big man lowered his chin. "An' talkin' behind yo' back. That's grade school shit. We should be adults 'bout this shit, even if we disagree." Nick laughed outright, the sound cut with a nasal, sardonic edge, and Coach leaned in slightly. "I ain't tryin' to do anything but look after Ellis, you hear? You get that, don't you?"

That lifted Nick's gaze. He glanced at Coach, sideways, a meticulously calculated flatness taking over his features. That was about right, wasn't it? Protecting Ellis from him. Because Nick was damaging, and always would be. He rusted out those around him, one way or another.
Whether by his attitude, or his touch, or an illness run rogue in his veins -

The word escaped him without thinking. "Sure."

He looked away before Coach startled, the ex-football player blinking carefully at him, seeming genuinely surprised. He set a fist against his knee, taking stock of Nick's relaxed posturing before he uttered, "I'm just sayin' Ro' takes point on talkin' to him for a bit." When Nick made no motion to respond, he nodded his head. "Boy thinks the world of you, but he needs a gentle hand right now."

Nick wanted to laugh, to throw it in his face that his hand was anything but gentle and that seemed to work fine - but his urge to get in the last word did not outweigh his urge to keep his secrets.

"What part of 'sure' was unclear?" he snarled, with little energy put to it. It came out weak and tired, and he hated how his voice sounded when he spoke. "I could really do without this soap opera shit, so how about you go sit on your chicks downstairs, and I'll sit up here and worry about the numerous fucking ways we're going to die horrifically in the next few days?"

Coach gazed at him, sitting back slightly. A faint chuckle escaped his lips, even as he straightened and stood. He uttered a sigh wearily, stepping away from the sofa. "That's the shit I'm talkin' about."

Resting his head back against the couch, Nick closed his eyes. He was angry, and lashing out, and fuck if it didn't feel good. "Just being realistic. You think we've survived all these close calls, because we're good? We've gotten lucky, and it's going to run out. So you can sit here and stress over who's feeling sad, who needs a hug, or you can get with the fucking program. I recommend a smoking habit."

Tilting his head, Coach looked toward the glass doors, eyes settling on the far-off horizon. A distance entered his expression, seeming to mull the words over, his jaw shifting as he trapped his tongue between his teeth in a musing gesture. After a moment, he finally uttered, "You think we'd be here without them?"

Nick didn't open his eyes to look. He grunted, noncommittally, and the sound was enough to prompt Coach to continue.

"You think either of us would have kept on goin' if it weren't for those two? I'm too old fo' this shit, Nick. Maybe you could do this alone by bein' so damn stubborn, but I wouldn't. I'd have given up already." Slowly, the eldest survivor drew his palm against his neck, rubbing there. "Now it's flippin'. They're runnin' out of steam, losin' hope, so you an' me gotta be there fo' them."

He turned slightly, shifting on his heel, gazing toward the staircase. "I wish Ro' was right, 'cause I don't rightly know if she's even got it in her to keep Ellis goin'. I'd be damn thrilled to be wrong 'bout you, Nick, I would. So if you wanna drop the bull and be a friend to him, I'll eat my damn shoe. Just try not to make this shit harder on them, a'ight?"

Nick did not respond, and something about the tension in his posture told Coach he'd gone far enough. Any further and the conversation would swing right back into all-out argument - so he backed away, lifting a hand in a gesture of defeat.

"That's it, Nick. Just think on it."

He retreated, only distantly aware of the way Nick's gaze latched onto his back as he made for the stairs.
Christophe grew tired again before long. As nice as it was to see him up and talking, he needed rest if he was going to recover - so Rochelle had taken Ellis' arm and gently ushered him out, leaving the injured man to sleep.

She didn't get the sense that Chris was anything but genuinely enjoying his company, but Ellis could have kept him up for hours if she'd let them stay at it. Rochelle got the feeling Ellis needed a new friend more than he let on.

The atmosphere in the rest of the condo was less than warm, however.

Coach had taken up a post at the window downstairs, and Nick was upstairs, flooding his surroundings with an aura of disdain so thick it was practically buzzing. If Rochelle understood the small warning look Coach passed her at all - they'd talked, and it hadn't gone well.

Part of her was annoyed, because the last thing she needed was Coach meddling in Nick and Ellis' relationship when he had no idea the context, the repercussions. He needed to trust her to handle things.

She wanted to sigh, but held it, for Ellis' benefit.

Instead, she turned to face him, flashing him a small grin. "Hey. We haven't really done an inventory of the house. How about you check the closets and bathrooms down here, and I'll check the kitchen? Maybe there's something we can use to hold the gas."

He looked at her with some hesitancy, and it was much the same look he'd passed her earlier as she'd urged him upstairs. A look that said he'd seen through her... so she leaned closer, and whispered to him with a gentle wink. "I need a distraction as much as you do."

That made him smile a little, and snort, and Ellis shook his head. "Alright. That ain't a half-bad idea, anyway. Gotta make do with whut we got, since we can't really leave... not without riskin' runnin' intuh whoever's out there." When Rochelle patted a hand coaxingly on his arm, he turned away to walk down the hallway.

"There we go." she encouraged. "I'll go look upstairs, holler if you find something."

He waved at her over his shoulder, already ducking into the secondary bedroom to look into the closet, and Rochelle inhaled deeply. She couldn't decide whether things were looking up or not. Every time she thought they were doing well, something else came up.

At least things were close to okay at the moment.

Steeling herself, Rochelle turned and made for the stairs. Coach eyed her as she passed, and he seemed poised to make her stop - but said nothing in the end, merely watching her pad up the staircase to the second floor. Maybe he sensed she was irked with him, or simply knew he'd not coax her to do anything but persist.

She didn't have any intent to speak with Nick about the issue, anyway. Whatever Coach had said to him had likely done enough damage, and there was nothing she could say without potentially making it worse. Nick didn't take advice well, even when it was well-intentioned.

Better to let it blow over.
As it turned out, Nick seemed equally as interested in avoiding her. He'd laid himself across the
couch again, and his attention was solidly riveted on the glass doors. He made no move to so much
as look in her direction as she passed above the floor and stepped into the loft, even though he was
clearly awake.

Rochelle turned and crossed the space to enter the kitchen, glancing a little hesitantly around at it.
There were drawers and cabinets galore, and though instinct had her trying to determine the best
starting point, she eventually just threw herself into an eye-roll and started from the left.

Sliding drawers and throwing open cabinet doors, one by one, she initially found a lot of nothing.
There was a drawer full of plastic cutlery and napkins, all wrapped up in plastic seals, and another
with a set of basic wooden kitchen utensils. One of the larger cabinets on the lower level had some
pots and pans, and underneath the sink was some assorted cleaning supplies.

She'd gotten the washcloths from there, and beyond that, there was a bottle of bleach, some
disinfectant lemon-scented spray, and a bottle of window cleaner.

Rochelle was almost tempted to spray the disinfectant around, if for no other reason than the
pleasant smell of something other than sweat, blood, and gore. She resisted the urge, however,
continuing her search.

One of the drawers at the end had a small collection of supplies, pencils and pens and a few small
pads of notepaper. She gave it a cursory look before noticing a small book tucked away in the
corner, bound in a plastic cover like an agenda or a calendar booklet.

Picking it up, she turned it over, finding 'A Guide To Tybee Island' written in bold print across the
front, stamped into the plastic. A slight laugh escaped her, crunching her nose, unable to resist
amusement at the oddly mundane sight - a guidebook to tourist spots. It seemed strangely
ridiculous, now.

Curiosity made her flip through it.

The book was mostly about the history of the area, though a few sections were devoted to modern-
day sightseeing opportunities and landmarks. There was a theatre refurbished from an old movie
house constructed for soldiers who were stationed at the nearby army base, a marine science
center, a museum built within an old fort, a watchpost that had been converted into a party and
wedding rental spot...

Melancholy made her close it.

It was difficult to even remember the days when she might have entered a town and taken the time
to casually wander, bouncing from tourist spot to tourist spot, taking photos and posing in front of
the same stupid places everyone else did.

She set the book down on the counter and closed the drawer, turning away to focus on opening the
remaining few drawers. There was no sense in pining for a life and a time that didn't exist anymore.

The second-to-last drawer in the kitchen stuck when she attempted to open it. The resistance made
her blink, head tilting, and she tightened her grip and yanked a little harder. Something was
trapping it closed, so she reached her hand in and felt inside the space.

Her fingertips touched plastic, and she wrenched it carefully out, finding herself holding a yellow
cooking funnel. She frowned a little, turning it over in her hands, examining where it had been
warped into a soft oval shape by the pressure of the drawer closing on it. A little squeeze made it
widen back into a circle - but it collapsed back into an oval when she let go.

Rochelle stared thoughtfully at it, only idly raising her voice. "Hey, Nick. I got one of those dumb little funnel things in here. You think that might come in handy somehow for gassing the car up? Like... if we get the fuel from the old car in a container of some kind... we can use this to pour it into the new car?"

She shouldn't have been surprised when Nick responded in a droll and uncaring fashion, but somehow it still managed to make her eyes roll.

"How the fuck should I know? I look like the car guy of the group?"

She exhaled, grasping her fingers around the funnel and lowering her hand. She put her knuckles against her hip, turning to face him. She could have reacted angrily, spited him - but she willfully chose an alternate tactic, dropping her voice to something innocent. "You need a lay, suit."

It worked about how she hoped. He perked up off the couch, just enough to slant a look over toward her, expression somewhere between suspicious and intrigued. Better than sullen, anyway. "Is that an offer? Changed your mind?"

Rochelle flashed him a smile, batting her eyelashes with a tilt of her chin. "Not on your life. But the point stands." He dropped to a glower, but it was a mild one. She quickly took advantage of the change, intent on plying him with harmless conversation. "Chris is doing good, by the way. He's in pretty good spirits, all things considered."

For reasons that escaped her understanding, that deflated any chance she'd had of breaking through his fugue. He settled right back into that dark and unwelcoming look, sparing a scowl for her before he settled back down against the couch. "Great." he muttered, brimming with sarcasm.

Frowning after him, Rochelle took a deep breath, holding it for a moment. She certainly didn't know why Chris would suddenly be a hot-button issue, but she'd take the hint - lick her wounds - and leave him alone. "Okay, boy. You take a nap and get your panties untwisted, huh?"

Sighing sharply, she took the time to nudge open the remaining drawer, ensuring there wasn't anything else. Its only contents were a set of oven mitts, a cheery yellow, stained black along the fingers from contact with heat. With that, she tucked the funnel under her arm and moved to leave.

Nick made no effort to stop her, so she ducked onto the staircase and hopped down it, elbow bracing on the railing.

She passed by Coach at a quick pace, and the glance he gave her was meaningful. Like a tiny 'I told you so'. Rochelle pointed a finger at him in a warning gesture, narrowing her eyes, daring him to say it aloud. He quickly averted his gaze out the window.

When she turned the corner to go down the first floor hallway, she was faced with the sight of the laundry room at the end of the hallway open. The washer she'd picked out a glimpse of earlier was in full view - as was Ellis, crouching atop it in socked feet, reaching up for something.

Rochelle couldn't stop a startled sound, launching into a soft sprint to skid into the room. It was small, barely larger than a powder room, housing only the washer, dryer, and a set of coated wire shelving above them. There was a broom and mop leaned against the wall in the corner. She didn't need to advance more than a step to get behind Ellis, putting up a hand to set it flat on his lower back, a bracing gesture.

He startled at the contact, but only just. Ellis craned his head around to peek down at her, grasping
a hand on the wire shelving to balance himself.

"Ellis, are you trying to fall and crack your head open?!"

Shaking his head with a slightly bashful grin, the Georgian returned his attention forward. "Nah. Just this was pushed up against the wall and I couldn't reach it." He stretched both arms up, and before Rochelle could lean and look around him, he'd dragged the object down and was turning to show it to her.

It was a bucket, clearly a pair for the mop. The capacity couldn't have been more than five gallons or so, but it made her eyes widen. She reached out, grasping it with one hand and looking it over, at the same time she held up the funnel so he could see it. "Hot damn. With this and what I found - I think we can do it!"

Eagerly, Ellis nodded. He slipped down onto his butt on the washer and then dropped off it onto the floor, circling an arm around the bucket. 'Okay... so... should we do it now? Ain't heard anythin' outside in a while... and we won't need tuh leave the fence or nothin'. And I'd sleep better knowin' we had the car workin' proper."

Rochelle took a step back, nodding her head. "Agreed. We don't want to be scrambling to do this if we get in trouble." She glanced back out into the hallway, noting Coach's attention on them. "Can you keep an eye on us from there?"

He nodded, shortly.

"Okay." Tossing the funnel into the bucket in Ellis' arms, Rochelle freed her hands to pull the handgun out from its tuck at her lower back. She turned away, leading the way toward the front door, calling over her shoulder. "Nick - Ellis and I are going to try and deal with the fuel situation."

The gambler made no effort to respond, so Rochelle rolled her eyes again and turned away. Both she and Ellis shuffled into their boots where they'd left them near the front door. She set to opening the door, undoing the locks in a quick gesture.

Together, they piled out of the condo. Ellis scooped up Chris' machete from where he'd left it leaned against the wall near his bedroom, and tucked it under his arm. Rochelle couldn't resist glancing around their surroundings, a little anxiety rising.

There were some milling infected, including a Boomer that she just glimpsed waddling around the corner of a house a few blocks down, but no obvious sign of humans. Although part of her wanted to be nervous, when she glanced at Ellis and saw him looking excited - she buried it.

"Grab the hose, I don't think Nick finished gettin' the cap off." he uttered, hopping down the stairs and scooting toward the side door of the garage. He nudged the door open, toeing it open far enough that it caught on an elevated patch of earth and stuck there.

Rochelle obeyed him, stepping to the bottom of the stairs and crouching down to gather up the coiled hose where Nick had unceremoniously dropped it. Ellis was correct: the endcap, where it would screw onto a faucet, was only half removed, frayed and broken where the plastic mesh had come undone.

She looped her arm through the coil, hauling it up and carrying it after Ellis. By the time she joined him in the garage, he was already kneeling beside the gas cap, still open where he'd left it. Rochelle approached him, grasping the sundered endcap in one hand and the rest of the hose in the other, offering it out to him.
He flashed her a small smile and raised the machete, carefully bracing the blade edge against the material left connecting the two pieces. He sawed in very careful motions, watching the hose give way so he could take off pressure once it came close to breaking.

With only a few strands left, he pulled away, and Rochelle merely tugged it apart. The endcap tore off, and she tossed it over her shoulder before offering the hose down to him.

"Neat." Ellis uttered, taking the hose from her. He leaned up, flipping it around in his grip and cautiously moving to insert the hose into the fuel port. It took some wiggling to get it to nudge aside the metal flap, but it made it in, and he released a sigh.

"Man. I was worried it'd be too big." he admitted, setting the machete down. He put both hands on the hose, carefully working on pushing it down the fuel line. "Pretty -" He abruptly stopped, motion betraying that he'd hit resistance. His eyes widened just a twitch, and he gave the hose a tug to retract it - then put his weight on it, shoving.

It did not go further.

Rochelle couldn't resist stepping closer, bending in a little. "What's wrong?" she urged, voice more strained than she meant. Ellis gave her a hesitant shake of his head at first, testing the hose a few more times, yanking it up and wiggling it.

"Shit." he uttered, letting go. "Ah... shit." His eyes lifted to meet hers, a weak apology in his eyes. "So... you got this line, right, whut leads intuh the fuel tank? Well.. tuh stop gas from goin' back up - y'know, whether yer siphonin' it or the car done flipped - they put this little ball in the valve. Lets gasoline trickle past, but you can't get nothin' through the pipe, and it'll pop up'n'seal the tube if the car goes belly-up."

Slowly nodding in understanding, Rochelle turned her eyes onto the car, staring at the vehicle's flank. "Okay... so what are our options?"

Ellis slowly rubbed at his jawline, shaking his head. "I mean... shit, girl. We could just take the tank off, but I need tools fer that. It's got a little scissor jack fer changin' tires we found earlier, but I need two good ones tuh lift the car and the transmission up. We could just open up the drain on the bottom, let it pour out, but the bucket is too dang tall. It's gotta fit under the car tuh catch th-"

He halted, again, suddenly, staring abruptly at the hose. Rochelle couldn't resist a frustrated noise, leaning slightly closer.

"What?"

Dragging the hose back out of the fuel port, he turned it around, eyeing the sundered end of it. He thoughtfully stuck his finger in it, wiggling it. "Huh. Gimme that funnel?" Without any hesitation, Rochelle turned, reaching into the bucket sitting behind him on the floor and grabbing up the funnel. She offered it out to Ellis, and he snatched it up, eyeing the smaller end.

With his tongue sneaking out to stick out between his lips, Ellis put it against the open end of the hose and carefully worked the narrow mouth of the funnel inside. It almost threatened not fitting, squashed into its strange oval malformation, but he pressed it back into a circular shape and wiggled it in. The hose was just flexible enough to stretch around it.

Holding her breath, Rochelle watched with a mix of fascination and incomprehension as he worked it firmly in. A joyous little noise escaped him, and he looked from his contraption to the car. "... Okay. If we can get the tank drain open... I can get under there'n'hold this under the hole. The gas'll
drain out, and you can hold the other end over the bucket so it'll pour in there."

Nodding, the woman couldn't resist a slight smile. Ellis was never more bright than when he was in the midst of solving a problem, let alone a car-related one.

"Only problem is -" and though her heart sunk at the idea there was yet another obstacle, Ellis seemed almost excited. "- the drain's a lug nut. We just gotta hope the lug wrench fer this car fits it. It's in the trunk, if you can grab it... should still be open."

When she sidestepped to approach the car's trunk, Ellis turned around, leaning down to lay flat on his back on the garage floor. The blown wheel dropped the sedan's profile just enough to make it a tight fit, but he managed to reach his arms under the sedan, feeling a flat palm along the belly until he'd located the fuel tank.

His fingertips hunted out the drain plug, and he let his other hand reach back out, grabbing the funnel-tipped hose and pushing it underneath the car where it would be in easy reach. It didn't take but a moment for Rochelle to return with the lug wrench they'd been planning to use to change the tires, and she bent down to tap it against his thigh.

"Is this gonna be messy? I don't know that a washcloth is gonna be enough to get you clean if you spray gasoline all over yourself. " she teased - promptly lowering her voice. "And Nick might have a problem with it, too."

With his face disguised under the edge of the car, she didn't have the joy of seeing his face redden at that, and he merely muttered something incoherent and reached out to grab the wrench from her hands. She grinned to herself, quietly.

He pushed his arms back under the car, getting the lug wrench around the tank drain nut mostly by feel. He gave it a testing twist, just enough to confirm it fit, wincing a little as he had to torque his shoulders against the concrete.

"Can you get the hose set up in the barrel? Not sure how fast it'll work."

Rochelle obeyed, crouching down and grasping the other end of the hose. She put it in the bucket, anchoring it with a hand, and watched as Ellis worked at the tank. Turning the lug wrench was difficult in the tight space he had, and he mostly ended up scraping his shoulders up on the concrete.

Grunting, kicking his heel against the ground idly, Ellis worked the wrench in a circle, feeling the nut give way. When it felt it might break loose, he shifted to one hand, using the other to grab the funnel-tipped hose and hover it close. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Rochelle uttered, and he yanked.

The nut clattered loose, and he let the lug wrench follow after it, jolting his hand to shove the funnel under the now-open hole. Gasoline began draining in an enthusiastic sputter into the funnel. Ellis couldn't really tell if their plan was working, unable to see up into the funnel, so he merely craned his head back and peered toward Rochelle from under the edge of the sedan.

"Give it a minute. Ain't flowin' real strong. Try'n'hold the hose kinda low...? Gravity ain't on our side."

Rochelle tipped the bucket, letting the hose lay more of its length flat on the ground - but it was a waiting game more than anything.
Ellis kept his fingertips on the edge of the funnel, just in case it started backflowing... not that he was quite sure what they'd do if it did. "Guess if it don't work, I'll just cram my finger up on the hole tuh stop it, and you can go get a pot from the kitchen." he joked - mostly. "It'll take a real long time, but we got all evenin', right?"

She laughed a little, crinkling her nose at him. "God, I hope not." Shifting on her knees, Rochelle exhaled gently, changing the topic with an interested tone. "You and Chris seemed to get on. You like him?"

Putting his jaw forward slightly, Ellis fidgeted his legs. "Well.. I mean, yeah. He's pretty cool." He had to hold the funnel where it was, and it was less than comfortable. "He's real interestin', and it's nice havin' someone new around."

"Do you trust him?" Rochelle glanced down at Ellis, adjusting her grip on the hose and bucket. "I know it wasn't really.. optimal, having him know about you and Nick. But I think he'll keep it secret. He understands the situation enough to get it, I think."

The Georgian gazed at the underside of the sedan, chewing on his tongue. "Yeah. I do." he admitted, inhaling faintly as the smell of gasoline came strongly to his nostrils. "I just wish we could tell Coach. That, and get Nick tuh quit hidin' it."

Rochelle slipped him a sympathetic glance, but there was not much comfort she could offer. She was saved the pain of holding her silence when a sudden pattering sounded out from the bucket. Startled, she glanced down, and found a burnt yellow liquid pooling in the bottom of the container. "Holy shit." she uttered, laughing with a giddy edge. Rochelle steadied and straightened the bucket, moving slowly so as to not disturb the hose's flow. "You did it!"

Ellis grinned widely, unable to resist it. He carefully held the funnel in place, even as his shoulders and back complained incessantly from contact with the hard concrete.. At that rate, it would take a while to fill up - but he was proud of himself all the same.

"Nah, girl. We did it."
By the time Ellis and Rochelle were finished, the sun was dipping low in the sky. Rochelle burst into the house in a flush of exhausted energy, high on their success, and hopped to land half-crouched before the doorway. She reached out an arm to hold it closed behind her.

"Drum-roll, please!" she hollered.

Coach was the only one in sight, seated on the staircase, and he turned a bewildered and tired look toward her. He made no motion to humor her, but it didn't douse her enthusiasm. She rapped her knuckles on the door a few times to make her own, before throwing it open.

Ellis stood on the front porch, a bashful grin over his face, machete held against his shoulder. "Ro' -" he uttered, embarrassed, but she was already off, voice passionately over-dramatic.

"Our vehicular saviour, the best mechanic this side of the apocalypse, sweet and neat and quick on his feet - Ellis -" In the midst of her introduction, she balked, twisting her head and glancing up at him. He blinked back, unsure. "... Huh. I don't actually know your name."

His grin flickered to a smile, shaking his head gently. "Um... Mayfield."

Without skipping a beat, Rochelle flung her arms out to flourish toward him, fingers splayed and wiggling, despite the way the Georgian gave a mortified shake of his head. "Ellis Mayfield! Everyone give a what-what!"

No one responded - except the softest, sleepy "¡Olé!" from inside the bedroom.

Rochelle couldn't help but laugh, straightening up. She reluctantly waved Ellis on, reaching to close the door behind him as he shuffled in. "You guys are no fun." she complained, slanting a squinted glance at Coach before jumping to step ahead of Ellis. "Let's go wash you up, boy."

"Y'all worked the car out?" the big man uttered, shifting up to stand and clear the staircase. He leaned against the wall, glancing out of the window. "I was about to go out there and check on y'all. Been awhile."

Ellis nodded his head a little excitedly, padding after Rochelle as she made for the stairs. "Yeah. Took some doin', and the bucket we had was too small, so I had tuh block the tank drain while Ro' emptied the bucket." To illustrate his point, he raised his left hand, showing off the slickness staining his palm and trickling down his forearm. "- but we managed okay. Car's gassed up, anyhow."

Coach nodded, exhaling faintly in relief. He watched the two tromp up the stairs, a slight smile lifting the edge of his mouth. "Good job, you two. One thing we ain't gotta worry about." It was only with a sharp inhale that he followed, leaning against the railing to take some weight off his bad knee.

"Just figured, better get it done, right?" Rochelle uttered over her shoulder, reaching out to scratch playfully against Ellis' back. He jumped at the touch, giving a ticklish utterance and a laugh. "Ellis and me can't be stopped."

"Fantastic." came a sarcastic utterance from Nick as the three advanced up into the loft. He'd taken up a seat at the island, sitting on one of the barstools facing away from the counter with his elbows draped on the edge. "Now we'll end up with two greaseballs."
He had his dress shirt half undone and dropped off his shoulders, and was carefully scrubbing his shoulder wound clean of what sweat and grime had accumulated around it. It had healed enough to stop bandaging it for fear of bleeding, at least, but removing the bandages left it open to getting dirty. The puckered skin around the sealing wound did not speak well of its health, and the look on his face betrayed its tenderness.

"Nah. I think I'll leave that to Ellis. I'm not afraid to say getting my arm elbow-deep in car guts is not my idea of a good time." Rochelle shrugged her shoulders, slipping up to the kitchen counter to tear a sheet of paper towel free from the roll. She turned to offer it out to Ellis. "Fun to watch him do it, though."

Grinning a little bashfully, Ellis wiped his hands clean, head shaking the whole time. "I did run a car shop, y'know. Keith'd be right pissed with me if I couldn't make do." He lifted his head, hesitantly glancing up toward Nick. His bared shoulder and back were - while intriguing - the least of Ellis' focus.

Although Rochelle had done a good job in distracting him, the point remained that Nick's conversation with him had left him on edge. The older man seemed almost disappointed, though he couldn't discern at what. Like Ellis being upset, afraid, bothered him. It made him feel guilty, atop so many other feelings.

And then there was what Ellis now knew about that shoulder wound.

He couldn't help but imagine it. Nick flying into a blind rage, rushing Brenda senselessly - charging at her without even a weapon? Running himself onto a blade he was so shaken by the idea of Ellis being dead? He couldn't lie and say he wasn't fascinated, grateful. A little embarrassed.

Nick felt everything - anger, dismay, fear - so ferociously, so harshly, viscerally. Wouldn't it make sense to think he'd love much the same? That he was afraid to admit what he felt for Ellis because he knew, for better or worse, he loved at the expense of himself?

Maybe that was wishful thinking. Maybe Nick would have done the same if Rochelle had been in Ellis' shoes, or Coach. Still, it made his chest tighten, and he found himself staring longer than he'd meant to. Nick noticed, and their eyes met with a faint spark of energy, the gambler's brows arching subtly in question.

Ellis quickly averted his gaze, embarrassed.

"How's yo' shoulder?" Coach offered up before Ellis could, stepping to cross his arms and stand just behind the couch, posture guarded. He kept his gaze right on Nick, even as the gambler did not acknowledge him beyond a quiet grunt. "Better keep on those antibiotics. Gotta keep you healthy, boy."

Nick snorted, quietly, dropping the washcloth in his hand to the counter. He shrugged his shirt back on straight, tilting his chin down so he could button it up. "Aww, you care about me, big guy?"

It was with sincerity that Coach bobbed his head, saying simply, "Course."

That seemed to catch Nick off-guard, as he shot the older man a flat glance before pushing forward off the barstool. He snatched a hand back to grab a nutrient bar from the pile of foodstuffs on the table, head shaking. "Whatever. For the record, I'm going to lose my shit if we don't find something other than granola and trailmix. Or a way to heat up this soup. So if you fuckers want to magically fix another problem, how about that one?"
He stalked across the loft, taking up a position in front of the few inches of glass they allowed to show through the curtains. Squinting out at a dimming sky, the gambler set to shelling the bar of its plastic wrapper, shoulders lifted defensively.

Coach's head shook, glancing back at Ellis and Rochelle. "He ain't wrong, but that's a task fo' tomorrow. We should eat somethin', and head to bed. Gettin' dark soon." He spoke as he reached for a bag of trail mix and one of the small cans of diet soda that had been in the icebox. "I'll take first watch; ain't much tired."

Reaching a hand carefully up to grab onto his shoulder, rubbing carefully where he'd earned himself abrasions on his shoulderblades on the floor of the garage, Ellis piped up. "I can take second watch. Got a bunch of sleep this mornin', so, y'know..." he uttered, trying to keep his voice casual.

He was desperate to steal some time with Nick. With everyone else around, he had no real hope of working through whatever fugue the gambler had taken to - but if he could get some privacy, maybe Nick would open up. Maybe they could talk, if only for a little while.

Something was bothering the older man, and Ellis wanted to find out what. That, and he was sure nothing would help ease the anxious feeling in his chest more than Nick's hands on his body.

If he thought too long on that, he might just fluster himself - so he focused on grabbing up something to eat, instead.
Considering how worked up he'd felt, Ellis was surprised at how quickly sleep had come. He'd hit the bunk bed mattress face-first and couldn't remember much more past that.

Maybe it was emotional exhaustion from the day, or physical exhaustion from cramming up under the car for so long - where he'd normally have been settled on a cushioned roller Keith had fashioned for him out of a skateboard and a throw pillow he'd stolen from his parents' house - but either way, he'd passed out without much ceremony.

Sometime in the night, he awoke from a dream. It took him a moment to recognize what was happening. His eyes were suddenly flooded with light through his lids, but when he blinked them open, the light flashed away to illuminate the wall instead.

Still faintly blinded, he could only just make out a shape standing next to him, and for a moment his heart leapt - but then Coach's soothing baritone came to his ear, quietly, and he relaxed. "Hey, son. I'm dozin' off. You ready?"

Quickly nodding, Ellis blinked away the blotches left in his vision, vaguely blinded. He reached up to rub the heel of his hand into his eyes, carefully sitting half-up without smashing his head into the bottom of the too-small bunk.

"Huh.. yeah." he uttered, unable to resist mumbling. "Man, I had the craziest dream... like everythin' was normal - I mean, now normal, like it was the apocalypse'n'stuff - but Keith was here. Like we were just sittin' around together, talkin' about our plans, just like we are now... 'cept with Keith."

As his vision returned to him and adjusted to the darkness, Ellis could see Coach focusing a vague smile at him. The older man was holding their recharged flashlight, pointing it off toward the wall. "Yeah? He have any advice?"

Ellis uttered a laugh, despite himself, crinkling his brow and glancing down at his knees. "He voted we start our own city. Call it Badassville. No zombies allowed." He shrugged his shoulders, lowering his voice as he shuffled out from under the sheets and crawled off the bunkbed. Coach reached up to put a palm against the top of his head, ensuring he didn't hit the edge of the top bunk on the way out.

"I know it was just a dream, but it was nice seein' him again. I miss him." he uttered, and he meant it.

He'd rarely spent so much time apart from Keith; they'd been attached at the hip since they were children, and from schooling together and working at a mechanic shop together - little had coaxed them to separate. There was plenty to keep him distracted, but he'd have loved if Keith had been there, too.

Coach released him as he stood, pressing the flashlight into his hand. "Bet he misses you too, Ellis." he said, a simple comfort. Ellis grinned gently back at him, stretching out a kink in his back as he took a step away.

"Yeah." he hummed, a little wistful edge touching his voice. "Anyway. G'night, Coach. See you in the mornin'."

The eldest survivor grunted, making his way to the bed against the wall. Ellis stayed long enough
to light his way with the flashlight before ducking to the door, slipping out. There, he stretched for a moment, rising up onto his toes and thrusting his arms into the air, squirming there as a few pops sounded from his back.

The bunkbed was less than comfortable, and it hadn't done any favours to his injured back - between being dragged on the parking lot by a Smoker and crawling around on a concrete floor, his skin felt more than a little abused. It was with a faint mewl of pain that he shuffled out of his stretch, alighting his gaze on the staircase.

He steeled himself with a breath. He wasn't nervous to talk to Nick - he was pretty sure, anyway. Of course, that was assuming Nick even wanted to talk to him. It wasn't like he'd explicitly announced 'yeah, I'll take second watch so I can sneak up and meet with Nick!' to the team.

Before he could start second-guessing himself, Ellis lurched into a stride, taking the stairs on careful steps. He'd quickly noticed one of the stairs had a creak to it if he stepped just in the center, so he made sure to hop over it, taking two steps at once.

"Nick?" he murmured, softly, as he passed up into the loft. He lifted the flashlight, glancing around the room, but didn't immediately see the older man. It was with a vague frown that he approached the couch, leaning over the back to direct the flashlight down onto the sofa.

And right into Nick's eyes.

"Jesus, kid!" he snarled in protest, flashing up a hand to smack the flashlight away. He nearly knocked it out of Ellis' hands entirely, but the Georgian stumbled to catch it, startled, immediately blustering into apologies.

"Uh, sorry, sorry, man, I didn't know if you were there - you didn't respond or nothin', so - sorry, I -"

Nick straightened, dragging himself upright on the sofa. He slid an arm over the back of the sofa, gazing at the younger man with a few blinks to clear his vision. He interrupted Ellis simply, raising his hand to rub into his eye sockets. "I didn't know if you'd come up. Seemed tired."

Halting, Ellis carefully circled his hands around the flashlight, squeezing at it softly as if to wring it out. "Uh..." he uttered, nerves flaring when he couldn't get a read on the gambler. "Is that okay...?"

With a flat gaze, Nick looked him over, taking stock. Distant humor lit a smirk on his face before he shifted, palming a hand against the cushion next to him. "Sure. You and me got some unfinished business." His tone of voice was anything but simple, then, lowering to something dark and graveled.

Ellis felt his spine go to jelly, knees weakening. Between their interruption earlier and the way Nick's voice cut through his self-control, it took effort - but he refused to move, digging in his heels. Nick noticed his hesitance, head cocking.

The Georgian didn't give him the chance to ask. "Um... I was wonderin', Nick - if you were okay. You seemed kinda upset earlier, and I didn't know if I'd done somethin'... or if you wanted to talk about it, or..." He was flustered and he felt it, eyes doing their best to dodge Nick's for a moment before he forced himself to match gazes.

He saw it, for just a beat. Something flickered to life in those green eyes, and it was new and raw and Ellis did not know what it meant.

Then Nick was straightening, weight on his knees, and reaching out. Ellis might have been able to
coax himself to stay still, but there was not an iota of his being that wanted to actually recoil, and Nick got a hand on his waist. He pulled, drawing the younger man forward until the couch back was the only thing separating them.

His hand skated all the way up until he could circle a hand behind Ellis’ neck, bracing him there so he could press a kiss upon him. It started gentle, coaxing, but did not remain so.

The moment Ellis responded, parting his lips and reaching out a hand to brush his fingertips against Nick's hip, the gambler leaned into the kiss, deepening it. His hand darted back down to retrace its path, hooking fingers on Ellis' shirt. He tugged it upwards, and a grin curved at his lips when Ellis' breath hitched at the brush of his knuckles against his belly.

Nick put both hands to the task, some ferocity lining the way he grasped at Ellis' T-shirt and drew it upwards. He only gentled when Ellis gave a slight hiss, the shirt scraping against the abrasions on his shoulderblades. "Sorry." he immediately uttered, muffled into the kiss, but Nick hummed dismissively.

Nick slowed his movements to lightly peel the shirt up, avoiding dragging it over his shoulders. Ellis raised his arms to cooperate, and they broke the kiss to get it up and off his head. The Georgian didn't bother to glance after it when Nick tossed it aside, much too distracted by the way he settled both palms against his waistline.

"I don't want to talk." he murmured, smoothing his palms up, the touch raising goosebumps as it went. "But I do want to fuck you senseless." His thumbs brushed over either of the other man's nipples, a grin curving his lips as Ellis released a soft sound of appreciation, leaning into the touch.

"Come over here, kiddo."

Ellis obeyed, inwardly chastising himself for being so easily coaxed out of his plan. He comforted himself with the idea they'd get to talk afterwards, but that was mostly an afterthought, and probably an excuse. As he hopped to circle the couch, the only thing on his mind was getting into Nick's arms.

As he slipped to sit, one leg curling underneath him, he reached out to grip palms against Nick's jaw. The gambler looked mildly surprised as he was dragged into a kiss, Ellis leaning back gently so the other man had no choice but to lean against him.

A growl left Nick as that surprise turned to arousal, and he placed a hand at Ellis' bare lower back as if to trap him, surging to close the gap.

When their positioning didn't allow for enough contact, Nick was suddenly wrapping both arms around his midsection and dragging him into his lap. The Southerner had to scramble to get himself seated properly, legs spreading to straddle Nick's thighs.

The moment he'd done so, Nick shifted forward and languidly ground his hips upwards, hands descending to brace on Ellis' waist and hold him there. The friction made Ellis shudder, and he couldn't help but push down, meeting the pressure halfway. All the energy from the garage came suddenly flooding back, and they were rutting against each other with increasing desperation.

"Damn, Nick." he whispered, voice catching in his throat. He looped his arms around the gambler's neck, anchoring himself. His spine arched to cant his hips, a sigh escaping him. His thighs tightened, eagerly, and he let his head fall back gently on his neck.

Nick took advantage of the gesture, tilting his head and grazing his mouth up to nip at Ellis'
"You wanna do something for me, Ace?" he murmured, words mumbled against his jaw with a thick and cutting hunger. Ellis couldn't resist a shiver at the tone, feeling suddenly vulnerable. "Try something new?"

He was nodding before he even realized it. Maybe it was the need in Nick's voice, and his desire to please the older man - or maybe it was his own blind lust, wanting something. Anything.

A subtle grin touched Nick's lips, seeming amused by the ready acceptance. "Good..." He slid his hands around to Ellis' stomach, pushing gently, and the younger man didn't comprehend at first. It wasn't until Nick uttered, "Knees, on the ground." that he caught onto the instruction.

Shifting back, Ellis let his body shuffle off the couch, dropping his feet down to land on the floor. He slid to kneel between Nick's legs, hands lingering to grasp just above his knees. He sat there, nervousness rising, as Nick's lids lowered to gaze down at him with a tight and animal interest.

"Whut do you...?" he managed.

Nick outright laughed, then, and it was a pleasantly rough sound. One hand slid to brush against the top of Ellis' head, then card fingers loosely through his hair. His other hand dropped, and Ellis froze faintly as Nick gripped his chin, thumb brushing against the swell of his lower lip.

"C'mon, kid, don't be naive. A blowjob was probably the first thought I ever had about you." Ellis was shocked into silence, reddening, when the gambler's thumb pressed subtly between his lips. He tasted gunpowder and cigarettes and sweat and it shouldn't have aroused him, but it did, a little. "With a mouth like that?"

Ellis stammered his way through a few words, leaning back slightly to escape the touch of Nick's thumb. "I-I uh... I don't... I mean, I ain't sure..."

He'd had the act performed on himself once or twice, but that was a far cry from having the confidence to actually do it - and they were years-old memories, and not overly good ones. Him young and awkward, his girlfriends barely any better...

But the idea of it - wasn't it somehow enticing, if for no other reason than the fact that Nick had apparently been wanting it for a while? The idea of pleasing him so literally sent a nervous thrill up his spine, jaw tensing.

The focused attention Nick had on his mouth, even as he spoke, only worsened his embarrassment. It wasn't so much an unwillingness to try as the fear he'd mess it up. The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint. "I mean... I wouldn't know how tuh... do it."

Nick flashed a grin, widening with an eager edge, like Ellis had hardly seen on his lips. "That's half the fun." He sunk his fingers deeper into Ellis' curls, twining until he could grip there. The clutch was enough to press his rings into Ellis' scalp, a tingling sensation accompanying the touch. "Don't worry about that. I'll take the reins."

"O-okay." Hesitantly, the younger man nodded, just a twitch in the space he could. Even still, the gesture made him tug against the grip held on his hair, and he was aware of a flash of arousal dilating Nick's eyes as he tightened his fingers slightly. "If you wanna..."

Other hand withdrawing, Nick lowered his voice to a faint growl, grasping at the zipper of his slacks. "Fuck, yes." His desire bled through in the frantic nature of his movements, pushing his hips up enough to allow for his slacks to slip down low on his pelvis.

Ellis couldn't help but watch raptly as the Northerner slid his hand into his boxers, curling fingers
to grasp his erection and draw it free. He gave it a soft stroke, mostly for the younger man's benefit - and it worked, flooding a mortified fascination into his blue eyes, riveted on the rigid flesh just a foot in front of his face.

Looking at it with the awareness he needed to wrap his mouth around it made it suddenly seem intimidating.

As if sensing his hesitance, Nick settled his head back against the couch, slanting his gaze down his nose. His voice settled into a croon, fingers going from a grip on his hair to a soothing stroke, running fingertips through the brown curls and against his scalp. "Don't overthink it, Fireball. It's easy. Just open your mouth, and let me know if you want to stop."

His voice was taut with restraint, eyes lit and narrowed with lust, and Ellis withheld a faint whimper. His nerves eased at the coaxing nature of those last words, gentle reassurance. He obeyed, unable to stop from running his tongue over his lips before he parted them, loosening his jaw.

Nick's eyes did not miss a single movement, and he let the pressure of his palm tip Ellis' head back just slightly. He gripped his cock firmly, allowing his hips to nudge forward, forcing an exhale as the tip of it nudged against the Southerner's lower lip.

The warmth and velvet-softness of Nick's erection didn't surprise him, but having it pressed against his mouth was very different from touching it with his hands. He inhaled, sharply, body stiffening with the sensation of the pulsing flesh against his lip and the husky smell now flooding his senses.

It was only gently that Nick pushed forward, sliding the head of his erection past those plush lips and into the hot space of his mouth. Ellis took an urgent breath through his nose, closing his eyes in a sudden blink. The hot flesh pressed into his tongue, filling his mouth with a heady warmth, and he could hear the stuttered sigh that escaped Nick.

It was low and graveled with pleasure, and it made Ellis' hair stand on end. He couldn't hold back a shudder, jaw reflexively tensing and lips sealing softly around Nick's length. It was mostly the self-conscious desire to ensure he didn't drool - but it made Nick's fingers tighten on his hair.

"Fuck, Ellis. Shit."

He didn't expect it, nor did he expect the way Nick bucked his hips softly, rocking up an inch or so into his mouth. The feel of velvet sliding against his lips, his tongue, shocked arousal up his spine, but even stronger was the thrill he felt at Nick's cursing loss of control. He spread his thighs a little, allowing his body to slump forward, nudging up against Nick's palm.

The Northerner seemed to take it as encouragement. Rather than raise his hips, he used his grip on Ellis' hair to drag him lower, gently urging his mouth to take in more. His breath thickened with every slip of added length -

Then it was too much, brushed too far, and Ellis felt the urge to gag hit in a surge. His face scrunched as he resisted, spine flinching. He tried to hide it, play it off, but Nick's gaze was so intent on his face that he caught the shift.

With a deep groan, the gambler dropped flat to the couch, letting his fingers loosen reluctantly on Ellis' hair. "Breathe." he uttered with the motion, and he might've been talking to either of them. Between the two gestures, his cock slid free of Ellis' lips, and the Georgian couldn't resist a quick cough, licking his tongue against his teeth.
"S-sorry, I -"

Before he could continue, Nick smoothed his palm over the top of his head, sinking fingertips into his hair with chill rings pressing into his scalp. "That's fine. That's fine, Ace, fuck." He lifted his head from the couch, gazing over Ellis' face with a warm sort of lust. "I'll keep shallow. You good?"

There was a restrained interest, a desire that flickered in his eyes, and Ellis couldn't find any part of him that wanted to stop. He didn't know if it was the sensation itself, or just how much Nick was clearly enjoying it, that made him want to continue.

All he knew was he was stiff to an almost uncomfortable degree.

"Yeah." he managed in a wet huff, and Nick did not hesitate to lift his hips, pushing up off the sofa. Ellis let his jaw go slack, pushing his tongue forward to press against his teeth, and the Northerner guided his erection back between his lips. His fingers tightened, clutching, and he held Ellis right where he was.

A faint and honeyed sigh left Nick's lips, hips picking up a slow and cautious rhythm. His length glided in and out from Ellis' lips, pushing against the hot silk of his tongue, and his voice went thick and almost desperate. "Christ. Fucking better than I thought."

There was a tremor to his voice, and Ellis couldn't stop his body from shifting, fidgeting. His groin was pulsing and tense, heartrate rising. Ellis was almost sure he could see a flush of color lit over his thin and stubble-dark cheeks, and the flood of arousal seeing Nick flustered spurred in him was enough to make his hips buck with want.

He tried to moan, utter any sort of noise, but he couldn't do more than hum past the flesh in his mouth.

The younger man's eyes closed, flustered breaths escaping his nose every time Nick rolled his hips up and thrust into his mouth with increasing urgency. His erection was rigid and full, slick with saliva and hot to the touch. Somehow it was almost more intense, more intimate, than the feeling of that same flesh sliding into other parts of him.

"Come on, El." Nick soothed, roughly, almost hoarse. His free hand drifted, grasping at Ellis' cheek, thumb smoothing over his cheekbone. He reopened his eyes to look up, and the older man was staring down at him with faintly parted lips. "Suck for me."

The command sent a shudder through him, and Ellis drew in a breath, letting his jaw widen just softly to place some suction on the flesh in his mouth. Nick snarled quietly, fingers clenching, and his hips rocked to drag in and out of the tight pressure. "Goddamn." he uttered, an awed breathlessness touching his voice as he grunted out, "Fuck. Fuck."

Ellis almost startled when Nick suddenly drew back, both hands sinking to grab at his biceps, hauling him up off his knees. He struggled to get his bearings as Nick dragged him up, and the next thing he knew, he was being dragged back into a straddle on the older man's thighs. He swallowed, thickly, mouth full of a husky flavour, limbs numb and clumsy as Nick's hands arranged his body on his lap.

Before he could speak, Nick was yanking his coveralls down, boxers quick to join them, just enough so he could bare Ellis' erection. When he glanced down, disbelief flashed raggedly over his features, tongue flashing eagerly over his bottom lip. "... shit, kid." Embarrassment flooded Ellis' face with even more of a redness, instinctively glancing down, too.
He was hard as a rock, and there was no hiding it. "U-um." he managed, huffing shortly, but didn't get much farther before Nick leaned forward, burying his mouth against the side of his neck.

Sharp stubble scraped into his skin, and Nick's teeth caught on the tender muscle just below his jaw. "You like that, do you?" he murmured, heavy lust fueling his tone. One of his arms looped around Ellis' waistline, while the other slid to grip their lengths together, squeezing on the hot flesh. "Maybe I should just push you back down, fuck that pretty mouth some more, huh?"

Ellis pushed against his knees, shivering, arching his back to grind against the older man's grip. He should have been mortified, or at least protested, but all he could do was clutch a hand on the back of Nick's head and rut against him, whining out a thin breath. The Northerner bit and nipped along his neck, catching teeth on skin and sucking softly, roving between his clavicle and his jawline.

When Nick joined the motion, stroking and squeezing his hand loosely to encourage him along, Ellis found himself tumbling effortlessly into orgasm. His voice pitched as it struck, burying his mouth into Nick's shoulder to muffle the sounds that threatened to leave him. He mouthed softly against the older man's skin, just barely nipping, mindlessly, as the older man's fingers drew tight around his length.

He didn't have the chance to feel abashed that he'd come so quickly, because Nick was not far behind.

The arm around his waist tightened, and they huddled there, breathless and shuddering, Nick's bites turning to slow and languid kisses against the side of his neck.

"Fucking hell." the older man muttered, almost to himself - almost shaken, and Ellis couldn't stop a thrilled joy from singing up his body at how pleased he sounded. "Holy Grail of fucking Georgia."

Ellis laughed, half-uncomprehending and snorting in his exhaustion, and nothing felt better than the curve of Nick's smirk against his neck.
Nick pinched fingers against his cigarette, holding it still as he took a tight drag and watched the end burn a dull orange, crumbling. As his lungs filled, chest expanding, he tilted his head back, held it a moment - then exhaled, billowing smoke out over the back porch balcony.

Though he wouldn't have willfully opened the door, he also knew he'd get chewed out for smoking inside.

The view across Tybee and toward the ocean wasn't terribly unpleasant, anyway.

He watched the smoke drift up and off on the wind, a vague frown lingering on his lips. He'd left Ellis to clean up, eager to light up, clear his head, because *fuck* if he was thinking straight anymore. His body was limp, like all the tension had been drawn by force from his muscles.

*Or sucked.* he thought, and promptly smirked.

With a little more training, some confidence, he was quite sure the kid could effortlessly blow his mind. And to know he'd *enjoyed* it? It was all he could do not to grin off into the distance, aware of how stupidly his pleasure must have painted itself on his expression. He'd known a few women who'd enjoyed giving head - or claimed to enjoy it, anyway, as it was hard to tell the difference when he didn't take the time to wonder - but to have Ellis slide into his arms, rigid and begging for release...

*I take it all back. I am, apparently, the luckiest motherfucker in the apocalypse.* He took another inhale off his cigarette, enjoying the rush of calm from the nicotine. He glanced up at the dark sky as he puffed out a smoky breath. Little to no light emanated up from the city, with the electricity out seemingly everywhere, and it left the sky untarnished.

The moon shone down from a cloudless black, dotted and speckled with stars.

"Pretty out here." came a quiet mumble from behind him, and Nick maintained his gaze forward as Ellis slipped out through the glass doors, joining him next to the railing. The Southerner slipped his forearms hesitantly against the top of the rail, craning his head back to peer up.

"Almost makes you think things ain't changed, huh?"

Nick pulled his cigarette from his lips, tapping it out over the lawn below. "Almost." he echoed, morosely, though he flashed a faint smirk sideways. Ellis didn't look at him, merely smiling up at the sky. "My uncle used to smoke on his apartment balcony and pour beer on people walking by. He thought it was hilarious. Kinda was. That, and a good use of shit beer."

Grinning a little, Ellis shifted forward. He let his body slump, armpits draping over the rail, looking down toward the ground. "Man. That's like Keith - when we was kids, used tuh go to Whisperin' Oaks, this amusement park over in Griffin County...? We'd go sneak intuh the Tunnel of Love, get on this overhangin' bridge, make a contest outta who could hang loogies down long enough to hit folks floatin' by, kissin' -"

Releasing a bewildered exhale, Nick pushed out a hand to hit his palm flat against the side of Ellis' head, shoving him away gently. "Gross. Colour me not fucking surprised." He wished he could say
he didn't want to laugh.

Ellis grinned wider, letting his head duck down with the gesture. "We were kids, man." He slid back into place a beat later, nudging a little closer, even. "Y'know, I had a dream last night 'bout him. He was here, just like... part of the team. Made me wish you could meet him."

Placing his cigarette between his lips at the edge of his mouth, Nick snorted, letting his eyes close. "I dunno." He rolled the cigarette with his tongue, inhaling shortly and exhaling smoke through his nostrils. "I think I'm glad I don't have to. You fill my idiot quota for this century."

A slight smile quirkd at Ellis' lips, though he turned to glance at Nick, examining his face. A hesitance crept into his posture, shifting on his feet with a gentle clear of his throat. "Well... If we got rescued - y'know, if the government don't let us down or nothin'... maybe you could." He dropped his chin, focusing again toward the ground. "Or somethin'."

Nick tipped his head, eyes still closed, dismissively waving a hand before lacing his fingers together where they draped off the railing. "As if that's likely." he uttered, easily.

Hesitance deepening, Ellis carefully molded his face into something casual, brows quirking over his eyes. "Well... if it did happen. I mean, if we got rescued,...y'know. Whut would you do?" He was aware of Nick's head turning, gaze alighting on him, and he tried to relax his posture. "Y'know, after everythin's over."

The gambler's lips drew into a vague pinch, shrugging. His voice lowered, dulling. "Dunno. Not like anything's going to go back to normal. 'When everything's over'? It'll never be over, Overalls, even if the government does come pick us up. What'll that get us? Packed away in some refugee camp somewhere, at best?"

He could tell by the faint drop to Ellis' head that that wasn't the response his younger counterpart wanted, or expected, so he shrugged again and reclosed his eyes. "Not the best thought to be having right now, kid."

Tentatively, Ellis turned, letting one of his arms slip off the railing to hang loosely at his side. He faced Nick but didn't look at him, gaze lowering to the ground, and it was a shy tone that lowered his voice. "Better than thinkin' it won't happen, ain't it...? Sorta nice to hope on it...?"

That made him stop. Nick let his features fall to a flat veneer, exhaling gently. Coach's words threatened at him; did he have to crush the kid's hopes with his pessimism every time? Couldn't he stand to be positive just once?

He slowly took his cigarette from his lips, tamping it against the railing to crush out the cinders, and flicked it off into the darkness. Ellis was watching him; he could feel the younger man's attention on his every move, and it was slowly that he turned.

Nick reached out to get a hand on Ellis' chin, thumb brushing over his mouth, drinking in the way abrupt surprise turned into flustered embarrassment at the touch. "I prefer to think about anything else." he uttered, letting some lust leech into his voice. "Like how good those lips feel on -"

It didn't surprise him when Ellis stumbled back, escaping the grasp shyly, but there was something in his eyes that betrayed a faint disappointment. That surprised him, unpleasantly.

"I -" the Georgian began, a little unsteady.

Some distant tension rose up Nick's spine. Something was going on, and he didn't like being at a disadvantage. Rather than give Ellis a chance to respond, he jumped on defense, suddenly wishing
he'd kept his cigarette.

"What? You gonna play coy and pretend you didn't love my dick in your mouth? 'Cause I have pretty hard evidence to the contrary." Knowing full well Ellis was likely upset about something else didn't stop him from trying to direct the conversation elsewhere, only pushing harder when embarrassment flared up on the younger man's face.

"I wasn't even expecting you to get excited over it." He took a step closer, leaning in, and self-satisfaction purred to life in his chest when he noted Ellis swallowing, the kid's blue eyes darting toward his mouth reflexively. He was nervous, and that was a win in Nick's book. "Maybe next time I won't stop. See how you like -"

"You'd stay, wouldn't'cha?" Ellis' gaze went intent on his, suddenly, colour filling his cheeks and the tips of his ears as Nick broke off into silence, blinking just once down at him. That nervousness lingered. "If we got rescued. If all this... was over. Yuh wouldn't leave?"

There was soft desperation there, cut in half by something Nick could only describe as fear. Before he could do more than part his lips, Ellis broke off into silence, blinking just once down at him. That nervousness lingered. "If we got rescued. If all this... was over. Yuh wouldn't leave?"

Nick stood in place, joints stiff as though a cold wind had suddenly frozen him where he was. Ellis thought he was being subtle, but Nick had been here before. Dealt with the shy, dismissive candor of a one-night-stand hoping for more. He knew the dance, and its steps, and where it ended.

That thought didn't stop him from fighting, resisting, doing his best to lead the conversation away. The reflex agitated him, because he could feel within his chest some buried hope that Ellis would just give it up, and they could continue on as they were. "I already said that's not likely. More likely we die tomorrow, or whatever we're carrying finally decides to kill us, or -"

Ellis twitched his head into a shake. "I know. But... if we make it, y'know."

Shifting to put his elbow on the railing, Nick cradled his chin against his knuckles, allowing his stare to direct numbly outwards. "If you're trying to ask something, just ask it." he uttered, quietly. It was a last ditch effort, because maybe if he put Ellis on the spot, he'd shy away -

"Are we gonna... stay tugether?" The mechanic's voice was soft, hesitant. Nick didn't bother to look, lest his expression match the vulnerability of his words. "I mean, would you want to?"

Part of him had expected such a question. Felt it coming. Maybe it was overdue.

Maybe this is overdue.

Nick let his digits spread, scratching into his stubble. He inhaled, and fuck if he could feel anything but a distant exhaustion. "Stay together?" he echoed, flatly. He wasn't even sure why he was still playing dumb. "Why? Aren't you all bound for your families?"

Ellis' head lowered, and he managed a careful, "Well... yeah, I guess. But you could come, too... Meet Keith. My mama." A soft excitement rose in his voice, tender and cautious, the kind of emotion that struck a tight discomfort into Nick's chest. "You and me could -"

"Meet your mom? Jesus, kid." Nick couldn't fend off a disbelieving shake of his head. He sensed the stiffness that entered Ellis' posture at his words. "Where's this even coming from?"

There was a weakening when Ellis spoke. A fragility that came to the surface, a tremor to his
voice, like he was holding on - but just barely. "Look, Nick, I know... I know yer scared, but we need tuh talk about this. I can't keep goin' like this... I need tuh know - whut we are." Nick didn't want to, but he looked. His gaze cut sideways, catching the fear gone wild in the Georgian's eyes. "I'm startin' to... think... I..."

He trailed off, abruptly putting his hands together into a nervous clasp. He couldn't get it out, and the Northerner was almost glad at the failure.

"I'm not scared." Nick returned, voice going harsher than he meant it to, cutting as he broke through the vagueness. The tone seemed to startle Ellis a little. "I just am what I am. What we are? I fucking told you from the word go, what this was, Ellis. When did I ever say anything else? When did I tell you I was anybody else?"

Ellis steeled his jaw, and reached out. He grabbed Nick's forearm, squeezing on the fabric of his the fabric of his dress shirt. "Nick. I get it, okay? You don't think... you got yer heart broke, and you don't think you can trust nobody. But -"

Nick recoiled, trying to yank his arm away, and was vaguely surprised when Ellis let him go. "What the fuck are you talking about?" He took a step to the side, turning, glancing off along the length of the porch where it wrapped around the condo. "Look, Ellis. It's very simple. I don't do the relationship thing. I've tried, and it doesn't work out. I didn't get my heart broken, I'm just not that kind of guy. And I never fucking said I was."

He could feel the younger man's eyes on his back, and he didn't turn around, not even when the softest mumble escaped Ellis from over his shoulder. "Maybe you just ain't tried with someone who loves you...?"

Some cold and harsh emotion cut into his chest, and Nick gazed down toward his hands. It hurt to hear, and he didn't know why. Some ferocious guilt threatened to crawl up his spine, talons sunk deep into his body. He'd been selfish to put himself on Ellis, the fucked up guy he was, and for what? I shouldn't have even let this happen.

Part of him knew he could have loved Ellis, and maybe that just made it worse.

There was something familiar and comforting in the decision to burn it all down.

"Don't be stupid." he snarled, quietly, lowering his chin. "We're just two sad fucks looking for something that doesn't hurt for two seconds. You don't love me, and I don't love you." Nick palmed down his chest, flattening his dress shirt, head shaking. Were his fingers shaking, too? "You -"

When Ellis spoke, breaking in, he could hear the fractured emotion just barely held back. He didn't have to look to imagine the misery threatening on the Georgian's features. It was in his mind's eye, clear as day, because Ellis had been nothing but miserable lately. "Nick, I... I know you. I know you don't wanna admit it, and I don't... need you to say you love me, but you gotta... You can't keep sayin' we ain't somethin'."

He was pleading, and nothing had ever sounded so pathetic. "It... it hurts. I just wanna know we're somethin'."

It wasn't fury that flared in him. Nick had passed the point of anger; anger was just the raw material he shoved up to insulate him from the conversation. A wall. It was separate from him, distant. No, it was a hollow and wickedly cold feeling that took him over. Like letting go, because that was easier.
"We aren't." His voice hissed as it escaped him, more like air from a punctured balloon than actual words. "What the fuck exactly do you think we have, here? I'll go and meet your mama, come for Sunday dinner, take you to a movie? I'm not that goddamn guy."

There was a beat of silence, just enough, and Nick thrust up a hand toward the sky. "You don't love me, and if you think you do, you're a fucking idiot. I'm not what you want. You want some little cute blonde in a sundress to come and impress your mom, make you breakfast, laugh at all your fucking jokes."

Ellis' footsteps sounded on the wooden porch as he took a half-step back, and his voice was soft and trembling. "All the stuff you've said - everythin' we've been through - you can't be serious. You don't mean that. I -" He hesitated, and it was with a voice like sugar that he whispered, "I'm in love with you, Nick."

Nick turned, poised in anger, lip curling up from his teeth.

It was worse. It was so much worse than he expected. He couldn't speak, it struck so deeply.

Those blue eyes sunk pain in his chest. They were wide and vulnerable and wounded, tears building up along those delicate lashes and sparkling like ice. He saw it: saw the desperate flare of love and need, like he'd never seen on anyone. Never seen directed at him.

"... 'n' I think you are, too."

For a moment, he could have lied, just to capture that look and call it his own.

Or was it tell the truth? Did he even know, anymore?

"That's how you got that shoulder wound, ain't it?" Ellis' voice hitched, a hiccup that shook a tear loose, tracking down his cheek in a glistening path. "You were so afraid I was dead, you 'bout killed yourself chargin' at Brenda. So you can't stand there and tell me you don't care. You can't keep sayin' all this stuff."

Nick slapped a hand over his shoulder, grasping into his shirt with clutched fingers. "What -" But there was no room to argue over how he'd come to such a conclusion, not when doing so admitted it was true. "You expect me to say I don't care if you die? That's a far fucking leap."

The younger man's mouth opened, but Nick overrode him, taking a harsh step forward. He didn't know how he felt about the fact Ellis retreated a step to match. "Just because I don't hate your company doesn't mean I love you, or we're gonna be anything. This isn't a relationship, we aren't dating. You're a good screw to pass the apocalypse with. That's it."

Every word brought another tear down his cheeks, sped the flow, until he was staring up at Nick with a tremble through his form, tears freely falling. It was like watching something fall apart inside of him, something breaking. "You don't mean that." he whispered, barely audible. "Please - I can't keep doin' this. Tell me you don't mean that."

Nick put his arms out, and a laugh escaped him, harsh and sarcastic and cruel. He did not recognize the sound. "Then don't. Don't keep doing this. What the fuck do I care?"

He turned, but Ellis abruptly reached out to him, hands outstretched. The Georgian's fingers just barely brushed his chest before Nick reached up to circle his wrists, shoving his hands away without letting go. The contact was hot - too hot, and some rogue voice begged him, screamed at him, to just stop.
Pleaded with him shut up, drag the kid into his arms, kiss him until the tears stopped. Keep him. Not because anything good would come of it, but simply because if he didn't have Ellis, what the fuck did he have?

"Please, Nick -"

The Northerner let him go, taking a step back. "Please what? What do you want from me? You want me to lie?" Ellis' head started shaking in time to the tremor of his body, but Nick just snorted. "Fucking drop it, Ellis. We aren't anything. I'm just a mistake, kid, one you made because you're too fucking stupid to know what's good for you. So just fucking go."

He turned his head, averting his gaze off into the night, and the faint shudder of Ellis' voice betrayed the way he surrendered to his tears. "What... are you..." He was hiccuping with each utterance, struggling to even piece together words as he teetered on the edge of sobs, and his voice grew muffled as he pushed his hands against his face. "Nick -"

"Get out." He leaned to shove his weight against the railing, gripping it with either hand, gone white-knuckled with the force. "You'll thank me for breaking this off, eventually." He dug his fingernails into the wood until it ached and he felt he might break them, turning his back on the younger man.

He truly believed that.

He didn't believe a lot - but he genuinely, sincerely believed that.

He heard Ellis stumble back, heard his toe catch on the threshold of the glass door and almost fall. Heard his breaths shift into sobs as he fled, and heard them shift to silence as the Georgian retreated into the house. He was left with nothing but the night sky and the whistling breeze and a throbbing pain in his chest.

It was better, wasn't it? Better for Ellis, better for him. They'd never amount to anything together. Nick would have broken him sooner or later, and better to do so cleanly, when he could still recover. The selfish thing to do would have been to keep up the illusion Ellis had, keep taking advantage of him.

Ellis wanted things Nick would never be. Didn't he?

Nick stared up, looking toward the moon.

He didn't understand why it blurred, why he couldn't focus on it, not until he blinked and something hot traced down his cheek. He shoved a hand up to wipe it away like it burned him, and he was left to gaze at the slick stripe across his palm.

It mocked him.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO here-comes-the-boom on AO3 - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
HERE-COMES-THE-BOOM AO3

*IMG SOURCED TO here-comes-the-boom on AO3 - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
Rochelle didn't know what made her wake up. With Coach's snoring, it was hard to imagine it had been a sound - but that was the only thing that made sense.

That, or some sixth sense.

All she knew was she came to consciousness with a deep and unsettled feeling of wrongness. Something ached in her gut, spooling nausea through her body. She pushed up off the bunk bed, blinking into the darkness, startled at the feeling.

"Ellis?" she whispered, instinctively, only to be met with silence and the rumble-squeak of Coach's inhale. She craned her head off the edge of the bed, looking down into the bottom bunk, and found it empty. That shouldn't have worried her; he could easily be on watch, or sneaking some time with Nick, or gone to the bathroom for all she knew.

Yet, she worried.

Pushing the sheets off herself, she straightened up to get her legs scooched toward the edge of the bed. She took a moment to mull over retrieving her bra from where she'd shucked it to a corner of the bed, but enough exhaustion and aches laced her body that she couldn't begin to care. With luck, she'd soon be back in bed.

With a tired sigh, Rochelle slipped down to get a foot on the bunk ladder, clambering to the floor. She had to be careful; the last thing she needed to do was stumble in on the pair. That in mind, it was cautiously that she stepped to the door and cracked it open to slip outside.

She did not have to search long. Ellis was sitting on the stairs, elbows on his knees, hands up and buried in his hair. Rochelle couldn't resist a relieved sigh at the sight of him, putting up a hand and whispering to him.

"Oh, hey, sorry. Thought I heard something - anyway. Are you -"

She didn't really seem to startle him, though there was a sluggish surprise in the way his head lifted. His eyes darted to hers, and it took just a moment for her to realize what she was seeing in the low light.

He was crying. All-out, messy, unrestrained crying. Tears streaked his face and put blotches around his eyes and even as she looked at him, his lower lip trembled and his body hitched with a sob. She'd never seen him so miserable, so shattered. He looked hollow.

Her body reacted before she'd even fully processed the sight. She bolted, dropping down to her knees in front of him, arms sliding to envelope him. Her hands slid up to grasp his shoulders, gripping there as he succumbed to a full-body shudder.

"Hey, hey, shh. It's okay. Everything's okay." she soothed, mindlessly, rubbing at his arms in gentle circles. "You're okay, baby." Ellis' head dropped, and she surged to catch his forehead against her shoulder, arms slipping to embrace him entirely. "You're okay. Just breathe."

Rochelle stopped herself from rubbing his back, mindful of his injuries, and instead slipped a hand up to brush fingers through his curly hair. The touch made him tremor, and it was a choked and muffled sob that escaped him.
"I-I tried. I just wanted... I didn't mean tuh.."

She didn't stop petting his hair, setting her cheek against the side of his head. "It's okay now, sweetie." she murmured back to his nonsense, squeezing him gently when he leaned further into her. "I'm here. Was it a bad dream? Did you have a nightmare?"

All he could do was shake his head at first, so she held him tighter, palm pressing against the back of his head to encourage him to bury into her neck. He didn't need much coaxing.

It was as he buried against her shoulder, wet immediately leeching into the thin fabric of her shirt, that he whispered out a fractured and mournful, "Nick broke -" Ellis couldn't get through the whole sentence without a sob wracking him, breath hitched to a rattle in his throat. "- up with me."

Shock froze her there, holding him tightly, expression drawn into wide-eyed surprise. She couldn't utter a sound.

"I-I fucked it up. I ruined it." he muttered, so miserable it almost came across as disgust. "I just - I tried tuh tell him how I feel - I love him, Ro'. I love him 'n' he just said - the most awful -" He was whispering, but the more he spoke, the more his voice pitched and raised, and Rochelle forced herself into motion. Her eyes darted to look up the stairs.

Nick couldn't be far. The condo was only so large.

Rochelle looped a hand to press at the base of Ellis' spine, slipping away and pushing him to follow. "Come on. Let's go in the bedroom. Okay?" He followed numbly, like he would have merely collapsed without her support, and it was gently that she guided him toward the main bedroom.

"There we go." she murmured, soothingly, barely cognizant of the words as she spoke them. Her mind was spinning, wheels stuck in the mud. Had she so badly misread Nick's bad mood? She'd thought it nothing abnormal, something that would pass, like his moods always did - had Coach so terribly overstepped as to cause such a breakdown?

Or was it simply a matter of Ellis scaring him off with a confession?

Were they so out of touch?

Rochelle pushed the bedroom door open, not having bothered to close it entirely when they left Chris to sleep earlier. She barely convinced Ellis to walk much further than the end of the bed before his legs collapsed under him, sliding down to the floor, pushing his back against the outside of the footboard. He drew his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them.

"I should've -" He was losing it, now, voice quavering. He pushed his palms over his eyes, but all he managed was to smear tears across his face. "- j-just kept muh.. muh dang mouth shut..."

Gently slipping away just long enough to close the door, Rochelle returned to his side. She slipped down to sit on her knees, rubbing one hand up and down his shin, and letting the other lift up to tuck a wandering curl behind his ear. "Honey, no. That wouldn't have been any better."

His head shook, desperately. "N-no. I knew - I knew he was scared, 'n' I did it anyway - I just ... I know he cares 'bout me, I just wanted him tuh... I just wanted tuh hear it..." One of his hands dragged up, pushing into his hair, curling fingers in it until he could draw it painfully taut. "I thought if he just said it, we'd be okay - He'd get all riled but we'd be okay -"

A frown found its way onto her face, and she felt abruptly and suddenly close to tears. Maybe it
was how miserable he sounded, or how sincere. Or maybe it was the flood of guilt she felt for having let him get this far. She'd known better, and hadn't listened to her gut and put a stop to it.

Some part of her had believed in Nick, or Ellis' ability to soften him.

"Sweetie -" she began, but a vague rustle from the bed halted her. She raised her head in time for Chris' head to lift, and he blinked at her in bleary confusion. "Sorry, Chris. Just... Just go back to sleep." She shouldn't have expected it to work, but she didn't have the energy to protest when he started to wearily and achingly crawl himself upright and down the length of the mattress.

Ellis' head shook, releasing a few staggered breaths that came worrisomely close to hyperventilation. "We were fine, 'n' I just had tuh push him - I'm such a fuckin' idiot -" he muttered, voice close to a whine, barely even acknowledging it when Chris came to a panting halt just behind them at the end of the bed. "I couldn't just -" He groaned through gritted teeth, like actual pain flooded him.

Slowly, Christophe blinked over the footboard at Rochelle, eyes questioning. She shook her head gently without speaking, expression morose, and some comprehension made its way onto his face.

"You didn't do anything wrong." she hushed, settling her hand at the back of his neck and rubbing there. Ellis peeked vaguely up at her, quiet misery stained on his features, and he did not look convinced. "Okay? He's the one who messed up. He's the idiot. You're sweet, and perfect, and he's going to regret this."

If I have to make him...

Ellis put a trembling hand against his mouth, muffling the choked breath that escaped him. "I thought - I really think he... cares 'bout me. Wh.. whut if... whut if I ruined it? Whut if we'd be okay if I just hadn't... made him say it? I knew I was pushin' him..."

Rochelle took a breath, leaning in close, til her forehead touched the top of his head. She closed her eyes and tried to summon some kind of calm. She found none. "You can't think like that." she whispered, soothingly. "You can't live not knowing these things. It's not healthy to love someone and hope they love you back, think it. You don't think you deserve to hear it?"

He shook his head, not knowing how to respond, or perhaps not able to past the sobbing that clenched his throat. She pressed a kiss against his temple, soft and unassuming, before pulling away. As she did, Chris' voice raised tentatively from the bed.

"Rochelle is right, hermano." He said it with a grunt, grasping his hand on the top of the footboard to leverage himself and lean forward just enough to look down at Ellis. "En España, if you see someone beautiful, you say something. If you love someone, you say it. Not this... estaís vacilantes." He lifted a pinky to gesture in a flick, seeming afraid to let go of the footboard lest he lose his balance.

"Can't make up your minds, ¿sí?"

Ellis' head lifted enough to turn wet blue eyes upwards, looking up at the Spaniard, their faces upside-down from each other. "I know how I feel." he mumbled, weakly, lips quivering as he spoke. "'N' I thought I knew how he felt."

That made Christophe cock his head gently, a soft and discontent emotion darting over his eyes. "¿Quizá...?" he uttered, sympathetically, glancing toward Rochelle with a slightly helpless twitch of his mouth. "Perhaps he only needs time? He will come around?" She frowned at him in quick
disapproval, the expression only deepening when Ellis shifted his gaze to her, too, and she could read a faint hope there.

Nick was stubborn. Too stubborn. Was there even a chance - or were they mistaken after all? What if he truly didn't love Ellis, and breaking it off with him had been the one truly honest thing he'd done? The thought frightened her, but wasn't it her responsibility to consider these things, to guide Ellis to the right conclusion?

"Em... I only mean -" Chris seemed to recognize he'd stumbled into unsteady territory, shifting his weight uncomfortably as apology flooded his expression.

"I don't know." Rochelle admitted, honestly, turning to look Ellis directly in the eyes. He crumpled into a kind of resigned disappointment, nodding his head, and she gently pulled her hands away to settle both of them, clasped, in her lap. "We'll figure it out, okay? But right now, you need to feel this. Okay? I know you want to think it'll get better, but you need to be prepared... it might not. He might not be able to do what you want."

Ellis fell into tears as quickly as they had begun to stop, a shake traveling over his form, but Rochelle forged through. She had to, even if it hurt. And God, it hurt.

"We don't know what's going to happen. I need you to be prepared for the worst, because I can't watch you run this track anymore. If he's hurt you, if he can hurt you like this, then he's going to have to buck up and make it better, or maybe you're better off, anyway."

It was cruel, and she knew it. Knew it when Ellis' tears turned into sobs, though he tried to muffle it behind a hand. Knew it even more clearly when she glanced up and found Christophe trapped in a vaguely pained expression, though he merely lowered his gaze in some strangely visceral submission.

"All this time, I thought - it was okay, because he made you happy." She reached out, touching her hand to his cheek, her chest clenching when he pushed his face against it in a desperate gesture. "You're not happy now."

That tore a stuttered breath from him, and he barely managed a nod. "I-I know." he whispered, fractured, staring suddenly down at his lap. "I just - I love him. I love him like I ain't never loved anyone. I don't wanna do nothin' ever again if he ain't there. I wanna -"

He lost his voice to a sobbing groan, hunching forward, and Rochelle jolted to catch him in her arms. She held him, tightly, grasping at the back of his head and pushing him down to bury against her chest. "It's okay." she whispered, closing her eyes, though all the gesture did was force out the tears she'd been fighting. "I never wanted to see you like this."

As Ellis buried his face against her, the thudding in his ears was not enough to muffle the sound of the door opening.

They both jolted away from each other, startled, and Ellis looked up through a thick blur of tears to see Nick standing in the doorway, holding it open with one hand while his other hand dangled the flashlight low and pointed at the ground. His heart felt like it stopped in his chest, leaving only a numb sensation to crawl delicately up his limbs as they ran out of oxygen. His skin prickled with anger and misery and fear.

Fear, because he did not need more than a glance to see the betrayal laced in the older man's expression.
Rochelle stood, abruptly, putting both her hands on her stomach to slowly flatten out her shirt along her body. Her voice was remarkably calm when she spoke, though her insides roiled with fury. "Nick. I -"

Nick did not spare her a glance, did not even acknowledge her presence in the room. His eyes were locked onto Ellis', even when the Georgian tried to avert his to the ground. "How long?" he asked, simply, voice hollow despite the vivid rage stewing just behind his eyes. "How fucking long?"

He knew. He'd listened in long enough to know Rochelle knew, overheard the conversation clearly enough to pick up on it.

Though his throat felt like it might have wrung itself into knots, Ellis worked out a wheedled response, rough and raw with tears. "A while." he said, honestly, because it didn't matter anymore. The Northerner's eyes flashed wide, cutting across his face with something that might have been horror had it been less enraged.

"I asked for one fucking goddamn thing."

It started quiet. Not soft - no, his tone was razor-sharp, but so quiet it was almost just a hum.

It did not remain quiet.

"I asked you for one fucking goddamn thing, and that was to keep it a secret. You fucking agreed to it. How many fucking times did you lie to me? How many times did you tell me they didn't know?" He was getting louder, stance wider, aggressive. His hands lifted with clenched fists, looking for all the world like a cornered animal. "How many times have you three been laughing behind my fucking back?!"

Ellis could not manage more than a hoarse whisper. "No one was laughin' -"

Nick paid him no mind, pacing just a few steps forward - and the gesture was almost threatening, so much so that Rochelle reflexively stepped in front of him, blocking his view to Ellis by force. Nick's gaze didn't lift to hers, and she swore the way he kept it low was ashamed, or something so close she couldn't tell the difference.

"Coach doesn't know." she stated, still calm, because someone had to be. "I found out on my own. And we haven't been -"

"I'm going to give you five fucking seconds to reconsider talking to me right now." Nick hissed, low and furious, eyes darting around her face with a panicked and wild energy. He looked half like he was trying to puzzle a way to dart around her, like she was merely an obstacle. "Like I need to hear from you, when you apparently can't keep your legs or your mouth shut around this fucking -" He jerked a hand up to gesture at Christophe, and there was a surge of motion.

Chris looked like he might lunge off the bed, voice going sharp. "¡Cómo te atreves!" he shouted, though what he intended to do was uncertain, considering his legs didn't seem sturdy even with him balanced on his knees on the mattress. "You do not speak this way!"

Instantly, Ellis was up and on his feet, reaching out to grab an arm around the Spaniard, pulling him into a messy hug with the footboard between them. The man did not succumb, trying to push away but lacking the leverage to do much more than squirm his torso.

His fight only worsened when Nick flicked a look, askance, toward him, coldly spitting out, "You shut the fuck up. You are not part of this team, asshole. I don't give a shit what you think, and I'm not scared of a fucking cripple, so sit the fuck down." The Spaniard nearly got his leg up and onto
the edge of the mattress, like he meant to fling himself up, but Ellis tightened his grip and dragged
him back by force.

When the Georgian released a desperate, "Please - don't.", Chris' fight stilled, darting a glance at
him. His brows still wrought with fury, he slipped his attention reluctantly toward Rochelle,
examining her without moving an inch.

For her part, Rochelle stayed perfectly still, her eyes on Nick's as they doggedly traced her form
rather than match her gaze. There was a beat of silence, as if Rochelle were patiently awaiting to
see if Nick intended to continue - and when he didn't, she very quietly spoke.

"He found out on his own, too, but for the record - I don't give a shit. You spent this whole time
stringing him on, treating him like shit in front of us just because you wanted to keep up your
appearances. Keep him hidden." Nick was inflating his chest with fury, lip curling up from his
teeth in a snarl, but Rochelle did not give way. "You didn't think how that would make him feel?
How lonely that would be? When you couldn't even let him talk to you about you guys, you
thought he'd make it without someone to talk to?"

She thrust out a hand, jabbing a finger toward him. "I was there for him. That's all. If you want to
call me ugly names, fine, but considering what you did to him tonight, he needs someone who
gives half a shit."

Suddenly, something tipped in Nick. A darkness entered his eyes, like a light had cut out behind
them. He gazed abruptly up straight into her eyes, so cold and numb it almost frightened her. She
retreated a step before she could stop herself.

In perfect time, a door opened in the hallway, and there was a thunder of footsteps as Coach threw
himself into the doorway just behind Nick. "What in the damn hell is goin' on?" His expression
was weary, stricken, and the fog of sleep had not yet lifted from his eyes. "Y'all are shoutin' like -"

His eyes caught on Ellis, tear-stained face just lit by the scattered glow of the flashlight. He slowly
took in the bubbling anger on Chris', the cool disgust on Rochelle's. Nick did not turn to look at
him, but the aggression in his posture lingered enough to give an idea.

Coach stood in silence, even when that silence dragged on for a few strained, uncomfortable
moments. His expression gave away nothing but vague concern.

It was only very softly that Rochelle murmured, "Maybe we should just sleep on this. Talk in the
morning."

She didn't anticipate Nick's reaction: he laughed.

He laughed, and it was the coldest sound she'd ever heard. It put goosebumps up her arms, it was
so hollow and empty - emptier, even, than his voice when he had been sitting on the floor of the
gunstore. His tone rasped with it, and he looked at her as if she was just a photograph in his hand.
A fond memory he was in the process of stowing away, but wanted to steal one last glance of
before it went in some box in some closet somewhere.

"Talk? There's nothing to talk about. Talking is the exact thing I never wanted."

Rochelle barely got the chance to part her lips before he turned, shouldering past Coach forcibly.
The eldest survivor half-turned to gaze after him before looking back into the bedroom, a tense
confusion lurking behind an otherwise stern gaze.

Nick did not go up the stairs. He hit the wall and turned, and there was the clatter of the katana as
it was drawn away from its lean on the wall. Just a beat later, and the front door locks were turning, metallic thunks announcing their progress.

Ellis released his grip on Chris, taking a stumbled step forward so he could place a hand on Rochelle's arm. "Nick!" he burst out, voice breaking in half with a certain desperation. The sound *terrified* him, and that terror bled into his voice. "What are you doin'?! You can't -"

The door swung open - and then ferociously slammed shut.

As fast as Ellis could lurch to bolt, intent on chasing after him, Rochelle put an arm out to grab him. She dragged him by force back a few steps, pushing him until his hip hit the bed - and as he fought against her, she fought back. "No, Ellis. No. Stay." He shoved his forearm flat against her chest, trying to dodge to the side, and she stifled a wince as she wrestled with him. "Ellis! I will get him!"

That made him stop, lips parted to pant, eyes darting desperately from her face to the door. Fear had stopped his tears, leaving just a wild panic across his features. "I will get him." she repeated, slower, and the Georgian slowly relented. He slid his weight back, hip braced against the footboard.

She waited just long enough, hands sliding to hover flat in the air - and then she ran, skidding out into the hall. She had to throw her boots on, swearing a simple "Fuck!" under her breath when they resisted her attempts to step into them without unzipping the sides... and then she was out the door.

Coach gazed after her, arms slowly drawing to a cross. He turned his head, examining Ellis and Christophe.

The Spaniard slowly and tentatively slid himself flat in a sit on the mattress, reaching out his hand to place it flat on Ellis' shoulder. The Georgian's frame threatened to crumple at the touch, dropping his head to bury his face against his palms, and it was miserably that he leaned there.

If they'd looked a little less broken, Coach might have stepped in and asked for an explanation. As it was, he drew away from the bedroom, slipping instead to follow Rochelle.
"Nick!"

Rochelle hissed it, trying not to shout, as she bolted down the porch stairs. The gambler was just a light blue and white shape in the dark, lit by moonlight, striding across the lawn. She chased him down, and his pace did not change as she came up behind him.

"Where the hell are you going?! You're just gonna walk out in the middle of the night?"

Swinging the katana to rest it on his shoulder, it was with a dull tone that he kept walking, stepping up on the slab of concrete that made up the driveway, linking the fence gate to the garage. "Sure. You should be glad I didn't take the sniper, too."

It was so flippant and casual, Rochelle felt a flash of anger. She lunged forward, grabbing his shirt sleeve. He halted at her touch, arm just barely drawn behind him by her grip. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Nick?! What are you gonna do, go solo? We know how that goes!"

Snorting, he didn't turn to look at her, but he didn't pull away, either. He glanced upwards, suddenly, gazing at the sky. "Maybe I'll hunt down whoever the fuck's out here, join them. Better than you lying fucks."

Rochelle stared up at him, and it was all she could do to keep her voice steady. They couldn't afford to yell, not outside, where infected - or humans - could hear them. "Lying? Us, lying? You're the one who made him think you were together. You're the one who led him on."

The casual sarcasm disappeared in an instant. Before she could blink, Nick turned, snapping his arm free from her grip and jerking so close to her face she had no choice but to arch her spine and step back. He snarled at her, eyes dark. "I never fucking did anything. I never fucking said -"

Then he was turned away again, hand over his mouth, and she couldn't deny that her heart rate had picked up. There was something wrong in his energy, cold, and it took her a moment to realize why it unsettled her so much; it was like an animal under attack. Wild and unpredictable, visceral. Terrified, maybe.

Ellis had said he was afraid of people finding out about them - she'd thought he'd been exaggerating.

Nick hunched away from her, head faintly shaking. "I told him from the start I wasn't that guy. It's his own fucking fault he convinced himself I was." Rochelle didn't want to believe... didn't want to let herself hope... but did he not seem miserable, in his own way?

"And his own fucking fault for telling you - Jesus. The one fucking thing..."

Did it not say something that he was so angry, so upset, so frantic?

She tried to soften her stance, her voice. She reached out, and her fingers just brushed at his upper arm. "Nick... sometimes I wonder if you don't have yourself convinced you're a certain kind of guy."

Nick stepped away, a furious exhale escaping him. "You and Ellis both. You're a fucking pair. Tell yourself fairy tales and blame me when they aren't true." he uttered, scathingly. He shifted his grip
on the katana, dropping it to his side as he started to walk away again. "Forget it. I'm not staying in
this shit."

Frustration flooded her, hands curling into fists. She jolted a step forward, hissing after him. "Nick. You're going to die out there, and it'll kill him. It'll kill all of us."

She couldn't have known how the words cut him through, so close to an echo of what he'd told Christophe. Like a leash had drawn taut, Nick halted. His gaze dropped to the ground, shoulders raising a twitch. He didn't turn, but he stayed where he stood.

She felt a surge of hope in her chest to see him falter, and pressed.

"If you run out there because of something he did, and get killed - by a zombie, or whoever's out there - he'll never forgive himself. You've got to know that." Putting her hands together, carefully, she lowered her chin. "I don't believe you don't care at all. You're part of this family, Nick. Whatever's going on, whatever happens, none of us want you to walk out there and die."

His head tilted, a little - not enough to look back at her, but enough so that she could see just the side of his face. She had him, almost, but she needed to hook him. She had to get him back in the house, one way or another. Wasn't that the priority?

Rochelle inhaled, carefully, steeling herself to make a promise she wasn't sure they could keep.

"We won't talk about it."

That stiffened his posture.

"Please. Just come back inside. We won't talk about it. Okay? If you really don't want to - we won't. I need to be there for Ellis, but we'll leave you alone. This is between you two. We're not going to circle you and have a big argument. Okay? You can just hole yourself up like you always do. Just..."

She couldn't help a hand from lifting, weakly spreading fingers into a pleading gesture. "Please. Just come back inside."

Nick gazed down toward the ground, katana slowly lowering until it touched the concrete with a soft metallic rasp. His posture fell to something vaguely slumped, resigned, as her words settled over him. He exhaled a short breath and turned on his heel.

"Fine." was all he said, and it was rough and small and petty.

He didn't look at her as he stalked back across the lawn. He took the porch stairs in a quick stride, and only slowed slightly when he noticed Coach waiting on the landing just outside the front door. The two men didn't utter a word to each other, with Coach watching him closely and Nick staring solidly past him.

The football coach stepped to make way, silently watching as Nick shoved past him and into the house.

Rochelle watched Nick disappear through the threshold, hearing the door to the second bedroom slam shut a few moments later. She slumped, all the energy draining out of her body in one swift motion, and raised a hand to cover her eyes.

It was breathlessly that she uttered a thin stream of swears, venting out an elongated stretch of "Shitshitshit." When it failed to make her feel better, she eventually simply rubbed over the length
of her face and started walking back to the stairs.

Coach was looking at her.

She didn't expect him to talk - he'd been so silent, part of her had forgotten about him. Not so much his existence, but forgotten that he was a rogue element. Forgotten that he didn't know what was going on, and she had no clue, even, how he would react.

The woman might've just walked up the stairs and back into the house without a word, had he not reached out and pulled the door closed before she'd made it more than halfway. The sound startled her, and her eyes darted up to his.

He didn't seem angry, but she couldn't determine what he did seem like.

Slowly, Coach drew his arms into a cross, sighing, such a gust of wind leaving him that his body deflated. His eyes closed, leaning back against the railing of the staircase. "How long's this been goin' on?" he questioned, tone flat and exhausted.

Rochelle tenderly closed the distance between them by just a few steps more. She ran her tongue across her lower lip, biting it between her teeth when it hit the corner of her mouth. Only eventually did she admit in a soft and half-humoured voice, "A while."

He didn't open his eyes.

Shame flustered her as she realized what that expression was: disappointment. She didn't know at who, but shouldn't it have been directed at her? Hadn't she had a hand in all this, encouraging Ellis on a path to heartbreak?

"I didn't think it would go like this, Coach, I swear -"

Lifting a hand from his forearm, he waved her off with a halting gesture, voice gone dry and low. Anger did rise, then, but it was almost melancholic. "Here I was, thinkin' Nick wasn't a good friend to him, an' you tellin' me they were datin'? Nick's said all that shit to Ellis, done all the shit he's done, an' they were datin'? Lordy, girl, just what in the hell were you -"

Something snapped, and she didn't know what. She didn't even feel the tension rising in her chest until it broke her, the backlash of force hitting her so strongly she barely stayed standing.

"I don't know. Okay?! I don't know what I was thinking! Maybe I thought they loved each other, and it was all just a big show for Nick to be a jerk, but deep down he loved him - just like deep down he loves us. Is it so damn wrong, am I such a horrible person, for trying to support Ellis when he's in love?"

Coach seemed startled by her fury, taking a half-step forward on the landing, but there was no stopping her.

"Maybe I fucked up. Maybe I should have done something different. But it wasn't my relationship. It wasn't my place to say anything. I didn't want anything but the best for him. Do you really think I meant for him to end up hurt?! Do you -"

She was almost shouting, and a snarl drifted up, cutting through the cold and empty night air. Coach's head lifted, moving in a flash to open the front door with one hand in the same gesture his other hand raised to hush her.

It sounded again, closer, inquisitive.
It didn't sound like a Hunter; it may have even just been a regular zombie, wandering near the fence and alerted to the sound of her voice. Rochelle didn't have much time to think before Coach was practically hauling her up the stairs and into the condo, close behind her. He shut the door and leaned against it, letting his head fall back against it, eyes closing.

"Babygirl, that ain't what I said."

Running a hand over the top of her head, exhaling, Rochelle shook her head. "... It's how I feel." she stated, dully, before glancing suddenly at him. Her voice went tremendously quiet, a murmur just between them. "I need to know, right now. Do you have any problems with Ellis being gay? I'll need you to stay out of this if y-"

Coach couldn't raise his hands up fast enough, waving both. A sort of irritation crept into the quirk of his brow, though his voice was reassuring. "Girl, I taught boys' football and health class. You don't think I had young'uns ask me for help comin' out? Advice? I been through that shit already. That ain't my issue."

She gave a cursory glance over his face before nodding. "If you want to talk about everything... we can talk later. Can we please just be there for Ellis right now?" Letting her eyes lower, she pleaded, because the last thing Ellis needed was more arguing.

When the big man nodded curtly in acknowledgement, Rochelle turned to walk into the master bedroom with a short flick of her hand to indicate him to follow. He did, hanging his head faintly in a tired shake.

Ellis stood in the center of the room, hands fidgeting nervously on the hem of his shirt. His eyes tentatively darted between Rochelle and Coach as they entered, a tender balance to his expression. He'd stopped actively crying, but only by force of will, it seemed.

His eyes were threateningly wet.

"I-I'm sorry." he managed, softly. "I didn't mean tuh ruin things.. or get y'all involved." His eyes flickered shamefully toward Coach, fixating on his face without meeting his eyes directly. "'n... I'm sorry - I would've told you, but... he didn't want to, 'n'..."

The eldest survivor stepped forward, circling an arm around Ellis to place a hand on the back of his head. The younger man startled, eyes widening a little, as he was drawn against Coach's chest.

"You ain't got nothin' to be sorry fo'," he stated, simply. "You just quit that, a'ight? We'll get through this, like anythin'. It'll be a'ight." At Ellis' soft noise of uncertainty, Coach lowered his chin and uttered, "We love you, son."

When Ellis' body trembled, burying against his shoulder with a sudden and fractured sob, body practically wrenching with the force of it, Coach tightened his arm. The gesture brought Ellis into a hug, Coach's chin settling atop his head.

From the bed, Christophe slipped tiredly back, bracing his weight on a flat palm. He cocked his head, unable to resist blinking over Coach and Ellis with some bemusement. Whatever he thought, he didn't put it to an utterance, slowly easing himself back to lay on the bed with a quiet groan of pain under his breath.

Rochelle crossed her arms, setting an elbow against her inner forearm to prop her hand up and gently cover her mouth. She exhaled, closing her eyes, because watching Ellis cry into Coach's chest would have brought on tears and she couldn't afford to lose it.
"Guess we're gonna be sleeping upstairs on the couch, huh?"
Chapter 167

Nick hadn't made it one step in the bedroom before sliding to the floor. He landed hard on his rear, back braced on the door, staring ahead into the darkness. His eyes were wide, sightlessly riveted on the far wall.

His heart was not racing.

His mouth was not dry.

His chest did not ache.

None of those things were true. They could not be true, as long as he repeated them enough times to carve a track in his mind - dig a moat of pure will between him and the treachery of his body.

He slid a hand to cover his mouth, only to regret the motion when it brought the trembling of his fingers into harsh reality. "Fuck." he whispered, choked with the urge to get up and break something, break furniture, break the window, like the glass' sharp edge might shock him out of feeling. Break his fist into the wall.

He couldn't get his body to move to try any such thing, and maybe that was for the best. They'd have heard him, noticed, and wasn't he hiding from them in there? Wretched and huddled in the dark, primed and ready to run, because he couldn't stand to be under their attention. He shouldn't have let Rochelle convince him back into the house.

He hated it.

It was worse than just leaving, throwing himself to whatever fate awaited him, fighting alone.

But what was it, exactly? Having a house full of people knowing he sometimes fucked men, or how absolutely miserable Ellis had looked? How broken and tiny and shattered? The sound of him sobbing to Rochelle, voice barely holding together, had cut through Nick like - but that wasn't right. It had been hearing Ellis talk frankly and openly about their relationship, like it was something normal and commonplace, that had cut through Nick like a razorblade.

He was sure of that much. Wasn't he?

Allowing his head to tip back, touching the door, he closed his eyes. Nick inhaled, despising the way he could not do so smoothly. He wasn't sure of anything anymore. This was his punishment. His punishment for a moment of weakness, where he'd almost reconsidered everything, considered breaking all the rules he'd set for himself.

Where he'd stood in the loft, staring down the staircase, trying to convince himself not to go down, not to find Ellis, not to see if he was alright - because no good would have come of it. What would he do? At worst, he'd apologize and lie and pretend he'd changed his mind that they would be anything but a miserable wreck of a pair... at best, he'd try and offer useless comfort to a person he'd crumbled with his bare hands.

No good would have come of it, just like no good would have come of them together. Nick didn't have it in him to do it. Even if he could have pulled together the fractured scraps of feelings lurking around in his chest into something like love, did he really think he could make it with a man? Did he want to be that?
He'd never manage, and didn't Ellis deserve better? He and his ex-wife had deserved each other, but Ellis? If they died tomorrow, he could be comfortable in the knowledge that he hadn't stolen any more of Ellis than necessary. But what if they survived?

What if they survived, and Ellis felt stuck with him? Ellis was too kind, too sweet, too heartfelt. Nick was the manacle around his ankle dragging him under the surface. If there was even any slim chance they might survive, find rescue, make it out - what a waste it would be for Ellis to love a guy like him, who didn't even think he could love him back.

No good would have come of it, which did not explain why he had ended up standing in front of that door. If he could have found whatever part of him had caused him to make that walk down the stairs and to the bedroom door, he'd have dug it out with his nails. The part of him that couldn't have slept knowing Ellis was breaking down alone, and by his hand...

Only to discover he wasn't alone. And hadn't been for some time.

The violation came from such a visceral place, it was like he'd seen red, and only come to halfway outside. It was like awakening in a house of mirrors, surrounded by nothing but the mockery and scorn of a wall of warped faces. He just wanted to run, like gravity had changed and the air was suffocating him by simple, unyielding compression.

Ellis had betrayed him, and that was suddenly easier to handle.

He pushed away from the door, using his palm against it to shove himself until he reached his feet. Nick stepped into a walk, though his heels dragged on the carpet, and forced himself over to the single bed. He dropped the katana, not even caring to lean it against the wall or tuck it away, and let his body collapse onto the mattress, face-first. He hit so hard he clanked his teeth together, but couldn't muster up the energy to be irritated.

Would it hurt less tomorrow? Would he feel better? Would the sun rise and clear away the ferocious anxiety brewing in his gut? He didn't want to imagine walking out into the condo in the morning. Coach and Rochelle looking at him like he had blood on his hands, Ellis unable to look at him...

What did you expect? What did you expect, you fucking asshole? Did you think he'd sleep it off, be fine? That he'd be able to hide it from them even if they hadn't already known? No. You didn't think anything. You didn't think about anything. You never think. He lowered his chin, just enough to bury his face against the mattress, sucking in a muffled breath. When have you ever considered the consequences for anything? For anybody?

He raised his hand, sliding fingers against the side of his head - but they lifted further on their own until they carded furiously through his hair, pulling, clawing against his scalp. Why did you ever fucking get him involved in this? You knew he was stupid enough to think he -

He couldn't even think the words. Not even the voice in his head could, fueled by anger and self-hatred and a desperation to inflict pain on himself... because at least he could control his own misery. Deepen it. Stew in it.

You just wanted something good. You just wanted to steal a little warmth for a little while, because that's what you do. You crawl your way into people's lives, steal a little something, and then dig your way out. Fuck the consequences, right? Fuck everyone in your way.

And then that voice spat out what it knew would cut:
You'd never have made him happy, anyway.

If he buried his face hard enough into the mattress, he could almost pretend the world around him had ceased to be.
Chapter 168

It had taken some time for Ellis to fall asleep.

With Nick having holed up in the secondary bedroom, there was no choice but to go upstairs and camp out on the couches. Coach laid flat on the sofa with Ellis and Rochelle on either loveseat. It wasn't uncomfortable, but there was an odd silence between them. Nobody really knew what to say, though that was, perhaps, for the best.

Not talking kept Ellis' composure together, and he eventually drifted off, curled up tight against the armrest with a slumped exhaustion. The emotional turmoil had wrung him out, and he was left exhausted and hollow. Crying had risen dark circles under his eyes, and he looked almost ill.

The two older survivors remained in silence, some tacit unity in the way they merely sat, watching Ellis' chest rise and fall. The slower and deeper the motion grew, the more calm settled itself into Rochelle's chest. Watching him sleep was like some quiet reassurance that he'd be okay. That they would all, perhaps, be okay.

Though they'd intended to leave the windows mostly closed, for fear of revealing their position, Rochelle couldn't stand the claustrophobic atmosphere and had flung the curtains to the porch doors open. The cloudless night lit the air with unrestrained moonlight. It helped, a little, and the house was raised so high it didn't really reveal them to infected down in the street.

Eventually, Coach's attention shifted to her.

She merely sighed, at first, stretching her leg out to catch her heel against the coffee table. She didn't want to have the conversation, but it was due. Coach was due answers, and if she didn't calm him now, he might otherwise explode on Nick the following day. She'd brokered wary peace so far, and if anything happened to chase Nick out again, she wasn't certain she could do it a second time.

She inhaled, preparing for the worst. She knew he, more than anyone, would take issue with the promise she'd given Nick. He was undoubtedly chomping at the bit to go down and yell at the gambler, because that would definitely solve their -

"You okay, babygirl?"

Startled at that, Rochelle felt a gentle flicker of guilt as she forced a small smile. She shifted on her loveseat, crawling gently closer to the armrest to lessen the distance between them. Her eyes lingered on Ellis, ensuring they didn't disturb him. "Yeah. Just the last thing we needed, y'know?"

When he nodded, calmly, leaving it at that, she gave an insecure puff of air and continued. "I guess you want to talk about everything?"

Coach shot her a vaguely droll look, like she were being obvious, so she prompted: "How much did you... hear?"

The ex-football player shrugged his shoulders weightily, sliding a hand to rest flat on his gut. "'Nough. They been datin' in secret, you knew, Nick found out, blew his top. Now we got this shit to deal with, alongside everythin' else."

"Well... mostly." Rochelle cautiously slid her fingers to twine with each other, draping an arm over the armrest and letting her hands lay flat atop it. She put her jaw forward, sucking her cheek between her teeth to worry it for a moment. "That's true, but... Nick and Ellis broke up, I guess,
first. Ellis told him he loved him, Nick freaked and ended it... I'm not really clear on the details. Everything fell apart from there."

He gazed at her, muted surprise flickering across his face. His voice lowered, passing a faintly concerned glance to the sleeping mechanic. Coach cuffed his knuckles against his lower lip, brushing there thoughtfully. "You think he does?"

She could only shrug, speaking gently. "Does Ellis love him? ... Yeah, I think he thinks so. But he's young, and who knows, y'know? ... Nick? I'm not sure. You know as much as I do on that front, if I'm being honest. I think Nick cares about him, but he's afraid, and I'm not really sure if that's just... him being afraid to let someone in, or... some closeted macho shit, or what." Her hand lifted tenderly, brushing fingertips over her temple in a small massage. "For all I know, he really was just - he really doesn't have any feelings for Ellis. Not love, and he's just so ashamed of it and ashamed of himself for getting Ellis' hopes up..."

Coach tilted his head, closing his eyes at that with a stiff grunt. "Don't much care why. He hurt Ellis real bad. If he cares, ain't lookin' like it."

A wince crossed her expression at that, canting her head. "Look, I... I know. Okay? You don't think I've been wracking my brain this whole time trying to decide if they were good for each other or not?" She palmed flatly over her forehead, a stressed motion. "Every time Nick hurt his feelings, or yelled at him, or closed him out, I thought - God, what kind of person am I to let this happen? ... And half of me felt like it wasn't my place, but there was a lot of my gut that said Ellis was happy, and they had a shot, and -"

He didn't interrupt her, exactly, but when her voice faltered, he interjected. "If I'd known, I'd have sat Ellis down a long time ago, had a real good talk 'bout this." Coach uttered, shaking his head in a slow wag. "Gotten him to rethink this shit. I hate sayin' I told you so, girl, but Nick ain't good fo' him. Don't know if Nick is much good fo' anyone. Man's already divorced, who knows what he did to his ex to make her -"

"Whoa." Rochelle jolted up off the armrest, straightening, voice going reflexively stern. "Whoa, now. That's a leap." The big man gave her a dubious look, but relented, allowing her to speak. "I don't know a whole lot, but I've picked up enough to know that's bullshit. He told me he actually wanted to commit to her. I think she hurt him, and whatever ended it, I really don't get the feeling she was all that heartbroken over it."

Some surprise traced Coach's face, turning his head to glance suddenly toward the stairs. "... I assumed..." he uttered, vaguely, trailing off for a beat before he caught himself, pushing back a little defensively. "You tellin' me you don't think he's to blame fo' nothin'? He's just a victim, heartbroke?"

Rochelle lifted a hand, flatly, forcing herself to relax back down. She gazed at Ellis, trying to moderate her voice back into a whisper. "I didn't say that. I just mean..." She trailed off, unsure at first, but then her eyes darted back to him, suddenly. "My relationship issues with Jacob are equally my fault. The way you talk about your ex makes it sound like you blame yourself. You gonna suddenly make everything about Nick's ex?"

The faintest hurt lined itself into Coach's face, just before he sighed, shaking his head in a relenting gesture. "A'ight, a'ight, point taken." Dully tilting his head, the eldest survivor passed her a blink, voice softening. "Relationship issues? You said you two were on an' off, but that sounds like somethin’ else...?"

Quickly, Rochelle raised her hand, waving it. "Not important right now. What's important is we get
He didn't look convinced, but canted his head in acknowledgement, remaining silent.

"I know you're angry. I'm angry too. But whatever the reasons, Nick is... not in a good place right now. We need to focus on keeping Ellis sane, and not ripping into Nick." She could tell he didn't like that idea - his eyes narrowed a twitch - but he said nothing. "None of us want him to storm off and get ripped apart by infected, especially Ellis. Even if we're angry at him. He's still our teammate; he's still Nick. We haven't given up on him yet, and I don't want to now." Her eyes lowered, gazing toward the ground, softening. "Not after everything."

Coach's arms crossed over his stomach, shoulders raising, a quiet discontent to his posturing. "An' if it turns out he's been playin' Ellis fo' a fool this whole time? Takin' advantage of him?"

Rochelle lifted her eyes to his face, a sadness twitching at her mouth, even as she maintained a steadiness to her voice. "Then I'll never forgive him. But if we chase him out, he's going to die. Are you comfortable sentencing someone to death? Nick? Because that's what kicking him out is."

When he didn't respond, at first, staring her down - she felt a surge of insecurity. Surely on that, at least, they could agree?

He dropped his gaze, eventually, weakening. The relief that flooded her was a tangible coolness, because she wasn't sure if she could handle having that argument. "Course not. I don't want that. Whatever he's done, that ain't what I want. Just don't want him hurtin' y'all, an' I hate how this all turned into him havin' the upper hand. He can just threaten to leave, and we all shut up, he ain't got to deal with the consequences?"

"Yeah, I know." Rochelle gently squinted her eyes, exhaling. "It was the only thing I could think of to get him back inside..." She curled her tongue against the roof of her mouth, delicately, shaking her head. "But, look. The only thing I can promise isn't going to help is yelling at him. If he doesn't close up more, he'll just run again. So believe me, as much as I want to go and tear him a new one, all that'll do is make things worse."

Coach gazed at her, and his question was clear in his eyes: Then what do we do?

She shrugged her shoulders, and it was with a weighty exhale that she tipped her head to snuggle into the crook of her arms. "For now, you get some sleep. Let tomorrow's problems be tomorrow's problems. I'll keep guard for a while."

Though his glance was dubious, he relented, shrugging his weight against the couch and settling his chin against his chest. He let out a gruff sigh, slouching down with no small exhaustion. "Y'all kids are gonna run me ragged." he muttered, dryly, and it was enough to make Rochelle laugh a little, even as it made her distantly sad.
When Ellis felt himself awaken, there was a blissful and bedraggled moment where he forgot where he was. Being on the loveseat confused him, and he couldn't remember why he'd arrived there or what had happened -

And then it all came back to him in a flood. Like ice water dumped over his head. His chest constricted, sunk again into the realization that he and Nick were no longer together. Worse, that Nick hated him. No more sly grins cast his way. No more quiet utterances of 'El', or 'Ace', or 'Fireball', or any of the so-close-to-petnames he'd grown so used to. No more soft touches in a private moment. No more chances to look into those green eyes and wonder just what the heat behind them meant.

He felt empty, and yet full to the brim with such an aching, cottony sensation. He hurt all over, til he felt like he might snap in half if he attempted to get up, just by the pure force of his own movement.

Was this what heartbreak felt like? Or was it what Chris felt, missing an entire piece of himself?

That thought stirred him into motion, reluctantly, because it was petty of him to compare himself to Christophe - even if that didn't feel so far off. He grasped onto the back of the loveseat, dragging himself slowly upright, rubbing his eyes to clear them of the sharp remnants of sleep and tears.

As he got upright, he blinked around the room, faintly surprised to find the other sofas empty. He had to twist at the waist to locate Rochelle, hunched over the counter. She had a blank gaze down onto the surface, the only noise escaping her being the soft sound of chewing and, slowly, the crinkle as she reached into a bag of trail mix to draw out a little more.

Ellis tiredly propped himself against the back of the loveseat, eyes flickering over her face. He couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking. Was she thinking about him? Or Nick? Or something entirely different, just one more worry atop the mountain that had them cornered in at every side? He frowned, softly, under a soft wave of regret.

If he'd just kept his mouth shut...

"Yeah." he managed, startled when his voice cracked in the center. He cleared his throat, swallowing, averting his eyes as Rochelle gave him a sympathetic pinch of her brows. "Kinda exhausted." He forced a smile when she pushed the trail mix bag out to him, taking it, even as he felt a general sinking sensation at the idea of eating. His throat still felt so closed up, he wasn't sure he could swallow if he tried. "Thanks."

She swept around to the side of the loveseat, taking up a perch on the armrest. Her head tilted, but she glanced toward the glass doors rather than look at him, and he mimicked her. The sun was up, though there was still such a golden tint to the light that it must've been just past dawn. "Coach is downstairs getting Chris something to eat, and his pills."

Ellis nodded, slowly. He reached into the bag, plucking up a small chunk of chocolate from the
mix and popping it into his mouth. He didn't bother to chew or swallow, just tucked it under his
tongue and let it melt, closing his eyes to the sweet and heady flavour. It soothed him, though only
a little.

"I had an idea."

He blinked, glancing toward her uncertainly. A smile lingered at her lips, and he couldn't help but
turn to face her, cocking his head.

Rochelle splayed up a hand, fingers spread. "Yesterday, when I realized I didn't know your last
name... We're all probably missing a lot of information about each other. If we get rescued, if the
government is taking refugees... we might get separated. Finding each other might be hard if we
don't even know our full names."

A little frown touched his lips, nodding as she spoke. "Yeah... I guess I didn't think 'bout it like
that."

Pointing a finger in an eager gesture, Rochelle leaned forward. She reached out, snatching up a
small notepad from the coffee table, along with a small black pen. Ellis hadn't even noticed them
laying there, and he squinted curiously as she drew the pad against her thigh, flipping it open. "See,
Coach and I already did it..."

The first page was adorned with two entries, the first broad yet precise.

Rochelle Maureen Palmer
6/22/79
271-00-2901

The second was compact and rounded lettering.

Samuel Elijah Garrett
9/12/64
259-00-1838

"Maureen?" he couldn't help but utter, looking up to find her face immediately drawn in a
displeased squint. Ellis ducked his head, a fragile grin sneaking onto his lips much despite himself.

She threw her free hand up, shaking her head. "My grandmother's name. Believe me, I wanted to
change it for a long time. Teenage girl with that for a middle name...? Then my grandmother
passed away, and... I guess I understood why people do that." When his grin faded in sympathy,
she smiled at him, taking up the pen in her grip and tapping on the page. "Anyway, I thought we
could all put our information down, memorize it. Then if anything happens, we can identify each
other."

Ellis gazed down at the page, a softness touching his features. He felt a heavy conflict - because
his instinct was to jump at the idea, jump at the chance to more securely know they wouldn't lose
contact... but it was tempered by the awareness that Nick would want nothing to do with the plan.
Hadn't that been the start of their argument, anyway? Nick didn't want to stay with them.
Didn't want to stay with him.

Coach had been right, after all.

He could see Rochelle's hesitance rise when his silence extended, grew, and he forced himself to smile. There was nothing he could do, and no matter what happened, it wasn't like he wouldn't want to stay with Coach and Rochelle. "It's a good idea," he managed to say, aware it sounded choked and light, and he quickly reached to take the pen from her.

Ellis chewed on his lip, applying pressure to chase away the tingle of tears hidden just behind his eyes. He'd cried so much in the past half-day, he didn't even know if there were any tears left in him. He was determined not to. Snapping the pen open, he carefully set the tip against the page, continuing on just below Coach's.

Ellis Tyler Mayfield

04/05/85

259-00-4051

"How did you end up with such a cute name?" Rochelle murmured, stretching an arm to sling it around his neck. He had to shuffle his legs around to meet her in the embrace, putting his feet on the ground. A smile transiently passed over his face when she landed a smooch on his temple. "Thanks, baby. See? Now we can memorize it, and if anything ever happens, we'll have an easier time finding each other."

He couldn't help faltering, touching fingertips on the blank space left at the bottom of the notepad. There was just enough room... Ellis could remember Nick's name and his birthday from when he'd looked in his wallet, but that wasn't the point.

"Nick ain't on here." he murmured, unable to help himself. He frowned down at the page, feeling a surge of pain, crisp and fresh. He was far too tired to cry anymore, but his jaw tightened down to bite on his cheek as if to fight off tears. He lowered his chin as Rochelle raised her hand to tuck some wild curls behind his ear.

She tipped her head to catch his gaze, smiling firmly. "We'll convince him. Okay? Give it some time."

Ellis nodded, knowing the gesture came off insincere. He took the pad from off her lap, slipping sideways and out of her grasp. She let him go, watching him collapse to lay flat on the loveseat, back braced on the armrest. The Georgian pulled the notebook up to his face, eyes tracing the other two entries.

"I'm gonna sit and read it a few times, if that's okay." he murmured, softly. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to her. He just didn't want to talk to anyone, at least for a time. Her attention made him nervous, like he needed to pretend to be okay.

He wasn't.

Rochelle patted a hand against his shin, nodding her head. If she sensed his ulterior motives, she gave no indication. Standing back up on her feet, the woman stretched a little with a sigh. "Okay. I'm gonna go check on Coach and Chris. Maybe if you feel like it, later, you could come and talk to him? You seem to really cheer him up."
She didn't really wait for an affirmation, flashing him a smile before turning away and retreating to the staircase.

In her absence, Ellis let the notepad slip to his chest, frowning after her. His eyes slid half-shut, exhalting tightly. At the same time he relaxed... he also stiffened, tension clawing a discontent through his body. He just wanted to go back to sleep. Sleep was easier than having to think.

He missed Nick already.

Rochelle took the stairs two at a time, hand balanced on the railing. She slipped down onto the first floor, crossing the hallway gently. Her eyes slipped to examine the bedroom Nick had taken for his own - there hadn't been a peep from him all night. She wasn't inclined to be concerned, not yet. He'd have to come out for food and water at some point, whether he liked it or not.

Passing by, Rochelle stepped into the master bedroom, tilting her head as she passed the threshold.

Christophe was completely upright. He'd slipped his legs off the edge of the bed, socked feet flat on the carpet, body hunched forward. His hand was braced on his thigh to take the weight of his torso, face trapped in a heavy wince. "S-sí. I think so," he uttered under his breath.

Coach nodded, patiently, glancing back as Rochelle gently tapped a knuckle against the door in greeting. "Hey, babygirl. Just talkin' to Chris 'bout takin' a walk around the room. If we need to move, best if it ain't the first time he's on his feet."

Unable to resist a frown, Rochelle glanced toward the Spaniard. He flashed a small smile at her, but all the expression did was betray the trembling fear bleeding into his eyes. "Are you sure?" she questioned, worriedly. "I don't want to stress him out for no reason..."

Christophe lifted his fingers in a vague gesture, palm still flat against his dirtied cargo shorts. "I did not lose my leg. Just do not ask me to... como - ay, juggles? Por favor." Rochelle was struck by the urge to laugh, but uncertainty stopped her until he smiled again, and sturdier that time.

She did laugh, then, raising a hand to cover her mouth hesitantly as she advanced a step or two. "Okay... Carefully, though. Just a test run." When he nodded, Rochelle stretched out both hands, offering them in a slight clamshell to grasp his hand. He slipped his hand into her palm, gripping there as she gripped back, and Coach placed a hand at his lower back.

Carefully, the Spaniard straightened, resting some considerable weight on them as he pushed flat onto his feet. There was no small tremble to his frame as he came to his full height, a strained inhale touching his breath. The muscles in his neck were flexing, and judging by his wobble, he was instinctively trying to thrust out his missing arm to counterbalance himself.

Judging by the unpleasant frown touching his lips, it hurt and upset him.

"You a'ight, boy?" Coach questioned, examining him carefully. Chris gave a silent nod, stubbornly moving to take a step forward. They moved with him, and as he proved fairly stable, Coach pulled his hand away. Rochelle kept a grip on his hand, and carefully walked back with him until she hit the wall.

Though his breath was stuttered, his eyes were fairly bright as they came to a stop, his gaze dropping to glance down his form. "It is... strange. I can still feel it, yet I am... lighter. Inclinado." He glanced up, hesitantly, honey-brown eyes flickering between Coach and Rochelle. "Do not know if I can run without falling."

Rochelle couldn't help a light sigh, nodding. "Well, hopefully you won't have to run. Fingers
crossed." He passed a faint smile at her, eyes flickering down to glance at their linked hands. She meant to continue, but he carefully twisted his wrist, catching his fingers around her palm and baring the scabbing slice across her palm.

He glanced over it, a frown dragging his entire expression into a mournful and quiet anguish. The expression startled her a little, and she curled her fingers hesitantly, cocking her head. "Uh... it's nothing." she managed, lowly, gently pulling her hand free from his grip. "I'm okay."

The Spaniard did not protest, merely nodding. When she reached to brace his elbow as he began to turn, he waved her off, and she merely watched carefully as he started to gingerly pace the distance to the bed. His balance was still wobbled, arm stretching slightly to one side, and his expression was caught in bemusement. Like he'd lost some intrinsic understanding of his own body.

As he walked, he murmured, "How is Ellis?"

That made Rochelle laugh a little, a kind of sad humour touching her expression. She was faintly amazed at how readily concerned he was over the Georgian, considering he had plenty of things to worry about.

"He's... he's making it. It's too early to tell, really." A flash of inspiration struck, like lightning, and it was all she could do to keep her voice casual, innocuous. "He could probably use someone to talk to, though, if you wouldn't mind letting him come in and chat with you. Boy's a little sad."

Christophe nodded his head, reaching the edge of the bed and stretching down his hand to grasp at it, a weary tremble touching his frame, as if he were exercising rather than simply walking. "Claro." he uttered in strained affirmative. "I would like the company, ¿sí?"

Rochelle couldn't resist a self-satisfied little grin, one Coach caught and gave her an inquisitive glance over.

It was the perfect opportunity. Both of the men needed a friend, some distraction, and maybe Chris was just uninvolved enough to help where she couldn't.
Nick didn't want to awaken. It wasn't a choice, so much as that when something disturbed him - footsteps, he was sure, in the loft - his mind instantly snapped awake. And once it was alert, there was no deactivating it.

He did not move, but his attention became a wild and frenzied static. Every sound set his teeth on edge, waiting for it to approach his room, waiting for someone to knock or open the door. He prepared every time for conflict, coiling, only to have the sounds fade away.

Even when his stomach began to complain, Nick remained still on the bed. He had no interest in leaving the room, if he had to starve there. Opening himself up to the group's attention was the last thing he wanted to do. He'd rather just waste away in the bedroom, end up a corpse for some other survivor to stumble upon and wonder what had ended him.

Better that than walk out and interact with them.

Inhaling sharply, he slowly rolled onto his back, placing a hand against his chest. He hated the feeling huddled there, hated the cornered sensation that raised his hackles. It didn't shock him, exactly, but he'd hoped to never be in the position to find out what it felt like.

No one had ever outed him before, not like this. He'd never had to face the truth in the open, raw light of day, where someone knew who wasn't the other half of his trysts. Not even his ex-wife knew. It had never been a part of him, never settled in as something he was defined by.

He felt like the material of his being had been whittled away, revealing the raw and ruined nerve under it all. He'd prefer to be seen as an asshole who took advantage of Ellis, a cruel and heartless man, than a -

What? Bisexual? Worse, gay, when that couldn't be in any way the truth? That just grated at him. He felt lessened by it, weakened, that label he had never wanted stuck to him. He'd long since relegated his interest in men to something secret and transient, because it was never anything he wanted to pursue. *I learned my lesson on that one a long time ago.*

It wasn't about morality. Even if he had believed in any higher power beyond karma and luck, it wouldn't be the first or last sinful deed he'd committed. It was about his image. His reputation. The way people would look at him differently. He shouldn't have given a shit, but when had he ever *really* not cared? Wasn't everything he did a careful balancing act, filtering and processing himself into something uniquely and precisely unpalatable, so those around him would leave him alone?

If they thought him an irredeemable asshole, he could handle that. He was *trying* to be, so therein lay his success.

If he offered out something genuine, only to be rejected... well. There was no sense in letting anyone have that power over him.

He was a fake. Just a pile of lies and misconceptions in the shape of a man. Why did anyone think he was capable of a stable relationship, and least of all with Ellis, who needed things he could never be? He couldn't pretend not to care. He cared, more than he wanted to.

More than he ever wanted to.

Footsteps down the stairs made his head lift. He listened, despite himself, tracing their passage. He
didn't know how he knew they were Ellis', but he did. Maybe the gait, or the weight. They paused at the bottom of the stairs, and he could do nothing but wonder after what look graced Ellis' face as he gazed toward the bedroom.

Was it sad? Thoughtful? Did he look on the verge of tears, or the verge of breaking into the bedroom and confronting him? Did he look betrayed - infuriated, perhaps? Nick preferred the latter.

*Hate me, kid. Please. It's easier like that.*

Then the footsteps continued, moving up the downstairs hallway to the main bedroom. He heard the hum of voices, too muffled by the wall to discern any words - then a laugh, quiet and mild and definitely Ellis'. Christophe and he were getting on, it seemed, for the foreigner to make him laugh so soon.

Why did the sound hurt?

Why did it make him a little angry?

He wasn't jealous. That would be stupid, and selfish. Manipulative and abusive, to push him away and then spite him for having any kind of good moment - *and isn't that just like you? Jesus. Don't you want him to forget about you? Move on; Wasn't the whole point to get him to give up on you, go back to his life? Come on, Nicolas. Get your fucking act together.*

Groaning faintly, Nick allowed a hand to flatten over his face. He pressed fingertips into his eyes, massaging out the headache building in his sinuses. The window just beside the bed called to him. He could crack it open and leap out. It was an 8, maybe 9 foot drop to the lawn. Landing flat might twist an ankle, but if he rolled, he'd make it. Because sneaking out like a rebellious teenager would reflect well on him, he was sure.

When the hum of voices continued, Nick thrust himself up off the bed. An irritated energy drove him to movement, storming across the bedroom and toward the door. He grasped the knob, twisting it with a smooth pressure. He eased it open just an inch, careful to move slow and easy so it made no noise.

As the door cracked, the voices came into clarity.

"- hope so. It'd be real cool if you could come fight with us." Ellis was in the middle of saying, voice tender and raw. Nick could hear the tightness to it, the insecurity. He knew Ellis well enough to know the difference between it and his regular voice, and there was something rough and injured in the tone. "I bet you could do it."

The Spaniard laughed a little, hesitantly, voice a rolling murmur. "You have more faith than me, hermano. I do not feel like I can fight." A sadness bled through, real and grief-stricken. "No good to you all like this."

"Aw, that ain't true. We like you just fine. And you wouldn't be fightin' alone or nothin'. We'd have yer back if anythin' happened."

Nick couldn't help but snort, letting the door shut gently, their voices relapsing into muffled hums. He didn't want to listen to the conversation, them continuing on as if nothing were wrong. Cheering each other up. He definitely didn't want to find out if it would work.

Stalking back toward the room's window, Nick leaned forward. He flicked the shutters open, staring out toward the fencing. Leaving wasn't an option. He wanted to get out from under the
consequences of his own actions, sure, but out of the dark cloud of panic, he knew as well as anyone that leaving would be a death sentence. One Hunter, or even just one sizeable horde and he'd be dead.

Even more than that - he didn't know if he wanted to. After all, whether he'd wanted to or not, hadn't he grown a little used to the bunch? He wouldn't know where to go, what to do. He'd fight, sure, but why? Just for the animal need to keep on living?

Surviving alone suddenly sounded lonely.

Growling under his breath, Nick picked up a pace up and down the length of the room, sliding his hands into his slacks pockets. He felt trapped, suddenly, which only grated at him more; he should have just strode out and sat on the couch and emblazoned his apathy on him like armour.

But he couldn't do it, and fuck if that didn't infuriate him. Since when had he started to care so much about what they thought of him? When had he lost the ability to withstand their disapproval? They'd weakened him.

He was weakened, and he didn't know when it had happened.

Nick kept his body moving, because if he didn't, he might pull out a cigarette and start smoking. He only had six or seven left, and if he started, he might not stop. Pacing back and forth, he let his fingers clench and loosen in his pockets. It somehow reminded him of being in a jail cell.

The abrupt and distant bark of an engine made him halt where he stood, for just a beat. He moved on instinct, jolting to the window and shoving his hands under the blinds. Shoving the window up a little, the plastic squeaking as it rolled upwards, Nick leaned down to hover his face toward the opening.

The sound was coming from the other side of the house, but he could still hear it. It was, he was sure, the same sound from the other day. It guttered and roared in uneven patterns, wavering, and it was approaching. He was confident it was approaching.

As Nick closed the window with a flat palm pressed against the glass, he lowered his chin. He could hear the alarm raising throughout the house, footsteps moving fast across the loft and Ellis' voice hollering in concern from the master bedroom.

He barely listened. He couldn't parse it, mind whirling, because he had to make a choice.

There hadn't been enough time for him to recover. He wanted more time, to find balance and work through his state of mind. If he left the room now, he'd still be raw and sore and unpredictable, even to himself. He didn't know if he could look Ellis in the eyes, let alone stand to be around the team.

*Maybe it's just a false alarm, and they won't need me, anyway.*

He wanted to believe it, but with his luck, it was unlikely.

With a taut sigh, Nick advanced to the door, and grabbed the doorknob. He hesitated... for just a beat... before turning it sharply.

*Fuck it.*
Ellis had already reached the downstairs front-facing window by the time Nick opened the door. As he stepped out, the Georgian startled, slanting a glance over his shoulder to look in his direction. He didn't want to meet gazes any more than Nick did, it seemed, as his attention was angled downward.

He didn't say anything, and Nick matched his silence.

There wasn't time for it to drag on, as Coach and Rochelle thundered down the staircase to join them.

"Shit. That sounds really close." Rochelle muttered, slipping up to the window. She reached to grab the drawstring to tilt the blinds, squinting through them out into the street. She didn't acknowledge Nick's presence in the slightest, resting a hand against the wall. "I can't believe they're not attracting a horde with that..."

Coach stood at a slight distance, arms slipping to a cross over his chest. Discontent read clearly in his posture, not that Nick was surprised to see it - if anything, he was surprised that Rochelle had apparently convinced him to keep his mouth shut.

Ellis' head shook carefully. He practically whispered to her, head lowering, as if afraid to speak. "It... it sounds like stock pipes. Ain't that much louder than a car, just must be real clo-"

He didn't have the words out before Rochelle jolted, startling, a hand clasping over her mouth. The wheedling sound of the engine hit a fever pitch, and from between two condos across the street buzzed a slim black blur. The motorcycle crossed into the main road, hitting the turn too fast as it made to straighten out, and it toppled.

As the bike flipped onto its side and skidded, grating against the concrete, it flung its cargo - two passengers, and a sizeable duffel bag that had been loosely lashed to the back.

The two figures hit the ground rolling, cast in opposite directions in the crash. They were dressed in matching motorcycle helmets and riding leathers, thick Kevlar jackets adorning their torsos and protective guards strapped over their shins and knees. The protection did not stop the crash from hurting, it seemed, as they lay where they landed for a few seconds, curled into almost fetal positions.

"Lordy." Coach uttered, closing the distance to stand behind Rochelle, leaning in to look past her and out at the strangers. "They a'ight?"

With a heavy surge, one of the figures crawled up onto hands and knees. They carefully picked its way over to their partner, placing a hand on the fallen shape's leg in a few quick pats - and the still-prone person raised a hand in a weakly reassuring gesture. Clasping hands, then, the two hauled themselves to their feet, stumbling and stiff.

Ellis couldn't help but lean himself forward, squinting toward them, voice raising to a normal level as it grew a little fascinated. "Think so... They look like ladies, don't they?" It was hard to tell, with the helmets obscuring their faces and the thick jackets and protective gear bulking their frames - but Rochelle nodded.

"Kinda." she admitted, watching as the two figures straightened up, revealing one to be a good few inches taller than the other. "Lucky they didn't smear themselves on the pavement with that..."
Attached to the shorter woman's back by a brown leather strap crossing her body in bandolier style was a long-handled brush hook. The blade on it was wide and curved backwards at the tip, covered by a laced-up sheath to cushion the edge where it threatened to hit the backs of her thighs.

The taller woman had a wooden baseball bat hooked under her belt, lined along its length by a few strips of what looked like sheet metal, pocked by nailgun marks where it had been attached to the weapon. The bands of steel encircled the wood like reinforcing brackets.

The taller figure took her partner's arm and dragged her to spin, examining her back as if to look for injuries. When the shorter woman tried to coax her off with a shrug, she relented... only to get blindsided by a smack on the side of her helmet by her smaller compatriot.

They started arguing, gesticulating out their arms in vague threatening motions. Judging by the way the shorter woman kept pointing a gloved hand at the bike, it was about the crash. Rochelle couldn't resist a vaguely bewildered glance over at Ellis. He returned it, shaking his head.

"Not... sure if I should be laughin', or worried..." he muttered, uncertainly. The argument made them seem a little more human, but at the same time, the show of anger worried him. The last thing he wanted was to run into more aggressive types - but wasn't that presumptuous to think? Having an argument didn't mean they were murderers.

It was then that Nick spoke, just a quiet utterance, voice rough. "Worried."

Despite the innocuous nature of the statement, Ellis flinched, lowering his gaze to stare toward the floor. It was enough to flare agitation in Nick's chest - as if he didn't deserve it. As if he hadn't brought it on himself, asked for it. Stop interacting with the kid. All you're doing is making yourself angry, and him miserable.

Rochelle reached up a hand to point, voice raising. "Shit. They did attract some stuff. " As she said it, a few infected came sprinting out onto the road, two from the same alleyway the motorcycle had fled through and four from scattered directions. One came running from alongside the survivors' condo.

The infected shrieked as they ran, and it was instantaneous that the strangers reacted. In swift unison, they tore their weapons from their holsters, the shorter woman taking a second to yank the sheath free of her axe. She stuffed it into the deep pocket of her thick-fibre jacket, and got a firm two-handed grip on the long axe handle.

The whole weapon from hooktip to hilt end was a good four and a half feet long. She held it tight, swinging it loosely at her side to warm up - and as a zombie reached her, she let it arc up in the air... then drop, momentum carrying it in a horizontal slash. The hooked blade made such an impact into the infected's chest that it sheared through its ribcage and implanted itself.

Just as quick, the woman yanked back with her body weight, and the curved hook took flesh with it, disemboweling. The creature collapsed, guts spilling in a flood of black and red, snarling and stretching up its arms in vain fury as its body failed.

She readied for the next one, slinging the axe forward as if it were a lance, bracing her hands on it to meet the zombie's force as it ran senselessly at her.

The baseball bat-toting survivor had it up at her shoulder, and she adopted a bouncing stance on her feet as she squared up to the infected racing at her. As it came close, she lashed out, and the bat caught the infected on the side of its face. Its head cracked violently to the side, body continuing on even as its neck seemed half-broken.
She kicked it hard in the gut with her boot heel, shoving it back so she gained the breathing room to turn to face another zombie that had closed the distance. Raising her bat over her head, she brought it down flat on the creature's head, crushing its skull open in a splatter of gore.

The infected with the injured neck recovered faster than she did, however, and it was abruptly on her. Its hands went clawing for her face, but merely squeaked and slid on the surface of her motorcycle helmet. She shoved up her arms to push it away, dropping quickly to take a swing at its knee.

The bat splintered its leg, sending it crumpling to one side, and it was shortly toppling to the ground. When it gave a snarl and dug its fingers against the asphalt, stubbornly trying to drag itself toward her, she slammed her bat down against the back of its head.

What was left of its neck must have snapped free of its spine, internally, because it went suddenly and abruptly still.

The two women slid closer to one another, facing the couple remaining infected together, and it was with a familiar ease that they took them down. As the last infected hit the road, unmoving, they seemed to collect themselves. The taller woman spun her bat in her hands as if to shake off the gore, head shaking in time.

They returned to talking, slowly stepping back toward the motorcycle. There was something conciliatory in the taller woman's posture, scratching up at her shoulder. When she leaned down to start hauling the motorcycle upright, shaking her head, her teammate stepped to help her.

Rochelle slid her arms into a careful cross, eyes still on them. "I'm... not sure," she uttered, warily. "Maybe we... should greet them. They seem like... regular people, for what that's worth anymore... And if they're not, I mean, we outnumber them and we have more guns, so surely we can just chase them off."

Allowing a shrug, Coach reached up to rub at his jawline. "We talked about this. We ain't doin' nothin' without a vote. They might help us. Might attack. Might leave an' come back, try an' rob us. But we gonna vote, and abide the vote, yeah?"

There was silence, then, as they all gazed out on the two strangers fighting to get the bike upright and the duffel bag placed back on its back end, hooking it in with what looked like bungee cables. Nick could barely resist a snarl, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Look, I realize you guys are desperate for new friends, but why take the fucking risk? We don't need them. Just keep your fucking mouths shut and they'll move on."

"What if we do?" Rochelle abruptly retorted, turning her head to glance at him. He didn't want to - but their gazes met before he could look away, and he had no choice but to hold the stare. "What if they know something that would help? Something about the military, or the evac?"

Ellis placed a hand hesitantly against the wall, thumbing at the blinds in a nervous gesture. "I... I dunno. They don't know we're here... maybe it's best tuh just... let 'em go. If they ain't friendly, we'll be puttin' Chris in danger, too..."

Thrusting up a hand in a vague gesture, Nick shook his head. He squarely avoided directly responding to Ellis, glancing at Coach, instead. "You want to let more fuckers in where they can hurt us?" The big man did not return his gaze, and Nick could tell he was biting back anger. "I lied to you guys with the Angels. I'm being real straight-forward now. This is a bad fucking idea."

Coach slipped him a small look, and past the restrained anger there was a small reluctance there,
like he didn't disagree. He inhaled, and closed his eyes. "Who's for goin' out there? I say no."

Nobody responded, at first, beyond Nick shaking his head firmly. Both Ellis and Rochelle glanced up at the window, hesitantly, and he chewed at his lower lip. She noticed the gesture and reached over to touch his arm, gently. "What are you thinkin', honey?" He shook his head, watching the women as one of them toed the kickstand of the bike down and leaned against it.

She was gesturing, one arm stretched out wide to indicate something off in the distance, and her partner had her arms crossed, a hip cocked.

Ellis wasn't sure what made him glance up. All he knew was his eyes darted toward movement, and his body stiffened - there was a Hunter crouched on the roof of a house opposite them. It was coiled down into a tiny shape, watching the two survivors with intense interest, walking itself back and forth as it seemed to seek out the best footing to leap.

He didn't know what broke in him. Maybe it was just everything that had happened lately, or maybe very specifically what had happened the night previous. All he knew was he couldn't watch someone die. Couldn't stand there and allow it to happen. He'd never forgive himself if they stood aside and watched that Hunter pounce and tear into one of the strangers.

The vote didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except for the fact that he was a good person.

He was determined to be.

He bolted, grabbing the sniper rifle from where it was leaned next to the front door. He heard his teammates give a startled outburst at the motion, heard Rochelle give a "What -" right before she realized the same thing he had and shouted, "Oh, God, there's a Hunter out there -"

Ellis fully processed as Nick hissed out a furious, "So what?! Great! Let it take them out!", and Coach hollered his name. He processed all of it, and didn't care.

Shoving open the front door, Ellis jumped out, flinging himself out onto the front porch. He raised the sniper rifle, getting the stock against his shoulder and his gaze slanted through the scope, aiming squarely at the Hunter. He swore it looked up at him, just as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet missed its head, entering in through its shoulder and carving a path through its body, with gruesome results. It collapsed, clawing against the roof, its own wild struggling tipping it over the edge and sending it falling down to the ground.

There was a moment of peace, where Ellis felt nothing but a faint sense of relief, of rightness - and then the two women went sprinting to take cover behind the condo's fence, disappearing, and several pairs of hands grabbed him to drag him bodily back into the house.
Ellis found himself pinned to the wall, Coach's broad hand flat on his chest, holding him there with a gentle force. Nick and Rochelle both shifted to join them against the wall, the gambler moving to align himself with the edge of the window and look outside.

"God fucking damnit!" he snarled, head shaking, gaze darting to scan for any sign of movement. "What happened to fucking majority rules, Coach?!!"

Slowly, Ellis lowered the sniper rifle to point at the ground, eyes gently closing. The anger didn't surprise him, even if it hurt, a little - not because Nick was angry, but because he didn't even direct his anger at Ellis. He felt terribly small. Did Nick not even care to talk to him anymore?

Rochelle grabbed for her pistol where it sat under the waistband of her jeans, tension touching her voice. "Shut up, Nick. It's over. Now we deal with it." She stepped back toward the front door, slipping into the threshold and hovering just at the edge of poking her head out. "Do you see them?"

"Of course not." he retorted, bitterly. "They got fucking alerted of where we are and scattered, and now we're fucking surrounded."

Ellis' eyes reopened, lowering to the ground as his fear was confirmed. Nick was managing to yell at him without acknowledging him at all. He was being ignored, suddenly, and that was almost worse than being the focus of his anger. "I'm sorry." he whispered, roughly. "I couldn't let 'em get hurt."

Releasing him, Coach exhaled deeply. He drew a hand across his forehead, catching sweat there before it could do more than bead up. He met Ellis' gaze, firmly, though not aggressively. "Son, next time we're makin' a choice, you make it with us. Hear? That was dangerous, what you did."

He nodded in understanding, just a soft twitch, and Coach stepped away.

"They ain't gonna leave if they think a sniper's got a bead on 'em." The health teacher gestured toward Nick, flatly, and the gambler slipped him a snarling twitch of his brow. "Last thing we need is them chargin' in here, locked and loaded, just 'cause we scared 'em. Let's just holler, see if they respond."

Nick did not protest, green eyes flickering back to the window.

Inhaling, Rochelle steeled herself, hand flexing on her pistol as her other hand flattened against her sternum. "Okay. Okay." she murmured, just privately, self-soothing. Her eyes flashed nervously back over her teammates before she turned her chin and called out testingly, "Hello?"

There was a few beats of silence, where she chewed on her lip, waiting. It was only cautiously that a voice responded, echoing from somewhere over the fence, though it was difficult to pinpoint it. It was muffled, like she still had her helmet on, and there was a strained delicacy to it: an amicable edge that only served to make Rochelle visibly nervous.

"Hi. That was a pretty good shot." Words had lost their meaning, when it came to determining intent.
Ellis took a half-step forward, moving as if to slip next to Rochelle and talk, but Coach grabbed his arm to stop him, head shaking firmly. Rochelle glanced at them, frowning faintly, even as she responded. "Sorry if we startled you. We just didn't want that Hunter to make a move. Are you guys okay?"

That same voice spoke out - instantly, this time. "We're fine. Who's we? How many of you are there?"

Uncertainly, Rochelle passed a glance toward Nick. The quirk to her brow spoke to a kind of fear, as if she wasn't sure whether to tell the truth or not. He caught the look and merely nodded, so she inhaled carefully and called back honestly. "Five. Is it just you two out there?"

There was a heavy silence after that. Though it only lasted a few seconds, it was noticeable enough.

"Yeah." the woman responded, a tension entering her voice. If she was trying to mask the fact that Rochelle's answer intimidated her, she did not do so very well. "Pretty nice house you set up in. Got power? The grid's down around here, seems like."

Leaning suddenly over, Nick hissed urgently underneath the woman's questioning. "She's buying time. Where's her partner?"

Rochelle gave a faint nod, leaning just outside the doorway, eyes scattering a glance over their surroundings. The fence that had provided them security was now blocking their view, trapping them. "Why don't you two come in here, and we can talk?" Her voice grew just a little confident, forceful. "We shouldn't be shouting out here where the infected can hear us."

When the stranger responded with a wary tone, Nick began shaking his head furiously. "No offense, but we haven't really had the best luck with people in all this. How about you come out and we talk in the yard?" The gambler's head only shook more, and Rochelle made an agitated gesture of dismissal at him.

"Neither have we, okay? So let's just take a -"

Christophe had been silent, so much so she had almost forgotten he was awake and aware. It startled her, then, when he suddenly spoke, voice thin and raised in alarm. "Amigos, someone is climbing the back fence."

Rochelle jolted, looking up toward the master bedroom. Nick was instantly in motion, snatching the sniper rifle out of Ellis' hands too quickly to allow him time to protest. The Georgian tried to grab after it, yelping out a faint noise, but Nick was already out of reach.

In a swift and primal sprint, Nick went up the stairs, rifle held tight against his side. Rochelle gave a frustrated utterance after him, muttering, "Don't shoot her...!" The gambler did not give any indication he'd heard her - and if he had, whether or not he intended to obey. Coach seemed to take notice of that, because it was with a grunt of annoyance that he went silently charging after Nick.

With that, Rochelle clenched her hand into a fist, biting the inside of her cheek as the woman outside spoke again.

"Take a what? A breath? Look, dude, I agree. Let's all stay breathing." There was a pause - just a short one, enough time for an inhale - and then she added, voice thickening with abrupt and visceral desperation. "So let's just... look... you sound reasonable, okay? So I'm going to come into the fence, because right now my stupid, stupid baby sister is trying to flank -"

That startled Rochelle, eyes going a little wide as she flashed a confused look at Ellis. The woman
being honest was the last thing she expected, and it set an entirely new sort of tension in her chest.

However, there was no time to react before Nick's voice shouted abruptly from the second floor, startling them both. "Don't fucking move! ... that's right, asshole. You just fucking come around to the front."

There was a moment of silence, and then the front fence gate was suddenly shoving open. The woman must have had the latch already undone with how fast she burst through it, brush-axe held close to the blade and flat against her side. Rochelle heard her intrusion and jolted out onto the porch. She pulled her pistol into her hands, aiming it up, one hand braced under her other hand.

Just as she'd gotten the sights focused in the woman's direction - she watched as the helmeted stranger dropped the weapon outright, throwing both hands up. "No! No, no no, don't hurt her, please!" Her voice got frantic, breaking in the center.

Rochelle felt Ellis behind her, his hand brushing against her back in a faintly frightened gesture. She couldn't take the time to reassure him, slipping forward to quick-step down the staircase, pistol trained on the woman. "Coach? Nick? You guys calm?" she shouted, because the last thing she needed was Nick losing it and shooting someone.

The gambler was the one to respond, however, shout just a furious hiss. "We're completely calm. Cool as a fucking cucumber, as long as this bitch keeps walking."

Slowly, the second woman came into sight around the side of the condo. She was moving with a delicate and careful posture, arms up, baseball bat dangling out of her left hand. As she approached, Nick and Coach came down the other staircase, the gambler's sniper rifle focused unerringly on her head. The stranger said nothing, carefully continuing on until she came within arms' reach of her partner.

The moment she did, the shorter woman jolted forward to grab her, snatching fingers in her jacket sleeve and dragging her close. "You stupid, stupid jerk - I thought you learned your lesson. God, why -" she hissed, furiously, barely audible under her motorcycle helmet. The taller woman's head started shaking, and she seemed to be trying to whisper to her partner, but Nick was already striding forward, rifle trained on them.

"Give me one reason not to fucking shoot you two right now, because that stunt was a pretty goddamn good reason to." he snarled, halting a good yard away from the two women. Coach slipped next to him, a heavy frown drawn on his features, glancing over toward Rochelle and Ellis.

Carefully, Rochelle raised one hand, even as she kept her pistol at the ready. Her tone was taut, but cool. "He's not wrong. If you're not looking for a fight, why go sneaking up on us?"

With a slow caution, the shorter woman stepped in front of her partner, raising both hands to carefully grasp her helmet. She dug thumbs in along the edge and shoved it up, freeing her head from it. The woman underneath was a brunette with a set of almond-shaped, muddy green-hazel eyes, wrought with an earnest panic.

"I'm sorry, okay? She's way too into this dog-eat-dog... crap. She didn't even have a gun, she was just... trying to... scare you. I'm sorry."

Frowning, Rochelle slowly turned to glance at Ellis. He blinked back, and an uncertainty passed between them. "That... ain't very nice, tryin' tuh sneak up on us." the youngest survivor managed, quietly, taking a gentle step to flank Rochelle. "We weren't doin' nothin' but -"
Coldly, Nick shifted his grip on his rifle and uttered, "Sorry doesn't mean shit." The way he cut Ellis off made the younger man flinch, gaze lowering. "Sorry doesn't tell me you fuckers won't try something again if we let you go. You -"

"Nick. We get it." Rochelle hissed sideways at him; it was her turn to interrupt, and Nick looked distantly furious even as he held his tongue. "Okay? Let's take a second and calm down. Can you let me handle this?" His continued silence, along with a petulant snort, was the only response.

The brunette stranger turned to look Rochelle directly in the face, chin tilting, slim mouth gone into a tense line. "I swear. If you guys just let us go, we'll go, and we won't come back. We've got some food in that duffel bag, you can have some, okay?" Her intensity struck sudden insecurity into Rochelle's chest.

They weren't supposed to be the group shoving guns in people's faces and threatening them. Was their fear justified, or had they just been so jaded by recent events as to lose sight of what mattered? Did she even know how to tell the difference anymore? Maybe these were just two frightened survivors who'd been through the same things as them.

"Look..." she managed, hesitantly, lowering her pistol. It wasn't like Nick didn't have them under his gun, anyway. "I... can sympathize with panicking, okay? We just went through a lot of shit with some survivors who nearly killed us, so... We're all paranoid right now."

The stranger nodded very slowly in careful understanding, and Rochelle continued with a vague glance over her teammates. Nobody seemed completely content - but neither did they interrupt her, so she took it as a cue to continue.

"We don't want to steal your stuff, we don't want to fight. We're trying to figure some shit out. Maybe we can have a conversation, without the weapons. As people, right? We're just people. The zombies are the bad guys, aren't they?" She couldn't help a hopeful lift of the corner of her mouth, meaningfully. "Maybe we can help each other."

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The taller woman leaned forward, whispering urgently to her through her helmet. It was too quiet to be heard, but whatever it was, it widened the brunette's eyes. "You're kidding me -" she whispered back, genuine fear touching her voice when her partner shook her head.

Both women took a step back, and Nick's eyes went narrowed at the sudden shift. He advanced to close the gap, hand shifting on his rifle.

The brunette started to nod, some relief fluttering over her features and a slight crinkle of humour touching her prominent nose - only to startle openly when her partner grabbed for her arm.

The taller woman leaned forward, whispering urgently to her through her helmet. It was too quiet to be heard, but whatever it was, it widened the brunette's eyes. "You're kidding me -" she whispered back, genuine fear touching her voice when her partner shook her head.

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The brunette was not a talented liar, it seemed, and her face betrayed her; something was wrong. There was an edge of almost-laughter to her voice, raw with the same panic she tried to play off. "Look, okay, I... I think we should just go. We were just on a supply run, and -"

Rochelle gave a hesitant tilt of her head at the change, and Ellis lifted a hand in a soothing gesture. "'Ey, whut's goin' on?" he uttered, some suspicion entering his voice as he didn't miss the interaction. "We ain't lookin' tuh do nothin' but be friendly."

Suddenly, Nick advanced, jerking the muzzle of his rifle. "Take your helmet off." he ordered, tone cutting. When the brunette put an arm in front of her taller teammate as if to shield her, he only grew fiercer. "We're all friends here, right? And you've been awfully quiet so far." That helmeted face slowly shook, back and forth, the woman hunching backwards.
The refusal flashed fury into his expression, though it filtered down into something cold and fiercely curt. "Take. It. Off."

Coach slid a hand up as if to wave Nick off. His other hand held his double-barrel shotgun, where he must have grabbed it from its place upstairs while chasing Nick. "Maybe we should just send 'em off. We didn't want no trouble to begin with, seems like they don't either." He exhaled, jaw flexing carefully. "Ain't no reason to be fightin'."

Rochelle was just about to step forward, when Nick lunged.

The shorter biker shouted, making to block him, but Nick got a grip on the bottom edge of the taller woman's helmet. When both she and her partner tried to retreat, arms lifting defensively, all it did was tear the helmet off. He came away with it gripped in his hand, a triumphant sort of snarl touching his lips.

That snarl disappeared in a flash as the woman carefully reached up a hand to tuck rough blonde hair away from her face. It was unkempt and straw-straight, dark roots revealed along her scalp where the dye had begun to fade. She glanced up, hazel-green eyes in a perfect match for her sister's, and now tremendously familiar when set in a harsh face, highlighted by the metal stud in her brow.

The slim chip taken out of her left canine when she parted her lips in a weak and nervous pant only confirmed it: standing in an awkwardly defensive posture was the woman who had tried to mug them in front of a gas station.

Shock and slow realization fueled the moment of silence before all hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO Courtney Hahn - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
Chapter 173

Nick was the first to react. He charged, and there was no indication in his posture that he meant to use the gun in his hand. He looked half ready to drop it, like he might just leap on the woman and strangle her. "You fucking piece of shit, I told you you'd regret showing your goddamn face to us again!"

Coach was on him just as quickly, grabbing an arm around his waist and holding him stationary like he were little stronger than a child. "Nicolas!" The gambler made a noise of utter fury, swinging an elbow back and colliding it directly with the side of his head - but the big man held firm.

Rochelle reflexively raised her pistol, only to drop it again. In the same moment she didn't trust the blonde, who'd proven herself a liar, part of her wanted to trust the older sister. There was something there, something sincere.

This was all secondary to the part of her that simply longed for friendly faces. Especially now...

As the two men struggled, the brunette stranger tensed the arm held defensively before her sister and began slowly walking them back. "I'm not gonna let you guys hurt her!" she shouted, voice heightening when the sign of her retreat only worsened Nick's anger.

"Hurt her?! Bitch tried to shoot me!" he snarled. There was some surprise that flashed over the shorter woman's face, glancing at her partner with a stricken disbelief, like she hadn't heard that part of the story. "And -" Whatever he was going to say cut abruptly off, in favour of a ferocious growl as he twisted his body.

Nick lifted a foot, like he might kick back at Coach's knee - and it was fear that made Coach recoil, releasing him to jolt back a step. Whether or not Nick would have actually gone through with it was left uncertain.

When Nick lunged forward, Rochelle threw herself in the way, hands going up as if soothing a rearing horse. Conflict raged on her expression as she clearly had her own thoughts on the situation, but she wasn't going to stand by and watch them escalate to violence. "Nick! For Christ's sake, let's take a breath! They're obviously scared!"

As he came up on her, trying to dart around her only to get matched step-for-step, Nick snapped off a furious, "Good! They should be, because I'm going to fucking tear them both a new -"

The blonde thief jerked her chin up in threat, hissing past her shorter companion. "Yeah? Try it, big boy! You and me, no guns, loaded or not!"

Before she'd even finished, her sister ferociously wheeled around on her, throwing gloved hands up in the air. "Rhiannon! Jesus... frick, can you try and not make this worse? Let's just go!" she practically pleaded, voice high-strung with concern and fear.

Hesitantly, sliding to step to the side, Ellis shook his head. He lifted flat hands to gesture, eyes slipping worriedly toward Nick. "Maybe that's best..." he mumbled, reluctantly. Did he even have the ability to calm the older man anymore? He remembered pulling Nick away from the brink of shooting the woman once before, soothing him away from blind rage.

Would Nick even listen to him now?
The two women managed a step further back, only to halt when a gurgled belching noise echoed from the street. The vast and bubbled shape of a Boomer waddled into view through the open fence gate, looking at them from a stiff and bloated face. It looked almost triumphant as its body wretched up and its mouth opened.

If there was anything that could break up the fight, it was that.

Everyone - Nick included - scattered to either direction at the sound of its guttering gag. The thick stream of green-yellow fluid sprayed from it with projectile aim, and though most of it hit the ground, not one of them was spared some of the splatter.

Some more than others: Nick's fighting had placed him and Coach directly in its path, and they did not escape it unscathed. Though it mostly struck Nick on the shoulder and side, Coach couldn't turn fast enough to avoid taking a blast of it to the face.

He roared, hands immediately going up to his face, and blindly stumbled down to take a knee. Past a groan of horror, visibly board-stiff in disgust at the mess soaking into his shirt, Nick staggered toward Coach to get a hand on his back. "Fuck - oh, fuck that smells - you okay?"

Coach's head shook, muttering a stiff, "Can't see... shit's in my eyes." He grabbed his double-barrel shotgun, holding it up blindly. The approaching sounds of shrieks and howls on the horizon was not a surprise. He growled, "Someone take it, I can't shoot like this. Gonna have a horde on us in a second."

When Rochelle recovered her footing, one hand having grabbed Ellis' to drag him along with, she looked up to see the two strangers bolting outside. The Boomer charged them as they came close, but the taller biker swung her baseball bat and hit it flat across the belly, sending it staggering back.

A generous tear split its skin from the blow, and it gave a bleat of pain, arms lashing out as it retreated up the sidewalk and out of sight. With it out of the way, the two bikers sprinted to the right, disappearing toward their motorcycle.

Flexing her hand on her pistol, she couldn't help a hissed, "Shit." She wasn't about to chase them down, but a surge of frustration went through her, anyway. "Of course they aren't going to help." Turning her head, she glanced at Ellis, quickly pointing at Coach. "Honey, take his gun."

Nodding, carefully, Ellis winced as he brushed a chunk of something foul and sticky off his arm. It was at a quick jog that he ran to take the weapon Coach had held out. He avoided Nick's gaze with a vengeance, tucking the double-barrel shotgun under his arm before grabbing a hand under the blinded man's elbow. "Maybe we should get Coach inside, defend on the stairs...?"

Nick glanced up, glaring at the fence gate and the empty space where the strangers had stood, a cold fury baring his teeth. "You should have just let me fucking shoot them from the start." he muttered, tone acidic.

Swinging to glare at him, Rochelle choked out something like a laugh. "They didn't sic the goddamn Boomer on us, Nick, you shouting like an asshole did." she retorted, anger making her talk too fast and too thoughtlessly. "And maybe if you hadn't terrified them, they'd have been willing to help us deal with this!"

His eyes snapped to hers with abrupt rage, but the screams of the horde were pitching higher.

"This ain't no time tuh argue!" Ellis blustered, irritation turning his voice desperate, pulling hard to
drag Coach to his feet. He leaned the ex-football player against his side, not taking the time to mind as the smell hit him full-force. "Y'all shut up'n'focus, or we're gonna get swarmed!"

There was just a beat of silence, and then Rochelle huffed, turning to bolt toward the staircase. Nick growled under his breath but moved to follow, slipping a step forward and starting to grab Coach's other arm - but before he could, Ellis tugged the big man into a step, dodging them both out of the way.

Slipping Nick a glance that just barely slanted out from underneath his capbill, Ellis muttered, "Stop bein' a dick, man." His voice was raw, and it came out rougher than he meant it to.

Or maybe just as rough as he wanted. He wasn't sure anymore.

Ellis didn't wait to gauge his reaction, but he was convinced he saw a flicker of surprise dart over Nick's expression, just before he turned around. Steeling himself, Ellis braced Coach's weight and guided him toward the stairs. "You're okay, Coach." he muttered, receiving a vague grunt in return. If he wasn't crazy, there was some humour in Coach's voice, and it embarrassed him a little.

They'd just reached the bottom stair, Coach tripping a little as his foot hit the edge, when voices halted him. Ellis startled into a turn, lips falling into a part as his eyes fell on the two women standing in front of the gate opening. The shorter woman was wielding some kind of steel tube, wrapped with wiring and topped by a length of thread, and they were arguing.

"What's the fuckin' point?!" the thief hissed, jabbing at her with the end of her baseball bat. "They're -" "They're -" Head shaking, her older sister snatched a hand into the pocket of her jacket and shoved the object into her hands. "Can you just freaking turn it on, Rhee?! Please?!" she yelled back, furious, digging for something as her partner started fiddling with the tube.

The blonde's hands worked quick, taking hold of some of the wires dangling from the steel cylinder. "Fuckin' goddamn shit, fine. Waste of time." she growled out, frustrated. She twisted the wires, linking the copper ends bared from the rubber sheathing, and with a sudden blink, something lit up on the object. Ellis was too entranced - and confused - to move, and Coach gave a bewildered utterance.

"Boy, what's goin' on? Let's go!"

Ellis dragged Coach's hand to touch the staircase railing, dodging away from him to jolt a few steps toward the gate entrance. "You go!" The horde was close enough that the noise had turned piercing, shrieks and howls approaching from up and down the road. He skidded to a halt a good yard away from the bikers, hollering, "Whut are y'all doin'?" His tone was fueled by concern. "They're almost here!"

The taller woman blinked toward him, pausing for just an instant. Some surprise darted over her expression before a guarded squint overwhelmed it. "Stay back!" she responded, tilting the object toward her sister. The harsh sentiment startled Ellis, a frown touching his lips.

"I'm just tryin' tuh -"

When the brunette suddenly tore her hand out of her pocket, it was with something gripped in her fingers. It took Ellis a moment to realize what it was: a steel lighter. She snapped it open and flicked it alight with her thumb, and the thief grasped her hand to guide the flame to set the thread alight.
Then it clicked - it was a bomb.

His realization must have shown on his face, because the slightest grin cut across the thief's lips, right before she pressed a button attached to some of the wiring. After just a beat of time, a shrill noise cut through the horde's screaming, fierce and ear-splitting.

It was the howl of a fire alarm, and there was a moment where the horde seemed to silence... and then roar anew, screams heightened like they'd been enraged. Though Ellis could hear Rochelle's voice calling his name, all he could do was watch as the woman turned and threw the bomb down the street.

It spiralled through the air, still-screaming, and as infected came into view across the room, they turned and sprinted after it. More came flooding in from up the street, and they ignored the survivors entirely, chasing after the thrown bomb.

Curiosity drove Ellis to bolt forward, stumbling out through the gate, halting just next to the bikers. He stared down the road, blinking at the sight of the horde as it gathered around the pipe bomb. They were dogpiled on it, clambering atop each other in the need to get closer to the screaming alarm, even beating at each other with claws and fists -

It stopped beeping just an instant before it exploded.

The force of it was not tremendous, but it must have been full of shrapnel. With the explosion came a spray of blood and gore. The infected that didn't instantly go limp went staggering and stumbling back, screaming in denial as the bomb had blown away limbs and pierced vital organs. They were quick to scatter and quicker to die, collapsing as their bodies failed from broken muscle and bloodloss.

Ellis could not stop himself from hooting, leaping up onto his toes, a familiar thrill coursing through him. His mouth went on babbling before his brain could catch up. "Oh muh gawd, that was the coolest thing I've seen since - how did you -"

Then he remembered himself, and he quickly took a half-step back, lowering his chin as he turned hesitantly back toward the women. He could see a struggle taking place between them, the thief struggling between laughter and a surly silence while her sister fluctuated between nervous fear and a certain pride.

Gently, the shorter woman offered both her hands out in a flat gesture, almond eyes softening to something apologetic. "... Now can we talk? Without the shouting?"

Ellis hesitated, shuffling on his feet where he stood. He glanced over his shoulder, looking back to find his teammates at varying heights on the staircase, all frozen. Nick and Rochelle were both staring at him, the gambler's gaze guarded and disapproving while the producer looked mostly dumbstruck.

Blinking warily, Ellis turned back around. With a decisive and sudden smile, he reached out to clasp his hand on her inner forearm. The dark-haired biker seemed startled, at first, but quickly adapted and clapsed his forearm back, the gesture firm and amicable. Her sister gave a dubious glance up and down the Georgian, but Ellis could not find it in him to be intimidated.

Few people matched Jerry, anyway - and her posture soon softened to something dismissive. He didn't have to search hard to see the buzz of shame lingering at the edges of her expression, an awkward and embarrassed sort of distance, and something about the so-very-human attitude made him yearn to forgive her. Hadn't they all made mistakes?
"Name's Ellis." he uttered, feeling an immeasurable sort of relief course through him when the shorter woman smiled back, eyes crinkling in an expression that mirrored his own.

"Lena."
With Coach incapacitated, the team's priority became getting him up into the condo and into the kitchen. As unpleasant as the stench was, worse was the way it had splattered into his eyes and blinded him. Rochelle and Ellis stood on either side of him, papertowels wielded to try and clean off the worst of it.

It was difficult not to gag, the physical reaction set off with a visceral urgency. Every time they did, it was with a vague "sorry", and Coach looked about as thrilled as they did.

The two women were out stowing their motorcycle away safely in the yard, and taking awhile doing so. Whether they were talking amongst themselves was up in the air, and it hardly mattered; the survivors were certainly doing as much. They'd been in such a rush to get Coach safely inside, there hadn't been much time to talk.

Nervously, Ellis glanced between them - and then glanced up. Nick was across the kitchen, facing away, using a paper towel to try and wipe away the worst of the mess from his dress shirt. His posture was close to furious, or maybe sulking, hunched and disdainful. He hadn't said anything so far, though his silence was fast becoming far worse than active anger.

Ellis had to try. He felt his voice come out plaintively when he murmured, "I know we didn't get off on a great foot with 'em. But they could'uh left, and they didn't. Means somethin'."

Nick did not respond beyond a muted grunt.

"Look, I'm with Ellis." Rochelle offered up, cleaning Coach's eyes off with cautious attention. He flinched, blatantly, like it hurt. "I was super on the fence, okay? But they just saved us an entire horde. And we aren't doing great on ammo right now. I wasn't sure if we were even going to be able to handle that."

Shrugging a shoulder, weakly, Coach tried to speak without opening his mouth, as if he could avoid inhaling the stench lingering around him. "I ain't 'bout to argue. You wanna talk a gesture of good-will... that was a'ight."

She laughed, a little, shaking her head. "I think we're all just on edge after everything that's happened. Let's not lose sight of things, okay? It's not crazy to be suspicious, but... I don't want us to totally give up on people. I don't want the apocalypse to win, y'know?" When Ellis nodded in soft agreement, she slanted a look toward Nick. "You on board, suit? Or do we need to be on alert for you going on another rampage?"

It was with a remarkably vapid tone that Nick muttered, "Whatever. Not the first or last shitty decision I let you guys make."

Slowly, Rochelle glanced back at Coach. He blinked at her blearily, eyes bloodshot and watering. A tacit wariness passed in the look, and she cleared her throat. "No offense, Coach, but you're not gonna get any better without us dunking you in the ocean. I should go update Chris on what's going on - he's probably pretty confused, and I don't want him to freak if they walk in."

Ellis couldn't help an inward tension when Coach calmly grunted, standing up with a vague shudder. "A'ight. I think I'm gonna air out on the porch." The two moved away simultaneously, and there was nothing at all subtle in the way they left Ellis alone in the kitchen. He wished they hadn't; wished Rochelle didn't look at him with this bemused sort of intensity.
Like she wasn't sure what he'd do - or, maybe, wasn't sure what she wanted him to do.

Coach opened up the glass doors to the balcony and stepped out, and Rochelle quick-stepped it down the staircase to the first floor. Their absence left Ellis standing in an awkward silence, slowly turning the papertowel inside out in his hands and using it to scrub away the splatters of foul-smelling liquid that had stained his arm.

Nick made no move to acknowledge him, giving a faint growl and abruptly starting to undo the buttons of his dress shirt. He snapped them open, shrugging out of it, and took it in his hands to scrub more thoroughly at the staining. He'd grabbed a half-drunk bottle of water and now dribbled some out to wet the fabric and ease his efforts.

Ellis made strict and careful effort to not look at him and his bare upper body. His frustration and his hurt and his sadness did not so easily override the part of him that also wanted Nick's body on his and hands down his -

He couldn't think like that.

Instead, he inhaled, steeling himself. Was there any reason not to have the argument? Any reason to keep the peace? If Nick was going to be upset no matter what, Ellis could at least speak his mind. He didn't have a plan. The words just sort of left him, with more anger than he expected from himself.

"Are you just gonna ignore me, now?" he muttered, squinting down toward his feet. "We can't even talk no more? You can't even yell at me?"

Half of him didn't expect Nick to respond, only to be proven vastly incorrect. The older man set his shirt against the counter, flattening it, and a short and derisive snort escaped him. "Oh, forgive me. I didn't realize you thrived off me getting angry at you. Believe me, I can do that again. You make it real easy, pulling shit like that."

Ellis clenched his fingers into fists before he could stop himself, cocking his jaw to release a slightly disbelieving puff of air. "Like whut? Not lettin' someone die? Not -" He shook his head, harshly, glancing suddenly away, determined not to let Nick rile him into losing track of the conversation. "That ain't whut I'm talkin' about. You ain't so much as looked at me all day."

"You fucking let the whole team know." Nick's voice went chill and stark, head shaking in quick snaps of his neck. "The one fucking thing I wanted kept secret. Am I supposed to be sorry? Because I'm in the fucking doghouse on this one? I don't want to look at you, Overalls. Least of all talk to you. Is that a fucking shock to you?"

As fast as lightning, that anger melted, and all Ellis wanted to do was cry. He'd grown so good at looking past Nick's outer shell, translating what he said into what he meant - why did he suddenly hear nothing but anger? Vitriol? Nick had never spoken to him like that before, not in a way that said he meant it.

Pain blinded him, numbed him. He bit back a thick tension in his voice, feeling his jaw tremble as he spoke. "Nick - don't -" was all he got out, soft and half-broken.

"Don't what?" Nick turned, suddenly, eyes gone distant and cruelly veiled. He was mocking him, and Ellis wanted to run rather than listen to it, flee, because there was some fire burning at the core of Nick's voice that he couldn't identify and it frightened him. "I thought you wanted me to yell at you. Be angry at you. Isn't this what you wanted?"
Ellis shook his head, lifting a hand as if to cover his eyes, feeling his breath go unsteady even as he tried to tense his chest and force it back into a rhythm. "I just - I can't handle you actin' like this. Please, Nick, just -" He was begging and he hated it. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry they found out, I'm sorry - but you can't keep doin' this. I just can't do this -"

Nick released a laugh, a distant and angry sound. "The alternative being...? Is this a fucking 'why can't we still be friends' conversation? Jesus Christ." Before Ellis could protest, Nick was suddenly moving, stalking toward him - and the Georgian's spine went flimsy as he slumped back at Nick's approach, eyes averting. His heartrate went up and he didn't want it to; couldn't tell if it was fear or something else.

"Let me be really fucking clear, Ellis." Nick enunciated with such vicious clarity, it made Ellis' chest ache. "We weren't dating. We were fucking, and now we stopped. I don't want to spend any more time around you than I have to. I definitely don't want to act like nothing's changed, because it's changed. And you don't get to make the choices here, because you're the fucking dumbshit who thinks he's got feelings."

Ellis couldn't get himself to meet Nick's gaze, forcing his eyes up just far enough to stare blankly at the older man's chest, eyebrows gone wrought with the pain surging up his spine. "Why?" was all he could utter, just a whisper, as if afraid of hearing his own pathetic tone echoed back to him.

Nick's fist hit the counter in an infuriated strike, slumping his body, tilting just far enough forward that Ellis couldn't help but flinch. "Because." he hissed, snarled, faster than he seemed able to control. "I'm not a good enough goddamn guy to say no when you try to fucking fix this."

He'd said too much.

Ellis could tell it, suddenly, lifting his chin and blinking warily into Nick's face. He could see the moment of panic, the darkening of Nick's eyes, and could only startle faintly as Nick snatched his shirt from the counter and stalked forward. "Do us both a favour and fuck off. The house is full of new friends for you to make miserable." His shoulder hit Ellis', body-checking him into a stumble, and Ellis gazed after him as he stormed out of the kitchen.

Nick took a hard right, ducking into the upstairs bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. Frowning, lifting a hand to shove the back of his hand against his eyes in a faint self-beratement at the tingle of tears, Ellis exhaled harshly. Somehow he'd ended up more confused than he started, and without any of that anger left to buoy him through it. It left him empty and hollow and hurting.

"Whut's that supposed to mean?" he mumbled, a miserable utterance just for himself. Did Nick think he'd take advantage of him? That Ellis would let him? That if they interacted any more than necessary, Ellis would end up back in his arms and Nick wouldn't think twice about it?

Wasn't it just a little bit true?

He might've just stood there, struggling with the conflicted emotions roiling in his gut, had a gentle tap-tap not caught his attention. He looked up, blinking quickly to focus himself, finding Coach leaning into the glass doors from the other side. When their eyes met, Coach crooked a finger to urge him over.

It was reluctantly that Ellis obeyed, with a glance over his shoulder for the bathroom door. He'd prefer to leave before Nick came back out, anyway, he supposed.

Coach opened the glass door for him, and Ellis slipped out, quickly advancing to lean himself
against the railing. He sighed, glancing up at the sky, closing his eyes as a breeze cut across his cheek, bloated with salt. The ex-football player slid the door closed again, stepping to rest on the railing a good few feet away from Ellis.

They didn't speak for a few moments. The silence did more to fray Ellis' nerves than soothe them, even as he tried to inhale and exhale, like it might calm him down. When that didn't work, he settled for holding his breath until he felt his chest might burst. Maybe he could just pass out right there, spare himself the effort of thought.

It was eventually that Coach chuckled, and the sound startled Ellis into blustering out the held air.

"Can I be honest, son?" Ellis shrugged gently, making a soft hum of affirmation. "This whole time, I thought you were gay, an' had a big crush on Nick he didn't know about." Shock widened Ellis' eyes, unable to stop a gape from dropping his jaw as he turned to look at the big man.

Coach merely slipped him a soft and weary grin. "Seen enough of that, schoolin' boys. You catch the signs. I kept tryin' to coax you away, an' watchin' Ro' keep pushin' you on him just... drove me nuts. Figured she didn't see it, an' I never said anythin'. Didn't want to, in case I was wrong." Coach gave an almost bashful shrug, shaking his head, quickly turning to a grimace as he wiped a hand down his cheek that came away sticky. "Or right."

Looking away slowly, Ellis absorbed that, blinking at a gradual and surprised pace. "Oh." was all he managed. He didn't know how to feel about that - and not the smallest reason for his uncertainty was that word.

Gay? Was he? His instinct was to protest, because he'd had girlfriends before. But had any of them really made him feel what Nick made - had made - him feel? The buzzing warmth in his chest and head and plenty of other places, some he shied away from thinking about too hard, was like nothing he'd felt before.

He found he didn't mind the idea; it didn't really change anything, after all. It mostly felt like something he should have realized a long time ago, like slipping into a brand new, carefully sized shoe after years and years of hand-me-downs.

"I ain't tryin' to stick my nose in yo' business." Coach murmured, misinterpreting his silence. Ellis glanced over at him, tilting his chin down gently. "Just can't help but wonder what you see in the guy, if he can treat you the way he does, convince me you're just pinin' after him, all this time."

Unable to resist a sigh, Ellis allowed his eyes to close. The sentiment didn't sit well. It hurt, stung, and mostly because he didn't know what good it would do him to argue anymore. He couldn't gather together the energy to protest further than a soft, "He ain't who you think."

Coach shrugged up his shoulders, gazing out over Tybee from their vantage point on the second floor balcony. He didn't argue, exactly, simply responding with a sincere tone. "Just worried 'bout you, son."

Ellis merely hushed back a quiet, "Me, too."
Chapter 175

By the time Nick had redressed and left the bathroom, Ellis was gone, standing out on the porch with Coach. That suited him just fine, and he wasted no time in crossing the loft to duck downstairs.

*Christ. I'm gonna fucking lose it if he doesn't drop this soon.* was all he could think, taking the stairs two at a time. He couldn't handle the argument Ellis wanted to have. It was entirely too easy to sink into that old, familiar cruelty. Too easy to make Ellis cry, as fragile as he was. Too easy to hurt him.

And too hard to watch himself do it.

*It's better this way.* had turned into a mantra. He repeated it to stave off any moment of weakness he had, that distant longing to just forget everything and go back to the unspoken simplicity of whatever they had before - mutual comfort, sex, warm familiarity. He missed it.

He missed the way those eyes looked at him. The presence of another body, even in the quiet and the calm. Knowing he could turn a dry gaze to catch Ellis' and get that nose to crinkle up.

He missed Ellis.

*You're fucking pathetic. You can't have him, just because you're lonely and want some stupid kid to validate you. You aren't what he wants, and you've never changed before. Why would you change now? Pretending anything between you would work would be lying to him and yourself. Just let it go.*

He was better off alone, anyway. Every time he tried anything different, it collapsed under his feet. He'd always been alone. It was only fitting; a skin he'd become used to.

Nick intended to sequester himself back in the bedroom. However, he had not even reached the bottom of the stairs when the front door slid open. Through the doorway came the two women, moving warily and halting the instant they spotted him.

The brunette gave a forceful clear of her throat, carefully placing the head of her brush-axe against the floor. She'd cleaned it off and re-sheathed it, the curved blade covered by a thin leather wrap. "Um. Hi." Her sister hovered close at her elbow, and there was a mistrustful scowl written into her features as she gazed silently up at Nick. "We didn't get properly introduced. I -"

He cut her off, lifting a hand, closing his eyes with a put-upon sort of sigh. "Let me save you some time."

Stepping off the stairs, Nick flashed an arm out flat in a vague gesture, voice condescendingly slow. "I don't give a fuck. I don't give a fuck about you, or what you think. The best you can hope for is me deciding to ignore that you exist. So ride that high, girls, because *fuck* would today have gone differently if I had -"

"Ookay!" sang Rochelle's voice, sudden and abrupt, practically bursting from the master bedroom. She skidded out into the hallway, raising both hands and firmly placing herself in front of Nick. "Hi! Hey! My name's Rochelle."

With a slight snarl at the interruption, Nick shifted away. He wasn't about to press the issue, so he
merely stepped to lean against the outer edge of the staircase and throw his arm over the railing. He glanced down to examine the carpet, posture gone hostile in its tense lean, even as he held his silence.

Breaking into a slightly nervous smile, Lena offered forward her hand. Rochelle had to fumble a little, stopping herself from returning the gesture with her injured right hand and instead sticking out her left. The woman switched quickly, and they shook gently. "Lena. And this is Rhiannon. She's on her best behaviour, I promise."

The blonde gave a slight chuffing snort, breath vibrating through her nose, even as she averted her eyes. Her hand lifted in a small wave. "... Hey." was all Rhiannon said - only to get a firm glance from her older sister and, with a pained blink, added, "And sorry. For all the shit I did. It was, um... it was fucked up."

A tense laugh forced itself out of Rochelle, head shaking quickly. "Honestly, the shit we've been through lately, I'd half-forgotten about what you did. Besides, Ellis is the one you hit and he's willing to give you another chance so let's just... forget about it. Okay?"

Rhiannon's eyes downturned, looking vaguely uncomfortable, even as she nodded. There was something awkward in her posture, like she didn't know quite how to respond, and Rochelle couldn't resist a slight smile. It was almost endearing to watch her flounder.

That, and it was nice to talk to people who seemed half human.

Rochelle thumbed up the stairs at the second floor. "We can sit upstairs. I'd love to talk, team to team, share ideas..."

The master bedroom door nudging open all the way startled her, just as she'd begun to turn and lead the way upstairs. Her eyes blinked a little wide as Christophe stepped carefully around the door, a vague pain in his eyes.

"Oh, Chris, you didn't have to -" the producer began, raising her hands, only to be interrupted.

Rhiannon burst out, voice bluntly shocked, "Holy shitfuck, dude!" There was no holding back the awe in the way she stared straight at Chris' bandaged stump, morbid fascination mixed with a kind of horror that struck her face blank. "What the fuck happened?!"

Although she tried to shove an elbow at her sister's side and stop her, Lena looked similarly shocked. Her attempt to stifle it only made it more apparent when she managed out a quick and stuttered, "Rhee, don't be rude..."

Chris balked, and had he been a little less weary he might have been able to hide the flash of insecurity that crossed his eyes. It was with a quick and slim smile that he uttered a laugh. "All these beautiful women, and me, en este estado..." he murmured, gently placing his hand on his ruined shoulder, just before the bandages. "I was wounded. They saved me."

"Criminy." the brunette managed, almond-shaped eyes gone soft with sympathy. "That's... kind of amazing. I've seen some wounds before but... I'm shocked you're even mobile. How long ago...?"

Rochelle slipped over to duck herself under Chris' arm. He relented, slipping his arm over her shoulder to balance himself, weight shifting gently into her side. "Too recently." she interjected pointedly, bracing a hand on his waist to tug him into motion. She spoke wryly as they moved toward the stairs in a faint hobble. "Come on, ladykiller."

A faint grin touched his lips, more sincere this time. He dropped his voice to murmur, just between
them. "No te preocupes. I only have eyes for you, bonita."

She couldn't resist a purse of her lips, rolling her eyes and choosing very specifically not to respond.

As they carefully began ascending the stairs, the two women walking a safe distance behind, Nick circled around to go to the front door and lock it, unable to resist a glare up toward the stairs as he did so.

How they'd gone from at each others' throats to acting like buddies was beyond him. He didn't trust the two bikers as far as he could throw them, and if the team was intent on letting down their guard, he'd just have to double up.

*Or quadruple.*

It was with that in mind that he followed, stalking up after them, intent on observing. As much as he'd have liked to secret himself away and get a break from being around people, he didn't have any interest in missing whatever discussions took place. The last thing he needed was to turn around and find they'd invited the women to join the team, collected two new strays to go along with their cripple.

He needed to monitor things, so he followed. Rochelle led the way with Chris, and as they passed up into the loft, she helped him to one of the loveseats. Lena and Rhiannon moved to stand in a slight huddle behind the couch, seeming insecure, and Nick slipped past them to take up a lean on the kitchen island.

After she got Chris settled into a sit on the sofa, slumped to ensure his ruined shoulder didn't nudge into the cushions, Rochelle straightened. "Okay. You two can sit, and we've got some drinks if -"

The way Rhiannon perked indicated an eager interest, but Lena stepped closer to her with a careful quickness, uttering, "We're okay. Not gonna take your supplies." She flashed Rochelle a careful smile, even as the producer prepared to insist.

Nick interjected, sharply, "You already did." All three women darted looks at him, some more tense than others. "The food at that general store up the road? That was ours."

The brunette biker passed an uncertain glance at her younger sister, only to witness a rising kind of anger flinching to life on Rhiannon's face. Nervously, Lena raised the hand that wasn't gripping her brush-hook. "Um... Crap, okay. We can give it back, if, uh..."

Rochelle instantly laughed, more a tense gesture to cut the tension than actual humor. "No, no. No way. It's not a big deal. Don't pay any attention to him, okay? He's in a bad mood, and it's got nothing to do with you." Nick turned an acid stare toward her, lip curling up from his teeth, as if daring her to discuss the situation with them.

She didn't.

"Just play dead and he'll lose interest." she joked, instead.

Lena did not look sure if she should laugh, but Rhiannon flared into a practically enthused set of snickers, raising a gloved hand to tuck a knuckle against her mouth. Smiling quickly, Rochelle backed up to walk toward the glass doors, rapping on it to catch Ellis and Coach's attention.

They blinked back at her in unison, and Ellis doggedly turned, sliding the door open. He stepped into the loft, glancing up at the bikers with a hesitant smile. It was a smile that dissipated
immediately upon seeing Nick standing across the room.

Ellis lowered his chin, crossing to slip behind the loveseat and rest his forearms against the top, just beside Chris. It put him as far from Nick as he could get, barring literally walking to the wall. "Glad you guys stayed." he mumbled, blinking across the loft at Lena.

Coach did not move from the balcony, but he did turn around to face inside the condo. "Think I'll stay out here. Ain't tryin' to stink up the place." he explained, wryly.

With a careful nod, Rochelle slipped to center herself in the room, clasping her hands gently in front of herself. She inhaled - and then smiled, thinly. "Okay. You guys met me, and Ellis. This is Coach, and Nick is the grump over there." she introduced them with gestures. Before she could get to Chris, he leaned in gently.

"Christophe. Chris is bueno." he said, lightly, raising his hand to point at Lena. "I like your weapon, ¿sí?" She gave a blink, only belatedly glancing down at her brush-axe where it was leaned tip-down into the carpet with the haft rested along her side.

"Oh. Thanks." she managed, grinning a little. "It's heavy as crap, but it wrecks those freaks."

Nudging her carefully with an elbow, like some little encouragement, Rhiannon offered up, "Broke into a hardware store across the way, Lee found that. Guess trees and zombies aren't that different." She flashed a grin, displaying her cracked canine with the slanted expression. "She kicks ass with it."

Nick tightened his arms against his sides, exhaling with a vague eye-roll. He interjected harshly, "Great. Awesome. Bonding over. Pretty sure we had some fucking questions to ask them? Or are we just here to have a slumber party?"

Rochelle carefully shook her head, expression going a little tired. "Nick, please feel free to fuck off. Some of us are enjoying two seconds to chat with people that aren't complete assholes. And I'm literally talking to a girl who tried to mug me."

When the gambler started to respond, tensing, he was interrupted by Coach's quiet laughter - and worse, the way Ellis glanced up at him, vague and mulling disapproval lingering in those guarded blue eyes. Rather than retort, Nick merely snarled out a huff, turning and digging through their food supplies to find a granola bar. His anger bled into the way he tore into it and started eating.

He felt cornered.

More than that, he felt unwelcome.

He wasn't sure why he suddenly minded it.
Chapter 176

Lena shrugged her shoulders, carefully touching her fingertips together. She and her sister had undone most of their protective gear, revealing more clearly the clothes they wore underneath.

The brunette was in a thin grey hoodie, pale blue capris hemmed just a few inches below her knees. She had black running shoes, but had slipped half out of them, curling and flexing her socked toes in idle cracks. Rhiannon wore nothing more than a thin white cami, tight along her waistline, and black pants with zipper pockets in slashes at the sides of her thighs.

Her black boots took up a tapping on the carpet, eyes watching Lena's hands move as she spoke. "The military? ... Honestly, we've been avoiding everyone. We haven't seen much sign of anything or anybody, least of all the military. Nothing except whoever blew the bridge into Tybee. And you guys, I guess."

Ellis frowned a little. He'd taken up a pace behind Christophe, and every time he turned to start another pass, Chris fidgeted. He was making the Spaniard nervous, he could tell, but he couldn't convince his body to stop. "You guys ain't lookin' fer an evac?" he questioned, lightly.

With a slight snort, Rhiannon lifted her gaze, cocking her studded brow. "Bud, if you're looking for evac, you're shit outta luck over here. Last I heard, they'd pulled back to New Orleans. I think the zombies just overwhelmed everybody."

Rochelle couldn't resist a slight frown, glancing toward her knees. "New Orleans..." she echoed, faintly, some uncertainty entering her tone. "We hadn't heard that. You guys haven't... seen a ship around, have you? A military boat, maybe?"

The two women looked at each other, then shook their heads in unison.

Exhaling, Rochelle shifted her weight. She'd taken up residence on the empty loveseat, legs crossed tightly. "Okay. We... found some information that made us think there's a ship hanging around here. Not sure if it's true, but..." Flicking her gaze between the two bikers, she risked, "If you don't think anyone's still here, why are you guys hanging around? Why aren't you heading for New Orleans?"

Rhiannon thrust her jaw forward. She thumbed at her cheek, scratching there with a light sniff. "We're trying to grab a boat, get enough supplies to head down the coast. We gotta hit Texas." When Rochelle's head cocked in obvious question, the blonde flapped a hand. "Our dad lives there. He's a fucking loser, but we don't have anyone else."

It was so off-handed, so casual, Rochelle wasn't completely sure of how to react. There was some kind of well-worn hurt there, so old and familiar it came off more like a scar than a wound. There was a grin faint on her lips and mirrored in Lena's eyes, like the topic had become almost satire between them.

Coach approached a little closer, tiredly stepping and leaning in the threshold of the glass doors to the balcony. "Y'all think he's even still there? Way things have gone, ain't sure anybody's stayed home."

"I wouldn't even think he's alive, but..." Lena raised a hand, placing fingers over her mouth carefully. "He's a huge nut. Literally has a bunker built in his backyard. He was pretty sure aliens were gonna get him, but I bet now he'll just say aliens dropped the zombie virus as a bioweapon or
something."

Ellis couldn't resist laughing, brows crinkling up at the statement. "Oh, man. That's like muh buddy Keith. He's real convinced that this one time, he got - like - abducted, but I'm pretty sure he just got drunk'n'passed out in a field. I mean, he came home with all these bruises he said were on account'uh them testin', but they sure looked like hoof-marks tuh me."

Snorting, Rhiannon leaned in slightly, placing her elbow on her inner thigh to slump her weight there. "We grew up thinking it was normal to have our dad guarding our bedroom with an AR because the aliens might take us. Dude, you should have seen the fucking look on the CPS lady when we told her. She could've combusted."

With a grin, Ellis halted in his pace, pushing his hands into his pockets. "Dang. That's worse than Keith. Was he intuh them tinfoil hats'n'everythin'?" The blonde seemed primed to nod, but Christophe lifted his hand to gently interrupt, fingers splayed questioningly.

"¿Qué es 'CPS'? This is some kind of police?"

Lena laughed a little, reaching down to rub thoughtfully at a scrape on her shin. "Child Protective Services. They handle neglect and abuse, stuff like that." She shifted enough to bump her sister with a shoulder. "Our situation was more the former, but y'know. That was a long time ago."

A wary nod touched Chris' head.

"You're not from around here, h'uh?" Rhiannon questioned, abruptly, glancing at him as he blinked in uncertainty. She seemed to realize the abrasiveness of the question after a beat, quickly raising a hand to scratch at her scalp, fingertips nervously brushing over the dark roots showing there. "Sorry you picked a bad time to visit, with all the zombies."

The Spaniard gave a rich laugh at that, placing his hand against his chest. "I came for education, on a visa. It took me a few days to realize it was el apocalipsis, and not just ... ah, vuestras vidas diarias -" His tongue flicked against his teeth, settling on, "Em, normal for you, ¿sí?", with a teasing grin that warmed at his eyes.

Coach leaned in slightly from the porch doorway, a chastising tip touching his head. "Boy, what's that supposed to mean?" When the foreigner gave a chagrined blink, Coach outright laughed.

From his place in the far end of the kitchen, Nick observed with no small scowl. He attempted to emanate disgust, but couldn't shake off a sulking edge that just made him feel petty. He didn't know what was worse: that the team was getting along with these newcomers, or that Ellis was.

As if the kid sensed that his attention had shifted, he looked up. Their gazes met for just an instant, Nick caught red-handed staring at him - and then the Georgian furtively looked away, surging forward to place a hand on the back of the loveseat where Christophe sat. The Spaniard startled, flinching, though he tried to play it off.

"If y'all are lookin' fer a boat, maybe we could help out? We're tryin' tuh figure out whut we're doin' anyway... Ain't like it's outta our way. Already on the coast. Maybe we can do some huntin', look fer a boat."

That sparked indignation in Nick's chest. Between inviting them in and now offering help out of hand - it felt half like Ellis was just doing it all out of spite. Like he meant to make Nick as miserable as possible. *Is he actively trying to piss me off?*

Rochelle thumbed at her lower lip, glancing suddenly at Coach. Some hesitancy bled into her
posture, a distant voice that wondered if they could afford the extra risk, danger - but Lena was already talking, hands lifted.

"Gosh, I'd never say no. It's dangerous out there. We do okay, but the close calls have been closer than I'd like... And if we can do anything for you guys -" She passed a glimpse at her sister, receiving a faint look of wary affirmation before finishing. "We'd be glad to help."

Before Ellis could start to grin, looking pleasantly surprised and a little proud of himself, Nick uttered a cold retort. "I love how you all have accumulated such great additions to the team. We really needed some thieves and murderers to spice things up."

Ellis flinched, a certain frustration simmering up in his chest. It felt like he couldn't do anything, say anything, without inciting Nick to anger. He had to inhale, breathe, because the last thing he wanted to do was let Nick rile him up in return and have an argument in front of everyone.

All those tender feelings had turned into something painful, and he'd never felt like that before. It was a kind of anger he didn't know how to deal with, not when most of him just wished it would stop - wished he could cross the room and bury his face into Nick's chest and sense that familiar resignation just before Nick returned the affection.

It wasn't supposed to go this way.

Though everyone else turned to look at Nick, Coach was first to speak. His tone was almost droll, like he didn't have the energy to keep up the illusion of the argument any longer. "She didn't even steal anythin'. An' Chris didn't kill no-one. You wanna say somethin', Nicolas, say it."

The two bikers passed unsure looks at each other - then Chris. He noticed, and tried for a small grin as if to reassure them. It came off hesitant.

Nick thrust up a hand dismissively. He laughed, short and breathy, pushing away from the counter to stalk closer at a lazy and threatening pace. "Why? I'm apparently not part of the decision-making process, so why ask me anything?"

Abruptly, Coach took one step into the room so he could get a clear sightline to Nick. Their gazes met, wickedly sharp, and the football coach rose up into an aggressively puffed stance. "I wonder why we'd be ignorin' you right now." he uttered, flatly.

Nick looked surprised for just a beat of time, before his expression cut off into something hollow. He snarled under his breath, eyes slipping to gaze off to the side, and moved to cross the loft. He snatched his katana from where he'd left it leaned against the wall, gripping it tightly.

"Fuck you." he muttered, darting down the stairs and making for his claimed bedroom, because silence was better than the atmosphere there. Try as he might to think otherwise, to put off an aura of something else - he knew he was fleeing. Retreating.

Ellis watched him go, head tilted to slant his gaze out from under his cap. A frown lingered on his lips, deepening once Nick had disappeared down the stairs. Why did some strangled part of him still want to follow after, check on him? Nick had told him, so explicitly, not to try to fix them, but the alternative was letting him go.

Ellis didn't know how to do that.

In the silence that followed, he sighed, and Chris turned to glance at him over his shoulder.

"You are okay?" he questioned, gently. "Ellis?"
Slowly, the Georgian blinked back toward him, and realized all eyes were on him. He cleared his throat, turning half-away, giving a shrug. "... I'm fine. Sorry." he lied, unsure of how much his tone betrayed him. "Dunno why he's gotta be so damn rude."

Leaning slightly over to catch Rochelle's gaze, the brunette biker hesitantly thumbed toward the stairs. "... What's going on? Not to be nosy, but... is this just because we showed up, or...?" When Rochelle inhaled deeply, a wince catching over her face, Lena quickly waved a hand. "It's fine. Forget I asked. Team drama, right? I'm traveling with my sister. Believe me, I get it."

Rhiannon grimaced at her, lengthily. "Ditto."

"Something like that." Laughing - and then sighing just as quickly, Rochelle let a palm slip over her eyes in a tired gesture. "Between you and me, I'm kinda thrilled to see some other women. These boys are exhausting."

"Hey." echoed in unison from Christophe and Coach, booming bass and trilled tone mixing in vague offense. All three girls laughed, Rhiannon surging to cover a hand over her lips and hide her cracked canine.

Ellis barely paid attention.
Chapter 177

With a frown, Ellis worked to crack open a can of spaghetti rings. He'd shaken it mercilessly, still remembering the lesson they'd learned long ago on eating it without shaking it up. It was bad enough eating cold soup without being stuck with settled layers of varying consistencies. His attention was now focused on using his pocket knife to saw open the top.

He hadn't eaten anything all day, despite Rochelle's attempts, and it had finally caught up to him. His belly grumbled in angry mutters, and even though he'd have liked to sulk around and refuse to eat, the sound had grown embarrassing - so he'd settled on one of the cans they had, attacking it with little enthusiasm.

As it turned out, their two new acquaintances hadn't eaten that day either. Still waving off any offers of shared supplies, the two had slipped outside to retrieve food from their duffel bag.

Ellis was sure he hadn't heard them return - which made him startle nearly out of his skin when Lena's voice suddenly spoke at his elbow. "Need help?" she uttered, muffled, and he jolted to look at her. Her mouth was full of something, and he didn't realize what it was until the smell hit him.

Spam.

She was gripping a soft-edged rectangular can of it, having popped off the slim top and bent it into a rudimentary spoon. The smell of it struck him with such a greasy, meaty intensity, he could have collapsed. It smelled incredible, surging up such bittersweet memories of the sandwiches his mama used to make -

Blinking, she seemed startled by his wide-eyed attention, and took a half-step back. Then she offered it up, swallowing her mouthful to give a wary smile. "Um... Want some? It's not as good uncooked, but -"

Ellis quickly shook his head, a little embarrassed at himself. With how regularly rank the air was in those blood-soaked days, the smell of something closer to real food was intoxicating. He returned his attention to his can, furtively, tightening his grip on it and the pocketknife to work on sawing a line through the lid. "Uh. No, thanks, that's okay. Just smelled good is all."

Lena seemed tempted to laugh and argue, but she didn't. Instead, she focused her attention on her food while Ellis worked to extricate his from its container. As he got enough of an opening made, he flipped the can upside-down over the bowl he'd set beside it, shaking out the contents.

It was about as appealing as cold spaghetti could be, though more appealing than eating yet more too-salty trailmix. With that, he took ahold of the spoon now buried amongst the spaghetti rings and lifted it up to his mouth. He shoved it in, quickly setting to a quiet chew as the thick tomato flavour mulled over his senses.

Lena had retreated a little more, pushing her hip against the counter, and seemed off-put by his quiet. She took a slow glance over her shoulder; Rhiannon was pacing cautiously near the staircase, mowing through a chocolate protein bar. She held guarded attention on the center of the room, where Rochelle, Coach, and Chris were splitting a bag of trailmix.

The Spaniard was barely eating, and Rochelle did not fail to notice. "Still feeling sick?" she questioned, around a hunk of raisins that had all collected together in a dusty lump.

He gave a vague shrug of his shoulder, holding a peanut between his fingertips as if to examine it.
Though his expression was distant and mostly inscrutable, it was hard not to notice a trailing exhaustion. His pallor had gained a thinness, like his veins might show through his skin.

Rochelle pushed the issue, voice turning soft with unsure sympathy. "You should've stayed in bed. This is a lot of activity for you." She almost stood, elbow going against the back of the sofa to brace her weight. "Maybe you should lay down."

Christophe winced, eyes averting, but relented with a clear nod of his head. "I can do it." he responded, just a tiny utterance. There was some subtle force - some frail irritation - behind the tone that made Rochelle sit back down. She frowned, barely, watching as he thumbed the peanut into his mouth and freed his hand to grasp the back of the couch. Chris worked his way down to lay on his back.

As he settled, he closed his eyes, looking half ready to pass out. Rochelle turned her frown to Coach, who merely shrugged in silence.

"Kinda tense around here, huh?"

Lena's statement made Ellis stop outright, twisting his head to blink at her. She used her lid-turned-scoop to dig out a measure of the moist pink substance, throwing it back with ease, barely even chewing the finely processed pork. She shook her head, quick to elaborate. "I get it, but dang. Things really that bad for you guys lately? You're acting like it's the end of the world."

She was trying to make a joke, make him laugh, but Ellis barely processed it. He only forced a huff when she smiled awkwardly at him, driven by some social instinct.

"We, uh -" He fumbled, momentarily, because the last thing he wanted was to talk about the events of the last day. Some far-off spite surged, reminding him that there was little reason to keep it a secret anymore... but that faded as fast as it rose. "Yeah. Some folks tried killin' us, 'n' then Chris got hurt. We're just... worn out."

Nodding faintly, the short biker thumbed behind her in a vague gesture. "Your friend, Nick - seems more than worn out."

Nodding faintly, the short biker thumbed behind her in a vague gesture. "Your friend, Nick - seems more than worn out." Ellis flinched a little at that, canting his head as if to glance away, but Lena lowered her voice and leaned in slightly. He couldn't help but look back at her, eyes widening slightly at the force in her voice.

Her expression, so soft and highlighted by almond-shaped hazel eyes that didn't seem capable of harshening, went suddenly firm and direct. It stirred up Nick's words in his mind; that nobody was alive anymore who didn't flourish in the chaos. Nobody was alive anymore who was weak, anyway.

The thought made him feel tired.

"Look, I just want to know Rhee's gonna be safe here. He seems a little... okay, a whole freakin' lot unstable, and she didn't exactly - get off on a good foot with you guys. If she's in danger, I'd rather just leave now."

She wasn't trying to step on a nerve, but it was all he could do not to thrust a step forward and argue. Was it even his place to defend Nick anymore? Did he know what to say? Some injured and flagging part of him wondered if he knew Nick as well as he used to think.

Ellis settled for frowning rather than say what he was thinking.

His eyes averted, and it was thoughtlessly that he mumbled back, "I ain't gonna let him do nothin' stupid.", wanting it so badly to be true. His voice softened despite himself, furtively glancing down
to swirl his spoon through the cold spaghetti before him. "He's just - been through a lot. He don't know how tuh deal with stuff except gettin' angry. That's all."

Warily, Lena nodded. Something in her expression exposed this awkward uncertainty, chewing on her tongue - but she forced a smile all the same. "Okay. Can't say that's not my sister, too." She grasped at her makeshift spoon, scooping out a hunk of Spam and eyeing it momentarily, returning almost cheerily: "Guess every group needs a big ol' jerk to get through all this, huh?"

That hurt, and he knew precisely why: he didn't know if he'd get through without Nick. Maybe he was the weak one, after all.

Rochelle must have sensed his discomfort, because she was suddenly turned on the sofa, bracing an arm over the back of it and calling out. She did so innocuously, but he knew instantly she was offering him a lifeline - and checking on him. "Hey, Ellis. Finally get that damn can open? And with or without cutting your finger off?"

Eager for the chance to duck away, Ellis grabbed a hand under his bowl and carefully sidestepped around the short woman. She watched him go, a little curiosity making its way into her expression as he practically fled. "Yer just jealous, 'cause I got somethin' better than more granola." he retorted, weakly.

The producer flashed a smile back at him, all teeth, and it was soothing somehow.

"You got cold pasta, son." Coach interjected, calm, tone wistful. He somewhat moodily dropped the bag of trail mix on the coffee table, shoving it away. "I don't think none of us are winnin'. Reminds me of when my wife tried puttin' me on a diet."

Ellis tried to laugh, but all that came out was a strangled squawk. "Least we got food at all. Can't be fightin' zombies on an empty stomach." He approached the sofa and rested his hip against it, unfazed when Rochelle stretched back a hand to grab onto the folds of his wrapped overalls and yank on them playfully. "Besides. It ain't that bad."

Coach flinched as the younger man took a heavy scoop of spaghetti rings, shoving his maw full until tomato sauce threatened to trickle from the corner of his mouth. "Boy -" he uttered, half-threatening and half-disgusted, causing Ellis to sputter into a more genuine laugh.

Grinning slightly, Rhiannon took a step forward, plucking at her cami straps to rearrange them on her shoulders. "You guys are a fuckin' riot. Remind me of some old buddies." she muttered, almost to herself - and her eyes darted to glance toward her sister.

Something passed in the look, something only translated by years of familiarity, a blink and a quirked sentiment in a language just their own. They must have settled on an agreement, because both women looked toward the other survivors in unison. Lena was the one to speak.

"So, we weren't gonna mention it, but I feel like... we can work together. And you guys seem like you need a break." the shorter sister offered up, tentatively. All eyes moved to her - even Chris reopened his gold-browns, tiredly tilting his face to glance at her from his place prone on the couch. "We've actually got a base across the way. Rhee staked it out the other day. There was a generator set up, and we got it working."

Rochelle blinked, surging to straighten up. She raised a hand to brush fingertips over her mouth, uncertainly. "Really? So it's got power?"

Nodding, Rhiannon shifted on her feet cautiously. "Takes gas though, and the shitfuck makes some
noise. We've been trying not to use it too often. Always end up getting a few fucking zombie fa-"
Whatever she was about to say died behind her lips, shooting a wary glance at Lena before
modulating the sound into something else. If the brunette noticed, she didn't indicate it. "-uckers."

Coach palmed against his chest, fingertips brushing over the blood-encrusted fabric of his worn-out
shirt. "That mean runnin' water?" he queried, visibly trying to mask his interest behind innocuous
question. Lena didn't miss that, however, and a grin touched her lips.

"Heck, yeah." she responded. "Hot water, too. It's a restaurant, though, so it's not like there's a
shower - but it's got this huge sink for dishwashing, and a big spray hose attached to it. There's a
drain in the floor, so we were just washing off right there. Not, uh... decent, but we're sisters, so..."
She gestured with her head, taking up a hearty helping of Spam onto her 'spoon'. "Doubt you guys
give a frick at this point, huh?"

Rochelle and Ellis passed a startled glance between them, his eyes widening gently. While
scrubbing down with the water they'd found had been refreshing, the idea of something closer to an
actual shower was enticing.

The very first thought Ellis had was how thrilled Nick would be - and that hurt the moment it
struck him, pain joining a kind of anger when he found he couldn't break himself so easily from
caring about what would and wouldn't make the man happy. He tried to shake it off, but it lingered,
even as he tried to smile and pretend his heart didn't ache.

"That sounds kinda amazin'... we could probably get our clothes washed a bit, too. If y'all want, I
bet we could siphon a car to get more gas for it. Repay y'all whut we take."

Laughing a little, Rochelle prodded at his stomach, making him jump. "He's our resident mechanic.
And sweetheart." When Ellis allowed a strained noise of displeasure to escape him, his ears
heating up slightly, Rochelle turned to better face the two other women. She glanced meaningfully
between them, receiving a faint grin from Lena and a slightly awkward head-tilt from Rhiannon.
"We'd owe you two so much. Seriously."

Crossing her arms over her stomach, Rhiannon gestured flatly with a hand in a negating motion.
"Not really." she responded, bluntly. "Kicker is, last time we left, got jumped by a Boomer. Left a
horde back there. It'll be an ass-nasty fight clearing them out." She looked warily toward her older
sister, earning a supportive nod. "If you pussies are up for it."

That supportive nod turned into a weak grimace, and Rhiannon looked faintly mischievous in some
awkward and half-apologetic sort of way. Despite himself, Coach chuckled. He gestured around at
his teammates, vaguely, tone wry. "Our asses don't look up for it?"

Him, keeping weight off his bad leg.

Christophe, one-armed and pale.

Rochelle, nursing her injured hand.

Ellis, broken and distant.

Nick, absent.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Coach legitimately had to wonder. Were they together
enough - strong enough - to venture out? Pick up and move? Should he put his foot down and veto
the idea, or take advantage of the chance for some much-needed relief? They could clean
themselves and their clothes, even warm up some soup and have a hot meal... And with Chris'
burgeoning struggle to eat, a hot and appetizing meal might make the difference.

He felt out of touch with his team. Nick and Ellis had been so far from what he thought, and Rochelle had been party to it. It left him unsure, off his footing, and moreso than his injured knee made him. Leading a team, a well-oiled machine - that was one thing.

Now that they had fractured, did he know how to pull them back together?
Knowing it was petty and stupid and transparent didn't stop Nick from closing himself off in the bedroom.

He sat on the edge of the bed, cigarette held between his fingertips, trying to convince his other hand not to reach for his lighter. Every hum and buzz of conversation that was audible through the ceiling made that urge grow stronger, an unreasonable frustration coursing through him. Instead of feeling glad and relieved to not be a part of the goings-on, he just felt like shit.

Maybe it was the fact that Ellis was getting along better with a woman who'd mugged and pistol-whipped him, than with Nick.

It was pure anger that made him stow the cigarette back into its box, cramming it into his pocket. He wouldn't allow himself the indulgence, not with those sorts of thoughts going through his head. Who was he to yearn for what he'd willfully thrown away? It's over. You need to start acting that way, buddy. He's not yours anymore. Get over it, and stop feeling so fucking much.

Unfortunately, the feelings were not so simply numbed. Looking at Ellis made something in him ache, something far-off and muted, a vague pining for any lingering hope that he could be the type of guy who could make it work. Make them work.

Make anything work in his entire life.

It was easier to admit he wanted Ellis, now that he knew it was over.

The idea of someone like Ellis, someone good, wanting to be around him for longer than it took for a drink and a fuck, seeing through him and still wanting him; he didn't have it in him to deny it was enticing. Still, wasn't it just wishful thinking to believe Ellis actually wanted him? And how far was he willing to go down that rabbit hole, knowing how it would go in the end?

He didn't know what scared him more: opening himself up to care about Ellis, only to have the kid grow sick and tired of him - or the awareness that he would inevitably ruin it. Nick would cheat, or hurt him, or lose interest. There was no path that didn't converge on a single point: they'd never last.

If only that hurt less.

Surging up to stand, Nick released something close to a growl. Impulse made him raise a hand, striking himself across the cheek with a flat palm as if it might shake himself out of the spiral threatening. All it did was hurt, sting, but at least he could focus his mind on physical pain to the exclusion of whatever other pains lingered.

He'd landed the blow on the dulling bruise a Charger had left behind near his jawline. The pain caught him by surprise, a sharp cuss escaping him, doubling over as his eyes fought to water. They won.

It was almost defeatedly that Nick soothed a hand over his jaw, stubble scraping his fingertips. The presence of wetness across his vision just made him feel pathetic all over again. You're a mess. Nobody needs this shit right now, Nicolas. Least of all you. Pull it the fuck together.

Exhaling, some measured and feigned calm sunk over his expression. He brushed his eyes dry
against his sleeve, making to sit back down.

He'd only just dropped when a knock sounded at the door.

Although he started to prickle, he forcefully cooled himself off. Rochelle was the only one light enough to get down the stairs without any noise, and she was the lesser of his worries. She was, if nothing else, the one who promised to keep her mouth shut.

"What?" he responded, aware it sounded rough. He could only hope it came off angry, rather than whatever it was he felt.

The door did not open, but Rochelle's voice came through the wood. She sounded wary, but spoke anyway. "I have good news. Thought you'd want to hear it. I can guess your answer, but figured you'd want a chance to respond before we made any plans."

Nick snorted, coldly, resisting the urge to spit back something sarcastic. He inhaled, sharply, closing his eyes and responding instead: "Don't make me say 'what' again."

There was a soft rustle, as if she'd pressed herself against the door. He was sure he heard her sigh, but she continued regardless. "The bikers have a place for us to go. They've got a generator, and hot water. We'll have to do some fighting to clear it out, but I figured you wouldn't need much more encouragement than the idea of getting cleaned up."

She should have been right - so why did he feel so apathetic?

Nick stirred up something like agitation in his chest, shaking his head at nobody. "You fucks are serious, aren't you? It isn't enough to sit around and gab with them, but now we're literally teaming up? How the fuck haven't you guys learned your lesson is beyond me."

He didn't expect her to explode, nor for the door to suddenly burst open. With no warning, Rochelle was standing in the doorway, one hand lingering on the knob while the other thrust toward him. "Jesus Christ, Nick. What lesson? Never to trust anyone ever again? Excuse me if I don't want my last days on this Earth spent being like y-"

Rochelle stopped. Regret blinked across her features, but Nick wasn't stupid. Like you. He wished that, too, hurt less.

Rather than acknowledge it, Nick placed a hand against his thigh and released a half-laugh. "Whatever." he uttered, not looking directly at her. The last thing he wanted to do was watch the mixture of anger and apology strangle itself on her features. "I'm outnumbered, so fine. When all this turns south, you guys'll only have yourself to blame. And I get first goddamn shower."

Gazing across the room at him, Rochelle allowed her hand to clasp over her stomach. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, exhaling shortly. "Chris needs a little rest before we do anything. I'm going to start packing up in the meantime." When she stepped into the room, Nick almost protested, but she was quick to take a step to the side and lean into the linen closet just to the right of the door.

He watched her flip through what was left, tucking some blankets and towels under her arm. She didn't make any effort to speak, which left them drenched in moderate silence as she gathered up what remained, and what seemed useful. She had only some difficulty with her injured hand, but seemed intent on powering through.

Nick might've gotten up to help, had things been different. Instead, he just observed.
Once she'd collected up enough - four woolen blankets and three thin beach towels of varying gaudy colour and design - Rochelle made to retreat, ducking for the door without a word. He should have let her go. He almost did. But some stupid, vestigial part of him needed her to understand. She was the closest thing he had to a friend.

"Would you have liked it more if I lied to him? Told him what he wanted to hear, instead of the truth?"

The producer halted as if she'd been grabbed, staring a moment out through the door before tenderly turning on a heel to glance back at him. He could see the thought in her eyes, weighing whether or not she should respond. But he'd been the one to break their silence, not her.

So, she rose to the challenge. "That's what you think you did? Told him the truth?" Her eyes flickered to a muted disapproval, darkening, and her lips pursed. "He thinks you hate him. You broke his heart."

Nick tightened his jaw against a snarl at the statement, unsure if it was the accusation that made him angry, or the fact it was undoubtedly true. "That was his own fault. I didn't make him care. All I did was put a stop to it before it got any worse."

Rochelle laughed, the sound full of a saddened yearning he couldn't quite decode. "God. You really think you stopped anything?" Before he could protest or question, she shook her head, attention going abruptly piercing on his expression. "You honestly don't have feelings for him?"

The question startled him, though he should have seen it coming. He couldn't stop his gaze from averting, squinting to the beat of that ache in his chest he couldn't shake. He wanted to say 'no,' wanted to laugh in her face and assure her just how ridiculous the notion was - but his lips had other plans, much despite himself. "I can't."

It was too close to the truth, and Rochelle blinked at him with a certain exhaustion. "That's not the same thing." she responded, simply, shrugging her armload closer and turning to slip out of the door. He watched her go, feeling nothing but burgeoning pain.

*Isn't it close enough?*
Chapter 179

Coach stood at the kitchen counter, gazing down at the pile of foodstuffs they'd stored. He couldn't help a slight frown, more thoughtful than anything else. "Y'all don't think this is too soon? Feel like we just got settled here." Reaching up to brush his palm over his scalp, rustling over the hair growing there.

It was tentatively that Ellis glanced over at him, chewing at his lower lip. He'd set himself to collecting their weapons from where they'd become scattered around the condo - his shotgun, Coach's double-barrel, Rochelle's new handgun, Nick's sniper rifle, and Christophe's machete. "Maybe. But gettin' washed up'd be worth it, especially fer Chris."

Quietly, the Spaniard spoke up from his place on the couch. "You think I smell, hermano?"

Ellis couldn't resist laughing, though it came out in an airy giggle, biting on his cheek and shooting a look at the other man that struggled between apology and chastisement. "No... if anyone stinks, it's us. Took that Boomer real hard." He thumbed at his cheek, scratching. "But keepin' you clean means fightin' off infection. 'N' bringin' the swellin' down."

Christophe gave a heavy grimace, eyes opening to turn a dulled glance his way. It wasn't quite the fear he'd shown at Ellis wielding a washcloth, but close. "More wash... mierda."

"Keith don't like it either." Ellis exhaled a little tautly, fiddling fingertips against the coffee table where he'd arranged the weaponry. He traced fingertips over the butt of his shotgun, idly. "Always gotta haul him caterwaulin' intuh the bath when he's hurt."

Rhiannon had taken up a seat against the wall, knees bent up toward her chest and arms wrapped around them. Her iron-banded baseball bat lay snug between her heels and rump, frowning gently as she watched them. It didn't seem so much dislike or distaste as it was unease - discomfort, maybe.

He'd thought she was opening up, softening, but the moment her banter had died she'd retreated back into a strange awkwardness. Like she'd stepped too far out of familiar territory and only belatedly realized it, though it wasn't harsh so much as self-conscious.

It reminded him of Nick, a little, and that dragged his lips into a frown at the same time he felt a distant and sad fondness.

Pacing in front of the glass doors to the balcony, Lena held her brush axe with both hands, slow and cautious movements swinging it along with her steps. It seemed like exercise, taking advantage of the heavy weapon to gently stretch out her arms and shoulders.

"Who's Keith?" she questioned, lightly and with off-hand interest.

"Muh best friend." Ellis stood up, grabbing Chris' machete. Lena offered a blink, then nodded, unaware of any reason to think his response odd - the curtness, the simplicity. It was left to Coach to stare at the younger Georgian, looking faintly shocked. "'Ey, man. You should take this."

Carefully tensing, the foreigner looked up at him, fingers curling against the sofa as if to steady himself. He avoided meeting Ellis' gaze directly, protesting thickly, "... I do not think I will be any help with it. Keep it, please."

Frowning to himself, Coach withheld his thoughts. Watching Ellis not rise to take the bait of
talking about Keith - to someone new, most of all - it scared him, a little. There were so many warning signs in his behaviour, his stability, yet somehow that seemed the most severe.

At least Ellis was trying to keep things together. They had to, if for no other reason than survival.

"It'll be okay." The mechanic put on a smile, sincerity warming his eyes, turning the machete around to offer the handle toward him. "Better tuh have it on hand, in case you need it. We'll all be with yuh. Ain't nothin' bad gonna happen."

Christophe did not look convinced, a strained discontent flickering across his features - but he relented, reaching up his hand to grab the machete from him. He lifted it up above his head, slowly flexing fingers against the handle, a quiet thought collapsing his expression into something small. "Sí." he mumbled, quietly.

Ellis' prop smile faded soon after, turning his attention back toward the brunette biker where she moved in smooth patterns along the width of the balcony doorway. She was staring after Chris, and Ellis cocked his head in clear question.

Lena acknowledged it without looking at him, tongue flicking to wet her lips before she spoke. "I don't want to be rude, but - I'm flippin' shocked you're alive." Stopping, she set the tip of her axe against the ground, wrapping her elbow around the shaft to rest her weight on it. "How'd you even survive?"

Blinking at her, forced to tip his chin up and look at her almost upside-down, Chris managed a weary grin that did not touch his eyes. "No sé... if I am honest. I was not awake for it. Ask them, ¿sí?" He jerked the tip of his machete in Ellis' direction, though the end of its arc included Coach in the gesture, too.

So, the big man shrugged a shoulder, aware of both of their new acquaintances looking in his direction. "Nick's the one to thank, mostly." he admitted, aware of a flatness at the edge of his voice - and the way Ellis suddenly looked down toward the floor, lips tightening against each other. "Burnt the stump shut. Boy would'a bled out otherwise."

Christophe's expression went conflicted, suddenly, brows threatening to lift like the words surprised him.

"Burnt?" Lena echoed, tone bewildered. Her eyes widened vaguely to stare closely at Christophe's bandaged stump shoulder, too shocked to take notice of how he flinched with the attention. He let his gaze drop and his eyes, eventually, close. "You mean like cautery?"

Bursting in with a soft utterance, Rhiannon gripped a hand against her shin tightly. "Shitfuck. That's hardcore." Her sister shot her a disapproving squint, quick to raise her hands. "Freaking amazing is what it is." Pointing toward the ground in a firm motion, Lena shook her head. "The fact that that worked... I mean, you use electrocautery to stop bleeding, but... not... this."

She lifted a hand to press her thumb between her lips, nibbling thoughtfully at her thumbnail. "Makes you wonder if it's luck, or -"

Rochelle came up from the stairs, wielding an armload of linens. "Luck would have been him not getting hurt in the first place, but y'know." She swept quickly around the railing, hurrying into the kitchen in such a rush that Ellis swore he felt a breeze follow her passage.

He also swore that when he glanced back at her, he caught a glimpse of something odd on her expression. If he hadn't known her as well as he did, he might've missed the signs of tears.
"And yeah. Nick's the only reason a lot of us are here. We're also the only reason he's here."
Almost throwing the blankets and towels onto the counter, Rochelle set her hands against her hips, only a faint flinch marking the pain from her hand. She sounded angry, curt. Focused, most of all.
"Let's start loading up the car."

Frowning, Ellis was quick to his feet. She'd gone downstairs to speak with Nick, ensure he was on board to go - and now she came back distressed? He'd made her cry?

He started to advance, raising a hand to catch fingertips onto the brim of his hat, only to watch as she looked directly at him... and stepped to return to the stairs. Her posture could not have spoken more clearly of retreat, and all he could do was look after her as she made to return to the first floor.

"I'll get the backpack from the bedroom." she muttered over her shoulder, cool and so much more collected than her expression spoke to.

Ellis wrung his hands carefully in front of his chest, staring after her, his heart jumping into his throat. She didn't want to talk to him, and he didn't know how to feel about that. Was something wrong? Had Nick said something? He must have agreed to the move, but... there was something else.

He barely noticed as Coach began to organize the foodstuffs into piles he could carry, stacking cans. "Guess that's that." he grumbled, only a quiet irate quality to his voice. He, too, seemed concerned, but his worry died out into a disgruntled weariness. "Ellis, young'un. Come help me."

Lowering his chin, Ellis reluctantly obeyed. He kept his eyes on the staircase, mind spinning and whirling faster than he could control. If there was something wrong, why wouldn't Rochelle tell him? Maybe she was just waiting until they could get privacy from the bikers - but if that had been the case, surely she'd have given him a look or a nod.

No, she'd fled from him.

It was hollowly that he started to scoop up some of their supplies, barely watching his own hands as they moved. He hardly noticed as Coach dumped a few cans into the crook of his arm, merely grunting and adjusting to the added load. The health teacher slipped him a look of vague question.

He couldn't panic. He'd stow away the feelings, and save them for later. Later, when he could just ask her what was happening.

Ellis turned, averting his gaze when he found Lena crossing the loft toward them. She raised her weapon to tuck it behind her back, guiding its shaft into the holster strapped across her body, letting it hang there. "I'll help." she offered, stretching her freed arms up toward Coach in a cradling gesture.

The big man humoured her, something close to a grin making its way across his features. "Offerin' a chance to clean up ain't help 'nough?" He shrugged his shoulder to emphasize the vomit-soaked slope of his shirt, and the short biker's expression drew into a wary smile that softened her eyes.

"It's a start."
With a grunt, Ellis tossed his armload into the sedan's trunk. He took the time to carefully arrange the food, setting the cans at the bottom and laying the bags of granola atop them. It was mindless organization, something to put his mind to.

Better than thinking about Nick and Rochelle. Try as he might, he couldn't shake mulling over what might have happened. If they'd had a fight - and if it had been about him - why hadn't Rochelle told him yet?

If he didn't fight it, he might get angry. He felt the sensation of fury lingering at the edge of his head like the creeping, hunched presence of a Hunter ready to pounce. He didn't feel on the verge of tears anymore; he felt on the verge of shouting.

Wasn't it the next stage of grief? Denial, first, because Nick surely hadn't meant what he said. Surely he hadn't found it so easy to toss him aside... surely hadn't looked at him that way, touched him that way, if not for love...

Now came anger.

Inhaling, Ellis rested his hands against the rim of the trunk. He slumped, closing his eyes. He didn't want to be angry. The emotion had never suited him, and he'd never found that getting fired up and hollering solved many problems. But he was human, and he wanted so badly to holler.

He didn't even know at whom - maybe Nick, maybe Rochelle. Maybe himself, or no one in particular at all. He just wanted to vent out the frustration building in his chest before it reached some critical mass. Better than lingering in the helpless fugue that had overtaken him.

What if Nick had told Rochelle he'd really never cared for him?

Patting palms against the car, Ellis uttered an agitated sigh and stepped back. He turned to circle it and make for the condo, eager to continue loading the car. As he moved, he raised his eyes and watched as the blonde, taller biker hop-stepped down the staircase.

Rhiannon had replaced her protective gear, kneepads and shinguards strapped on tight, but had her jacket carefully folded over her forearm. The woman blinked at him, freezing for just a second before continuing down.

"Hey." she uttered, making to quickly step out from in front of the staircase. She couldn't work out something feral in her posture, an energy edging her steps like she were squaring up for a fight.

"You look pissed."

Ellis waved off the inherent question, barely slowing as he moved to pass her. "'M fine." he responded, soft and idle - words that turned into little more than a startled surge of air when Rhiannon grabbed his arm. She didn't quite apply the force and grip required to halt him, but he stopped anyway.

Shooting her a bewildered glance, he was almost surprised to find her staring ahead blindly. She did not meet his gaze, and her words were spoken through the side of her mouth.

"Hey, buddy. I don't know what's going on with you shitters, but - I know you got the most reason to hate me, and you're the one who took out that Hunter. And got your friends to give us a chance. And stopped that crazy asshole from shooting me the first time we met."
His mouth gawped, slightly, and she turned her face to direct a steely and stiff-jawed look at him. He could see the strain gratitude put on her expression. "So. I wanna know. We cool?"

Ellis wanted to laugh, suddenly, because it was almost absurd. She was so low on his list of worries, so far off his radar - and maybe that was irresponsible of him. Shouldn't he have been more worried, considering what she had tried to do? He could hear Nick now.

*What the fuck is your problem, dumbshit? Do I have to save you from every bad actor in the apocalypse?*

But Nick wouldn't. Not anymore.

Shaking his head before the thought could sink in, Ellis averted his eyes. "Uh... Yeah. 'Course." He tried to shrug her grip loose, but it only tightened. When he glanced back at her, he found her expression drawn in a frown with her teeth bared and tongue bitten under her cracked canine.

He got the feeling she misread his conflict.

"That face says no." She let him go, abruptly, taking a step back and spreading her arms in something nearly threatening. Her expression, however, was anything but - she flashed a grin and cocked her head as if to offer her cheek for a kiss. "C'mon. Hit me."

Shocked, Ellis let his jaw swing open. His eyes could have bugged out of his head for how wide they flashed, darting around Rhiannon's face. It wasn't the first time someone had urged him to punch them - Keith did it often enough, either for dares or as a way to avoid uttering the words 'I'm sorry' - but a girl?

He had never hit a girl. Never wanted to, or been in the position to. The idea stung so ferociously at his sense of honor. It hadn't been pleasant to watch Nick do it the first time, and he had no intention of doing it himself.

"No, no way - it's fine, really..." he babbled, putting up his hands in a guarded gesture. "I don't wanna do that. We're fine, I promise."

Rhee flexed her jaw with a gape and then clenched her teeth, speaking past them. "I hit you, you hit me." She kept her cheek turned outward. "Come on. Even it out. I can take a punch from some little cunt redneck."

The insult might have sparked a nerve, had he not known so clearly it was an attempt to rile him into attacking. That, too, was something Keith did. He retreated a step, only to have her advance to match.

"Look -"

But the biker was already leaning in, voice attaining the nasty twist he remembered viscerally from her robbery attempt. "Too much of a pussy? Come on, do it. Hit me. Or does your dickwad buddy do all the work around here?"

That hurt, and for reasons beyond him. It wasn't machismo or insecurity, but it was something deep and instinctual - a sort of fear. Nick wasn't his buddy anymore. Not his lover. Not his... anything.

Not his, anymore.

"You can't be a huge cream puff. You made it this far, and I bet it wasn't totally on the backs of those other shitbags." She reached out, suddenly, shoving knuckles against his chest to push him
Something blinked on in him, like a light or a flame - or maybe it blinked out, leaving him in some moment of quiet dark. All he knew was there was a surge of bile up the back of his throat, hearing that word, alongside the pang of pain through his chest.

A word and a pain that did nothing but remind him of Jerry.

He wanted to say he didn't panic, but the alternative was saying he was fully conscious when his fist collided with Rhiannon's chin.

It wasn't the most collected punch. He realized his own motion halfway through and tried ferociously to abort the gesture, but his momentum carried him into a swing. It caught the biker off-guard, and he practically heard her teeth grind as her jaw popped sideways under the blow.

Horror and regret shot through him as her head snapped back, and he tried to grab for her arm as the rest of her body followed suit. His fingers slipped on her bare wrist, however, and he had to watch her fall flat on her rump on the grass.

"Oh!" escaped him, snapping both his hands flat over his mouth. "Gawd - Lordy, I'm -"

Rhiannon's voice was muffled as she grabbed fingertips against her jawline, a vague groan touching her tone. "Fuck me!" She rolled into a lean, hunching forward. "Cheap shot, you shitfuck!"

She started laughing, and Ellis couldn't help a distressed noise, dropping to a crouch. He lifted his hands to hover them in a helpless gesture, waving. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to -"

"What the fudge-nuts!" High and bewildered, Lena's voice burst from up the stairs. Ellis barely had time to react before she was sprinting, stumbling down the stairs. He recoiled, shame dragging his lips into a frown.

His knuckles hurt, but his heart hurt worse.

After all he'd been through, had he finally reached some breaking point? Violence had never been in him. Sinking a knife into Jerry's thigh had been self-defense under the animal fear of dying. He'd orchestrated Rochelle shooting Brenda, but it hadn't been his finger on the trigger.

He'd always tried so hard to cling to goodness. Where had the instinct to strike come from, and why? It felt so contrary to everything he felt about himself. It was all he could do not to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness.

Or run, rather than face his actions. But that was what Nick would do, wasn't it?

"I didn't mean tuh, I swear!"

When Lena reached them, almost slipping off the last wooden stair, she dropped to a knee and grabbed her younger sister's arm. It was with no small surprise that Ellis watched the brunette's ire flare... and turn on Rhiannon.

"What did you do? Rhee, I turn my back for two seconds, and you start up crap -" While the blonde choked out a laugh, Lena grabbed a hand under her jaw and forced her face upwards, examining for damage. She thumbed under Rhiannon's chin and squinted eyes into their twin pair. "And not even with the one who already hates your freakin' big-headed -"
Shoving her head into a jerk to free herself from the attentions, Rhiannon rolled her jaw in its sockets with an audible pop-crackle. "Chill, damn! We were settling things."

Her gaze flicked up, meeting Ellis' in his horror. She seemed almost inclined to frown, puzzled at his expression, and it was with a grunt that she grabbed at her sister's shoulder to haul herself off the ground. Lena helped, snatching a hand at the waist of her pants to pull her upright.

Reaching her feet with a hop, Rhee flashed that cracked smile, fingertips nursing over the injured slope of her jaw. "We're good now. Right?"

Ellis balled his fist up, thumbing over the soft tenderness there from colliding with her mandible. He wanted to frown, but forced a vague smile back, instead.

He didn't feel good - and mostly because he felt a little better, like he'd vented out something that had been building pressure in him. It left him hollow, but better that than full to bursting with emotion.

"Did I hurt you...?" he questioned, tremulously, approaching a step or two.

She snorted, reaching out to shove at him again, palm pushing at his shoulder. He took it with dug-in heels, resisting the stumble. "What do I fuckin' look like, my sister?" Lena scowled sideways at her, affection bleeding through. "You got a right hook, though. And I thought you Georgia shits were all talk."

Ellis' face heated up, embarrassment flooding down his spine. He raised a hand and rubbed at his neck, shaking his head. "I... Usually am." he tried to joke, weakly.

Rhiannon outright laughed, palming over her jaw. "Not today, motherfucker." She turned, patting sand and scraggly grass off the seat of her pants, and started to wander off toward the garage and her stowed motorcycle with a long-legged swagger. "Least that's settled."

As she left, Ellis dropped his chin, wary of Lena's attention turning to him, but it didn't. She merely slid on her heel to half-spin, following after her sister - though not without a wink over her shoulder.

"Don't feel bad. She could make Mother Teresa grab for a switch." the brunette uttered, quickening her pace to catch up with her sister.

Ellis couldn't help but snort, expression softening just a little to something quietly ashamed. He looked after the two women, watching as they ducked into the garage. He looked at his fist, too, observing the rising redness blooming amidst his knuckles.

He didn't like the color.

Sighing, he pushed both his hands into the pockets of his coveralls, raising his head. He glanced toward the beach condo, intent on returning to grab something else to load into the car.

His motions fell to a slumped energy, trying not to think. The two women had acted like it were nothing, but it didn't feel like nothing. He didn't want to change, or let things change him. Punching someone shouldn't have been an act within his power.

Ellis took the stairs at a careful and plodding pace, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. It was a bad sign when he was almost looking forward to getting on the move and fighting some infected.

The front door had been left cracked open, so he nudged an elbow into the space and leveraged it
Cigarette smoke struck him an instant before his eyes alighted on Nick, leaned against the wall next to the window. Ellis' eyes widened faintly, taking in how the blinds were parted enough to see past - how the gambler was bent in toward it - 

Ellis didn't have to wonder how much he'd seen. The answer was scrawled across those rugged features.

The softest glimmer of humour shone in his eyes, greens gone fractionally readable in a weak flash of emotion. Then they broke away, and Nick stared out the window, teeth clenched around his cigarette.

Shame exploded through Ellis with such ferocious and cutting force that he could do little more than drop his gaze. Nick had seen everything, and that was almost worse. It wasn't bad enough that they were broken up; Nick had to see him in such a state?

Ducking his chin, Ellis accelerated his pace to practically rush through the doorway and up the stairs, making every effort not to look at the older man. He dodged everyone else just the same, funneling his energy into motion.

He missed, then, the wistful way Nick slanted a glance after him. The vague bemusement that bled into his posture. Like there were a puzzle before him, and only force of will kept him from investigating.

Nick let smoke billow from his nostrils.
Tapping his cigarette out over the grass, Nick licked idly at the backs of his teeth.

He didn't know what to think, really. Watching Ellis punch the biker out had been the single best thing to happen to him in what felt like years. He'd struggled, at first, watching them square up, but he restrained the urge to intercede.

Sure, it made rage flood him - but it wasn't his job to clean up the kid's mess. He wanted to go down and eviscerate her the instant she put a hand on Ellis, but he forced himself to remain stagnant. Better that than the mixed signals he was liable to send... so he watched, trying to ignore the boiling temperature of his blood.

Then she went down. Nick wasn't sure what he felt more like doing: laughing at the thief's suffering, or getting his hands on the Georgian. He also wasn't sure what it said about him that watching the man lay somebody out was enough to stoke a fire in him.

It did not, however, last. Past the humour, past the arousal, a quiet discontent sunk in. He wasn't stupid enough to miss that Ellis was upset, but seeing him explode in such uncharacteristic violence was startling. Surprisingly attractive, but startling.

Was he really that upset? And what the fuck did she say to get him to snap? He was at fault, surely, but it had to have been more than that. All the things the kid had been through, all the things Nick had put him through, it had never pushed him to physical retaliation.

And he'd looked humiliated as he'd stormed past.

Exhaling sharply, Nick flicked his cigarette away with his pinky, licking the tacky flavour of menthols from his lips. What's it matter? Not your business, anyway. Shaking his head, he turned to face the car sitting in the driveway, mindlessly taking the time to grind his cigarette into the sand with his heel. Not the time to pretend you give a shit, Nick.

Rochelle was nervously pacing alongside the sedan, while Coach shoved their icebox of water into the trunk. His jaw was set tightly, a hand raising quickly to brush over his forehead and wipe off sweat from his skin. "Gettin' hot." he muttered with a sigh. "If these showers don't pan out, I might lose my mind."

Pushing a hand into his slacks pocket, letting his posture slump, Nick allowed a snort. "My shirt still reeks." Coach didn't make much effort to acknowledge him, closing the trunk with a slam that sounded harder than was necessary. "So, what's the plan? Follow these bitch bikers into some fucking trap?"

The big man grimaced toward him. "Nicolas." he chided, simply.

Leaned down where she stood, Lena tightened the bungee cables holding their duffel bag to the motorcycle rack. She raised her voice without raising her head, tone pinched. "Nobody's forcing you to come, dude. But for the record, we're not trying to kill you."

Nick rolled his eyes, lips going taut as he shrugged up a shoulder. "Well, then." he growled quietly. He mostly believed her, but that didn't stop him from protesting. If they were intent on traveling that road, it would be with his loud opposition. "Neato. That's all I needed to hear. Now I can rest goddamn easy."
Rhiannon stood with her hip against the side of the motorcycle, thumbing against her leather jacket. Her lip curled away from her teeth, a quiet agitation flitting past her eyes. "You -"

In a flash, Nick turned on his heels to face her, snapping the fingers of one hand so his index finger ended in a threatening point toward her. 'Do I look like I want to hear from the chick who got sucker-punched by a fucking hayseed?"

Both Coach and Rochelle turned, confusion sparking between them. She spoke first, shrugging her shoulders up in an insecure gesture. "What? Ellis? What are you talking about, Nick?"

Lena paused, hands stilling on the duffel bag. She lifted her head, teeth catching on the inside of her cheek and eyes darting toward Nick. He leveled his gaze with hers, a small smirk touching his lips as he recognized her anxiety. Nothing would destroy their chances of assimilating with the group like getting into a fight with Ellis.

_I should know, considering._ That soured his mood, and he reached up a hand to scratch at his eyebrow. He meant to shift the conversation away, toy with her, but didn't get the chance.

"Nothin'." came Ellis' voice, and all eyes lifted toward the condo's main staircase. The Georgian had his arm looped around Christophe's waist, body tucked under the foreigner's armpit to support him.

Nick slid his hand up, knuckling into his shoulder, massaging a stinging pain into his muscle. He allowed his eyes to track the younger man, even as he tilted his chin down to shade them. Annoyance flickered through him, though faded.

"Are we good to go? I think we got everythin'." Rochelle frowned at him, and the look on her features spoke to lingering curiousity - but Chris gained her attention, surging to hurry forward and wait at the bottom of the stairs for them. "Yeah, I think so." She set a hand against the stair railing, watching as they began their descent.

It was a tough thing to watch. Ellis and Chris stayed molded close to one another, the Georgian taking his weight in a solid and constant lean. The Spaniard looked vaguely out of it - like he was focused so harshly on some distant point he couldn't recognize what was in front of him.

He tightened fingers on Ellis' upper arm, squeezing. "Cuidado." he whispered sideways, voice a trembling hush. "Me siento mareado."

Quickly, Ellis soothed him with a cluck of his tongue, encouraging him into a few more steps. "I got'cha, man." he promised, glancing up at Rochelle with a faint squint as if sensing her concern. "He's a'ight. Think it's mostly the painkillers."

She nodded, advancing to hover near them as they reached the ground. Chris’ Vans hit the scraggly grass and slid on the sand, but Ellis was prepared. It didn't take much at all to catch him, and the Georgian braced his knee against the other man's in order to keep him upright.

"I got'cha!" he repeated, cheeriness forged into his tone. Chris nodded slowly, thickly, following his pull.

Rochelle's frown deepened, following behind as the two men walked toward the parked sedan. "Alright. Let's get everyone into the car." She turned her head as she walked, eyes flickering toward the two women. "What's the plan? We'll follow you?"

Wiping her hands together, Lena stood, wincing vaguely. "Makes sense. It's not that far. Rhee and I
will lead on the bike. If we run into trouble, she and I can take it. Hopefully we won't, but -"

"Whoa. Whoa." Nick's hands both raised, fingers splayed, advancing a step. His shoulders raised in aggressive tension, eyes narrowing. "Run that one past me again?"

Ellis frowned, but did not speak. He approached the car with Chris tight against his side, nodding gratefully as Coach opened the rear passenger door. The process of getting the Spaniard in the car was awkward, but he slid in with his stumped shoulder leading, letting his arm stay hooked over Ellis' shoulders as he went.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Rochelle turned to face Nick. Her posture shifted, widening, matching his. "What, Nick?" she spat out, maintaining a remarkably flat expression compared to her tone. "What is it this time?"

The gambler approached one long step closer, bending at the waist a few degrees to come closer to eye-level. He had shown some vague weakness to her earlier, and had no intention of letting it stand. "When did it get decided they were going to lead us? And we're supposed to trust they won't lead us into a trap, or just fucking abandon us out there?"

Rochelle did not so much as flinch. Her chocolate-brown eyes turned such a frustration on him, he was the one tempted to break.

"What the hell reason would they have for doing that?" She didn't even sound angry, just exasperated. "If they wanted to kill us, they'd have done it already, or let the horde earlier get to us. If they wanted to lose us, they'd have left when they had the chance. So go ahead, Nick. Explain this bout of paranoia to me, or are you just being a bitch?"

Nick's lip curled up from his teeth, advancing, but Lena was abruptly walking toward them. Her hands lifted in a defensive gesture. "Hey, easy. It's okay. Let's -"

That burst a nearly furious sound from Nick, throwing his arms up. "Oh, well, fuck me right up the ass, some Sonny Barger wannabe thinks it's okay." His voice grew louder as he went, unable to put a stopper on the fury rising in his chest. "I guess we're goddamn fine and dandy, then! I'll just take a goddamn nap. Wake me when we fucking get there."

Nick had the distinct feeling of being observed, like his team merely gazed upon him, waiting for him to quiet. It made him feel impotent, and that was almost as infuriating as being ignored outright.

"Shitbird." Rhiannon muttered under her breath, just loud enough to be heard.

Had Nick had the time to react, he might have rounded on her and started anew in rage. However, before he so much as registered the insult, Lena was speaking. Her voice raised as if to speak over her sister. "Let's compromise. We'll swap a member, okay? So neither of us can abandon each other."

Nick had to utter a laugh. "Oh, like hell. Been here before, lady, I'm not giving you a hostage."

Standing up from easing Chris into his seat, Ellis couldn't stop the smallest glance over his shoulder. Past a frown, he couldn't avoid an awareness: he'd been the hostage Nick had left behind before. He also couldn't avoid the distant piece of him that wished Nick might glance his way in that moment, that those eyes might give away some insecurity. Some emotion other than anger.

That thought frustrated him into surging back around, leaning in to carefully pat Christophe on the leg. The Spaniard gave him a weak grin, vaguely drugged.
"Tu amante, se puso furioso." he uttered, earning a confused blink back from Ellis.

"We'll both have a hostage." Rochelle pointed out, tone dry, with an apologetic edge to the way she glanced at the other two women. Lena tilted her head in quiet acquiescence, like a soft 'it's okay.' 
"One of them in the car, one of us on the bike. Besides, it'll let us split our hand radios to keep in touch."

Nick fell to a scowl, unable to stop his body from retreating one staggered step. He darted his tongue to wet his lips, glancing toward Coach - a futile gesture, as he'd receive no support from the ex-football player. The big man briefly lifted a brow at him, daring him to argue.

"Fine." he snapped off, reaching down to draw his Magnum from his thigh holster. He tapped the muzzle against his palm, pointedly, in a gesture that drew nothing but a quietly disdainful blink from Rochelle. "I'll go on the death trap. Gets me a fucking break from you guys, anyway."

Faint surprise flashed over Rochelle's face, and she scattered an abruptly nervous glance between Lena and Coach. "I was thinking Ellis, or me." she returned, carefully, sliding a palm against her cheek. "Someone not as likely to overreact?"

Nick tightened his jaw, agitation rolling his eyes, but it was the brunette biker who spoke, raising an index finger.

"No, it makes sense. If he's the one with issues, he should be the one to do it. Anyone else goes and he'll just be nervous the whole time." Her eyes - primarily green with that slash of brown - shifted toward Nick, holding a firm and sincere attention on his face. He matched it, letting a brow twitch in a clear indication of contempt. "Rhee can go with you guys."

The blonde barked out a sound of protest, but Lena raised a hand to silence her into a quiet grunt. The younger woman shifted antsily on her feet, but took a few silent and agitated steps away from the bike in a relenting gesture.

Keeping his head low, Ellis turned to face the group. He hated the feeling of relief that crept in his chest; the plan meant Nick wouldn't be trapped in a car with him for the move. His lips twitched uncertainly, before he offered up, "Means if we get separated or somethin', we'll still have someone tuh lead us."

Nick slit a glare his way, and the subtle narrow to it made it supremely clear Nick read between the lines. There was something angry in the look; an agitation. "Shit's for the best." he snapped off, shortly, and Ellis let his eyes avert toward the ground.

It was wishful thinking to feel like he reacted out of hurt.

Lena turned, reaching to pull one of the two motorcycle helmets from where they dangled off the bike's rear-view mirrors. She shoved it over her head, straightening it out, and took the time to zip up her leather jacket. Her hands dusted over the protective pads strapped over her knees and shins, testing their grip with a tug or two, before she grabbed the other helmet and held it out toward the gambler.

He drew his chin up, sidling across the grass and up onto the driveway concrete. Rhiannon advanced to pass him, and they seemed liable to snap at each other like wild dogs as they drew near. He managed to resist the urge - but she did flash her cracked canine at him in an irritated half-snarl, one he could read like an open book.

She was scared, and that made him smirk. He had no intention of doing anything that wasn't self-
defense, but he wouldn't say no to having her be afraid of him. \textit{Over-estimate me, under-estimate me; I don't really give a shit as long as the assclown doesn't know what I'm capable of.}

With little more than a sneer, he stepped up and snatched the helmet out of Lena's hands.

The brunette let it go without a fight, expression now hidden behind the blacked-out window of her helmet's faceplate. Her voice came out just a little muffled, cocking her weight onto a hip. "I'd get Rhiannon to give you some gear, but I don't think it'd fit you. I'll try not to crash."

Nick flashed her a look of irritation before he lifted the helmet and drew it down over his head. It was a slightly tight fit, but it would work. He didn't bother to respond, turning to glance back at the sedan. He watched as Ellis slid into the car next to Christophe and Rhiannon stepped anxiously around to enter from the other side, baseball bat gripped in a cross over her chest as she opened the door and ducked inside.

He could just see her through the back window, and her body ended up squished against the inside of the door like she was trying to shrink away. It was likely in the interest of avoiding Chris' stumped arm, now facing her, but Nick liked to think it was discomfort. He wanted nothing more than for their car ride to be cripplingly awkward.

Coach stepped to the driver's seat, and with Rochelle hanging half out of the passenger side door, he glanced up. "A'ight. You lead, we'll be behind." he uttered, firmly. At Lena's nod, he opened the door and slid inside, Rochelle following suit with one last wary glance toward Nick.

Two car door slams later, and Lena turned toward the motorcycle. Grabbing the handle of her brush axe, she swung it up to collide the shaft against her shoulder, taking its weight there with her wrist hooked over the top to keep it from tipping backwards. "Okay. Think we can be civil?"

Nick went to smirk - but quickly faltered, reminding himself that she couldn't see his expression anymore than he could see hers. He grunted aloud instead, shaking his head. "That's up to you." he snapped back, and when her head cocked as if in preparation to respond, he pointed at the motorcycle. "Let's fucking go."

Grimacing to himself within the privacy of the borrowed motorcycle helmet, Nick approached the flank of the vehicle, setting a hand firmly on the biker's shoulder to brace himself as he slid up behind her.

Settling down, Nick braced a hand back against the bike beneath him, palm flat on the leather seat. Lena noticed, head turning to speak over her shoulder. "It's okay. You can put an arm around me. I won't bite, and it's safer." There was no malice, no mockery - nothing but a vague and hesitant warmth, like an olive branch.

He stared her down, silent in his disdain, so she shrugged at him and turned back around. She grasped ahold of her weapon, sliding it back and hooking the hilt within the bungee cables that rigged down their duffel bag. It remained within reach, sheathed and curved blade nestled against Nick's side.
She slipped a hand onto the bike keys and twisted them in the ignition, the bike rumbling to life. It was quieter than he expected, more a purr than a roar, and the woman lifted her foot enough to let it skid against the ground as she twisted the handle. The bike gave a lurid growl, effortlessly kicking into motion, rolling down the driveway.

Lena guided it past the sedan, and Nick was aware of eyes on him from inside. He inhaled, fighting off a sense of annoyance. While riding bitch wasn't optimal, neither was he interested in piloting the metal contraption. He'd never had the need to learn or the desire to, and getting on it at all was an unpleasant prospect. It vibrated dangerously beneath him, and he felt tremendously close to falling off.

*At least they'll be more miserable than me.*

He had approximately five seconds to enjoy that thought before Lena drove them through the opened front gate and out into the street - at which point she gave it some gas, causing the bike to lurch, and the sudden shift of balance caused Nick to snatch an arm around her waist. It was that or fall, and he'd had enough scarring and pain for one lifetime.

Nick heard her laugh, just a faint chuckle. The only reason he didn't outright demand to be let off was that she'd waited just long enough to get the fence between them and the sedan, saving him the pain of having everyone else witness it. That did not, however, stop him from internally making a note to get revenge.

Somehow.

Suddenly, he second-guessed who had it worse.
Chapter 182

There was quiet in the sedan - or the closest approximation to it, with Christophe in the back.

He sat leaned against Ellis, slumped into the curve of his arm, voice a low and thoughtless mutter. It didn't seem to be to anyone in particular, and most of it was in Spanish.

"Si hubiese sabido que iba a ser así no hubiese dejado - deseo haberme quedado en España..."

Ellis tried to keep his arm tucked tight against the carseat, making sure it didn't touch the foreigner's stumped arm. He frowned, distantly, eyes on his knees. The silence of his teammates itched at him, made almost worse by Christophe's quiet utterances. His nerves frayed at the sound - until he inhaled, and focused on listening, instead. The man's voice was a little soothing, with its rolling trill... even if he didn't really understand a word.

That, and he sensed that even had he spoken the language, it wouldn't have been very intelligible.

"Deseo haber ido con el. You know? Deseo. No hago bien a nadie."

Ellis tried to nod, soothingly, and it seemed to work well enough to calm the foreigner. Chris turned his chin, face nearly buried into Ellis' chest. The gesture startled him just slightly, but he tried to take it in stride.

"El corazón me duele... Hermano, you know. Tú y yo."

Rhiannon glanced over at them, lips quirking, but said nothing. She'd been tensely silent the entire time, huddled around her baseball bat with a certain nervous energy, out of place and isolated. Ellis would have normally extended some conversation to lighten the atmosphere, but he had little left to give.

The sedan trundled along the roadway, dodging obstacles and corpses under the careful guiding hand of Coach. They followed along behind the motorcycle, both moving at a fairly slow pace, half to keep close to each other and half to avoid making too much engine noise.

With the commotion and pipe bomb earlier, the area directly around the beach condo had been fairly quiet. It did not, however, last long. Within a few turns, the motorcycle led them onto a street littered with infected.

The survivors' presence quickly earned them some attention. "Fuck." Nick hissed from his place on the back of the bike, bracing himself with a tension, expecting the woman to speed them past. She did not.

Lena shoved her head into a jerk. "Grab the axe." she called loud enough to be heard through her helmet, an instruction that made Nick grimace. He was loathe to release her, and even moreso to add the heavy weapon's burden to his poor balance.

He was, however, beyond loathe to reveal those concerns, and retracted his arms from her waistline. The Northerner grabbed onto the brush axe's lengthy handle, just beneath the curved blade, and yanked it free of its bindings to the chassis of the motorcycle. It was not light, especially with his lingering shoulder pain, but he gritted his teeth and dragged it into his lap.

"The fuck am I supposed to do with -"
Lena's enthusiastic twist of the motorcycle handle sent them rollicking into an easy lunge, cutting across the road. The handful of infected streaming toward them followed eagerly, sprinting into an awkward clump as they followed the growl of the engine. Their screaming rose to a fever pitch, enraged.

She yelped, "Joust, dude!", as they approached. Nick had little option but to obey, even as he wanted to complain mightily. He got one hand on the handle mid-way up, twisting it to brace the end against his stomach so it was jutted out horizontally from them.

The biker swerved, just softly, and lined them up to cut just in front of the collection of infected. Nick snarled, angling the axe like a lance as they drove past. The collision was hard, jamming the end of the weapon into his gut. He grunted in pain, but the infected gave way before he did.

The blade sunk effortlessly through flesh, splitting an infected nearly in half as it speared into it with the motorcycle's momentum. It collapsed in a flood of viscera, snarling from a pallid and sunken face.

The next infected lunged into the weapon, grabbing at it as they drove past. It missed, mostly, but managed to ram its hip into the blade with a wet pierce. The blade sliced into the joint, sawing through the base of its thigh by pure momentum, but sticking grittily against the thick thigh bone.

Nick tightened his grip on the brush hook, growling as the strike sent him off-balance. He was distantly aware of Lena's gloved hand abruptly grasping fingers in his shirt, directing the bike one-handed as she used the other to keep him aboard. He might've protested, had he not been a little glad.

"Hold on!" she announced a split second before she squeezed the brakes, killing the forward momentum that had been carrying them along even when she'd released the gas. The motorcycle jolted, twisting hard to the side, and Lena dropped a foot to drag her heel across the concrete as they slowed to a stop.

When the woman leapt off with no warning, Nick startled into straightening his legs and catch his heels against the road, keeping the bike upright when it threatened to topple.

Her hands slid to tear the axe from his, gripping it like a spear. Lena dropped into a low stance, facing the oncoming group of infected. A quick swipe lopped off the head of the closest, though it continued to run at her with only a gradual, twitching failure of limbs. It collapsed onto its knees - then its face.

The remaining zombies charged her, and she was forced to slant the axe into a diagonal block, shoving out at them with the long handle. The blow struck them into a stumble, bumping into each other, and gave her enough time to get a hand under the shaft and jab it out, piercing the hooked end through the midsection of one.

Pulling it back caught the curved blade on flesh, rending the infected's body open in a gash as it was removed. The smell of torn stomach and bloated intestines was nearly enough to singe Nick's nose, even at a distance.

Nick reached down to grab his Magnum from its holster on his thigh, thumb snatching the safety off before he carefully raised it, gripping his other hand over his knuckles to steady his aim. She must have spotted the motion out of the corner of her eye, because she took a quick step backwards to get out of his line of fire.

He fired twice, pulling the trigger in quick succession.
Two infected went down, one missing a hole through its cheekbone, the other choking through a burst throat. He eyed them as they collapsed, one of them stumbling back and crashing into the remaining zombie still on its feet. *Guess my aim's gone back to normal.* crossed his mind, some idle observation. He spared a glance toward his hands, noting how the muzzle of the gun did not tremble anymore. *If only everything else would.*

Surging forward in her newfound room to breathe, Lena swung the brush hook over her head, wielding it with a tight two-fisted grip like a sledgehammer. Gravity did most of the work, and the blade came down right into the infected's skull, sundering it just as it had recovered its balance. It stood there as if in shock, arms up and hands striking her helmet, but its nails found no purchase against the polycarbonate front visor.

Lena twisted, hard, blade prying the two halves of its skull apart. A seizure struck its body before it collapsed, sliding to the ground with a gargled and incoherent whine. She grimaced, quickly retreating, lowering the axe and twisting her wrist to shake some of the gore off. Glancing over her shoulder, the blank face of her helmet - now streaked with fingerprints of black and red gore - directing toward Nick.

"Thanks." she uttered, lightly.

He grunted noncommittally, replacing his Magnum safely into his holster.

The sedan rolled up to them, wheels crackling against the asphalt. Coach leaned his head through the broken driver's side window, where Ellis had broken into the car, and gazed at them. "Y'all a'ight?" Nick could see faces peering at him through the windshield; Ellis' was a notable exception. "Better keep movin', them gunshots'll bring on more."

Lena waved up a hand in quick acquiescence, turning to jog back to the motorcycle. She handed the brush axe back to Nick to free her hands, hopping smoothly in front of him. Her weight shifted back against his front, raising her elbows in an instinctive gesture to allow Nick room to grasp her midsection again. "Gosh-darn zombies." she muttered, only just audible through her helmet.

Nick snorted, despite himself. It reminded him just a little of Ellis, and that should have annoyed him. Instead, he crossed the brush hook over his chest with one hand bracing it there, and let his free hand snake around the woman's waist. He gripped fingers on her hip, digits catching on the leather of her jacket. "Just don't throw me off, yeah?"

She let out a laugh, a charmed little twist to the sound. "If I haven't kicked Rhee off all this time, you should be fine." she promised. As she twisted the gas, drawing the bike into a thin U-turn to get them facing the right way again, Nick couldn't help an idle awareness of how warm it was in the space between them.

He didn't know what bothered him more: that it had taken him that long for his interest to perk, or that he felt a faint and soft guilt at the thought.

That *did* annoy him.
Chapter 183

Rochelle chewed on and off on her lip, teeth grinding against the grooves dehydration had made in the flesh. She blinked her gaze subtly up to the rear view mirror, gazing at their passengers.

Chris had fallen asleep abruptly, pressed tightly under Ellis' arm. She could see the shine of drool on the Georgian's shirt, and couldn't help a little swell of fondness. It was cute, if worrisome, to see him so delirious. "Are we sure we didn't mess up the dosage?" she murmured sideways to Coach. "He's super out of it."

The big man shrugged, eyes riveted on the motorcycle rumbling on ahead of them. "Don't much know. Gave him what you told me." he responded in an almost defensive snap, drawing a frown from Rochelle. She hadn't meant it critically, but couldn't blame him; they were all tense.

Drawing her arms into a careful cross, she tried to respond with a flat tone: "I'm not saying you didn't. I'm saying maybe we gave him too much. Especially considering he hasn't been eating, and he's lost weight - maybe we should be halving it or something..."

Coach grunted, indelicately, flicking a pinky against the steering wheel. "Maybe he took extra."

She blinked, head tilting, worry draining irritation from her posture. "You think?" Her eyes returned to the mirror, gazing more intently at the Spaniard. "I hope not. Last thing we need is to run out of meds, or have him get sick. No wonder he's loopy..."

"I'd be popping shitloads of pills if I lost a fucking arm." Rhiannon offered, quietly, the first words she'd said since they'd left the condo. Ellis' head vaguely twitched up, turning to look at her, curiously. "That's ass luck. I felt like going postal just with a cracked tooth."

The Georgian allowed a slight wince, gaze dropping. He wasn't certain why he felt responsible, but he did. After all, he was almost sure Nick had gotten so violent because he'd been injured. Because he cared, or at least felt so protective, it drove him to rage.

Still don't mean he loves me, I guess. Ellis wasn't sure if he meant it sarcastically or not. All he knew was that it hurt to think.

"Yer tooth still achin'?" he questioned, instead, earning a slightly slanted grin from the blonde.

She took her gloved thumb and tapped it against the broken canine pointedly. The bottom left edge had sheared off, leaving it jagged. "Nah. Don't notice anymore. Just gotta eat on the other side. I bit into a piece of jerky once and fucking lost my shitting mind. Hurt like a bitch."

Ellis shook his head, vague shame touching his voice. "Sorry 'bout that. If I could go back'n'make it not happen, I -"

Rhiannon put a hand up, cutting a grin across the cabin at him. "Hey, douchebag. We're even, remember? Drop it." She kept her eyes on him, missing the way both Coach and Rochelle stiffened. Ellis caught it, however. His eyes flickered forward, a flood of relief threatening when they waited to gauge his reaction. At least they trusted him enough to follow his lead.

So he laughed, maybe slightly forcefully. "Okay, girl." escaped him in a soft voice. He saw Coach's fingers loosen from their death grip on the steering wheel, and Rochelle's head relaxed against the seat headrest.
The blonde pushed her body against the car window, tilting her head to look out at the street. "Anyway, I'm sure your buddy is fine. He seems like a fucking badass. You don't get an arm chopped off and come out laughing if you don't have some big brass balls."

Ellis tightened his arm against Chris' side, hearing the softest murmur from the young man as Chris' hand tightened on his waist in response. It was embarrassing to admit, but he didn't mind the contact, the familiarity. If Chris had been intentionally trying to comfort him, he might have felt awkward about it - but the way it was, he allowed himself the indulgence.

It helped quiet the pain in his chest. Made him feel less alone. Warmed him. He didn't know if the foreigner would have initiated the embrace without the influence of painkillers, but he decided not to overthink.

"He is." he admitted, closing his eyes. "He fought to protect us from his last group when they turned bad, and he wrestled a Witch to save Coach'n' Ro'. It's how he got hurt."

The biker's studded eyebrow raised, giving a sideways glance to Christophe. A vague surprise lingered there, and a calculated blink, like she were adjusting some calculation in her head. "Reminds me of a guy Lee and I met awhile back. We split up, though. Fucknut didn't want to hang around, I guess."

Rochelle placed a hand against her thigh, turning her head to glance back over her shoulder. "Oh, yeah? When was this?" Her tone held itself back to something innocuous, but Ellis knew better. It was a cautious voice, verging on nervous.

He scrunched his nose slightly, curious. The question was loaded, and he didn't entirely understand why. Sitting behind her meant he couldn't see her expression to gauge her intentions.

Rhiannon shrugged up her shoulder, bouncing her knees from side to side so her banded bat tipped one way and then the other. "Few days ago. Man, he was a fuckin' prick. Hot, though, like - take a bite kinda sexy. I'd have gone there, even with an eye missing."

Unable to resist, Ellis cocked his head to interject, "Damn, an eye? Did he have one of those glass eyes or somethin'?"

The biker snorted, snapping her legs together to catch her bat and still its motion. She flicked up a hand to run gloved fingers through her roughened blonde hair in a thoughtless gesture. "Dude, no. He lost it in the apocalypse, fighting with his old buddies. Apparently some cunt just hacked it out with -"

Coach slammed on the brakes, hard.

Ellis felt the distinct sensation of the car halting, and his body trying very hard to continue on without it. His seatbelt dug ferociously into his collarbone with a snap, and Chris nearly flung forward and off his side. It was reflex that made Ellis grasp fingers onto the waistband of his cargo shorts, keeping him from tumbling off, but the jolt still woke the man.

"¡Mierda!" he blurted, eyes glazed as they darted around the car. "What -?"

Rhiannon grasped the shoulder of Coach's chair, leaning to look ahead. "Oh, motherfuck." she uttered, raising her free hand to point. Lena and Nick had halted, just before an intersection in the road. "Trouble."

Ellis scrambled to join her in leaning forward, arm keeping Chris close as the foreigner druggedly clung to him, expression trapped between confusion and alarm. Lena was waving, just twice - and
then she fisted a gloved hand and tapped it against the side of her helmet.

"She's hearing a Charger." Rhiannon announced, simply, drawing a slightly gawped look from Ellis before he realized what was happening. The idea of telepathy was slightly more fun than the concept of hand signals, but he still felt a flood of envy.

"Aw, man, my buddy Keith'n'me used tuh make up signals! Especially after his hearin' got bad."

"And a Smoker." Rhiannon overrode him flatly, as Lena tapped two fingers near her covered mouth. She didn't get to continue before the brunette flashed up a hand and circled it in the air, then thumbed toward the road crossing theirs. "That's for horde. Goddamn, it's a clusterfuck ahead... Maybe -"

"If we're done doing sign language like idiots." Nick's voice crackled abruptly from the front seat, droll and agitated. Ellis' eyes flickered up, watching as Lena's arms lowered, posture abashed as she glanced back at Nick where he sat behind her. His helmet was lifted just enough to talk into the radio grasped in his hand.

Lena smacked the forehead of her bike helmet with a palm, and the softest echo of her voice came through the radio. "Oopsy-daisy. Forgot." If Ellis squinted, he could almost see the slip of teeth from Nick's grin under the bottom edge of the helmet, and - for reasons he couldn't quite put into words - it bothered him.

"Uh-huh. Anyway, we're gonna get fucked out here. Sounds like a goddamn rock concert around the corner."

Since when had he been being nice to them? Good-natured? Last Ellis had checked, the gambler was all-around violently opposed to their presence. Now they were getting along? Ellis should have been relieved, but all he felt was a distant jealousy.

Surely, he was just being paranoid.

Coach grabbed the hand radio where it sat belted on his khakis, pressing the 'Talk' button with his thumb. "A'ight. How 'bout I keep drivin', and everyone else comes out, be ready to fight? We'll try skirtin' trouble if we can, go slow."

Lena waved a hand at Nick, and he offered the radio forward toward her, activating the transmission. "Sounds good. If we're careful, we can probably go around the worst of it. Our base is still a few streets down." she uttered, eagerly. "I'll push the bike."

With that, Coach glanced over his shoulder. His eyes darted to Christophe, thoughtful, then matched the younger Georgian's with sudden ferocity. "The girls go. Maybe Ellis, you stay wit' Chris, make sure he stays calm? And in his seat?"

Ellis wanted to frown - but not out of offense. If anything, he frowned because he felt a little glad for the excuse to stay in the car. He knew it wasn't realistic to want to avoid Nick entirely, but he needed just a little break. Some breathing room, where he could think clearly.

He definitely didn't want to watch Nick be nice.

"Yeah." he managed, quietly. He reached down to the floorboard, grabbing up Nick's katana where it lay there. Raising it, carefully, Ellis poked the handle up into the front of the cabin. "Ro', take the sword. Ain't got the ammo fer a bunch'uh shootin'."

She relented, grabbing the katana and dragging it into her lap. Her other hand slid to pick up her
handgun from the cupholder in the door, flashing a smile over her shoulder. "Okay, Rhiannon. You ready to fight some zambos with us?"

The biker gave a look that could almost be misconstrued as *beaming*, sliding her hand down to grip the handle of her baseball bat.

"I was fucking born ready, baby."
Chapter 184

Lining up next to the motorcycle, there was some quiet tension as the group took stock.

Rhiannon tapped her baseball bat against the toe of her right boot, the metal of the bands plinking softly. Beside her, Lena balanced her brush hook on its tip against the asphalt, fingers tapping against the shaft. Nick leaned with a hand on the motorcycle, attention rotating around them guardedly.

Rochelle approached, the faintest of frowns on her lips as she stepped away from the sedan.

Her eyes flickered to the two bikers, withholding a sigh. She was wary of jumping to conclusions, but the idea of them meeting a man a few days ago... one who had been chased from his group by someone cruel enough to carve out an eye...

Didn't the dots connect themselves?

Panic oozed at the edge of her consciousness, a paranoia that desired to flood out her good sense. If the other ex-Angel were still around, how would he react to seeing Chris? Wasn't it possible the man might blame him for his pains, much like Nick seemed to feel the Spaniard had been complicit in theirs? Worse, what if he didn't understand why Brenda had perished alongside Jerry, and considered the survivors enemies?

You're being ridiculous. she tried in some vague self-soothing gesture. At least wait until you know something for sure. Don't just freak out.

Rather than obsess over potential fears, she focused on the very real ones at hand. Assuming they made it safely to their new base of operations, she'd have plenty of time to grill the women on the subject, anyway. There was not nearly as much time to deal with the infected quietly snarling and wandering along the adjacent street.

"Okay. Nick -" Rochelle lifted the katana gripped in her left hand and offered it out, hilt-first. The gambler shot her a mildly surprised glance, taking in her posture as she advanced. "You, Lena, and Rhiannon lead with the melee weapons. I'll push the bike and watch our backs."

As Nick lazily crossed the distance between them to pry the sword from her fingers, Lena frowned just softly. "I can push it. It's my bike, my problem."

Though the words came off defensive or possessive, she didn't break from her usual gentle tone - so Rochelle spared her a smile and raised her right hand, palm out, to display the wound there. Her skin had knit together in a rough and jagged line, the flesh light where it was newly healing. "I'm not in great fighting condition, least of all with a two-hander. Better to have you on deck."

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The biker's eyes darted to take in the injury, quick to nod. Some sympathy tinted the green-hazel colour, but a businesslike brusqueness took her body into a turn. "Okay. Let's move, then. If we go down two or three blocks, I think we can cut across and make it to base."

"That's all well and good -" Nick uttered, grasping the katana and slinging it up to rest the back edge against his shoulder. "- but I just want to make some things clear before we move."

Rochelle crossed her arms, rolling her head back slightly on her neck. She got an immediately bad feeling about his intentions.
"We're under a bit of a time crunch here, suit." She was growing thoroughly impatient with Nick, even as she tried to rein in her frustration... for the time being, at least. Fighting wouldn't make it any easier on Ellis. "Like zombie-bite sort of crunch."

Nick snorted, reaching his free hand to catch fingertips on his dress shirt, plucking idly on the button at his navel. "I just want to make sure we understand each other. I'll fight, but I'm not putting my ass on the line for some fucks I barely know. If shit goes south, we leave."

With narrowed eyes, Rhiannon watched Nick's movements, her posture carrying an intensity that came off vaguely threatening. She curled her tongue idly against her cracked canine, sucking in air enough to make the softest whistling sound. "Same to you, cuntstick." she spat back, shoulders hunching up.

Rochelle felt a stir of humor. Working to understand Nick's warped shows of emotion had trained her well, making it almost trivially easy to decode the woman's posture as faint hurt - but fear, too. Defense.

Lena put out a hand to almost touch Rhiannon's arm. "Sis." That silenced the younger woman, and Lena let the hand drop, grabbing instead at her axehandle. She twisted it to face the blade forward, gripping the weapon close to her side. "You can do whatever you want, hoss. But for the record, we'll have your back."

Turning, the biker gingerly stepped toward the intersection, leaning out to look across the road. Rhiannon almost moodily followed, body slinking low like that of a stray dog. She slipped up behind her sister and a mutter was shared between them, making Lena grin outright.

Rochelle glanced sideways at Nick, a faint smirk touching her lips. "I like her." she offered, dodging the wilting stare he sent her way by busying herself with sidling up beside the motorcycle. She bumped the kickstand out of the way, grabbing the handlebars and grunting faintly as she shoved it into motion.

"All I need is more women badgering me." Nick muttered, exhaling a frustrated sigh as he turned away. "I get enough of that from you." He started to move forward, matching Rochelle's pace as the bike rolled forward.

Her palm stung where it pressed into the handle, so she adjusted her grip to rest more on the heel of her hand. She grinned to herself, wearily. Her voice dropped to a mutter with little energy behind it. "Boy, if that's how you think about women, colour me unsurprised you're into dick."

Nick's gaze swiveled, latching onto her face without stopping his stride. "What?" he snapped, low and suspicious of her utterance, it having been just barely too quiet to be made out.

Rochelle's grin turned devilish, pushing harder to jog the bike forward for a few paces to pull ahead of him. "Nothin'." She turned to look behind them, watching the sedan roll along at their heels. The sunlight streaked a messy glare over the windshield, but she was almost sure Coach was glaring at her like he sensed she was making trouble.

She stuck her tongue out.

Nick didn't have time to press the issue when Lena advanced out past the fence that bordered the street corner. She gripped her brush-hook with one hand midway up the handle and the other cupped around the end, bracing it, and gave a thin chirrup of a whistle.

Although Rochelle couldn't see, a snarl made it clear there were infected waiting for them. It only
took a beat of time for a shape to flash forward, a female zombie bolting forward in a staggered lunge. It didn't seem to register when the head of the axe slid into its torso, bringing it to a stuttered halt as the flat end of the haft struck into it and impeded its progress along the blade.

Lena took a short step back at the collision, grunting. The infected stretched out its arms, kicking and sliding its feet against the concrete sidewalk to surge against the weapon spearing it. A single flip-flop slapped from its place on the thing's left foot.

As it struggled, the biker slid a palm to the top of the handle and pushed downward with a jump of her weight.

The blade burst down through it with a wet splatter, striking hard into the thick pelvic bone and getting stuck there. The creature screamed, bending forward in a rage-possessed attempt to reach her, but all it did was hurry the leaking of its innards.

The short woman yanked, hard, unsheathing her weapon. When the zombie tried to lunge forward, footing unsteady, Lena swiveled on her heel, hands sliding up the shaft as she moved so she could whip the end up and strike the infected across the face with it.

Its head snapped to the side, and whatever light was left in its eyes went out.

"More coming!" she alerted, quick to relax back into a readied stance. Rhiannon jolted next to her, a practiced distance between them to allow space for Lena to swing her axe.

A faint scowl touched Nick's face, but he didn't hesitate to advance. "Okay, come on then, assclowns." he muttered, gripping his katana with both hands as he strode wide around the two women.

Rhiannon was staring at him; he could feel it.

He could definitely feel that she feared him, for one reason or another. He knew when someone was afraid of him. It had always been, after all, one of two of his favourite emotions to manipulate. Fear and lust gets you anywhere. Even if it's all lies.

Love had never made that list.

He'd never wanted anything to do with it.

There was just a handful of infected streaking toward them, and their attention was zeroed in on Lena. Taking advantage of their tunnel vision, Nick took a few steps forward, turning himself and winding up with the sword.

One good swing as the infected came within range cleaved a head from its shoulders, and the body took a wide stutter-step to the side and crashed into one of its fellows. The smaller zombie went down under the weight, screaming, and the remaining three merely trampled them in their urgency to advance.

He watched them pass, turning a cool stare onto the blonde biker as if to say: "Well?"

She snarled, furiously, and he knew he'd gotten under her skin.

Rhiannon jumped forward, catching one of them with a blow to the knee. Its leg twisted wildly as bone broke, shards and rounded planes of white popping easily through the flesh, and she followed it to the ground. A quiet huffed growl left her as she brought the bat up over her head - and then smashed it down, bursting the thing's skull on the concrete like a rotted-out pumpkin.
Her teeth flashed in a sneer of challenge, eyes darting up toward the gambler, just in time to watch him spear his katana down through the zombie that had become trapped underneath the headless one. The blade sunk through the back of its skull, though it took a twist to get it to stop moving.

She stared at it - then his face, almost uncomprehending, pierced brow twitching.

Nick froze up where he stood, tongue half-curled, because what he meant to say got stuck in his throat.

Two to your one.

His eyes darted away, and his body followed. As Lena jabbed her brush-hook into the chest of one zombie, twisting to shear between ribs and thrust into its lungs, Nick lashed out at the other infected remaining and took a massive slash out of its back.

It screamed, turning in a stagger as black blood flooded from the wound like sludge. The zombie rushed him, and he barely struck in time to stop it from clawing out at him. His katana split through its midsection, rending flesh like paper.

As it fell, the four stood amidst the pile of corpses - still, but for the twitch of rogue neuron impulses and the flow of sickly-sweet smelling blood - and panted.

Nick licked at his lower lip, regretting the reflex when something sour touched his senses. He turned, sharply, taking in the road ahead rather than acknowledge the way Rhiannon's scowl had turned nearly befuddled.

"Let's go. And watch for Chargers." he muttered over his shoulder before darting into motion. The sound of footsteps and the roll of wheels behind him was the only indication anyone obeyed.

He wished he felt anger.

Anger was better than melancholy.
Chapter 185

Rhiannon and Lena fought like a well-oiled machine.

Watching them was distantly mesmerizing, as the brunette's heavy weapon swings took off limbs and hacked deep into flesh - and Rhiannon filled the space between, agile movements darting her in and out of the fray. Her bat was lightweight enough to pepper blows and keep the infected back, but the banded reinforcements kept it strong enough to lay down bone-shattering strikes when backed into a corner.

It made sense that they would work well together. Even without a familial bond, the idea of surviving as a pair did not pass Nick by without a fair bit of surprise. It was a simple matter to get overwhelmed as a foursome; as only two, it was hard to believe they'd made it at all.

It impressed him, he dared to think.

This did not preclude him being an asshole.

"Keep the fuck up, ladies." he ordered, slashing his katana easily through the blur of flesh that streaked past him. When they gathered in a crowd, a flood, it became hard to distinguish one zombie from the next or even the whole. Every time he thought he'd killed one, a limb would surge to grab and claw for him.

They kept up a constant pace forward, but the infected kept up a constant stream, sprinting out from alleyways and doorways and charging at them. Between him and the two bikers, they managed to keep forging ahead - but it felt like whatever they severed would only grow back exponentially.

What is it? Chimera? No, that's the goat thing - "Zombies don't reproduce, right?" he snarled, beheading an infected as it lunged, teeth snapping and broken nails catching on his sleeve. A burning sensation said it had scored his wrist, but cuts and scrapes barely triggered his awareness anymore.

As the fighting intensified, Rochelle had drawn nearer, huddled close to the motorcycle she pushed. Her eyes kept a constant guard around them, taking care to watch their back and ensure Coach was following along in the car. "Why? Looking for a date?" she retorted, mildly, only avoiding a nasty stare from the Northerner by virtue of the fact he was distracted.

"Trying to decide if they'll run out." he snapped back, colder than he meant. Nick could feel the vague pleasure radiating from her, satisfied with getting on his nerves. She'd found a loophole in their agreement, it seemed; being a bitch to him without specifically mentioning Ellis.

It was working.

"There's only like, a few hundred million people in the U.S., so... I guess." Lena offered helpfully, tone breathless. "Eventually." She braced the handle of her brush-axe against her waist, jabbing it, spearlike, to implant it in the chest of a zombie. The creature clawed and gnashed in protest, stuck there like it was looped in the end of a dogcatcher's pole.

Rhiannon leapt at the opportunity, bashing the infected in the face with her bat. It stumbled back off the blade, staggering, neck crackling as the strike fractured vertebrae. It seemed like it might recover, so she struck it a few more times, grunting. "Minus all the immune like us. And everyone dead."
Shaking a hunk of flesh off her blade, the older biker grimaced lightly. "And anyone like Dad, holed up." She gripped the axe tight, lashing out low to cut into a zombie's thigh as it raced forward. Its leg failed underneath it, but that didn't stop its momentum as it put weight on the dead flesh, knee locking in some vague mimicry of a step.

The joint protested, wobbling, and it lunged itself at her in a leap with arms splayed. The male was dressed in swim shorts and an open Hawaiian shirt, though both were so bloody and dirtied as to be a dim shade of brown. Lena reacted quickly, thrusting her weapon up in a crossed shove.

"Crap -"

The creature hit the weapon first, lunging against it, but Lena's arms were not quite long enough to hold it entirely at bay. Its hands scrabbled at her shoulders, failing to find purchase against the leather or do more than scratch at the material.

Lena's strength held firm, heels digging into the street as the large infected shoved against her weapon, shrieking into her face. She winced as black spittle struck her cheek, ducking her chin away in time for Rhiannon to grab her bat with both hands and jab the tip of it into the side of the zombie's head.

It staggered with the force of the blow, turning with a ferocious snarl to face the blonde.

The infected might have lunged for her, had Lena not jolted backwards a step and swung her axe. The blade slammed hard into its back, hooked edge piercing through its flesh. One good yank caught the hook through its spine, and its lower body collapsed like it had been paralyzed.

It hit the ground, helplessly clawing at the air, snarling and champing its teeth. Lena didn't waste the time to put it down, abandoning it to suffer on the ground. She continued on with a slightly winded exhale and a quick glance of gratitude toward her sister.

Nick eyed the eager grin that crossed Rhiannon's lips, unable to help a twist of humour. For all her intensity and acrid attitude, she looked like little more than a praised child under the attention of her sibling. It amused him at the same time he filed it away.

It was obvious enough that Rhiannon was Lena's weak spot, judging from their behaviour earlier. Knowing it was mutual gave him a weapon, an edge. Nothing he'd use except in dire straits, but a tool nonetheless.

After all, hadn't Chris' soft spot for Rochelle come in handy?

He turned his attention forward, noting that the flow of infected had slowed. "So, ultimately, too fucking many." He stepped ahead into the street, slashing at a zombie scrambling at him, nearly on all fours. His katana slid easily through its shoulder, cutting in until it hit chestbone and halted.

Nick winced at the impact. He did *not* want to break the blade.

"But one less."

Withdrawing it gently, he kicked the dying infected away with his heel. His chin lifted to glance down the road, scanning the streetside. They'd left the scruffy, unkempt rows of beachhouse condos and re-entered something like a town. The road widened to accommodate fat sidewalks, lined with storefronts.

It might have been filled with wandering vacationers, in some distant past, and not a clotted mix of infected and corpses.
"Where's this base of yours?" he questioned harshly, jerking his sword to point down the road. There was a cluster of cars a few blocks away, noses crushed together in what looked like it had been a high-speed collision. One was a dirtied SUV, but the other was an ambulance, white and red paintjob marred with streaks of blood as infected had leaned and pawed past it. "Close?"

Lena nodded, raising a hand to wipe gore from her cheek with an unpleasant twitch of her lips. In the same motion, she thumbed ahead in a motioning gesture. "Yeah. If you look, you can see the -" A snarl from behind them snapped Nick's head around, eyes quick to catch on the shape of an infected scrambling toward them. It was sprinting up to the sedan, and reflex had him moving before his mind fully processed it. "Watch Ro'." he barked over his shoulder, striding up to and past the car. His gaze cut to the side long enough to catch Coach eyeing him up through the broken driver's side window, almost gaugingly. The look wasn't aggressive; moreso, it was an examination. It was beyond him what he'd done - recently - to earn the stare, so he ignored it.

And then his gaze flicked up, slanting into the backseat, to find Ellis with an arm wrapped around Christophe. The Spaniard was tucked into a curl, so tightly pressed into the loop of Ellis' arm and the curve of his side that it put his cheek on Ellis' chest. The man's existing arm was shoved behind him, and Nick could just make out his hand, gripping Ellis' waist. He felt nothing, and then he felt fury.

Nick did not intentionally halt, did not mean to stare. He didn't realize he had, not until the infected was suddenly upon them, slamming hard into the trunk of the sedan. It bent over the rump of the car and started clambering up, hands beating on the rear window, squealing out a furious noise through a broken set of teeth and torn lips. The impact startled Ellis, grabbing suddenly to place his other arm in front of Chris and keep him close. His eyes lifted, blinking up to meet Nick's through the cloudy window. Genuine confusion flickered over them, and Nick forced his body into motion.

He lifted his sword, thrusting out with it like a rapier. The blade sunk straight through the zombie's torso, and with it caught against the strong bone of its ribcage, he shoved hard to the side. A squawk left the infected as the sword dragged it along, rolling off the car. It slid free of the blade as it fell to the ground.

It recovered almost immediately, scrabbling to get its feet under itself and catapult itself back up. The creature screamed, eyes gone wild and yellow behind a set of swim goggles, and charged him. Nick slashed the blade at neck-level, taking off its head with a wet squelch. He had to step to the side as its body fell at him, muscles twitching in some attempt to keep running even after its head had been cleft from its shoulders. He grimaced at the flood of black-brown blood that left its sundered neck. It didn't squirt out like it should have. It oozed, like the creature's heart had long since slowed, or its blood thickened and congealed.

Green eyes flickered back up, staring for just a moment at the car, though he had lost his line of sight to Ellis.

He knew what jealousy felt like. He wasn't stupid enough to miss the feeling brewing in his chest. Knew that feeling from the late nights his ex-wife spent out - the casual way she'd come home, or not come home at all, and how he'd sit there and stew. Knowing acutely he shouldn't care...
that he cared.

The only difference was that he’d earned the pain this time.

Exhaling shortly, he shook his head, sliding his katana to hang at his side and charging back toward the front of the group. He was being ridiculous; it wasn't as if there were anything actually going on between the two men. The Spaniard was ill and injured and needed support, and Ellis was too kind to do anything but provide it.

That was what logic told him.

Emotion had him snarling at Rochelle as he passed.

"Watch your fucking boyfriend." She startled outright, straightening, confusion making her eyes flicker between him and the sedan. He didn't wait for her to process, continuing on, vitriol lingering in his voice. "Let's fucking go, Jesus Christ. Is this a goddamn picnic or are we going to actually make any goddamn progress?"

He hated the ugly feeling roiling in his gut. It made him feel pathetic and small, wretched, and he wanted to slide his katana into his stomach and carve the tension out.

If only he had the courage.

Lena passed a look toward her sister, lips pursing and teeth catching on the inside of her cheek. She tried for a small grin, shrugging, though she seemed vaguely put off when Rochelle failed to even look her way. The producer was busy examining Nick's back, expression somewhere between confused and thoughtful.

Lena's bewilderment only worsened when Rochelle abruptly looked - for all the world - tickled.

The brunette paused long enough to scratch at her arm, frowning faintly before she forced herself to continue moving before Nick got too far ahead. She snatched Rhiannon's sleeve as she went, dragging her along. "Hey, Nick, slow -"

Her words fell on deaf ears, interrupted flatly by the hacking, squelching cough of a Smoker. Nick froze, and that was potentially the worst response. It made him an easy target for the agile, glistening tongue that shot out from a fence across the street and struck his leg.

There was a serene quality to the sensation. The idea of being dragged away and eviscerated did not distress him as much as it should have. Then the tendril yanked his legs out from under him, sending him crashing bodily to the concrete, and survival instinct kicked in.

Namely, he curled his body, turning to take the majority of the fall on his shoulder, and lashed out blindly with his katana. He did so blindly enough that he missed, and a sharp gush of pain said he'd nicked his leg, instead. The sensation flinched his hand away, and he distantly heard the sound of it clattering away on the asphalt.

The tongue retracted, dragging him effortlessly across the road.

Even as hot pain marked the scrape of concrete as he rolled and skated, he tried to grab for the Magnum holstered to his thigh. Unfortunately, the tongue was faster, and it wrapped up the length of his calf and trapped his hand there, flesh oddly rigid and tightening to an excruciating crush.

It felt like the bones in his hand might give way, crushed against the hard shape of his gun, and he could do little but shout in pain. It seemed to take years to reach the Smoker, eyes closed and body
as tightly curled as he could manage to focus the damage on the softer shapes of his shoulders and legs.

_Holy shit, how fucking slow are your fucking reflexes you useless fucking pieces of shit -_

And then he was slamming easily against a strange shape, and a set of cold, greasy fingers closed around his head, gripping on his jawline to tip his chin up. He was vaguely aware of the reeking scent of smoke and decay, but had little time to acknowledge it before the tongue wormed its way straight up his torso and slid around his neck.

It could have torn his throat out, or ripped claws into him. It could have done any number of things to kill him.

It didn't.

The creature hacked out a noise near his ear, breath somehow both chill as ice and moist like steam - and it drew him close, tongue tightening around his neck. It meant to squeeze the life out of him, feel him die, and that was uniquely terrifying. It exposed a cruelty that he didn't know how to process from something that should have been mindless and fueled by rage.

He writhed, fought, but it only encouraged the creature to tighten fingers against his jaw and tendril against his frame. He could not think clearly enough to recognize that he should have limpened, as oxygen-starvation started to whiten his vision.

Then it screamed, and the tongue loosened enough to let some air enter his chest. Nick gasped in a surge that shuddered his whole body, but he didn't get oxygen. He got foul, acrid air that stung his eyes and burned in his lungs. He felt a hand grab his chest, and blindly collapsed toward the contact, feeling the tongue slither loose from his upper body.

It remained tangled around his legs, and he stumbled down to his knees as his saviour dragged him out from the worst of the cloud.

"Jesus, Nick!" Rochelle's voice cried out, agitated, as she dropped to a crouch in front of him. One hand slid to grab the back of his neck, while the other set down his katana on the concrete. She started to yank the tendril free from his legs, movements frenetic. "Get your shit together! We've got a Charger nearby -"

Nick didn't have the presence of mind to fight as she freed him, or complain. He couldn't do much but cough, like the foulness exuded from the Smoker had sunk low in his lungs and he couldn't breathe deep enough to expel it.

He only just managed to crack his eyes open, barely registering his location, now on the opposite side of the street from where the bike and car sat. The blur of dark colours in his vision marked where Lena and Rhiannon stood in the middle of the road, braced close together. There was a much larger blur of grey that loomed out from behind the crashed ambulance, lopsided shape hard to mistake.

The quiet did not last before it _roared._
Chapter 186

Nick wanted to say he chose to be useless. That he was just holding up his promise not to put his life on the line for two near-strangers, and it was a conscious decision to sit there incapacitated. That felt better than admitting he was too weak to move, his hand pulsing and his head and chest aching ferociously, vision barely clear enough to identify what emotion was on Rochelle's face.

"Fuck." she uttered, leaping up to stand. "Stay here!"

Nick could do little more than give a rattling cough in response, spitting onto the concrete as a sour taste threatened to crawl its way up his throat. The sensation and the flavour prompted a heave from his gut, though it resulted in nothing more than tacky bile.

Uttering a frustrated noise, Rochelle turned, fearful attention darting for the Charger. It stamped hard against the road, chuffing incoherently, sunken eyes darting between the survivors. Rochelle's abrupt movement had drawn its attention, but the bikers were closer - it seemed unsure, like it couldn't quite decide who posed a more significant threat.

The creature turned, head swiveling to stare toward Rochelle and Nick.

Panic startled her into motion, grabbing for the pistol tucked in the waistband of her jeans. She couldn't let it charge; even if she dodged it, it would either trample Nick or kill him by hand the moment it'd regained its bearings. She also didn't know if she could hit it from that distance, and did she have more than one or two shots before it reached them?

Okay. Breathe. Focus.

She raised the pistol, bracing her palm against her curled fist to steady her aim. The Charger snorted - then howled softly with a snapping and rigidly boned jaw, zeroing in on the gun with pinpoint attention. That was a threat, and its posture shifted, ready to propel itself with muscle-bloated legs, the gesture sending its withered off-arm into a boneless flap.

Focus -

"Hey! Hey, you jerk!"

Thrusting her arms up, Lena suddenly jolted into a few steps, nearly pinwheeling them as she shouted. Rochelle's eyes shot wide, darting between the creature and the brunette. There was just a moment where the Charger froze, head cocking. "Come on, big-arm! I'm -"

A flash of motion marked the moment where it spun, and there was so little time to react. For how large it was, skin rough and cracked like stone, it moved with unnerving speed - or maybe just momentum, like a boulder set to rolling down a mountainside. Its bare and bloated feet struck the ground with thunderous noise.

Lena jolted to dodge out of the way, but it was too fast, and it curved its sprint to follow her. The sound of its shoulder striking her was only just louder than the feral shout that left Rhiannon.

The collision was like watching a car accident. It was as if Lena had been effortlessly blown off her feet, and the speed at which the Charger exploded forward pinned her against its arm. Her weapon flung from her hands, unable to keep a grip under the agony of the blow. There was just a beat of time where Rochelle saw her struggle, grabbing at the Charger, clawing for its face -
Enough time for her to wonder, *fear*, because she'd never actually seen someone get hit by one dead-on before -

Then the Charger slammed into the side of the building across the street. The sound was gut-wrenching, as Lena hit the vinyl siding first and then the Charger struck second, the full impact of its weight slamming her into the surface. It stepped back, staggered away, and shook its head in a ferocious wag as the brunette slid down to the ground.

The softest groan left her, body trying to crumple to one side, and the Charger blinked down toward her with animal curiosity. Its face was too sunken, skin stretched too tight over the bones of its facial structure, to do more than snarl out a few huffs of air in anger. It reached down with its ballooned arm, broad fingers grabbing her shoulder in a clutch.

She protested weakly, trying to reach up as if she could unhook its fingers from her shoulder. The creature effortlessly dragged her into a lift - and then slammed her down, grunting with the effort it took to bodily smash her into the sidewalk.

The softest mewl of pain sounded out, and then nothing at all.

Rhiannon screamed, *shrieked*, rage fueling the sound as she sprinted into motion, throwing her bat to the ground in favour of grabbing her sister's brush-hook from where it had clattered to the ground. "You fucking mutant piece of shit! I'll kill you!" she howled, misery bled into the waver of every word.

It was the second smash, the Charger pulling Lena - her frame now limp - up and then crashing her back down that shocked Rochelle into motion. Her hand tightened on her pistol, readying it. Shooting it anywhere but the head would do little to nothing. She had to get close enough, get it right in the face.

Rochelle jolted forward, running, but Rhiannon was faster and reached the Charger at a scrambling sprint.

"Let her -" Thrusting the axe, the blonde stabbed blindly, piercing the infected just where its kidney should have been. "- go -" The curved blade sunk in an inch or two, and no further. Blood did not leak out; rather, it weeped a strange and chalky whiteness, the flesh crumbling rather than tearing.

"Fuck!" she bellowed, forced to pry the weapon back, putting her whole weight behind the yank to get it to come unstuck.

The Charger made no indication it was hurt by the attack, but a faint grunt of agitation escaped it. Shaking its head, it grasped tight onto Lena's body, dragging her up into the air. She dangled there like nothing but a ragdoll, and Rochelle caught the smallest glimpse of her face, eyes closed and blood trickling from the corner of her slack mouth.

Was she even breathing?

Rhiannon screamed something primal, thrusting up and below the Charger's arm where it was now raised. The blade shoved through the thin and chafed flesh at the creature's armpit, and she twisted, wrenching her entire body to one side. That got its attention, and it gave a strangled snarl, jaw snapping in a few angry bites on air.

Releasing Lena to let her body drop limply to the ground, thudding softly into a half-curl on the concrete, the Charger turned. Its arm swung out with the gesture, flaring, and the bloated mass
struck Rhiannon across the chest. Her fingers slipped on the axe handle, leaving it implanted in the infected like a dart. She released an utterance of pain, slung hard to the ground and left breathless by the blow.

The broad-chested infected groaned, vaguely, some faint twitch traveling through its vestigial arm as if trying to move it. When it could not, it spun dumbly in a few steps, chittering out a harsh breath as the brush-hook wobbled from its anchor underneath the infected's arm.

The Charger looked up, dull gaze catching onto the muzzle of Rochelle's pistol just before it went off.

Panting softly, Rochelle watched it collapse, skull obliterated into so many pieces amidst a mess of greyed flesh. Her hand was trembling as she lowered the pistol, adrenaline accelerating her heart rate to a pound in her chest.

"Shit." she muttered, eyes lifting to gaze toward Rhiannon. She was vaguely aware of Coach getting out of the sedan, his dirted yellow-and-purple shirt a fuzz in her peripheral vision, but didn't acknowledge it. "Are you -" she uttered, but the blonde was already moving, scrambling up to her hands and knees.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Rhiannon blurted, slurred, her posture wavering in a pained shudder before she forced herself forward. The biker pawed past the Charger, forcibly, crawling to reach her sister where she laid. She dragged herself into a slight curl around the brunette, softly pressing a palm against Lena's cheek, trying to pet there without jostling her... "Hey. Hey. Lee. Come on, you bitch."

Rochelle couldn't stop a hand from raising to cover her lips, brows wrought into something pained as her body went limp and a sheen of wetness crossed her eyes. It was their fault. Her fault for letting Nick get ahead - her fault for not returning sooner, not shooting sooner - for just watching as Lena took a Charger that should have been aimed at her -

Maybe it was just her fault.

"You're fine. You're fucking fine, you son of a bitch. You're too badass for this, right? Not one fucking Charger. Not one fucking cunt Charger." The blonde was trembling, voice gone rough, breath stuttering at the end of every word as if she couldn't catch it. Her palm smoothed over her sister's chin, trying to wipe away the blood there but only smearing it, the liquid thick with saliva. "That's not how this goes."

Her arm started to loop underneath Lena's shoulders, like she might try to draw the older woman against her chest - and then suddenly Coach was beside her, kneeling just a short distance away.

"Don't." he stated, calm and short and soothing. "Don't move her."

The blonde stared at him, chin trembling, eyes too full of fear and fury to make any room for tears.

It was only as she didn't protest that Coach leaned in, delicately placing a hand underneath the unconscious woman's jawline. Though Rhiannon maintained her silence, she watched his every move with feral and deeply mistrustful attention. Coach's fingertips pressed in tight against Lena's jugular, pausing for just a beat before he nodded.

"Got a pulse." Very cautiously, he slid a hand to rest against her knee, gaze tilting toward Rochelle. "We don't got no clue if she hurt somethin'. If she's got damage, and we move her, could make it worse. Spinal fracture could turn into a break."
Rochelle couldn't respond, even as he looked at her as if for answers. The shock of it hit her, cold as ice, and she couldn't get the words out fast enough... and they couldn't soothe the miserable guilt that shot up her spine. "I-I'm sorry. Rhiannon, I - if I'd gone faster - if we hadn't stopped, I..."

"We move her."

The blonde spoke, suddenly. Hollowly. She didn't look away from her sister's face; she barely even moved. It was not soft - it was, perhaps, the harshest she'd ever sounded, like her voice was nothing but shards of glass. Like it cut her to even speak. "Can't stay here. So we move her."

Carefully, Rochelle took a half-step forward, raising her hand in a subtle gesture. It was dangerous, especially if her spine had been damaged... but there was no alternative. Nothing to do, nothing they could do. They were helpless, just like with Christophe, left with nothing but half-assed solutions to problems they weren't prepared for. "Are you - sure?"

"Yeah." was all that left the blonde. Her eyes fell to an empty stare, gazing down at the limp body of her sister. The younger biker's body seemed frail, somehow, quivering at the edge of something - though whether it was collapse or explosion, Rochelle could not tell.

She hesitantly shifted her gaze to Coach. He met it, then abruptly looked past her, inciting her to turn.

Nick half-hobbled toward them, wiping something slick from his neck with one hand and other arm loose at his side with his katana gripped tightly there. His eyes were guarded, nothing exposed but a distant pain as they still showed a lingering redness from smoke and burst blood vessels.

Rochelle tried to tighten her expression, tense it, as if she could get across some plea. The last thing they needed was Nick saying something cruel and starting a fight. He examined the look with a short glance, but said nothing at all. Instead, he focused on looking down, inspecting the blood seeping thickly from his calf and staining his pantleg.

He listened, for once. Or maybe he was merely cowed. For once.

Attention shifting toward Coach, Rochelle carefully slipped an arm across her stomach, forcing an inhale. "We should get her in the car. Be softer than carrying her down the road." she murmured, earning nothing but a stiff silence.

Resolved, Rochelle replaced her pistol in its place at the base of her spine and approached, tucking herself to the side. She gently started to get her hands underneath Lena's frame, delicately supporting her. Rhiannon instantly pressed close, shoulder to hers, and joined the effort. Coach looped an arm under Lena's knees, palm going to rest against her stomach as if to keep her as still as possible.

They were almost ready to hoist up, a tacitly coordinated pause bracing them before they lifted - and then Nick was abruptly bending down, slipping to the opposite side of Rochelle and Rhiannon. He grabbed one hand on Lena's bicep and pushed the other under her lower back.

He said nothing.

Nobody did, other than Coach uttering a soft, "Ready.", prompting them to lift. There was something comforting in the faint groan that escaped the brunette as she was hoisted up off the ground as smoothly as they could manage.

It was better than silence.
Ellis felt like he'd forgotten how to breathe. His chest clenched, his throat tightened, his heart rate went wild against his ribs.

He didn't want to move, with Chris nestled so tight against him, but it was like torture to watch Lena get charged out of his sight and have to sit there, helpless. Coach sprinted out of the vehicle, not even bothering to close the door behind him. Ellis only kept himself in place by repeating a mantra: his responsibility was Christophe. He had to stay with Christophe.

He had to -

When his teammates came walking carefully toward the car, circled around a limp shape, he broke. Pain surged in him, thick as sluggish denial, and he had to leave the car, had to know what was happening. His hands dusted softly over the Spaniard's side, whispering in a cracked and pleading tone: "Just - Just stay here, okay? I'm sorry, I gotta - I gotta go."

The foreigner muttered something faint, and Ellis tried to be gentle as he pried himself away, pushing Chris against the car seat. The man's honey-brown eyes flickered open in a low-lidded gaze, only belatedly shoving himself upright as if in some weak attempt to be helpful, though he seemed confused.

Huffing shortly, Ellis scrambled to get the car door open, less sliding out than falling. He landed on a heel, stumbling before he got himself upright. He grabbed a hand onto the side of the sedan, balancing himself as he ran toward them. "Is she - is she okay?!" he shouted, barely holding himself back from saying 'alive.'

He tried to meet someone's gaze, get some kind of reassurance, but nobody looked at him. Not even Rochelle looked his way, or made any attempt to respond to him. Raw and vulnerable reflex had him staring after Nick, and the gambler's brow twitched in some faint tell. What emotion hid behind it, Ellis didn't know.

"Open the door." Coach instructed, short of breath as they carried Lena carefully up to the car. Ellis was frozen in place, shifting back and forth from foot to foot, causing Coach's voice to harshen into a snap. "Ellis! Door!"

That broke through his trance, and Ellis bolted to the opposite side of the car, yanking open the back door. He held it with a white-knuckled grip, watching as they tenderly carried Lena up to the opening and eased her onto the seat. Christophe watched through half-closed eyes, weakly reaching his hand up to grab onto the safety bar screwed above the passenger window.

A groan of pain left him as he dragged himself by it, pushing himself up against the door to make room. He was cognizant enough for that, at least.

It was a careful balance of curling her body to fit without manipulating her any more than necessary. There was not enough room in the car to lay her flat, not without bending her knees gently and putting her head in Chris' lap. He didn't utter a protest when they did, merely laid his hand against her shoulder in some gentle comfort.

"Maybe..." Rochelle uttered, voice tremulous, trying to hold herself together. She had no right to be upset, and yet she wanted nothing more but to throw herself to the ground and cry, sob, scream - rail against whatever sick world they'd become trapped in that had such a sense of humour, that
thought it appropriate to crush every speck of goodness they had left.

"... Maybe there's something in the ambulance that'll hel-?"

"No." Rhiannon uttered flatly. She stepped away, not even sparing a look for her sister once she'd been settled down in the car. Rochelle couldn't help but watch her, worry flinching at her lips. "We checked it already." The blonde bent down, grabbing her baseball bat from the road. She tucked it under her arm and continued on to the Charger's motionless corpse. "Let's just go."

Her tone was so close to authoritative, it unsettled Rochelle. She'd only known the woman for a few hours - but that had been long enough to recognize the titanic shift in her behaviour. The hollow intensity, the stability that made no sense, like Rhiannon had detached. Dissociated.

She wanted to say she didn't think of the hollow, animal glaze that had overtaken Brenda in that final day, but that would have been lying.

It frightened her, just a little.

Rhiannon grasped the long-handled axe, using a bootheel to brace herself against the Charger's ribs, wrenching it free with a near-silent growl of effort. She held it in her hands for just a moment, frame still... and then she thrusted it, sinking it anew into the fallen Charger.

Once, twice, she gored the steel through the Charger's back - but she faltered before the third strike, strength failing such that the blade merely nicked its thick hide before halting where it sat. She stood there a moment, head low, before withdrawing the axe.

"Someone." She turned, slipping both her hands to grasp the weapon and lift it. "Take this."

It was offered out blindly, Rhiannon's eyes averted to the ground. Something like shame tightened her shoulders, revealing the gesture for what it was: a plea for help, because she couldn't wield it. Her hands trembled, and it wasn't from the effort of holding the axe aloft. They quivered like touching it burned her.

Rochelle's chest ached, almost ashamed of herself for comparing her to Chris' previous leader. Of course the woman was detached - the alternative was to break down, and there was no time or room or space for it. They had to keep going.

"I... I'll get it." Ellis suddenly burst out, drawing a surprised blink from Rochelle. Her eyes sought his, but it was her turn to be avoided. "Chris's okay now." Even as he spoke, the Georgian turned his head, gaze slanting in to look at Christophe, gaugingly.

Urgently, because he needed to be okay.

The Spaniard blinked back at him with foggy attention, the healing cut along his cheekbone crinkling when he offered a weak smile. It held as firm as he could manage, like a reassurance. His hand tightened on Lena's shoulder to hold her where she laid. "Yes, okay, hermanito. You go."

Ellis spared a look for the fallen woman, eyes flickering over her features and the blood thinly coloring her lower lip and chin. She didn't deserve it, hadn't earned it. She'd thrust herself into danger to save his friends. She'd taken a Charger that could have hit Rochelle instead.

Or Nick.

_You'll be okay. I promise._ He wanted to say it aloud, but what good would it do? _We got you._
"Let's hurry." he muttered, feeling the sudden warmth of threatening tears lash at his eyes like the crawl of high tide. He stepped away, following in Rhiannon's footsteps. "Sooner we get in, sooner we can get her layin' down..."

As he reached her, Ellis grabbed ahold of the brush-hook, drawing it from her hands. The biker let it go with only the softest resistance, and when he got the weapon solidly in his hands, she turned away. Letting her bat fall into her grip, Rhiannon pointed down the street with it.

"Few blocks down." she stated, waving her bat in a small motion. "Place on the right. Sunset Café."

"Okay." Ellis murmured, turning to glance hesitantly back toward the sedan. He watched as Rochelle closed the back door, and Coach prepared to slide back into the driver's seat - though not without sparing a short mutter at the younger woman.

Whatever he said, Nick heard it, too. Ellis could tell by the faint flicker of annoyance that darted over his expression, and he could tell it was about him by the way both of them looked his way.

He frowned, silently, and Rochelle abruptly hurried away from the sedan. She returned to the motorcycle she'd abandoned to save Nick, struggling momentarily with the kickstand before she got it folded away. She took the bike against her hip, guiding it into a roll forward.

Ellis was distracted enough by her efforts that he momentarily forgot the consequence of his joining the survivors on foot: Nick approached him at a slow walk, katana held low. The older man gave him a visible berth, attention cautious and gauging. Ellis couldn't help a surge of frustration - anger, almost, but then something softer than that.

Longing.

He buried it by force, inhaling. He buried the part of him that wanted Nick to pull him into an embrace, kiss him, soothe away the pain and the fear like he'd done so many times before -

He only wished he could bury the part of him that felt a surge of sympathy when his eyes caught onto the blood staining Nick's slacks' pantleg. "Yer leg -" left him before he could stop it, and he quickly averted his gaze, clearing his throat. Try as he might, he couldn't take the words back from where they hung in the air.

Nick glanced more fully at him. A distance entered his eyes at the same moment he examined Ellis' half-turned face, the attention causing a heat to rise to the younger man's face. Some kind of soured humour touched Nick's voice when he spoke, roughly. "It's my bad leg. Barely feel it."

He walked past, then, turning his back on Ellis.

The Georgian raised an arm, wiping his forearm against his brow, fighting the urge to close his eyes. At the very least, they needed to communicate enough to get to the base. With danger at every turn, they had to work together. There was no time to argue, no time to fight.

If not for them - for their new friends.

So Ellis steeled himself, sliding one hand up the handle of the brush-axe, letting the other grip low, near the end. He held it carefully, blinking out from underneath the bill of his cap. "I'm ready." he stated, as calm as he could. "Let's go, before somethin' else finds us."

Rhiannon nodded without looking back at them, fisting her free hand at her side as she marched down the road. The soft sound of the sedan rolling along the road to catch up to them prompted Nick to follow. Ellis took a careful inhale before starting to move, allowing his steps to take him
closer than he wanted to Nick. The gambler didn't acknowledge him, and that suited him fine.

Rochelle quick-stepped to join them, jogging the motorcycle alongside her. Moving in a loose triangular formation, with Rochelle at their back and the sedan making its way gently across the road, they approached the accident blocking the center of the street. The smell of gasoline was thick in the air where it puddled around the wreck, like a gas tank had been punctured in the collision.

Ellis eyed it as they stepped past, curiously - the sight surprised him, as the crash seemed otherwise gentle... but he didn't have time to mull it over. Rhiannon stepped quickly to the nose of the ambulance, tilting to glance past it in a cautious scan.

She halted with a short, "Shitfuck."

Although he knew already what she must have been seeing, he hurried forward, anyway. The Georgian pushed to stand near her flank, blinking past the emergency vehicle.

A block or two down, the road was swarmed with infected. They were in varying states of rest - laying on the asphalt, leaned against building storefronts, kneeling and squatting with their heads in their hands or digits clawing at their skin. The remnants, he was sure, of the horde that had chased them out of the base in the first place.

"Shit." he stated, despite himself.

Nick glided to stand behind them and gazed over Ellis' shoulder, ghosting the quietest mutter in agreement.

"Fuck."
Chapter 188

Nick paced quietly on the concrete, thumb brushing repetitively back and forth against his chin and
the softening stubble there. He was uniquely aware of how quiet Ellis was, leaned against the side
of the ambulance, bent to place his hands on his knees.

Nick tried to catch a glance at the Georgian's face, but it was hidden under his trucker cap. "Watch
him." Coach had said, simply. "He can't take much mo' of this shit." He said it with such concern,
like Ellis was weak, and that agitated Nick. Ellis couldn't handle more? Could any of them?

He probed into the feelings in his chest, the tension, the boiling discontent - and why? He'd barely
just met the woman, and had no reason to feel anything but apathy. He told himself that, repeated
it, yet her bloodied face and slack body stirred something so close to regret he couldn't stand it.

Her soft face, gentle eyes, the sweetness edged with fierce attitude, even the brown hair - maybe
she reminded him too much of Ellis. He'd held her in his arms and carried her to the car and a voice
hissed in his ear, Maybe next time it'll be him.

Nick's frame shivered, instinctually, practically tasting the fear roiling in his stomach. It made his
pains seem far-away and unimportant, buried under the overwhelming self-awareness crawling
unpleasantly up his spine: he knew if it had been Ellis in the path of that Charger, he'd have done
the same thing Lena had.

He'd have willfully died - or risked death, at least - to save the younger man. He knew that, as clear
and real as the pain pulsating in his sliced leg. Even with Ellis standing healthy and whole before
him, he couldn't shake a feeling of dread. It had nothing at all to do with Lena, he realized, and
perhaps that was cruel of him, heartless.

Not that that's news to anyone.

He tightened his grip, squeezing on the hilt of his katana. He had to focus. He could stew later,
berate himself for his weakness later. "We heard you two shooting a gun earlier. Where is that?"

Crouched low, Rhiannon had her wrist pressed into her mouth, lips parted in a faint panting
gesture. Her eyes were blank on the air, like she was thinking, wracking her brain. That, or on the
brink of some terminal collapse. "Ran out of ammo." she muttered in response, almost idly.

"Okay." the gambler huffed out, turning his chin to glance over his shoulder. Rochelle had her
fingertips up against her mouth again - tearing, gently, at the chapped flesh of her lower lip. It was
new, he thought. A new neurosis. "We've got three people on melee weapons, two handguns with
nearly no ammo, two shotguns with even less, and a sniper rifle with a few bullets left. Not a
fucking armory, exactly."

Rochelle shook her head, slowly, murmuring under her breath. "We should have taken a detour
back and gotten more ammo. We knew we could be walking into trouble. Stupid."

Nick huffed, harder, doing his best to moderate his voice even though part of him wanted to raise it
and drown her out. "If we set up, have someone tick them off and then make a line back there -"
Nick was speaking low, pointing back down the road. "- and have everyone on guns while they're
charging... then grab melee weapons once we've taken out everything we can..."

He trailed off, and it was hard not to notice there was very little attention being paid to him.
Nobody responded, nobody even looked at him. He snorted out a quiet breath, squeezing fingers
on his katana handle, and shrugged. "It might work. Or, we cut our losses and leave."

Rhiannon's head twitched, by a degree, to one side.

It seemed innocuous, until she slowly drew to stand, her head turning to cut a glance his way. Her eyes widened just faintly, then narrowed, and cold fury drizzled across her expression like the first gust of a cold front. "Cut our losses?" she echoed, quietly, tone vibrating on the cusp of fury.

His lip curled up away from his teeth, affronted - and mostly because he hadn't meant it like that - but Rochelle exploded out of her reverie and abruptly pressed between them, hands up.

"No, no, no. Shush, both of you. No fighting. Not right now." she hissed out, gaze darting between them. "That's the last thing we need. We need to get somewhere we can get Lena safe and resting. Can we all agree that's the priority right now? Please?" Her gaze stopped darting, then, and stared directly at Nick.

He wanted to protest, argue, but didn't. He matched her attention with a lifted chin, but a calm acquiescence.

She did a half-turn, glancing at Rhiannon. The blonde's posture didn't relax so much as deflate, jerking her face away to glare off toward the other side of the street. Tenderly, Rochelle spoke, a wariness drawing the words out. "I don't know if we can handle that many at once, but we have to try. Nick's plan's what we got, so let's focus, okay?"

The blonde didn't respond at first, and when she did it was with merely a nod.

Rochelle turned to Ellis, bending in slightly and placing a hand against his cheek. "You okay, baby? We're gonna need you for this." He nodded, and the listlessness of the gesture drew Nick's attention. Isn't this backwards? Isn't he the one always making stupid, ridiculous plans that get us out of trouble?

Hadn't he come to rely on it?

Nick crossed his arms indelicately, katana dangling at his side. He examined the Georgian, clamping teeth on his tongue to withhold a sigh. He knew fighting the horde head-on was a bad idea. They didn't have the brute strength or the ammo for it. They needed something crazy.

The solution to his problem was obvious - and he hated it. Hated himself for thinking it. Hated the fact that he knew he'd do it.

"Overalls." The Georgian startled at hearing his nickname - jumped, a little, and his head lifted. Blue eyes blinked to meet Nick's, caught off-guard in a raw display of confusion. They held, though Nick wanted intensely to break away. Instead, he thumbed over his shoulder, away from the group. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Some subtle upset made his jaw flicker tense when Ellis looked almost panicked. The kid's eyes flickered in soft fear toward Rochelle, as if seeking out reassurance or support, but she looked nearly as surprised as he did. Warily, he forced himself to straighten up, slowly lifting a hand to rub at his jawline. "Uh..." he muttered, airlessly, and Nick could tell he didn't want to go.

So, Nick didn't give him the chance to say no, turning on a heel and striding across the road, doing his best to mask his limp. With the slash he'd given himself along the side of his calf, cutting straight through his slacks, the discomfort from his Spitter-lame leg was only worsened.

There was a pause before he heard the Georgian hurrying after him, boots striking hard on the
As he reached the sidewalk, Nick stopped, only turning half-way back around. The gesture forced Ellis to tentatively step around him in order to be in front of him, and he stood there, awkwardly grabbing at his elbow with his free hand.

"Um. Whut's up?" he uttered, rubbing up to his bicep with a nervous tension. It was unfamiliar and strange to see him so awkward. It was painful to be alone with him, like the air itself was choked with everything they'd said in the past few day - and everything they hadn't. "I kinda thought we weren't..." He trailed off, eyes darting to look anywhere but Nick's face.

Nick forcibly placed his gaze focus squarely on Ellis'. He inhaled in a soothing hush, lowering his chin. "Ellis. My plan is shit." The Georgian startled, eyes snapping to his. "We don't have the ammo for it. They'll swarm us. And between my leg, Lena being out of the picture, Ro's hand - at worst we'll get killed, at best we'll get more injuries to add to the pile. It's not gonna happen."

Softly, Ellis frowned, shaking his head. There was no comprehension there, just insecurity. Discomfort. A whole host of other emotions Nick wouldn't have ever desired to witness on his features, let alone directed at him. "O... Okay. Whut're you sayin'...?"

It took Nick effort to soften his features, drawing them into something like sincerity. It was easier, though, for the fact that he wasn't entirely insincere. "I'm saying - we need you." That struck Ellis like a blow, the younger man taking a half-step back, gaze scanning with such urgency over Nick's face... it ached, just a little, to play that game. It ached to manipulate him, and worse for the fact that it worked.

It ached, but not enough to get him to stop.

"You're always the one getting us out of this shit. So come on." He advanced a step, and hated himself for it when Ellis flinched into a slump. "I know you can do it. You've done it before, and under more pressure, and with less time." His face reddened slightly under the intensity with which Nick held his gaze, and there was that soft fire, that tingling electricity, that urge to close the distance - and Nick might have broken, under different circumstances.

"Start thinking up something. Stop worrying and start coming up with a plan to get us past that goddamn horde." Ellis was staring up at him, hanging onto his voice. The only thing sweeter than that flush on his cheeks was the helpless sense that, for one isolated moment in time, Nick could have fixed it. There was some resignation, some desperation, in the way Ellis looked at him that said he could have leaned in and kissed him and returned everything to normal.

It said that they were not so broken that he couldn't find a way to put them back together.

*I'm sorry, kid. I can't.*

Nick turned, murmuring over his shoulder, closing his eyes rather than look at Ellis when he said it.

"We need a Hail Mary and you're it, doll."

If he'd slipped a knife into Ellis' heart, that was the twist. He didn't hear the reaction, didn't see it, but he felt it in his bones. Ellis stared after him with a gaze so hot and sharp it rose the hair on the back of Nick's neck. He walked back to the ambulance with his chin low, acutely aware that Ellis did not follow.

Rhiannon was staring off into the distance, fingers caught around a strand of frizzy blonde hair, but
Rochelle was watching him with something akin to accusation. She narrowed her eyes, lips tight and thin and tone laced with wary threat. "What was that about?"

She hadn't heard any of their conversation - but she knew, maybe, or merely figured he'd been up to no good. He couldn't argue the notion.

"Nothing." the conman returned, voice low. He cast a shallow glare her way in some aloof challenge, like a silent urge to keep her nose out of things. The look offended her instantly - she straightened, tensed, and approached a step toward him in a gesture that made it extremely clear she had no intention of doing so.

Rochelle raised a hand, pointing indelicately toward his face. "Nick." she muttered, quieting her voice to something dangerous.

She might have continued, had her eyes not flickered over his shoulder. He didn't turn, but Ellis' approach was audible enough on its own. The producer started to speak, strafing a step to get out from behind Nick, but Ellis ghosted past both of them to stand at Rhiannon's flank.

Nick got enough of a look at his face to see some of what he'd hoped for - but a lot of other things. Resolve, but shame, too. Disappointment, and he didn't know who it was directed at.

"Hey, girl." Ellis uttered, though Rhiannon didn't acknowledge him with more than a grunt, staying where she was, crouched on the road. "That bomb yuh threw earlier. You got any more?"

Rhiannon shook her head, slowly. "I got a bomb, but it needs an alarm. There's a spare fire detector in the bag, but shit's dead." The thought seemed to draw her out of the fugue that had overcome her, gradually turning her head to look up at him with a vague snarl playing at her lips. "The dickbags won't come if it's not noisy. If we throw it right we get maybe two, three...? More if we're lucky and they clump up?"

Hesitantly, Rochelle spared a short and nervous glance at Nick before drawing her arms into a clutch over her stomach. "Dead?" she queried, seeming almost afraid to speak at all, like some trance had fallen over Ellis and she was wary of breaking it. "We have batteries, if that'd help - double-A, for our flashlight..."

"Fucker takes 9-volts." the blonde returned, shaking her head in negation, a frown appearing on her face as she did. "No good."

Ellis turned, glancing up at Rochelle. He very explicitly did not let his gaze shift toward Nick, screwing up his brows in a look that walked the line between worry and apology. "We don't need no alarm. We got one already." When nobody seemed to understand, the Georgian took a step, patting a hand on the ambulance.

Rochelle's eyes widened a little, glancing up at the emergency lights bolted to the top of the ambulance. "Oh." she uttered, half in realization and half in lingering uncomprehension. "But -"

The mechanic lifted the hand back up, waving it to interrupt her, a sigh escaping him. He dropped his chin with a kind of exhaustion, morosely shrugging up a shoulder. "But, you ain't gonna like the plan." It was not his usual elation with an idea. He looked self sure, but hollow. Tired.

Nick had gotten what he wanted, and it left a sour taste in his mouth.
The group had retreated from the ambulance, pulling back up the road to avoid drawing any attention from the infected swarmed along their path. They huddled around the sedan's driver's side window, and all eyes were on Ellis - except for Nick.

The gambler stood at the slightest distance, eyes scanning their surroundings to ensure nothing snuck up on them. It was a mere bonus that it allowed him to avoid looking at Ellis.

Was it guilt, lingering in his chest? Is that what he felt? You didn't do anything wrong. You just motivated him to get his head in the game. Just so happens the best motivation you have is in using the fact he thinks he loves you. That's not your fault, that's his.

It was weak, and he knew it, but it was all he had between himself and the tingle of disappointment that he hadn't taken the chance that Ellis had offered him.

If you die tomorrow, you'll wish you'd taken what you could while you had it, Nick.

Ellis leaned Lena's weapon against the car and raised both his hands in a hesitant gesture. "Okay. We need somethin' tuh draw 'em together fer the bomb, right?" He spoke slowly, pointing toward the ambulance where it sat in the middle of the street. "Well, the siren'll handle that fine. We turn it on, wait for 'em to get all gathered, then throw the bomb."

Rochelle put her shoulder against the car, frowning gently in a clear indication of uncertainty. "How do we know they'll stay while the bomb goes off? Or go after the car and not us?"

Ellis shrugged up his shoulders, chin lowering. "When we set off alarms'n'shit, they get drawn - but they don't attack the car or nothin'. But that pipe bomb Rhee rigged up, they went after it like crazy. I think it ain't just the noise, but it's the lights, too. Like the whole thing drives 'em nuts as Boomer puke. Figure the sirens'll do the same thing."

Rochelle couldn't quite force her frown away, raising a hand to brush fingertips against her jawline in a faint scratch. "Okay." she uttered, carefully. "If that's true, then they swarm the car. Without blowing the whole ambulance up, it's not like we could kill all of them. They'll probably circle it."

Pacing back and forth beside the flank of the car, gloved fingers working against one another in a vague wring, Rhiannon shook her head. "So, we kill half of the fuckshits. Better than two or three."

A faint smile darted over Ellis' lips at the support, raising a hand to rub at the back of his neck with a quietly bashful dip of his head. "We'll get rid of some of 'em, n'the rest'll be distracted long enough fer us tuh get the jump on 'em. It'll give us a better shot than just facin' the sons'uh bitches down." He glanced warily between Rhiannon, Coach, and Rochelle, gauging their expressions.

Coach nodded his head, exhaling out a grumbled breath. "Agreed. How we gonna trigger the sirens?"

That faded Ellis' smile, reaching up to thumb against the bill of his cap and push it up from his face. He licked the backs of his teeth, swallowing, nervously. "That's... the part y'all won't like. We don't wanna attract any more zombies than we gotta, so... I was thinkin', someone should stay in the ambulance, so they can shut the siren down once the bomb goes off."

Rochelle bristled a little, blinking around his face as if in search of something. "That... seems dangerous. Doesn't the bomb have shrapnel in it? What if it blows through the ambulance and hurts
whoever stays behind?"

"I know." the Georgian agreed, looking distantly toward the ambulance. "It's pretty reinforced, though. Shouldn't nothin' get in, as long as we throw it on the ground 'n'it don't land on the windshield. But I can't promise nothin'..." Some worry fretted at his features, dragging his lips into a frown. "I know it's risky."

Leaning to rest his elbow inside the open car window, Coach lifted a hand to chew thoughtfully at a hangnail jutting out from his thumb. "Why don't we all just get in the ambulance? Least that way, if somethin' goes wrong, we'll all be together."

Nick released a snort, dryly uttering the first words he'd dared to say since the conversation started. "So we can all die in there? Have that gasoline light up from the bomb and set the whole thing on fire, cook us inside? No thanks." He thrust out an arm, glancing just lowly over his shoulder. "Why not just one person, in case something goes wrong? It sucks, but can we afford more risk than that?"

A sigh escaped Ellis as he muttered out, "It ain't gonna catch fire. They're frag bombs."

"I don't like sitting someone out like bait." Rochelle muttered, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. Her eyes wandered up, striking a slant to gaze in at what she could see of Lena's slumped frame. Christophe's gaze drew hers when she looked in, his eyes softened in some silent empathy, and she averted her attention to the ground. "It feels... We've lost enough today."

Rhiannon stepped abruptly closer, a frown cutting a harsh line across her face. She reached up to brush her hair behind her ear, fingertips catching on the stud in her eyebrow in the gesture, brushing against the steel. "I'll go." she stated, flatly, tone sharp as a tack as she slid her hand to grab ahold of her bat and swing it. "Give those motherfuckers what for. For Lee."

There was the smallest flurry of motion. Rochelle and Ellis both poised to protest, because it was untenable to risk her with her sister already injured; Nick turned around entirely with an easy frown, because he knew the others would argue despite the fact that sounded just fine to him... but it came to a halt when the car door opened, suddenly.

Moving rigidly, Christophe crawled out from the sedan, his hand gripping the roof of the car to keep himself balanced. He got to his feet, standing as straight as he could manage, turning to gaze at them over the roof of the sedan. His bare torso trembled just a little, goosebumps raised on tan flesh, and who knew if it was pain or chill.

"No." he uttered, simply. Nobody had the time to protest before he was advancing, crossing his arm in front of himself in order to keep a hand on the sedan, gliding it along the metal to support himself. "It should be me, sí?" He glanced at Rhiannon, attention slim, before he focused on Ellis. "She can fight. I cannot. No tiene - you do not have sense, to put her in the car."

Ellis flung his hands up, seeming to only just hold himself back from bolting around the car and grabbing Christophe, like the man might fall if he didn't. "N-no - buddy, you can't - you're barely standin'. You been out of it all dang day."

Rochelle had no such restraint, and she quickly moved to circle the sedan and step in front of Chris. He kept moving, however, so she started to back-step to keep up with him. "Not a chance, Chris. You're gonna sit back down and watch Lena. We need you to watch her, okay? And keep her safe. I need you to do that."

Ellis couldn't help but quiet, glancing at Rochelle, unable to shake the sense that it was the same as
the way she'd urged him to watch Christophe. To stay on the bench, because he couldn't do it, out of fragility, weakness - whatever it was.

A frown spawned on his lips, hands lowering.

Slowing his footsteps, Christophe met her gaze, examining the intensity there. He laughed, a little, and his arm twitched like he might reach up and cup her cheek like he'd done in the gunstore, that gesture that somehow seemed so tender and so dismissive all at once - but he didn't. He merely cocked his head and lowered his voice. "En verdad tengo que hacer esto." he murmured, witnessing frustration spawn over Rochelle's eyes.

Chris looked instead toward Nick, eyes low-lidded, and everyone joined him in the gesture.

Nick allowed himself the smallest of grimaces, reaching a hand to touch flatly over his bicep where it stung from abrading against the concrete. 'I need to do this.' He hated it turning to him, like Christophe thought he'd understand. As if they were somehow alike, as if Nick cared at all. It was softly that his forearm brushed into his chest, and something hard pressed into him from the breast pocket of his dress shirt.

He didn't need to remove it to know what it was.

The bullet that Christophe might have put through his skull, had things gone differently. He'd never reloaded it.

Adjusting his gaze to point up, staring toward the sky for a beat, Nick shrugged his shoulders. "Don't look at me. Assclown wants to do it, let him do it. Pull his own weight. Someone has to." was all he said, flat and apathetic.

Rochelle's gaze shifted to a glare, seeming disappointed, though unsurprised. Ellis looked down at his boots, and Nick was almost sure there were wheels turning under his grungy, faded cap.

Christophe smiled just a little, sublimely, and a dusky exhaustion crept into his eyes that might have been as much the influence of painkillers as it was resignation. "Puedo ser útil." He glanced back to Rochelle, and his arm did move that time. He reached out to cradle her wrist in his hand, fingertips just gently brushing there. "I cannot rest forever, mi bonita. I can be helpful here, por favor."

Fighting a soft pant, stress drawing her brows into a wring, Rochelle retracted her hand from his. Her voice quivered just faintly, head shaking a few furious times. "I... no. I'm injured, too, but I could still defend myself if I needed to. If someone's going it should be me."

Releasing a faint growl, Rhiannon thrust her arms out in an agitated gesture, voice turning to a scathing hiss. "Fucking shitballs, people, I said I'd go. I'm not part of your fucking team, so that's that. I'm going, whether you shitsticks like it or not."

She started to turn, charge off, but Nick snapped out a hand and grabbed her elbow, snakelike. His fingertips gripped on the leather of her jacket, almost squeaking with the force it took to keep her there.

She had just about a second to look utterly enraged, like she might turn and drag him to the ground, pummel his face into the asphalt below them - and then he stated, shortly, "Your sister wouldn't let us let you. And I'm more scared of her than you." Rhiannon stared at him, a raw discomfort edging into her expression until he twitched into a smirk.

The blonde snarled, almost flapping her arm up in order to shake free of his grip. He let her go, but
only after her posture turned a little in a clear indication of surrender. She shifted away from him a foot or two, defensively, tightening her fist around the handle of her baseball bat. Her eyes set to a shifting, low scan, growling out a rough-hewn, "... What the fuck ever."

Nick knew enough of body language to know he'd successfully triggered at least one of those choice emotions: fear.

Lust was up in the air.

"If Chris thinks he can do it, then I say we let him." Coach grunted, slipping a hand down to grasp the handle of the driver's side door, popping the latch so he could get to his feet. He bent his arm back to grab up his double barrel shotgun from the passenger seat. "We gotta trust each other. Now more than ever."

Ellis nodded in quiet agreement, a gesture that brought a gentler smile from Christophe. He glanced back at Rochelle, halting, examining the woman's face with a mixture of earnest curiosity and a subtle sadness. "I will be fine, ¿sí? I promise."

Rochelle stared him down, dark eyes widening just a tick before abruptly closing. "Yeah. I know you will." He relaxed just an instant before she continued: "Because we're both going."

The Spaniard gazed at her, head tilting, but no protest rose to his expression. He revealed only a small slip of a smile that flashed teeth, full of an adoration that lit his eyes to sparkling. She nearly flustered under the look, but jutted her jaw and scanned her teammates for dissent.

Nobody could find the footing to argue, it seemed, not when it would spin them in circles yet again. She spoke anyway, soothingly. "I'll have a gun to cover him, if it comes down to it. And I wouldn't be much help to you guys as it is."

Nodding indelicately, Coach reached to place a gentle hand on Ellis' shoulder. "You three best go look in on the ambulance, see what we got. Gotta make sure we can even go 'bout this before we get all riled up."

Ellis laughed a little, ducking his head at the contact. "Yeah, okay." He stepped away, glancing across the sedan with a faintly concerned tilt to his lips. He watched Rochelle step back, leading Chris around the nose of the car. "Get all the weapons ready, I guess."

He couldn't help but think Christophe looked at her like he'd just crawled out from a desert and she was a glass of ice-cold water. He followed her, less like he meant to and more like he couldn't manage anything but to be near her.

Was it possible to feel nervous, pleased, and envious, all at once? Whatever that set of emotions amounted to, it sat in his throat like a frog he could not swallow.

"I'll get the bomb." Rhiannon muttered, quietly, turning to slink over to the motorcycle and the duffel bag lashed to its rear.

Ellis tried to pass her a smile, but the blonde was already facing away. He let the expression melt off his lips, sighing faintly before he turned to follow Rochelle and Christophe. As he did, he drew past Nick. He didn't intend to engage - even tilted his chin to shade his eyes in the hope Nick would let him go. The man did not have such self-control, it seemed.

"Good job, kid." the gambler uttered, quietly.

Ellis froze mid-step, feeling an ache in his chest he thought might grow until it choked his lungs off
air... but it didn't. It stayed a faded hum and that was, perhaps, worse. Like he'd gone numb.

He looked over his shoulder, recognizing the strain in Nick's flattened expression. Either he was forcing himself to affect some warmth or holding himself back from something deeper, and Ellis didn't know which he preferred to believe. He settled on the former, because at least that came with resignation, and that was almost like calm.

"I didn't do it fer you." he responded, low enough to keep it between them. Nick almost looked startled, and that stirred a nugget of spiteful satisfaction - right next to the well of heartbreak. "And next time yuh want somethin', just ask. Don't say... that stuff."

The older man gazed at him in silence, expression thinning into something cryptic, unreadable.

"It hurts me when yuh don't mean it. So quit."

Ellis could have waited for a response, but he forged on ahead. He didn't want to hear whatever Nick had to say. It would either be a new lie or an old one, and he didn't trust himself not to get angry if Nick defended himself. It had been obvious, after all.

To hear him compliment him like that - worse, that little 'doll,' that petname he'd never used before... It hurt, and hurt even more for the fact Ellis knew it had been on purpose. Even more for the fact it worked. He hated being vulnerable, desperate, hoping Nick might reconsider them.

He'd felt that surge of emotion like he could just kiss Nick and make it all go away, and he was disappointed in himself.

Maybe Nick had been right. Maybe it was better if they kept their distance, considering Ellis felt like one step less distance and he'd have been begging Nick for just... something.

> *Can we just ferget it all? Can we just... stop, and go back tuh how things were? I'll fergive you, we can ferget everythin'... You don't gotta say you love me... I just wanna stop bein' like this. I wanna fight fer you. I wanna touch you again. I wanna - listen tuh you breathin' at night, sleep knowin' I'll wake up tuh see you - I miss yuh -*

And there, Ellis supposed, was bargaining.

Nick watched him leave, a coldness seeping into his veins, and supposed that love had finally made the list.
Chapter 190

Ellis carefully cracked the ambulance door open, a visible relief surging through him when it did so with no protest.

"Okay. Watch muh back." he whispered over his shoulder, looking back to see Rochelle nodding quickly. He carefully craned his head into the vehicle and peeking around the cabin. The interior was completely open - the two seats in front had just enough room between them to slip past, and the main portion of the ambulance was accessible to him.

There was a bench-like table built into one wall of the interior, and a cart that might have held medical supplies at one point. He squinted in, but there was not much else - aside from a corpse, dressed in a crisp pale blue shirt and dark khakis. He gave it a nervous stare in the shadowed space, but it did not move.

It stank, ferociously, and he could tell even from that distance that its skin was bloated and bruised as it decomposed. The smell of rot and even more unpleasant things burnt his nose, but he focused on the task at hand.

"Least them zombies don't play dead like in the movies," he offered, sighing. As Rochelle and Christophe looked on, Ellis crawled up into the passenger seat, perching himself there and glancing over the dashboard.

There was a small box attached to the roof, just near the rear view mirror, and he reached up to brush fingertips over the metal surface. It had a set of controls - an on-off switch, a red button labeled 'SIREN' and a dial that had a variance of settings that meant little to him. 'WAIL', 'YELP', 'PHASER', and then a notch that read 'W-Y-P'.

Tones or patterns for the siren, he decided. Though he didn't know what they correlated to, it made enough sense compared to the sound he imagined in his head. Worst to worst, he figured, they'd just pick one at random. Any noise would work, as long as it was loud.

There was a fat panel of switches built into the dash, and he squinted at it. The labels next to each switch read out a dizzying array, and though a number of them referenced lights and floodlights, he didn't feel certain which he actually wanted. He grimaced faintly at the unfamiliar sight, inhaling shortly.

They had some room for error, as long as they managed to get the lights and the siren going in some form - but still.

Thoughtfully gazing over the switches, Ellis touched idly at the buttons. Everything was flipped into the 'ON' position, except a scattered few, and one marked 'MAIN POWER'. With a vague grunt, he decisively moved to flip the handful of switches that were off - leaving only the power switch deactivated.

Shit better light up like a Christmas tree, if this's gonna work.

"It is okay?" Christophe questioned, leaning his shoulder against the inside of the open door and looking in to follow the motions of Ellis' hands. "I do not see the key."

Ellis sighed gently, tilting his head to glance at the ignition. It would have been too easy for the keys to be merely dangling there, he supposed, but there wasn't much reason for the keys to have gone far. "Me neither. Won't know if it's gonna work until we can test the battery. Don't need her
tuh turn over, just get power."

Grabbing ahold of the headrest of the chair, Ellis shifted up, pushing between the seats and drawing to his feet in the back of the ambulance. He carefully picked his way around the corpse on the ground, kneeling down next to it with his nose wrinkling at the smell.

As he neared, his eyes found a needle clutched in the woman's hand... or what remained of her hand, rot-fattened fingers appearing waxy and skin stretched like it might burst.

He wasn't sure what the needle had been full of, but it seemed likely it had been what had taken her life. It wasn't the first suicide they'd seen, but it didn't get easier with time, it experience. A frown touched his lips, sympathetic, as he steeled himself with a sigh.

The Georgian reached down, trying carefully to probe at her pockets without touching her. Despite his efforts, when his fingertips brushed something metallic in the right pocket of her khakis, he had to slip his hand entirely into the pocket. He clenched his jaw against disgust when he felt her skin give way inside the constraints of her pantleg, like she crumbled into meat and tendon at the manipulation -

When his fingertips caught on the set of keys, he yanked them free in a hurry, fighting off a shudder. He didn't mind the gore so much when it was zombies, but the corpse of an uninfected was different. It yanked at his gut til he felt like he might be sick.

He had to focus.

Straightening, Ellis clutched the keys and scrambled back into the front of the ambulance. He raised them with a shake, jingling them at his companions. Chris gave him a heady grin, leaned into the door, but Rochelle merely watched from her place beside him.

"Alrighty. Let's see if she's still got some juice." the mechanic uttered, sliding into the driver's seat. He nervously grazed fingertips over the controlbox above his head, double-checking that the power switch was flipped to the off position - because the last thing they needed was it barking to life - and then slipped the keys into the ignition.

He glanced to the dash, sticking his tongue out enough to clamp it between his teeth. Pleasepleaseplease -

Twisting the keys just once, he couldn't help a wave of satisfaction when the dials jumped to life and a few lights blinked on, including a tiny red dot in the corner of the controlbox and a glowing light in the center of every one of the buttons on the switch panel. "Yes." he hissed out in a joyous utterance, but just as soon as he'd turned it on, he turned it back off.

He glanced up, leaving the keys dangling from the ignition. "Okay. Y'all best get up in here." he uttered, even as he pushed himself up and carefully stepped back past the seats. Rochelle shifted to give him some room, and he clumsily slid out of the ambulance and back onto the road. Ellis lifted his head to look over at the sedan.

Coach was standing next to Rhiannon, and Ellis could see she was holding another pipe bomb in her hands, their discussion close and quiet. He frowned a little, curiously, but focused his attention back toward Rochelle and Christophe.

The Spaniard grasped ahold of the edge of the passenger seat, dragging himself up into the car. "Dolor de muelas." he grunted as he did, and Rochelle placed a hand at his lower back. She didn't really push him in - just held it there in some reflexive gesture, following his progress.
As his hip hit the seat, he shoved himself in place, exhaling hard. He grabbed the steering wheel, then, steadying himself as he sidestepped the distance between the two seats and plopped his weight down.

The effort was not overly strenuous, but lacking an arm seemed to disturb his balance enough to slow and stagger him. He sought to balance himself or grab out with an arm and hand that didn't exist, only recognizing the fact when his weight would shudder, leaning into support that wasn't there.

Rochelle bit her cheek rather than ask him if he was okay. The answer was obvious, and it seemed foolish to press the issue, not when it was most likely to make him feel worse. Instead, she stepped a foot up, getting ready to push up into the ambulance.

Shifting into a thin smile, Chris reached his hand out, palm up and fingers gently curled to offer her help up. She blinked between it and his face, unable to stop herself from recalling the first time he'd offered a hand out like that. She'd sort of despised the smug affection bleeding into the gesture as he tried to ferry her across a busted-down door like she were feeble.

A lot had changed.

She took his hand this time, fingertips locking in something that was less than a clasp; it felt like some delicate, old-fashioned invitation to dance. Rochelle crawled up into the passenger seat, wanting sincerely to believe there wasn't a warmth making its way to her face. "Thanks." she uttered, almost out of the corner of her mouth.

He merely grinned.

As Rochelle settled down, flattening her palms against her thighs, she looked up and gazed over the ambulance dashboard. "What do we do here? This looks only slightly more complicated than my old control room."

The mechanic pushed his body forward, gesturing in widely. "Just turn the car on, then flip the power switch up there -" He pointed toward the controlbox rigged into the roof, then down at the dashboard panel. "- and there. If everythin' goes tuh plan, it'll all turn on, and them dead'uns'll swarm yuh." She looked daunted, almost, and he couldn't offer much comfort.

He was worried, too, and sighed. "We only got one shot at it. If it don't do like we're hopin'... You two stay in here, okay? 'N' after y'all turn on the siren, maybe duck down or go in the back, away from the windows."

Waving his hand in a dismissive gesture, Christophe leaned a bit to one side to rest against the door. He had to twist to avoid pressing his bandaged stump against the surface, almost turning entirely to face Rochelle and Ellis. "Everything will work. No fear, hermanito." he promised, and Ellis flashed him a hesitant smile.

It was easy to be positive under the influence of painkillers, he mused, though he kept that to himself.

Hadn't he been unerringly positive, what felt like so long ago? The realization drew him to an uncomfortable realization, an awkward sort of self-awareness. He'd lost something, somewhere along the way, and he wasn't sure if that was Nick's fault or not.

"I think he's the only reason it didn't happen sooner."

"You okay?" Rochelle was looking at him, and he hesitated. Honesty came thrusting to the
forefront, tempted to tell the truth - but Rhiannon's hushed voice interrupted.

She approached at a cautious pace, eyes alert to an overstimulated degree. "They wanted me to bring this." she muttered, raising a hand as she walked, clutching one of the two hand radios. Rather than hand it over, she tossed it, forcing Ellis to scrabble to catch it lest it fall and hit the ground. "So. Yeah."

Grasping the radio carefully to his chest, trying not to frown, the Georgian turned to offer it up to Rochelle. "Here." She took it from him delicately, like it were precious, setting it in her lap. "Y'all get ready in there. I'll radio when we're good tuh go, okay?"

The producer winced, offering a barely-withheld sigh as she shook her head. "Okay, sweetie. Just make sure you guys are careful with that bomb, alright?"

With a grin, Christophe leaned in to whisper across her, conspiratorially. "Sí, por favor. I am running out of limbs to lose."

Ellis snorted, wrinkling his nose at the both of them. He started to respond, mouth opening - but Rhiannon turned to walk away, and he gave a scattered look toward her and scuttled to follow. He caught up with a few long strides, settling into a trot at her flank. The Georgian cut a slightly hesitant look to the side, scanning her expression.

It was a little cold. Distant, like she were actively trying to affect a hollow expression.

"Um.. hey. You holdin' up alright?"

The blonde grunted offhandedly, wiping a hand up to brush her hair behind her ear with a crooked thumb. She bit her tongue, baring teeth in the gesture as she glanced at him, askance. "Dude." she stated, flatly, like he'd said something stupid.

He blinked, deflating just slightly, glancing down toward his boots. "Just askin'." he muttered back, unable to fight a slight irritation, hands fisting at his sides. He felt too on-edge, on too thin a tightrope to handle being rejected so thoroughly. He didn't want to be angry with her; after all, she was the one who'd nearly lost her sister, and still could.

Ellis tried to inhale, like it would calm him.

It didn't, really.

Rhiannon lifted a leather-clad shoulder, returning her gaze forward. She said nothing, and gave no indication she intended to. It shouldn't have bothered him as much as it did.

He felt like he'd run out of patience.
Rochelle inhaled, hard.

Okay. This isn't awkward.

It was.

You aren't alone with him for the first time that doesn't involve him being unconscious or you tending the arm he lost saving you. No big deal. Just a cute latino boy who nearly died for you. Nothing new. It's not a big deal.

It absolutely was.

She flexed her fingers on the radio clutched in her hands, gazing intently through the windshield of the ambulance. Shaking her head quickly, she tried to leave the thought process behind. She exhaled thinly, watching her teammates as they held some conversation. Nick was animated, gesturing at the bomb, and she wished she could read lips at that distance.

Ellis looked somewhere between frustrated and embarrassed, averting his face to the side, and she didn't need to so much as squint to see that the gambler was talking about him again. And, judging by Ellis' reaction, it wasn't wholly negative.

A surge of protective instinct rose up, drawing her into a sigh. What are you doing, Nick? All you're doing is confusing him. At least when you were being a bitch to him, we could pick up the pieces. Now what's he supposed to do?

"¿Cómo estás, mi sirena?" the Spaniard murmured, drawing her attention with a blink.

She sighed, raising a hand to run the pad of her thumb along her chin, closing her eyes for a passing moment in time. She considered shrugging the question off, but she didn't have anything to hide anymore - not when it came to that. "Nothing. Just this whole thing with Nick and Ellis is really messing me up... I'm not really sure what to do about it."

Chris didn't respond, eyes on her, so she flipped a hand up and continued. "Like, what? I can't separate them, and I can't make them make up. The only reason Nick's still here is because we... I agreed not to talk about it." She wrung her hands a little, circling them on the air in a strangling gesture. "Even though what I want to do is chop him into little pieces with that sword of his."

"Pagaría por verlo, de hecho." he murmured, and she wasn't sure what he'd said - but his tone was a subtle croon and she found herself embarrassed all the same.

It was tempting to ask, but she suddenly thought she might be better off leaving it alone.

Pushing her shoulders back into the seat cushion, Rochelle exhaled tautly. "I just wish Nick would get his head out of his ass." She flipped her hands to give a vague gesture, palms up and fingers splayed. "He... said some stuff to me that makes me think he... cares. I just can't tell if he cares enough to admit he doesn't love him, or if it's.. something else."

She didn't want to say it, like the uttering of it might jinx it: maybe Nick didn't think he could handle a relationship after a failed marriage. Maybe he did feel for Ellis, but was afraid. Didn't it make more sense than Nick being a liar?
Strange, that she'd come to trust him, when it came down to it. She firmly believed he might hurt Ellis out of some well-meaning but warped intention, but maliciously? Maybe, at worst, it had started off like some ploy for sex and evolved out of Nick's control - beyond what he wanted, what he meant.

That made sense, too, though she desperately wished it wasn't true.

The man tensed his lips to whistle, just softly, eyes flickering toward the team where they stood. He watched Nick point toward them, watched Ellis jostle forward to interrupt as Rhiannon looked like she was getting angry. "It is a shame," he murmured, lowly. "They are a good couple."

Rochelle frowned a little, drawing her arms into a cross over her chest. "I'm not so sure. Couples talk, they're honest. They don't want to hide their relationship. This on-again off-again shit, it's not... good for you. Even if it's great in the time between, you end up spending all of it waiting for the next disaster."

Christophe hummed quietly. His attention lowered, staring at the dashboard, and she could sense a discontent. Rochelle turned her head to glance at him, uncertainly. "... What?"

The man shrugged, a pained gasp leaving him when the gesture jostled his bad shoulder. Rochelle wanted to surge over and make sure he was okay, but she was trying not to overreact. Treating him like he was breakable was tempting - but ultimately unhelpful. So, she merely watched as he reached to place his hand over his ribs, rubbing there with a shaking head. "I think he is honest. Just not by speaking. He is... a man of action, ¿sí?"

"He may as well not if he's not gonna say it." she returned, ire flaring, despite herself. "Maybe I'm crazy, but Ellis deserves to hear it. Out loud."

Chris curled his fingers to scratch at his side, pursing his lips with a coked head. "He did not say it enough in the gun store?" he offered up, almost soothingly, only to widen his eyes when Rochelle outright flashed a glower up at the roof of the ambulance. "I do not mean to upset you, bonita. Is it not the truth...? Running into a sword, sin pensar... It is romántico."

Rochelle let her head hit the headrest, closing her eyes. "... I don't... I don't disagree. It just isn't enough. Whatever he did or didn't do, it doesn't change the fact that Ellis came out of this in love with him - and thinking Nick doesn't love him. That's what matters. And now he's just... confusing him."

"¿Qué?" Christophe questioned, examining her cautiously.

She kept her eyes closed, chewing on her tongue for an instant. She was tempted to keep it to herself, but Chris was a third party. A fresh set of eyes. She couldn't tell Coach much, as it'd only make him angry... and telling Ellis would only further the issue. At least she could tell someone, now.

"I'm pretty sure you made him jealous, sleeping on Ellis in the car." she stated, guilt threatening when she couldn't help a slight grin. "I really shouldn't be laughing about this, but it's about time he suffered a little. The guy was practically spitting fire."

Chris looked vaguely shocked, his jaw popping open in a thoughtful gesture. He huffed out a sound of interest, looking ahead to glance toward the sedan. "He was?"

Rochelle lifted a hand, waving it. "The look on that boy's face, you'd have thought you two were an item. I know Nick's paranoid and all, but he was about to have a straight-up meltdown. It would've
been hilarious if it weren't frustrating. Like, you dump him, treat him like shit - then have the audacity to get jealous? And over nothing? Honestly."

Slowly, Christophe tore his gaze away from their teammates. He glanced back at Rochelle, a slow grin filtering onto his lips. He cocked his head, leaning toward her just the smallest degree. "Seems that he is not the only one."

It was surprise that made her balk. Her eyes darted over his face, caught between protest and bewilderment. She didn't know what was more startling: the fact he wasn't upset at the idea of Nick thinking he and Ellis were flirting, or the implication she was jealous.

"I'm not jealous -" she blustered, affront touching her voice as she prodded a finger in the air, reflexively trying to turn it around on him. "Unless you're trying to tell me you and Ellis actually were cuddling."

She said it without thinking. Her face heated up, catching her lower lip between her teeth in a quick gesture of nerves, one Chris noticed. That isn't nearly the point, is it? His grin widened a little as if he sensed her realization, but whatever he was going to say was lost when the radio abruptly crackled to life in her lap.

"Okay, folks. " Ellis' voice came through, a nervous and stressed breeze to it. Rochelle quickly averted her eyes, pointing down at the radio, and Chris dropped the conversation obediently - but not without a slim grin. "We're gonna hide behind the sedan and wait for the zombies to cluster up, and then I'll throw the bomb. Y'all ready in there?"

Rochelle glanced up, spying their teammates. Ellis stood near the nose of the car with Lena's brush-hook gripped in his off-hand, and Nick was standing behind him with his katana balanced on his shoulder. Coach had Christophe's machete in hand and Rhiannon was swinging her bat idly beside her.

"Yeah." she responded with a quick press of the radio's 'Talk' button, trying not to look at Chris. "Let's do this."

"Okay. We'll go when y'all go. Just hit the power switches'n'let that baby shine."

Scratching at the side of her neck, Rochelle pointed toward the ignition. Chris easily grabbed ahold of the keys, twisting them to turn on the battery. The ambulance clicked to life, and Rochelle looked over the controls now lit in front of her. She reached out to place a fingertip against the main power switch on the dashboard switchpanel, nodding her chin up toward the box on the roof.

With a blink, Chris stretched up his hand, grabbing the power switch of the sirens. Neither pressed it quite yet, gazes matching on a sudden whim. Rochelle soothed herself with an inhale, trying to coax herself into that familiar calm that came with surrendering to her teammates' protection. They'd keep her safe. They'd get through, because they always had.

"Ready?" she uttered, earning a grin from the Spaniard beside her.

"Espero que sí." he responded, with an affirmative nod.

It was in calculated unison that they pressed the switches. There was just the subtlest moment of silence, of calm, where Rochelle started to wonder if the ambulance was even working. She had just enough time to glance up at the ceiling before a pitchy wail reverberated around them, and the softest click preceded lights flashing on from every angle.

She looked around, startled. Red and white lights flashed against their surroundings, and bright
white flood lights snapped on at either side of them to light up the street. The siren shrieked up to a fever pitch - then fell, dropping to a low growl before it rose back up. Rochelle almost laughed, a sense of pride swelling in her chest at Ellis' plan finding its footing.

And then the ambulance shuddered, and the scream of infected broke through the noise. They flooded around the vehicle, pouring into the back of it. The pounding of body and hand against the rear of the car grew until the zombies changed tactics, flooding up toward the front, seeking out weaknesses in the ambulance's chassis.

Rochelle's eyes widened slightly, flinching backwards as an infected gave a furious pound of its fist against the window on her door. Her lips parted to speak, discomfort threatening - and then the zombie leapt, bashing its face against the window, instead. A crack started in the glass, spiderwebbing gently between its own edges. "Uh -"

As the infected reared back, readying itself for another attack, Rochelle scrambled back off the seat. She bumped into Christophe's side, grabbing his elbow to drag him with as she retreated into the rear of the ambulance. Her heel struck the corpse there, raising that horrendous stench around them, and she halted with Chris leaned into her.

The window broke a little more with another meaty thud, and Rochelle carefully stretched a hand back to grab her gun from its place tucked under her waistband. She thumbed the safety off and exhaled, feeling a kind of clarity when Chris' hand slipped to loop fingers loosely around her wrist, stabilizing himself - and offering some sort of comfort, some solace.

Come on, Ellis.

We need you.
When the sirens started and the lights flared to life, it was hard not to leap in the air in triumph. Ellis felt that familiar rush that came alongside the success of some hare-brained scheme, some stunt coming to fruition. He wanted to holler, throw his hat, but Coach must have sensed it. The big man set a hand on his shoulder, eyes grim as he nodded toward the pipe bomb. Ellis chewed at his lower lip, gazing through the car window where they all crouched behind the sedan. They had to time it right, and there was no room for error with Chris and Rochelle in danger. He had to throw it soon enough to stop the infected from breaking into the ambulance, but late enough to get as many infected in the blast as possible. The latter, as it turned out, would not be a problem. There seemed even more infected than he'd expected, as if they'd erupted from the ground like ants from a disturbed anthill. They swarmed the ambulance in a writhing and furious horde, smashing against the boxy rear before clambering their way toward the front. Some bashed and clawed at the sides while some flooded against the nose, crawling up to reach the windshield. Panic struck like lightning; there were too many, and they came too quickly. Ellis could see the ambulance shuddering and jolting with the assault, and he scrambled to activate the lighter in his other hand. "Shit." he uttered, attention scattered as he snapped his thumb against the lighter's trigger until it lit. "Shit. They're movin' faster than I thought!"

"Come on, Ellis!" Nick snarled, looking through the car window to watch the zombies clamber atop the car's front. One slammed its fists against the windshield, a vast set of shattering lines crackling along the glass in a branching pattern. "They're getting swarmed! Either get the bomb thrown or we go in -"

Rochelle's voice crackled from Nick's hip, edging toward desperation. "Guys?! Now would be good! Please!"

Ellis crammed the fuse into the flickering orange flame, watching the thread catch fire eagerly. "Got it!" he shouted, standing straight up. He put one arm out, counterbalancing, twisting his hips just faintly to coil his body behind the throw. Nerves started a chanting self-encouragement in the back of his head.

You threw a 'nade at a Tank from yards off, you can do this, man - just don't land it on top of the car - that's all - and don't roll it under - and don't -

He inhaled, and threw.

There was a helpless sensation that sunk in the moment it left his fingertips. He watched it go, tumbling through the air, top-heavy. It went too high, but there was an infected kneeling on the nose of the car, and it struck into its back. The soft ricochet sent it to the ground, sitting neatly just in front of the ambulance. Ellis might have dumbly watched it explode, had fingers not latched in his shirt from both sides and dragged him down to the ground. He hit a knee roughly, wincing, and scattered a look to his left and right. Nick having a hand tangled in his shirt didn't surprise him - bothered him, sure, but didn't surprise him - but Rhiannon doing the same caught him off-guard.
Their eyes met, and she looked almost as startled as he did.

Then the pipebomb went off.

It wasn't a tremendously loud sound. As he'd learned the first time, the girls' bombs weren't about percussive force so much as gathering infected in a tight clump to then shred them with shrapnel. Behind the siren's wailing, he didn't hear much at all - except the wet thumps of any number of infected hitting the ground, some gurgling and snarling, but most silent.

He raised his head enough to peek, and the front of the ambulance looked like it had collided, full-speed, into the horde. Blood smeared it in messy swipes and stripes, a bit like a Boomer had exploded just at its nose. Although plenty of infected had perished outright from shrapnel to vital areas, some looked merely staggered as they grasped and palmed at the metal jutting from their skin.

One grabbed hold of a nail stuck through its cheek and yanked it free, tearing away a hunk of flesh with it. Another tugged and clawed at a shard of metal sunk straight through its eye, only stopped by the thick ridge of bone that made up its eyebrow.

They were stunned for just a moment - and then the remaining infected resumed their attack like nothing had happened at all.

A zombie leapt into the front of the ambulance, feet striking blood and viscera and slipping, sending it crashing to the ground. The next had more luck, and it went skittering up to crouch on the hood. Its hands started a quick and lashing pound on the windshield, thickening and broadening the cracks.

"Come on!" Coach bellowed, that protective instinct driving him to lunge to his feet. He sprinted, lighter on his feet than seemed possible, machete ready in his hands. "They gonn' get through!"

Nick was on his tail in an instant, katana gripped in both hands, and the two men bolted toward the screaming, flashing ambulance. Ellis scrambled to grab up Lena's weapon, racing after them with a shout. "Nick - tell 'em to shut down the -"

The infected broke through the windshield with a tremendous shattering, the tempered glass turning to sparkling, crystalline shapes. It tinkled up and over the nose of the ambulance, raining into the interior. Amidst the glinting white flakes of glass, the zombie crawled into the ambulance's front cabin, shrieking in tune to the siren.

Ellis felt horror for the split-second it took for a gunshot to ring out, a flare of light illuminating the interior. The zombie fell backwards, landing spread-eagled over the breach between the hood and the dashboard. Its mouth was still gaped in a growl, teeth bared. If he squinted, he could just see Rochelle standing behind the seats, gun raised.

And then her gun lowered as she cradled her head, nearly collapsing as the gunshot sent agony through her ear drums. Christophe tried to catch her, but he was struck just as badly by the sound reverberating through the echo-chamber of the ambulance, and they both collapsed into hunched curls.

Another infected leapt to fill the gap made by its predecessor, but Coach was faster. He grabbed it by the leg, halting it, and it had just enough time to twist around and howl into his face before he slashed the machete into its midsection. The weapon took a massive slice from its side, its insides draining like so much grey and ruby molasses.
It screamed, clawing at his face in fury. He earned a scrabbled strike to the cheek before he could attack again, hewing the infected entirely to the spine. They were resilient, but not invincible, and it slid bodily to the hood and then to the asphalt. Coach brushed the back of his wrist against the blood streaking along his cheekbone, glaring up at the lights flashing atop the ambulance.

"Cut that shit off!" he shouted, trying to be heard over the wail, and only partially succeeding.

There was one small benefit to the sirens' continued cry. The infected that hadn't yet noticed the windshield opening seemed possessed by the lights, trying desperately to climb up to attack the spinning and flashing glow. They offered easy targets, scrabbling and kicking at the ambulance in their efforts.

Nick and Coach separated, stepping to either side to start picking them off. With their blades, it was a matter of slicing into their core or their neck, taking advantage of their single-minded distraction. It felt less like taking down a horde and more like clearing vines, unearthing the ambulance from the scattered few that had survived the bomb.

It was simple enough - until more infected began sprinting out from around fences and flat, gravel alleyways, and their attention zeroed in instantly on the survivors.

Ellis saw it first, but Coach charged before he could react, meeting the first infected with a swipe to the neck. "The siren!" he shouted when Ellis started to run to help him, and the younger man balked for just an instant with uncertainty turning his step into a stumble.

As much as he wanted to help fend off the infected, they had to turn the siren off or more would just keep coming. And that was not so simple, either. The broken windshield had scattered glass everywhere inside the cabin; trying to go for the control panels would tear him to shreds. He had to shut it off another way, and quick.

Lena's brush-axe was suddenly heavy in his hands.

He bolted for the ambulance, skidding to a stop just in front of it. He shifted his weight to bounce into a wide stance, swapping his grip to level the blade with the ambulance's hood. He jammed the tip between the hood edge and the chassis, jerking and shoving to get the length of the blade sunk in - and then he set his palms flat on the handle and jumped.

It took two tries. He could feel the weapon groaning, protesting, and the hood undoubtedly did the same. The sensation of something snapping traveled up his arms, and he thought it might have been Lena's axe - right before the hood flew up a foot or two, and all his weight suddenly bore down on the handle of the weapon with nothing to counter it.

He went down, Lena's brush-hook clattering to the ground in front of him, only just managing to catch himself so he didn't land completely on his wrists. His knees took some of the blow, though he felt the bones in his lower palms sting, shaken by the collision. He gasped a little, scrambling back up to his feet before he could really feel the pain.

Grabbing fingertips underneath the hood's edge, he thrust it open, holding it there with a palm flat against the edge of the hood. His eyes instantly flashed to the battery there, and he took one single inhale before he grabbed the black cable that marked the negative terminal.

He didn't know how ambulances worked, really, but tearing the battery out seemed like a good start.

There was a lugnut holding it there, so he put a heel against the nose of the ambulance and yanked,
leaning his whole body into the gesture. It strained, resisted, and he released a sound that verged on furious as he pulled -

When the cable's connection failed in his hands and released from the battery post, he stumbled back by his own force. Ellis only kept on his feet by luck, reflexively shoving a foot back to catch his weight on his heel. The relief that flooded him at the success was short-lived when the sirens and lights did not deactivate.

Ellis looked up. He had enough time to feel a distant disappointment in himself, a frustration, and then white and orange flickered along the dashboard.

A spray of sparks drifted up, then faded. He blinked, the colours searing into his vision at the same time a sour smell prickled at his nose, unpleasant and burnt. The lights blinked out instantly, though the siren gave a sleepy and warped groan before it faded to silence.

"Huh." he uttered, almost bemused, unsure.

Although part of him sunk into curiousity at the explosive and unexpected reaction, he was startled into motion when a faint lick of flame darted up from the dashboard. It struggled to catch on the plastic and likely wouldn't turn into much, but he shouted anyway: "Guys! Get out the back!"

He could just see Rochelle straighten, dizzily grabbing Chris by the elbow and dragging him deeper into the ambulance to open up the rear doors. Ellis turned, reaching to pick up Lena's axe from where it had fallen on the ground. His wrists ached softly as he gripped it, clutching, darting a look around.

Rhiannon had joined Coach, the two standing nearly back-to-back. She struck her bat against an infected's head, dropping it to the ground, and followed up with a quick kick against its face. The strike snapped its neck, leaving it twitching on the asphalt.

Nick had one zombie speared on his katana, backing up as it snarled and flailed its way up the blade thrust through its midsection, but another was charging at his flank. There was no hesitation as Ellis bolted toward him, shifting his grip on the brush-axe to ready it like a sledgehammer.

Whatever he felt, and whatever happened between them, it wasn't in him to watch Nick get injured.

He sprinted, and cut the zombie off before it reached the older man. The creature screamed at him, flaring hands forward in a clutching grab, refocusing on the new threat. Rage sent spittle dribbling from the corner of its mouth, along with some greasy black substance.

Momentum swung the brush-hook over his head, bringing it down over the infected like he were chopping a log. It landed on the zombie's shoulder, shattering clavicle and splitting it down until the blade was stopped by the thick bone of its ribcage. The infected shrieked, continuing toward him even as its arm peeled away, lifeless.

Ellis grunted, kicking out at its knee. The infected stumbled forward at the strike, snapping teeth at him in some effort to bite. He reflexively shoved up a hand, palm catching against its forehead - but while the zombie's right arm was nonfunctional, its left snatched forward to dig nails into his bicep.

He grimaced with the pain, startled by the discomfort as its clawlike grasp cut into his skin, damaging the abused skin left behind by the Smoker that had dragged him across the parking lot a few days earlier. "Sonuva -"

Ellis might have punched it away, but before he could react, Nick was next to him, almost surgically thrusting the katana into its chest. The blade struck through its lungs, an audible tacky
breathlessness touching its snarls as they lost function, and its body went quickly limp.

Nick let it slide to the ground off his katana, sparing the shortest glance for Ellis, eyes only just tracing the crescents of blood on his bicep. Something guarded touched his eyes, a distance, and he turned with a short and flat utterance. "Be more careful."

Gritting his teeth, Ellis almost didn't respond - almost had the strength not to.

Almost.

"'Thanks' works too, y'know." he snapped, a flustered energy flooding warmth to his cheeks when Nick didn't so much as acknowledge him. He watched the gambler stride away to glance up the road, examining the now-clear street. Ellis grunted in agitation and turned toward Coach and Rhiannon, who had finished off the last of the infected.

He felt a furious kind of annoyance, but he felt a little stupid, too.

Yuh gotta stop lettin' him get under under yer skin, man...

Stumbling out from around the ambulance, Rochelle staggered along with Chris in tow, his arm looped over her shoulders. They both looked dizzy, disoriented, and Ellis took it as a merciful distraction.

"Guys! I'm so sorry!" he babbled, racing toward them, putting one hand up while the other gripped the brush-axe at his thigh. "That didn't work near like I wanted. Shit was too dang close, I -"

"Ay, dios." coughed out Christophe in a weak tone. He leaned into Rochelle's side, lifting his hand in a pleading gesture for silence. Ellis skidded to a stilted stop, frowning a little before he realized the Spaniard was joking. "Talk slowly, hermanito. I hurt, my head hurts - como estar borracho."

Helping him along as they walked, Rochelle uttered a faint laugh. "Okay, yes, shooting the gun was a bad idea. I got it, Chris. I got it. I'm very sorry. Next time I'll let the zombie crawl in and eat us, okay? Will that be better, you big baby?"

The man tipped his head to give a grin, eyes low-lidded with exhaustion. "Y estoy borracho de tu amor."

With a curtness that startled all three of them, Coach cleared his throat. He gestured with the machete in his hand, sweeping it back to point toward the sedan. "A'ight, young'uns. Glad everyone's a'ight, but we still got Lena to get settled. Can we get a move on, get our asses inside this base?"

A faint embarrassment lowered Rochelle's eyes, glancing at her boots in a discomfited sort of shame. She hadn't forgotten, but adrenaline had flooded out her good sense. The fact that she'd been enjoying Chris' company only worsened the cold feeling of distaste with herself that wormed up her spine.

She shrugged out from under his arm, a hand cupping under his elbow to keep him supported. He blinked at her, confusion entering his expression. She avoided looking at him, fully aware that he thought he'd done something wrong, but didn't know what. "Let's get you back in the car. Coach, you stay here - I'll drive."

Ellis watched them head toward the car, offhandedly aware of Rhiannon stepping toward Coach. The blonde raised a hand to sift fingers through her hair, uttering a small, "Thanks, big guy." The football coach offered a nod of acknowledgement, highlighted with a gruff smile.
"Nice fightin'." he stated, and Rhiannon nearly grinned.

The mechanic felt abruptly like he and Nick were the only ones not getting along, and the thought brought on an unexpected surge of loneliness.

Any pride at his plan working out turned to nothing but a sour taste in his mouth.
Chapter 193

It was self-indulgence that led Nick to stand watch on the street corner. The task gave him quiet, gave him time to think, though thinking felt more like sinking into the clinging quicksand of self-pity. He gritted his teeth and tried to pay attention to his surroundings, even as he wanted to do anything but.

There was no way to come out unscathed, it seemed.

Ican't leave, but

seems like that's the only thing that'd make you happy. Nothing else fucking works.

Spite flew a whim across his thoughts: If he's just going to be miserable no matter what, why not let him stay with you? At least it'll be less fucking lonely. He exhaled, shaking it off. He couldn't. If they survived long enough to find rescue, Ellis could leave him behind, scot-free. Guiltless. If they didn't, at least they'd die being honest with each other.

Isn't honesty the fact that seeing him like this makes me want to gouge my own goddamn eyes out? But what's the alternative? I lie, get back with him, waste his time? Waste our time, whatever we have left?

Watching Ellis grow to hate him was easier to swallow this way. It would have happened one way or another, and at least now it was on his terms. Burn it down before it burns you. If it's doomed anyway, why try? Why keep trying? Why ever fucking try?

Nick's eyes flashed up to watch a scrap of litter dart across the street on a wayward breeze.

Because you miss him. snapped a smaller part of him, and he grunted aloud, shaking his head as if to dismiss the thought. It didn't work. Because you miss the way he looked at you, that made you feel like you were worth half a damn. You miss believing for a minute someone could care about you the way you care about them.

Because you miss feeling safe with someone for the first fucking time in your life.

He closed his eyes, though the action prickled the hair on the back of his neck. Breathing didn't soothe him, not when the air was practically rancid, and he wasn't sure that his own body wasn't contributing. He felt infuriated - and tremendously alone.

Thing is, he won't be safe with you.

As it turned out, the Sunset Café was a small seafood restaurant, gilded exuberantly with seagulls. The sign was painted with them; there were sculptures of wood and metal gulls adorning the fence and the scrubby yard; the windows had stickers stamped on them of seagulls in varying states of flight and bow-legged repose...

A grimace crossed the gambler's lips. "What the hell kind of senile asshat decorated this place?" he muttered, distantly registering Coach's appearance at his flank. "Because disease-ridden, flying rat shit-factories make a guy real hungry."

That drew a snort from Coach, wearily. The big man crossed his arms, turning to watch Rochelle ease the sedan up and into the squat parking lot just in front of the building. It had a slim porch, and though its door was busted off its hinges, he could see the front door through the fine mesh
walls and noticed it was intact.

"If it'll get me washed, I ain't gonna moan 'bout nothin'." he stated, quietly, rubbing a hand over his gut.

"Good luck washing the old lady stink off after a few nights here." Nick was quick to retort, thrusting a hand up to indicate the restaurant, palm out like he was warming it at a fire. "I can actually feel it from here. Is that shit contagious? Someone got a fucking Geiger counter for Alzheimers?"

Coach broke, uttering a rumbled laugh before he muffled it into a dry look of disapproval. It was the closest to normal Nick had felt since the break-up, the closest Coach had come to treating him like everything hadn't changed.

Then it passed.

"Rhiannon." the ex-football player uttered, shortly. She lagged behind the sedan, posture tense as she pushed the motorcycle along. Her eyes darted up to acknowledge him, silently. "You wanna check the base out? Make sure nothin' got in? I'll go with."

Exhaling shortly, the blonde sped into a slight jog, running the bike up the slight bump that made up the sidewalk. Once it was settled there, she nudged the kickstand out, letting the motorcycle lean there. "Okay." she agreed, flatly. "Then we get Lena inside."

Coach nodded curtly, leading the way at a quick march. "We'll do a sweep. Y'all watch the car." The blonde fell in line behind him, bat dropping from its tuck under her arm, quick to catch up. "Ellis, check on the girl."

With that, the two stepped up into the porch, making their way to the door. Rhiannon drew a key out of her pants pocket, unlocking it, and they slipped inside together.

Nick turned his attention just enough to watch Ellis as he padded up, chin low and face masked under his trucker cap. The younger man was in his own head like Nick had never seen - stewing, boiling, primed to blow. His gentle nature had failed him, leaving just a frustrated, wound-up anger.

It was only more proof that Nick was nothing but bad news.

You'll get over it, kiddo. I promise. You're young. One day, you'll be glad you passed me by, glad you got while the getting was good.

And maybe one day, Nick would stop regretting it.

"Who bets Tons of Fun gets murdered in there by our little maneater?" he tossed out, agitation prickling his shoulders and only worsening when nobody paid him any mind. He should have been used to it, but it grated on him, now. It wasn't the reaction he sought to elicit, though he didn't know what was.

Rochelle pushed the driver's side door open, sliding out with a mewled grunt as she pressed her injured palm to her tummy. She watched Ellis approach the sedan, reaching to pull the unlock switch so the back doors clicked open. "Too bad there wasn't a stretcher in the ambulance. Would've been nice to carry her in on."

Crossing his arms loosely over his chest, Nick shrugged. "If there's damage to do, probably already done." When Rochelle flashed him a frown of disapproval, he repeated the gesture, firmer. "Just
being honest. I'm not thrilled about it, either, for the record."

That seemed to surprise her, and the producer quieted to a thoughtful blink. She didn't seem sure what to react to: Nick caring at all, or admitting as much aloud. She settled for neither, and turned to keep an eye on Ellis as the younger man pulled open the car door and leaned inside.

He reached in to touch a hand onto Lena's ankle, where she lay compact and crumpled along the backseat. His fingers gripped there, uttering a sigh as he gazed over her face. The blood on her chin had dried and no more had dribbled to join it, leading him to think - hope? - that she'd merely bit her tongue or cheek, and not bled internally.

There was nothing they could do if that were the case. Nothing but pray.

"She's doin' okay still." he announced, whether it was true or not. He could see her chest moving under the thin hoodie zipped up snugly to her neck, a quick-paced breathing that only comforted him a little. "Maybe we should -"

He didn't get to finish, not when her eyes flickered open. The sight shocked him into freezing, hand still lingering on her ankle, the intense feeling of his heart coming to a bracing halt in his chest sending cold tension down his limbs. His body surged forward instantly, leaning further into the car to bring his face closer to level with hers.

"O-oh - shit, she's - she's awake!" he uttered, voice cracking just a little, barely registering the way Rochelle rushed to push herself up against his flank and look in. She said something, a frantic question, but Ellis barely listened.

Lena's green-hazel eyes darted, matching his, and he could see the pain and realization there. It sparked a faint fear across her face, jaw just barely moving to run a dry tongue over her lower lip, rustling against the blood caked on the flesh. She did not move - but her body trembled in a way that made him think it wasn't incapability so much as fear.

It was that fear that sparked Ellis to speak, hushing out a soothing tone, even as he felt like he were floating a few inches above his body.

"Hey, girl. Yer okay. We got'cha." His hand tightened a little on her ankle, just softly, and relief threatened to break him into a small smile when she flinched at the gesture. She felt it, at least, and that was better than not feeling it at all. He released her just as quickly, lifting both hands up in the air. "Sorry. Sorry. That's good, though. Okay? We made it home 'n' we're gonna get you inside. Okay?"

He didn't think she was listening, if the glazed look on her face was any indication. She grunted, exhaled, and the roughest utterance left her: "K-.. kitt.." There was urgency there, desperation.

Ellis didn't react fast enough to stop her when she pushed an elbow against the seat cushion, wrenching up a few inches, but neither did it last. Pain caught like a hook in her, and as suddenly as she'd blinked awake, she was gone. Her body limpened, eyes rolling up to disappear in a flash of white before they closed entirely.

He yelped, despite himself, almost reaching out to grab for her, but Rochelle put a hand on his back to stop him.

"It's okay, baby." she muttered, grief apparent in her voice. "Let her be a sec'." Ellis turned just enough to look at her, see the wetness over her eyes, before he broke into a sigh. She let her hand retract, slipping a thumb between her teeth. "She's in pain. I don't know if we have enough
painkillers for both of them."

She said it quietly, vaguely, so Chris wouldn't hear it where he sat inside the car.

Ellis winced, gaze flicking to his fingers. He curled them, tightened them, head shaking. "We'll... we'll figure it out. Maybe we can find some more, or maybe she won't be so bad after some rest."

Rochelle seemed dubious, thoughtful, but didn't get the chance to respond before Nick took a loud step forward, catching both of their attention. He lowered his chin, voice falling to a muttered, clipped annoyance. "We're spending meds on them, too? Is this the fucking game plan, nurse every broken-winged bird we find lying around?"

With a slow turn, Ellis landed flat on his heels. He lifted his eyes, gaze struggling to meet Nick's. When he spoke, it was flat and calm. "She's hurt 'cause you ran on ahead. So we're gonna help her best we can, and you can just go sit by yerself if you don't wanna help. He's seemin' the only person you care about, anyhow."

He didn't get angry. He didn't let himself get angry. It felt better to say it like that, as if he'd regained the higher ground. He didn't feel petty that way - he felt collected, and maybe disappointed. It felt even better when Nick's eyes widened just slightly, caught off-guard.

Did he look hurt? Injured, behind those guarded eyes?

Ellis was okay with that, if only just this once. He'd feel bad later, maybe, but in the moment - it felt good.

He lifted his chin, looking away well before Nick managed to collect his expression into a scowl. Ellis shrugged his arms into a loose cross and looked up toward the restaurant, a little relieved when he saw Coach lean out of the doorway. The interruption kept Nick from getting in a retort, and that felt very good.

"A'ight, y'all." the big man announced, tone level. "Rhiannon's gettin' somethin' set up fo' Lena to lay on. They got some beddin' in there, but the shit we brought'll come in handy. Let's get her in, an' then we'll unload." His eyes flickered over them, and if he noticed something had happened, he didn't let on. "Nick, you keep on guard."

The gambler grunted, noncommittal and irritated. He turned on a heel, and the slouch of his body - though he likely meant it to look closed-off, dismissive - mostly came off sulking.

Rochelle inhaled gently, sharing the smallest glance with Ellis, wordlessly searching. Telling Rhiannon her sister had drifted into consciousness seemed risky, and potentially do nothing but raise false hope. If the woman woke again, then it wouldn't matter.

If she didn't, it wouldn't matter, either.

She turned, leaning slightly toward the car to softly utter, "Hey, Chris. We're gonna get inside, and then you can get some rest, okay?" When the man did not respond, she frowned, stepping around the open car door to lean in and look through the broken driver's side window. "Chris?"

She paused there, softly, before an almost melancholic laugh left her. Ellis side-stepped to lean in and look for himself.

The young Spaniard had fallen right back asleep, drool and all.
Chapter 194

Coach carried Christophe in his arms, the boy's arm tucked against his stomach and stump facing outwards. He seemed half present, eyes opening before fluttering shut again, content to surrender to the larger man's care.

A fondness found its way into Coach's expression, even as he winced a little with every other step.

"Guess he tired himself out." Ellis mumbled, watching the elder Georgian carefully return inside the restaurant. Coach pushed the door open with his knee to protect Chris' legs from hitting it on the way past, and the two disappeared. "Guy's a real trooper. Dunno how he's keepin' it tuhgether."

Rochelle nodded quietly, focus shifting back to the car before her sympathy could shake her resolve. "He did good. He deserves some sleep. We all do." She sighed, lacing her fingers together and straightening her arms to crack her knuckles. It hurt her palm, the flesh drawn taut.

"We should go ahead and get Lena inside. Nick, give us a hand."

Both men turned, faces in varying states of protest and discomfort. Nick looked half angry, and Ellis' face drew in a wrenched look of betrayal. It was what she expected, but no less frustrating.

Rochelle put a hand up before either could speak, a finger extended and agitation flaring. "You can split the café up with a chalk line and stay separated later. Right now, we need to get her indoors, so everybody put on their big boy pants and come grab a leg." As much as she could, she kept her tone light - but her anger must have bled through, as the two men cowed under her direction. It was either that, or the awareness of Lena's health standing in the balance.

She chose to believe the former.

Ellis looked more apologetic than Nick did, head ducking low and eyes averting. The gambler grunted out a sound of irritation, gaze slitting as he advanced toward them. It should've been laughable to watch them flounder, but all it did was make her sad.

"Okay." she stated, taking a step to approach the open back door. She gazed in on the unconscious brunette, eyes flickering uncertainly to look for the best way to haul her out. "I'll climb in the other side and push, you two get a grip as you can, okay? Try and be gentle."

Without waiting for any sign of assent, Rochelle retreated. Ellis moved to take her place, shoving in close and setting a hand on Lena's hip. The producer circled the car and yanked the opposite door open, crawling onto the seat on her knees. By the time she got settled, Nick had appeared beside Ellis, and the two looked insufferably tense standing that close to one another.

Sighing, Rochelle slipped her hands forward to cradle them under Lena's shoulders. As she did, Ellis' other hand tucked under the woman's waistline, and they both shared a momentary nod before moving.

It was a calculated motion to slide Lena along the seat, and as her lower body neared the edge, Nick ducked to grab under her legs. With that supported, Ellis' arms slid to hug her torso, and she slipped off the seat to balance snugly between the two men. The posturing put them much too close together, and Ellis wanted nothing more than to stop the warmth threatening at his face.

It was childish, he was sure, to struggle so much with proximity - but it hurt. It ached with the reminder of the intimacy they no longer had. Nick felt warm and all he wanted was to turn his chin...
and bury into the gambler's shoulder.

He set his jaw, keeping his eyes on Lena's face where the woman tilted into his chest... or he tried to, until Nick's eyes caught his. The older man looked almost self-satisfied. Amused, like he'd sensed Ellis' conflict and found humour in it. Nick blinked his expression back to neutral upon realizing he'd been caught, but too late.

It was with an agitated energy that Ellis slipped a foot back, only truly committing to the step when Nick moved with him. The gesture was less like a coordinated effort, and more like Nick losing his footing in some tug-of-war contest. "Quit." escaped him, more flustered and weaker than he wanted. "This's hard enough without you enjoyin' it."

Even as they stirred to motion, Nick drew his head back in something almost affronted, narrowing his expression into a pinch. "I didn't say any-"

Ellis didn't have the patience to let him finish his protest. He hushed out a sharp breath, tightening his arms gingerly around Lena, ensuring she wasn't jostled more than necessary as they moved. "You don't gotta." he snapped off, quietly, and the statement seemed to put Nick off enough to silence him for just a moment.

The older man's frown gave nothing away other than an exasperation, even when a distant bitterness made him sigh. Kid's got you pegged, huh? Just a sadistic asshole.

They walked in cautious parallel toward the café's front porch, and it was just before Rochelle hurried to catch up with them that Nick allowed himself a muttered, "I'm not enjoying anything. Fuck, since when did you start playing the victim? Careful, kid. You'll put my ex to shame."

He knew acutely he'd crossed a line the moment he'd started, but his voice could not be halted. He witnessed a flash-fire of anger cross those blue eyes, and for a moment, they were strangers.

Then misery washed up over the younger man's face, mired in some distant disappointment, and he knew precisely who stood in front of him - and who had taken that blow. He wished he could coil the words back into his lungs, diffuse them back into nothing but air in his chest.

But they'd formed, and there was no taking them back now.

Rochelle had rushed up as if to help them, to take some of Lena's weight, but she was stopped dead in her tracks by the exchange. Nick didn't bother to look her way, and Ellis merely tipped his chin away and resumed his cautious strafe toward and through the restaurant's front door. Nick followed, as there was no alternative.

The restaurant's interior was nothing but wood paneling. Dark brown boards lined the floors, the walls, the ceiling - the entryway funneled into a short pathway blocked off by a shoulder-height partition. The building itself was shaped like a squat L. Over the partitioning wall, a main section of sturdy tables and benches lead up to a bar. Past the bar curled off a small ancillary section of the restaurant, lined with tables set up end-to-end as if to host larger groups.

It was there that Rhiannon was putting together a pad of bedding. She'd gathered together an assortment of blankets, some light-coloured and delicate, others dark and woolen. Her eyes darted up as Nick and Ellis approached, gazing over the distance between them, attention sharp on Lena's limp frame.

Coach was at her flank, setting Chris down atop a bench, laying him flat on his back with a tender attention. He acknowledged his teammates' entrance with a grunted utterance, but did not turn his
head. "Bring her over here." he stated, simply.

Ellis led the way in silence, eyes rooted any place but on Nick. They wound cautiously between tables, careful not to bump anything or allow Lena to. Nick felt more than ever like crawling into the nearest hole and expiring - though that seemed too quiet and calm an end.

... *Fuck. This is getting... I got what I want, he already hates me. Why am I tormenting him? Why can't I stop - this?* He felt oddly claustrophobic, pinned between Ellis' utter silence and Rochelle's threatening presence on his heels. *Why can't he just stop pissing me off for just a minute? It was never supposed to be -*

His chest tightened with something he couldn't pinpoint, but his heartrate increased with something he knew well enough: regret. Self-hatred. Some bitter mix of the two, brewing into a layer of frost that cooled his blood and rose goosebumps along his arms.

*This was never about making him miserable. Was it?*

The moment they'd passed the bar, slipping through the small space between the edge of the bar and the inner corner of the building's bent shape, Coach and Rhiannon approached. The big man stepped to meet them, and he scooped his arms under Lena's body to help carry her - but as he slipped into place, Ellis' shoulder abruptly pressed into Nick's, turning.

It was an unmistakeable gesture. Ellis forced him away, leaning into Coach to let the health teacher's arms take her weight instead. Although the big man looked vaguely confused, he said nothing. In one swift transfer of grip, Nick was left with no reasonable option but to let go. He halted, watching Ellis and Coach carry the woman gently to the table.

Rochelle came to stand next to him, arms drawing into a cross, and he could feel the vibration of her anger. He didn't need to look to know she was slanting a glare his way, and he almost laughed at the intensity of her vitriol.

Rhiannon had no attention to spare for them, too busy rushing to flatten out the blankets in preparation. She leapt up to stand on the bench, resting a knee on the table itself. Her hands were quick and darted to follow as Ellis and Coach eased Lena down.

"Careful." she hushed, repeatedly, an edge of anger left sharp in the word. Neither man took it personally.

As Lena came to lay flat, Rhiannon sat down entirely on the edge of the table and placed a hand on her older sister's cheek. She said nothing at all as Coach and Ellis retreated, muddied green eyes firm on Lena's face, thumb drawing a line from her cheekbone to her jaw.

She seemed listless, suddenly. Harmless. Empty. It was like all the energy she'd funneled into keeping herself together had drained to numbness.

With a sigh, Coach turned, raising his eyes to Ellis' face. He studied it, thoughtfully, but did not seem inclined to comment on whatever he saw there. "A'ight, son. Let's get settled, sooner we get cleaned up."

The younger Georgian's head bobbed in agreement, and he turned on a heel. Ellis strode back to make his way toward the front door, chin low. He moved stiffly, arms at his sides, and his upset was a palpable tremor. When he stepped to pass Nick and Rochelle, the gambler lifted a hand and moved to intercept him with a step.

He didn't know exactly what he wanted to say or what he wanted to come from the conversation,
but he had to say something. He'd let things get too far, and they had to regain some kind of equilibrium. He couldn't just make a mess and leave it behind; there was nowhere to go.

An utterance left him, just a growl out of the corner of his mouth. "Kid. That wasn't... I didn't mean -"

Shock left Nick reduced to silence when Ellis passed him as if he'd said nothing. It was not a matter of stepping around him - Ellis charged through him, giving no quarter. He led with his shoulder, and Ellis was a bundle of muscle and wound tension that had Nick stumbling out of the way before he could catch himself.

A scowl grew across his face, swinging a hand out to strike onto the edge of a table and steady himself. He turned his chin, watching Ellis march his way back toward the entrance. Nick slowly rubbed a palm onto his bicep, soothing out the scattered pain from their collision.

He spared a look for Rochelle, and the expression on her face was conflicted. Whatever amusement she might have felt was tempered by a drowning kind of concern. The woman tried to stifle it upon Nick's gaze turning to her, but couldn't quite manage.

She inhaled, letting her gaze drift slowly to meet his.

"Are you going to fix this?" she mumbled, seeming abruptly exhausted more than anything. "Or just keep making it worse?" Nick wanted to growl and bluster and blow her off, but her fatigue was contagious. He leaned onto his palm where it sat on the table next to him, slouching into his own arm.

Rochelle continued, with a wary quiet to her voice, even as Rhiannon couldn't have paid less attention to them. "He's angry. And I'm pretty sure he's going to get angrier. Nick, talk to him. Whatever damage you thought you were doing, it can't be worse than -"

Fury surged, feeding off his weariness, turning sharp to cover the weakness that wanted to overwhelm him. Nick's eyes slitted to challenge her, frustrated. "Didn't we have this fucking conversation already? Where you said you'd keep your goddamn mouth shut about it?"

Rochelle's expression tightened, and he knew just as clearly that he'd crossed a line with her, too. She didn't look angry anymore - she just looked injured. Her eyes turned the faintest bit soft, wetness threatening, and she shrugged her shoulders. "If that's what you want." she stated, and the way she turned and walked away... it felt final.

Like maybe she wouldn't come back this time.

Coach passed Nick by, and though he prickled in readied defense, the eldest survivor didn't even look at him. He ghosted past, focused solely on the task at hand, ignoring Nick entirely. The gambler was left to watch both his teammates follow after Ellis, and something deflated in him.

He felt tired. Alone.

He'd started to forget what that felt like, but he closed his eyes and succumbed to the feeling - and it welcomed him back with open arms.
Inhaling, Ellis grabbed up an armful of blankets, burying his face into the fabric for a moment. The soft darkness soothed away the headache starting behind his eyes, but it did nothing for the pain in his chest.

He was overreacting, wasn't he? Nick had even started to apologize - didn't that mean something? It hadn't been the first time he'd said something rash and regretted it soon after. Ellis had always forgiven him, or known better than to take him seriously in the first place.

This time, though, it cut.

He wasn't strong enough to make excuses anymore. He searched for that resolute knowledge that Nick cared for him, that feeling he'd thrived off of, and found nothing but a struggling insecurity. He didn't know anymore, and that was more frightening than the apocalypse. More frightened than the infected waiting to tear him limb from limb.

He just wanted it all to stop.

To be so bluntly, so dismissively compared to the woman who'd broken Nick's heart - it was pain he didn't know how to handle, and he didn't feel he deserved.

It was still fresh in his mind, the way Nick had sat in a lawnchair, lazy with beer and exhaustion. The way he'd relayed the story of his ex-wife and their marriage - their divorce. The pain in his voice. The bliss-soaked urgency with which they'd had sex there, like Nick had buried into him to escape whatever feelings had overcome him.

It had been frantic, but more than that, meaningful. Ellis' first time and for all the pain that came afterwards, it felt like such a honeyed memory. Nick had opened up to him. He'd let Ellis be there for him, shared something painful -

And now to conflate him with the woman who'd broken his heart? Like any of this had been Ellis' fault, Ellis' choice? That he'd wanted this, and wanted them to be like this?

It hurt. For many reasons, but especially because it seemed so clear in intent: he was nothing special. Just another bad memory that Nick would walk away from sooner than later - that he had already walked away from. Like it was easy.

For all he thought he knew Nick - maybe he'd been wrong.

A hand touched his arm, and he jumped. He thrust his bundle of blankets away from his face and shied from the contact, turning to find Rochelle warily standing beside him. She looked concerned, and he wanted to groan. The last thing he wanted was more pity - so he said as much. "... Don't look at me like that." he muttered, trying for sincerity... humour. He fell short. "'M fine. Ain't like I ain't used tuh him blusterin' already."

Rochelle frowned indelicately, shaking her head in a slow and pendulous motion. "Now, that's a load, and we both know it. You're hurting. We need to talk about it, before you explode."

Ellis' eyes met hers in a surge of frustration. It was the last thing he wanted to do; put his misery on display, hash out a situation that had no resolution. He just wanted to stop feeling entirely, or at least busy himself with something such that he might forget for a little while. "I don't want tuh -"
"Too bad." she responded in something near sing-song. The producer slipped around him, grabbing their supplies backpack from the trunk. As she brushed close, she planted a kiss on his cheek, startling him into a quiet gawp. She pulled away and flashed a saddened smile at him. "Look, sweetie. I haven't been a very good friend to you."

Ellis' eyes widened, outright shocked by the statement. If he'd had the chance to guess how the conversation would go, he never would have guessed those words. "Wh-what!?" left him in a vague whine, dropping his arms to hug the blankets to his belly in a confused squeeze. "How... do you figure that? You ain't the one makin' him... makin' him be like this."

Exhaling in a tired murmur, Rochelle shook her head and let her eyes close. "I wanted you guys to work out. I... I needed it, a little, I think. You seemed happy and I wanted it so bad... Like it was the one good thing around us sometimes, you know? I think it blinded me. Or scared me, anyway."

Frowning slightly, Ellis felt his body fall to some weakened slouch. He listened, but couldn't help but notice Coach standing in the doorway of the café's porch. It was hard to tell if he could hear from that distance, but he approached no closer. Maybe he could tell they were talking, or maybe Rochelle had told him to hang back.

"It meant I wasn't honest with you. Or me." Her fingers fidgeted against each other, a stress to the gesture that belayed a fragility. "I didn't tell you the truth about how I felt or what I thought, and I supported you when I shouldn't have - and maybe didn't support you enough sometimes."

Ellis felt almost numb; blindsided. This wasn't what he'd anticipated, and he wished he knew how to react. He wanted to argue, but didn't have the energy.

"I know Nick isn't easy. He's an ass, and he's... fucking up. Major." Her lips curled in the vague shape of a frown. "I also know he cares about you. I don't know if that means you two can patch things up, or even that you should... But it's the truth. It's the truth he should've at least made sure you knew."

Ellis gazed at her, unsure if the feeling in his chest was pain or not. He wanted so badly to believe her, and so many things - moments - chimed in his head as proof, but fear drowned out what had once been confidence. Surety. All he had anymore was a vibrating anger.

"It don't feel like it." escaped him in a whisper, a tiny and fragile admittance. She opened her eyes and looked abruptly right at him.

"I know." Tiredly, Rochelle turned to lean her hip against the car's bumper. She took a deep breath like it might cleanse her, and it trembled on the release. "I cornered him the other day. I didn't mention it, but - he seemed... messed up. I think he genuinely thinks he's bad for you. That you're better off this way. I think we can all agree that's not true, but... it means something, right? Even if he's doing it the wrong way?"

Ellis hesitated, trying to digest the statement. It was a bit like chewing glass. He was trapped somewhere between wanting to believe her - and wanting to hear none of it. He felt too much and too ferociously to allow Nick any such excuses.

"I... He's scared. I know that. I knew that, 'n' I never thought him spoutin' off meant much... But he ain't never been this nasty before. He said - " A strangled sensation tugged at his throat, and he knew he wouldn't get through the conversation without crying if he spoke too long, so he spoke rapidly, instead.

"He said stuff 'bout us bein'... nothin'. Just - sex 'n'stuff, 'n'.. I don't wanna believe it, but whut if it's
true? Whut if he's always planned tuh leave?" It hurt to say, but there was nothing stopping him now. "And even if it ain't... He don't wanna be with me no more. I can't - I can't change his mind. I can't make him do nothin'. Never could."

Rochelle was watching him, seeming just barely holding herself back from rushing to embrace him. He wouldn't have minded if she had.

"I wish he'd just - stop. Even if he don't love me, he don't gotta be... I can't keep doin' this. We could'uh been okay, even if he didn't want... me.." The wetness was encroaching, blurring his vision, tightening his breath. Had he ever felt this deeply broken before? "I... I miss 'im, Ro', but I feel like I hate 'im right now, too."

Softly, Rochelle sighed. She raised her hands to press her fingertips into her temples, massaging. "I think you guys need time. Away from each other." she stated in a whisper, before lifting her gaze to his face. She nearly continued, but her eyes caught the distressed tremble to his chin. Thick regret found its way into her eyes, and she advanced in a smooth step.

Her arm looped around his waistline, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning into it, his face burying into Rochelle's neck. She quickly let her other arm slip up to encircle behind his back, and they embraced with the bundle of blankets trapped awkwardly between them.

"It's not gonna be easy, ever. And if you two don't - make up... I know it'll hurt." she murmured to him, squeezing her arms. "... I don't know how it'll all work out. But I know this can't keep going on. I think he needs time to figure himself out, and fighting like this... It's not helping either of you."

Ellis shut his eyes, pressing closer into her arms. "I-I dunno how to fix it." he mumbled. She tightened her grip in response, holding him tight.

"You don't." she responded, simply, shaking her head. "That's not what I'm saying. You don't do anything - maybe even ignore him. You _stop_ doing things. I know you, Ellis, you don't want to fight. It's killing you to be like this, and it's killing me to watch you. And right now, I'm not sure anything you do would change his mind, anyway."

He frowned, squeezing his eyes tighter until he saw stars. The gesture sent tears tumbling down his face, and a shiver passed through him at the sense of weakness - but when he reluctantly reopened his eyes, something like a relief of tension passed down his spine. "Yeah." he mumbled. He relaxed, just a little, though perhaps it was just resigning to weariness.

"He deserves you being angry at him, but you deserve better. It's eating you up. So let Coach and me be a buffer. Chris cares about you, too. He'll stay with you, keep you distracted. And hell if we don't have plenty of other stuff to worry about, right?"

She pulled away a bit, slipping her hand to cradle his cheek. He flustered at the sudden way she drew back to get a look over his face, a sad smile creeping across her lips before she wiped at his cheek with a thumb. "We'll be okay, honey. I promise. I'll keep talking to him. I think he... I like to think he trusts me, as much as he trusts anyone. I'm not saying give up, I'm just saying stop playing his games."

Huffing out a laugh, Ellis stumbled back, forcing himself into the mimicry of a frowned pout. He freed an arm to shove his wrist against his eyes, shaking his head. "Y-yeah. I guess. I'll... try tuh stop lettin' him rile me up. I..." A sigh left him, eyes darting down to gaze toward his boots. "I've had breakups before. Man, it ain't _never_ been like this..."
Rochelle smiled wider, leaning into the trunk to scoop up one of their family-sized packs of trail mix into the crook of her arm. "Honey, I ain't never seen you like this. You're handing that boy his butt on a silver platter. It'd be hilarious if it weren't terrifying."

Screwing his brow into a slightly bewildered look, Ellis allowed a disgruntled noise to leave him. "I-" he uttered, uncertainly. "I guess." Did he not feel a little satisfied at the idea? In some distant, petty corner - a part of him that he wasn't wholly fond of? "I don't really like how I'm actin'. I wanna be better than that. I... I don't wanna hurt him, either."

"Speak for yourself." Rochelle sang back, breaking into a laugh. "I'm telling you to get off his back. I didn't say anything about me. I more than plan on making up for you leaning off." Ellis wanted to protest in the same moment he wanted to laugh with her. It wasn't a completely unlikeable solution, but he didn't get the chance to respond.

"Don't hassle the boy." Coach's grunted chastisement announced his abrupt approach. Ellis blinked up toward him, suddenly lowering his head into a vaguely submissive gesture. The big man must've noticed it, as he met Ellis' gaze and gave a firm and comforting smile.

It made Ellis smile back, dropping his gaze to the ground. He tightened his grip on his armful of blankets and took a step back, making room for Coach next to the trunk. "Uh... s'okay, Coach. She ain't doin' nothin'. We was just talkin' 'bout stuff. We better get this shit unloaded, though, 'fore the zombies come knockin'."

"Agreed." the eldest survivor uttered, leaning in to start stacking cans atop one another so he could grab up several at once. "We unload. Make sure the girls are settled. Then we investigate into this shower business. We go any longer an' I'm gonna start puffin' up BO like a Smoker. Coach needs a freshenin' up."

Rochelle uttered a small whimpered sound of interest, shuddering idly with a groaned and elongated "Yes...!", and Ellis had to laugh.

He wasn't sure if he felt better - but he felt a little less alone, and that was something. He inhaled, closing his eyes, and focused. It was for his own good, to stop the fighting. It wasn't for Nick's benefit; wasn't because he was afraid, or weak, or giving up.

"Me, too." he agreed amidst a sigh.

Maybe getting clean would put everything into perspective. He could only hope.
Chapter 196

Unloading the car was a somewhat tiresome project - it felt like they'd only just claimed a place as something like home, and it was difficult to settle in again. They piled up their food supplies on the bar, and set their excess weapons down along the foot of it.

Ellis took the blankets they'd scrounged up from the beach condo and set to trying to put together some sleeping spots around the main dining area floor. They didn't have quite enough blankets to make anything comfortable on the hard wooden floor, especially for five people.

If they'd had their old truck, or even the van they'd lost to the Angels, they could have scavenged mattresses and made something vaguely comfortable. A sigh left him, thoughtfully pressing a palm down flat on the ground. If for no other reason than Christophe's comfort, he felt a twinge of regret.

Maybe it had been a mistake to leave the condo. Chris was barely on his feet, still, and who knew the setback that might come from sleeping on a floor. Was it counterbalanced by the chance at getting cleaned up? Surely the risk of infection was more of a priority, but he felt bad all the same. The man needed rest, more than any of them.

Ellis straightened up, turning and walking toward the bar. He craned his neck to see past the inner corner of the building, and his eyes caught on the sprawled lower body of the Spaniard. He hadn't so much as stirred from where Coach had laid him on the bench, jaw slack and chest rising and falling at a steady pace.

A little smile caught onto his lips. Maybe he was worrying too much; sleep did not seem out of the man's reach so far, and he was tough.

"Not exactly comfy cozy." Rochelle remarked. Ellis twisted around to look at her where she sat on one of the barstools, legs curled to place her heels against the supporting struct between the legs. "But we'll manage. We can always just pile together for warmth."

A snort left Ellis, wrinkling his nose a little. "You and Chris, maybe." he teased, quick to flash a stuck-out tongue when she looked almost startled by the retort. A warmth flooded her face, and he was left with the impression she was gratified beyond her embarrassment. Maybe she was just pleased to see him joke around.

If she needed him to be upbeat - he could do that, at least.

"Me and Chris? After that car ride, I think it's you and Chris. You two were little peas in a pod. Maybe we'll just set you two up for a sleepover." she uttered in a lilt, wagging a finger at him. "You apparently make a good pillow."

Ellis crossed his arms with a huff, shaking his head. "Man, he was sleepin'. Whut was I supposed tuh do? Push him off?" he blustered, finishing with a stubborn lift of his chin, "Besides. He's muh buddy, 'n' it was nice."

An idle giggle escaped her, putting a fisted hand against her jaw. "Uh-huh." she stated with a small grin, almost begrudgingly jumping up to her feet. The woman thumbed over her shoulder to the deeper portions of the restaurant, where the rest of their team "C'mon, snugglebug. Let's go see about this generator, yeah?"
He obeyed, only a little reluctant. They walked around the bar, slipping into the secondary dining section. Rhiannon had settled down to sit on the table with her legs tucked under herself, one arm wrapped around her sister's frame and the other resting in her lap. She looked up as they approached, a defensive tightness to her posture.

Ellis felt a wary concern spark up his spine, despite himself. He was fairly sure if anyone tried to so much as step near Lena, she would attack like a wild animal.

"Hey, girl." Rochelle soothed, voice soft and unassuming. The blonde flinched a little, but met her gaze. "You said this place had power? Be nice to get cleaned up. If there's a kitchen, maybe we can heat up some of the soup we have. You're welcome to join us."

A blankness lingered on Rhiannon's face, half like she genuinely didn't parse the words. It was with a sluggish shake of her head that she lifted a hand, pointing at a slim door in the furthest corner of the building. "Outside. Little shed. Shit's gas-powered, but it was good last I checked."

Rochelle nodded, gratefully, glancing between her and Ellis. "Okay. How long do you think it'll run? Ellis and I have gotten pretty good at siphoning gas -" she said with a wink toward him, reassuring. "- but I don't want to waste any more of your stuff than we have to."

When Rhiannon didn't immediately respond, offering a shrug, Ellis raised a hand to scratch at the back of his head through his cap. He somewhat awkwardly inserted, "Most'uv 'em don't run much longer'n ten, twelve hours? If it's cheap, more like nine. Presumin' it's full up."

Rochelle inhaled, humming in comprehension. "Okay. We should hurry, then, so it's not running too long. Maybe tomorrow, we'll hunt for some more gasoline, keep a reserve." She rubbed her palm against her chin before allowing herself a weary grin. "I don't know if we said thanks - but thanks for letting us come here. It... was a really good thing of you two."

Blinking back up, Rhiannon examined her face for a solid moment. She seemed frustrated, distantly, but disguised it behind a vague flash of teeth, more like a sneer than a smile. Ellis got the feeling she'd have rathered the topic never came up again. "Yeah. Well. I owe you guys, right?"

Forcing a quickly panted exhale, Rochelle shook her head in a few repetitive gestures. "Water under the bridge. More important things to worry about, now."

It was a slow, lancing jibe that intruded on the conversation. "Speak for yourself." From where he leaned in the far corner, Nick had his arms crossed and his chin low. He watched them with an almost wolfish, predatory attention, and the way he postured said he'd found his opening. "Some of us are still on the fence. Had enough of hosting up with assclowns who turn out to be Children of the fucking Corn."

Ellis drew in a reedy inhale. He thought he'd had enough time to prepare himself to ignore Nick - but it was still a punch to the gut to listen to him talk. It was an uncertain feeling where he couldn't seem to decide between running to engage in the argument, or running from the building entirely. Love was not the only thing Nick made him feel intensely, it seemed.

For her part, Rochelle swooped in gracefully, a sublime smile to her lips. Her eyes kept Rhiannon's, and for the best: the blonde's jaw twitched in a surge of anger that looked anything but composed, but Rochelle's interceding kept her quiet a moment longer. "Is that what that movie was called?"

Nick shot her a scathing look, tightening his crossed arms with a snorted sound of derision. "I'm just saying. Am I seriously the only one holding a grudge here? We really upgraded our friend
group. Pickings are slim these end-days, I guess."

Drawing into an exasperated sigh, Rochelle just barely kept together that light and easy-going sense of humor, like Nick weren't trying to start a fight. "Can you just try to be polite? Don't make me take your shower away, boy, because I -"

"Lee's like this because of you." Rhiannon uttered. It was spoken so simply, flatly, that there was a moment of silence where nobody knew what to say. The blonde turned her chin enough to slant one eye at the gambler, energy cold and somehow fractured.

Nick, however, was not quick to drop his guard.

"Oh, bullshit." He spat back, teeth flashed when his upper lip twitched with near-disgust. "Save your pity party for the bleeding hearts. She's like this because of a Charger. Shit could've happened to any of us. Me, even."

Pressing her palm onto the table, Rhiannon slid herself slowly off of it to stand next to the bench. "Yeah." She fisted her hands at her sides, voice thickening, as much rage as it was grief. "It happened to her because your bitch ass ran ahead. So you can fucking cry at me all you want, but you're lucky I don't fucking tear you a whole new -"

Urgently, eyes going a little wide, Rochelle raised her hands to direct her palms at either of them. "Guys! This isn't helping - please!"

Nick paid her no mind at all. There was a fury leaching into his posture, with such ease that he seemed almost relieved. Like he'd been itching for a fight he could win, and had found one. "I'd love to see you fucking try. Remember how that worked out last time? You know, when you tried to fucking shoot me?"

A harsh breath left Rhiannon. She looked on the verge of either flying into a rage or collapsing into tears - it was hard to pinpoint the difference. "Like you wouldn't have fucking done the same if your buddies hadn't been there!"

The gambler allowed his head to cock, chest inflating just softly as his nostrils flared to fill his lungs. There was a sage wryness that entered his voice when he returned, "Fuck, really? That seems so unlike me. I wonder what could'a made that happen."

He paused just long enough for the silence to taunt Rhiannon into opening her mouth - and then he flung his arms to either side and let his voice explode into a growled: "Oh shit, that's right. You mugged us! That's what it was. What a fuckin' relief! Here I was worried over my fucking goddamn integrity for a second. Phew."

Rhiannon's fists trembled, nails digging into her palms. "You think I don't remember?"

Sympathy more than anything drove Ellis to speak, low and defensive. He tried to remember what Rochelle had; he tried to keep calm and focus on anything but Nick. "That was a while ago. We all been through a lot, bet Rhee has, too. I don't think she's the same person."

"Oh, yeah. Because people change all the time. Especially for the better, and especially these days." Nick scoffed, crossing his arms back over his chest. There was a nasty humour to his voice, sharp and unforgiving. "She's probably a saint now. Gives money to charity. Donated a kidney."

Ellis chewed on the inside of his cheek. He couldn't convince himself to speak, though he yearned to catch Nick's eye and utter what came to mind. You changed - I thought.
It was Coach who abruptly cut in. He spoke calmly, rumbling from where he sat at the far end of the row of dining tables, carefully holding a palm over a gouge on his forearm where it was sluggishly bleeding. "Explanation wouldn't hurt nobody."

Nick's head snapped toward him, and the way he stiffened said he expected an attack - so when Coach essentially agreed with him, it left him unsteady. He swapped between a frown and snarl before settling on some small and discontent moue. "Explanation of what? Sorry, is this where we find out she had a bunch of mouths to feed, so it was all okay? She was really just robbing us to save us from poisoned food?"

The big man didn't look at him. Instead, he glanced at Rhiannon, low-lidded attention catching her gaze. The way he spoke wasn't kind, just matter-of-fact. "We spent the last while fightin' folk who didn't care 'bout their fellow man. Any one of us could'a been killed, 'cause we put trust in a group we shouldn't'a. You understand why gettin' some comfort y'all ain't the same breed would go a ways to coolin' tempers?"

Nick's eyes slitted. He seemed caught between satisfaction and disgruntlement, like he'd partially wanted a war on all sides, and it had been stolen away from him.

The blonde dipped her chin, gritting her teeth slightly. "I - what the fuck else do you want?" she muttered. "Bringing you here, Lee getting hurt for you - what else do you want from me? I gotta do jumping jacks? Suck a cock?"

"Like putting your dick in a bear trap. Pass." Nick inserted, scathingly, earning a furious look from both women in the room. Self-preservation made him recoil an inch or two, baring his teeth, though it was unclear if he was more put off by Rhiannon's agitation, or Rochelle's. "Christ. Joke."

With a sigh, Coach lifted the hand that wasn't covering his injury, waving it. "What I'm sayin' is... Our boy, Chris. He wasn't on our side, either, back in the start. We went through shit and he's proven himself. You don't gotta lose an arm, but we deserve some kinda answer." His eyes flickered over Rhiannon's face. "We're grateful, don't misunderstand. But we got ill-meanin' hospitality before."

Rhiannon seemed to stutter her breath, suddenly looking up to glance between the survivors standing in a loose circle around her. Her shoulders limpened, and she closed her eyes, but said nothing. One hand drifted back, gloved fingertips brushing against the warm curve of her sister's forearm.

Soothingly, Coach shook his head. "Just talk to us, girl. Ain't askin' fo' nothin' else, just talkin'. Why'd you attack us back then, and why should we feel safer now?"

"Look -" she muttered, bitterly, and a weight fell on her that dropped her to sit on the bench. "My sister and I got separated. Lee would've told me to leave you guys alone, but she wasn't there to tell me no. I didn't want to hurt any of you fuckers, shit just - ... I don't know. It got out of hand." She splayed her fingers before angrily taking a moment to yank her leather gloves off, throwing them to the ground with an exhale.

"I don't know what you think I'm gonna say. I'm sorry. I was trying to be a badass, but I was just an asshole. I've been an asshole my whole life. I've been an asshole and a fuck-up and everything in between. But don't pretend I didn't fucking suffer, too, even if it was my own fucking fault."

Nick looked half-ready to retort, but Rhiannon reached down suddenly to grab the bottom of edge of her dark pantleg and yank it up, showing the puckered line of a healed gash up the front of her leg. It went from ankle to halfway up her shin, and the pinkened flesh cut a smooth and scarring
line through the dark hair on her skin.

"You -" She stuttered a beat, before hissing out a sigh. "I'm not saying it was anyone's fault, but I didn't have a fucking weapon after you left me. It took a day to find Lee again, and before I did, a Smoker dragged me into the side of a crashed car. Slit my leg open on some metal. I barely made it out. Wouldn't have, on my own."

Ellis drew his arms into a tight clutch over his belly, regret sinking his gut into a pained shudder. He'd never considered the impact of their actions back then - he'd not cared to think what might happen to the thief they'd disarmed. It made him feel cold; insecure... even if there hadn't been a better option, and she hadn't given them much choice.

Slowly, the biker replaced her pantleg flush against her skin, shrugging loosely. "When all this started, I thought... Fuck everyone who isn't me or my sister. You can't tell me you haven't thought it - how do I survive, screw everyone else? What good is being nice if it gets you killed? There was no cops anymore. No jail. Why not take your shit and live a little longer?"

Coach's attention went vaguely weary, and Rhiannon must've noticed the tired disapproval. Her eyes suddenly caught on her hands, frustrated, digging a nail against a scab on her knuckle that was beginning to peel off.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Didn't even think you would live much longer, whether I took your shit or not. So yeah, I fucked up. Could've killed you if that gun had been loaded. And I'm fucking sorry, but I can't do anything about what I did fucking forever ago." Her gaze darted up, and she tried for a sardonic flash of teeth. "Just my fucking luck it was you I ran into again."

Leaning down gently, Rochelle placed a fisted hand against the edge of the table, knuckles pressed into the wood. She exhaled tightly, softly encouraging, "You seem different, now."

Rhiannon let her head shake. "A whole bunch of shit happened since that. Just... what the fuck's the point of any of this if we just tear each other apart as bad as the fucking zombies? I don't..." Her voice faltered, roughly, and she turned at the waist to stare down at the unconscious frame of her sibling. "... Whatever. I'm not gonna fucking sit here and beg. You can believe me or not, I don't fucking care."

Ellis warily looked between Rochelle and Coach, reading the restrained sympathy in their eyes before letting his attention dart toward Nick. There was no such sympathy there, but Ellis caught just enough of the neutrality there to know he'd tipped.

Then Nick caught him, and all he received was a blank look and a tightened jaw, like a tiny admittance of frustration. At what, Ellis wasn't quite sure.

"Te creo." came a soft utterance. Ellis startled at the man's tired voice, craning his head to look. It shouldn't have surprised him to find Christophe awake considering the argument raging around him - though judging from the Spaniard's only-just cracked eyes, he'd been trying quite desperately to stay out of it. "I do. You thought the rules changed, ¿sí? Todo fue diferente. To survive, you change, too. I understand."

The blonde's flecked eyes darted down to her knees, placing palms against her thighs and smoothing down their inner sides. "Maybe. Think I didn't change that much, though." she muttered bitterly, giving a bracing inhale before she clanked her teeth tightly together and gritted them there.

"Fer whutever it's worth, I think you changed plenty." Ellis offered, hesitantly, and when Rhiannon snorted it sounded a little genuine. "'M glad we ran intuh each other again, 'n' sorry fer how things
went before. I think we should all just get cleaned up'n'fed, cool off."

A vaguely moaned agreement came from Christophe's prone form. "Sí, por favor... me muero de hambre."

Rochelle glanced over the two - then lifted her eyes toward Nick. The gambler shifted a cold look her way, and they matched stares for just a moment. She didn't speak, but the question was clear enough. "Satisfied?" So, Nick sneered and turned to glance out the heavily tinted window at his shoulder. The gesture might've had more impact had he not ended up looking into the eyes of a sun-bleached seagull sticker pasted onto the glass.

It had its beak wide open to a gaped grin, and he was moderately sure he was being mocked.
Coach examined the gash across his forearm, cautiously thumbing over the worst of it. It was clotting, but it had taken some pressure to manage that. He'd lifted his hand and lost his progress, so he inhaled and held it tightly again.

He meant to keep watch as Ellis and Rochelle rooted out the generator, but the bleeding kept him still.

Closing his eyes kept his heartrate low, even as his head spun. Every time he thought he knew the situation for what it was, it flopped on its side and took some new turn. He was starting to feel like he should stay out of it, if only by virtue of his own cluelessness.

Nobody seemed terribly inclined to keep him in the loop. His calm and measured attitude was too often mistaken for disinterest, he supposed, though that was the very last emotion he felt. His body rumbled like an idling engine, full of stress and anxiety he had no way to release. The only difference was, he'd had a few more years than his teammates to learn how to keep it under wraps.

There was no room for him to lose himself. He'd lost himself just once, dizzy and confused in the darkened belly of a forest, and he'd failed them. Failure in the apocalypse turned fatal, fast.

He'd meant to never let that happen again, even if that meant sitting on the sidelines. The team had grown its own leadership since then, after all. Between Rochelle and Nick, sometimes he'd wondered if he deserved the moniker at all anymore. *When was the last time yo' ass led these kids?*

Instead of taking control, Coach had merely watched as they came unraveled. Contributed to it. He'd lost some core grip on things, and now he felt mostly like an outsider, observing, detached. Had he been so disconnected as to miss all the signs, all the evidence? Or had he simply not made them feel safe enough to come to him?

He should have reached out to Ellis. Even if he'd been wrong, thinking it was just some secret crush, he should have done something. Anything.

Anything but nothing.

Instead of getting involved, he'd just... watched. And by the time he made any attempt to meddle, it was practically all over. Now it felt too late to intercede, when he was only just recovering from the revelations at all. He'd been two steps behind for a long time, and that hadn't really changed.

He'd watched as Ellis had acted angry, for a while. That had been new - and not entirely unwelcome. Frankly, Nick deserved it, and it was the only way Coach saw things healing. Anger fueled Ellis’ honesty, and maybe they could hash things out... but after Rochelle spoke with him, he'd fallen back into quiet.

The health teacher was a little disappointed. He didn't enjoy Ellis' suffering, but how would anything change if he didn't make his frustrations known? Surely Rochelle didn't intend to silence him, but that had been the effect. Nick needed sense knocked into him, and he didn't listen to anyone but Ellis.

*I know my ass won't have no luck, shit.*

Coach wanted to lower his head to the tabletop and rest. The whole situation had catapulted out of control from his perspective; if he'd only known about the relationship earlier, maybe catastrophe...
could have been avoided. He could have done something.

Damn. Who am I kiddin'? I don't got advice fo' this shit. Barely sho' I think they belong together, in the first place. He sighed, half at himself, unsure if the pang in his chest was guilt or just sadness. Did he care, or did he just want whatever would make all his team - his new family - happy? He wasn't sure. If they'd come to him and told him, he'd have given his blessing.

Their relationship was strange to him, sure, and he hadn't always been accepting of their sort. His younger self would've had a much different reaction to the situation, a fact he wasn't proud of. Would'a had a real easier time in this damn mess, though. Miss my damn knee workin' right.

He had to make a choice: he had to decide if he wanted to help them patch things up or not. Whether he could was ultimately irrelevant, but he needed to come down on a side. He was determined not to repeat Rochelle's mistakes, though he couldn't and wouldn't blame her for them. If he had any intention of offering Ellis any advice, he wanted to be certain. Clear.

That was difficult when he felt about as clear as mud, and as certain as anything else in the apocalypse.

He screwed up his face, exhaling. A frustrated part of him wanted to do nothing at all, because what had he done to deserve being wrapped up in such a strange situation? However, that spite died as soon as it rose. His family was hurting. Even Nick, he was almost sure, was hurting.

The man never got so nasty as when he was upset, and while it was no excuse, Coach understood it, too. He hadn't always thought well of Nick, and the gambler still got under his skin like it were second nature, but when it came down to it...

"I didn't notice."

The mutter caught him unawares, and Coach quickly lifted his head to blink up. He found Nick gazing squarely down at him, quiet discontent on his features. It was genuine enough, so the ex-football player allowed a tilt of his head in open question.

Silent at first, Nick slid down to lean his hip against the table edge. Coach sat at one corner and Nick stood on the opposite side, leaving only a feet between them. As he settled, the conman gestured at the older man's injured arm.

Coach shrugged instinctively in dismissal, letting his eyes re-close. "Ain't no thang. Took a swing earlier. I'll live, most like."

Nick snorted with a faint wring of his brows, turning his head to glance toward the clustered forms of their new acquaintances, Rhiannon busying herself with blotting sweat and grime off her sister's face with her wrist. Coach noticed the vaguest of snarls at his mouth and couldn't fight the sense that Nick was jealous.

It might've made him laugh, any other day, to know Nick was envious of the girl. She'd mugged and nearly killed them, and she currently stood in better standing than he did with the group.

Nursing his wound with a tightly clamped palm, he was caught off-guard when Nick returned his attention forward. "Need a patch job? I think we have some scraps of my jacket left, along with whatever's left of my sanity." When the big man gave him a dubious look, Nick raised both hands defensively. "What, are you going to be pissy at me, too?"

Giving a slight roll of his eyes, Coach allowed himself a flash of bitter humour. "That's a real shit way of askin' fo' a cease-fire, son, but let's let it sit." he stated, jerking his chin up as he couldn't
gesture with his hands. "I'm a'ight. I'll wash it off, get it bandaged after that. Thanks fo' the offer."

Nick nodded vaguely, turning his body away just a little. Coach couldn't resist watching him, picking out the subtle shift and twitch of insecurity. It brought something like discontent to his chest, inhaling thinly.

If he put down his pride, rejected his fear, spurned his need for retribution - he couldn't let go of a simple fact: Nick meant something to him. He'd throw himself to the wolves for the gambler, and he felt some tremendous certainty that Nick would return the favour. He'd watched him throw himself to the sword, after all, though that had been for Ellis.

A sigh left him.

_I am a damn fool fo' not seein' that shit earlier. Don't help that Nick's got a stick up his behind, right to his mouth._

Nick's body slid to drop to sit on the bench, and Coach watched him reach into his pocket and pull out his carton of cigarettes. The man tapped it against his palm, and Coach didn't miss how lightly it moved. He was running low. Dealing with his nicotine withdrawal along with everything else did not sound appealing.

"Getting clean and a hot meal sounds good." the gambler uttered, quietly, succumbing to a tired frustration. "Might make up for sleeping on the floor for a while."

Uncertain, the health teacher merely cocked his head. Nick didn't see the gesture, turned away as he was, and Coach watched a vague rise touch his shoulders. It seemed almost self-conscious, and there was some humour to be found in how easily frustrated the man was by being ignored when it wasn't on his terms. Like he'd rather fight than fade quietly away.

He envied the man for that.

Coach had stood by and watched his marriage come unraveled, too. He'd taken it like some inevitable fate, as if he'd been living on borrowed time, anyway. He let it wash over and past him, bowing and folding because he'd known there was no changing her mind. She'd claimed it as his greatest weakness - that she hadn't seen him fight for something since his knee had taken him out of the game. That he'd grown lazy, physically and emotionally.

What he'd thought was calm and measured was a cover, perhaps, for something more like resigned. Apathetic. He was just so tired, though he didn't want to feel that way. He tried more than anything to bury it, to take charge. God-fearing men didn't lay down and accept life like some bitter pill. _You give, the Lord gives. You take, the Lord takes. You turn your chin down, give up - the Lord ain't got time fo' you._

Weariness stung at his eyes. _That's all well an' good, but damn if I don't need some help._

He'd failed his team, and he didn't know how to recover.

"Hey, Nicky."

The gambler's posture prickled, and he turned his head to cut a slim glance back at the older man. He looked primed for attack, though it eased off slightly as if he could read something non-confrontational in Coach's posture. Doubt lingered in his eyes, but he said nothing, merely waiting.

"What's the odds on us makin' it outta this shit?" Coach wasn't entirely sure what fueled the question. Maybe he just wanted to reach out, felt some exhaustion with the friction among them.
He wanted some reassurance, some lifeline, even if it was only in the form of some small moment of connection. "Not dyin' to zombies, findin' rescue... gettin' somewhere safe fo' more than a few days..."

Nick thumbed abruptly against his cigarette carton, slowly easing it back into his pocket with a regretful slowness. He half-turned to face the other man, licking at his lower lip with a short sigh. Coach watched a softening touch his jawline as his defenses lowered. "You know that guy who landed a plane on the Hudson? Some birds kamikazed into the engines, jet started falling?"

Coach nodded just once, matter-of-factly. Before he could question the point, Nick ticked a nail on the table before putting his elbow on the surface and his chin on his palm, closing his eyes.

"Honey, brace for impact."
Chapter 198

When the power turned on, there was no dramatic flash of lights or buzz of electricity. Nick almost didn't notice at all, and if it weren't for a small lamp on the corner of the bar, he wouldn't have.

The silhouette of a marching seagull, flat-footed and and its wing tight to its sides, hunched under a pale blue lampshade. The lightbulb screwed into the crown of its head, and when it lit into a dull and faded yellow, its features were shaded and highlighted by the sickly glow. Nick startled into straightening, staring at it for a moment.

He should have been excited. He should have been thrilled.

He didn't feel much at all.

Had he felt much of anything lately, beyond the comforting warmth of frustration and spite and self-pity? It was odd to think on a hot shower with such disdain, but he felt like he'd just as soon crawl into a corner and sleep. Taking the time and energy to soothe himself with anything but oblivion sounded like too much effort.

"Hell yeah." Coach uttered, suddenly pushing his weight against the table to jump up to his feet with abrupt agility. "They got it. Boy, we gonna have to fight fo' first wash? Coach is 'bout to have himself a spa day up in this shit." Nick blinked up toward him, guardedly. Hearing Coach so easily joke in his direction again was a welcome surprise.

He hated to admit he'd been lonely, but there was no avoiding it. He'd gotten used to the company of his team, and being on the outs with Rochelle and Coach was wearing on him nearly as much as being so with Ellis. I miss not giving a shit. He meant it as a joke, but all he ended up with was a jumbled set of emotions that boiled down to bitterness.

"I can take you." he stated flatly, flashing a judging look up and down Coach's frame. "I already know your weakness."

Coach crossed his arms over his chest, exhaling a harrumphed breath. The man's dark eyes lit with some kind of humour, head cocking, and his voice came out playfully threatening. "You go fo' my knee, I'll give that shoulder a good check. Just 'cause it's been a while since I played don't mean I can't lay yo' ass out."

Nick lifted a hand, fingers splayed neatly. "Actually, I was just going to throw a bar of chocolate outside, watch you scramble." He observed with no small satisfaction as a dry disapproval flooded the older man's face. He couldn't resist the urge to grin just a little, tucking his chin low to shadow it.

"I think, if you are not careful, el jefe would throw you after." came a mumbled retort from nearly below the table where Christophe lay on the bench, turned to put his stump a little in the air and save it from contact with the wood surface.

Dragging his lips into a slight sneer, Nick let himself lean in closer to the Spaniard, who was positioned not far from him on the bench. "Sorry, did you say something? I was too busy thinking about that time I saved your life." A little more spite entered his voice than he intended - how angry was he, really? Am I actually gonna be the pathetic asshole pissed at every ounce of attention my ex gets from someone? "Oh, no, the two times. Right."

Yes. Apparently, I am.
Chris' body stiffened a little, and Nick felt a stir of satisfaction when he hunched his head against the bench. The Spaniard had become the least of his concerns when contrasted against the bikers now invading his territory, but he had no intention of being friendly, either. Claiming the man's silence as a victory, Nick glanced back upwards.

Coach crossed his arms, giving a disgruntled look at him, but spoke as if nothing had happened. "Anyway. Need to be movin' quick so we don't waste power or hot water. I was only kiddin', if you wanna go first, Nick. Figure you'll need the good mood."

The gambler snorted distastefully. He wasn't sure he liked the implication, but couldn't argue. His eyes caught on the lamp again, and before he could find some derisive way to take the offered kindness, something triggered in the back of his mind. A quiet and laughable realization settled like a soft glee.

He considered - for just a moment - and then allowed a small, demure smile. "I don't care. I'll be just as clean if I shower last. You go ahead." The football coach blatantly sized him up, seeming startled but disguising it behind curiosity. Before he could question the uncharacteristic show of self-sacrifice, the back door of the restaurant slipped open.

Rochelle re-entered at a slow pace, eyes alert on their posture and expressions. She looked at the ready for a fight, like she'd entered a zombie-infested building and not their new base. Her eyes scanned them, but seemed to not find whatever she was looking for.

So, mildly, she offered: "Power's on. Who's up first?"

Ellis came up behind her, ducking inside the restaurant and nudging the door shut behind them. He pushed his hands into his pockets, straightening out his arms until his biceps tensed in an awkward posture. "I'm a'ight." the kid mumbled, just loud enough to carry. Ellis' eyes flashed furtively toward Nick, and the thought on his face was obvious enough to stir Coach to a statement.

"Nick's passin' up first go."

When both Ellis and Rochelle looked startled, gobsmacked, Nick released an unpleasant sigh. It grumbled at the edges, and he let it heighten in his throat. He'd intended to play up the drama, but found himself genuinely annoyed instead. "Jesus, is it that fucking unbelievable I do one thing nice? Can we all look less goddamn shocked? For fuck's sake." He pushed back against the edge of the table, allowing his leg to cross up with his ankle on his knee.

Rochelle shared a small glance with Ellis, though he ducked away from it quickly. It had become easier, after all, to imagine Nick being unkind. Especially lately.

Seated on the top of the table, Rhiannon had her arms wrapped around her legs where they curled to her chest. She'd shed her jacket and laid it over her sister. She now sat in her thin white cami, buckled safety pads locked tight to her shins and knees. The woman gazed between them, the metal stud glinting on her brow as she raised it.

"... Fuck, you guys argue a lot. And I thought Lee and I bitched. Look - I'll make it fuckin' easy, shitsticks." she muttered quietly before nodding toward Coach. "How about the guy who stinks like Boomer barf goes first? It reeks in here."

Blinking, Coach tilted his head to sniff toward his shoulder, where the splattered mess from the Boomer attack earlier in the day had dried to a faint crust. "Ah, hell, I do? I can't smell shit lately. Nose been burned out by all this runnin' about with infected an' dead bodies an' shit." He brushed a palm against his gut, sighing in tired disappointment.
The blonde laughed a little, muffling it quickly behind her knees. A light caught in her eyes that hadn't shown all day, bristling with mischievous energy. "Yeah. And that's coming from a girl who once popped a puker with a fuckin' switchblade. So - go on, big guy. Door's behind the bar. Sink in there has a hand-sprayer, and there's a drain in the floor. Isn't a classy setup, but it works."

Rochelle put a hand to her cheek, fingertips catching near her temple in a slight scritch. She couldn't help but grin a little in Coach's direction, however sympathetically. "We snagged a few towels from our old place - and I'd like to do something about our laundry. I don't really think any of us want to hang around buck-naked, but maybe we could give our shirts a wash at least. We look like we've been playing paint-ball with zombie guts."

Ellis blinked down at himself, lower lip jutting a little. "Man. I miss paint-ball." he muttered in a wistful manner, pleased when Rochelle gave a snorted laugh.

She waved a hand over her shoulder to dismiss him, attention focusing more alertly on Coach. "Here." The producer crossed the restaurant floor, reaching the bar. Beside their foodstuffs on the bar lay some towels - the only linens they hadn't used to set up bedding in the main section of the restaurant - and Rochelle grabbed up the loosely folded stack. She offered it out, and Coach took it off her hands as he passed.

"Y'all kids scared of me sittin' 'round in my boxers? Shit. Hurt my feelin's." he teased, nudging past the bar counter and toward the door behind it. His head tilted, eyes catching on the contents of the bar. The shelves - where bottles of liquor and mixers should have sat - were oddly empty, with only some scattered remnants of broken glass on the wood to indicate it had ever been full.

_Fo' the best._ he thought. Had there been alcohol, he wasn't sure he could have kept his teammates from it, let alone himself. Part of him abruptly wondered if some kind of group release might have been good for them, but it was a moot point in the end.

The glass had been swept tight against the inner edge of the bar counter, leaving the pathway past it safe. He'd only just put his free hand out to catch a palm against the kitchen door when Rhiannon released a thin wolf-whistle. It stopped Coach in his tracks, and he uttered a legitimate, throaty laugh.

"Girl, quit." he uttered as if in chastisement, head shaking as he pushed into the kitchen, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Unable to resist a grin, Rochelle put a hand over her mouth to try and disguise it. She glanced toward the blonde biker who was doing much the same, though she busied herself instead with turning her attention back on her sister. Rochelle drew her lower lip between her teeth and let an elbow set against the edge of the bar.

Nick was lounged past Rhiannon at the banquet-style table, and something eerily satisfied lingered in his posture. Whatever it was that pleased him, she had no interest in it at all - so she made the intentional choice not to give him too much attention, instead looking toward the Spaniard hunched just in front of him on the bench.

"You doing okay, Chris?" The man lifted his head enough to peek at her over his stumped shoulder, the white bandages of which had turned damp with an off-yellow staining. It might have been sweat, or pus, or a mix of the two. "You're gonna have to wash up, too, so we can change those bandages."

He flashed her a miserable look, muttering, "Oye, no me hagas sufrir más... not again, mi alma."
Barely allowing him to finish, Rochelle lifted a hand, finger extended to jab idly in his direction. "It's either clean you up or let your shoulder rot off. So buck up, buttercup, because I've got no intention of letting you sit there and stew." Christophe grimaced with a meek nod, and she softened just a little, dropping her arm to her side. "It'll be fine. Afterwards we'll drug you up again."

Chris' nod that time was more sincere, if a little eager. His pain bled through the gesture, and a tug of sympathy drew Rochelle into a frown. However, Ellis spoke first, voice tender and eyes wide beneath the bill of his cap. "It hurts, huh, buddy? 'M sorry we can't do more."

A weak laugh escaped the Spaniard, and he lowered his head back to the bench, curling his knees a little to come closer to a fetal position. The posture put the crown of his head dangerously close to Nick's leg - a fact that did not escape Nick's notice. The gambler curled his lip up from his teeth and shifted a few inches away in a shuffle against the bench.

"I am fine, tío. At least I am alive."

Ellis didn't look quite satisfied with that answer - but didn't argue, either. He merely bobbed his head, blue eyes darting uncertainly toward his hands. "If yuh say so."

Rochelle could barely resist a sigh, watching him. His attitude had turned so meek of late, it was difficult for her to keep her irritation under control. The last thing she wanted was for him to realize how upset she was over everything. It would only make things worse for him.

He'd been near-silent while they'd explored the yard and the thin shed that housed the generator, tucked up against the building like a rickety lean-to. She hated seeing him so withdrawn, especially when it was transparent that he was trying (and failing) to act normal for her benefit. *Sweet baby Jesus, Nick. You just had to pick Ellis to screw with, huh?*

If their ever-optimistic Georgia sunshine went grey and faded, what did they have left? And what was she supposed to do to make things better? She didn't even know what the right thing to do was, anymore. Encourage them to make up? Encourage Ellis to move on?

"Son'uv'a!" Coach's voice burst from the adjacent room, muffled by insulated walls and wrought with something between surprise and disgust. There was enough of a bark to it to shock Rochelle to attention, but not enough fear to send her running.

Sparing a bewildered look for Ellis, she took the distance to the kitchen's swinging door at a slim jog. Rhiannon watched her move, head cocking idly. "Uh -" Rochelle didn't open the door, but leaned against it and raised her voice. "Papa bear? Everything okay?"

She was sure she heard a few scattered swears before he growled out, "Water's damn cold."

It took Rochelle a moment to register what he meant. When she did, her first instinct was to turn her head and stare directly at Nick. He met her gaze with an unmistakable readiness and a curt grin, both of which she saw through instantly.

'Nice thing my ass. Rochelle narrowed her eyes to get across the sentiment, but Nick was unfazed by her. "What?" he questioned, innocently, even going so far as to bat his eyes a few times. Had they been a little less bloodshot and a little less tired, it might have even been attractive.

Because naturally the heater would need some time to start up.

"You are so bullshit, suit." she muttered, and his satisfaction faded into something disgruntled. The interaction drew confusion from the others in the room, but Rochelle decided against making it into a public argument. Instead, she pressed a knuckle into the space between her brows. "Coach, just
come back out - we'll let it run for a little bit so it'll heat up."

Ellis frowned, tucking his arms over his chest in an awkward cross. "I can go.. I don't mind a cold shower none. Keith'n'me used tuh go fer baths in this river by muh house when we were campin', it weren't too bad. I -" he offered, but too quietly to carry into the kitchen. Coach spoke up and over rode him, unknowingly.

"How's 'bout we just eat first? So we don't waste power sittin' around. Water'll be warm by the time we're done, then we just shower an' shut it off."

With a short shrug, Rochelle allowed herself a sigh. "It's fine, Ellis." She waved her hand at him in a soothing gesture, and laughed a little as she spoke, tiredly. "I'm not letting any of us take a cold shower. We've been through too much shit lately not to have something nice happen."

The Georgian grinned softly with a nod. "Yeah, 'kay." He, with a small inhale, dared to add: "That, or we make Nick use up all the cold water."

Nick looked bluntly affronted, but the impact was lessened by his disinterest in looking directly at Ellis. The gambler instead tossed his arms into a cross over his chest and exhaled a taut breath. His disapproval bled harshly into the tone of it, but Ellis merely kept eye contact with Rochelle, looking a little pleased with himself.

She grinned back, despite a voice in the back of her head that wondered if it was the right thing to do.
The kitchen was fully functioning, beyond the currently-cold water. It was a relatively nice setup, with stainless steel and clean white subway tiling affecting a kind of confused aesthetic on the line between 'bathroom' and 'hospital'. The air was tainted by the odd and musty smell of rotten food. It was not entirely repulsive but getting there, fast.

The room was a lazy rectangular shape, empty in the center and lined on all sides by steel countertops and appliances. That was, ultimately, as deep an examination as Ellis managed - try as he might, he couldn't get his eyes to lift long enough for anything else. After one perusing glance, he'd yanked his attention to the floor and taken up an intense stare on his boots.

There was a mock clothesline made from an empty pot-rack. Dangling from the hooks were a few items of clothing, stiff, as they'd clearly been hung to dry some time ago. A few T-shirts, a set of cloth capris, a long-legged pair of camo pants - but a couple other things, too.

All he knew was he saw a mix of bright colours and pale tans in distinctively feminine shapes, and then averted his gaze solidly. Seeing the bikers’ underwear was the very last thing he wanted to do.

It Rochelle noticed, she gave no indication, and it seemed Coach had already seen and dismissed them out of hand. Their lackadaisical attitude shocked him a little, grabbing the bill of his cap and tucking it low to shutter his vision from the dangling delicates.

It was wholly embarrassing, and only moreso when he started to pick apart his own reaction. Was it normal to feel mortification? Wouldn't Nick have sauntered in and made a snide comment, all while drinking in the sight?

He didn't exactly want to be like Nick, but if they were no longer together, Ellis had to answer some questions for himself. Their relationship had managed to bring on numerous revelations without giving him any clarity at all... mostly because it had been so easy.

Nick never demanded answers, nor did he give them. They'd behaved on instinct and followed some magnetic draw he'd never felt before. They'd certainly never really discussed it at any length, which had been the whole issue. Ellis hadn't had any ammunition to defend against the assertion their relationship had been only physical - because hadn't it?

Just touches and feelings. He'd thought he'd understood what any of them meant, but maybe he'd been wrong.

Ellis sighed through his teeth, forcing his eyes up to glance solidly toward one of the bras hanging limp from the pot-rack. He tried to feel anything but awkward, and failed. Relief only came when he looked away, and he did so with a vaguely agitated twist on his heel. *Man. Am I really...?*

"Figure we'll pop some of that beef stew in a pot. Meat and veggies sounds *great* right now."
Rochelle groaned under her breath, sidling quickly over to where a few pots sat nested inside each other on a countertop. She took the largest out from under the pile, lifting the smaller ones up to free it, and gave the inside a wary examination. "One of you get a stove running."

Coach obediently crossed the kitchen to one of the two stoves, topped by four circular elements each. He squinted down at the control panel on the front before prodding a button with the pad of his thumb, and the foremost element lit with a quiet snap. The big man shrugged in a begrudging manner, like he'd expected it to be more complicated.
"Reminds me of that ol' Burgertank we took over, back when." he stated with an edge of warmth, like the memory were a fond one. "Things might just start lookin' up, we get some full bellies. Shit always seems real dire on an empty stomach."

Rochelle laughed, just a faint pant of humour, shaking her head. "I'm pretty sure you always say that, Coach. Are you sure shit's not just dire?"

Coach passed her a look that was on the line between chastising and affectionate, rolling his eyes. "'Scuse me fo' tryin'." He waved a hand over the heating element, as if he wasn't convinced it was working until the growing warmth grazed at his palm. "Ellis, you mind grabbin' some cans from the front? Beef sounds a'ight. Think we got enough to feed everyone."

It took Coach a moment to notice Ellis wasn't responding. He didn't look back, at first, but when there was no sound to announce Ellis scurrying for the kitchen door, he twisted at the waist. Coach blinked squarely at the younger Georgian, who was staring off at the far wall with a look he could only describe as consternated.

Warily, he glanced at Rochelle. She caught the look and turned, too, and both of them stared toward Ellis in unified silence.

It was, eventually, enough to trigger his awareness.

Ellis looked at them with an initial lack of comprehension, but with a short double-take he stomped to attention. His eyes flashed wide between the two of them, trying to read their expressions and seek out any hint of what he'd missed. "Uh - huh? Sorry? I was -"

"Not payin' us a damn lick of attention." the eldest survivor finished with a laugh. It faded, however, when Ellis mostly just looked injured. He set a hand on his hip and leaned forward with a cautious eye. He tried to gentle his tone a little, soften it, sympathetically. "What's eatin' you, boy?"

The mechanic blanched faintly, shoulders hitching up, a guilt flashing across his face like he'd been caught at something. He put up his hands, waving them, backing up across the kitchen and toward the door. 'N-nothin'. Sorry. I'll go get the food." he managed, in a hushed and hurried tone that only just avoided squeaking.

Coach might've stopped him, had Ellis not bustled out from the kitchen in just a few long strides. The football coach was left exhaling in a quiet and disgruntled tone, glancing at Rochelle. She had little to offer but a bewildered shrug, approaching him with the pot she'd chosen rested against her shoulder.

"Got a lot on his plate." she murmured, setting the pot on the warming element where it had just begun to glow a little. "I can't blame him."

The big man raised a hand, thumbing against his lower lip. He closed his eyes and shook his head lengthily. "Ain't sure how to talk to the boy. Damn complicated. Feel like I'll just trip on my damn tongue." The statement drew Rochelle's attention, a frown sparking on her lips. "Had a boy or two come out on my teams, you know, but shit was simpler. Advice was easier."

She nodded her head gently, eyes darting to the kitchen door. When Ellis did not immediately come back, the woman allowed a small utterance. "I'm not sure what the best advice is, either. More than anything, we just have to be here for him."

Coach seemed to mull that over, his expression drawing into a reluctant frown. It wasn't obvious whether or not that response helped him, and he reluctantly maintained a tired silence.
The kitchen door re-opened with a scuffled sound, and Ellis returned to the room, hunched forward with three white-and-red cans cradled in his arms. He had an uncomfortable squint on his face, an awkward laugh escaping him as he shoved the door shut with a kicked heel. "Man. They're quiet as mice. Kinda weird," he whispered, roughly.

Rochelle quickly flashed him a grin, brows lifting. "Oh, yeah. It's not exactly the A-team out there, huh?" Her eyes caught on the cans in his grip, and a hummed thought had her turning, looking around uncertainly. "Anybody see a can-opener?"

Taking the cue not to speak on Ellis' odd behaviour, Coach stepped away from the stove, circling the kitchen and glancing along the countertop. There were a few drawers, and he tossed them open, digging through the variety of tools inside. "Feel bad for Christophe."

That made Ellis laugh, a little snorted sound that verged on a giggle, and the younger man picked his way across the kitchen. There was something vaguely embarrassed in his posture, like he knew full well they were intentionally not having a conversation. "I grabbed our switchknife, tuh open these, in case we don't got a can-opener. Worked okay earlier."

With a begrudging nod, Coach tossed some kind of peeling implement back into the drawer. "'A'ight. Bring it over here." He met Ellis halfway, scooping the cans from him in one easy motion, not allowing the kid any time to argue. The ex-football player carried them to the counter next to the stove, dropping them there and then holding his hand out flat for the knife.

Ellis merely put his lower lip out, fishing the switchblade out of his pocket and patting it onto Coach's palm. "Oh, uh.. Okay." It was with some hesitance that he pushed his hands against his thighs, peering between his teammates.

There was a companionable silence as Coach flicked the switchblade open and cautiously sawed into the top of one can, prying the metal up enough to create a hole. He pushed it toward Rochelle with the back of his hand, moving unceremoniously to the next one.

Rochelle grabbed the sizeable can with one hand, taking a moment to sniff at the opening with some suspicion - but with a shrug, she tipped it end-up over the pot.

The first trickle of liquid to touch the pot sizzled and snapped on the hot metal, making her startle. The reaction was quickly muted as the rest of the can splattered out to join it. She gave a chagrined bite of her tongue, peering down at the gravy-brown liquid, highlighted by the soft tan of chunked potato, the neon orange of chopped carrot, and the perfectly cubed lumps of beef.

"Smells like a regular weekday dinner." She uttered it like a joke, but it mostly sounded melancholic.

Ellis shifted on his feet with an antsy energy, lowering his chin. "Muh mama used tuh get this big ol' beef roast from the butcher down the road, throw it in a crock-pot like, this big -" To illustrate, he circled his arms as if hugging something to his gut. " - 'n' put a whole load of veggies in there. It'd stew fer like, twenty-four hours. I'd wake up starvin', 'cause I had tuh smell it all night long. Man, that shit was my favourite."

Coach hummed easy agreement, practically smacking his lips with the sound. "Sounds like a swell lady."

The younger man grinned, waving a hand. "Not as swell as that pot roast. Keith had like a sixth-sense fer it. Mama'd so much's crack the lid off tuh check on it, 'n' he'd be knockin' at the door." He watched, a little tentative, as Coach passed the second can for Rochelle to dump out. As she
tapped it against the edge of the pot, he questioned, "We got enough?"

Rochelle tossed up a hand, smoothly shifting from a dismissive gesture to grabbing a ladle off a thin shelf screwed into the wall above the stove. She dipped it in the stew, stirring it in lazy circles. "We'll find out." she responded in a cheery tone, flashing him a smile as he stepped closer. "So, what's up?"

It was so casual - so off-the-cuff - that he hardly registered at first. It took a solid beat for him to catch up, abruptly staring at her in blunt confusion. "Uh." was all he uttered, inciting her to laugh, just gently.

"Honey, you're a neon sign sometimes." she explained with thick affection. Rochelle shook her head in time to the swipes of her ladle, keeping any of the meat and veggies from burning to the bottom of the pot as her other hand darted down to twist the temperature dial and lower the heat. "What's on your mind? No more secrets between the three of us, so go ahead."

Ellis gaped in fishlike bewilderment, eyes darting between her and Coach. He blustered out reassurance first, a tiny note of frustration leaking through. "I - I know that. It ain't like that. I'm just thinkin' on stuff, is all."

Rochelle gave a casual shrug, slipping a glance toward Coach. The older man looked back with an expression akin to distress, wide-eyed, an edge of humour to it. She was taking a leap, and he looked clearly at a loss - but there was a solidarity in how he nodded, giving up control to her.

So she inhaled, and went for it. "Stuff like what?"

When there was obvious frustration on Ellis' face, shifting uncomfortably and gaining a flighty sort of nervousness, she disengaged. Her attention focused solely on the stew, and she accepted the third and last can from Coach, dumping it in. She sniffed at it as steam started to rise up from the pot, sighing in a pleasant fashion.

It was hesitantly that Ellis shifted, stepping over to an empty section of the countertops. He put the heels of his hands up on it, and pushed to hop himself up on it, legs dangling. He put his elbows on his knees, idly palming against the backs of his upper arms, where scabs lingered from being dragged across a parking lot by a Smoker's tongue. "I... I dunno. I guess it's dumb, worryin' 'bout stuff like this, just... sorta stuck."

Rather than push, Rochelle merely hummed supportively, just a sound of acknowledgement.

"Do y'all think - I mean... is it possible tuh, y'know, go through like... Go through life thinkin' somethin', and find out you were wrong the whole time? 'N' not somethin' small... somethin' big. I feel like... I'd'uh known..." He trailed off, brows quirking in distant frustration. Rochelle passed him a small look, blinking, and he didn't miss the meaning: he wasn't being tremendously clear.

So he sighed, raising a hand to palm over his eyes. "I... Ever since Coach said it, uh... I'm wonderin' if I ain't uh -" His voice cracked a little, but he forged through. "Y'know. Gay."

Bewilderment pushed Coach and Rochelle to stare abruptly at each other, confusion causing a moment of silence. It was with a slightly high laugh that the woman managed a response, nose crinkling up as she queried a little teasingly: "Um, sweetie... what did you... think was going on with you and Nick, exactly...?"

Ellis forced a breath out through his nose like a snort, screwing his face up. He was aware of
Coach somewhat awkwardly avoiding his gaze, and hunched down in his seat. "N- Ro'... that ain't what I meant." he huffed, growing a little flustered when she grinned at him, like she knew full well what he meant.

It was with a sigh that he shook his head, attention darting to his hands, spreading his fingers out idly. "I'm sorta confused, is all... S'just, he was the first guy I ever liked. I didn't know I did. It's all real new, 'n'. Guess I'm feelin' sorta lost 'bout it, now that we... Ain't. Not like I'm upset or nothin', I just dunno how I'm only figurin' this out now."

That drew a grunt from Coach, a determination making him murmur, "We've all been learnin', changin'. Whole world flips upside-down, you find some shit you didn't know about. You think my ass figured he'd be survivin' the damn apocalypse?"

Ellis frowned, though more in thought than disagreement. "I... guess. Just weird thinkin' 'bout my girlfriends, back in school. It feels like I was lyin' or somethin'."

Scooping the ladle up through the pot of stew, Rochelle tipped it to allow the contents to pour back out, slow and ponderously. "You know, I was just teasing. Just because you like boys doesn't make you gay. Bi, maybe." She glanced at him, prompting: "So you had girlfriends. Did you like them?"

He didn't balk at saying, "Yeah, of course!", but he did hesitate shortly thereafter. His frown deepened, and he gazed at his dirtied and rough-edged nails. The smallest spark of sadness caught in his voice as he admitted, "Just, uh... I dunno. Not like I like him, I think." Ellis caught himself there, mumbling a vague correction. "Liked."

Rochelle's brow darted up at that, but she decided against pressing the issue. Instead, she lifted her shoulders, exhaling a laugh before she clarified, "Sexually?" If Ellis startled, Coach startled twice as much. They both shot her disgruntled looks, and she couldn't quite pinpoint which one of them was more mortified. She put her hands up, abandoning the ladle in the pot. "It's just a question!"

Bumbling through an awkward duck of his head, Ellis cupped a hand over his billcap, puffing out air. Coach was trapped squarely between them, and it was with a grumbled sigh that he took a step back, crossing his arms.

"Come on, boy. May's well humour her, else we ain't gonna get through this."

Ellis grimaced, firmly rooting his eyes on the floor. He chomped his jaw open and shut a few times, clinking his teeth together, before he sighed. Resignation made him open up honestly. He had nothing to lose. "N-... I dunno. I guess I... never really cared. The girl I was with the longest, she wanted tuh wait til marriage, so we just... didn't. I just liked bein' with her."

Sympathy flecked into Rochelle's posture. She crossed her arms, watching the stew over her shoulder as small bubbles started to form in the still surface. "... Can I share a story?"

Ellis nodded, eagerly, lifting his chin up to look at her.

"When I was a little girl, I had the coolest best friend. She was smart, and pretty, and her parents were rich. I'd go to her house and we'd play with all her toys, and I just wanted to be around her every day. We hung together at school, we'd come home and play - next to my parents, she was my favourite person."

Both Ellis and Coach listened intently as she waved a hand, laughing a little. "I was like, six, and I decided I was going to marry her. I knew I loved her, and that was the only thing that made sense. My mom always talked about being soulmates with my dad, and I felt that, I thought."
Quietly, Ellis leaned forward. His eyes were a little wide, and he asked gently, "Whut happened?"

Rochelle grinned, head shaking. "It passed. We lost touch the minute we weren't in the same grade, and I met a different best friend. My point is - I had all these feelings, and I didn't know what to do with them, or what they meant. I learned about romance, and that was the box I thought they fit in. Do you think maybe you just loved this girl like a friend, but the only box anyone gave you was dating her?"

Ellis couldn't help but blink, scanning her expression. His lips parted as if to speak, but nothing came out.

It was Coach who uttered, "Damn, girl."

The producer gave a slim smile, focusing back on the pot. "Maybe you just didn't click with her. Maybe you don't like girls at all. I'm not sure." She grabbed the ladle and stirred, making sure to scrape the bottom of the pot to ensure nothing was sticking. "End of the day, Ellis, it's about what you feel. And it only matters as much as it matters to you, anyway. So don't let it get to you."

Slowly nodding, Ellis seemed to take some comfort from that. His posture straightened slightly, a thoughtful purse touching his lips as he put his palms together. "That... that helps. ... Thanks. So you don't like ladies, after all?"

Rochelle put one finger up, wagging it. "Boy, I am not sure of a lot, but I am sure of one thing: you and me like dick."

There was just a beat of silence before both men burst into laughter, Ellis clapping a hand over his mouth and Coach breaking into a great belly-laugh, like the statement had caught him so off-guard he couldn't help it. "Girl, what in the good Lord -"

The kitchen door opening startled them all into silence. All three of them turned, Ellis' expression turning a little bit stricken to find Nick leaned into the threshold. The expression on his face was vaguely sour, and Ellis couldn't help but wonder how much he'd heard. Until he spoke, anyway.

Flatly, the gambler stated, "... She's awake."

Ellis' gaze snapped instantly to Rochelle's face, as if seeking permission.

She was nodding toward the door before he got the chance to speak. "Both of you, go," Rochelle nudged her elbow in Coach's direction. "Go check on her, and make sure Rhee's okay, too. I'll watch the food."

There was no hesitation, and the two men charged out of the kitchen in unison, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Nick lingered there, sidling back to open the door and hold it there as they brushed past him. His eyes did not follow them. They instead slanted to gaze at Rochelle, something inscrutable behind the attention.

Was he angry - or maybe just curious? Rochelle didn't know, and was left to blink back at him. She slowly drew her arms into a cross over her chest, palms tucked over her upper arms in a hug. She wanted to question him, but didn't. She merely held the stare, chin up, caught in defiance despite herself.

It only took a moment for him to look away, turning to follow in his teammates' footsteps.

She exhaled, deflating. Her eyes closed, feeling inexplicably shaken, unsure just what caused the
feeling. Maybe Ellis, maybe Nick, maybe a little bit of both. She just knew they needed good news, and Lena recovering would do.

Rochelle turned on her heel, staring down at the stew which was just approaching a boil.

*Or a good dinner, at least.*
Chapter 200

Lena was silent and still when Coach and Ellis rushed into the dining area of the restaurant. Both Rhiannon and Christophe had ended up seated on the table, and the Spaniard scattered a vaguely alarmed look toward them, his arm wrapped around his midsection.

"She is almost as tough as me, amigos." he announced, voice feigning a confidence that wasn't reflected in his posture.

A strained huff of a laugh escaped the prone brunette, followed by a thin whine of discomfort. The noise startled Ellis, almost stopping him in his tracks. He hadn't expected Lena to be cognizant enough to handle such humour, and he couldn't help a swell of relief. "You ain't kiddin'..."

His eyes darted toward Nick when the man slid to stand next to the bar, too close to him. The Northerner ignored him, but Ellis couldn't help himself from shying away, lips tugging into a purse. He was moderately sure he saw Nick's shoulders bristle, though he tried not to pay attention.

Coach bustled past him, circling the bar to reach the long banquet table. He stepped to the opposite side from Rhiannon and Chris, and as he came up level with Lena's face, he cocked his head to look her over. She laid flat on her back, and eyes like muddied jade met his dark ones.

"Hey, girl. How you feel?"

She grimaced, blowing a small breath through clenched teeth, the noise whistling. "Like I got... hit by a big zombie, or something..." she managed, very gently raising a hand to rest it against her stomach, fingers clutching just a little on her grey hooded sweatshirt. Her humour was sickly with pain. "Hurts like heck."

Tapping his thumb on his thigh, Coach quickly raised that hand and reached to touch the woman's bare shin in a gentle prod. He kept it light enough to avoid jostling her, fingertips brushing over the dark hair there. "You feel everythin'? Toes move?" He nodded at her socked feet, bare above the ankle.

She didn't immediately respond. A quiet fear darted across her eyes - but it was merely trepidation, as a beat later, she wiggled her toes in a gentle wave on both feet. "Y-yeah." she whispered. "Think... everything works. Just dizzy."

The big man nodded, glancing up warily toward Rhiannon. His gaze did re-lower to match Lena's after a moment, but he was clearly asking both of them for permission. Rhee did look, after all, primed to fight. "I ain't no medic, but I know a little 'bout gettin' bashed up. Played football, coached it, ran a health class and did some nursin' at school. You mind if I take a better look?"

The sisters shared the smallest glance, Rhiannon's raised shoulders brimming with distrust and tension. The blonde nodded in a short jerk, however, and Lena closed her eyes in a tired fashion. "Sure." she whispered, the quieter tone sounding less pained. Her expression remained gently stricken. "Whatever."

As Coach settled one foot up on the bench to lean on, Ellis nervously approached the very end of the table. He intended to watch closely - but when Coach reached down and grasped the zipper of Lena's thin hoodie, he couldn't help but avert his eyes. Chris did the same, he noticed.

Gently dragging the zipper down to unhook it from its counterpart, Coach pulled the hoodie open to bare her upper body, hugged by a black shirt speckled with grey. The shirt's form-fitting cut and
tight jersey material made it difficult to ignore the fact she was without a bra. The biker's body was svelte and petite, and the jacket had disguised it well enough before.

The eldest survivor swallowed whatever embarrassment he could have felt on that point. He was much more concerned for her well-being than decency, though he cursed himself for not chasing the rest of the team away beforehand. He took some measure of comfort in the fact that the two younger men were looking away - and that Nick was lingering at the bar rather than approaching.

*Come on. Ain't the time fo' this shit.*

Withholding a sigh, Coach announced his intentions carefully before he acted on them. "'A'ight. Just wanna look at yo' belly, maybe get you rolled over, check yo' back." He gently grasped the bottom edge of her shirt and slipped it up her midsection, just to the middle of her ribs.

Any embarrassment evaporated as he examined her.

He'd done his fair share of quick once-overs, when a boy on his team had taken a tackle or a charge too hard. It wasn't something he'd claim as *experience*, not under the circumstances he now found himself in, but he definitely knew enough to know he was out of his depth.

A soft purpled color flushed up from her stomach, mottled around her ribcage. He bit his tongue at the sight, flattening a hand to touch delicately at the soft slope just above her belly-button. She flinched faintly, though perhaps that was less pain and more self-consciousness. He scattered a look up toward her face, but she had not yet reopened her eyes.

Lena's skin was clammy to the touch, and when he applied some gentle pressure, she sucked in a breath that heightened with discomfort. Rhiannon's gaze flashed toward him with a sharp and territorial anger, and he couldn't help the instinct that made him yank his hand back.

He did, however, swallow the apology that threatened to dart from his lips.

Indecision struck. It was clear enough to him that she'd bled internally, but he had no way of knowing how badly - or how likely it was to continue. Where was the line between bruising and hemorrhaging? The sweaty, cool feel of her skin worried him, but she seemed alert and awake enough. It was, he ultimately knew, a matter of chance and time.

At least they could clean Christophe's wound, keep it tended, apply antibiotics topically *and* orally - but this? What could they do, if she was bleeding internally, beyond pray?

More than that, he had to choose what to say. He didn't have the right to withhold what he *did* know. He couldn't lie and say she was fine; he couldn't lie and say that she'd be fine. His gut said she wouldn't be, and that the bleeding might just continue until she fell into shock and died. If something had ruptured inside of her, what could they do but watch her deteriorate and pass?

Then again, they'd thought much the same of Chris.

Coach's eyes lifted, and he found Lena's on his face. He startled just a little, because she was looking at him with a serene sort of calm amidst the pain tightening her face. Hazel eyes flickered toward Rhiannon, almost imperceptibly, such that he might not have noticed had he not been staring straight at her.

It was a paternal instinct that made him understand: she knew, and in that split-second, begged him not to say it.

Coach tenderly grasped her shirt and tugged it back into place. He held his silence as he carefully
ran a hand along each of her limbs, squeezing at muscles and joints, just probingly. "Hurts real bad anywhere else?" he questioned, the words spoken with some small breathlessness. "Nothin' feels broken?"

Lena's eyes closed, wincing faintly with his touch on a few key spots - her right elbow and wrist, her left shin, the outer stretch of either thigh. Despite the reaction, she gritted out a noise of negation, and he allowed a soft sigh.

"Think it's best if we leave you layin' still." he uttered, cautiously, keeping his tone level. He had no intention of going through the strenuous process of turning her over - part of him wanted to know how tender her spine was, how delicate her condition, but was there a point?

"You just rest, a'ight?"

The woman nodded thinly, a wheezed stream of air passing between her lips as she tried to exhale without too much force. She turned her chin enough to crack her eyes open and look toward her sister, and Rhiannon's chin lifted. Eyes widening slightly, the blonde examined her with razor-sharp attention, almost watching her very lips move as Lena whispered, "I'm okay, kitten."

Something broke. Coach watched the younger biker's posture shatter, and he willed his eyes away as Rhiannon's head ducked low. She gritted her teeth so tightly that her voice came out like gravel, rasped and tight.

"I thought -"

When Lena merely nodded her head, the blonde flattened herself down low, prostrating against the edge of the table so her face buried into her sister's shoulder. "I tried." Rhiannon muttered, body trembling. Lena immediately placed a hand against the back of her neck, though pain fluctuated across her face at the effort of crossing her arm over her body. "I - tried to keep going... like we swore. You fucking scared me... I thought I'd... never..."

"I'm okay." the injured woman repeated, softer, exhausted eyes brimming abruptly with a wetness that threatened to escape down her temples. "You did good, Rhee. I'm okay."

Coach retreated, the urge borne by the feeling of intrusion. He didn't want to hover by them and listen, not when a yanking, clenching feeling in his chest told him Lena was lying. He fell to a quiet blindness, almost charging right through Ellis in his hurry. The young man obediently darted out of the way, too urgently interested in slipping forward and worriedly glancing over the sisters to pay him much mind.

Nick did not act nearly so oblivious.

The gambler slipped one solid step to the side, not quite blocking Coach's path, but mostly. Their eyes met in a muted sort of stare, and Coach merely jerked his chin up before continuing on. Nick passed into lockstep behind him, and it was wordlessly that they returned to the kitchen.

Ellis barely noticed, at first, so focused was he on their newfound partners. "I'm real glad you're okay." he uttered, delicately, twining his fingers together in front of himself. Lena matched a soft smile at him, slanted from where she lay. "We were all worryin'."

Christophe leaned slightly over, his hand settling on the slope of Rhiannon's bicep, soothingly. She made no motion to shrug him off, so he let it remain there, fingertips tightening. "You should have seen Nico. He was upset, I think. For a softer man, it was like him crying, ¿si?"

A faint hiss left Rhiannon from her muffled posture, angrily. "Best be. Fucker's half the reason this
shit happened to her." she muttered, spite bristling at her voice, though it was half-hearted with exhaustion. "He should've taken that fuckin' Charger, instead of Lee."

The thinnest frown touched Ellis' lips, despite himself. He still couldn't quite fight the instinct to defend the Northerner, but he did manage to stifle it down to a vague platitude that just left him feeling obtuse and tense. "Wish nobody had."

Neither woman responded, but Lena allowed a soft twitch of a nod. Her eyes closed tightly, and Ellis looked hesitantly over his shoulder. His gaze sought out Nick in some reflexive hunt for comfort - but found only empty air, and the softly swinging kitchen door. His frown deepened at the realization that his teammates had slipped away and left him behind. To talk, maybe?

He wanted to be angry, a little, but stopped himself. Anger had gotten the best of him too much of late, and he wanted to hold onto the warmth in his chest that spawned from hearing Lena talk again. He'd trust them - and ask later.

Rochelle had given him a task, and he intended to uphold it.

The Georgian pushed in to rest a knee against the bench, leaning in a little. He managed a smile, eyes squinting. It felt fake on his lips, and Christophe's eyes flickered to him. His gaze thinned a little, like the Spaniard wasn't as easily fooled. "You up to eatin'? We got a stew cookin' that'll knock yer socks off, here in a minute."

The woman didn't quite open her eyes, but she did flash teeth in a weak show of humour. "Charger already did." she whispered, a phrase he had to strain to hear - and one that made him break into laughter, even as he felt a stir of sadness.

Hearing Rhiannon snort in a wet, genuine laugh, buried into Lena's shoulder... it took the edge off, just a little.
Chapter 201

The declaration had been simple and blunt. "I don't think the girl's gonn' make it." Coach looked distraught as he spoke the words, eyes refusing to quite meet anyone's. "She's bruised up somethin' foul. Hurtin' like she's swellin' in the gut. If she don't stop bleedin'..."

He trailed off rather than say it twice.

Nick couldn't help but cross his arms, tightening them, fingers clenched in the sleeves of his dress shirt. He stood in the center of the kitchen, eyes slowly tracking between Coach and Rochelle. There was some awkward tension there, fitting when put against the backdrop of sizzling, popping stew.

It was an after-thought that made Rochelle turn and snap the temperature dial down a little, moving it to point to the 'Simmer' label.

"... You don't know, though." she stated, voice strained in its lowness. Her shoulders trembled before she raised them, stiffening them against the weakness that showed there. "None of us do. Shit, Coach, what were the chances Chris lived this long? If she's awake, isn't that a good sign? What do we know?"

The ex-football player thrust his hands up, palms flat. It was a gesture he must've regretted as he lowered them shortly thereafter, but too late; Nick could pick out the way his fingers shook. "Baby girl, we don't know shit, a'ight? Maybe I'm wrong; Lord, I hope I am. You think I don't want her to get better? But we ain't seen someone get hit like that. Ain't got no idea how much damage it did."

Rochelle's head gently nodded, a soft dismay dragging the full curve of her lips downward. "Okay... okay. I understand." Her eyes closed tightly, squeezing. "We can't really help her chances, right? You can't... do anything to help this kind of injury. Like Ellis' rib fracture."

The shrug that touched Coach's shoulders was tight, hollow. "Not us. Surgery, maybe. IVs." He pushed a palm into his hip, idly twisting. "I got the feelin' she knows, so.. I didn't say anythin'. Don't know if Rhiannon should hear it from us. Shit, don't know if I'm right, anyway. Scare the girl for no damn reason."

Nick's eyes blinked between them, darkly. His chin lowered to shadow them before he spoke. Whisper-quiet in his interjection, he uttered: "Should prepare for the worst."

That made a sharp exhale leave Rochelle, stiffly turning around to face the older man. Her eyes sought his, a twitch lowering her browline. "Prepare?" she questioned, softer now. It could have been an innocuous statement, but she picked up on something in his tone that said otherwise.

He shrugged his shoulders, eyes slitting. "You think her sister's gonna let it go easy? Lena dies on our watch, but 'oh no, too bad, shit happens', and she's cool? We're gonna end up in another fucking survivor war, and we barely made it out of the last one."

Nick watched the protest rattling around Rochelle's expression, though it took her a solid few seconds to form her response. "I... Jesus, Nick. I'm not there, not even close." she hissed out, eyes flashing toward the kitchen door. "Let's just... let's just focus on now, okay? We've got two injured people out there, and an entire team who needs food."

He snorted, closing his eyes for just a moment, before flashing them back open. "You're not the one who's gonna be on the fucking chopping block when that blonde bitch goes sour again, Ro'."
Rochelle spared a faint look for Coach, a little confusion breaking through in her eyes. "Nick... where is this coming from, I -" She abruptly dropped her arms flat to her sides, a laugh escaping her flatly. It was disbelieving, and her voice fell to a gentle and yet pointed note, testing the waters.

"You feel guilty," she stated, aware she'd struck gold when his head reared back, disgust darting across his features... but did not speak. She flicked a finger up to indicate at him. "You're freaking out because you think it's your fault." The knowledge satisfied her, at the same time it frustrated her. Where was that guilt with Ellis, when it would have been more valuable?

Nick's arms tightened, and what should have been an angry gesture turned into something vaguely pathetic and huddled. He shook his head in a frustrated surge of energy, tongue flicking across his lower lip. "It's got fucking nothing to do with what I think. It's what the goddamn situation is, and if Lena dies, we are fucked. Specifically me."

"Damn, son." Coach grunted, sighing deeply. "Quit playin'."

He flashed his teeth a little, some muscle going wild in his cheek in agitation. "I'm not." he retorted, coldly, eyes flicking up toward the ceiling to avoid looking at them. "And I'll keep not while we get fucking betrayed, again. This is the same goddamn shit as always - you assclowns circling up and having your kumbaya shit that gets us nearly k-"

"Nick." Rochelle stated, voice so sharp it actually startled him. He tipped his chin to turn a lancing gaze in her direction, but it was a look that crumbled to outright bewilderment when the woman was suddenly in front of him and suddenly grabbing his hand.

Their fingers didn't lace, but she did curl hers around his palm. His arm flinched, eager to yank it free, but he restrained the motion at the last second. "You're not in a good place right now. I get that. Can you please just... trust me? Us?"

The gambler didn't want to look at her, that much was clear in the screw and twist of his brow. He did anyway, and in the depths of his expression she swore there was something like a wry and faded misery.

It was little things like that that made her believe in him, though she felt just as much like a fool for doing so.

He tore away from her grip, snapping off a sigh. Whatever she'd seen was gone as fast as it had risen, leaving only agitation. "Fine, whatever. At least this time I've got the goddamn katana." That was an uglier joke than Rochelle fully expected, but she simply watched him stalk a few steps away. He pressed his palm to his mouth, rubbing ringed digits against his stubble. "For the record, I fucking protest."

"Noted." She exhaled quietly, raising her hands suddenly to press fingertips to her temples. "Can you protest your way to finding some bowls and spoons?"

Almost to her surprise, he obeyed. That didn't stop his posture from turning loose with annoyance as he moved, throwing a hand up in a flashed middle finger, but she allowed him that much. After watching him walk up to a hanging cabinet full of dishware and start piling bowls onto an upturned palm and curled fingers, she returned her attention to the stove.

She found Coach at her elbow, and couldn't stop herself from talking. "I don't know what the hell to think." left her, without anger and full to the brim with exhaustion. "I got so scared for Chris, but he's bouncing back. I never thought he'd be walking around already. How hasn't the shock killed him? The blood loss?"
The big man let his head wag in a shake. "Got me, girl. CPR cert don't help a man deal with shit like this."

That almost made her laugh.

"Maybe we're just lucky." Nick muttered over his shoulder in brash sarcasm, the stack on his hand growing taller. Rochelle eyed it with abrupt clarity; there were seven bowls nested atop one another when he turned away. It seemed like a tremendously huge number.

It felt like they'd only just been four, and now they'd accumulated seven. Her eyes slipped to the stove in one smooth turn, and trepidation came unbidden to her, unsettling her stomach. The responsibility threatened to rest its weight on her chest, crush her in a soft and stifling pressure. Hadn't the Angels reached such numbers - before their collapse?

Had they taken on too much? Whatever their flaws, the foursome had survived. They'd fought their way, tooth and nail, and survived. Sometimes they'd almost done so easily, and achieved things she'd never have thought possible before the world ended. Now they were in friction, unbalanced, and not just because of Ellis and Nick.

What if they couldn't find more food? What if they used up all their medicine and then another of them got injured? What if they spent so much time recuperating that they missed some chance to escape?

They had moved away from the shoreline, she realized. If a ship did pass, they'd never see it.

What if Lena did die and Rhiannon snapped?

"Let's focus on feeding the gang. That's the one thing we can do," she uttered, brushing off Coach's hand with a small turn. He watched her, closely, but didn't press the issue. He turned instead to watch Nick approach them, observing the gambler's rough scowl and high shoulders. Sulk - quietly, it seemed.

He couldn't help but enjoy watching the clout Rochelle seemed to have with him. As much as he was trying to stay neutral in the odd situation they found themselves, seeing Nick humbled was a pleasant change. It comforted him.

Whatever Nick's mistakes, he was still the same man Coach had grown to know and care for: petty and sometimes cruel, but never evil.

"I'll tell Ellis." Coach stated in a sigh, eyes closing. "It'll upset him, but the boy deserves to know."

Rochelle hummed her assent, but felt a tug of discontent. The last thing Ellis needed was more reason to break down, and she felt a strong urge to protect him from the news. Something must have shown in her expression, because Coach rested a hand on her arm, squeezing. "We'll handle it like we done everything else. Together."

She tried to smile at him, but it felt strangled on her face.

Feels like we're the least together we've ever been.
The polite thing to do would have been to wait until everyone was served. Those were the kind of manners Coach and Ellis had obtained as thoroughbred Southern men. Nick, spawned from lower-middle-class New York, had no such instinct - and his hunger won out over any interest to pretend he did.

He claimed the first bowl Rochelle ladled full of stew, and a stool at the bar. It was the closest he could get to separating himself from the group without isolating himself entirely at the other section of tables. He wanted to listen, after all, if only to make sure he didn't miss anything important.

It was easy to bury himself in his food and look unapproachable when it was the best food he'd had in what felt like weeks. His stomach grumbled in protest, groaning and chugging as he ate much too fast, but he couldn't take the time to care.

Between bites, his gaze darted up to watch the rest of his growing team get situated. Rhiannon ended up seated on the table again, legs crossed under her and thigh acting as a pillow to Lena's head. The injured woman looked only half awake, but was conscious enough to take the cautious spoonful offered to her by her younger sibling.

The blonde moved gently. Tenderness edged her every move, and she watched Lena like a hawk. It was tremendously unlike her, and put a sour twist on Nick's lips. The closer the two girls were, the harder it would be if Lena didn't make it. He'd have preferred them acting like a normal family and hating one another.

He stared down at the oily stew gently steaming in his bowl, using his spoon to prod at a sizeable hunk of potato. He didn't feel guilty about her injuries - he hadn't forced her to jump in front of it, nor had he been the one to slam her into the ground like a ragdoll. She'd made the choice, and the Charger had done the damage. It wasn't guilt, but it wasn't a simple emotion, either.

It was a very Ellis thing to do, to self-sacrifice like that, and he couldn't stop his brain from following that train of thought through. What would he have done if Ellis had been injured that badly? If the situation were reversed, and Lena had, unintentionally, architected it?

The answer was not as difficult to discern: he'd have shredded her, limb from limb.

That was more than likely the source of his anxiety - that he'd understand Rhiannon taking her vengeance on him, because he'd do much the same in her shoes. He wouldn't have blamed her. Still, it wasn't guilt that fueled the tightness in his chest, and it wasn't fear, either. Rochelle hadn't really pinpointed it, but she'd come closer than he felt comfortable with.

Maybe he just felt overwhelmed at the idea that Ellis could have just as easily been the one to go down. Or maybe his survival instinct had some fight-or-flight terror surging through him, eager to get away from a woman who'd already bodily threatened him once before. A girl who'd looked down the sights of a gun at him and pulled the trigger... unloaded or not.

Maybe you just don't want to deal with the consequences of your actions. That's your M.O., isn't it? Trash the place and leave. How's that going for you, buddy? With either of them?

If he thought too much, he might ruin his meal. So, he turned his eyes up, seeking out distractions. Ellis and Chris sat together on the bench, nearly thigh-to-thigh, and the foreigner was treating his
food like so much poison. Nick didn't miss the way he faked it, keeping the spoon near his mouth whenever Ellis looked at him, motioning as if to eat while barely taking sips of the stew broth.

Whenever he did anything more significant, or slurped up some hunk of vegetable or beef, his expression blanched in unmistakeable nausea. *Good; a waste of food. Exactly what we need right now.*

That and their proximity accumulated together in yet another reason to be sour. He had no idea why he was the only one upset with how cozy Christophe had become with Ellis - *For fuck's sake, Rochelle doesn't even care. When is she gonna jump the goddamn gun on that one and get him out of my hair?* - but he was not about to make a scene. The last thing he needed was attention drawn to his jealous streak.

*Super. Thanks, Ellis. You really did make me into the crazy ex.*

He grimaced when that felt a little too true, reminding himself he was trying to avoid ruining his appetite. He looked instead to watch Coach and Rochelle settling in on the other side of the table, both of them quick to turn to eating. He didn't blame them, but he had to fight off humour as their motions were undeniably ravenous.

He didn't realize his snort carried until Ellis slipped a glance his way, and Nick made the mistake of letting their gazes meet. It was... painful, and mostly because of the way the younger man wilted down in his seat, furtively staring at his meal.

Nick missed watching Ellis struggle to get enough of looking at him. Craved it, maybe more than the food currently trying to start some sort of revolution in his gut rather than be digested. *Shit.*

He grabbed for a canned Coke from the bar, cracking it open with a sigh. The caffeine was liable to kill him outright, considering how delicate and sensitive his body was behaving, but he was willing to accept the risk. The warm liquid foamed up against his thumb where it pressed into the metal tab, though he didn't waste the time to lick it off before he lifted the rim to his mouth and practically inhaled some of the sugary drink.

His stomach only protested more, and he sat there in a long-suffering silence, closing his eyes to will himself to some kind of internal equilibrium.

Rochelle was the one to break the silence. Nick hadn't realized it had grown awkward until she did, her voice a little weak. "Doing okay, Lee? Food okay?"

Lena uttered a faint affirmative sound, but it was Rhiannon who responded for her. The woman seemed calmer than usual, her tone relaxing. "Yeah." Her chin lowered, watching her sister indelicately chew and swallow, even that small motion making the brunette's expression shudder painfully. "Thanks for sharing, or whatever."

Easing herself into a lean against the table, Rochelle laughed slightly, more meant as a dismissive gesture than one of humour. "Don't sweat it." She focused acutely on her bowl, using the tip of her spoon to carve a piece of beef in half, the meat so tender it submitted without much force required. "All that's happened... We didn't really get much time to get to know each other."

There was something vapid in her voice, so casual as to be uniquely pointed. Nick wouldn't have noticed it had he not known her as well as he did. She had some ulterior motive, though he didn't know what. "Your dad's into aliens? That's pretty nuts, even for Texas."

A laugh left the biker, teeth flashing in a grin. She set both her bowl against her thigh, letting Lena
rest a moment. "Wasn't that much weirder than your normal shithole of a house to grow up in. Just instead of a curfew because some fucker wants to kidnap you, it was a curfew to stay clear of the UFO patrols."

The prone woman laying against her leg huffed a laugh, strained, and Rochelle's eyes ticked across Rhiannon's expression. She set her spoon down abruptly. "I for real can't tell if you're joking."

With a thin smile, the blonde threaded the fingers of her free hand in her sister's hair, playing with the strands in some gentle gesture. "Not, mostly. But it was okay. Made us scrappy little shits. We figured out pretty quick he was fucking insane, and... after that it was... fine."

The softest utterance left Lena, her eyes tightly shut. "He loved us."

Rhiannon tipped her head to look down at her, and something flickered to life in her face. Discomfort - regret, maybe, but too mired in relief to be read clearly. "Yeah. Can't say the loony bastard doesn't."

There was more, Nick was sure, but Rochelle merely deflected. He wasn't in a position to press the issue, nor did he care to. "Everyone we've met so far were all strangers before the apocalypse. We all just ran into each other... How'd you two end up being together? Just coincidence?"

Rhiannon nodded her head a tick, green eyes harsh as they returned to focus on the other woman's face. Her mood had just faintly soured, turning her tone short. "We were meeting up to ride to a concert. We hadn't seen each other for awhile, so.. Whatever. Sister road trip. The evacs started right after... so we turned around to head to our dad's. We got lucky."

It was softly that the producer prompted, "You guys have made it pretty well out here, for just the two of you."

"Yeah. Guess that streak ended." the blonde retorted, a bit harshly - but she seemed to recognize it. Shifting her weight, Rhiannon flashed a look back at the other woman, face contorted in something close to discomfort. "Not... that we were perfect before. Shit, I got really fucked up after I met you guys the first time."

Rochelle offered a lifted chin, urging her on. "Smoker, right? You mentioned that earlier."

Shrugging her shoulders, the young survivor let her free hand lower to her hip. "Yeah." She casually scratched at her waist through the thin fabric of her cami, sighing before returning her attention to Lena. "Wouldn't have made it out if she hadn't found me again."

A hum touched Rochelle's voice. Her gaze was attentive, but she seemed to be fishing for something in particular - so when the attempt didn't bear fruit, she adopted a slightly more direct method. "You talked about someone else in the car."

The blonde seemed distinctly surprised at that, like she'd forgotten. Her tongue darted to rake against her broken canine as she surveyed the room, nodding her head slowly. "Uh, yeah. Not for that long, though." Some discomfort edged her posture when Coach abruptly looked directly at her, like he were hearing it for the first time. "He was a cool guy. Helped us out of some shit, and we helped him rest for a few days. I -"

Nick did not waste any more time. He was on his feet in a flash, any sense of his upset stomach evaporating behind what he could only describe as fury. He reflexively clenched his hand around the can of soda before him, leaving it awkwardly stifling the way he tried to gesture at them. "Ex cuse me? When the fuck did this conversation happen?"
Rochelle's expression went dry, though unsurprised. She'd expected his outburst but remained disappointed in it. "In the car, Nick." The casual manner she handled him with was belittling, like she didn't respect him much anymore. He shouldn't have cared. It shouldn't have mattered. "When we separated because you asked us to."

Protest darted across his eyes at that description of events, but he forced himself to prioritize arguments and rounded on Rhee. Her eyes turned to quick darts across his face, insecurity funneling to anger. "So there's someone else out there? And what blonde biker bitch was he friends with, exactly, the new and improved Saint Rhiannon or the one who tried to kill us? Where's this guy on your fucking moral gradient?"

It was going to turn into a fight, and Nick was beyond ready for it. He'd been ready for days. The energy in the room sparked suddenly into aggression, as tangible as electricity arcing through the air. He might've gotten goosebumps had he not felt so iced over, so unreasonably calm, so -

Then Ellis stood up.

Nick knew he flinched. He couldn't get a handle on his expression before it happened, and he saw Rochelle and Ellis look surprised. For that matter, he was surprised. Since when did the kid's ire unsettle him so, intimidate him?

The idea put him off so much he lost steam. Momentum escaped him in favour of hiding away the reaction that had betrayed him. His head twisted, snapping his gaze to the side, shaken even further by his own falter - and Rochelle jumped on the moment of weakness.

"Look, this is why I'm bringing it up. Okay? I bet you and me are thinking the same thing, but if you could cool it for two seconds, we can find out if we're right."

He didn't want to admit defeat, but seeing Ellis aggress at him drew the situation into sudden and sharp clarity. What had he done to push the younger man to that? What had he become, and why did the idea bother him so much?

He'd wanted Ellis to forget about him, to hate him enough to move on. He hadn't appreciated what that would actually feel like.

You're bein' an asshole, Nick. spoke the chipper drawl that had taken up residence in the back of his head; the angel on his shoulder that was all he really had left of the Georgian. It was a sentiment that made him want to laugh for innumerable reasons, a flash of humor that struck him somewhere deep.

"Whatever." left him in a snarl, his mouth reflexively filling the silence. He dragged himself back to his stool, excruciatingly aware of Ellis' eyes on him. The kid's attention was... perturbed, and he didn't have to stretch to imagine why. Ellis was just as put off as he was by the newfound shift in power.

He felt weak, and couldn't do much more than stew in it.

Rhiannon warily scanned the room, her anger having deflated into a quiet smugness. Alarm won out on her face, however, voice shifting to a cautious tone when she spoke up. "What... do you mean, 'find out if you're right'? The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

Ellis nodded heavily, echoing the question silently as he sat back down. Coach merely observed, his eyes stuck on Nick. Sympathy put his mouth in a weird quirk, like he'd tasted something sour.

With a small inhale, Rochelle tipped her head toward Christophe. The Spaniard looked startled at
the sudden attention, sitting straight, dewy brown eyes blinking past a fog. "He... used to have a friend. He disappeared a while back, hadn't seen him since. I'm -" She corrected herself shortly, passing a glance to Nick he did not return. "We're thinking he may be the guy you met."

The reaction to her words was odd, and tremendously unbalanced. Christophe's lips drew into a grin that managed to echo the brilliance he'd once put into everything he did; Ellis' jaw made an effort to strike the table. Coach grunted in surprise, but his eyes betrayed the easy way he adapted to the new thought.

Rhiannon, body stiff, merely blinked. She seemed frozen for a beat of time, her emotions unclear behind a guarded stillness. It was mechanically that she turned her head, eyeing Chris with precise attention, and harshly that she spoke.

"You didn't do his eye, did you?"

Christophe's grin faded, confusion taking the place of excitement. He searched her face for a moment, before uttering, "¿Qué?... No comprendo. Do... what?"

Though the blonde's mouth opened, Rochelle cut in. Her hurry to do so revealed a concern, and she spoke delicately, reaching suddenly across the table to flatten her left hand on the table just in front of him. "He was... missing an eye." Chris almost didn't focus on her words at first, so distracted was he by staring down at her hand, like it were an offer he was afraid to accept. "If... it is him."

Then it clicked, and Christophe looked up abruptly. His face fell, thinned lips drawn into the softest circle. He had to swallow before he could manage to speak again, brows screwing up in a knot. "Qué mierda." he ghosted. "Less and less is left of us."

Shrugging her shoulders, Rhiannon lowered her chin, glancing toward Lena. The older woman had closed her eyes, and she sighed. Her voice faded as some of the confidence drained out of it. "He talked about some chick, and the dude who cut his eye out. You don't seem like either. How do you know we're even talking about the same guy?"

A sadness crossed Chris' expression, but it was gone just as fast as it had come. He flashed a smile, instead, lowering his chin coyly. "I had both arms when I knew him. Less, em - memorable, creo."

When the biker merely grunted at him, seeming unconvinced, Rochelle tipped her head and piped up. "If you'd met his old team, you'd... know." Her smile was uncomfortable, and it took everything she had to avoid looking at Ellis when she spoke. "They were the type to hurt you like that."

Ellis seemed uneasy, but his voice remained in a soothing register, a hand slipping to rest on Christophe's shoulderblade. "Did you know his name?" he questioned, shifting where he sat. His eyes tentatively searched Rhiannon's face.

The blonde shook her head, tongue curled against the roof of her mouth. "No. Wouldn't tell us, and we weren't with the fucker that long anyway. I can describe him, though." Her attention flickered to Christophe, raising her voice slightly. "Dark hair, dark eyes. Uh... Asian, maybe. He was heavy, barely taller than me."

Everyone in the room looked his way, causing him to hesitate. It was almost fearfully that he managed a nod, eyes shifting as if to seek out some reassurance, first from Rochelle and then from Coach. When that failed, he leaned into Ellis' hand, gaze falling. "Que coincide... sí, that... sounds like him."

Ellis squeezed fingers against his back, comfortingly.
There was silence, full of the grinding of thought and only just broken up by the clink of Coach's spoon as he set it down in the bowl. There was something grim in it, uncertain, and he spoke up before it could settle too thickly.

"Ain't no sense in gettin' fired up, kids. Nothin' anyone's said says he's a bad person. Sounds like the boy might just have reason to like us, if all this shakes out the way it's lookin'." He lifted his hand, flicking a finger in Chris' direction. "Enemy of my enemy is my friend, and most definitely if my enemy cut my god-damn eye out."

Christophe hesitantly bobbed his head, raising his hand to press his thumbnail against his lower lip. "I... did not know. He disappeared. Nunca pensé - ... I did not know Jerry had done this." Guilt threatened at his voice, trembling.

It was with a narrowed gaze that Rhiannon lowered her chin, glancing at her lap. She took a slow spoonful from the bowl resting in her palm, and popped it into her mouth, speaking past it in a grumble. "Not sure why you guys are afraid of him. He was pretty chill, and besides. He's missing a fuckin' eye. For all I know, he kicked it out there."

A sigh dropped from Rochelle's lips, and she closed her eyes. "It's a... it's a long story." She looked to be summoning the strength to explain, dredging up some inner strength - and failing. Her well had long since drained to empty, and all she earned for the effort was a tremble to her chin.

The silence she left behind was enough to incite Nick to speak again, quietly. He cut to the quick.

"We killed the two people he talked about. Self-defense doesn't make them less dead. Not sure he'd love that. Or how he'd act, seeing Chris again." He grasped at his Coke, aware of everyone's eyes on him but definitely aware of Ellis'. Rhiannon's eyes darted to him, inscrutable in a squinted stare. "Generally a shitty can of worms I have no intention of fucking opening if I can help it."

The blonde glanced down at her sister, shoulders lifting slightly. She seemed to chew on that for a moment, caught in some insecurity without Lena there to guide her response. Only eventually did she look back up, expression narrow and tight. "Sounds like they got what was coming to 'em to me." she stated, simply.

Nick offered little more than a slanted sneer.

Rochelle pressed a palm into her temple, rubbing in a small circle. "Yeah. I wish it had gone differently, but they brought it on themselves. We aren't like that - we really tried to stop it." she whispered, half to herself. "Hopefully everyone sees it like that."

She jumped just a little when a hand touched hers where it lay still on the tabletop. Her eyes reopened, expecting Ellis' fingers to be the ones settled atop her knuckles... but Chris' slender ones grazed there instead, soft and just a little cold.

When she blinked up at him, she found him doggedly avoiding her gaze. The fact surprised her right out of her distress, as he'd never come off to her as shy before. If anything, he'd always exuded a casual, easy confidence that toed the line between grating and a little suave.

That had changed, it seemed.

Rochelle let her fingers fidget, just enough to brush against his palm and acknowledge the touch. "It's just been a rough time for us. We're all a little gunshy."

It wasn't the new stranger who worried her, in and of himself. It was the potential for misunderstanding, and the risk therein. Would they have the chance to explain themselves, and
would they be listened to? What proof did they have besides Chris’ corroboration?

Would he accept that, if he didn't even care enough to mention the Spaniard?
Chapter 203

Ellis laid flat on the bench, one arm draped across his stomach. He tapped his foot against the floor in a dull tune, eyes half closed. It was all he could do not to run through it a million times in his head, to sit there mulling over Nick's stricken look.

He'd *cowed* him. They'd come to conflict and Ellis had won, without even saying a word. Just his anger had been enough to send the older man running.

He didn't enjoy the feeling. It mostly made him feel frustrated, and maybe a little disappointed in himself. He'd promised Rochelle he'd try to stop letting Nick get under his skin, but the older man's antagonism toward their new teammates was grating. Especially when the girls had done nothing but help them, and at great cost to themselves.

The new dynamic wasn't what he'd wanted, but was it better?

Maybe regaining some power would be good for him. He jutted his jaw forward slightly, trying to own the sensation, to force himself to feel it. *Yeah. 'Bout time he gets tuh feel shitty, instead of it just bein' me all the time. 'Bout damn time.*

Saying it didn't make it feel any more true, and Ellis just felt a tired sorrow.

*Wish neither of us did.*

Coach had tried a second time to go wash up, and judging from the fact he hadn't burst into shouts again, it had been more successful. The dining area was quieter, with Lena back asleep and most everyone else trapped in a variety of thoughtful silences. It felt tense, like they were all waiting for something.

That tension made Ellis startle outright when Chris' arm curled over his raised knee, the man draping his body forward against Ellis' shin to hang his head low and peer down at the Georgian's face. All Ellis could do was blink, trapped there, caught off-guard by the contact. "Uh -"

"Chico, la cabeza me explota." Chris lifted his hand off Ellis' knee, pressing fingertips into his own forehead. A flashed pout touched his lower lip, making the Georgian frown a little.

"Headache?" he questioned, reflexively touching his cap where it pressed into the top of his skull as if to communicate the word in gesture form, as well.

The Spaniard's pout twitched to a grin, shaking his head smoothly. "No, no... it means... I worry. So much to think about." Releasing a sigh, Chris dropped his chin til it rested atop his bicep, body curled almost entirely around Ellis' bent leg. "And only some of it *bueno.* " His eyes drifted up, slanting toward Rochelle where she stood across the dining area, looking out a hazily tinted window and into the street outside.

Ellis didn't miss the angle of his stare, and he allowed a tiny grin of his own. Some internal voice nagged him, reminding him of her boyfriend - but a louder voice decided to leave those worries to her. It wasn't much of his business, either way. Besides, who even knew if her boyfriend was still alive?

So, he threw caution to the wind - not that he had much left, anyway.

"I saw you two holdin' hands."

Chris whipped his attention back toward the other man, practically huffing in denial, but Ellis was already shaking his head. "I know what I saw, brother. You got a big ol' crush on her."

Christophe's eyes squinted as if in anger, but he couldn't hold the expression for very long before it cracked into humour. "What is this you say, ¿pequeñín? I do not understand." he responded in an airy fashion, tilting his head to lean an ear closer.

Ellis stuck his tongue out at that, laughing a little. He shifted his knee to jostle the other survivor, raising an arm and crooking it casually underneath his head. "Whatever, man... be like that."

With a grunt, Christophe placed his hand against his sternum, palm pressed onto the bandages that wrapped around his chest and made up the only fabric covering his upper body. His humour was gone as fast as it had appeared, dulled by some distracted emotion. "Lo siento, amigo. I would prefer not to think about it."

That surprised Ellis, his eyes darting up to seek out further meaning on Chris' face. The young man's expression was oddly stricken for a moment, but he warped it into a smile by force. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"You know, tío, I think we - nos vigilan. We are being watched."

Ellis blinked - and then he craned his neck, looking around the restaurant. It took him longer than it should have to realize what Chris meant, and even then, it was only by virtue of the way Nick looked suspiciously interested in his hands. He must've caught Ellis looking around and dropped his gaze.

A frown tugged at his lips. "I... dunno whut you mean." he half-lied.

The expression made the other man laugh, slyly nodding. He peeked over his stumped left shoulder, checking to ensure Rhiannon was paying them no mind, and lowered his voice even further. "I hear he is jealous. I move close to you, and it is like he tries to kill me with his eyes, ¿sí?"

Furtively scrunching his face up, Ellis put an elbow against the bench abruptly, leveraging his body to bend at the middle and lean closer. Free couldn't help but babble, barely moderating his tone. "That's - that's silly. Yer imaginin' things, man, he's just... angry at everythin' lately. And it ain't like he's ever been real nice tuh you."

It was silly, wasn't it? The idea of Nick envying Chris seemed ridiculous, so he puffed out a breath and said as much. "He's the one who dumped me. Besides, it ain't like we'd... I mean, yer way intuh Ro'. 'N' I like you, but not like that."

The Spaniard put out his lower lip, complete with a slight flutter of full lashes. "No...?"

Ellis could've choked on his own tongue. He knew his face lit up, and that only furthered his distress. He didn't want to give the wrong impression, nor did he want to hurt Chris' feelings. Sure, the man was attractive enough, but he'd never considered it from his own perspective, just Rochelle's... and even if he recognized the fact of Chris' looks, he'd never do anything to hurt her or intrude on whatever she and the ex-Angel had.

That fact didn't stop a thought from intruding in on his internal debate.

*Is... he my type? Do I got a type? I mean... aside from Nick, I guess... Is my type really angry guys from the city? Shit...*
Before he could internally dig himself any deeper of a hole, Chris broke into a grin. "Ah, please do not look at me this way, amigo. I am only messing."

Ellis blew out a blustered sigh of annoyance, relief etching itself into his expression. "Man... That ain't funny right now." He jostled his knee again, and this time, Chris removed himself from his lean. A teasing beam faced him as the Southerner dragged his body upright, sitting in a straddle on the bench so he could lean in close.

"Look, even if he was -"

The kitchen door shoved open, and Coach strode out. It was a night and day difference. Layers of grime and blood had been scrubbed from his skin, leaving it practically glowing, except for the scrapes and scratches - new and old - that lined his frame. More than that, though, he looked almost happy.

He was also in only his tan slacks, with a towel wrapped tenderly around his torso in a modest drape. Ellis couldn't resist bursting into laughter at the sight, startling Chris into looking with him.

Coach gave a dry and dull look in their direction, but his lips twitched in the threat of a smile. "Don't make me whoop y'all." he warned, placing a palm over his chest. Ellis quickly tried to affect an apologetic, chagrined look, ducking his head. "I had to wash my damn shirt. Nearly fell apart on me. That seam's ready to call it."

Rochelle turned, arms wrapping around herself, attention drawn to the exchange. She seemed only freshly attentive, like her mind had been elsewhere. "Yeah. We could all really use a change of clothes. Maybe next time we're out, we can keep an eye out for a store or something."

The big man shrugged his bare shoulders, half-hearted. "Maybe. Least we can clean up some now." He stepped away from the kitchen door, thumbing back at it. "Someone go on and take the next shower. An' don't take too long. We're wastin' gasoline here."

Ellis didn't expect Rochelle to turn in his direction. A slight hunch touched his body as if to hide, reflexively, blinking gently as she spoke - but her eyes were on Christophe, not him. "Why don't you go, Chris? That'll give me a minute to prep some bandages so we can change yours after you clean up."

The Spaniard struggled with a hesitant frown, body shifting. He looked about as excited as if he'd been asked to lose his other arm, too, for a moment. Then some energy lit in his eyes and spawned a subtle grin on his face. He exhaled in soft drama, turning his head to blink at Ellis.

"Chico, I am... em, ashamed, to ask... but I do not know how hard it will be to wash." He illustrated his point by raising his arm and trying to reach at his back, a sincere grimace of pain fogging at his eyes with the strain it put on his body. "¿Ayúdame, por favor?"

His legitimate discomfort didn't distract Ellis from the convenience of the moment. They'd been discussing Nick's jealousy, and Chris had seemed so oddly pleased with it. Now to try and pull Ellis into helping him shower, and with a glimmer of sly encouragement in his eyes... the Georgian was left wondering if he was actually trying to inflame tension.

More importantly, he wondered if he should let him.

His peripheral vision caught Nick straightening where he sat on the barstool. The motion was snappy and half-aborted, and surprise struck Ellis at the same time frustration did. There was no room to deny it when the evidence was on display: he was jealous, and reacted like a coiled snake.
Quiet, but furious.

It was a posture and attitude Ellis had grown more than a little familiar with.

The Southerner looked more fully at Christophe, and those honey-brown eyes lit up in a coy and knowing energy. He'd seen the realization and looked a little triumphant at it, like they were playing a game and he'd gotten the upper hand. Playful.

Anger brewed in Ellis' stomach, bringing a nearly embarrassed flush to his face. He didn't want to laugh about it. It wasn't funny, it was mortifying. Infuriating. Nick threw him to the wayside, and then had the audacity to act offended when he got close to someone else.

Was he not allowed to have a friend? Intimacy? If Nick had no interest in him, why should he care about what Nick thought? And even if he did have any interest in Christophe - how was it any of Nick's business? And why did the Spaniard think his struggle was something to laugh at?

"Yeah." he gruffed out, agitation and a little hurt lowering his chin. He pushed away from the bench and scrambled to stand, ignoring the perturbed look Rochelle sent his way. Instead, he lowered his chin and looked away, trying not to curl his fingers into fists. He failed. "Fine."

There was a moment where Coach and Rochelle looked at each other, confused, balking at speech. They seemed at a loss for the sudden shift in energy, and couldn't gather their sense before Ellis lost his patience. He turned away and started to cross the dining room, giving what berth he could to where Nick sat at the bar.

He swore the gambler's shoulders prickled in anticipation of his proximity, drawing the bloody and faded blue of his dress shirt tight against the plane of his back. The hole speared through his shirt at his shoulder caught Ellis' eye, and only served to stir his emotions into a fever pitch.

How was it that the man could run onto a blade at the thought of losing him - kill someone to save him - and then hurt him like this? What was he supposed to feel, to think? He'd tried to reason with Nick. He'd tried to argue. He'd tried to feel nothing at all.

None of it worked.

He was being mocked, it seemed. Mocked by his ex-lover, mocked by someone he thought of as a friend. Mocked by his own thoughts, spinning until he wanted to burst. It blinded him, and he charged into the kitchen door with his shoulder. By the time he reached it, he was almost running.

The kitchen dizzied him, surrounded by steel and white tile, and he struck stomach-first to the counter on the far wall. His palms hit the surface to balance himself, and he hunched down and squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't breathe. His throat constricted, so tightly wound that his muscles began a full-body tremble, screaming for oxygen.

Ellis wanted desperately to stop. He wanted to pick himself up and recover. He was tired of suffering, and tired of the pain and the weight crushing at him. He'd never felt so thoroughly enraged and miserable and alone all at once.

He'd never loved someone the way he'd loved Nick - and he'd never hurt this deeply, either.

When a hand touched his back, he moved on instinct, whipping his weight onto one heel to both turn and jolt away from the touch. He spun, chin raising, barely managing to maintain his composure long enough to open his eyes and look. He just wanted to be alone, for a moment, just to catch his breath... "Please..." escaped him, desperately.
Christophe's presence silenced him.

Any anger Ellis felt died the moment he processed the man's posture. Chris had seemed to stumble his way into awkward confusion, catching onto the idea he'd erred. His eyes panicked their way across Ellis' face, and his abrupt fear was striking.

He looked terrified, and it was raw and bone-deep. The fervor of it took Ellis by surprise. Chris might have been trembling, though it was difficult to tell past the haze that had overtaken his vision, half dizziness and half tears.

Ellis was forced to take just a moment to remind himself, shakily, that Christophe didn't mean any harm. The man had given up everything he'd ever known in their new, torn reality - and all for them. He'd chosen good, or the closest they came to it anymore.

The Spaniard hadn't meant to upset him, or reopen wounds Ellis had just barely been staunching. Getting angry with him was just one more way to let Nick get in his head, to surrender to the tempest that was stirring in his chest, his heart.

Ellis didn't want to.

Chris never had the chance to speak. Before he could, Ellis shot his hands up to bury his face into his palms, crushing them against his eyes. "'M sorry," he blurted, almost a sob with the tender way it cracked in the center. When Chris didn't respond, he repeated it, softer. "... 'm sorry."

When the Spaniard slipped forward, pressing close and putting his hand against his shoulder, any control shattered. His body crumpled into the touch, burying forward to fold into Chris' chest. He had enough sense to avoid touching his stumped shoulder, snatching his arms around Chris' waist and clinging.

The embrace was returned as best as the man could, with one arm. He looped it over Ellis' back and placed his hand against the back of his head, sinking fingers into his curls. "Chico -" he uttered, almost startled.

Ellis tried to talk, but it left him in such a blubber, he had no confidence that Chris understood a word.

"I-I can't keep - I'm goin' nuts. I miss him, 'n' I - I thought I knew him, but now I.. I dunno if I was stupid or not, thinkin' he'd love me... I thought I knew him, man. Now it's like we..."

It was like they were strangers.

Everything he took for granted, everything he thought he knew, it had fallen apart under him. He couldn't get through it or over it. Every time he felt better, something dragged him back into the muck. He couldn't let go, not when he had so many questions, so many loose threads dangling from what remained of his heart.

Was he not worth the time? The effort? Had he done something wrong, or had Nick never intended to see it through? Had he not been as special to Nick as the man had been to him?

"I dunno how tuh stop," he whispered into Chris' neck, the words breaking apart as tears caused his voice to hitch. "I can't stop thinkin' about him."

The Spaniard tightened his fingers into Ellis' hair, palm pressing against the crown of his head to draw him even closer. The gesture was encouraging as Ellis' arms went practically vicelike around the man's thin frame. There was a wall between him and breakdown - but just a thin one.
He felt it, like the surface of a bubble, transparent gossamer built only by force of will. If he breathed, *moved*, it would burst.

"Aguanta, tíó, aguanta." the man whispered to him, soft, like he knew being too loud might crumble the Southerner. His hand shook free and dropped, releasing Ellis' curls to instead rest over his back. Chris' chin lowered to touch down against the top of his head. "The world has ended, and you cry over a boy?"

Ellis laughed, bleary, half-hearted. His lips parted to speak, but nothing came out.

Then that barrier broke.

Whatever control he thought he had, whatever composure he'd clutched tight, it was gone. His body wrenched into sobs before he could stop it, shuddering, and Chris did not have the strength or grip to hold him up.

They slid to the ground, collapsed. The cold tile flooring bit into his knees as he buried his face into the ex-Angel's collarbone and surrendered to the pain surging through him. He gave up, gave in, and it could've swallowed him whole.

Maybe he'd leave something behind, there on the kitchen floor, and come out lightened.

Christophe let him try.
Neither Ellis or Chris were inclined to talk about what happened, not at first.

Awareness of the clock ticking - and the gasoline burning - stirred them to action. They moved in silent unison from their crumpled place on the tile, retreating to gather up the composure they'd lost. Ellis leaned against the counter, using his palms and forearms to scrub at his face.

He should've felt ashamed, insecure, but he didn't.

It was partly because when Christophe pulled away, his face was marked by wet trails. Ellis didn't know if it was sympathy or his own emotional break, but it made him feel less alone. They'd shared some pain, and when it was over, Ellis felt... calmer.

He lowered his hands and looked at them. The dried blood speckling his fingers had smeared with the moisture on his face and turned tacky, and he wiped it off on his thighs. He let his lips part, sucking in air, inhaling until his lungs expanded and his chest trembled.

His mind was clearer even though his eyes felt cottony, like he'd flushed out more than just salty tears. He'd traded sorrow for exhaustion, and his limbs were loose and heavy. Better, somehow. He felt like a cloud had lifted from him and he could actually breathe.

Even if it was short-lived, even if the next time he saw Nick the pain all returned to him, he was grateful.

Lifting his gaze, Ellis watched as Chris awkwardly balanced on one leg, the other bent up so he could yank his shoe off. He swapped to do the same to the other foot. With no left arm to counterbalance, he struggled to stay upright - or, at least, struggled to stay confident with his balance.

Ellis cleared his throat, pushing off the counter to approach. There was a towel on the floor where Christophe must have dropped it in favour of holding him, and he bent down to snatch it up and sling it over his shoulder. With it settled there, he padded up behind the other man.

Rather than speak, he quietly placed a hand against Chris' back, at his shoulderblades. Splayed fingers and a flat palm offered him something to lean against without getting in his way, and Chris took the offer. His weight settled against Ellis, and he shed his Vans and socks in short order.

The silence continued, not terribly uncomfortable. When Chris reached up to hesitantly pluck at the bandages across his chest, Ellis quickly took over. He separated the knot where it sat on the man's ribs, and peeled the bandages away. Most of it came off in one strip, but the gauze padding set against his stump was stuck there.

Ellis reached for it, even as Chris flinched his body into a tight hunch.

He set his jaw and forged on, using the hand at Chris' back to hold him steady while his free hand grasped at the gauze and delicately peeled it away. The man's shallowed breath seemed more anxiety than pain, however, and it came off easier than he expected.

Tilting his head, Ellis examined the wound. The dark black and greyed colours left behind by Nick's cobbled-together 'procedure' were, to his surprise, circled and highlighted by healthy pink and red. His biggest concern was improved, too; the segmented chunks of flesh that covered the surface of the stump had smoothed, skin waxy as it healed back together.
Chris was progressing *so quickly* - and so well. He was glad, but confused, too.

It gave him pause. He'd had plenty of experience watching wounds and injuries heal even before the apocalypse. Keith had never been hurt so seriously, but a few times came to mind. He tried to pull together what he knew about amputees, but most of it was about rehabilitation. He didn't know much about the medical recovery, or the timeline...

*Maybe folk're just stronger than I think.*

He was hardly inclined to reject what was distinctly good news. A puff of air left his lips, looking up toward Chris. The Spaniard returned the look through squinted eyes, warily, his jaw trembling just faintly.

Ellis didn't have to force the smile that tipped his lips up.

"It'll be okay." he promised, voice rough as he managed the first words he'd said in a while. "It's doin' real good, actually, but we better clean it up anyhow."

The man nodded, slowly, head drooping. He seemed resigned more than anything, and he took a stumbling step forward. The Spaniard came to stand in front of the huge stainless steel sink on the inner wall of the kitchen, just to the side of the door. He put his hand on the rim, leaning into it.

His eyes closed, stiffening, and Ellis took that as permission.

The sink was topped by a tremendous faucet, and a sprayer nearly the size of a showerhead. Ellis grabbed it, and it came loose from its bracket in the wall, a coiling tube with a flexible linked mesh giving it some freedom. It extended far enough to reach Chris with ease, though he directed it into the sink at first.

He reached out to twist the faucet, and water just barely trickled from the mouth of the sprayhead. He twisted just one more rotation, and a trickle turned into a jet. It splattered into the sink basin with a high-pitched squeal, the tube shuddering with the force at which the water flowed.

The sudden explosion of pressure made him outright jump, and Chris' expression contorted into abject horror. He may as well have threatened the man's stumped shoulder with a power-washer, and the Spaniard looked prepared to flee.

Ellis quickly decreased the flow, reversing the twist of his wrist, until it sprayed out in a gentle rain. He shot an abashed look at Chris, but the man didn't relax so easily. The foreigner surrendered in a turn despite his reticence, offering what remained of his shoulder to Ellis.

"Be gentle, amigo." the man uttered in some weak attempt at a joke that mostly came off pleading.

Nodding, Ellis focused on the wound. He still had some bandages gripped in his offhand, and he crumpled them in a fist, burying his thumb in a fold of fabric so he'd have a scrubbing surface. He wrapped his other hand around the head of the sprayer so his fingers crossed over the water stream, which was cool - but heating up.

He waited, and it settled into a burn that he wasn't comfortable with exposing Chris to. He let go of the sprayer and let it dangle, turning the faucet closer to the blue mark. When he dunked his hand back into the flow, it had settled to a pleasantly warm temperature.

Rather than give Chris more time to tense up and grow anxious, Ellis moved quickly. He grasped the sprayer and lifted it to hover over the man's injured shoulder, letting water gently trickle down over the stump's surface. He used the bandages in his other hand like a washcloth, leaning in to eye
the injury as he moved.

He swept away grime and sweat with ease, but he took some time to carefully brush off the gunk of dead skin, shedding away in grey peels. He tried not to apply too much pressure, but even a feather touch sent shudders through Christophe's body.

Ellis was tempted to apologize, but there was no room for it when Christophe started a stream of Spanish so thick he couldn't have begun to understand a word. The intonation and sharpness was not indicative of anything polite, though he didn't direct it at Ellis. He closed his eyes and shivered, hunching his chin to his chest.

The nicest thing he could do was not waste time, so Ellis hurried. Cleaning away dried blood resulted in more seeping up, but it quickly washed away under the gentle spray of warm water and it stopped before long. Redness flushed up Chris' neck and across his chest, as if his very body was protesting the treatment.

Surges and flinches crossed the man's body in inconsistent waves, tortured and strenuous. He visibly struggled not to jerk away or fight it, and Ellis avoided looking at his face, lest the pain there distract him.

Scrubbing the wound's surface clean revealed the strained flesh that had scabbed over the very center, where it covered the remnants of his upper arm bone. It was so close to the joint he was sure it wasn't functional and wouldn't move, but some length of bone remained there under the surface.

He wondered if they should have removed it before the wound healed over, but it was a little late to think such things.

Rather than worry, he kept his attention on his work, ensuring that he'd given every area at least some attention before he dropped his hand and pulled the sprayer away. The moment he relented, Chris curled down against the sink's edge, gasping in a reedy breath like he'd not inhaled the whole time.

Ellis winced, feeling guilty, and averted his eyes as the Spaniard pulled himself back together. It only took a few moments for him to come back to cognizance, and he swapped back into English with a sputter. "I... I think I... hurted less to lose it."

A slight, awkward laugh passed Ellis' lips.

Then Chris collapsed.

Ellis wouldn't have caught him, had the Spaniard not landed first against the sink, belly striking flat into the rim before he started to tip sideways. The extra few seconds allowed Ellis to react, grabbing for him in a scrabble. One hand snatched into his capris and the other against his side, gathering him in an awkward hug as most of him went limp.

"Whoa! Hey, Chris, buddy...!"

It was only a passing swoon, it seemed, as he began to stir almost immediately. Dizzied and glassy-eyed, the man gazed up at him and breathed a soft, "Lo siento."

Quickly shaking his head, Ellis pulled him back upright, turning a little to push him to lean against the sink's front. "No need, buddy... It's over." When the other man nodded distantly, regaining some amount of strength to his limbs, Ellis released him and took a step back. "I didn't mean tuh hurt you." he uttered, regretfully.
Christophe forced a smile, dipping his head low. His breath was tight and panted, accelerated as it shallowed his chest. "Una maldad necesaria." Ellis was only partially sure of what he meant, but the words were reassuring - right before they turned pleading. "Perhaps I rest? Un momento?"

Exhaling shortly, Ellis reached over to shut off the water, sending a sympathetic look his way. He stepped away to throw the bandages in a massive trash can sitting in the corner of the kitchen. "Yeah, 'course. Take a breather."

The Georgian sidled to stand in front of the kitchen door, peering through the small and faded glass inset in the top of the door. It was not very clear or clean, but he could see through it enough to watch Coach and Rhiannon talk. They were almost around the corner and out of sight, but he could press his cheek into the window and catch a glimpse.

Coach had come up to stand next to the table where she sat, and they were laughing, almost. She tucked her thumb against her chin and nodded at something he said, lifting her arm to rap on her wrist with her fingers as if tapping a watch. He grinned, a look that enthralled Ellis with its honest brightness.

So he babbled, to fill the silence.

"Man. Coach is gettin' along with 'em real well. I ain't seen him cheered up like that in a while." Leaning slightly tighter against the door, he released a sigh. "Guess it's pretty cool, havin' new folk around tuh talk to. Especially some neat ladies."

Chris' lack of response didn't daunt him. He merely rested his body more completely against the door and continued. "I was worried, at first, thinkin' they might hurt us. But I like 'em. They fight real well, 'n' - you weren't out there, but... Rhiannon had another bomb like whut we threw at the ambulance, 'cept she had a fire alarm hooked up to it. All the zombies jumped on it like it was candy. Then -"

He splayed his fingers in a small mimed explosion, grinning slightly. "Zombie guts everywhere. It was awesome. Keith would'uh loved it." Glancing over his shoulder just long enough to make sure Christophe was still standing, Ellis crinkled his nose. "Closest we ever came was this one time when Keith made these homemade firecrackers. Turned out he didn't really understand how folk make 'em... I mean, he was only a li'l tater tot back then... So he just packed it full'uh -"

"Hermanito, you speak too fast." Chris complained abruptly, tone winded, and Ellis turned to blink at him. "What... is a 'tater tot?'" The Georgian's mouth opened, hands raising, but the other man shook his head strongly before he could speak. "No importa. No, forget it, por favor."

Ellis tried not to laugh, but didn't succeed. He grinned to himself, lowering his chin and pulling away from the door. He walked back toward the Spaniard, embarrassed. "Sorry... uh. I get carried away. My mama says I get it from my pa, but she's a chatterbox, too."

Chris rested his hand against his stomach, sparing a glance for the sprayer. He squinted at it, and released a sigh. "It is hard to understand. You Americans have so many... it is so different to hear you talk, or Nico. Like you speak different languages."

A smile quirked at Ellis' lips, only a little mild at the mention of Nick. "I feel the same way, listenin' tuh cityfolk jabber." He thumbed at the sink in a gentle encouragement. "If yer ready tuh rinse off, we can do that. That won't hurt none."

When the other man nodded, Ellis was certainly expecting him to undress. That didn't change the flood of embarrassment when he tucked his thumb under the waistband of his cargo shorts and
pushed like he meant to shuck them. Reflex sent Ellis' hand flying up to cover his eyes, and he froze slightly in his self-imposed blindness.

Christophe didn't notice at first, grunting as he shimmied free of his clothes. When he did notice, he laughed - cackled, almost. "Americanos..." he muttered, disbelieving.

Ellis jumped a little when something metallic pressed into his hand. It took him a moment to realize it was the sink sprayer, and Chris grabbed his wrist and raised his hand up. The posture left his arm and hand posed like a showerhead, and Ellis couldn't stop from breaking into laughter, mostly at his own predicament.

"Uh... is that helpin'...?"

A soft noise of affirmation from the other man made him relax, and he kept his hand where it was as Chris turned the water back on. The sprayer sputtered, and then picked up a strong flow, raining down onto the tile. The sound changed when the other man ducked into the impromptu shower, water hitting skin and misting.

Despite himself, Ellis knew his face reddened. He wasn't a stranger to bathing publicly, either jumping into lakes and rivers in the nude with Keith and his other friends, or showering in the locker room when he was a teenager - but it felt different, now.

Awkward.

He would've kept quiet, but curiosity would've strangled him had he not asked the question at some point - so he went for it. It wasn't like he had much pride to lose after breaking down in the foreigner's arms. "Uh... hey, Chris. You mind if I ask you somethin'? Um... personal?"

Another affirming sound encouraged him on, even as the man stuttered out an uncomfortable grunt, faintly pained. "I have nothing to hide, mi amigo. I am naked."

Ellis reddened further and decided against trying to respond to that sentiment. He merely continued, exhaling gently. "Uh... I'm just curious if you're... I mean, if you've ever been with a guy, or wanted tuh - I mean I'm only askin' 'cause I couldn't tell if you were really jokin' or -"

Laughing in a startled squawk, the Spaniard gave a quiet and winded response, rife with humour. "I told you I was messing, amigo. Mi corazón pertenece a Rochelle, em... she has my heart, you know? I am flattered, and you are - ¿Qué dicen? Fine, I think? Muy guapo."

Laughing in a startled squawk, the Spaniard gave a quiet and winded response, rife with humour. "I told you I was messing, amigo. Mi corazón pertenece a Rochelle, em... she has my heart, you know? I am flattered, and you are - ¿Qué dicen? Fine, I think? Muy guapo."

Ellis wanted to drop through the floor, mortified, but Chris flew into a burst of Spanish and spoke too quickly to interrupt. "Pero... no quiero herirla, y no quiero una pequeña aventura de rebote. I -"

He paused thoughtfully, likely to try and translate, but Ellis jumped on the break.

He understood enough, anyway, even without the last piece.

"N-no! That's... That ain't what I meant. I'm just askin' in case..." The moment he started, he felt a wave of regret. The words felt stupid as they left his mouth, but he couldn't stop them. "I dunno, I was hopin' you might have some advice or somethin'. I'm still figurin' stuff out, 'n' Nick weren't never the type to talk about it, so... If you'd gone through the same thing, maybe we could... I dunno. Talk."

He was glad he didn't have his eyes open, because he could sense Chris' gaze on him before the Spaniard slowly started to wash again, water pattering on the ground. He didn't know if it was pity or amusement, and neither felt particularly good.
When Christophe spoke, however, it became apparent that the only thing he felt was honest empathy. "I do not think I know how to help, hermanito. I have only tried once, with a boy, a few - a few years ago. We were... compañeros de cuarto, em... we lived in the same house, ¿sí? Para la universidad. We drank and..."

He trailed off, and Ellis nodded, unsure if the man was even looking at him.

"I did not like it much. But perhaps I did not like him, or he was - ah - bad."

Ellis frowned in thought, absorbing that for a moment. He certainly couldn't have said either of those were true with Nick and him, though he picked up on something in Chris' tone and prompted: "So... You didn't like him, but..."

"Maybe I would like someone else." the other man agreed, tone a little dismissive. "Or maybe not. No se."

"You don't care." Ellis stated, less a question and more an observation, and Chris didn't argue. "I mean... I don't care, either, I guess... S'just..." He sighed, shoulders drooping, though he made sure his arm stayed upright. "Things were easy with Nick. Even when it was hard, it was easy, 'n'... Now that he's gone, I..."

A quiet intruded, bringing the splatter of water into harsh focus where it struck the floor, or the softer noise as it struck Chris' frame. Ellis chewed on his tongue in some attempt to stir his brain into functioning, but all he was left with was a feeling akin to white noise.

Loving someone thoughtlessly, throwing himself into the feeling without stopping to care about what it meant - that was easy. Would it be as easy the second time around? Would there be a second time, some other man, that made him feel the same way?

A tiny voice cried out in the back of his head, protested and wailed and ached, because he didn't want someone else.

"You think too much, tío, like you talk too much." Christophe stated, a cheer touching his voice. "Maybe los muertos will eat us tomorrow and you will not have to worry about love, o desengaño. Or maybe Nico will eat his pride and come back to you."

Ellis couldn't hold back a slight grin, sighing as he flexed his bicep against the encroaching tingling in his arm. Holding the sprayer aloft drained the blood from his fingers, but he resisted the urge to swap arms.

"Man. I wish." he uttered, not really sure which of the offered options he meant.
By the time everyone finished showering, the sky had darkened. The idea of being the only lit house in a pitch black night was unappealing - like being a lamp surrounded by moths - so they'd shut down the generator as soon as they were done.

Coach felt like he'd blinked, and suddenly, everyone was asleep.

He didn't mind. He'd intended to take first watch, but he was still bemused by the silence. Exhaustion made sense, but it wasn't just that.

It hadn't passed his notice how furious Nick had looked, doing everything but snarling and snapping his teeth like a rabid dog as he went to take his shower. Coach may have been oblivious, but he wasn't brain-dead; watching Ellis and Chris go off to shower had sent the gambler into a broiling rage.

Nick wasn't about to discuss it aloud, but he telegraphed his displeasure loud and clear. Coach thought it was wholly childish, though that had never stopped Nick before.

They had all instinctively mimicked his example, and it seemed each of his teammates had taken at least one article of clothing and washed it alongside themselves. Nick had come out shirtless, hanging his dress shirt up as best he could. Rochelle had bemoaned the state of her jeans but ended up washing her underclothes instead, citing how long it would have taken to air dry them.

Ellis had plodded out just in time to hear her say that, missing his denim coveralls and in just his T-shirt and boxers with a towel tied around his waist.

He'd looked just shy of horrified.

It hadn't taken much organization to get everyone tucked in for the night. Nick had bodily grabbed a few blankets and curled up inside a small two-person booth at the far side of the restaurant, and that left Rochelle, Ellis, and a freshly-bandaged Christophe to set up in a sprawl between the tables and chairs that filled the dining room.

If they had gathered much closer, he'd have called them a pile. Coach took some peace from that, if nothing else.

When he'd told Nick their younger compatriots needed help, support, he had been deathly serious. They'd both dropped the ball, and he hated that. Least the kids got each other.

Pressing his fingertips into the dips just at the inner corners of his eyes, Coach crossed the restaurant at a cautious pace, trying not to make more noise than he had to. He grabbed his shotgun from where it sat leaned against the bar, snapping the barrels down to check the dual ammo wells.

It was unloaded, as expected, and he dipped a hand into his pocket to fish out the two remaining shells he had left. He sighed, plugging them in with his thumb and cracking the barrels back into place. They should have doubled back and gotten more ammo. Now he wasn't even confident he could find his way back to the gunstore.

He turned away, making his way down the restaurant floor. As he moved, he grabbed a chair by the back and hoisted it up against his side, taking it with him.

He circled around the chest-high wall separating the dining area from the front door. It would
come in handy if they drew a horde - like a chokepoint, any infected would have to come down the
funneled hallway to reach them. That was assuming they didn't just bust through the windows
encircling the place - but Coach had some hope left in him, it seemed.

Stepping up to one of the glazed windows in the wall, he peered out. The screened-in porch
provided a layer of security from the street, though it would never hold up to an attack. He could
already see one furious zombie lunging straight through the mesh like it were paper.

It did make him feel slightly more safe, though, as the dark wire barrier would make it harder for
the zombies wandering outside to notice him in the window. They were already fairly oblivious
when they hadn't been stirred to rage.

Coach stilled as one stumbled toward the café, as if it had heard his thoughts. The creature
wandered up to the porch, crawling across the scraggly, dusty lawn until it reached the outer mesh
wall. It seemed perturbed by the obstacle, lips moving in a snarl as it lashed out a hand.

When its fingertips didn't have much effect on the wiring stapled in place on the porch framing, it
slumped down, collapsing onto its knees. Exhaustion made its head lower, too human. Too alive,
too real.

Grimacing, Coach looked away. He was almost tempted to cross himself, but it seemed a little
moot.

He continued on to the center of the wall, setting his stolen chair down and taking a weary seat.
With a sigh, he slumped, and the towel wrapped around his torso slipped free. It earned little more
than a grumpy stare before he shrugged it off, shifting enough to let it fall to the floor.

Relaxing, the man placed his shotgun across his lap and closed his eyes. He kicked his feet free
from his shoes, stretching out his legs, the curl and flex of his aching feet blissful. Bathing had
almost worsened his pains; it hadn't been long enough or hot enough to soothe his muscles, and it
had been just enough to flush his body with circulation and bring his nerves back to life in a
resounding -

"Ow." he muttered. Just to himself.

He thought of his tiny house on the outskirts of Savannah, with almost more porch than home,
seated on a cozy field nestled between farmland and untamed forest. If he closed his eyes, he
could've been seated on the stairs with a glass of iced tea - laced with a splash of whiskey, to the
dismay of his doctor - listening to the drone of cicadas.

*Like the trees are screaming.* he'd said once, to his daughter. It was a joke, but one he regretted
when she started to cry.

*It's the bugs.* He'd caught one, a fat creature with long legs, bulbous and somewhere between green
and brown in colour. It sat in his palm, and he never was sure if it was fear or the lack thereof that
made it stay. *They're singing to each other. Just ain't real good at singing.* He'd hummed, as if to
join them, and she'd beamed at him past big wet tears and hummed along.

Sometimes, instead of a lullaby, he'd hum her to sleep. It always worked.

But he reopened his eyes, and he was sitting in an abandoned café, listening to the groans and
snarls of countless infected, trying not to breathe in the smell of rot and death.

What did he feel, deep down? Was there fear waiting to overcome him, the spectre of every failure,
every misstep? Or was he angry? At his wife, at Nick, at himself, at God? Where was the well he
drew his strength from, and what was the cost?

His wife used to ask why he never cried, like it was some failing of his. Why couldn't he open up to her, express himself? She'd ask why he never talked openly, honestly, and he'd throw up his hands and ask her what that even meant.

He still didn't really know.

Coach placed a hand against his chest, like his pulse might beat out an answer from inside his ribcage, some staccato insight that would lead him to epiphany. Instead, it just thundered there, like a dull promise to sustain him.

Perhaps in spite of him.

Exhaling, Coach turned his head to look through one of the other windows and found a shape caught his eye, instead.

Someone stood at the far end of the building, just at the turn where the wall ended and left room to curve into the dining space. Instinct stiffened him, while sense kept him from reaching for his gun.

Rhiannon ducked forward into the light hazily entering from the window in front of her, broken grin glittering. "Shit. I was trying to scare you."

He screwed a brow up, relaxing his shoulders by force. His voice harshened, though it was only half sincere. "An' get a damn face full of buckshot fo' yo' trouble? Girl, get yo' ass back to bed."

He felt no surprise whatsoever when she ignored him, approaching at a casual pace. "Fuck you." she chimed out, looking through the windows out at the infected littering the street. Their attempts to clear the horde had only attracted more, leaving them thinned, but never zero. "We're living in a shark cage out here, huh? Fucking crazy."

Coach grunted, lowering his chin. "We ain't even got us a cage." he pointed out, solemn, despite the joking way he passed her a smile.

She grinned back at him, fiendish.

It was with a decidedly stubborn energy that the blonde sat herself down on the windowsill just to his left. She curled up one leg and put the heel of her thick boot on the edge of it, allowing the other to dangle. She looked firmly out the window, and he said nothing.

He didn't mind the company. The blonde seemed to think he was funny, for reasons entirely beyond his understanding. He had no reason to deny enjoying the attention, though he also found himself simply enjoying the presence of someone new, and who didn't want to kill him.

He could sense she was smart as a whip, beyond her sincere attempts to radiate apathy. That, and what he thought was brash vulgarity, he was coming to see as a refreshing honesty. Nick used anger to disguise how he felt, and did so to great success.

Rhiannon was just, it seemed, angry.

Coach closed his eyes, feeling that uncomfortable tension crawl back into his chest. He felt like he was keeping a secret from her, not being honest about his slim confidence in her sister's survival. It wasn't inaction to hold it back - it was malice.

He'd want to know, if he were her.
She spoke, quietly. "You know, I thought about you guys."

Rather than open his eyes and look at her, sure he'd lose his grip on his tongue if he did, Coach merely hummed an inquisitive noise.

"Yeah. At first I didn't think twice. Then Lee mentioned the bridge being out, how there was nowhere to go but forward... fuck, I said. We might run into those guys again. They'll fucking kill me. I warned her, but she was sure it'd be okay. I knew at least the Yankee would fuck me up."

Coach swallowed a laugh, crunching his brow.

"Then - we found this guy, your friend's friend. He was half-dead, and all Lena wanted to do was nurse him back to health. I wanted to leave him, but he was a hunk and I figured what the shit, right? Maybe he'd put out."

He didn't swallow his laughter that time, eyes opening to shoot her a startled look. She cut a sly grin his way - but it faded, and she looked sharply back outside.

"And... I thought about you guys. About how shit could've gone if I'd been... human, to you. Maybe we'd have gotten out of this fucking shithole already." She put an arm around her raised knee, pressing her chin into the crook of her elbow. "Everything that's happened since, I thought, Jesus. This is all fucking me. I did this. Everything. Because I thought you deserved to live less than me."

Coach laced his fingers together, tightly. He didn't know what to say, and she didn't wait for him to come up with something.

"I don't know when the fuck it happened, but I started - after I heard about those freaks who cut his eye out, I kept thinking, what if they took you guys out, too? And I should've been relieved, but I felt... like shit. I hated it. And when I saw you assholes again, fuck. I was glad. I was glad you guys were okay."

She fell silent, abruptly, gaze severe on something outside. Coach hesitated - waited - before gently reaching out a hand. He set fingertips against her arm where it hooked around her leg.

Rhiannon flashed a dull look at him, dry. She didn't shrug him off, but her expression was clear in its meaning: she didn't want comfort, or soothing. He didn't know what she did want, though, so he willfully dropped his hand and spoke. "That's good."

The blonde sighed, closing her eyes. She leaned forward until her forehead touched the glass window, landing atop the soft plastic legs of a seagull sticker. "Yeah. I know."

She didn't continue, and Coach looked up and through the window rather than look at her. He sighed, tightly, and wished he had a harder time deciding what to do. Lord, if I go on an' break promise with a dyin' girl, I won't be too sore if you cast me down. Just know it ain't easy, either way.

"... Girl, I gotta tell you somethin'," he managed, voice almost a croak, forcing the words out. "She didn't want me to say anythin', but... yo' sister, she might not -"

"I know." Rhiannon repeated, just a mutter. Coach blinked back at her, mouth slack from the interruption, confusion sparking over his expression. The woman didn't open her eyes, but his silence made her clarify. "She's not got much chance. I'm not stupid, dude."

His surprise gave way to genuine shock. He examined her face, cut into fragments by the shadows
the fast-fading sunlight left behind. He couldn't tell if he imagined a quiver to her lips or not. Her voice maintained a steadiness that put him off his guard.

"It's hard out here. It's fucking hard. And just the two of us - we barely made it, so many times. She made me swear if anything ever happened to her, I'd keep going. I wouldn't let it take me down, too. I'd leave her and go on. I was ready. I'm still ready."

Coach stared at her, his heart clenching in his chest like it might break. He forced himself to speak evenly, level, calm. "We don't know, not one hundred percent. I'm just worryin'. We don't know fo' sho'."

"I know." Rhiannon repeated, hissing just gently, not angry so much as frustrated. "We don't know shit. I just know, if things had gone different, if I hadn't made you guys enemies, maybe it wouldn't have happened like this. Or it'd have been me with her, not Nick, and maybe I could have taken the Charger hit."

She shook her head in a jerk, suddenly sliding off the windowsill. Her eyes cut low, avoiding his face, and she turned away to retreat in some fevered hurry. He made no attempt to stop her.

"... Whatever. I'm going back to bed. I'm... done talking about this."

Coach watched her go, a frown on his lips. He wished he had any answers - but when he reached for something to say, something that would fix what was broken, he came up short. She was still a stranger to him, and he barely even knew how to help his family.

It was at the very end of the hallway that she stopped a moment, head tilting. He couldn't quite discern if she looked back at him or not, so dark was the room, but he heard when she spoke.

"But thanks, anyway. For telling me. It... means somethin'."

Instinct made him hold his tongue. He merely canted his head in acknowledgement, and the shadowed shape of the biker passed back out of sight.

Coach leaned back in his seat, exhaling and focusing back out into the street. He was almost sure, if not completely certain, that he'd managed to do the right thing.

Just this once.
It was still dark when Nick awoke, stirred by a faint knocking sound. It threw him, disoriented in the moment of time between sleep and actual consciousness, trying to parse where it came from and what the sound was. Then his eyes blinked open, and he reminded himself where he was.

*Shitty bird restaurant.*

He rolled his tongue over his teeth, frustration quirking a brow. It took will not to snap and roll his body away, bury his face into the booth cushion and refuse to get up. He wanted to *sleep*, and he'd actually found a comfortable position against the wall that the booth was set flush against.

Or he thought he had, until he shifted his weight.

Pain sparked violently through his arm, the pulse and throb and clenching agony of a pinched nerve, so close to numbness. The limb was completely dead, immovable where it was curled under his weight. "Motherfuck -" he gasped out, growled, trying to stifle it behind bitten lips.

His urge to quiet himself was split between an awareness that most of the team was likely asleep, and simply not wanting to admit that it *fucking hurt.*

He was vaguely aware of Rochelle's voice, concern overwhelming her tone. "Nick? Sweetie?" A hand touched his elbow, soothingly, and the woman was suddenly kneeling on the booth cushion beside him. "What's -"

"Am fine." he forced out, a tight breath escaping him as a dull whine. He grabbed at his bicep, squeezing at the muscle, though all that did was intensify the discomfort. "Arm's asleep."

She eased off slightly at that, and he was aware of her watching him. He struggled to sit upright, thrusting his legs off the bench, and get his arm away from the wall. As bloodflow returned, stabbing needles in every nerve-ending from his fingertip to his shoulder, he regained some amount of mobility.

Starting to shake and flex his joints, snorting out a breath when that only hurt worse, Nick squinted carefully over at her. It was too dark to catch much beyond her frame and the smallest glimpse of amusement in the glint of her eyes.

"My turn?" he grunted, flatly, earning a nod from her. Coach had taken first watch, and since Rochelle was stirring him, she'd likely gone after - which meant it was probably halfway through the night. "Why isn't Miss Bitch on watch?"

The producer leaned back slightly, giving him more room on the booth bench. "She is." she stated, just as flatly. "I'm trying to get her lazy ass up right now."

Nick grimaced, mostly upset with himself for teeing the joke up for her. He blamed it on exhaustion, and shoved himself down the bench. "Christ. I'm going." Rochelle dodged out of the booth, retaking her footing with crossed arms. "Your bedside manner could use some fuckin' work."

He got a good look at her smile when he slipped past her, holding his arm to his chest like it were broken. As he stood, losing the insulation of his curled body, he was struck by how cool it had become. Cold, almost, and he regretted the loss of his shirt.
Looking across the restaurant toward the kitchen, he considered going to see if it had dried. There was a good chance, considering it was a thin dress shirt - but it was also likely to be stiff and scratchy, the once-expensive fabric suffering from the poor treatment. He mulled it over, but had no chance to make a choice either way.

A dull impact *whumpf* ed against the side of his head, and he had to jolt a foot forward to catch himself, releasing his numb arm in favour of grabbing for the shape that struck him. It took him a moment to realize it was a blanket, thin and cottony.

Holding it awkwardly against his chest, Nick blinked back toward Rochelle, bewildered by the gesture. She was already returning to her bed, practically flopping her body down onto the set of linens she'd folded up into a mock mattress. "Shotgun's by the door." He was left to feel put out, uncomfortable, only reluctantly drawing the blanket over his shoulders.

Her being considerate just made him feel like an asshole.

Resisting the urge to try and come up with a retort, he stepped into his dress shoes and turned away, wincing at the lingering pain pulsing through his arm. It was like every signal sent to the muscles in his limb was mistranslating - like his brain said "*Hey, move to the left.*" and his arm replied "*Oh, I'm on fire? Neat.*"

Nick sucked in a breath as smoothly as he could, rubbing a flat palm into the meat of his bicep. He could've very easily walked the few feet between him and the entryway, turned the corner and put the chest-high wall between him and his team. That would've been the smart thing to do.

Instead, he turned and looked behind himself, eyes unerringly finding their way to the curled-up shape of his ex-lover. His vision had adapted enough to pick out the Georgian, eyes skating over the bare legs tangled up in a sprawl, just kissed by reflected moonlight -

He groaned, inwardly, willing his mind away from the thought. The last thing he needed was an Ellis without pants, flaunting stocky legs he'd much rather have wrapped around him. He could practically feel the warmth under his palm, tickled by soft leg hair, digging his nails into pale skin as he held his body at just the right angle -

"*Shit, Nick -*"

His mind, unsurprisingly, was disobedient.

Frustration had tossed and turned in his mind from the moment he'd had to watch Christophe and Ellis go off into the kitchen together. He was being punished, that much he knew for sure. Whether it was an intentional act by Ellis or just God enjoying his misery, he didn't really care.

He didn't even really blame Chris, though he *wanted* to rage and shout and strangle the Spaniard with his bare hands, and he'd probably do a few of those things anyway. It wasn't like the guy had taken Ellis from him. He'd managed that feat all on his own.

Storming into the odd hallway that lined the front of the restaurant, Nick tried to focus himself. He couldn't chase his tail and run in circles, regret his choices just because he was horny - or lonely, or whatever he felt. He'd made his (cold) bed, and he had to lie in it.

Inhaling, he forced himself to slow, striding to the door. He passed a chair set by a window, double-barrel shotgun resting atop the seat, and he grabbed the weapon as he passed. It only took a moment to confirm it was loaded, and then he held it low against his hip and continued to the entryway.
Nick found himself a place against the doorframe, digging into his left pocket with his free hand. His cigarette pack and lighter were secreted away there, his right pocket stowing his wallet and the bottle of lube he didn't have it in him to throw away. Sex was the one area he tended to hedge his bets.

Then he wondered if Ellis had thrown the condoms away yet, and the thought drove him to yanking a cigarette out and lighting up in a desperate rush.

*Stop. Thinking. About. It.*

The flood of smoke into his lungs helped, minty cool. He reached out to open the front door a crack, directing his smoke outside and holding it open with a foot tucked into the doorway. He gazed out into the night, through the mesh wall that enclosed the porch.

Staggering shapes lined the street, passing in and out of what moonlight streamed in from the sky. He watched them wander, attentive to any sign that they noticed him or the gentle glow of his cigarette. It wasn't unusual for one or two infected to grow interested in their base, but for the most part, keeping quiet and dark at night seemed to pass them under any zombie's radar.

The mutated ones, however, seemed to have more of a sixth sense.

They'd been haunted by Jockeys and Hunters before most often, as if there were something heightened to their senses - or their intelligence. Nick was inclined toward the latter, considering past experiences.

For that reason, his gaze scanned the rooftops. Most of the mutated zombies seemed to love a height advantage, with the only exceptions being Boomers and Chargers. He had no interest in being dragged from the house by a squirming, slimy tongue or getting blasted by skin-melting acid.

At least the porch separated him from danger. It was far from impenetrable, but better than nothing.

He sighed, letting his cigarette droop in its place between his lips. He wasn't looking forward to the next day. Assuming Lena survived the night, they'd have a decision to make: what to do, and how to do it. He knew the bikers' plan had been to secure a boat and sail down the coast, and they'd offered to help - or more specifically, his teammates had.

Nick mulled over the thought. As much as he wanted to put them on a boat and see them gone, he had to wonder: should they make the same choice? They had no evidence that the government was going to help them, and some evidence that they might just be hunting them.

Or, at the very least, not interested in helping.

Was he stupid to think they should join them? They could find some kind of yacht and sail away as a group. Zombies could likely swim about as well as he could, and if what he'd heard about their father was true - *Isn't it always the kooks who end up making it? Like cockroaches? Like that redneck in the swamp we met?*

His nose stung at the memory.

It wasn't anything he'd suggest aloud; he didn't even know if it was a good idea or not. He'd prefer getting executed by the military than floating the thought to his team. Not to mention that it would be moot if Lena died. Rhiannon would never agree to it, assuming she didn't just turn on them on the spot.
Regardless, the next day was going to unpleasant. Either they'd go out hunting for a boat or clothes or ammo, leaving their injured behind... or they'd huddle in the café, resting. Trapped in a building with one person who hated him, two people who mildly disliked him, and the guy he'd freshly broken up with.

He genuinely didn't know which sounded more fun.

Palming over his mouth, Nick gripped his cigarette idly between his knuckles and pulled it away. He sighed forcefully, breath gusting smoke through the open door. If I have to spend one more minute getting the fucking evil eye from every person in this building, I might just reconsider sticking around.

It was, he knew with unfortunate surety, a bluff.

He'd had his chance, floating ten feet above his own body that night. The panic had numbed him just enough to disregard the consequences of his actions. Maybe even invite them, in some apathetic and offhand way.

Like closing his eyes and walking into the road, to let fate decide whether he got to the other side or not. It wasn't suicide; it was more like surrender, and letting someone else choose whether they'd accept the white flag. Or maybe it's just like telling yourself you're playing Russian Roulette when you really just want to blow your brains out.

Then you're a little disappointed when it clicks.

But he was a cockroach, too, ultimately. He couldn't stop going, finding some new way to make it through. No matter how low he got or how many hits he took, there was some animal need for survival that drove him. He'd burnt things to the ground around him, people, but he always crawled out only a little worse for wear.

Nick was shaken by the thought. He wanted to ignore it, shrug it off, but it stuck in his craw and he could barely swallow.

His ex-wife hadn't loved him. She'd had plenty of other flaws, but that had been the very core, the foundation, of their failure. She hadn't loved him, and everything collapsed from there. He'd loved her and she had tossed him aside, broken his heart, burnt it all down rather than try. She'd left him when he'd needed someone the most.

Sound familiar?

Suddenly his cigarette burned his fingers, and the feeling startled him so much he dropped it. He had to jolt a step back to avoid it dropping into his foot, hissing out a breathy, "Shit."

He examined the smoking cigarette where it lay on the ground, sighing just lightly before dragging his gaze away. He had two left, and they were unlikely to last him the day. He'd have to keep an eye out for more the next time they went supply-hunting; nicotine was very likely the only thing keeping him going.

Nick rubbed a knuckle over his mouth, pressing his tongue into the roof of his mouth and swallowing as if to get every last wisp of smoke - and then he looked up.

Standing in the very center of the road, staring bluntly in his direction, was a slumped and bulky shape. It was uneven, too wide on the bottom, forming an almost rectangular shape if it weren't for the clear shape of a head. He squinted, but couldn't pick out anything for sure.
It wasn't nearly large enough to be a Charger or lanky and stretched enough to be a Smoker. It wasn't rotund or belching - so Boomer was off the list - and it wasn't spewing the green saliva that marked it as a Spitter. Standing upright meant it wasn't a Hunter or Jockey.

He was at a loss, then.

It didn't move, at first, as if it were watching him. He should have ducked back inside, but he hesitated. There was something mesmerizing in the silence, his eyes locked on the odd shape and only just processing the stagger and shift of forms beyond it.

Then it stepped forward, upper body lilting to the left as it did so, and he jolted to the side of the door. He placed an elbow against the door, shoving it closed, and sucked in a breath. *Fuck.* It was just one infected, but its screaming attention would draw more. A gunshot, most certainly, would draw more.

He slipped carefully along the wall, pressing his cheek against the edge of the window so he could peer out. The creature was approaching, swaying with every step. It didn't seem in any rush, as if it had only the barest awareness it was going toward anything at all.

Tightening his fingers on the shotgun, he carefully turned it around, getting the butt against his shoulder. He got his hand in place, feeling the split trigger under the pad of his index finger. *Fuck. I should've kept the fucking door shut.*

He could bail, run in and alert his team quietly. Or he could just yell from where he was and get their attention.

Nick watched, instead, as the creature staggered limply up to the porch stairs. It stood there, swaying lightly, as if examining the screen door in front of it. He held his breath with his tongue bitten, willing it to turn away. *Come on, fucker. Go slump around somewhere else.*

It didn't.

Pushing forward, the zombie thrust itself blindly into the door to blunder through. The screen door gave way eagerly, though the creature barely made it, struggling with its significant width. There was a clatter, like plastic and metal, and Nick screwed his brow up. *What the fuck is this thing?*

He surveyed his options for just a moment. It made sense to retreat, since the creature hadn't even really noticed him yet. He could get some back-up in case the encounter turned dangerous - or loud.

Then again, he could also just handle it. Asking his team for help was not high on his to-do list at the moment.

It was with a grunt that he decided. He strafed to stand in front of the door, using his free hand to tenderly rotate the deadbolt. The click it made was dull and scraping, too quiet to alert the infected on the other side. He inhaled, grabbing the knob. *Okay. Twist, pull, shoot. Catch it off-guard. Deal with the collateral. Easy.*

He could hear the creature's scraping, dragging footsteps. It approached the door at a shuffle, stepping up so close he could almost hear it huffing, snarling. He settled his finger in a careful position over one half of the trigger.

*Twist.*
He rotated his hand in one smooth motion, turning the knob.

Pull.

He yanked the door inward, pushing the shotgun up to direct the barrels out at the creature.

Shoo-

It was close now, close enough to see in the low light. It seemed to react in a sluggish jolt to the door opening, peering at him. He only had a moment to take it in. The infected stood before him in full body armour, grey so it almost melded into the darkness.

Its hand was trapped in the arm straps of a full riot shield, holding it awkwardly in front of itself like it hardly knew what to do with the bulk. The shield just scraped along the floor, dragged in front of it.

Through the cloudy plastic that made up the top fourth of the shield, he could see beady yellow eyes staring from the facemask of a helmet. The word POLICE was printed across its helmet's forehead and the bottom of its shield in reflective white. He swore the creature looked as confused as he did.

Then it lunged.
Nick knew full well the gun would be of no use. It didn't take a genius to make the leap that shooting point-blank into a riot shield - let alone a zombie in full Kevlar body armour - was a bad idea.

That didn't leave much in the way of alternatives, except bracing.

The zombie's body-weight was not insignificant, a broad build more than filling the armour it wore. That weight was put behind the flat plane of the riot shield, and Nick imagined it felt something like getting struck by a snow plow. He was scraped unceremoniously along the floor, pushed and slammed flat into the shield's front, and then between it and the wall.

All the air left him with the blow, stars spinning in his vision as he was pancaked against the shoulder-high wall. His only relief was that he was tall enough that his head didn't smash straight into it, instead craning his neck over the top edge as the zombie pressed its body into the shield, straining and pushing to reach him.

It was as if it couldn't comprehend that the shield was in its control. Rather than swing it to the side and attack him, it smeared itself into the inner side of the riot shield, beating on it with its free hand.

Its face jolted into the plastic panel at the top of the shield, snapping teeth uselessly at the air as both its helmet's acrylic faceguard and the riot shield cooperated to separate the creature from him.

They fought, struggled, squirming in thick unison. He felt the blanket scraping off his back, slithering down to the floor behind him.

"Je - sus - Christ -" he gasped out, shotgun caught between him and the shield. He tried to shove with it, a hand on either end of the weapon, but there was no leverage against the face of the shield. The zombie snarled, muffled from inside its helmet, shoving hard into him.

Smashed anew into the wall, Nick acted on raw instinct: he went limp and slid into almost a crouch. The zombie's weight kept pressing, pushing to close the distance - but the top of the riot shield hit the top of the wall first, and its bottom edge caught against the floor.

It was stuck there, diagonal, and Nick rolled himself to the side in the space left in the center. He scrambled to get to his feet and by the time he'd caught his footing, the zombie had only just begun to face him. It struggled with its own bulk, and before it could turn and drag its shield to follow, he leapt.

Nick let the shotgun go, hearing it thud dully to the ground, in favour of grabbing the riot shield with both hands. He snarled even as the infected snarled back, and it reached with the hand that wasn't strapped to the shield to try and claw for him.

Only just piercing his awareness was the shape of someone darting out into the hallway, and when he saw them freeze for a beat at the sight of his situation, he couldn't help a vague surprise. A distant, Oh, yeah. I have a team. Right. Like he'd forgotten for a moment.

"Get a fucking weapon!" he shouted across the space between them, voice choked with strain. He didn't know who it was, but they obeyed without a word, sprinting back into the darkness. He was sure he heard voices beyond his own, but the ringing in his ears and his pulse were too loud to pick out specifics.
He kicked off the balls of his feet, practically running his weight into the infected. The zombie squawked out a wet sound of frustration, stumbling over its own feet and going down. Nick had little choice but to ride it to the ground, all his efforts focused on contesting its mass.

He likely would have failed, had the creature reacted a moment sooner or thought to dig in its heels.

They went tumbling and clattering to the floor, the shield landing flat and both of them collapsing on it. Nick landed on his knees in something like a straddle atop the zombie, his weight leveraged to keep the creature down. The zombie's free arm lashed up at him, but he grabbed it by the wrist, holding its grabbing fingers at bay.

It had lost its glove, revealing the waxy skin of its hand, fingers tipped by calcified nails that approached talons. It grasped and stretched its digits toward his face, desperately rotating its wrist in attempts to get close.

He grimaced down at it, flashing a glance up and out of the front door. The scuffle had not passed notice, and there were shapes approaching. He blinked, and there were more. He didn't know how many, unable to see in the dark, but any was more than he wanted.

"Fuck," he said, simply, before abandoning his grip on the zombie's wrist to one hand. It became more of a struggle, then, but he focused on twisting around and grabbing for the shotgun laying just behind him.

It dodged his fingertips, skating further away, so he snarled and thrust his weight into it. The second attempt succeeded.

He swiveled back forward, jamming the shotgun directly underneath the infected's helmet, finding the gap between the helmet and the collar of its body armour. Only a thin fabric separated him from the flesh of its neck, and he couldn't resist a satisfaction when he pulled one of the two triggers.

The blast was small, but still enough to send a shock up his arm. The recoil that couldn't escape through jerking the barrel up went straight to his body, and he might've lost his grip on the gun had he not had it flush against the infected. Gore and blood splattered out and onto the shield beneath them, almost pitch black, and he wasn't sure if it was the darkness or its actual colour.

The zombie went into a seizing set of jolts and tremors as its nervous system processed the loss of its connection to its brain, but Nick ignored it. He couldn't shut the door with the infected's body in the way, and the porch door was hardly an obstacle. He wasn't sure he had the time or the brawn to haul the big male zombie out of the way, loaded down with Kevlar.

The strength afforded to him by sleep and food couldn't make the zombie weigh less than it did.

Without something between him and the oncoming zombies, he'd be dead. He set the shotgun down and grabbed for the riot shield at the same time he stepped off it, trying to wrest it out from under the infected. If he could get it, he could use it, block the door with it until help arrived -

His efforts failed, and he only recognized why after a moment of struggle: the strap was buckled tightly to the zombie's forearm, just below the elbow. He'd never get it off in time and in the dark.

He looked up and outside, vision quickly filling with the movement of dark shapes, sprinting up to the porch. They'd be on him shortly, and one shotgun shell wouldn't be enough, nor did he have the time to implement his plan as he'd intended.

"Nick!"
The sound of Ellis' voice was oddly, uniquely pleasant. Maybe it was the honest concern, the fear. It was the closest to a positive emotion he'd heard from the Georgian in what felt like ages - directed at him, anyway. His skin prickled, and if there hadn't been a cluster of infected charging for him, he might've let himself enjoy it.

Instead, he jolted to his feet and looked up to see Ellis' shadowed form striding toward him, either hand gripping something.

As he approached, Nick recognized them: in one hand, his katana. In the other, Chris' machete. He reached reflexively for the sword, only to find Ellis planting the machete's handle in his palm. It was, most definitely, intentional defiance.

Nick allowed him that, not that he had much choice.

The first infected through the door trampled right over the infected policeman, stumbling only slightly. It lashed out its arms, sprinting directly at them with a shrill scream. Ellis gripped the katana's hilt with both hands, stepping in front of Nick to slash out with it, catching the zombie on the shoulder.

The blade stuck on its clavicle, but before Nick could feel any kind of spiteful satisfaction, Ellis merely twisted his wrist and let the blow skate up its shoulder so the blade sunk into its neck. Blood guttered from the wound where the steel cut into an artery, though it was quick to clot and thicken to sludge.

The zombie tried to shriek but couldn't manage more than a broken sputter, like Ellis had damaged its windpipe.

It lunged at them, but Ellis met it with a step, and the momentum slid the blade deeper into its neck. It didn't last much longer after that, and he had to dodge as its body went down, spine flashing white through the dark shades of its flesh.

There were more behind it, scrambling to reach them.

Jaw flexing, Nick slipped to stand beside Ellis, thrusting into the fray. There was only just enough room for both of them, the hallway awkward and cramped. He had to pay a little too much attention to where he swung the machete, lest his backswing hit the other man.

It felt natural, to fight alongside Ellis. They moved in practiced rhythm, even in the dark, when it was so easy to fall out of sync or miss a cue. When one of them lunged, the other retreated, rested. When they overextended, the other was there to cover.

The silence, he supposed, helped. It was easier to pretend things between them were anything like normal.

Together, the small rush of zombies fell without much trouble at all. There only ended up being a handful - whatever infected had been in the immediate area - and they couldn't overwhelm the survivors in the thin hallway.

Nick and Ellis held their ground, and before long, they were left standing there, quiet but for the panting of breath and the trickling patter of blood against wood. Nick tightened his grip on the machete, looking carefully over the pile of corpses they'd left behind.

The only movement he saw was twitching, shuddering, the remnants of life leaving rent and inflamed flesh. He glanced at his body, just able to pick out where blood had sprinkled over his torso and right arm.
And I just fucking showered.

Ellis was watching him, he quickly realized. The sensation tugged on his awareness until he turned, gaze landing on Ellis' face. The low light allowed little detail to be gleaned - but enough. The Georgian looked at him, perturbed, eyes darting rapidly between Nick's chest and his face.

Was he thinking the same thing - bemoaning the so-soon degradation of cleanliness - or was he as distracted by Nick's lack of a shirt as Nick was by his lack of coveralls?

Ellis' frustrated voice came to mind, pleading with him to stop enjoying the kid's obvious and lingering attraction to him. The memory plucked a note of guilt in the back of his mind. It was, among other things, unpleasant.

He'd never intended torture, suffering. He'd never meant the situation to sour so. He'd wanted to free them both from the tangled mess he'd woven them into, the promises he'd never meant to make, that he'd never be able to keep.

He inhaled, scrabbling for something to say that didn't reveal his thoughts.

Ellis beat him to it.

"Why'd you open the door?"

Nick's expression screwed up slightly, brows crinkling at the question. His mouth popped open before he had any time to consider what he was saying, sarcasm writ in broad strokes across his voice. "I thought it was the pizza guy."

They stared at each other, trapped in vague tension, hovering on the edge of something, and Nick didn't know what was beyond the precipice.

He was dreading that discovery.

The slightest laugh, airy and wet, escaped the young man standing next to him. A smile tugged at Nick's lips, eyes squinting in the darkness in abrupt desperation, seeking out a better view of the Southerner's face. He'd not forgotten the visceral pleasure of Ellis' genuine attention, his amusement. He'd not forgotten it, but he had underestimated its effect on him.

"Is everyone okay?" Rochelle's voice broke through, sharply, and the light from a flashlight burst into the hallway as she came around the corner. Her other hand was tightly gripped on her handgun, black metal cold in her palm. "Nick?"

"Yeah." Nick stated, looking forward. The light gave him a much better view of the carnage, and he advanced, picking through the bodies until he reached the front door. "Just some zombies looking for a midnight snack."

He came to a stop standing over the infected riot officer, eyes intent on its slumped form. He shifted and rolled his shoulders, working out tension. Moving the creature would be difficult, but necessary.

It was with a sigh that he bent down, setting the machete on the floor. He sunk fingertips under the zombie's Kevlar jacket, digging into the holes made for its arms.

"Need to get these outside." He struggled with the weight, strained, taking a step toward the door and trying to drag the body along with him. "They'll reek by morning."
It only mildly surprised him to have Ellis step up behind him and get a grasp on the creature's legs, haul them up. "Okay." They dragged it out onto the porch, and then through the porch door. Together, they indelicately threw it into the lawn.

Both of them reflexively wiped their hands, and in the moment, Nick glanced at Ellis. The moonlight was cold, and the air was colder. Sharp. It was crisp against his skin, raising goosebumps across his chest.

The younger man trembled, and his posture tightened with the awareness of the gambler's eyes on him. "... s'cold out here."

Nick felt a swell of tiredness as whatever remained of his adrenaline faded away. In its place came a hollowness, and he looked up at the sky instead. He could imagine the version of himself that still had the right to wrap an arm around the kid, drag him close.

He didn't want to picture it, but he still could.

When he turned, walking back into the café to grab another body, Ellis followed close behind. There was a bloated hesitance between them that was missing, suddenly, and Nick wasn't sure why. He just knew he preferred the wall that had been between them.

"Then let's get it done with." He focused himself on the task at hand. There was no good that would come of it, mulling over their relationship, or lack thereof, or whatever was burgeoning between them now.

Rochelle lit the way with her flashlight. A peculiar silence sunk its claws into her, watching them work for just a moment before she moved. She clipped the flashlight to her jeans - flipped the safety on her pistol - tucked it against her lower back - and joined in the efforts.

There was some flutter of activity in the house as their teammates confirmed their safety. However, only Rhiannon appeared to help, a thickness to her movements that betrayed her exhaustion.

It was the first time Nick actually felt a thing in common with her.
Chapter 208

Morning came like sludge, unpleasant in its advance. Christophe flinched at the feeling of surfacing consciousness, trying to turn his face away from whatever it was that it perceived. Even the simple flexion of his neck hurt.

A gritty taste in his mouth was his reward for awakening, pushing a dry tongue against the backs of his teeth. He sighed past a sharp pain in his throat, like the flesh had cracked in his sleep. He forced his eyes open after a moment, finding Ellis' sympathetic face hovering over his.

He groaned, and a hand patted gently at his thigh.

"Take a minute, man. S'okay. Just figured I'd wake you up since we were all rousin'."

A broad range of responses came to mind, some darker than others, but Chris merely nodded. Ellis shifted away and disappeared from his sight. Taking the time to breathe, Chris reached up to rub fingers at his eyes and chase away the sleep.

Nothing landed on his face, and he corrected himself, lifting his right hand instead.

It was strange to so vividly feel his amputated left arm. He could sense its presence, accounted for it when he moved, felt the flex of muscle when he tried to use it. He could even feel the cottony press of the blanket underneath him, cushioning an elbow he didn't have anymore.

Was he crazy? Had he snapped, finally, after all? He was hallucinating the presence of a limb that every piece of evidence said was long gone. That unsettled him more than anything he'd yet experienced, and he'd woken up in his college dorm room to find his roommates disemboweled in the living room.

He frowned, very gently placing his hand below the bandaged end of his stump. He waved fingers there as if to convince himself the air was, in fact, empty. Unfortunately, the action did nothing to erase the sensation of weight; logic had no impact on what his senses were so sure of.

Chris looked up, scanning the restaurant carefully. He startled to find Nick staring directly at him where he sat at the bar, arms crossed, wearing his unbuttoned blue dress shirt. The gambler's cold eyes ticked between him and his missing arm, pointedly.

Shame drew Chris' chin down, tucking his hand against his waist. It was bad enough to be sick and tired and crippled. Showing weakness took his breath from him, raised his heartrate. He felt an instinctive fear, and that fear inverted into something sunny.

"Good morning, traje." He plucked at his lower lip with his teeth, as if hiding a smile. "Not that there is much traje left, eh?"

_Distraigo. Desvío._

If he disguised his pain, his fear, he wouldn't get hurt.

Except he'd already shown plenty of weakness to Nick. More than he'd meant or planned to, though he hadn't expected to live through the admittance in the first place. Part of him had pegged Nick for a heartless survivor - or at least someone who despised weakness. Someone who'd look at him, begging for death, and grant it to him.
Then Nick had done the opposite. He was, really, the only reason Christophe was still alive.

Nick grimaced at him, eyes falling away to instead focus over where the rest of the team clustered around Lena. "A good bit of my suit went to your fucking bandages, so watch the attitude." he snapped out, dully.

Chris examined his face, trying to get a read on the scowl there. He didn't know a lot about Nick - just scraps and inferences. The man must've had something under the surface to get Ellis' adoration, and he'd seen enough in the gunstore to know Nick was hiding something.

Setting his jaw, Chris pushed the heel of his hand against the floor and scrambled to his feet. It was difficult not to try and swing his left hand out, grab the nearby table for balance. He steeled himself against the sensation of unsteadiness and got to his feet.

"I want to thank you." he stated, aware of Nick's expression souring even further as he approached. He smiled, gripping at his ribs as if to hold his body together. "You have helped me. If I can, I would - te devolveré. Pay-back, ¿si?"

Nick's eyes snapped to his face, gauging, and Chris held strong against the examination. It took a moment, but the gambler relaxed, apparently deciding that his slight misuse of the term was innocent.

And it was, mostly.

"Not necessary, bucko. I really, honestly don't give a shit." Sighing lightly, Nick put his elbow on the bar counter, resting his chin on his palm. His tone was blasé, dismissive, and Christophe took advantage of the disinterest to step closer. "You're pretty much the least of my worries."

The Spaniard grimaced melodramatically, lowering his chin and puffing a breath. Most of his theatrical energy was wasted when Nick barely looked at him. "You have more worry than most. It is... hard, watching you all fight. Quizás -"

Nick shifted his hand, tapping his pinky against his lower lip as he interrupted the man. "I'm not interested in chatting with you. You don't owe me anything, and I don't need a shoulder. So thanks, but no thanks." His eyes narrowed, but he maintained his gaze on their teammates without sparing Chris a glance at all.

Chris' gaze did a quick dart over toward the rest of the survivors, standing around the table where Lena lay. His mouth pursed, thinking. It was all he could do not to respond before he'd put his words together in careful order.

"Nico. I think... if you try, he wants to forgive you. You miss him, ¿si?"

He watched Nick stiffen and adjust his posture, aggression seeping through even as he tried to keep a lid on it. He lowered his voice to a silky-smooth mutter. "Watch where you're headed. This conversation could turn unpleasant for you."

Scuttling back a step, Chris increased the distance between them again. However, after an inhaled breath, he stomped back forward, fisting his hand tightly. "I only mean -"

Nick jolted upright on the barstool, tensing, mouth tightening to a thin and dangerous line.

There was no doubt in his mind that Nick would've gotten up, that he would've hurt him. He felt himself steeling for it, impudently tipping up his chin to match Nick's gaze. He'd take it, whatever it was. He'd taken it from Jerry, and he'd take it from Nick.
He'd take whatever he had to. If helping Ellis was the foothold he could find to fitting in, the way he could make himself useful - he'd take any punishment. He found a clarity in his desperation, and meaning in it.

What he didn't expect was for Nick to look at him, green eyes sparking confusion for a split second before he awkwardly blinked. He saw the expectation in Chris’ eyes, the resignation, and it startled him. The Northerner raised a hand up, palm flat, a wince crinkling one side of his face.

"Look - just... leave it alone." he stated, tone chilly with irritation. "And lose the kicked dog look."

He shoved off the barstool, stepping around Chris in a frustrated sweep. Nick set to buttoning up his shirt, focusing very closely on the motion, and Chris watched him cautiously.

It took a moment to shake off the electric sensation of danger, reminding the animal part of his brain that he was, relatively, safe. He felt tremendously out of his depth, somehow moreso than he had with his old team.

At least he'd known what his purpose was, his value, with them. At least he'd had an idea who he was in a new reality where nothing was the same. Being around his new team made him feel the yawning distance between him and who he'd been, and some wild and mournful part of him missed his old teammates.

Of course, his old teammates would have put him down themselves, in this condition.

He could barely fight, if he ever regained his strength at all. He was just... present, hanging on by the mercy of others, and felt at any moment like he might say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. Worse, like if he garnered their ire, maybe they'd leave him to die.

He tried to inhale, breathe. He shook his head and retreated a few steps before turning around entirely. If he weren't crazy - and of that, he wasn't confident anymore - he'd managed to offend the man.

"Él debe languidecer por ti, y tú debes languidecer por él." he stated, a mumble, earning him a cold glance from Nick. The gambler didn't wait or ask for a translation, merely retreating across the dining area as if to escape him.

*They pine for each other.*

Chris raised his hand and palmed over his forehead, exhaling a frustrated breath. It seemed simple to him - though, he supposed, he was being a bit hypocritical.

His eyes immediately found Rochelle across the room, and she seemed to shift, as if she felt his attention. She pushed a thin lock of stray dark hair behind her ear, a self-conscious gesture that set his heart to thumping in his chest.

It was easy to call her beautiful, but that didn't encompass he way he felt about her. She'd come crashing through the delicate balance he'd found in this new life, shattered everything he'd thought he'd understood about how the world worked now that it had fallen apart.

He'd accepted violence. He'd accepted survival above all else. He'd accepted the warping and culling of morality, because it made sense to do so when faced by an apocalypse. He'd taken, chameleon-like, to mimicking those around him in the interest of living another day. There had been no alternative, and no other option.

Chris wouldn't pretend that he'd never gotten caught up in Brenda's self-serving tirades, that he
hadn't felt powerful, better than those that died or got sick. Games of dominance were a good
distraction from a new reality that should've terrified him.

Then Rochelle looked at them like they were monsters, and he'd never so badly wanted to please
someone.

She was normal, and kind, and part of a team that didn't vacillate between despising each other and
actively perpetrating violence against one another. They took care of each other, and behaved with
a warmth and humanity he didn't think existed anymore. He hadn't thought there was room for it
anymore.

He was drawn to it, and his team had punished him for that - but when the time came to choose, he
chose to believe that there was still good.

"Or," spoke the laughing voice of his dead leader. "You just went with the better odds. Not that I
blame you. Why die with me when you could live with them?" He shook his head, trying to stop her
words from forming. "Just don't pretend you ditched me because you had a crisis of conscience.
You jumped off a sinking ship."

He practically felt the cold point of a butcher's knife suddenly press into the small of his back,
nudging in until he could either retreat forward or let it pierce him. "And we'll be the ones laughin'
when this ship sinks, too, cunt."

A stuttered breath left him, and his chin dropped as his chest tightened. Terror cut through his
body like a cold breeze, making him tremble. He clenched a hand he didn't have, nails biting into
an imaginary palm.

His arm wasn't the only thing he'd found himself hallucinating.

Christophe had withdrawn so fully into the recesses of thought that he didn't even see Rochelle
look at him, or frown, or pull away from the group to move toward him. It wasn't until she stepped
up to him and spoke that he snapped back to himself.

"You okay?"

He tried to crack a grin, tried to brighten his expression, but she barely acknowledged it. Her hand
suddenly lifted, pressing the back of it against his forehead. He flinched, staring up at her wrist
where it hovered before his face.

Her hot touch was enough to give him goosebumps.

"You're clammy." she stated, frown pulling her face into a disappointed pinch. "You feel sick?"

A smile came easily, then, and he reached up to set fingertips against her elbow. "Sólo en mi
corazón." he murmured, though he knew his voice shook as he spoke. She saw through him, eyes
flashing to his with some concern, though she smiled anyway.

"... Apparently middle school Spanish class and pop songs on the radio prepped me just enough to
get embarrassed by you." she chastised, sighing, lowering her hand in a quick motion. Rochelle
rubbed at her arm gently, smoothing over the place he'd touched. "Don't feel like Lena being
injured means you can't be, too. I don't want you to push yourself just because you don't want to be
a burden."

Chris' body deflated a little, though he tried to keep it propped up by a stiff spine. He forced a grin,
gaze skating to the side. "We are all hurt, ¿sí?" he managed in a quiet voice, shifting on his heels.
He didn't want to be weak in front of her. He felt damaged, lessened, just a broken thing still clinging onto something it didn't deserve. He didn't deserve her, and she deserved more than whatever he'd become. What value did he have, now?

She blinked into his face, head tilting gently. "Yeah." she agreed. "Thanks for making Ellis hurt a little less yesterday."

Christophe's eyes darted up, meeting hers, a little startled. He hadn't shared Ellis' breakdown, and he hadn't thought Ellis had. She smiled knowingly, and he was filled with the warm and tingling sensation that accompanied the sight. \textit{Te deseo.} he yearned to say, craved it, but the words caught in his throat.

He laughed instead, voice cracking in the middle of the sound. "I am happy." he stated, quietly, shifting on his feet. "He is my friend, and I want to help him."

"You did. Not sure \textit{what} you did, but keep doing it." She looked to the side, glancing at Nick. The gambler had busied himself with buttoning, straightening, and tucking in his shirt, but the intensity of his exuded lack of attention only highlighted how much attention he was paying. Chris couldn't fully tell if she was amused, or a little sad.

Rochelle blinked back at him, and reinvigorated her smile. "Come on. I can at least give you some meds." She turned away, leaning down to grab the supplies backpack from the floor next to the bar. She started digging through it in search of the antibiotics and painkillers they had stowed there.

Chris watched for a moment, eyes flickering up toward the other end of the restaurant. Lena was stirring, woken by her sister cautiously petting at her cheek and forehead, and he sighed lightly. She had, at least, survived the night.

He cocked his head, slowly looking down at the empty air where his left arm should've hung. He hadn't noticed the dull ache rising over time; he'd never relaxed it. He tried to, now, but the feeling of clenched fingers and tremulously stiff muscles didn't change. He attempted to move it, spread his fingers, but the limb didn't respond.

It didn't take long for the clench of imagined muscle to scatter burning pain along the memory of nerve-endings. He couldn't shake it out, couldn't convince himself that his nails weren't digging into his palm and his muscles and tendons weren't strained in a spasm.

A staggered puff of air left his lips, shakily. When Rochelle looked at him curiously, he forced a grin that belied the rise of anxiety that came along with the new, unfamiliar kind of pain. "Sí, por favor."

She didn't question him - but she moved a little quicker.
Chapter 209

Lena's eyes were hazy, unfocused, her face drawn in an unclear pinch. She seemed to only partially understand where she was and what was going on around her. When Rhiannon leaned in to talk to her, Lena watched her mouth move with a glassy stare and a hesitant blink.

"Hey, sis. You're here. I got ya."

The brunette's focus wavered, eventually lifting to look her sister in the eyes. It was like she looked out through a one-way mirror, with only preternatural instinct telling her someone was on the other side. Her lips pursed, and a vague cough preceded a flush of agony across her expression.

She looked pale, fragile.

"H-hey -" she whispered. "Hey, kitten."

Rhiannon cradled her palm against Lena's cheek, laughing sharply under her breath. "Hey, duck." she murmured back with a sigh. Her eyes darted around her sister's face, examining her closely. "Looks like you made it through the night. Fuck dying, right?"

Lena bared her teeth in something like a smile. She moved her arm carefully and tenderly, slowly placing her hand against her belly. "Cold." escaped her in a huff, and Rhiannon quickly moved to tuck the blankets more thoroughly around her body.

Every touch, every jostle - even small - made Lena's face go white. Rhiannon couldn't soften her touch enough to avoid hurting the older woman, and regret soaked her expression in a grimace once she pulled her trembling hands away.

Coach leaned in, eyes slanting to meet Lena's. He offered her a reassuring and soft expression as he spoke. "You're lookin' better today." he lied, gaze catching on the strip of her belly he could see between the folds of the blankets around her. She seemed more swollen than before, and shades of red and purple were battling for real estate on her midsection.

The brunette shut her eyes, a single wheeze passing her lips in a laugh. She didn't bother responding, expression tightening in intense focus, and Coach looked back over his shoulder. Ellis and Rochelle stood together, her hand resting on his bicep in a soothing touch.

"Ain't no surprise, but she ain't goin' anywhere. I say we hole up, maybe a day, maybe a few days. Get all of us some rest." He gestured to the bar, where they'd lined up most of their supplies. "We got food, water, med'cine. We can afford a break."

Ellis found himself looking rapidly between Coach and Rochelle. He felt a conflicted set of emotions at the idea. On the one hand, he agreed with the sentiment of not straining their injured teammates. Chris would benefit, too. On the other... the restaurant was very, very small. Whatever tiny and tender peace he'd eked out between him and Nick was in danger.

There wasn't much room to get away from each other. Whatever tiny and tender peace he'd eked out between him and Nick was in danger.

Not that that was reasoning he could very well share.

Rochelle pressed her lips tight together, shaking her head. "I don't disagree, but... We're really low on ammunition. I'd feel safer if we had some stockpiled, in case we get any infected attention with the generator." She gazed between her teammates, an appraising edge touching her eyes. "We've
got enough people to split up without spreading ourselves too thin."

It was Ellis who piped up, uncertainty making him shift on his socked feet. He was still bare-legged; his coveralls had, unsurprisingly, not dried overnight in the cold and heavy air. "Nick'n'me handled some zombies real fine last night with the weapons we got. You sure we need tuh risk it...?"

A sigh left Rochelle, putting both her hands up. "Yeah, you guys did. But that was, what? Five, six? The girls got chased out of here by one rogue fatty. What if another Boomer waddles in here and gets a horde on us? We won't just be fighting them off, we'll be the only thing between them and our injured."

The Southerner nodded reluctantly, conceding her point with a light frown. "Wouldn't hurt tuh be armed."

Speaking lowly from his place near the bar, Nick helpfully muttered, "Hey, look. A plan I finally agree with. It's a Christmas miracle." When all eyes turned to him, he set a hand on the bar and sighed. "Just because we've gotten lucky so far at night doesn't mean we'll stay that way. And fighting with swords and bats means more injuries. We can't keep getting hurt."

Coach grunted, sounding unconvinced, even as he closed his eyes and dropped his chin in a resigned gesture. "Think there's ammo 'round here? I don't want y'all goin' far."

Rhiannon lifted a hand, palming over her forehead to wipe away sweat from her brow. "There are signs for a gun and pawn around here, but we could never find it." Her eyes hung on Lena's, expression falling to a grim clench. It took her effort to spit out, "I can show you."

A hesitant curl touched Rochelle's fingers, reaching out toward the blonde in a useless gesture. "You don't want to stay? We can go. You should be with your sister."

The woman shook her head, a harsh laugh passing her lips. She stood suddenly, hopping off the table and to her feet. Rhiannon turned entirely away, scratching nails along her brown, undyed hairline. "I'm gonna fucking lose my shit if I have to sit here. So do us both a favour and let me go."

Rochelle looked her over, not missing the tremble and shiver of her frame, nor the restraint at the edge of her voice. She was just holding herself together - not that the producer could blame her. Sympathy welled up in her chest, and she nodded. "Okay."

Coach put his thumb against his upper teeth, biting down on it idly. "Alright." he uttered. "So Rhee goes. Chris stays, Lena stays. I'll stay, mind the radio. Ellis stays." He started to gesture between Rochelle and Nick, but Ellis released a displeased and protesting huff of air, only for the big man to round on him. "Boy, you ain't got pants. You wanna go fight zombies with no damn pants on?"

Ellis' eyes gently lowered, abashed, peering at his boxer-shod lower body. "Uh... Right. Yeah."

Even as she patted at his shoulder in idle comfort, Rochelle turned to look at Nick. He stood with his hip braced on one of the barstools, arms crossed over his chest. "What do you say, suit? Join the away team?"

Nick winced, eyeing her with a heavy dose of disdain. "Please... tell me that wasn't an intentional reference. I don't need another reason to doubt your taste, beyond the obvious." He said the final word with a heavy roll of his entire head to jerk it toward Chris, who stood by the wall, expression vapid and eyes a little distant.
The Spaniard didn't even respond to the attention, just staring down at the floor, clenching and releasing a fist with his hand in a slow and repetitive motion. He seemed remarkably attentive - just not on the reality that currently surrounded him.

Rochelle chalked it up to his fresh dose of painkillers, and focused wholly on Nick. "Bitch, Nichelle Nichols is a national treasure. I will fight you."

A stunted chuckle rumbled from Coach, nodding toward Nick. "If y'all two are done." he stated, dryly, only continuing once he had all eyes on him. "Let's organize our weapons, get us a grocery list. Nick, you mind? Get the guns, see how much ammo we got, what calibers we need."

The gambler tipped his head in acquiescence, stepping away from his stool and turning. He kneeled down next to the weapon stash by the bar, removing them from their stack and instead lining the guns up in a grid on the floor.

Rochelle approached, stepping up to his flank and pulling her pistol from her jeans waistband. She carefully pointed it toward the ground and released the magazine, catching it in her palm. She pulled back the rack, turning it to peer into the chamber and confirm there wasn't a bullet loaded. With that, she offered the gun to Nick, grip stuck down to him.

"Five shots in there. I think there were some spares in the pack, though."

He grunted, accepting the gun. He set it on the floor, pointing at the backpack in a silent request for it. Rochelle obeyed the direction, using her foot to slide the pack toward him, an eyebrow raising when he spoke. "I never did ask how you knew your way around guns. The hicks, I get, but you? Aren't you a news nerd from Ohio?"

The woman laughed, crouching down. She watched him unzip one of the front pack pockets and pull out the ammo boxes they had left from the gun store, crumpled and mostly empty. There was a fair number of loose bullets at the bottom, and Rochelle was quick to dart in a hand and start sorting through them.

"My dad was a cop. Pretty sure he wanted a boy, because my nursery was painted blue, and I learned gun safety before I learned how to walk. I didn't really want to. Never practiced using them, so this whole apocalypse has been a little sink-or-swim, if we're talking about shooting. I apparently swam."

Nick took to aligning the guns with their ammo, a careful order to his movements. Ellis' pump-action was entirely empty; Coach's double-barrel had just one shell left. His Magnum had three bullets in it, and his sniper had five.

Rochelle helpfully offered one more sniper round to him, and he sighed before taking it.

"Was that a jab at me?" he retorted, loading the bullet with a slanted grin. She blinked innocently at him, batting her eyes, and the conman huffed a breath before focusing on his work. "Okay. So we've got two 12-gauge shotguns that need ammo, one .50 caliber pistol and one 9 millimeter pistol. Sniper takes 5.56 millimeter."

Blinking, Rochelle nodded. She picked up the magazine for her pistol, gripping it in one hand as she grabbed one of the few bullets she'd found for it. Carefully pushing it into the magazine, using her thumb to brace and guide it into the mechanism, she bit onto her tongue. "Emphasis on the shotguns. We could use some heavy firepower."

Nick agreed with a dull hum.
Footsteps approached from behind them, and Rochelle was a little surprised to look over her shoulder and see Ellis. He was hugging his midsection awkwardly, glancing between them even when Nick didn't turn to acknowledge him. "Need any help?" he offered, quietly.

Rochelle hesitated, balked, because she'd honestly not expected the Georgian to come over. She found herself looking immediately toward Nick, and the only thing that surprised her more than Ellis intruding was what the gambler responded with.

"Yeah. Load these."

Nick pushed the sniper rifle across the floor toward him, metal scraping, and cupped his hand in the air with the couple of loose rounds he had cradled there. Ellis put his hand out, and Nick dropped the bullets into his palm without letting their fingers touch.

The mechanic dropped to a squat, lifting the sniper rifle and resting it against his knee. He set to loading the rounds, one after the other, eyes low. "You guys better keep in touch with the radio. I'll be a nervous wreck til y'all get back." he stated, quietly. "And if you catch wind'uh this other guy, Phil... come back, okay?"

"I'm not looking to make any new friends." Nick responded simply, tone flat and matter-of-fact. He took the magazine out of his Magnum and loaded it with the couple .50 cal rounds Rochelle scavenged together. "Why, you worried about us?"

He couldn't fight it; couldn't kill the idle flirtation before it started. It didn't surprise him, but he was left remorseful of the words as soon as they escaped him. Getting complacent was a surefire way to repeat his mistakes, and getting cozy with Ellis again was the last thing he wanted to do.

It was also very easy to do.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on which side of the debate he landed on) Ellis breezed over the sentiment entirely, his gaze lifting to focus on Rochelle. "I'm just not lookin' forward tuh sittin' around while y'all risk yer lives. So be careful."

The woman smiled, though the tension around her eyes betrayed a quiet worry. "We'll be fine. Trust me, I get it. You haven't sat out fights much, since you're usually one of the first to go, up in the action. But you can do just as much good here, taking care of Chris and Lena, okay? Coach needs your help."

Ellis nodded, cracking a small grin. "Yeah. Ain't like I got a choice, anyhow."

"You'd be the only badass zombie killer who forgot his pants." Rochelle supplied in a cheerful tone, grinning back at him before she finished loading her pistol magazine. She grabbed the pistol from the ground and slapped the mag back in with her palm.

Slowing his movements, Ellis put his lips out in a thoughtful jut, voice thick. "I ever tell y'all 'bout the time Keith showed up tuh school with no pants?" The kid set his hand flat on the side of the rifle to hold it in place, gesticulating widely with his other hand. "He just walks right intu class, bold as can be. I mean he had undies on, but Keith's a briefs guy, so... Barely."

"Man. The teacher was flyin' off the handle, kids were hollerin' - but it weren't til I grabbed his arm and was all like 'whut the hell' that he jumps outta his seat and yells, 'I thought it was a dream!', before boltin' like a bat outta Hell."
Ellis set the sniper rifle back down, grinning gently toward the floor. "Fer like, a month, he just slept in his clothes so he knew he'd be a'ight." He scooted the rifle back toward Nick, who snatched it up and aligned it evenly with their other weapons.

With a teasing roll of her eyes, Rochelle leaned toward the Southerner. "I didn't know you had Keith stories that didn't end in bodily harm."

The young man crinkled his nose and snorted. "I mean. If we're bein' honest, the e-motional scarrin' was just as bad." He pointed at the row of guns, eyes catching on Nick's hands as he collected the few .50 cal rounds Rochelle had found and started to load them into his Magnum's magazine. "You guys should take the guns we got loaded. We'll keep quiet, won't need 'em."

Thumbing over the opening of the magazine to ensure the bullets were tightly loaded, Nick placed it into the Magnum with a hearty snap. "Agreed." he uttered, before turning the handgun around to offer the grip to Ellis. "But take it, anyway."

Ellis startled, looking at the gun and then back to Nick's face. The gambler's expression was difficult to read, flat in an almost inscrutable plane of vague annoyance. It was the plaster he used to fill in the cracks that formed on his self-control, the skin he found most comfortable.

Ellis might have said he knew what it hid, but he lacked the confidence to claim that anymore. An insecurity blurred his focus until he couldn't bring himself to keep looking. He wanted Nick to care about him. He wanted Nick to press the gun in his hand and press a kiss onto his lips, to say "Be careful, Ace." He wanted to cradle the man's face in his hands and say "You, too."

Nick's eyes flickered between his, like he could follow the thought across Ellis' expression, but he gave nothing away.

The Georgian took the gun and mumbled a soft, "Okay.", before he straightened up out of his squat. He knew Rochelle was looking at him, eyes soft and a little concerned, but she said nothing. The Magnum was still a little warm from Nick's hand, but a coolness settled in as the metal returned to its normal temperature.

He could've gotten dizzy, could've practically floated away. It was a bittersweetness that tightened his chest and threatened to topple him, but he found himself inhaling deeply and soothing the sensation away by force. He closed his eyes, then reopened them, refocused.

He felt a distant calm, watching his teammates pack up and prepare to leave. Nick shouldered the sniper rifle, and Rochelle kept her pistol. Rhiannon took the double-barrel shotgun, using the slashed zipper pocket at her thigh to hold the extra shells they'd gathered together.

With the radio attached to her jeans pocket, Rochelle led them out of the restaurant, a quiet having taken over the group.

Listening to the porch door clatter shut behind them, Ellis turned away and did the only thing that made sense: he cracked a big smile in the face of the faraway stare from Chris, the barely-there attention from Lena, and the tired look from Coach.

"Y'all wanna play a game?"
Chapter 210

Nick liked to think he could size people up.

He could sort the weak from the strong, the gullible from the intelligent. The sheep from the wolves, so to speak. He knew who he could mess with and who he'd be smarter to avoid, though he tended to ignore his own advice on that subject. He knew a mark when he saw one. Sometimes he was wrong, but he trusted his gut.

His gut had said Rhiannon was dangerous, but ultimately in over her head. He'd proven the second half right during their first meeting, from which he'd come out with the upper hand.

It was, apparently, time to affirm the first half.

They'd left the brush-axe and machete behind for Coach and Ellis, but Rhiannon had kept her baseball bat, and Nick had the katana slipped through one of the beltloops of his slacks. The weapon was wooden, but four strips of some dark metal plating had been nailed around its width at the top, twice amidst the center, and just where it thinned out to the handle. The nails holding it all together were messily done, jutting up from where they sat.

She charged up to the nearest infected standing on the street, and a guttural snarl escaped her as she took a swing that collided directly with its jaw. The zombie barely had time to lock eyes with her and growl before its head snapped cleanly to the side, a crack announcing the fracture of its neck. Its arms pinwheeled, and she lunged forward to collide her shoulder with its chest.

The creature went down, gargling, and couldn't get up. Rhee spun the bat in a quick circle, twisting her wrist, and darted for the next one. It was already running for her, but she was ready. Placing the handle's end against her palm, she fisted her other hand around the grip and jabbed it into the zombie's gut as it came within reach, letting the creature's momentum double it over.

Zombies did not react to pain in the same way a regular human would. It was not winded by the blow, and beyond the initial energy it wasted on scrabbling at the bat itself, the infected wised up and reached out to claw at her face.

She'd shrugged into her leather motorcycle jacket, and the moment the zombie swiped at her, she released the end of the bat and flung up her arm. The creature's nails dug into the leather and barely made a dent. She kicked out at its knees, forcing it to trip to the ground. The moment it landed, Rhiannon gripped the bat with both hands and bashed it into the back of the creature's head until its skull shattered, brain matter burst on the asphalt.

Two more came running, and while Rhiannon turned to face one, Rochelle lifted her pistol and snapped off a quick shot at the other. Blood burst in a spray around the lower half of its face, jaw collapsing, and it staggered a few steps before going down.

She spared a glance for Nick as she lowered the gun, a little worry laced in her gaze. It was, however, a sympathetic worry. Rhiannon was angry. The last thing she wanted was Rhiannon's anger to translate into recklessness. Nick did that enough for all of them.

"Need to get everyone some fucking weapons." the blonde muttered almost to herself, shaking her bat until the fleshy remnants of skin and brain stuck to the metal banding fell free. "Need a gun and a back-up."

Rochelle took a few long strides to catch up with her, aware of Nick close at her heels. The gambler
adopted a cautious lookout, head swiveling, and used his rifle's scope intermittently to check down the road and get a better look at far-off figures. He very willfully stayed out of it.

"Did you make that?" she questioned, tone light and conversational. "The bat, I mean. It's pretty sweet."

Rhiannon didn't bother to look at her, craning her head around in a gauging motion to get her bearings. "Yeah. We found a hardware store back when shit went bad. Lee got her axe there, and I put this baby together." She tossed the bat up a few inches, catching it as it fell. "I tried barbed wire first. Got it stuck in a zombie's neck and the other ones just about fucked me."

She took off at a jog, moving with the steady calm of a predator following its prey, conserving energy and priming for the final sprint. "It was a shitty idea. They bleed out too slow, and there's always too many of them." Rochelle and Nick kept up, falling into a single-file line along the sidewalk.

The producer uttered a thin 'huh,' nodding her head in understanding. "Guess that makes sense. We've just been picking up weapons as we find them. Didn't think about modifying anything. Maybe you can help me whip something up."

"Yeah." was muttered back, though Rochelle couldn't tell how serious Rhiannon was.

They approached an intersection down the road, the streetlights all sitting dead on their wires. Two cars had collided with each other, their noses crushed up and merged in a mess of metal. A few infected wandered around the wreckage, one zombie leaned against the car's passenger door.

It snarled, bashing a fist against the vehicle's roof, anger making it lash out senselessly. None of them noticed the survivors.

"Left here." the blonde hissed before darting along the sidewalk, keeping close to the thin wooden fence lining the road. The backs of thin beach houses loomed over them, with the opposite side of the road lined with lengthy strip-mall buildings. Most of them were covered with FOR LEASE signs, though a scattered few had been inhabited.

At a glance: a chintzy souvenir shop, a fast-food seafood restaurant, and a nails and hair salon.

"Hey, Nick." Rochelle hissed over her shoulder. He looked at her with such calm obedience that she almost felt bad for making fun of him. Almost. "Need some hair-gel?"

He looked to where she pointed, recognition flickering to life in his eyes, and he sighed, a little miserably. He raked the fingers of the hand that wasn't holding his rifle through his hair, unkempt and scraggly strands hanging over his forehead. "Yes."

Rhiannon halted, dropping to a low crouch and sliding up to the side of a parked car. She didn't bother to gesture for her new teammates to follow suit, and she didn't need to. Both of them ducked to join her, and Nick narrowed his gaze upon spotting the same thing she had.

It was, to his surprise, the rest of the police zombie's squad.

There was something almost comical about the sight. Three zombies in black riot gear clustered mostly together, staggering mindlessly down the road. Whether they intentionally kept close in some animal pack instinct, or pure coincidence had kept them together, Nick wasn't sure.

"Shit." Rochelle uttered, shaking her head. "We can just avoid them. No reason to go wrestling with armoured-up zombies."
Rhiannon clucked her tongue with an eye-roll, pointing insistently. "Don't be a pussy, dude. Check out their kit." She leaned forward, tongue flashing over her lower lip. It took Nick a moment to recognize what she was referring to; the cop zombies had heavy utility belts with straps holding gear. "One of the fuckers has a baton. Couple grenades, probably flashes and smoke. Might have mace, too."

"Is... any of that really useful?" Rochelle whispered, screwing her brows up. "Against zombies? That's all riot defense, tactical weapons. We're not dealing with a riot. It's a zombie apocalypse."

The blonde laughed, just a puff of air. She thumbed at her chin in an idle scratch. "Any grenade'll catch their attention. And they're still fucking human, they can get blind and deaf just like us, it just doesn't usually stop them." She grinned over her shoulder at Rochelle, gleeful. "I saw a group of the shits chase after a little dollar store smoke bomb like it was crack. Not as good as my pipebombs, but got me out of a tight spot."

Rochelle examined her expression for a moment, and found herself nodding. The bikers had survived against fairly long odds, and it would've been short-sighted not to take their advice. She glanced at Nick, and he shrugged at her.

She took it as acquiescence.

"Long as we're careful. I'll back you guys up, just try to take them out quickly."

Hopping to her feet, Rhiannon shook out her shoulders in an eager gesture. "As long as he doesn't get in my way." She flashed a narrowed glance at the gambler, almost threatening, and he leered back.

"Won't be a problem, since you won't keep up." he snapped off, throwing his sniper rifle onto his shoulder and letting the strap dangle it against his back. He drew the katana cautiously from his belt loop, ensuring he didn't cut the fabric, and gripped it tightly in both hands. "Have fun beating them to death. For the next hour."

Rochelle gritted her teeth, fighting the urge to sigh. She had known they wouldn't get along and she'd end up being caught in the middle of their tension, but that didn't make it less frustrating. "Can you guys focus the anger on the zombies, please?"

"Gladly." Nick growled immediately, charging around them before Rhiannon could react.

He wielded his katana low at his hip, skidding out into the street. It didn't take more than that to catch the zombies' attention, and the closest one wheeled around, snarling and growling. It had lost its helmet, revealing the pallid and waxy skin of its face - which was missing most of its lower lip, like it had been torn or bitten off.

The infected howled a guttural noise, arms waving with the intensity of its fresh rage, and its kin quickly followed suit. Nick was prepared to dig his heels in, let them come to him - but Rhiannon exploded past him at a full sprint. She practically leapt, putting all her body-weight into the swing as the very top edge of the bat collided with the zombie's forehead.

The raw metal banding split skin, taking the brunt of the force of the blow. Blood gushed from the wound, thick and blackened, and the zombie staggered as if some critical damage had occurred within its skull. However, it soon reasserted its balance and lunged for her, and she dodged to the side.

As it stumbled past her, she funneled her momentum to bring the bat right around, striking it in the
back of the head. The creature went down, catching itself on all fours, the body armour on its legs and arms protecting it from the asphalt.

"Gonna stand there and watch, fuckstick?" she snarled up at Nick, right before she grabbed the bat with both hands and bashed at its head until it caved in.

Nick gritted his teeth, striding forward. He met one of the other infected before it reached her, twisting his katana around and using the end of the long hilt to strike it in the front faceplate of its helmet. The hit sent it staggering back a step, giving him enough room to reorient the katana and drive it directly into the creature's neck.

The metal slid between its helmet and its body armour, slicing through the vulnerable viscera in its throat. He slanted it hard to the left in the interest of avoiding its spine, and the angle sent it slicing through flesh and artery. Not even the infected's quick-to-clot, thickened blood could resist the pressure of its own heartbeat gushing it out.

He freed the blade with a yank, dodging back. The zombie tried to continue after him, mostly unhampered by the gout of blood pouring from its jugular - but before he could react, Rhiannon was up and hitting it in the side of the head.

"Fucker!"

The fragile structure of its neck failed with so much muscle sawn in half. She didn't quite knock its head off, but its vertebrae groaned before giving way like the rotted trunk of an old tree. The zombie went down with as much life.

The two survivors turned on the last infected in unison. Had it been sustained by anything but animalistic rage, it might've made the choice to run.

One blow from Rhee's bat sent it reeling, and she lashed out a hand to grab onto its faceplate. She wrenched at the hard plastic, lifting it up off the zombie's face to bare its bloated features, and then dodged out of the way. Taking advantage of the opening, Nick hefted the katana before lunging, piercing the tip right through its clouded left eye.

He felt it break through, felt the sudden stutter of resistance as the blade sunk through and entered the cavity of its skull.

The cop zombie continued to move up til the moment he pivoted the blade, sharply raising the hilt end so the tip arced downward. A jolt passed through the infected before it dropped to the ground with little more than a meaty thud. Nick had to wiggle his katana free, prising it from the zombie's ruined eye socket.

He grimaced, sparing a glance toward the biker.

She returned the look with a deadened lift of her studded brow, like a dull 'what?'. Despite her efforts to appear aloof, he recognized the glimmer of surprise in her eyes. It matched his own.

They didn't make a terrible team, as it turned out, and she wasn't a terrible partner. The dynamic was much like her and her sister; she was the quick brawler bouncing in and out of the fray, supporting his larger, slower weapon. It worked, though it would have its limits.

If they got overwhelmed or separated, she didn't have the killing power, and he didn't have the speed. The katana was deadly, but too heavy to handle an onslaught of infected. She was fierce and her bat had stunning power, but could only kill with some time and space to move.
He shared none of these observations, instead turning away from her and examining the street they now stood on. It was empty of additional threats, it seemed, though his hearing prickled at the sounds of infected in the streets surrounding them. He watched Rochelle approach, handgun held low.

"Good work, guys." she uttered, taking to a light jog to close the distance. She stepped up to one of the corpses, leaning down to look it over. "I'd rather not toss some grenades in our pack. You think we can just take one of these belts? Keep them on there?"

Rhiannon grunted in affirmation, dropping down to her knees. She placed her bat down, reaching down to the infected corpse lying at her feet. She gripped onto the utility belt strapped around the riot policewoman's waist, wrestling it unlatched. She used the toe of her boot to kick the corpse over, rolling it off the belt as she pulled it free.

Straightening with the belt gripped in her hand, dangling loosely, Rhiannon tore from the straps a slim baton. The weapon was about the length of her forearm, and she flipped it a little in her hand. The motion was slow and weighty, the object heavier than she seemed to anticipate. "Huh. Shit isn't what I -"

Interest sparked over her face, right before her thumb shifted on the grip, and a flash of light lit over the tip of the baton. The joy in her expression was unbridled, and nothing Nick had ever expected to witness. The odd, snapping sound of electricity preceded her cackling.

She whipped around, lifting the stun baton over her head and letting it snap and hiss just a second longer before she released the switch on the handle. "Oh, fuck yes." she blustered in a tone of voice just approaching a moan. "This is my shit. You can borrow my bat, Rochelle, because this is my new boyfriend. I am gonna fuck some zombies' day up."

Rochelle covered her mouth, stifling laughter. She tried to focus on retrieving the slim canister grenade from the corpse lying near her. "Watch it, Nick. You probably shouldn't run your mouth at her anymore, unless you wanna be a test dummy for that thing."

Nick's mouth popped open in protest, but Rochelle corrected herself.

"Actually, nevermind. Run it. Please."

The look on his face soured when Rhiannon let out a sneering and self-satisfied chuckle, and he glared down at the corpses of the three riot police at their feet. He sighed, loudly, dropping down to cautiously examine and pry free the cylindrical grenade hooked on one's belt. It had an odd, latticed appearance, with large holes cut out along the center of the casing.

Text along the rim identified it as a stun grenade, along with a few serial numbers that meant nothing to him.

He didn't know much about the equipment, but he knew enough to know it wasn't a harmless flash of light. He liked having all five digits attached to his hand, and had no intention of holding it for longer than necessary. If a grenade were going to go off in someone's hand, he wasn't about to let it be his.

"Why I get stuck with the fucking Dixie Chicks is beyond me," he muttered. "Can we get this over with?"

Having both of his teammates break into satisfied laughter was the last thing he wanted.
Chapter 211

A small billboard stared down at Nick, prominently displaying a cartoonish black-and-white bird with an uncomfortably toothy grin. Broad font wrote out 'Magpie Gun & Pawn', and an address was listed as 'on the intersection of 7th Avenue and Prawn Street.' That, obviously, meant nothing at all to him. He barely knew what street they were currently on.

"Jesus. The fuck is this town's obsession with birds?" he groaned, putting his hand over his eyes to shade it from a cloudless sky.

At his elbow, Rochelle stifled a laugh before kneeling down. She set the backpack hanging off her shoulder down on the ground, unzipping one of the side pockets with a yank. "Nick, chill." she hushed off-handedly, before digging into the satchel.

Rhiannon padded up to her, spinning her baton with the wristwrap attached around her forearm. "What're you looking for?" she muttered, nosily leaning in to look over the other woman's shoulder.

"Well..." Rochelle explained with a grin. "In our last base, I found this town guide." It took her a moment to dig the small booklet out, flapping it a few times like a fan next to her face. "I almost didn't grab it when we left, but I thought it might come in handy. There was a map, though... I don't know how thorough it is."

Opening up the booklet as Rhiannon dropped to a crouch beside her, Rochelle thumbed to the very end. There were a few different maps of different sections of Tybee, divided up in sections and only inconsistently labeled. Rochelle squinted down at the book, carefully chewing her lower lip.

"Do you recognize anything?" she muttered, thumbing carefully on the page. "Most of the smaller roads aren't labeled here. There are numbers for a key, though..." She tapped her thumbnail on the left side, where a rectangular box contained store and locale names helpfully numbered from 1 to 30. The map was dotted with matching labels.

The blonde biker leaned in closer, using a pinky to point to where number 23 sat on the map. "That's base."

Rochelle confirmed the number on the key, exhaling with a surprised laugh as it read 'Sunset Café'. In the same moment, she was disappointed to find that their target, Magpie Pawn, was not on the list. Pawn shops weren't the most common of tourist destinations, she supposed.

"Okay, cool. I was counting intersections on the way here, and we should be -" Pausing, she used her index finger to trace the path they'd taken, ending in a vague circle around the road they'd landed on. "- about here. Yeah?"

The blonde nodded warily, but seemed unconvinced.

Nick spun on his heel and tossed a hand up. His voice raised, expressing the doubts she likely shared, judging by the way she crossed her arms and looked tautly at Rochelle. "How is any of this helpful? If we don't have an actual map, where we are is useless."

Undaunted, Rochelle placed a palm on the page in a light pat. "No, no, hear me out. These roads are almost all grids. And if there's a 7th Ave, that means it's probably next to 6th and 8th, right? All we need is to find a numbered street and figure out which way is up, and then we're golden."

Nick stared her down, squinting his eyes slowly. His voice adopted a dull mockery, enunciating
each and every syllable in an exaggerated fashion. "So... We just need to find it. And then we're good. Because we found it."

Rolling her eyes, Rochelle jumped to stand. "Don't be a bitch." She aligned her hand with the crosshatch of roads, vertically and then horizontally. "They should be one of these sets. If we can just get on the right system..." Suddenly turning, Rochelle darted up the road, retracing their steps and dodging over the corpses they'd left in their wake.

Rhiannon hadn't had the opportunity to use her stun baton. Nick - entirely out of spite - was intent on taking the chance from her, and had renewed his efforts to take point. Although she wished she didn't, Rochelle found Nick's pettiness a little funny. He was nothing if not committed.

Between his sudden energy and Rochelle wielding the bat and joining the fray, the biker barely managed to get licks in. Though, they'd also avoided much zombie attention at all. It should have been a relief, but it was mostly worrisome. It felt like the calm before the storm whenever it was quiet.

Stepping out into the T-bone intersection they'd taken to get there, Rochelle looked up at the dangling streetlights and pointed to the thin green signs hanging there. The one facing them - labeling the road running perpendicular to where they stood - was 'Triton Street.' Rochelle cocked her head, looking for the one that would label the street the billboard was located on.

It was nowhere to be found. She noticed the small hinges still dangling free off the cabling, but the sign itself was not there.

Her eyes immediately dropped, looking around, but the green rectangle of metal was not on the ground, either. Crawling around looking for it under the garbage and gore piled on the street seemed ill-advised, so, she pinched her lips and strode ahead, squinting down the road.

Another intersection was only a few blocks away, and just a couple zombies wandered across the length of the road. She couldn't see road signs at a glance, but it was their next best shot. They needed, more than anything, to secure a load of fresh ammunition. It was the last loose end between them and some security.

Chris' convalescence was not truly over, after all, and Lena's had only begun.

"Let's run down there." she muttered, unsurprised when Rhiannon pushed past her and strode down the road.

The blonde rotated her arm in its socket, stretching, footsteps turning aggressive as an infected came scrambling from around a crashed car. She got a two-handed grip on her baton, squaring off with the female now charging at her. Eagerness bled into her posture, excited at the chance to draw blood with her new weapon.

Nick only just convinced himself that it wasn't worth the bullet it would cost to snipe off the infected before it reached her. *Even if her face would be goddamn hilarious.*

Instead, he reluctantly watched her come up on the infected, using the baton to strike it directly in the face. It staggered wide, arms pinwheeling, but recovered as soon as its feet hit the asphalt. The creature spun to face her, snarling and spitting out the cracked remnants of broken teeth.

Rhiannon smoothly jabbed the baton out, tip sinking into the flesh just above its sternum, where a bloodied V-neck shirt bared waxy skin. She grinned ferociously, right before thumbing the switch and activating the electricity.
The response was immediate. There was no dramatic flailing or throwing of sparks; just a stiffening of the zombie's body, right before it fell to the ground, stiff as a board. She followed it, keeping the stun baton in full contact until it thudded to the street. As it landed, she released the button, and stomped her boot heel into the creature's skull.

Something crackled, and the infected was left writhing its legs, upper body oddly immobile.

"Oh, *sweet* mama, that felt fuckin' amazing. That is better than an orgasm." the blonde blustered out in a moan, gripping her baton tightly, almost hugging the weapon. "You are my -"

She did not finish the sentence before a flood of infected came bolting out from an alleyway. Her voice had likely drawn them, and they charged out en masse, too many to count at a glance. She dropped back a step, fear pushing her into a defensive posture, preparing for the onslaught.

It was a little like she'd forgotten she had back-up, judging by the surprise in her eyes when Nick and Rochelle came in at a sprint, skidding to her sides. The producer raised the bat with a test swing, voice raising. "Might be a good time for that shotgun, girl!"

Rhiannon jammed the baton under her arm, reaching up to yank Coach's double-barrel shotgun off her shoulder and into her hands. She charged forward, meeting the group of infected with both barrels - one, and then the other, pulling the triggers asynchronously.

Nick had the maddening feeling of irritation at the idea Coach had taught her how to use it. He wished the thought never crossed his mind, because there was no explanation for the sensation except raw jealousy. Like she'd stolen something that should've been his; stolen a moment he hadn't realized had meant something to him.

It was childish. She wasn't the reason he'd become estranged from his teammates.

He funneled his anger into a slash that very nearly disemboweled a zombie deeply enough to spot its spine as it toppled to the ground. He grimaced down at it, but the next one was on him too quickly to allow for introspection. *Focus, Nick, Jesus.*

Rhiannon flung the shotgun to dangle at her side by the shoulder strap, now that its two shells had been spent. Rather than take the time to reload it, she grabbed her baton from under her arm and jumped into the fight, the heavy-duty metal landing damaging strikes. The infected were many things, but invulnerable was not one of them.

They could survive grievous wounds, but not head wounds or broken necks. Though they weren't truly the living dead, aiming for the head seemed just as effective as fiction claimed. They could clot fast enough with their gritty black blood to last through cuts and gashes and lost limbs, but their nervous system was fragile.

Rochelle hit an infected so hard in the jaw with the banded bat that the skin split open to reveal a mandible unseated from its joint, all grey skin and grisly fat. It merely shook out its head, unhinged mouth flapping, undeterred by the damage.

Then Nick struck out, thrusting the tip of his blade through that open maw and through the soft palate of the roof of its mouth. The tip of the blade struggled to penetrate the bony structures beyond, and he had to twist with both hands. He more likely hit spine than brain, but whatever he hit sent the zombie sagging to the ground.

All three of them tore through the small horde, spiraling around one another, like the gears of some fell machine that ground and churned. They left blood and slumped bodies behind, and as the last
infected fell, Nick was struck by a surreal kind of self-awareness.

It was not the first time, nor would it be the last.

*It's like when you're sitting in some crazy dream, and out of nowhere you go 'Oh, fuck. I'm dreaming. Why didn't I realize I was dreaming back when that elephant in a suit sold me a Lambo? How did it take me this long?' except I haven't gotten to that part yet."

*I'm still sitting here, goddamn katana in my hands and intestine on my shoe, thinking 'Yeah. This seems about right.'*

He shook the gore off the toe of his dress shoe and turned to face his teammates. Both women were recovering, alert for movement from the corpses around them - but their attention was directed toward the ground, and they did not notice the flash of limbs from a rooftop across the street.

Nick's eyes darted to follow it, and as it settled into a leer over the edge of the roof, he recognized the string-bean limbs attached to a bloated midsection. The creature was topped by a sputtering fountain of neon green liquid, flowing and scattering in dripping globs.

"Acid!" left him in a shout, and he leapt into a sprint that carried him down the road and behind a white panel van. He was aware of bodies behind him, but all he could focus on was escaping the oncoming blast. His leg protested, clenching, like the very muscle itself cringed in fear of the hiss and sizzle.

He hit the rear edge of the van at a full run, catching a hand on the edge to stop his momentum. It mostly slung him into the side of the vehicle, rocking it with the force that he slapped into it, and he slid along the surface to make room for his teammates.

The Spitter must've been tracking him, because the two women hadn't even made it to safety when a wet splatter struck the other side of the van. The wheezing and huffing of the creature recovering from the expulsion of its acidic bile was audible even at that distance. Even louder, however, was the snarl of a Hunter somewhere in the same direction.

Nick tightened his grip on his katana, glancing sideways at Rochelle as the producer came suddenly pushing against his side. The contact was warm, and he might've found a comment to make, had circumstances been different. He settled on an internal pleasure, and gestured behind them and through the van with one hand.

He meant to speak, to warn them of the Hunter lingering somewhere nearby, when Rochelle shoved him.

It was a cheap shot, he determined, and he'd been caught off balance. That was the only excuse for the fact that he was so easily pushed out of the way, crashing down to his knees and palms on the asphalt. If he'd been prepared for it, she'd never have gotten him off his feet. She'd also never have lived to tell the tale, had he not quickly realized why.

From the top edge of the van, acid dribbled down. It must've pooled on the top of the van and spilled over. Had he remained where he was, it would've fallen down over his head and his shoulders. The very idea made his skin crawl, and he scattered a thin look up toward Rochelle as he righted himself.

She didn't seem particularly self-satisfied. She was mostly still shaking off a look of horror, like she was imagining it herself.

"I can't tell where it is." Rhiannon hushed, crouching beside the cabin of the van. She had the baton
gripped tightly in her hands, wringing it in a slow and practiced rotation. The Hunter growled again, but it had moved, now echoing from their right. "Little fuckshit's crawling around."

Carefully turning to peer through the van's windows, looking through the interior and out into the street, Rochelle shook her head. "I don't see it - I think it's circling." she whispered back, stretching down a hand toward Nick blindly, offering him help up. "Let's just hang here a minute. Wait it out."

Nick ignored the portion of his brain that wanted to push her hand aside, and instead grabbed up his katana from the ground where he'd dropped it, and used his free hand to grab hers. He got to his feet in a shove, quickly releasing himself from her grip in favour of dusting off his knees.

"So it can get the perfect angle to jump us?" he growled, quietly, glancing just once at his palm and the subtle rasp of a friction burn from the sidewalk. "Not good." Despite his protest, he did not make an effort to leave. He pressed back toward the van, avoiding the puddled acid, even though it was dulling to a dark green and the sizzling was slowing to a quiet pop.

They waited, breath held, Nick's attention to the left of the vehicle and Rhiannon staring to the right. Rochelle split the difference, peering through the van windows and intermittently glancing to either side. There was an eerie silence, as if their focus made it quiet down.

It was a matter of patience, and felt like a contest of who would break first.

While the mutated zombies may have had elevated intelligence, they maintained the rage of their more common counterparts. The Hunter, it seemed, couldn't resist attacking, even though waiting for them to bolt out from the van would've been the tactically superior move.

When it suddenly came crawling around the nose of the van, it was clear that tactics hadn't factored in.

It screamed, howled, and all the tightly wound energy in every fibre of its musculature came flying loose. It pounced on Rhiannon, hooking clawed fingers into her jacket at the shoulders and landing the toes of its ruined sneakers into her midsection. It rode her to the ground, their bodies tumbling.

The blonde looked pale as she fell, eyes wide with adrenaline and fear, and Nick couldn't help but notice the feral energy there. He had the time to feel a little bad for the Hunter as he noticed the stun baton pressed just under its chin, trapped between them.

They landed hard, skidding to a stop, and the Hunter raised its arms, intent on lashing out at her. It seemed to aim for her throat, trying to slit it with one good slash of its ragged talons. She didn't even flinch, thumb squeezing on the baton's trigger.

This time, there was a crack and snap - but rather than that of electricity popping, it was the sound of the Hunter's jaw slamming shut so hard it must've broken teeth or bitten right through its tongue. Its body seized, twisting hard to the side as the taser arced the high-amperage current directly through its neck.

Rhiannon followed it, rolling to her knees in a straddle on the slight creature, gripping both hands on the stun baton to keep it jammed where it was. The Hunter lashed out in inconsistent jerks, but kept catching nails in her leather jacket rather than find purchase in her skin.

Her eyes snapped to the side, darting for Nick. The gesture was clear enough even without her saying a word: she couldn't necessarily kill it with the stun gun alone, and if she released it, the Hunter might regain the advantage. All she could do was immobilize it.
While it was tempting to make her *ask*, Nick didn't want to be the one who stood there and watched her get a claw to the face.

So, he lunged forward, katana readied in his grip. She leaned as far back as she could without losing her grip on the baton or surrendering its place tight into the creature's jugular, freeing Nick to slash down with the blade right into the center of its stricken, grey face.

Its features split, skin raw where it sundered from the blow. Nick was sure he saw straight into a broken nasal cavity, inflamed flesh clung tight to bone, and he averted his eyes before the details could quite sear themselves into his mind's eye. He looked up instead, watching Rhiannon slowly withdraw her baton.

She was panting, jaw slack, and he suddenly saw something new in her eyes.

Weakness.

He'd seen surrender, but it had always been stubborn and spiteful. He'd seen pain, but that of a wild animal's. He'd never seen raw and fragile *weakness*, like she had nothing left, not even anger. She was empty, and made no effort to disguise it. It was an emotion he could understand, but his understanding was a selfish feeling that mostly stewed into self-pity.

The urge to feel real sympathy came, but Nick couldn't summon any. He exhaled harshly, and faked it.

"C'mon, kid. Up." He reached out, tucking a hand under her elbow. She stiffened, and he almost thought she was going to shake him off, ferociously reject the assistance. She disappointed him, and let him haul her to her feet. Her chin lowered to reject any eye contact, a frustrated clench at her jaw.

He let her go once she'd straightened, turning away, aware of Rochelle watching him closely. If he'd cared to, he might've tried to read her expression. He didn't. Instead, he pointed down the road at the next intersection.

The road didn't have streetlights, so the road signs were not hung from cabling. These were on a post at the corner of the sidewalk, and he could just barely read it from that distance. "Doesn't that say -"\n
Quick as lightning, Rochelle was darting forward. Her energy gave her teammates no choice but to follow, or be left behind. "4th Ave!" As she said it, she turned a beaming grin back at Nick. "Told you, ya big loser."

Nick couldn't stop a strangled snort, brows screwing up. Her enthusiasm reminded him of Ellis, and the thought didn't sour his mood like it should have.

"Keep your panties on, doll. We ain't found shit yet."
Ellis put both hands on his knees, leaning in, seated on the edge of the chair he'd dragged over. His eyes were squinted, focused, and he rolled his jaw in a thoughtful gesture. He was silent for a few moments, under the stare of all three of his companions - including Lena.

She'd awoken, and though she was essentially immobile, she'd propped herself up on a lump of blankets and had a sightline around the room. Her attention was vague and glazed with pain, but being alert was better than nothing.

It was with a dramatic flare of his fingers that Ellis finally nodded.

"Okay." he stated, calmly. "Here goes."

The Georgian gripped his cap and raised the bill away from his face, the hat tipping back. With his eyes unshaded, he put up a fist - then extended his thumb. "I ain't never eaten a waffle." His index finger uncurled next. "I once burned muh eyebrows off at a Midnight Riders concert." His middle finger joined the others. "I spent a whole week in a haunted house."

Proudly, he sat back, crossing his arms with a heavy lounge against the back of the chair. Chris immediately looked toward Coach where he leaned against the wall, but the heavyset survivor lifted his hands. "I ain't givin' no hints, boy, you on yo' own."

The Spaniard grimaced, gesturing limply with his hand as he protested loudly. Between him and Lena, the haze of opiates over the conversation made Ellis feel a little like he was babysitting drunk friends. "It is no fair! We are new. How do I know those things?"

Ellis tipped his chin up, a helpful and understanding tone to his voice. "That's okay. See, you don't know much 'bout us, but we don't know nothin' 'bout y'all either. By the end, we'll all know more." He was undaunted by Christophe's perturbed expression, and flapped a hand dismissively. "C'mon, you can't pout 'til you try it. Whut's the lie?"

A few stuttered sounds of protest escaped the man, mindlessly grabbing at his waist. He almost surrendered to the game, sighing breathily with legitimate reticence. "Ah... Vale, vale, si quiere." The man's honey brown eyes darted between Ellis' lips and his eyes as if hunting an answer. He found nothing, and merely shook his head. "You Americans have too much breakfast. I do not believe this."

Despite himself, Ellis huffed a laugh, leaning closer to the other man. His eyes twinkled with humour, and he shook his head back. "Too much breakfast? Whut's that?"

Patiently settling a hand on his belly, Coach inserted, "You ask me, all other meals oughta have more breakfast in 'em."

The statement drew a wiry, cracked laugh from Lena, sputtering a pained sound just as soon as she'd exhaled. Ellis was a split-second from leaping up to check on her, but the dark-haired biker blinked away tears and spoke first. "I miss eggs. Could go for a big omelette."

Ellis smiled at her, slowly settling back completely in his chair. Her tone was wistful, and saddened in a way that made him yearn to hug her. He only resisted the urge by reminding himself the gesture would probably hurt her more than anything else. "You'n'me both." He lifted a hand and waved it amongst his teammates. "C'mon. The rest'uh y'all gotta answer."
Sighing wearily, Coach placed a hand under his chin, scrubbing at the dense facial hair thickening around his mouth. "I don't think no one goes to no Riders concert and comes out intact, so that's not it. An' I'm wit' Chris. You a Georgia boy, and you ain't had a waffle? You tellin' me you ain't ever eaten an Eggo, boy?"

The younger Georgian grinned in a thoroughly unhelpful manner.

Lena closed her eyes, quietly murmuring past the hitches and sighs her weakened body was wracked with. "I-... I don't buy a week in a haunted house." She shook her head in a minute gesture. "What haunted house is - even open for a week? Sounds like bull-honky."

Ellis merely tipped his head, looking so sublimely pleased with himself that it only took a few beats for Chris to bleat out a sigh. "Chico, por favor, ¡desembuche!"

The young man laughed and lifted his hands, palms out as if to defend himself from an oncoming attack. "Okay, okay... Fine." He lowered his chin to peep out from under his trucker cap. A glint of mischief made him bite his lower lip. "I dunno whut to tell y'all. Muh mama always made pancakes, 'n' that's all I ever ate."

A sincere uproar of disbelief had Coach's hands going up. "Son, that is a damn travesty. I have never been disappointed in you before right this damn minute."

Affection bled into the words, leaving Ellis to grin bashfully. He focused entirely on the first portion, putting his knuckles against his chin. "Aw. Not even when I set that car alarm off that one time, pushin' Nick?"

Coach chuckled, barking out the sound, and shook his head. "You mean when you used Nick's head to set off that car alarm? That was the proudest I ever been of yo' goofy ass." He thumbed at his mouth as Ellis burst into a pleased chorus of laughter. "Might take me some time to get over this no waffles shit, though."

Clearing her throat with a wince, Lena let a half-smile play at her lips and croaked out, "Dish on the haunted house, dude."

At that, Ellis eagerly gripped a hand on his jaw and whistled, low and soft. "Aw, man, that ain't nothin'. Muh buddy Keith's grandma's house was haunted real good. That shit was built hundreds'uh years ago, man, you couldn't take a step without gettin' haunted. Weird sounds, chills, lights flickerin' - you name it. So this one time, this big ol' storm knocked the power out in our neighborhood, 'n'we stayed at her place fer like a week and a half. Just lucky they weren't like, angry ghosts."

There was not a trace of belief anywhere on Lena's pinched expression, but she exhaled an admirably non-committal sound before uttering, "Oh. Thought you - meant Halloween."

Scratching at the few patches along his jawline doing their best to grow out facial hair, Ellis snorted. "Nah." A spark suddenly appeared in his expression, thoughtful. "Aw, man. I wonder if all this means there won't be no more Halloweens."

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Coach couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head. "Sorry, son. Probably so. I ain't keen on any of that spooky shit after livin' through it, myself." He rounded on the young Spaniard perched on the closest edge of the bench, lifting his eyebrows pointedly. "A'ight. Who's next?"

There was a little force in his gaze, face tightening as he could tell Christophe didn't want to play along. The Spaniard was tired and in pain, and he knew that, but a game to pass the time was a
small price to pay to give Ellis something to smile about. It was good for all of them.

He might've engaged in an all-out battle of wills with the ex-Angel, had Lena's quiet voice not broken in. "I'll go." she almost whispered, hazel eyes wide and gentle.

Ellis had to resist the urge to clap, turning and giving the woman every ounce of his focus. "Aw, hell yeah!" He waved encouragingly, urging her on, looking pleased as punch at the ready volunteer. "Two truths and a lie, girl. I bet I got you pegged already."

Christophe looked mostly relieved at having the pressure of Coach's stare removed, but the injured man did pay genuine attention as she chewed her lip thoughtfully. The bikers were fairly mysterious, after all, and he couldn't resist the chance to learn something new. It only took her a moment to settle on what to say, and she nodded.

"I used to be a vegetarian." The words took effort, and every few syllables there was a small hitch as she had to take in a breath, like she were only using a portion of her lung capacity. "I have a dog back home that comes up to my hip - and I've never had a boyfriend."

Ellis blinked, unable to stop his expression from faltering a little in thought. He couldn't help but grab onto that statement, turning it over in his head. Maybe he was overthinking it, and maybe it was as simple as it seemed, but an obvious conclusion landed in his lap: she'd never had a boyfriend because she'd only had girlfriends. If he was wrong, he might embarrass her - or himself. If he was right...

He wasn't really sure what he'd do if it were true. He just knew he felt a longing, a quiet curiosity.

Chris bolted out a laugh that outright startled Ellis, rubbing down the bare plane of his side. "You are messing. You, sin novio? ¡Eres demasiado guapa! There is no way." The biker tried to laugh as he went on, pain fluttering over her face as her body shook with the effort, and a smile pulled at her lips and didn't fade. "I do not have the fingers anymore to count the chicos who must be in love with you."

"Aww." she mumbled, appreciatively. Her fingertips reached up to brush at her mouth when a cough shortly wracked her, as if nervous to find wetness there. "You're - you're sweet."

The Spaniard huffed in protest, and looked over to his teammates as if searching for support. Ellis blinked back, at a loss, mouth gawping a few times. Coach lifted a brow, releasing a grumbled hum, before offering up, "I've seen some big damn dogs. What I ain't seen is a damn vegetarian from Texas. Girl, you tellin' me your pop let yo' ass skip steaks? Y'all kids and y'all damn food bullshit."

Lena managed a demure tilt of her mouth. "Dad was a lot of things. Not a dictator."

Attention moved, naturally, to Ellis, as the last to give an answer. Putting both hands on his cheeks, Ellis took a moment to squash his face in a massage, puffing out air in an awkward attempt to look like he was thinking. He started to speak, but his lips had not fully popped open before a crackle of static sounded suddenly at his feet. He jumped, before remembering he'd set the radio there.

"Hey." It was short and flat, and garbled as it was, Ellis only recognized it as Nick by the annoyed cadence.

"Uh, one sec." the Georgian muttered, dipping down to grab the radio. The flash of relief at hearing from the other half of his team was outweighed quickly by a vague nervousness; he'd not yet gotten used to the newfound peace between him and Nick. He quickly got the radio in his hands,
Nick's response was immediate, almost cutting into the last few syllables of Ellis' statement, the radio chirruping aggressively. "Checking in. We found the pawn shop. Shouldn't be that long back, just calling to -"

Another voice interrupted abruptly, sing-song, and so loud that it crackled through the radio and almost pitched out of audibility. "To talk about how much of a rockstar I am." There was shuffling and scratching, like the radio were being wrestled with. "Oh, yeah, baby. Rochelle saving the day - beauty, brawn, and brain, all in one. I am accepting all praise, starting n-"

The audio clicked off abruptly. Ellis was left to stare down at it in bemusement, stifling a laugh with a bitten tongue. He glanced up at his teammates with an embarrassed pinch to his brows. "Uhm. Least they're havin' an okay time out there."

Chris crossed his arm over his chest, curling his fingers into a fist. "Nico sounds angry." he observed, simply, golden-brown eyes flashing across Ellis' face, suddenly clear and alert.

Ellis gave a heavy shrug, expression dulling with a 'duh' plastered over the look. "Huge surprise, man. Least Ro's keepin' him under control." Chris practically swooned at the statement, a quiet affirmative noise escaping him. Trying to keep a straight face, Ellis lifted the radio to his face and spoke into it cautiously, rather than wait. "Okay. Y'all keep safe. Everything is fine down here."

It took long enough to get a response that Ellis almost put the radio back down. He was struck by the image of Rochelle and Nick fighting over the radio like school-children, and couldn't decide how he felt about it. He wasn't jealous, and he wasn't upset with her. He knew well enough that Rochelle was mad at Nick on his behalf, and it didn't do any of them any good to harp on it.

Being actively hostile to each other was only going to risk actual danger. The apocalypse didn't have much room for pettiness.

"Roger." spat back through the radio, Nick's voice full to the brim with agitation. The word caught Ellis by surprise, brows going up with a startled laugh. He choked back the sound as quickly as he could, reflexively looking up. Coach was eyeing him, a dubious and knowing pinch to his face.

Ellis felt his cheeks blanch a little, eyes darting to the ground. He felt guilty, like he'd done something wrong, and quickly sighed out a breath. "Uh. Anyway - I'm with Coach, I guess." he managed. He lost the confidence to go with his gut, ducking down in his chair, vastly preferring staying under the radar. "You sure didn't look guilty eatin' that Spam earlier."

Coach beamed, slapping his thigh in an eager gesture. "I knew it. I know a red-meat-eatin', good Southern girl when I see one."

The biker lifted a hand very delicately, spreading her fingers. A wistful energy touched her expression, but she still smiled. "Big ol' Great Dane named Wrecker. Worst thing he ever did was wreck Rhee's shoes, though." Her hand dropped, lying flat against her hip, and she closed her eyes with a sigh. "At least I know he's keeping dad safe."
Christophe blustered out a bewildered, "Dios. You are serious? How?" He thrust his hand in her direction, tone bordering on legitimately upset. For all his disinterest in the game, he now seemed almost overly invested. Ellis couldn't decide if it was a competitive streak, or simply frustration at being wrong. "Not one boyfriend? I do not believe this, ni por un momento."

Stretching out a foot to kick his ankle, Ellis soothed out, "Chris, leave her alone." He felt a sudden drive to cover for her, to stop the Spaniard from pressing the issue, an urge he couldn't completely explain. He kept his gaze away from the woman, insistently overriding Chris' attempt to respond. "Maybe she just don't like datin'. I knew a girl once who just didn't wanna date no-one. I -"

With a little chime of laughter, Lena placed a palm over her mouth. "I'm lesbian, dude." she interrupted, smooth... except for the crack in her breath at the end that sunk her into a small coughing fit, body clenching up and legs curling just a degree.

Chris floundered, mouth moving like a fish gasping for air, trapped out of water. "Oh. Oh. I -" It was the first time Ellis had ever really seen him at a total loss, stammering for words. "I - no quise decir - I mean -" He might've outright blushed, had the woman's coughing not spiralled into almost a wretch, startling him. "¿Chica?"

Coach didn't waste a second, launching away from his position against the restaurant wall. He strode up to the table, getting one hand on her shoulder, tone soothing. "Easy, girl, easy." He rubbed a thumb into the divot of her clavicle, massaging in a tiny circle.

It took her a moment to get her breath back under control. Her coughs were rattled, and wet. It sounded like the phlegmy exhale of a pneumonia patient, but there was a wheeze to it like her lungs struggled to manage. Her eyes met Coach's, and the mirth that had glinted in her eyes quickly faded, swapping with a kind of fear.

"Easy." he repeated, lifting his hand to carefully catch her wrist and pull her hand away from her mouth. He was unsurprised to find a smear of blood across her palm and dampening her lips. A sigh escaped him, worry darkening his voice. "Ellis - go get a cloth from the kitchen."

Ellis bolted obediently, scrambling off his chair and toward the bar. "Right." he practically shouted as he went.

Chris put his hand on his chest, leaning in toward the table and cocking his head to catch a glimpse at Lena's face. "Ay, pobrecita. You okay?" When she managed a nod, face pale and fear wild across her eyes, Christophe pursed his lips. He reached out to rest his hand against her elbow. "Te tenemos." he promised, and a lack of comprehension didn't stop Lena's expression from softening a little at his tone.

The brunette gave a slow sigh - more like a leak than an exhale, eyelids fluttering shut. She swallowed, and nausea followed the gesture. "My frickin' luck, right?" she whispered. "All the ways to die out here, and I pick the slow way."

Sharply, the ex-football player bent down, voice chastising. "Girl, don't talk like that. We gonna get you through this."

Her bloodied lips twitched up, and her voice became faint, like it barely mustered the strength to pass beyond her teeth. "Don't think you got much say in that, Coach." She fidgeted her fingers just enough to shoo him off, and he set her hand back down, releasing her wrist reluctantly. "Nice to - ugh, to... have friends, though. Don't let Rhee chase you off, okay? Please..."

Coach watched her, worry caramelizing to outright anxiety on his face, warily flicking a glance
toward Christophe. The young man shook his head, slowly, silent, and the heavyset survivor lowered his voice to a hush. "You just quit worryin'. Let me worry. You rest, a'ight?"

Lena mumbled some non-committal sound, attention drifting off as her eyes flickered under their lids.

Ellis was scrambling back in, footsteps slapping on the tile of the kitchen, and Coach took advantage of the moment before he returned to pull the blankets away from her - just enough to glimpse her bared midriff, where her skintight black-and-grey jogging shirt had ridden up. The blood pooling around her midsection had deepened, darkened. The purple and red had intensified until it was almost black, and he grimaced, before carefully returning the blankets to their original position.

He could feel Chris watching him, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Admitting that he had no hope, no confidence, wouldn't do any good. All it would do was scare his teammates and weaken his own resolve. If stubbornness and denial was all he had, then at least he had something.

Denial, and a prayer, if those even worked anymore.
"Come on. Say it." Rochelle insisted, loudly.

Nick grabbed at the air, miming grasping a rope. He looped it in his hands and neatly ducked his head into the imaginary noose. After he'd pretended to settle it comfortably around his neck - he drew it taut with a yank upwards. His tongue lolled out, complete with a short and dramatic choking sound. "Aaghk!"

"Somebody can't admit when they were wrong." the woman sang out, knuckling both hands against her hips and leaning in to squint into his face. "Come on, you big dumb lug. Just *once*, I wanna hear you say it. You were wrong. I was right." She jerked her chin up at the pale two-story building rising before them, all waxen stucco and slats of white vinyl siding. The broad window making up the front face of it was tinted, and a partially peeled sign was taped onto the outside: 'Magpie Gun & Pawn.'

It was a plain looking establishment, but the outside was clean and maintained, encircled by trimmed shrubbery. The parking lot was gravel and sand, and heavily used, if the deep tire tracks criss-crossing it thickly were any indication.

"Gurhhk." Nick sputtered back, lifting his hand as if to tighten the noose.

The gesture made Rochelle's eyes roll, and she tossed up a hand, looking toward Rhiannon. "Can you believe this douchebag?" The blonde bared a small grin, cocking her head. She'd remained well out of the argument, but was visibly enjoying it. "Here I am, having gotten us safely to this shop, and he can't even put his ego aside to just give me a li'l credit. Not even a word."

Exhaling heavily, Nick dropped his hand, mouth popping open. "You -"

"Oh, no." Rochelle swung her gaze back on him, jabbing a finger into his face so suddenly he had to jolt backwards from it. "You hung yourself, remember? You don't get to talk anymore. If I can't get you to admit I was right, I'm definitely not going to listen to you bitch."

It was almost defiantly that he narrowed his eyes... but he sighed, shortly, rolling his head back on his neck. "Jesus, fine. You were right. Congratulations, Magellan, you successfully navigated the streets of a small, backwater village. Your talents are miles above all the other assclowns stupid enough to get themselves lost in the apocalypse, and your ability to count up to seven is unparalleled."

Rochelle put her lips out in a pout. Before he could recoil, she patted a hand on his jaw in an affectionate gesture. "You're such a sweet-talker. I see how you get all the girls." She tried to pinch at his cheek, but he ducked back and escaped her touch before she could manage it.

The man scowled at her, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand. "And you're a goddamn treat. Can we just go, please?"

Laughing, Rochelle turned, waving over her shoulder dismissively. She stepped off the sidewalk and onto the gravel, her boots crunching on the ground-up stone, and both Nick and Rhiannon were quick to follow. "Keep an eye out, guys. I can't see in those windows to know if there's any trouble in there - seems quiet, though."

Slipping his katana under his arm, Nick pushed both his hands into his slacks pockets. He dropped his chin, glancing around the empty parking lot. "I have such fond memories of the last pawn shop
we took over." he snapped, ignoring the obvious curiosity that made Rhiannon blink over at him. "Let's double-down. Ten bucks there's a Witch in there."

Rochelle accelerated into a light jog, hopping up the small set of stairs leading to the front door. She grabbed the doorknob, twisting just enough to test if it was locked or not. It turned easily, and she looked back at her teammates. "Guess we'll find out." she responded, almost cheery. The producer reached up to yank the baseball bat out of its resting place in the backpack on her shoulders. "Ready, guys?"

Falling into place behind her, Rhiannon lifted her stun baton. She reached down to her hip, brushing fingertips against the utility belt she'd buckled tight around her hips, and the two smoke grenades and flashbang dangling from the holsters sewn into it. "Let's rock and roll." she hissed.

Nick grunted an assent, and with a quick inhale, Rochelle opened the door. It was certainly dim inside, but the large window let in enough light to see. The shop was built more like a jewelry shop, with an inner set of cabinets surrounded by open carpet, and the walls lined with display cases offset by just a few feet. At a glance, she saw mostly a lot of junk.

'Junk' was, of course, relative - the contents of the shop would have likely added up to a pretty penny. Valuables, however, had little value anymore. Rochelle couldn't help but reach up and touch her earlobe. She'd abandoned her earrings long ago, the jangly hoops begging for trouble. They'd been her favourite, too.

"Wanna get a gift for your boyfriend? The Spanish one, to be clear." Nick muttered. "I bet he'd love a nice diamond necklace."

She flashed a discouraging look his way, sighing out a breath that betrayed a genuine stress. It was carefully that she strafed to the side, looking around the cabinets in the center. "Look behind those counters. I don't hear anything." she ordered, glad to see the gambler quickly obeying her.

He strode to the glass display cases lining the room, putting a palm against the metallic skeleton that held it together, and leaned up to peer over the edge. "Nothin'." he stated, simply, turning his head to watch as Rhiannon crossed to the far wall of display cases.

She shrugged, before hopping over the counter entirely.

Nick wished the glass had broken under her - but he wasn't so lucky, and she landed on her heels on the other side. "Nope. Shit-all." Straightening up and sidling up behind the register, Rhiannon reached down and opened a drawer beneath it. She started rifling through it one-handed. "There are a bunch of keys in here. You guys see any guns?"

The gambler scanned the room, noting a wide set of cabinets hanging off the far wall, behind Rochelle. Though they were shrouded in darkness and closed, they seemed of the right size for weaponry. He gestured with a flick of his hand, and Rochelle turned, quickly registering the sight.

She also noticed another feature of the room when she looked up: there was a thin shelf lining the wall, encircling the entire room, only a foot and a half below the ceiling. It caught her eye, mainly because it didn't seem very functional. There was nothing on the shelving, and it was far too high to be reachable.

The woman couldn't help but turn, following the structure with her eyes. It met with itself in the far corner, and beneath it was a staggered set of shelves. They, too, were empty, and set in a specific pattern: one in the center, and then two split below it. This configuration repeated itself all the way to the floor.
Rochelle might've taken the time to wonder at it, had she had reason to care beyond simple curiosity. Instead, she noted the door just to the left of the shelves crawling their way up the wall. "Second floor," she announced, hearing a grunt from Nick in affirmation. She slipped to the side, finding a gap between two of the display cases and shimmying through, only struggling when a beltloop on her jeans got snagged on the metal casing.

She managed, scrambling free and settling on her feet in front of the tall cabinet. She set Rhiannon's bat down on the waist-high glass case behind her, raising her hands to grip the cabinet's handles. Tugging resulted in nothing but a creak, and she carefully thumbed over the surface of the cabinet door, feeling around the handle.

It was too dark to see details clearly, but her thumbtip found the metal shape of a lock.

She reached over her shoulder, slipping her hand into the backpack on her shoulders. It only took a moment to fish out the flashlight there, and she got it turned on and flipped around, directing it at the cabinet first - and then pointing it halfway between her and Rhiannon. "Hey, this cabinet is locked. Mind bringing those keys over here?"

The blonde took just a moment before walking around the perimeter of the room, stepping up beside her with a heavy ring of keys in her hand. It was split into a few different rings, all interconnected, and one of the rings had keys labeled with a small strip of tape wrapped around the ends. They were marked on with black pen, from 1 to 20.

Ignoring them, Rhiannon flipped through the main ring of keys. There were four in total, and she gripped them all together before thumbing one free. With Rochelle holding the light, she tried it, but it immediately stuck and refused to enter. The second one immediately felt too small, though she tried it anyway. The third one sunk in with a metallic rasp.

Rhiannon twisted it with a triumphant energy, and when she grabbed the right-hand door, Rochelle grabbed the left. They opened it together, and the producer's free hand pointed the flashlight in at the contents.

The inside was structured neatly with hooks, from which hung an array of coloured locks. The key lock was connected to a loop of flexible plastic, a kind she recognized from the gunstore the Angels had led them to - the type that looped through the gun's barrel, blocking it from being loaded or firing at all. Most of them were empty.

The only one that wasn't was labeled 17, which was looped around the rack of a slim rifle. It was a little flimsy, but Rochelle reached out to grab it anyway, offering it out to the biker standing next to her. She looked away while Rhiannon focused on fishing out the matching key and getting the lock undone, and instead peered into the bottom compartment of the cabinet.

Lined up in careful rows were boxes of bullets of assorted brand and amount, organized beneath tags for caliber and size. Rochelle whistled out appreciatively, shrugging out of her backpack and setting it down on the floor between her feet. She carefully rattled off their contents as she plucked up boxes and set them into the open satchel, pleased.

"Plenty of 9 mil and shotgun shells. I don't see any for the sniper rifle, though." She prodded through the rows, ignoring some ammo she didn't recognize and a box of blanks. "Here's a box of .50 cal - just one, though. Can't have everything, huh?"

Rhiannon snorted, prying the gun lock free. She turned the rifle in her hands, examining it, and erupted in an outright laugh as her eyes alighted on it. "Um. Dude, this piece of shit doesn't have a trigger." Rochelle uttered a disbelieving sound, turning immediately to lean in and look, using her
flashlight to inspect the gun. Rhiannon put her finger where the trigger should have been, wiggling it on the empty air. "No go."

"Gun and pawn my ass." Nick inserted, helpfully.

"Well." the producer uttered, taking a step back and shaking her head. She flashed an encouraging look at Rhiannon. "We... we didn't really come here for more guns, anyway, just ammo. I don't think we're in a position to repair it, even if we wanted to or... knew how."

The blonde gave her a thinly veiled look of *no shit,* and tossed the gun to the floor like so much refuse. She pointed in at the ammo Rochelle had rejected, waving her hand. "Don't leave that." she stated, more an order than a request, and Rochelle squinted at her. It took the biker a solid few moments to realize what it meant, and she looked almost embarrassed. "Uh. Please?"

Rochelle's expression immediately flashed to a beam, and she scooped up the boxes of ammo she'd previously ignored. A glance at the labels revealed it was buckshot and birdshot; it would work in their shotguns, but she doubted the efficacy against zombies. "Sure thing, string bean." she uttered.

The biker looked at her like she'd burst into a foreign language.

"The rest of this shit is useless." Nick announced. Rochelle turned to look at him, and found him wandering the store, peering through the display cases and cabinets. "Unless we need a waffle iron. Or, hey, a set of golf clubs."

As quick as it had come, Rhiannon's confusion turned to interest. She spun on her heel, grabbing onto the edge of the glass display case behind her and leaning in. "Clubs? How shitty? If they're sturdy, you could bash some fucking skulls in." The biker flapped her hand, insistently. "Get one out, let's take it for a test drive."

When Nick didn't react beyond grabbing the sliding door of the display case and yanking it open, the biker shifted on her feet. "... Drive. Hah." she muttered under her breath, swiping her tongue over her lower lip and letting it curl over her broken tooth.

It took Rochelle a moment to recognize the joke, and she held back a laugh when the realization struck. "Oh my god. I'm surrounded by dorks." she groaned, zipping up the backpack as she'd finished loading it with ammunition. "And for once I don't even mean Ellis."

"Har." Nick uttered, flatly.

He had no time for any other response, as a heavy thud sounded in the ceiling. They all jumped, reaching for their weapons, but only Rhiannon fully completed the motion. Wielding her stun baton low at her side, the biker stared up. All of them stood, still and silent, waiting for any other noises.

They came in the form of a crash, like something breaking. It didn't sound quite like glass - the shattering was thicker and heavier than that. A scattered few thumps, like footsteps, traced a path across the ceiling. Then: silence.

When the quiet encroached on them and did not seem likely to break, Rochelle turned her attention toward Nick, lips pinched. "Well. We got what we were looking for, right?" To prove her point, she lightly jostled the backpack dangling from one hand. "We don't have to go following every noise we hear. Why go hunting for trouble?"

The gambler arched a brow, pausing for just a moment before he started walking across the pawn shop floor and toward the door in the corner. "No offense, sweetheart, but who the fuck are you
talking about? We *love* trouble."

She couldn't really argue.
The three survivors moved in slick single-file, creeping their way up the stairs. Rochelle was holding the flashlight high, lighting the otherwise pitch black stairway, and Nick was leading the silent - and very slow - charge.

No more noises had come from the second floor, but that didn't ease Nick’s concerns. He'd been joking about a Witch in the pawn shop, but now the thought came back to haunt him. The idea made his skin crawl and it was all he could do not to let his nerves show. He couldn't. He had to stiffen his jaw, shake it off, and take point.

A thought occurred to him, and it soothed him in a strange way - *At least Ellis won't be that broken up about it if I get my head lopped off.* He raised the katana in his hands and forced his breath to stay level. "Ro', keep the light up. Blondie, get ready on the door. I'll go in," he uttered in forceful instruction.

Neither of them protested, and Rhiannon slipped past him on the stairs to reach the small landing just before time door to the second floor. She pressed herself into the corner, reaching out to grab the doorknob. Her eyes darted up, body tensing as she waited for Rochelle and Nick to ready themselves.

It wasn't until Nick was poised at the door and Rochelle had the flashlight trained on the gap that she cocked her head.

"Ready, old man?" she breathed and, when he glared, yanked the door open.

He didn't burst in. There was no reason to lose the advantage afforded to them by a bottleneck and a door they could close back up, so he merely jolted into the threshold, sword held up in front of himself. His eyes struggled to find one thing to focus on, assaulted by moving shadows, lit in a ramshackle splash of yellow from Rochelle's flashlight.

There was not a single window in the small loft space, and it was thinly furnished, but packed with cardboard boxes. They were full to bursting, some with papers and folders, but others with assorted items. Dishware and silverware, stuffed animals, clothing - an observation he tucked away for later - and piles of books.

A bed sat on the far right wall, and a desk beside it. He didn't have the time to examine its contents when another detail caught his eye: kneeling beside the bed was a slumped shape. It was a person, bent down on all fours, with one arm stretched beneath the bed. There was only a few inches of space, it seemed, and whatever he was straining for was further than the distance of his arm.

*He,* Nick recognized. *He,* because he could not determine immediately whether the shape was an infected or not. It was too dark, the hunched form intensely focused on reaching his arm under the bed. It was possible, wasn't it? The owner, holed up in his shop?

Nick hesitated. He took a half-step forward, lips parting, ready to call out a warning.

Then the man's head turned, *swung* to face him, and yellow eyes flashed to look at him. They were pinpricks in the dark, and reflected the light shone upon them in an eerie way that shot an animal fear up Nick's spine. His fingers tightened on his weapon, and he readied it above his shoulder.
The infected howled, scrambling away from the bed and charging toward him. It struck into a pile of boxes, almost tumbling, but it caught itself with a wide stagger of feet and lunged at Nick. The gambler was ready, however, and it was simply a matter of completing the swing he'd prepared and poised for.

The blade struck just at the side of its neck, but he felt it stutter. It didn't slide through like he expected, like he'd hit on a dull section of the edge. "Shit -"

Blood guttered around the blade from where it had pierced skin, but the infected continued on unimpeded. It lashed out both hands, one gripping Nick's bicep, the other tangling fingers in his shirt. The zombie staggered into him, and the weight of it nearly sent Nick stumbling back into the stairwell. Rather than risk him or one of his companions falling down the stairs in the struggle, Nick snarled and fought back.

He twisted on his heel, leading with his shoulder to charge into the infected in kind. The creature was less interested in defending its balance than it was on doing damage - and as Nick shoved it back a few steps, its teeth snapped in his face, nails digging into his arm enough to shoot pain through the limb.

Nick was forced to recoil to stop those yellowed teeth from finding purchase on his cheek, but he'd gained himself enough space that he was able to jolt a few steps backward.

Drawing the katana low and shifting his grip on it, Nick thrusted. Where the edge had failed him, the point speared straight through its midsection. He yanked it down, applying his weight, and the blade split the creature from its bellybutton to the top of its pelvis. It screamed and lashed out an arm, striking him in the head with its forearm.

The blow landed across his ear, snapping his head to the side, and his vision swam with it, dizzied. He staggered backwards, unsheathing the katana from its belly as he moved, and a blackened sludge poured from the wound as it tried to advance on him. He raised his arm in a reflexive attempt to defend himself.

It wouldn't have worked. Fortunately, he didn't have to find out, as Rhiannon was suddenly next to him. The blonde lunged, baton pressing just below the creature's jaw. When she depressed the trigger, its neck arched back, face twisting and contorting in more anger than pain.

Though the shock clearly distressed its cognitive abilities and stole away any chance for coordinated movements, it did not immobilize its limbs, and the infected swung wildly with its arms as if to lash out at whatever it could reach. The zombie caught nails in her jacket front, scrabbling, and she released the trigger, winding her arm back.

The infected had almost recovered when she landed a fierce, cracking blow across its mouth. It snarled, spitting blood, and she struck it twice more before it collapsed.

It took Nick a second to shake off the disorientation from the strike. He huffed, blinking his vision back into focus, lifting his head to watch the zombie land in a slump on the ground, blood leeching from its midsection and freshly crushed face. His eyes darted up to watch Rochelle slip into the loft.

"It's dead?" she questioned, sighing lightly when Rhiannon gave the creature a swift kick in the thigh, to no effect. The woman turned toward Nick, reaching out to touch his elbow. "You okay, suit?"

He grunted, placing his palm against his sore ear. "Oh, yeah. Getting boxed out by a zombie and..."
saved by a Bitch of Anarchy. I'm just peachy." Rhiannon sneered at him, shaking her baton to flick off the blood left behind by the zombie, and he sneered back. "I need to sharpen my sword. Apparently."

Rochelle looked around, carefully directing her flashlight around to check over the rest of the room. "God, it reeks in here." she muttered, crinkling her nose. "Guess this sorry son of a bitch has been *stewing* this whole time."

Nick mimicked her, examining the room. With more time to focus, he could acknowledge that she was right. There was a heavy stench dousing the room, blood and decay and something much fouler. Ammonia stung as his nose in waves, and he carefully took a few steps forward, moving up to one of the cardboard boxes that he could see clothes in.

He leaned in to it, sniffing - and he nearly wheeled himself backwards, the smell was so strong. "Aw, fuck." he muttered, disgust making his stomach roil. He retreated from the box, trying not to inhale too deeply. "God. What the fuck is this? I thought we could grab some clothes from here, but screw that. Smells worse than my uncle after a bender."

Paying him little mind beyond a hum, Rochelle muttered, "What was he after, anyway?", picking her way across the small room.

Rhiannon followed after her, moving toward the desk and examining the papers and trinkets littering its surface. As she stepped up, her boots crunched on the waxy white ceramic of a shattered plate. It was, no doubt, the source of the crash they'd heard earlier.

Her attention was stolen by a small picture frame. A man and a woman kneeling together, her arms spread in excitement and him giving a big thumbs-up. Behind them, framed by pristine shades of blue, was a yacht. Rhiannon reached out and touched the glass of the photo, tracing the edges of the ship.

"Hey, uh..." The scattered glow from Rochelle's flashlight let her see, until the other woman knelt down next to the bed. Rhiannon protested her actions immediately, stilling in the pitch black left when the flashlight turned away. "Dude, we're in the dark over here. The shit are you doing?!"

Mostly ignoring her complaint, the producer leaned herself down, directing the flashlight under the bed. She swept it over the space between the floor and the bed, scanning along the wall. "Just looking. I -"

The sound that left her was nearly choked out, a reflexive shriek, more startled than frightened. Nick jolted to advance toward her, moving off the memory of the room. A faulty memory, as it turned out - and he swung a leg directly into this side of a cardboard box, knocking it over with a heavy thump.

The contents of the box tumbled out, clattering as a set of metal cookie pans went sliding to the floor. Nick had time enough to catch his balance before he looked up.

It was not time enough to prepare himself as a pair of glinting eyes came flying at him in the dark. His instinct screamed Hunter, but logic overrode it - not even a Hunter could've fit under the bed. The shape was far too small to be a human, though he could barely even make out the edges of its darkness in contrast to Rochelle's light.

Then it struck his chest, and needle-sharp points of fire pierced through his shirt and directly into his skin. He yelped in pain, dropping his katana to the ground in favour of grabbing for whatever was anchoring itself in his flesh. He didn't know what he expected to find, but he didn't expect fur.
A hiss sounded just beneath his face the instant he'd touched it, and the claws tensed, finding purchase to crawl higher up his front. Pain made him stagger back, and he tried to prise the small body off himself. Gripping the soft fur only drew another growled hiss, and before he could react, teeth sunk into his thumb. They were almost as sharp as the claws, and as determined to not let go.

"Fuck!" he shouted, trying to jerk his hand away and only earning himself the pain of every individual sharp object hooked in his skin jostling all at once. He was blinded by Rochelle turning the flashlight on him, and fully expected the woman to come and help him.

Instead, she maintained her distance and yelled, "Nick! Nick, stop!" He had the presence of mind to think, *Oh, sure. I'm being mauled by a feral cat, but I should stop. Okay. Sure.* before she continued, urgently. "It's scared! Just stop moving, for Christ's sake!"

He froze, forcing his legs and his arms to lock in place. It felt a little like holding still after putting his hand into an activated blender, but he didn't have much choice. Yanking the creature off him would take off most of his flesh with it, if the stabbing pain on his chest was any indication.

So he held still, and held his breath, and there was a remarkably quiet moment where the only sound was a low and constant panting in perfect time with the clench and release of claws in his skin. Its body pressed flatter against him, and he could feel a hummingbird-quick heartbeat beating into his sternum.

Slowly, tenderly, the teeth released his thumb like a tiny bear-trap coming undone.

He had to fight off the urge to jerk his hand away, hesitant to move too quickly. He instead allowed his fingers to slide, just centimeters at a time, and come to rest at its thigh. Applying a small degree of pressure made it hiss again, the sound mingled with a heavy pant, but also took some of the weight so the thing wasn't dangling solely by his flesh.

As his vision cleared of white spots from the flashlight pointing directly at him, he slowly tilted his head down, getting a look at his tiny assailant.

It was equal parts black and orange, merged in a scattered coat of splotches and streaks of fur. Its attention was firmly trained on the rest of the room, head cocked to stare back and forth between the two women standing there, askance.

"Jesus." Rochelle muttered, her voice oddly taut and distressed. "Poor thing."

The gambler tried to choke out a laugh, but even that small movement made the cat tense, sinking its claws a little deeper. He flinched, whispering, "Seriously? I'm getting fucking sliced up here, and you're sorry for the fucking cat?"

There was a beat of silence that, he imagined, contained expressions directed at him. Since he couldn't see them very well past the light, he was spared knowing exactly what kind. Rochelle dropped the flashlight a few inches so it didn't point directly at them before stating: "It's been in here, this whole time, with a zombie trying to eat it - a zombie that's probably its owner. I'm very sorry for the cat."

"I'm surprised the little shitter didn't starve." Rhiannon spoke quietly, sounding less sympathetic and more curious. "And this explains why the place stinks like piss. I fucking hate cats, dude. They're everything that sucks about dogs, with claws and a shitty attitude."

Nick glanced down, startled to find the creature looking directly up at him. Owlish eyes peered up at him from a tremendously round face, pupils blown to black with a ring of pumpkin orange
edging them. Its mouth was open, revealing white teeth, and its sides heaved with the force of its panting.

The cat's nose was almost entirely black except for the smallest touch of pink... though it was more like red, flushed and bright with its elevated heartrate.

"I really want to not be a fucking pin-cushion." he stated, quietly, staring back at the feline as it licked out a bright red tongue in a flash. It wasn't like he expected the creature to comprehend the instruction, but it seemed worth a shot. "Can you please get your goddamn claws out of me?"

Unsurprisingly, it did not respond.

Rochelle approached hesitantly, head shaking. "I didn't... think there were any animals left. There were a lot of reports of pets running away, before the epidemic. Like they sensed it coming." She cautiously leaned in, eyes flickering over the cat curled tightly into Nick's chest. "I figured the rest died, or... starved." She lifted her free hand, stretching it out toward the small cat, knuckles first. "How did you make it in here, little guy?"

The cat whipped its head to stare at her, and Nick felt its claws clench in his skin right before it released him with one paw. The minor relief of pain was quickly traded for more when it lashed out, striking at the air in Rochelle's direction, jostling its whole body in the process.

Rochelle yelped as its claws caught in the skin of her hand, recoiling immediately. The cat outright growled, the sound vibrating into Nick's chest and muffled when it licked its chops. Looking almost hurt, the producer huffed, putting her bloodied knuckle against her lips, soothingly.

"Can you please -" Nick gritted out, eyes watering much despite himself as the agitated creature shifted its weight. "- not piss the cat off?"

"Sorry." she managed, retreating, sounding insulted. "I wasn't trying to..."

The further she got, the more the cat's slim body relaxed. Nick blinked past the pain to look down at it, confusion worming its way into his brain. Why was he safer than her? Why would it have picked one stranger over the other to cling to? A gender difference, perhaps, making it gravitate toward whatever was closest to its deceased owner?

Nick inhaled, squinting as if to try and ready himself for a blow. He raised his other hand, slowly and carefully. The movement of his arm caught the cat's attention, and it twisted to watch him move, sides heaving. Nick almost halted out of fear of a strike - but he steeled himself and went ahead to tenderly placed his fingertips against the cat's back.

He just touched it, lightly. A half-formed hiss left its open mouth, tensing, but it didn't attack.

There was a cautious silence in the room - like a held breath - as he let his fingertips trace down the cat's spine. Its skin flinched and twitched in rapid patterns, but it stayed perilously still as he very slowly stroked its back. Nick almost halted out of fear of a strike - but he steeled himself and went ahead to tenderly placed his fingertips against the cat's back.

"I think it likes you." she murmured, her tone softening.

Rhiannon put her arms in a cross to tap her baton against her thigh, forcing out a thin laugh and lowering her chin. "Can't imagine why." she grumbled.

Blinking down at the cat, Nick watched it look back up at him. Its pupils had shrunk, and its whiskers were high and twitching in an over-stimulated, fearful gesture. He managed to slip his
arm into more of a cradle under its rump, supporting its weight, and only received a small growl for his effort. The sound was a warning, and he was mindful to stop petting it for a moment or two, lest he overwhelm it.

"I'm a pussy magnet." he stated, trying it like a joke, but he was unable to muster up anything like a smirk. A feeling clenched in his chest, a sensation he couldn't quite define. It was fragile and small, and a protective instinct swelled in him before he could stop it.

The creature looked at him desperately, eyes unblinking, like it were trying to communicate something mortally important. The warmth against his sternum from its belly was comforting somehow, and he could almost ignore the pain blaring across his chest. He tightened his arm to gather the feline close to him, a little surprised when the gesture made it loosen its claws.

With his grasp tighter, he could feel its bones jab into him and press into his forearm. The thing may not have starved to death, but he wasn't sure how far off it had been, after all.

He felt shaken.

"I'm... gonna sit on the stairs. For a minute." he uttered, voice distant. He didn't bother to look up at his teammates, aware they were staring at him. He didn't care to know what they thought, or what they could read off his expression. "I don't think there's anything in this shithole for us."

Rochelle offered an innocuous, "Sure. We'll look around real quick."

Nick backed out through the doorway, until he'd found the stairwell wall with his back. It took effort to slide down without bending forward, keeping as still as he could to not jostle the small bundle of fur and claw. That didn't stop it from lacerating his chest on the way down, insecure in the movement and grabbing for purchase with its paws.

As he landed on the edge of the top stair, sliding one leg down the staircase, the cat wriggled its way up to anchor its claws in the shoulder of his shirt. They caught more fabric than skin that time, and he was able to exhale a breath of relief as some of the pain eased.

Its nose was close enough to his jaw that its whiskers tickled at his neck, and he closed his eyes, returning his hand to a slow pet against its spine. Rochelle turned the flashlight away, leaving them in the dark as she examined the rest of the bedroom space with Rhiannon.

The cat laid against his chest, dreadfully silent but for its heavy and winded panting. He found it soothing to feel the creature's heartbeat slow, its breathing soften. It perked at every sound from the bedroom, body tensing at every movement. It was only gradually that Nick crawled his fingers up until he could get the pad of his thumb behind its ear, rubbing there.

"I think you took more blood out of me than most zombies." he muttered down at the creature, sarcastically.

The warm press of a dry nose grazed against his neck, along with the tickle of whiskers as it cautiously sniffed at his skin.

"Probably don't smell great, huh?" His index finger slipped behind its other ear, massaging the back of its head in a careful pinching motion. The cat's shoulders twitched, and he flinched his hand away in anticipation of a bite - only to feel its whole body shake with a heavy sneeze. The pain of its back paws digging into his midsection was enough to make him grit his teeth, but that didn't stop a slightly winded laugh from escaping him.

"Yeah. Figured."
Rochelle's mind was spinning at what felt like a dizzying pace. She had her knuckle between her teeth, pressing her tongue flat against the bleeding slice she'd earned from the cat's ire. A thin section of flesh was detached, bubbling underneath with dots of blood, like a papercut had sheared across her skin.

She didn't blame it. She could barely wrap her head around the idea of what it had gone through, trapped in a small bedroom, hunted constantly by someone it had trusted - loved. She closed her eyes, clenching them tightly, and it was all she could do not to think back to those few early hours of pandemonium, when the apocalypse truly began.

The slow way her cameraman, Neil Lundberg, had begun to sweat, to cough - and then how quickly that had become vomiting out blackened, foul liquid. How fast he went from laughing, joking, to lunging at her. She'd blinked, and he was gone. The young man she'd known for years, bright and hopeful and loving, reduced to murderous rage.

She hadn't killed him. She hadn't had the strength to do it. She'd begged him to stop, even as every instinct told her it was futile. If it hadn't been for a military man passing by who'd shot him dead, she wouldn't have survived. He'd have bashed her skull in, clawed her throat out. She'd sat there, holding his limp and swollen hand, and cried until she had no tears left in her.

It had been easier, when it came to defending herself against Carmine. Maybe it had been easier because Carmine had been so far gone, so warped and alien in an overnight metamorphosis, or maybe it had been easier to defend her team than just herself.

Maybe it just got easier.

She couldn't say, though, that pulling the trigger on a rifle aimed at Brenda's gut had been easy. It had taken something from her that she wasn't sure she'd been able to find yet. There was a hole in her, like the bullet had passed through her as much as it had passed through the Angel's leader. *None of it ever gets easier. It just... stops being a matter of choice at all.*

Rochelle shook her head, trying to shake it off, exhaling a harsh breath.

Loss was not an emotion unique to humans, that much she knew for sure. The small tortoiseshell cat had experienced no less trauma than they had, and it hadn't had anyone there to comfort it all this time. It was a miracle it had accepted anyone at all, let alone that Nick had allowed it to. She genuinely wasn't sure which part surprised her more.

Her eyes darted up, looking toward the doorway, unable to see more than the vague shape of Nick's slouched frame. She'd never seen him that way: never seen that vulnerability so brazenly on display. He'd taken the claws almost in stride, and rather than hurry to get rid of the animal... once he'd realized it was merely afraid, he'd soothed it.

Compassionate was not a word she'd describe him with. There was affection in him, and warmth, but it had taken all they'd been through to uncover any sign of those qualities. It was hard work to earn his trust, and harder still to maintain it. He did not open up easily.

*Maybe it's not so weird that he'd like cats.* That made her laugh, but none of it changed the voice in
the back of her head that chanted out, *This is stupid. We can't keep a cat. What if it cries at night, and draws in infected? Where'll we get food for it? Where would we even start to take care of it?*

Rhiannon walked up to her, hands gripping a small object. The blonde seemed impatient, shifting on her feet, and lifted it up. She pressed it abruptly into Rochelle's hand, insistent. "Check this out."

It took Rochelle a second to gather herself, dragging her eyes away from the doorway and trying her best to focus on the metallic object in her free hand. She didn't realize what it was at first, attention scattered and body numb - and then it clicked. Her eyes darted over the picture frame, examining the photo placed inside. "He's got a ship?" she uttered, distantly.

The biker snatched the ring of keys they'd found downstairs out of the slashed zipper pocket at her thigh, thumb flicking through them until she found a small silver key. She held it up, turning the flat head into the light of Rochelle's torch, and illuminated on the silver metal was a small beveled sailboat.

"There's a fuckton of papers on the desk. Might say something about it." Rhiannon stated, voice low and full of brimming excitement. "Give me the flashlight."

Rochelle acquiesced, handing her the flashlight with a sigh. She lifted her hand to rub her eyes tiredly. It was difficult to remind herself that the bikers had an ulterior motive. Their hunt for a boat had slipped her mind, especially considering Lena's current condition. It seemed far-away.

Rhiannon needed something constructive to focus on, she supposed. Something to do that presumed Lena would survive.

While the blonde stepped back to the desk, aggressively sifting through the paperwork covering the desk and filling the two drawers beneath it, Rochelle eased herself across the room. Although her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she still kept a hand out in front of herself to make sure she didn't run into a cardboard box. It was a slow process, and when she reached the doorway, she dropped to a crouch.

She could barely see Nick, but the cat's two glinting pale yellow eyes flashed toward her, crystal clear in the dark.

"You okay, Nick?" she murmured, rubbing her wrist. "You seem -" Rochelle hesitated, tongue curling against the backs of her teeth, unsure what exactly to say. 'Upset' seemed mild. She was saved having to finish the sentence when the gambler grunted, and she heard him shift his weight.

"Fine." he responded, voice low, and she was surprised to hear so clearly in his voice that he was not. Maybe it was the darkness, and the fact that they couldn't see each other much at all, but he seemed raw and honest, suddenly. "I'm gonna need stitches after this little brat is done."

It wasn't pain in his voice, though. There was something else; a melancholy. She kept her silence, and he continued.

"My uncle had a cat. Tabby he picked up off the street, when I was in high school. Lost his tail getting run over by a car, and he was mostly deaf. You couldn't walk up to him without pissing him off - he never heard you coming, so you'd scare the shit out of him and get slashed for it." Rochelle watched what movement she could see in the dark as he stroked the cat on his chest. "I figured out real quick to come at him from the front. I think he appreciated it, because after a few weeks, he started to come up and sit on my lap."

Pressing her palms together with the photo between them, Rochelle settled for looking down
toward her knees. "He just needed someone to understand him. Give him a chance."

Nick exhaled, shortly, irritation creeping into his shortened diction. "Yeah. Somethin' like that."

Rochelle waited, biting at her lower lip, sure there was more. It didn't take him long.

"My uncle died a few years later. I'd already fucked off and gotten myself an apartment, so - when he died, my parents had to do something with the cat. They tried to get me to take it, but I didn't want to deal with it. It wasn't that I didn't like the cat. I did, I just... I was on my own for the first time, and... stupid. Angry."

Something brewed in his tone with that last word, and she knew there was more to it than he let on. Context she didn't have, and insight he failed to share. Rather than press him on the issue, she simply murmured, "What happened to it?"

The silence that dragged on after her question was tense. Her nerves frayed at it, unable to see his face to know what kind of thought was crossing his eyes. She was tempted to approach, but kept her distance, afraid to upset the cat that had grown so much calmer from earlier. It had grown difficult to know how to handle Nick when part of her wanted to lay him out, but she couldn't stop the instinctive sympathy that dragged at her conscience.

"I've fucking got it." Rhiannon announced, a bit of actual excitement touching her voice. The woman was suddenly striding toward them, the flashlight illuminating the top of the stairs, and Rochelle twisted around to see her gripping a folded piece of paper. "There's a bill for a dock. We've got fucking keys and we know where the boat is. Shit yes. I can't believe it took me this fucking long."

She halted a few feet away from where Rochelle crouched, waving the slip of paper.

"Lee's gonna be over the moon."

Hesitantly, Rochelle glanced back at Nick, now that she could see him. The gambler's eyes were averted, staring downstairs, his hand still on the back of the cat who'd ended up nearly bent over his shoulder. The small orange-and-black cat was completely silent, its paws tucked together on his clavicle and its tail curled tightly between its huddled back legs. Its ears and whiskers twitched compulsively, staring between the two women like any move might set it to growling.

"Nick -" she nearly whispered, but didn't get any further.

"I know." he stated, flatly, abruptly matching her gaze. His eyes were cold now, and tired. "We can't take it." His voice harshened to something angry and mocking, like he were echoing her rather than stating it himself. "The fuck'll we do, right? Cage it up? Get kibble? Find a litter box?"

Rochelle closed her eyes rather than keep looking at him, a pain striking in her chest. "I - even if we kept him... what if something happens to us? All we'll do is lock it up in another room to starve to death if we never came back. We don't have the luxury, Nick. And it's not fair to him, either."

"I know." he spat out, a scowl twisting at his lips. "I'm not a goddamn dumbass."

Silence hung for a moment, and she let her eye reopen, watching him catch the cat's ear between his fingers and roll it gently. The touch made the cat's head lower, and its eyelids threatened to soften for a blink. It shifted its paws in a slow gesture, and its body settled a little tighter against his chest.

Rochelle glanced over her shoulder, and if she could be glad for anything, it was Rhiannon sensing
that she should be quiet. Her hazel eyes were wide and dubious, but she held her tongue, examining the situation in front of her like it were a puzzle. She met gazes with the woman, and softened her face in an encouraging gesture, a small degree of gratitude.

When the blonde awkwardly looked away, Rochelle turned back to Nick. She did reach out, then, and as her fingertips touched Nick's knee, the small cat noticed. Its eyes flashed toward her, tensing up and crawling its body around to face her, hissing out a slow and tired sound. It was an almost heart-breakingly weak noise.

It was exhausted.

The gambler winced in clear pain as its claws must've come back out - but he didn't complain aloud.

"I put a bottle of water in the pack. We can get a bowl and leave it with some water, at least. Give it some time to rest in here." When his head twitched in faint affirmation, she squeezed her fingers on his leg, just softly. "It's a wild animal. It'll have better luck out there than we do, I bet."

Rhiannon did speak up, then, quietly. Her tone had a reedy impatience to it, just a little drawled, and she thumbed over her shoulder. "There's actually some bowls in there. They were under the desk. Water bowl's almost dry, and it tore into a food bag in one of those boxes. Must've been crawling around whenever the zombie got distracted. It would've starved otherwise, for fuckin' sure."

Nodding with a tense sigh, Rochelle stretched a hand out to point downstairs. "Just. Give us a minute, okay?" she mumbled. "Why don't you go down and check out those golf clubs real quick?"

The biker's expression flashed with a slight annoyance, but she handed Rochelle the flashlight and slipped to obey, anyway. Her approach sent the cat into a sharp hiss, jolting its front legs straight to ease itself off Nick's shoulder. Its back arched awkwardly as it faced her, tail twitching low in a fearfully aggressive gesture. She huffed out a laugh, sneering down at it as she moved past Nick.

Just as she came almost into range, the tortoiseshell cat lashed out with a paw, swiping in three quick gestures that all struck only air. It nearly overbalanced itself in the gesture, scrabbling for purchase on Nick's arm. Whistling out in a pained breath, Nick moved to smooth his hand over its side, trying to calm it. However, the cat snapped its head around and landed a bite square on his wrist. He flinched and jerked his hand back, grimacing.

"Y'know, I hate her too. Don't need to bite me. .." he muttered at the cat, who only had eyes for Rhiannon as she descended the stairs.

Rochelle couldn't help a small frown, gazing at him. She slowly pulled the backpack off her shoulders, unzipping it and fishing out the water bottle tucked deep in one corner. "Here." she murmured, offering the bottle out to him. The cat stared at her extended hand, tense, until Nick reached out to snatch the bottle from her. "Do you... want me here? Or -"

"No." he grunted. He fist ed his hand around the bottle and set his knuckles against the ground, pushing himself up. His other arm scooped under the cat to hold it to his chest, keeping it there as he got to his feet. "Brat's not gonna let me go with you here."

Rather than move past him, Rochelle slipped back a few steps and gave him room to come into the bedroom. She placed the flashlight on the ground, letting it roll to illuminate the room, and shuffled into the stairwell landing before coming to her feet. She turned, looking after him where he stood beside the fallen corpse of the pawn shop owner.
His shoulders were high, turned away from her. She could just see a set of eyes peeping over his shoulder, staring at her with such an intensity she couldn't help but feel a swell of guilt. "We're - I'm right, aren't I, Nick?" she ghosted out, gaze dropping to the ground. "Maybe -"

"You want to bring a cat home, and get it killed?" His tone cut, and it was angry, and she knew it wasn't directed at her. "Give everyone the choice of wasting food on it, or starving it? What if it gets sick, or hurt? You want that on our shoulders? A new reason to be fucking miserable, like we don't have enough?"

Rochelle didn't say anything, curling her fingers into a fist.

"If we let it go, at least it can be outside and hunt. Take care of itself. If it can dodge a zombie locked in a bedroom, it can dodge them outside." he muttered, stepping into the room, carrying the cat toward the desk. "We can barely take care of ourselves, let alone a fucking pet, as if we haven't picked up enough strays already. We saved it from starving to death in that bedroom. That's all we can do."

She got the feeling he was talking to himself more than her - but she let him have it, and didn't argue. Tucking her arms in a soft hug across her chest, she turned away, carefully moving to start making her way down the stairs. She'd already passed the doorway when he called after her.

"... They put him down."

She halted, and her footsteps stopping must've been enough of a query that he elaborated.

"My uncle's cat. My parents put him down. They said he was violent, because they didn't give enough of a shit to work with him. I didn't find out until it was already done. Always felt like I left the grumpy furbag to die."

Her gaze dropped, eyes closing for just a beat. The words sat on her chest, crushing out a tiny breath. Nick said nothing, and she knew him well enough to know she had nothing to say back that he would accept. She shoved the framed photo in her backpack to free her hands so she could follow the wall with her palm and balance herself, maneuvering down in the dimming light.

The hole in her gut felt a little bigger.

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO [here-comes-the-boom on AO3](https://www.a03.com) - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
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Chapter 216

When Nick stepped out of the pawn shop, he sucked in a heavy breath. The air wasn't pristine, but it was clear and fresh in contrast to the air in the shop's upper floor. He glanced around the parking lot, scanning for danger.

There were a few infected wandering the street, but they hadn't noticed him yet. He had enough breathing room to close his eyes for a moment, trying to calm the turmoil in his stomach. He shouldn't have been upset. It shouldn't have dug at him like this.

The cat hadn't known what was happening. He'd set it down, and it had lapped up a few desperate mouthfuls of the water he'd set out for it, and then bolted back under the bed. It hadn't had any awareness of its circumstance, or the instinct to do anything but hide.

It was a shitty goodbye, but wasn't it appropriate?

They didn't have any other choice. It was the only realistic thing to do, and the fact that he felt guilty didn't make him wrong. They couldn't take on the responsibility - or the risk. The last thing they needed was the added stress. He could only imagine the team's reaction to having a pet. Worse, their reaction when something inevitably happened to it.

It was begging for an unhappy end.

Letting it go was better for both of them.

Or maybe this is just another round of 'Nick quits rather than lose'. He sighed harshly, head shaking, palming down the plane of his face. Jesus. This is getting to me.

Footsteps approached as his teammates joined him outside the pawn shop, and he reluctantly looked back to find Rochelle pushing the pawn shop door wide open. Gripped in her other hand was a small wedge-shaped block, and she dropped it next to the door before kicking it into place, nestled under the door and holding it open.

He watched her for a moment, before letting his gaze shift to watch Rhiannon step past her. The blonde had tucked the haft of her stun baton into the back of her black pants, the already tight fabric straining at her hips, and had in her hands a weighty golf club. She drew it close, and held it out, moving it as if to test her grip.

"This thing's either gonna bust some heads, or bend in one go. Let's fuckin' find out." She grinned, just a slash of teeth between her lips, and bolted out into the middle of the parking lot. She leapt into a low stance, swinging the club just at shoulder-height and shouting out: "Come on, shitstains!"

Rochelle uttered a faintly nervous sound, shrugging her backpack higher on her back before jogging after the other woman. "You like tempting fate, huh?" she muttered, earning a loud, pleased laugh from the biker. Rochelle freed the bat from its place in the pack on her shoulders, moving just close enough without stepping into range of Rhiannon's backswing.

Nick couldn't get himself to care enough to join in. He watched with a quiet kind of apathy as the infected charged them. Rochelle darted to the side, and the zombies split between them. Rhiannon nearly jumped into her swing, and the head of the club struck into the oncoming zombie's skull so hard it cracked open.
Gore dripped from the iron, and she might've celebrated had the next infected not been right behind.

The two women took the handful of infected with wordless coordination and practiced ease. Rochelle's palm, healing from getting sliced grabbing Brenda's katana and holding it from her throat, seemed not to bother her.

Indelicately, Nick hooked a finger in the collar of his shirt and pulled it away. He could finally get a look at the damage done to his chest, and it was not insignificant. Stripes of red wound amongst the hair on his sternum, droplets of blood having bled through his faded blue shirt.

He glanced at his thumb, too, and found gentle bruising in the shape of a tiny mouth. It hadn't actually broken skin, as it turned out. *Hurt like it did.*

*The brat's a fighter.*

That thought crystallized into a feeling he could only describe as misery.

Panting heavily as she brought the bat into a horizontal shove, pushing an infected back and earning herself enough room to prepare a swing, Rochelle burst out, "Having a nap, Nick? I didn't know you liked making the women do all the work." She struck the zombie square in the nose, the metal banding slicing at skin.

It stumbled, blood gushing from its nose, and a flash of silver followed the head of Rhiannon's golf club as it seated itself in the zombie's skull. "I saw that shit coming a mile away." The blonde grinned fiercely. "What's the term for a dude starfishing?"

"Sex?" was Rochelle's morose response, and their explosion of cackling set a surreal background to the infected left dying on the ground. Rochelle turned on her heel, struggling with a smile - though it faded the moment her eyes alighted on Nick's expression.

He looked nauseated.

"C'mon, nothing? No bite?" she tried, but when it earned nothing but a vague stare that said he hadn't been listening... a sigh escaped her, and she moved to quickly close the gap between them. Irritation flashed into her voice. "Nick. You're this upset about a cat, and you can't spare a minute to be upset about -"

That got a reaction. His eyes narrowed, threateningly, and she was forced to lift a hand in a coaxing gesture.

"I'm just saying." She lowered her gaze, biting onto the inside of her cheek. "I really don't want to be the cold one here, but we've got too much to deal with already, and it's just not feasible. We have to be *logical* about this. You know I'm right. You *said* I was right."

Nick slid his hand to grab at his chin, thumb tucking underneath his jawline to press against the softness behind the bone. He inhaled sharply, aware of Rhiannon turning to look over at them. A mild frustration set her foot to tapping.

A much less mild frustration set his heart to pounding.

"Give me the radio." he stated, low and matter-of-fact. It was easy to tell she had no intention of doing so, and before she could protest, he continued. A snide edge touched his voice, despite the fact that he was dead serious. "We're supposed to vote on shit like this, aren't we?"
Rochelle took a step back, releasing a scoffing breath. "Nicolas. You know full well that's a terrible idea. You know if Ellis heard anything about this, he'd never let it go." She put a fisted hand against her other bicep, like a half-cross. "Are you seriously going to put this on them?"

Nick laughed, outright. "Oh, so I hide shit from the group and I'm an asshole. You do it and you're just looking out for 'em. Is that how it is?"

She gritted her jaw, clenching her teeth against each other, pushing a palm against her temple. "Jesus. I am not the bad guy here, and you know it. You're emotional about it, and that'd be fine, if you were honest about it instead of being a dick." Anger made her turn away, rubbing at her eyes, like she couldn't stand to look at him.

Looking away left her surprised when he muttered, "... I don't want to leave it."

Rochelle spun back around, lips falling to a flattened line. Her eyes traced his expression, soaking in the tension and the frustration there - and she sighed. Her whole body slumped a little, and it was reluctantly that she reached to pull the radio from where it sat hooked on her backpack's side pocket.

"I still think it's a bad idea." she murmured, pressing it into his hand. "But if we're gonna make a bad choice, then yeah. You're right. We can at least make it together."

Nick avoided meeting her gaze. His face felt hot, and it was with a sharp turn that he directed his body away. Maybe he felt like everything was spiralling out of control - a hilarious under-exaggeration, considering the world as they knew it had ended - and he needed to dig his heels in on something. Seize control.

*Or it's just a pathetic attempt to fill a hole. Same hole I've been trying to fill for years. Booze, sex, gambling. It all just makes it bigger.* Blindly, he thumbed the radio's activation trigger and grated out a quiet phrase before he lost his nerve. "Someone there?"

*The same hole I don't want Ellis to fall into with me.*

It hurt to think. The blunt truth of it pained him. It wasn't news to him, really, but it felt like the first time he'd admitted it to himself. It was easy to say he was a shitty person, and that he'd be bad for Ellis. Easier still to use that martyrdom, that self-hatred, to push off the obvious next assumption.

*I wanted him. I wanted the stupid dream he believes in. I wanted to be whoever the hell he seems to think I am.*

*I still do.*

"We need to talk."
It had not taken long for Lena to drift off. Their short game and her coughing fit had exhausted her, and she'd fallen asleep as soon as attention wasn't focused on her.

Ellis was left gripping the cloth he'd cleaned her mouth up with, eyes on the smear of bright red blood. A thoughtful frown touched his lips, slowly folding the cloth in half, feeling a twist in his gut. He felt even more helpless than he had watching Chris suffer.

At least there had been things he could do; they could wash and bandage him, give him medication. Lena was suffering injuries for which there was no care or treatment. It would have taken actual surgical experience to stop whatever was hemorrhaging in her midsection. All they could do was watch.

He didn't want to watch.

A hand alighted on his shoulder, and he blinked up to find Coach gazing at him, somber and quiet. The big man shifted to sit on the barstool next to him, leaning his elbow on the bar counter while leaving his hand where it was. "You doin' a'ight? You look like you're thinkin'."

Ellis lowered his gaze, sighing out a breath. "Just worryin'. She's gettin' worse. I feel useless watchin' it happen."

Grunting in agreement, Coach let his hand squeeze on the younger man's shoulder. "Shit ain't easy. But who knows what'll happen. I'd never have thought Chris would make it, an' here he is, crackin' wise like nothin' changed." Ellis didn't look convinced, glancing over at Christophe, where the man sat alone on the small bundle of blankets that made up his bed on the floor.

He'd not missed how the Spaniard had suddenly taken to zoning out, his hand clenching on the empty space where his other one might've lain on his thigh or hung in the air. He had it filed away for a time when it felt appropriate to talk to the man about it. It seemed like pain, and the last thing he wanted was the Spaniard to be suffering in silence.

"This whole situation, it makes us hardy. Those girls ain't lasted this long without bein' tough. You ain't wrong that we can't do anythin' - it's up to her an' God. But we're givin' her the best shot, keepin' her safe here. It's all we can do." Coach leaned in, and Ellis was forced to look back at him. The older man smiled. "That an' keep morale up, right?"

The brunette couldn't even force a smile back, sighing out a frustrated noise. "Sorta gettin' tired of that bein' all I can do." He didn't mean it as caustically as it came out of him, but he couldn't help it. Ducking his chin, he scooted off the stool and to his feet. "I'm gonna check on Chris."

Coach watched him go, a frown playing at his lips. It was with a heavy sigh that he resigned himself to silence, palming against his forehead.

Chris didn't seem to notice Ellis' approach. It wasn't until he could have touched the Spaniard that he finally shifted to attention, warm brown eyes darting up, a look on his dark features like he'd been caught. "Oh - hola." he quickly uttered, scrambling for a smile.

"Hey, man." Ellis dropped down into a crouch, tugging on the edges of his boxers to ensure his decency remained intact despite their dogged attempts to ride up his thighs. He ignored the slow way Chris noticed and expanded his smile into a slight grin. "You okay? Need anythin'?"
The foreigner blinked, and Ellis had come to recognize it as the flutter of lashes that preceded him misdirecting the conversation. An act of innocence; a ploy. It didn't frustrate him, but it did confirm that the man was hiding something. "Me? I am fine, chico. Pero... ¿Cómo estás? If you miss Nico half as much as I miss Rochelle -"

Ellis decided to let him have the win, and allowed the conversation to drift out of his control.

He huffed a laugh, slowly putting his elbows on his knees and pursing his face into a grimace. "Just can't let it go, huh?" When Chris merely smiled, all sublime wickedness, he closed his eyes. "I dunno. We're... okay, I guess. Like, we can talk without fightin', and he don't seem so angry all the time anymore. I just ain't sure where tuh go from here. I..." He hesitated, eyes flickering open to stare at the ground.

He couldn't help but think back to the fight he had with Nick in the condo, where the older man had snarled out his reasoning for acting so vitriolic: that if he didn't keep Ellis at arms' length, they'd end up in bed together. That Ellis would, inevitably, try to mend things, and Nick would use the leverage for sex.

'Because I'm not a good enough guy to say no.' was what he'd said.

It was tremendously confusing, when all Ellis heard from it was: 'I don't want to hurt you.'

The Spaniard watched him, his expression slipping to something curious, prompting him to continue with a gentle, "¿Qué?"

"Uh." Ellis looked up at him with a quiet exhale of breath, trying to decide how to put the words together to explain. The honest truth was that he didn't even know what he wanted anymore. It wasn't so much that he felt differently about the man - he knew he didn't, deep down - but he definitely knew he wanted things to change.

Though a desperate, tiny little part of him probably wasn't strong enough to say no, it wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want to tumble back into their half-baked relationship, even if the alternative was never having anything at all between them. He wanted something real, even if Nick decided he could never give that.

But, if he could... if it were possible... if there were a way to rebuild what they'd broken... he wanted it with Nick.

That much sang in a klaxon truth through his very soul.

"¡Cristo todopoderoso!" Christophe crowed out, only quieting himself back to a mutter when Coach shot him a warning look from across the restaurant. "You make me wait so long, I think it is better to guess." Without giving Ellis time to protest, the man leaned in, nudging his bare knee with a knuckle. "You want to forgive him, but he has to earn it, ¿sí?"

Ellis must've looked a little dumbfounded, because Chris flashed a triumphant look. "No soy estúpido." he stated. "And it is normal. You want him - ah, ¿suplicar? You want him to beg, ¿creo?"

Frowning, the Georgian shifted to drop down to the ground, sliding his legs into a cross as he landed flat on his rear. He didn't like the idea of making Nick beg, even if the idea of Nick begging for him put a warmth in his chest. "It ain't like that. I'm just worried 'bout... lettin' him off the hook, I guess. That if we're friendly, I'm... sendin' the wrong message, I guess. I like us not arguin' so much, it's just... it's hard tuh..."
"It is hard to be angry with someone you want to fuck, and hard to fuck someone you want to be angry with." Christophe finished for him, smiling in a blissful way that suggested he thought he was being genuinely helpful. Ellis choked on his own saliva, slapping a hand over his chest. He jolted to look behind him, and judging by the way Coach was looking fiercely down at the floor, he was listening.

"Uh -" Ellis barely managed to utter.

He was saved the mortification of continuing the conversation when he heard the crackle of radio static. He'd left it on the bar - now next to Coach.

"Somebody there?"

Nick's voice prompted a considerable colour over Ellis' cheeks, and he started to stand, inwardly cursing the timing. However, he hadn't even gotten fully to his feet before Coach waved him off and grabbed up the radio. Ellis was left to stand there, awkwardly watching, unsure which outcome would've been worse: Coach talking to Nick after that conversation, or him.

"We need to talk." It was grim, but not frantic.

Resting his elbow on the counter, Coach reluctantly hovered the radio next to his mouth, eyes closing in a look of subtle consternation. It was the silent suffering of a tired man, who'd run out of gas and couldn't even find the energy to protest his lot in life anymore. "I got you, Nick. What's goin' on?"

"I -" The pause was full of dead static, like Nick sat there with the TALK button depressed, trying to decide what to say. "Is everybody with you?"

"Mostly. Lena's restin'. Why?" Though Ellis had been listening closely, the words drew Chris' complete attention, tilting slightly to look around Ellis' legs.

"That's fine." His voice flashed to irritation, quickening - but more than that, Ellis couldn't help but think he sounded upset. "Look, we found something at the pawn shop, and we need to agree on what to do about it. Vote."

Coach's attitude wrapped right back around to impatience, using his free hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose. He used his elbow to haul himself off the stool, getting to his feet and walking toward the two other men. A small glance as he passed by confirmed Lena was still fast asleep. "Spit it out, Nick. You're gonna give me an ulcer."

"... There's - a cat."

The silence that followed was deafening. Coach was only a few feet away at that point, but he stopped dead in his tracks, staring at the radio. It was slowly that his gaze ticked up. He must've found equal amounts of disbelief on both of them, because his eyes seemed unsure whether to settle on Ellis' face or Chris'.

"Yes, you heard me."

That stirred Ellis into motion, babbling, almost faster than his mouth could keep up with. "Whut the - hell - are you tellin' me they found a cat? How could - how'd it survive all this time?! I thought all the animals got eaten by zombies, or somethin' - is it okay? Where -"

"I can hear Ellis freaking out from here."

The Georgian startled, but Coach turned the radio
immediately to display the fact his thumb was not on the trigger. That was almost worse. "Look, Rochelle is giving me a fucking death glare, so I'm just g-"

A moment of silence preceded the radio clicking back on, Rochelle's gentled voice taking over. "Guys. I know the instinct is to save it. I get it, okay? I really, honestly do. But I've got to be the voice of reason here and say there's a lot to consider here. If we take it in, we're taking on a lot of responsibility."

Chris reached out suddenly, grabbing Ellis' wrist. The Georgian quickly responded and clasped his forearm, half-turning, to help the Spaniard to his feet. "If it has lived this long, why would it need us?" he gasped out, voice smoothing out once he'd caught his balance.

Ellis outright stepped back, eyes widening like he'd been slapped. "That's -" he stuttered in horror. The foreigner seemed a little startled, like he'd not anticipated the reaction, a sluggish apology sinking over his eyes even as Ellis burst out a protest. "It's a cat, Chris! It ain't meant tuh be alone out there, with all them zombies, like -"

Coach flung a hand up, palm flat, silencing both of them. "Let me talk, kids, damn." Only once both men were looking at him did he lift the radio and speak into it. "What's the situation, Ro'? How'd you find it?" When Ellis looked ready to speak, Coach's eyes went sharp, warning him to stay silent. "An' why not just let it go?"

A sigh rustled into the radio. "I... It was locked up in the pawn shop. Its owner holed up there, but he turned. He's been hunting it around the bedroom for who knows how long." Shock dropped Ellis' jaw, and he barely kept himself back from lunging after the radio. "It's not exactly an alleycat. So - no, I'm not gonna pretend I think it's gonna thrive on the streets. But how are we supposed to take care of it? Feed it? Keep it safe? It's scary, Coach. It's a scary burden to take on."

Sighing, shifting his hand to rub over the whole length of his face, Coach affirmed the sentiment with a grunt into the radio before lowering it. He spared a look at Ellis, eyes dark and conflicted.

"Son... I know how you feel. But Ro's right, too. This ain't as easy as it would be, if shit was different. If we can't take care of it - it'll be better off on its own. My family had a cat for years, thing spent more time outside than in, hunted mice an' birds more than it ate from us."

Flinching his jaw tight, Ellis curled his hands into fists and leaned in. His voice went firm, conviction inflating his chest. "This ain't the same. It ain't right tuh just abandon it. We're the only other folk it'll ever see, that ain't tryin' tuh eat it. It lost its dad - it ain't got anyone else."

Coach did not look convinced, but he examined Ellis' posture, and resignation touched his eyes. He lifted the radio, thumbing the TALK button. "What do y'all think?"

"Rhiannon is a no. I - I think it's a bad idea. Nick is a yes."

That startled Ellis. All his frustration and conviction dissipated, leaving only a wide-eyed confusion. Nick, voting against logic and reason and the best interest of the group, and landing on the side of selfless kindness? To save an animal? The same man who'd violently protested at every turn as they decided to save other people, first Christophe and now Lena?

It wasn't that he thought the rest of his teammates were being cruel. He understood the concerns, and the risks associated with the choice. Taking on a pet was not something they'd ever planned for, and with two injured teammates, it was already a careful balancing act. He appreciated that. He just hadn't expected Nick to be on his side.
Quietly, Coach's eyes darted to Chris. A brow silently raised, prompting the foreigner.

Christophe paled a little, caught between Coach and then Ellis. He panted out a slight laugh, ducking his chin, looking abruptly like he'd have preferred fainting. A small gesture of his hand highlighted his bandaged shoulder. "I am here because you all pity me. I cannot say no to someone else."

Ellis immediately looked back to Coach, his heart rate picking up in his chest and his throat. If the older man refused, then they'd be tied, and it would come down to Lena... if the woman was even in a state to wake up, let alone vote. If he agreed, then her vote would be inconsequential, anyway.

The ex-football player lowered his shoulders, posture outright drooping, his head shaking in a slow motion.

Ellis felt his gut drop.

Then Coach muttered, harshly, "You got a worse puppy-dog look than my daughter." He lifted the radio, sighing before stating into the grille of the microphone: "Got three yes votes. Looks like we're gonna figure this one out on the go."

He was almost sure he heard a weary "Okay. We'll figure out a way to catch it and get it back to base." from Rochelle, but any shot at responding was stolen from him by the full-force collision Ellis had with his gut. The kid's arms were around him and squeezing in an instant, a chorus of "Thank-you!"'s muffled into his chest.

There wasn't anything for Coach to do but to set a hand on the crown of his head and sigh, deeper.

"Ain't sure I'm doin' any of us a favour."

All the same, he held onto Ellis for a few moments longer.
Chapter 218

The waiting was insufferable. Pacing seemed the only reasonable way to vent the energy buzzing in his skin, and Ellis took to circling the restaurant tables, cap in his hands. He didn't know if he was excited or afraid, but he knew whatever it was, it was too much.

Coach had his eyes closed, seeming strangely calm, and Chris' head ticked to watch him orbit the room. Ellis kept expecting someone to snap at him, to tell him to quit it, but the chastisement never came.

It took everything he had to keep from rushing over to the radio and demanding an update. The lack of contact drove him crazy, and his mind flittered between the possible outcomes. Maybe they'd run into trouble, or the cat had escaped. Maybe they'd gotten into trouble because of the cat or due to the extra time they'd had to spend.

What if the very first thing to happen was trouble because of their new charge?

It took what felt like hours. He was almost sure he'd go crazy waiting - and then there was gunfire, the short and snappy crack of a handgun. The moment he heard it, he was off, bolting for the table where he'd left Nick's Magnum. It felt cold and heavy in his hands, and he gripped it tight as he bolted for the front door.

His socked feet skidded as he turned the corner into the walled-off walkway, a hand lurching to grab the edge of the divider and sling himself around. Even as he ran to the door, his neck twisted, trying to look out the windows as he passed them.

Coach was not far behind, but Ellis didn't have enough patience to wait.

Twisting the lock undone and thrusting open the door, Ellis scrambled out onto the screened-in porch. He landed in an awkward stance, like he only just kept himself from running outside entirely, and scanned the street eagerly.

When the rest of their team appeared, it was not the sight he expected. Rhiannon had Nick's katana in her grip, walking backwards behind them, and Rochelle was to the side with her handgun. Nick had his sniper rifle and Coach's double-barrel shotgun shouldered on his right arm, his left hand busy holding a rectangular, dark blue canvas shape, about the size of a small duffel bag.

It took Ellis a minute to realize it was a pet carrier.

A few infected sprinted into sight, chasing after them. Rhiannon darted forward, slashing as she moved, blade hacking through the delicate flesh of the nearest one's face. The edge skated across bone, taking messy hunks out of its nose and cheek, and it stumbled to the ground. She took advantage of the falter to jab the point of the blade through its neck and twist.

Rochelle let the other two infected get just close enough - and then the shotgun went off, one blast after the other. The first shot punched a hole through one zombie's midsection, big enough to shear the flesh off its ribs and reveal its spinal column. The second one jolted higher as the recoil lifted the barrel of the gun, and the next zombie's skull burst in a flash of black and red gore.

They kept moving, Rochelle retaking her place at Nick's flank, and they darted across the parking lot and up to the restaurant. Ellis quickly opened the porch door, pressing himself against the threshold to make room for them to come through. He couldn't help but blink up at their faces as they passed.
Nick looked oddly calm, and didn't acknowledge him at all. Rochelle strained to put together a smile before he noticed she seemed stressed. Rhiannon winked at him, practically cheery.

He didn't know which one threw him off more.

"Where'd y'all even find a li'l cat case like that?" he couldn't help but question, bewildered, closing the porch door behind them. He spared a careful glance to ensure there was nothing still after them before he followed his teammates into the café. By the time he'd made it inside and locked the door behind them, Rochelle was the only one still waiting for him.

"Its owner had it." she answered, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "We got lucky. Though the thing's so attached to Nick, I'm pretty sure he could have just carried it the whole way."

Ellis found himself immediately screwing up his brows, startled. "Really...?" He still wasn't used to the idea, and the image summoned by the statement was surprising to say the least. He hadn't expected Nick and pets to land in the same sentence, and he didn't really know what to do with the new information. "H... huh."

"Mm." Rochelle turned away, slumping a little under the weight of the backpack on her shoulder. She walked down the wooden walkway, voice tired and quiet. "No hard feelings about the cat, right...? I wasn't trying to be mean, I'm just... concerned we're in over our heads."

Instantly, Ellis shook his head. His eyes darted to the floor as he followed after her. "Nah. I get it, I just - couldn't sleep if we didn't do nothin'."

Rochelle laughed gently. "You're a big softie. I'd never ask you to change that." She continued on into the restaurant, eyes darting to account for Coach and Chris before settling on Rhiannon where she stood next to Lena. The blonde's head was low, her hand settled on her older sister's forehead. "Is she okay?"

"Más o menos." escaped Chris from where he sat on the floor, wrapped in a thin blanket.

The gentle rumble of Coach's voice cut in, reluctant. "Girl had a little fit. Coughed up some blood. She was doin' a'ight for a while before that, but tired herself out. Ain't had good news today." It was bluntly honest, and Rhiannon's chin dropped in response.

When she turned away, her expression had fallen to a coldness. Whatever cheer that had been there earlier was gone. She sat on the bench, and did not have eyes for anything but the floor.

Hesitantly, Ellis twisted his head to look at Nick. The gambler had slipped back into the booth he'd claimed for himself, setting the pet carrier on the table. He hunched down, looking in through the mesh front to peek in on the animal inside. Curiosity grabbed Ellis by the ear and he was approaching before he could stop himself.

"Uh... hey." he managed, awkwardly. Nick glanced up, and their eyes met with an ease. Ellis came to stand near the end of the table, hands fidgeting down to tug at his boxers.

Slowly, Nick placed a hand on the top of the carrier and turned it, sliding it to face the Georgian. The older man's eyes were hard to read, curious and attentive. "Wanna see?" he offered - but before Ellis could move or nod, he warned, "It's taken a swing at everyone else so far. So watch your fingers."

Ellis frowned a little. "I'm usually pretty good with animals..." He shifted, dropping down to a crouch to get himself at eye-level with the mesh of the pet carrier, and squinted inside. The first thing that struck him was the brilliance of two orange eyes, peeping at him from the dark. He
clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and those eyes stayed trained on him in unblinking silence.

He raised a hand, gently pressing one fingertip against the mesh. "Hey, li'l -"

The second thing to strike him was more literal.

Jolting forward and giving him just a glimpse of its mottled orange-and-black fur, the cat slashed a paw at the mesh, catching in the fabric rather than his skin. He recoiled, a startled noise escaping his lips as he reflexively looked at his fingers to confirm they hadn't gotten nicked. When he found no blood, he lifted his gaze back up.

Those orange eyes had returned to the dark. It was telling, in his opinion: the cat wasn't pressed against the mesh, hissing and trying to reach him. It had fled immediately to the very back of the carrier. It was scared, not angry. "It's okay, buddy." he hushed out, settling back on his heels. The moment he leaned away, he saw it shift, eyes lowering in the dark as it curled itself down on the floor of the carrier. "I ain't gonna hurt you."

Nick set an elbow against the table and put his palm against his jaw. The gesture slumped him, and Ellis' eyes caught on his chest. The blood speckling his shirt wasn't anything out of the ordinary, and Ellis wouldn't have thought to examine it. With Nick's posture, however, he could see past the open part of his undone shirt buttons.

Cat scratches laced his chest, visible as red lines through the hair on his sternum. A frown touched the younger man's lips, blinking up at his face.

"I didn't know you liked cats."

A slight smirk twitched at Nick's face, abruptly closing his eyes with a light exhale. "It's not really like that. I hate pets. Never had an interest in some fuzzball shedding all over my clothes and tearing up my furniture." Ellis watched him, dubiously, and it wasn't long before Nick added, "But, ya know. If I had to have something, it'd have been a cat."

Crossing his arms over his knees, Ellis smiled a little. "Guess that ain't a huge surprise." To the older man's arched brow, he clarified: "A-holes get along with each other, usually."

Nick's affront was tremendously gratifying, only worsened by the short laugh that escaped Christophe. "... Fuck off, both of you."

"We still have some things to work out." Rochelle sighed out. When Ellis turned to look at her, she was hopping up onto one of the restaurant tables, dangling her legs off it. "We found a lot of ammo, so that's off our list - but now we've got a cat to worry about." She slung the backpack off her shoulders, unzipping the front pocket, and dragged out the wadded-up shape of a laminated paper bag. "There was a little cat food left, too, but it's not gonna last that long."

With the slightest tone of irritation, Nick leaned up and back into the booth seat. "I was thinking about that." He lifted a hand, gesturing flatly. "We were arguing between saving it, and letting it loose. So we compromise."

Rochelle crossed her arms, slowly, tilting her head. "I'm listening."

"We crack a window in the front, and cut a hole in the side of the porch screen. Let it come and go." He didn't miss Ellis' heavy frown, and shook his head. "If it runs away, we weren't going to be able to keep it here, anyway. And if it can hunt something out there, then that's less we have to feed it. Plus, we're on a beach. It's a giant litterbox out there."
Ellis ducked his chin down to look into the carrier, watching the pumpkin-coloured eyes flicker to stare him down. "But... whut if it gets hurt out there? Ain't we tryin' tuh keep it safe?"

It was Rochelle who spoke up, leaning her head back on her neck. "Yeah, but we can only do so much. And if it can take care of itself even a little, that's a big deal for us. Could be the difference between this working out." She glanced at Nick, head still draped backwards as if to stretch out her neck. "You think it'd come back?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders. "Do we have another choice?"

Coach sighed, bouncing his knee idly as he did. "This is the damn last time I let y'all go out on yo' own. I turn around, and y'all start bringin' pets in this house." He stood, wiping his palm over the scruffy stubble covering his chin and jaw. "We at least gonna see this new damn spot of trouble?"

Grabbing at the edge of the carrier, Nick unzipped the front, pulling the mesh cover open. Ellis couldn't help but flinch when he reached in, but there was no hiss and no scrabble or flash of claws. He watched, a little surprised, as Nick gently drew out the small feline. His hand was tucked under its belly, and it curled its paws and tail up, only scrabbling for a moment on his forearm before he set it down on the table.

Instantly, it was down into a low crouch. The cat tentatively scanned the room, pink mouth hanging open as it huffed in a few breaths, like it were tasting and sniffing the air all at once. Its whiskers trembled, and as its sides heaved with the force of its inhale, it gave a low and hollow growl.

"Ah, más bello." Chris uttered with a soft whistle, staying very still where he sat. "Un gato precioso."

Coach took one step forward, and in a flash, the cat was scrambling across the table. Its paws skidded on the wood for an instant before it caught traction. Nick uttered a grunt as it scrambled down onto the bench and - judging by the way his hips rolled forward to pull away from the booth's seatback - burrowed into the space behind him.

Even Nick looked a little startled at the act, with an expression somewhat like he'd been goosed.

"Damn." Ellis uttered, scooting to the side. He could almost see the glint of eyes peering out from the dark space behind the small of Nick's back. "You weren't kiddin'. It's real skittish, and it definitely likes you..."

Rochelle laughed slightly, raising her hand. The bloodied knuckle she'd received from the cat earlier had scabbed over, a line of red gone dark and congealed. "Skittish is a word. Little scamp nearly took my finger off." She nodded toward Nick with a slight grin. "Guess Nick has a new friend, since none of us can touch the thing."

Nick shifted a little, stretching one arm behind his back, settling a hand on the cat's back. "I think 'leech' is a better word, considering it won't let go for two minutes." he uttered. "And it's bleeding me about as much."

Rochelle laughed slightly, raising her hand. The bloodied knuckle she'd received from the cat earlier had scabbed over, a line of red gone dark and congealed. "Skittish is a word. Little scamp nearly took my finger off." She nodded toward Nick with a slight grin. "Guess Nick has a new friend, since none of us can touch the thing."

Standing up in a slow motion, Ellis put his hands on his hips. "Maybe it just needs some time. From whut y'all said, it's had a real hard time. I know I'd be real freaked if I'd been trapped in a room fer that long, let alone with a zombie. Best if we just let it get some rest. Maybe it'll calm down."

Nick shifted his weight, careful to keep from leaning back and squishing the cat dug in between
him and the booth. The cat was utterly silent now that it had hidden away again. "Great. We'll just let it rest. On my spine."

"You're the one who wanted to adopt it, Nick." Rochelle returned, a teasing tone to her voice that made his grimace widen. She hopped off the table and walked toward the bar, hunting out a bag of their trail mix, her stomach having kicked into gear now that the adrenaline of being out and in danger had begun to wear off. "Welcome to the pains of motherhood."

Nick grimaced.
Chapter 219

The day passed quietly. With Lena's health in decline again, Rhiannon had retreated into herself, and the atmosphere in the restaurant was less than relaxed. Stress hung heavy in the air, and there was nothing to say that didn't feel cheap and over-used.

Chris had fallen asleep after eating a small bowl of granola and taking his painkillers. He'd curled up onto his side, and Rochelle had ended up sitting next to him, letting her legs stretch out and supplying her lap as a pillow. She rested back onto the legs and seat edge of a chair, and her chin drooped to her chest, eyes closed.

Coach had whittled some time away reloading all their firearms, but that had only taken so long. He'd then set himself to the task of cleaning off their melee weapons, armed with cloths from the kitchen, and he was only halfway through the process when Ellis approached him.

"Need some help, Coach?" he offered, already kneeling down. "I can -"

He hadn't even finished the sentence before the big man waved him off. "I got it, son." Coach grabbed ahold of Nick's katana, wiping it clean from haft to end, scrubbing at a few swatches of flesh that had stuck to the metal. His voice offered no alternative but to listen and follow his instructions. "You get some rest."

"Oh... okay." Ellis managed, trying not to betray his disappointment as he turned away, looking around the room.

That left him nothing to occupy himself with.

He wanted to check on Rhiannon, but the girl was radiating an unnerving aura. Her posture discouraged his approach with pinpoint accuracy, and he wasn't sure what he'd say even had he ignored the signs. She'd never taken comfort very well, and he didn't know how to reach out to her.

He could've taken a cue from Chris and Rochelle and taken a nap - but he wasn't tired in the slightest, and he needed to put his body to work, lest his mind pick up the slack. Between Lena and Nick, he had too much to think about.

Ellis quietly made his way across the restaurant, kneeling next to their backpack. He unzipped the front pocket carefully, reaching in to search for the small notepad they had stowed there.

Thumbing the cover up revealed the three sets of information they'd written down: his, Rochelle's, and Coach's.

A determination sunk into him. He'd pass it around tomorrow, and convince everyone to fill it out. Even Rhiannon and Lena, whether Rhiannon did it in her stead or not.

Even Nick.

The idea pleased him, and he pulled away from the satchel with the notepad gripped in his left hand. He intended to go curl up on his nest of blankets, but halfway there, he stopped in favour of looking into the booth Nick had claimed as his bed. The gambler had ended up slumped forward, arms crossed on the table and head buried into his forearms. He was unmoving, except for the slow rise and fall of his shoulders.

Ellis craned his neck, looking for the cat. Nick's back was pressed firmly against the back of the booth, which eliminated that as an option. It was dark under the table, but he was pretty sure it
wasn't in his lap, either. He turned and looked around the room, hunting out any sign of the little tortoiseshell cat.

Had it escaped? They still had all the doors closed, so there wasn't anywhere for it to go, but if it was running around the room, scared and alone...

He glanced back at Nick, for just a moment, and a flicker of movement caught his eye. It took him a moment to realize the motion was the twitching of a tail-tip, almost hidden entirely under Nick's elbow. It barely made itself apparent from the shadows around it, black with a speckling of orange.

The cat had crawled onto the table and stowed itself under his chin, burrowed into the space made by his crossed arms. It must've been fast asleep, judging by the fact it didn't react to his presence, and those big orange eyes didn't peep suspiciously out at him. It was comfortable, no doubt, and safe.

The most absurd feeling of jealousy sparked over his mind, followed by a flash of humour at his own weakness.

He quickly scratched at his temple, turning away before he could think too much on it. He tucked the notepad against his belly, retreating to his bed on the floor. He'd pushed it underneath a table, giving him something like a cave, and he sighed as he flopped himself down.

There wouldn't be enough light to read by for very long. He'd have enough time to go over it a handful of times, to burn the letters and numbers into his brain. The act calmed him, like it were some little rebellion against the apocalypse. A declaration that they'd be alright, that his family would stay together.

He just needed to fill out the rest of the notepad.

"¿Chico...?" came a mutter from Chris, bleary and slurred. "¿Dónde estás?"

"It's okay, buddy." he whispered, eyes flickering up to watch the Spaniard's stirring shape lift from its place against Rochelle's thigh. He hadn't meant to disturb Chris, and didn't want him to disturb Rochelle. He coaxed, "Just go back tuh sleep."

"Ojalá pudiera dormir..." the Spaniard moaned back, quietly. Ellis screwed up his brows, trying to listen as best he could. His lack of comprehension set another knot of determination in his chest: maybe he'd get Chris to teach him a little Spanish. If they were trapped in the restaurant for some time, they may as well entertain themselves. "Me duele el brazo. No se detendrá."

'Duele' stuck out. He'd heard it before from the man, and some far-off instinct, some unconscious association, said it had to do with pain. "Do you need more meds?" he whispered softly, and was surprised when the young man uttered a sigh. It was frustrated, angry, and more than a little delirious.

He almost straightened, worry shooting him upright. He'd not heard Chris that agitated before, and it sounded like something far deeper and harder than just an ache. Before he could speak, however, the Spaniard dropped down against Rochelle's thigh and mumbled, "No, gracias."

Ellis wanted to press the issue, but Christophe didn't utter another sound, and they'd as-of-yet avoided waking Rochelle up. He let it go, focusing back on the notepad in his hands. Another task for tomorrow, he decided, thumbing over the varied curves and edges of the three sets of handwriting on the page.

At least he wouldn't lack things to do.
Chapter 220

The first thing Nick felt when he woke was fur. Warm and soft, and crammed against his mouth and nose until it was a miracle he hadn't suffocated. Instinct jolted his head up, shaking off the sensation, and he slapped a hand against his forehead and dragged it down his face. His fingers came away dusted with fur, and when he moved his jaw, the unpleasant feeling of fur caught in his mouth made him grimace.

He looked down, finding his other arm looped around the small cat curled up underneath him on the table. His rude awakening had woken it, too, and it was peering up at him intently. It looked, he was almost certain, a bit offended.

The cat must've crawled there after he'd fallen asleep. He wouldn't have minded it that much, if it hadn't apparently come hand-in-hand with trying to suffocate him in his sleep and coating him in a layer of fur. This is exactly why I never had a pet. All this goddamn fur on all my suits.

"Brat," he informed it, and it surprised him by meowing. The sound was small, and the second half of it broke into just a silent movement of its mouth. He arched a brow, staring down at the cat as it flicked its tail against his bicep. "So you do make noises other than hissing and growling."

It blinked at him, and he lowered his hand to place his thumb under its chin. He scritched there, watching with some satisfaction as its eyes almost closed. It wasn't that he liked cats. He hated plenty of things about them, after all, and not the least of those were the claws that had torn him to shreds the previous day.

He mainly just liked the chance for unassuming company. He didn't have to excuse or explain, and a cat didn't give a shit who he was or what he'd done. All cats cared about was the warmth of another body, and that much, he could provide.

"Still no purr, though, huh?"

Continuing to rub at its tiny chin, Nick let his other hand rub the crunchy sleep from his eyes and looked out from his booth. It was early morning, with the sun just beginning to lavish the windows with a glow. He hadn't been woken to take watch, or by any disturbance, and he was surprised to count out the entirety of his team.

Chris and Rochelle sleeping together, Ellis curled under a table, Coach sleeping upright in a chair with his legs laid out on the seat of a second. That meant Rhiannon was on watch.

Glancing back toward the small cat, Nick exhaled a breath. He'd made a plan, and he needed to stick to it. Pulling away from the table, Nick slid off the booth and stood. He was aware of the cat watching him with precision, every step and movement under careful supervision.

It gave him the strange impression of being observed, like the creature didn't fully trust him not to suddenly turn on it. Or just turn. Maybe the thing knows we're all Carriers.

He considered whether to laugh or wince at that, and settled on neither. Crossing the restaurant with careful steps, skirting around his slumbering teammates, Nick found the crumpled-up bag of cat food where Rochelle had placed it on the bar counter. He picked it up and carefully unfolded it, reaching in to take out a handful of the dry kibble, and turned on his heel.

The cat hadn't left the table, but it had gone to the very edge of it, looking like it was ready to leap after him. Its eyes were huge, whiskers perked desperately, all attention on the bag in his hands. He
couldn't help but laugh, choking it back behind a knuckle. He was lucky it didn't seem prone to meowing, as it would've woken the whole room had its posture translated into vocalization.

All that time spent in a room with a zombie had likely trained it out of making much noise, he supposed.

Rather than torture it, he quickly set the bag back down, grabbing up Chris' machete with his other hand and tucking it under his arm before he returned to the booth. The cat practically paced along the edge of the table as he approached, tail up and curled at the end.

By the time he reached it, it was trembling. He set one hand on the cat's back and deposited the food on the table with the other, giving it a few pats along the spine as it hunched down and started lapping up kibble piece by piece. Its fur twitched under his touch.

The kibble wouldn't last, but at least it was something. He left it there, crossing the restaurant to make his way to the front. He dropped the machete into his hands, placing a thumb against the edge and testing it in a few places. It was dulling, too, and he wasn't entirely sure what to do about that.

Chris would know, most likely. He'd kept it sharp up till then.

Glancing up as he came around the corner of the half-wall, Nick found Rhiannon perched on a chair, her feet up on the windowsill. She acknowledged him with a sidelong glance, not even moving from where she had her chin on steepled fingers. Her eyes darted from his face to the machete in his hands, and then returned to looking out the window.

Nick considered a comment, but decided against it. At least she's taking watch shifts now.

He quietly passed by, stepping up to the front door and gently unlocking it. He opened it just a crack, enough to stick his head out and look for any infected near to the porch. When he didn't see any, he slid through, immediately scanning the bottom edge of the screened-in porch.

He needed one of the inner corners, where a small hole wouldn't be noticeable. Although the porch wasn't high-tech security to begin with, it wouldn't do to slash a giant gap into it that a zombie could just stumble through. He wanted, at least, a semblance of security. So, he moved to the far left side, examining the screen where it attached to the frame.

Prodding it with his thumb, he found where the sheet of mesh wiring was nailed into the wooden slats building the skeleton of the porch. He set the tip of the machete against the screen, just to the right of the wooden frame, and used his fist to tap on the handle end. He started gentle, trying to make as little noise as possible. When the screen didn't give, he went harder.

It took a few firm strikes, but eventually, the blade sunk through.

Once he had leverage, he sawed it down a few inches, then pulled it free. He used his left hand to wriggle fingers through the slit he'd made, and pulled. A slight creak announced the mesh giving way, folding, and when he released it, he'd created a messy opening big enough for the cat and little else.

The hole led directly out into shrubbery. It was, at the very least, a secure exit. He stepped back and admired his work, most likely more proud of himself than he should have been.

The window directly next to him squeaked open, just a few inches, and he turned to find Rhiannon leaning in and giving him a dark look through the safety screen. "The fuck are you doing? I thought you were going out to piss."
Nick thumbed at the damage he'd done to the porch. "Making a hole for the cat. We talked about it last night. Did you not listen?" he returned, voice low and sarcastic, happy to state the obvious. She glared at him dully, and he approached the window, grabbing the edges of the window screen. "Watch it, spitfire. I'm popping this off."

It took him a moment. He struggled to get leverage, digging his nails into the trim, and it was only when Rhiannon leaned forward and pulled up the two tabs on her side that it came free. He didn't bother to thank her, pulling the screen away and setting it aside.

"There." he uttered, turning and looking through the screen. The street wasn't clear of infected, but they were idle and wandering, not paying him any mind. "So tell me, Blondie. Do you seriously think you're just gonna float on down the coast, make it to Texas?"

Rhiannon leaned down, crossing her arms on the windowsill to center her face in the opened window. She blinked at him, caught off-guard by the question. "... We don't really have another choice, so, yeah. That's the general fuckin' plan. Why?"

He shrugged, rubbing at his neck. He didn't look at her, because looking at her was liable to lend too much sincerity to what he said. "Because I'd like to know there's some substance to a plan before I hitch my horse to it. So to speak." He reached into the pocket of his slacks, pulling out his cigarettes and lighter in a fist. It was his last one - and as good a time as any.

_Never saw reaching out to the biker bitches for help in my future. World must be really upside-down._

A scoff escaped the blonde, raising a hand to rub at her jaw. "The shit? Who ever said invitations were open?"

Nick pried out the final menthol, putting it between his lips and turning his attention to the lighter. A laugh escaped him, harsh and quiet. "You're not a goddamn school club." He lit up with a snap of the trigger, inhaling the moment it caught and started smoking, and watching as it blared bright orange like a flare. "And before long, you might even be the only member."

He heard the chair scrape as it was pushed backwards, and he was completely unsurprised to listen to her fleet footsteps charge to the front door and shove through it. He let her move toward him, and did not turn. It was hard to resist the animal instinct to defend himself, but he merely breathed in tangy smoke to soothe his nerves.

"You fucking piece of shit -" she snarled under her breath, all fire and fury, and he almost expected her to jump him. To her credit, she didn't. "Don't talk about her. You asshole. You -"

He wasn't in the mood to get yelled at, though he was fully aware he'd brought it upon himself. He couldn't quite bring himself to stop it, either. "Yeah, yeah." he muttered, pulling his cigarette away and tapping some ashes out onto the porch. "I get it. I'm the reason she's hurt, right? I invented zombies. I specifically made that Charger, and ordered it to attack her, and -"

"Can you just fucking apologize?!"

She broke. That was the only word for it - she broke. He had to turn to look at her, disguising his surprise when he found her posture wide, and her muddied green eyes wet. "That's all I fucking want. Just -" She shoved both her hands against her face, turning half away. "Just... Once. Fuck."

He found his shoulders dropping, of their own accord. He'd not expected her to fold, and certainly hadn't expected her to start crying. Hadn't really meant her to. Averting his eyes to his cigarette, he
held his silence. He had no comfort to give, so he just gave her a few moments, pretending not to hear the wet sounds of her crying.

It was slowly that she quieted, and only then did he roll the cigarette to the corner of his mouth and speak.

"For the record, I'd have traded places with her." He looked up and outside, ensuring her outburst hadn't garnered them any attention from infected. "If that was how this shit worked." When he received only silence, he turned on his heel and glanced at her. She was staring at him, and hatred still brimmed in her eyes, liquid.

Or maybe it was just misery.

"But it isn't. And no amount of apology and begging and crying is going to change that. But if you want me to say it, sure. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for a hell of a lot more things than your shitty situation, but 'I'm sorry' doesn't fucking change anything there, and it won't change anything here. Do you feel better?" he spat out, jabbing a pinky at her. "Did that really help?"

Rhiannon's chin dropped. She hesitated, her body stuttering before it slumped, and she let out a snort that bubbled wetly. "No. But you suck ass at apologizing, so that might be part of it." Her arm raised to rub at her eyes in an oddly childlike gesture.

He smirked, just a little, taking a puff of his cigarette. The temptation to snark back was intense, but he bit his tongue, watching her pull her composure back together. The woman slowly crossed her arms, seeming to suddenly notice the morning chill outside in her thin cami.

"What even makes you ask, anyway? Aren't you fuckers trying to contact the military, get saved?" She said it with a wave of her fingers, lifting them off her forearms in a plainly dubious gesture. "I thought you guys had a big plan."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, settling back on his heels. "They are, yeah." He plucked his cig from his lips and looked at it, examining the small length he had left before it burned down. "But I don't have a family to look for, and I'm not sure it's the best move for me anymore."

Rhiannon snorted more intensely that time, screwing up her studded brow. "Jesus. I got the feeling you shits were fighting about something, but I didn't -" She made a vague gesture, trying to illustrate the words she couldn't find at first. "I thought you were still tight. Didn't think it was that bad."

That made Nick stop, and cautiously inhale off his cigarette. He held the smoke in his lungs for a moment before forcing it out through his nostrils. "It is what it is." Lifting a hand, he scratched at his jawline, unsurprised to find cat hair stuck in the stubble. He scowled at it for just a moment before shaking it off. "... Just think about it. It's a ways off. But even if your sister gets better, she'll be weak. You two could use somebody else."

She was watching him, and he wasn't sure what exactly was behind the attention. She was thinking, though, and considering the offer. That was more than he'd expected, if he were being honest with himself.

Eventually, she muttered, "You're not exactly the kind of guy a girl wants to take home to daddy."

He laughed, genuinely. The statement caught him off-guard and pleased him in a visceral way, and he forgot to keep quiet. He was almost certain he heard a growl from outside the porch in response. "Inside, Blondie, before we get eaten out here. And do me a favour and don't mention this shit to
anyone. I don't need the drama."

The biker moved to return to the restaurant interior, but not before shooting back a cool, "That sounds like blackmail to me. Looks like you're my bitch now, Yank." She lilted the end in sing-song and laughed shortly, despite the fact it was very clear she wasn't joking.

Nick didn't give her the satisfaction of hearing him admit she wasn't completely wrong. He just stamped out his cigarette and took a second to mourn its passing.

_Damnit._
Chapter 221

Ellis had never been more grateful to have pants on.

His coveralls were still a little stiff from the mistreatment, but they were dry, and he was happy with that. Running around in his boxers was bad enough on its own, but it bordered on problematic with Nick in the room. He'd felt exposed and vulnerable and a whole host of other things he couldn't describe.

Sighing softly, he shifted on his feet, reaching back behind the microwave on an upper shelf in the kitchen. He'd hidden the roll of condoms there while his pockets were out of commission, and now stared at them in his palm.

He hadn't been able to convince himself to throw them away, despite the crawling shame that came along with their presence. Like it was a symbol to represent his hope for more, or his weakness to it. If he hung onto them, wasn't that giving in already? Clutching at them in the thought they'd come in handy?

He winced, at that. He didn't want the crinkle in his pockets to remind him every time he moved that if Nick called, he'd probably come. Or desperately want to, at least, and that was almost worse. Not to mention, if Nick ever discovered he still had them... God forbid.

But what if he did need them? If keeping them was a statement that he wanted Nick again, was throwing them away a statement that he didn't?

Did he really want to make that statement? It felt... significant.

All those thoughts spun and whirled in his brain until it dizzied him, caught up in the centrifugal force dragging at his skull. The act of dropping the roll into the trashcan nearby was like slamming on the brakes, and he took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a minute.

Once his gut calmed down, relief washed over him. It was for the best. At least he wouldn't have to think about it anymore.

Ducking back out into the main restaurant, pushing through the swinging door of the kitchen, Ellis looked up. Nick was seated in the booth, slouched down with an elbow on the table and his knee acting as the perch for their newest addition to the team. The cat was crouched down, tail curled around its paws and attention flickering around the room as movement caught its eye.

Rochelle was kneeling next to Coach where he sat on a chair, her arm draped over his leg. Her head lifted, blinking toward Ellis with a small smile. "Hey, sweetie," she called. "Your clothes finally dry out?"

He shifted on his feet, gesturing down at his coveralls. "Yeah... at least they're a li'l cleaner now." He approached, glancing over at the cat perched on Nick's knee. It tensed at his proximity, and he didn't test his luck, keeping a good distance between it and him. "I hope we find some new clothes before our old ones wear out. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea tuh go back out soon."

Coach grunted, lightly. "Gotta be shoppin' around here. But I ain't rushin' to get folks on the street again." He nodded his head toward Lena, drawing Ellis' eyes to settle on the woman where she laid. She hadn't stirred all night. "Rather have Rhiannon around if shit goes sideways again."

The blonde was not out of earshot - and at her name, she suddenly hopped up from the other side of
the shoulder-high wall, folding her arms over the rim and tucking her chin on her forearms. "I'm not leaving." she stated, simply.

Lifting his hands in a soothing gesture, Coach nodded. "That's what I'm sayin', girl. That's a'ight. Until Lena gets better, you shouldn't leave. I don't want nobody callin' you up on the radio sayin' somethin' happened." He sighed, and let a hand rest on Rochelle's shoulder. She tipped her head to lay her cheek on the back of his hand. "We got time. Got food and ammo now."

A small frown touched Rochelle's lips, her eyes closing. "I wish we were still near the coast. We could keep an eye out for ships."

That made Rhiannon perk up, shifting her hand to place her thumb against her cracked tooth and bite on it in a few controlled clenches. "We've been on the coast a lot, you know. Haven't seen a ship. Not to be a downer, just..." She shrugged. "Honest. I think you guys are shit out of luck."

Ellis put his hands on his stomach, slouching his shoulders. "Well. Whether there's a boat or not - we gotta find a way to contact somebody. They can't all be gone. The army'll be tryin' tuh take cities back before long, I bet."

Setting his knuckles against the cat's cheek and rubbing, Nick sighed out a breath. His eyes were low-lidded, relaxed, and Ellis might've marveled at the cat's influence on him had he not caught a whiff of cigarette smoke that explained it away. "Nobody is sure they're not going to count us in as infected if they do a purge. Honestly, if I were them, I'd be carpet-bombing the whole country."

He was, apparently, not so relaxed that he couldn't be pessimistic.

"If a whole bunch of people are Carriers, they can't just write us all off." Ellis protested, shaking his head. "They probably just panicked, before they understood whut was goin' on. I mean... if they thought Carriers were gonna turn, it'd make sense they'd be scared at first. They're probably workin' on a cure right now. Heck, there's probably Carriers in the army, right?"

Nick snorted, but merely closed his eyes rather than continue to argue. In his stead, Rochelle raised her voice, body shifting to stand. "We've been here before. Let's leave it, okay? I say we get some food scrounged up." She clapped her hands, rubbing her palms together. "I'm 'bout to get hangry."

Ellis nodded tentatively, opening his mouth, but Rhiannon spoke first. "We could fry up some Spam." she offered, bouncing on her toes. "We've got a couple cans left, if Lee didn't guzzle it all without me knowing."

Coach looked like he might jump to his feet at the statement. He restrained himself, but only barely, placing his left hand on his knee while the other patted at Rochelle's shoulder. "You best not get my hopes up, girl. You talk fryin' up meat, I get excited."

The blonde grinned, fiercely. "Now my hopes are up."

A choke put Coach's hand over his mouth, lowering his chin with a sharp clear of his throat. "Ellis, wake Chris up." he ordered, quietly but firmly, pushing to stand gently once Rochelle leaned off him. "Boy's been crashed out. Gotta get him up an' movin' so he'll eat."

Ellis obeyed with a ducked head, sliding a hand up to rub at the crown of his head through his trucker cap. Coach's embarrassment surprised him, and he tried not to laugh. Watching him get teased was unusual and more than a little hilarious, though Ellis couldn't help but wonder how serious it was.

That was a perplexing thought, and he shook it off.
Ellis crossed the restaurant floor, pausing beside Nick. The cat on his lap was peering at him, tense but calm, and he took the chance that a night's rest had calmed it down. He offered his hand out knuckles first, fingers almost curled into a fist. He was relieved to find that it didn't immediately attack him.

When the feline flinched, he froze entirely - and after a few seconds of a wide-eyed stand-off, the cat's black nose started working, whiskers taut and trembling. It very cautiously leaned off Nick's knee, stretching onto its toes to sniff at Ellis' hand. A few deep breaths preceded its mouth popping open, hanging frozen as a slip of pink and white, and it blinked up at his face before releasing a mumbled growl.

Hunching down, the creature turned, slipping off Nick's lap and onto the booth seat. It disappeared under the table and out of sight, body like slinking liquid. Ellis lowered his hand, looking after it with a small exhale. It was progress, he supposed.

Though he knew full well Nick was watching him, he didn't acknowledge him. Turning around, Ellis walked over to the bed where Chris was still asleep and dropped to a knee. The man was laying on his back, his arm flopped over his eyes as if to hide away under it.

Patting his leg, Ellis watched as the Spaniard vaguely stirred, taking very careful stock of the man's behaviour as he did. "Wakey-wakey." When Chris groaned, he queried, "You alright, buddy?"

When a shudder passed through Chris' body he was quick to grab at the other man's elbow. "Chris?"

The touch seemed to bring him back to himself, and Christophe uttered, "Ah... eh. Sí. I am fine. I am fine." He leaned heavily into Ellis' grip as he dragged himself to an upright position, seeming bewildered and only partially cognizant. His voice was huffed and low, blinking away a haze before he looked up at Ellis. "Pesadilla."

Ellis frowned, hand reflexively going to rub at the other man's upper arm. "Whut's that mean?"

"It is -" He hesitated, pressing fingertips into his temple. Ellis wasn't completely sure that it was really the language barrier that had him stuttering and struggling. "Bad... sleep. I -"

"You had a nightmare?" Ellis supplied, and Chris shrugged his shoulders in a frustrated gesture. The Georgian glanced up, and found the entirety of the team watching them. Rochelle gave him a slight frown, concerned. "Sorry, buddy. I know how that is. You wanna talk about it?"

Christophe shook his head tightly. "Just... un momento, por favor."

Ellis hesitated. He lowered his voice, and was aware of the sudden way Rochelle gestured to Rhiannon and murmured something to Coach. It was a brazen attempt to draw attention away from them, giving Ellis space to work. "You sure, man...? If somethin's botherin' you, I'm happy tuh talk 'bout it. You went through a lot. You're goin' through a lot. If there's anythin' I can do..."

The Spaniard exhaled, his head still shaking, but gentler. "You have enough to worry you, mi amigo. I am fine." When Ellis frowned, obviously dissatisfied with that statement, Chris lowered his chin. His voice sharpened a little, going desperate. "I do not want to talk, tío. Por favor. Maybe later."

Ellis didn't want to relent, but something in the other man's voice made him stop. There was a sincere plea there, and Ellis didn't have much choice but to let it go. Again. Though he didn't do so without a forceful, "Okay. Later."
Without affirming the promise, Chris placed his palm over his brow and rubbed there. "We are going somewhere?"

"No, no." Ellis quickly assured him. "Just wakin' you up so you can be ready to eat in a bit. We're gonna get the gennie back on and fry us up some Spam, I guess. Be nice tuh eat some real food again." An after-thought struck him, and he somewhat bashfully prompted, "... Uh, do you know what Spam is?"

The man waved him off, shifting forward to fold his legs and rest his chest against his knees. "Sí, sí. I am not that kind of alien." A barked laugh left him, one that wheedled off into a tired sigh. "Vale. I will try to eat."

Ellis smiled gently, easing back on his heels. "Okay. I'll get you some water."

Chris held his hand out in front of his face, staring at his fingers rather than watch Ellis stand up and walk away. He flexed his fingers, trying to coax his nerves into believing what his eyes could see clearly: that his left arm wasn't there, and that it wasn't trembling, clenching, muscles seizing in agony.

He stuttered a breath.

It just wouldn't stop.
Chapter 222

The sizzle and pop of grease as the thinly sliced Spam seared from a bright pink to a browned and crispy colour was intoxicating. The smell of processed meat cooking threatened to weaken Rochelle's knees. It was easy to underestimate the effect their relative malnourishment had until her body was reminded of what real food was like.

She paced, listening to her stomach grumble and complain, only vaguely paying attention to what was going on around her.

"Hey, Nacho Libre." Nick grunted, leaning out from the booth to glance at Chris. The Spaniard has taken Coach's seat, the big man having disappeared into the kitchen to cook their lunch with Rhiannon. "I had a question." When Chris looked at him, he gestured loosely. "How were you sharpening your machete? I was having some issues fighting zombies. Think the edge is going."

Chris seemed surprised by the question, a frown touching his lips. He scratched at his chin slowly. "B had a sharpener I used. I do not know what happened to it."

Nick grimaced unpleasantly. "Nice. So that's out." He turned his head, looking toward the kitchen. It was with a weighty groan that he rolled out of the booth, stretching his arms over his head for a moment. "Maybe there's something in there. Guess I'll go interrupt our new lovebirds."

Flapping a hand from where he sat cross-legged on the ground, Ellis groaned. "Nick, don't be weird."

"I'm not the one hitting on Coach." The Northerner grinned with a lowered chin, taking a moment to glance under the booth. "Behave." he instructed the glowing eyes peering at him from the shadows. He nodded like it understood, and put a hand in his pocket before striding into the kitchen.

Watching him leave, Rochelle rolled her eyes with a sigh. "Who the hell saw Nick the cat-lover coming?" she muttered, laughing shortly thereafter. Her arms curled over her stomach, feet guiding her to a halt. "At least this apocalypse has a few good surprises every once in a while."

Ellis snorted, tapping his feet against the floor. "Guess so."

The woman turned to look down at the Georgian where he sat. She cocked her head, seeming thoughtful, and lowered her voice. "You okay, sweetie? You and Nick seem kinda - ... good all of a sudden. Did something happen?" When Ellis' expression flashed to something a little startled, she quickly raised her hands. "I'm glad, don't get me wrong. I just -"

Ellis frowned, hands slipping to rub at his shins through the denim of his coveralls. "Just whut?" he prompted, tone guarded. "I thought you wanted me tuh stop lettin' him get me angry. And we ain't fightin' anymore."

"Yeah, of course." she soothed. "I just don't want you getting in over your head. I know what getting roped back in looks like. You get your mind set on 'never again', and then there's some cute buns up for grabs and it's like a reverse snake charmer." It took Ellis long enough to understand what she meant that he only had time to look horrified before she continued. "I'm just trying to look out for you."

Although Ellis understood, and it wasn't anything he hadn't been thinking about himself - hearing the accusation aloud made a sense of shame flood him. Surely his struggle hadn't been that
obvious. "I'm not gonna do nothin' stupid, I promise."

Rochelle lifted her hands, a sigh parting her lips. "I'm not saying it'd be stupid. I'm just saying I don't want you to do anything you'll regret. What that is, or isn't, is up to you. I just don't want to see you pining after him." His frown deepened, but he nodded. As reluctant as the gesture was, he knew she was right. "Do you think there's a shot? At... y'know, working things out?"

He balked, lips parting. That was hardly the question he expected from her, and he realized he genuinely hadn't put much thought to it. His eyes darted to the floor, and then over to Christophe, who was very quietly listening to their conversation. The Spaniard seemed at a loss, and shrugged his shoulders in a gentle gesture.

When Ellis responded, it was with an honest uncertainty. "I'm tryin' not tuh think about it like that." He scrubbed at the corner of his left eye, sighing faintly. "I'm just figurin' out where we are, I guess."

He looked up, expecting concern from her. What he got instead was a smile and an affectionate scrunch of her nose. "Good."

Ellis didn't totally know how to respond, but he felt gratified by the positive reaction. Maybe he was handling this okay, after all. He smiled back, gently.

The kitchen door swung back open, and Nick stepped out, gripping a long steel honing rod in his left hand. He released a triumphant "Hah." as he circled the bar counter, hopping his weight half onto one of the barstools. Sliding the machete into his lap, he got a good grip on its handle before setting the sharpener against its edge. "I am a goddamn champion."

Christophe made an urgent noise, putting the heel of his hand to the floor and pushing to roll himself onto his knees. Ellis immediately turned, grabbing for him, intent on helping him to his feet. The Spaniard let him with only a small grimace, but he pushed away once he'd gotten standing. "Chulo, you need help?"

Nick darted a glance over his shoulder, staring the Spaniard down as he approached. "I've got two arms to work with, so, no. I'm g-" As Chris padded up and crawled into the barstool next to him, he grunted, "...And you're here. Neato."

The Northerner focused back on the blade in his hand, slanting the sharpener at an angle before starting to slide it along the edge. The rasp of metal was rough and scattered, and he followed the curve of the machete carefully. When Chris leaned forward, lifting his hand, Nick shot him a threatening blink.

Smartly, Chris withheld whatever advice he'd started to offer.

Working quietly, Nick pretended not to pay attention as Ellis and Rochelle moved away. They crossed the restaurant to sit around Lena, speaking quietly, and he took advantage of the distance to initiate a conversation he'd been meaning to have for days. It had simmered in the back of his mind, but it had only been recently that the Spaniard seemed recovered enough to take it.

He certainly hadn't been inclined to bring it up anytime soon after the man's attempt at suicide.

"I've been meaning to ask. Who was this friend of yours - Sean?" He didn't acknowledge Chris' initial startled look. "Just another kill-crazy assclown you guys picked up?"

Then Christophe's eyes softened a little, and he exhaled the slightest laugh. "He was the first I met, that was not sick. He lived in my dorm but I did not know him. We tried to get to the evac, but -
always one step behind, ¿sí? He stayed with me. He was very kind. Me recuerda a él." A nod towards Ellis preceded his messy translation. "He is like him. Was."

Nick kept his eyes on the weapon in his hands, testing the edge with a flick of his thumbpad. It definitely felt sharper. With his window of opportunity now open, he turned the honing rod to the opposite angle and uttered, "You said he's dead. How?"

With a slow nod, Christophe lowered his gaze to watch Nick hone the edge of the machete with careful and unpracticed strokes. "Ah... sí. I guess I did not tell you. He, Phil, and B were going for supplies, and they found some people. B wanted to steal from them, but... Sean argued. The people heard them and shot him." He raised his hand, shaping his fingers into a gun and pressing his fingertips between his eyes.

He let his hand fall, landing on his lap limply. "If he stayed quiet, listened to her... He would be alive." A cynical smile touched the man's lips, fingers fidgeting. "And if I did, I would have both my arms."

"Not exactly." Nick grunted. "I'm pretty confident in my ghost's haunting abilities to say you'd have gotten fucked one way or the other. You got off easy, I'll bet." When Chris merely huffed a laugh, Nick shrugged. "For what it's worth, I think there's something to be said for keeping your shit together through all this. It's easy to go crazy; hard as shit to stay sane. You might be a cripple, but at least you got off Team Batshit."

Chris looked at him, those golden-brown eyes suddenly gone gentle, and Nick recoiled a few inches. He had only half intended it as a compliment, and it was painfully clear Chris had taken it completely too seriously. "Nico..." he crooned. "This is the most nice you have been to me."

"Don't get used to it." Nick snapped off, glad to fall into the simmering silence between them for a moment.

He chewed on the new information, rolled it around in his head. He set it down next to Brenda's dying words and observed where the two stories merged, and where they differed.

"If Brenda murdered Sean, and Phil was there to see it, but didn't tell anyone... Who's the real bad guy? Nick halted his efforts to instead press his knuckles into his brow, exhaling harshly. Feels like the setup to a joke. A one-armed twink from Spain ain't the worst punchline in the world, either."

"... When the fuck are we gonna get out of these asshats' shadows? Swear they're still breathing down our neck."

Chris peered at him, curiosity tilting his head. "¿Nico?"

"Nothing, kid. Just thinking." He reached out, setting the machete down and grabbing his katana from the counter. He placed the hilt between his thighs, resting the dull back of the blade against the bar so he could start sharpening the edge. "I could really go for doing less of that."

The Spaniard flashed a grin that seemed to agree, eyes lowering to focus on his knees. Nick examined him from the corner of his eye, and then looked away.

There didn't seem to be any point in telling him. The man's reality had been rocked enough, and sharing the information seemed mostly like playing into Brenda's post-mortem revenge. There had been no other reason than spite to tell Nick what she had, after all, and Nick was content to not give her the satisfaction of his obedience.
It had nothing to do, he was quite sure, with protecting the man.

"Oh! Hey, hey -"

Rochelle's raised voice made him stiffen, and he jolted upright to look across the restaurant. He was vaguely surprised to see Lena's head lifted, and it took him a moment to follow her gaze.

The cat had crawled silently from under the booth, creeping closer to Nick, but Chris' presence had balked its progress and it was left to sit in the middle of the dining room. Its body was hunched low, all its four legs tucked tightly under its belly and its tail twitching incessantly.

"The - frick? I'm..." ghosted from the biker's lips, and it was a monumental task on Nick's part to keep from laughing at her confusion.

He apparently did a poor job of disguising the struggle, because Rochelle shot him a dark look before surging to rest a hand on the woman's forehead and encourage her to lay back flat. Ellis was quick to join the efforts, placing a hand on her shoulder while Rochelle uttered, "Come on, girlfriend, relax. Everything is fine. Just rest, okay?"

Even as she spoke, she was jerking her head to gesture at the kitchen, eyes still on Nick. He took the cue with a grimace and slid to his feet, resigned to alerting their errant teammates of the development.

Nick did not miss the way Chris slid off the stool to casually follow behind him and, not interested in encouraging the puppy-like behaviour, he pointed severely back at the bar. Christophe slumped back into his seat, almost chagrined, but not quite.

The Northerner was left with the impression he'd played into a game by accident.

As Lena's head rested back down, her eyes darted up to pin Rochelle with a glassy fear. "Y... You see it, too, right...?" She seemed shaken and fragile, and Rochelle soothed her with a careful pet across her hair and a quick nod. Appeased, the brunette closed her eyes, exhaling gently.

"... Thank God."
Chapter 223

Nick was relegated to finishing up the Spam - a task he might've bemoaned had it not given him some time to himself, and saved him the pain of faking interest in the bikers’ predicament. It also gave him the chance to stuff a slice in his mouth before splitting it "evenly" amongst the team.

It was greasy and sweet, salt overwhelming any other flavour. It was spine-tinglingly pleasant, in the same moment it stirred a bitterness in his chest.

The moist pork product tasted like long nights trying to cook and care for his drunken uncle. He ran his tongue over his teeth and thought of burying his head in his knees and crying to the sound of his mother's voicemail. The memory made him laugh, really.

Those nights had fueled in him a spiteful desire to make something of himself. *Rich kids become politicians, businessmen, leaders off that shit. Poor kids usually just end up criminals.* And he had, among many other things.

The problems of his younger self couldn't have been further away, yet somedays they seemed closer than ever. The entire purpose of his trip to Savannah had been some slapdash attempt to convince himself he was fine; that he'd moved on; that nothing - or everything - had changed. He had been desperate to escape the life he'd crafted for himself, to prove something to somebody.

Then he'd driven himself into an apocalypse and a new ex.

He rolled the phrase around in his head: his new ex. It was so dismissive, so compartmentalized. So easy. He wished he could scrub Ellis' actual name from his brain. He wished he could sterilize his memories down to everything he hated, and all the annoying, stupid things about Ellis that grated at him.

Instead, he just had the irrepressible conviction that if they'd met in a world that made sense, under different circumstances, where Nick had the time and the breathing room to let him - Ellis might've been the one to make him into something better.

Nick didn't bother to portion the thin slices out onto enough plates for each person. He took only three, with enough for Rhiannon and Lena on one, enough for him on another, and the rest piled high for his teammates. The heavy plate went on a flat palm, and the other two held in his other hand, separated by his index finger.

Reluctantly turning, Nick made his way across the kitchen and pushed through the swinging door. He was immediately struck by the fact that Lena was upright. It actually made his footsteps pause, though the hesitation didn't earn him any attention. All eyes were on the injured woman.

"Just because you feel a'ight, don't push it." Coach was in the middle of saying, voice firm. "Most like, you're just feelin' better on them painkillers."

Lena grimaced gently at him, though it was edged with a small smile. "If I don't sit up, I think my butt's gonna fall off." she whispered, placing a hand over her belly. Her fingertips probed there through her shirt, tenderly following the underside of her ribs. "And I'm... serious. I feel... better."

"You can't be better." Rhiannon snapped at her, thrusting her hands up. She didn't actually put them on her sister, but the gesture was clear enough in its intent. "Don't lie just to make me feel better. Lay down, for fuck's sake. You're just making it worse."
Ellis shifted back and forth on his heels, hands tucked tightly behind his back. "I'm with Rhee." he stated, quietly. "You shouldn't be pushin' it. You should be restin'."

The brunette uttered a laugh, the exhale bringing a cough to her lips - and when the sound made just about everyone flinch, she sighed. "Fine, sheesh." she mumbled, and slowly eased herself back, resting her elbows down first to let her body relax at a controlled pace. "Can I eat, at least?"

At that, Nick pushed himself to advance, raising the plates. "Suspicious pink meat, at your service." he announced, circling the bar to set the heavier plate down on its surface. He kept the other two, walking over to the group to offer the bikers' plate out to Rhiannon. "Three slices each. Not exactly a buffet."

The blonde offered him little more than a glance before hopping onto the table to sit next to her sister. She set the plate on her knee, grabbing up a slice from the six arrayed there and tearing it in half with her fingers. "Yum. Grease."

Ellis practically lunged across the room, scooting up next to the bar and leaning in on an elbow. He grabbed three in a neat pile and, without skipping a beat, stuffed the stack in his mouth all at once. Nick watched it happen, biting back on the laughter that wanted to bubble in his chest.

He thought of little tuna sandwiches; the masquerade of family. A fantasy he'd believed in, just a little.

"¡Asqueroso!" Chris yelped in obvious disgust, leaning back and away from the other man. "Chew! ¡Eres un cerdo!"

Rochelle moved to join them, but Coach stayed behind. As Rhiannon nibbled at one half of a slice and offered the other out to Lena, he leaned in and gestured at the prone woman. "You mind if I look at your gut real quick, young'un? Just wanna keep an eye on things."

Plucking the torn square of pork from her sister's fingers, Lena bit off an edge of seared meat and nodded. Her free hand dropped and grabbed into her thin shirt, like a tight jersey athletic top, tugging it up a few inches to bare her belly, just to above her bellybutton. "So much better cooked." she murmured, mostly to herself.

Coach snorted gently, leaning in to examine her stomach. It did not take more than a second of looking for his eyes to widen.

"The damn hell?" escaped him, standing straight up. The urgency of the motion pushed the bench he'd been sitting on back, scraping wood on the floor below. His body bent in, circling a hand over Lena's hip to balance himself as his gaze darted across her belly, thoughtless of the touch.

Nick immediately set his plate on the edge of the long banquet table, stepping closer. He didn't know what he expected to see, but he didn't see anything notable. Her entire midsection was still bruised, and just a little bloated beyond what seemed normal for her frame. It looked pretty much the same as the last time he'd looked.

"What?" Rhiannon hissed, eyes jolting from Lena to Coach. "What?!"

"I -" Coach's voice hesitated, and he seemed to remember himself. He retracted his hand, and very slowly and cautiously placed his palm against his chest. He seemed less shaken and more confused, speaking like he'd only half-formed the thought to begin with. "I know how bruisin' heals. This ain't healin' normal."

Blinking, Nick tried to look again, doing his best to find some kind of meaning in the mottled
colours. When he failed, he commanded, "Coach. Let's take a deep breath and try talking in English. You're making less sense than Chris."

As Rochelle slipped suddenly up to his side, Coach reached out to touch a fingertip to the edges of the injury. "Sorry. Just - look. It's turnin' green at the edges. Good half-inch, already." Both women leaned in to look at where he'd indicated. Lena shifted her weight, uncomfortable under the scrutiny. "Bruises go red, then darken, then go green, then yellow before they fade out."

"Doesn't that take time, though?" Rochelle warily returned, frowning, her voice containing the fragile tension of realization.

"Days." was Coach's immediate response. "You whack yo' knee on somethin', it'll take days to go green and yellow. Takes a week or longer fo' the body to break the blood down, absorb it. Lena didn't get smacked. She's bleedin' internally. She got hit barely two days ago, and she was coughin' up blood just yesterday."

Rhiannon thrust a hand up, palm flat. Agitation crept into her voice, a frustration, as did a certain anxious force. "Sounds like a really long fucking way to say 'she's doing really well.'"

Coach's brows were up, his expression having finally settled into disbelief. "... Yeah. I guess... that's what I'm sayin'." However, his head shook, and he looked anything but satisfied. He eased back, slowly finding the bench with his calves to drop down to sit. "I'd call it a miracle, if I'd been seein' any of those these days."

Lena slowly pushed her shirt back down, gaze somewhat shyly darting around the cluster of bodies near her. She tried for a joking tone, but mostly ended up unsure. "I told you I felt better." Her intonation lifted at the end, like it were a question.

Coach released a laugh, as if he didn't know what else to do.

Rochelle gently placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing, catching his gaze with some effort. "Let's eat, big guy. It's good news, right?" When he nodded, she circled his arm with hers, giving him no choice but to stand up. "So let's celebrate, and get some food in you."

Nick watched as they moved away, and only slowly returned his gaze to examine the two women. He trusted Coach's knowledge, and in retrospect, it did make sense. The green colour stood out, now, and he acknowledged that he'd known that information somewhere in the back of his mind. Her rapid healing was weird, though it was a kind of weirdness he couldn't decide how to react to.

It was unarguably good news - but it stuck in his craw.

He understood Coach's reticence. It was in his nature to look gift horses in the mouth.

He stared too long, and Lena looked up at him. She offered a small, gentle smile, and the expression shot discomfort through him. He turned away, focusing down on the plate in his hands and picking up a slab of Spam. "What, Coach, you can't believe something good would happen to us?" he muttered, walking back to his claimed booth.

"Hell no."

It was nice, admittedly, to find the small cat waiting for him on the booth seat. Its tail shot up, and its whiskers and nose went wild. Most of its excitement was undoubtedly directed at the meat in his fingers, but he'd take it.

As he sat down, he tore a piece off and offered it out to the feline. He was mildly surprised when it
hopped easily onto the tabletop and gently mouthed at the Spam, taking it without biting his fingers. The tortie quickly returned to its safe spot on the opposite booth bench, and he could just hear its breathy chewing.

"Whut if it's the Flu?"

Ellis' voice stilled all movement in the room, and Nick blinked up, looking at him from across the restaurant. The Georgian put his hands in his pockets, jutting his lower lip at the abrupt attention. "Uh... I just mean... we're all Carriers, right? So even though we ain't sick like zombies, it's in us. We don't got any idea whut it actually does to us."

Slowly lowering her chin, Rochelle swallowed her bite of pork and shook her head. "I - you think the virus is helping us? That's crazy."

"Is it, though?" he returned, lifting his shoulders. "You ask anyone a few months back, they'd'uh said all this mess was impossible. And it's mutatin' folk all the time, so why not us? If zombies can take a wallop 'n' keep tickin', don't it make sense that we can, too? Or somethin' like that, anyway?"

Choking out a disbelieving laugh, Rhiannon set an elbow on her knee and leaned in. "Why the fuck would a flu that's wiping out the fuckin' human race want to help us survive it? That's not how sickness works. That's not how viruses work. The fuck are you talking about?"

Nick slowly pulled a slice of Spam in half, watching it tear messily along the seared surface. "Technically, we don't know how it works. That's kind of the whole point."

"This shit's way over my head, babygirl." Coach sighed out, slowly grabbing up a slice of Spam and popping it into his mouth. "I just know it ain't normal, how she's recoverin'. I'm glad an' all, it just ain't normal. Not even fo' us. Shit, what 'bout Ellis' rib? Nick's shoulder? Yo' hand? None of it healed this fast."

"They all healed faster than we expected, though, didn't they?" Rochelle countered, turning her palm up to look at the pinkened strip across her flesh. "I mean... Christ, Coach. It's crazy, but it makes sense."

Coach grunted, shaking his head, less in negation and more in frustration.

Christophe hesitantly looked between Ellis and Coach, placing his hand gently over his bandaged stump. He seemed oddly distressed, and it was with a reassuring smile that Ellis leaned over to nudge his thigh with a knuckle. "Hey, man. It's a'ight. Just means we're like... superheroes, right? It's pretty cool, if yuh think about it. I always wanted superpowers, but I guess I didn't think it'd happen like this."

"Let's not jump to that kind of shit." Nick muttered, turning his gaze to stare back at the two orange eyes peeping at him over the edge of the table, watching intently as he took a bite of Spam. "We've seen Carriers die. Whatever it's doing, if it is actually doing something, let's not act like we're invincible."
He was pretty sure Ellis stuck his tongue out, but couldn't look up fast enough to confirm it. The Southerner crossed his arms over his chest and dropped his chin. "I always wanted super speed." he drawled, pleased when Chris uttered a laugh. "Or controllin' time."

The Spaniard waved his hand in front of his stump, and grimaced. "I would take, em, regeneración, ¿sí?" Ellis snorted, breaking into a full grin when Coach had to swallow a laugh of his own.

"Y'all kids can't take shit seriously."
Chapter 224

It was overdue when it finally happened. They'd all been so buried in their food and their thoughts, wrestling with the revelations and what it all meant, that it was easy to forget that Lena had been unconscious for most of the previous twelve hours.

Finally, as Nick had settled into a sprawl with his legs stretched out on the booth seat and the feline crawled up onto his lap, Lena asked the question.

"Is someone gonna explain the cat...?"

He looked down at the orange-and-black bundle of fur settling down into a tight ball in the crevice between his thighs. A laugh escaped him, realizing that her confusion probably equaled his own when he first set eyes on the creature. It was a tiny, fragile thing that didn't belong in the apocalypse.

"Uh -" Rochelle uttered, rubbing her palm on her cheek. "Yeah, sorry... We found it last night, going on a supply run. Some of us are big softies, so... Now we're stuck with it. He's pretty cute, but Nick's the only one he'll let close. Everyone else gets clawed."

"She." Lena responded, earning her a bewildered blink from the producer. With a faint smile, the brunette curled her arm to rest it above her head on the table, letting her head nestle into her forearm. "Tortoiseshells are all female."

Ellis popped his lips in a surprised noise, turning and looking toward the prone biker. He'd hopped up on the bar, sitting between Coach and Chris, and his dangled legs swung and kicked in the air. "Really? Huh. I didn't know that." He scratched at his jawline, nails catching on the few scattered hairs trying to grow there.

Sliding her hand to rest on Lena's arm, Rhiannon bent her head in with a frown. The sisters locked eyes, and the blonde's voice went low. "Speaking of. I found something while we were out there."

When Lena nodded encouragingly, Rhiannon darted to her feet and slipped to kneel next to the group's backpack.

She unzipped the main pocket and pried out the small picture frame they'd stowed there, carrying it back to her injured sister. Offering it out, she grinned. "Looky-looky."

Lena took it, holding it up in front of her face. A glint sparked in her eyes, brushing the pad of her thumb over the surface of the frame's glass. "Did you -" She didn't even finish the words before Rhiannon was prying the small keyring from the slashed pocket at her thigh, raising them with a jingle.

"Got a bill for the place it's docked at, address and all. Say you love me."

The brunette laughed a little, though the exhale brought her to a few small coughs. When she'd regained her breath, she smiled and uttered, "I love you." At Rhiannon's giddy grin, she looked back at the photograph and let its bottom edge rest against her chest. "Where'd you get it from...?"

"Same place we got the cat." Rhiannon responded easily, shrugging her shoulders. "Magpie Gun and Pawn, or some shit. The owner -"

She shut her mouth, disgruntled, when Lena burst into laughter. The sound immediately turned pained, and she almost desperately placed her free hand over her mouth, tears pooling in her eyes.
as one leg kicked up off the table in a small flail. She was too breathless, wheezing, to respond when Rhiannon flashed a confused look down at her.

Lena pointed at the photo, handing it back, and Rhee was left to stare at it uncomprehendingly.

Interest piqued, Coach grunted as he got up to his feet, walking over. He held his hand out for the photograph, and Rhiannon acquiesced to handing it over. The big man took a long look at it, and barely restrained a twitch at the corners of his mouth. "... So we're clear, this is the owner of the place y'all found the cat? So the owner of the cat, too, right?"

Nick frowned, feeling very distinctly like he should've gotten involved in the conversation before it escalated. He didn't know what was coming, but he'd been around long enough to know when he was about to dislike something. He definitely disliked whatever was going on across the room. "... Yes?"

That released the floodgates, and before he knew it, Coach was *barking* laughter, bending forward with the hand that wasn't holding the photo braced on his knee. He, however, had the composure and health to speak through it. 

"Nicolas - he looks just like you!"

Nick very much wanted to charge across the room and grab the photo, but he had four pounds of anxiety with razor-sharp talons on his lap, and he was pretty sure his crotch wouldn't survive if he tried to throw the cat from his lap. He was forced to watch as Ellis did instead, and the Georgian practically hopped to steal the frame from Coach's hand and look at it.

"Ho-lee shit." he ghosted, rubbing his thumb against the man in the photo. Dark hair was held back from his forehead by a pair of sunglasses, and a broad smile cut into his sharp features and shone white through the trimmed stubble covering the lower half of his face. "Dude, he does! The eyes ain't right, 'n' he's older, but -"

"Wait." Nick snapped, much faster than he could control. He set a hand against the cat's side, gently trying to encourage it - *her* - to slip off his lap. Her claws came out, catching in his slacks, and he was forced to stop almost as soon as he'd started. "Which one of us is older, exactly?"

Ellis didn't get a chance to clarify before Rochelle was on him, grabbing his wrist so she could turn the photograph around and get a look at it. She gaped, staring at it even as she snatched it up and sidled over to show it to Chris.

"No way -" she uttered. "I didn't even look at him! It's like Nick, only happy, and apparently the purveyor of a local business. It's the Twilight Zone in here." Nick could not put into words the various ways every part of that offended him. "No wonder the cat likes you, Nick! She thinks you're her daddy."

Christophe helpfully offered up, "Do not feel bad, Nico. You are more handsome."

"That really doesn't help." Nick glanced down at the small tortoiseshell, and was faced by an owlish pair of eyes that looked at him with something he was almost sure was fear. As much as he wanted to protest the suggestion, it also made a lot more sense than pretending he'd earned the cat's loyalty.

"You do realize your dad tried to eat you, right?" he reminded the feline, watching her face slowly squint into a blink. "Maybe not the best role model."

He made a concerted effort to ignore the giggle that escaped Rochelle. She turned away, taking the photo and walking it back to the bikers. "Sorry. I'm a sucker for a chance to make fun of Nick."
She grinned. "And for what it's worth, I'm really glad we could help you guys. We'll do whatever we can to keep helping, even if I'm not excited to say goodbye to you two."

Rhiannon hesitated visibly. Her eyes darted up to Rochelle's face, examining the producer's dark features and wide smile. Rochelle's cheer faltered, sure she'd misspoken or over-stepped.

Then the blonde reached out to snatch the photograph up, curtly turning her chin away. "Yeah. Thanks." She set the photo frame down on the table, leaning in to rest her elbows on her knees and glance down at her sister. "Keep up your inhuman healing, and maybe we'll be outta here soon." she snarked, baring her teeth in a gesture that was definitely not a smile.

Lena's lips curled, and she closed her eyes.

Rochelle gently folded her hands together, standing there for a soft moment. She considered pressing on the shift in behaviour, but knew better than to do so. It was likely as simple as Rhiannon being uncomfortable with the emotional show. It wasn't the first time, after all, and it certainly wasn't anything she hadn't gotten used to from Nick.

So, she inhaled, and stepped back. She spun on her heel and faced Ellis, smiling. "You know, we should really give her a name."

Ellis' eyes practically bugged out of his head. He put his hands on the back of his neck, fingertips curling into the muscles of his shoulders, beaming. He started bouncing on his heels, practically hopping. "Oh, man. You're right. We don't know whut her real name is?"

"No collar or nothin'?" Coach inserted, gently.

Nick placed a hand at the cat's scruff, circling fingers halfway around her neck and rubbing up to her ears. "Nope." he answered, simply. "Not that it really matters. It's not like she cares what we do or don't call her. How about, 'little furbag'?"

Ellis slid his hands up the back of his neck and got his fingers under his cap, pushing it up enough to rustle his own hair. He completely ignored Nick, practically buzzing with thought. "Whut'd you say the shop was? Magpie?" he questioned, searching out affirmation from Rochelle.

When she nodded, he paused - and then beamed.

"I got it. Easy." With a wide and exuberant swing of his arm, he pointed across the restaurant and at the booth. Nick couldn't help but tense - but mostly because the kid practically hollered, and the cat on his lap sunk claws into his thighs in response to the noise. "Maggie."

Rochelle slapped a hand on her cheek, laughter chiming in a burst of pleasure. "Oh, Jesus. It's like a little grandma cat. It's perfect."

Nick scowled, leaning his head forward to try and get a look at Ellis. The kid looked tremendously pleased with himself. "Who put you dumbshits in charge of naming her? She doesn't even like you."

"Oh, how quick his tone changes. Okay then, Mr. I-Vote-When-It's-Convenient. Let's vote." Rochelle crooned, before turning to face the rest of the survivors. She slung an arm over Ellis' shoulders and ordered authoritatively, "All in favour of Maggie, say 'aye'!"

Nick grimaced at the shouts that rose up from every goddamn person in the room except him.

He genuinely regretted the fact it didn't bring a horde down on them. All it did was send the cat -
now christened, he supposed - shooting to the floor under the booth, leaving behind tracks of pain where claws treated his slacks like tissue paper.

He wasn’t sure he'd come out of this experience with much skin left.

Or dignity.
The café had proved a solid enough hideout. The day passed with only a few incidents of infected wandering too close, and one Hunter that spent an hour crawling around on the rooftop, growling reverberating through the ceiling. Rhiannon was the one to eventually lose her patience and run out into the yard, taking it out mid-leap with Coach’s shotgun.

She came back with blackened blood on her cheek and a relaxed air like she’d released some energy.

Maggie disappeared a few times, slinking into the front of the restaurant and through the passageway Nick had prepared. She returned, however, looking none the worse for wear. Nick didn't say anything, but he seemed tense while she was gone... and relieved at her reappearance.

Lena's improvement wasn't all-encompassing, and she quickly tired, falling back asleep in her bundle of blankets. It seemed more like genuine rest, though, and less like a sweaty, clammy convalescence.

The restaurant was a distinct downgrade from their previous home, however, particularly when it came to privacy - or more accurately, the lack thereof. Although Ellis was a generally heavy sleeper, the team was so closely compacted that any disturbance was liable to wake at least someone, and the apocalypse had trained him to be alert for conspicuous noises.

Those factors together meant that halfway through the night, Ellis woke to the soft sound of a chair scraping against the floor. He startled, eyes opening, almost unsure if he'd imagined it for a moment. A soft groan made him straighten, blearily trying to blink away sleep. He pawed at his eyes, curling his legs underneath him.

His eyes were not adjusted to the darkness, and when he sought out the source of the sound, he mostly just saw shadows moving amongst shadows.

It happened again, and he was fairly confident it was Chris. He had, unfortunately, grown familiar with the Spaniard's pained utterances. Ellis straightened up further, eyes latching onto the shape of a body as it came into gradual focus. The man was slouched, standing in the center of the restaurant, arm hugging his torso.

Rather than speak, Ellis pushed a fist into the floor, getting himself up to his feet. His legs wobbled with exhaustion, but adrenaline was quickly working its magic on his muscles, waking his body up well before his mind had completely stirred. He approached the other man, working mostly off the assumption that the floor between them was clear.

Luck was on his side, if nothing else.

"Buddy?" he whispered, gentling his voice. He wasn't entirely sure who was on watch, but judging by the fact Rochelle had not stirred, he thought it might be her. "Whut's goin' on?"

It did not fully surprise him when Christophe moved away, retreating from him. "Nada está mal. Todo bien." came the response, harsh and torn and full of tears. It was so gut-wrenching that it caused honest fear to spark in Ellis' stomach, surging to maintain their closeness. "Go back to sleep."

"Chris -" he uttered, reaching out a hand. His fingertips made contact with the man's waist, and found him recoiling, uttering a pained noise. Ellis let him, at first, but instinct overrode his caution.
Something was seriously wrong, and he couldn't let it slide again.

"Chris." he repeated, forcefully, aware that his volume was raising. If he had to wake the rest of his team in order to corner the man, he would, and his intent must have carried. The ex-Angel halted, holding mostly still but for a soft tremble. "Talk tuh me. I can't help if yuh don't talk about it."

He knew he'd broken through to the other survivor when his head dropped. The shame that suffused his voice, however, came as a shock. "N-no. I do not want to - I am fine. I do not need help. Sleep is hard, but I - it is fine."

Ellis hesitated, arms falling slack at his sides. Suddenly, in the darkness of night, he felt like he saw it clearly for the first time: Christophe was not just unwilling, but terrified of being a burden. He was afraid of it, in a more primal way than made sense. His tone was desperate, like he were begging Ellis to forget, to let it go.

*His old team would'uh never helped him through this. Does he think... he can't be weak? He wanted to laugh. Man. We're weak all the dang time.*

"You know we're here for you, right? You don't gotta hide it if yer hurtin'." Softly, Ellis spread his arms, helplessness imbuing his tone with a plea. "Please, man. You helped me, gettin' through Nick. I just wanna do the same."

Did he hear the audible snap of Chris' self-control, or was it his imagination, fabricating the noise? All he knew for sure was that there was suddenly a body against his, collapsing, and he only just caught the man in his arms. He tightened his grip on Chris, slipping the man's arm around his waist and getting fingers gripped on the waistband of his cargo shorts.

His relief and his worry mixed into a discontent in his chest.

"C'mon. Let's move before we go wakin' everybody up." he whispered, glad when Chris cooperated. They made their way across the restaurant floor, carefully picking through the tables and chairs to make their way into the tiny, unisex bathroom built into the corner opposite the front walkway. Ellis pushed the door open with his shoulder, and walked them carefully to the toilet.

He nudged the cover down with his knee before coaxing the Spaniard down onto it. The moment that the man was seated, Ellis dropped to a crouch, resting his forearms in a tight cross on Chris' knee. He looked up at him, blinking through the darkness to get a better view of his face. "Whut's goin' on?"

Christophe's expression was strained, young features stricken with pain. His breath was damp and thick, and sour with the slightest hint of bile. "My arm hurts. It is - the drugs no help. It does not stop."

Frowning, Ellis echoed, "Arm? Like, yer shoulder hurts?"

Christophe negated that with a frown. "I... My arm, tío. It is like I still have it, and it... hurts. Mordiendo mi puño - I -" To illustrate, he gritted his teeth and curled his hand into a tight fist until his nails dug into his palm. "I can't move it. It is like... fire. It has been days."

Ellis' chest tightened. He retracted his arms and settled his hands on his thighs, gaze lowering. "Do you know what phantom pain is?" Without waiting for confirmation, he curled his fingers into a fist, eyes closing. "It's... like yer body's tryin' tuh find the arm you lost, but yer arm ain't talkin' back, so it keeps tryin' harder'n harder, until all you got is pain."
When he reopened his eyes, he found Christophe looking at him, inscrutable in the dark. He couldn't tell if he understood or not, and found himself babbling. "Yer brain's tryin' tuh play Marco Polo, but yer arm ain't respondin', so yer body's yellin' "Marco!" louder and louder. It's like, a feedback loop, or whatever."

"How I stop it?" the Spaniard whispered, lifting his hand to press his palm against his left eye and grip nails into his skin.

Ellis frowned, sucking carefully on his teeth. "I... wish it was that easy. There's some stuff we can try. Like, massagin' yer shoulder's somethin' we gotta start doin'. Gets the blood movin'. But stoppin' the pain is... I dunno. You gotta find somethin' that works, get yer mind off it. Or if somethin's triggerin' it - stop that, y'know?"

Chris' head lowered, chin dropping in a hopeless gesture, and Ellis glanced up and around the bathroom. His eyes caught on the small circular mirror hanging over the sink, putting his lips out in a purse. "There... is somethin' we could do. I read about it once. It's kinda silly, though."

A slight laugh escaped the Spaniard, wry. "I think I am desperate, ¿sí?"

Straightening, Ellis got to his feet and walked over to the sink. He dug his fingertips underneath the mirror, prising it from the wall. It came off with barely any effort, tearing away like it had been attached with nothing but sticky tack. It weighed little, and he bounced the delicate frame in his palm. "Okay." he uttered.

"Scooch over." he ordered, sitting down on the toilet next to Christophe. He cradled the mirror in his arm, turning toward the other man. He did not miss the confusion that spawned on the Spaniard's face as he watched.

"Hermanito, what are you doing?" he protested, tone bewildered as he gestured with his hand toward the reflection tilted in his direction. Ellis was torn between laughing at his confusion and feeling a bitter sadness at the weakness to his voice. "I do not want to see this - mi cuerpo destrozado. I don't want to see it."

Chris had been full of over-confident bravado when they'd met him. He seemed different, now. Smaller.

Insistently, Ellis pressed the edge of the mirror perpendicular to Christophe's chest, nodding down at it. "Just look, a'ight?" When the man obeyed, glancing down at the reflection of his upper body, Ellis peeked over the top of it to join him. "See? It looks like you got both yer arms now. Like a magic trick."

The reflection was not quite perfectly lined up, a few inches off-center, but the mirrored halves of Chris' body made a convincing illusion - and the Spaniard was suddenly desperately quiet. "Guess the idea is, if you can convince yer brain tuh stop yellin'... make it think it's gettin' listened to..." He trailed off. Ellis was tempted to continue speaking out of nerves, but something made him keep quiet. He watched the other man, feeling a soft tension in the air.

Chris lifted his hand, stretching his fingers in a careful and slow motion. He seemed simultaneously fragile, like a child discovering the movements of his own limbs for the first time, and abruptly focused with a steely dedication. Responding to the optical illusion seemed to come naturally to his body, eyes riveted on the reflected image.
"¿Qué demonios?" he muttered, voice fractured. He sounded disbelieving, and Ellis struggled to follow the words. "Quiero decir, sólo un idiota creería esto."

A soft laugh escaped the Georgian, and he settled his chin more solidly against the edge of the mirror. He was almost sure there was slightly less pain in the other man's posture, but he was afraid to assume. "Man, I can barely catch a thing when you get goin' like that. You gotta throw me a bone here, man. Is it helpin' at all? I don't think it'll fix things all at once, but..."

Christophe mumbled a non-committal sound at first, eyes not lifting from the mirror's surface. Eventually, he spoke. "I do not know. But... I can... move it. Move my fingers." His body pressed a little closer, and Ellis wasn't able to stifle the vaguely startled noise that escaped him. "It is good to feel it move. Even... un poco. A little."

"That's good." Ellis responded, pleased fit to burst. ",M glad."

They sat there for a while. Ellis didn't bother to count the minutes, content to be there as long as Chris needed. He was just happy to have even the smallest positive effect, the subtlest therapeutic influence. It was a favour he could finally return, at least. The contact of their hips and legs was soothing, and he relaxed his head back against the tank. Ellis closed his eyes, determined to rest them for a moment.

He didn't even realize he'd started to drift off, not until the Spaniard's hand was shaking his shoulder, startling him out of the twilight of half-sleep. He'd kept a grip on the mirror despite the relaxation of his body, and he tightened his fingers, blinking quickly into Chris' soft look.

"We go back to bed, ¿sí?"

Ellis gave a tired smile, lifting his free hand to rub at his eyes. "Sorry - guess I didn't wake up all the way." He shifted the mirror away, dropping it gently onto the floor, braced against the bottom of the toilet. He tried to give the other man a more thorough once-over, and felt confident that he was less tense. "You think you can get some rest now?"

Christophe nodded his head, expression settled into a slightly shy frown. "Creo." he murmured, nodding. "It is better, now." When Ellis moved to stand, he was stopped by Chris' hand abruptly alighting on his elbow. He startled, turning to acknowledge the man, finding the Spaniard's face drawn in a weak smile. "Gracias, mi amigo. It helps to have you here."

His voice was oddly abashed, withdrawn, and his uncharacteristic embarrassment lent a sincerity to the words that made Ellis' face heat up in response. As confident as he was that he didn't have feelings for the other young man - he was tremendously unsure how Rochelle held hers back.

"'Course, man." He grinned, offering his hand out with a reassuring nod. Chris took it, unbalanced as he drew to his feet, but kept aloft by Ellis' firm grip. "I'm here anytime."

The Spaniard looked at him, eyes almost black in the darkness, and a frown touched his lips. Ellis couldn't help but cock his head, sure there was something more. It stuck in the foreigner's throat with a visible hitch, his body struggling into a shiver as he fought down the urge to voice it.

"You okay?"

Softly, just once, Christophe nodded.

Ellis considered him. He knew it was a lie, but Chris had already opened up more than he'd expected. He didn't want to push him too far and have him break, not when he'd gotten the man settled back down. It was a process, he reminded himself. A process he didn't want to mess up.
So he smiled. "Okay. If it starts hurtin' again, wake me up."

The man's nod was honest, then, and that was enough.
Rochelle was absolutely convinced something had happened. She couldn't put her finger on it, had no concrete evidence, but she was certain that something was different.

It wasn't odd for Chris and Ellis to be near each other, for sure. The two boys had become close, and she was glad for that - but it was different, today. Chris orbited him like he was leashed to the Georgian's wrist, and the once or twice that Ellis left his side, Chris started to fidget and grow tense.

He only relaxed once the mechanic returned to him, like it was a breath he'd finally taken.

When she initially noticed it, she dismissed it. Then the pattern continued, and she was left to wonder. Ellis either didn't pay attention or simply didn't mind it. Either was likely, in her mind.

Her first instinct was to go to Nick, not that she was quite sure why.

The man was slouched in his booth, resting up against the inner wall, his low-lidded attention on the can of carbonated orange soda in his hands. He was playing with the tab, bending it up and then flattening it back down, listening to the aluminum creak. When she slung an arm over the top of the booth and leaned in to look at him, he didn't acknowledge her.

"Hey, Nick. You notice anything weird today? Chris is acting... off."

The gambler snorted, looking at her with a slight sneer. His tone was just a little crueler than she expected, though she'd anticipated some amount of aggression. "You mean his separation anxiety with Overalls? Yeah, a little. Maybe he's finally gotten tired of waiting for you to make a move."

The ease at which he understood what she was talking about, and the speed of his diction, made it painfully clear how attentive to the situation he was. If he'd had any chance at playing it cool, it was gone. She considered leaving it alone, but couldn't resist taking a shot. "Jealousy doesn't suit you, suit."

Nick tried for a dull look, but didn't quite manage the apathy.

"Nothing happened last night, right? You didn't hear anything, or -"

His thumb suddenly pushed too hard, and the can tab snapped off from its moorings. He seemed vaguely agitated at the aluminum's failure, taking the slim piece between his fingers and tensing his thumbnail against it like he might flick it away. "Do I look like I fucking care? Jesus Christ, woman. I am not your wingman on this. Go talk to the guy yourself."

Rochelle frowned, though it was mostly hollow. She didn't feel much disappointment or surprise at Nick's scathing attitude, not lately; it was the simple sting of a readjustment, leaning back into the same rut that had become almost comfortable with time. The quiet reminder that yeah, right, that's where we stand. She sighed, hands going to her hips.

"That's not the worst advice, actually." left her, flashing him a sad smile before turning away. She'd have to be satisfied with the clear discontent that went through him, and how apparent it was that he disliked her getting the last word.
One tiny victory.

Ellis was huddled at the bar with Chris, their attentions intently focused on something on the bar counter, and it wasn't until Rochelle had stepped up closer that she recognized it: the small notepad they'd filled with their personal information. Her last-ditch attempt to cheer him up after Nick had dumped him, not that she'd not been deadly serious about its use.

If they ever got separated, they'd never find each other again, if all they had was first names. Hell, she was pretty sure most of them would've stupidly gone looking for a Georgia man named 'Coach.'

*It's weird, how we don't really know each other that well... and I still feel like these guys know me better than anyone I've ever met. Guess this kind of situation pares everything down to the bone, down to what matters. You think you'd die for someone, but we've all actually been in that position.*

"What'cha doin'" she chimed, trying for a playful tone. She let herself hop into place behind Ellis, slipping her arms around his shoulders and linking her fingers over his chest. He started, looking his usual degree of embarrassed, before he craned his head to smile at her.

"I was just tellin' Chris 'bout our plan. I thought now'd be a good time tuh get everyone in on it, since we ain't got much tuh do, anyhow."

She nodded in a big, slow gesture, eyes flicking toward the Spaniard. He avoided meeting her gaze directly - something else she'd noticed that he'd been doing of late - and flashed a nervous little grin. "I wish I knew my student visa number. Ay, no importa."

"Do y'all got social security numbers over there?" Ellis asked, scrunching his nose curiously. "Or like... somethin'?"

Christophe laughed, at that, placing his hand on the clavicle of his stumped arm and rubbing there idly. "¿En serio?" When the Georgian looked a little put out at the clear tease in his voice, he shook his head. "Sí, sí... it is not like this, though." With a vague flick of his hand down at the other entries on the page, he reached to grab the slim marker Ellis had left on the counter.

Ellis instinctively reached out to help him with the cap, but Chris had it gripped in his teeth in a flash, yanking the marker free with a soft squeak of plastic. He kept the cap trapped between his teeth like a cigar, leaning in to start writing beneath Ellis' entry.

The Georgian's body stiffened. Rochelle could feel it perfectly, pressed into his back, and she knew exactly why: he'd mentally eked that space out for Nick. It was silly, of course - there was plenty of room for all of them, and Chris' entry wouldn't replace Nick's.

She squeezed her arms, then released him, sliding between them. She rested a palm on either of their stools, watching Christophe's name take shape on the page. He tried to brace the notepad with his wrist, but the strange posturing of his hand made his handwriting shaky and uneven.
"It is similar, ¿sí? I only came to here for school, so I did not get anything like this." The cap in his mouth exaggerated the soft lisp that exposed itself now and again in his accent. He tapped his thumb against Ellis' social security number - then, abruptly, froze. His thumb slid down to the date Ellis had written: 04/05/85. "...Ellis, mi amigo. This is your birthday?"

The Georgian's eyes blinked down to the paper - and then both men looked at each other in unison.

"You're younger than me?!!" Ellis blurted, shocked.

Christophe lifted his hand in a bewildered gesture, fingers splayed except for where he held the pen. "You are older than me?!!" He spoke with such force that the cap caught by his teeth fell, landing on his lap.

Hesitantly, the Georgian put his elbow on the bar, palm bracing his jaw. "I mean... I guess I should've figured, when you mentioned college, but... I didn't think 'bout it. You just seemed older than me." He blinked a few times as if to process the new information, and then lifted his gaze. "Huh."

The one-armed survivor seemed utterly bewildered, still uttering little offended huffs and puffs.

"I... sort of figured you two were about the same age." Rochelle managed, doing her best to keep a straight face. And though it was true, she still couldn't deny feeling the slightest bit weird about having it confirmed. Ellis was too young for her, already.

But that was a very presumptuous thought. Besides. It's not like I see Chris as a little brother. It's totally different. Which left the question of what she saw him as, and that was too far deep in waters she didn't know how to traverse.

"Why don't you go get the girls to put down their info?" Rochelle put a hand on Ellis' shoulder, soothingly, thumb catching on the blue tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve. Chris placed the pen atop the notepad as she spoke. "Even if they go off sailing to Texas, it'll be good to have a way to look for them some day."

Rhiannon was already looking up, eyes narrowed suspiciously, but Ellis didn't seem daunted at all when he got up and practically bounced to close the distance. He started babbling, explaining the notepad in his hands. Lena's attention was soft and understanding, though Rhiannon seemed strangely awkward about the whole thing.

Lowering his chin, Chris glanced over his shoulder, eyes flickering over Rochelle's expression.

There it is. she thought, confusion creeping through her. He was already getting tense, nerves visible in the way his fingertips started to tap together, index finger following the line of his thumbnail cuticle. He dug at it, trying and mostly failing to peel off a hangnail.

It was an itching gesture, scratching, subtly neurotic. It was hard to separate abnormal hints of
blood from the average spray and splatter of the apocalypse, but she reminded herself that he had no reason to have speckles of dried blood around his nails. He hadn't been in combat in a long time.

She wondered if it was anything like the tic she'd picked up of tearing at her lower lip - and the moment she thought of it, her tongue sought out the roughness of the plump flesh. It took effort not to go after it, and she wrung her hands together to stifle the urge.

*Crap. We're all gonna end up anxiety-ridden and setting each other off. Cabin fever gone self-destructive.*

She smiled, gently. "Do you want to get some air? You've been cooped up more than any of us."

When the man - she was trying so very hard not to think 'college boy' - hesitated, she dipped her chin to get a better look at his face. "I promise I'll keep you safe from the zombies."

That hooked him, and his lips twitched upward, their gazes matching. "I believe this." With a gentle shift, Chris set his hand on the edge of the bar, sliding himself to stand. "Vale. But you must get me home before dinner."

Rochelle uttered a genuine laugh, covering her mouth with a quick flash of her hand before she retreated, giving him room. She turned to lead him toward the back door, aware that Coach was very closely monitoring them from his seat at one of the restaurant tables. She didn't say anything, but she turned her hip to show him the gun tucked into her jeans.

He let her go.

The backyard was small, pressed close to the neighboring building. There was a small square of concrete off the door, with a set of stairs down to the ground. The shed that contained the generator was right up against the restaurant's exterior, built next to the breakerbox.

Easing down to sit on the stairs, Rochelle gave a tight sigh. She pulled her handgun from her waistband, setting it beside her hip on the concrete. "Can't believe I'm this close to the beach, for the first time in years, and I'm stuck in a damn crab-shack with a bunch of uptight grumps."

Christophe didn't respond, so she looked up at him. His eyes were on the pistol.

She followed his gaze, then returned her attention to his face. "You can probably shoot it, you know." He startled at the words, almost recoiling, like he'd been caught. "The recoil's not that bad, and we can always trade off when you have to reload it."

He stood there, awkwardly parting and sealing his lips in a strange rhythm. He struggled at words, and she found herself frowning. She had no concept, no way of knowing, that he'd very seriously considered placing that very pistol to his temple and pulling the trigger. That didn't mean she was oblivious to the existence of some kind of emotion surging through him.

"... Sorry, did I say something wrong?"

The Spaniard laughed abruptly, a soft fracture to the noise. He approached, slowly joining her on the stairs. He crouched down first, then put his palm against the concrete to balance himself as he pushed his legs down the steps and relaxed onto his rear.

There was not much room on the stairs. They were so close, she could feel the gentle buzz of almost-contact between their arms. "No, bonita. Lo siento. I would like to fight again."

Her frown softened, though it didn't completely disappear. She was tempted to look at him, but decided instead to keep her gaze up, scanning the yard for any sign of infected. "I didn't mean to
make you nervous. I just wanted to talk to you, and I thought we could get a minute alone."

Naturally, that served to make him nervous, curling his fingers into the fabric of his cargo shorts. "There is not so much... 'alone' in this place." he responded, softly.

"Yeah." she agreed with a subtle grin. She didn't miss the way he snuck a glance at her, like her smile caught his eye and he couldn't convince himself to look away. Her composure maintained itself by force. "Packed like sardines. But at least we're clean."

Chris uttered a hum, lowering his chin.

"You want to talk?" he queried, his tone much more conversational than his stiff wording made it seem.

Rochelle slipped her elbow onto her knee, resting her chin on her knuckles. "I'm just worried about you. You've been quiet, and I feel like it's been getting worse, not better - and I know Ellis is being there for you, and that's great, but... I know he's got his own stuff right now, too. So, if you need a different ear..."

She trailed off, pinky slipping to her lips, grazing the chapped flesh. The quiet that came afterward was not uncomfortable, but she felt a nervous flutter in her stomach at the silence. If he'd laughed and quickly agreed, reassured her, given some dismissive affirmation, she would've almost felt comforted that she was being paranoid.

But he hesitated, and that let her know he was sitting on something important.

She was ready to dig, ready to hunt for the answer. She'd chase him if she had to.

"... Mi alma, I do not want to upset you." That startled her, and her head snapped gently to glance at his face. His expression was set in a deep frown, brows tightly quirked. "But I - want to know. How did she die?"

Rochelle wished she didn't instantly understand. She wished that it had taken her a moment, because then, at least, she could believe that it was not always on her mind. She could have convinced herself that she might forget it one day.

Instead, she was left with a ferocious pain in her stomach, like the violent stab before illness. It stole her breath, and she knew Chris noticed, but he said nothing. He let her have it, maybe, let her deal with it - like he didn't trust his ability to comfort her. Or he knew that nothing would.

"I..." she started, then faltered. Her voice grew the slightest edge, a frustration, though she wasn't angry. "I'm not sure what you want me to say. Do you want to hear she died quickly and painlessly? Do you want to hear she suffered? I don't want to tell you something that'll just make you feel guilty."

Christophe's posture lowered, eyes slanted to stare down at his shoes. He closed them entirely after a moment, exhaling a soft and trembling breath. "I do not care. I just want to know she is dead."

That wasn't the response she expected. Rochelle shifted to examine him, lips parting slightly in a hesitant gesture. "You... aren't sure?" He didn't speak. His mouth quirked, pursed - strangled his expression into a mire of emotions she couldn't even begin to read. Shame read most vibrantly, just under his skin, almost glowing.

"Chris -" she began, confused, but he barked out a laugh that startled her.
"I have pain. So bad, it is like I..." Rather than find the words, he lifted his hand to circle fingers around his neck, as if to cut off the flow of oxygen through it. She watched his nails dig into his throat, watched his eyes grow misty. "It is like they are still here, and they punish me."

She moved on instinct, one hand sliding to rest on his knee, palm tickled by the curly hairs that covered his legs. Her other hand lifted, slipping her fingers to lace with his, prying them away from his neck. She should have let go, then - but she held on, feeling his digits tighten against hers.

"I hear them." he admitted, and it was so broken, so tiny - her chest ached. "Both of them. Like they are still here."

She sucked in a sharp breath, gently rubbing the pad of her thumb against the side of his hand. "You're hallucinating." she stated, less a question and more an observation. When Christophe shrugged in a strange and half-aborted gesture, she squeezed her grip on his knee. "You know they're dead, Chris. Ellis watched Jerry die, and Brenda bled out in front of me. They're gone."

That didn't matter, and she knew it. Saw it, clear as day, in his expression.

"Do you miss them?"

She had to ask it. It had every chance of being a cruel question to force upon him, something he might not even know the answer to, and most likely wouldn't want to answer at all. It was awkward and hard and necessary. He lifted his head and looked at her with a wrenched frown, startled. She met his gaze with cautious intensity.

"I know you think the right answer is no, but... it doesn't have it be."

Christophe wilted, just a little. He looked down at their hands, linked in the air between them, and bit into his lower lip. "I think I forgot how to... not be with them." he croaked, weakly. "Yo no pertenezco aquí. I... am not part of this team."

Rochelle was quick to snort, shifting her arm so their wrists fell into a soft touch, more of their skin in contact now. "Not part of this team? Chris, you've been a part of this team since you put down that gun rather than shoot us. You fell in with them, but you fought for us."

Tears started streaking down his cheeks, droplets of salted glass.

"You think you're responsible for what they did. And maybe you were, back then. But you paid for it - God, you paid too much..." Her voice trembled, shaking. "You changed. You did the right thing. You saved my life, more than once. How can you say you aren't part of us?"

He struggled, lowering his chin, and she'd never heard a voice crumble like his did. He sounded bitter, a mockery to it that cut inward. "I - no, chica. I only went to the best chance to survive. Stay with the bigger numbers, ¿sí? I just survive."

Rochelle hesitated. She almost withheld her response, but it escaped her anyway in a soft tone, soothing. "Is that what you hear them say?"

She knew she'd struck truth when his honey-brown eyes lifted, looking into her eyes with a quiet misery. Her heart ached at the sight, and at what his face admitted: he wasn't just hearing voices, they were *tormenting* him. She felt a fear brew in her belly, because she had no clue how to help him.

"Chris. We care about you, so much, and I think you're one of the bravest people I've ever met. You stood up to Brenda when it mattered. You made the *choice*, and it wasn't the safe one. You
made the hard choice." Her fingers squeezed, tightened, and he gripped her back so hard it almost ached. "They're wrong, Chris. You're part of our team. Absolutely. And you did what you did because you're a good person."

His eyes were vast and hopeless in their search of hers.

_We aren't equipped to deal with this. This is real; this is goddamn PTSD. This is a guy breaking, and I don't know how to help him. This is serious. This is -_

the soft touch of lips on hers.

It was so quick, and they had already been so close, she barely registered the movement of his head before he was kissing her. It was the gentlest press, the most chaste of gestures, just a butterfly kiss with the graze of his lower lip against the curve of her upper one.

Her heart leapt into her throat, and she didn't have time to formulate any reaction before the Spaniard was scrambling to his feet. She'd never seen him so flushed, tawny skin lit up in a blush that rivalled Ellis'. He looked so _shocked_, it was like she'd kissed him rather than the other way around.

"A-ah. Ah." he uttered, practically stammering. He backed away, stumbling softly like his legs didn't completely function. His expression was bluntly apologetic, and he burst into a flustered few sentences. "Perdóname. Discúlpame. I did not ask - I - _mierda_ -"

She lifted her hands, fingers going flat in a soft gesture. "Chris." she tried, intent on coaxing him to calm, but all her voice did was make him jolt further back. He was _fleeing_ from her, and she couldn't get him back.

Surprise and, maybe, embarrassment froze her to the spot, watching him stagger back into the restaurant. She lifted her hand, fingertips settling on her mouth, feeling the tingle of raw nerves zap over her lips. She uttered, "I'm not angry. ", because it seemed the most important thing to say.

Because she wasn't.

She felt a lot of things, and confusion was high on that list. Anger, however, was not anywhere.

Chris' footsteps stuttered just enough that she knew he heard her. That didn't stop him entirely, however, and he slipped inside with a posture that reminded her entirely too much of Nick's slinking, scared cat. He moved slower, though, less like fear and more like embarrassment.

It was in a faint fugue that Rochelle stood up. She dropped her hand, self-conscious, and she couldn't even begin to stop the laugh that left her. Honest, sincere, genuine laughter. She felt _good_ for the first time in what felt like forever.

The feeling lingered like a hot coal had gotten stuck in her chest, and she wanted desperately to jump and spin and maybe scream just a little... but she wouldn't allow herself the girlish reaction.

Rochelle was completely unsurprised that, upon re-entering the restaurant, she found Christophe firmly rooted next to his Ellis-shaped protective shield. He did his absolute best not to look at her when she was looking at him - and took every opportunity to glance her way when she focused on something else.

The one time she managed to catch him, their gazes came together for a long moment. Then Christophe winked, and it was a rare flash of the flamboyance that she'd almost thought he had run out of. The bright exuberance that she'd once thought of as grating, but had grown to miss.
It wasn't like they hadn't flirted with flirting before - but this was something entirely new, and absolutely uncharted.

She felt delightfully out of her depth.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 227

The scatter of metal across the ground was followed by the scramble of claws and limbs.

Nick had been spinning the tab of his soda can on the table, nail caught in the small hole. It had taken very little time for Maggie to notice, and her ferocious interest was visible in the extreme perk of her ears and the tremble of her whiskers. Her tail was almost perfectly still, except for the soft twitch at the base of it.

The orange of her eyes was almost invisible, just a sliver surrounding blown pupils.

It was off-hand, really, how he'd thrown it out into the restaurant floor. She leapt after it, chasing it between the legs of the chairs and tables. He figured it'd be a few seconds of entertainment, she'd scamper after it, and that'd be that. Laughter burst across his team at her antics, a pleasant noise.

It was nice, having something to distract them. Something innocent and... real. Something that felt normal. It was a lot like what Ellis had been to him: a bracing reminder that he was still human, in a world that tried desperately to make him feel less than.

Something good and warm and distinct from all the pain.

He hadn't expected her to suddenly leap up onto the table, body low, the tab glinting silver from her mouth. Even then, he definitely didn't expect her to drop it with a clatter, and stare at him expectantly.

"Jesus. Of all the cats, I get the clingy one who plays fetch? What happened to being independent?" Despite his words, he snatched up the tab, chucking it across the room. Maggie became a blur of black, gone like a shot, slim body managing a significant amount of noise in her hurry.

"She's so gosh-dang cute." Lena murmured from where she laid. She'd curled on her side, the compromise they'd reached rather than let her get up and move around. The position gave her a better view around the restaurant, though the L shape cut off her sight of the far corner, where the bathroom was. "I haven't seen any animals before now."

A hum left Ellis, sprawled lazily over a few chairs he'd lined up seat to seat, his body messily arranged across them. "We met this one girl who had a dog, but she said it ran off. Oh, 'n'my neighbor had a cat who disappeared a few days afore the outbreak, now that I'm thinkin' on it."

Rochelle practically startled, her head lifting in a snap that betrayed the way she hadn't been paying attention. Nick smirked to himself at the gesture - he'd been watching closely enough to notice she was distracted, and it wasn't hard to puzzle out why.

She had dragged Chris into the backyard, and they'd come back awkward and flustered. Nick figured they hadn't had the time to screw, but something had happened. They kept staring at each other in shifts, blatant as teenagers, and it was a wonder how he seemed to be the only one that
noticed. *It's about fucking time.*

*Ha.*

*'Fucking' time.*

He had no vested interest in them doing or not doing anything, but it was the perfect opportunity to taunt, harass, and otherwise make her miserable, and he had revenge to get. Nick didn't like remembering the fact that she'd known about him and Ellis for as long as she apparently had, but the idea of turning the tables on her was very appealing.

*Not that she's likely to hide it like I did.*

That soured his mood.

Maggie jumped back onto the table, soda tab in her teeth, and nearly slid straight across the smooth surface. This time, when she dropped it, Nick picked it up and merely held it. She seemed primed to tackle his arm, but instead obediently sat and watched him turn it in his fingers.

"Sorry, what?" Rochelle queried, drawing Ellis' gaze. "I said what?"

The Georgian laughed softly, quirking his brow. "I was sayin' how all the animals are gone. The swamp was even kinda empty when we went through it. Didn't even see no gators or nothin'." Something flashed in his eyes, eager, and he flapped a hand up in a limp gesture. "Man, did I ever tell y'all 'bout the time muh buddy Keith -"

Nick leaned out from the booth, aware of the tortoiseshell cat following his movements like a hawk. He carefully aimed, flicking the tab with his thumb, watching it arc gracefully to clatter just beneath the chairs Ellis was laying over.

He watched with no small joy as events unfolded precisely to his intent: Maggie bolted for it, Ellis scrambled upright at the sound of her approach, his movement frightened her into freezing mid-sprint, and Ellis was completely distracted from his story.

"Aw, Nick!" the kid complained, loudly, swinging his legs off the chairs. He looked sympathetically down at the cat, who had dropped low into a crouch, owlish eyes observing Ellis' movements with a small hiss. "You made me scare her!"

"She doesn't like your stories." Nick returned, calmly. He'd been about to lean back into his booth, but Ellis bent down to grab the can tab, and he couldn't help but watch.

When Ellis held it up, dangling it in the air, the cat's conflict was visible in her posture. Her ears tracked him closely, but her eyes were riveted on the small scrap of aluminum. "You want this?" he teased, gently, waving his hand in a circle to get her head to rotate. "You want it?"

The small cat seemed mesmerized, fascinated - and when Ellis tossed it in her direction, she leapt straight up to catch it.

Ellis laughed, pleased, watching her wrestle it for a second before flopping hard onto her side. The aluminum tab was far too small, but that didn't stop her from gripping it tightly and trying to kick at it with her back paws. She mostly ended up kicking air.

"You guys went through the swamp?" Lena's voice was a light question, distantly tired. Rochelle hummed in affirmation, leaning in from her place at the bar. Coach was sitting next to her, and he snorted.
"Yeah. Was damn miserable. How'd you two make it? The bridge was out, and all the maps showed it as the only way across. We had to take a big detour, gettin' 'round that river."

Rhiannon passed a grin at him, crossing her arms. "Uh, shit, dude." Her expression waffled between humour and mockery, jerking her chin. "We went down-river a mile or two, and there was a crossing. Shallow spot with some rocks. We almost lost the bike, and Lena, but we got back on track pretty fast."

Her sister uttered a soft laugh.

Coach blanched, looking like he'd swallowed something unpleasant and was in the early stages of deciding whether or not he'd choke it up. "... Mile or two?" he managed, grunted, with a haunted tone.

They'd spent somewhere around twenty-four hours in the swamp, all-told, after all.

Rhiannon seemed to pick up on his horror, and her grin widened. "How big was that detour, exactly?" Exhaling heavily, Coach slid his hand onto his temple, holding his head in a reluctant gesture. Rather than respond, he merely held his silence.

When Maggie finally returned to Nick's side, interest in her makeshift toy having waned, he scowled at her. "Cheating skank." he muttered, reaching out to scratch at her forehead. She gave a quiet meow, half-broken, and slid down to settle into a squat on the table. The position allowed her the vantage point to look out at the restaurant with attentive, twitching whiskers.

Ellis babbled on, obliviously. "Man, the swamp was crazy. There were these zombies that crawled around in the water, 'n' they slung mud at us. Like tryin' tuh blind you!" He waved both his hands up, fingers splayed. "We had tuh cross on this boat, but Nick can't -"

Nick cleared his throat, loudly.

"- swim, so -"

"Overalls!" Fury made Nick straighten, sliding to sit on the outer-facing edge of the booth seat and lean out. "You wanna not go giving out all my fucking personal information to every goddamn assclown you meet? Jesus Christ."

The dismissive way Ellis waved him off only served to throw fuel on his anger. "It ain't nothin' tuh be embarrassed about." Then Ellis blinked, head tilting slightly as his tone dipped into playful mockery. He either didn't know how much his words clawed at Nick's self-control, or didn't care. "Well, you fallin' in the river and almost drownin' was kinda embarrassin'."

Rhiannon's cackle exploded instantly, her legs curling up to set her heels on the bench, tucking her body into a curl. She squirmed in glee, raising a hand to press her fingertips into her scalp, rubbing at the streak of brown hair growing in under her dyed blonde. "Oh, fuck, yes! Please give me all the details. I want a perfect fuckin' mental image of this."

Helpfully, Rochelle lifted her hands to wave them at either side of her face. "Think drowned rat. Angry drowned rat." Her description made the blonde burst into more laughter, joined after a beat by Ellis, his grin flaring wide.

"I had tuh dive in after him." he practically boasted, like it were something to be proud of.

Both the bikers laughed, Lena's laughter weak and faded.
That fury tripled, gone wild in Nick's blood. He had no interest in being made a fool of, let alone by Ellis, and certainly not with Rhiannon listening. If he'd softened his stance and lulled Ellis into thinking he was going to stand for being the butt of their jokes, he'd have to rectify the misunderstanding.

He was, if nothing else, a master of over-correction.

"I'm glad everyone thinks it's so funny." he hissed through his teeth. His tone caught Ellis' attention, the Georgian looking at him with lingering humour. The half-grin only served to send crawling agitation up Nick's spine.

"It was." Ellis returned, easily, a childish jut touching his jaw. His grin faded, traded for a thin glaze of challenge.

Lacing his fingers together, Nick forced his expression into something flatter, less like anger. "You wanna talk embarrassing? Let's talk embarrassing." His eyes did not stray from Ellis' face. "Let's talk about the time you popped a Boomer in your own face and reeked for hours. Or when you ran into a building with a Smoker, and I had to drag your dumb ass out. Hmm, two times? Three?"

The Georgian's expression went from perturbed to outright irritated, jovial contrariness replaced by a quiet hardass. "Jeez, Nick, somebody got yer goat today?" His frustration only heightened Nick's, feeding off each other in some discreet stubbornness.

Rochelle must have sensed things were catapulting out of control, because she lifted her hands, fingers splayed. She opened her mouth to talk, but Nick steamrolled over her, easily.

"My fucking goat almost drowned in that goddamn river because you thought it'd be a fucking great idea to cross in a glorified goddamn bucket. I don't know what fucking chemical imbalance makes you think the way you do, but you have been a goddamn menace from the day I met you."

The producer almost stood, expression drawn in a look halfway to horrified. "Nick, what the hell -"

Surprise flashed across her face when it was Ellis who interrupted her, voice quiet. "Let him talk, Ro.'" The calm edge to his tone was quickly betrayed by his tight fists and raised shoulders. "He's got shit to say? We got nothin' but time."

Nick didn't know what had toughened the kid up more: him, or the apocalypse. He'd have been impressed if it hadn't made him angry.

If his ex-lover wanted to fight, they'd fight.

He tossed a hand up, layering on the sarcasm liberally to his voice until it practically pitched up. "Oh, shit, if you're gonna ask so nicely - let's talk about the seven hundred times you've set off car alarms. Or attracted zombies with your fuckin' loud mouth. And how about the time we were stuck out in a forest and you fucked up starting a fire so many times we ran out of goddamn matches and nearly froze to death?"

*Or the time you fell in love with me.*

His chest was volcanic rock, and his anger was magma, rising and bubbling from nowhere. His footing was unsteady, tectonic plates shifting under him, until he couldn't even recognize his own landscape. His chance to regain the reins had passed.

*Or the time you made me almost think I loved you back.*
Ellis' jaw flexed, and his eyes held a quiet edge of sadness. "I didn't do none'uh that on purpose. And are you gonna pretend I didn't help out a lot, too? That I ain't saved y'all?"

Dragging his hand over his face, Nick shook his head, a fierce roll of his eyes joining the gesture. "Before or after you caused the thing that got us in trouble? How about you taking a fucking nap instead of having our backs with the Angels?"

He was out of control, and the temperature in the café was dropping rapidly. Chris was pale, gaze ping-ponging between everyone in the room like he was looking for someone to step in. Lena and Rhiannon had disengaged from the situation with calculated distance, two onlookers to a fight they had no skin in.

Ellis' body wound tighter with every second - but his voice remained stoic. If Nick hadn't known him well enough to pinpoint every time his words struck home, the kid might've fooled him. "You ain't gotta be nasty, Nick. Besides, you ain't perfect, neither."

Nick laughed, aware that it came out caustic and loud and aggressive. The words that tumbled out of him were uncalculated. It wasn't that he hadn't meant to say them - but he did not measure the consequences, did not consider his surroundings. It was the lashing out of animal instinct, the desperate, below-the-belt jab.

"Oh, no. I can think of one pretty big mistake I've made off the top of my head."

You. hung unspoken.

The silence that followed was so loud, he withheld a swallow for fear the whole restaurant would hear the sound. Ellis' expression flinched between a hollow disbelief and a tense frown, eyes searching Nick's, looking for something.

Hunting for some amount of regret or apology to signify he hadn't meant it.

When Nick offered him no such thing, Ellis quietly drew himself up and off the chairs. "At least I can say I ain't never done nothin' tuh hurt any of y'all." There was a composure to his movements, a carefully structured stiffness that only highlighted just how injured he was. "I'm gonna keep watch out front, if y'all need me."

"Ellis!" Coach tried, voice a low chastisement, but the younger Georgian did not respond. He disappeared around the wall separating the restaurant from its entranceway, and awkward tension filled the room in his wake.

Nick lifted a hand, thumb brushing over his left eyebrow in a frustrated gesture. The anger left behind threatened to choke him, engulf his vision in a blur. He huffed out a laugh, shaking his head with a sardonic utterance. "Dishing it out but can't take it. Goddamn."

"If you keep talkin', Nick -" Coach's voice came, thin with a sort of anxious anger. He did not finish the sentiment, but he didn't really need to.

Clenching his jaw against the urge to retort, Nick slammed his palms into the table hard enough to launch himself to his feet. He spat off a bland breath, just a scoff, and charged across the restaurant. His shoulder lead the way, shoving open the kitchen door and storming inside to some amount of safety.

Escaping, if he were being honest.

_Fuck. The kid really knows how to push my goddamn buttons._
Anger made him growl, fisting hands in his hair, but it was hard not to lose steam when there was no one around to posture for. ...Goddamnit. He didn't deserve that. Why do I have to take everything to a fucking ten?

Some fervor left him, drained out of his body, and he found himself suddenly bent over with his hands on his knees. They were trembling, so he bit his nails into his slacks to stiffen them against the sensation.

Why am I so fucking angry all the time? Why does he make me so fucking angry? Have I always been like this? Maybe I just never gave a shit about the people I hurt before.

His imagination summoned up the image of Ellis out front, baby blues full of tears, and Christ if he didn't get angrier.

They'd almost reached some neutral place, some calm, and Nick's reaction was to hunt down the pettiest reason to blow it all to shit again. And for what? The fuck does this get me? The fuck does any of this get me? God, I need the hell off this fucking trainwreck.

He wanted to go find a boat and sail away, with or without his tentatively formed new alliance. He wanted to walk out the back door and never see any of them ever again. He wanted, more than anything, to have it all just go away.

Instead he straightened, and turned on his heel.

Nick's posture was dull and his eyes half-closed as he walked back into the café, feet moving, possessed by something very far from conscious will. He didn't acknowledge the startled suspicion he earned for his reappearance, didn't utter a word to his team.

He just walked toward the entryway, feeling very much like a man gone to the gallows.

Come on, Nicky-boy. Time to clean up your mess, for once.
Chapter 228

Ellis' gaze was fixed on some far-off point, and made no effort to move it when Nick approached him. If he was surprised, he stifled it.

The gambler moved languidly, drawing into a lean on the wall a few feet from the chair Ellis sat on, posted just in front of one of the windows. The motion was casual enough to play off the berth he gave Ellis, the space he maintained between them.

Nick waited, but he didn't have to wait long.

"If Ro' made you come talk tuh me, you can just -"

Smoothly, Nick lifted a hand, pressing his palm into his jaw as he shook his head in negation. The gesture made Ellis' eyes dart toward him, but they returned to facing forward just as fast.

"I ain't in the mood fer this, Nick. I don't know why you felt like yellin' at me today, but if you think I'm just gonna sit there'n'let you, yer wrong. So unless yuh got somethin' tuh say -" He trailed off, there, and his meaning was clear.

Nick inhaled through his nose, chest filling with sour air, and eyes shutting. He chose very explicitly not to have them open when he spoke. "I'm sorry."

The darkness behind his eyelids didn't leave him deaf, and he heard the rustle and sharp shift as Ellis whipped around in his seat. Felt the burn of eyes on him. Imagined very clearly the look of shock on the kid's face. It should have offended him, how much it threw Ellis for a loop.

"I crossed the line."

Simple. Flat. Matter-of-fact. It should have been easy, the normal, human thing to do. Swallow his pride and apologize for a mistake. *So why does it feel like pulling my own fucking teeth out?*

Ellis' silence practically drowned him. With his eyes shut, he couldn't see the kid's face to even get a hint on how his words were being received. For all he knew, the other man had fainted. It seemed likely enough, considering how shocked he was.

Then a slight huff of air left the Georgian, and Nick dared to open his eyes.

Ellis was slumped, seeming tired more than anything else. A small, perturbed smile tugged at his expression, strangled into a weird grimace as he tried not to allow it to widen. "... I don't think you've ever said that tuh me before."

Nick frowned before he could stop it, cocking his head as a scoff touched his voice. "I've apologized before."

"Not like that." Ellis looked down, abruptly, peering at his socked feet. His smile faded, replaced with an exhausted pinch that drew a line between his brows. His tone stiffened, growing guarded. "You always just blow it off, or pretend nothin' happened, or... do somethin' rather than say somethin'. So why're you sayin' it now?"

The Northerner had to close his jaw tightly to prevent himself from the instinctual response: *Nevermind. Fuck you. Pretend I didn't say anything.* He sighed, shaking his head to jostle himself out of it. "I told you. I went over the line. I can always take it back, if that'd make you more
comfortable."

Mostly out of it.

Ellis shot him a mild look, verging on annoyed, but not quite. He inhaled a deep breath as if to calm himself before he responded. "I shouldn't've been teasin' you. But you -"

He hesitated, gently, before lowering his voice, mindful of the fact they were separated from the rest of the team by nothing but a few feet of wall. "That hurt. Sayin' that, let alone sayin' it when they're all there, 'n' I can't respond on account'uh the sisters not knowin' about us. Especially when I'm keepin' quiet fer you, not me. I don't gotta, y'know."

The inherent threat should have irritated him. It did, in fact, but Nick merely tipped his head a few degrees and kept an even keel. "I'd prefer you did."

That was not the correct response, it seemed, as Ellis released a gust of air that might've formed a laugh had it contained any humour in the slightest. Instead, it sounded more like the aftermath of a punch to the gut. "Yeah, I figured that part out muhself." His stone-blue eyes narrowed, squinted, and he looked up and out the window.

Silence clawed at them for a moment, very far from the comfortable lull between two lovers.

When he did speak again, the mutter that left Ellis was small and fragile, a vulnerable little utterance. "I thought we were doin' better. I'd... I'd've liked tuh be friends, y'know, even if... we ain't... y'know."

Nick cut his gaze to the side, curling his fingers into fists and crossing his arms over his chest. "That's not what you want. You want things to go back to normal, and I don't."

Rather than obey the urgent need to escape the conversation, Nick put his thumb up in the vague mimicry of a shrug. "So I - got pissed." It was too honest, too clumsy, and he found his footing amidst the words only in retrospect. "And I took a pot-shot. Because at least when we're fighting, I know we're both on the same page."

The Georgian's gaze lifted to meet his, and those eyes cut to his quick. Wounded, bleeding, he grimaced and deflected.

"I'm aware it's fucked up. And I don't actually enjoy it, for the record."

Ellis seemed to mull that over. He rolled it around in his head, considering it from every angle, with such honest curiosity that it made Nick anxious. Every second that ticked by made him regret more fervently every word he'd uttered. He regretted his honesty, because what was the point?

Slowly, the younger man settled his hands on his knees, a calm pout touching his face, plush lower lip lending a terribly enticing edge to the expression. Nick had known plenty of women who batted their eyes and pouted their lips, all sex appeal and coy energy. Ellis was utterly oblivious to his own attractive nature, and that was the worst part.

*He's the stupidest knock-out I've ever met.*
"Do you really think that?"

A momentary flood of discomfort preceded Nick reminding himself that Ellis could not, in fact, read his mind - and he uttered a slightly dull, "Think what?"

Ellis' pout faded, and a hesitance drew the slightest shift of colour to his face, subtle enough that Nick could almost pretend it wasn't there. The younger man knew full well his face was giving away his shame, ducking away before clarifying lowly, "Us bein' a big mistake."

The answer was easy. It was gift-wrapped, poised on a silver platter, teed right up for him. He knew exactly what to say: yes. They'd been a huge mistake, a mistake he desperately wished he could undo. All he had to do was say yes, and walk away.

So, when he hesitated, actually froze up, a small beat of time might as well have been an eon.

In games of bluff and lie, tells were everything. A twitching muscle, a fidgeting digit, a tapping foot. Pupils dilating on the reveal of someone's winning hand, and the gentle pause on realizing the cards were against them. Luck and chance played their part, as did talent and simple ploys, but nothing pleased Nick like pinning down someone's tell.

The shock and the horror as an enemy realized they had betrayed themselves.

"I think my big mistake was not letting you run me over in that goddamn monster truck, save myself all this fuckin' time." he shot back, like a joke, a joke that betrayed him.

Ellis looked up at him, eyes gone soft, and Nick turned away. He didn't let himself utter another goddamn word, not when he'd lost faith in what he'd end up saying. He clutched his silence close, his last defense, and buried himself in the refuge of his booth-turned-fortress.

Fuck if relationships aren't like poker. You don't gamble with the same people over and over if you want to win. They learn your game, and they learn how to beat you. You get them worn into you like tire tracks, until you're predictable. You can't play someone who knows you.

The only reason he didn't have a pitchfork-wielding mob at his heels, he was sure, was because Ellis followed shortly behind him and started chattering up a storm like nothing had happened. He didn't seem cheery, but he was, at least, relaxed.

Nick wished he didn't feel some creeping relief.

Christ, he's got my goddamn number.
Chapter 229

Stretching her arms over her head, Lena tried desperately to work the muscles in her biceps and shoulders without straining the ones in her torso. She grunted, groaned, squeezing her eyes shut. Her body felt tremendously close to shattering, like she was metal brought on and off heat until she cracked and warped.

She'd been so hot - as if whatever was happening under her skin was in overdrive. The idea of the virus in her veins working to keep her alive should have scared her or made her uncomfortable, but she mostly just felt grateful.

*I can't leave Rhiannon alone. Not like this. She needs me.*

Inhaling slowly, the brunette did not notice Rochelle's approach, not until the woman was just a hair's breadth from the table. Conscious of the proximity of another person, she opened her eyes and looked up.

Rochelle smiled at her, gently.

"Hey. Doing okay?"

Curling her fingers into limp fists, Lena considered answering honestly - and then smiled back with an affirmative noise. "Are you guys?" When the other woman winced, she managed a soft laugh. "I know, I know. It's none of our business. I'm just worried about those two."

Rochelle followed her glance to look in Ellis' direction, where he sat near to Christophe. The Georgian was quietly kneeled behind him, tremendous delicacy tempering his movements as he worked hands on the man's shoulders. It was very close to a regular massage, just achingly slow.

"Oh, yeah. They're fine." The dark-skinned survivor seemed relieved, an animated edge touching her posture as she waved both hands. "I think Chris was in some pain. Coach and Ellis said it helps with blood-flow or something."

"I wasn't talking about Christophe and Ellis."

Rochelle seemed hesitant, right before she rolled her eyes and dropped her body down to sit on the bench close by. Her voice lowered to almost a whisper, furtive and frustrated. "I'm sorry you guys had to see that. It's... been rough, lately. We're just cooped up with nothing to do but fight. And Nick and Ellis are really good at fighting."

"They remind me of my sister and me. We haven't always been close; we fought like crazy for a long time." When Rochelle gave her a curious look, she shrugged a shoulder. "Family drama."

Lena hummed, quietly, eyes slanting to look across the room and watch Rhiannon pace the length of the dining area with her baton in her hands. She considered prying - but it hadn't borne fruit in the past, and she didn't want to upset the woman.

So, instead, she gave a soft laugh.

"The producer put her hands together, palms cradling her chin, and smiled. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." she teased.
If Lena hadn't already been flush with a fever, that would have done it. *Shoot. How come the one cute gal I meet out here is taken?* Smoothly lowering her chin, Lena canted her head in order to get a more level gaze on Rochelle's face. "Our parents separated when we were young. My dad got custody of us, and Rhee blamed me for taking Mom away from her."

Frowning, Rochelle leaned closer, taking the cue of the other woman's lowered voice and keeping hers to a murmur. "Why?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Lena slipped a hand up to tap her cheek with a fingertip. "Mom and Dad disagreed on what to do with me when they found out I was dating girls. She wanted to kick me out and he wouldn't let her, to be specific. They compromised with sending me to boarding school."

Rochelle's flash of surprise affirmed what she had already figured; nobody had spread what she'd told them during their game. That was fine with her, even though she didn't care to keep it a secret. *Nice to know I can trust them.*

"Oh." the woman uttered, and Lena was gratified to see her stay close. "I didn't know."

The biker summoned up the slyest smile she could manage, wishing she wasn't borderline infirm. It put a damper on her game. "You would've, if you weren't clearly head over heels for that Spanish boy... I'd have been puttin' all the moves on you."

It was a risky joke - but one that paid off when Rochelle broke into laughter, the closest to giggling she'd heard from the woman. She leaned forward, crinkling her nose. "Aw... Thanks. You're sweet." Not fully distracted from the conversation, Rochelle tipped her head. "If they agreed on boarding school, why'd they end up splitting?"

Lena's smile faded to a soft neutrality, resting a hand on her swollen gut. "Because my dad eventually found out that it wasn't boarding school." When Rochelle's gaze searched hers, unsure, she shrugged a shoulder. "Reparative therapy. Pray the gay away, we usually called it."

Rochelle's eyes widened, and Lena couldn't help the way she tensed when the woman suddenly reached out, grabbing her hand in a tight clench. The touch served to fluster her, and she reflexively curled her fingers. "Jesus. Seriously?"

"It wasn't as bad as you think." she quickly murmured, glancing up. Coach was looking at them, quietly arching a brow, but didn't get up or approach them. "It was mostly like messed up therapy. It only got bad when I didn't play along, and even then, I know some kids had it a lot worse than I did. It was a long time ago, too."

Rochelle's concern was undaunted. It was terribly flattering, and Lena was sure her peaking heartrate must've been audible through her chest. "I... I knew that was a thing, but I've never known anyone who went through it... Christ. That's horrible."

Lena laughed a little, pulling her hand gently free. Rochelle let her go, tucking her hands into her lap, instead. "It could've been worse. The worst thing they did was put me on emetics and play lesbian porn on full blast. All the junk they said, I shook it off, but that... stuck for a while. Sex scenes in movies still give me the heebies."

"That's awful." whispered the producer, voice catching in a sympathetic hush. "I can't believe anyone would do that - or your mom would do that to you..."

Forcing a quick smile, Lena lifted both hands in a dismissive gesture. "I don't think she really understood what I was in for, honestly. They didn't let me call my parents, and it took about two
months for Dad to realize Mom was lying to him about hearing from me. He found her emails with the management, found the place, and stormed it to come get me. They divorced pretty soon after."

Rochelle looked like she was bursting with questions, and they all must have lobbied so hard for priority that she ended up speechless for a moment. Lena averted her eyes with a small grin.

"Like I said. It was a while ago. I'd probably be messed up about it, but my dad was there for me. He even sent me to therapy, even though he's super sure they're all quacks. He didn't know how to help me on his own, but he made sure I got help from someone."

The other woman was watching her closely, attentive, and Lena fidgeted with a strip of blanket. "Anyway. It's not illegal or anything, but the judge took it all into account and gave Dad custody anyway. Rhee loved Mom, so... Dad decided we wouldn't tell her what happened with me."

Lena scratched at her ear, her eyes drifting low, thoughtfully. "She was pretty young at the time, but she wasn't stupid, and Mom played her against us a lot. She knew it was my fault somehow. Gosh, she hated me. She was hard on Dad, too." She chuckled, wryly. "She always hated that she didn't get any say in the custody battle. She wanted to stay with Mom."

Rochelle curled her fingers together, shaking her head. "But you're okay now. What changed?"

A soft frown preceded Lena shrugging. "Honestly? I'm not completely sure. She and Mom had a falling out a few years later, and I guess Mom told her everything. I figure she thought it'd make Rhiannon hate us, but it back-fired. Rhee felt like she betrayed me, and... I think she realized we'd been trying to protect her. Both by keeping it all secret and letting her have a relationship with Mom... and by keeping her under Dad's roof."

Puffing out a sigh, Rochelle leaned back, gaze tracing her expression. "I see why she's such a firecracker, and why you're tough as nails." she murmured, gently. "That's a lot to grow up with, for both of you."

Lena hummed before giving a laugh, brows wrestling into a knot. "That's what people always tell me. But it's just... what it was, y'know? I got lucky, though. Most kids in my position didn't have a dad who cared enough to fight for them. So, I try not to take it for granted."

Turning a little on the bench, Rochelle glanced out over the restaurant. Lena followed her gaze, seeing where Chris was laying out flat on his belly, speaking in low tones with Ellis. Judging by the Georgian's apologetic expression, he'd pushed the man to his limit.

Coach and Rhiannon were at the bar, sitting peaceably in each other's presence. Nick was, unsurprisingly, still asleep - or pretending to be.

"Your turn."

Lena felt a mild amusement when Rochelle startled into refocusing on her, and she smiled when the other woman nodded quickly. "Mm... I did promise, huh? My family's pretty boring compared to yours. Not sure I can match up."

Slitting her eyes half-shut, Lena laughed softly. "I was thinking more your current family." When Rochelle regained that stricken look, restrained, she tipped her head and tapped her fingertips against her midsection. "C'mon, Ro'. I think I earned a story, didn't I?"

She meant it as a joke, but Rochelle flashed a frown at her. "Oh, girl, it isn't like that. It's just... not my story to tell. I'll just make things worse. You understand, don't you?"
Lena pursed her lips to fight off a heavy smile. She reached out, cuffing her knuckle on the other woman's cheek, allowing herself the enjoyment of Rochelle's blatant embarrassment. "Yeah, okay. Only because you're freakin' cute."

Rochelle laughed out loud, quickly batting the woman's hand away. She pushed up to her feet and backed away, muttering under her breath, "First Chris, now you. Why did it take a goddamn apocalypse to bring out all the people who are into me?"

Thoroughly pleased with herself, Lena let her eyes close, listening to the woman's retreat. It didn't take long at all for her sister's voice to break the silence, low and private as she scooted up to sit on the table.

"... News?"

Lena hummed once without opening her eyes. "Inconclusive."

Rhiannon grunted, sounding dubious, and a palm landed on the top of Lena's head in a condescending pat pat. Her voice was almost a whisper. "I'm tellin' ya, dude. You're fuckin' crazy; there's no way they're boning. Your gaydar is broken."

A grin touched the brunette's lips, faint. "Doesn't take a gaydar to see heartbreak." She only drifted one eye open, glancing across the room to where Ellis crouched beside the Spaniard. The boy's face was soft, but his eyes were sad - and he didn't strike her as a sad person.

Another grunt sounded from her partner, as dubious as the last.

Then, softly: "I should tell you... Something happened the other day."

Lena lifted her head to look up at her younger sister, their matching eyes meeting in a flash. The discomfort in Rhiannon's face made her instantly nervous. She braced for the worst, and was not disappointed.

"It's about Nick."
Chapter 230

The next two days passed in short order. There was a tension nobody could quite put a name to floating in the air. Rhiannon and Lena reverted to huddling away in the larger dining area, and Christophe spent most of his time sleeping. Ellis and Nick gave each other space, but that also translated into a weird void of conversation where they didn't engage one another.

It wasn't aggressive or spiteful, but neither was it subtle. It was like they'd decided not to argue, and also decided not to get along, so they were left with largely ignoring each other.

Rochelle and Coach were the only ones to bridge the numerous gaps, but even then, the bikers seemed distant.

The producer was left to wonder if Rhiannon had gotten angry over Lena sharing their past, and she'd caused tension. That explanation grew flimsier the more she considered it, however. Even moreso after Rhiannon abruptly handed her a tiny snack-sized bag of low calorie brownie bites she'd apparently hoarded away in their duffelbag.

It felt like a conciliatory gesture, but Rochelle hadn't the faintest idea what for.

It was the morning of the second day when something changed in the air. Nick sensed it the moment he awoke, a restlessness. A buzzing energy. They were all uneasy, and their close quarters only worsened the anxiety.

Everything was harder when they weren't even good company to each other.

Lena got to her feet, moving well before anyone could protest it. She stretched, bringing her arms up over her head and lifting onto her toes, a whined sound of pain escaping her. As she fell back into a slump, she looked up and squinted her eyes.

"... Can we please get out of this darn building today?"

Nick perked his head up, lifting it from its place on his crossed arms. He arched a brow as he looked at her, snorting thinly. "Are these accommodations not up to snuff? Someone forget the mint on your pillow?" he returned, humour and sarcasm blending until it was hard to tell what reaction he actually wanted.

Standing quickly, though not as quick as Rhiannon, Rochelle watched the younger biker grab her sister by the arm as if to hold her up. Lena allowed it, shaking her head. "Look, hoss. I need air. And if I don't move my freakin' legs, I will go nutty."

"Do you think you're up to it?" Rochelle pressed, gently. "I know we underestimated how fast you were gonna heal, but... the last thing I want to do is knock you back. We can wait a little longer. A day, at least."

Coach grunted, just once, before gesturing a hand around them. "I disagree. Restaurant's been gettin' weaker. That last Smoker who came pokin' around almost punched our back door in. An' the longer we're down, the harder it's gonna be to get back up. Think a trip out is just what we need."

Ellis leaned up and out from his bundle of blankets on the floor, peering around at his team. "We could go shoppin' fer new clothes." he offered, cheerily. "Chris was whinin' 'bout bein' cold. He needs a shirt."
A soft mumble from the lump of blankets and slimly bared tan skin was Chris' lodged complaint. "Yo no era - I was not."

"I can get behind that." Rochelle muttered, looking down at the ratty grey T-shirt that had long since replaced her Depeche Mode shirt, and the bloody and torn jeans doing a modest job of holding themselves together. "Our town guide might include a strip mall or something."

Pumping her fist in the air with a small grin, Rhiannon circled her other arm in Lena's and nodded. "Shit yeah. I'm so ready to get on the road again. And Lee and I have a boat to start looking for - I was thinking we could find a real map of Tybee, hunt down the dock address we found."

Ellis pushed his hands into his lap to push his blankets down and off his body. "Maybe it's time tuh get Chris back on the horse, too."

"We have fought before." Chris muttered like a deflection.

"In both meanings of the phrase." Nick offered up, sunnily.

Rochelle put both her hands up, spreading her fingers in an attention-getting gesture. "Okay, chill. Look, I'm eager to get my wiggles out, too, but we need to be ready that things might get nasty. If there's a horde, or God forbid a Tank... We need a plan. And I've been thinking about this for a while."

She seemed to pause, like she expected commentary, but none came. Everyone was looking at her with quiet attention, and that put her off so badly she couldn't help but stammer for a second. "Uh - right. So."

Nick didn't miss the shift in her posture. She stiffened, tightened, and he was left with the strong impression that it was the same change that overtook her in front of a camera. Authoritative and composed. He found a little humour in it.

"We need to mesh our teams. When Nick and Rhee and I went out, we did fine, but it's a matter of muscle memory, too. Our teams fight differently, and we've gotten used to each other. So we're gonna be clumsy, and that's fine, but we have to account for it. And that's not even taking Chris into account; he's gotta relearn how to fight at all."

Coach released a soft sound of affirmation. "Fo' sho'."

Christophe frowned, pushing himself messily to sit upright. "I do not think I can. I am weak, and - I do not know how I will be useful. I will be dangerous."

"Ah... cielos. That is fine, but... I thought I would fight with you, mi alma." He lifted his gaze, peering up toward her, so sincere it visibly ached him.
Nick watched the flash of embarrassment over Rochelle's expression.

"I'll be back-up, but I think it's better if you have a dedicated partner, so you can get used to each other. And Ellis is super flexible and quick-thinking, and I think he'll do a better job than I will. I don't want to mess things up when it's life or death, and -"

She was doing an admirable job of pretending she wasn't floundering, but Nick didn't miss it. So, he decided to be helpful and interject, and it had nothing at all to do with the vague annoyance he felt at the two men being paired up. "Worried you two can't keep your hands off each other? Or, hand, as the case may be."

Rochelle looked instantly furious, darting a glare at him, and her angry response only confirmed his statement. He grinned in slim self-satisfaction, shaking his head when she retorted mightily. "I'm worried about everyone being safe. And Chris and Ellis work well together."

"Sure." Nick lazily murmured, looking away.

Frustration seeped into her posture, but Rochelle shook it off, pressing a knuckle to her lips and clearing her throat. "Keep in mind, I'm not saying we split up. Just keep to the buddy system if anything goes wrong, and stay close to each other."

Rhiannon turned her head, glancing over her sister's face. "I got Lee." she stated, flatly, very much not like a suggestion. "We've been fighting together a long-ass time, hurt and not hurt. Just not this bad before."

"I'm fine." Lena insisted, making to pull her arm free, only to find it trapped in a vicegrip. She grunted faintly, trying a few times to tug away, fighting insincerely to escape. "Sis -"

"That makes sense, but I don't want to partition you guys off. Ruins the point." Rochelle turned, looking toward Coach. It made sense; Nick had noticed Rhiannon and him getting along, as much as either of them seemed to get along with anyone. That mostly amounted to silently enjoying each other's company.

If Coach went with the girls, then he would likely be partnered with Rochelle. He was mostly fine with that.

Nick looked away, glancing at his hands. He clenched them into fists gently, letting his thumb escape in order to toy with the rings on his fingers. *Got so used to being partnered with Ellis so much, it's practically weird to not be. I gotta get over this shit. Then, unbidden, We made a good team.*

He was rudely disturbed from his thoughts by a statement that raised the hair on his neck. It made his skin crawl, made his most animal instincts kick into high gear. He was a few inches away from leaping out a window.

Rhiannon uttered, "Why doesn't Nick pair with us?"

Fortunately for him, nobody cared to look over and see him barely restraining himself from crawling over the restaurant wall like a Hunter and escaping through the front door. Instead, all eyes were on the bikers. Lena stood next to her with a casual resolve that shamelessly suggested they'd come to an agreement on the issue previously.

"Oh. Uh." Rochelle managed to spit out in something not completely shocked. "Okay. If that works for you guys - Nick? Are you fine with that?"
He had just long enough to assemble his poker face before she and every other survivor in the room turned to stare at him. *No. I am not fine with that. I am absolutely not goddamn fine with that. Please save me. If there is a God, please save me from this.*

"Yeah, why not?" was what he said instead.

_Jesus Christ. I am gonna die, Basic Instinct style._

Lena shot him a smile, and he could not fathom what made her show him such a sweetened look. It made him tremendously suspicious, though it also served to focus him. There was a game afoot, and he could wrap his head around that.

He allowed a slip of teeth, just a plain and unassuming smirk. "Let's bond. Sounds like a good time for everyone."

She didn't even blink. Lena's voice was reasonable and calm and definitely hiding something. "I figure we got off on the wrong foot. Seems right to work it out with zombie guts. That's how we fix everything nowadays, right? Darn zombies."

"Mm." Nick agreed, resting his hand on his thigh. The other lifted to card through his hair, eyes slitting closed. "Are you gonna resist the urge to throw yourself in front of another moving train in Charger form?"

He felt his words strike out at some invisible barrier. It was the first serve, the first volley. He was testing the waters.

When she laughed outright, wincing with a soft touch to her midsection, he was decidedly surprised - but it was Rhiannon's utter lack of reaction that really got to him. She looked between them, blankly, and it was not natural on her face. _Shit. She fucking coached her on this. They prepared this. I wonder if this has got to do with - _

He blinked, despite himself, as the pieces came together with a tactile snap. _They must have talked about me coming with them. Wonder if this is tryouts._

"Coach and I'll stay together." Rochelle interjected, with the busy rush of someone trying to force a conversation past an awkward rut. "We'll keep close to Chris and Ellis in case anything happens, but everyone have everyone's backs, okay? We're a big team now. We have to keep focused."

With a subtle shift of his body, like he couldn't quite contain the energy therein, Ellis bit back a small grin. "Oh, man. I'm so excited!"

Nick didn't let his gaze stray from the bikers, even as they turned away. He hummed calmly, thoughtfully. He forgot himself long enough to utter sarcastically, "You are the only person I know who gets excited for zombies. Or is it the shopping?"

Ellis must have forgotten himself, too, because he easily chirped back, "Both!"
"Let's get a move on!" Ellis hollered eagerly, thrusting the porch door open with such gusto that it struck the outside of the structure as it swung on its hinges. The wood clapped together, and the snarl of zombies surrounded them, attracted by all the noise.

The front yard reeked of decay, as the corpses of infected they'd killed previously lay baking in the sun. Nick barely flinched as the stench hit him - his nose was distressingly used to the smell. His attention remained focused solely on his surroundings and the infected charging toward them.

Ellis was a blur of energy, five-and-change feet of youthful muscle driven to excitement. He had his pump shotgun in his hands, and with its stock set against his hip, he was gripping it less like a gun and more like a flamethrower. The laugh that left him was exaggerated, like the cackle of a cartoon villain.

"Get some, baby!" he yelled, charging forward with a long stride.

Nick wasn't sure what had the kid more thrilled: being outside again, or having ammo for his shotgun. It had been so long, he'd almost forgotten how good Ellis was with it; the Georgian's left hand flashed in and out of the pockets of his coveralls, feeding shells into the gun whenever there was enough time and space to do so.

It reminded him of simpler times - times when evac had been a few streets away, and they weren't all bloated with painful subtext.

Of course, it was just as possible that he was being over-dramatic, and it had never really been easier or simpler or any different at all. Or maybe the team had built something special, and he'd torn it all down, brick by brick. He didn't know which of the two options he preferred.

"¡Tío!" Chris burst past Nick in the doorway, already panting. It was likely as much emotional duress as it was physical, and he seemed unsure of himself and his balance as he moved. His machete was gripped in his hand like a lifeline, and he looked out at the infected swarming close with a pale fear.

Nick had never seen him face battle with anything but sick pleasure. This was a kid who had shorn a zombie's head from its shoulders, and then kicked it like a can down the street. He'd stood, blood-splattered and covered in gore, and beamed and howled along with his team of wolves.

Now he looked small and terrified. He's just a kid. Just a kid, hardly old enough to survive on his own in the real world, let alone the new world before them. Maybe it was all an act, after all, the way he was. I'd have done the same thing in his shoes - fake it to make it. Or maybe losing an arm just does that to you.

Breaks you.

"Cuidado, por favor..." Chris croaked, staggering slightly out of the way when another shape burst from the porch doorway.

Rhiannon barreled past on long legs, bat held low. She lurched to meet the nearest infected, winding her arms up in a coil before lashing out, and the metal banding cracked straight into the female zombie's skull. "Leave some for the rest of us, hot stuff!" she shouted sideways at Ellis, making him laugh.
They were a storm, a whirlwind, a flurry of violent force that kept the infected at bay as they tried to swarm into the yard. Playful and competitive energy turned into a formidable offense, but it did not lend itself to solid teamwork.

Ellis turned his back for an instant, catching a zombie coming up on his flank, and his shot struck home in its gut. Rhiannon did not notice the opening he created, and another infected lunged to take advantage of it, slamming into his back. He shouted in a startled yelp, and Nick's skin prickled with a sharpened sense of fear.

The Northerner was ready to run, to sprint in and defend him, but Ellis moved too fast for him to react. He dropped down to a knee in one smooth motion, and the infected lost its balance in the gesture. It collapsed in an awkward bend over the Georgian, and then fell to the ground in a scramble of limbs. It screamed, scrabbling to try and get back up off the dirt.

It might've managed to regain its footing, had Ellis not immediately swung his shotgun up and clocked it directly across the brow with the stock of the weapon.

Nick forced himself to ease, lowering his shoulders and watching the infected reel from the blow. Ellis straightened, directing the shotgun at its core. When he pulled the trigger to put it down, the creature's bare chest burst under the shot, splitting along the lines of its ribcage. The infected screamed, gurgled, but did not die.

Rhiannon had dispersed the last of the infected near her and noticed the scuffle. She darted a glance over as Ellis placed the next shot into the infected's skull. As gore splattered across the earth and the zombie's corpse followed, she winced.

"Shit. Okay, bud?" she called out, rough with a slight coughing sound that disguised her apology.

Ellis hummed an affirmation, getting to his feet, none the worse for wear. If he was annoyed at her he didn't show it, and Nick lowered his katana to hang at his side. It took effort to remind himself that Ellis had survived a long time off his own talent, with and without his team's help. He was not weak; he had not been broken.

Nick observed as the rest of his team came piling out from the restaurant porch door. Rochelle had taken Rhiannon's stun baton, and Coach had his double-barrel shotgun shouldered by its strap and Lena's brush-axe in his grip. When she stepped out into the daylight, Lena was moving slow and cautious, body trembling like some loosely connected machine.

Her eyes were faint and pained, but they were driven to focus when she noticed Nick's attention on her. She grimaced dramatically in his direction, but he could barely stir himself to even fake interest.

Undaunted when he did not react beyond a dull and distracted blink, she approached, arms slipping into a tight fold over her belly. Lena had tucked herself back into her grey hoodie, and over that was her black motorcycle jacket. "It's too hot out here." she complained in a soft voice.

Nick arched a brow, glancing down to examine her layered clothing. "You're kinda over-dressed." he muttered, droll.

Lena flattened herself back onto her heels, lips curving subtly. "Says the dude in a suit in the apocalypse." she challenged, leading him to snort. Her hands tightened on her sides, squeezing fingers against the tough fabric of her jacket, meant to protect her in the event of a crash. "I'll happily sweat if keeps me safe from a Hunter."
That made his head cock, and he glanced at the black leather jacket set high on her shoulders. He wondered if the material would actually do any good against claws - and if she'd ever tested the theory. Rather than voice the thought, he looked up, glancing over the survivors clustered nearby. "What's the plan?"

Rochelle hesitated before turning to look at him, setting a hand on her hip. "I checked the town guide, and there's a small strip mall a few streets over. We can just walk down there, and we'll be back soon. We could keep an eye out for new bases, but, until we figure out where this dock is for you guys -" she spoke the words with a nod toward Rhiannon. "- we don't know what direction we're gonna be moving in. We can figure that out later, if this trip goes okay."

Nick tensed his brows in a flash of thought, lowering his gaze before turning entirely to glance up at the restaurant's porch door. "Sure." He inhaled thinly, stepping back to the porch stairs and slipping inside. He crossed the porch and approached the window he'd cracked open for Maggie's egress, setting his palm against the top edge and pushing. It closed with a heavy thunk.

He felt a tug of insecurity. An urge for control.

There was no telling if the cat would stay there and wait for them to return. He had no way of communicating with it, and locking it up in the restaurant was condemning it to the same fate it had already almost suffered, if they didn't come back. The alternative, however, was accepting the chance the cat might decide they'd left and run away.

So he chose the lesser of the two evils, caught underneath a strong sensation of helplessness. He wanted to protect her, and he couldn't. *Add one furball to the long list of things I can't protect lately.* It was a list he didn't have any interest in thinking on too hard.

He returned out into the yard, aware of the intentional way nobody's gaze was directed at him.

"Makes sense to me." Coach grunted, adjusting the holster on his shoulder that Lena had given him to hold her brush-hook. Closer examination revealed it as scavenged strips of fabric stapled together to accommodate the weapon, remarkably sturdy for the seemingly ramshackle construction. "We gotta get back on track fo' signallin' the military, too."

Rochelle gestured with one hand out into the street, fingers loosely spread. "As long as we get back within sight of the shore, I'll be happy. I hate to think we've missed a boat going past while we've been over here."

"Even if we see a boat, we gotta get their attention somehow." Ellis pointed out with one hand up and cradling his cheek, brusquely scratching at the fuzz marking his jawline. His tone carried his characteristically helpful and obsessive lilt of determination, sinking his teeth into a problem that needed solving. "Like flashin' S.O.S. or somethin'."

Lena's chin lifted, her eyes narrowing softly, voice light with an unassuming curiousity. "Anything that's going to get a boat's attention will probably get some zombies' attention, too. You folks should be careful with that plan."

Ellis looked vaguely put-out, but it only took him a moment to recover, bouncing on his heels. "Whut if -."

Before he got any further, Coach lifted a hand in a shushing gesture, grimacing. "One step at a time, son. Let's focus on not gettin' killed out here first." When Ellis ducked his chin in an apologetic gesture, Coach turned to look out into the road with a soft squint. "Everyone good? Ro', you gonna lead us?"
Rochelle flashed her teeth in a broad smile, a laugh passing across her eyes that she didn't allow to fully form. She slipped her hand into the wrist-strap of the stun baton, looping it there so it was solid and stable in her grip. "Lead you bunch of rascals? I do not get paid enough for this."

"You get paid?" was Nick's flat response. "I want to get paid."

"Boy, don't think I forgot you cramming money in your wallet." Rochelle glanced back at him, eyes narrowed, mirth in the challenge of her tone. Nick met her look with a puffed chest, defensive energy making his body stiffen. "I'm pretty sure you're the only one of us with cash anymore. For whatever that's worth."

Rhiannon tossed her bat from hand to hand, tongue slipping out to get caught between her teeth in a pinch before she offered up, "Toilet paper."

The disgusted sound that left Nick stirred Ellis into a violent sputter of laughter, a sound he choked down, sharply. The gambler looked his way, but the younger man was already facing the other direction, head bowed, so Nick merely stated: "If society pulls itself back together, I intend on being the richest motherfucker alive."

Lifting her borrowed stun baton like a torch, Rochelle started marching forward. "Society wants new clothes. Let's go, guys!" Coach fell into close step behind her, and from there, their pre-apportioned teams fell into place. Christophe jogged up to Ellis' side, posture huddled low, and Nick found the bikers moving in eerie unison to stand at either side of him.

"This is going to go horribly." Nick muttered, sarcastically, unpleasantly tensing when Rhiannon's elbow jabbed into his upper arm. He would've dodged it, but all that would have done was stagger him into Lena. He felt definitively trapped, and there was not much to do but start walking forward at the touch, haunted all the while by the image of two head-strong Texans ushering him on with a cattleprod.

The blonde's cracked grin did not pass by his notice. "Don't worry, puddin'. We'll take care of you."

Nick would get revenge, one way or another, though he had not yet figured out how.

_Maybe I'll get in their boat and shoot a hole in the bottom when we're out at sea._

_Two birds, one bullet._
The scream of an infected was broken sharply off, as Nick's katana slotted into its chest. Whatever he hit was vital enough to degrade its howl into a wheeze of wet air, but wasn't enough to kill it. The zombie thrust forward, arms gone wild, left forearm striking him across the face.

Its skin was wet, smearing something half-congealed on his cheek, and he snarled in disgust at the sensation. "Ugh - asshat!"

Twisting his wrists sent the blade sawing along the curve of its ribcage, and a ferocious seize preceded its collapse. He let its own body weight pull itself off the blade, shaking its limp corpse free, and he was turned and prepared for the next in an instant.

Rhiannon was close behind him, but her attention was mostly focused on protecting her sister. Lena had taken Rochelle's pistol and was not defenseless, but the younger Texan was quick enough on her feet that she wasn't forced to use it very often. Nick cut them a path, and Rhiannon cleaned up the stragglers. It was not precisely coordinated, but they managed.

Their teammates were near, the larger group never quite splitting up even as they kept in their smaller duo and trios.

Rochelle and Coach worked together smoothly, the news producer staggering infected with her stun baton so that he could jab out the borrowed brush-hook from Lena and gut them. They were a well-oiled machine and kept in the frontline.

Christophe had yet to kill anything at all, but Ellis had more than enough bottled-up energy with which to carry his weight. Regardless, they were pinned closely enough to Coach and Rochelle that the one-armed Spaniard was protected.

The constant, steady flow of infected was - in its own way - more dangerous than a horde. They came from houses and side-streets and burst through windows, broke down doors, attracted by the gunfire of the survivors and the screams of the infected before them. They were unending. They did not tire. They did not hesitate.

The survivors were not so impenetrable.

Nick's arms were sore, muscles straining with the weight of the two-handed blade. His back hurt from a swing he'd taken slightly too far, twisting just beyond his normal range of motion. His jaw now ached from the fresh blow. They'd only been out for a short time, and he already felt exhausted.

"Come on, Chris, you got this!"

Eyes darting up, Nick watched Ellis take an infected down with a heavy swipe of his steel-toed boot. The creature shrieked, tumbling down to the ground, its left leg buckling with the damage. It struggled back up, weight entirely on its good leg, half-broken one slumped and barely supporting it.

The female's slack-jawed rage turned to Chris, eyes hazy and muddled, flashing yellow as the sunlight struck them at odd angles. It surged toward him, black spittle dripping from the corners of its mouth, but the Spaniard did not act. Christophe held his machete in his hand, fingers white-knuckled, frozen in fear - like Ellis weren't asking him to do something he'd done a million times before.
Nick's eyes were riveted on him, watching the young man take a step backward to maintain his distance. Did he think of the number he'd scrawled on the sides of buildings, the kill counts the Angels had touted? Did he see hundreds of kills in his mind's eye, corpses and blood and gore, at his hands? Did he even recognize himself anymore?

Nick felt a surge of some indescribable anxiety flood him as Chris lifted the weapon, body shuddering as he found his balance. The infected stumbled closer, and Ellis had his shotgun aimed - but he did not shoot.

He merely watched, and Nick's pulse jumped, erratic.

*Kid, shoot it.*

Ellis tracked the infected with the nose of his shotgun, following it, but his finger was loose on the trigger.

*What the fuck are you doing?!*

Chris hesitated, shifting another step backwards, retreating from its approach. Nick knew full well that he wasn't ready, if he'd ever be ready. The entire purpose of pairing Christophe and Ellis was giving the Spaniard somebody to rely on, somebody who'd protect him in a pinch.

He wasn't ready to fight. Putting him in that position was begging for disaster; either he'd fail and get injured, or he'd falter and have his courage crushed for good.

Nick didn't know how to quiet the part of him that cared about the outcome.

The infected lunged, and the clipped blast of Ellis' shotgun sounded out. Nick watched the infected collapse to the ground, the skeletal structure of its ribcage bared in sleek stripes of white, gore sputtering from its broken body.

The sharp tension that passed through Christophe's body, shuddering and then hunching his head low, betrayed his shame. He did not react in the slightest when Ellis darted to clap a hand on his hip, soothingly, speaking soft enough that Nick strained to hear. "It's okay, buddy. I got yer back 'til yuh feel up to it."

There was a clinging anxiety that set his stomach to flipping, and a bitter taste that crawled up his throat. He had to remind himself that he was the only one who knew how close Chris had come to ending his life over his injury.

Ellis had no reason to coddle him, not like he might've needed, and Nick didn't have the capacity to. He'd already come to terms with the fact that keeping Chris' secret had been a mistake. He was the worst person to deal with the situation - and someone needed to.

Sooner than later.

"Spitter!" Rochelle shouted, her voice cutting through the din of infected. Nick turned on a dime, hand darting down to the holster wrapped tight on his thigh. It only took a flick of his thumb to unlatch his Magnum, and he drew it and lifted the weapon, eyes darting for signs of the elongated and clumsy creature.

He didn't spot it, not before a glossy splash of green sparked into his vision. The instant it did, instinct made him bolt, heel hitting the ground hard to absorb and reverse all his momentum. It was only when the wet projectile struck the ground and burst a few feet ahead of the team that he convinced his body to stop.
The acid bubbled and spat, puddling in their path. Rochelle and Coach hadn't even needed to retreat to dodge it, only to halt; it was as if the Spitter had aimed to catch them as they charged forward along the street.

That tactic had failed. It did, however, serve the purpose of slowing their progress and allowing a cluster of infected to gather around them. They circled the survivors like a flood of liquid, flowing between and around them in a blur of grey skin and yellow eyes.

Snarling and growling, a set of blood-splattered zombies charged toward Nick. He took one out with a messy shot to the skull before shoving his Magnum back into his holster and gripping his katana with both hands again.

As one sprinted close, he lunged out. The tip of his blade drove straight into its nasal cavity, sinking the tip into bone somewhere deeper in its skull, and the zombie slumped in an instant.

"Cripes. I hate those things." Lena muttered, her pistol lifted and gripped in both hands. She took careful aim, pulling the trigger with a measured determination, only shooting when she could get an angle well away from any of her teammates.

The explosive laughter that followed was definitively inhuman - and Nick jolted a step closer to the bikers nearby in the same instant that he perked onto the balls of his feet, trying to keep his other teammates in his sight-line. Zombies had snuck between them, separating them into two groups, and flashes of skin and colour were all Nick could get beyond the gathering mess of bodies.

"Watch yo' asses, there's a Jockey 'round here!" Coach shouted, his tone wrought with a mixture of anger and discomfort. "Don't let the damn facehugger grab nobody! Y'ALL, close up!"

Nick swung his katana sharply, blood spraying as the blade sliced through the mass of a zombie's chest, and pushed back until he felt the brush of bodies against his. Rhiannon and Lena formed a tight triangle with him, and with them at his flanks, he focused on cutting a path toward the rest of the team.

An infected lunged at him, but its chest burst with a light spray of red as the brunette at his elbow shot twice into it. The damage did not stop it, but it staggered it enough that Nick could easily land a slice across its throat, sawing halfway to its spine and sending it to the ground.

"Shit -" ghosted near his ear, and he half-turned, finding Rhiannon jolted entirely too close. He met her muddied eyes and then followed them, and a flash of pinkened skin was just barely visible as the hobbled Jockey skittered through the infected around them. It was running straight toward Coach and Rochelle.

It didn't take long for his mind to process the situation. He'd seen the dirty work of enough Jockeys to know how things would play out; the scrawny creature would leap, and either Coach or Rochelle would take the blow and stumble.

They'd stagger, trying to keep their balance, and the Jockey would swing and jostle its weight to usher them on. It would, no doubt, take them directly into the acid still sizzling ferociously on the ground. The window of time to stop its victim would be perilously short.

He could fling himself into the fray, throw himself bodily in their direction, chase the Jockey and stop it from reaching his teammates. It was what he wanted to do, but it wasn't the smart thing to do. He was paired with the bikers, and he needed to stay with them. Abandoning them in the midst of a fight seemed a surefire way to fuck his chances with them.
It was for those reasons that he was mildly surprised to find himself sprinting forward.

The sound of Rhiannon shouting his name, the twist of betrayal in her voice, registered in the back of his mind. He'd suffer the consequences later. Committed to his choice, Nick swiped in jagged motions to cut through the infected separating him from his team. He could only just spot glimpses of the Jockey through the encroaching crowd, and he could only keep up by luck.

The zombies did not part ways for him - but they didn't for the Jockey, either. The creature's twisted and small stature only afforded it so much of an advantage in ducking past infected, and adrenaline fueled Nick to make up the difference.

"Coach!" he shouted in warning, katana cutting deeply into the side of a zombie. The infected collapsed, its body spreading apart as it twisted in its fall, sending a gush of viscera to the asphalt. His heel landed on something wet and hard, and his footing slid right out from under him.

_Fuck._

He was going down, one way or another, so he shoved his weight forward in a leap rather than let it tip him backwards. The Jockey was just ahead, its skeletal face twisted to look back at him, tongue lapping wildly at its crooked cage of teeth.

Its eyes lolled back before focusing on his face, and he felt a tug of satisfaction as his outstretched hand encircled its knobby little ankle.

Then he hit the ground.

Belly-flopping on a street surface was not, as it turned out, an enjoyable activity. He felt any number of pain points where a knee or hipbone collided with the rough ground, and the only reason that his chin didn't crash into the asphalt and crack his teeth was because he'd landed half on his side.

His ribs and his shoulder complained exuberantly about that, but he was quickly given a distraction.

Most of the infected around him ignored him, as they were enraptured in the single-minded focus of sprinting toward a different target and lacked the presence of mind to look down. The Jockey, however, reacted instantly and violently to his touch.

It kicked out with the leg he'd grabbed, and the power of it startled him. He gripped so hard that he felt its skin give way, the outer layer of flesh squeezing off like loosened sausage casing. It was enough to make him want to retch, and it took all he had not to let go.

He abandoned his grip on his katana, surging that hand up to scrabble for purchase on its other leg. It screamed a strange sound, broken and whistled, seizing in his grip.

"Someone - fucking -" he choked out, unsure if his voice even carried. He swore he blinked, and the Jockey was abruptly twisted almost into a ball, straining down toward him. The bend of its spine was wholly unnatural, an impossible angle that should have snapped it in two.

He didn't have time to recoil before it sunk its craggy teeth into his forearm. The sound of pain that left him was unfiltered in his shock, and he couldn't stop his body from instinctively yanking backwards. The Jockey released him the moment he released it.

It had precisely enough time to hop up to its feet and cackle out a thrilled whinny before the dark metal of a machete blade implanted itself in the creature's skull. The sound was dull and flat, and
there was no blood at all.

The Jockey simply twitched, jerked, and then collapsed.

Nick blinked away the blur of pain from his vision, warily lifting his head to look up. Chris had given up his hold on the machete the moment he'd completed the swing, and he stood with his arm curled close to his chest, pale and wide-eyed.

Their gazes met, but Nick got the strong feeling the Spaniard wasn't seeing very much at all.

As fast as it had formed, the rush of infected ended. Nick was vaguely aware of the blast of guns and the impact of weapons on skin, and then there was some approximation of quiet. He pushed up to his knees, grimacing down at the smear of saliva and black blood pressed into the sleeve of his shirt.

He didn't pull it up to look; he could feel the damage already. It hadn't broken skin, but he'd be feeling it for days, all the same.

When the survivors approached, Ellis came immediately to Christophe's side. His eyes darted toward Nick, taking stock of his condition, and the Northerner allowed a faint wince in his direction. *Ow,* it stated, blandly, and Ellis seemed to accept it at face value.

"Chris, man!" he cooed, excitement bleeding into his voice. "You did it! 'M so dang proud! Man, if it weren't creepy as all hell, I'd make you a damn trophy outta this thing!"

"That's... a horrifying mental image." Rochelle supplied, breathless, bent over with her borrowed stun baton braced above her knees. Her eyes slanted to look over at them, worry etched into her face. "You okay, Chris?"

Christophe's expression filtered to something vaguely conscious, weakly forcing a smile. He looked down at his hand, spreading his fingers and then clenching them. His fist trembled softly, like he were digging his nails into his palm. "Ah... Sí. I... Yes."

Shaking his head fiercely, the man relaxed his fingers and reached down to grab at his machete handle. It was stuck fast, and he had to set the toe of his shoe against the Jockey's corpse to get the leverage to pry it free. It dripped with a tacky layer of fluids, more pus than blood and gore.

When he got it in his hand, straightening, his smile became a little more sincere. "Cago en tu leche." he spat down at the creature's limp body, a huff to his voice.

"Shit, Nicky." Coach's voice boomed gently, walking at a quick pace to close the distance. He bent down the moment he reached Nick's side, setting a hand on his shoulder. "You a'ight?"

When Nick ticked his head up in a nod, the ex-football player got him by the elbow and the back of his shirt and dragged him to his feet. A distressed sound left his lips, both at the ache of his body and the feeling of being, essentially, plucked up by his scruff.

"Jesus - I'm okay, I'm okay..."

Coach didn't acknowledge his protest, turning in a small circle to look over all the survivors. He had the focused look of a teacher taking a mental roll call. "Everyone a'ight?"

When Nick turned to follow his gaze, he wasn't prepared for a glimpse into the fires of hell - but that was what he got when he looked into Rhiannon's eyes. She was staring him down with the exact kind of fury he could remember from the first day he'd met her.
Except this time, I sort of deserve it.

He opened his mouth, and then thought better of speaking at all.

"We're fine. Let's go." Rhiannon gritted out before charging ahead with Lena close at her flank, the older woman blinking apologetically in Rochelle's direction. The fact that the blonde was withholding her anger at all did not bode well for the rest of their time together.

Nick was fairly certain that by the gentle way Coach patted his back before turning away, his suffering was common knowledge.
Chapter 233

Fear spiraled hard up Chris’ spine, sharp and painful. Was it cold as ice, or so scaldingly hot his nerves couldn’t tell the difference? He bit his lower lip, enduring it, like he endured the seizing pain of his phantom arm.

An infected lurched toward him. It filled his vision in a swell of grey skin and clouded eyes, and he swung out with his machete in a panicked swipe. His blow was weakened by the way he flinched, unable to commit all his force to the action. He only managed to slice through the flesh of its cheek, inflicting just a cosmetic wound.

Jawbone and blackened teeth showed through the yawning gap in its flesh, stretching and tearing as it opened its mouth to scream at him, and his second swipe was harder only out of desperation. The blade sunk into its throat and threatened to catch in its vertebrae. As the infected fell, dead, Chris gasped out a sharp yelp.

He felt the weapon tug at his grip, and he almost lost his hold on it; he almost let it go. Only having one arm meant that he had no other defense. If he lost the machete, or it got stuck in a zombie, he was helpless. He could have kept a zombie at bay with both his hands, gripping it by the wrists and holding it at arms’ length.

Now, with only one limb, what could he do? What use was he? Jerry would have put him down without a second thought, if he'd ever seen him in this condition, and Chris couldn't blame him. Everyone had to pull their weight, and he could not. If he had been alone, he wouldn't have lasted. He'd be dead. He should have been dead.

Tranqui. Toma un respiro. Breathe, he thought, lungs protesting the instruction by beginning a fevered few jolts and hiccupps of air. His eyes darted up and around, reassuring himself with the sight of Ellis only a few inches away. His friend's attention passed to him for an instant, beaming, before he turned away and shot an infected directly in the midsection.

Chris gulped in air, turning again to face outwards, to face the infected swarming them.

He had to maintain his calm. The Georgian was so relieved to see him regain his confidence, and it clearly meant so much to him to know Chris was improving. He couldn’t reveal the honest truth of how bone-deep his terror was. He didn't know how to admit he was afraid, that he was broken. It had been hard enough to admit his pain to Ellis, and his - whatever it was to Rochelle -

Saving Nick had been a fluke, and it had not bolstered his confidence. He was left only with the bristled sensation of anxiety, like he'd lied and convinced them he could do it. They'd trust him to handle himself, and he'd eventually let them down.

Christophe hadn’t been truly terrified of infected in a long time. He had been during the first few days of the outbreak, but all his energy had been focused on keeping Sean safe - safe and happy, or the closest he could come to it. There had been no room for his confidence to waver, not when his partner relied on him to be upbeat and optimistic.

And then they’d stumbled upon the Angels of Death, back when the group had been at its height, and things had changed. They had changed.

He’d never felt so powerful. It was the iron grip of animal instinct, of realizing that everything he'd believed in was gone. He’d once considered himself gentle. He’d taken pride in being the sort of
man who’d turn the other cheek, who’d talk his way out of a fight. None of that meant anything anymore.

Jaime, the red-headed Kansas native with crooked teeth and biceps that rivaled Jerry’s, had grinned at him the first time they’d met. She’d handed him a machete and rasped out, "You’re cute, but you better learn how to swing a blade."

And he had. Driven on by the saccharine praise of his team, the drug of it consumed him. He’d grown apart from Sean, drawn tightly into the vague alliance between him, Brenda, and Jerry that would later split the group in half. He’d never been so important. He loved the power, yes, but he mostly loved how valued it all made him feel.

As much as the majority of them hated each other, they still stood shoulder-to-shoulder and took on all comers. He was relied upon, and for so long, they succeeded. Life had become a game of violence, and they’d won. They’d come out on top - though he’d realized too late what the cost had been.

Jason, Brock, Phil, Sean, Jaime, Brenda, and Jerry. They’d all look down on him now.

If he blinked too quickly, turned his head too suddenly, he’d see the broad shape of Jerry’s shoulder - but it was only a large infected, gutting blood from a fresh wound to the gut. Brown hair would flash past his vision - but it was not Brenda, just a zombie falling dead to the ground.

Jaime’s solid frame and jaded green eyes flashed toward him, shambling. Jason’s dark skin covered in black blood. Phil’s sunken features, a black gash where his left eye had been. Brock’s corpse laid flat with its arms spread and its guts slung out like he were nothing more than ransacked luggage.

He could not look without seeing them. Driven to drowning amidst air his lungs refused to take in, Christophe closed his eyes.

A body struck his, a rank stench swelling in his nose and throat. He shouted as he was taken to the ground, and when he landed, the impact of his hewn shoulder with the asphalt was nothing less than agony. His head collided with the ground shortly thereafter.

Any grasp on reality snapped free from him, plunging him into a dark and quiet space. Something like a memory surfaced, a gentle realization, though he couldn’t be certain that it had really ever happened. He felt some subtle dissociation with the sensations of it, no different from the distant-yet-visceral pain of his missing arm.

"Mi español es malo." Sean's voice was soft and his pronunciation was warped, some heavy American dialect clinging to his words. Chris laughed, burying his face in his hands, rather than look at his partner's disappointed face. “What? Was that wrong?”

He couldn’t stop. Tears came to his eyes, ribs aching, driven to hystericis. It was the stress, he was sure, making such a stupid thing so hilarious. He tried to breathe, but nothing passed his lips except cackling.

“Why are you laughing?” It was accusatory, but Sean was starting to laugh, too. “Am I just a big joke to you?” He always broke, even when he was angry. Hands gripped his wrists, pulling them away, and Chris had to look up.

Sean's eyes gleamed at him from either side of a gushing bullet hole.

“It was always just a joke.”
Chris came back to himself, and he only recognized the fact he was screaming by the fact that there was someone else's hand clamped over his mouth. It was Coach, he realized, when the voice speaking nonsense in his ear was deep and bassy.

He forced his jaw shut around the sound that was escaping him, the guttural noise that he didn't recognize as his own voice, and arms encircled him and pulled him close. He wanted to scream, then, as his body seemed to take the pressure and touch and translate it into pain. He'd never felt so claustrophobic in his own body, strangled by the skin wrapped around his bones.

There were voices all around him, and his attempts to focus and listen were only partially successful. His English was good, but it was so hard to hear, understand, and then translate before he'd already forgotten the words they'd spoken. He mostly clung to his own name where he caught it.

All he knew was he was suddenly upright, seated on the ground, and a hand gripped the back of his neck. A thumb braced beneath his jawline, forcing his face up, and his vision filled with someone's face. The features barely registered, just a jumble of shadow and light and colour.

"Chris."

A sharp inhale tugged at his chest, and the shape crouched in front of him snapped violently into focus. Nick's eyes were dark and flat on his, searching, and he felt the fevered static in his veins fall to a quiet hum. Calm fell across his body, more like surrender than relaxation. He'd put his life in Nick's hands before.

"Stand up."

It wasn't gentle. It was a command, with an edge of anger. Christophe tried to obey, but his body failed to respond. When a panted breath left his lips, stuttered, Nick reached out and grabbed his elbow to drag him up to his feet. His legs almost collapsed, but the Northerner's grasp was iron-clad, and it was either stand or dangle from his hand like so much dead weight.

So he stood, legs trembling beneath him. His body seized with a diffracted pain, spiralling in ribbons through his nervous system. He tried to hug around his torso - only to be reminded of the absence of his left arm.

The darkness that swallowed his vision thinned, drifting further into his periphery, and Chris vaguely glanced around to see that they were almost alone. They'd been given a berth, some privacy. Coach, Ellis, and Rochelle had moved forward, and the bikers were lingering close, but not too close.

Chris blinked, focusing, and if he looked ahead, he could just make out Rochelle's worried face looking in his direction. It should have soothed him, but it only served to heighten the stress buzzing in his teeth.

"You need to get your shit together."

Christophe's head twisted too quickly as he looked at Nick, the abrupt shift sending his balance teetering. A hand struck flat onto his elbow, steadying him, and he uttered a wheezed breath. "Nico -"

Nick's face was suddenly tremendously close, leaned in, voice a low growl. "You made a choice to keep going, kid. You made a choice, and now you've got to deal with the consequences. What did I fucking tell you? We can't carry you, and if they can't rely on you, you're going to get someone
killed.”

“I no say I can do it.” spat from Christophe’s lips, a thought he hadn’t meant to vocalize. His eyes darted to match Nick’s with a startled squint, aware of the sigh that deflated the man’s chest. Nick seemed regretful, for just an instant, before he snapped back to quiet irritation.

When he spoke, there was a wry humour to it. “Too bad. We’re out here. And if you’d been out here alone, you’d be dead, whether you were ready or not.”

Chris blinked his vision into focus, staring abruptly up at the gambler, slanted to account for the height Nick had on him. He felt a surge of pain, followed shortly by numbness. His hand lifted, reaching out, and he gripped fingers in Nick’s sleeve where his hand had lingered at Chris’ elbow to keep him standing.

“I should be.” a voice stated. It took a moment to recognize that it was his own.

Nick gazed back, unaffected. Nothing flickered in his eyes, not recognition and not sympathy. It made Chris second-guess himself; had he even spoken English?

Then Nick turned away, leaving his hand where it was, looking over his shoulder. “Lena.” he called, shortly, frustration mingling with a kind of determination. Chris’ vision blurred, chin lowering, gasping for air when his throat threatened to close. “Come give me that gun.”

An absurd, manic laugh passed Chris’ lips. Perhaps Nick had decided to put him down after all.

"’Bout time." hushed Jerry's voice, just by his ear. It made him flinch, sure he felt the brush of hot air, of breath sliding down his neck. He barely maintained composure, though his body jolted away from the imagined stimuli, and Nick looked back at him with a cautious attention.

Chris looked anywhere but his face, afraid his eyes might give his fear away. He watched Lena approach at a limp, not oblivious to the way she avoided looking at him. Her lips were drawn in something pinched, eyes difficult to read, and she silently turned Rochelle's borrowed pistol around and offered it to him, grip-first.

When Nick took it, she stayed, muddy eyes flitting between them with rapt attention.

Nick seemed to pause, to hesitate, but he didn't say anything to her.

He slid his katana between his belt and his slacks, letting it sit there, and released Chris' elbow to get both his hands on the pistol. Drawing back the rack, he glanced in, and Chris watched with a furrowed brow as Nick grunted lightly and then reached up to his breast pocket.

Chris didn't understand, not even when Nick's hand came back with a bullet gripped between his fingers. He watched, uncomprehending, as Nick thumbed the bullet into the chamber and let the rack slide back into position. He could do nothing but cooperate when Nick shoved the gun in his hand, staring down at it. It was so cold, though Lena's grasp should have kept it warm.

So heavy, though he knew it weighed very little.

"You chose not to put that bullet in your brain." Nick stated, voice cold, derisive. Lena's body shifted in discomfort as she listened, and her eyes rooted fully on Chris' face, widening a little as she absorbed the new information. Chris might've paid more attention to her, had he not had his gaze yankedsolidly upward to stare at Nick. "But that was just half the battle. You've got to fight or die, because everything here wants to kill you. There's no time for you to straddle the line here, Chris."
It wasn't just a bullet, he realized. It was the bullet that Nick had loaded for him, and taken back when Chris had been unable to use it.

The Northerner's arm lifted, gesturing out, fingers splaying and then clenching. "You made a choice. So either stick with it, or don't. You're firing that gun, kid, one way or another; that's the world we live in now. The only thing you get to choose is where the bullet goes."

Christophe lifted his chin, and he could see it with such clarity: he could still remember Brenda's slumped frame, her exhaustion blending with rage, grip shuddering tightly on her katana. She had not begged him to stay, or threatened him. She'd just trembled and uttered a single word.

"Choose."

And he'd made a choice. He'd left her and stepped into the yawning unknown, determined to find himself again.

"So choose, kid."

Christophe lowered the pistol, aiming it at the ground, and fired. The recoil was explosive but short-lived, and the snap of gunfire was followed by a puff of dust as the bullet lodged itself in the asphalt road. His arm trembled, shivered, and he couldn't relax his finger enough to release the trigger.

He exhaled, closing his eyes, taking in the quiet surge of calm that enveloped him. It felt like purging something. It had never occurred to him that Nick had hung onto that bullet, that it was there in his pocket, following them like some cursed trinket.

Burying it in the ground felt good.

Pulling the trigger felt good.

Making the choice, most of all, felt good.

For the first time in days, he realized he couldn't feel his left arm at all. He felt its absence, felt the lack of it, like the buzz of a pinched nerve - but he didn't feel it. He didn't know if it would last, but even a moment's respite was enough to make him sigh.

Nick snorted, shallowly, and he felt the man brush past him. It took Chris a moment to open his eyes, and when he did, he watched Nick bend down to retrieve his machete. He offered it out to Lena and the brunette took it without a word.

"I was thinking something more like aiming it at a zombie, but let's go with that." he uttered, and his voice held a strained kind of humour that vibrated with an urgent composure. His features were sharp with tension, jaw clenched until it thickened his speech pattern. "You good, Pancho? Take the gun for a while."

Christophe gazed down at his hand, slowly coaxing his finger to relax until he could remove it from the pistol's trigger entirely. "Sí. That is okay," he croaked out, aware his voice was faint and reedy.

"I was thinking something more like aiming it at a zombie, but let's go with that." he uttered, and his voice held a strained kind of humour that vibrated with an urgent composure. His features were sharp with tension, jaw clenched until it thickened his speech pattern. "You good, Pancho? Take the gun for a while."

"Sí. That is okay," he croaked out, aware his voice was faint and reedy.

Nick looked at him for a moment. Their eyes met, and Nick's gaze tightened. It was a subtle warning, a challenge. "Keep close. And keep the screaming to a minimum."

A laugh panted from Chris, faint. "Sí."
When Nick turned away, Lena moved a step closer to him. Her hand settled at the small of his back, and her head tilted to look at his face. He forced himself to meet her gaze.

"We got you covered, hoss. Don't worry." Her eyes were full of concern, and just the slightest bit of doubt. He wasn't sure if she didn't believe in her own words, or didn't believe in him. Neither would have surprised him.

He smiled, just a little, and managed, "I believe whatever, when a beautiful chica says it."

Lena's eyes brightened, just before she punched with her knuckles into his back. "I get the feelin' you'd flirt on your deathbed. No wonder Rochelle likes you so much."

Chris' smile widened, and he lowered his gaze just before letting his body turn and his attention drift up. He watched as Nick came up to the rest of the team, gesturing up the road.

"He's fine. He's going to stick with us, so you three stay together." the man stated, and nobody looked entirely convinced. "Let's go." Ellis' concern shifted to apology, hurt, as if he'd failed in his duties. Rochelle peered around Nick to look directly at him, and her pursed lips spoke to worry.

So, Chris lifted up his hand, shifting his grip in order to lift a thumb.

Rochelle stifled a smile, raising a hand to mirror the gesture.

When they mobilized again, organizing into two tightly knit clusters, Christophe looked into the swarms of infected and saw only strangers.
Chapter 234

The road drew tighter, thinning until it was only one lane on either side of the faded yellow line that Ellis walked along, one foot after another. Cars dotted the road thickly enough that even had they brought their sedan along, they would have been forced to leave it behind. There simply wasn't enough room.

Zombies came at them in waves and bursts, and they cut through all of it without missing a beat. As much as he didn't want to admit it, reorganizing the teams made them move a lot quicker. He and Chris had been slowing them down, and with Chris now safely tucked between Nick and the bikers, their pace had improved.

Of course, there were a lot of things Ellis didn't want to admit.

He didn't want to admit they'd rushed Chris into battle. He'd been so confident in his ability to protect the man and so hopeful that it would go well, that he'd not stopped to consider how Chris felt. They'd made a mistake, and now they might have even set the Spaniard's confidence back.

He, similarly, didn't want to admit that he'd ignored the signs that said Chris wasn't ready. He thought Chris had been doing better, but one zombie had been enough to reduce the man to screaming and babbling Spanish. He'd looked completely out of it, like a sleepwalker mid-nightmare, and it had taken brute force to quiet and calm him before he brought a horde down on them.

More than anything, Ellis didn't want to admit he was jealous. At first, he attributed the grimy feeling in his chest to Chris' outburst. He'd thought he'd been making breakthroughs, helping him, but it was Nick that talked him out of it? Nick that knew what to say - whatever it was he'd said - to soothe him? Nick that picked him up off his feet and put a hand on his face and...

Shit.

He was definitely jealous. Just not of Nick.

Ellis grimaced, rolling his eyes before he could stop the gesture. He couldn't help but be angry with himself for the petty and unfamiliar emotion surging up. It was beyond him why the two men would have any kind of rapport; Nick barely gave Chris the time of day. Had they ever even been alone together for more than a few minutes?

Logically, he should have been proud of Nick for stepping in and helping. It had been desperately needed, and Chris seemed significantly calmer now. Ellis should have been grateful. He didn't want anything but the best for his friend, even if it meant someone else providing the support.

Emotionally, he wanted to put his fist through a wall.

Everything would have been easier if Nick weren't still the same person as he'd ever been. Ellis wished that the break-up had soured his view of Nick, that he thought less of him. He wished he thought he'd been wrong about Nick the whole time. Maybe Nick genuinely didn't love him, but he couldn't believe that Nick didn't care about him, and that everything they'd shared had been completely hollow.

Maybe Nick didn't love him, but he, unfortunately, still loved Nick. That much was obvious to him, struggling to keep a lid on the intense frustration broiling in his gut. He didn't even know who he was angry at. Chris? The man hadn't done anything except get scared. Nick? All Nick had done
was offer support to a teammate.

Himself? That seemed more likely.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Sudden movement snapped his head up, and he watched a zombie charge at Coach. The big man lifted the brush-hook in his hands, widening his stance, and he jabbed out with it as the infected came within reach. The blade sliced into its face, sending blood gushing around the metal. It gargled, grabbing at its face, and Coach twisted the weapon to send it limp to the ground.

Ellis quickly scanned for any more, but nothing appeared. He'd have happily taken the distraction from his inner turmoil.

He must have sighed louder than he meant to, because Rochelle abruptly looked at him.

"You okay, peanut?" she murmured, lowering her stun baton to her thigh. Her eyes were sympathetic, and a sad smile crept onto her lips, like she knew full well the answer to the question she asked. Her steps shortened to match his as he traced the road lines with toe-to-heel steps. "You look grumpy."

He grunted, chin lifting to look around them. "Think 'm okay..." he responded, as honestly as he could, glancing at her. When she blinked, tilting her head in an obvious urge for him to elaborate, he shrugged and said nothing. He couldn't explain how he felt in a way that didn't make him sound pathetic - and he would be okay, he was sure.

Rochelle must have picked up on his reticence, because she smoothly looked up and down the road. Her voice raised to carry to the rest of the survivors walking some distance behind them. "We're close. I think it's a left up ahead." She had tucked the tourist guidebook into the waistband of her jeans, so she pulled it free in an easy motion.

It was already folded open to the loosely labeled map, and she merely glanced down to confirm the name of the street that crossed in front of the mall they were aiming for.

"We've still got a few blocks." Her head turned, gaze slanting to look over her shoulder. "Hope this goes okay. A strip mall is probably going to have a bunch of activity."

The knowledge of their destination's proximity drew the survivors together, and Lena quickened her steps to come in line with the other woman. "I know the first thing I'd do when I heard a disease was spreading is go to the mall." she joked, lightly, drawing a grin from Rochelle. "Green Flu? Pshh. Need me some new shoes."

Nick, Rhiannon, and Christophe approached close behind, and Ellis couldn't help but glance over. He was struck most by the extreme tension in Nick's posture, shoulders high and jaw gritted. It wasn't anger; no, his eyes were too empty, too calm. It was something else, simultaneously new and familiar.

He was paper-thin. He looked on the edge of something, but it wasn't the usual way he brewed his way towards an explosive outburst. It was wilted somehow, like he'd hollowed himself out. It cut through the anger rolling around in Ellis' gut, replacing the emotion with something a lot more troublesome: worry.

"You'd be surprised the dumb things people do before disasters. And nobody really knew how bad things were until it... was." Rochelle responded, screwing her nose up. "Most people didn't even believe the evacuations were mandatory."
It was very casually that Christophe cut in front of Nick, darting in a wobbled sort of strafe to park himself at Rochelle's elbow. She looked like she was completely ignoring him - except for the gently affectionate quirk at her mouth that she couldn't fight off.

"And what about you, bonita?" he cooed, and if his voice hadn't been rough and winded, he might've seemed completely normal. Ellis couldn't help but examine him, staring for a moment, bemused by the resurgence of his chipper attitude. "Why you no evacuate?"

*It's almost like Nick'n'Chris done traded places... except for the part where Nick ain't ever really cheery, but... still. A thought occurred to him, alongside a flood of uncertainty. Are either of 'em okay...?*

Rochelle laughed, lightly. Swinging her step a little wide had her boot come perilously close to tripping Chris, and he stumbled a step away with a wicked grin plastered all over his face. I'm with the news. The news doesn't evacuate. We run into hurricanes and fires and, apparently, zombie outbreaks."

"The 'news'?" the man responded, tone delicate around the apparently unfamiliar word. "¿Qué?"

"You know." Ellis interjected with a flap of his hands. Chris turned to watch the gesture, the confused twitch of his brow indicating that he was probably trying to put meaning to it. "Like, folks on TV talkin' bout what's happenin. "Like, a reporter."

That triggered Chris to cluck his tongue, nodding, gesturing with the gun in his hand. "Sí, sí, comprendo. La reportera." His eyes squinted slightly, exhaling a breath with a disgruntled expression. "Americans have so much... news. It is a lot of talking for nothing, ¿sí? And so much about politics, y... escándalos. Drama."

A choked snort escaped Rochelle, turning at her waist to lift a brow at him. Her voice walked the line between casually offended and extremely offended. "You have news in Spain, too, boy. It's not some dumb American invention. What are you talking about?"

Christophe cautiously pointed his pistol down at the ground, tilted away from his feet. His eyes widened just a twitch, realizing he'd stepped squarely into something unpleasant before he managed, "Em, ¡sí! Claro. I only mean to say, en España, there is not so much like it, so... tipo de... entrometido." He shook his head in a placating gesture. "I am sure you did ah, muy buenas, eh, news, y -"

"Oh, God, please stop. Let's call this conversation a loss." Rochelle coughed out a laugh, snapping her head to the side with a wince, as if to look well away from him in embarrassment. "I hated running politics, anyway. And I'm a producer, not a reporter. I only got on the ground because -" Her voice faded a little, and when she re-directed her gaze forward, it was sobered. "- my coworkers kept getting sick."

Dropping his chin, Christophe focused squarely at his blood-encrusted Vans. His footsteps stuttered a moment, and he said nothing.

"Let's keep moving, huh?" she offered up, calmly.

He slowed, where Rochelle didn't, and Ellis took advantage of the discrepancy to side-step over toward the younger man. Chris glanced at him as he approached, his light brown eyes unsure, and Ellis gave a questioning tilt of his head.

"Hey, buddy." he whispered from the corner of his mouth. Chris acknowledged him with a few
blinks. "You feelin' any better? Sorry 'bout that zombie gettin' you earlier. I wasn't lookin'."

"No worry." the Spaniard responded, lifting his gun with a jerk of the muzzle. His gaze lifted and directed elsewhere, down the road, and Ellis didn't miss the slight urgency in the reassurance, the dismissive edge. He didn't want to talk about it. "This is better, anyway, creo."

Ellis pursed his lips, thoughtfully. He was going to let it go, and change the subject or simply not say anything at all. He must've looked like he wouldn't, because Chris abruptly burst into a laugh, throwing up his hand, gun gripped tight. "¡Tío! No worry, ¡por favor!" He leaned in close, arm still up as if to balance his weight as he leaned into his amputated side. "I feel good. I do not feel it anymore."

He went to gesture with the gun, turning it to point the muzzle at the empty air next to his left side, but seemed to think better of it at the last second and lowered the weapon. Ellis gave a hesitant smile, nodding his head gently.

"That's good." he uttered, feeling distant from the words as he spoke them. He didn't want to be discouraging, and tried for delicacy. "Just, uh, y'know... it may come back again. It ain't just gonna go away like that. Stress'n'shit'll bring it on, so... if it don't stay gone, just -"

Exhaling a sigh, Christophe shook his head. He limped his body until his knees bent a little mid-walk in a full-body gesture of agitation, even as his voice was edged with strained affection. "Ay, Ellis. You give me the can, mi amigo."

Ellis felt his face screw up. "Huh?"

Rather than answer, the Spaniard shook his head and jogged a few steps forward. "Nada... nada. I am fine." he called back. With the only alternative being to chase him, Ellis let him go with a sigh. Chris clearly didn't want to talk about it, and the Georgian didn't see the point in forcing the issue. It'd come out, or it wouldn't.

He watched Chris move to the side of the road, and Nick came into his periphery. The gambler spared him no mind, speeding up to fall into step behind the Spaniard. He leaned in, the hand that wasn't gripping his katana pushed stiffly into his slacks pocket, and growled thinly over Chris' shoulder.

Ellis blinked, startled, because he swore he heard Nick say to him, "Watch it, kid." Chris didn't react at all, like he hadn't even heard the chastisement.

That just put a whole new set of emotions broiling in his gut. Was Nick defending him? And why? He asked himself the question, despite knowing perfectly well the answer: if Nick felt justified in being jealous of him, then it only made sense that he'd be justified in being protective of him. It all added up to the same picture, and multiplied the same confusion.

_Damnit, Nick. The hell do you want, anyway? And why do you look so damn miserable when this ain't any'uh my fault? You did this all tuh yerself - tuh me - 'n' I gotta see you lookin' like a kicked dog. I gotta deal with worryin' about you when I can't do nothin’ bout it._

He sighed, _growled_, letting the noise rumble in his throat.

Embarrassment flooded him when Rhiannon suddenly slipped beside him, looking at him, with one pierced brow raised high on her forehead at his outburst. He hadn't realized she'd been so close behind him, and all he could do was offer a strained look.

She grinned harshly and offered up, "Me too, dude."
It was the first time Ellis genuinely felt a camaraderie with the blonde, and he wasn't even completely sure what she meant. He'd have pressed - but the next wave of infected was upon them, a crowd of zombies bursting up from their prone positions beyond a wrecked bus, and there was no time.
Chapter 235

Nick couldn't coax his body to move. His feet were rooted to the spot, arms slack at his sides, and he was aware of his teammates at either side of him doing much the same thing. Rochelle came close, her hand brushing against his elbow before catching fingers in his sleeve like a child.

"What... the hell?" she whispered. "What the hell is this?"

They'd come around the corner, and the squat roadside had opened up into a courtyard of patterned pavestones. The shopping mall was a U-shaped construction, two stories tall, and its walls were speckled with windows so densely packed that it seemed more like a greenhouse than a mall.

The heavily tinted glass was shatter-proof, and bullet-holes pecked most of the upper panels in isolated dots of open air without having brought the whole structure down. The ground-level panes were not as lucky; they had been mostly busted inward or outward. Glass was scattered all around, shimmers and sparkles prickling here and there as the sunlight struck it.

The building itself was made faded adobe stone, pale yellow chipped and cracked in what might have been some intentional weathered aesthetic, or - just as likely - disrepair. It was difficult to tell if it had even been in use before the apocalypse, as what little Nick could make of the insides looked like rows of shuttered and empty storefaces.

It had definitely been in use since.

A few police vans were parked messily to one side, doors flung open. He couldn't help but think it was the source of the infected decked out in police riot gear that had attacked him several nights before. It was also the closest he'd come to really seeing any kind of organized military presence, and it genuinely unnerved him.

The plaza was packed tightly with tents, separated by metal fencing that eked out pathways between them. Some of them were simple, like oversized camping tents or simple awnings, but one was a massive construction with metal ribs holding up dense camo-green fabric. The door flaps were closed tightly, zippered shut.

All of those details registered, but all Nick's eyes could focus on were the bodies.

They layered the ground, a carpet of gore. Limbs jutted up where they'd fallen, and the smell was tangible even at a distance. They'd been there a while in the heat and the weather; their skin was mottled red and green and their skin bloated, bursting at the seams of their carcasses. The stone below them blushed with a rusty wash, like the flow of rainwater over and around them had painted it with bodily fluids.

From where he stood, he could pick out the difference between infected corpses and uninfected ones. It was hard to tell beyond the rot, and with their eyes too cloudy and dessicated to determine if they held that yellow and reflective quality. However, there was something distinct in the pallor imparted by the Flu.

It was a greyness. It was a hollow and drained look that not even death and decomposure could quite match up to... not that they didn't try.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." Coach muttered under his breath. He shifted into place next to Rochelle, setting a hand against his cheek in an uncomfortable gesture. "What the hell happened? Looks like a survivor camp... or, it was."
It was Rhiannon who spoke, and Nick swallowed mild surprise. She'd been frigidly ignoring everyone since he'd abandoned the bikers mid-horde, and he hadn't expected her to stop. "It looks like an evac center. We've come across shit like this a few times. They all got fuckin' overrun, though this is... pretty fucking up."

Lena stepped close to her sister's side, looking out at the mall with widened eyes, her voice low and husky. "Understatement."

"Yeah." Rochelle muttered, her hand still gripped tight on Nick's sleeve. He might've shaken her off, had the touch not provided him a little comfort. "We were trying for an evac site at a hotel when we all met up, but... it burned down before we could get there."

Ellis' croaked voice barely registered above the buzz of flies swarming around the area. The black shapes zipped and flashed through the air in miniature battles for valuable real estate amidst the corpses. "It didn't look nothin' like this."

Nick wanted to turn his head and look at the Georgian, but didn't. His neck prickled painfully, a wretched disgust tugging at his stomach. It was too much like the diner they'd discovered, the piles of bodies arranged there like refuse. Was Ellis thinking of it, too?

Past the surge of unease in his veins, Nick forced himself to look at the scene critically. His voice came out hard, mechanical.

"They're not all zombies. Looks like a horde came down on them and whoever had the guns just opened fire, fuck the casualties." His hand lifted, pointing toward the handful of police vans, and he was only partially sure nobody noticed it shaking. "I don't think they made it, either, or why leave the cars?"

Rochelle's hand pulled away from his arm, and she took a half-step forward. Nick got a look at her face, and she looked faint. "God. Looks like what Brenda was talking about. Maybe she wasn't completely insane, after all..."

Christophe stood at a distance, his head low. "She said they see if you are a Carrier, before they help you. Maybe these were Carriers?" he suggested, mildly. Nick didn't miss the lack of reaction in his eyes, the disinterest. Zombies might have scared him, but the massacre before them did not.

"Look, y'all. We didn't come here fo' this shit." Coach turned, gaze darting over the line of survivors next to him. An authoritative edge touched his voice, waving one arm vaguely toward the scene before them. "Let's just circle 'round it and get in the mall, see if they got any clothes. A'ight?"

Nick was aware of a strong wave of assent passing through his compatriots. He was forced to sigh, chin dropping a few sudden degrees. Dully, he stated, "There might be something interesting in that big tent. Medical supplies, if we're lucky, or information. Worth a look."

Coach did not look pleased. His face crunched up, thickening beard gone salt-and-pepper along his jaw and chin. "Ain't nothin' worth walkin' through that." he argued. "Don't go bein' contrary for no reason, Nicolas."

"I'm n-" he started, fingers curling, but he abandoned the protest as quickly as he'd started. The agitation that flooded him was vague, tired, like he couldn't even stir up the energy to have a real argument. "Good thing you're not my keeper. I'm going to go take a look. If someone wants to come watch my back, neat."
A quiet, "Nick -" from Rochelle was strangled into silence, turning into a frustrated sigh instead. She'd mostly given up talking sense into him of late, it seemed. He should have been relieved.

Nick shifted his grip on his katana, lifting it to hip-height, and started forward. A discomfort prickled sharply at the back of his neck, and taking steps felt like moving his legs through quicksand. He didn't want to go, and he definitely didn't want to go alone. The plaza was seemingly clear of actual infected, but there was no telling what the tent contained.

His anxiety eased when he heard footsteps behind him, though didn't look to confirm who it was. Looking would have affirmed that he cared, and that was hardly desirable. *My luck, there's a fucking Hunter in there or something.*

The large tent was central in the makeshift camp, surrounded by steel rail fencing set up in loose pathways. It was a queue, he realized as he approached it. A queue leading through and past the tents and into the mall. The image summoned of a screaming mass of people, crammed into the pathway like cattle, made him feel strangely claustrophobic.

But they were all dead now, he reminded himself, and there was no point in thinking about it. And jaggedly - with immense difficulty - a hundred people, if not more, were forced into white noise in the back of his head. Discarded. If he'd had the luxury of self-reflection, he might have been disturbed by it, might have taken the time to acknowledge it as an indictment of his stability.

Sometimes he understood Christophe better than he wanted to.

Making his way through the sprawl of corpses was difficult. It was impossible not to nudge or brush a body or a limb with the toe of his shoe or the edge of his heel. He didn't want to look down, but looking down was the only way to ensure he didn't step directly on a corpse.

When he reached the hip-height fence that marked out a path, he got a hand on the metal and started to swing a leg up and over. His blind urgency pushed him to continue even when it ended up being just slightly too tall. It landed him in an awkward straddle on the railing, his foot failing to make contact with the ground on the other side, and the immediate flash of regret that coincided with the pain of the position multiplied at the touch of a hand on his elbow.

It was not a graceful move, and had not gone unnoticed by his previously-silent partner.

Nick's head snapped to the side out of reflex, withholding some surprise when he found his arm gripped firmly by Lena, the woman's slight frame hunched back as if in preparation to brace against his weight. She'd been readying to keep him from falling.

He would've thought on that, and how it - both her willingness to help, injured as she was, and her apparent perception that he wanted her help at all - made him feel, had his gaze not drifted a little to the left.

Ellis' stone-blue eyes were big enough to dive into. If Lena had him gripped by the arm, the Georgian's attention had him by the scruff. He wanted to scramble and right himself, ears picking up an unfamiliar burn, because he looked like an idiot who needed help from a woman only a few days off her deathbed to keep upright.

*To be fair,* his mind supplied helpfully. *You are apparently exactly that.*

He bared his teeth, more in exertion and pain than anger, and threw himself into a tip. His foot hit ground, and he was forced to do an awkward hop-step onto his heel to get his other leg up and over the fence. His scarred calf gave an angry pulse at the abrupt weight, muscles complaining under
the strain.

Lena seemed to recognize his agitation and recoiled her hand, watching him stagger into his balance. She set her knuckles against her hip, almond-shaped eyes gone squinted. "You good, hoss?" she prompted, with an edge of humour.

Nick could barely focus past the stinging awareness of Ellis looking at him. Staring, as if they were on good terms. Terms where the kid had the right to look at him like that; soft and full and concerned. Terms where Nick felt the urge to stare back.

"Nick?" prompted Lena, voice hoarse and vaguely tired. His gaze snapped to hers, refocusing, and he didn't miss the waning patience in her expression.

He was not doing a brilliant job of schmoozing his way into the women's good graces - though, he supposed, he'd be fooling himself if he thought that had ever been within his power. Whatever tact he could have summoned had long since been drained out of him.

He'd been a good liar, once, hadn't he? He'd kept his cool under pressure, upheld false pretense, manipulated and played games. When was the last time he'd kept a lid on his emotions and faked it? Not since the divorce, at least. Definitely not since the world fucking ended.

Definitely not since -

He grunted, and put out a hand toward the biker, palm up and arm extended over the fence. Lena seemed surprised, right before she clasped his hand and used it to brace herself as she climbed up and over the railing. Her movements were nearly as clumsy as his had been, wincing with the bend of her midsection.

It made sense, in retrospect. Rhiannon wouldn't have let her sister go alone, and Ellis was eternally eager to please, volunteering to fill the void and make sure she was alright. It made sense to think Ellis' concern was for her, not him. Because of course it wasn't.

Jesus, Nick. You are a shitshow.

"Oof." Lena muttered, weakly, as she landed on the other side of the fence and next to Nick. "Thanks." He released her hand the moment she'd come to her feet, and he turned away in silence, starting to pick his way down the queue. It was littered with corpses just like the main plaza.

He could hear Ellis clamber over the fence after them, loudly, and tried not to pay attention. The other man's presence, buffered only by yet another person he didn't want to talk to, was very acutely painful. He didn't want to engage either of them.

Instead, he focused on the large camo-coloured tent just before them. He had to take a turn in the queue, following parallel with the side of the structure, before the fencing guided him up to the entrance. The tall flap was zipperered shut down the center, the large metal tab resting at the bottom edge of the material.

He couldn't hear anything inside the structure, but that hardly ruled out the idea.

Turning his head slightly, he glanced over his shoulder, acknowledging the rest of his team where they waited at the edge watched as Lena approached, tailed closely by Ellis. The kid's chin was low, capbill almost covering his face, mouth drawn in a grim and focused line as he picked his way through the bodies beneath his feet.

It took effort to rein in his gaze, force it to lock onto the woman rather than his ex-lover. "Don't
think there's anything in there." he stated, flatly, thumbing toward the tent.

She smiled, quick and breathless, and the spark of humour in her expression had him tensing long before she actually spoke. "We got your back, if there is." It was innocuous, calm. It shouldn't have irritated him.

"Swell." he uttered past gritted teeth, definitively irritated.

The gambler redirected his attention forward, dropping down to a knee. He gripped the metal tab that held the tent flap zippered shut, and with a silent count of three, drew it upwards. He stood with the gesture, guiding it open, stretching up onto his toes in order to push the zipper up to the highest point his wingspan allowed.

The tent flaps remained stoically shut around the small slit of open air left behind. He wished they'd flung open enthusiastically, and removed the element of choice from whether or not he wanted to see what was inside. Instead, he was forced to extend his arm, grabbing the canvas and pulling it to the side.

His eyes blinked, adapting to the dimness inside the tent, reflexively hunting first for movement. When nothing reacted to him, lurched toward the door, his gaze slowed and hunted out detail.

It wasn't a medical tent. There were no cots, no IV stands or platter of syringes. No sign at all of any paraphernalia that might have indicated a hospital. It was more barren than he expected, though he might have presumed that was the result of a speedy exit - if it weren't for the relative neatness of what did lay before him. There was a plastic table, like one might set up for a card game or a backyard house party. There were no chairs surrounding it; it did not look like some casual arrangement.

Papers lay sprawled out over the surface, piled thinly until there was little surface left. Nick struggled to identify much from the doorway, and the very first thing he noticed was the thick layer of blood pooled and splattered over the table.

The previous owner of the sizeable puddle was flat on the ground nearby, belly-down and limbs spread out in all directions. The woman wore dark body armour, very similar to the riot-equipped zombies they had encountered earlier, though with less padding and no helmet. She likely regretted the choice, if the dark shape of a bullet hole in the back of her skull was any indication.

Across the room was a whiteboard roughly stood on spindly legs. Rather than being covered in marker scrawl, it was completely shrouded by one huge sheet of paper. On it was printed a full-size map of continental America in grey-scale, with states and their counties roughed out with dotted lines. Nick gazed for a moment at the map, eyes tracing the familiar shapes and observing the circles, arrows, and X's written in bold red ink.

He breathed out, less a sigh and more an unconscious expulsion of air.

_Holy shit._

Quietly, he spoke without looking over his shoulder. "Tell them to come over here."

Lena brushed close, leaning to try and see around him. Her voice fell to a hesitant hush, aware of the strange and sudden calm that had overtaken his tone. "Ro' and Coach seemed pretty happy not coming anywhere near all this." she pressed, a slight cough following her words. "Not sure they -"

The woman was hovered just at his shoulder, and as she took notice of the map, she broke off. Her abrupt silence was eventually ended by a quiet swallow.
"I'll get 'em."

Nick barely paid attention as she pulled back and retreated back out into the fenced-in queue. He paid more mind when Ellis took her place, though the kid said nothing. They stood in silence, both staring across the dimly-lit tent. He hurt, ached. He should have left it alone. He should have listened to Coach; he should have let it be.

He should have let that very first infected, hunting him in a remote gas station parking lot, tear his throat out.

"Jesus." Ellis muttered, voice so weak it nearly broke. "That can't be right. There ain't no way."

Sharp red X's were scratched all over the map.

Every major city center was crossed out. He could recognize most of them: Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Austin, Indianapolis, Boise... some he didn't recognize at all, didn't know how many dead or infected the X represented. He felt a clench of fear when he saw a huge scratch over the New York area - and a strange and disconnected realization at the sight of an X over Savannah.

The three circles lacking X's seemed small. Insignificant. One lay near the lower edge of Louisiana, one bordered Washington, and another within Michigan limits. *The last bastions of humanity,* he thought. Then he laughed.

It wasn't humour. He didn't know what it was. He felt like he'd broken, then and there, shattered by the vivid representation of how far gone they all were. The laugh threatened to choke him, hard and solid in his throat as it closed, tightened. *We're all fucking doomed.*

His eyes slipped to look at the young Georgian next to him, unsurprised to find Ellis looking back. There was fear there, and a fragile uncertainty. It was not panic. Maybe he was not completely unprepared for the reality laid out in grey-scale and red. "That can't mean whut it - all those places ain't overrun, are they? Maybe they're places whut got evacuated already, or -"

The other man trailed off, and Nick swallowed heavily, trying in vain to wet a painfully dry mouth.

"I don't know." he lied. It wasn't quite the lie he wanted to tell; he wanted to say everything would be alright. He wanted to erase that worried look off the kid's face, make him laugh again. He wanted to be comforting, reassuring. He definitely didn't want to say the truth and admit that he was mostly sure they were some of the last people even alive - but he wished he could have managed a better lie.

Something better than, "I'm... I don't know."

Ellis saw through it, surely, but said nothing at all.
Chapter 236

Rochelle picked through the papers littered across the table with a slow and rigorous focus. There was a numbness in her chest, like the feeling right before her hand recognized the pain of a scalding surface. It was quiet anticipation, a held breath.

She hadn't spoken a word since entering the tent - not when everyone else was handling the talking for her.

"Jesus." Coach muttered for the fourth time. He stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Nick, both men staring at the map hung drably before them. "They ain't accountin' fo' every city here, but they got most every portion of the U.S. covered. Maybe them circles mean main evac centers? Places where the army had folks hole up?"

Nick's arms were crossed. He trembled, like he were cold, but spoke with a blunt calm that said he might not have even noticed it. "Every single one is scratched out except for those three." His index finger escaped the grip of his crossed arms in order to point at the remaining circles. "So, what? Every major city but these three is done for? They've given up? The zombies won?"

Christophe was quietly knelt beside the single corpse in the tent, gently pushing it onto its back. He struggled to gain the leverage with only one hand to put to the task, and Rhiannon flashed to his side, expression grim as she got fingers tangled in the woman's pantleg and helped flip her over.

"We don't know what this map even means." Ellis argued, hands deep in the pockets of his slacks. "Maybe they're scratchin' out successful evacs, or - maybe this ain't even about the zombies. We can't just... go assumin'-"

Brusque and sharp, Nick shook his head, a sigh clawing at his throat. Ellis' attention darted toward him, hesitantly, head shifting into a low hang. "We have to assume. That's all we fuckin' got."

Lena pushed gently closer, her hands pressed into her waistline in a gentle grip, as if holding her ribs together while she inhaled deeply. Coach and Nick parted in unison, opening enough space between them for her to stand there. "That's New Orleans." she stated, reaching out to tap a fingertip on the circle within Louisiana. "That's the only place I've heard was still safe."

Her eyes darted to the scratched out marker over Texas - but she said nothing.

Rochelle peeled a stapled-together set of papers off the table. The spray of gore had saturated most of them, making it hard to pick out the text where it had stained and run. There was as much handwritten as there was printed - but she couldn't miss CEDA's logo emblazoned on most of them.

"This is CEDA stuff." she mumbled, eyes darting down the page. "These are... guidelines? For detecting the Flu, or something... 'fevers of 110 or higher', 'elevated perspiration and salivation', 'extreme hypoxemia'. here it says, 'the appearance of' - ... 'mutated tapeta and retroreflection', whatever that means. They must have been screening people before they evacuated."

Nick turned only partially, gazing over his shoulder in her direction. "We've seen CEDA employees in hazmat suits who got turned, and watched a girl go from completely normal to a fucking Witch in less than eight hours. They don't know what the fuck they're talking about." he snapped in a low tone.

When she blinked up at him, silently tensing her jaw in a warning, a muscle under his eye jumped and he dropped his chin. It wasn't an apology; just an acknowledgement that his anger was really
directed elsewhere.

"I'm just saying."

Chris, having successfully turned the policewoman over with Rhiannon's help, now bent down to stick his hand into either of her heavy denim pants pockets. With some effort required to manage the awkward angle, he came out with a set of four silver keys, jangling loudly amongst themselves. Hidden in the mix was a thick black fob covered in a few rubber buttons.

His head lifted, mouth open to announce the find - what was most likely keys to the police vehicles outside - but when Coach spoke gruffly over him, his shoulders deflated slightly and he fell to silence. "Fever that high will kill a man."

Rhiannon tilted her head in Chris' direction. When the Spaniard looked at her, she lifted a hand, fingers curled and fist offered out toward him. That sparked a grin on his lips, and he gripped the keys in his palm in order to mirror the gesture, bumping their knuckles together.

Puffing out a breath, Lena shook her head. "108 and over usually starts killing you, I think, yeah." She reached out, pressing her palm onto the map, square in the center. "Don't think any of us thought the Flu was in the normal limits of the human body, though, huh?"

"Not really." Nick muttered, palming over his mouth. "And last I checked, hocking acid and growing claws wasn't on the average resume."

The older of the two Texans looked on the verge of a smile at the statement, but it never quite made it to her face when Ellis urgently sighed. He jerked his hands out of his pockets and thrust his arms in either direction. "Whut're we s'posed tuh do? If this map means - if they lost all these cities... if they lost all these places... if they've given up..."

Gently, Coach turned. He set his palm against his mouth, walking away from the map and toward Ellis. When he was within arms' reach, he dropped his hands to grip Ellis by the biceps, fingers firmly curled. "Son. We don't know what it means. Even if all these places got overrun, this ain't got no math on how many people they evacuated beforehand."

Ellis looked up at him, expression falling into a vague frustration, teeth pulling his full lips into a harsh bite. "I... know." he mumbled, voice stifled. "S'just... I guess I was hopin' things were just real bad here, 'n'... it was better in other places. If they're pullin' out like this - where're our folks...?" His eyes lowered, then, blinking a few times as he sucked in a tight breath.

"Keith got on one'uh them whirlies with Mama. Whut if it took 'em somewhere worse? Tuh somewhere that got overrun?"

Coach shook him, jostled him just a little bit, before pulling the shorter man forward. He wrapped one arm around Ellis' shoulders, tucking the younger Georgian tight against his chest. "I hear you, Ellis. I do." Ellis' arms remained loose at his sides, merely leaning into the embrace.

Rochelle slowly replaced the set of barely legible papers back down onto the table, glancing at her bloodied fingertips. It was hard to muster disgust at the all-too-common liquid, turning her attention back toward her teammates. She gazed at Ellis and Coach - then Nick, who was staring down at his shoes in a blunt attempt to look anywhere but at the other two men - and then up at the map.

Her mouth quirked, a softness to her voice. "If those X's mean lost causes... we're awfully close to one."
Nobody responded, not for a moment.

It was slowly that Lena turned, pinching at the tip of her sharp, defined chin with her index finger and thumb. The brunette watched the other woman closely, concern tugging at her mouth. "You guys keep talking about a military ship, right? If there's government around, they can't have pulled out that far."

Closing her eyes, Rochelle sighed. "We've never seen it. Might not exist." She lifted her left hand, gesturing up at the map. "Look, we don't know what this means. We don't even know who these people were, or where they were getting their information from, or - anything. And who knows what's going on in Canada, or South America, or the entire rest of the world."

Christophe's head lifted, vaguely, eyes flickering at the sentiment. "You think they are better?" he murmured, a clear sense of uncertainty in his tone, as if the thought had not occurred to him previously.

"I don't know." she responded, lifting her hands to gesture openly in either direction. "I don't. But I know that this map - whatever it means - doesn't change anything for me. I need to find my parents. I need to - do whatever I can to find the people I care about, to get the hell out of here. Maybe the government has given up. Maybe CEDA has. Maybe they're waiting at the border with shock blankets and hot cocoa. Whatever the answer is, we need to find out."

When she was met with silence, she looked up and around the room. "Anyone feel differently?" Coach and Ellis both shook their heads quietly, but Nick made no move at all. She gazed at him, the corners of her mouth curving down. "Nick?"

His head lowered, and the laugh that left him was low and harsh. "Is me saying yes going to change any of this? We're so close to home free, but I'm the holdout?" When no-one responded, he shrugged. "Las Vegas was a fucking waste of space, anyway."

As if that were an answer, he turned his body and carefully stepped past where Coach stood. His efforts to look anywhere but Ellis was not subtle, and he strode out of the tent at a pace that was too calculated and slow to be casual. Rochelle watched him go, shaking her head, and when he slipped past her sight, she returned her gaze to the table full of CEDA documents.

She was aware of Lena watching her, but said nothing, letting the other woman eventually speak unprompted.

"If New Orleans is one of the last evac spots or - areas they've got under control..." the brunette managed, voice husky with her effort to speak gently. She took a small step forward, a feint toward closing the gap between them. "You guys should really think about going there. I'm not trying to tell you anything you don't already know, but..."

Rochelle didn't intend to speak as curtly as she did. Her jaw refused to relax, and what left her was gritted and short. "How? All seven of us pile on your boat? I'm not sure the logistics work out on that one." She grimaced, sighed, eyes lifting toward the Texan. "You aren't totally wrong, though."

"Nawlins ain't real close by, but it's the closest outta all this shit." Coach offered up with a big gesture across the map before them. "If we find out this military ship ain't an option... we gotta start talkin' alternatives."

Ellis returned his hands to his pockets, sighing. "Yeah. We just been so busy just... makin' it. Ain't hardly had time tuh make no real plans." His eyes darted toward the tent entrance, looking after the gambler, now absent. "Ain't been makin' no plans as a team, that's fer sure."
Unable to help staring at the young man for a moment, always surprised by the unfamiliar melancholy on his face, Rochelle forced herself into motion. She leaned forward, clapped her hands together, and found herself staring pointedly at Chris. He blinked, looking back, unsure.

Was it suddenly easier to look him right in the eyes, or had their kiss made it wildly more difficult? Why couldn't she tell the difference? Then he smiled just a little, and she landed squarely in the latter.

"I think we all got a little distracted when somebody decided to lose their whole damn arm."

That smile turned into a grin, and Christophe lifted his hand, patting his chest with the found car keys tucked in his palm. "Us españoles, we are big on drama, ¿si? I thought I would lose only a hand, but that seemed too small." He shifted to stand, only wobbling for a moment before regaining his balance. "Now we go...? I would like to leave."

Motivated by the request, Ellis seemed to shake out of his faded reverie and instead focused on the Spaniard. He smiled, weakly, bobbing his head. "Yeah, okay, buddy. That sounds good."

Rochelle gave one last look in the direction of the map before shrugging her shoulders. "I don't think there's anything here for us. Just CEDA crap. I don't need this kind of reading material." With a soft thrust of her hands, she turned, moving as if to usher her teammates out of the tent. "Let's move, before Nick gets himself snagged by a Smoker."

"Hah." snarked a dry voice from just beyond the tent flaps, betraying that the Northerner had not gone very far at all. For some reason, the thought soothed her, even as it reminded her bitterly of the night he nearly left. The fear that threatened to close her throat at the idea of losing the family around her was worse, perhaps, than whatever fear the map stoked in her.

At least we're not completely falling apart.

We can do this.

We have to do this.
The front entrance of the mall was a set of large push doors, spanning four across. They had been mostly glass, but the tinted material was almost entirely busted through. Metal framing held the doors otherwise together, and shards of glass jutted out from the outer edges, clinging delicately to the corners like cobwebs.

Most of the carnage had been contained to the plaza, but not all. Nick could see sprawled corpses, blood sprayed and pooled amongst the tile flooring. They had been spared the weather, but they were no less rotten. The smell was like a tangible, hot mist just in front of his face. He could have reached out and touched it.

The mall was a strange mixture of well-lit and terribly dark. The closer hallway, edged by shuttered storefronts, was lit by the dense network of windows. The inner center was lit, too, by the streaming sunlight from clear glass roof panels. It was the space between that was pitch black, unaided by a sun that was approaching its highest point in the sky and casting light straight downward.

He could see infected milling in the dark. They almost seemed to avoid the lit portions, preferring the darker hallway. Some staggered in and out of profile against the bright interior as moving shadows, while some were barely visible where they sat and stood in the hallway.

A presence brushed near his elbow, and he glimpsed dark leather and pale skin without needing to turn his body and really acknowledge the younger of the bikers. "Just like high school trips to the mall." Rhiannon offered up mildly, a grin cutting across her face in raw humor. "I'll probably hate this more."

Nick turned his head to glance at her, aware of the pull of a frown at his mouth. "You seem awful chipper. Guess the apocalypse suits you, huh, blondie? None of that back there bother you?"

Rhiannon's muddy eyes flicked to look at him, snorting. "Dude. My dad was a prepper, he ran apocalypse drills. I literally trained for this." Her head tilted, dropping her voice to a low hiss. Some amount of aggression edged her expression, defiant. "Besides, what do you care?"

Because he shouldn't have.

Because he was not going to stay, not going to find out whether the government was really going to come through.

Because he was going to fold, give up, finally. An overdue reality.

He grunted, focusing forward. "I don't." he lied, swallowing the unpleasant taste that accompanied the reminder of their plan. It felt like a train barreling toward him, something unfathomably larger and heavier than he could ever hope to stop. He'd pulled the lever, shifted the tracks to direct it toward him... and there was no pulling it again.

If they found a boat, would he really get on it? He'd had the chance to leave his team, and he'd chickened out. The haze of betrayal and anger and shame fell to leave only the awareness of how vulnerable he was without them. And, perhaps, how little he wanted to.

Second try's the charm. They don't need me, anyway. I was always tacked onto the edge of this stupid fucking family fantasy they cooked up. Mama Ro', Papa Coach, and precious little Ellis.
The fuck do I fit in? Shitty uncle?

The ex they never liked, anyway?

Rhiannon scoffed dully, her thumbs catching in the waistband of her tight black pants. "Whatever you say." she muttered, studded brow lifting high. She turned to look behind them, raising her voice just a little as the rest of the survivors came into earshot. "We got a bunch of zombie cock-suckers in here. Who's ready for a party?"

Christophe whistled low, lifting the handgun held in his hand and squinting one eye shut to aim down the sights. "I have one, quizá... two left before my arm no work anymore." His grip trembled, and despite his quick grin, it was clear that he was exhausted.

With a hushed breath, Ellis suddenly launched into a jog, stepping next to the Spaniard. "Uh, yeah, buddy. Maybe watch yer aim with that, huh? Last time I saw someone shootin' like that, it was Keith tryin' tuh shoot out the back of a truck. We was gettin' chased by this wild dog, see - man, it actually reminds me of that time we fought this Tank, drivin' through -"

"Ellis..." Rochelle managed, weakly, sighing. Nick stole a glance at her face, recognizing the too-familiar conflict of wanting him to stop, while also not wanting to crush his enthusiasm. "Can we do this when there isn't a mall full of zombies waiting to notice us?"

The Georgian inhaled, nodding, a meek energy about it. He scratched the back of his neck. "Sorry. Okay."

Coach drew close, pulling his shotgun tight into his hip. Lena's brush-axe had been re-holstered in its makeshift leather strap, tight on his back. "We got two shotguns here. Let's lead with those, y'all keep close and watch our backs. We should see pretty quick if there's any call fo' us bein' here." He gestured up with the nose of his gun, pointing toward the inside of the mall. "Think I see some signage on the second floor. Don't think the place was a hundred percent shut down."

Stretching up on his toes, Nick strained to see what he indicated; the mall did have a second floor, and the center of the building was built like an open-air atrium with a balcony encircling the space. There were a few dull signs over storefronts on the upper floor, and though they were shuttered, they didn't seem completely abandoned.

"Yeah, alright." he responded. "Ladies first."

The sigh that left Ellis would have made him laugh, under different circumstances. It was desperately put-upon, and made even better by the momentary confusion that flashed in unison over the bikers' faces. He wanted to soak it in - but then the kid walked past him, and there was genuine frustration on his face.

They weren't on those terms anymore.

The two Georgians aligned in a calm row, sharing a glance and a nod. They turned to face the mall entrance, Ellis dragging his shotgun down from its position strapped on his shoulder. There was an easy coordination between them, strides starting in one easy joint step. Nick stepped to their flank, drawing his katana from its holster in his belt.

Lena and Rochelle joined him closely, and Rhiannon and Chris took up the rear. The blonde casually slipped behind the Spaniard, swinging her bat in wide circles behind her body as if to stretch her shoulder. She stepped high, hitting her heels with the weapon with each stride, the metal banding making a satisfying clang against the tread of her boots.
The impact of rubber and metal was the beat of a battle drum, and as they stepped up to the front entrance of the mall, it was a dinner bell. Snarling from the darker innards of the mall started - and then shrieks, and before Nick could so much as blink, his vision was a blur of greyed bodies and yellow eyes flashing in the dim light.

The infected burst through the front doors, breaking out what was left of the glass, barreling through the doorframes. If they disliked the sun at all, their hatred for the survivors won out. *Jesus. Like kicking a hornet’s nest.*

He lifted his katana, but between Coach and Ellis, the infected never made it close enough that he had to use it. The blast of the shotgun shells tore through them in wide sprays, shearing the flesh off their ribs and revealing blackened gore. Corpses hit the floor in dull, wet thuds, carpeting the ground as the survivors breached the entrance.

There had been a ripple effect; as infected noticed them, their outburst alerted the ones further in. There was a limit to the zombies' awareness, however, and even as the gunshots echoed in the empty, tiled space, Nick could see infected wandering further inside. They were just shadows against the lit inner atrium, too lost in their feverish misery to notice them.

The survivors pressed in as the initial flood wore down. They didn't bother to open the mall's front doors, simply climbing through the open frames. Nick delicately gripped the edge of the metal doorframe as he stepped through, glancing over his shoulder. He watched as Rhiannon placed a hand on Chris' back, keeping it anchored there while he clambered through.

He didn't know when they'd gotten familiar. It likely had something to do with the bikers being let it on his fragile mental state. He hadn't actually been completely convinced Rhiannon had any sympathy in her at all, so it came as a mild surprise.

Maybe she was just softer to people who hadn't tried to kill her.

A harsh, feral growl snapped his head back around, and his eyes immediately started searching for the crouched shape of a Hunter. It didn't make itself apparent, and there was just enough leftover infected charging toward them to obfuscate his vision.

"I hear a jumper out there." he hissed out, clipped, instinctively jogging forward to take up a position flanking the two gun-toting men in front of him. His sudden advance earned him the attention of a few infected, peeling off from the main group to charge him.

His katana slid into the first zombie's chest with slick ease, the satisfying glide a far cry from how it had performed before he'd sharpened it a few days prior. He wrenched it, twisting, gritting his teeth as the infected seized against his grip. It didn't go limp as quickly as he'd anticipated, and he couldn't free his weapon from the infected when it continued to lunge into him.

Nick did the next best thing, and he let the infected push him. They staggered backwards, further from the other two zombies rushing at him. The gap opened up was filled by Rochelle, darting forward with a yell, both hands gripped tightly on the heavy stun baton in her hands.

Turning at the waist put as much momentum as she could muster behind her swing, uppercutting the first infected, and its head snapped up with such force that Nick heard a crack. The next zombie shoved past it, knocking the half-dead woman to the floor, and lunged for Rochelle with a shriek.

The producer was off-balance, and she couldn't redirect her weight quick enough to bring the baton down on it. She dodged it instead, diving to the side to avoid its reaching arms. In the spare few seconds the jolted motion earned her, she recovered her footing.
"Come on, you -" she panted, breathless, but the zombie did not wait for her to finish. Its dark features split into a fearsome snarl, murky eyes blown wide, and it scrambled itself back around to charge at her again. The creature had a foot or so on her and at least fifty pounds, but Rochelle did not hesitate to meet it halfway.

She swiveled the pronged end outward, catching the infected man in the stomach. The moment her thumb depressed the switch, the zombie's body convulsed into a rigid posture, muscles spasming. Its expression was one of rage, and its arms struggled against the sluggish immobilization caused by the electricity arcing through its body.

A normal person might've collapsed. The zombie kept on its feet, reaching for her in erratic jerks, spittle trailing from its tightly gritted teeth. Disgust darted over her face right before she kicked out, striking the heel of her boot flat on its knee.

Its leg failed with a wet snap, sending it teetering down to the ground. The creature didn't catch itself in time, landing flat on its side, body still recovering from the trauma caused by Rochelle's stun baton.

She startled when Ellis suddenly stepped into her vision, but instinct made her step back. The Georgian directed his shotgun down at its skull, and one quick blast scattered grey and pink all across the tile. She shot a quick smile up at him, but it faded within a few seconds. Her eyes moved in time to see a crouched shape dart across the floor, on all fours and inhumanly low to the ground.

Its gaze was locked on Coach. Fear choked at her throat at the sight of its glinting talons, though it wasn't enough to stop her from uttering a warning. "Coach, Hunter!"

The ex-football player was already in motion. He dropped to a knee without a thought, crunching his body up behind his double-barrel shotgun. The posture made him a smaller target, lessening the area he had to defend. The Hunter seemed to recognize the challenge, uttering a deep growl before it screamed.

Its taut legs wound tight, the small creature burst from the ground, frog-like, and launched through the air. Its arms were spread, claws ready and stretched out in search of purchase in his body.

The eldest survivor waited with a calm patience, waited much too long. Rochelle's heart threatened to thump right through her ribcage in those few beats of time that felt like ages - and then there was a tremendous clap, a flash, an explosion. Coach rolled his weight, landing on his hip with his legs loosely sprawled to the side, and the Hunter's body sailed past, landing on the ground in a crumpled pile of tattered clothes and blackened gore.

Rhiannon hooted with a laugh, darting across the tile floor in a blur of long legs and blonde hair, balancing her baseball bat against her shoulder while she shot her hand down, reaching to offer Coach help up. He clasped hands with her, grunting as he rolled to his feet. "Smooth, Pops! Very smooth."

The heavy-set man grinned at the blonde as he got upright, patting his fingertips against the side of his shotgun. "Coach ain't no slouch." He spared a glance for the Hunter, its upper body shredded by the blast, blood pooling thickly around it. "Hate those damn things."

Sealing her lips tightly, Rochelle watched Ellis and Nick finish off the last of the infected. They'd cleared out most of the inhabitants of the hallway, though there were more waiting to be disturbed. She pulled the backpack off her shoulders, prying open the main compartment wide enough to stick her hand in and retrieve the flashlight they had stowed inside.
Clicking it on, Rochelle lifted it just enough to direct it into the dark middle section of the hallway, illuminating the space. The few infected stumbling past or seated on the tile didn't react to the scattered light, eyes glinting a metallic yellow in the dark.

"Plenty more where that came from, sweetheart." Nick muttered, sourly.

"Ay... claro." Christophe crooned back. He turned his hand, wiping the back of his wrist against his forehead. "Too many, Nico."

Rochelle inhaled, tucking the flashlight under her arm. "New clothes are definitely worth it." she whispered loudly, as if to herself, chanting it. "New clothes. New clothes. New clothes." She was aware of Lena stifling a laugh at her from somewhere over her shoulder, and it only egged her on. "New clothes."

Ellis joined in the chant, low and drawled, and then Coach's bassy voice accompanied them, and Nick muttered, "You're all fucking weird." despite the fact that he was just as eager as any of them to get out of his bloodied, sweat-soaked clothing.

Rochelle didn't stop - and Ellis did, but only for a moment before continuing - and Coach got only louder. Maybe the hanging awareness of the suddenly-too-real end of the world had driven them all insane, because they broke into laughter, and it didn't stop even after a few infected were driven to screaming and running at them, disturbed by the ruckus.

She did not miss the way Nick pulled away from them, drifting, letting the bikers fill the space between. That drained her humour away more than anything else, a sadness tugging at her chest that she couldn't dissect, couldn't shake. She didn't know how to close the gap again, but maybe something pleasant like a change of clothes was a first step.

As the producer landed a blow right into the jaw of an infected, splattering blood across her front from the impact, she did have to wonder how long new clothes would even last.
The inner atrium of the mall was split into two levels, connected by escalators in the very center. They were, naturally, not functional. That much was obvious at a glance - and yet it still felt strange, somehow, when the group split to go up both sides, up and down. Like they were breaking some critical law of nature.

But there were no over-worked mall cops there to chase them down for going up the down escalator, just zombies.

The small horde scrambled up the escalators in an awkward flood, tripping over and clawing at each other in their desperate attempts to reach the survivors. Nick jabbed out with his katana, scoring the tip straight into the eyesocket of an infected, and when it went tumbling backwards it did so directly into several of its fellows.

The result was initially almost comical. Then, as the infected caught behind the dying one caught their balance, it quickly became grisly; they tore through the corpse blocking their way. They rent it where its Flu-weakened flesh made it soft and tender like meat left too long in a crockpot.

His body threatened to gag, but he swallowed it down. It was easier than it should have been to shake off, to turn away and blink the image off his eyes. There was no more room for nightmares in his skull, and so many still shots of gore and viscera behind his eyelids that little merited remembering anymore.

That was the way of things, now, he supposed. There was a category for infected, filed away in his memory, for the awful things they saw. A box for the feeling of cutting and shooting and killing infected that he'd long since pushed away from himself, distanced from who he was.

That had been why the Angels had so disturbed them, hadn't it? It was the difference between isolating the violence from oneself - a necessary evil, kill or be killed - and wearing it like a second skin.

_I don't enjoy this. Any of this shit._ he thought, watching Ellis pull the trigger on the infected charging up the other elevator. His eyes tracked the spray of the shells by way of the blood that guttered up, the flesh that separated from bone, the shards of bone that separated from flesh. He observed it, distantly.

_I just wish I wasn't so fucking used to it._

The survivors ran up the frozen escalators, and infected met them there from the second floor. There was a moment where Nick thought they might get trapped there, sandwiched... but only a few came to meet them from the second level. Coach launched himself to the top step, where the escalator leveled out, and his broad shoulder turned to form a battering ram.

He thrust his body weight into one of the first infected that scrambled into the escalator. "Come on, folks!" he barked as the blow sent the scrawny zombie up and over the rail of the escalator. It gave a wheezed scream as it fell, and though the thud of its landing wasn't audible, Nick caught a glance and saw it land headfirst. It did not move again.

"Jesus. We're going for clothing, not chocolate, big guy." he muttered, panting out a laugh that didn't hold any humour at all, hurrying to close the gap between him and Lena higher in the escalator.
"Maybe both?" Christophe suggested, voice winded to the point of hoarseness. He kept close to Rochelle, gun stowed in the deep pocket of his cargo shorts to free his hand so he could grip the escalator railing and balance himself.

Rhiannon was at the very top, matched with Coach, and she was fury in a leather jacket.

The blonde had traded weapons with her sister, wielding the machete, and she slashed out with it in a wide swipe. The wide blade hacked straight through the outstretched arm of an infected, lopping it off with an audible crackle of bone. "Whatever the fuck we're going for, let's fucking go!"

Lena was struggling, though that had been normal for her since her injury. The effort of climbing stairs seemed to worsen it, her breaths short and strained, shoulders trembling. Nick noticed, jaw tightening, and turned to face down the escalator. He dug his heels in, slashing with his katana to fight back the infected scrambling up toward them.

"Thanks." she gasped out, making him grunt, withholding the response he wanted to give: *Just picking up your slack.*

"No problem." he gritted out instead.

The bottleneck of the escalator did them a favour, forcing the infected into nearly single-file and creating a blockade of corpses that the zombies had to climb over and claw through. Nick walked backwards up it slowly, heel finding the edge of each next step with caution, only striking out when an infected managed to clamber within reach.

His gaze darted to the side, watching Ellis on the other escalator, separated from him by the glass-and-plastic railing. The Georgian was using the butt of his shotgun more than shooting it, allowing the infected to cluster and gather packed tightly together before he fired, pellets tearing through them.

The kid had an urgent calm on his face, composed like wrought iron, tense and focused. It spooled a tension in Nick's chest. How scared was he, faced with the possibility of the military’s collapse? How much was that reality weighing on him? *His mom’s probably dead. Keith. Didn’t he mention a kid? A cousin, or...?*

Ellis' gaze flicked toward him, catching his stare, and Nick snapped his head forward. Frustration made him lash out with his sword, puffing out air through his nose with the exertion.

*Don’t think about it.*

Not Ellis' mental state. Not the myriad of worries that must have been bouncing around in his curly-haired head. Not the fact that everything was no doubt worse - no, *exponentially worse* - for the fact Nick was still hanging around.

*He could've been over you already, instead of adding all this shit to the mix.* That hurt in some far-off place. It was a remote, grey sensation, miles of haze between him and the feeling. *It’s better if you leave. For everyone else. They're better off without you. You just make everything fucking harder.*

How was it that he felt both relief and nothing at all?

Nick took a moment to breathe, to swipe at his forehead with his wrist, and it came away slick with sweat. Had he exerted himself that hard? The mall was lined with tile and stone that didn't keep much heat, and the air felt cool on his skin. It was the adrenaline, he was sure, and nothing else -
Not stress, or anxiety, or anything at all to do with why his hands were still shaking -

Rhiannon shouted in alarm, followed almost in unison by Rochelle, and Nick startled into a half-turn. His view was just obstructed by the top of the escalator and Lena's form, but he caught enough to see the blonde's frame zip past his sightline, a greying loop of flesh ensnaring her midsection.

Whatever pains slowed Lena's progress, she quickly forgot them in favour of launching up the escalator. Everyone else followed suit with Coach in the lead, the big man sprinting past and to the right down the balcony-like second floor.

As Nick breached onto flat ground, his eyes immediately tracked to follow Coach. Rhiannon was getting pulled by a Smoker's tongue, her body half-curled as it skidded across the slick tile. The zipper on her pantleg thigh grated against the tile, echoing in the wide-open space.

A significant distance down the balcony stood the tall figure of a Smoker, its frame half-crouched with the effort of reeling in its victim. Its mouth was slack-jawed to allow for the girth of its tongue, but its rotten lips were drawn tight as if slurping it down into its throat, and - to where?

It was a thought Nick didn't even know how to approach. It hadn't really occurred to him until then; maybe hearing CEDA's description of the Flu - mundane, like it were just a normal outbreak - had stirred him to think about it. What sort of mutations had taken place to create the creature before them, or any of the others?

Fortunately, there was no time to dwell.

"Get her!" he shouted, scanning the upper balcony. A few infected burst out from a half-open storefront shutter along the wall, drawn by the noise, and he strode to meet them.

Not needing the encouragement, Coach was long-gone, racing after the biker with his shotgun held tight to his chest. Rochelle was close behind him, and Lena had to visibly restrain herself from staggering after them. She stayed at the top of the escalators instead, placing herself just between the two stairways.

Lifting her sister's bat, she gritted her teeth and squared her body. When an infected made it to the top, she was ready, bashing it in the head and sending it careening back down the steps. The effort made her body shake, but she managed, maintaining their back line.

Picking up their slack, he supposed.

Christophe lingered just behind the brunette, drawing his gun again, eyes darting between the splintered survivors with a dull nervousness. "Do not separate!" he shouted, before turning to watch Lena with his finger tense on the trigger.

Nick's left hand released his katana, darting to retrieve his Magnum from the holster wrapped around his thigh. He snapped it up, shooting at one of the infected when it darted to go around him and aim for the rest of the team. He winged it, the impact sending it to the ground, but it scrabbled back up and started to run again.

"Ellis -" he started, falling back on instinct. Expecting the kid to intuit what he meant: you get that one, I'll get the others. It was a well-worn reflex, expecting the kid to be right behind him, within earshot, ready to back him up.

Frustration filled him at the easy way he betrayed himself, but a vague wistfulness won out instead when Ellis suddenly - obediently - charged through his periphery. "Got'em!" the Georgian yelled,
sprinting to intercept the infected. One swing of his steel-toed boot knocked the zombie's legs out from under it, and he used the metal nose of his shotgun to crack it in the back of its skull.

Nick might have stared dumbly, had his share of the zombies not been upon him and forced him into motion.

His Magnum shoved back into its holster, Nick gripped his sword with both hands, focusing his full attention on the three infected trying to circle him. They fell simply enough, no match for the sharpened edge of his katana. Blood puddled around him, forcing him to back up a step or stand in it. He inhaled a short and focused breath before turning.

Looking up, Nick watched as Coach finally reached the Smoker. The creature had pulled Rhiannon up and into its grasp, circling its arms around her, but not without a fight. The blonde must have kept her arm extended out, because the Smoker's tongue had entangled around it but hadn't managed to bind it to her side.

That freed her arm to messily, blindly jab with the machete gripped tight in her fingers. The blade struck home in the Smoker's neck, but the blood that guttered out was black sludge that clotted faster than it could spray.

An admirable effort, and certainly more than he'd ever managed to pull together in the same situation. However, the tongue must have started compressing around her and cutting off the flow of oxygen into her lungs, because her grip limpened and then released entirely.

The Smoker's claws dug into what it could reach of her past its own tentacle-like appendage, clinging, choking on its own massive tongue as the flesh pulsed and trembled in its tight hold. Its eyes were dull and cloudy, peering out from a bloated face, staring at Coach as the big man thrust the muzzle of his shotgun up to its forehead.

It seemed frozen, like all of its energy and focus went toward maintaining the constriction around Rhiannon. The best attempt at self-defense it could manage was lifting an arm, stubby claws lashing out at him.

Then the shotgun went off, and the Smoker went down. Its skull burst, but the explosion of gore was secondary to the unnatural seepage of dark air. The sundering of its head was like puncturing something pressurized, and the gas that escaped was acrid and horrendous. The smell of rot stung at Nick's eyes even from that distance, and he knew from experience that being closer to it was almost unbearable.

Coach's coughing was instant, booming, but he didn't recoil. He dropped down to grab the tangled-up biker, tongue and all, and started to drag her back. Rochelle was close behind and, despite the tears that started glistening in her eyes from the burning smoke, quickly grabbed onto Rhiannon's arm and helped pull her across the tile.

Its tongue had not detached from whatever internal structures it connected to - not at first. When they hit its end, the fleshy tentacle drawing tight, it slipped free from the Smoker's ruined neck with a squelching, wet sound that made Nick shudder.

He could've joined them, but Ellis had already started toward them, practically tripping over himself in his hurry to help. Nick tightened his grip on his katana and turned toward the escalator instead, jogging quickly over to Lena's side. There was another infected charging up the stairs, and as he came close, she leaned forward and struck out with the bat in her hands.

The blow burst a bruised slice across its temple, sending it staggering backwards. The fall down
the escalator killed it halfway to the ground floor. Lena held her ground and watched it go down, but her body was trembling. She looked like she might collapse, and when he set a hand on the woman's shoulder, she almost did.

Nick quickly dropped his hand to cup under her elbow, steadying her. "Whoa, doll. That's enough." he muttered, pulling her away from the escalators.

She followed, at first, eyes a little wide with pain. It wasn't more than a couple steps before she shook free from his grasp and staggered toward where Rochelle and Coach had halted. They were in the process of unwinding the convulsing tentacle from the younger biker's body, and the more they freed, the more she struggled.

"Fucking - off - me - goddamn - cuntstick -" was the only coherent thing Nick caught.

Chris drifted near his elbow, leaning in to breach his personal space. It was a far cry from the solid few feet Ellis put between them, though the kid kept glancing at him from under the bill of his cap. It was not subtle.

"Poor Smoker. It is like going to fish, and catch a piraña, ¿sí?"

Nick couldn't stop a choked laugh from escaping him. He also couldn't stop his eyes from darting to catch a glimpse at the small grin that flashed across Ellis' lips.

Covering his mouth with his wrist, Nick forced a rough exhale. "Pretty sure we all feel like that lately." he muttered, lowering his gaze rather than watch Lena drop to her knees and pull her sister into a tight embrace, staring at the ground rather that look anywhere else.

The blonde's struggling continued in earnest.
Chapter 239

Coach gripped the bottom edge of the storefront shutters, crouched there with no small discomfort at the low position. He shifted his weight before trying to lift the metallic barrier, rolling onto the balls of his feet and pushing, straining -

Then his bad knee gave a threatening stab of pain, and he halted.

His mouth opened to ask for help, but he didn't get a word out before Ellis was kneeled beside him with a softly eager look on his face. He passed the younger man a blink and when Ellis nodded, they both heaved.

The shutters gave a rattling protest before something snapped audibly above their heads. The gate promptly succumbed to their force, rolling up on squeaky tracks. They lifted it up above their heads, arms extended, the metal shutters lopsided where Coach reached higher.

It was likely meant to be motorized, opened and closed with a button, because it did not stay shut when Coach started to let it go. The slight jolt of it trying to drop made him grip harder, and he kept his elbows locked to hold the shutters up.

"Whoop -" Ellis chirped out. "I think we done broke it."

Coach grunted, peering into the shop. The room was dim with no windows to let in light, and the light coming in through the space they'd opened only went so far. His eyes had adjusted to the low light, however, and he could see enough to confirm what he'd been hoping for: clothing.

If anyone had come to loot the few stores remaining, they had apparently had no interest in clothes. The racks were full, though he couldn't help but notice that the only clothing he saw in the nearest racks was all distinctly for women.

"Gotta wonder if this shit's even gonna fit me." he muttered, allowing himself the small bitterness before glancing over his shoulder. His eyes skated over his team, nodding his head toward the space between Ellis and him. "Y'all go on before my arms fall off."

Rochelle was the first to dart forward, eagerly ducking between the two men to enter the store. She pulled the flashlight from where it was hooked on her jeans waistband, but didn't turn it on quite yet, not when there was still enough light to see. "Looks pretty promising, actually. I didn't know if we'd end up in some kind of Hot Topic hellhole."

Close behind her was Lena, the brunette raising both her hands to pat her fingertips against her cheeks with a small smile. "Speak for yourself. I know a chick who still shops there. Or... shopped."

Rhiannon released a low huff, kicking out her foot mid-step in the older woman's direction. "Watch it, dude." She turned sharply to the right, walking up to an advertisement stand that stood just to the side of the entryway. She grasped ahold of the steel framing, giving it a shake. When it proved sturdy, she looped a hand under the bottom edge and started dragging it back toward the door.

Coach stepped out of the way, keeping the shutters held open, and watched Rhiannon drag the framed stand into the center of the entryway. He and Ellis both lowered the shutters, letting them fall onto the top edge of the steel-framed poster board so it was blocked open.
Ducking beneath the shutters where they were bowed open at shoulder-height, Christophe slipped into sight with a gritted flash of teeth. He gave a weary huff of air, stumbling immediately to one side to press his back against the wall next to the entryway.

He looked exhausted, pallor thin and breath reedy. Coach withheld a sigh, closing his eyes for just a moment. It took effort to remind himself that they had no good alternatives to bringing Chris with. *Boy's gotta get up to snuff sooner than later. Been lucky, but we ain't gonna stay lucky.*

His eyes blinked back open. *Coddlin' him don't do him no favours.*

Despite the thought, Coach strode past the store's entrance to stand by the Spaniard. He reached out with both hands, but before he could grip the man's arm and waistline, Chris was sagging. It wasn't a full collapse, but it was enough to make Coach startle.

He scooped the Spaniard into an embrace, getting an arm fully encircled behind his back. Together they lowered to the ground, with Chris' shoes skidding on the ground in short squeaks. Once his backside was planted on the tile, the ex-football player relaxed into a kneel beside him, quick to grab his chin and tip it up.

"Chris?" he prompted, firmly, and the silence in the room said everyone had noticed the disturbance. Nobody approached, but he felt eyes on his back. "Talk to me."

"Estoy bien." the foreigner groaned out, lifting his hand as if to push the older man's hand away. He seemed to forget there was a pistol gripped in that hand, because Coach was forced to lurch his head back from the muzzle of the gun when it flopped dangerously close to his chin.

With a huff of air, Coach retracted both his arms, quickly snatching fingers around Chris' wrist. He slipped the gun out of the ex-Angel's grip without much resistance, checking the safety - off, naturally, so he switched it on - before setting it on the ground.

"Take a breather, son." he responded, trying not to let his agitation get the best of his moderate tone. "You look terrible."

The Spaniard burst into a small cackled sound, eyes widening before focusing on his face. "Amigo, you try to flatter me?" Coach felt a small stir of worry, looking back at him, reading the manic hollowness there. It wasn't his usual cheeriness, not really. It was just so close that he could almost confuse them.

Coach released a sigh. A swell of paternal warmth made him reach up to flatten his hand on the young man's cheek, palm gripped against the slim beginnings of a beard along his jawline. Chris didn't flinch at the touch, didn't seem surprised. "You gotta be honest wit' me, Chris. All the shit we got goin' on, I gotta know you're bein' honest."

The tilt left Christophe's lips, deflating them to a thin line. "Estoy - I feel fine." he managed, and it was almost angry. His entire presence shifted instantly into something anxious and tense, like if Coach pressed a little harder he might break into outright animosity. "Te prometo. I am just tired. Why do you think I am lying?"

That made the bigger man lean back, softening his expression into a sympathetic moue. "I don't think you're lyin'. I think you're holdin' it together, like everyone else. An' that's fine, so long as you admit when it's too much. And don't swing that gun around."

Chris fidgeted, shifted, lifting his hand to push Coach's hand away from its framing position on his face. The older man watched as his anger dissipated as fast as it had arrived, replaced by that
fragile exhaustion - *Boy's gonna give me whiplash. "Vale."

A hand touched his back, and when Coach didn't turn to acknowledge it, Rochelle murmured down to him. "I think Lena spotted some clothes that might fit you. How about you go look?" He felt a vague surprise at the abrupt statement, and twisted his head to look up at her. The woman's expression was distinctly casual - too casual. He was being extracted from the situation.

Coach's gaze drifted, spotting Rhiannon and Lena both looking in their direction, though their attention was firmly on Chris. He might've argued, had a part of him not recognized that it wasn't the worst idea.

Delicacy did not come easy when his body felt like Styrofoam and cardboard, hollow, surreal and fake and liable to collapse. Nothing came easy when he was buried under the suffocating weight of their circumstances. *Don't think about it. Not yet.*

He inhaled, exhaled, and nodded. "A'ight."

Rochelle slid a hand under his elbow, but the gesture was largely ceremonial. Coach got himself to his feet without putting any weight on her, patting off his thighs before turning away. He glanced back long enough to watch her kneel down in front of Christophe and reach out to rest her palms on his crumpled legs, soothingly placed just at his knees.

She leaned in to murmur to him, and he caught the genuine smile that sprawled onto the boy's lips. It was a far cry from the manic energy that had driven him a few moments' prior. It was honest, adoring.

Coach knew that look.

He just didn't know how to react.

*You get a bunch of kids in a room together and they ain't got the sense to keep their hands off each other. Like runnin' a damn high school. As if we need all this mess, on top of everythin' else. Like Nick an' Ellis ain't bad enough.*

He didn't mean it, not really, and sighed in a morose and guilty grumble at himself. He observed where Ellis had busied himself against the far wall, picking through packs of socks that were stuffed tightly into multi-tiered wooden trays. Nick stood near the two bikers, hands stuffed into his slacks pockets.

The man looked agitated - more than normal. The closer Coach got, the better a view he got, and the higher his brow rose. Stress seemed to be settling in; he looked pale, haggard. He didn't seem focused on anything other than the air directly before his nose.

It was worrisome, but Nick hadn't appeared healthy or content in days.

"Nicky." he stated, drawing the gambler's irked attention. He felt the snap to attention between them, the abrupt tension, but the threat of conflict didn't stop him. "Yo' ass looks near as bad. You feel a'ight?"

Nick's mouth twisted into an unpleasant grimace, putting a hand against his temple. His palm came away with sweat, which he wiped off on his shirtfront. "Dunno. Headache creeping up. All the running around and the fucking stench out there got to me or something," He seemed to catch himself, and clarified, "I'm fine."

"You sayin' you're fine is always a bad sign." Coach allowed a smile and paused, reaching into the
wide pocket of his khaki-coloured slacks. He'd slipped a bottle of water there, crumpled and bent and half-full, and drew it out to offer it to the Northerner. "Drink."

There was protest on Nick's face, even as he snagged the bottle and cracked it open. Coach turned away with some small satisfaction, some relief at managing to tend to one of his teammates successfully. One of his family.

Maybe the only family he had left.

Not yet. Don't you go there. Don't.

He turned his gaze on Rhiannon with a weary sigh, nodding toward Lena. "Y'all actually find somethin', or was that just hot air to get me to leave?" he joked, trying for wry. He figured he succeeded when Lena laughed.

Beside her, the blonde grinned, thumbing over the slashed brown of her studded eyebrow. "Both." she returned, voice coarse in a way that was not unpleasant. Husky. He grimaced playfully at her when she nudged at him with her elbow. "Come on, Chief. Let's get you out of those clothes."

Coach snorted, shaking his head in her direction. He spared a glance at Lena, but she had nothing for him except a vaguely unhelpful smile. The brunette lifted her hand and saluted with two fingers against her temple before turning away.

She wandered toward where Ellis crouched, and Coach sighed before following in Rhiannon's wake. She had not waited for him, and he had to pick his way between two racks to see where she'd ended up. "What -"

The flash of colour through the air preceded a bundle of fabric heading squarely for his face. He jolted, reflexively lifting his hands to intercept it before it struck him, huffing out air. "Woman, watch yo'self." he barked out, even as he laughed, extending his arms and gripping the fabric in such a way that it unfurled before him.

Rhiannon's snickering passed by him, drifting away as she searched through the clothes around them.

It was a T-shirt, just plain grey speckled with white. He held it up to his front, aligning it with his body, and eyeballed the size - too small. "Ain't gonna make that shit work." he muttered, tossing it into a nearby rack. He lifted his head, glancing toward where Rhiannon now crouched in front of a set of shelving, pawing through sealed plastic-wrapped white undershirts.

"You got an XL in there? Got football shoulders over here."

She hummed, before snagging a pack and offering it up over her shoulder. He approached to take it, but when his fingers caught on the thin plastic packaging and pulled, she did not release it.

Rhiannon side-eyed him, slanted up from her kneeled position. The humour had left her.

"You shouldn't push him, dude. We're lucky he's fuckin' holding it together at all. I don't think poking holes in whatever is keeping him moving is the best idea." She spoke like she always did: blunt, confrontational, but not strictly cruel. Or strictly wrong.

Coach sucked in a breath, pulling the pack of shirts free when she finally let go. "Can't blame me fo' tryin'. Only thing we got's each other anymore; I just want the kid to know he ain't alone. He... lost a lot, past few weeks. More that any of us."
He noticed her pause, and watched her a little closer. She was moving stiffly, nursing her left leg where she'd been dragged by the Smoker, but that wasn't it. The woman was unusually somber, teeth worrying at her lower lip.

With a faint frown, Coach stepped closer, resting one hand on her shoulder. She flinched but didn't recoil, stilling.

"I saw Texas on that -"

Then she did recoil, shooting him a hollow glare. It was mulled, half-sweet and half-bitter and wholly injured, like he'd taken a cheap shot. "What did I just say about poking holes, shitbird? I don't want to talk about it."

He gazed at her, hand hovering where it was. A misshapen ball of frustration caught in his throat, tightening his voice when he grunted. "Sometimes it ain't helpin' to hold it all in. Gotta purge it, get it out there. Every damn mistake I ever made could've gone different if I'd listened a little more. Talked a little more, too."

Rhiannon's mouth drew into a downward curve, displeasure tainting her sharp laugh. "Fuck, big guy. Welcome to the human condition."

Coach frowned, aware of the way it tugged at his brow and twitched at his jaw. "Rhiannon, I'm serious. We ain't known each other long, but I know you're scared damn silly just like I am. I know that shit out there scares the daylights outta me."

"Yeah, and I bury it." She shook her head, tangling fingers up in her dyed blonde hair, scratching at the browning part where her colour was growing out. "We bury shit. It's what we do. You see us getting through all this if we were all pissing and moaning about how scared we are and how much it all sucks ass? Not likely."

"I been buryin' shit all my life, an' I wouldn't be here if these three hadn't lifted me up." Coach muttered, focusing down on the packet in his hands. He started tearing through the plastic with an overgrown thumbnail. "Kept me goin'. Stiff upper lip only gets you so far. You gotta open up sometime or this shit'll kill you."

Maybe the rest of the team could hear him. He didn't care. Maybe he hoped they did. He meant every word; maybe too much.

"Close up, cut off from the grief, what you got left? What we got left if we ain't got each other? If the damn world's endin', the hell kind of consolation prize is ego an' damn - pride? If we can't comfort each other what the hell are we doin' here?"

The woman was silent at first, staring at her hands. She lowered her head as if to laugh, snicker at him, but all that escaped her was a pant of air. Coach had one of the three shirts packed tightly in the bundle, but he just clenched it in his hands.

She muttered, "You don't feel like if you start crying you'll never fucking stop? Because I look at that shitty map out there, and all those cunts out there who put bullets in their heads start to make sense. So don't fucking lecture me, dude. We're all scared shitless and trying to keep a lid on it."

Rhiannon stood, abruptly, head briskly jerking in his direction despite the fact that she didn't meet his gaze. "More clothes in the back."

When she strode past him, he didn't stop her. Coach simply watched her go, wrestling down the
urge to respond. He surrendered with a weighty sigh, drooping his head toward his chest and closing his eyes.

"Wasn't lecturin' you." he grunted, before she passed beyond earshot. "That was all fo' me, girl."

Coach didn't know if she'd stopped at first. He was about to give up, open his eyes and follow her, when a hand alighted on his forearm. Her fingers tightened in a light squeeze, just enough.

He let his eyelids blink back open, gazing at her perturbed little frown. Exasperated, almost, and she flashed her teeth when he looked at her. "If you needed to... I mean, if - uh, shit, you know. I got ears and nothing fuckin' better to do. Maybe later."

It took him a moment, it honestly did. Her awkward stance and bloated wording threw him, but it all snapped into place with a realization that made him smile. She was offering to listen. Badly, but sincerely.

Rhiannon immediately wheeled around, striding further into the store, tossing her hands up in the air with an agitated flare. "Don't look at me like that, Coach. That's my second-least-fuckin'-favourite look."

Coach chuckled, following after her, and did not rise to the bait.

She clarified shortly thereafter.

"My first-least-favourite is every single look Lee gives me."
Chapter 240

Rochelle tugged on the shirt she'd found, worming into it and pulling it down over her newly donned sports bra. The top was a dense material, like a hoodie, but it was loose and almost cropped. A slice of skin was just visible above the waistband of the black sweatpants she'd gravitated toward, a huge change from the discomfort of her old jeans.

Cozy. Easy to move in. Tight enough that they weren't cumbersome. Thin enough that she didn't feel like they'd cook her alive. The logistics of the outfit didn't bother her, but she was otherwise significantly bothered by it. She couldn't help but look herself over in the dressing room mirror, illuminated messily by the flashlight propped against the wall at her feet.

Her eyes were critical, lip caught between her teeth.

_Still got it._ she assured herself, inhaling. _Don't look almost thirty. Don't look like you've spent the last - forever in an apocalyptic nightmare. Don't look like your last shower was crouched under a sink faucet. You definitely look like someone who should be macking on a college student._

Her expression fell into a grimace, sighing, lifting a hand to place it on her belly. It was all the last thing that should have been on her mind, but it sat in the attic of her skull, a ferociously silent weight. It was safer than anything else she could have thought about, anyway.

"You doin' okay in there, Ro'?" Ellis' voice chirped out to her, only partially muffled by the dressing room door. She heard his footsteps approach, shuffling and clumsy in the dim light of the hallway that lead to the singular dressing room. "Lemme see!"

Rochelle glanced down, giving herself a small pat-down before she nodded. "Okay, jeez, nosy." she returned, taking the small step between her and the door. She cracked it open and retreated back so the light fell on her.

Ellis hadn't decided on anything, it seemed. He was still in his Bullshifters T-shirt and overalls - but he'd shucked his boots in favour of padding around in pristine white socks. He stood flat-footed, eyes widening slightly when they darted to absorb Rochelle's form. He was silent for just longer than made her comfortable.

"Well?" she prompted, hands quickly darting to tangle her fingers together. "It's kind of, 'just rolled out of bed on a Saturday' but I've been suffering in denim for too long and you are not going to get me back into that. Lucky me, I wore my skintight jeans to the end of the world. My legs are still numb."

It was apparently clear that she was nervously babbling, because Ellis waved quickly at her, a laugh escaping him. "Whoa, girl. I just didn't - you look great, I promise."

Her eyes narrowed, but he seemed sincere enough that she believed him. She puffed out a breath and turned away, peering at herself in the mirror. "Why am I asking you, anyway? You're gay."

She said the joke before she thought about it. Was he at that point - humour? She didn't know. Her immediate regret was, however, washed away firmly when he bolted out a laugh. The Georgian clapped his hand over his mouth and looked at her with something between affection and scandalized horror.

"Ro' -" he coughed out.
"Sorry." she stated, anyway, passing him a grin. "I ran you into that. Your sense of fashion is not exactly refined, though." When he scrunched his nose up at her, she threw her hands into the air. "Oh, come on. You can't deny that one."

With a vague softening of his expression, Ellis lowered his hand. He smiled and responded, "Actually, I can't deny either of 'em."

That caught her off-guard, and she cackled, stepping closer to wrap her arms around her waist. However, any attempt at further response was waylaid by the approach of footsteps.

Rochelle blinked in their direction and hesitantly retreated a step back from Ellis, grabbing the strings of her hoodie's cowl in a nervous gesture. She ignored him when he cocked a brow at her, all of her attention on the hallway, her heart lurching up into her throat.

Relief crept at her when it was Coach, his arm tuck full of clothes. She couldn't get a good grasp on what he had other than the distinct pattern of plaid.

The big man halted sharply in the dressing room doorway. "Oh, sorry, kids. Y'all need a minute?" he uttered, holding his clothes to his chest, looking nearly abashed. He glanced between them, and Rochelle swore he seemed just as off-kilter as she felt. "Didn't mean to butt in."

Rochelle grabbed her boots from where they sat on the ground, hopping her feet into them in a rush. "No, no, you're fine. I'm done. Just-" Stamping her feet to settle her shoes on firmly, she ducked between the two men, waving over her shoulder. "Go ahead."

"Thanks, babygirl." Coach called to her, and she hummed affirmatively back. Ellis speaking to him as she left vaguely reached her ears, likely grilling the man about his clothes, too.

At least he seems a little upbeat, considering. I think we're all just trying to hold it in until we get back to base... or maybe for forever.

She strode back toward the main area of the store, breathing in a lungful of air, chasing away the tingling in her fingertips. She couldn't recall the last time she'd felt such a strange mixture of excitement and... something else. Plenty of other things, maybe.

Shame, definitely.

There was that slim, wild chance - what if Jacob was still alive? What if he'd waited for her, and thought she'd wait for him? They'd survived plenty of arguments, though the last few words they'd shared had been a new, awful breed. Could she handle the idea of finding him alive, seeing his betrayal, if she'd given up on him and found someone new?

And the idea of him being dead? That was worse. The fact that that would have been simpler, more convenient... that was so much worse. It wasn't something she wanted to think about.

She meant to avoid thinking about it at all costs.

Although she'd left Chris seated on the front checkout counter, resting beside the register, he'd slipped off and wandered to the far wall to start looking through tops hung off hooks set in a grid pattern. A pale green polo shirt dangled from his fingers, the man clearly unimpressed with it. In fact, the Spaniard nearly dropped it to the ground when his eyes darted up to alight on her.

His silence - no, speechlessness - made her break into a grin. He didn't manage to rip his gaze away from her body even as he broke from his fugue and babbled, "Bonita. ¡Ah! Perfecta. ¡Qué hermosa te ves!"
She crossed her arms, interrupting his gaze on its path up her body. "My eyes are up here." she retorted dryly, resisting the laugh that tried to make its way from her. When he snapped his attention to her face, she approached, tightening her arms in their cross. "Thanks, though."

Christophe was still staring at her, though decently, now. It filled her with a giddy warmth and she held the feeling close, held it tightly. She bent down to grab the shirt he'd dropped, shaking it out in front of herself to get a look at it. "Cute." she stated, gripping the bottom hem. She lifted it up, holding it over his head, and he seemed to realize her intent only after a moment.

"Oh -" he muttered, breaking into a laugh. The man quickly lifted his arm to worm his hand into and through the shirt, catching his hand within the sleeve. "Gracias. It is harder to do, now."

Rochelle grinned gently as she had to yank the shirt over his head, tugging the shirt down his frame and flattening it where it tried to get caught. "I bet. You'll get the hang of it. And we're here for you." Once his arm was free, he reached up to run his fingers through his hair, fussing it back into place. His stumped shoulder sat in the deflated sleeve, exaggerating his lopsided posture.

A polo shirt and cargo shorts did not make for the most refined appearance. She couldn't muffle a smile, nose crinkling as she looked him up and down, and he turned a pinkened colour she wasn't sure she'd seen before. "¿Qué? Do not laugh at me, Rochelle, por favor."

"I'm not, I'm not!" she hushed despite her grin. "You just look halfway surfer kid and halfway frat boy. It's kind of impressive."

Christophe looked at her with no comprehension in his eyes, and she couldn't help but actually laugh, then.

"You look good, I promise." She breathed out a shaky laugh, retracting her hands from where they'd lingered too long at the hem of his shirt. "It's cute, but we should really get you in darker colours. We're gonna get covered in blood in two seconds flat. May as well pretend these are going to last for more than a day."

Chris vaguely grunted, but she didn't think he'd listened much at all. He took a step closer, chin lowering, and Rochelle tensed a little at the warmth of his presence. "Te ves increíble." he crooned to her softly, matching her gaze, and he reached out his hand to brush fingers with hers.

His fingertips grazed up her arm, her shoulder, tickling through her sleeve. She couldn't stop a shiver when he placed a knuckle against her chin. She couldn't stop much of anything, in fact, as he leaned in close.

Goosebumps threatened and her breath caught behind a curled tongue. His movements were slow but not cautious, and his fragile brown eyes searched hers with brimming warmth. She'd missed most of the buildup to their first kiss, with it being so frantic and sudden - and almost entirely one-sided. It had lacked the tender approach, the brushes of skin, the almost-maybes.

Chris seemed intent on making the second one better.

"Hey, Ro'." Nick's voice was tired, a little rasped, and Rochelle pulled away like she'd been burned. The cozy space between her and Chris fractured into something uncomfortable as he registered her rejection, and he retreated a half-step from her. "Where's the flashlight? I think there's some shoes in the back here, but it's too fucking dark."

Tension flooded her, anxiety brimming, made worse by the fact that Nick knew her situation better than anyone. He knew about Jacob. He knew their rocky past, knew her uncertainty about how
they'd left things, their current status. He was the only one she'd really confided completely in, and the only one who'd look at her and know.

He halted a few feet away, abruptly silent as the realization of what he'd interrupted settled in. The huff that left him was awkward in an uncharacteristic way. There was no mockery, no joke at their expense, just silence. Whatever he knew or thought, he kept to himself. For once.

That didn't change the fact she'd recoiled, and Christophe hadn't missed the subtext.

She saw the flash of uncertainty cross the Spaniard's face, hurt crashing tightly into a strange resignation, and she quickly averted her gaze rather than let the image stick too clearly in her memory. "Uh, sorry." she mumbled to him before spinning on her heel. Avoiding Nick's gaze, she bobbed her chin. "Yeah, it's in the dressing room. Coach is in there, so -"

"So don't barge in unless I want an eye-full. Got it." Nick finished for her. She glanced more fully at him, and he had the faintest frown, and she couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted to say something. Maybe even something reassuring.

It was an odd moment that quickly ended.

Nick did a smooth heel-turn and walked away, ducking into the hallway leading to the dressing room. Rochelle looked after him warily. She wanted to stand and look anywhere but Chris, shame settling into the grit of her jaw. The urge to rewind time, change her actions, do something different... it filled her, taking up space she didn't have. But it was easy to make excuses, and she didn't want to do that.

So she turned, facing Chris, inhaling sharply to steel herself before she raised her gaze to take him in fully.

Christophe had his arm looped over his stomach, hunched in on himself in a way that seemed to mirror the same shame she felt. His eyes were on the ground, and he was quick to speak. "Lo siento. I thought -" He sounded fragile, and a flood of regret threatened at her, heavy. He was in a delicate state of mind, and the last thing he needed was uncertainty. "After - we kissed, I -"

Not that I'm in a great position to offer stability in the first place, but...

They hadn't talked about it. It was well overdue to talk about it, but Rochelle was not ready. Everything felt too surreal, and their surroundings were clearly not conducive to any kind of privacy. She lifted her hands up in a softly pleading clasp. "Chris. Can we... have this conversation later? Alone? I - really wish it was all simple and... easy, but..."

Judging by the stutter of his frame and the tightening of his jaw, he'd filled in the blanks, and she wasn't sure with what. Before he had time to think anything more, she clenched her fingers into a tight tangle and advanced, til they were once again too close. She thought he might retreat, but he instead leaned a fraction of an inch closer, warming to her presence even as his eyes remained low.

It was softly that she closed her eyes and spoke to him with as much sincerity as she could muster. "I like you, Chris. And I liked the kiss. I just don't want either of us to get in over our heads before we talk. Everything's too crazy right now to do that. And this isn't the... well, height of privacy."

"Talk?" he parroted, voice weakened.

Her shoulders shrugged lightly, struggling through syllables in an honest effort to find ones that didn't imply anything other than the truth. "If things are gonna change... we need to... figure it out. Be honest with each other, instead of just leaping into something. God, I've learned that much the
past couple days." She dropped her chin slightly, a wryness touching her voice. "You know?"

Chris didn't say anything at first.

When she re-opened her eyes to look at him, he'd fallen to a simple, perplexed frown. The subtle caramel colour of his eyes searched her dark ones before he nodded. "Vale. Comprendo. Pero... You promise I did nothing?"

His tone was vulnerable, and it ached at her heart.

He'd done nothing but his best. It wasn't his fault she didn't know what she wanted, or how to go about letting it happen.

A smile jumped the corners of her lips up, and she reached up to grip the collar of his polo shirt with either hand. Flipping both points up to pop it playfully, she gave a soft wink. Sincerity came much easier, then. "Promise."

Christophe broke into a grin, tilting his head, his gaze darting around her face to soak in every inch of her smile, even the subtle things - the small dimples caused at her cheeks, and the lines it made around her eyes. His anxiety did not completely dissipate, but it weakened and thinned. His chest puffed a little to lean into where her hands still held the collar of his shirt, voice lowering. "I will not kiss you, then. But it is hard, you know. Sufro, bonita. Yo sufro."

She let her palm slide onto his sternum just long enough to push him, forcing him back a step, laughing under her breath. "Poor thing. I'll say a prayer for you."

"Por favor, chica. Gracias."
Chapter 241

Nick felt like he might suffocate. He breathed, but couldn't get the air into his lungs. It sat on his teeth, blocked his throat, refusing to go any further.

He settled a hand against the wall, leaning his weight into it, narrowing his eyes as he gazed blankly forward. His skin crawled with something he couldn't identify. It was frustratingly mild, infuriatingly slow, glacial.

He wanted to boil over, and all he could do was simmer.

It had nothing to do with Rochelle and Chris. He'd picked up on the change in their relationship instantly, well before now, so it didn't surprise him to stumble upon them nearly kissing. It did something worse than that.

He should've laughed. He should've winked at Rochelle, bemoaned missing his chance once more. He should've shot her the look that said, *Guess Jacob loses, huh?* He should've given her shit.

Instead, he froze.

He felt jealous, and he froze up as he tried to wrap his mind around the feeling. He felt jealous and lonely and angry with himself for it.

Nick lifted his hand and pressed his thumb into the space between his brows, driving his fingertip in like a screw. He applied enough force that it might just break through his skull, trying to grind out the headache rising behind his eyes.

The world had ended days or even *weeks* ago.

There was nothing for any of them to go back to. No point in any of it. He'd never had anything to go back to, either, but at least he'd had the fantasy of a return to normal. If the whole of America had crumbled - they were just rats in the rubble, fighting for scraps while everything burned around them.

What was the point of it?

What was the point of being alone and miserable, on top of everything else?

It was the human thing to do: lurch out for comfort. Grab the nearest solid object to anchor to. He was familiar with the instinct, after all. It was that very instinct that had always sent him crawling bars for one night stands, for a warm body.

There had been days when an empty bed was even worse than dealing with the awkward small-talk and presence of whatever stranger had taken the bait. He'd never pretend he was invulnerable to longing for touch and company, but it had always been agnostic of the person themselves.

Those people - they had not always, after all, been women - had always just been a means to an end. It was all just a way to achieve a feeling, a set of sensations.

Ellis was different. From the very start, he'd always been different. Nick missed him.

Nick wanted to hear *his* voice, see *his* face, touch *him*. He wanted Ellis' lips on his, Ellis' hands on his waist and curling against his neck and gripping into his back. He wanted more than anything to
press his face into those tousled curls and hear the kid laugh again.

He wanted to laugh again.

He wanted to take it all back.

You can't. buzzed in his skull like feedback through speakers and he wanted to shout back at himself, Why? Why not? If we're all going to fucking die, why not?

He asked the question, and the answer dropped plain as day before him. It spilled out of him like blood, guttered from him like an artery had been clipped and all that was left of him was pattering onto the store's tightly-wound carpet fiber.

I don't fucking know.

He barely fought back a chuckle, just a panted breath, because wasn't it perfect? You're a real fucking martyr now, huh, Nicky-boy? Do all this shit, set him up for this, and for what? So you can feel sorry for yourself?

Because you don't know how to be anything but miserable?

He was brimming with something too big to manage, too heavy to bear. It sat at the edges of him like spiderweb, clinging and sticky and threatening to wind him up in some suffocating grip.

You didn't fucking leave him for his sake. You keep saying that and you know it's bullshit, don't you? You did it for yourself, because being fucking alone and angry is all you know how to do.

Because being alone and angry was better than getting hurt. And Ellis would hurt him, one day. The kid would get his hopes up, addict him to some fantastic dream, and then pull the rug out from under him.

It was never about him, just you. You never gave a shit about anyone before, why start now? Burn it all fucking down before it gets you. Before he gets you.

His ex-wife had almost broken him. Ellis would shatter him. It seemed so simple, so obvious, and so insanely pathetic.

So, you ended it first. Is this better? Is this what you wanted? Are you fucking happy with yourself? Are you -

"- okay?"

His body jumped well before his mind caught up with it. His eyes darted up, landing on the stone blue eyes examining him cautiously. Ellis' concern was badly plastered over, disguised under a tense calm, an enforced distance.

The kid had walked right up to him, barely a foot between them. His hand was vaguely outstretched, frozen in a splayed gesture like he'd been about to reach out but thought better of it at the last second.

Nick hadn't heard a thing. Not a word Ellis had spoken before that, and not his footsteps. He'd crushed his focus down into such a pinprick of attention that he had to close his eyes and shake his head just to re-center himself in the moment.

He scrabbled for composure and came up with tatters.
"What?" escaped him; it not the correct response, it seemed, and Ellis' concern broadened into a frown.

The Georgian maintained his calm attention, lowering his hand to his side in a stiff jerk. His voice tightened slightly with awkward tension, and Nick was left to wonder what his tone had betrayed. "I said, are you okay...? You look, uh -"

Nick surrendered a half-step's worth of space, increasing the distance between them. "I think I'm good not knowing, thanks." he muttered quickly, aware of the way Ellis' posture softened a bit at the slapdash attempt at humour. The kid's lips quirked at the edges, and Nick couldn't stop his eyes from catching on them.

Was it a restrained smile trying to find its way into his face, or him struggling against a deeper frown? Nick honestly couldn't tell the difference, couldn't discern between the two.

He just knew his own mouth fit just perfectly there.

"Fer real, Nick." Ellis turned his gaze downward to the floor, and he either didn't see the older man's focus or pretended not to. "You look kinda pale. Maybe you should sit awhile, catch a breath..."

Nick tried to laugh, but it caught in his throat like a hiccup. "I'll catch my breath when I'm dead." he muttered, dryly. "Which, judging by that map out there, isn't gonna be long. Might just go fall on that katana for real this time."

Ellis did look up at him, then, brows crinkling over suddenly worried eyes. There was no humour in his expression, not even coloured by exasperation. It was just pure and wholly terrifying empathy.

"That ain't funny." he stated, drawing his arms into a loose cross over his chest. "Don't say that kinda stuff, Nick."

The Northerner wanted to argue, to jut his chin up and say Why not? It'd simplify just about everything, wouldn't it? - when he fully processed Ellis' expression. It struck something cold in his chest.

The brunette's concern reflected his thoughts back to him, and they sat with a sudden pressure on his already-singed synapses. He didn't mean it, not like that. Not really. He'd fallen into the joke like some ritual in the back of his mind, a soothing release of tension.

He'd just not really said it aloud before.

Not like I'd ever have the guts to off myself, anyway. sparked across his thoughts, followed promptly by a startled sort of self-awareness. It felt like looking suddenly down from a height and being drawn into the pull of vertigo. Jesus.

"It was a joke." he stated, unsure for whose benefit.

Ellis looked up at him, his expression softening a little as he lifted a hand to scratch at his curly brown hair. Maybe he saw through it, or maybe he was assuaged by the statement. Nick might've been able to tell had he met the kid's eyes for more than a few seconds at a time.

When did it stop feeling like a fucking joke?

"Look, Fireball -" He started the sentence without any idea how to continue it or where he meant it to end. It was a knee-jerk response, a desperate utterance, and Ellis' face went slack with surprise.
At first, Nick didn't understand. Not until he realized how long it had been since he'd called Ellis any of those old nicknames. Sincerely, without even thinking, he'd dipped back into an instinctual pet-name.

Because that's what it was - what it had always been.

The Georgian looked at him with confusion and some kind of dawning fear. Apprehension better described it - but fear nonetheless. It was absurd next to the way his posture opened just slightly, leaning in, anticipating.

He craved it, whatever it was supposed to be, and Nick crumbled into even smaller pieces. He rattled and shook and waited to fall apart.

"I'm fine. Gallows humour is just all I got left at this point." he muttered instead of whatever clung to his teeth, and Ellis' expression fell.

He was disappointed - and then, worse, resigned.

Movement caught his eye, and Nick's attention jerked toward it much despite himself, watching Coach come into the light bearing the unlit flashlight in his hands. "You don't know shit 'bout humour, Nick." the man groused.

It was not aggressive, though, and Nick did not even have the energy to rouse him into an argument. "I'm hilarious." he stated instead, a canned retort.

The man had changed entirely. A red and white plaid button-up stretched across his chest, the slightest hint of a white undershirt peeking up from the bottom edge of its open collar. His tan khakis had been traded for a similar light blue-grey pair, but it was a thicker fabric and looser on his frame.

He'd shouldered a thin red windbreaker, and when Nick's eyes caught on it, Coach shrugged. "Extra fabric ain't gonna hurt nobody. Lost enough clothes to Hunter claws an' shit. It ain't as warm as it looks."

Nick hadn't really even processed the sight, but he grunted, just to seem like he'd been aware. He slipped his right hand into the pocket of his slacks, turning his chin to glance across the store.

His eyes caught on Lena and Rhiannon huddled close next to a clothing rack, the older sister gesticulating widely as they spoke in whispers.

Neither looked particularly pleased.

"I need to get some clothes together." Nick muttered, holding out his hand toward Coach. It put his arm stretched out past Ellis, forearm far closer than he meant, and the younger man shuffled to the side to put distance between them.

Ellis was staring at him, and he desperately needed to get away from the gaze and everything it was full of. He couldn't take another second under it.

Coach eyed him with an uncertain, studious look, then sighed and passed him the flashlight. "Didn't see no suits back there." he commented, lightly.

If it was a joke or mockery, Nick couldn't tell. He backed up a few steps and sneered, mildly sure it came across with the appropriate amount of apathy and not the wild instability he actually felt. "I'll pull something together."
The eldest survivor grunted, and Nick felt some distant gratitude when Coach turned and nudged Ellis with his elbow. The gesture dragged Ellis' attention away long enough for Nick to escape in silence.

He found his way into the back of the store, gripping the flashlight in both hands. He could barely even remember what he'd wanted it for - he just closed his eyes and let the darkness take some of the edge off his headache.

"Pull yourself together, man." he muttered, pressing the end of the flashlight against his forehead. It felt cool.

Or maybe he just felt hot.

Squeezing his fingers into a clench, Nick searched through the barbed wire knotted up tight in his chest and found only one conclusion: I don't think I'm okay.

"Not the fucking time to lose it."
Chapter 242

Fumbling with the button of the pale blue jeans he'd found, Ellis squinted down at his lower body. They fit fine, and though the legs were a little long, it was nothing that his boots wouldn't account for.

It left him standing on the hem, huddled in the very far corner of the store behind a tall rack of bathrobes, just big enough to provide him cover while he'd quickly changed into a new pair of boxer briefs.

He'd tried to circle around, find Nick again to corner him into talking, but the gambler had disappeared into the dressing room before he could even blink. The urge to go find him anyway was outweighed by sense.

*He don't wanna talk.* he reminded himself. *If he wanted tuh talk, we wouldn't be in all this mess.*

Resigned, he left Nick alone, and changed in the corner rather than go into the dressing room hallway and wait for the man to finish. He wasn't interested in watching Nick find more excuses to avoid him.

A sigh passed his lips, closing his eyes. He reached up and palmed down his chest, flattening the Bullshifters T-shirt he'd yet to take off. He wanted to not think about it, but how could he avoid it?

Ellis hated the position they'd ended up in. He wanted to call a truce, lay down arms and make sure the man was alright, but he couldn't. Nick would just go on the defensive and accuse him of trying to fix their relationship, and he wouldn't be entirely wrong.

*I ain't never seen him like that. He was jokin', wasn't he? He'd never -*

He dismissed the thought before it could form, setting his jaw.

*He's just more scared than he wants tuh admit. He plays a big ol' game 'bout not carin', but he's lost stuff, too. No one wants tuh think everyone's... everything's gone. 'N' it wouldn't be so dang hard if...*

Ellis inhaled, opening his eyes to peer dully down at his socked feet. Losing Nick had made everything worse, and he couldn't shake the feeling Nick was thinking the same thing. Every new piece of bad news added an extra weight to their already overburdened shoulders.

Though he'd been coping even without Nick there to comfort and distract him, it wasn't easy, even when they were mildly amicable. Nick wasn't coping at all, and Ellis was worried about just how bad it was.

Worry fed easily into care and concern, and in a split-second, it was so easy to forget everything they'd been fighting over.

*I don't care 'bout his rough edges. I don't care if he's nasty sometimes. I don't care if we gotta work on shit. All the junk him and we all been through, we could work through this. We could. If he'd just let me in, fer real, we could... do somethin'. Get somewhere.*

It had been easier to accept the state of things when Nick had seemed confident and sure of it all, even if that had been hard to take. Now, seeing him... *broken,* Ellis felt an urge to reach out. Nick's ego was nothing new to him.
Ellis had tried more than once to fix things, but Nick didn't know how to lower his guard. He'd made a declaration, and would be damned before he went back on it.

*Maybe I've been goin' at it the wrong way. Maybe - if I'm just here fer him right now... I don't want nothin' tuh go back tuh normal. I don't want us tuh just move on like nothin' happened. But if I can just get him tuh talk, if I can just get past his damn bullshit...*

The thought petered out, leaving him with a steady frown. There was no sense running himself in circles for no good reason. He wasn't the one who needed convincing.

The Georgian slumped his body tiredly. He grabbed the bottom edge of his Bullshifters shirt and tore it up and off his frame, wriggling his arms free. With it gripped by and wrapped around his hands, he turned it enough to get a look at the logo emblazoned on the front.

His frown reached his eyes, using his thumb to trace the faded, bloodied shape.

Keith and he had, along with some buddies of theirs, started a highschool club. It had mostly been an excuse to hang out, and they'd adopted a variety of rituals to pass the time: tinkering with each other's cars, drag-racing across the countryside around their hometown, cramming into his mom's tiny basement and watching awful horror flics...

They'd made up T-shirts, and if Keith and he had ever successfully bought a garage to start their car repair business, it would have borne the same name.

*But we ain't gonna, are we?*

He felt a little woozy at the thought.

"Oh!"

Lena's voice startled him, and he turned in a dumb stumble. It took looking at her and realizing she'd covered her eyes with a hand to make him recognize the fact he was shirtless.

Reflex made him jolt to move, quickly falling to a crouch to grab the grey undershirt Coach had thrown at him. "Uh - sorry. Dressin' room's taken, so I figured I'd just change out here."

He peeked at her even as he threw the shirt on over his head, shimmying into it. She kept her hand squarely over her eyes, but a grin parked beneath the bottom edge of her palm. "It's okay. I should've barked before I got over here."

Ellis straightened the thin shirt on his frame, grabbing his trucker cap from the ground and setting it atop his head. He stood, blinking in her direction with a lowered chin. "I'm uh, decent."

Lena dropped her hand, looking him over, that grin turning into a quirked smile. "Lookin' good, mister."

He laughed, reddening despite himself, turning to grab the matching pale blue denim jacket from off the small rack he'd laid it over. He pushed his arms into the sleeves, peering down at his body rather than look at her. "You doin' okay? You seemed kinda beat by the time we made it here."

A thoughtful twitch made it to her brow, and the short woman grabbed the bottom edge of her thin hoodie, tugging it up enough to look at a portion of her tummy and navel. The pale colour of her flesh was mottled with greens and blacks, and it made Ellis flinch to see.

But she shrugged her shoulders. "I'm okay, I think? My stamina's not great, and running around
makes me feel... sore. Crazy sore. Like my whole body's one big flipping bruise. But I haven't coughed up any blood, so that's a win."

It was so lackadaisical that Ellis snorted, unable to help the reaction. Judging by Lena's faint grin, it had been her intent.

"I was actually over here to check on you. Y'know, with the stuff that's happening."

That faded his humour, replacing it with a soft confusion. "Oh. Uh. That's real sweet'uv you, but 'm fine." He appreciated the gesture, of course, but he hadn't yet betrayed Nick's trust with the sisters and he didn't intend to. That left only one good excuse for feeling upset - and he didn't want to talk about the end of the world.

He found he mostly just didn't want to talk, but his manners made him pretend.

"Really." he uttered, when she looked unconvinced.

Lena hummed, putting her thumb against the tip of her nose and wiggling it idly back and forth. "Rhiannon said you were a tough cookie, but I thought she was joking."

Placing his hand on his chest, he itched at his sternum, shaking his head. "Uh... I guess that's a compliment, comin' from her..." he offered, turning to locate his steel-toed boots where he'd kicked them off, and sitting flat on the ground to start loosening the laces to more easily put them back on.

The biker darted a look over her shoulder before shrugging. "Rochelle and Chris are pretty cute, huh? He's a tough cookie, too."

There was a bloated meaning to her tone, and his movements paused. He didn't look at her, but he did frown just gently. He recognized the tone from a conversation they'd had back at the condo, over Spam and canned soups. She'd pried for information about Nick with the same un-subtle comments.

He didn't distrust her; far from it. But he was struck by the thought that she seemed to target him, like he'd be more receptive.

Or more gullible.

Ellis shook his head, dismissing the intrusive, Nick-like thought. He tried to be an open and friendly person; it made sense that she'd search out the one least likely to react poorly to a probing question. He couldn't assume it was ill-intentioned until he had reason to think so.

She was just terrible at disguising an ulterior motive... or Nick had honed his ability to notice them. A mix of both, perhaps.

"Yeah." he threw out, idly.

"You think he's okay?" she questioned, and that made Ellis stop outright. He blinked at her, and she seemed to hesitate at his expression. Genuine insecurity darted across her face, and the sincerity threw him for a loop. There was something going on, but he hadn't expected wariness and concern from her. "Like... actually okay? He's full of hot air, that one."

"Yeah." He spoke slowly, chewing on every word before it escaped him. "I mean, as okay as he can be. It hurts him pretty bad, I think, but we got him on meds as best we can. He's tryin', y'know?"
She approached a step, and he turned where he sat to blink up at her. Surprise flooded him when she looked outright upset, frowning. "I get that. But... aren't you worried?"

Ellis mouthed vaguely, gaping in a fishlike gesture. "Y-yeah, of course!" he managed, fighting back a twist of offense. He'd spent days being nothing but worried, and he'd done his best, even if his best hadn't always been enough. "We're all worried. 'N' we're doin' whatever we can."

His distress must have shown on his face, because she sighed, approaching a few steps with a flat and apologetic gesture of her hands. "Sorry, dude. Sorry. I'm not trying to - I'm just trying to look out for the kid. I wouldn't even say anything, but this... hits a nerve, you know? I don't want to do nothing."

Ellis fell to staring at her, confusion overwhelming all other emotion. He suddenly had the distinct sensation that he was out of his depth, out of the loop, and he was about to open his mouth and say as much when she muttered a handful of words that stopped him dead.

"Nick told me, alright? Or I... heard him, anyway. I know about Chris."

A million questions flooded him all at once. He wanted to leap to his feet and grab her by the hands, beg her to explain. He didn't know what was worse: the idea of something being wrong with Chris, or the idea of Lena knowing something from Nick that he didn't.

Had he confided in her? No, that didn't sound right. If she'd heard him it was more likely she'd eavesdropped - so had he been talking to Chris? The only thing that came to mind was whatever Nick had said to Christophe to get him back up on his feet earlier in the streets outside.

Lena had been nearby, hadn't she?

He shoved it all down, buried it by force, and tried to look calm when he did not feel it. "You do?"

Now who's probin' who?

The woman frowned, drawing her arms into a tight cross over her chest. "Seriously. I wouldn't say anything but... dangit, I've been there, y'know? I don't want to over-step and talk to him, or make it worse, but... we're the two weak links, right? Maybe I can help..."

She hesitated, trailing off, hazel eyes darting to the side. Ellis had to clench his fingers to keep himself still. He didn't know the right way to prompt her without revealing that he was summarily clueless.

He didn't have to.

Lena closed her eyes entirely, shaking her head. "I'm still sort of shell-shocked, Ellis. I don't know the dude very well, but... trying to kill himself just doesn't... seem like Chris." Her expression warped into a wince. "Guess it doesn't seem like anyone until... it happens."

Quiet sunk into Ellis' skull. It was like someone had pulled a fire alarm in his brain, and the foam had started to fill him up and spill from his ears. He stared at her, only distantly registering the rest.

"I can't blame him, I mean, frick, none of us knows what losing a limb is like. I can't pretend I understand how it feels, but I understand not knowing what else to do. Y'know? Shoot, dude, I dunno."

It was like he'd taken a too-large bite of sticky caramel, and his molars had cemented together. He lacked the energy to strain against the emotions holding his jaw shut. He'd considered the fact Chris would struggle with depression. It had been the very first thing the doctors had discussed
when Keith had almost lost a leg.

He'd been aware of the possibility, conscious of the likelihood. None of that softened the blow of knowing Christophe had actually tried.

*When? How... how'd I not know? Why'd he not tell us? Why'd Nick not tell us? We ain't been watchin' him. If we'd known, we could'uh been watchin' him. Whut if Chris had tried again and we didn't -*

As his vision blurred, breath only reluctantly expanding his chest, Ellis moved shakily to stand. The motion made Lena open her eyes, look at him, and she stiffened.

"I didn't mean to start up - wait." Her voice broke off with a sharp inhale, and he was vaguely aware of her retreating a step, distancing herself from him in a sudden motion. "You... did know, didn't you?"

There was no point to lying, so he shook his head, just once. Horror overtook her rounded, soft features.

"Oh, shoot, dude, I -"

Ellis lifted a hand and grabbed at the bridge of his nose, pinching there, and his fingertips grazed wetness at the inner corners of his eyes. "Ain't yer fault." was the most coherent response he could manage, pushing himself to step past her. "I gotta go."

She didn't stop him. She put her hands up, almost defensively, giving him a wide berth. Her expression was one of mild horror, lips sealed tightly like she'd decided saying nothing was her best option.

He should've gone to find the Spaniard, but that was not where he aimed his footsteps. *How could Chris not tell us? How could he not tell me, at least? How could Nick not tell me? This ain't about us, this's about Chris dyin'. Jesus - whut was he thinkin'?*

As quickly as sorrow had struck, anger rose up in its stead. With every step he took toward the dressing room hallway, he boiled a little hotter, bleaching out the grief until he was left with just fury.

*Goddamnit, Nick. You better have a good damn explanation fer this.*

If he tried, he could drown out the part of him that wondered if this was partially to blame for Nick's fractured state.

*Shit!*
Chapter 243

The dressing room mirror reflected Nick's dull expression back at him, pale and washed out in the darkness. He sat on the dressing room bench and gripped his chin, thumbing at his jawline, staring at his own face like he didn't recognize it.

He'd only managed to get half changed. Nick had found a dark pair of jeans and a navy blue button-down, but he'd only managed to change pants and remove his old dress shirt before a wave of dizziness threatened his balance. He'd sat down rather than fall down, and hadn't yet convinced himself to try to stand again.

The Northerner couldn't muster up the energy to be bothered by how awful he looked. He felt...empty, but empty didn't wholly define it. He felt nothing.

He reached for anger, but felt nothing. He reached for grief - nothing. It was like he'd willed himself to find composure, and it had promptly expanded and swallowed him whole. He took a moment to glance down at his hand, lifting his other hand to join it, and he curled his fingers tightly.

He watched his fingernails catch in his skin, watched them tighten until they surely must've hurt, watched the flesh of his palm go taut as crescents were dug into them. He stopped short of drawing blood, but at no point was there any pain. Nothing. Not even the pressure of his grip, or the ache of his clenched fist.

Nick didn't feel it.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

The thought jolted air past his lips, and he looked up again, meeting his own gaze in the mirror. He let his chest expand, filling his lungs and holding the air there, willing the oxygen to filter into him. He needed to ground himself in something, anything, and pain wouldn't work if he couldn't feel it.

Was it a panic attack? That seemed like a reasonable conclusion, but he didn't feel panicked. His skin crawled with a numb static, and he felt hot, but his heart beat slowly in his chest. Too slow?

Slowing?

That stirred a little fear in him. He straightened, placing his stiff fingertips against his neck and seeking out his pulse, but locating it did him no favours. He couldn't focus long enough to count the beats and, more than that, he didn't know what he was counting to.

He breathed steadily, trying to focus. At least when he reached for humour, he felt something.

*This is all the stress catching up to me. This is just everything finally boiling over. This is what happens when I run out of smokes, sex, and alcohol all at the same time.*

Maybe having those outlets had been the only thing that had kept him stable, or perhaps it was just the landmine they'd casually stepped on, finally blowing his legs out from under him. The map outside was a perfectly good justification for losing his shit, but it didn't leave him with any recourse.

He couldn't fix the end of the world - not that he could fix any of the other potential causes, either. *The world isn't going to un-fuck itself anytime soon, so how about you get your shit on straight,*
Nick?

He inhaled and closed his eyes, nodding to himself.

Yeah. Okay.

It made sense, for a moment. It felt like something he could compartmentalize and bury. He just had to coax his nerves back into functioning.

Then the dressing room door was suddenly creaking open, startling his eyes into doing the same. A blur of motion and blue denim filled the mirror he stared dumbly into, until Ellis' hunched form came into dizzy focus. That made much less sense, scattering all his hard-won concentration.

"What are you -?" his voice uttered of its own volition, the sound echoing back to him at an odd disconnect. He watched Ellis lift up a hand, gesturing at him with his index finger raised, an aggressive shushing motion.

Nick turned his head to look at the younger man where he stood, rather than peer at his reflection, and there was a mercifully long pause wherein he was more than happy to obediently stay quiet. The silence allowed him to steel himself and shore up his focus, piece together his handful of assertions.

At the top of that list: something was wrong. That much was obvious by the way Ellis was trembling. He couldn't see his face, but his shoulders were low and shaking. If Nick didn't know better he'd have thought it was -

"Jesus Christ, Nick. I don't even know how tuh start, 'm so pissed at you."

- rage.

He had the presence of mind to think the whole situation funny, but not the presence of mind to keep a snort from escaping his throat. In an instant, Ellis was staring at him, and there were tears welling in his eyes. Nick swallowed his laughter in a bitter-tasting gulp, sealing his lips to keep it safely in. Bad move, buttercup.

"You think this's funny?"

Nick hadn't seen him this angry, ever, and recent days had seen him angry often. Seeing Ellis furious was sobering enough to knock some amount of sense into him, though it didn't fully ground him. He struggled to grab onto a clear thought, a feeling, to make sense of it. If Ellis is pissed, I probably did something to deserve it. But that's not news.

He grimaced, lifting his hand to palm down his face. His fingertips came away slick with sweat; it seemed the heat wasn't just his imagination. "I don't know what this is." Nick stated, dully. "You're welcome to explain anytime, kid."

Ellis stood there, trembling like he was so full of something he could barely contain it. It was a sharp contrast to Nick trembling like he might collapse inwards into the yawning emptiness beneath his skin.

Nick had time enough to allow his eyes to drift, taking in the Georgian's frame. He was outfitted almost head-to-toe in pale blue denim, and where his old coveralls had sagged on his frame, the jeans he'd picked out hugged at his legs. In contrast, his old T-shirt had been tight enough to put his body on display, but the denim jacket he wore now made him seem... larger. Rugged?
Intimidating was not a word that would easily apply to Ellis, but he certainly didn't look like a kid anymore. Nick didn't know how to stop himself from staring, soaking in every inch, taking in every curve and edge. It's definitely the fucking end of the world if I willingly gave that up. occurred to him in a slur, and he at least stifled his laughter that time.

"When did Chris try tuh -" He choked, voice dropping as his chin did the same. "Why didn't you tell us he was suicidal?"

Huh. So that's what a bucket of ice on my balls feels like.

His eyes snapped to Ellis' face, and suddenly focused; actually focused. He was tempted to stand, but the moment he shifted his weight he was faced with how disjointed and unsteady his legs felt. Disinclined to show that sort of weakness, he drew his hands into tight fists on his knees, taking Ellis in more fully.

The Georgian's cheeks were wet now, but Nick didn't make the mistake of thinking he was seeking comfort, or wanted it.

"I had it under control." he stated, instead, simply. "He's still around, isn't he?"

Ellis' hand suddenly flew to cover his mouth, shaking his head. "Shit. Kinda hoped it wasn't true."

"Just -"

He was silent for a few minutes, and Nick didn't speak. He wasn't foolish enough to think he had the upper hand, nor coherent enough to think he could talk his way out of trouble.

When Ellis finally opened his eyes, he looked... exhausted. The tears on his face were still, fat droplets stuck in his lashes. He was quiet but unyielding.

"You didn't think fer a second if we'd want to know? Whut makes you think it's all up tuh you?"

Nick opened his mouth, but Ellis kept on, voice coarse with a raw misery. "Why wouldn't you tell me, at least, so..."

"So what?" Nick wished it sounded less cobbled-together. He wished he sounded angry, but he didn't. He sounded about half as pathetic as he felt, trying to lash out, trying to get Ellis to drop the conversation entirely. "So you could handle it? I did my best. And last I checked, he didn't do it, so I'd say it was good enough."

Ellis lowered his gaze to the ground, clenching his fists, and he gritted out, "You shouldn't've dealt with it by yerself. You should'uv told me."

A scoff touched Nick's voice, miming out offense he could barely manage. "Yeah, 'cause screw me, right? I don't need your permission to -"

"Nicolas! Fer fuck's sake!"

The gambler halted, eyes widening a little. It wasn't like Ellis didn't do his fair share of swearing, but that was different. It was like hearing his own voice - albeit significantly more Southern than when he owned it - piped through Ellis' perfect lips.

And he didn't think Ellis had ever uttered his full first name. He was being lectured, and he wished it was less effective at getting his attention.
"Can you listen tuh me fer two goddamn seconds?" Ellis rubbed fingertips into his forehead, massaging, the grimace on his lips betraying the headache that must've been rising. "You ain't listened tuh me since the day we broke up, 'n' I'm real sick'uh listenin' tuh you. If your head's gonna be that far up yer rear-end then the least you could do is shut up."

Nick tried to. He genuinely attempted to sit there in silence, partially because he was too tired to fight in earnest and partially because he thought Ellis deserved it from him. He deserved a chance to chew him out.

So why, he was left to wonder, did his lips start moving?

"I didn't listen to you before -"

There wasn't much distance between them, and certainly not enough to give Nick enough warning to defend himself when Ellis lurched forward. He could only brace, ready, wondering idly if he'd even feel it if Ellis decked him in the jaw.

But a blow didn't come. Instead, hands gripped his shoulders, digging in fingertips tightly into the meat of his shoulderblades and just above his clavicles. There was a vague shake, and Ellis' face was suddenly barely inches from his. "Nick."

Nick's mouth hung open, shocked into silence, because fuck if he didn't feel that.

Ellis' skin was so hot, he thought he must've been ice cold. Hands did not grip his shoulders; they were hot irons, melting through his skin. It burned him like frostbite, sending goosebumps down his arms, making his fingers clench in the thick and unfamiliar fabric of his dark jeans.

He wanted to cry out, tell Ellis to let him go, because it hurt - but he bit it back, instead closing his jaw with a snap and breathing deeply through his nose. He felt the rippling soreness that tore across his nerve-endings, like a yawn as they stirred. He stared back at Ellis, eyes locked, aware he shouldn't have felt the relief that surged through him.

The pain was infinitely better than emptiness.

"I need you tuh take this seriously." Ellis said, flat. "Take me seriously. Please."

Nick said nothing, unsure what he'd sound like if he did speak. And judging by the way his mouth actually stayed shut, he'd at least regained most of his faculties.

He just nodded.

A frown starting on his lips, Ellis leaned back slightly. He didn't release Nick, not entirely, but his grip slackened. "I don't care whut's been goin' on with us. The idea of you dealin' with this alone scares me." Nick's eyes must've tightened, narrowed, because Ellis hurriedly added, "I know you say yer fine, but I don't think you are. 'N' whether I'm right or wrong, you shouldn't be takin' this on by yer lonesome. It ain't healthy."

Nick realized it, there, sluggishly: Ellis wasn't even angry about Chris. He was angry for Nick, worried for him.

"You look awful. 'N' you feel - hot, Nick. It's eatin' you all up."

The sadness in his still-wet eyes was overwhelming. It was enough to drown in, and the anger that edged it wasn't enough to dilute the simple pressure of affection. Ellis cared about him, despite him, and that was more terrifying than anything else.
At least he could wrap his mind around the concept that the virus had overwhelmed the country. That was measurable in blood and lives, that could've been described in some formula. There were numbers somewhere - how many were infected, how many had died, how many still lived.

Love had no metrics. Care had no bounds. He couldn't comprehend its width and breadth, nor its effect on him. He had no way to grip the thing gleaming in Ellis' eyes.

"I know we broke up, so I ain't - I know why you didn't come tuh me. I get it. That ain't why I'm upset." Ellis' jaw was taut, and it didn't take a genius to tell he was lying through his teeth. "You just should'uh come tuh somebody, even if it wasn't me."

Nick's chin lowered, and he responded thickly. "It wasn't like that. I made the right call, and it didn't have anything to do with - you. Or me. Or what we are or aren't. It was between Chris and me, not... It had nothing to do with the..." He'd talk himself in circles if he kept trying to talk about it without talking about it, so he sighed sharply, trying to look away. "Besides, you and me were still -"

He snapped his mouth shut; his brain processed it just a few seconds too late. Ellis, however, was quick on the uptake.

The Georgian jerked back as if to look him over, brows going flat in surprise before they tangled right back up. "'We were still?' he prompted, craning his head to follow when Nick darted his eyes to the side. "We were still whut?"

Bad fucking choice, Nick.

"Nevermind." he muttered, as if it would have any effect.

"We were still datin'?" Ellis abruptly let him go, and breathing was like huffing in cold air after sucking on a mint. Nick couldn't help but tuck his arms over his chest, not in anger or defense but cold - and Ellis gaped at him, unable to stifle his shock when he didn't contest the statement. "Back at the condo? This happened - yer tellin' me this happened while we were still datin'?"

Nick held his breath, waiting.

"Jesus, Nick. You - we -"

It wasn't the first time Nick had seen betrayal on Ellis' face, and it wasn't the worst. So why did it feel like he'd gripped his own heart and squeezed?

It hadn't even really occurred to him before now, how Ellis would feel. He'd not thought about it in those terms. A fresh look made it all obvious: of course Ellis would feel wounded, hurt. The timeline betrayed the fact that they'd had to have had sex at least once in the interim.

A very good once, he recalled, Ellis' mouth wet and warm around his -

Not the time.

They'd been intimate with the secret between them, fine, but how was that some egregious sin? Their whole relationship had been, to Nick, a secret. And Ellis had been keeping Nick in the dark about Rochelle knowing. And both of them had been keeping secrets about what they really wanted, what they thought, what they felt.

How was this the final straw? How was this what hurt the worst?
Nick wanted to say it all, but couldn't. He couldn't say any of it, body rigid and tongue heavy in his mouth. He just stared up at Ellis, eyelids low, half-open, and muttered, "It didn't have anything to do with us."

There was so much of them, and so little. 'Us' was such a tiny word, and so loaded. Loaded, enough, that he thought he saw a vague softening of Ellis' posture.

Then knuckles boxed into his ear. It wasn't a hard blow, but it was enough to startle him into straightening, enough to spark pain and make him flinch. His eyes blinked up at Ellis to find him with fists clenched, shoulders high. "That's fer lyin' tuh me 'bout it. And this -"

He moved again, this time with the other hand, but Nick's reflexes acted first. He grabbed Ellis' forearm and aborted the strike before it landed, holding his arm aloft. Nick only just had the strength to keep him still, particularly when Ellis reared his head back at the defense and struggled, trying half-heartedly to prise his forearm free.

Ellis' mouth opened, but Nick spoke first.

"It was a no-win scenario for all of us, either way." he spat out. "If I'd told everyone, you all would have gotten fucked up over it, and fucked Chris up over it, so I dealt with it. And it was fine."

A vague huff of air passed Ellis' lips, like a laugh. Awkward, maybe, and Nick didn't miss how he was still trying to subtly work his arm free. "So instead, you fucked yerself up over it. Why do you think that's fine, Nick?" Anger stoked back up in his voice, stubborn. "That ain't fine! I know you enough tuh know you ain't fine!"

_This is why he's too fucking good for you, Nick. Because you break his heart and throw it on the ground, you grind salt in the wounds, you act like a fucking asshole to him, and he still cares. You fucking ruined it, and he's still here._

Nick stood, pushing forward, forcing Ellis into a half-step backwards to make room for him to get to his feet in the dressing room. "You don't know anything about me. You don't know who I am." There was suddenly so little space, so little distance between them and little more to gain without pressing into the walls.

"I'm a fucking terrible - ... I'm fucked up. I'll always be fucked up. But I was just trying to protect - everyone. You. That's all I've been trying to do."

Hearing the truth fall so bluntly from his lips was startling. Both of them tensed, Ellis' wrist flexing under his grip, a grip that was suddenly tighter than he'd meant. The younger man's eyes widened just a twitch as Nick straightened, tilting up to combat the slight height advantage Nick had on him with both of them barefoot.

As quickly as he'd fallen to a chill, he'd dipped right into the inverse. Nick felt sweat beading at the small of his back, and his voice dropped to a growl, energy finally surging in him. There was no other way to vent it. It filled him, overwhelmed him.

"I'm just trying to - do the right thing. Not fucking easy. It's easy for you." He finally felt, and it was such a relief... but it was frenetic with the buzz of hypersensitivity. Sense dragged at him, alarms firing off in his skull, but it did little aside from slowing his movements. "Fucking world's ending. I don't even know what the right thing fucking is anymore. I just know it isn't me, and you won't... stop."

_Stop._
Nick shifted his grip, thumb sliding on the denim of Ellis' jacket until the pad found skin. He pressed there, and his own pulse beating through the digit mingled with Ellis', quickening like some scared animal.

"Nick." The Georgian's voice hit a soft note, trembling, like a warning, like a plea. "Whut do you want me to think here? Whut am I supposed tuh think, you sayin' stuff like that? Why can't yuh just admit when you need... someone? Need me? Why do you have tuh do this?"

_Don't do this._

He shifted, nudging forward, and it only took a step to reach the side of the dressing room. They did not shove into the wall, Ellis did not strike it. No, he _melted_ into it, pressed against it as if the consciously enforced distance between their bodies was a physical force-field that slowly pushed him flat.

_Don't do this to him._

It was too dark, the flashlight's glow broken up by their bodies. Nick couldn't see his eyes, but they stared at each other in the dark all the same. Ellis was frozen, trembling, and Nick froze himself by force.

"Nick." This time it was something else entirely, just a puff of a syllable into the intimate bubble around them. The Georgian's free hand lifted, and Nick's spine shuddered when he grazed fingertips on his bare waist. It was the only movement between them for what felt like forever.

They traced up, following the slope of his side, finding their way up over Nick's chest and blindly seeking the shape of his chin in the dark. When they touched there, Ellis tentatively molded his hand to Nick's jaw, sinking into the facial hair that had grown just a little too long, a little too thick, softening.

The darkness that clawed between them grew denser when Ellis leaned forward. Their noses touched, grazing, and it was sharp electricity. They were so close, it would've only taken a nudge to seal their lips, a little more to slot against his body.

So easy to ruin everything.

So close that when Ellis whispered to him, Nick almost felt the words rather than heard them. "Please -"

So easy to fill in the blanks with what he wanted to hear.

But Ellis forced the rest out, breath hitching and breaking, tone raw with shame like Nick had never heard from him before. He bled, shattered, and Nick hadn't even touched him more than the thumb at his wrist, hadn't even reciprocated - though maybe that was precisely the reason for his shame: how _easy_ it had been. "I-I dunno whut this is..."

_Don't make promises you can't keep._ he thought, but to whom, he wasn't sure.

It took so much effort to restrain himself, and even more to actually pull away. Nick's fingers drifted open, releasing the other man's wrist. "A bad idea." he rasped, lips barely moving, jaw glued shut. He slid his left foot back without even lifting it, scraping against the dressing room carpet, turning his body enough to break away.

His head tilted to the side to jerk away from Ellis' hand, mouth instead hovering just over his shoulder. His cheek still tingled, a live wire with the left-over heat from Ellis' touch.
He closed his eyes. "This is... a bad idea."

He heard the sucked inhale of breath, felt the air shift as the younger man sagged and then the sharp graze of denim against the outer side of his arm as he stumbled past Nick. Both of them panted in the dim space, Ellis' breath heated and open-mouthed and Nick's strained through his nose.

Nick thought he would run - but he didn't, not immediately.

There was a moment, and then Ellis let out a sharp and stuttered sigh, voice shaking when he spoke. It was so fragile, trembling at the edges, but stiff with the framework of well-tread thought. They were words he'd put together with care but was terrified of uttering.

"I hate not knowin' you. I hate not knowin' how you feel, because I want tuh think you miss me, but I'm so scared I'm wrong. That I'm just bein' an idiot, missin' you. 'N' then you go on and say shit like that, talk about protectin' me, 'n' I'm supposed tuh think it was all fake? That it didn't mean nothin' at all? Bullshit. I don't believe it."

Nick gritted his jaw, his whole body gone rigid. "You don't -"

But Ellis gave no quarter for his protest - his voice may have been glass-thin, but it cut through his with no hesitance. "I was ready tuh figure shit out. I didn't need easy, I didn't need simple. I just needed you, 'n' - tuh know - how you felt 'bout me. If you... wanted tuh... try."

Nick's eyes opened, unsure what precisely made him do it. He didn't want to see Ellis in that instant, but he looked, like watching a car crash. He glanced over his shoulder, looking toward where Ellis had pressed himself tightly into the dressing room door, compacted as far from Nick as possible. Despite the fact Ellis was looking squarely down at the ground, he tensed up, aware of the other man's gaze on him.

Nick said nothing, and the moment of silence afterward ached.

Only eventually did Ellis whisper to him again. Nick could hear the wetness, the strain, as he held back tears. "You were already protectin' me. It was all you ever did. The only person yer protectin' now is you."

Watching him open the door and slip out, not even bothering to shut it behind him, sunk a cold pain in the pit of his stomach. Nick found the far wall with his shoulder, leaning into it, finding his back pressed tight into the flat plane of the wall-mounted mirror.

This time he didn't look. He didn't want to see what was in his reflection.

He knew it wasn't emptiness anymore.
Ellis didn't know where he meant to go, only that he wanted to leave. He didn't look - he just walked.

He walked till he couldn't walk anymore, pressing his hands into the cold steel rail of a clothing rack, hanging onto it with little more energy than the shirts and pants that rattled at his flanks. He closed his eyes, squeezing them shut, unable to stop the tears from streaking down his cheeks.

His knees were jelly, threatening to give, and his body surged with heat that pooled in his gut and sprawled up his spine and felt a lot like shame.

It came in waves, like lightning - I should'uh kissed him. - and then the inevitable thunder:

No. Stupid. That would'uh been stupid.

He pushed his hand into his cheekbone, grinding his knuckles at his eyes. It had been the closest to a real conversation they'd had, the closest Nick had come to telling him the actual truth. He'd finally said it in so many words: he thought he was protecting Ellis. He was trying to do the right thing - or what he thought was the right thing.

It was misguided and foolish, yes, but Nick had done it out of care. And given the chance to take advantage of Ellis, Nick had been wrong: he'd said no after all.

Ellis felt a whole host of things, but at the top of the list was relief. He felt relieved, the sensation mingling in with the clenching sadness in his chest. Doubt had crept in despite his best efforts: what if Nick didn't really love him? What if he was wrong, and Nick had no interest in a relationship with him - liked him, perhaps, but didn't love him?

That had been so painful, because it had been possible. Believable, as much as he hadn't wanted to believe it.

Standing there, trying to stop the tears flooding down his face, Ellis felt relieved - and finally, mercifully, confident. Nick cared about him. Nick wanted him. Every time he'd read between the lines and assumed, presumed, had been right. All the moments that had meant so much to him, and he'd thought had meant so much to Nick... he'd been right.

Love.

That feeling had come back. It had brewed between them, magnetizing them. He hadn't imagined it, and hadn't mistaken sexual attraction for it - though there was plenty of that, too. Nick was in an awful state, and as much as Ellis worried for him, it had also torn down the walls the older man had put up enough for Ellis to see in and see the pain. The yearning and the need and the fear had all been on display, and it was as terrifying as it was heartening.

He's so scared tuh hurt me... and if I'd just kissed him, let him kiss me - I'd be provin' him right... or he'd think that, anyhow. Wouldn't do either of us no favours. Even if I miss him so bad...

Nick had been sure that things would get out of hand, and he couldn't honestly say the man was wrong. If Nick had pressed, would he really have rejected him? No - he'd have made the same mistake he always had, taking the subtext to heart: Nick needed him, and he needed Nick, and that felt like enough. He'd felt like it would be enough to make the difference when it finally came time to acknowledging it aloud. Making it official.
Except subtext had never ended up being enough, and when it had come time to put it all to words... they'd broken. They needed to mend that break first.

Logic didn't help the burn in his cheeks. Logic didn't make it any easier to dismiss the feeling that he'd thrown away a chance to improve things. Maybe pulling Nick close and kissing him would've fixed something, brought it all to a fever pitch that they could have healed from.

Ultimately, he could've run himself ragged considering the possible outcomes, the what-ifs, but he tried to shake it all off to instead focus on the one truth he did have.

He'd been right: Nick cared about him.

He'd also been so, so wrong: Christophe was not okay.

"I swear to God." Rochelle's voice came into focus out of the buzz in his ears, approaching. She was laughing. "If you keep talking in Spanish at me, I'm gonna kick you. Just because I don't understand you doesn't mean I can't tell when you're -" She interrupted herself easily, tone chipper. "Ellis! Come help me. I'm being harassed."

Ellis tried to bring his hands up and scrub the tears and redness off his face. He wasn't foolish enough to think it would prove effective, but he couldn't just turn around without even trying to hide it, either. The last thing he wanted was to talk about what had happened, but he couldn't shake it off, either. It clung to him, desperate for some kind of release.

Christophe's voice carried to him, too, full of a grin. "Eres la chica más guapa del mundo, y me he enamorado de ti." he crooned. "¿Te gusta hablar sucio? Haré lo que sea por ti."

Any efforts to calm himself fell apart, there. Chris. I can't believe he... He turned without thinking, eyes darting up, to find Rochelle only a few steps away and Chris hovering at her elbow. They were both laughing, right up until the moment they looked at him. Rochelle realized it first, her expression falling.

"Ellis? What's wrong?"

Christophe blinked at him, lips parting to speak.

He didn't manage anything before Ellis bolted to cross the distance between them. He yanked the foreigner into his arms, squeezing around his midsection, drawing them so flat and tight together he felt Chris squeak out a strangled noise. The man didn't immediately return the embrace, shocked into freezing with his arm stretched out as if to balance them against falling over.

Ellis started babbling before he could control himself. "I-I'm so sorry! I should'uh known better, 'n'... I should'uh known somethin' was up, but - I been so caught up in muh own stuff, I didn't... see nothin... 'M so selfish -" He buried his face into the soft curve of Christophe's shoulder, swallowing the urge to sob. All it did was choke him, suffocate him, and he gritted out a miserable sound instead. "'M sorry."

"¡Tío! Por favor, slowly! What is -" The flat of his hand settled tentatively at the crown of Ellis' head, bracing him. Ellis was vaguely aware of another set of hands coming to land on his back as Rochelle started smoothing her fingertips in circles over his spine, rustling over the taut denim of his new clothing. "Why do you apologize? You do nothing to me."

"I should'uh known." was all Ellis could force out, strangled.

Rochelle sighed, loudly, her voice falling to a frustrated note. "Ellis, what happened?" She must've
given up on him, turned her head away, because she suddenly sounded a little bit more distant. She directed her words at someone else. "Were you talking to him? He left to go change. Who was talking to him? Where's Nick?"

Calm but full of a gritty, lingering exhaustion, Coach's voice rumbled back. "They both went back in the dressin' room." he stated simply, though the statement - and its implication - was anything but simple.

Rochelle sighed again, this time more of a growl. "Seriously? Of all the days..." Her hands lifted off Ellis' back as she strode away from them, and in the absence of her comfort, he blearily lifted his head to peek up at Christophe. The Spaniard grimaced at him, and there was a vague and uncertain discomfort in his golden eyes.

"¿Chico...?" he uttered, hesitantly.

If there was a better way to handle the situation, Ellis wasn't sure he had the strength to find it. So, without recourse, he didn't know what to do except speak honestly. "I know... whut happened. I know you almost..." he whispered, barely managing to moderate the sound to keep it just in the squat space between their faces. "I'm so glad you didn't do it, Chris. Really. 'N'... so sorry I wasn't there."

That discomfort flashed to outright panic as comprehension flooded the foreigner, but it quickly muted itself to a dull tremble. Chris' chin lowered, before he looped his arm around Ellis' torso and tightened it, dragging him back into the crook of his neck. Burrowed close to Ellis' ear, he croaked back, "Do not tell her, por favor."

Ellis would've argued, but Rochelle was already speaking over both of them.

"I'm gonna go kick his ass."

She sounded furious. The statement grabbed Ellis by the collar, making him surge to twist his head and look at her, blinking away the blur in his vision. "N-no!" She was standing a few feet away, halted next to Coach, her hands gripping her hips and her head hung low. She didn't even look at him. "Ro', please, just... leave it alone."

Rochelle's head lifted enough to look at Coach. They shared a glance, the content of which was half-disguised from him - but if Coach's weary shrug was any indication, it was not fruitful. She sucked in air through her teeth, darting a glance over her shoulder in Ellis' direction. Her eyes were worried, maybe, beyond the miles of frustration. "Then tell me what happened."

Ellis hesitated. He looked up first at Chris, reading the silent plea there. The idea of participating in furthering the secret made him sick to his stomach, but it wasn't his to tell. At least if he knew, he could get Chris alone and try to convince him to open up to the rest of the team on his own terms.

Betraying the Spaniard to Rochelle now would just ensure he wouldn't listen to Ellis' advice later.

He carefully pulled away from the man, lowering his gaze to the ground. Chris let him go without argument, arm held tightly against his side, head dropped until his chin touched his chest. Ellis put both his palms against his closed eyes, squeezing, pressing. "I..."

There was silence, where nobody moved. He felt Chris' anxiety spiking beside him, pulsing like some tangible force next to him. Ellis peeked out between his fingers, looking up and across the store.
Lena and Rhiannon stood as far away as possible, practically against the wall - Rhiannon literally so, arms crossed and back pressed into the wall with her legs crossed at the knees - and both were watching him intently. The brunette had her thumb between her teeth, chewing at it anxiously. Her eyes were soft and apologetic.

It comforted him just slightly, but he was left, still, clueless. *The hell'm I supposed tuh say?*

"Look, Ro', I... it's been a bad day, y'know?" he mumbled, dropping his hands. He wished he seemed more convincing, that his face wasn't flushed and he didn't have to sniff wetly between his sentences. "We just fought a li'l. It ain't nothin', okay, just -"

The dark-skinned woman gritted her teeth, thrusting her arms in either direction. "The second or third or fourth time he made you cry, I might've taken that as an answer." she muttered, quietly enough that it might've not carried across the store to the biker sisters. "I'm supposed to let him keep doing this?"

Ellis squeezed eyes shut again, breathing in deep. His fingers were clenched into fists, leaving him unresponsive when Chris' fingers touched lightly onto the meat of his thumb, a searching touch, like comfort. He thought Ellis was covering for him, and he was only half-wrong. The Georgian thought clearly enough to force his pinky to relax, turning his hand to nudge the other man's wrist in a soft acknowledgement.

"We're..." He struggled, the truth clamouring at his lips. *We're gettin' somewhere. he wanted to say. We might get somewhere this time. *"Please, Ro', just - let me -"

A subtle vibration started in the air.

At first, he thought he imagined it, just stress ringing in his ears. His eyelids fluttered in surprise, head cocking, gaze flashing around him. When he saw Rochelle doing the same, followed by Coach and Chris, and then Rhiannon jolting to stand straight from the wall, he had to admit it was real, and growing. It started at his edges and worked its way in, buzzing in his teeth.

"The fuck?" Rhiannon's voice barked out, preceding her sprinting toward the propped-open storefront. She didn't leave the store, simply leaning her head underneath the metal security screen and looking outside. "The fuck is that?"

Ellis half-turned, frowning, swiping his knuckles across his mouth and forcing in a quick breath. "I... I dunno. It's gettin' louder."

Both Coach and Lena moved to follow Rhiannon's footsteps, though the ex-football player pushed past her and ducked entirely underneath the security gate. He stood a foot or two beyond the door, his lower half visible as he stood in silence rather than shout back where it would echo through the mall's internal atrium. As he stood there, the sound rose, expanded.

As it became louder and gained clarity, Ellis started to better define it. Rather than a singular hum, it pulsed in a rapid vibrato. The closer it got, the more distinct the pattern became: a growing and repeating *whuff-whuff-whuff* -

"Is that a helicopter?" Rochelle stated, her tone airy, like she didn't fully comprehend the words. The statement hung in the air in isolation for a few moments, none of them moving as the sound started to vibrate in Ellis' bones.
Then everyone moved.

"That's a fucking helicopter!" left the producer like a swear, shouting, her posture darting into tension, primed to run somewhere. Anywhere. "We need to get outside and flag them down!"

Ellis bolted for the clothing rack underneath which he'd left his steel-toed boots. Midway, he glanced toward the dressing room hallway - Nick was still in the dressing room, with no signs of surfacing. He almost braced himself and adjusted his path, but Christophe had already started in that direction and Ellis was quick to surrender the responsibility.

He couldn't think about it. He had to re-prioritize, and that meant stuffing down his feelings, burying it so he could focus. There was no time to break down and break apart. He had to focus, for his team. For himself.

Lena was stumbling to the store's counter, where Rochelle had left the team's supplies backpack next to the register. She gripped her side, expression caught in a heavy wince, scrambling to grab the bag and put her arm through one of the straps. Even as she got it settled on her back, she huffed out, "No way we get their attention on the road. Not with zombies everywhere."

Rochelle released a frustrated sound, like a whining exhale of air. Coach had returned from the outer mall atrium and was grabbing his shotgun from against the wall near the entryway, and he grunted tense affirmation.

"Girl's right."

Throwing himself to the ground, Ellis started to force his feet into his boots, fighting just momentarily with the tight fit of the ankles and his trembling fingers. They shook so badly he thought he wouldn't manage at all, but they obeyed him with only some argument. "We could find the roof access." he uttered, more a question than a statement.

"Whatever we do, we have to do it fast. Now." Rochelle grabbed at her sternum, clutching fingertips in the soft and stretchy material of her hoodie top. Her eyes darted toward the dressing room, where not a single sound emanated from. Christophe had disappeared into the hallway mere seconds previous - but seconds were precious.

The sound began to consume them, the vibration whipping through the air, shaking in the mall's very structure. There was no mistaking it for anything else, now. It was reaching such thunderous volume, it must have been flying perilously low to the city. And it had come up on them so quickly, it must have been flying perilously fast.

She knew one thing for sure: if there was a chance to be seen, to make contact with someone who could rescue them, it was this.

"Ellis, Rhee -" Rochelle darted for the entryway, and she hadn't even reached the half-closed security gate before Coach was tossing the stun baton at her. She snatched it out of the air, nodding at him. "Let's go! Everyone else stay here." Rhiannon was already dodging underneath the gate, disappearing around the corner, and Rochelle flashed after her.

Lena hesitated at the counter, paling, but she did not protest. It made sense to send those of the team that could sprint, but that inevitably meant splitting them up.

Coach had shouldered his double-barrel shotgun, and he grabbed Ellis' shotgun from where it sat nearby, holding it out in the air. Ellis scrambled on hands and knees in the instant before he got
himself upright, kicking himself to standing off the solid toes of his workboots to run toward the front door.

He wanted to worry about Nick, worry about why Chris had not yet returned with him, but there was no time. No space. No room to breathe. Is he okay? Is he as upset as I am? Should I've stayed? Or...

He tried not to think at all, not when thinking would only slow him down.

He just grabbed his shotgun from Coach’s hands and ran.
The mall had become a buzzing hornet's nest. Infected screamed from the lower level, scattering in every direction, lashing out at each other when they couldn't pinpoint the helicopter's thunderous noise. It was a small mercy, really, that all the sound disguised the rapping of their feet striking the tile floor.

*Shit. There's a fifty-fifty shot this brings a whole bunch of infected down on us.*

Rochelle kept looking up, glancing through the glass paneling that made up the center of the mall's roof. She felt like the chopper was just seconds from them, judging by how loud it was, but it had not yet passed over them. There was still time.

They sprinted along the upper balcony, reaching an intersection that had a hallway branched off to their right. The glass roof didn't extend over the side corridor, which was a promising sign. Rochelle only needed a glance to notice restroom doors, and a tall door on the far wall labeled 'EMPLOYEES ONLY.'

There was no way to know if there was roof access beyond it, but there was no better direction to run, and not enough time to look for other options. "Come on!" She bolted down the corridor, and Ellis and Rhiannon were close at her heels.

Four infected were clustered halfway down the balcony's wide offshooting hall, and although the sound of the survivors was well-disguised, the zombies were so enraged and alert that they saw the oncoming trio almost immediately. They screamed, arms flashing out in angry swipes, scrambling to meet the survivors in the middle of the corridor.

Rochelle felt her teammates right at her flanks, closing in to defend against the oncoming infected. They didn't need to communicate to coordinate their next moves; all three of them knew there was no time to get caught in a scuffle. They needed to get past.

Rhiannon darted to strike first, leaping ahead to twist her body and bring her bat up to strike the first infected in the chin. The blow was strong enough to knock it backwards, tripping into the zombies behind it, halting their progress for a spare few seconds. She bolted past them, swinging her body to avoid the snatching fingers and claws.

Following her lead, Rochelle sprinted hard to the right. Ellis followed her, and as all three of them circled the group of infected, he turned on his heel. Stopping only for an instant, he lifted his pump shotgun, bracing himself with a long step backwards.

The infected were clustered, gathered, and one pull of his shotgun trigger sent a burst of pellets through the bulk of them.

The center-most zombie suffered it the worst, the gunshot blowing a sizeable chunk out of its broad, bare chest. Scraps of gore lined the hole that made up its chest, now, revealing what might've been the pulsating shapes of blackened organs, contained and framed by jagged and toothlike ribs. Meat only just clung to the bones, tendons and sinew holding it together.

It shrieked as it lost its footing, and the impact with the tile was enough to jar a gush of black fluids from its open torso. The creature didn't get up again, clawing at the ground in futile attempts to gain traction, its legs gone limp and sluggish.

Flanking it were two female infected, and though the shotgun blast hadn't done quite as much...
damage to them, it had clipped their sides and sent them both staggering with the force. They were off-balance and bleeding, but still mostly intact.

He almost pulled the trigger again, but the sound of his teammates sprinting away from him made him scramble and follow. The wounded infected proved enough of an obstacle to slow the fourth, uninjured one, though all three of the still-living infected would be shortly on their heels.

It wasn't the best plan, but none of it would matter if they let the helicopter pass them by.

Rhiannon lengthened her strides to pull ahead, and she stretched out her left hand to grab the handle before her body had fully settled to a stop in front of the door. She twisted, and it did not give, a click betraying the fact it was locked shut.

"Of fucking course." she snarled. Before either Ellis or Rochelle could so much as think about acting, she'd swung her bodyweight back onto one foot. The biker brought her heel to bear on the door's surface, just beside the keyhole panel.

The first strike jolted the door, but there was little visible effect. If there was a cracking of breaking sound, it was disguised under the beating of the helicopter blades, intense in the air around them. Fury exploded across her expression, and she stepped back to coil her body behind a second kick, harder this time.

In one swift flash, the door snapped open, pale white wood chips shattering from around the doorjamb. It broke, fractured, but it was not the only thing that gave way.

Rhiannon shouted, staggering in a quick double-hop when she set her weight down on the foot she'd used to kick. Ellis saw her face pale, though she continued forward in a rough few steps to disappear through the door. There wasn't much to do but follow her.

Ellis chased Rochelle as she bolted into the room, turning back around once he'd reached the threshold. With the lock broken, it wouldn't have provided them much cover, anyway - so he braced himself there and waited for the infected to reach him.

He had enough time to glance over his shoulder and get a look at his teammates just a couple feet behind him, keeping his shotgun directed outward with his finger tight on the trigger. Concern for Rhiannon overrode his desire to examine the room, and he absorbed little more than shelves and stacks of boxes.

"I'm fine!" Rhiannon's voice cut through the beating rhythm of the helicopter's blades where it had stabilized to a constant thrum. She was hunched over, right leg slightly lifted until only her toes touched the ground. Rochelle had slung the other woman's left arm over her shoulders to help her stand.

When the producer looked back at Ellis, their gazes met in a subtle panic. The biker didn't look fine.

The three still-standing infected, screaming over the din, charged at him. The yet-unharmed one had gotten ahead of its wounded fellows, and the trio ran in a messy triangular formation. Ellis aimed low this time, and when he pulled the trigger, the buck of his gun preceded all three going down.

Their legs were mostly obliterated, blood guttering from ruined muscle. The two that had already been injured struggled even to move, their bodies sluggish and jerky, though the previously unharmed one was trying to crawl forward.
It was on hands and knees, its shins ruined and tattered. Its mouth was open in a snarl, the sound barely audible over the thunderous noise overhead. Ellis responded with a swift kick, the steel toe of his boot crushing the bone of its chin and sending its jaw into a clap shut, greyed teeth breaking on themselves.

Ellis turned, rushing through the doorway, urgently darting his gaze around the room even as he shouted, "Is she okay?!"

With no glass roofing outside in the hall to shine in line, it would have been almost too dark to see had the room not had a squat, tinted window on the far wall. Sunlight meandered through, split along the bottom right edge by metal rods criss-crossing past it in the shape of a staircase.

A fire escape, perhaps, as it seemed to lead both higher and lower than their current height. He did not, however, see a door leading out to it.

The rest of the room was full of cleaning supplies, some boxed up and some opened and spread across a few plastic fold-up tables. Shelves lined the far wall, leaving a gap in the center for a doorway that hung ajar. It looked like a maintenance hallway, stretching on behind the stores’ inner walls.

*Shit. Is there a door down there? It's dark...*

"Might be a twisted ankle, might be a sprain - might be a fracture -" Rochelle sounded nearly furious, voice just below a shout. "Why didn't you let the guy with the goddamn workboots kick it in?!"

Rhiannon responded in a yell, husky voice nearly breaking in the middle, and she sounded as angry as she was mortified. "I was trying to fucking help!"

Instead of listening, Ellis turned, rushing to the window. He pressed his cheek against the glass, trying to peek to either side. The stairs continued upwards to the right and out of his vision, and downwards to the left. It leveled out to a platform, stretching on along the outside of the mall’s exterior.

He was vaguely aware of a presence staggering up behind him, a hand touching his back. Rochelle growled, frustration tugging her voice into roughness. "Where's the door? There's just this window!"

The mechanic blinked, and vague apprehension fluttered over Ellis' face, right before his jaw tightened with certainty.

A feeling came to him he'd not fully felt until that moment: complete desperation. They'd talked about rescue so many times, but it had never been so close. He'd never been so close to it before.

The Vannah had been abandoned to burn long before they got there. They'd never seen any sign of actual, living military forces, and the people they'd met along the way had been sometimes friendly, sometimes dangerous, sometimes both - but none of them had brought the group closer to rescue. Not like this.

And, despite everything, he still believed in rescue. The map terrified him; their whole situation terrified him... but he still believed, deep down, they'd end up safe in some military camp. They'd find their way out. They'd win. *We can't give up.*

*I can't give up.*
He lifted his shotgun, turning it in his hands and striking out with the wooden end to bust the window. It impacted right in the center of the tinted glass and punched a fist-sized hole in the glass.

Ellis ignored Rochelle's startled yelp, turning his wrists swiftly to wriggle his shotgun. The glass, spiderwebbed in concentric shapes, didn't shatter as easily as he expected. He had to get leverage, pushing his gun like a crowbar with it half-extended through the hole he'd made, the torque applying force to both sides.

When it cracked, splitting lines in every direction, he yanked his gun free again. A few more strikes knocked most of the glass out, scattering it on the ground around his feet and sending it glittering out into the sunlight. With the window cleared mostly out, he shrugged his shotgun strap on to free both his hands.

Gripping his right jacket sleeve to pull it taut up into his fist, Ellis swiped over the bottom edge of the window frame with his forearm, trying to brush off as much of the glass as possible. A sliver found its way through the denim, stabbing pain into his skin, but he ignored it. "We ain't got time." he huffed, mostly to himself.

Ellis reached out, grabbing the rail of the fire escape where it was bolted to the exterior of the building at hip-height outside. He gave it the smallest shake, just to make sure it was sturdy. When it didn't so much as jostle, he scrambled to get his right foot balanced on the bottom of the windowsill.

With a heave, he ducked through the broken window. The fire escape was so close to the exterior, it wasn't hard to take the step over the railing and land with a clattered thud on the metal staircase.

The moment he'd gotten his footing, he stretched out his hand back through the window, reaching out for Rochelle. Her eyes darted to it, then up at him - then to the biker leaning heavily into her. Rhiannon's grimace was only faintly disguised as a scowl, and the blonde tried to pull her arm back from around the other woman's shoulders and stand on her own. "I got it, go with him!"

However, Rochelle kept a tight grip on her wrist, keeping the blonde pulled against her body in a bracing slouch. The now-injured woman would need help through the window, she'd slow them down... and leaving her behind wasn't an option. She shook her head and shouted through the window. "Ellis, go! Start trying to flag them down! We'll be right after you!"

He hesitated. His eyes lifted, but the staccato whuff-whuf-whuff-whuff was coming from too far over the mall, too far to get his eyes on the helicopter itself. Was it hovering? It had come upon them extremely quickly, so why hadn't it passed them already?

"Shit!" he burst out, frustrated, turning to scramble up the fire escape. His boots slammed against the metal with each step, gripping the railing to shove himself forward.

Breaching the top of the fire escape lead him onto a flat roof space, extending along the shape of the corridor they'd run down and edging the building in direction. The middle of the mall's roof was nothing but tinted glass, the panes set into a raised platform that separated it from the rest of the stone roof.

There were utility structures - vents, pumps, and electric boxes - scattered along the roof. It was devoid of infected, though Ellis didn't even think to check. He stared, lips parting, at the squat shape hovering in the air on the other side of the mall.
A pale blue military helicopter drifted over the mall's front pavilion, sleepily rocking back and forth. Four blades rotated above it, so fast he almost couldn't pick them out from the silvery circular pattern they formed as they spun. It was larger than he expected.

On its tail in bold lettering was printed out, 'NAVY.'

He couldn't tell how far it was from him, how high it was from the ground - though it was far, and it was high. Scope and context escaped him, shocked into freezing at the sight of it.

Its stubby nose had five paneled windows, and on its flank was two small hatch openings. Sticking out of the one closer to the helicopter's tail was the rounded shape of a minigun's nose, slumped and unmanned.

"H-" he ghosted, before forcing his voice into a shout. "Hey! Hey, we're here! Over here!" He started running, throwing his arms up to start waving both. When that felt inadequate, he scrambled to shrug his jacket off, stumbling with the effort. "Please!"

Terror flooded him. If he couldn't get its attention, he wouldn't just be letting himself down. He would let his entire team down. He would let Nick down.

Gripping his jacket with one hand, Ellis started waving it over his head, skidding to a halt just before the glass ceiling that separated him from the other half of the mall. "C'mon! We need help! Please!" He flailed his arms, jumping in attempts to make himself as big and noticeable as possible.

His heart threatened to stop in his chest when the chopper shifted.

It lowered, suddenly, maintaining its parallel orientation to the mall. It didn't move in any direction as it dropped vertically down, and his movements slowed. If they continued, they'd land in the paved square in front of the mall.

Relief flooded him. He didn't know if they'd seen him, or if they'd been planning to land regardless, but he didn't care. They were going to land, and suddenly the need to reach the roof was replaced with a desperate need to reach the pavilion.

He started to turn on his heel and bolt, peripheral vision catching Rochelle running up the fire escape with Rhiannon staggering close behind. He shouted, "They're landin'! We gotta get outside, quick!"

Then the helicopter wobbled.

The motion caught his eye, making him stop. It canted hard to one side, then the other, as if someone had yanked on the controls and then tried to counteract the motion. It rotated sharply as it did, rolling a little in a wild buck.

Amongst all that movement, none of it was as severe as the drop in altitude. It plummeted as the blades gave a stutter and slowed.

Ellis stopped, turning, eyes widening as the chopper continued to spin, and its nose suddenly pitched downward as it swung forward. 'Forward,' however, changed as it spun, and the helicopter cut a path directly over the mall. Ellis watched dumbly as it flew closer, flight smoothing out as it accelerated, but the loss of altitude had already taken its toll.

Ellis heard his own voice whispering, "No. No, no, no -"

As the machine crested the front edge of the mall, missing it by inches, it swerved forward and did
not clear the raised edge of the glass paneling down the center of the building. The front left wheel knocked into the stone and mortar, momentum taking a massive hunk of stone from it.

The blow knocked the helicopter into another wobble, this one pitching the nose further down.

Again, with a jerk like some over-correction, the helicopter's blades roared higher, and the nose yanked upwards. Ellis couldn't get his muscles to move, standing there as the cocked tail rotor dipped down, slamming into the glass roof. The spinning blades broke, warped, and a stripe of glass was shattered where the tail dipped down through it.

As much glass flung upwards as fell down and into the mall's interior, shards scattering up, and the helicopter's control instantly wavered. Without the tail rotor, it started to spin, wheedling over the roof.

Air started to buffet around Ellis' form as the helicopter's downwash struck the roof of the mall and whipped around him. He stared up at it, only distantly recognizing the fact it was swerving dangerously low, and dangerously toward him.

"No!" he shouted, though he couldn't hear it over the rumble of the blades, now with a vague screech as the engine struggled. "Stop, please!"

Something struck him, and in a blink, he was sprawled on the ground. Rochelle's body curled against him, covering him, and they lay tightly together as the helicopter's downwash wind reached a fever pitch, grabbing and clawing as them - then pulled away.

As the roar lessened, the helicopter driving past them, Ellis lifted his head and craned it to look behind him. He watched, trembling, as the chopper wavered before straightening out.

Rather than stop, it accelerated.

Ellis couldn't do anything but yell as it tilted and wobbled in its flight away from them. "No! No, you can't leave! Come back!" He shouted like they could hear him, shouted because there was nothing else to do.

He tried to get his footing and scramble upright, but Rochelle snatched arms around his waist to keep him down. "Ellis! Honey, sweetie, stop!" she shouted against his ear. He started to fight, but he didn't want to hurt her.

They both watched the helicopter fly off, drooping left and then right and back. From the height of the roof, they could see a fair distance across Tybee.

Past the gridlike roads surrounding the mall, full of square adobe buildings and tall pastel condos, the city faded into scrublands covered with squat swamp trees. The sandy ground curved low, and far in the distance, faltered entirely at the edge of a river.

Ellis could just pick out the shape of a bridge, and yet more city beyond it. It was past the bridge, beyond the trees and roofs of the deeper city subsection, that the helicopter finally dipped out of sight.

He didn't see it crash - but, as silence settled between him and Rochelle, and as Rhiannon staggered back up the fire escape with her hobbled foot nursed in small steps, wisps of grey smoke started to creep up against an otherwise clear, blue sky.

Rochelle's grip tightened around him.
"Ellis." she whispered.

He didn't respond.

It was gone.

"Ellis. It's okay. We're going to be okay."

He hadn't realized he'd started crying. It wasn't some all-encompassing feeling of misery, it didn't even affect his breathing. It was shock, quiet and subtle and exhausting. He might've stared after the helicopter forever had she not gripped her hand on his jaw, pulling his face into her sternum and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

He closed his eyes, sinking into her grasp, body going completely limp. "I - I tried tuh - I think they saw us, 'n' - they were gonna land. They were gonna land, Ro', 'n' - I dunno whut - I dunno whut happened, 'n' -"

Rochelle's arms tightened, Her voice was blistered, trembling. "It's okay. It's okay, sweetie. It wasn't your fault. We'll figure it out."

With a weak laugh, Rhiannon gripped the railing of the fire escape where she stood at the very top, dropping to sit and let her injured leg flatten out. "Fuck this fucking shit." she muttered, pushing her fist into the space between her eyes. "I keep waiting for it to get fucking better."

Ellis slowly slipped his arms around Rochelle, returning the embrace dully - then, suddenly, crushingly tight.

"We gotta get back." he choked out, and when Rochelle nodded they stood, using each other to keep upright when shock turned their joints into jelly.

Now, with the soundscape devoid of the roar of the helicopter, all he could hear was infected screaming from all around them, like a horde had encircled the mall. It grew, expanded, multiplied. The helicopter had drawn plenty of attention, and they had left their teammates behind.

The hollow sensation in his chest solidified into fear.
Chapter 246

It was abrupt, and without warning.

Nick had slowly stirred himself to dress, thoughts in a cycle of abuse he couldn't break. Fucking stupid. I don't know which one of us is the bigger idiot here. Why's it so fucking easy to hurt him? And why's it so hard to stay away?

He didn't want to hurt Ellis. The kid was right about one thing: all of Nick's energy had gone to protecting him. He wanted Ellis to be happy, to live long enough to find someone who could match his zest for life, his goodness, his kind nature.

Nick did not fit that bill.

If they made it out alive, Ellis didn't deserve to be saddled with an angry, sad excuse of a man, more than ten years his senior. Why can't you just find some cute little Southern belle and get married and forget all about me?

Then, it happened. One moment, Nick was buttoning up his shirt, fingers trembling so badly he kept missing the holes - and the next, he was on the ground.

There was no fanfare to it. He didn't feel the collision of his body with the ground, or even clearly remember the fall. There was a few seconds where he stared at the wall of the dressing room from his sideways position, confused, awareness mouthing numbly at the realization that he'd collapsed.

Then his skull split open.

The pain started behind his eyes, like a spike had been driven up into the back of his neck and through his brain. His spine drew straight, then curled, clawing into his forehead as if he could dig out the source of the agony.

It was sharp, and it was hot. It was worse pain than he'd ever felt; the worst pain he could conceive of. Every nerve in his body was on fire, surging nausea through him like his system could summon no other response than a purge. It was too much.

He tried to yell, for help or simply out of pain, but his throat was constricted and nothing escaped him beyond a whine.

Struggling past the stiffness of his limbs, feeling his teeth sink into the meat of his tongue, he forced his hands away from his face. His eyes flashed open - or only one. His vision blurred, half darkness. Was only one working?

Even limited sight was enough to see his fingers where they remained half-clenched. They were stained red with blood, nails dark with gore. He'd clawed his own skin apart, he realized. Or, perhaps, the pain had been his skull bursting open on its own.

I'm going to die. occurred to him, a simple, calm epiphany.

He expected fear, but all he felt was blistering, overwhelming pain. It was simple. Animal. He curled up against the carpet like a flinching insect, devoid of any higher thinking beyond: I'm going to die here.

Then it was gone.
It vanished so suddenly that it felt like a dream, blending it all into an overwhelming sense of dread and unease. It was like blinking awake from a nightmare, remembering little more than the bitter taste of fear. He knew something had happened, but details faded faster than he could grab at them.

It all faded.

Nick's vision dimmed, and then came into brilliant focus. A blinding light seared across his eyes, and when he squinted against it, it shifted away. As it diffused, the dressing room fell back into place around him.

He wasn't flat on the ground. He was seated up against the wall.

*What... happened?*

He didn't remember moving, like he didn't remember falling. He didn't remember how long it had been. There was just a numb, distant gap, separating him from the knowledge. Like he'd blinked, and the space around him had shifted into a different configuration before he'd reopened his eyes.

The pain dissipated, evaporated, and only a scrap of a memory made him look down. His hands were clean, relatively. But why did he think they wouldn't be?

Fear came in a wash, but it was scattered and confused. He clenched and unclenched his fingers, watching them move, trying to scan back through his memories and make sense of things. *Ellis and I fought, he left, I - what was I doing? What happened? Did I... -*

He remembered pain, and he remembered being terrified, but little else. *I must have passed out.*

*Jesus. Did I hit my head or something? What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Fingers snapped in front of his nose, and the sharp sound broke through what had been deafening silence plugging his ears. He startled, chin lifting, and the intense silence in his skull was replaced with a rushing vibration that seemed to come from everywhere. It clung to him, rattled him.

Chris' eyes sparked bright in the scattered light from the flashlight set on the ground beside him, and he reached out, palm setting on Nick's shoulder. He spoke, but not a word of it made sense. It was just noise and air.

Maybe he was speaking Spanish, or maybe Nick had forgotten how to comprehend words entirely.

Nick let his gaze drift, forcefully, air drug in through his nostrils. He felt a full-body ache creeping through him, and his eyes were sore, like he'd been staring into a fan on full blast and dried them out. Fainting was the only thing that made sense, though he didn't have a lot of experience with it.

It felt more like waking up after a bender. That, he had experience in.

Then again, he did remember feeling unwell. He'd been feverish and dizzy, composure fracturing, especially when Ellis pressed him. It had started shortly after discovering the map - but didn't that point toward stress? *Stress doesn't usually... whatever the fuck this is. Jesus.*

A sliver of a moment in time came back to him, crystal clear, and his body jolted.

"Blood." he muttered. "I was - bleeding -"

He wasn't completely sure he was speaking coherent words at first, but he must've been. Christophe immediately started to paw his hand around his waistline and then against his legs, forcing him to shift enough to get a good look over the gambler's body. "Nico, I see nothing."
That, at least, processed in his mind. Nick's jaw slackened, but he didn't respond. He let his eyes close, trying to slow his breathing. It's fine. Everything's fine. I'm just losing my fucking mind.

"You scare me, amigo." The Spaniard's hand was still on his side, fingertips pressing into his waist through his shirt. He wished it didn't soothe him a little, and that he didn't notice acutely when the hand lifted away. The man muttered, low, "Por un segundo, pensé que estabas muerto. Jesucristo."

Suddenly, a swift strike of pain made Nick's eyes fly open, head abruptly twisted to the side. It took him a solid couple seconds to piece together the stinging on his cheek with the fact Chris' hand was extended out, fingers splayed and flat.

Nick let his eyes flutter open and shut, blinking away the stars in his vision.

The realization that he'd been slapped came with a heavy dose of fury. He had every intention of acting on it, but when he made to lunge forward and grab the Spaniard by the shirt collar, his body had different ideas. His muscles protested with a painful creak, and none of his limbs acted how he willed them to.

He just slumped forward, almost dead weight, and Chris grunted as he caught the gambler against his shoulder. Pain fluctuated in his voice when it was his stumped side, but he held firm and wrapped his arm around Nick's torso all the same, supporting the other man.

"Nico, Nico, por favor. We have to go, ¿sí? You hear that? El helicóptero."

Teeth gritted, Nick reluctantly lifted his gaze, blearily looking toward the ceiling. The humming all around them came into better focus, and his eyes widened as he realized it wasn't just his imagination or the fallout from his collapse.

A fucking helicopter? When...?

The Spaniard gripped fingers in the back of his shirt and tried to stand, but between the man's weakness and Nick's own lack of coordination, it was not easy. "We go now, ¿vale? Rápido. Acompañarme, Nico." He spoke simply, as if to a child.

It wasn't ineffective.

"When - I don't - how fucking long was I out?" Nick spat, scrabbling one hand back onto the wall to try and support himself when Chris momentarily released him to grab the flashlight from the ground and grip it with his teeth, jaw stretched to account for the girth.

"Fucking helicopter...?" Nick muttered; babbled. His tongue felt heavy, moving sluggishly with too much saliva pooling in his mouth. It ached, too, stirring up the memory that he'd bitten it. "When the fuck - where's Ellis? Where's everyone?"

His whole body felt heavy, in fact, and the very first step they took proved monumentally difficult. The desire to reject Chris' help was overridden by his need for it.

"Va'os, Nico." the ex-Angel managed past the flashlight held in his mouth, and his voice hit a comforting, nonsense tone. "Hablare'os de'pués." The bulk of his attention was focused solely on walking, and the sweat on his brow indicated it was no small task for either of them.

Nick might've pressed - but getting upright and into motion sent nausea rippling through him again, and he kept his lips sealed for fear of vomiting.

What the fuck just happened?
Coach believed in the push and pull of a wide array of forces in everyday life. He did not, for instance, believe God had an active hand in what happened around him. He did, however, believe in fate and karmic pressure. He believed in destiny.

Good things didn't always happen to God-fearing men and women - but through perseverance, they'd always find some reward, somehow. *We just too deep in the tunnel to see our way back, an' too far from the end to see the light. Gotta keep goin'. Keep movin'. Keep fightin'.* And whether or not he believed there was a deity actively looking down on him and hearing his prayers, it was comforting to think *someone* had a design.

Someone smarter than he, hopefully.

Maybe God was cruel, or absent, or simply apathetic. He'd never claim to know which it was - though cruel was seeming more and more likely every day - but he did know bowing his head and clasping his hands wouldn't do any good. He hadn't gotten on his knees and prayed in a long time, and had no intention of starting now.

He had to *do* something.

*Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, sins. So what happens when I don't know the right thing?*

The helicopter roared overhead, continuing unabated in the long moments following Rochelle, Ellis, and Rhiannon rushing out further into the mall. Separating the team in such a way wasn't a great plan, but the appearance of a helicopter had caught them completely unprepared.

They couldn't let the opportunity slip past, even if that meant stretching themselves thin. *Necessary evil. Or, we gone an' messed up real bad.*

The noise would undoubtedly bring some infected attention, but whoever it was that was equipped and experienced enough to fly a chopper around would hopefully be able to help them repel it. That, though, was assuming they would be willing.

*Chris an' Lena ain't in great shape, but they ain't nothin'.* He sighed, pressing fingertips into the dents stress had written into his forehead. And at least I got -

Not even the thunderous noise surrounding them like an oncoming tornado could quite dull his senses enough not to notice the flurry of motion behind him. He spun on his heel, looking away from the half-open security screen to instead face the survivors behind him.

Chris had suddenly returned, staggering from the dressing room hallway. He had the flashlight in his mouth, teeth clamped on the slim plastic frame, freeing his arm to support Nick where the man was slung against his side like a drunkard.

He was conscious enough to walk, clearly, but Coach had never seen him so pale. He looked ghostly, and the small glimpse of his face Coach could manage revealed a vague and distant confusion darting the Northerner's eyes around.

"Nick?!" Coach shouted, crossing the distance between them in broad strides. Chris seemed close to faltering, body trembling with the effort it took to keep both him and Nick standing. The very first thing Coach did was grab onto the gambler's arm and Chris' waist to steady both men. "The
With his hand free to release its death grip in Nick's shirt, Christophe took the flashlight from his mouth, gripping it in his hand and directing it to the ground. "No sé." he muttered, so quiet Coach had to lean in to hear him. His dark skin was flushed, and uncertainty quivered at his lower lip. "He did not hear me, al principio, como... I do not think he is -"

With a grunt, Coach pulled away and shifted his grip. He grasped both of Nick's biceps, holding the man up and forcing their gazes to meet fully. He lowered his tone to a serious rumble, flat and arresting. "They ran to go flag down a chopper goin' over us. We need to go after 'em. So I need you on yo' toes, Nicolas, 'cause I can't cover all y'all. You gotta tighten up right now."

Nick's lips curled downward, genuine frustration flaring to life. The cloud of agitation that so often disguised his internal thoughts came down over his expression, slow and detached. Coach anticipated a fight, readied for it, so he was blind-sided when Nick muttered softly back, "I'm - yeah. Okay."

He took a second, slower look over his teammate. The man had changed into dark colours, and if he hadn't been sheathed in sweat and sporting a thickening and messy scruff, might've looked outright handsome. It suited him, though seeing the man in jeans was jarring.

Then Coach glanced down and saw grey sneakers in place of his dress shoes, and if their situation had been less dire, he'd have laughed.

Instead, he pulled one hand back and gripped the side of Nick's head, fingers mostly lost in the whorls of his hair. It was a steadying gesture, like the huddle right before the big play, but it also gave Coach the opportunity to feel his temperature against the flat of his palm. He was on fire.

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He ain't right at all. The hell happened?"

The Northerner's attention flashed into surprise at the touch, frozen there.
"We gonna talk about this later." the eldest survivor stated, and a bitter acknowledgement sparked in Nick's green eyes. "But right now, I need you."

Then Coach let him go entirely, watching as Nick stood on his own with unconvincing rigidity. He fist his hands at his sides and winced, then tilted his chin up to look at the eldest survivor with a little more clarity than before. Forced, maybe, but better than nothing.

"Aww." he quipped back, and Coach almost smiled.

From a few feet away, voice raised over the noise, Lena spoke. "Rochelle said to stay - but this is kind of a death trap." She'd thrown her brush-hook back into its holster over her back and had Chris' machete in her hand, gripped tightly, nerves betrayed in the way it waivered back and forth. "Zombies are gonna surround us with all this noise."

"Agreed." Coach turned, crossing back to the front entrance. He picked up his double-barrel shotgun and their small handgun, shouldering the former. "Best chance we got is together - an' if they do get this helicopter to land, we gotta get on it, quick. They ain't likely to wait."

He slipped the handgun into the pocket of his red windbreaker, freeing his hands to pick up Nick's katana from where it leaned against the wall, tip to the carpet. He turned to face the three of his teammates that remained, expression grim and focused.

"We -"

Then the mall's glass roof exploded inward.

He yelled, instinct darting him into a stumbled duck, even though their place inside the store and up on the balcony had them sheltered from the blast. Coach wheeled around despite all logic telling him not to, rushing toward the security gate and thrusting his head underneath it.

He watched the rain of glass down into the mall atrium, and with the roof broken inward, the helicopter's blades chopping through the air echoed with renewed vigor - right before it faded away. A sinking sensation clung at his chest, unable to move from where he stood. Disappointment surged a sickly sensation up his skin, winded lungs aching.

The helicopter was leaving.

He set the thought harshly down, abandoning it along with the part of him that had sincerely thought they might be saved. He allowed himself only a few seconds to mourn it, before leaving it to rust. He had to worry about his team, now, and there was no time to grieve.

It was easier than he expected, in fact, as he was quickly distracted.

Lena hadn't been wrong. Infected had, in fact, been drawn to the noises, and now that the helicopter's noises were fading away it became easier to hear the rising screams echoing up from the lower level of the mall. Whatever had broken through the roof had also sent a fresh shockwave of rage throughout the horde.

Coach could hear the clatter of metal as innumerable footsteps came up the frozen escalators, the horde drawn to their presence, or perhaps simply driven to search the building for life. His eyes caught on a flicker of movement at the waist-high wall that edged the second-floor balcony.

A set of clawed hands wrapped up on the top edge of the balcony rail, gripping tight as the creature craned its head up over the top. Bared teeth and glinting eyes centered in the face of a Hunter, and they shared a blink right before it lurched to get itself up and over the wall.
The ex-football player had only a few seconds to react, and he did the only thing he could think of: he stepped backwards and kicked out the framed signpost that was keeping the security gate open. It clattered to the ground and skidded inside the store, and with it gone, the metal security gate slammed closed.

Then a shape struck the very center of it from the outside, and the loud, strangely human yelp announced the Hunter's collision with the gate.

"Hell." he muttered, overcome with a bleary sort of dismay, backing up slowly from the door. "Hell and damnation."

As the horde grew loud around them, the security gate came under a battery. Blows struck it in increasing numbers, though the screams and footsteps sprinting past indicated not all of the infected stopped at their door.

"Frick." Lena echoed, and Coach darted a glance to see her staggering toward the store counter. She circled around it, almost throwing herself at the slim door set into the wall behind the counter. "Did anyone try this door?" she shouted, even as she twisted the handle, to no effect.

"It was locked." Nick muttered. He moved at a stiff walk, like all his energy went to maintaining his balance, approaching the counter after her with little sense of urgency. It was less apathy toward their situation, and seemed more a genuine disconnect with his surroundings. "Breakroom or some shit."

"Quizás haya algo aquí." he muttered, almost soothingly. "Em - maybe there is... more? In there?"

Chris followed in his wake, fretting close at his heels. Nick didn't even fight him off, and that was the most worrying part. "We ain't goin' out the front, an' I don't see another way. So better hope."

Coach strode across the store, and as he passed Nick by, he rested one hand on the man's lower back and pressed his katana into his grip with the other. He said nothing, merely nodding when Nick obediently took the blade in hand.

Nick held it like he could barely remember which end was up. Concern flooded Coach like an ache, and he couldn't pretend, couldn't even begin to fight the warm and tender paternal inclination in his chest. He wanted to get the man to safety, get him fed, let him sleep, but the apocalypse had different ideas.

It always did.

"A'ight, Sam. 'Bout time you held him up. 'Bout time you did right by him - right by all of' em. They need you right now, so you better buck up."

With his freed hands, Coach dragged his double-barrel shotgun down off his shoulder, bracing it by his hip. He circled the counter, grabbing their backpack off the surface as he moved, approaching the back door with his shotgun wielded. Lena took one look over her shoulder at him and slid back, getting well out of his way.

Gritting his jaw, Coach placed the nose of the gun right between the lock and the doorframe. He turned his face away before pulling one of the triggers, and the blast made him stagger back, a few wooden shards flying free.
One took root in his wrist with a twang of pain and a trickle of blood, but he ignored it, blinking up as the door swung messily open. The metal mechanism holding it shut was still intact, but the wood around it was not. With nothing to hold it together, it had lost its mooring into the threshold.

He nudged it entirely open with his shotgun, advancing a quick step, alert for motion that he did not find.

Beyond it was a small staffroom, with a table and a few chairs as well as a few heavy-duty shelves, and further beyond it was a slim door leading further on. As Chris pushed close to him, directing the flashlight into the room, he could read a small sign beside the door, lettering stamped on it: MAINT. HALL. He didn't know where it led, but it had to lead somewhere.

"Keep close, folks. We ain't got long." Coach barked, and the sound of the security gate creaking inward another inch concurred with him.
"No, no, no! You fucker -"

Ellis winced as Rhiannon's elbow cracked into his temple. It was an accident, judging by the way she stiffened afterward, though that didn't make it hurt less.

He pushed to his feet, straightening, with her carried in his arms. His left arm was tucked under her knees and his right arm was cradling her back.

He hadn't given her the chance to protest, and now that he'd picked her up, she didn't have much choice but to wrap an arm around his neck and hold on. Her baseball bat was tucked tight against her chest by her free hand, her legs curled in to make her tall frame as compact as possible.

"I gotta at least get you inside." he grunted, starting to descend the steps of the fire escape that led back down from the roof. Rochelle was right behind him, expression grim but focused. Her stun baton dangled from the wrist strap that was around her forearm, and Ellis' shotgun was in her hands. "Okay?"

Rhiannon's nails dug into the back of his neck, a faintly painful gesture. "Asshole." she bolted out, smothered into her bicep. When he darted a glance at her face where she huddled into his shoulder, he couldn't miss the embarrassed flush on her cheeks. "Fine."

A softness smoothed out Ellis' brows, focusing down on his footsteps as the fire escape rattled gently beneath them.

The first time he'd met the woman in his arms, she'd been holding them at gunpoint. Now, she'd injured herself in a selfless rush to get them to a rescue she didn't even want. To get them something that meant nothing to her.

His arms tightened against her, guilt striking a dissonant chord in his chest, forcing up the cluttered misery he was trying to keep a stopper on. She was injured, and it had been all for nothing. He'd let the helicopter get away when they'd been so close to rescue.

So close; he should have done something, anything. Instead he'd just watched as the helicopter crashed. He had been their only shot at rescue, and he'd failed. Something in him couldn't help but turn bitter, agitated, musing dully: Nick would be hollerin', he'd be so pissed at me.

But that didn't seem right.

If Ellis really thought about it - and he couldn't help but think about it - he'd tuck a hand on Ellis' cheek and pull him close. His jaw would grit, tone gone wry, leaning into him with some poorly restrained urge for further contact. It resounded in his ears like Nick was right there.

"Shit happens, kid. Nothing you could have done."

He would have done anything to hear that, just then, but he'd find no such comfort... assuming Nick was still alright. God, I hope he's alright. I hope they're all alright. If we split up fer nothin' and they get hurt, I...

"Ellis!" Rochelle shouted, and he jerked his head to look back at her, yanked free of whatever grip that line of thinking had on him.
"Later." jolted him into focus, and he only barely acknowledged that it, too, was Nick's voice.

She was pointing downwards, and when he looked, his eyes caught on where the fire escape coiled down and underneath them. The stairs they stood on flattened out into a platform, eventually meeting with a set of stairs that curled off the building and then led down onto a second platform below their feet.

The termination of that platform opened with a ladder extended down, closing the distance with the ground, and that was what Rochelle was gesturing to. "If the front's overrun..."

Ellis’ gaze flicked back up, and caught on the shape of a door at the far end of the top level of the fire escape. It was all the way at the other side of the fire escape’s upper platform, though, and even further from their teammates. Who knew how many additional infected would complicate the way back?

The Georgian grunted, dismissing the thought and re-focusing. Whether or not the fire escape was a good route out of the mall was irrelevant when they had a team to reunite with. If they had to run right into the horde, they’d do so. "We gotta find 'em first!"

Rochelle uttered a nervous affirmation, and Ellis understood her anxiety. Nick had been unstable before he'd left, and their argument had likely worsened it. How well could he, Lena, Chris, and Coach defend themselves against a horde? How well could Coach pick up the slack?

_Why'd we think this was a good idea? Dammit!_

Carrying Rhiannon in his arms only slowed him slightly as he charged back to the broken window they'd climbed through. His intent was to lift her up into the frame and help her through it. As he came close, however, the screaming that echoed around in the air came into sharp focus as it drifted out of the open hole. It sounded terribly close.

Blinking, he jerked to flatten himself against the railing of the fire escape. Rhiannon jolted in his arms, drawing herself into a tighter curl out of reflex. Noting her warning grimace, a silent urge for caution, he carefully craned his neck to peek in through the busted-out window.

His gaze landed on a huge shape, grey skin rough and peeling over the enlarged curve of a Charger's shoulder. It was _searching_, and he had to wonder if it smelled them, or smelled their earlier passage. It huffed out a few raspy breaths as it surveyed the room they'd climbed out of.

For a moment, he thought it didn't see him.

Then its flat yellow eyes blinked up at him from the deep ridges of a skeletal face, skin taut over its cheekbones like stretched leather. The Charger didn't even roar as all its weight suddenly pulled into motion, inhuman momentum carrying it into a sprint right in their direction.

"Fuckin' shit!" Rhiannon yelped. She might've leapt out of his arms had he had a less firm grip on her.

As it was, Ellis couldn't stop himself from protectively drawing Rhiannon close and jerking back a step up the stairs, even though a dense brick wall separated them from the creature. The animal instinct to flee took over.

The Charger slammed into the wall's other side with a tremendous thud that made him recoil even further. When he looked back at the window, there were a few hairline fractures in the framing of it. The infected wouldn't break through the brick, he was sure, but the sight of the damage was enough to flood him with unease.
It gave a choked-out growl, breathy, warbled as it shook itself. Ellis watched with a rising tension as a pawlike, blistered hand suddenly grabbed ahold of the windowframe. Blunt fingers - mostly absorbed into the strange and calloused shape of its pawlike hand - tightened on the brick.

He had no idea if the creature could successfully cram itself through the window or not. Either way, he had no intention of finding out, and they weren't easily passing by it.

"Change'uh plans - this way!" he shouted before bolting, sparing a glance to ensure Rochelle was following him.

Sprinting down the fire escape platform was not quiet, his workboots thundering beneath him. As they ran past another squat window, a fist burst through the glass, clawing out at him, shards of the window jutting out from the flailing upper arm.

Nails caught in the sleeve of his denim jacket, but found no purchase. He continued running, pulling Rhiannon in tight against his chest. His lungs strained a little with the effort; she wasn't particularly heavy, but that didn't mean she weighed nothing.

"I'll get the door!" Rochelle shouted, voice raised over the din.

Ellis wordlessly shoved himself just past the doorway, spinning to brace his hip against the railing that cordoned off the end of the fire escape platform. He lowered Rhiannon carefully to the ground, letting her get her uninjured foot settled on the fire escape surface.

Rhiannon grabbed ahold of the railing behind them with one hand, catching her balance, and then handed her baseball bat to him. Her eyes were low, tone and expression strangled. "Here."

A shriek pulled Ellis' head up, and his eyes widened as the infected that had punched through the window now thrust its whole upper body through it. It screamed, clawing at the windowframe, kicking itself through the hole even as the effort shredded its belly against the glass.

Another set of hands scrabbled at the windowframe, and then another, and there were no signs of the flow stopping.

At the further window, the Charger had given up on fitting through, the only evidence of its attempts being the chunk taken out of the brick edging the frame. He was not comforted by the creature's disappearance, especially when it stood between them and their teammates.

The first infected slipped through the window, landing face-first onto the fire escape but quickly scrambling to its feet. Two more started to crawl through as the first got its bearings, fighting each other as much as they fought to advance.

Tossing the bat in his hands and catching it with a steadier grip, Ellis strode a few steps to stand between his teammates and the zombie threat. "I got 'em." he huffed, widening his stance to block the platform. "Check inside. We gotta move!"

The producer gritted her teeth, glancing uncertainly down at the shotgun in her hands. "Agh - fuck." She aimed carefully at the door, sliding to poise where she could quickly get a shot inside it as it opened. With a nod, she tightened her shoulders. "Okay, open her up."

Rhiannon flashed into a faint and winded grin. "Don't shoot me, tiger." she uttered, reaching out to grab ahold of the U-shaped door handle. She jiggled it first as if to check if it was locked, and it gave way a few centimeters with a heavy, resistant drag.

Then, after a short pause to glance and ensure Rochelle was readied, she drew it entirely open.
Smoothly mirroring her pace, Rochelle scanned into the mall's innards where light slanted in over her shoulder. The fire escape led to a branched hallway much like they'd been in earlier, this one at the very end of the building.

The hall was mostly empty, except for one infected that was running away from them. It was drawn around the corner and out of sight by a sharp, metal clattering that she could just pick out. She recognized the sound as that of battering on the security gates blocking off the stores.

If they were breaking into stores, the horde might've already broken into the clothing store they'd left the rest of their team inside. Panic drove her to dart a few steps forward, staggering into the hallway. "We need to go!" she shouted.

She didn't get far.

The same Charger swinging into view at the end of the hall pulsed a blank fear through her, dumb with adrenaline. She hadn't even locked eyes with the bleary yellow dots in its sunken sockets before it was in motion.

*Jesus. It circled the balcony to come meet us?*

Fight or flight battled in the back of her skull, trapped in the constraints of her lizard brain, and it landed squarely on fight.

She lifted the shotgun in her hands, barely registering her own intent before her finger was pulling the trigger. It was too far, and the scattering of the buckshot mostly missed it, though a few sparks of dust pocked up from its leading shoulder.

Her palm tightened against the forend of the shotgun, sliding it smoothly down the barrel, aware of the spent shell flying free off to her right with a puff of smoke. Reversing the slide chambered the next round, and a gurgled bark of pain followed the next pull of her trigger.

She saw blood, she was sure, pooling around the craggy flesh just at its neck. She'd hit something vital, but though its charge wavered, it did not stop.

Starting to pump a new round in place, Rochelle let her foot slide back, shifting her weight. Alarm started to override her instinct to hold her ground. Even if she killed it, momentum might carry it into her anyway.

As it turned out, the choice was stolen from her entirely: fingers snagged in the waistband of her sweatpants.

A yelp left her as she was pulled back, though she had sense enough to cooperate. An unsteady lurch had her colliding messily into Rhiannon, their arms swept around one another in a struggle for balance as they half-fell back out onto the fire escape. They landed in a thud against the railing running parallel with the fire exit door, nothing but slim metal beams between them and a long fall.

The Charger burst through the fire escape door, catching it as it had begun to fall closed and slamming it back open with a tremendous crash. The tall biker tightened fingers against Rochelle's waist and rolled them both off the railing.

They went down together, falling to the platform in the space between the door and where Ellis had made his stand. Rochelle landed first and hard into the metal grating, losing her grip on the shotgun. It mercifully clattered only a few inches away and did not slip through the gap between the platform and the mall's exterior.
Rhiannon flattened out on top of her, and both women huddled low as a scream of metal sounded out and the whole platform shuddered underneath them.

Jerking her head up from the ground, Rochelle blinked past the stars in her vision to watch as the Charger collided with the railing they'd been against mere seconds before. It tore a two-foot-wide section of railing free entirely, popping the joints with a grating, wrenched screech.

Unable to stop, it went over the edge and dropped out of sight.

The sound of the Charger's body hitting the concrete below was delayed and dense. It struck like stone on stone, crackling, and the strained bellow that had been leaking from it cut off instantly.

Rochelle breathed out, thinly, relief sending a cloud over her senses for a moment. The screaming din all around them fell to a buzz in her ears.

It was easy to become desensitized to near-death experiences when they were mostly commonplace, but the flush of euphoria never really lessened. She felt it, then, along with a steady chaser of adrenaline.

Then the softest of miseries; they weren't going to get rescued - not anytime soon. The knowledge settled in like cold ash, like the final gasp of embers fading. She'd genuinely believed in it, for a moment, but no longer. Rescue was an esoteric thing again, a dream, out of reach.

Strangely, the next thing she felt was defiance.

*We're not going down, not like this. They can't break us.*

As endorphins flooded energy all the way to her fingertips, she was only distantly aware of Rhiannon's similarly relieved laughter panting in her ear... and then much more aware of just how aligned their bodies. When the blonde lifted her head, pushing off the fire escape platform with her palms, they were nose to nose.

They shared a blink - right before Rhiannon grunted out, deadpan, "Wrong sister."

As much as Rochelle wanted desperately to laugh, cackle out in the giddy fluster of survival, there was no time. The sound of Ellis snarling and his borrowed bat impacting with flesh made her tip her head back.

She had enough time to look over and see Ellis mid-swing, bashing the end of the baseball bat into the chin of an infected and staggering it back into the zombie behind it. He darted a wide-eyed look over his shoulder, mostly at the open gap in the railing.

Though the slim nature of the fire escape was forcing the infected into a single-file line that bought them some time, he couldn't keep the stream of zombies back forever, nor could he stop to help them up.

"Jesus." he huffed, lowering his arms slightly, catching his breath in the spare moments he'd earned himself. The infected were quick to scrabble at each other, fighting to advance past the infected whose jaw he'd broken. "You guys okay?!"

Rochelle squirmed her body, grabbing Rhiannon by the jacket to help her roll off. "Yeah, yeah -" As she came to her knees, she kept a grip on the blonde, both women getting unsteadily to their feet. "Thanks, hun." she murmured, breathless.

Rhiannon put a hand out to brace herself on the stone wall of the building, biting onto her tongue.
Her expression was pained as she staggered onto and then off her injured foot.

"Hate those fuckers." she barked back. "Let's go!"

Shuffling back a few steps, Ellis struck out again, knocking a zombie away with a blow to the chest. The bludgeoning collision doubled it over, and the infected behind it tackled into it, clotting the fire escape pathway. "Please!" he hollered in response. "Gettin' hairy here!"

They retreated as a unit, Rochelle grabbing the pump shotgun from the ground and getting it back in her hands.

Rhiannon planted a hand on her shoulder, using her like a crutch, stepping in time with a staggered limp on every other stride. They pushed through the doorway in a cluster, and Ellis yanked the fire escape door shut behind them.

The alarm wired to it was clearly without power, and the electronic lock that was connected to the pushbar on the inside was similarly non-functional. Their saving grace was a heavy handle located just at waist-height, helpfully labeled with arrows to indicate cranking it to the left or right.

Large stenciled letters announcing LOCK / UNLOCK was enough to make Ellis yank the lever, and the soft chunk of metal sliding into place preceded bodies slamming into the other side by a split-second. Rochelle didn't know if it would hold forever, but the door was definitely heavier than anything she'd seen them bash through before. It would take them some time.

"Shit." she muttered, grabbing at her temple, digging fingertips into her skin. "Shit, shit, shit."

The following few moments were far from peaceful as the three stood closely packed, Ellis breathing hard, just long enough to center themselves. Their plan had been slap-dash from the start, and it only looked more grim.

When they moved to advance back into the mall's interior, it was not with reckless abandon, but due caution.
Nick's vision fell in and out of a blur. He was forced to keep reminding himself that there were only three survivors around him, because every time he blinked, they doubled. His headache had faltered to a simple throbbing, at least, and his stomach had settled enough that he didn't taste bile.

*Feel like death warmed over, instead of just death.*

The reunion with his sense of humour was not a joyous one. He studied it at a distance, doubted it. It had betrayed him too many times in one day, and he forced it to quiet, trying to focus. That was not easy.

He found himself repeating the bare few facts he had over and over in his head. He'd collapsed. That much was undeniable, as much as he wanted to deny it. He'd also had an excruciating headache, before the collapse, or as a result of it - and he was sure he'd had some sort of hallucination.

The more he tried to remember what exactly happened, the fuzzier it got. He was left, still, with little but the impression of blood, and he kept glancing at his hands in the darkness. Sometimes the shadows caught his fingers just right, and the black could've been blood, and his pulse would come to a threatening patter in his chest.

It felt familiar - but Chris had assured him there was nothing, and his clean, new clothes affirmed the idea.

He felt like he'd locked himself into a washing machine: his body was sore, and his balance was still spinning in circles. He moved stiffly, because his knees threatened to buckle if he allowed them to take too much of his weight without being mostly straight.

*You're just sick.* he tried to assure himself, but that was hard to swallow. 'Sick' was a loaded term when they were surrounded by sick people turned rabid, turned monster. 'Sick' was a loaded term when they were all very sure the Green Flu sat in them, dormant.

He'd been sick before. He'd been violently ill, even. He'd laid on bathroom floors and mulled over whether he'd live to see the next day. He'd once let himself get sleep-deprived enough that the walls started to melt and he'd forgotten what day it was. He'd once gotten so drunk that his ex-wife had been forced to call an ambulance.

None of it felt like what had happened. He'd lost himself, lost time, lost memory. Chris had looked - and looked, even now - frightened, and that frightened him.

*No, Nick, stop. You're just normal, human sick, and it just feels worse because everything feels fucking worse lately. If you were going to turn, why now? If you were going to turn, why wouldn't anyone else? Why would it just be you?*

*You're an unlucky son of a bitch, but why would it just be you?*

He wasn't unaware of Chris practically breathing down his neck, he just didn't see a point to protesting. The man had seen everything; he knew more than Nick did, that was for sure, and wasn't going to be dissuaded from his concern. Fighting would only draw attention to it, anyway.

*And, fuck, maybe I need a babysitter.*
Maybe I need help.

It was scary to think, and scarier because he knew there was a kernel of truth to it.

Coach and Lena had dragged one of the heavy shelves over to hold shut and blockade the small breakroom door behind them. It would buy them some time... although if the maintenance hall led to a dead end, they were just barricading themselves inside.

His interest was dull and vague when he lifted his chin, watching Coach carefully open the door to the maintenance hall. It was pitch black beyond the threshold, facing straight into an opposing wall. The hallway opened in either direction, no light visible.

Coach held his hand up and over his shoulder, fingers splayed, and Chris immediately stepped around Nick to place the flashlight in his grip. Grunting out a noise of acknowledgement, Coach stepped out into the hall, head swiveling as he tried to determine where they needed to go.

The screaming around them moved, shifted, like the scattered horde was searching the mall's interior. It was losing strength now that the helicopter had moved away, but they must've still sensed - smelled? - the presence of uninfected bodies in the building, because they did not calm.

Behind them, a tremendous crash announced the failure of the security screen.

With a shout, Coach bolted through the door. Lena scrambled to follow him, and Nick might've stared dumbly after them had Chris not grabbed his arm and pulled him forward. He staggered to keep his footing, allowing the Spaniard to drag him out into the maintenance hall.

Nick darted a glance over his shoulder, watching as Coach slammed the door shut behind them. He held his knuckles against it for a moment, pausing, but there was nothing to lock it with. The crashing of metal against the tile flooring was muffled through the two doors separating them and the horde, but the thuds that quickly started up against the first door were much louder.

"We need to go, Coach." Lena urged, voice a hurried tremble. She lifted her arm to point down the left hallway, in the direction their teammates had run out on the mall's second floor. "They went right, so let's go that way. Maybe this leads into another store."

She was calm, Nick noticed, looking over what he could see of her face in the dark. The energy coming off her in waves was focused and rigid, but calm.

As she turned and started at a low trot down the hall, however, she moved like she'd leave them behind if they didn't keep up. Whatever pain lingered in her body was not visible in her posture. She swallowed it all down and grit her teeth and fought past it.

Nick couldn't remember how he used to do that. He'd forgotten the steps to that dance. He didn't feel focused and calm - he felt empty, shelled, just a husk. If there was anything sedate about him, it was more of a symptom than a choice.

The desire to stoke something like anger listed sleepily in his skull, but he couldn't pay attention long enough to manage. He was exhauste, like all his energy had gone into whatever his body had done in the dressing room.

Coach grunted out a frustrated noise, nodding before pushing off the door and following her. He put the flashlight up against his shoulder, holding it there to illuminate the hallway. He fumbled the handgun out of his windbreaker's wide pocket, flipping it to grasp it by the muzzle and hold the grip out behind him.
"Chris -" he barked, not even looking. Christophe immediately lunged forward to grab it, carefully arranging his hand on it before fully pulling it from Coach's grasp. "Son of a bitch. Right as she ran off, I was thinkin', why the hell didn't I throw her a radio? If I'd given her a damn radio, wouldn't be in this mess."

There was anger in his voice, raw and full of vitriol, more frantic than Nick was used to hearing from him.

"Got two damn radios, can't do shit-all wit' 'em if they're all with the same -"

Lena's voice cut in to interrupt him, and though it wasn't strictly angry, it was harsh enough to snap his eyes up. "Focus." It almost made Nick laugh to see the chagrined tension enter Coach's body, subtly cowed by the small woman. "It wouldn't have made a spit of difference. We'd still be separated, and we couldn't follow in their footsteps after the zombies got here. We'd be in the same crappy situation."

Distracted by the gun he now carefully wielded, Chris hurried his footsteps a little, catching up to walk flanking Coach. It put some distance between him and Nick, and he didn't look back. "They are okay, Samito. They are muy fuerte, ¿sí? No worry."

When Coach responded, strong shoulders slumped, he did not sound convinced. "Son, it ain't them I'm worried about."

Christophe looked at him with a helpless pant, some kind of disappointment twisting at his mouth, like he'd been chastised. His footsteps stuttered, but he kept moving. The worry that had caused him to flock close to Nick had shifted, reoriented to Coach, and he looked ahead into the hallway fearfully.

"Eso no inspira mucha confianza, cariño..." he muttered, faintly. His hand tightened on the pistol in his grip, flexing his finger on the trigger.

Screams had been all around them at varying volumes, but when they suddenly burst into a terrifying proximity and echoed down the hall from ahead, all three of the survivors in front of Nick jolted into tension. He watched sluggishly, aware that he should have been just as on-alert, but unable to convince himself to care.

Things played on before him, and he couldn't root himself in it, couldn't sink his teeth into the moment. Like I'm just... watching a movie. His footsteps slowed, distance increasing between him and the others.

He forced both his hands to grip his katana, looking down at it, breathing in hard through his nostrils. As much as the visceral pains and nausea had faded, the idea of fighting was still miles beyond him. He'd never have the reflexes or the strength to defend against an onslaught.

He was useless.

As the sound of glass shattering sounded distantly down the hallway and the screams heightened, his teammates began a flurry of motion. Coach snapped the flashlight onto the waistband of his light grey canvas slacks, freeing both his hands to grip his shotgun.

It turned the light spastic, the cone of light shifting as his body did, but there was no better option. He jolted to brace his shoulder against the right-hand wall, shouting out to his teammates, "Get ready, y'all! I'll thin 'em out but I'm gonna need y'all behind me!"

And they obeyed. Christophe bolted to mirror Coach's posture, pressing his stumped side against
the left-hand wall instead, carefully aiming down the hall. Lena slipped between and behind them, clear of the angle of fire and prepared with the machete in her hand.

As the screams drew closer, bouncing around the constraints of the hall, Nick closed his eyes.

*It'd have been easier if I'd just*

He couldn't finish it, couldn't let himself finish it. He clawed into the thought and reeled it back in, breath halting in his chest at the weight of it crushing down on him. *Fuck.* Maybe it wasn't apathy, but disappointment. The strange emptiness in his chest was disappointment.

He should've heard the blast of Coach's shotgun, of Chris' handgun. It should've shaken him out of his fugue, captured his attention. He should've rushed forward and tried to help.

Instead, he stood there, frozen.

And then it tumbled free anyway, like he'd been trying to grip something made of gelatin, and the harder he grasped the more it escaped between his fingers.

Why hadn't he collapsed and died in the dressing room? Or Brenda's sword could have struck lower, through his heart. Or instead of splashing acid against his leg, that Spitter could've just spewed all down his back and burned right through him. Or - even simpler than any of that - he could've just clicked his seatbelt shut, speeding away in his Barchetta, and ended up crushed against the trunk of a tree along with his car.

Ellis would've driven past him, none the wiser. The kid wouldn't have stopped and checked on a crashed car among hundreds of crashed cars - and even if he had, he'd have found nothing but a bloodied corpse. He'd have looked on it, sadly, and then gotten back in his truck.

*He'd never have had to meet me. And I'd never have had to meet him.*

Why did that sound so good? Why did it comfort him? Why did he ache for it, just a little?

He relinquished one hand's grip on his katana, raising it to touch his brow, and his fingertips grazed skin so hot that he flinched, so hot that his hand recoiled on instinct. He stared at his fingertips where they hung in the air, only visible in the way their shadow contrasted against the light ahead of him.

Then:

"Nick."

It was soft. Too soft and far away, really, to fully process. It wasn't Coach, or Chris, or Lena; it came from behind him, not in front of him. It felt like the first thing to actually hook his attention, cutting through the fog. He jerked his chin up, twisting to turn around and face it but finding only darkness.

He stiffened, for just a moment, sure he'd imagined it. *You hallucinated earlier. You're just hallucinating now. It's not real.*

"Nick?"

It came again, but clearer. It was a man's voice, rasped, but pitched up with gentle misery. Tears risked at the edges of it, bloated with a confusion, a betrayal, a fear that he recognized. *It can't be real.*
He recognized that voice, and it sunk terror into him like he'd not felt since he was a kid, when nightmares seemed like things that could tear through the fabric of sleep and leak into his reality. His heart constricted, chest collapsing, and he stared into the dark. The motion and the sounds behind him may as well have been miles away.

Then something moved in the shadows, and he jerked a step back, holding his katana up in some fruitless effort to keep it at bay. He trembled, his arms trembled, and he didn't know what he thought he was defending against - except he knew exactly what it was, and it terrified him.

_It's not him. How could it be him? He's dead._ The shape closed in, approaching, but there was no light to illuminate it. It just loomed in his vision, black on black, a vacuum inside of a void. _You're losing it, Nick. You're fucking losing it. Keep it together._

His voice broke when he tried to speak, shaking as it forced its way from lungs that refused to function.

"Brett?"

The shape didn't answer, just came closer, and that raspy voice wrenched out the quietest sob. _That_ voice. The voice he hadn't heard in twenty years - that he knew he'd never hear again. Horror took any concept of fleeing from him. His thoughts stuck in a rut, on repeat, _It's not him. It can't be him._ _You know that. It doesn't raise the fucking dead. You know that._

Light suddenly started to coalesce around him, stretching languidly around his knees and filtering past him to illuminate the space. His eyes caught on legs, too slender and angular to be truly human.

Pale grey skin stretched taut over frail-looking bones, sunken under the shredded scraps of jeans that only just clung together. The light just reached its midsection, pale yellow scattering over a bare and distended belly, and then it blinked out, plunging him into darkness.

His heart surged in a cold and painful lurch.

Arms grabbed Nick from behind, circling around his upper body and trapping his arms against his sides. A hand closed over his mouth, sealing it shut, and suddenly he was spun around and pressed into the wall, hard.

The collision sparked pain through him, and he'd have audibly gasped had a palm not ground against his mouth to quiet him. He surged against it, fighting, but the figure leaning into him only pushed harder, flattening them both.

"Shh." a voice panted in his ear - Coach's.

Nick's right eye was closed where the side of his face was pushed into the wall, but his left strained to look out in vain into the darkness. The only sound was the wheedled rush of Coach's stifled breathing, hot in his ear, and the soft scrape of shuffled footsteps approaching ever closer.

Sense finally began to settle in as he choked air in through his nostrils. Something hot sparked over his scalp, settling in deep under his temples, like a migraine. He'd imagined it, like he'd imagined blood on his hands.

_I thought -_

The voice crying gently just beside them in the dark was too soft. Too young. Different. The Flu couldn't entirely scrape away the human edge to its voice, and it was not the voice he knew. It did
not speak his name. It had not spoken his name. It was a grim relief that washed over him, tempered by the only conclusion to be drawn: he'd hallucinated, again.

The male Witch walked slowly down the hall, its soft weeping punctuated with little gasps of air, gentle hisses. It stumbled when it kicked into one of the corpses of the infected his teammates had mowed down, and a slurred yelp sounded out, footsteps stuttering and then halting.

Nick did not breathe, then, holding it as Coach did and squeezing his eyes shut. He leaned into where the man's broad chest crushed into his back, collapsing them further into the smallest shape they could manage.

With a moaned exhale, its footsteps started again.

They were the only sound around them for what felt like ages. They echoed, loud even as the creature passed on down the hallway - and then a scraping sound joined it, like claws against the wood, and the gentle creak of a door pushing open.

A sob, fainter.

Not a word was spoken. Slowly, glacially, Nick felt Coach moving against him.

When the flashlight clicked on again, the muzzle of it was pressed right against the wall, the light nothing but an orange glow illuminating through the plastic of its casing. Coach tentatively tipped it, allowing one side to lift and the light to scatter down the hallway.

Nick looked, and his eyes caught first on Lena and Chris, flattened on either wall. The Spaniard's face was bleached white and his jaw slack, body trembling. Lena's eyes were closed so tightly the edges of them crinkled, lips forming a few shapes over that he only belatedly recognized as please please please please.

Still, nobody uttered a sound.

Past the corpses filling the space, just before a turn in the hall, a dark shadow inlaid in the wall made up the doorway that the Witch had turned into.

Silently, Coach took a step back, freeing Nick to pull away from the wall. He placed a hand on the gambler's shoulder, tightly, his other hand turning the flashlight to press into his belly to muffle the light except for a dim glow just around them. With his shotgun strap slung over his shoulder, he started walking forward.

His fingers dug into Nick's shoulder so tightly it ached, and Nick had no choice but to follow in close parallel to him. From the dim light, he could see Coach wasn't looking at him, focused entirely on the doorway ahead. Would he have something to say, later? Were the fingertips crushing into his collarbone driven by fury?

He surrendered to it, because he had no defense.

You fucked up, Nick. You almost got them killed because you can't keep your shit together long enough not to see fucking ghosts. You almost fucking killed them.

He surrendered to it, because he didn't know if he had the will to walk otherwise.

As they passed their teammates, soft footsteps announced that they had joined them, and Nick felt a toe scuff his heel when they huddled too close. Breaths panted behind them as they all crept up the hall, stepping over and around corpses, approaching the cracked door left open behind the
Witch’s exit.

They all held their breath, again, as passing by the door brought a sob back into clear focus - but
the Witch didn't pay them any mind as they walked on, taking the turn in the hall.

Coach let the flashlight pull away from his stomach as they gained distance, the hallway quickly
looped around what was clearly the room the Witch had wandered into. Two quick right turns and
then a left had them back on track along the perimeter of the building.

There was light ahead; sunlight crept in through a doorway that had been flung open, black blood
smeared across the wall. Nick could see glass scattered across the floor of whatever room laid
beyond the threshold, like a window had been broken.

Broken, too, was the spell they'd been under.

"¡Mierda! ¡Eso fue muy aterrador!" Christophe whispered, voice hoarse with fear, like adrenaline
had dried his mouth out. His arm wrapped around his midsection, knuckles rubbing at the
bandaged stump that was just visible through the floppy sleeve of his green polo. "I did not hear it
come!"

Lena reached out, placing a hand against his back and bending forward slightly as she walked, less
a gesture of comfort and more an attempt to brace herself. "That was really, really close. I've never
seen a... all the Witches I've seen have always been girls." A breath wheezed out of her like a sigh.
"I didn't -"

Coach suddenly turning, facing Nick, made her mouth snap shut. Nick wanted to brace for a blow,
or shouting, but he couldn't even bring himself to do that. He didn't even bother to work up the
anger he'd need to defend himself.

He just waited for it.

What he didn't expect, and couldn't have prepared himself for even had he tried, was being drawn
into Coach's arms with a crushing tightness. His first instinct was to struggle, as if the big man
intended to strangle him. Then a hand settled against the crown of his head, and the high-school
teacher muttered against his temple.

"Scared the shit outta me, Nick, Jesus! What were you thinkin'? Turnin' around an' seein' - my
damn heart jumped right out my chest!"

He held him, and Nick froze in the embrace, the realization of its intent sluggish to sink in.

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn." Coach hissed, half to himself. "Damn it."

The contact threatened something in him - it took something from him. He felt the falter, felt the
weakness, like he was just pile of sticks arranged in a very particular order and Coach had swiped
one right out from the center. He didn't know how to stay standing without it.

He didn't want the touch. He didn't want to need it. He didn't want Chris and Lena looking on,
gawking. He also didn't have the energy to do anything but close his eyes and let his weight shift,
resigning control.

Coach's arms tightened - just a little.

Nick couldn't bear to stand there in silence, so he croaked out, "I... froze." It was an awful excuse,
flimsy, and only a fraction of the truth.
"It's a'ight, Nick." The anger was gone, leaving a hollow, soothing tone, and Nick hated it, and hated himself for not having the energy to pull away. He hated that he needed it, and held his breath rather than speak again, afraid it might betray him more than he already had. "Just stay with us, a'ight? We gonna get out of this."

He couldn't breathe, and he might've feared the tension that kept building up behind his eyes if he didn't feel so cold, so numb. He grabbed for ego, for pride, but his nails scrabbled on slick surfaces that gave him no purchase.

He was so tired.

*I just want this to stop.*

"We need to find them." he hissed, and it was the closest he could get to begging Coach to release him. The man held firm, for just a moment, before letting him go. He locked his knees against the urge to collapse.

Coach turned away without a word. Maybe he knew he'd driven them close to some unspoken line, because his voice was suddenly firm, steps already taking him further down the hall. "Agreed."

Nick snapped into lockstep behind him, less a choice and more a simple act of reflex. If he shut his thoughts down and focused on nothing but mirroring Coach's footsteps, maybe he'd make it. Like a broken-down car on a towline.

Had Coach, or any of them, heard the name he'd spoken? It wouldn't mean anything to them, of course. Ellis was the only one who knew something - and he didn't know anything, not really. *Not the parts that matter, huh, Nick?*

*You never share those.*

He let his head droop, clenching hands on his katana, biting onto the inside of his cheek, like the sensation would ground him. Footsteps sounded behind him as Christophe and Lena silently flanked him, putting him in the center of the group.

Shame was even closer on his heels.
Chapter 250

The infected largely moved in a flow. They attracted each other in their efforts to get to the noises that attracted them, and it snowballed into the hordes that sprinted almost as one unit. Individuals rarely split from the whole, except for the heavily mutated ones that behaved much more intelligently.

As Ellis pressed close to the corner of the hallway's end and poked his head around it, rather than a scattered landscape of infected, the mall was strangely empty. The screaming and pounding that sounded behind them from the other side of the fire escape was not the only source of noise, but he couldn't see any infected.

Deeper, in the direction of the store they'd left, there was the muffled sound of numerous footsteps and heavy thudding, snarls. It sounded like infected fighting amongst themselves, and beating on something solid.

Now-brighter light streamed in from the broken atrium ceiling, focused and scattered by the soft shimmers of glass shards that coated the tile of the balcony and the lower floor. It was like the sheen of dew frozen on a cold morning. When he took a half-step forward, the tile crunched like frost-crisp grass.

The image might've made him laugh, crinkle his nose, had his heart not been pounding in his ears, fit to burst with anxiety.

The security gate to the clothing store they'd found was broken in, he could see it from where he stood. If he focused, most of the noise seemed to be coming from inside the store - but there was no gunfire, no sounds of weapons striking flesh or active combat. He could only hear infected.

"The gate's down." Rochelle ghosted next to him, leaning in close. Rhiannon had her hand gripped tightly on her shoulder, using the other woman to balance herself as she kept as much weight off her foot as possible. "God. Where are they?"

Ellis swallowed, but fear made his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth. Part of him had anticipated it, but he'd hoped, desperately, that they'd gone unnoticed in the store. "Maybe they're just holed up somewhere. Or... they got out, or somethin'... Coach would've gotten 'em out."

"Haven't heard any fuckin' shots this whole time." Rhiannon muttered in a husky tone, eyes narrowed and darting over the interior of the mall. "Feel like we would've heard it if they got in a fight."

But Rochelle shook her head, just once. "Who knows how much we could hear from outside?" she argued, a frustrated edge touching her voice, though Rhiannon didn't seem to react much to the stress-fueled aggression. "We can't assume anything right now. Let's sneak up to the store and get a look inside. We need to make sure they didn't leave anything, or a sign, or something."

Ellis knew his fingers were tightening on the handle of the baseball bat in his grip, generating the softest squeak with the sweat built up on his palms. He couldn't help the tension growing thicker and thicker in his muscles.

He tried desperately not to consider the idea that they'd been overwhelmed in the store; if they turned that corner, looked in past the broken security gate, they might find blood. Bodies.

He tried to find that old confidence, that feeling that they were invincible, that everything would be
okay. He found, instead, fear. It was depthless and vast and merciless. It clung to him, and all he
could do was swallow it - and when that simply choked him, he could only hold his breath and
wait.

But for what?

"Y'all stay behind me," he urged, already moving.

*Please be okay. All of you.*

He'd freeze up if he thought on it too long, so he didn't. He shook it off and trudged forward, trying
his best to be as quiet as possible. The glass scattered on the ground made it difficult, every step
 crunching underfoot, tripled when Rhiannon and Rochelle followed after him.

As they passed by a few shuttered stores, the noise wasn't enough to earn them any attention from
the horde - but, as always, there were exceptions.

It was the flash of bright green spittle that caught his eye, the gurgled sound coming moments
after. The second-floor balcony wrapped around the entire mall and on the other side, a Spitter
leered out from behind a slim column. It peered out, like it had been intentionally hiding there.

Dimly flashing eyes locked onto them, and before Ellis could blink, a wad of green acid was
sailing toward them, dripping flecks down into the first floor as it flew over. He jolted, shoving
back and putting both his arms up to shield his teammates.

The misshapen glob struck the wall beside them, the thin layer of membrane that held its shape
bursting open with the impact. Acid spewed free, sizzling as it glided down the wall to pool on the
floor.

It splashed outward, and though he jolted back to dodge most of it, Ellis felt a stray splatter strike
his forearm. The pain wasn't instantaneous. He thought his denim protected him, at first, and
turned his wrist to look at the green stain sprawled over his sleeve. He meant to admire the
significant change from his short-sleeved T-shirt.

Then it soaked through.

He couldn't stop himself from yelping. He didn't expect it to hurt as badly as it did - once the acid
reached his skin, the denim insulated it, pressing it in tight and close to his flesh. He couldn't
escape it, couldn't shake the worst of it off.

"Shit! Shit -"

The bat dropped from his hands, clanging on the ground as it bounced a few times before rolling to
a stop. Ferociously, like it had caught fire, Ellis shrugged his shoulders forward to fight his way out
of the jacket.

As quick as he'd begun to struggle it off, Rochelle's hands were suddenly on him, grabbing the
jacket near his shoulderblades and helping to wrench it free of him. He twisted away from her,
hopping to put his whole weight into the effort, and the sleeves went half inside-out in his hurry.

The moment he'd gotten his arm free, he gasped, shaking it out as hard as he could in the hopes of
getting at least some of the sizzling liquid off. Instinct almost had him wipe his forearm with his
other hand, but he merely clenched both his fists, restraining himself from worsening the damage.

He dared to look, and the splotch of strange green across the back of his forearm leech to a
frothy pink before his eyes. He hissed, shoulders curling inward, eyes watering gently at the too-hot, too-sharp pain. "Fuck."

"Dude, are you okay?" Rhiannon managed, voice a squawk of concern. She let Rochelle go in favour of hobbling a step closer to the balcony railing, craning her neck to look for the Spitter. The squeals and gurgling faded as it disappeared into a darkened, un-shuttered storefront. "How bad?"

Rochelle dangled the jacket beside herself, surging forward to try and look at the Georgian's wound. "Ellis -"

Gritting his teeth, Ellis dropped his arm to his side, steeling himself against the pain. There was no time. "I'll live." The acid started to sizzle out, growing inert on his skin, and the bright colour faded to a dull green, like algae. Blood welled up within the smudged border in strange patterns, like he'd grated off the top layer of his skin. "Hurts like a sum'bitch, but we gotta move."

There was a beat of silence, and he expected Rochelle to fight him on the point, to insist on looking his wound over.

Instead, she stepped behind him, taking the jacket by the wrists. Her arms slipped to frame him, looping the jacket around his waist in a quick motion and pulling the arms into a tight knot. "Let's go." she murmured, firmly, stepping back to Rhiannon's side and linking arms with her.

That startled the blonde, but she quickly adapted, allowing the gesture with a grimace. They matched paces, right leg moving with left, like their ankles were tied. "Shitfuck zombie's gone, but it'll be back. Got three minutes, tops."

Ellis barely listened, attention focused forward. He reached down to grab the banded baseball bat in his right hand, lifting his left arm and flexing his fingers. He twisted his wrist, feeling the burn and stretch of his damaged skin. Adrenaline took the edge off, at least, so he could focus.

"Ain't nothin' compared tuh how much Nick's leg must'uv hurt..."

The dark-skinned woman shot her a confused look, brow twitching up, and a flash of humour broke through the stress that had wound her like a spring. "That's... specific."

Rhiannon's voice faltered a little when she muttered back, defensively, "I've... counted, okay? It takes them some time to - it has to fuckin' - reload, or -" She growled, suddenly, tossing her hair with a sharp twist of her head. She seemed embarrassed. "Fucking forget it."

"I wasn't -" Rochelle started, but the sudden rise of screams made her freeze, voice cutting to silence. They'd stepped out in front of the hallway they'd initially gone down, the one that led to the break-room and the window they'd climbed through. Footsteps and shrieks sounded from down it, but no infected came through the still-open doorway.

The pounding from the fire escape was still just faintly audible, but there hadn't been much room to crowd around the door. Had some of the horde come back around? If that was the case, then where were they going?

Ellis hesitated, looking ahead toward the busted-in storefront, still a few yards away. If there were infected in there, then their teammates must have not been. But where else would they be? They hadn't followed after them to the roof, and if infected had broken in the gate, they'd likely come from the front of the mall.

His brain cranked, wheels spinning, and it all clicked right as motion caught his eye.
The door to the side-room, at the end of the hall, swung open - and Coach was the first to step through. Ellis gave himself just a moment to feel relief. It could've crushed him, splintered him, and it felt like pulling back from a swell of vertigo when he forced it to quiet.

Coach looked scared. Fear was not familiar on his features, and Ellis’ heart sank as fast as it had risen. Something was wrong, and all he could think was Nick. Where's Nick? Why isn't he -

Immediately, his eyes darted past the ex-football player, hunting out for more shapes. Christophe was close behind, Lena next to him, and he strained onto his toes to crane his head. Though he should have felt glad to see their faces... selfishly, desperately, he barely looked at them. If that was the last time - if the last thing we did was fight, 'n' he's -

He couldn't even think it.

Then, stepping around the other three, Nick slid into view.

Ellis' knees went weak; his breath caught in his throat. He wanted to laugh, cheer, throw his hat, but something was still wrong. If they were all alive and seemingly unharmed, then what was wrong? Why did Coach - no, he realized, all of them - look so miserable?

The older man stood there, fists clenched, shoulders low. His head was tipped to stare at the ground, body rigid, clad in dark colours that suited him almost as well as the sharp blues and whites. He did not look up, even as Ellis could not pull his gaze away.

Why did he seem ashamed? Of what, more importantly? Was it what happened in the dressing room, or something else?

Once, Ellis had stood in the doorway of a ransacked gunstore, wracked with pain, and their eyes had met. The relief of it, the peace he felt looking into Nick's eyes, realizing that they'd be okay, had knocked him off his feet. Nobody had ever looked at him like that. The ferocity with which he'd held that stare had shaken him as much as it has settled him to quiet.

Ellis had let go, blinked and darkness had swallowed him whole, because it had felt like that ferocity would hold him up. He'd surrendered himself to it... safe, finally.

The urge to give that feeling back, to do the same for Nick, to set him alight with that same wordless feeling.... he drowned in it.

But Nick didn't look up.

Ellis' body froze there, staring, feeling his brows draw together and he didn't realize his eyes were growing wet until his vision blurred. Nick, please. Just - There was nothing he could say that he hadn't already tried to say, but he knew it was in his eyes. I love you. He knew if Nick would just look at him, he could communicate it.

He barely recognized as Rochelle stepped past him, leading Rhiannon by the arm. She called out, but the words meant nothing to him. The edge of his view was faint, dark, thinning. His breathing shallowed, trying to smooth it out, to calm it when it tried to hitch.

Slowly, mechanically, Nick's chin lifted. His eyes darted toward Rochelle, then Rhiannon - and then, suddenly, they were on him. However, they lingered somewhere below his chin, steadfastly refusing to go any higher.

Just look at me. Please.
Then past him.

Then they widened.

Ellis turned without thinking, a well-trained reflex, bringing his face to bear as a small, crumpled body collided into his. Lanky, bone-thin arms and legs tangled around his neck and his shoulders, clinging, and a rank smell flooded him as the warped and sweat-slick skin of its belly pressed against his face.

The collision of the Jockey leaping up off the balcony railing and striking him should have knocked him back, closer to his team... and it did, for a step or two. However, as it gained a grip, it leaned all its weight off him and threw his balance askew in the other direction.

The pain of its knobbled fingers yanking on his hair, nails digging into his scalp, sparked a muffled shout. Before he could do anything, before he could think at all, he was staggering blindly along with its pull.

Instinct made his legs move, feet seeking out stability, unable to see anything with the Jockey clinging to his face. The insecurity of sightlessness panicked him, thrusting his arms up and clawing at the creature's back, desperate to get free of its grip.

His foot struck something solid - and even blind, he knew what it was: the short wall that bordered the balcony. Beyond it lay a thirteen foot drop to the atrium's first floor.

The Jockey's weight pulled, yanked, strength outmatching Ellis' by far despite its wiry and hunched frame. His hips hit the wall and he buckled over it, and gravity clawed at him alongside the Jockey's claws. Laughter screeched in his ear. He had, slow as molasses, the realization that he was going over the edge.

He had enough time to think, Oh, shit. Enough time to hear the crash of the fire escape door failing down the hall, and the shouts behind him, and the screams heightening as the pounding from the store suddenly halted and was replaced with footsteps.

And then he fell.
Shame, in Nick's experience, was a hot sensation. It burned, steamed, came out like sweat. It was a flush. It was something he chased with liquor, acrid and fierce, gritting teeth. It was something he chugged and woke up with a hangover from.

So why did he feel cold?

The moment Coach had released him, a chill had sunk into his bones. It was so hard to walk when his joints crackled, like they'd iced over. It was hard to focus when all he could think about was how much he was shivering.

Silence consumed the three survivors around him, and if he hadn't been so glad for the reprieve from sound, he'd have hated the bloated atmosphere. Nobody was looking at him, and that might've been worse than surreptitiously watching him.

They'd all seen through him. He'd failed, miserably, to keep any of it secret. He'd gutted himself and laid it bare for his teammates to see, and it hurt just barely less than finding out he'd been outed long ago to Rochelle.

He didn't know how to recover - and he always recovered. Even from the gutter, he'd crawl his way back up to his feet and walk away, start over. And fuck everyone you ever loved. Step on 'em, get a little higher for it, never look back.

Never fucking look back.

He'd gotten so good at it.

Until now.

Coach led them, and Nick kept his eyes firmly on the ground, only watching the other man's feet enough to guide himself along after. Couldn't find enough fucking nightmare fuel in all this? I had to go twenty fucking years back?

There had been a time - years, really - when he'd have killed to hear that voice again. Not that he'd have anything to say to me, after everything that happened. That's how it's supposed to go. That's how it works. That's how it's always worked.

Nick cared about something, and it all burned up in his hands. That was a comfortable pattern; the only pattern he knew. His failed marriage had been his one shot at something different, and he'd proven he couldn't handle it.

Nick didn't keep things he cared about.

"What are you still doing here, Nicolas?"

It was late. Almost dinnertime, but winter had the sun almost setting already.

Nick buried his hands in his coat pockets, huddling lower, trying not to appear as cold as he felt when he scowled up at the form looming over him. He sat on the stairs leading to the school's rear entrance, away from the street, where there was still a healthy crowd milling.

The truth was, of course, that Nick just didn't want to go home. His uncle would be out all night,
and he hated being in that apartment all alone. Hated, more, the idea of calling his parents to come get him.

He especially hated the arguments that call would start between the three adults.

"Waiting, Mr. Sullivan." Nick snapped back, snide, clipped to keep the shivering from coming out in his diction. "Took you long enough. 'M starving."

His history teacher laughed, voice like rusted-out metal, and he put a hand on the top of his coiled and curled red hair. His weight shifted, staring down at the thirteen-year-old seated by his feet.

It was a break in the pattern. Until now, their time had been spent sitting in the history classroom after-hours, talking, grading papers together. "Who knew my worst student wanted to TA?" he'd said, laughing in that smoke-rasped voice, continuing to laugh even when Nick kicked his leg. Hard.

Until now, it had all rested cozily within the bounds of normal.

Nick clenched his fists, unsure why he felt so scared. He waited for rejection, but hoped beyond hope he might be wrong. He didn't even know what he hoped to gain, or why he thought he'd gain it. He just knew no one else seemed to care.

He wasn't acclimated to being isolated and alone; the feeling still overwhelmed him. It hadn't sunk its teeth into him yet. He still yearned, let himself yearn. He still looked boldly into his own fears and thought he might win in the end.

He was so young.

"Chinese?" the older man offered, casual, like they did it every day. Like he had nothing better to do. He'd sit in a grungy takeaway, make a big show of texting his wife that he was going to be late planning a lesson - and maybe he knew how much it meant to Nick to feel important, even for just a moment - and they'd talk.

They'd talk about anything Nick wanted to, and nothing else. Never anything else.

It was always easy like that.

Unassuming.

"When we're not at school, though, it's just Brett."

Nick's teeth ground together, and though he tried to mask it, his footsteps stuttered. He'd long ago learned to pluck the good memories from the bad - and after years of mental distance, dust had settled on any emotions he'd once had. Or so he thought.

That tension came back, spooling behind his eyes, and he felt a vague confusion. Why did he suddenly want to cry over ages-old pain?

Because it's not about Brett, and you know it.

Christophe walked so close to him, and yet he felt miles away. The Spaniard said nothing, though Nick was sure the man had noticed his stagger. Maybe he simply knew he'd get nowhere by asking, and knew there was no point. Maybe Chris had the best understanding of him, next to Ellis.

As they walked hurriedly through the small side-room, stepping over the subtle carpet of glass
shards beneath their feet, Coach heaved a sigh of relief that made Nick's head lift. He darted a glance up, actually taking in his surroundings, and the sight of the mall's interior hallway through the cracked door.

He wanted to laugh as much as he wanted to strike himself across the cheek. He'd done nothing but get dragged along like dead weight. He may as well have been unconscious for how much he'd helped them so far. He needed to wake up.

That was how it felt, anyway; like he was asleep.

When they stepped through the door, returning into that high-ceiling atrium, and the blur of Ellis' soft blue denim came into sight... he knew he should have been happy. He felt the burst of energy in the three bodies around him as they staggered out into the hall, and he knew he should have felt it, too.

But he didn't.

He didn't feel anything but freezing cold shame, not even as Ellis stared at him. He felt the stare boiling on his skin, saw it in his periphery. The shame doubled, tripled, until it was all he could process. It stole his breath, dizzied him.

Despite that dizziness, with more clarity and coherence than he ever really had before, he thought it: *It's not about anyone else. They're just part of the same old shit, and I can't fucking do that to Ellis. Not this time. Not again. Not to him. Every time I care about someone, I hurt them, or they hurt me.*

*I just...*

"Oh my gosh." Lena's voice cracked, gently, and she brushed past him. Her urgency made him look up, but only to examine Rochelle and Rhiannon where the women were approaching them, leaving Ellis behind. The blonde was limping. "What happened?!"

Coach's hand touched his shoulder, lightly, and the sensation was distant and vague. It was some attempt at comfort, but it just landed like a numb weight. "Y'all are a'ight." he muttered, soft, like a prayer.

The Northerner couldn't stop his eyes from working their way toward Ellis. He knew he didn't want to face the look in those eyes, because he was sure he'd seen it before: the overwhelming dismay stewing in stony blue, the sadness, the desperation. The frustration. The anger. The confusion.

Nick didn't want to see it, but still his eyes lifted, roved in that direction, despite all his efforts to prevent it. He didn't want to see Ellis, and he didn't want Ellis to see him - but there was nowhere else to look.

It was movement over Ellis' shoulder that yanked his attention away before he could meet the younger man's eyes. He'd have been relieved, had he not promptly realized what he was looking at.

The Jockey's eyes glinted as it clambered up over the stone wall bordering the balcony, lurching its body into a leap.

There was no thinking involved when Nick moved. Had he been thinking, he might've noticed the sounds of infected around them. It might've changed his tactic, or at least made him balk, just for a second... or maybe that was a foolish lie. He'd stopped considering the consequences of his actions
a long time ago, and never moreso than when Ellis was involved.

Where he'd been transitioning suddenly between burning up and freezing to his core, he was, abruptly, neither. Calm enveloped him as his body lunged into a sprint, running, like he'd been previously coiled up and readied for a marathon. The ache and shudder of his muscles faded into a dull roar, irrelevant beside simple reflex.

Fireworks. That was the only word for it. He didn't realize how little he'd felt, until he felt everything. Rage and terror mixed into a strange cocktail of emotions that hit him with an explosive force, stirring his senses alive. It was painful.

He, finally, woke up.

No.

He knew, instantly, the Jockey's intent. It played out in his head well before it had even truly begun to transpire, and as he watched it happen, his fury condensed down into a single point of pain just below his sternum. No!

Coach shouted, followed by the rest of his team - a chorus of Ellis' name, of denials, of guttural cries filled with surprise and shock. He heard footsteps behind him, and he was sure that their reactions were not as delayed as he felt they were. They all ran, and seconds passed in half-time.

Ellis was bent over the wall - and tipping over, the Jockey kicking a bony foot off the rail to help leverage him over. He saw the Georgian's hands scrabbling. He was trying to grip on the balcony's rail, to slow his fall somehow, all to no avail. Ellis was dropping out of sight.

Movements smooth and feral, driven on by those fireworks blasting and popping in his ears, Nick lunged.

Unthinking, Nick's other hand released its grip on his katana as he lurched forward to pin his hips against the edge of the barrier. He didn't even hear the sound of the sword clattering to the tile, scattering glass shards as it collided and slid.

If time moved at half-speed before, it became a mere fraction of that.

Bolstered against the balcony wall, Nick thrust his arms down. His fingertips brushed the denim at Ellis' ankle, and his eyes narrowed, almost closing. He curled his fingers, snatching at the fabric, trying to get a grip on it before Ellis fell out of his reach.

Nick whipped his other arm forward to join his left, and he'd only barely gotten a grasp when the younger man's descent finally snapped his whole body taut.

He snarled, growled, roared maybe; his nails had grown long enough to peek out over his fingertips, and caught in the denim, he felt more than one tear and break. The pain didn't stop him, letting the edge of the wall cut into his pelvis as he dragged back, heels skidding against the tile floor beneath his feet.

He had Ellis by one pantleg, all of the man's weight - and the Jockey's - threatening to drag him with.

But he resisted, strained. Unfortunately, in halting his descent, Ellis' momentum carried him to crash flat into the other side of the barrier. Nick heard a crack of flesh on stone, and fear tried to burn his insides to ash at the sound. Fuck - shit! Was that the Jockey? It had to be! It was on his face, it had to be!
It was the blast of a shotgun that caught his attention, though it didn't wander for more than a split-second. There were infected bearing down on them from both sides, he knew, but he could do nothing. The only option he had was to depend on the survivors behind him to protect him.

He was forced to lean forward as it took every ounce of strength he had to keep from losing his grip or going over himself. Through his grimaced squint of exertion, he darted his eyes downward.

The Jockey hung upside-down from Ellis' shoulders, and it wrenched its body up to leer at him, bugged-out eyes dried to a visibly gritty texture. Its tongue lolled, trying to work its way through a gap where its teeth had fallen from its stretched gums. A cackle left it, wheezed and soft, frightened, like Nick had gotten the upper hand.

As it started to twist around, getting its gnarled fingers tangled in the jacket looped around Ellis' waist, Nick couldn't stop himself from looking past it. "Fuck!"

Ellis dangled limply, arms jolting as the Jockey shifted its grip on him. Nick could see enough to see blood dripping up the side of his face, curving along his cheek and past his temple. He was not moving.

He realized, somewhere, that the Jockey must've darted out of the way of the collision, let its grip loosen to swing around and cling against the back of Ellis' head instead. The Jockey saw it coming and dodged it, letting Ellis take it, instead.

Oh, Jesus.

The hobbled infected suddenly crawled up Ellis' hanging form, moving with a deftness that did not match its emaciated frame. Every time its weight shifted, Nick felt his body strain a little harder. He couldn't let go, not when he was only just holding the Georgian aloft as it was, and couldn't defend himself.

In time to the thought, a body pressed against his, and he darted his eyes to see Rochelle wielding her katana as she leapt to bend over the wall. She jabbed down with it, catching the tip in the Jockey's hobbled shoulder.

It screamed, and the strike made its hands flash up, grabbing for the blade. It missed, and its surrendered grasp on Ellis' body shook its sense of balance. It had unlocked its legs from around Ellis in order to move, and when it grabbed for purchase, it grabbed the jacket tied at his waist.

The moment its weight came fully onto the denim jacket, the knot yanked loose. With a yelp like a kicked dog, it fell, the jacket gripped in its hands. Nick might've watched it hit the ground, gloried in whatever damage was caused to it by the fall, had Ellis not been dead weight in his grasp.

He didn't see it land on its back, weight striking first on its shoulders, and its head soon after colliding with the tile. He didn't see its body go still in an instant, terribly still, as its neck cracked under its skin.

He had other concerns.

"Help -" he snarled, but Rochelle was already reaching, the katana once again tossed by the wayside. Her hands circled Ellis' leg, and they both heaved, struggling together with strained breaths.

It was not easy. Rochelle was not weak, and adrenaline fueled both of them, but Ellis was completely limp in their grasp. Even had he been light-weight - which he was not - getting him up and over the barrier was going to be difficult.
The only mercy came when they'd gotten him a little further up, and Nick was able to jolt his left hand down, hooking it in his jeans' rear pocket. The added leverage helped, and the closer they pulled him, the more they were able to loop their arms around him entirely.

Nick and Rochelle dragged him over the balcony's border wall, and both of them collapsed, all three forms sliding to the ground amidst the broken glass. Ellis slumped into the wall, and before he could even think about restraining himself, Nick jolted forward, his hands gripping the younger man's face.

He barely noticed when Rochelle recoiled, and didn't care to pay her any attention. She grabbed the katana, gone as quickly as she'd appeared, and the sounds of his own blade striking flesh only just pierced his awareness.

*Jesus. Thank fuck, he's breathing, at least...*

Ellis' expression was vapid, empty, like he was deeply asleep. His lip was split near the edge, but most of the blood came from a scrape that centered mainly on his jawline, like he'd taken the blow with his head turned. Abrasions ran from his jaw, over his cheek, and across his temple, all bleeding gently.

They were all minor - cosmetic. However, Nick didn't waste time being relieved about that, when the blow itself had knocked him out. "Kid." he hissed, using the thumb of the hand that cradled his undamaged jaw to tap on his cheekbone, both his hands jostling him, softly. "Kid, you gotta -"

Ellis did not respond.

Turning his head gently, Nick stole a glance behind himself. The other survivors had formed a loose semicircle around them, Coach and Rhiannon on the left, with Lena, Rochelle, and Christophe on the right. The flood of infected from either direction on the balcony was no full-strength horde, but he caught glimpses of enough to know it took all they had to keep them back.

Lena had slung out her brush-hook again, and her body stiffened against its weight as she lashed out in wide swings, slicing the sharp blade through multiple infected with each strike. Chris' handgun stuck half out of the pocket of his cargo shorts, and he'd instead taken his machete back from the brunette beside him.

Rhiannon stood with Ellis' shotgun, weight balanced on her uninjured foot, and Coach had his double-barrel. They shot in a battery, each blast taking hunks out of the cloud of bodies before them.

Rochelle split the difference, head constantly twisting to check and find the spot where a zombie was about to get through, where the flow was almost out of control, and she'd dart in a flash to control it. There was gritted tension on her face, muffled fear, and it did not fade even as the horde petered out around them.

Absurdly, Nick wanted to laugh.

_They'd be doing fine without you. All you did was put Ellis in this position. All you did was fuck him up enough that this happened. He stood there like an idiot, because of you, because all you've done is fuck everything up, from day one._

When he looked back, he couldn't even muster up surprise when Ellis' eyelids were gently flickering, stirring, drifting back to consciousness. Couldn't even be glad, or relieved, or any of the things he should have been. _And why should I be? This is my fucking fault. Fuck... he's right, isn't_
The tension behind his eyes rose, tightening, clenching his chest in a knotted mass that he was too afraid to look at, too afraid to put a name to. It rose, peaked - and then was once again overwhelmed by that cold sensation.

I'm just protecting myself. If I was protecting him, how'd this shit happen? How'd any of this happen?

Steeling himself with a clenched jaw, Nick let go of the younger man's face, shoving an arm between him and the half-wall behind him. He nudged his shoulder under Ellis' armpit, tangling fingers in the grey T-shirt he wore. "Gotta get you up. " he muttered, to himself more than anything else.

He lifted, hard, and Ellis' feet shifted sluggishly to flatten against the tile, drunkenly. He was only fractionally aware, responding on physical instinct more than conscious thought. Ellis' plush lips moved, ghosting the outline of a word.

Nick couldn't pretend it didn't look like his name.
Chapter 252

Ellis was slow to stir. Awareness came in pieces, at first, clouded and foggy.

He knew he was walking, though that was a strange thing to realize when it felt like he'd just woken up. It was more like the ground was slipping away under his feet, and he had to keep his feet moving or lose his balance. He stumbled, staggered, but did not fall.

It took him a moment to process why. There was a body flattened against his - or, more accurately, his body was slumped into someone else's.

He blinked his eyes open, vision blurring for a moment before coming into focus. When he tried to lift his head to look toward the warmth he leaned into, his head throbbed in a piercing ache, and he flinched it back down. Still, his gaze drifted, and from that angle he could see enough of the body beside his to recognize Nick leaned into him.

That seemed normal, right up until he remembered it wasn't.

"Nick -" he managed, feeling a burst of nausea right after the words. His toe caught on something, staggering, and Nick's hand suddenly gripped into his chest to keep him upright.

When Nick spoke, it was so loud, Ellis' brain spun. "You hit your head. Keep walking." That brought up vague flashes of memory, lining into unsteady order: the Jockey and the sensation of falling, then the cessation of that falling and a blinding pain. On top of it all was one, solid fact.

Ellis mumbled it, a statement more than a question. "You saved me."

The Northerner didn't say anything.

The more Ellis' vision cleared, the better view of his surroundings filtered in. They were walking across the balcony, sidling up toward the escalators, and Ellis peered over his shoulder to see the rest of their team walking behind them.

"- crashed." Rochelle was in the middle of saying, voice coarse with frustration. "I don't know why, or... there was nothing we could do. It looked like they were going to land, too."

Beside her, Coach was shaking his head, eyes low. "It was a long shot, babygirl. Y'all did good gettin' back." His arm was tucked loosely around Rhiannon's shoulders, helping the blonde walk through her limp. She was pressed nearly as close to him as Ellis was to Nick. "We just got the home stretch now."

"Anyone see that Spitter?" Rhiannon's voice muttered, to no response. "I thought the shit'd be back by now."

Not looking forward made him stumble again, but Nick had never removed his hand from Ellis' chest, and the grip held him up. His hand was so warm, even through the fabric of his shirt. Slowly, Ellis lifted his gaze, landing it on Nick's face.

His expression was gritted, strained, yet so exhausted. Bruising had crept around his eyes; had it been there mere hours before? Ellis wasn't sure. He just knew Nick was so close, close enough to brush lips against his cheek... and he wanted to.

Instead, Ellis slumped his head, settling it against his own bicep where it was slung over Nick's
shoulders. His forehead made contact with the gambler's jaw, and if he'd been less dizzy, he might've thought twice about the gesture. As it was, it soothed him, and he leaned into it.

"Thank yuh." he sighed, softly.

Again, there was no response - but did the hand on his chest tighten a little? Did the arm crossing his back go rigid? He was too scattered to tell, so he merely soaked up the sensations and filed them away, something that he could mull over later. His head pulsed, a headache forming like his very skull were throbbing, and sharper pain started to form on his cheek and the side of his face.

Gently, uncertainly, Ellis started to take the steps below them. He managed, though Nick bore most of his weight, and he was sure he'd have fallen otherwise.

Behind them, Rochelle watched with a bitten lower lip, anxiety making her sigh. As much as she wanted to intervene, at least to check on Ellis, seeing the men so close brought on a conflicted set of emotions.

First, of course, was relief that they'd all reunited, Nick included. Then came anger, because she hadn't forgotten Ellis' tear-stricken face in the clothing store. Then - ever so reluctantly - came hope. Maybe a close call like that was what Nick needed to jog sense into him.

Or it'll just get Ellis excited for no reason.

She frowned, rolling her eyes in a tight gesture, sighing. At least for now, she'd leave it alone. They had bigger concerns, and she couldn't be anything but glad that Nick had jumped so instantly into action. God, I don't want to think about what would've happened if he hadn't. I should've been looking.

A hand brushed her arm, and she darted her eyes to find Christophe walking beside her, machete tucked under his armpit. "¿Estás bien, bonita?" he murmured, knuckles gently stroking down the sleeve of her purple sweatshirt, a soothing gesture.

Rochelle wasn't so oblivious that she didn't notice the stressed tightness around his eyes. She knew she didn't know him - not really - but she had outlines of him. She had the caricature he'd put forth with his old team, and she had the vulnerable and broken shell of him that had surfaced after his amputation. She had, too, the soft sincerity that he had shown in increasing vibrancy.

Plotting between those vague ideas had given her an understanding of who he was, in the simplest terms, and what was normal. She knew enough to know when he was worried, and that it had nothing to do with his own situation.

Maybe he was thinking the same thing as she was. He was just as worried about Ellis' wellbeing, after all.

"I'm okay, sweetie. Thanks." she returned, twisting her hand to catch his. The flush of colour to his face was a little satisfying as she let her fingers tangle loosely with his, squeezing. "Did something happen while we split up? You guys seem, uh, -"

Before anything more could leave her lips, Chris' expression fell into a grimace, and his voice dropped to a cracked hoarseness. "Ay, chica... Es demasiado." There was a bitterness, a sadness, and she frowned instinctively. "Maybe later, when we are safe."

Rather than argue, she darted a glance toward Coach. The big man was looking at them and, grimly, he nodded. It was that slow nod that she'd come to know very well: We'll talk, it said.
It just made her more nervous.

They filed in close, following Nick and Ellis down the escalator, Rochelle picking up speed to close the gap between her and the two men. She didn't fully process that she hadn't let go of Chris' hand, dragging him along with, and the Spaniard didn't seem inclined to say anything.

Or, more specifically, anything he meant her to understand - as they quick-stepped down the escalator, he murmured behind her, "Tienes que dejar de ser tan bonita, cariño."

Her eyes drifted over Nick's back, taking stock of his posture. She had to remind himself that a portion of the issue upon the helicopter's arrival was that Nick had seemingly closed himself up in the dressing room. She knew they'd argued, but about what? That, and she'd seen his face before the Jockey had shown up.

I've never... seen him look like that. I don't know how to describe it. Like he wasn't really there, like he was so far in his head, he couldn't get out. He's always kept up the bullshit, even when he was scared, or angry. He's always got something to say. Where's that guy now? She wanted to be furious with him, but she mostly felt concern. Hate to say it, but I do love the douchebag. He's the big brother I never wanted, and I really want to kick the shit out of sometimes.

And, Christ, I just want him to be happy.

The urge to laugh died out quickly, as did her resolve to mind her own business.

"Is he okay, Nick?" she murmured, hesitation colouring her voice. She felt Chris' fingers go tight on hers, nails digging in gently like a warning, but she ignored the gesture and persevered. Inlaid into the words, unspoken but just under the surface, was a soft gratitude. "That was so close..."

Nick's head dipped, smoothly, and it seemed like a quiet sigh. When he spoke, it was flat, matter-of-fact. It might've been aggressive had he sounded less tired and empty. "He's got a fucking concussion, so, no."

"'M fine." the Georgian protested, a soft mumble, his head lifting slightly. He turned his head to look backwards, and she got a better look at the scrapes down the side of his face, as well as the vagueness to his eyes. "Just dizzy, is all - I'll be fine."

Coach's voice raised over them, grunted. "Considerin' the alternative, I'll take concussed." He did not sound pleased, not that Rochelle could blame him. Very little of the day had gone how they wanted. "But between Ellis an' Rhiannon, now... need to get our asses back to base, let 'em get some rest."

Rochelle grimaced, squinting her eyes half-shut. "Why does it feel like one step forward, two steps back, every time we go out...? Clothes weren't worth this."

"We got information... the map, I mean." was Lena's gentle response. The biker's hazel eyes wandered over the team, idly at first. When Rochelle snuck a glance at her, she noticed the other woman's gaze had settled squarely on Nick and Ellis as the two men reached the bottom of the escalators and stepped off to the side.

That raised an interesting question. Rochelle had been conscious of the two's previous relationship for what felt like forever, and it had become second nature to read into gestures, looks, comments. It seemed obvious to her, but how obvious was it, in reality? And how hard should she have been working to keep the secret?

Would the bikers finding out drive Nick to a fresh panic?
But Lena did not seem fazed, didn't stumble, continuing earnestly. "And we're going to find that helicopter crash, aren't we?"

That balked her. Rochelle quickly looked over the faces she could see, searching out an answer, fumbling even as she did. Christophe's eyes widened with a quiet fear, and Coach looked grimly uncertain. "Uh - shit. I didn't think that far ahead. Do you think someone survived?"

Ellis' small voice sighed out, "There was smoke. Dunno."

"It was the military?" the Spaniard muttered, weakly, huffing out a gentle breath like descending the escalator had winded him. Rochelle turned around as she stepped off the escalator, and their fingers dropped away from each other as he re-gripped his machete in his hand. "Do you know this?"

Rochelle hesitated, but Rhiannon piped up, instead. Pain was clear as day in her voice, gripping tight onto Coach's forearm as she hop-stepped down off the frozen escalator. "Yeah, dude. It was a Navy chopper. It even had turrets - and am I the only one who fucking shit myself, seeing that? What's the universal sign for 'I'm not a zombie'?"

"Y'all." Suddenly, Coach's voice was gritted. There was a slight jolt, in unison, that passed through the rest of the survivors, and Rochelle quickly looked up at the heavyset man. His jaw was clenched, gaze distant, and a mournful edge touched his voice. "Can we just focus?"

A tender frown quirked at her lips, and she nodded, raising her voice. "Coach is right. We've got a lot to worry about. Let's talk about this later, okay?"

They were all going to have to cope with the near-miss with rescue, and preferably when they were back safe at their current base. Driving each other to a breakdown in the middle of the mall was not optimal.

Rochelle opened her mouth, intent on saying something to redirect the conversation, but the opportunity was stolen from her.

She didn't miss the way Rhiannon swung her weight, jostling the ex-football player who had her in a one-armed grip in playful antagonism. She definitely didn't miss the subtle light that flickered on his eyes, a flash of subdued humour in the blonde's direction. The lanky biker let him go, then, pulling her bat from under her arm.

"Let's go, then. I'm hungry."

Lena snorted, loudly, drawing a dark look from the blonde.

"What, asshole?"

Rochelle's nose crinkled, biting back a laugh when Lena rolled her eyes. She genuinely wasn't sure when Coach and Rhiannon had bonded, but she wasn't about to complain. *Even if I have no idea how they're getting along, but Nick and Coach fight like cats. At least she has a little humility sometimes.*

All of them moved, advancing - except Nick. Even Ellis started to take a stumble-step forward, but the gambler stood rooted where he was, chin low. Rochelle blinked at him, startled at the tension radiating off his frame.

"Wh-" the Georgian started to mumble, startled, but Nick cut him off.
"His stuff. He lost his jacket and his hat."

Rochelle needed to really process it for a moment, blinking dumbly. She didn't know what threw her more: the information, or the way Nick said it. He sounded... ashamed.

Then it all flooded into coherence; it all made sense, all clicked. The look on his face and the hunch to his shoulders, the way he'd stood there in Coach's shadow and looked so small. It was shame. And not the ferocious shame that had almost driven him to run out into the dark of night, all alone, that one night - this was crushingly heavy.

It dragged him down, turned him to stone. He barely functioned under it. He didn't get angry; he just faltered, wilted.

She'd never seen him like that.

It froze her, and she could only watch as Ellis slowly recognized the truth behind the words, his hand darting up with abrupt speed to touch his bare curls. Genuine panic flashed across his face, and if she hadn't known how attached he was to his hat, she might've thought it was mostly the concussion. He jolted, seized, and half-turned around before Nick grabbed the wrist of his other arm to keep him still.

"Stay here, dumbshit." the Northerner hissed, quietly.

Before Rochelle's eyes, Ellis seemed to slowly come into the awareness of just how much contact there was between them. He looked, slowly, at the hand gripping his wrist - and where his arm lay over Nick's shoulder - and the other hand grasping just at his ribs -

Loudly, Chris offered up, "Espera, tío. I get it!" He bolted at a slight jog, glass crunching under his white flat-top sneakers, toward the Jockey's corpse. It still had the jacket gripped loosely in its knotted hands, and Ellis' hat was a small lump just a few feet away.

The Spaniard bit onto the handle of his machete to free his hand to collect both, one at a time. He shook them clean of what glass shards had gotten stuck in the fabric, placing the hat on top of his head and slinging the jacket over his good shoulder. He returned, beaming around the wood handle, walking right up to where Ellis stood.

As he came close, Nick suddenly side-stepped, using the grip he had on Ellis to push him into a firm step backward. It was too tender to be a shove, Nick supporting him through it even as he forced the Georgian away. Maybe they'd both realized how close they were.

Despite the support, dizzied, Ellis staggered a little as he was pushed into Christophe. His expression fell to a gentle confusion, and the Spaniard scrambled to loop his arm around him. He grunted, insistently, forcing Ellis to look at him rather than look after Nick.

When Chris bobbed his chin, Ellis frowned gently and reached up to take the machete from his mouth. Freed, the Spaniard let his slim eyebrows waggle underneath the low-set bill of the trucker cap and murmured, "Ay. I get you, too, ¿sí?"

Ellis didn't laugh, but he smiled a little, dropping his eyes to the ground rather than look up.

As Nick turned away, shaking his head, Rochelle got a better look at his face. He looked pale, washed-out, the contrast driven to further exaggeration by the dark colours he'd changed into. "Where's my katana?" he sighed out, hollow. "We should get moving."

None of it made sense. Ellis had been in danger before, plenty of times, and Nick had been
responsible for some of those times. It had never crushed him - he'd just gotten angry. And unless a lot more happened in the dressing room than Ellis had let on, nothing had happened to change things so drastically.

*What the hell happened while we were gone?*
Chapter 253

Holding his breath, Nick let himself blink a few times.

Unfortunately, after each flash of darkness, the scene before him didn't change.

It was not news that the helicopter had attracted infected. The scope of it, however, came as a shock. Nick stood just before the busted front doors of the mall, body slumped and katana scraping the tile flooring, eyes drifting over the square. Zombies milled around the tents, wandering outside the fenced-in queue that gated off the mall's entrance.

Ten. Twenty. Thirty. More, but he lost count. They wandered, snarls and little shrieks announcing their arguments, lashing out at each other when they came too close. Agitated energy was in the air, like they had not fully come down from the excitement that had led them to the mall in the first place. He looked out into the square and could feel nothing beyond quiet distress.

*If it's like this everywhere, if survivors are in the single digits compared to all these infected... How can you come back from that?*

"A'ight." was murmured behind him, though he didn't turn to face it. Soft footsteps gathered a few feet away, as the rest of his team huddled close to Coach, voices low. "We gotta get out of here, an' we ain't in the best shape. Ideas?"

There was a beat of silence that hung thickly in the air, regretful, before Rochelle sighed heavily in a frustrated gesture. "I know we're not at full strength, but we can take a horde. We just did."

Coach must have given her some sort of look, because her voice pitched a little, defensive. "The fencing is gonna slow them down, and we're sitting in a chokepoint."

Quietly, Coach returned, "We don't even know how many there are out there. Whole mall might be surrounded."

At that, Nick turned his head, just enough to look over his shoulder. His eyes ticked over to where Chris and Ellis stood, leaned into one another, and he couldn't stop a sluggish protest from boiling over in his gut. The contact between them frustrated him almost as much as seeing Ellis' hat on Chris' head - and that was a stupid, childish jealousy.

As desperate as he'd been to get the kid out of his arms, away from him, he felt desperate to reverse the decision. The sound of Ellis' breathy gratitude, the temple pressing into his jaw, soft and warm... He'd finally felt a break in that overwhelming nothing, previously only overshadowed by that empty shame that had threatened to swallow him. Without him, the cold crept back in, and it frightened him.

It sat on his shoulder and chewed on him, nibbled slowly but voraciously, like rats on a corpse in an abandoned attic.

Rhiannon lifted a hand, fingers half-splayed in an open gesture. "Look." she drawled out. "Lee and I have been dodging hordes for a living. You can't handle a lot with just two fuckin' people. If they're already on you, it's hard as shit - hiding doesn't work, and you can't outrun the fuckers."

Folding an arm behind Rhiannon's back to support her, Lena glanced around seriously. Her soft face was unable to harshen into anything truly intimidating, and she cut in with a gentle and leading tone of voice. "But, the creeps aren't on us. Not yet. So we distract them, draw the bulk away."
Rochelle frowned, tightening her fingers on Ellis' pump shotgun. She looked out into the square through the shattered front doors, teeth worrying at her lower lip. "Okay, sure. But unless you guys have another one of those alarm pipebombs, how?"

Before Lena could open her mouth, her sister was in motion. Smoothly, Rhiannon spun on her heel, keeping her injured foot up a few inches off the ground. She halted upon facing Christophe, who went wide-eyed in a flash as the blonde lifted up both hands, aiming dual finger-guns in his direction.

She grinned. "You're up, hot stuff."

Instantly, Chris tightened his arm around Ellis, dragging a foot back a half-step in a defensive gesture. He looked genuinely concerned, darting his gaze around as if hunting for support, but found only confusion and Coach biting back a wary laugh. "¿Qué?! What I do?"

Rhiannon seemed vaguely disappointed, rolling her eyes and dropping one hand. The other lifted, pointing insistently down at his hip. "Your pocket, dude." she hissed, put out, like he'd missed a cue in a skit.

He blinked down, staring at his cargo shorts pocket. It took him a moment - that much was obvious - and when he finally moved, it was slow with a lack of comprehension. His arm pulled away from Ellis' waist, digging into his left pocket, and when he pulled it back out he had a set of keys dangling from his fingers.

Confusion bolted across the team, Rochelle's expression in particular darting into a scrunch. "Where'd...?" she managed. "Where'd you get those?"

Shifting on his heels, Chris gripped the keys in a tight fist to stop them from jangling. "Ah, while we were in the tent... I found it on a body, the police. But how do we get to the cars?" He squinted, peering out from under Ellis' capbill, muttering out a clipped, "No veo cómo eso puede ayudar..."

"The police vans?" When Chris nodded, Coach rolled his shoulders to a low slump, shaking his head. "Even if we got to 'em, the road was a mess comin' in. Ain't drivin' back the way we came. We'd have to find a detour back to base, off the main road, while losin' all these zombies."

With a groan, Rhiannon put a knuckle into the corner of her eye just at the bridge of her nose, screwing it there as if to grind out a headache. "I gotta wipe your ass, too?" she grunted. "Look, we don't need wheels, we just need a way out. Shit's got a panic button, doesn't it?"

Understanding blossomed in a two-fold wave. First came that subtle eagerness, latching onto a solution to their predicament. Then, slower, came discomfort, as the memory surfaced of the last time they'd experienced a car's security system weaponized. It was difficult to forget, as was everything that came before.

Nick watched the shift happen, turning his body entirely around. The thought ping-ponged from Rochelle to Coach, both of them biting back frowns and looking reflexively toward Christophe, and then it hit Ellis.

Unfortunately, Ellis was nursing a concussion, and critical thinking came slowly behind his excitement. "Oh, shit!" he uttered, gently lifting his hand to press a palm into his sternum. He looked to Rochelle, oblivious to the warning that lit in her eyes. "Like how Brenda got that horde on us, 'n' -"

It was the stiffening of the body next to him that made Ellis realize his mistake. Context wasn't
necessary; Chris knew full well that there was only one altercation between them and his old leader that he hadn't been a part of. He knew the circumstances, and the outcome. None of it had been kept secret - except for Brenda's dying words, of course.

That didn't lessen the visible flinch that dropped Chris' chin.

Ellis was out of it, but not so completely that he didn't catch on eventually. The sound he made was a mortified hiss of air, pulling it in between his teeth and his lower lip so it crackled a bit. "O-oh. Uh. I only meant... Chris, man, I..."

"It is okay." muttered the young ex-Angel, although the words were betrayed by the half-step he took to the side, putting some distance between them. The look in his honey-brown eyes was little more than a melancholy sort of distance, resigned, and he forced a soft laugh. "It is a good plan. She... had good plans." An awkward tone crept into his voice, like he regretted every word as he spoke it.

Hesitantly reaching out, Ellis quickly forced his hand back down, ducking his chin in visible self-beratement. "Sorry..." he mumbled, softly, wincing his eyes shut, and Nick watched the slow tug of pain drag his shoulders down. He knew, without a doubt, that it was not physical. Was he thinking about Chris' suicide attempt? Afraid, perhaps, to bring up painful memories? "I wasn't thinkin'."

Slowly looking around in the uncomfortable silence that followed, Rhiannon let her fingers clench in claw-like shapes, frustration leaking through the gesture. She turned at the waist, eyes narrowed, and gave Lena a thin grimace. It screamed, "Well, I tried."

Raising both hands, the brunette warily took a step back. "Cripes, guys. I know you all have stuff going on, and I get that we're not in the loop. But let's get out of this, okay? We're all frickin' stressed, and we're all frickin' tired, but we need to buck up right now." Her eyes moved distinctly to Nick, and drifted slowly toward Coach. "We gonna do this, or what?"

"Agreed." Coach muttered, grimly, looking ahead to the mall's front doors. "I'm not sure if this'll work, but it's a better plan than runnin' out there guns blazin'."

With a frown, Rochelle crossed her arms, fingers flexing on the stun baton in her left hand. "So we set the car off, and it brings all the infected from around the mall - plus more. What then?" She flung her fingers out without uncrossing her arms, gesturing out to the square beyond the mall's entrance. "They'll come running, but the car isn't going to hold their attention when they see us."

Ellis pressed the palm of his hand against his jaw, wincing as he applied pressure to the gently bleeding wounds there. "Only thing that'll keep 'em busy is that puke stuff. They go crazy fer that, don't pay no mind tuh anythin' else."

"And we don't have any of that." Rochelle lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes. She turned entirely around, looking back into the mall with a quick puff of air from her lips. "Okay, so we go out the back. There was a fire escape up to the roof from the second floor, and there's probably a back door on the first floor, too."

Lena touched a knuckle to her jaw, tapping it there, thought parsing out into an expression of thin agreement. "It'll cut line of sight to the zeds out front, too. Maybe enough that we can circle around and dodge most of them. Even if some of them catch us, the noise'll cover the sound of us fighting. Damage control."

Coach shrugged up his shoulders, nodding in the same gesture. "If none of y'all got a better idea, let's do it."
He surveyed the faces around him, looking for protest, and landed finally on Nick's. Their eyes met and a muted concern blared to life in Coach's eyes; the gambler hadn't said a word. No jibes, no snorted complaints. The man was looking on and listening, clearly, and he seemed more together and composed than he had earlier, but still - he stood silent.

"Nick?" he prompted, despite knowing better. He needed to test the waters, to throw that stone and listen for the sound of it hitting something in the darkness that loomed beyond. Gauging, probing.

Nick's expression darkened, lips going tight in a pinched look. His chin lowered, eyes breaking from Coach's to focus instead on the tile floor, off-white smeared with red and black from their first pass through the hallway. "Seems fine." he bit off, so quiet that it might've not carried had the hall not echoed it.

It was not the response Coach wanted, but it was the one he expected. Nick had always laboured for the appearance of apathy, along with spite and caustic sarcasm. He had none of it, now. He seemed to be wielding most of his energy just to keep himself upright, like a single tentpost holding up a canvas structure. The facade of stability, at best.

"Ain't the first - or gonna be the last - thing I ever wondered about the boy... but who the hell is Brett? An' the hell's behind all this shit? Ain't just Ellis, what happened in that dressing room. Don't know what it was, though."

He wasn't sure he'd get an answer, even if he pressed. Just... keep focused. Time fo' that shit later.

Coach frowned, sighed, but turned his attention to Chris before the silence that followed could drag on. He reached out a hand and set it on the Spaniard's shoulder - though it landed almost more on his neck, his clavicle, staying well away from the bandaged stump now cloaked by the open sleeve of his green polo shirt. "'Aight, son. You ready to ring the dinner bell?"

Tentatively nodding, Christophe let his thumb rub against the red button on the bottom of the key fob, emblazoned with an icon of a trumpet. "We will need to run, ¿sí? Is everyone ready?"

Inhaling a reedy breath, Nick forced himself to move, striding to close the gap he'd created between him and the rest of the team. He didn't stop, continuing on, swinging his katana up to place the dull back against his shoulder - nor did he bother to speak. His motion prompted the others to join him, and as everyone started to turn back into the mall, there was a soft click as Chris pressed the button.

Then, stillness, when nothing at all happened.

No alarm, no siren. Not even a honk.

There was an awkward moment where nobody wanted to break the silence, before the Spaniard released a weak laugh. "Esto es lo que llaman tener 'mala suerte'." he whined out, sighing, squinting his eyes to look up toward his teammates as they slowly turned back around. "Plan C?"

Nick swept a hand up, pressing his thumb into his right eye and the rest of his fingers into his left, squeezing. "Of fucking course." he muttered, wryly, looking into the stars and fireworks that sparked at the pressure to his eyeballs. "Just great."

Coach released a heavy sigh, shaking his head in a tense gesture. He lowered his shotgun from where he'd raised it, prepared to bolt, and turned back to glare out through the mall's front doors. "Car's dead, maybe?" he grunted.

In a fluster, Ellis staggered a step closer, reaching out to gently pluck the set of keys from Chris'
hand. He turned them over in his hand, peering at the fob uncertainly. "Uh, well... Maybe. But if that's the case, then the whole plan's shot tuh hell, anyway." He pressed the unlock button, twisting it around to look in vain into the small plastic bead jutting out from the plastic.

Ellis' eyes cleared a little, brightening as he mulled it over. "It's probably just low on battery, or somethin'. Or it's usin' an IR sensor - they ain't got much distance on 'em, 'n' you need tuh point it right at the thing fer it tuh work." With a loll of his head, he gripped the fob between his thumb and his forefinger, smacking it into the meat of his palm. "We ain't got a clear shot tuh the vans, unless we go outside."

Ellis turned his head, looking back toward Coach with a worried half-frown. The gesture left him ill-equipped to react when Chris suddenly snagged the keys back from him.

With an angled grin, eyes gently lighting below slim brows, the Spaniard turned to face the team arrayed out a few feet deeper in the mall. "¡Sólo hay una forma de averiguarlo!" he uttered in a stage whisper, cheeriness crashing into him all at once. "Wish me luck, amigos." He flashed a wink from under the bill of Ellis' cap, at no particular person, and bolted.

Ellis lurched for him, but reacted too slowly, fingers closing on air as the Spaniard moved on light steps toward the front doors of the mall. Rochelle, too, started to move, but Coach had her by an elbow before she'd made it more than a few steps. She twisted around as if to fight him, but he held firm. The sudden gesture froze the entire team, and nobody advanced when Coach spoke.

"Fussin' is only gonna bring them zombies' eyes over here." he hissed, low, and her eyes widened a little. "Let him try. He ain't goin' far."

Frustrated, Rochelle jerked her chin back around to watch as Chris ducked through one of the doorframes, just empty metal around the remnants of broken glass shards. He picked his way over the glass with some success, moving mostly through the footsteps they'd left behind that had disturbed the glass. Their previous passage left him places to step that weren't terribly noisy.

Chris escaped out onto the stonework in front of the mall, where the soft U shape of the building and the cap of metal fencing at the end sheltered him. No zombies had come in that far and not ended up inside the mall itself. He darted instantly to the side, pressing close against the leftmost wall, creeping carefully toward the end of the mall's entranceway, where the square opened up in all directions.

If he could get to the edge, aim the fob out around the corner of the building, directly at the crowd of vehicles...

Nick watched from where he stood, feeling a drained sort of agitation. Don't get killed, kid. Vague anger was all he could muster.

I owe you a slap, still.
Chapter 254

Slow and light, delicate, Chris crept along the adobe stone wall that pressed into his back. He couldn't fight the quick breaths that passed in and out of his chest, shallow enough that his fingertips went numb, as if in the subtlest suffocation. It had been a consistent feeling surging through him since he'd stepped through the dressing room doors to find Nick, collapsed on the floor.

His first thought, of course, had been that Nick was dead.

The panic that flooded him was not wholly unfamiliar, but the feelings that had surrounded that panic were.

When Jerry had died, he'd felt mostly disbelief. Shock, like a world-view had been upended rather than a man's life. When Rochelle had told him Brenda was dead, he'd felt resignation. Walking away from her had been a death sentence in its own right, and he'd known that. That choice had already been made, as far as he was concerned.

This was like heartache, like the thought punched into his chest and gripped his heart with cold claws.

Once, Phil had placed a hand on his shoulder and met his gaze with those mulled, dark eyes. They were so intensely brown that they seemed to be nothing but black, pupil indistinguishable from the iris. They'd held his gaze, firm, and he'd felt fear before he'd known what was going on.

He'd not truly realized the situation he'd gotten himself into until that moment. Until Phil quietly spoke - "Sean's dead." - it hadn't really hit him.

Chris had almost fallen to his knees. He'd almost started to cry. Brock's death and the subsequent splintering of their team hadn't shook him, but losing Sean was like losing an arm. It was a comparison he could make now, after all, and it held true.

It wasn't just the death. It was knowing, without a doubt, that it was his fault.

But before he could so much as wobble, Phil's knuckles had been striking into his jaw. He'd gone down with no resistance, hitting the ground, and a numbness had settled in as he'd looked up to find all eyes on him. If he squinted, they might've been wolfish, glittering red in the darkness as Brenda and Jerry looked down on him.

It was the first time he'd truly bled in front of them, shown real weakness, and for a moment he thought they might pounce - then Phil had gotten him by the collar, dragged him upright to mutter in his ear.

"Don't let them see."

Distraigo. Desvío.

And Christophe had swallowed that instruction like a pill, took it between his molars and crushed it and gulped down the chalky aftertaste. He'd burnished anew his outer shell, the protection of humour and loud exuberance, but a hollowness had grown beneath it that he'd never felt before.

The thought of Ellis being dead had taken his legs out from under him, again. When he'd dropped to his knees and grabbed for Nick's wrist, certain he would feel no pulse, it was all he could do not
to break into sobs.

Rochelle had held his hand and he'd wanted to bring it to his lips and kiss it, bury against it, pull her into whatever embrace he could manage with only one arm...

He loved his new team. Maybe he'd never really be part of their insular family, not really - but he loved them. He'd love them like he'd loved Sean, and this time, he'd fight for them. He'd do whatever it took to keep them safe.

He'd die, if that was what had to happen, for any of them.

Hazé cualquier cosa por vosotros.

Pinning himself against the wall, Chris carefully edged closer to the corner of the building. Although the fencing - put up to force people to a queue to reach the mall - had kept most of the infected wandering around at a distance, there was a handful that had clambered over the fences and were staggering idly within the walkways.

They didn't notice him, nor did the ones further on. Most of them were intensely focused on the bodies sprawled across the square, bending down to claw and snuffle at them, more animal curiosity than anything else. The stench that filled the space likely helped keep them distracted, and their own noisy snarling and shrieking hid his footsteps.

He sucked in a sharp breath, slipping close to the very edge of the building. The fencing was flush with the mall's exterior, balanced on wide metal feet. Pressed as tightly to the adobe as he could manage to make himself as small as possible, Chris craned his head around the corner, just enough to see with one squinted eye.

The main tent sat between him and the cluster of police vans. Only the noses of two of the three cars were visible. Biting down on the tip of his tongue, Chris carefully stuck his arm around the corner, directing the end of the key fob as squarely on the cars as he could.

Breathing in, he let his thumb press down on the panic button.

Nothing.

Swearing under his breath with a soft, "¡Mierda!", Christophe drew his arm quickly back in. Maybe it was dead after all, or his current line of sight still wasn't enough. He had no way of knowing, not really.

He stared down at the fob, then twisted his head to look back inside the mall's entrance. He could just see the shaded outline of his team, lingering at the edges of the afternoon sunlight. They were all looking after him, frozen there in the darkness, and he thought he could've picked out Rochelle's silhouette among them.

He smiled, just a little, despite the fear ravaging through him.

Hazé cualquier cosa por ti.

Inhaling smoothly, he put his thumb through the ring on the set of keys, freeing most of his hand to grab onto the edge of the building. His fingertips rasped on the stone, scraping, and he used the grip to steady himself as he leapt in one motion over the fencing.

His heel struck the metal, rattling the fence as he vaulted over it. Every metal rod and fastening to it shook with the impact, jangling, and as he dropped into a half-crouch on the other side, his eyes
lifted to see the couple infected stuck in the maze of the queue snap their heads to look at him.

Instinct said freeze, as if they might not process if he just stood still - but he overrode it. Without waiting to see what they'd do, Chris turned, darting back to press against the wall.

The U shape of the building no longer shielded him, but the infected scattered densely across the stone-tiled square were not looking in his direction. The few that weren't actively fighting or investigating corpses had their heads in their hands, digging nails into their cheeks and foreheads until they pierced the skin and gushed out thick streaks of blood.

Behind him, there was a crash, and he couldn't help but dart a glance over his shoulder.

The infected in the queue had started to charge toward him, but didn't have the agility to vault the fences. Instead, one had leapt into the fencing, knocking it over. The fencing fell straight into the piece parallel to it, and the sounds of their collision and subsequent clattering to the ground was not masked by all the ambient shrieking.

Chris focused forward, determined, or too deep in to turn back. He lunged forward a few steps, circling the tent without leaving the relative safety of the mall's exterior. He could see infected reacting, snapping around to look toward the commotion - not, mercifully, at him.

Maybe they recognized their own, because although a number of them faced the noise and screamed, arms flung wide, few actually ran to investigate. It was anger and protest, the horde stirred like dogs howling back and forth.

It was a distraction, just for long enough.

As the bulk of the vans came into view, Chris lifted the fob again, squinting under the crawling tickle of a drop of sweat threatening at his left eye. The vivid sensations played out by his muscles and nerves, imagined or otherwise, had him gripping it with both hands.

"Get some, baby." he hissed, a vague mimicry of Ellis' intonation.

His thumb had barely even fully depressed when an alarm whooped to life, lights flashing dimly.

It was the furthest van from him. Not only did the siren kick off in a spiralling tune, but the horn started to bleat in a steady rhythm underneath it. The reaction to it was instantaneous. What had been a buzzing layer of snarls turned into screaming, so loud that he felt it vibrate in his bones, like the helicopter that had flown low overhead.

Chris choked back a laugh as he pressed himself as tightly against the wall behind him as he could, head swiveling to appreciate the sight for just a moment.

All the infected filling the square turned on a dime, attention laser-focused on the shrill alarm. They clouded toward it, so much motion blurring his vision that it was almost dizzying.

He grinned, chest tightening, skin gone warm with an eager pleasure. Was the team cheering? Were they proud of him? He knew he should've been moving already, but viewing his success was an indulgence he couldn't resist.

As the first few infected hit the van, climbing atop it to beat at it with their fists and knees, Chris' eyes caught on a single shape in the mix that was not moving.

He couldn't help but look it over, grin giving way to a frown as the crowd of infected seeped away, thinning around the shape, giving him a better view - and it a better view of him. His heart skipped
a beat when it turned to look at him, and cold seeped into his chest in the absence of his pulse.

Hollow eyes stared at him, its head tilting in a sharp tick to the side. Most of its cheek was missing, raw muscle clotted up with black blood and grit. Short dark hair was wildly scattered across its face, stuck in bunches on the wet and tacky sections of its face.

Its body was covered in blood and dirt, rust and black colours soaked into its clothing - familiar clothing.

The slim boots, scuffed and paled from their dusky black. The black pants, crusted over with fluids of varying colour. The purple blouse with soft ruffling, most of which was torn off, holes and tears dotting it. It was dirtied all over but completely soaked through around the abdomen and down to her pelvis, blood like pitch and tar. Like she'd bled out; like her belly was raw and open under the shredded fabric.

His old leader stood there, looking at him with a snarl written onto her features as if drawn into her flesh with a knife. It was not the expression he remembered of her; the cool, composed sneer that looked down on everyone nearby. It was animal. Visceral.

She looked at him, yet looked through him.

He'd hallucinated them before. He'd seen all of them, mixed amongst the infected. He'd heard their voices. He'd felt them - Jerry's knife against his skin, Brenda's breath on his ear - as real as if they stood before him. This felt different; the sight of her was terribly, vividly different.

But she was just another image painted on his mind's eye.

She was not real.

"Estás muerta." he whispered, chanted, gritting his teeth. He would not succumb to her; he would not let her take the small amounts of peace he'd sewn together. He would stand his ground, for once. "Te has ido."

And then she turned to run, merging suddenly into the horde around her, disappearing as suddenly as she'd come into view. She was gone, not even that dingy purple showing amongst the greyed bodies that piled onto the car.

He couldn't keep his eyes on her, stumbling forward a half-step. His hands reached vaguely out, fingers spread as if in plea. He didn't know what he meant by the gesture; did he want her to stop? To come back?

Maybe he just wanted to touch her, to confirm that his hands passed through her, like they would a ghost.

His hands -

Shock overwhelmed him, like the numb seconds after jumping into ice-cold water. Gasping in air, his gaze shifted to look down, staring for just a moment at the empty air where his left arm should have been. He'd extended it out to join the other, unthinking.

As he stared, he felt his lost fingers tightening and clenching. Pain spasmed through them, then the whole hand, then up his forearm, panicked signals jolting through the imagined limb. That pain, the pain he thought had disappeared for good, resurfped.

He was frozen, immobilized, and then he was moving.
Christophe was distantly aware of the keys dropping from his hand, thrown to the ground. He bolted, not bothering to stick close to the mall's exterior this time. He ran like he was being chased - and wasn't he?

The infected that had already seen him had never been swayed by the car alarm; as he sprinted back to the entrance of the mall, they were clambering over the last of the queue fencing. Had he waited even a second longer, they'd have beaten him to the corner of the building and blocked his path, forced him to use the gun bouncing heavily in his pocket.

Hissing a harsh breath out, Chris let his momentum shift, heel grinding hard into the stone below his feet to turn him sharply as he came to the edge of the mall, and jumped.

Adrenaline got him over the fence and back into the penned-in entranceway, just yards from the doors, and his team. Adrenaline kept his footing stable when he landed, instinctively accounting for the strange balance of his body. Adrenaline numbed the pain and tension of his muscles. Adrenaline put a lid on the emotions thrashing urgently in his chest.

Adrenaline did not take the edge off the pain pulsating down his left arm.
"I'm surrounded by big-headed, idiot men."

Rochelle groaned, lifting a hand to press the tips of her fingers into her eyes. She'd built up a headache in the few seconds since Christophe disappeared around the corner, pulse pounding in her throat.

"I give up on all of you. I'm serious. I'm done."

Nobody responded, except for the hand that touched softly between her shoulderblades. When she looked, it was Ellis standing next to her, a frown twisting at his mouth that mirrored her own.

She turned into him, face burying against his shoulder, and he swept one arm to circle around her shoulders in silence. His arm tightened, drawing her into a squeezing grip.

"He knows whut he's doin'." he murmured - though for some reason, Rochelle couldn't fight the sense that he didn't fully believe it himself. That was a shock. "He's been at this just's long as we have."

She started to lift her head, to look up at him and see what she could glean from his eyes. *He hasn't been confident about anything, lately, but since when did that include Chris? He's always had complete faith in the guy, even when I was too scared to get my hopes up.*

Before she could find a way to vocalize the question, an alarm kicked into life from in front of the mall. Frenetic honking joined it, bleating out a flat tone, and the sound only just drowned out the screaming that rose in response.

Instantly, Ellis had flashed forward, releasing Rochelle in favour of punching a fist up over his head. "Hell yeah!"

The gesture was too much, it seemed, for his unsteady balance, and he staggered at an angle from his own slung weight. The stumble put him close enough to Coach that the big man reached out reflexively to grab his arm and stabilize him.

"That's it, buddy!" he huffed, restraining himself from an outright shout, though his voice was unlikely to carry much beyond the front doors with all the noise happening beyond. His energy waned as quickly as it had come, leaning hard into Coach's grip, but his enthusiasm remained. "Come on back, now!"

But Chris did not appear.

Slowly, in faded unison, they all stepped up to the very edge of the mall's front doors. They lined the entranceway in a loose and staggered row, looking out as infected streamed across the square. They flocked to the sound, and trying to count them as they passed made Rochelle's head spin.

He had a gun, she forcibly reminded herself - but what if he dropped it, or was too exhausted to aim it? Was it out of ammunition? *I should've checked. I should've made sure, while we had a minute. He can't reload it with one hand!*

"Where is -" Ellis started to whisper, uncertainty winning out over his excitement, but he didn't finish the question before he was interrupted. He couldn't mask his surprise when Nick muttered, low, from behind them.
"I'm counting to ten, and then I'm going to go get the armless dumbshit."

Ellis jerked his head around, blinking at the gambler where he stood a few feet back. Nick's eyes were low, shoulders high and tight, and he only stiffened further under Ellis' gaze. A softness quirked at the edges of Ellis' mouth, a gentle longing.

Nobody poised to argue. Lena and Rhiannon stood just behind Rochelle, and they shared a small glance, loaded - but in silence, they wielded their weapons a little higher, a little tighter. Maybe they'd simply resigned to throwing their lot in with the team surrounding them, or maybe they readied with sincerity. It was hard to tell.

"Okay." the Georgian breathed. "Ten'n'we go. Horde or no."

Rochelle squinted her eyes, keeping them forward, pretending she didn't recognize that quiet little lovesick hitch in his voice. She'd heard it before, listening to him talk about Nick, back when things between the men had been simpler - back when everything had been simpler. Strange, to feel nostalgia for days that still sat firmly under the label 'apocalypse'.

She focused, instead, on counting down those precious few seconds. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until her lungs started to ache, and sucking in air to fill them took active effort.

They did not end up putting their resolve to the test. She hadn't reached 'four' when a flash of dark green darted around the corner as Chris flung himself over the fencing, stumbling just a step upon landing. His arm shot out to counterbalance himself, straightening out, and he ran toward them at full pelt.

Relief didn't fully encapsulate the feeling that passed over her. There was relief and gratitude, but anger, too. Some pride, buried underneath. She wanted to box him in the nose, but she also wanted to plant a kiss right over his dumb grin.

A dumb grin, she realized slowly, that he did not possess. His dark-toned skin flushed with something she could only describe as horror. There were infected chasing him, clambering over the fencing that made up the queue, but the look on his face was not the simple fear of self-preservation. It was more raw than that.

Coach stiffened, raising his shotgun, but Rochelle quickly thrust up her hand to halt the motion.

"Too loud." she reminded him, turning away when he nodded. The woman lifted her stun baton into a two-handed grip, jerking her chin toward the infected. "Nick?"

The gambler started forward without a word, moving at a broad stride that propelled him through the open frames that made up the front of the mall. Rochelle was close on his heels, rushing into a short jog to pull up beside him. They advanced to meet Chris a few feet beyond the mall's entrance, both survivors parting to let him run between and past them.

The Spaniard looked small. It was an obtuse observation considering the amount of body mass he was simply lacking, yet she couldn't shake the thought. He was strangely deflated, curling in on himself. She'd seen him go through a litany of emotions, but she hadn't seen him like that since the moments before they'd kissed.

Rochelle wanted to stop and check on him, make sure he was alright - or something close to alright, at least - but the infected charging at them would not wait for her. There was no more than a moment to trade glances, and no way to communicate what she wanted to in that one look.

One glance was not enough.
The three infected sprinted down the slim stone walkway leading into the mall's foyer, and both Rochelle and Nick stepped forward to intercept them. The gambler's arms raised to draw his katana over his shoulder, ready to swing, and Rochelle darted a couple steps to the side to avoid crossing into the path of his blade.

One of the zombies strayed from the group, angling toward Rochelle, and she jabbed out with the end of her stun baton as it came within reach. The tip jammed into the bridge of its nose, and a quick flick of her thumb activated the electric charge. She held it for just a pulse, enough to send a seize of tension through its frame and interrupt its footsteps.

As it staggered, she retreated a step, turning at her waist to get the strength of her upper body behind a strike to the side of its head. The blow, combined with the unsteadiness of its limbs following the shock, sent it sprawling to the ground.

Letting momentum carry her into a step, Rochelle brought the heel of her boot down on its skull. It took a twist, grinding her weight, but she heard - and felt - a strange crunch.

Rather than look and see the damage done, she hopped her weight off that foot and bolted to close the gap between her and Nick. He'd lopped the head off one infected, gore sputtering from the rent flesh where the body lay by his feet, but the other was now charging him.

He couldn't get his sword in place in time to strike, so all he could do was lift the grip and shove, catching the zombie against the chest. Its clawing left hand struck home, but Rochelle couldn't tell where exactly. Nick lurched away with a swear, twisting his body to recoil from the blow.

Sprinting up behind the female infected, Rochelle gripped both hands on the end of her baton. She gritted out a noise of exertion as she landed the metal weapon right into the crook between the zombie's head and neck, directly into its vertebral column.

Its chin snapped up, body thrust forward with the impact, but she didn't break its neck like she'd hoped. It shrieked in pain, whirling to face Rochelle, arms lashing up to claw for her. She hissed in a breath, trying to get her baton up and braced to hold it at bay.

Then it halted.

The strip of glinting metal that pierced through the middle of its face in a smooth glide was quickly overtaken by a flood of blackened blood, spilling down its features. They did not go slack, even as the focus faded from its eyes, rage maintained in the twist and tension of its facial muscles.

As the infected slumped to the ground, Nick came into view behind it, both fists clenched around the hilt of his katana. He let it drop, panting, blood streaking along his cheekbone where a pair of twin lines had been torn in his skin. Pain lit low over his expression, gaze darting up to match Rochelle's.

"Are you -?" he gasped out, vague, broken off before he reached that damning last word. Like if he doesn't say it out loud, she mused, you can't prove he meant it.

Rochelle panted a laugh and nodded. "I'm fine."

Turning on her heel, she redirected her focus back to Christophe. The man stood a few feet back, arm tucked neatly over his chest and fingers clutched on the collar of his polo. His eyes were focused past them, looking out into the square, and he didn't seem to notice her gaze - nor her approach, when she walked toward him.

Something was wrong, that much was apparent. But logic won out over her concern; the car alarm
was still wailing, but they didn't have forever. It would shut off soon, if the horde crowded around it didn't break it outright first.

"We need to go!" she called, breaking into a sprint back toward the mall's front doors. Rather than trust Chris to follow, Rochelle snagged his shirt at the waist as she ran past. She felt him stumble, but he quickly regained his footing, and she let him go once he'd begun to run at her flank. Nick's footsteps joined them, crunching on glass as they leapt through the mall's entrance.

The moment they'd reached the tiled interior, the rest of the survivors set off running back further into the mall. Ellis was running on his own and seemed more stable, but Rhiannon was still locked in a tight embrace with Lena, the two sisters lagging behind a few paces as they ran unsteadily. The thunder of their joint footsteps echoed, just loud enough to be heard over the screeching car alarm, and growing to overtake it as they retreated further inside and the siren grew a bit more distant.

None of them slowed, however, skidding to a stop just long enough for Coach to lift his head and point down the left side of the mall's interior.

Everyone followed as he bolted in the same direction. As Rochelle lurched out into the center of the mall in pursuit of them, her eyes caught on an unlit exit sign hung on the underside of the second-story balcony. It was aligned with a perpendicular hallway, a mirror of the ones on the upper floor, and their best chance at a back door.

She turned her head, glancing over her shoulder, finding Chris and Nick close behind her. Both of them seemed winded, and only Christophe tried to brighten up when she looked at him. It was a soft look, a gentle acknowledgement.

Rochelle wrinkled her face up in her best attempt at anger she didn't really feel. *Don't do that to me again.* it said - though judging by the way Chris fell to a smile, unsuccessfully.

"Keep movin'!" Coach barked, and Rochelle had to snap to attention. She forced her body to face back forward, accelerating to catch up with the rest of her teammates. There would be plenty of time to regroup and check on everyone once they were out of immediate danger.

Back to their delicate peace, in a busted-up seaside cafe, with no better idea for rescue than they'd had weeks ago, and maybe less hope. Was she foolish for wanting to believe that the helicopter - even with its crash - was a good sign? *If someone is still sending military choppers this way, then they can't have completely given up. And the fact that there's even still military out there at all...*

As much as she wanted to think something positive, she was also not interested in getting overly distracted. Thinking wouldn't get them anywhere, for better or worse, and she had plenty to think about.

Running at least kept her mind busy in the meantime.
Chapter 256

Although the survivors' luck had turned sour in the moments surrounding the helicopter crash, it had not entirely abandoned them. By the time they burst through the rear fire escape, there were no infected to be seen.

Any zombies that had been milling around the back or wandering the streets along the mall's rear had been roused by the alarm and cleared out. Although the outdoors hardly felt safe with the car still wailing into the late afternoon sky, infected screaming in time with it, their escape still felt like a victory.

None of them were quite confident enough to say so, however... or talk at all, except for the necessary curt phrases to coordinate their way out. Coach's grim silence set the tone more than anything else.

He held the fire escape door open, one arm extended out to brush against whatever he could reach of his teammates as they passed by him. It was not so far from that pre-game ritual, counting out his football players, one at a time. He touched a shoulder, an elbow, a hip - a tender headcount, full of worry.

Coach only moved once his palm touched Rochelle's arm, the last to stumble out into the slim space between the mall's exterior and the chain-link fence boxing them in. The door eased sluggishly shut behind them with a belated chunk.

His gaze darted left, then right. There was a gate a few yards down, and it hung open a few inches. A chain dangled from its outer edge and indicated that it had once been secured. He hadn't been looking forward to trying to climb the fence, so that was a relief.

"That alarm ain't gonna go forever." Coach muttered, moving before the words fully left him.

Footsteps followed in his wake in easy obedience, and some surprise crept over him when Nick's dark profile pushed into his periphery. The man didn't look directly at anyone, let alone Coach. He just stared on ahead beneath low-lidded eyes, walking stiffly, mechanically.

It seemed less like a conscious effort to move to the front of the pack, and more like an attempt to escape the claustrophobia of the bodies huddled in close behind them. He had regained colour in his cheeks, at least, since he'd come out of the dressing room only half-conscious; since the Witch.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek, catching flesh between his molars and biting down before he released the tension in his jaw with a sigh. *Wonder if Ellis'd make any sense of this... I gotta tell him, don't I? Gotta tell him and Ro', both, even if Nick'd hate me over it. This ain't about politics.*

Coach was afraid, for the first time in a while.

*Stopped bein' about keepin' peace when he started talkin' to Witches.*

He couldn't gather his thoughts long enough to list out the questions he had, but he knew it wasn't the time for conversation. They were balanced on a razor's edge, emotionally, and there was a not-insignificant walk between them and their base.

There'd be time later - to figure out what was wrong with Nick, to discuss the helicopter, to plan their next move - but 'later' did not satisfy the white-knuckled anxiety in his chest.
It's always later, feels like.

"Let's get."

They slowed now that they were outside, a mixture of caution and awareness of Rhiannon's hobbled pace. The survivors darted through the open gate and followed along the chain-link fencing as it met with the rear edge of the mall. Rather than continue along the mall's exterior, they broke off, crossing the road to reach the block adjacent to the mall's rear alleyway.

A tiny gas station lay between them and the next parallel street, asphalt surrounding three rows of pump stations and a building that seemed too small to contain anything but space for an attendant. The structure was bleach-white and, Coach quickly noticed, marked across the side with green spray-paint.

'FUCK CARRIERS'

Unease twisted through his gut. His hands fist ed, tightened, certain that the phrase referred to the sprawl of bodies in the mall square, and the tragedy that had caused it. There were a few scenarios that played out in his head.

It could have been that Carriers had gotten into a crowd and begun to turn other people. Or, the simple presence of a confirmed Carrier - through whatever test they had - had sent the police into a panic. Maybe there had been a horde, and the overrunning of the mall square had been completely irrelevant to the presence of Carriers.

If they were contagious, how was it transmitted? Was it airborne? He'd never thought to wonder. Had Carmine been doomed the moment she'd opened her door, or had it been the contact with Nick? Surely society wouldn't have collapsed so quickly if it required a bite or contact with bodily fluid.

If he wracked his brain, he could hear Rochelle's voice. Hadn't she always assured them it was airborne? It was airborne, so they'd already been exposed and proven immune, and getting wounded or bitten didn't matter.

If they were Carriers, harboring the virus, didn't that mean they were contagious in the same fashion? That would give the government ample reason to, at best, refuse them refuge... at worst, shoot them on sight. He couldn't blame them, really, if that were the case.

No time. he reminded himself, glancing quickly to take stock of the bodies around him. Nick was the only one staring at the message writ out in blocky letters, as everyone else had their gazes furtively lowered or directed elsewhere. Ellis had his lower lip bitten, staring at the ground.

Christophe was looking square at Coach with something like weariness in his eyes. It said, "Told you."

Rochelle was busy looking at Ellis with some worry, and the sisters were hunched close until their temples touched, expressions mirrors of reserved distance. They did not look surprised.

No time. Later. Always goddamn later.

Quietly shaking his head, Coach reached out to grab Nick's elbow. The contact jolted Nick's attention back to his surroundings, and the ex-football player hustled forward without letting go. The Northerner followed the pull without protest, and they rounded the corner of the building to reach the sidewalk on the other side of the block.
Then, with no warning at all, the alarm stopped.

Although normal human instinct said to stop and look, they had enough sense among them to bolt. Coach did sneak a quick glance, just enough to confirm that there wasn't any infected in immediate pursuit of them. The tents sat between them and the now-silent van, but there was nothing stopping the horde from scattering now and getting on their trail.

The gas station lot didn't provide much cover, but the next building would completely cut line of sight between them and the square in front of the mall.

So they ran.

They had only just breached the next block, sprinting into the relative safety of the building's shadow, when a set of grunts sounded behind him. Coach jerked instantly to look over his shoulder, finding Lena and Rhiannon barely keeping their footing, the blonde's body sagging hard as she reached down to grab at her knee.

"Fuck -" she gasped out, expression split evenly between anger and pain. The increased pace was taking a toll on her, that much was obvious, and her grip on Lena's zippered hoodie was straining the fabric. "Shitting ankle keeps rolling."

A small panicked bob touched Rochelle's head, looking between the injured woman and Coach where he'd frozen on the sidewalk. "Maybe we should take a look at it. She kicked a door in. If she fractured her ankle, we shouldn't let her walk on it..."

"I'll look at it when we get back." the blonde countered, scowling gently down toward her injured foot. "Not like we can do shit about it until then, anyway."

Ellis lifted his hand, pressing the palm of his hand against the crown of his head. "I carried her earlier, I can -"

"Not carry her all the way to base, son." Coach shook his head, ignoring the way Ellis deflated. The teacher turned on his heel and shouldered his shotgun to free his other one, and as he approached the tightly huddled sisters, he reached out to place a palm on either of their outward-facing shoulders.

His gaze, however, was firmly matched with Rhiannon's. She blinked back at him, her initial spike of tension quickly tempered. "None of us are in a shape to. So you gotta push through fo' now. Until we get home. A'ight, Rhee?"

The blonde's muddy eyes sparked with a flash-fire of gritty pride, pushing a hobbled inch closer to grin up at him. "For you? Sure."

Coach squeezed her shoulder with a small huff of laughter, sparing a glance toward Lena long enough to get an affirming nod from the woman. He backed up, turning to look toward Ellis. "Hey, why don't you take her other arm? If y'all can keep her off that foot, we'll keep the zombies off y'all."

"Course!" Ellis rushed into motion, practically tripping over himself to reach Rhiannon's side and duck his head in invitation.

She looked at him sourly, even as she looped her arm around his neck. Drawing the grip a little tight, hooking her wrist under his throat, she squeezed him into a rough headlock. "It's the three hurt fucknuts, all peas in a pod." she barked, cheerily, wrenching her weight to make him choke out a squawked sound. "Make it easy for the next asshole Charger."
It should have bothered him. He should have panicked, like he did when a Jockey had him by the neck, feet ground into his chest, reminding him so viscerally of Jerry.

But he didn't.

Had he gotten stronger - gotten over it? Or was he just too empty to muster up the emotional response? He wasn't sure.

Rather than fight, Ellis went limp, cutting a grin sideways and upwards at her from where his head had been yanked down. "I'll protect yuh." he promised in a - mostly - feigned wheeze. She was stronger than her lanky frame telegraphed.

She snorted, releasing her chokehold on him to instead twine fingers in the heavy material of his jacket sleeve, just at his shoulder. The renewed grip had her supported on either side, now, and she lifted her injured foot entirely off the ground. "Okay, pretty-boy. If you say so. Let's get the fuck out of here, huh?"

In the small space of time allowed to them by the pause, Christophe had quietly padded up to Nick's elbow, observing the man's face where Nick studied the grip he had on his katana. He watched, with no subtlety, and the other man ignored him with just as little.

"Nico -" the Spaniard started to murmur tenderly, but Nick's head snapped up and cut him off with a flat blink of dark green eyes. The younger man put his hand up, fingers splayed, in a gesture of surrender. "I just mean to ask if you are okay...?"

Forcing out an unsteady breath, Nick grunted out, "Take that stupid thing off." in place of an answer. He darted his gaze downwards, shrugging into a step that started him walking again, following Coach as he took off along the sidewalk.

Christophe didn't take his eyes off Nick, turning to follow him, putting his hand on top of the blue trucker cap fitted over his head. He sighed, slumping his shoulders, and warily fell into line behind the Northerner.

"At least he is angry again." he mumbled to himself, wryly.

Rochelle slipped to take up the rear, ushering on the clumsy trio of Ellis, Rhiannon, and Lena, nervously rotating at the waist to look behind them. "Let's go, guys. Last thing we need is to lose daylight."

"How are you so skinny and so freakin' heavy?" Lena groaned, tightening her arm around her sister's waist. They started into motion, the first step awkward and mistimed, but the next falling into a rhythm. Ellis and Lena stepped first, holding Rhiannon's weight as she matched them, barely letting her injured foot touch the ground. "You're so dense."

The blonde snapped back, "Your mom's dense."

"Our mom's dense." was Lena's gentle-toned correction.
Nick didn't imagine he'd be capable of feeling anything but disgust at the sight of the seagull statues scattered across the yard of the restaurant. A copper-coloured one, perched atop a stake and peeping at him from under a spread wing, met his gaze with unnatural acuity for an inanimate object.

He never thought he'd feel relief.

The walk home had been less eventful than the walk out. A Jockey had come at them from an open doorway, only to lose most of its face to a blast from Coach's shotgun. A couple infected had charged them, but Rochelle and Christophe had dealt with them, her wielding Lena's brush hook and Chris his machete.

There was something panicked in how he fought, like he was hyper-aware of how close he was to disaster at any given moment. There was fear in his posture preceding every swing, and fear following it - but Rochelle stayed close by, and her presence seemed to bolster him enough to continue.

The sounds of agitated infected had circled them the entire walk back. The helicopter must have flown in close over the route they walked, but far enough away that it had drawn infected off their path. It was, no doubt, clearer than it would have been otherwise.

By the time they reached the restaurant, Lena had given out. It had only taken one stumble, her face gone pale, for Ellis to quietly side-step in front of Rhiannon and drop into a crouch. He didn't give off the air of someone who'd take no for an answer, stubbornly putting his hands back, so Rhiannon wasn't left with much choice but to climb on.

Ellis had only been carrying her like that, piggy-back, for a short while. Still, he was not at his strongest, and while Rhiannon was slender, she was also tall.

As he stepped onto the scrubby yard, boot grinding in the sandy earth, he halted. Sweat traveled down his cheek and tickled its way through the scruff that was building up on his jaw. "Alright, ma'am, end'uh the line." he panted out, bending over gently to allow her to slide off. "Thanks fer travelin' the Ellis Railway."

Rhiannon landed hard on her uninjured leg, grabbing either of his shoulders to stabilize herself. The moment she'd gotten upright, she leaned in to set her chin on the back of her left hand where it rested on his shoulder. "Don't ma'am me, you prick. Do I look like a ma'am to you?"

"We're born and bred Georgia boys." Coach sighed out, a grumbled breath, gilded with the faintest affection. Ellis peeked at Rhiannon from over his shoulder, his mouth stuck open as he panted. "Everyone's a ma'am to us."

She squinted at him, then pushed with both her palms to make him stagger a step forward. "Stupid country boys."

Ellis caught his balance, whipping his head around to look at her, confusion plain across his face. He reached up an arm, using his whole forearm to wipe sweat from his brow. He'd tied his denim jacket around his waist. "Uh... Ain't you from Texas?"

"Yeah. And it's crammed full of stupid country boys." The blonde grinned, broadly, cracked canine on full display. She started forward, motions tender as she hobbled on her injured foot. "Let's go
get something to eat, huh? I'm fuckin' starved."

Nick gazed up at the restaurant's front. Nothing seemed disturbed, no windows broken into. Their base looked much the same as they'd left it - nothing had broken in. Or out.

He started forward, moving quicker than he meant to. The emotion that bubbled up in his chest was so much simpler than everything else he'd been feeling. He didn't have to explain himself to Maggie, at least, nor would she look at him with concern. The cat would just be glad to see him, and that would be that.

Rochelle's voice called after him, but he barely processed the words, or the scattered laughter that followed it. "Got a date, suit?"

Scaling the small set of stairs leading into the screened-in porch at the front of the building, Nick pushed through the screen door. He ducked around it, sliding up to the restaurant's main door and twisting the knob to shove it open.

It was dim inside, with what little light entered through the slim windows blocked and coloured by the seagull stickers pasted over the glass. He blinked, trying to get his vision to adjust, darting a glance over the top of the shoulder-high wall separating him from the rest of the restaurant. He didn't immediately see movement.

Clicking his tongue, Nick took a step forward, setting his katana down against the wall behind him so it leaned against the protrusion of the doorframe. He moved down the corridor formed by the half-wall, and halted at the end, hands gently fisted at his thighs.

"Hey, brat. Where are you hiding?" he called out, self-aware enough to drop it to a mutter, like he might avoid the rest of his team hearing him.

At first, he thought, there was no response. He could hear footsteps approaching the front door, and he felt some strange urgency. He knew he'd done a shit job of disguising how much he liked the petite feline, but that didn't mean he'd crawl around on hands and knees looking for her while his team laughed at him.

Then, the black on black of a shadow became speckled with a creamy orange, and two owlish eyes peeped out from under one of the chairs they'd pushed out of the way to make room for their sprawl of blankets.

She'd curled up on the edge of the soft surface, and was in the process of standing, back legs stretching out behind her in small kicks. Her tail perked up, quirking curiously into a tiny loop at the tip.

Relief flooded him in full force, then, a sigh escaping his lips. "There you are." he grunted, dropping into a crouch. He set his elbows on his thighs, letting one hand stretch out, unable to resist a small smile when she sped her motions to hurry forward. "Bet you're hungry, huh?"

Then, inches from the tips of his fingers, she halted. Her nose twitched, whiskers alert, mouth opening a little as she huffed in air.

Those heavily saturated orange eyes flickered. Her pupils were already blown wide in the dark, but they seemed to widen even further, black overtaking the pumpkin colour ringing it. He didn't have time to react before the cat lashed out at his outstretched hand.

He felt the strike like dull pressure, hand jerking back instinctively. He hated the sensation that flooded him: hurt.
The pain came secondarily, and he didn't bother to look. She'd cut a slice across the backs of his fingers, from the first knuckle of his index finger to the last knuckle of his ring finger. It would bleed, but it wasn't deep.

"The fuck?" he managed, unable to do more than stiffen when she bolted. He barely stopped himself from reaching out to grab for her when she streaked past him, logic saying that he'd get nothing but claws and teeth for his efforts. That didn't stop him from scrambling to his feet, sneakers giving an unfamiliar squeak on the wood floor. "Hey!"

He ran, but went no further than a few steps into the corridor, grinding to a halt as the knowledge that he'd never catch her sunk in. She was a flash of dark colour, and Rochelle yelped as she jumped back against the open door, her fearful reaction making room for the cat to scrabble out the door. A couple more yells - Ellis', then Lena's - announced her egress through the porch, and then there was silence.

Rochelle slowly shifted her gaze toward Nick, eyes wide and widening. Gentle, cautious, she murmured, "Sweetie...?"

Anger wanted to rise. He felt it banging on the inner walls of his chest, heightened by the adrenaline that had his pulse up, and the pain that cut across his knuckles. He wanted to be angry, but something else washed over him: exhaustion.

He just wanted to sleep.

Rochelle must've seen something in his expression, because she tenderly pulled away from the door, holding a hand on it until Coach's slipped into view to prop it open. "She probably didn't recognize you. The new clothes and everything. You probably smell different."

Slowly, he raised his sliced hand, looking down at the injury. Blood was welling up in a thick line, red turning darker as it gained mass. He gritted his teeth, letting his eyes half-close.

Gotta kick me when I'm down, huh?

He felt some distant surprise when a hand touched his, and looked up to meet Rochelle's gaze. She gently slipped her fingers under his palm, lifting his hand up to examine the cut. She bit her tongue, chewing on it softly, before looking back up at him. "Are you okay?"

Nick forced himself to take a step back, blowing out a thin laugh. "Peachy." was all he said; flat, simple. It took effort to muster anything past monosyllabism. He lifted his hand, touching fingertips to the dual cuts across his cheek, flesh torn raggedly by nails skating across the surface.

He didn't miss her concern. So, he tried; he made an effort, even though it felt like pulling his esophagus out with a pair of pliers, putting on some approximation of a smirk. "Apocalypse is trying to make me into mincemeat."

Rochelle looked at him with a raised brow, dubious, but she took enough pity on him to snort. "Yeah, well, she took a hunk out of me earlier, so I guess we're even." She glanced over her shoulder, seeing where Ellis and Coach were somewhat awkwardly piled into the corridor behind them, Chris and the sisters stuffed into the doorway. "Go sit. I'll get you some bandages."

The idea of putting up a fight crossed Nick's mind, but he just sighed and turned away. Circling the half-wall, he let himself fall into the first booth that sat against it. He didn't realize how much he'd enjoy sitting down until he landed - he'd been so dizzy for so long, the world seemed to continue to spin around him even now that he'd settled.
He let an elbow rest against the table, getting the fingers of his uninjured hand pressed against the bridge of his nose. He sighed, deflating his chest, trying to tune out the sounds of motion around him.

His head was so full, it ached. He didn't know how to sort through it, how to categorize it.

*Normal people find someone to talk to.* he noted wryly. *But you've just got yourself, now.*

Turning his chin slightly, he flattened his hand, letting himself nuzzle blindly against his own palm. The darkness was soothing, if nothing else. *Okay. So you fucked up with Ellis again - twice, actually, today. Really driving home the mixed messages. You were too busy having a fucking mental breakdown to even be present for missing the first shot at a rescue we've ever had... assuming they'd rescue us and not put us all down for being infected.*

The blast of air from his nostrils was somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, but he quickly sobered.

*You're seeing shit, hearing shit, and three people know it. Meaning everybody will know it by morning.* That put a hard knot in his chest. *Maybe Coach didn't hear... maybe he didn't hear what I said. He didn't mention it, right? He never asked. They were fighting infected. Maybe he missed it.*

Ellis would connect the dots, if he found out, that much Nick knew for sure. The unfortunate thing was, Ellis listened to him. Took him to heart. He would remember the name, and he'd realize Nick hadn't told him the whole story. He'd stick his nose into it, because that was what the Georgian did best.

*So, you're fucked.*

*Neato.*

Normally, he'd have felt panicked, and reacted like a cornered animal. That, however, took energy - and he was completely out of that. He mostly just wanted to laugh at himself.

The rustle of fabric on wood sounded as a body slid into the booth opposite him, along with the faint sound of a few things being set down on the table. He opened his eyes, expecting to see Rochelle.

Coach blinked back at him, pausing in the middle of cracking open a tube of antibiotic ointment. There was genuine concern on his features, devoid of any conflicting annoyance or gruff disapproval. He just looked... attentive.

It made Nick balk long enough to force the big man to speak up.

"Maggie cut you?" There was concern to his voice, though it seemed like a rhetorical question. He finally broke his focus on Nick's face, looking down at the tube in his grip. "Thought the li'l thang was fond of you."

Clearing his throat felt necessary to talk, but Nick was not pleased with how uncomfortable it made him seem. "Yeah, well. We locked her up all day. She was probably just glad to get some air."

Nick twisted his head, looking around the room, taking stock of where the rest of the survivors were rather than look at the other man.

Chris and Rochelle at the bar, the sisters seated at the far table in the upper corner of the restaurant's L-shape, Ellis nowhere to be seen and likely in the kitchen or the bathroom behind them...
Fingers touched his wrist.

Nick snapped his gaze back forward, watching with some tension as Coach used a small wad of toilet paper to daub away the blood that had built up around his knuckles. He wanted to recoil, but a sensible part of him jumped on the chance to speak with Coach first, before anyone else.

The ungreased wheels in the back of his mind started grinding into motion again - but clumsy and desperate, he jumped the gun. He'd never been patient, but he used to know how to be manipulative, at least. Not desperate.

And he felt desperate.

"Look, Sam, about earlier..." He paused, like he expected Coach to say something. When the man merely arched a brow and applied some pressure with his thumb to the still-bleeding stripe across Nick's middle finger, the gambler was forced to sigh. He dropped his voice to a murmur. "You and me both know everyone'll panic if they hear shit about me collapsing, or whatever -"

"Thought it was a headache." Coach returned, quick, and his eyes flicked up to scan Nick's expression, gauging.

"You know what I mean." Nick reached his free hand up, rubbing at his eyes. It was evasive, and Coach grunted before returning his attention to Nick's hand. "Point is, I'm fine now, so there's no reason to get the girls upset. Right?"

The ex-football player leaned in, carefully taking a dollop of ointment onto his fingertip and lightly daubed it along the wound. "You know what our problem is, Nick? We don't like bein' weak. You hold it all in, knot yo'self up tryin' to keep it all inside, like you'll bleed out if you open up. I did that my whole damn marriage, an' you been doin' that your whole life, ain't you?"

Nick didn't move his head or open his eyes. "I don't need a fucking lecture."

Coach laughed, abruptly, a small snort bouncing his hefty shoulders. "Nicolas, you need a damn seminar, but that ain't my point. We're more alike than you wanna think, Nick." His fingers lifted, leaving the gambler's hand on the table. Paper rustled, softly, as he opened a packaged bandage. "It's half why I'm so bad at talkin' to you."

Without saying a word, Nick squeezed his eyes just that much tighter. A dull humour rose up. "I'd probably be better off if I was more like you."

"You remember after we got Chris stable? We started fightin' over somethin' stupid." Coach's voice was gentle, behind an exhaustion. "Ellis hurt himself, an' you got mad at us fo' gettin' mad at him. You were spittin' fire, like usual - and then you got dizzy, almost fell over. You had a fever."

Nick opened his eyes, lifting his head an inch, just enough to look over his knuckles at the other man. He sat, silent, expression falling to a firm emptiness. Coach wasn't looking at him; he was focused downwards, and Nick could feel a band-aid being wrapped around the midline of his middle finger. "I remember."

Coach didn't stop working, didn't raise his attention. Kept his voice low. "What... happened today, Nick? It ever happen before? Before the apocalypse, I mean. An' how much did it feel like what happened back in the pawn shop?"

A frown twitched at Nick's mouth, straightening just slightly. He couldn't stop his gaze from darting over the room, confirming that no one seemed interested in the conversation. "What are you getting at?"
Coach sighed, gustily, his crinkled features drawing into a sour expression. He murmured, "My dad had a stroke back in '96, and -"

Nick's arm recoiled in a flash. He might've stood up entirely, fled the booth, but as quickly as he'd recoiled his right arm, Coach grabbed the wrist of his left to keep him there. His grip was crushing, enough that Nick's jaw tightened, eyes flashing to meet the older man's gaze.

He was aware, distantly, that the room was dead silent around them. The shock of it all petered out in favour of violent self-awareness: the last thing he wanted was to make the conversation public. The urge to rip his arm free became quickly stifling, suffocating.

"A... stroke? Seriously?" he hissed, as quietly as he could. "You think -"

Coach shook his head, voice so low, it rasped. "I ain't sayin' nothin'. I don't know nothin', Nicolas, and I don't know up from down these days. I just also know needin' help ain't a weakness." He pulled, then, forcing Nick to slide a couple inches further into the booth, a simple gesture that forced him to settle. Even had Nick wanted to fight, he wasn't sure he'd have been successful.

The older man slipped to stand, a frown lingering on his lips. "You sit here, and you get some rest, Nick. You think on it. Think on what I asked. And I'll be here, if you wanna talk about it."

Processing did not happen easily. Nick felt his jaw slacken, watching Coach turn and walk away, feeling air thrust up and struggle at his throat. It threatened to turn into words, but did nothing except puff out past his lips. He didn't know what to say.

Nick stared, gaze growing distant and slowly lowering until it landed on the surface of the table before him. The smart thing to do would have been to think. He should've sat there and thought, tried to remember the hazy details of his collapse, tried to piece it together and consider it. Weigh it.

Instead, he slid sideways, sinking to lay across the booth's bench, and closed his eyes. He surrendered to the easy pull of shutting down.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, he didn't have to think.
"It hurt here?"

Coach passed a supportive smile up to Rhiannon when she shook her head. She was seated on the edge of one of the sturdy rounded tables in the middle of the restaurant, and he’d kneeled down in front of her, her boot and sock shucked to bare her injured foot. He gently cradled her heel in his palm, thumbs of his other hand pressing against the rounded shape of her ankle bone, following it up along the fibula.

When she gave no reaction, he shifted to palpate over the skin surrounding it, digging fingertips into the muscle around the bone. He followed it along the joint, pressing firmly over the top of her foot, right where it met with her shin.

"Ow." she stated, blandly, eyes narrowing subtly and leg hitching up a few inches. "Fucker."

A snort escaped him, pulling his hands away and letting her foot rest against his raised knee. "She'll be fine." he uttered, raising his voice. He shook his head, humoured, when Lena practically slumped with relief where she stood beside him. "It's just a muscle sprain. Not swellin'. After we eat, we'll get you some ibuprofen, let it rest."

"So we don't have to cut it off?" Lena gasped, blustering out a relieved whine and thrusting forward a step to loop her arms around Rhiannon's shoulders. "My baby's okay!" she cooed, squeezing and rocking them both back and forth a few inches.

The blonde instantly started fighting, pushing at her, but she didn't commit enough force behind the gesture to actually free herself. "Fuck off!"

Coach pulled back, getting to his feet with amusement crinkling the edges of his eyes as he crossed his arms. "Take it easy, though. Just 'cause it ain't broken doesn't mean you can't make it worse." he instructed, eyes rolling up when neither woman acknowledged him. He blew out a breath through his nostrils, turning away.

Chris and Rochelle had taken stools at the bar, and they sat in silence. The Spaniard looked rigid, eyes firmly on his clenched hand, and Rochelle's posture spoke to a shyness. She curled her legs up, heels braced on the crossbars between the stool's legs. Her body was gently turned away from Chris even as her head drooped to rest against his right shoulder, eyes closed.

They were okay for now. That suited him just fine, because Ellis was next on his list.

Nick had been at the top, naturally, but there was nothing else to do but wait and see. He was taken care of for the time being, like a cut temporarily staunched. Rhiannon had been next, and she'd been good news. He was glad for good news, but he couldn't rest yet, not until he'd checked on Ellis.

They'd barely entered the restaurant before the young Georgian had quietly peeled off. Coach had noticed immediately, but he hadn't wanted to draw immediate attention to it. There had been call to jump Nick while the man was still at least a little vulnerable. Ellis, on the other hand, likely needed a few minutes alone - so he'd given the youth a few minutes, given him some space.

Breathing deep, the ex-football player crossed the restaurant. He quietly walked past the bar, and Christophe's eyes flickered to follow him as he came into the man's view. It was questioning, but Chris didn't stop him.
He simply flicked his gaze hard to the right, and Coach followed it to see Ellis' hat sitting on the bar. The big man paused just long enough to reach out and grab the cap, tucking it into the pocket of his thin red windbreaker. He nodded gratefully, and Chris nodded back, muting the gesture so as to not jostle Rochelle where she rested against him.

It was tempting to wonder at the two, but he resisted. *Got myself waist-deep in one romantic mess, and I ain't much help there. Keep my nose out of this one.*

As he advanced, Coach put his shoulder forward to open the kitchen door, swinging it on its hinges with the force of a step's momentum. His gaze darted around the room, hunting out Ellis' familiar form. He shortly found it hunched over the stainless steel counter on the other side of the room.

If he'd gotten a concussion, the symptoms might have been delayed. He'd seen it take a day or more for the side effects to kick in fully.

Panic flashed through him, but he stifled it, maintaining a calm tone. "Ellis? You okay? Feelin' sick?" His calm didn't stop him from hurrying, quickly crossing the cafe's kitchen to come up behind the young Georgian. Coach set a hand on the space between Ellis' shoulderblades, relieved when his curly-haired head lifted.

"No." Ellis murmured, and his voice was honest, if still winded. "I'm a'ight. I just..."

Coach let silence hang for a moment, examining what he could see of the kid's face. A frown sat there, thoughtful, uncharacteristically hard to read and lingering even after he messily completed his thought.

"Today was bad, Coach. It was real bad."

The eldest survivor sighed, and the breath took much more out of him than he expected. He couldn't stop it, exhaling until his chest collapsed. It came with the uncomfortable sensation that he could feel the inner walls of his lungs press against one another. He let his chin drop. "Yeah."

He expected another spell of silence, and then received anything but.

"I could'uh reached out and touched that whirlybird, you know? It was so close. And there was *people* in it. I don't think they made it outta that crash, Coach, so where's that leave us?" Ellis' head shook gently, and he shifted, setting his elbow against the counter so he could cradle his chin against his palm. "I really thought we'd get it. Maybe it was dumb, but I... really did."

Ellis tapped his thumb against his jaw, eyes slowly closing. "I was standin' there, watchin' it tilt, watchin' it go down - you know what I thought?" A tender whine left him. "After all the bein' scared was over, I stood there, 'n'I was thinkin'... whut's Nick gonna say?"

Resisting the sudden urge to hang his head, Coach raised his hands instead, pressing his palms against the rounded bone behind either of his ears. He laced his fingers around the back of his head, squeezing there. "Ellis..." he murmured, a breathy attempt at an interruption that went unacknowledged.

"I was thinkin' about a lot, y'know, but I was mostly thinkin' 'bout him, how he was gonna react. Feels like I always think 'bout him." The tiniest laugh escaped the younger man, instead, a sour twist to it that Coach barely recognized. "Any time my brain ain't on somethin', it goes tuh him... Shit, any time it's on anythin' at all, half the time it's goin' tuh him anyway."

The brunette tipped his head, frown growing to a thoughtful quirk. "I ain't never been like that before. Even when there was this girl I... *thought* I really liked, it ain't like I'd think about her all
the time. Not like this. Makes me feel real stupid, if I'm bein' honest."

Coach stood, silent at first, squeezing and then releasing the tension in his hands, over and over, in pulses on the crown of his head. He slowly turned, letting his hip touch the edge of the metal counter to face back out into the center of the kitchen rather than look straight at Ellis.

He could have said nothing at all, and simply let Ellis keep going. He'd keep going, after all.

Samuel breathed in slowly, letting the sound rasp through his throat as his chest expanded, and he let his whole body slump with the following exhale. "I felt like that 'bout my wife." he murmured, aware of how Ellis suddenly looked up at him. He crossed his arms over his chest, tucking his hands into his armpits. "Since high school. Got engaged in college. Barely breathed if she wasn't around."

His brow arched lightly, gauging the faint colour growing over Ellis' face at his words.

"What? I say somethin'?"

Quickly ducking his head, Ellis lifted his hand, scrubbing a knuckle against the bridge of his nose. "N-no, just... you comparin' us tuh you'n'your wife... I guess I didn't think you..." He trailed off, struggling, but Coach was paying enough attention to catch the gist of it, and it saddened him a little.

Did he come off unsupportive? Judgemental? It wouldn't be the first time he'd heard the criticisms, but it felt like a blow coming from Ellis, unintentional or not. He'd never meant to give that impression - or, worse, the impression that he didn't care. He cared desperately.

"Approved?" the big man supplied, snorting when Ellis' mouth popped open in protest, only confirming the sentiment. "Ellis, I know I ain't always treated you like it, but you a grown man. You're gonna make yo' own choices, and just because they end up hurtin' don't mean they were wrong. Besides..."

It was his turn to trail off, but Ellis didn't prompt him; he just stared with those stone-blue eyes, expectant.

*I ain't so sure I was right about any of it. he wanted to say. I'm lookin' at Nick, watchin' the man fall apart, an' it's lookin' more and more like he's fallin' apart 'cause of you. I can't look at him without seein' sufferin'. I never thought he was the kind of man to hurt like that, but... Either I was wrong, or he ain't the same as he used to be."

*Maybe it's a bit of both."

"If anyone could make a tiger change his stripes, it's you." escaped him, a compromise between honesty and saying nothing at all. It was a dispassionate version of how he felt - mostly removed from the specifics of their situation.

Judging by the way Ellis lit up, grinning, it was an ineffective smokescreen. However, before Coach could even fully appreciate the expression, Ellis‘ expression was already falling. He looked down at the counter, examining the blurry reflection of his face in the silvered metal, visage like an oil painting sprawled across the scuffed surface.

"You don't believe in him, though." he murmured, abrupt uncertainty making his head bob. "I don't mean tuh argue or nothin', just... you were warnin' me away from him fer a while, right? When you thought I, uh, y'know... Before you knew we were actually datin'. You think he's bad fer me."
Coach grunted, feeling his expression twist into a grimace, more weariness than discomfort. He lowered his gaze, examining his shoes as he carefully crossed his legs, letting his weight rest against the edge of the counter. "He an' I go like oil and water, sometimes, son. You know that. But I care 'bout the man, warts an' all."

Ellis snorted gently, brows tangling up over his eyes. "Yeah. Me, too." His face settled on a small frown that was more thoughtful than upset. Appeased at that, maybe.

A moment passed between them, bloated but comfortable, before Coach took his chance.

Coach leaned closer, driven to lower his voice. "Ellis... I got somethin' to ask you. We all gotta talk, but I want to ask you first, just you an' me, a'ight?" When the younger man's attention jolted up, concern lighting in his eyes, Coach quickly raised his hands in a soothing gesture. "It ain't nothin' scary, son, I just want yo' thoughts."

Slowly, Ellis straightened, lifting off the counter to stand at his full height. He drew his arms into a cross over his chest, taking a half-step closer. The concern had gone mild but not disappeared entirely. "Okay. Shoot."

With a soft sigh, Coach slipped his hands into the pockets of his new, crisp grey pants. He rolled his weight onto his heels, feeling the all-too-familiar numb twang of pressure around his kneecap. He'd been considering how to broach the subject since they'd left the mall, and he hadn't settled on any good answers.

Beating around the bush wouldn't do it, however.

Rapping his thumb against his hip, Coach rolled his head on his neck, feeling something snap in an unpleasant stutter of tendon and bone. His eyes closed, steeling himself in the momentary darkness. "How much do you know 'bout Nick? His past, I mean."

When Coach's eyes reopened, the other man was examining him closely, a frown pulling at his lips. "Why're you askin' about that?" He'd anticipated panic, worry - but as Ellis processed the question, what came was far from it. The mechanic's shoulders bristled with an insecure energy, but the calm in his tone suggested it wasn't really directed at Coach. "I don't know a whole lot."

Without averting his gaze, the ex-football player jerked his chin up. "Name Brett mean anythin' to you?"

Ellis' head started to shake, but he hadn't fully completed the motion before recognition flared in his eyes. It was replaced just as quickly by confusion. "Y-yeah... that's... that's just someone from when he was a kid. He told me... a story, a while back. I don't see why it'd be comin' up now." He seemed to re-focus with an abrupt frown. "When did he tell you 'bout this?"

"What kind of story we talkin'?" Coach pressed. He knew his mouth was drawn into an unpleasant twist, and his tone wasn't the soothing, questioning cadence he wanted it to be. "This a friend? Family?"

He watched as Ellis' posture closed off to him, arms crossing tightly over his chest. The gesture bared the dense redness over the back of his forearm, where the Spitter acid had burned his skin raw. It wasn't bleeding actively, clotting having turned it into a fragile, membranous scab. "Coach, why're you askin'? You know he's awful weird about tellin' folk stuff. If he didn't tell you the whole story, I ain't gonna. I... Just 'cause we ain't doin' great, don't mean I wanna go betrayin' trust he put in me earlier, more than I already did."
He'd thought Ellis might have some insight - more than he'd manage on his own, at least - and he hadn't been wrong.

It felt like a slap in the face.

Coach's expression fell, thought making his gaze wander upwards. Nick had asked him not to talk about what happened, after all, and the man's private nature was no great surprise. Was it actually the right call to go around him? Would that be constructive, or merely agitate the situation further? There seemed little point in spreading the information if Nick himself wasn't open to discussing it.

Maybe... let him get some rest, try talkin' to him again after we all get some food. If I can coax him into talkin' to everyone himself, it'll be better than us cornerin' him. That ain't never gone well.

Ellis' hand suddenly touched his wrist, and Coach was yanked back into the moment, looking the younger Georgian's face over with a wary frown. Everything had melted away except a soft, open concern. "You okay, man? Did somethin' happen? Is somethin' wrong?"

A small smile caught Coach before he could stifle it. He shifted his arm, reaching out to set his palm on Ellis' shoulder. "No... no, I think it's a'ight. You're right, Ellis. That's helpful. Ain't fair, me askin' you that. I'll figure shit out."

The young man listened, head slowly nodding, but his gaze remained solidly on Coach's face and his response was firm. "Should I... be worryin'?" His brows tangled, an eagerness touching his voice. "I thought he was actin' funny, but I figured it was 'cause of missin' the whirlybird... Should I go talk tuh him?"

Coach let his head lower, a sigh escaping him. He closed his eyes, shaking his head in a quick wag. "Leave it fo' now, son. Let me work on it. Him."

Ellis hadn't moved an inch - not physically, and not in his expression. He was unconvinced.

"Look, Ellis..." The larger man put his other hand on Ellis' other shoulder, squeezing both of them. "I didn't mean to get you worked up, but I think you're hittin' on somethin' here. Us talkin' behind his back ain't gonna get us nowhere, right? Give me a day. If I ain't made no progress by then, I'll fill you in."

Slowly, subtly, Ellis' lips curved in a small frown. "Yeah, man. I get you." He released a sigh, shoulders lowering under Coach's hands, his stone-blue eyes wearily drifting toward the ground between them. "Can you just... tell me if he's okay?"

Coach looked him over, a grit popping the tendon of his jaw. He did not know the answer to that question, among many. He tightened his grip before releasing Ellis, taking a step back, widening the gap between them. "I'm gonna make sure he is, son. I promise."

The slight doubt that darted up over the younger man's eyes should have stirred offense at the lack of faith in him, but Ellis' blunt response startled him out of it and right into simple humour.

"Y'know, yer the one who said y'all go like oil'n'water. He might not listen tuh you."

Unable to resist a laugh, Coach reached up, curling the fingers of his left hand into a loose fist and tapping them against Ellis' right ear in a mock-box. He pushed his other hand into the pocket of his jacket, bringing out Ellis' cap and pushing it into his hand. "Get yo' ass back out there, boy. I don't need this shit. We got mouths to feed."

The slight grin that spread over Ellis' face was cheeky before it mellowed to a soft
sadness, lowering his chin as he lifted his cap and screwed it in place atop his head. He obediently
ducked away from the big man, retreating toward the door to the main section of the restaurant.
However, neither of their smiles lasted through the threshold.

Both of them knew that Ellis was not, after all, incorrect.
Their food supplies were running low.

The downside to the rest they'd gotten, holed up while Lena recovered, was that it made it very easy to get bored. Adrenaline and anxiety took a toll on their appetite, but inactivity gnawed at their self-control. When boredom came, there were two options to relieve the sensation and find comfort: sleep or eat.

As a consequence, they'd gone through all the trailmix and bagged snacks they'd found. Most of what was left was packaged meals and canned goods of varying appeal. Ellis gravitated immediately toward the two boxes of macaroni and cheese they had. The idea of some hot, artificial cheese seemed extraordinarily pleasant.

Two boxes would not, however, feed everyone.

Ellis grabbed them anyway, tucking them under an arm, and continued to poke curiously through the dwindling pile of boxes and cans they had left. A fat can of baked beans caught his eye, and he scooped that up, too. With the two mac boxes under his arm and the can wielded in that hand, his other arm was free to reach up and brace a palm against the bar as he got back up from his kneeling position.

He realized, then, that several sets of eyes were on him. Chris and Rochelle sat at the bar a few feet in front of him, and Rhiannon and Lena sat at the table in the deeper portion of the L-shaped restaurant. Coach had split the difference, resting against the inner corner splitting the two wings of the restaurant.

"Guess we better go get the gennie runnin' again." he offered up, tone rushed to mask the flash of insecurity that rose up under the scrutiny. "Unless y'all wanna crunch on raw macaroni."

The closest he got to a laugh was the way Rochelle's eyes crinkled gently, but that was the limit of the reaction. He withheld a sigh, the silence a weight pressing on his shoulders. He didn't know if it was just exhaustion or the belated disappointment of their failed rescue attempt, but the energy in the restaurant had fallen steeply.

Nick's curled form in the booth, unmoving, did not help - not that he usually contributed much to a jovial atmosphere.

That observation almost made Ellis stop to think, and as he felt the oncoming pressure of it, he started his body into motion. He didn't take the time to consider his plan of attack, or consider much of anything. He just moved.

His peripheral vision caught movement as Coach lifted a hand toward him, as if to reach out and stop him, but the gesture was aborted as quickly as it had begun.

Rather than question into the motion, Ellis found himself marching to the back door, pushing through and stepping out onto the small porch that bordered the scrubby fenced-in backyard. The outbuilding that housed the generator was across the space, a few feet of sandy earth making up the path between.

He stared blankly for just a moment, acknowledging the burden on his left arm only belatedly. He'd carried the food with him. It wasn't a drastically poor decision to make, but he realized then that Coach had probably been pointing out as much, rather than trying to stop him outright.
A sigh tumbled from his lips, eyes falling closed.

*It was Brett... shit. Brett S-somethin'. That night, when Ro' and Coach went out on their own, when they met up with Chris, 'n'that big ol' storm kicked up -*

He'd been injured, chest half-collapsed by the pressure of a boot on his sternum; it had been damage, in hindsight, that should have left him bedridden for so much longer than it had. Nick had worried over him, the lingering grief of their near-death experience slung into the simple pleasure of touch and closeness. Nick had *needed* him, desperately.

And he'd needed Nick.

They'd held each other close against the cracks of thunder, and they'd traded stories. He'd told Nick about his mother and father, the story of how they met, and the older man had spoken of a teacher from his childhood. It had been clear how much the memory meant to him.

Now, Ellis was confident he didn't have the full story.

As difficult as it had been to walk away from the conversation without prying, he truly believed what he'd said to Coach. Conspiring behind Nick's back had never worked well, and if Nick wasn't the one to tell him, what would be the point? If he'd told Coach what little he knew, what would've been the point?

It was all easy to say - and, he felt, the right thing to do - but keeping his mind off it now was almost impossible. Resisting the urge to walk right up to Nick and demand an explanation was a physically strenuous effort.

*Why'd it even come up? When the hell would it'uv come up?* He shifted, letting his free hand raise up, rubbing fingertips into the bridge of his nose. *I thought it was funny, him callin' a teacher by his first name, but I didn't think anythin' of it. Just figured they was close. Why's he tellin' Coach anythin'?*

Maybe his feelings were just a little hurt at the idea of what had been an important and private moment becoming, clearly, a bit less private. A groan left him at the thought, stomping either foot in a childish gesture of bodily frustration, forcing his eyes open again to look out into the yard.

"I should'uh kissed him." he grunted, weary.

A cleared throat sent him nearly out of his skin.

Whipping around on his heel, nearly dropping the food in his grip, Ellis felt his gut drop out as his gaze landed on Lena where she had her head poked out from the door behind him. He'd not fully closed the door, it seemed, as she'd pushed halfway out without much of a sound.

*Shit, shit, shit. I can't keep muh damn mouth shut.*

Her expression snapped to neutral as he looked at her, but he was confident she'd been fighting a smile a split-second earlier. A dimple struggled in and out of sight on her left cheek.

"Thought I'd watch your back." she offered, and when he seemed frozen before her, she slipped out onto the porch and approached a few steps. Her hands moved to pry the boxes from under his arm, taking them under hers instead, and she held out a hand flat toward the can in his grip. "Rhiannon's fine, by the way. Coach looked her ankle over."

He thought of the look she'd passed him, playing their game of 'Two Truths and A Lie'. He'd
accepted the idea that she knew he wasn't straight, though that information felt raw and fresh to him, let alone to a relative stranger. He could only hope she hadn't made any inferences about him and Nick.

At least she was keeping it to herself, if so.

Ellis forced himself to laugh, the sound more a choke than anything else. He had to coax his hand to relax, setting the can in her grasp. "Uh - good! Good. 'M glad. I was just gonna turn on the gennie, so, uh -" The muscles of his jaw ached as he managed an awkward grin. "I'll go do that."

The woman nodded, weight leaning back casually onto a heel. "Good." she responded easily.

"Okay." escaped Ellis like a whine, turning to scramble toward the small set of stairs that spanned the height difference between the porch and the earth. He took the set in one lunge, left boot landing first, scrub-clotted ground squeaking gently under his heel.

He'd hoped she might stay on the porch while he got into the generator shed, but soft footsteps behind him indicated otherwise. With no better alternative to vent his anxiety, he started to babble. "I ain't sure if this's gonna be any good... we ain't got any butter or milk or nothin', so it'll be kinda plain, I guess." He bobbed his head a few times in thought, picking up steam before he could stop himself. "My mama used tuh put pumpkin in mac'n'cheese - I know it sounds weird, but it's better than you'd think. Kinda creamy."

The shed had a lock, but it dangled open on the doorlatch. He pushed the door open, sliding into the slim interior, barely wide enough to comfortably stand inside amidst the shelves and the generator on the ground.

Lena's voice, low, floated from close behind him. "Doesn't sound weird. You ever had tomato pie? Tomatoes, cheese, some herbs, all in a pie crust. Mom made them." A kind of melancholy touched her sigh. "Cripes, it's been a long time since I had a good tomato pie."

Ellis couldn't help a grin, anxiety fading as he found purchase in an innocuous conversation. "Hot damn, girl, we're in Georgia, 'course I have." He thumbed at his jaw thoughtfully. "Muh buddy Keith's got this grandma. She churned out pies like nobody's business. Sweet potato, buttermilk, chess pies -"

A giggle interrupted him, morphed quickly into a groan, faux pain dousing her response. "Dude, we're about to eat watered-down macaroni and beans. Please stop."

He laughed, reaching down to rest one hand on the generator, bracing himself. The generator was simply operated with a nearly palm-sized red panel of plastic controls. There were a few open plugs, along with the thick plastic cord that trailed out and up to the wall-mounted breakerbox where it hooked into the building's electrical system.

It was a simple matter of flipping the fat switch labeled ON/OFF. The metal casing rattled softly as it chugged to life, but the generator wasn't awfully loud. It hadn't drawn much attention the first time beyond bringing a few infected snarling and growling around the back fence, and he wasn't highly concerned about it the second go around.

He did, however, hurry to back out of the shed and close the door. It muffled the sound to a simple vibration, and he patted his hands on his thighs as he turned to face the Texan standing behind him. "You started it." he retorted.

She smiled, gently - but then it faded. Her green-brown hazel eyes drifted to the right, and she
reached her free hand behind her back. "Um, I have something for you. I wasn't sure about it, but all that crap in the mall happened pretty quick, so I just grabbed it." Her weight shifted, shoulders raising as she seemed to fish something from the back of her pants' waistband.

Ellis' eyes widened from under the bill of his cap, watching her pull free a tightly folded square of faded, grungy yellow fabric. He knew what it was well before she turned it over, displaying the text of 'IFTERS' in soft ink.

His heart surged warmly. He looked up at her face, catching the uncertainty there, the fractional worry - and he scrambled forward, grabbing the shirt from her hands, words coming too fast to manage a coherent question. "Oh - shit, how'd - when did you -"

Lena laughed at him outright, looping her now-free arm under the burden carried in her other arm, tilting her head. "You were looking so dang upset at it when you were taking it off, I figured it meant something to you. And we don't have a whole lot to hold onto these days, so, I... I guess I took a risk on it being stupid."

Ellis gently pulled the shirt against his chest, gripping fingers in the familiar, worn fabric. He couldn't explain the flood of emotion that threatened at him. It wasn't about the shirt - not really. It was the kindness, maybe, and the gesture itself.

Then again, it very possibly wasn't about Lena or the shirt at all.

He laughed, the sound giddier than he meant, and shoved forward on instinct. His arms caught her in a hug, closing around the outside of her arms to trap them at her sides, squeezing tightly. As his chin pressed against her shoulder, he closed his eyes, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Thanks, girl."

A gust of air left her, an awkward wheeze, unable to do anything to return the hug except put her empty right hand on his hip and pat gently. "Uh... so not stupid?"

Ellis shook his head, forcing himself to let her go before the embrace lingered too long. He slid back, hands coming to rest against her biceps, palms pressed tight to the leather that made up the sleeves of her jacket. "N-no. I, uh... it means a lot. It ain't stupid."

Her lips curved into a smile that put a squint on her soft almond eyes, and the awkwardness in her expression faded in favour of wary apology. She twisted her voice into a Texan accent, harsher than his - and easy, like maybe fighting it off was the hard part. "So... reckon that means I'm forgiven?"

That made his head snap to the side, cocked, a brow lifting. He let her go completely, taking a sizeable step back. "Fer... whut?" he uttered, genuine confusion setting his gaze on a flickered wander over her face.

Lena slipped her lower lip between her teeth, rolling it there, before she nodded her chin up. "The... thing with Chris. I didn't mean to stick my nose into something, and it seemed like it stirred up some crap. I really didn't want to hurt anyone."

Ellis' posture lowered a twitch, shoulders dropping, and he shook his head in a quick gesture. "No, no. You didn't know any better." He reached out, nudging a curled knuckle against her bicep. "Besides. It's good, me knowin' the truth. I'm happy you came'n'talked tuh me. We ain't known each other that long, but I appreciate it."

She was looking at him, softly, and her eyes pooled with some gentle emotion that he could do
nothing more than acknowledge. He tried to read it, but could barely focus on her expression before she'd blinked her eyes and tipped her chin down. Tension washed it all away to a dull smile that did not carry those laugh-lines to the corners of her eyes.

"You're way too nice." she managed with a bright little laugh. It was not insincere, yet it was hard to take at face value, now. It was with sudden clarity, sudden focus, that Ellis reminded himself of a simple fact.

Lena had been with Nick alongside Coach.

As had Christophe.

He could have grabbed her arm and asked her. He almost did, in fact, but two things held him back. Firstly, empathy; she'd already been placed in the middle of things she didn't understand. Secondly, his own words to Coach came back to haunt him. Even if he plied her for information, what good would it do?

She likely had no context for what she'd seen or heard, if anything, and he couldn't do much with the knowledge. Even if he spoke with her or Chris, what would it matter if Nick didn't talk to him? He needed to hear it - whatever it was, and whoever Brett really was - from Nick.

That left only one option, and certainty came with a degree of calm.

Where he had felt full of pressure under a frantic seal, rattling and cracking at his edges, he suddenly felt it relieved. He tightened his grip on the folded T-shirt in his left hand, focusing himself enough to smile. "You think you can ride shotgun with me in the kitchen?"

Lena passed a smile over her shoulder, the expression gentler, and nodded. "Sure, sunshine."

Coach had asked him for a day. He'd give him the time, though he hated the idea of doing nothing when something was wrong with Nick and he was best positioned to help. He wanted to act rashly, to rush in, and knowing better didn't dissuade the desire.

Still, maybe applying a bit of pressure wouldn't be out of the question.

Maybe it was about time to toe the line that had been blurred back in that dressing room.
The sounds of conversation and scattered laughter from the kitchen was soothing, Chris found. He liked hearing Ellis laugh. It was altogether one of the most pleasant noises to hear in the grim days of the apocalypse, when there was little pleasure to be found.

Another was Rochelle's voice, but that had been difficult to tease out since they'd returned to base. She'd been rested against his shoulder for a while. The contact confusing, after she'd so explicitly refused his advances in the mall. He wasn't strictly upset, but it was hard not to have his pride wounded. Worse, though, was the uncertainty.

When she'd first wordlessly settled beside him, he'd been unsure what to do. Kissing had been strictly off-limits. Was it too much to put his arm around her? Draw her against his chest, set his cheek against her forehead? He wanted to do all of it, but the last thing he wanted to do was over-step the boundary she'd set... and she hadn't been very clear.

To be safe, he stilled himself, simply enjoying the warmth and softness of the contact, the offered intimacy. At least she still wanted to be near him.

His eyes wandered the room, tracing the shapes of his teammates. Nick had not so much as stirred since Coach and he had had their argument, and Coach had been similarly quiet. The entire team had been quiet, in fact, until Lena and Ellis had sequestered themselves in the kitchen.

He looked toward Coach, finding the man looking back at him. They observed each other in some quiet stand-off, staring for a few moments before Christophe cocked his head gently, glancing toward the booth that contained the unconscious gambler. His slim brow arched in an exaggerated query.

When he looked back, Coach was shaking his head.

Some frustration made Chris' breath huff out, reluctantly dropping his gaze to the ground. It seemed so backwards, so wrong, to do nothing. When he'd needed somebody, Nick had been there, twice now. Now it was Nick's turn to need somebody, and he felt inadequate.

His phantom left arm still hurt. It seemed to hang limp at his side, spasms passing through muscle and tendon, and it took everything he had not to show it. He felt exhausted, like the pain itself had drained his strength.

It came in waves and always in tandem with his panic. He'd been in the restaurant the first time it had happened, and imagined the voices of his old teammates, the tactile sensation of a knife tip in the small of his back. Then again, on the way to the mall, when infected had surrounded him and he'd seen nothing but the faces of the Angels of Death in the crowd.

Now, once more, a hallucination of his old leader had driven the nails of his phantom hand to dig into his palm, cutting skin he didn't have, the pain a crushing pressure. Her presence had been so much more tangible than it had ever been before. She'd looked at him, and he'd looked at her, and it had seemed so real.

Christophe closed his eyes, trying to remember how it had felt when Ellis had propped up the mirror to his hip and he'd seen himself in the reflection. The illusion of wholeness had soothed something in him. Even though he knew his arm was gone, seeing it move - or at least appear to move - had helped.
He tried to remember how it had felt to pull the trigger, to fire into the concrete the very bullet that he'd once wanted to fire through the roof of his mouth. That had helped plenty.

However, no matter what he did, the pain did not subside. The more he thought about it, in fact, the more it seemed to worsen. Rochelle's presence comforted him, but did nothing for the pain. He focused instead on keeping his body as relaxed as possible and hoping she wouldn't notice.

Me tranquilizo. he urged, inhaling slowly through his nostrils. Is no good to lose your head. Ellis said it would come back. It will go away.

He exhaled, slower. It will go away.

The kitchen door swung open, and from it, Ellis padded out with a plate in either hand. He'd been mid-sentence, the words catapulting suddenly into focus as he entered the main room of the restaurant. "- tellin' you. It was all fun'n'games until the cops showed up. Keith still ain't allowed within a hundred yards'uh any Six Flags. They had his picture up and everythin'."

As she followed in his wake, Lena's expression was strained between entertainment and wild confusion.

She had four plates in her grip with three on her right arm, a potentially perilous balance that seemed second nature. They were placed in a tiered pattern encircling her thumb, the third braced mostly on her forearm.

"Is he for real?" the brunette tossed out, gaze darting amongst the faces she could see from where she stood. When Coach merely brightened into a small grin at her, she sighed, advancing toward the bar. "Soup's on. Still on the fence if it's any good or not."

As Lena set down the plate in her left hand and slid it in front of Rochelle, the woman's head lifted from Chris' shoulder, rotating on her stool with a quick kick of her heel against the crossbar. Though it had previously looked like she was asleep or at least dozing, her movement gave no indication of drowsiness. "Thanks, you two."

Lena smiled gently, using her now-free hand to take the plate off her forearm and set it down in front of Christophe. As she did, her head cocked, glancing over her shoulder at Ellis, who'd halted just beside her. "I've got these guys." she said lazily, nodding her chin in the general direction of Rhiannon and Coach.

He balked, fingers tightening on the dishes in his grasp, watching her as she took one of the two plates balanced on her left arm and rearranged her grip on the other. She moved away without looking at him, attention focused entirely on Coach as she approached him.

Shit. drifted across his mind as he lowered his gaze to examine the two meals in his hands.

One for him.

One for Nick.

He'd been preparing to confront the man, but coming to bear with the reality of it felt very different from the hypothetical. He had no idea how Nick was feeling; the last real interaction they'd had had been in the mall atrium, bodies pressed close, as if - for a sparing few moments - things were back to normal.

Ellis sucked in air, squinting his eyes in a vaguely pained look. Okay, bud. You got this. Ain't got no reason tuh be a scaredy-cat. If anythin', he's the scaredy-cat. You know full well he's in love
He thought it before he'd really considered whether or not it was wise. Forming the concept so bluntly in his head suddenly dropped a leaden weight in his gut. He'd asked himself many times if he was wrong - if Nick really did love him.

The question, he found, had changed.

Now, staring down at the pallid yellow macaroni and dark brown beans in two unceremoniously piled heaps, all he could summon was, Whut if it don't matter anyhow? Nick's stubbornness, his ego, made up the bricks with which he walled himself in. Whut do I do if he admits he's been in love with me this whole time and it don't change nothin'?

It was a massive, towering thought. It loomed so large above him that the only emotional response he could manage was vertigo.

This one time, in high school, Keith'n'me went tuh this swamp plantation with our class. Knees locked, Ellis started moving, letting his feet carry him. If he allowed his brain to slow down to consider his actions, he might've chickened out. S'posed tuh learn shit 'bout the house'n'the folk who used tuh live there, but all he did was end up jumpin' in the lake out back and splashin' around lookin' fer gators tuh wrestle.

The Georgian inhaled deeply through his nose, unfocused vision landing warily on the booth Nick had claimed. He was curled lengthwise on the booth seat, dark sneakers the only thing visible as Ellis approached. He hadn't so much as stirred since they'd arrived at the restaurant.

He ain't never turned down a chance to find gators. Thing is with gator-huntin', is most times, gettin' 'em wrestled is the easy part. Figurin' out whut tuh do with a pissed-off gator after you got it gripped is the hard part.

An absurd flash of humour came as Nick's full coiled form came into view, affection tilting Ellis' head. The man looked small, cold, and the sight of him muted the internal panic Ellis had been fending off into a sudden calm.

I guess you're muh gator, sugar.

The soft whiplash of realizing his own thoughts, of feeling out the unfamiliar term of endearment, made his footsteps stutter. But it was just a secret trapped in his skull, and the flare of shame that followed did not last with no one to answer to.

I ain't lettin' you go, even if I got no damn idea whut tuh do with you now.

Ellis exhaled, then, ducking his chin to shadow his eyes under the bill of his trucker cap. He reached his hands forward, setting both plates down on the table of the booth. He slid one into the middle of the right side of the table, in front of where Nick laid, and pushed the other to the opposite side.

The curly-haired mechanic simply swung his weight, dropping to sit in the booth bench, jeans rustling loudly against the wood as he scooted a bit inwards. As tempting as it was to sit nervously and look over at Nick, gauge if the noise had woken him, Ellis instead dropped his gaze to the plate in front of him. A fork rested on the surface, the very edge of its handle having slid halfway into the baked beans lumped there.

Crossing his legs at the ankles, pressing his toes tightly into the ground, Ellis picked the fork free and lifted it to lick off the brown gravy that marred the metal. He focused squarely down on his
plate, distantly admiring the steam rising off the food, and a bit relieved when the beans tasted no worse than he'd expected.

For a moment, he thought Nick wouldn't rise. He started to mull over his next move, consider how obvious he wanted to be in his attempts to get the man's attention, when the smooth edge of the table was suddenly interrupted by a set of fingers.

They curled, gripped, and as tension and pressure was applied to them, the haggard shape of Nick's upper body creaked halfway upright off the bench.

Ellis continued to examine his plate, maintaining a relaxed looseness to his posture. He pretended not to notice as Nick's face came partially into view, one bleary eye laser-focused up at him, half-squinted. Darkness puddled in the soft skin below his eyelid, like a bruise, following the subtle structure of the top edge of his cheekbone.

He froze there, staring dimly, and Ellis couldn't shake the slight pleasure of feeling like he had the upper hand.

With the handle of his utensil now cleaned, he flipped it in his grip, reaching it down to meticulously start spearing beans onto the tines. They were soft and inclined to come apart under the pressure, but he managed a good stack.

Ellis lifted the fork to his mouth, but he'd only gotten it halfway there before Nick's voice, gritty and harsh with sleep, made him halt.

"What are you doing?"

The Georgian allowed his eyes to lift, landing them on Nick's face without quite meeting his gaze, examining the older man where he was still frozen in a strange crane upwards. Rather than respond immediately, he continued to shove his fork into his mouth, clamping his teeth down on the metal.

"Eatin'." he mumbled around it, cocking his head to the side.

Ellis watched for a moment as exhaustion roiled into blunt confusion on Nick's face, then returned his gaze to his plate. He swiveled his wrist to start collecting macaroni on his fork in the same fashion, unable to stop himself from stealing glances at the gambler, utilizing the bill of his cap to mostly obscure his face.

Nick released a few faint sounds of strain and discomfort, and his entire arm tightened as he put his weight on it, forcing himself to wobble upright. He was not stable, precisely; he wavered in his seat as if his body were filled with helium and it was only kept anchored by his now two-handed grip on the table.

He was still staring, and it was hard to read him without focusing on him for more than the few seconds at a time that Ellis could manage. Was his expression soft? Incredulous? Resigned? Did it lack anger and irritation only by virtue of his exhaustion?

"That's not what I -"

The Georgian lifted a pinky from off his fork, pointing it down at the plate in front of Nick. "You should eat, too." he interrupted, mildly, letting his chin raise so he could square his gaze on the Northerner. "Ain't food fer yer eyes."

Nick's attention did not move from their riveted focus on Ellis' face, and the weary intensity of it finally bored a hole in his composure. Heat threatened at his cheeks, and it took everything he had
not to clear his throat or drop his head.

Instead, he shifted his voice into a firmer register. "Eat, Nicolas."

The flicker of surprise that crossed Nick’s expression, slackening his features, was tremendously satisfying. The gambler's chin dropped, a few strands of dark hair sliding to cross his temple and tickle at his brow. A sigh strained at his shoulders, and he reached up to grab the fork off his plate.

Ellis hadn't actually expected obedience, and he found himself stilling to watch as the other man scooped up a messy cluster of macaroni noodles and shoveled it into his mouth. Some distaste quirked at his nose, but he chewed and swallowed in silence.

A mostly cooperative Nick was the last thing he thought he'd find in the booth.

The urge to talk more swelled in his chest, but Ellis stifled it down and remained quiet. He bit at the inside of his cheek before looking down at his food, letting hunger drive him into a few hearty mouthfuls. Keep it easy. Slow.

The macaroni and cheese tasted about how he expected it to; lacking the layered flavour added by the milk they didn't have, it was a bit watered-down and tacky on his teeth. The warmth was soothing, though, and he found himself slouching down slightly to quicken his pace, elbows braced on the table.

It was not a companionable silence. Tension sat between them, drying Ellis' mouth and bleaching some of the already mediocre flavour from his food. Nick shifted intermittently, motions mechanical. It seemed like he might simply keep pace, mouthful by mouthful, until he'd finished his meal completely.

However, halfway through, his arm suddenly froze. The tines of his fork rested against the plate, making a soft screech as his fingers trembled and forced it to skate a half-inch over the ceramic. Ellis didn't even have time to swallow his mouthful of bean and mac - a direct mixture of the two, he found, had been a mistake - before Nick spoke again.

"Your head hurt?" he asked, a mutter too rasped to get much emotion from, and it was all Ellis could do not to smile around his quick gulp.

"No." he responded, a half-truth, reaching up to touch fingertips onto the dried blood marking his jaw and temple, where the stone material of the mall's interior had scraped and burst his skin. "It weren't too bad. Better than me hittin' the ground, huh?"

It was supposed to be a joke, an attempt at levity, but the way Nick's jawline flinched said it had missed the mark.

"Are you okay?" he pressed, before the darkly dressed survivor could respond.

Nick slowly picked the tip of his fork up again, using it to prod mindlessly at the food before him. He chased a single bean in a lazy circle, trailing gravy behind it on the ceramic surface. His tone was flat, gusting out of him like a sigh. "What do you want, Overalls?"

That soured Ellis' expression just faintly, and he dipped his head, pushing sincerity into his voice. He lowered it, too, aware of how Nick's frame tensed with every further word. "I just wanted tuh check on you, man. After... earlier." He sensed that his opportunity to speak was limited, and he forced himself not to press his luck and continue much further. "I ain't mad at you. Are you mad at me?"
The gambler's eyes darted up, posture snapping straight, the motion the quickest he'd managed since he'd awoken. His gaze ticked in a slow pass over Ellis’ face, gauging, and there was some subtle trepidation in his pause.

Nick was struggling for composure, for calm, for control. The man inhaled and it trembled at his lips, and the urge to reach over and touch him became almost overwhelming. Sympathy took some of the pleasure out of having the upper hand, it seemed.

"You want to talk about it." Nick observed in a grunt.

When Ellis shifted with a soft squirm of his legs before nodding once, the Northerner lifted his other arm. He braced his elbow against the table, pressing fingertips into the bridge of his nose.

"Thing is, I don't. I really don't." His voice was so quiet that it broke every few syllables, as if he failed to put enough air into it to support the words he spoke. "We almost made a fuckin' mistake, but we didn't. Nothing happened, so there's nothing to talk about."

It was Ellis who first turned his head, looking out into the main area of the restaurant to ensure they had some amount of privacy. Nobody was looking at them, not even Coach. Their five teammates had wandered over toward the other section of the L-shaped restaurant, distance increased between them.

"N- nothin'? You call that nothin'?" he whispered back, unable to flatten the disbelief in his tone. "We almost -"

"But we didn't." Nick interjected, though it was faded. As Ellis looked him over, his whole presence seemed faded and worn. He seemed far-away, still struggling to remain grounded. His gaze wandered to focus on the cushioned backing of the booth behind Ellis' shoulder, unfocused, a humoured snort touching his breath. "I'm usually an expert at fucking my exes."

Taken aback, Ellis felt his grip go limp on his fork. He had to process that for a moment before it sunk in fully, and he screwed his brows up over his eyes as it did.

He'd intended to say, 'We almost kissed.'

He'd simply not thought of what might've happened after that hypothetical kiss. He'd not strictly considered the possibility that that moment in the dressing room, electricity sparking between them, would have escalated in the same fashion things always did with Nick.

He'd certainly not realized that sex had been Nick's intention, or that he'd been thinking about it in those terms.

Now, unbidden, his head spun with a painfully vivid image: the dressing room's low light, Nick pressing him into the wall, fingers rough and hasty on the zipper of his jeans. Goosebumps rose over his arms as he could practically feel teeth nipping at his ear, stubble and hot breath rasping against his neck. Fingers spreading him open, thrusting into him, coaxing his body to relax until...

Pressure pooled suddenly below his navel, body shifting of its own volition, an eager betrayal that he couldn't control. He felt his face lighting up, throat closing in a way that negated any chance he might've had at a response.

He had always viewed physical intimacy as an emotional exchange, a quiet and tender way to express love. He still did, in fact. After all, Nick always hid behind sex like some broad explanation for their relationship, but their intimacy had rarely been purely carnal: they'd needed each other, needed comfort.
The language Nick spoke with was hush and husk, affection muffled under intensity and passion. The number of times that Nick had kissed him rather than talk was beyond counting, but the distraction had never fooled Ellis... even if he’d doubted himself for a little while. *Now I just gotta convince him.*

The silence that followed seemed to only slowly occur to Nick. He blinked his vision back into focus on Ellis’ face, and he studied it, lines forming between his brows as he did. Ellis couldn't jerk his chin away fast enough to dodge the look, body sluggish with warped adrenaline.

*He can't read my mind. He doesn't know. How would he know? Just say somethin', anythin', before he gets ideas, 'n' -*

With abrupt delicacy, Nick shifted his weight, placing his free hand down against the table surface. His fingers splayed, thumb tapping just once on the lacquered wood. "That... was a joke." he stated, words stiff as they left him. His gaze took an awkward slant, darting suddenly away when Ellis' body twitched reflexively backwards in vague retreat. "I mean... it's true, actually, but I didn't mean... that. I... I wouldn't have..."

*... Or maybe it's all over muh dumb face.*

A bolt of laughter from across the room cut through the air between them, tremendously dissonant to their current interaction. They both winced and, in an abrupt mirror of one another, looked sharply down at their plates.

Ellis forced himself to breathe evenly, scrunching his shoulders in close to his ears. It wasn't going how he’d wanted it to... not that he quite knew how he'd wanted it to go... but he had no alternative paths to follow. He started to move his fork again, even as his attention had veered far from his hunger.

"Do you remember, um..." he started, just a mumble, lowering his head to fully block his view of Nick, hiding under the canopy of his cap. "A while back? When, uh..."

He could hear the sound of Nick's fork dropping, metal striking ceramic, soft enough that it must’ve been a deliberate motion rather than a frustrated gesture. The shift of fabric followed, like the man had leaned back in his seat.

"What?" he uttered, grated, finally sounding halfway corporeal.

Ellis tightened his grip, knuckles curling until the edge of the fork bit into the soft edge of his palm, mindlessly using the side of his fork to split a macaroni noodle in half. He stared down at it, watching the shape break apart. "After you burnt up yer leg, you locked yerself up in a bedroom. I broke in and, uh..."

'We made love', he wanted to say.

He didn't.

The way he paused as he let dead air buffer around the implication, swallowing past the dry sensation in his throat, felt like slipping dangerously close to an edge he couldn't see - the same way he couldn't see how Nick was reacting. It was not an easy task to keep going, but he forced his jaw to unglue and continue.

"Anyway, you were upset, but I... didn't let you close up. I chased you down, 'n'... you were glad I did. You said you were, at least. Even though you didn't really tell me why you were upset none, not really, it felt like you let me be there for yuh. Felt... like we got somewhere after that, or..."
His voice tried to falter, but the fact that Nick hadn't stopped him yet bolstered his confidence, and he let a quick huff of air clear his throat before he spoke again.

"Now, you said all that stuff back there, 'n' you can't pretend you didn't. I know you care 'bout me. I know yer just afraid of hurtin' me, or... me hurtin' you. But I - I just... I need you tuh understand somethin', Nick. I need you tuh hear it, for real this time."

The sound of clinking made him realize his hand was shaking, just enough to make his fork skitter indelicately across the surface of the plate. He set it down rather than let the noise continue, bringing his elbows in to link his fingers together over the table and stare, instead, at his dirtied nails.

"I love you." When Ellis said it, Nick did not flinch. For a moment, the Georgian doubted if he'd actually put a voice to the words - but they buzzed on his tongue and he must've uttered them. "I ain't givin' up on you, no matter whut you say. I'm gonna chase you, however long yuh keep runnin'. You can't shut me out. Can't keep lockin' doors ferever, Nick."

Silence. There was silence even when he waited, when he let it hang just to see if Nick would break it.

Ellis forced himself to lift his chin after a few moments had passed without so much as a hush of breath or a rustle of movement from the man across the booth from him. His eyes just barely cut out from under the bill of his hat, searching, despite the fear that crept his heartrate up to a steady pounding.

Nick's head was sagged as if in surrender, dropped so low and submerged in enough shadow that Ellis couldn't determine what was sprawled over his features. It was, undoubtedly, a frown.

"I know it ain't that easy, but if... if you want me tuh break in, all you gotta do is let me. 'Cause I want to. You just gotta let me, okay?" he murmured, voice cracking over the words as he forced himself to break that dense silence. "That's all."

Nick's frame shifted fractionally, like a motion he couldn't keep under control. He looked as if he might simply sit there forever - like if he never responded, the conversation would remain where they left it, untouched and stagnant.

The Georgian lifted his chin, staring fully across the table at Nick, examining his posture. There was no point, it seemed, in forcing the issue. He'd let Ellis finish, and wasn't that progress? Didn't that mean something? A sad quirk tugged at his lips, and he shifted to grab his plate from the table and pull the edge against his chest to brace it there. "I'll leave you alone." he murmured. "Thanks... fer listenin', at least."

Part of him, as he slid out from the booth, wanted Nick to stop him, but he was not so surprised that he could summon disappointment when it didn't happen. The fact that he'd gotten all the words out was enough, for now.

He inhaled as he stood, and when he exhaled, a little bubble of self-satisfaction crept up his spine. It had been a while since he'd felt light. It wasn't until that very moment that he realized how starved of oxygen he'd felt, as if his chest was full of water and he'd been holding his breath for hours. He inhaled again, deeply, just because he could.

His lungs were still full of air as he walked away, released only slowly in a gradual bluster. It took every ounce of self-control he had not to look back over his shoulder - and whether or not he imagined it, the burn of a gaze on him made the hair on the back of his neck prickle.
"I'll make things okay.

I promise."

He'd gone too far to hear the sound of Nick's head cracking against the side of the booth's inner wall, frustration boiling into the gesture. He didn't hear the grunt that accompanied it. He didn't see Nick lift both hands, pressing his fingertips into his eyes.

He definitely didn't hear the soft, weary little, "Dumbshit."
Chapter 261

The night had come upon them at a tremendous pace. The day had been a trial, certainly, but none of them quite expected the intensity of their exhaustion, nor how abruptly it would set in.

Rhiannon had already dozed off, laying flat on the ground with her leather jacket folded up under her head as a pillow. Her injured foot was elevated onto the bench that she laid perpendicular to. Lena was sitting next to her and, though she was still awake, the heaviness of her eyelids suggested it might not last.

Rochelle and Christophe were still at the bar, seated side by side on their stools, quiet hanging between them. She was no longer leaned against his shoulder, though their knees were pressed together just softly.

The ache wandering around Ellis' skull in crawling pulses finally began taking its toll, doubling down on the emotional exhaustion that had set in after his conversation with Nick. He didn't want to sleep, but sleep was all he could think of. His vision threatened to blur every time he blinked.

Nick had never really stirred from the booth, except once. He'd rasped something out about 'taking a leak', and disappeared into the backyard for a few minutes. Before his absence could grow concerning, however, he'd reappeared and collapsed once more into his makeshift bench bed.

Once he'd stilled for good, Coach had gotten up. Ellis watched from his seat at one of the tables as the big man gathered a blanket off the ground, flapping it out into a half-folded rectangle. He approached the booth quietly, leaning in to drape the blanket over Nick's curled frame.

Ellis tried to meet his gaze as he retreated, but Coach merely sighed and examined his nails as he walked away from the booth. The man was worried. That, more than anything, worried Ellis.

"Want to talk 'bout the chopper." Coach stated, simply, just loud enough to carry around the room to the survivors that were still awake. "'Bout what we gonn' do. But I think takin' a rest might be good, first. Get our thoughts together. We all had a long day, an' I want all of us at full steam when we make a call."

Nodding faintly, Ellis let his chin droop. "Yeah. Crash site ain't goin' anywhere, anyhow."

Lena hummed softly, her hand settled against Rhiannon's temple, thumb stroking along her hairline. "Sleep sounds good right about now. Hardly gonna go running out in the dark, anyway, even if we weren't all beat to crap."

Coach grunted out affirmation, footsteps pausing. He seemed to consider something, eyes swerving to look toward Ellis. Something turned over in his head, a decision made, and he blinked to break his own stare and continue forward.

The temptation to question the young Southerner on what had transpired in the booth - an interaction that had not gone unnoticed - was dismissed in favour of trusting him. Ellis had, after all, given his word.

"I'll take first watch." he stated, attention turning toward his double-barrel shotgun where it rested against the bar. "Y'all get some rest."

Sitting upright, suddenly, Rochelle leaned forward with an elbow bracing on her knee. "Actually - Chris and I can take watch, if that's okay." Her eyes were focused on Coach, visibly not
acknowledging as Christophe jolted up in his seat. He looked bluntly startled, brown eyes darting between the two.

"Oh. ¡Sí! Sí. We stay up." he agreed, head bobbing in a sagely manner, as if he weren't very clearly blind-sided by the idea.

Coach looked dubiously at him before cocking a brow at Rochelle. He shrugged after a few beats, surrendering with a put-upon sigh. "If that's what y'all kids want." He spoke with a transparently dismissive tone; he had no interest in prying, but his expression made it plainly apparent that he knew something was going on.

She smiled at him, simply, apology quirked somewhere at the edges of her lips. "Thanks, papa bear."

As she moved to slide to her feet, idly drawing one arm behind her back in a small stretch before doing the same to the other, Rochelle started to cross the restaurant. She passed by Ellis as she did so, reaching out to screw his cap down on his head and push the bill to cover his face.

When he garbled out a sound of protest, she bit back affectionate laughter, keeping her attention forward. "Get some sleep, hee-haw." she murmured without looking back at him, continuing toward the entryway to the restaurant. "One way or another, I get the feeling tomorrow's gonna suck."

"Sure, Ro'." peeped quietly after her in a sleepy tone. "G'night."

Rochelle crossed into the hallway created by the half-wall, looking back long enough to confirm that Chris was following her. She grabbed Nick's katana from the wall as she passed by where he'd left it, tucking it under one arm as she walked up to the first window along the wall.

She leaned in, grabbing at its frame, thumbing in the switches on either side that locked it in place. Pulling it up and open a few inches, she patted her hands on her thighs and stepped back. Christophe stopped beside her, some curiosity touching the tip of his head.

"In case Maggie comes back." she explained, a sad twist at the edge of her mouth. "Part of me wants her to stay gone. She'll probably survive better out there than with us."

Chris nodded in understanding, eyes drifting toward the sword in her hand with a soft attention. He shifted, settling his stumped shoulder against the wall with only a faint grimace of pain. "Nico will be very sad if no."

Rochelle snorted, tossing her chin in a faintly irritable gesture. She let her voice fall to a whisper, taking a step closer to the Spaniard. "Don't you wish you could smack that guy sometimes? I mean, Jesus, he's got Ellis hanging on his every word, and all he can find time to care about is a cat. A cat! Great Odin's raven, that guy..."

The foreigner blinked at her a few times, gaze snapping back to her face. "¿Qué?" he managed, a fondness mixing with his confusion. "What is... 'raven'?"

Her lips parted, only to falter.

"Uh, nevermind." she managed, instead, weakly laughing. When he didn't waver from his curious expression, she relented with some attempt at an explanation, dodging his gaze. "It's from a movie. I mean, a raven is a bird, but - the quote is from a movie. Anyway..."

There was a pause there, not entirely comfortable, where she shifted her weight and he gazed at her
with only the faintest comprehension. Rochelle wrung her hands together gently, pulling on her digits to cause an only somewhat painful stretch at the joints of her knuckles.

"I'm making this hard on you, aren't I?"

Christophe's expression warmed to a light smile, and he fidgeted gently on his heels. "It is okay."

"No, it's not, actually." A heavy sigh left her, turning to flatten her back against the wall, eyes fluttering shut in a frustrated gesture. It was a cowardly move, isolating herself from him as she spoke. "But you're not making it easy for me, either. You're very cute. And I'm an idiot. I should have jumped you from day one and never looked back, you know? What am I doing?"

"Rochelle..." Chris started, voice trembling just at the edges in a flustered rush, accent turning the 'ch' hard in that particular way that made her heart skip a beat. "I -"

Frustration peaking, the dark-skinned woman lifted one hand, pressing her fingertips against her eyes and harshening the gesture until she saw stars. "You've done everything right. That's the part that gets my goat. You're this handsome guy who sacrificed everything for us, saved my life. You're sweet and patient and tough as nails. It's a slam-dunk, right? Should be."

Fingertips brushed at her elbow, and on instinct, she reached out. Their forearms braced against one another, loosely gripping each other just at the elbow, a clumsy gesture. It was like the grab for balance after a stumble before it softened, gentled into a more natural posture, and his palm came to cradle against the curve of her tricep.

Her eyes opened, focused low before shifting hesitantly upwards to meet his. The first time she'd met him, Christophe had held sultry attention on her, lascivious but hollow. As events had unfolded, it had gained a certain softness as admiration had entered his attitude. Somewhere along the way, it had turned to adoration, and adoration was what she found on his expression.

That adoration drove her voice on.

"Everything's so messy; everything that's happened around us is so messy. I don't know you any more than I know anyone else on this team. Almost dying together, over and over, it messes up what's normal. It messes my head up. I don't want to hurt you, but it feels like that's all I'll do. As if I can think straight with everything going on... and you're scared and I'm scared, and..."

Then fear stopped it dead.

What if what I'm feeling is pity? What if I'm just scared shitless and lonely and you just happen to be here? What if I just feel guilty for everything you threw away for us? What if none of this means anything, and Jacob always did, and he's alive and I'm throwing all that away? What if I'm throwing something away here?

How the hell am I supposed to know what to do?

She didn't realize she'd begun to suck in air in short gasps, barely exhaling between them, until the hand on her elbow squeezed with sudden force. The sensation brought her attention reeling back into place. She forced herself to hold her breath outright, letting the oxygen filter through her limbs and combat the numbness that had started tingling at her fingertips.

"Rochelle," he murmured, and she watched as calm settled into his expression, brows lifting in a concerned quirk. His tone smoothed out to a soothing cadence, and she couldn't help but slacken her jaw and focus on his eyes.
They were gorgeous in the light, highlighting golden amongst the brown, but in the darkness that surrounded them now they came across almost pitch-black. It was a depthless and hypnotizing colour that started to weaken her knees. It felt a bit like being a few feet too far from the shore, water ballooning around her and threatening to carry her off on the tide.

"No podrías hacerme daño, amor." The smallest of smiles twitched at his lips, and he shook his head. "Tú nunca podrías hacer daño a nadie."

Before she could start to question him, he'd already slanted his head to the side to break the lock of their gazes. His smile widened, though she couldn't shake the impression that it was faintly wistful.

"You wanted to talk alone, querida. No alone in here." His head nodded toward the half-wall that did a poor job of separating them from the rest of the café. "I understand - I can wait. There is many things going on, ¿sí? I know I am... ah, demasiado, como - very much?"

Exhaling thinly, Rochelle tried to search his expression, to suss out the emotion there. She caught frustration at the edge of his voice, but couldn't precisely blame him, and her heart ached when he dropped his voice to a whisper. He stiffened his jaw to keep the hints of shame out of it.

"Pero... you know, if... you do not want me, you just say it. I will no be angry or... I will stop, okay? We can still be amigos. Si me necesitas, estaré contigo. I... be there for you."

It should have been no surprise that had been what her words sounded like to him. She'd ripped them from her gut and tossed them out like they'd make any sense to him, bereft of context, except for her recent rejections of him. She'd yet to even truly explain anything to him.

Groaning gently, Rochelle did the only thing that seemed sensible in the moment: she pushed her weight forward, closing the gap between them. She drew close enough to press her forehead against his jaw, though she had to slump to manage it, considering they were approximately the same height.

"I don't want you to stop. I just want to slow down a little." she murmured, hiding there. It was the truth, even if it was only a fraction of the whole truth. "We barely know each other."

Immediately, his arm curled to embrace her, his palm braced at her hip, grazing the skin of her bared midriff before it darted lower to settle on the waistband of her pants. Space remained between their bodies, but he tucked his chin lower to nestle against her temple. A laugh escaped him, subtle, though choked as if his throat had tried to close.

"You are very confusing, bonita." he murmured over the top of her head. "But you have salt, ¿sí?"

Her brows twisted up, and she couldn't stop herself from laughing in a confused huff. Pulling away from him wasn't something in her power, especially not as his nails started to graze in a gentle swirling motion against the curve of her hip, threatening to go lower or higher and she wasn't sure which one she wanted. "I'm gonna assume that means something different to you than it does to me."

Christophe cocked his head, almost settling his cheek entirely against her. "¿Qué significa? I meant..." He scrabbled for the word, eyes flashing to focus on some middle distance, just to the left of where they stood. "Em... no importa." A puff of air escaped his lips, warm against her ear, humour rising in his tone. "I have an idea. We try something, okay?"

Rochelle felt the smallest pinch of regret when the man pulled away, far enough to get a look at her face. His hand was still resting on her arm, though its touch lightened. Her brow quirked, suspicion
drawing her voice a little faint. "Um... Sure. What something is that?"

The grin that sprouted on his lips caught her off-guard. "We meet again. We start over, like it is not el apocalipsis. Like we are normal persons, ¿sí?"

Confusion made her snort, shaking her head. "You want to pretend we don't know each other. Like... roleplaying?" When eagerness flared in his expression and he nodded, she couldn't stop a laugh. Dropping her chin in an embarrassed wag, Rochelle tossed her shoulders up. "Why?"

"We did not get to meet like normal." he responded, simply, with an excited spark in his eyes. "It is not so hard to pretend, I think. Like you say, we do not know each other."

The urge to laugh was tempered by how serious he seemed, and Rochelle let her gaze drift over his face, taking in the sincere excitement there. "Can't hurt, I guess. Even if it'll be pretty hard to forget where we are right now." she relented, softening the curve of her lips into a smile. "Okay, fine, stranger."

Breaking into an eager beam, Christophe snapped his hand suddenly up to press it against his lips. The way he moved, she couldn't avoid the observation that he made room for his other hand to alight on the other half of his mouth. "¡Toma! Here, here..."

Turning, he pressed his back to the wall, abruptly jolting his gaze up toward the ceiling. He inhaled, the pressure of his fingertips making it whistle through the parted left side of his mouth. It seemed like a focusing gesture, a self-soothing surge of air.

When he dropped his arm and looked at her, his expression was mild and distant. He only half-focused on her, voice casual. "Hola. Me llamo Chris."

They could've been strangers, loitering together in a line, some mundane errand crossing their paths. It was a far cry from her original introduction to him, covered in blood and grinning cattily.

She couldn't help but feel a spark of some strange giddiness, her jaw aching with the effort it took to not smile. He was playing it straight, calm, and she wanted to match his efforts as best she could. It was the least he deserved.

"Oh, hey. Rochelle." She offered her right hand toward him, allowing herself that smile as Chris accepted it, shaking gently. "You're not from around here, huh?"

If he minded her clumsy attempt, he didn't let on. Christophe's expression only barely changed, but his eyes were warm. He released her hand, lifting his to scratch at the curls of hair lining his jaw in a thoughtful gesture. "No, no. I am from España. Came here as foreign exchange, for la universidad."

Glancing over his features, Rochelle crossed her arms over her chest in a slow gesture. She shifted, settling her shoulder against the glass of the window next to them. "What for?" It seemed an obvious question in hindsight, yet it had never occurred to her before to ask.

His lips twitched, fighting a grin, pleased. He closed one eye in a vaguely coy manner, like some lazy wink. "Art."

Rochelle's eyes widened a twitch, turning entirely to face him before she could stop herself. "You're an artist?" she blurted, too sincere, too surprised. She couldn't reel it in fast enough, quickly stifling herself with a knuckle against her lips. "Shit, boy. I can't draw to save my life. Like, painting, or...?"
Christophe chuckled, lowering his chin and closing his eyes entirely. "I study street art, principalmente. Barcelona has very good artists, you know. Sixeart, Btoy, Xupet Negre... muy fantástico."

"I didn't know." she murmured, leaning in a few inches towards him, much despite herself. As much as her nerves had spiked to begin with, she suddenly found an ease between them. It had never been hard, of course, not even after the kiss - but it had been undoubtedly complicated.

"Maybe you can draw me something later."

His eyes opened, flaring to a sudden focus toward her, and she only just heard him mutter, "Hace trampa." As quickly as he'd spoken, he tipped his head, turning his back to brace against the wall and slide downwards. A grunt preceded him landing in a sit on the floor, letting one leg flatten out while the other curled toward his body. "¿Y tú? Where are you from, chica?"

When she didn't immediately join him, he patted his fingertips against the wood floor just by the toe of her boot. With a bitten-back smile, Rochelle dropped to sit next to him, curling her legs under her body as she did so. "I work at the biggest news station in Ohio."

Christophe gave a soft cluck of his tongue, slanting a small grin at her. "Ah. You are a star on the television, ¿sí?"

She smiled, reflexively, but it faded after a beat. Her eyes drifted a few inches, and her voice started before she'd quite plotted out her sentence. "Not really. To be honest, I kind of... well, I've been exaggerating a little... or a lot. Until recently, I was pretty much a glorified intern. Associate producer doesn't mean a lot."

Her heart rate picked up. At first, she didn't know why the adrenaline had spun up in her veins - until, suddenly, she did. The opportunity sat in front of her, clear as day. It was time.

He hummed, softly, and she could see out of the corner of her eye how a gentle fondness settled low on his features. The sight of it made her heart clench, made it ever harder to imagine him as a stranger, as someone who wasn't tremendously important to her. "You say this to a student artist, chica."

That made her grin again, but it disappeared entirely after just a moment. Furtively, she looked down at her knees, drawing her hands into a clasp and tucking them between her thighs. "Yeah, uh... touché."

It was time.

_Stupid idea. Awful idea. You got a chance at something good, and you're gonna ruin it, for probably zero reason. Zero, except your own freaking conscience. Who's winning here?_

Her tongue tried to trip the words up as they left her, but to no avail. They came out anyway. "My boyfriend thought I was crazy, thinking I'd make it there. He always said I should've worked at a smaller news station, somewhere local."

She felt him stiffen, heard the soft sound of him straightening away from her against the wall. There was silence, at first, dense silence that threatened at her nerves. It lingered long enough that she couldn't stop herself from clearing her throat, shrugging up a shoulder.

"Last I saw him, we fought. Bad. We didn't exactly say the words, 'this relationship is over', but he asked me to choose between him and my job and I chose my job. I left and I knew he might never forgive me. I knew I was putting us on the line, and I did it anyway."
She didn't say the rest; she didn't point out that he was likely dead, killed by zombies or infected himself. It wasn't just the fact that it was incongruous with the distance they'd put between them and reality. She couldn't convince herself to say the words out loud. It felt like an excuse, like justification, like obfuscation of the truth she wanted to lay bare.

And it lay there, a blunt weapon at her feet. She wasn't sure which of them was meant to pick it up... or, more accurately, which of them would be struck by it.

"I'm... sorry I didn't tell you. I was scared, I guess, and a little ashamed. But if we're going to... keep going, I couldn't not tell you. You needed to know that this is messy for me. And if it's too much for you, I get it. I just needed you to know."

It would have made sense to be afraid. She had no idea, no concept, of how Chris would react. He might get angry, or feel hurt. He might never forgive her for keeping him in the dark as long as she had. Instead of fear, however, she mostly just felt relieved.

"I chose my job over him a long time before you came in the picture, so you're not... homewrecking, it's not your fault, it's not something you have to deal with, I'm just... It's harder for me than it should be, and it has nothing to do with you, I just - it's complicated, and -"

Movement entered her periphery, and it took her a moment to focus on it, then a moment more to recognize the intent of it. She watched Chris extend his hand toward her, palm up, fingers gently curled.

She lifted her gaze, hesitantly meeting his.

He smiled, just a twitch of his lips with a reassuring edge, and reached his hand further forward in an insistent gesture. The man only spoke after Rochelle had softly placed her fingertips against the soft skin at the base of each digit, a mirrored parallel of their fingers, and he'd rested his thumb over her knuckles to squeeze them.

"You no think it was complicado before? Bonita, I point a gun on you, before. My friends tried to kill you, and you killed them, before." He shook his head, body shifting subtly where he sat, a laugh panting softly from his nose. "It is all messy. Todo es mierda - así es la vida."

Rochelle couldn't help but snort, nose crinkling in a startled gesture, more sad than humoured. "Chris, that's not -"

His head shook, again, and he leaned a few inches closer. His voice raised to forcibly interrupt her. "We are starting over, chica, ¿recuerdas? Please. I do not care if you had un novio before... If you want - if you want me, I want you. If you no want me, I stop. If you are not ready, Rochelle, I wait. Okay?"

Breath abruptly caught behind her teeth, Rochelle couldn't manage much but a weak few blinks, gaze passing over the earnest half-frown on his lips. She felt that pull anew, that tidal drag, unsure how to do anything except draw closer to him.

"Alright." sheghosted, shifting her fingertips to press between his digits, sinking into the gaps there to lace their fingers loosely. "Kinda intense for a guy I just met, but alright."

Christophe's eyes warned, his lips struggling against a smile. When he broke, it was with a burst of laughter, too sudden for him to stifle. He sent a vaguely panicked look toward the wall that separated them from the rest of the café, biting his lower lip, hushing his amusement down to a few puffs of air.
"We think about it, ¿sí? I want you to be... sure, ¿sí?"

Exhaling gently, Rochelle shifted her weight, turning to rest her back against the wall more firmly. "I know. You're sweet." She tugged on his hand, urging him closer, at the same time patting her other hand on her thigh. "C'mere, chico."

His expression softened, and he followed her pull to drop down clumsily onto the floor, wriggling his lower body until he'd lowered himself to lay down. His cheek settled against her thigh, head resting in her lap, and she left her hand alight against the side of his head.

Toying fingertips against his temple, following his hairline and passing fingernails through his gold-brown, sweat-spiked hair, Rochelle closed her eyes. It was too easy for her mind to chew new holes in its surroundings, destructive energy focused on the nearest outlet. It found purchase in doubt.

*I put him on the spot. He's not even thinking about himself, he's just thinking about me. He should be angry, or at least confused about it, conflicted, or something... He should be something other than fine with this.*

*Damnit, girl.*

Rochelle rolled her head on her neck, feeling tendons pop and bones creak. "You should get some rest, okay? Today was a lot and... yeah. We both have things to think about." she murmured down to him, weariness drawing her voice into a gritty sigh. "You can stay here, if you want. I'll keep a look out."

He hummed, gently, a single squirm passing up his frame to push tighter against her and nestle his good shoulder against the side of her leg. He relaxed there, soaking in the comfort of the contact between them, and Rochelle tried desperately to convince herself that the conversation had bettered them. That it had been, in general, for the better.

They sat in silence for a few moments, buffered by the sound of oceanic winds rustling over the café's structure from the cracked window just beside them. It was only once Rochelle's fingernails had found a consistent pattern of scratches against his scalp that he spoke up again.

"So, bonita..."

When she prompted him with a soft sound, he closed his eyes and turned his mouth to bury idly against the sleek fabric of her sweatpants.

"Does this mean still no kisses?"

The small 'ay!' that escaped him as she yanked on his ear was not nearly as cathartic as she expected to be. The pleased arch to his neck when she rubbed it with a thumb in gentle mollification, however, was.
The sensation of waking felt sudden. It was that punch of fear, the lack of cognizance, the confusion. Nick jolted, reaching up an arm and stretching his hand out in front of him.

He didn't realize at first how he'd postured himself. It was only as his consciousness clicked into place, sleep-delayed, that he recognized his own defensive stance. His lungs ached as if he'd been running, and his heart was jumping against his ribcage, and he couldn't say why. He couldn't recall any dreams during the night, let alone any nightmares.

For that matter, it felt like there was only an inch-thick space of time between the moment he'd closed his eyes and the moment he now resided in. Had there been time for nightmares? Had he even slept?

There was a blanket over him that someone had laid there, however, pooled around his belly and draped over his prone frame. He must have been unconscious for at least some time.

A shudder of frustrated flexion passed through his jaw muscles, a sigh turning into a grunt. The material clung to him in a suffocating pressure, summoning the unpleasant question of where the blanket had come from. Had Ellis put it there? That felt like a likely answer, and he was greatly tempted to throw it off of himself.

Without Ellis there to witness the gesture, however, it seemed pointless.

Instead, he let it lay where it was; the pressure and warmth was better than the alternative. He closed his eyes, sitting for a moment in his half-raised posture, inhaling and exhaling to flood oxygen through his body and combat the strange and sourceless adrenaline. He felt rested, yet rest never felt like quite enough.

Groaning quietly under his breath, Nick made to collapse down flat against the booth seating, rolling onto his back rather than retake his previous position curled on his side. His head was entirely too full, bursting at the seams, and if he let his mind wander he knew he'd never get back to sleep.

However, his move was impeded by the soft object his shoulder slid into. His weight pressed onto a bundled shape that provided some resistance, like a pillow or a tightly folded blanket.

And then moved.

And then hissed warm air against his ear.

The sound was strangled, as if barely managed around surprise and exhaustion. His reaction was pitifully delayed as he surged away from the stimulus, but it did not take more than the limited mental capacity available to him to work out its source.

"Shit -" he managed, scrambling to avoid squashing Maggie underneath his shoulder.

His back collided with the edge of the table above him, body curling to yank his weight away from the cat buried between him and the wall of the booth. She had burrowed into the corner formed by the booth's seat and the wall separating the restaurant proper from the entrance, hiding there under his frame.

Pain sparked over the rear curves of his ribs, like the table edge had dug in and struck a nerve.
bundle that shot pain down his back. Nick managed to hover there, half on hands and knees. He couldn't pull much together but a dumb stare.

Though his vision was poor in the night, her eyes flashed yellow-green and some light reflected off the white of her fangs as she panted, open-mouthed, up at him. For a moment, they stared at one another, silent but for his restrained breath and her much softer huffing.

She was close enough to strike at his face if she lunged, and he had no more space to retreat back. His knuckle stung, a reminder of the greeting he'd received the previous evening - then, softly, a wheeze left her that he only belatedly identified as a meow. It broke and rasped well before it had finished, a weak sound that came with the audible shift of her body on her haunches, like it had taken physical effort to form the sound.

It was reassuring enough that Nick let his body relax just slightly.

"... Hey." he murmured, letting the arm that wasn't bearing his weight against the booth's bench shift, reaching tentatively toward her. It was a mostly blind gesture in the dark, and it wasn't until his fingertips touched fur that he could orient his palm to settle against her side. "Hey, girl."

When she didn't react, he stroked down along the bony protrusion of her hip, finding her tail where it curled tightly against her side. Touching it made it lash, a quick flick of the tip against his forearm. Her nose brushed the back of his hand, warm and damp, and he flinched into stillness until it became clear she wasn't going to lash out.

A smile twitched at his mouth. He was gladder than he cared to admit. "Forgave me, huh? Wasn't like I enjoyed locking you up, you little brat. Drama queen."

Lowering himself in an awkward slide, Nick let his hand nudge into the softer fur of her belly, scooping under her slight frame and lifting her up. She started to scrabble for purchase, so he was quick to lift her up and set her on his chest, rolling onto his back as he did. She sat stiffly on his sternum for a moment, ankles digging into him as she huddled low.

The fear in her posture was apparent, her hunched body now silhouetted against the rest of the dining room.

Nick grabbed the blanket from around his waist and pulled it up. Maggie seemed primed to panic for a moment as the fabric tented up over her, but with Nick's hand settling over her spine in a gentle squeeze, she relaxed. Her paws shifted and her body settled low, flattening herself against his chest.

As the blanket collapsed to be flush against them, Nick closed his eyes, trailing his hand up the feline's body until he could dig fingertips against her tiny shoulders and massage at the loose scruff there. He inhaled deeply, feeling her claws catch at his shirt for balance as his chest expanded beneath her.

He'd genuinely resigned himself to losing her. It had seemed appropriate, really, like a thing he deserved.

"I ain't givin' up on you."

The last few days had been a wild mixture of things he did and did not deserve.

Hearing Ellis talk had felt like pressing his ear to the glass of an airplane window and listening to the roaring air just centimeters away. He wasn't sure how he managed to feel so disconnected from the situation and so overwhelmed all at once. He felt, perhaps, resigned more than anything else.
He wanted to surrender. Laying there, exhausted, it was all he could think. Ellis had sat across from him and quietly informed him, in no uncertain terms, of his intentions.

*You just have to let him break in.*

It sounded... good. It sounded like something he could do. He could leave the door ajar, pretend not to notice as Ellis crawled beside him. He could roll over and press him into the mattress, bury them in sheets, bite into the curve of his neck. They'd speak in nothing but gasps and moans, and forget everything outside the bounds of the bedspread.

*That's how we got here, though, sex and bullshit. That's how all this happened... my same old bullshit. I use somebody until I can't use them anymore - except, again, it was someone I fucking care about. Someone who mattered.*

He could focus better with something to put his fingers to, stroking along her side and down her curled legs, thumb rolling idly at her warmed pawpads. The body heat against him was comforting enough to put a subtle buffer between him and his thoughts.

*Feels like me caring about someone just makes it all worse. None of this would be so fucking complicated if I didn't give a shit. I wouldn't have... gotten his hopes up.*

*Or mine.*

Nick grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. His consciousness drifted carelessly back to that night - the night of Ellis' clumsy confession. Everything had spiraled wildly out of control, driven by shame and knee-jerk fear. It was not his first time feeling those emotions.

*We both know what this looks like in the light of day. He gave me a chance, and I fucked him over. Now Ellis doesn't want what we had anymore, and I don't see how things can change. I don't know what the fuck it changes into.*

He screwed his brows up, tension lining the muscles of his face. His fingers moved a little quicker along Maggie's spine, feeling her fur twitch at the stimulation.

*Let's be honest here. I... like him. I like him enough that the fact that he's a fucking stupid, stubborn, annoying little redneck just makes me like him more. He's fucking trouble, and he's worth it... and if we weren't in the apocalypse, if we'd met anywhere else, I'd have gotten drunk, fucked him, and given him a fake number.*

*I'd have never seen him again, and probably never thought about him again.*

*That guy doesn't deserve him, so why would I? Ellis doesn't care about that guy. He's in love with whatever bullshit I've been feeding him. Best case scenario is the world never gets back on its feet and he doesn't have to figure out who I am, and what the fuck kind of best case is that? For either of us?*

Nick released a blistering sigh, shaking his head a few times, the crown of his head rolling against the bench. "I'm starting to think I'm bad at relationships, Mags," he murmured, just a breath, followed by a weary choke of a laugh. "Not sure where I get that idea from."

The cat rolled her weight, sprawling onto her side. She stretched her back legs down toward his belly, curling her forelegs up under her torso. The stretch made her body tremble before she relaxed, the muffled snap of teeth and tongue indicating a yawn from under the blanket.

"Good advice. Thanks."
With sleep relegated to a pipe-dream, Nick shifted. He slid his arm to loop against her spine, cradling her in her newly flattened position. It took effort to pick the cat up without disturbing her posture, but exhaustion made the warm body limp in his grasp. He managed to roll and deposit her onto the bench, blanket now wrapped around her.

As he slid out from the booth, the lump in the blankets shifted, squirmed, then settled.

Nick got to his feet unsteadily, keeping one hand on the table until he was sure he was upright. He took a slow glance around the restaurant, vision having adjusted enough that he could pick out shapes.

Two shapes in the deeper section of the restaurant marked out the sisters, and two more curled in the center of the main dining area marked out Chris and Rochelle. Ellis was asleep upright at a table, slumped forward onto crossed arms, his denim jacket laid over his back. It had fallen halfway to one side, barely kept where it was with one of the sleeves tucked tight under his folded elbow.

Nick could not justify the urge that had him approaching. He stepped quietly over the wood-slat floor, placing himself just to the side of where the younger man sat. His body bent a few degrees at the waist, both hands reaching to grip the jacket by the shoulders.

Moving slowly - delicate only in the interest of not getting caught, he assured himself - Nick pulled it back up around his shoulders to arrange it back into place. The moment after, when his fingertips lingered against the denim with only two thin layers separating him from Ellis' skin, felt like it lasted forever.

The urge to graze them up his neck and bury them in his curly hair swelled, then faded.

_Why does wanting to fix it and wanting it all to just go away feel so damn similar?_

Nick stepped away, eyes narrowing as he jerked his chin up and surveyed the room again. Coach was nowhere to be seen, which likely meant he'd taken up the usual watch-spot in the front portion of the restaurant.

He lifted one hand, rubbing the flat of his hand into the side of his neck as he crossed the dining area toward the front of the café. As much as he wanted to just crawl back in the booth and go back to sleep, he knew he would, regrettably, wake up eventually.

With a husky inhale, Nick ducked around the separating wall that lead to the entrance. He had a bullet to bite, and the realization didn't scare him like he'd expected. The idea of confiding in someone, even a little, seemed almost appealing. This felt more manageable than whatever Ellis wanted of him.

The hall was empty.

Instinct made his heartrate pick up, and he felt abruptly vulnerable without a weapon in his hand. He shouldn't have leapt instantly to panic, but it was hard not to, considering their day-to-day environment. Catastrophizing was easy in the middle of a catastrophe.

The first thing he did was exhale his lungful of air, turning on his heel. The small unisex bathroom door was open, removing that as a likely option.

Striking a low pose, weight pushed into the beginnings of a crouch that coiled his body, Nick crossed back through the dining room to the back door. He nudged the slim blinds out of the way, peering through them.
Coach sat on the porch, slumped shoulders low, shotgun rested against his knee.

Relief had Nick rolling his eyes, puffing out a sigh. Irritation came afterward, mostly at himself for the nervous falter. He reached down to grab the doorknob and twist it, moving gently to limit the noise created. Fortunately, the door opened relatively quietly, and he slipped outside.

The air was mild and thick with humidity, barely cut by the constant flow of breezes past their building. As he closed the door behind himself with a gentle click, Coach's head tilted, acknowledging the presence without looking back.

"You shouldn't be sitting out here." Nick managed to infuse some snideness into it - a triumph, as far as he was concerned. "A tonguer's gonna get you, and then who'll mind the girls?"

Coach snorted, the sound restrained, as if he tried to stop it halfway. His head shook, lowering, and the way he reached to grab his shotgun and place it on the other side of him opened a spot for Nick to sit, implicit and wordless. "Needed some fresh air. Ever feel like yo' head's gonn' explode? Been feelin' that way... few days, now."

Nick did not succumb so easily, standing by the door for a stubborn few moments. It felt like a quiet game of wills, counting the seconds and waiting for Coach to give up before he advanced. He needed that victory.

Coach gave no such indication. He waited, patient, but expectant.

"This whole fucking situation is a headache." Nick managed, sighing as he took the few steps between him and the stairs. He didn't sit, though, a petulant distance kept between them. "You'll have to be more specific."

A bob touched Coach's head, like the droop of a man barely staying awake. He started to fiddle with the belt at his waist, adjusting his grey pants on his hips. "Wish I could say I believed for a minute we'd catch that chopper, but nah. The minute they took off after it, I knew it'd never happen. Felt it."

Nick chewed at his lower lip, voice lowering. "I wasn't a hundred percent there at the time." he responded, mustering a not-insignificant amount of snideness. It wasn't untrue, but he spoke it like a joke.

Coach barely seemed to acknowledge that he'd spoken. Or, more likely, he simply recognized the sentiment for the hollow attempt at misdirection that it was. The man continued undeterred.

"You know, they say folks can... sense things. Not talkin' 'bout no ESP shit, but... twins feelin' each other, parents feelin' their kids. You know? Folk sayin' their kid got kidnapped an' they knew they were dead, or alive. Knew the moment it happened. You can feel it, they say, they just knew. Maybe God givin' them a sign, if you believe that, or somethin' deeper."

Coach gazed out over the yard, and now, the gambler could see his face in dark profile. His jaw was set, eyes hard as they looked upwards. "I don't feel my little girl. Not sure if that means she's dead, or if it's all bullshit."

The broad-shouldered Georgian looked at him, slowly, eyes still just as hard. They were not cold, exactly - but stoic to the point of outright apathy. Nick felt that gaze strike against him, and he could not stop himself from shrinking away from it. He found his eyes averting in some subtle submission.

"You think this shit broke me, Nick?"
Quiet, Nick drew to the edge of the porch, dropping his body in an uncoordinated crouch until he could slide to sit just a few inches from Coach. Silence hung between them for a moment, and he found his tongue clumsy in his mouth.

"I just think you're finally catching on." was what he said, simple, and as sincere as he could be.

The football coach sensed his discomfort, perhaps, or wandered into his own. Whatever the reason for his withdrawal, Coach returned his attention forward and released a heavy sigh. His arms crossed on his knees, hands clasping together.

Before that unpleasant quiet could sink in much further, Nick found himself blurting out, "How do you tell?"

At that, Coach arched a brow. His body turned to face his attention more directly at Nick, head canting. His gaze did a full scan over the other man, taking in his posture like it might give some insight. "Tell what?"

Nick grabbed at his own wrist with his other hand, rubbing over the pulse nestled into his wristbone. It was with a grunt that he forced out an explanation, feeling like he might suffocate before he got the words out. They were stuck stubbornly to the inside of his ribcage.

"Whether or not you had a stroke."

The time it took Coach to process the question was, surely, not as long as it felt. Years might have as easily passed as seconds, and by the time the older man straightened with a small frown, Nick was close to launching himself back inside the café.

Coach's response was quiet, and dead serious. "You passed out?"

Nick got halfway through a nod, but stopped. He struggled, still, tone strained with a discomfort he wished he had the energy to disguise. "I don't... know. I don't remember what happened. I just remember being in the dressing room, and then... being on the ground, and Chris was there."

And blood. Why do I still feel like there was blood?

Coach tightened his fingers in their clasp, heaving in a steady breath and holding it for a beat. He spoke with the exhale, brows twitching. "Dizzy? Felt sick?" Rather than continue to face Nick and stare him down, the big man turned back away. He talked up toward the pitch black that made up the sky, too overcast for stars.

That time Nick nodded, and said nothing.

"You remember any... weakness on one side? Confusion? You weren't all there when you came out."

The Northerner tried, genuinely, to remember - but it felt like holding water in his cupped palms. No matter how tightly he held it and how much force he applied, it seemed to only spill more and more. "No...? Maybe. Fuck, Coach, I'm not sure. I felt weak as shit but I don't think it was... I think it was everywhere."

They sat on the edge of the porch, stiff in their pointed refusal to look at one another. Nick shifted his weight, sighing out a quick breath.

"It's hard to remember."
The older man grunted, reaching up a hand to rub at his jawline. He closed his eyes, scratching into the salt-and-pepper hair growing over the lower half of his face, a thoughtful gesture. "I can't tell you nothin', Nick. Ain't no answer here. I just know you ain't been right, an' maybe you ain't been right fo' longer than you wanna admit."

Nick gritted his jaw in a few tight clenches, lowering his chin. It stung like a personal strike, and he couldn't stop his voice from turning caustic. "You kidding? I'm having a great time."

He didn't expect Coach to open his eyes and square them on him. They narrowed with abrupt attention, flickering over his face in a careful examination. It was calculated in a way that made Nick reflexively tighten his expression against the intrusion.

"You talked to a Witch, Nick. I heard you callin' out to it, like it was someone you knew. You 'bout let it get you."

A scoff touched Nick's voice, choked, and down collapsed the small part of him that had continued to hold out hope that Coach hadn't heard him. He recoiled his head in a sharp jerk, lifting his hands to gesture a vague 'whoa.' "That's not what happened. Look, Sam, I -"

Sharply, Coach flared his nostrils, kicking the heel of his left foot against the stair beneath it in a frustrated outburst. "Don't 'Sam' me, Nick. You only do that shit to throw me off my game." His voice was harsh, but exhaustion seemed to fuel it more than outright anger.

There was a few beats of silence, then.

Nick sat frozen in his defensive posture before forcing it to loosen. He buried the realization that he hadn't actually noticed the slip into the other man's real name. He buried, too, the tiny spark of hurt that reared its head in his chest, instead pushing a laugh from the back of his throat.

Coach exhaled at that, setting an elbow against his knee so he could press his knuckles against his temple. "I wish I knew how to talk to you, boy. Feels like every time I try, you just get wound up tighter." The slumped posture betrayed a resignation, head shaking.

"You gotta realize, ain't a single one of us who wouldn't die for you. I want to help you, Nick, but I ain't the one who can get through to you. We both know that. You ever think yo' pride ain't worth all this?"

It felt hollow, and Nick felt hollow listening to it, his eyes drifting to look across the yard. Apathy didn't fully encompass the sensation in his chest. He snorted as he spoke, shrugging up his shoulders in a quick gesture. "Since money's bullshit now, it better be worth something, or I'm broke."

The sound Coach made was not a laugh, but it couldn't have been anything else.

Nick's tone fell to a bland note, dismissive. He reached up to press his fingertips against his temples, massaging into the bone. "Didn't come out here to talk." he lied. "I'll take watch until sun-up."

Coach gazed at him, jaw clenched, shoulders momentarily lifting as he inhaled deeply. He lifted his right arm to land a hand firmly on Nick's shoulder, tightening fingers into the muscles there, forceful enough to command his attention. "Wasn't really someone you knew, was it?"

The question was genuine - sincere enough that Nick stared toward the hand on his shoulder, then quietly shook his head. "No." he murmured, voice a simple husk past a tight jaw. "Far as I know, the Flu ain't bringing back the dead."
The larger man kept his grip for a moment, seeming to consider that response. He was, perhaps, conflicted, and Nick couldn't blame him. Was it more or less comforting to know it had all been in his head?

Nick was not sure.

The Georgian settled on a soft, "A'ight.", before he got to his feet. "Don't stay out here."

Snorting, Nick looked up toward the sky, listening to the footsteps as Coach walked back to the door into the restaurant. He didn't fully relax until the door had opened and then quietly shut, leaving him alone on the porch.

He didn't stay out much longer; he remained where he was just long enough so that when he went inside, it didn't feel like it was obeying an order.
Chapter 263

By the time daybreak cracked the clouds apart with sheets and streaks of gold, Rhiannon was awake. She didn't bother moving from where she laid on the ground at first. Her ankle still ached, tight and pulsing, and walking around wasn't at the top of her priority list.

For a while, she simply rested her eyes, hands clasped on her stomach. Processing information thoughtfully was also not, generally, at the top of her priority list, but she tried.

Rescue - or a version of it - had been inches from her fingertips once before. She'd stood with her sister, yards away from a bustling evacuation line, screams and shouts surrounding them in a deafening thunder. Lena had gripped her wrists and clutched until her nails dug in and threatened to break skin.

They'd looked each other in the eyes and known, without words, that they couldn't go.

At first, the idea of the world ending had not shaken her. It had felt a little like growing up and out of fairytale mythos, only to wake up to footsteps on the roof, one early Christmas morning. Strange and baffling, perhaps, but also familiar in some childish way. There was a certain vindication to it, if only vicariously.

She'd never had cause to feel pride about her family, and her father being right about an inevitable apocalypse was not a reason to change that opinion. Still, she couldn't help a wry amusement. *Raise a glass to the crazy motherfucker. He's probably thrilled.*

From that moment on, they'd never chased signs of the military and CEDA. Their singular focus had been to make it to Texas, a hunt which had driven them south to reach Interstate 10. The interstate was their best chance at making it west... however, things had gotten rougher, harder, and one too many close calls had changed their tactic: they needed a shortcut.

If they found a boat they could sail down into Florida, catching the tail-end of I10. It wouldn't cut the bulk of their actual travel out, but it would get them onto smooth, flat asphalt. After all, once they got onto the interstate, it'd be a straight shot to their father's ranch... assuming, of course, that he was still alive.

That all raised the sticky question of why her instinct had been to rush toward the helicopter, to sprint like it had been something that mattered to her. There had been a moment, an instant, where the helicopter had been roaring closer and Lena had looked at her. Their gazes locked, and in that instant of indecision, they had disagreed.

Lena's eyes said *"Stay."* and Rhiannon had run.

Maybe she felt like she owed them one - or maybe she just cared.

At a glance, from her prone position on the ground, Rhiannon could see most of the survivors around her. She could feel the warm presence of Lena, curled up and dozing on her side just a few inches away. Ellis was asleep in a chair, curled onto the table with his jacket on like a blanket, and Chris and Rochelle were laying in the sprawl of blankets.

They were pressed tightly back-to-back, bodies otherwise curled away from one another. It might've been cute had it not also made her want to gag. *Fuckin' Prom King and Queen over here, Jesus.*
Coach was awake at the bar, bent over with his weight braced on an elbow. Nick wasn't immediately in sight, but there were pacing footsteps trailing up and down the entranceway. Since she could see everyone else from where she laid, she assumed they were his.

That thought was confirmed when she looked up and saw the crouched shape of the cat they'd somewhat reluctantly adopted, sitting atop the wall separating the entrance. She was poised like a small statue, still except for her rapt attention on the man below her. Her head rotated on her shoulders, watching him steadily.

Rhee did not like cats. She didn't hate them, precisely, but they'd always seemed to be more trouble than they were worth. Dogs were worse, between the barking and the need for walks, and the - from her experience - universal love of her leather boots.

*Want a needy little piss-factory as much as I want a steady boyfriend.*

Adjusting her hips, Rhiannon pressed her elbows against the ground, forcing herself upright. It took careful effort not to jostle her sister as she got up from the ground, and more effort not to put much weight on her bad ankle. It necessitated a quick scramble, grabbing for the bench in front of her to balance her weight.

When that made the bench's legs scrape gently against the floor, the blonde stiffened, looking out into the restaurant to see who it had disturbed. She was sure she'd wake her sister, at least - but only Coach turned around. His eyebrow raised as he noticed her upright, and his chin jerked in a subtle motion, urging her over.

Grimacing idly, Rhiannon crossed the distance between them, spreading her arms to either side in a wide and welcoming gesture. "Mornin', Coach." She sidled up beside the stool he sat on, throwing one arm over his broad shoulders and leaning her head down low to grin at him. "We ready to get cracking?"

The man rumbled a small snort, passing her a dubious look before tapping down at the counter of the bar. Rhiannon followed his gesture, finding his fingertip placed squarely on the small notebook Ellis had been passing around to the team. It was open, and the contents of the page it was open to hardly surprised her.

"Y'all are really set on Texas, huh?" Coach murmured, looking down at the address written there. There was a frown on his lips, though his voice held a genuine curiosity. "It's still a good ways off."

The blonde sighed, blowing the air up from a jutted lower lip so it blustered up the plane of her face and disturbed a few strands of brittle hair. She turned, retracting her arm from over his shoulders to lean instead against the bar, fingers tucking into her pant pockets.

"Don't have anywhere else to go. And if the old man's still kicking, there's no one else who'll go looking for the sorry fucker." When Coach merely hummed, she added, "And if he's not, then we got an underground bunker, two hundred years of Army rations, and a mostly-legal arsenal waiting
for us."

He grinned, teeth showing as his voice bubbled up with a restrained laugh. Even as he did so, the older man scrunched his brows at her in a bewildered flare of confusion. She'd quickly grown used to the look from him, like he couldn't quite puzzle her out. It was deeply satisfying.

"Ain't much use in me arguin' with you two." he sighed, closing the notebook and resting his palm atop it. His fingertips rapped out an unsteady rhythm, thoughtful. "Least we'll know where to find you if this shit ever gets better."

Rhiannon's eyes drifted to catch movement, and she watched Nick come around the wall at a slow pace. His arms were crossed, eyes narrowed with a cautious degree of tension, attention squarely on them. She smiled instantly, allowing a demure tilt of her head, faux-politeness dipping her chin when he glared back.

No shit he's fuckin' twitchy. Still hasn't told anyone he's leaving - or thinks he is.

It was complicated.

Rejecting the man was not, in fact, in their best interest. Their trip was only going to get harder, and an extra team member might mean the difference between success and failure. Being a small group had its advantages, but there had been more than one close call.

A Hunter launching at them, in time to the wet schluck of a Smoker tongue jettisoned from its gaping mouth, had often felt like a death sentence. Even just a few too many infected all at once tipped the balance. Getting overwhelmed was too easy in a duo.

The speed and flexibility of a smaller group helped counterbalance the negatives, but there wasn't much room for error. He's a fucking jack-off, but he's not nuts. We could use him.

Concerns for survival aside, though, Rhiannon couldn't shake a sense of unease.

For better or for worse, they'd become part of a team... and for better or for worse, she had grown fond of them. She did not like the idea of participating in what felt like a betrayal. As much as the inner-workings of the group, the politics, remained mostly obfuscated to her, Rhiannon knew enough to know that they'd be outraged.

She didn't have a lot of friends, even before the apocalypse. She didn't want to lose the ones she'd found.

Lena had instructed her to be patient, though hadn't said much more than that. She didn't know what her older sister had planned, precisely, though Rhiannon would've guessed that it was mostly to wait and see what happened. Lena was generally patient, and usually thoughtful. She'd always acted critically - she played chess, made plans, organized and executed.

I don't.

They'd recently narrowly avoided disaster, and it made it hard to sit idle. Her sister had unknowingly stepped into a minefield, alerting Ellis of Chris' apparently-secret suicide attempt. Rhiannon was inclined to blame Nick for not letting them know it was a secret in the first place, but that didn't change the fact that it had been a close call.

The Northerner was pushing them steadily closer to some kind of schism. Whatever drama he's running away from here, shit's gonna get worse before it gets better. I know drama - especially when it's about family.
When Nick tightened his expression into an outright scowl back at her, Rhiannon swerved her gaze back onto Coach. Her lips curled more genuinely, despite the tight feeling that worked down her body, tangible stress. She shook it off like a shiver, and funneled the energy elsewhere. Anywhere else.

Namely, at Coach.

"Aw. You gonna come visit li'l ol' me?" she cooed, leaning back in toward him just a few inches.

He grinned at her, head cocking as a joking tone softened the edge of his voice. "You girls have talked some crazy shit 'bout yo' pop. Hard to know if yo' ass is full of shit. Gotta meet the man myself, tell the truth from the legend."

There was a moment where Rhiannon let her eyes flicker down, maintaining attention on his mouth just long enough to ensure he noticed it, and ensure he didn't think it was some idle glance. As she did, she responded simply, "I've taken worse guys home to daddy."

The instant his brows went up, she turned away, pushing off the bar and sliding her hands in the slashed zipper pockets of her black pants. Satisfaction brought a swagger to her hips, strides lengthening, tongue darting to the corner of her mouth as she brushed past Nick. She spared him a slow wink, exaggerating the gesture with a scrunch of her nose.

Judging by the way the gambler had frozen dead in his tracks, eyes tracking between them in a pendulous motion - back, forth, back, forth - her actions had not gone unnoticed by him, either. That was fine with her.

*Being patient and subtle is for pussies.*

Without looking back, Rhiannon thudded her hands together, the sound a dull percussion of palm on palm rather than a loud crack. "We've got a crash site to go find, right? How about you rustle up some grub, and I'll wake these fuckers up."

The tall biker took great pleasure in the stunned silence that she left behind as she moved a few steps away, soaking it up, practically giddy with it. She dodged around the chairs that had been scooted out of the way to make room for the pile of bedding, coming up on the sleeping bodies curled there.

It only took a tap with the toe of her boot against her knee to wake Rochelle, and the woman jolting awake quickly made Chris stir. As they rose clumsily into seated positions, blinking and wiping the sleep from their eyes, Rhiannon limped around them to come up behind Ellis in his seat.

She set her hands on his shoulders, shaking him gently. "Get up, tiger." He stiffened immediately, but it took him a moment to lift his head and crane his neck to look at her with unfocused blue eyes. There was a sizeable welt of red flush over his cheek where he'd burrowed into his own shoulder and gotten the hard edge of his denim jacket. "New day."

Ellis huffed out a breath, pushing upright, stretching his arms forward with a rough yawn. "Ah, shit." he muttered, slowly and stiffly rolling his shoulders. His posture spoke to a degree of pain. "I could'uh done with a pillow."

Rhiannon gave a scoffed laugh, her grip lingering on his shoulders. "I slept on the ground. Suck it up, pretty-boy." It wasn't a massage; it was more an intentional harassment, the younger man releasing a squawked noise of protest as he lurched down in his seat to escape the painful clinch.
Scrambling to his feet to get entirely away from her, the Georgian turned a sour look in her direction. It was, however, not so sour that it didn't break into a smile the moment he started talking. "Ow, girl, jeez!"

She grinned back, unable to stop it. She'd have readily admitted that he was attractive - someone's type, definitely, if not hers - even before he'd bodily picked her up in his arms on the mall roof. He was the kind of guy every girl had a crush on at least once.

"Suck it up, I said."

She might've even gone there, were it not for the tiny voice in the back of her head that was pretty sure Lena was right, at least in part. There was definitely something going on between Ellis and Nick.

If she thought back, remembering those few days she'd have done a lot to take back, she could still close her eyes and see Nick's gaze gone feral, unfocused. His expression had warped into something beyond simply vengeful fury. Even as the entire group had urged him back, it had taken Ellis to snap him out of it, the rage had been so thick, so intense.

It only seemed odd in retrospect. At the time, she'd taken the events at face value; they'd both been two people capable of violence, thrust into opposition... but he'd not looked at her in that same way again, not even when they'd crossed paths the second time outside the beach condo. He'd been furious, and threatened her, but it just hadn't been the same.

He's an angry asshole, sure. But he's not the same asshole that almost shot me, just like I'm not the same asshole who almost shot him. She sighed, puffing out air, an unpleasant shiver touching her body. It wasn't something she liked thinking about, especially now that she considered the group her friends.

I... I lost myself in all this shit. Took me a bit to find me again. I'm still an asshole, always been, but... that wasn't me.

Rhiannon turned, letting her gaze find Nick. Where Coach had turned entirely away and hunched down over the bar, Nick was still staring at her with a dumbfounded look, snapping his mouth shut only after some delay. He turned away, then, raising a hand to scratch at his jawline. She swore his lips darted into an upward curl.

Wonder which asshole came first for him.
Ellis stuffed a few more crackers into his mouth, quickly reaching the point where he had to tip his head back to keep crumbs from tumbling free as he chewed. His mouth smacked with the motion of his jaw as he stared squarely at Chris, eyes wide, exaggerating every move.

The Spaniard grimaced back at him in horror, throwing his arm up and putting his hand in place against his temple to block vision of the other man. "I try to eat!"

Ellis' grin sent a puff of cracker dust tumbling free from the corners of his mouth, scattering over his lap like a light sawdust. Teasing him hadn't even been his original intention, but Chris made it *so easy* that it was tough to resist.

Keith would have had a field day.

"Disgusting." Rochelle managed past her giggling, leaning forward to waggle her eyebrows toward Ellis. The gesture was just shy of encouraging. "Leave it to you to ruin what little appetite we have left."

Laughing around his generous helping of mostly-chewed crackers proved difficult, especially as he was forced to realize just how much it had dried up his mouth. As the urge to cough rose up, he reached out to grab up the bottle of water by his elbow, quickly taking a swig. He swallowed, hard, drawing a horrified shudder from Lena where she stood a few feet away.

"God, dude. Wet crackers. Ew." The brunette snapped the bottom of her chip bag flat, tilting it to collect the crumbs in one corner before she tossed her head back and emptied it into her mouth.

"Like wet bread... crap's gross."

Across the room, seated on the end of one of the closer booths, Nick was staring down at the wrapper in his hands. He'd practically inhaled the granola bar contained inside, and was now in the process of meticulously folding it in some mindless pattern.

He followed the existing seams as much as he intentionally worked against them, working it down into a compressed shape, going until he couldn't get it to fold any further. It was thoughtless, idle, largely an effort he put forth to stop his brain from focusing on anything else.

Like the grin Ellis had on full blast.

"Sorry, y'all. I was hungry, is all."

Nick lifted his chin, darting his eyes across the room. Most of the team had taken up on a semicircle of chairs in the middle of the restaurant, though Lena was standing and rocking softly on her heels, and Coach had never moved from the bar. Nobody paid him much attention, a fact that did not escape Nick's notice.

Then again, nobody else had any particular reason to pay him attention - and Coach being withdrawn wasn't precisely out of the ordinary.

He looked to where Rhiannon was seated, injured leg sprawled up and onto the empty chair next to her, and carefully glanced her over. It felt like he needed to take stock of her again, recalculate, adjust his expectations. After all, he knew flirtation. He knew hollow threats, and he knew...
sincerity.

Right then, he had zero idea if the blonde had been sincere or not.

It wasn't like the idea of someone finding Coach attractive was beyond belief. He was, in that quiet way, like the echo of a young football champion was only a few steps behind him. His frame fit him comfortably, his face pleasant and kind, gaining a handsome edge as his stubble grew thicker, salt and pepper crawling up his jawline.

Nick found himself sighing, and his shoulders must've moved with the gesture, because suddenly Rhiannon's eyes darted to find his. She grinned, subtly, curling her tongue against the broken shape of her canine in a knowing little quirk. He knew that, too.

She was enjoying the game.

He'd found it all funny, at first, if only by virtue of how unexpected it had been, and how completely disarmed the older Georgian had been by the advance. Whether it had been sincere or not, it had definitely put the man on his heels. *Jesus... poor Coach. He's gonna get eaten alive.*

Strangely, after humour, the very next thing Nick felt was a twinge of protectiveness. He didn't imagine Coach was particularly romantically experienced, and Nick did not trust Rhiannon's designs with him. The last thing Coach needed was a game, and he had no intention of watching the man get toyed with.

That thought quickly penned him into an unpleasant corner, though.

*Why hadn't *he* seriously entertained the thought of chasing her? Of chasing either sister, really, or both. There was some sense to it now, he supposed, in the interest of not throwing away his chances to get on their boat when the time came - but since when had reason and sense stopped him before?*

*Fucking a biker would get Ellis off my back, that's for sure.*

Nick couldn't shake the slimy sensation that oozed over him, like a stunted kind of disgust. The thought felt intrusive, unwanted, not unlike the macabre internal jokes that had suddenly started to grow out of control in recent days. He didn't want it, but there it sat.

*If you aren't gonna let him fix it, you gotta do something. Rip off the band-aid. Make it easier for when you leave.*

It reminded him suddenly of his early attempt to scare Ellis off, pinning him to the wall on the roof of a gas station. He'd figured feeling the kid up would trigger that reliable Southern homophobia and earn him some room to breathe. Of course, it had proven to do exactly the opposite.

It hadn't been his proudest moment, and it had gone a little further than he meant. Nick was a lot of things, but sexual assault had not ranked among his crimes. Pleasure was exponential, in his experience, and he didn't have any desire to do anything that wasn't mutually beneficial.

Dropping his gaze again to the wrapper now crumpled up tightly in his left hand, Nick bit down on the tip of his tongue. Rhiannon was unlikely to play ball, considering their history, but Lena might. She had plenty of girl-next-door appeal; it wasn't his typical genre of choice, though he'd never been particularly picky.

It was, perhaps, food for thought.
"So, nice as this is." he muttered, forcing his voice to project across the room. He didn't look up from his hands, but he did feel a wide array of eyes snap to him. "Are we gonna talk about yesterday? More specifically, the helicopter we didn't catch, and what we're doing now?"

There was a small silence, broken after a few seconds by the scrape of chairlegs against the wood floor as someone adjusted their weight. The atmosphere in the room cooled by a few degrees, like a brisk return to reality.

Ellis' voice quietly responded, calm and thoughtful. "We didn't catch it, but it didn't go far, neither. We saw where it went down, 'cross this bridge just a little ways on. We can go see. Maybe folk made it, or... we can find somethin' useful in the wreck, at least."

Nick did look up, then, watching Rochelle's head nod faintly.

"It had guns. The chopper, I mean. It had big ones on the sides. Rhee said it earlier - it scared me for a minute, all the talk about shooting Carriers. But they tried to land before they hit the edge of the roof, you know?" A wryness touched her voice, a sadness, and her eyes lowered toward the ground. "Whoever they were, they saw us, and they were going to land."

Lena's shoulders shrugged up gently, crossing her legs where she stood. "It's the closest I've been to any kind of government presence in a while. It was Navy, right?"

Rhiannon grunted affirmation, lolling her head back on her shoulders. She let her eyes wander over the survivors around her, and there was something thoughtful in her posture. "Yup. Wonder if it has anything to do with that boat you guys mentioned."

A small sigh made Rochelle's head bow. "That crossed my mind. Navy chopper, maybe a Navy military boat...? Probably wishful thinking, though." she admitted. "So is wondering if anyone will come looking for them."

"Maybe it's not." Ellis piped up, leaning forward, putting his elbows on his knees and bowing his back into a slump. He reached up and scratched at his head through his trucker cap. "Y'know, them tents we found. Looked like some important people were there, right? All them maps'n'shit, 'n' them bein' aware of places whut've come under attack, like they were communicatin' with the military."

"Sure." Rochelle assented, eyes darting across his expression. "So?"

The younger man flapped his right hand, grimacing. "I mean, shit. They weren't comin' fer us, right? Maybe they were lookin' fer those folk. And if someone sent 'em lookin' fer those folk, maybe someone'll come lookin' fer them."

A snort made Nick's body jolt, shifting to rest his shoulder into the side of the booth. "At some point, that's a lost cause. If there's someone out there directing resources, you don't wait for three strikes."

Ellis' gaze drifted to glance at him, tracing up and down his frame, and Nick couldn't control the shiver that sent goosebumps up the back of his neck. The look was soft, attentive. Casual. Like that conversation hadn't happened barely a half-day before.

"Maybe." the kid responded, bouncing his shoulders. "If anyone survived in that whirlybird, maybe they can tell us."

Nick shifted his jaw forward, the gesture parting his lips as he puffed a sigh. The urge to laugh at the Georgian's ridiculous terminology didn't win out, but it did drag his mouth into a curve. "So,
 Nobody rushed to respond. As he looked up, Ellis looked to Rochelle. Rochelle looked toward Chris, and Chris snapped his gaze toward Coach's back. The small ping-pong of glances ended there, as Coach was not looking in their direction. Silence reigned for a moment, before Nick cleared his throat.

"Coach?" he prompted, dryly. "We're voting, remember?"

The man's head bobbed subtly before he spoke up. If he'd been distracted at all, it didn't come across in his response. "Way I see it, we got two missions. Gotta find the girls their boat, and get us to that crash. Ain't gonna move on either of those sittin' on our asses here."

Rhiannon tapped her foot against the ground so her heel made a dull thump. She let her head roll from side to side, taking stock of the expressions facing her. "So, we head out."

Without turning around, Coach raised a hand, rubbing at the growing stubble across his scalp. A small snort touched his voice, head shaking, and he did not seem completely convinced. "Seems like it. Anyone against it?"

A few heads shook, and Christophe leaned forward a few inches. His eyes darted to more fully examine Coach, crinkling at his nose as he offered up, "Nothing else to talk about, ¿tío?" His voice was cautious, and innocuous enough that it didn't draw much attention from the other survivors.

It did make Coach's head turn, sparing a glance toward the foreigner. Nick might've dismissed the interaction, had both men not abruptly looked at him. Fight or flight threatened instantly, a surge of adrenaline making his eyes narrow to slits.

He hadn't expected them to forget about his collapse that easily, nor that one conversation with Coach would clear the air. He still had yet to talk to Chris about it; that damage control needed to happen sooner than later. He was already lucky it hadn't yet gotten spread around; Ellis and Chris talked too much, and they'd talk about it before long.

The exchange was over as fast as it had begun - too quickly for anyone else to put that much meaning into it all - after Coach shrugged a shoulder. His eyes settled much more coolly on Nick afterwards, gentled, even.

"Nick, you gonna catch that cat? If we gonna move, you gotta get it back in that carrier. Sure as shit ain't gonna let anyone else do it."

The gambler lifted his hand to scratch nails against his jawline, vaguely startled as they made contact and a few sharp points scraped against his skin. He turned his hand over, gazing at the few edges where his nails had broken, holding Ellis up over the mall balcony edge. With a vaguely furtive frown, he lifted his hand up to start biting at the couple of hangnails.

"S'fine." he muttered through clenched teeth.

Nick watched with a lowered chin as Ellis stood, suddenly, pushing one of his hands into the pocket of his jeans. He drifted his other hand over his forearm, thumbing over the pinkened patch of irritated skin there, a fresh acid burn.

"Um... I got one condition, though." The younger survivor looked tentatively around the space, only belatedly breaking into a tiny, sheepish grin. It lit up his eyes as a giddy excitement was badly repressed in his posture. "Can I ride on the bike this time?"
Lena burst into a smile at that, a gesture split between amusement and a soft warmth. It seemed genuine, even if a little hesitant at the edges.

Before approaching him, she bent down to grab for the wide duffel bag that contained the sisters' supplies. Some effort strained at her frame as she straightened with it on her shoulder, quickly waving off her younger sister as Rhiannon almost jolted upright to come and help her.

The brunette then stepped toward Ellis, nudging his bicep with a fist as she passed him by and offering a wink. "Sounds like a plan. You and me, bud. Let's get it set up."

Ellis grinned bashfully back, darting to fall into step behind her. He bounced with every step, practically stumbling to stop himself from colliding with her back as he followed a little too close. "Man, muh buddy Keith always wanted a hog. We used tuh dirtbike all the time, but it ain't the same. He'll be so jealous, me gettin' tuh ride on one, killin' zombies'n'shit."

The woman gave him a humouring laugh, responding, "I bet."

Nick watched them cross the restaurant, disappearing into the entranceway and out of the building, their voices hushing as they moved to exit entirely. He resisted a wince as he peeled part of a broken shard of nail free, stripping just a little too close to his nailbed.

As he used the pad of his thumb to feel over the profile of his nail and appease himself with the feeling of the surface being now mostly smooth, he sighed. He couldn't shake a sense of dread and unease, and he was very sure part of it sourced from the fact Chris was still looking at him.

*Damage control.*
Chapter 265

It didn't take much time to load the car. The bulkiest of their supplies was the drink icebox, freshly filled with water, and the blankets and pillows they'd stolen from the condo. They'd worked through a lot of their food which, while unfortunate, also lightened their load.

Their guns and weapons were mostly held in their arms or on their shoulders, though Nick left his sniper rifle and katana in the front passenger's seat to claim it for himself.

If he was going to have Maggie in his lap, carrier or no, he wasn't going to crush into the backseat with two other people. She hadn't shown any sign of calming down around the other survivors, and the canvas material of the carrier wasn't thick enough to make him comfortable with balancing a hissing and spitting ball of fury on his lap. Not to mention, he just wanted the better seat in the car.

When he got a dark look from Rochelle, he deigned to stick his tongue out at her. She laughed, and something warm settled in his chest that he didn't examine too closely. It also didn't last.

Ellis and Lena had lashed the duffel bag to the rear of the bike, held tightly in place with bungee cords. The Georgian was getting prepared, pulling on Rhiannon's helmet, struggling a little to get it fitted over his head. He was grinning up until the moment his face disappeared behind the dark plastic visor, and Lena was grinning back at him.

Nick only watched for a moment before retreating into the restaurant. He ached, and calling it jealousy grated at him. *Pathetic.*

He closed the door behind him, inhaling sharply, looking up to where he knew his cat was perched. Orange eyes stared intently back at him from the top of the wall, her hunched shape backlit by the windows dimly illuminating the room behind her. She was poised uncomfortably, driven to a nervous energy by the commotion surrounding their preparations.

"Time to go, sweetheart." he murmured, stepping forward. He reached up, stretching onto his toes, and she didn't resist as he tucked his hands underneath her to lift her up. Her paws did scrabble out weakly as he pulled her to his chest, but her claws mostly caught on his shirt. "Us humans have shit to do."

Maggie sniffed at his jawline, whiskers tickling his cheek as she started to settle against him. Her body relaxed, tentatively surrendering into his grip, tail curling around his forearm.

Then the door opened behind him.

White flashed over Nick's vision, alongside the pain of eighteen tiny claws sinking straight into his skin. He bit back a shout, quickly staggering a few steps down the hall. "Jesus fuck! Warning!" He tried for a few seconds to keep a hold of her and support her rear enough to stop the instinctive unsheathing of her claws - but when the pain did not subside, instinct made him let go.

Maggie leapt from his arms, back paws grinding against his midsection as she used him like a launchpad. Her body was a flash of darkness as she scrambled back into the restaurant, skidding against the wood, paws and tail sprawling in all directions as she barely kept her balance before disappearing out of sight.

A startled laugh was stifled into a snort, and Chris' hurried response did not sound very genuine. "¡Lo siento!"
Nick scattered a glance back at him, grimacing, trying to communicate his agitation rather than his pain in the gesture. "For fuck's sake, Chris. If you're lookin' to kill me, just take a swing, okay?" he sighed, rubbing his hand into his chest to soothe the stinging points of pain scattered there. "It'll be less cruel."

The Spaniard grinned at him, that subtle and non-discriminatory flirtation sprawled over the soft brown of his skin. "Ya lo intenté, ¿recuerda?"

"I already tried that."

Nick wasn't completely sure if that was a joke aimed at their previous opposition, or the strike he'd received in the mall dressing room. He didn't like either answer. Disinterested in engaging at all, and resigned to the fact he'd have to chase the feline down, Nick started forward as he waved a hand behind himself to urge Christophe to remain at the door.

"Come on, girl, we gotta go." he murmured, eyes darting to look for her as he came into the main section of the restaurant. He started clicking his tongue in a soft attempt at a calming noise.

He circled the first booth that was against the wall, where he'd placed the carrier on top of the table there, the front panel unzipped and hanging open. An absurd instinct made him look inside... but that would have been too easy. It was empty.

His head turned to look behind him, tongue still clicking, and he found her peeping crossly at him from behind a table leg.

Maggie's body melded almost flawlessly into the dark, her mottled colouration almost better camouflage than a pitch black pelt. Her eyes reflected a sharp tint of yellow-green as they caught the light, dim headlights in the shadow. Her attention was sharp on him and only grew sharper when he took a step forward, like she might bolt.

A sigh dropped his shoulders, and he approached no closer. With something of a grunt, he dropped down, squatting where he stood and sticking his hand out, knuckles proffered. "Come on, you brat. Don't make this harder on me, okay? I'm tryin' here."

Maggie stared him down, her whiskers flexing as they stood on end along with the rest of her fur. It was, without a shadow of a doubt, the face of a cat who had no intention of obeying.

Hanging his head, Nick sighed - and he might've felt defeated, had he not had a backup plan. "Alright, fine. Bribery it is."

Nick reached into the front left pocket of his jeans, straightening a bit to ease the pressure his crouch put on the waistband. He pulled out the snack-sized, individually wrapped jerky he'd been holding onto for her.

With the last of her cat food gone, feeding her would quickly become an issue. She'd continued to display an eerie inclination towards quiet, like she'd learned that noise drew attention to her and avoided it. If they didn't keep her fed, however, he couldn't imagine that lasting.

Listening to the cracked and pathetic noises she did pull together on occasion, part of him wondered if she hadn't screamed herself hoarse in her time captive with her undead owner. It was a thought that made him strangely angry - and it was an anger he didn't know what to do with.

Her rapt attention on his hands made him keep moving.

Peeling the two halves of the plastic casing apart, Nick plucked the small tube-shaped hunk of
jerky meat out, fingers immediately slick with thin grease. He held it out toward her, waving it a little in the air as if to waft the scent over to her. It smelled vaguely spiced, yet syrupy and sweet.

"I can always just eat this myself, y'know." he threatened, a scowl touching his face, as if she'd understand the look.

Her attention was unwavering, but so was her posture. Her eyes flickered between his hands and his face, whiskers so taut they trembled, glinting in silver threads spread out to either side of her snout. She was desperate... and resolute in her refusal to move.

With a restrained sigh and the sudden urge to smile, Nick lifted the jerky up, opening his mouth to stuff it between his teeth. He found the halfway point with his thumb braced against his canine as a guide, biting to split the mini sausage into two pieces, ignoring the slightly burnt and smoky flavour that flooded his mouth.

Prying one half free and holding it in his fingers, Nick stowed the other half like a cigar butt clenched between his teeth, lips parted to pant out a breath around it. He leaned forward, tossing the half in his hand. It hit the ground and bounced to roll closer to her.

Though her posture twitched, it wasn't until the jerky piece was barely inches from her that she squatted down to lap it up. Quiet mumbled noises sounded up from her as she chewed, head bobbing with the effort of devouring the snack.

Nick took the risk of approaching, raising into a half-crouch and crossing the few long strides between him and the cat. He moved with calm confidence rather than trying to sneak up on her, and though her ears flicked up to track him, she was too focused on her food to shift away.

When he scooped his hand under her belly, however, the cat started to stiffen and her head recoiled. She swallowed the hunk of jerky with a snap of her jaws, and her distraction disappeared with it.

"No, no -" Nick hushed, quickening his movements to lift her up off the ground. She started to struggle, her back legs kicking up and gaining purchase against his elbow. With a grimace, the gambler hurried to turn, striding back toward the booth where the carrier sat open. "C'mon, almost -"

He wasn't sure how hard it would be to get her inside, but his concern was unfounded. When he bent over, she practically lunged out of his grip to catch her front claws in the fabric of the carrier, kicking off his chest to throw herself inside. She collided with the other end, the carrier sliding a few inches with the force of her entrance.

Wincing at the pain still flecked over his arm and across his chest, Nick sighed. He reached up to pluck the other half of the jerky sausage from between his teeth, tossing it into the carrier before zipping the flap shut behind her. She hissed at him, stubbornly - a few beats before more chewing noises started up.

"There we go, you little monster." he snorted, popping his thumb into his mouth and sucking off the grease left there. He turned his head to watch as Christophe stepped after him, the foreigner coming more cautiously around the corner.

"She is good?" he queried, looking with curiosity at the carrier. A soft embarrassment flecked his expression, like he'd been chastised, and there was no more humour to his voice. "I did not mean -"

Nick set a hand on the carrier when a muffled hiss sounded out again, rotating at the waist to face the Spaniard. "It's fine, kid." he interrupted, wryly glancing him over as he spoke, a firmness
flexing at his jawline. He tried for a dismissive tone, and wasn't sure what he ended up with. "Dealt with."

**Damage control,** he reminded himself.

The two of them were alone. It was as good a time as any to catch a moment with the man. It would've been easy to start the conversation himself... he *wanted,* in fact, to have it... but reflex had him turning away from the opportunity. Playing coy, perhaps, because it was likely no coincidence that Christophe had come to find him. "Let's go."

He started to pick the cat carrier up, grabbing the strap and starting to lift. He didn't do much more than tense his arm, however, before Christophe reached out and grasped at his other sleeve to stop him. Some satisfaction settled into his chest as he counted the interaction as a victory, but he kept the emotion out of his eyes as he offered a vague lift of one brow.

Christophe sighed, gently, his head lowering a few degrees. His fingers tightened and eased on Nick's sleeve, like a soft knead that dug his knuckles into the man's tricep. "Nico, you are good?"

The contact lingered, and Nick twisted his shoulder, only having to apply a little bit of force to the gesture before Chris relented and let him go. The Northerner snorted, drawing his voice into tight sarcasm. 'I'm great. Why are you asking? Aren't we all doing fan-fucking-tastic out here?"

The other man didn't do more than shift his weight before responding, lids lowering in a gentle and unamused half-blank. "I do not think so." Before Nick could react, the Spaniard lifted his hand, hovering it over the stump of his amputated arm. "You know... you save me, amigo. You see me... Entonces vio lo peor de todo. It was bad day, that day, with the gun, ¿sabes?"

Nick felt a frown start on his lips, unsure if it looked frustrated or insecure. He tried to morph it more confidently into the former. "Yeah, kid. I was there, I remember. Your point?"

This was not how he'd meant to steer the conversation - but he'd surrendered control from the very beginning by letting Christophe start it. It had been a miscalculation.

Chris hesitated a beat, lowering his hand to instead cup his palm against his waist and hug his torso lightly. His chin raised, gaze wandering over Nick's face, and the sincerity there was too heady for Nick's comfort. "You had bad day, too, right? You want to talk about it?"

At that, Nick outright laughed. It escaped him more genuinely than he intended, though that sincerity came with a dose of venom that he also hadn't quite planned to let through. He choked it back, curling his lips against his teeth for a moment before responding. "No, not really. And I'd appreciate you keeping whatever you think you know to yourself."

A sigh made Chris' chest collapse inward, eyes rolling upward. It verged on frustrated. "Nico, you do not have to hide. I know how it is, to be not okay. I know... pain, and... You feel like a... ay, una carga, ¿sí? You make it... hard, for others, so you hide it."

This was definitely not how he'd wanted the conversation to go. Full red alert activated in the back of his skull, forcing another laugh up from his chest, dismissive. Nick put his hands up, as if warding the younger man off. "Chris."

The sudden way that Chris invaded his space made Nick's heart jolt in his chest. He couldn't help a stiffening of his posture, his shoulders, as theforeigner pushed forward. His hand raised, this time firmly gripping Nick's shirtfront and tightening into a clutch. "You saw things, right? Alucinaciones, in the mall. I heard you."
Slow, deliberate, Nick let his eyes flicker down to motion in the direction of the hand grasping at him. It was a warning that Chris showed no indication of heeding.

"I see things too, Nico."

The confusion that sparked, then, was strangely cold. His attention darted up, gaze matching Chris' to search there. He found sincerity there that he didn't expect, and it put him completely off his guard, voice stolen by a lump in his throat.

The other man seemed to relax slightly, though his grip did not. "I see B. I hear them both, sometimes, but I see her outside the mall, too. Blood, all... all over, here..." He released Nick long enough to draw a vague circle over his belly, then dropped his arm to his side with a dull thud. "She looked at me - like a zombie, but... like she knew me, too. They both haunt me, I think."

Nick didn't need to try hard to have his mind's eye fill in the blanks. His last view of Brenda had been not far from that description. Her eyes had been wild, feral, even in the moments following her body failing under the point-blank shot. She'd cradled her stomach as her guts leaked crimson through her blouse, still grinning.

"It is... La culpabilidad, Nico, the... guilt, ¿sí? The head gets wrong." Sadness crept into his voice, but Christophe uttered a small laugh to force past it. "Ellis say I have... em, phantom pain, ¿sí? Dolor de fantasma. It comes with extra fantasma, for me, I think."

She'd grinned up at him, and he'd watched the blossoming darkness swallow her midsection, unable to think of much but how long it would take her to die that way. Her guts were sundered and they'd leak toxins into her belly and septic shock would kill her before the blood loss did. It was fitting. It had satisfied him.

It had been cruel.

Cruel enough, it occurred to him in some tilted half-pace that felt like sluggish fear, that they'd never shared the details.

"It is the stress, ¿sabes?" Chris' eyes were soft, understanding, and the hesitation in his voice fell away. He'd read something on Nick's face, maybe, or misread it. "Is not your fault, Nico, y... I am here, if you -"

"Who told you?" Nick returned, simply, the words falling harshly from his lips. He focused abruptly on the other man's face, gaze so sharp it might've cut the air it crossed over. When Christophe frowned in clear confusion, he repeated it more carefully, teeth on edge as he enunciated thicker. "Who told you how she died?"

Their eyes searched each others' in unison, confusion only multiplying when neither of them found what they were expecting. Neither of them understood, and they both saw it, and the gap between them felt massive and unknown.

"Nico -"

A gunshot, muted from outside but still loud enough to crack in his eardrum, stole the moment away from them.

Nick's body flung into motion on instinct. He reached out, circling an arm around Chris' waist and pulling him closer. When the younger man obeyed the pull, he twisted, and they rotated in some stunted swirl around one another that put Chris where Nick had stood a moment before.
"Get her." he stated, flat, only moving away when he saw Chris' hand dart toward the carrier on the booth table.

He reached down, pulling his Magnum from the thigh-holster strapped on his left leg, and he charged into the restaurant entry hall. His eyes slanted to look through the windows as he strode past, just shy of a run, and some of his adrenaline eased as he picked out the whole of the team on their feet outside.

They were clustered close, though, responding to some clear disturbance with that instinctive protective circle. Rhiannon and Lena were in the process of easing into it as he looked on, slower to join, the physical response less natural to them.

That didn't stop Nick's momentum, however, and he shoved the door open and thrust himself through it. The porch door surrendered to a strike of his shoulder, though he had the presence of mind to snap his free hand out and grab it before it clapped into the outside of the building.

"Guys?" he barked out, aiming his Magnum carefully down at the ground. Ellis' head was the first to snap up, looking toward him, but the black motorcycle helmet disguised any indication of his expression. "The fuck?"

The Georgian lifted the pump shotgun in his hands, gesturing, and Nick followed it to a slumped shape a few feet from them. It was warped, legs muscular. Its outstretched arm was topped with wicked claws, grown out from their nailbeds, spiked talons of yellowed keratin.

"Jumpin' sonnuva bitch, came outta nowhere." he returned, voice slightly muffled in the constraints of the helmet.

Nick gazed over the yard, inhaling, forcing in badly-needed oxygen through flared nostrils. You're insane. It's just a coincidence. Only so many places blood can go, for fuck's sake.

"We should go." Coach boomed out, calm tone edged by a tacit layer of unease. "No sense hangin' around waitin' fo' more to show up." He lowered his shotgun, but did not lower his shoulders. His gaze flashed up toward Nick with a critical frown. "You got the cat, Nicky?"

He felt a presence brush at the back of his shirt, and twisted his head. Chris stood just behind him, the carrier held up and away from himself like a loaded weapon. There was a frown on his face, his honey-brown eyes averted.

There was thought, there, wheels cranking in his head, not that Nick could blame him.

Just freaking both of us out for no reason. Rochelle probably told him and he doesn't remember, or maybe he was a little conscious when we carried him out of that pawn shop. Or maybe it's just a fucking coincidence. You're overthinking. The fuck else would it be?

Nick gritted out a sigh, blindly sliding his Magnum back into its holster as he reached out to take the carrier. As he lifted it out of Chris' grasp, he muttered, "I'm fine, Chris. Just let it go, alright? I don't need your help."

He didn't expect Christophe to nod, nor to step and abruptly push past him. He watched the Spaniard take the porch steps in one hop, and walk silently over to their parked sedan. He popped open the back door and slid inside, not sparing so much as a glance for the rest of the team.

Rochelle, at least, noticed - but she seemed to merely follow suit, like it was simply an effort to obey Coach. Rhiannon came after her, filing into the back seat of the sedan, leaving the front seats for Coach and Nick.
The gambler clenched his fingers around the top handle of the carrier, feeling Maggie's weight shift vaguely inside. *Least he's not thinking about you anymore, right? Situation under control, or something like that.*

He did not feel in control.

Lena was sliding into place on the motorcycle, patting the space behind her for Ellis, and Nick's feet started carrying him to the car with an urgency he couldn't restrain. He had no interest in watching Ellis' arms go around her waist.

*Fuck me.*
Chapter 266

Ellis closed his eyes, tightening his arms where they were wrapped around Lena's waistline, snagging fingers in his own sleeves to draw them even tighter. The warm air buzzing up against his bared neck was strangely soothing, as was the bassy rumble and vibration thrumming up through his body.

He should have been paying attention, but it was easy to lose focus. Lena was maneuvering the motorcycle forward at a steady pace, keeping up with the sedan trundling along ahead of them, and there wasn't much he could do aside from hold on. He tried to look around them, keeping an eye out for danger, but he mostly just wanted to rest into the warmth of Lena's back and soak in the feeling of speed and power.

It was smoother, he determined, than a dirt bike. Wonder how different it is tuh drive... wonder if she'd let me. Oh, man, Keith's gonna be so jealous...

He could feel the vague pressure against his lower back, where he'd stuffed his Bullshifters shirt with no better place to stow it. The knowledge of it there, alongside his current train of thought, made him strangely homesick. Homesick for normalcy, he supposed.

I can't wait tuh tell him.

"Havin' fun?" she called back to him. They were not going near fast enough that the wind could wick her voice away, and Ellis burst out into an exaggerated cackle in succinct answer. "You have no idea how many hot dates I've taken home on this thing. It's kind of my move."

That made him laugh again, but it was quieter, more for himself that time. "Girl, whut the hell -"

Their passage stirred infected, but they kept moving to outpace any of the zombies that charged out into the street after them. He saw the flash of a bloated shape, wobbling closer as they passed, but by the time the Boomer had reached the sidewalk they were well out of range.

"Can I ask you something?" she threw over her shoulder, voice slightly breathless despite the fact they weren't exerting themselves. Without thinking, Ellis tensed, and she must've felt the gesture because she added, "It's harmless, this time, I promise."

Her acknowledgement of the situation was comforting, and yet also raised his guard a little. She'd pried more than once with him, and he'd mostly assumed that she simply came to him as the most open-seeming member of the team. He'd been the first to extend friendship toward them, after all, and he tried to come across as honest and kind wherever he could.

Still, the voice in the back of his head - the one that sounded a whole lot like Nick - protested.

He'd been driven terribly close to losing faith in people after their encounter with the Angels, and breaking up with Nick had not helped. Meeting Rhiannon the second time around and seeing how she'd changed had soothed him. Bonding with the sisters had strengthened him back up, given him his footing again, given him that warmth and trust again. He believed again, even just a little.

He didn't want to lose that.

"Whut's up?" he responded, quieter, carefully.

She scattered a glance back at him, shadowed by her visor. There was a pause, and he couldn't help but think it was loaded. Did she sense his trepidation? Did it surprise her? He felt bad, then, and the urge to apologize crawled up his spine. She merely shrugged a shoulder. "Uh... nevermind,
actually, it's not important... We're here, anyway."

The dismissal made him frown, curiosity surging at the prospect of being denied an explanation. It was easier, naturally, to avoid the conversation entirely, as well as unsatisfying. He wanted to argue at the same time that he wanted to let it go without a word.

*Let it go.* he self-soothed. *She don't mean nothin' by it. She's just gunshy after messin' things up in the mall. Be kinder tuh let her off the hook.*

"Okay." Ellis responded aloud, which technically qualified as a compromise.

Leaning his head forward, accidentally bumping the corner of his helmet into the back of Lena's when he forgot just where the front of it extended to, Ellis glanced out in front of them. The road wasn't empty, scattered with parked cars and fallen debris that tried to impede their progress, but there was enough room to swerve from one side of the road to the other to avoid it - until there wasn't.

They'd quickly advanced along the path they'd taken to the mall, retracing their steps, but it didn't take long for them to reach the same obstacle they'd noticed on foot: the main road through Tybee was blocked up with vehicles.

Cars were pressed bumper-to-bumper and set askew on the road in places. Bodies littered the road between them, the whole scene a snapshot of panic, frozen in time. The movement of infected passing amongst the vehicles shifted in strange parallax to the environment: motion next to the petrified echo of it.

They'd anticipated the blockade, and known it wouldn't let their sedan through. They didn't have a detailed map of Tybee, but their tourist guide gave them enough of a layout of the roads to see the gridlike pattern of the area surrounding them. The network of roads had a good chance of providing a detour, but the risk of running into a dead end remained.

If they had to, abandoning the sedan was an option. The icebox might've fit on the back of the bike, lashed to it alongside the duffel bag pressed into Ellis' lower back, with only one person riding it. Still, that was a worst case scenario. They also had some canned and boxed meals left that they would have to leave behind, and that felt like a dangerous choice.

"Time to figure out if we're stywed or not." Rochelle's voice crackled from the radio clipped onto the collar of Ellis' denim jacket. He'd attached it there so it would be close to his ear, ensuring he'd hear the quiet buzz of voices from it. *"Stay-close."*

The sedan turned abruptly, pulling into one of the crossroads that opened up before the worst of the traffic pile-up. Lena accelerated with a twist of her grip on the throttle, turning them to nudge toward the sidewalk. The motorcycle jolted as it clambered up the edge of the sidewalk, once as the front wheel struck, then again as the back wheel followed.

She slowed once they'd scaled it, but still kept enough speed to overtake the sedan. Ellis turned his head to peer into the windows as they pulled up parallel, seeing his teammates clustered inside. Rhiannon's face took up most of the rear passenger window, looking back at him, and she raised her hand to press her middle finger against the glass.

Ellis couldn't quite resist a laugh, craning his head to look through the driver's side window as they drew further in line with the car. The glass was rolled down, Coach's arm resting in the frame, providing a much clearer view inside. Nick was leaned forward in the passenger's seat, one arm draped over the cat carrier in his lap and the other raised, their slim tourist guide held in his hand.
He kept staring - and when Nick's eyes abruptly cut over to look back at him, Ellis extricated one of his arms from around Lena's waist and raised a hand. He gave a teasing wag of his fingers.

Nick's mouth twisted in quiet irritation, and he did not wave back.

The motorcycle revved gently, speeding up and shooting them around the corner of the building to their left. The abrupt motion and shift in balance made Ellis surge his arm back around Lena's waist, grabbing his own wrist to lock his hands against her stomach. They surpassed the sedan, but remained on the sidewalk to stay out of the road.

Ellis peeked over his shoulder, glad that he could frown freely inside his borrowed helmet. So much of the strange emotion knotted up in him had eased after making his confession - no, his promise - to Nick. He felt in control, even though that couldn't have been further from the truth.

Still, he found himself worried. Something was going on with Nick that he didn't fully understand, and he had no way to know if he'd helped or hurt the situation by laying out his ultimatum. Would Nick listen, or just fight back harder?

*Probably good I did it, either way. Fer me, at least.*

"Zombies." Lena alerted, and Ellis stiffened, gaze darting up to spot the few infected she indicated. Two sat on the asphalt, kneeling next to the dark shape of a corpse, and two more were wandering out from a house's open doorway. Before he could do more than observe them, however, she eased off the throttle to let the bike slow to a crawl.

The sedan was catching up - it, too, slowing.

"We can't outpace them as well in these side roads, not with a car. Think it's better if we take them out." Lena's head turned to look back at him, shrugging her leather-clad shoulder. Though he couldn't see her face through the tinted visor, there was a grin in her voice when she spoke. "You ready to get a little dirty?"

Ellis' weight shifted in an eager wiggle, nodding his head in a firm bob of affirmation. "Born ready," he responded, tone his best attempt at a low growl, putting a little extra drawl into it.

His chest surged as the motorcycle suddenly snarled underneath him, gravity hooking in his gut and pulling, as if it were protesting the abrupt speed that thrust them forward. He gripped Lena harder, squinting his eyes against wind he couldn't feel as they shot over the sidewalk, staying atop the concrete pads.

The two infected wandering out into the street took notice of them instantly, snapping to face them, and Ellis snaked one of his arms back to feel behind his waist. His fingers landed on the duffel bag, zipped almost entirely closed except for the last two or three inches. From that opening protruded the black handle of Rhiannon's stun baton, and he tore it free.

He turned his left hand to clutch into the front of her jacket, letting his left arm anchor him as he pushed up, partially standing on the slim pegs extending off the motorcycle's chassis that supported his feet. His other arm hefted the baton, rotating his wrist to swing it threateningly.

"Just like hittin' mailboxes on muh bike!"' he shouted, grinning, an exhilaration running up his spine like crackling static. He stretched out his arm, less a swing and more simply putting the baton into position so their momentum would carry it into the other zombie's head or neck. "Get me there!"

Rather than respond, Lena accelerated, the side of the building to their left buzzing dangerously
The distance between them and the two infected rapidly vanished, especially once the zombies started running at them as if to meet them halfway.

The leftmost zombie angled to cut them off, the other an arm's length beside it, and its path drew it directly in front of the bike. They'd collide directly into it in seconds at their current pace.

Ellis expected her to brake and swerve away, but her body bore down, legs abruptly tightening against the sides of the motorcycle's body. Her fingers shifted to encircle the slim levers that jutted out behind the handles, and the soft tension she applied caused a stutter in their acceleration, a fractional hitch of their speed.

He braced himself, gritting his teeth, unable to stop his eyes from darting one last time toward the zombie that was just feet from the nose of the bike.

Then inches.

Suddenly, the motorcycle bucked, its front half lurching up off the ground. He shouted first in alarm, but it warped quickly into excitement as the front wheel of the bike smoothly lifted a foot or two off the ground, the engine roaring up as she twisted the throttle, just once, then let go.

They didn't go high enough to bring on that sensation of weightlessness, and they didn't swivel into a full wheelie. It was, however, high enough that when the infected collided with them, it mostly hit the front tire. As she'd released the throttle, the bike crashed back down in the same motion, the impact of its weight taking the zombie to the ground.

The scream of it cut into silence as they drove over it, her hand teasing at the throttle just enough to maintain their speed through the turbulence of its body rolling under the wheels.

It was as they jolted back onto flat ground that Ellis felt his arm snap back with abrupt force, pain spasming through the joint as the muscles were pulled slightly against the grain. He had to remind himself of why he'd been holding his arm out in the first place: the other zombie.

He looked back, and the infected was on the ground. Its head was snapped at a strange angle, torso trying to follow, twisting as if it could realign its spine with its skull by force. It clawed fingers against the asphalt to get up to its hands and knees, but the moment it lifted its head from the road, something seemed to give.

It fell limp, limbs twitching in odd spasms, even as its jaw continued to gnash.

Ellis drew his arm against his side, adrenaline numbing the pain that accompanied the movement, and he couldn't resist a wordless hoot. He turned, lowering himself to sit flat on the passenger seat of the motorcycle, shaking his hand where it clutched her jacket in an excited gesture. "Holy shit! That was amazin'! We're amazin'!"

He tried to look back, eyes darting toward the sedan as if he'd see his team looking out, impressed.

"Two more. Focus, sunshine!" Lena's voice yanked his attention back forward, and the motorcycle abruptly jerked to a halt as her right hand and foot shifted to manipulate the brakes. The bike turned just a little, skidded, her left foot dropping to scrape her heel against the concrete. She caught their weight on it as they halted, keeping it upright even as Ellis swung his legs to one side and leapt off.

He bolted, hearing the soft click and scrape as she popped the kickstand free and let the bike lean onto it, charging the two infected sitting on the road without waiting for her. It had taken the actual crash of metal on flesh for them to take notice, and they were just getting to their feet as he ran
toward them.

The first one lurched at him, and he wielded the baton with both hands, turning his body so he
could strike it in the chin as it approached. The blow knocked it back, chin splitting open in a gush
of black, and the other shoved past it with a shriek.

As the second infected charged him, its face came into abrupt focus, cracked smears of black and
dingy red over its mouth and hands. It screamed, lashing out, and he braced a palm on either end of
the baton to shove out to strike its chest and keep it at bay, grunting with the effort. As it skidded
back, falling to a crouch to keep its footing, he heard the thudding of footsteps on asphalt behind
him.

He might've stiffened and reflexively turned, had Lena not called out, "On your left."

The shorter woman was a streak of black and brown in his periphery, and she lunged forward,
wielding Chris' machete in her left hand. Her brush-axe was a little too heavy for her, still, her body
quick to exhaust after her narrow recovery.

The zombie looked up with a snarl just in time for the machete to strike into the dip of its neck,
hacking straight into the vitals there, and blood gushed around the blade. It screamed, lashing out a
hand to grab for her wrist where she held the handle of the weapon stuck in its neck, its nails
digging into the flesh bared just at the edge of her jacket sleeve.

A small cry of pain didn't stop her from kicking out, landing her heel square against its chest as if
to knock it off her. However, when it fell back, landing on its rear on the road, it did not release
her. The collapse of its body took her into a stagger, jerked into a forward bend as she was forced to
follow it.

"Shoot -" she uttered, voice pitching up just slightly.

Ellis lurched beside her and struck out, catching the zombie just behind the ear with the tip of the
baton. Its skull gave with a sickening squelch and it slipped to the ground, its grip going slack.

The shouted sound of the first infected, now recovered, lunging for him made his arm swing out on
reflex, and as the tip of the baton struck into the male zombie's sternum, he thumbed the button
built into the handle. The sharp crack of electricity buzzed through his forearm, and he watched the
creature's expression warp as its body suddenly stiffened.

It started to fall, to topple over, but Lena acted first. She slipped the machete right between two of
its ribs and twisted. Something cracked - broke - and when Ellis released the button, the infected
collapsed, leaving them in relative silence for a beat or two.

They stood, panting indelicately within the confines of their helmets.

Ellis looked down as he caught his breath, eyes catching on the corpse that the two infected had
been huddled around. It was not fresh, but the damage done by rot and the changes caused by the
Flu were very different. It wasn't hard to tell it was an uninfected body.

Its torso was split open, leaking innards and clotted viscera out onto the asphalt. It almost seemed
like the two infected had been digging around in its insides, now that he'd had a better look at it and
them. It made his nose twitch in a disgusted gesture, even as he continued to squint down at it and
cocked his head. "Nasty."

"Yeah. Gross." she agreed, stepping a little closer to him. "Good work, though." When Lena lifted
her uninjured hand, palm flat, Ellis practically tripped over himself to swap the baton into his other
hand and complete the high-five with gusto. She laughed at him, loudly, shaking her hand out as if in pain.

"Don't give cocky." buzzed from his jacket collar, startling him - and mostly because it was Nick's voice instead of Rochelle's.

Ellis squinted over his shoulder, and against his better judgement, reached up to thumb the 'TALK' button. He spoke before he could second-guess himself, letting a dubious edge touch his voice, and unable to hide the hints of a smile if he'd wanted to. "Worried 'bout me?"

Flirting again felt awfully good, even if it would've been better with genuine reciprocation. The silence that responded was answer enough, though, and he turned to start walking back toward the motorcycle, aware of Lena following quietly at his heels.

He certainly wasn't going to make things easy.
Rochelle couldn't stop looking around the cabin of the sedan, lips pursed, her brows in a stoic tangle. She genuinely hadn't expected just how much tension would build up in the car, and she couldn't determine precisely where it came from.

Nick was obvious enough, certainly. He'd started up a rigid silence the moment he'd gotten eyes on Lena and Ellis, particularly as the two brunettes had visibly been enjoying themselves. The idea of him being jealous of them was ridiculous for any number of reasons, not the least of which was the hypocrisy of it, considering he'd self-exiled from Ellis' attentions.

*Does he seriously think they're into each other? Even if both - either - of them were straight... Ellis is so stuck on him, I'm surprised there isn't glue involved.*

Not that the reverse isn't true, too.

His bad mood had thickened tangibly after the Georgian's stunt on the radio, about which she vacillated between pride and worry before settling on simple amusement. Ellis seemed in a remarkably good mood, and that was nice to see, whatever the consequences. Still, the Northerner was not the only source of tension; if he had been, she'd have dismissed it.

Coach and Christophe were dead silent, and had been since they'd gotten on the road. Even when she reached out and settled her fingertips against the Spaniard's wrist, brushing them inquisitively against the soft outline of tendon and vein there, he did not react. His eyes were vague and distant, head slumped back against the seat cushion behind him.

She stilled her fingers, then tapped them against his skin in a more insistent gesture. "Chris?" she murmured, splitting the difference between concerned and innocuous.

When he acknowledged her, it was with the smallest tilt of his head. He leaned his ear toward her without actually snapping his gaze into focus, as if he couldn't tear himself away from whatever far-off thought had him enraptured. "Hm?" he murmured, softly, only half-present.

Rochelle stared at him, her head cocking, perturbed at the shift in his mood since that morning. While the painkillers in his system surely played some part, it looked more like intense reverie, and more than a little anxiety. A moment of curiosity made her look down, gazing over his hand.

There was still dried blood around his cuticles, but it seemed faded, like he'd at least not dug at them too recently.

Comforted by that knowledge, she tapped her thumb on his forearm and responded, "You okay? You seem out of it."

Chris hummed, a faint dismissal. She might've felt put out had he not twisted his wrist abruptly, sliding his arm back so he could draw their palms together. His fingers slid between her knuckles, and she felt a smile jump over her expression. She squeezed his hand where his palm rested against hers and felt the gesture returned.

"Gay." Rhiannon intoned, calmly, and Rochelle's head snapped forward to look over Chris' lap at the other woman.

She was sprawled against the car door, one knee up and braced on the back of the driver's seat, the other spread till her leg nudged into Chris'. The angled lounge had her facing them with a little too much scrutiny. She grinned toothily at the attention, lifting one hand to press her thumb against her
cracked canine and biting down on it. It seemed like half a coy gesture and half a tic, applying soft pressure onto the broken edge of her tooth.

" Seriously?" Rochelle shot back, and it took everything in her power not to let her lips curve. She didn't miss the way Chris flinched out of his fugue, looking uncertainly down at their hands, and she meaningfully curled her fingers to tighten the grip they had on each other. "That's what you got?"

Chris flickered into a smile in her periphery.

The blonde gave a rasped laugh, studded brow waggling up and down. "Call 'em like I see 'em." She shifted her leg to jostle the driver's seat with her knee. "Right, Pops?"

Coach leaned forward to pull away as his seat shook, eyes squinting, clutching the steering wheel of the sedan a little harder. He stayed focused ahead, passing a vaguely chiding grunt over his shoulder to the woman behind him. It sounded almost sincere in its frustration. "Girl, I'm drivin' here."

Rhiannon laughed again, this time on the verge of a cackle, surging suddenly forward. She hooked one arm around the bottom of the headrest of his seat, leaning in to settle her chin on the upper edge of the seatback. Her gaze darted between the two men in the front of the car. "Fuck's wrong with you guys, anyway? It's like a funeral in here. How's my wet-blanket sister having more fun than us?"

Quietly allowing a sigh, Nick put a thumb against his brow, rubbing there gently as if chasing away a headache. "It occur to you some of us were enjoying the peace and quiet?" he grumbled, letting his other hand smack the outer edge of the Tybee guide against his thigh in a quick set of pats.

Tilting her head to settle her cheek on the seat cushion instead, she hummed, then returned, "Eat me."

The gambler's head rolled along with his eyes, laying his arm tight against the carrier in his lap. The cat hadn't made a sound since they'd gotten into the car, but it shifted every few minutes as she moved around inside. "For fuck's sake." he muttered, a snort escaping him. His chin jutted out to direct the rest at Coach. "Remind me why we got stuck with the shitty one?"

Coach shifted in his seat, discomfort bleeding into the gesture, then broke into an abrupt frown that he tilted toward the other man. "We got shit to do, Nick." Frustration lingered around him, and Rhiannon shifted a bit where she was, vaguely uncomfortable.

When the gambler scoffed lightly under his breath but obeyed, Rochelle leaned forward. She didn't release her grip on Chris even as she threw her free hand up near her ear. "Actually, I'm with Rhee on this. All three of you are acting like kicked dogs. The stick up Nick's ass isn't anything new, but... Are you guys worried about the crash? Or did I miss something?"

Nick didn't lift his head as he responded dully, "Trying to focus."

There was an irritation at the edge of his voice, taut and brimming with electricity, energy badly withheld. An insecurity hid there, too, familiar. He was trying to dissuade her with bald aggression - a move she knew well. Returning the anger worked sometimes, but most times it just encouraged him.

She settled on ignoring him, worry tugging at her mouth, looking instead between Chris and
Coach. That worry only thickened when Christophe averted his eyes, focusing on his knees as if he couldn't quite get himself to match her gaze. It was a guilty gesture, and served to double her certainty that something was wrong.

"What's going on?" she pressed, gently, turning her body to half-face him. Their knees nudged tight together, and his mouth curled into a tight and strangled shape, a distress that only made her lean closer. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

Chris cleared his throat, the sound rasping, before drawing his brows together. "Ay, chica... it is just... very much." He tensed next to her, and the scattered energy in his expression was oddly familiar. It took her a moment to pin it down - and then it clicked: he had the same look in his eyes he'd had on the porch, admitting to his hallucinations. It was not quite so vivid and hysterical, but close.

"But I am fine, ¿sí?"

Nick shook his head, tilting it to the side with an agitated jerk. His voice was milder than before, even if she'd be hard-pressed to call it gentle when it cut in to interrupt the other man. "Ro', can therapy with your boytoy wait? We'll have all the time in the world for an emotional circle-jerk when we aren't on the road."

His tactic shift served to heighten her suspicion. It was too close to a plea, and Nick getting desperate was not a comforting sign. Even putting aside how erratic he'd been of late, she'd gotten fairly good at sifting out his intentions from what he wanted her to think his intentions were. He was authentic as often as he was deceptive, once one learned his particular language.

*I have conversational fluency in Nicklish, apparently, not that it does me much good.*

The Spaniard grimaced as he lifted his chin and his gaze. He looked between her and Nick, and she couldn't shake surprise at the tangible tug-of-war occurring in his demeanor. She'd seen the two men interact with strange familiarity on occasion, but she generally marked it down to Chris' dogged refusal to be cowed, and Nick finally - begrudgingly - accepting the man into their inner circle.

This was different: this was secret-keeping. Rochelle might have been inclined to leave it alone, if it had been anyone but Chris.

She reached out, settling her hand on Chris' forearm, now holding onto him with both hands and squeezing to focus his attention on her. "Talk to me." she murmured, softly, studying his expression and searching for an explanation there.

Nick inhaled, his frame shifting in the front seat. He lolled his head back, releasing a frustrated laugh before barking out, "Jesus. Alright, fine. You wanna open this can of worms? Be my guest." He spoke as if he'd been the one under pressure to talk; Rochelle startled, but not nearly as much as Christophe did.

"Kid thinks he saw Brenda." That sent the temperature in the sedan careening to a frigid chill. "Like, actually saw. In the flesh."

Rochelle's head snapped to flicker her gaze between them hard enough that her neck muscles protested. She couldn't stop her mouth from moving, a choke bubbling up inside the words, disbelief clear in her voice. "No, you... Chris, you're still hallucinating?"

"Nope." Nick's voice was terribly calm, a certain apathy in it as he spoke. "Not a hallucination. The
real thing." Another move she knew well; a guise over the stress he felt - the pretense that the words meant nothing to him, when they clearly did.

Chris darted a wild look in her direction, a mixture of apology and fear. "No, I no say that! You -"

Waving his hand up in a stunted gesture to cut him off, Nick shook his head. "You said you saw her, with a gut wound." He glanced over his shoulder, eyes low-lidded as he looked toward Rochelle. "You never told him, did you? Not the nitty-gritty details. You didn't say, 'oh, by the way, I personally shot your psychotic ex-leader in the belly and left her to bleed out.', huh?"

Horror overtook Rochelle's face before she could rein it in, and that must've been answer enough, because Nick turned his eyes coolly toward Coach.

"Sam?"

Coach didn't look away from the road. He simply shook his head, unblinking.

Softly, tenderly, Rhiannon leaned back into her seat. Her eyes were frozen in a wide stare, attention shifting in an easy rotation around the other survivors. She did not utter a word, and her movements went glacial, like she were trying not to be seen at all. The way her posture turned, it seemed like she was weighing the choice to roll down the window and crawl out.

Rochelle couldn't work her jaw out of its glued state at first. She didn't understand the words she was hearing, not really. The thought of the Angel's leader out there, still, having survived their confrontation was awful.

The very first feeling she had was panic. Then, sense kicked in, as it very often did.

You don't survive a bullet to the stomach without medical attention. She'd lost so much blood by the time we left, even if she'd had bandages or... help, somehow... She was barely conscious. You don't make it out of that. She inhaled. Calm down, girl.

"I... Sorry. You're going to have to spell this one out for me, suit." Her eyes darted toward the man sitting next to her, aware of the way his posture tensed. "Chris? You... think she's alive?"

"It is not that!" Chris' voice went a little reedy, his hand abruptly tearing free from Rochelle's - which had gone subconsciously whiteknuckled - so he could gesticulate. "I see them before, you know? It was not real. Maybe... Ellis tells me, and I don't remember, or -"

Nick snorted, lowly. "Look, Pancho. Ellis barely said shit to any of us after that whole fiasco. So, I'm willing to bet he didn't tell you shit about her dying and the gruesome details, either."

Calm was hard to maintain when she wanted to climb into the front seat and slam on the brakes herself. "Slow. Down." she enunciated thickly, jaw shifting to set her teeth on edge, head jerking to focus on Chris. He weakly turned to face her, expression scrunchied as if bracing for some impact. "What did you see?"

He shrunk just slightly, and she forced her nerves to quiet long enough to reach out, settling her hand on his right shoulder and soothingly rubbing her thumb over the defined line of his collarbone. It did not seem to relax him, but he didn't shake her off, either.

"I... No se. The mall, when I was outside, ¿si? She was one of them, y... blood, aquí." He patted his hand against his stomach in a tender gesture, then slowly raised it to settle his palm on the back of her hand where it sat on his shoulder. "She looked at me and then ran. But it was not real, chica. She is dead, I know this. You know this."
Rochelle searched across his expression, reading the desperation splashed over his features. The certainty of his phrasing did not match with the look in his eyes.

"One of them?" she echoed, hesitantly.

He nodded, exhaling a small puff of air. His fingers squeezed at her hand, a mindless tension in his slim knuckles. "Sí. Her skin, eyes... You know. Los muertos."

"What -" she tried, forced to clear her throat and start again when it came out in a croak. "Think about this logically, okay? If you told me you saw her, I might believe you - I mean, shit. If you can survive losing an arm and all that blood, and Lena can survive who-knows-how-much internal damage..." Rochelle let it trail off, a frown clawing at her expression, though one she tried to moderate. She didn't want to admit the degree to which the thought frightened her.

A tiny part of her was drawn to the idea that she hadn't actually killed someone, pulled the trigger and watched them die - so much more visceral than how they'd likely killed Carmine - but it was quickly overruled. She made me do it. And I'd do it again, if you put me back there.

We did our best. Did the only thing we could do.

She focused, aware that she'd paused a little too long. "But you're saying she was a zombie - you saw her as a zombie? That's just not possible. She was a Carrier, just like us. Just like you. We can't get infected, and there's seven of us here who are all living proof."

Chris had been uncertain before, but with that, it wound up into outright doubt. "Pero... how did I know? The blood?"

With a cluck of her tongue, Rochelle thrust out her free hand, waving toward the car window and some far-off point. "Didn't you tell me your last leader got killed by a Hunter? That it had... gotten him... in the stomach? Doesn't it make sense you'd put the same image in your head, with your second leader, if you didn't know how she'd died for real?"

He frowned, faintly, at first - then managed a motion of his head that seemed half a shake and half a nod. "I did not... think about this. Maybe." Some tension left him, just a few degrees of ease, and his frown became thoughtful. "Maybe."

"We're all under a lot of stress, but the last thing we should do is start panicking. It was just a coincidence." she stated, and although she still felt a little woozy from the simple pressure of anxiety, she genuinely believed it. There was simply no other reasonable explanation. "Okay?"

Nick snorted from the front seat, his head dipping low. "Hell of a coincidence."

"Nicolas." Coach chided, flatly, out of the corner of his mouth. He sighed, then, glancing up to look at the car's passengers through the rear-view mirror, before refocusing on the road. "Y'all think we can start comin' clean with shit when we're safe at home?"

Rochelle snorted before she could help it, releasing a sigh. She turned her gaze more fully back to Christophe, darting both her hands to grasp at his, twining their fingers in a clumsy mess. "You can talk to us, okay? Talking it out is a lot better than you getting spun up, let alone you talking to Nick."

"Fuck you, too." chimed like clockwork from the front of the car, and Rochelle was almost tempted to smile.

Don't realize how much I miss him until he's normal for a little bit.
Relaxing just slightly, Christophe grinned, leaning until their shoulders pressed together. "Vale." he affirmed in a stage whisper. "I will try, but he is very charming, you know. Easy to talk to."

There was a beat of silence among them, except for the rumble of the engine, and the muffled scream of a zombie on the side of the road. It tried to give chase, but the buzz of the motorcycle trailing them picked up, and it quickly intercepted. Ellis' voice was a soft hoot, cheering on either himself or Lena as they dealt with the infected.

Then Rhiannon tentatively offered up, "... Gay."

Rochelle groaned up toward the roof of the car with a shake of her head, and was mildly surprised to hear Coach break into a snort.
Chapter 268

Sliding off the bike, coming to stand at its flank, Ellis let his arms fall limp by his sides. He cocked his head, uttering a faded, "Shit."

They'd arrived at an L-intersection, the road taking a sharp turn to the right as the gridlike structure of the town's roadways came to an end. There wasn't even a streetlight hooked up - just a stop sign, tilted hard to one side, wheedling faintly back and forth as if it was loose on the metal bar that moored it into the ground.

Laying across the road, overturned half onto its side, sat a broad-nosed boxtruck. It had all the makings of a generic, everyday delivery truck. Nothing about it was remarkable at all. It didn't even seem to have cargo, if his limited view of the inside through its half-open rear doors was any indication.

Then there was the damage.

The whole side of it was caved in, metal warped and bent as if it had taken a massive blow. It was not, however, anything like a normal car crash. The crushed portion of the truck was centered, where no reasonable angle of collision could have explained it. It was rounded, circular, where no reasonable shape of vehicle could have explained it.

Most car crash impact points were flattened, the depth difference between the center and the horizontal edges a gradient as the force diffused out. The collision before him was critically different - and there was only one reasonable explanation.

"This one time, muh buddy Keith tried tuh punch through a sheet of corr-uh-gated steel." he mumbled, as Lena tentatively balanced the motorcycle beside him, one foot stuck out and her heel dug into the asphalt. "Didn't work, 'course. All he did was break like, every bone in his wrist. Man's awful stubborn, though, so he just goes at it with his other hand. Ended up gettin' both arms in casts, y'know, 'n' they ended up just like, puttin' him in a *strait-jacket* 'cuz he wouldn't sit still fer shit."

Lena lifted one arm, tightening her grip on the left handlebar to keep the bike's front wheel straight, and pointed at the truck. "Your buddy didn't do that."

Ellis nodded, still looking at the overturned vehicle. "Tank." he affirmed, a grim energy making his jaw flinch. A little fear crept up the back of his throat, a sour taste - they didn't have the firepower to take down a Tank, and the streets were too crowded to effectively escape it in their sedan. He didn't have another jar of puke to turn the zombies against one another, either.

They stood there a moment, staring at the flipped vehicle, before Ellis turned his head to scan the nearby area. The buildings were fairly thick around them, clustered tightly in that familiar cram of a tourist area, and the possibility for one of the mammoth infected to be lurking nearby seemed, unfortunately, not out of the question.

The sedan pulled to a creaking stop a few feet behind them, wheels crackling on the road as it drove over the subtle debris that covered the surface. Coach's voice drifted over in a low tone from the open driver's window. "What's up, y'all?"

"Tank." Lena responded, her shoulders hunching up in a quick shrug. "Or a sign of one, at some point. Doesn't mean he's around - but we should be careful. Let's slow it down a bit."
Coach seemed to think on that, his fingers tapping against the inside of the window. "Shit. Last thing we need." He gave the truck a cursory look before turning his head as if to speak into the interior of the car to the rest of the team. It took a moment before his face stuck back out, a sigh quick to leave his lips. "A'right. Y'all want someone else to join you out there?"

The biker shook her head immediately, reaching up to paw her gloved hand against the side of her helmet. "No. Can't take three people on this thing, and on the off chance we have to boogie, we can't be scrambling to get someone into the car. Let's just stick close together, and keep going."

As Coach nodded and pulled his head back inside, Lena untwisted at her waist to face Ellis.

He hesitated, eyes tracking back onto the truck, mulling over their options. Without any idea of where the Tank was, there wasn't much to do except hope they didn't cross paths. He didn't like it.

She patted the back of the bike again when he did not immediately approach. "Unless you wanna go looking for an arm-wrestle with a Tank." she offered up, and he didn't need to see her face to know she was grinning. "Otherwise, c'mon. Worst to worst, we can outrun it on this thing, and lead it away from the others."

That made him nod, a smile twitching at his face as he stepped closer. He reached out, grabbing for the back of the bike to stabilize himself so he could swing a leg up and over it.

He didn't get his foot off the ground.

A dark shape flashed past him, stretched flesh whipping through the air. At first, it seemed like an arm reaching into his periphery... but it was longer, jointless; the whiplike shape of a tentacle. He saw her react, delayed, her head jerking up to look behind and high above them.

She lurched to try and grab at the front of his jacket, and he tried to grab her arms in return - but they'd only just latched onto each other when the tongue made contact with her shoulder. It flexed and writhed, instantly beginning to curl around her frame as it did.

The fleshy limb looped first around her neck, finding purchase between her shoulders and the bottom edge of her helmet, and the shock of its constriction made her hands jolt instinctively to claw at it. That gesture released what little grip she'd managed on Ellis, weakening the hold between them.

Ellis tried to maintain his grasp on her, but when the tongue's tapered end made contact with another section of itself to complete a loop, it jerked taut and began to reel back. The force of it yanked her clear off the bike, and his balance went wide as it dragged her bodily into him.

The bike crashed onto its side, metal screeching as it had nothing to keep it upright.

Ellis fell in unison. He didn't stop trying to scramble for purchase on her even as she was dragged past him and wrenched out of his grip with the Smoker's inhuman strength. His head cracked against the asphalt as he landed on his back - but the helmet took the brunt of the blow, softened by the padding on the inside, and his vision only blurred for an instant.

A shout left him, incoherent, and he rolled himself over to scramble up off the ground. He started to run before he'd gotten fully upright, the result a weak stumble that was half on all fours.

It took only a glance to identify the location of the Smoker. It was hard to miss, considering the thick tongue extending out from where it stood, and the woman being dragged in its direction - though he couldn't precisely see the Smoker itself. Its tongue draped out from a second-floor window of a slim but tall shacklike structure, dark wisps of smog creeping from the opening.
The idea of what he'd do to free her didn't occur to him. He just ran, barely keeping pace as the tongue's retraction sped up. The scraping sound of her body dragging over the street was hard to listen to... but she'd curled up tightly, and her thick motorcycle jacket must've buffered her from the majority of the damage.

He was far enough behind that he didn't reach her until she'd struck the wall. As her body flattened against it, the tongue drawing into a straining vertical line, it started to reel her up in unsteady jerks.

It was not anchored solely by her neck, but there was desperation in the way she was clawing at the tentacle, fighting against the loop that had cinched her left elbow against her hip. That, and her silence, convinced Ellis it had a choking grasp on her.

He lunged forward just as her feet left the ground, her own weight coming entirely onto the tentacle now dangling her against the wall. Her feet kicked, trying and failing to gain traction against the exterior of the house. Ellis snatched up to wrap both his hands around the tentacle, just above her helmeted head.

It had only wrapped once around her throat, and had not circled over itself. With a sharp twist of his whole body, forearm pressed against the side of her helmet to get some torque and push her away in the same motion, he prised the tongue from around her neck.

It hardly freed her, but the way she gasped in a ragged breath of air said he'd managed something, at least.

He was vaguely aware of Lena's right hand, her right arm still mostly unrestrained, placing against his chest and pushing. "No -" she choked out. The gesture was weak but clear in its intent, trying to urge him away.

He didn't obey, naturally, but that quickly became less of a choice as he felt the tentacle suddenly slip around his thigh, tightening, the slick muscle probing to find purchase. It constricted as if to wrap them up together, seeming to respond instinctively as he struggled to only draw tighter, curling around his knee.

The tongue jerked a little higher, and Ellis dug in his heels, his fingernails, trying to contest the Smoker's pull. Instead, he felt his own weight threatening to lift up onto his toes. The Smoker struggled to lift them both as dead weight with the same vigour it could pull multiple bodies across the ground, but it would get them both off the ground, sooner than later.

*Shit, should'uh grabbed the machete -*

Footsteps rang distantly in his ear, and he turned his head just in time to see Nick charging at them, katana drawn up by his shoulder, coiled into the beginnings of a high swing. Their eyes met for just an instant, and there was quiet focus on Nick's face, half a grimace. Like a subtle resignment, a faint frustration. Like he'd been drug into something against his will.

Ellis let go of the tentacle to drop both his arms, in the same gesture that Nick swung the sword up and toward the wall. He had to stretch, throwing his weight into the swing in almost a jump, to strike above Lena's head. The thick impact of steel hitting wood merged with the meaty sound of flesh tearing.

Relief came right before Lena dropped, and Ellis went with her. It wasn't far to fall, but neither of them were well-prepared to land gracefully.
He sagged to a knee, forced down as their legs had been mostly tangled together amidst the tongue, and reached out to grab her clumsily into an embrace and slow her collapse. She started coughing as they reached the ground together, body starting a slow squirm against the tongue still tight around her.

"Ow." she whimpered. "... Thanks..."

As his fingers started to seek out the tentacles, starting to unwind them from her frame, Ellis glanced up to see the sundered remains of the tongue snapping up and into the house. It reeled in so quickly that it struck the top of the open window, raw end wildly snapping in the air as it oozed a thick grey tar - then disappeared into the house.

It was, at least, no longer a threat. He'd never considered what they did once their tongue was broken. Did it grow back? Could they survive without it?

That made him wonder what, precisely, 'survive' meant to an infected... did they eat? Would they starve, eventually? They weren't truly zombies, as they were still alive - but had they become something so far from normal that the rules of metabolism and sustenance simply did not apply?

That was where he dropped the train of thought.

"You alright, girl?" he said, instead, focusing on the woman slumped in front of him.

He dragged some of the tentacles from around her upper body, and her arms came free in the motion. She started to shove the coiled loops down her body on her own, but not before giving a heavy series of coughs, the sound crackling in her lungs - and a quick thumbs-up. "M'okay. Only a little strangled."

Ellis opened his mouth to respond with a small smile, but not-so-distant shrieks and barks of guttural sounds made him straighten. "Shit." he gasped out, winded, turning his head to look over his shoulder.

A few infected had found their way out into the street, their approach scattered across various directions. He might've been concerned with their presence and his lack of a weapon, had he not seen the rest of his teammates dart past, picking up a rough semi-circle around them. He noticed, then, the sedan parked in the road, all its doors flung open.

It was nice having a team of their current size; their numbers provided some inherent safety net. He'd grown used to the capability to rely on each other to fill the gaps when they arose. He trusted them.

He watched Coach take Lena's brush-hook to the skull of an infected and it go limp. Rochelle had Rhiannon's bat and Chris was just at her elbow, pistol readied to snap off shots at any infected that got too close to them. Rhiannon had Coach's shotgun, and the staggered blasts made short work of the two infected charging her.

He felt a strange pride, thickened all the more by the presence of Nick beside him. He was still there when Ellis needed him. He was still driven to protect him, even after everything. He still cared, whatever he said and did to try and prove otherwise.

Then Nick crouched down.

The older man reached toward the still-flexing tongue twined loosely around Ellis' thigh, wordlessly moving to untangle it. Instinct made the Georgian tense at the approach of those too-familiar hands, freezing where he kneeled. The abrupt lump in his throat was, among other things,
embarrassing. His heart rate jumped, and why? *He ain't tryin' tuh - he's just tryin' tuh be helpful.*

He was somewhat surprised to see Nick freeze, too, though neither of them actually looked up. Their gazes were both firmly averted to stare downwards, bodies unmoving in that shared moment of realization. He wasn't sure what Nick was waiting for, let alone what he was.

*Well, shit.* he thought, and the urge to throw caution to the wind was irresistible.

He'd be the first to admit that the knowledge that Nick couldn't actually see his expression empowered him a little; he didn't have to mind whether or not his cheeks lit up or his eyes lingered too long or if the smile on his lips was obvious. It allowed his nerves to turn to mischief.

Ellis swallowed, turning his chin, closing the already perilously small distance between their faces. He murmured into the space left, ghosting the words, and they came out throaty in a way he couldn't control.

"How come yer always the one who runs in and saves me, Mr. Gamblin' Man? It's awful sweet."

He could've reached up and grabbed ahold of the tension that spawned abruptly around Nick's frame. It surely had a little to do with how close they were to Lena... but she was already rolling away and starting to push to her feet, oblivious. Her focus lay entirely on recovering her breath.

Similar to the quiet pleasure of knowing his expression and whatever nerves it betrayed was obscured, he found no end of satisfaction in the full view he had of Nick's. The Northerner blinked, his eyes shooting up, seeking Ellis' and finding nothing but tinted faceplate. His brows shot up, too, and it was nearly *shock* that plastered itself over his expression. It lasted for much longer than Ellis expected, a fact that he found uniquely interesting.

He hadn't realized how effective simple flirtation would be, how vulnerable the man would be to it. It wasn't as if they'd never flirted over the course of their relationship - but something had changed between them. The context and the circumstances felt different, now, especially with their most recent conversation.

He felt optimistic. He felt hopeful.

He felt a tremendous surge of excitement when Nick muttered - no, *stammered*, "I... the fuck - Ellis..."

Without waiting for Nick to regain himself, Ellis reached down and pushed the fat tendril down his leg, kicking it off as he stood. When he'd risen to his full height, he offered his right hand out to the man crouched beside him, palm up and fingers spread. "C'mon."

He was, again, glad for the helmet covering his face; his cheeks practically ached with the size of his grin. The expression was likely not as suave as he'd have liked, given the choice.

It was no surprise when Nick stood without taking his hand, and the Northerner made a limp-wristed swipe to knock it aside as he straightened. "Not fucking funny." Nick spoke with some strain, sparing a glance over his shoulder to ensure no attention was on them. "The fuck do you think you're doing, Overalls?"

Ellis looked, too, despite himself.

Their teammates had cleaned up the small number of infected they'd attracted, and Rhiannon jolted to hurry to her sister's side. Her hands immediately alighted on the other woman's shoulders, expression a vague twist of worry. "Dumbass." she chided, practically a hiss.
"Gosh." Lena groaned, wrapping her arms indelicately around her torso. The brunette bent forward slightly as she stood, doubled over as if to catch her breath. "I forget how much it hurts, gettin' hog-tied by one of those, until it happens again."

Ellis watched them, and watched as Rochelle and Chris approached. Coach started to turn and walk back toward the idling sedan. Nobody was even looking their way.

When Nick glanced back toward him, Ellis took a half-step to the side, moving as if to go around him, and the gambler made no attempt to stop him. As he pulled parallel to the other man, he leaned his head toward Nick's and responded in a low tone without looking at him.

"Courtin' you."

The sound of Nick choking on his own saliva was acutely satisfying.

Ellis put everything he had into keeping a casual pace, maintaining an ease in his walk. He felt Nick's baleful stare scalding at his back, and he had no intention of revealing just how hard his heart was hammering in his chest. His fingers went numb with the force of his pulse, and he blindly walked to join his teammates a few feet away.

Not looking back was difficult, but he managed.

Christophe glanced up at him as he stepped closer, his head tilting in an inquisitive gesture. "¿Estás bien, tío?" he questioned, uncertainly.

Ellis gave a heavy nod of his head, turning toward Lena. He set a hand against her shoulderblade, squeezing fingertips against the thick material of her motorcycle jacket. "You okay? We should keep movin'. Lucky all that noise didn't attract that Tank - though, guess that's a good sign it ain't around here..."

The brunette nodded back, putting one arm out loosely. "Yeah, but... Rhee, you take over. I'm a little woozy."

Rhiannon nodded with an eager grin, reaching out to slap her hands on either side of Lena's helmet. She pulled it up and off, tucking it under her arm. "Alright. I'll -"

"Try not to crash it this time?" Lena finished for her, grinning, one hand lifting to brush her mussed hair away from her face. The sour look on Rhiannon's face made her laugh, though she coughed as the air left her. "Sorry, sorry. Dog with a bone, I know."

Ellis darted a glance over his shoulder at the sound of footsteps approaching, and he couldn't help but smile anew. Nick moved past them, inspecting the edge of his katana as if to check for chips, furtively not looking up.

He's kinda cute when he ain't sure whut tuh do.
Nick was quickly realizing that he'd made a serious mistake.

He knew that what happened in the dressing room had been an error. He said things he shouldn't have, and nearly did things he definitely shouldn't have. He'd expected Ellis to come out of it confused, but he hadn't expected... this.

The kid was actively chasing him. And he was charming. And it made sense, in retrospect, but that didn't soften the surprise.

Ellis had never been, precisely, shy. He was unsteady, certainly, and often passive in his gentle acceptance. However, Nick had more than once mistaken his easy-going nature for weakness, only to see the fiery determination underneath. The Southerner did not give up or give in. He did not give ground. He was patient and self-sure, against all odds.

Every time Nick pushed him away, he'd wriggled back in. He'd broken through doors, climbed obstacles, sat doggedly at Nick's periphery waiting for the storm to pass. He'd weathered all the hurt and misery Nick had thrown his way and still, somehow, craved him. Even after he'd had his heart broken, he found his way back to his feet.

Nick thought, idly, of a day that seemed tremendously far away; they'd been in the swamps, and taken shelter in a small hut. He and Ellis had set to the task of lighting an oven - but the mechanic had been far from focused.

Instead, the younger man had crept up behind him, pushing secretly into his space to surprise him when he'd turned around. It had been forward, aggressive, and a little endearing. Nick wasn't often taken aback, and certainly not in romantic endeavours - but everything about Ellis was a deviation from the norm.

It had been nice, in the cold and the muck, to have the younger man press into him and kiss him of his own volition, in some mostly-innocent gesture of gratitude. The kid had been eager and unbreakable, still finding his legs within the strange confines of their relationship, but confident in pushing those lines. It was a change of pace he hadn't minded, at the time.

The last thing he expected was seeing it weaponized against him.

'Courting' me... Jesus fucking tits.

He'd made the joke first, off-hand, in a rare moment of normalcy during their short hotel stay. They'd been talking about Chris' interest in Rochelle, and Nick had turned it around on Ellis. He'd given into that wild urge to flirt with his then-lover, and that had escalated into less innocent urges.

It was all part of the foreplay, after all. Sometimes a one night stand came with the trappings of something torrid and intense, the false flare of connection. He knew how to pretend to be enraptured with someone. The very first time they'd - consensually - been intimate, hadn't he faked it a little? Hadn't he been gentler, more kind than he truly felt, just because it was easy to intuit that sweetness was what Ellis needed from him in order to agree?

Sex was transactional; everyone's cost was a bit different, and he was largely willing to pay. However, once he'd gotten what he wanted he'd abandoned the soft pretense, expecting Ellis to give up on him sooner than later.
Then Nick had gotten attached, and Ellis had never left.

Relaxing in the bathroom of a clean hotel room, shaving the unkempt stubble he'd been working on over the days previous, enjoying the steamed air of Ellis' hot shower, trading casual conversation... he could almost imagine there wasn't an apocalypse on the other side of their hotel room door. For an hour or so, it was as if they'd just been a normal - what? A normal couple? That made him snort. Nothing about their situation had ever been normal, and certainly not whatever had gone on between them.

Then again, perhaps it had been the most normal thing he'd ever experienced, and he just didn't know how to recognize it.

He'd looked at himself in the mirror, clean and fresh, and mulled over his situation. He'd acknowledged the likelihood of Ellis' feelings evolving, and taken stock of his own. It had felt safe, somehow. He'd felt safe with the Georgian wandering clumsily around outside the bathroom.

When Ellis stretched a hand out to help him up, goofy grin apparent in his voice though he couldn't see it past the man's helmet, he'd wanted nothing more than to take it. His ex-lover was offering that safety again, and he craved it - didn't realize how much he craved it, until it was looking expectantly down at him.

He looked at himself in the dull reflection of his katana, blurred with gore, and sighed out a reedy breath. *I've created a monster.*

He didn't know which of them he was referring to.

Nick lowered his sword, trying to settle the surging discontent in his chest. He needed to do something, regain control. He'd made a grave mistake in letting the younger man come away from their conversation in the restaurant the victor, or vindicated somehow. He should have fought back, but he'd just been so tired, and Ellis was so warm.

"Let's move, kids." Coach barked impatiently from where he stood next to the sedan, arm draped over the open driver's door. His eyes squinted, looking ahead down the road, past the cluster of survivors that had not yet mobilized. "Wastin' daylight."

Nick stiffened his jaw, turning abruptly on his heel. He looked to where Rhiannon was hauling the motorcycle upright, getting it leaned on her hip so she could slide the kickstand out with the toe of her boot. He approached at a pace that verged on hurried, moving quickly enough that several eyes caught on him, not the least of which was Rhiannon's.

Chris paid him some mind before turning to walk toward the car, Rochelle and Lena close behind. Ellis watched him closely, but did not intervene, nor draw closer.

As Nick drew up to her, Rhiannon swung her body around to face him, jutting her jaw forward in an unfriendly gesture - though there was a glint in her eyes that said it was mostly for show. "What's up, slick?" she prompted baudily, making no effort to moderate her voice.

He, on the other hand, kept his response muted. "You haven't said if you two made a decision."

The woman's whole posture shifted, tightening, growing defensive. He might've read into it, were she not generally wound as tight as a cornered animal. She made a groaned noise of frustration, shrugging her shoulders and lowering her voice to match his volume. "Honestly, dude? It's not fuckin' up to me. Talk to her."

That made him frown, leaning towards the blonde, distantly pleased when she held her ground.
"She's on the fence?" he pressed, keeping his frustration out of his voice. "If she's worried about the team, I -"

"Shit, dude, I don't know." Rhiannon cut him off, abruptly lifting Lena's helmet from where she'd hung it on the bike's handlebar and cramming it over her head. "And I don't really give a fuck. Far as I'm concerned, you're welcome." Her chin lowered, expression hidden but tone full of scorn - and a softness, a vulnerable twist. "I can't keep her safe on my fuckin' own."

The gambler paused, absorbing that statement for a moment before firmly labeling it as good news. *Halfway there.* he told himself, teeth gritted against a quiet flush of unease. *And probably the harder half.*

Halfway to freedom. Halfway to never seeing any of them again.

*_It's a good thing. It's for the best. It's happening, either way. Just ride it out. You'll be better off, they'll be better off... so what if it's the easy way out? Easy way out's worked for you so far._*

He snorted at himself, coughing to stifle the sound when Rhee's head jerked to look at him in response to the noise. He spoke before she did, lifting his free hand in a vague gesture. "Fine." he acknowledged, glancing over his shoulder. Ellis was walking toward them, hands in the pockets of his denim jacket, it hanging unbuttoned to reveal the tight grey shirt underneath.

The Georgian had taken his helmet off and tucked it under his arm, curly hair flattened on the sides and gone even curlier on the top due to the pressure of the helmet, damp with seat. A small frown lingered on his lips, but it flashed abruptly into a shy, gorgeous smile upon Nick's gaze landing on him.

A spike of heat nailed itself into the base of Nick's spine, the sensation drawing a frustrated sigh out of him.

*_I need out of here, before I do something stupid, or he does._*

"He was hallucinating, right?" Rhiannon abruptly hissed at him, startling his head into rotating back forward. He cocked a brow at her. "Chris. Between you guys and the one-eyed fucker we met before, I've heard enough to know I don't want to meet that bitch in person."

Nick mulled over his response and, more specifically, his opinion on the matter. His feelings were complicated by the fact that Christophe hadn't been wrong; Nick had experienced a hallucination of his own. It wasn't out of the question. Either it's contagious, or this is just what happens when you put a human being through this kind of shit.

*Or... occurred to him out of the blue. Maybe it's the Flu. We're all infected, after all - it can't all just be roses and fast-healing, right? Maybe it's fucking with our heads.*

"Yeah." he responded. He wasn't sure he believed it, but there were two alternatives and he liked neither of them: she was either alive and hunting them, or a Carrier-turned-infected. It was much easier to just respond, "He was."

Ellis stepped close - closer than Nick wanted him to come, and not nearly close enough - and opened his mouth to interject. However, he didn't get a word out before Coach's frustrated voice shouted at them.

"Kids! I look like I'm jokin'?" Nick turned on instinct, eyes landing on the eldest survivor. He was marching to close the gap between them, but stopped halfway, throwing his arms out to either side of himself in a hapless gesture. Genuine agitation harshened his voice. "Get yo' ass in the car,
Nick."

The Northerner moved to obey, giving Ellis a wary berth. "Coming, for fuck's sake..." The brunette's smile shifted from subtle and warm to knowing, a crinkle touching his nose, and Nick's pace accelerated.

Two steps in, and his eyes caught a flash of movement on the sidewalk a few yards away. His head jerked to track it, but they took too long to focus. It was far too late that he processed the crouched shape of a Hunter on the side of the road. It was staring intently at Coach, body just curling out from an open doorway.

The football coach had separated from the group, Nick realized. It had been watching them, waiting for a break in the cluster, waiting for someone to step out into the open, waiting for an easy target.

And he'd made Coach one.

In the time it took him to even lift his arm and gesture, let alone start running, the Hunter was in the air.

Its legs snapped straight, launching itself off the ground with a force that shouldn't have been physically possible. Its arms flashed forward, claws outstretched, a scream leaving it that was warped and broken. It did not sound like the normal pitchy howl that he had come to expect - it was muffled, somehow.

When it struck Coach, it hit him at a slight angle. It landed mostly against his side, one foot splaying against his thigh and the other leg curled to knee into his ribs. Its hands both found purchase against his neck, though one gripped lower than the other.

Nick saw a splash of red scatter between the Hunter's digits before Coach fell, crashing to the ground with the force of the collision.

Cold sunk into his gut, and the pain in his chest felt like his heart forgetting to beat. It was like moving through sludge when he started to run, hearing footsteps behind him and shouts all around him, and none of it processed.

Seeing Ellis getting reeled in, weaponless, had dropped that thoughtless rage over his vision. He'd barely considered his actions before thrusting the cat carrier off his lap and lunging out from the car. It had been anger and frustration and denial, fireworks, like at the mall balcony.

This felt like terror. This felt like sense and logic being torn from him by some cold weight, like fear and loss. This felt like hollow agony. This felt helpless.

"Coach!" he shouted, and the name was mirrored back to him by other voices from over his shoulder, from far ahead. His breath caught like a clot of air in his chest, lungs tightening, panic driving him into a charge. "Sam!"

Coach's arms were up, hands gripping the Hunter's shoulders, trying to wrestle it away and only managing to keep it slightly restrained. There was blood pooling next to his throat, slickening the zombie's hands and darkening the rough asphalt.

Panic filled Nick, like cotton was stuffed into his innards rather than guts and blood. His arms were numb, tingling as he drew his katana up to his hip.

"Can't lose him. Can't do it. Not after everything."
He was not the first to reach Coach, however - Christophe was. The Spaniard lunged as he approached, throwing himself down to his knees, and the hiss of pain that left him said he skinned his knees where his cargo shorts did not cover them. He didn't slow, didn't let the discomfort interrupt his momentum.

Chris placed the muzzle of his pistol against the base of the Hunter's skull, twisting it to aim upwards, and pulled the trigger. The point of contact and corresponding entry wound were subtle, almost unnoticeable amongst the creature's scraggly hair, but the exit wound blew a wide chunk out of its dark-skinned forehead.

It screamed, the sound choked as if the inner structure of its mouth had been compromised and its throat was filling with blood. It was still stifled in a strange way, but Nick had no time to think on it before it cut to a gurgle, then silence.

Nick abandoned his katana to clatter to the ground, letting his weight collapse to join Chris on Coach's opposite side. The road ground into his kneecaps through his dark jeans, but he didn't even feel the discomfort past the numbness spreading along his limbs. He didn't care to feel it.

Together, they grabbed for the Hunter's now-slumped body, and Nick shoved it hard as Christophe pulled. It limply collapsed into the Spaniard, and he wrapped his arm around it, scooting backwards on the road to pull it entirely off the prone survivor.

Rochelle reached them, then, and she grabbed Chris by the shoulders of his polo shirt to add her force to the effort. "Coach!" she gasped out, scrambling forward, but her footsteps stuttered to a stop. "Oh, God -"

Blood coated the right side of his throat, rivulets trailing from a line of dark punctures. Most of them were shallow, leaking trickles of bright red blood, but one had sunk deep just beside his jugular. A yellowed shard jutted out from it, half of a broken talon, and the guttered ooze of dark red from around it made Nick's chest seize.

He did the only thing he could think to do: he reached out, cupping one hand against the uninjured side of Coach's neck, bracing it so he could settle his other hand against the wounds. His fingers pressed against the lacerations in his neck, and he placed his palm just next to the claw jutting out of his skin.

His thumb wrapped around it without quite making contact, and his shoulders tightened as he tried to apply pressure, using his other hand to keep him still. At the touch, Coach's body surged lightly, a pained huff escaping him, and Nick's jaw eased enough to speak.

"Hey, hey, Sammy." he soothed, his voice like sandpaper. The blood was hot, slick as grease, sticky somehow as it clung to his fingers. He felt more of it trickle between his fingers, and he tried to press harder. "You're gonna be just fine, alright? Not gonna let some little asshole zombie take you out, right?"

The sound that left Coach was a whimper, and when Nick's eyes flickered up to his face, his eyes were wide. There was fear in them, pupils blown and distant with adrenaline, a dampness catching at the corners.

Nick heard and felt bodies skidding in to hover just behind him, just to his left, but nobody quite touched him and his peripheral was a blur, darkness pulsing into the edges of his vision. He gritted his teeth, trying to tighten his grip without choking the older man.

"J-Jesus." Ellis' voice croaked, coming into focus as he bent forward, crouching behind Nick.
"Coach..."

The Northerner startled as a body suddenly dropped to kneel next to him, so close their legs and hips settled into a press that verged on uncomfortable. Lena's face leaned into his vision, her chin turned to look directly at him. The look on her face was focused, tranquil.

"Don't let go, hoss." she murmured, voice even. "And don't take the nail out."

"I know." he hissed back, frustration and fear making his voice cold in a harsh contrast to hers. He felt like he was holding Coach together with his bare hands, and they wanted desperately to shake. He kept his muscles tense to resist the motion. "I look like a fucking idiot to you?"

The biker didn't respond to that, reaching her hand out to touch the back of his off-hand, the one not pressed actively against any wounds. "We have to stop the bleeding. Can you feel the jugular?"

She pressed her fingertips to his knuckles, urging it to move, carefully sliding his thumb past Coach's Adam's apple. Nick started to feel out low, toward his clavicle, but Lena quickly corrected him. Her fingers pushed his to move above the wound, closer to Coach's chin.

There was silence around them, like a held breath. Nick swallowed what remained of his pride, focusing on her words. He had to probe slightly, having difficulty distinguishing Coach's pulse from his own, beating in his thumb - but with a nudge from Lena, he located the thudding heat of the man's jugular, near where it delved up and into his jawline. "Yeah."

Her voice was in his ear, instructions calm and firm. "Press on it. Not too hard, just... firmly."

He obeyed, and as he tightened his grip, he felt Coach's thunderous pulse increase against the pad of his thumb. A sense of panic rose in his throat, but in the same moment, he swore the trickle of blood between his digits slowed just fractionally.

"Good, hoss. Good." Her head lifted, her hand loosening to circle around his wrist, and it might've been a comforting gesture. He might've even taken some comfort from it, were his body not full to the brim with a frantic energy that just made him feel overstimulated at the contact. "We have bandages still? Gauze? Tape?"

Rochelle's voice weakly responded, "A little.", right before her footsteps bolted away.

Nick looked down, gazing over Coach's face, noticing a heaviness at his eyelids. He couldn't shake him, couldn't pat his cheek, so he merely leaned forward and spoke more directly into his face. He raised his voice slightly, trying to get his attention. "Sam. Sammy. C'mon, big guy. Stay with me, okay? This isn't a good time for a nap. Need you to stay with me."

Christophe came to a crouch next to Coach's legs, his hand petting over his shin, eyes fretting up and down Coach's frame. Crouched there, the fresh blood trickling from his skinned knees was more apparent, but he paid them no mind.

Lena chimed in, her voice undoubtedly much more soothing to listen to than his. "You're gonna feel a little dizzy, okay, Coach?" The eldest survivor made the smallest nod, barely twitching his chin up and down. "You've lost some blood, and we're trying to make sure you don't lose any more. Just stay calm."

Nick leaned away, trying to give her space so she could press in and calm him - but as he started to move his upper body away, a hand suddenly grabbed at his sleeve. He couldn't help but stiffen, glancing at the fingers twined in his shirt. He looked, then, toward Coach, absorbing the fear still
apparent in his expression.

There was a plea there, written into the scrunch of his brow, that was not difficult to read.

A tiny laugh left him, more a sigh than anything else. "Not going anywhere, Tons of Fun. Don't worry." He leaned forward again, feeling Coach's hand shift up to grab his bicep instead, clutching there and digging nails into his skin until it almost hurt. "Just stop bleeding, if you don't mind."

Coach nodded again, even tinier than the first time, and Nick shifted to find some amount of comfort in his kneeling posture. The hand on his arm squeezed, and the ex-football player's eyes closed, some weary trust in the gesture beyond his exhaustion.

Nick's heart twisted into the tiniest knot at the irony of the situation, of his promise, of the sensation that surged in his chest. Guilt, first and foremost - and then something a whole lot harder to swallow: desperation. He'd have done anything and everything to ensure the man's survival. He wished, desperately, that it had been him to take the pounce and not Coach.

They need you more than they need me, Sam.

Fingers grazed at his shoulderblades, and he didn't need to look to know they were Ellis'. He wished, desperately, the touch didn't calm him... but his heart rate slowed, and he leaned up into it, and he hated all of it. He hated how he felt, and how much he needed the touch, and he hated Ellis for giving it to him.

"Okay!" Rochelle's voice came in a rush, suddenly scrambling down to the ground on the other side of Coach. The backpack was clutched to her belly, and she pulled out a roll of bandage material, fingers shaking as she pried it free from the slim wrapper encasing it. "Okay. You're gonna be okay, papa bear. We got you."

Lena leaned forward, brushing her knuckles against Coach's jawline. "Coach, you breathing fine? Can you say something for me?" When the man didn't respond, she patted her hand against his jaw a little more firmly. "Coach?"

He did not react, but his breathing was steady.

The brunette gritted her teeth, the first sign of a crack in her composure - before she lifted her chin and glanced over the survivors hovering around them. "We need to bunker down. We can't get him back in the car, not like this. He needs to stay laid out if he's gonna stabilize."

Rochelle nodded, shifting closer. "We're not going anywhere until he's okay." She unrolled the bandages, and wadded it up, leaning forward, and Nick started to carefully peel his fingers away, one at a time. The moment there was space, she stuffed part of the bandage in, and he returned to applying pressure, now buffered by the gauzy material.

They worked in centimeters, breath held between them, and Nick couldn't help but see the fear in her brow as the white bandages took on a red hue with the pressure he applied. It helped him smother his weight against the wounds, but the bleeding didn't completely stop.

"He's gonna be fine." he muttered, and she did not respond. Sweat trickled down her brow, and she worked tenderly around the nail jutting from Coach's neck. The spiked shape was made of yellowed material, like dirtied keratin built upon itself, layer by layer all the way to a terrible point. It must've been three or four inches long.

He'd never seen nails like that, not even on Hunters.
Ellis' voice was tense when he spoke, worry dragging at it. His hands pulled away from Nick's back, footsteps backing away. "I'll... I'll see if any'uh these houses got room. Rhee, get my back?" Her affirmative grunt sounded out from a few feet away, quiet. "We'll just... hole up, fer now. It ain't worth pushin' on."

Nick managed a small sigh, tightening his fingers to press the gauze firmly against the punctures in Coach's throat. "Can't make any fucking progress if people keep getting laid up." he snarled under his breath, catching the subtle offense in Rochelle's expression. "I'm just saying."

"Focus." she responded, biting at the inside of her cheek. "Just... focus, okay, sweetie?"

The gambler looked down, shifting his hands just softly, gaze flickering to examine the rise and fall of Coach's chest. The man's eyelids fluttered, but he didn't seem to come completely conscious, just drifting to a vague awareness before drifting out again.

Nick's hands were covered in blood, his knees hot from where it had soaked into the denim from the puddle on the asphalt. "Fuck. Fuck this." He tried to take a breath, to calm himself, and he just tasted gritty iron on the air.

Giving them up, leaving them - he could handle that, knowing they'd move on, end up better off for his absence. Everyone always was, after all.

But losing them, any of them... that he could not handle.

"Fuck this."
Chapter 270

The house they located was not the cleanest. The front room was a squat den, a sectional taking up most of the floor space and the rest consumed by the shattered remnants of a fallen television. Circuitry and the plastic shards of its casing had scattered over the carpet, the screen itself still mostly intact in a sheet of pale matte black.

Although there was power, the lights on inside proving the fact, it was strangely dim and poorly lit. It was hard to tell whether it was a voltage issue, or simply an inherent quality of the abode, pre-apocalypse.

They didn't have the luxury of being choosy.

"Careful! Careful." Rochelle hissed, her hands flashing to get a better grip on the big man's shirt. It took all of them to carry him - less due to his weight, and more due to the pressing need to keep him as stable as possible. "To the couch."

Nick was glued to him, both hands wrapped around his neck, skin turned dark red to match. He couldn't offer much help in supporting the man's frame, not with all his effort focused on holding pressure. Instead, he tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, keeping in steady sync with their footsteps and pressing himself tight against Coach's shoulder.

Ellis had his legs and was standing between them, the man's knees cradled tight in his hands and braced against his hips. His jaw was tense, sweat teasing at his temples, the effort of smooth motion making his arms tremble. "Turn him, guys. Gotta get him set down. Nick, maybe you -" He grunted, almost stumbling as his heel scuffed over the seam between the foyer tiling and the carpeting. "Get him on your lap?"

The gambler wanted to retort, wanted to say anything other than the trimmed "Yeah." that left him.

Rochelle and Lena were at either side of Coach, nestled against his ribs and clutching tight in his shirt. Rhiannon was opposite Ellis, crouched low to cradle her arms under his head and shoulders. Her eyes were riveted on Nick's hands, her whole posture dedicated to keeping his head level with the rest of his body.

As much as they tried, Nick couldn't stifle the awareness of every pulse and trickle of blood against his palms. The bandages they'd applied were soaked through already.

Holding tight, Nick rotated as the rest of the team did, backing up until his calves touched the sofa's edge. He lowered into a squat, moving in degrees, Lena crawling up onto the sectional beside him as she continued to draw Coach up and onto the cushions. As she ran out of room, she slid up onto the back, then off and out of his periphery.

"Gentil, tierno." Christophe babbled, crooned. He couldn't offer much help in the effort of carrying Coach, but he stood guard with his pistol in his hands, attention flickering to scan around them. "Pero tienes mi palabra, te cuidaremos."

Nick settled roughly down, pushing himself back into the couch cushions, taking Coach's head and shoulders onto his lap as the team settled him onto the sectional. They hissed and muttered at each other, tiny instructions and gestures passed between them, but Nick focused solely on carefully rearranging his arms to get a better grip on Coach's neck.

Blood seeped into his jeans, warming his thigh, and he couldn't stop the terror that started clawing
at his throat and sealing his airways. "It's not stopping." he hissed through gritted teeth, and he
couldn't stand how raw his voice sounded, how obvious his fear was. He was panicking. "I can't -"

Suddenly, Rochelle's body was sliding up onto the arm of the couch. Her shoulder pressed into his,
tucking close against his chest, her hands covering over his and pressing firmly. The touch of her
cheek against his neck was cold, chill, the temperature difference between them too vast for
comfort. "We'll get him through this. Like the forest, remember?" she whispered to him. "It's going
to be okay."

How did she manage to sound like she believed it?

Nick bit back any kind of response, focusing down on their joined fingers. The added pressure did
little to control the oozing, the flow slow but unerring, blood hot against his palm. He sucked in a
breath, trying to soothe himself, gaze darting to Coach's face.

There was a fractured pain on the injured man's features, eyelids just flickering open. They caught
distantly on the ceiling, glazed over, before closing again.

"Just keep pressure, guys." Lena murmured, coming around to kneel in front of them. "Lucky it's a
vein. If it wasn't -" She gazed across the bloodied mess of fingers and gauze twined at his neck, her
hazel eyes full of worry. "We need more bandages... Ellis, can you go see if they've got some
papertowels in the kitchen?"

Ellis nodded, but his feet were stuck to the ground for a moment longer. He looked over the scene
before him, the blood, the stricken look that hung so unfamiliar on Nick's features. Ellis felt sick to
his stomach, but numbness won out, buffering him from the sensation. He'd have liked to call it
composure - though he knew better.

"Okay." the Georgian whispered, breaking into a stumbling gallop. The kitchen was the next room
in the house, separated from the living room by a slim peninsula of bar counter. He clipped his hip
on the end of it as he tried to circle around it too tightly, but the pain came in vague delay and did
not slow him.

There was a roll of paper towels next to the sink, and he lunged to grab it, stepping over the corpse
sprawled on the kitchen tile. He'd seen it earlier, during the scattered scouting run he and
Christophe had completed to confirm the building was secure. A bullet wound to its skull had long-
since leaked grey and black over the floor, and his bootheel squelched on something in the dim
light.

It reeked, skin bloated and limbs distended. If they were going to stay in the house any longer than
a few hours, they'd need to remove it, but part of him hoped that wouldn't be the case. Coach's
gonna be fine. 'Course he's gonna be fine... after all we been through? He's a tough sonnuva bitch.

Snatching the cylinder of tightly wound paper towels off the vertical holder that held it aloft, Ellis
turned, retracing his steps with the tube held out in front of him. He offered it like a baton, rushing
to return to the living room. Lord, you better be watchin' out. If you're gonna do us any favours,
now's the time.

The moment he came within arm's reach of Lena, she grabbed it from him. A grateful tilt touched
her head before she focused on Coach, starting to tear off squares one by one. Ellis watched with
some hesitance as she leaned forward, her fingertips brushing against Nick and Rochelle's unified
grip.

"Need to pack in over what we have, leave the soaked bandages on for now." She crunched one of
The paper towels into a loose lump, settling into her crouch in front of the sofa, shoulders rolling in their joints. Her gaze darted up, muddy eyes sharp and half-squinted, passing a gauging glance over both of their faces. "Same way we got the bandages in. Nice and easy, hoss."

Ellis felt helpless watching them work, felt his chest tightening. Coach's skin was getting visibly clammy, sweat spreading over his body as the movement of his breath grew ragged. It was slow-going, and as they packed around the wound, blood continued to soak up through the gauze underneath.

Rhiannon paced up to Lena's flank, hands fisted at her sides, attention sharp. "Fucking Hunter came out of nowhere..." she breathed, and there was a vitriol in it, an anger that brimmed up and made her fists clench even tighter. "Fuckin' shitbag."

Rochelle's shoulders hunched, her head lowering, curling further into Nick's chest. "We're getting clumsy." Her tone was distracted, just a mutter, and she flexed her fingers to press down a bit harder against the backs of Nick's as Lena pushed a section of paper towel into place, bolstering the layer of soaked gauze. "This is what happens when you get clumsy... we have to... we can't make mistakes like this. We're better than this."

Lena's voice softened, her head shaking. Her eyes didn't lift from Coach even as she spoke. "Stuff like this is gonna happen, Ro', no matter how much you prep. We just... deal with it."

Nick released a quiet breath, shaky, like a laugh - though he couldn't muster much humour. Ellis slanted a look to gaze over his features, and he couldn't help but frown.

"Ain't sure I've ever seen him look so scared."

"Don't feel like we're dealing with shit. Not when I'm holding his fucking blood in with my bare hands."

Leaned in close, Rochelle spoke without looking up, her voice tight with mostly-held breath. "Nick... just stay calm, baby." They'd packed on a full layer of crumpled paper towel, and her hands slid to interlace fingers with Nick's rather than align directly on top of them, evening out the pressure they were applying. "It's slowing, I think. Just... keep holding it down."

Although red seeped through the white surface in small circles and splatters, growing damp against her fingertips, it did not soak entirely through. It was a good sign, however tentative.

When knuckles grazed at his lower back, Ellis flinched, quick to turn. Christophe stood behind him, wary concern drawing a line between his eyes, and jerked his head toward the house's front door. "Should get our gatita out of the car, ¿sí? At least. Does not help to... all be in here."

Ellis wanted to protest, instinctively rejecting the idea of leaving his teammates, even for a moment, but Chris wasn't wrong on either count. More than that, he caught the subtle tension that darted over Nick's frame at the mention of the cat, a conflicted instant of emotion before he refocused on the man in his lap.

As much as he would've chosen to go secure the small feline's safety either way, knowing it would ease Nick's mind even a little made the decision easier. The knowledge made it feel more constructive. He could help in some way, even if there wasn't much he could do to help Coach's condition.

Rhiannon darted a glance toward them, broken canine caught on her lower lip, chewing tightly. His reticence must've been obvious, because she barked out, "Go. I'll watch these fuckers."

"Okay. Alright." Ellis agreed, forcing out a sharp breath. He mindlessly pawed at his lower back, feeling both the small, sweat-damp lump of his bundled-up Bullshifters T-shirt, and his cap
buckled to a rear beltloop of his jeans - soothing himself with their presence. "Just... real quick."

The Spaniard forced a small smile, offering the pistol grip-first out toward him as he took a half-step back. "I need a hand, ¿entiendes?" He tried for a joke, but it came out flat.

Ellis couldn't muster more than a tense smile before taking the weapon, turning to walk back toward the front door. He snapped out the magazine of the pistol, glancing inside to see at least a few bullets glinting copper and gold inside before slapping it back into place. He inhaled, then, marching out of the house and into the small, scrubby yard.

The fence surrounding the tiny plot was barely up to his knee, more like a cosmetic edging than actual barrier. He crossed the sandy ground and stepped over it rather than follow the stone path back to the sidewalk. Their sedan was a few yards down the road where they'd left it, too focused on Coach to worry after it.

He scanned their surroundings, taking the extra time to look up and down the nearby building faces, wary of another Smoker. All he saw was a few infected, milling at the edges of the street in either direction. They were agitated but calming; they moved sluggishly, falling over themselves as if headaches overtook and sapped their desire to hunt.

"C'mon." he hushed over his shoulder, looking long enough to verify that Chris was coming with him. "Ain't lookin' tuh scuffle. We get Maggie, 'n' get back inside. We can move the car later."

The Spaniard nodded, running his palm over his spiked mess of hair. "Vale."

They moved in tight formation, so close it was only every few steps that occurred without some part of their arm or shoulder or knee making contact with the other's. Keeping on the sidewalk, they crept forward, and Ellis maintained his attention on the infected to make sure they weren't taking notice.

Metal clattering made both men flinch - but it was a street away, like a garbage can being knocked over. The sound drew the zombies' attention in that direction rather than theirs, and several peeled off to sprint into an alleyway leading to the noise. Nerves still frayed by the disturbance, however, Ellis reached his free hand back to grab Chris' wrist and accelerate into a soft jog.

They passed the place where Coach had gone down, the flat pool of blood over the asphalt making Ellis' breath hitch. They passed the slumped shape of the Hunter, still unmoving where they'd abandoned it. As they crossed into the center of the street, circling around the nose of the sedan to skid to a stop next to the passenger side's front door, Ellis only then released his held breath.

It was half-open, and Ellis released Chris' wrist, turning slightly to pass him the handgun back. "Hold this, a'ight, bud? I gotta get her."

Christophe huffed gentle affirmation, taking the gun into his hand - but then he spoke, the words abrupt enough to give Ellis pause. "He will be alright, chico. You know." He shifted, and the faint consternation that darted over his expression said he'd tried to gesture with his off-hand. "We have superpowers, ¿si?"

The Georgian smiled a little, and this time it was more genuine, though he fell to a sigh. "Don't think that's how it works, brother." he murmured, stepping around the open door. The cat carrier was on the seat, tilted half onto one side, and through the mesh in the top he could see the squished face of their furry companion peering out.

She was pressed tight to it, orange eyes squinted as the force of it compressed her face, as if she
could simply squeeze her way through the material. She'd clearly not enjoyed being left behind, though she'd been quiet in their absence. The cat seemed to be silent more than not, which was largely a blessing, though her hushed presence didn't translate to calm. As soon as he bent close she lurched to press herself into the back of the carrier.

Her hiss was almost silent.

"'Ey, girl, c'mon." he whispered, reaching out to hook his hand in the carrier's armstrap. He lifted it up off the seat, using his other hand to grab the bottom edge of it and keep it as level as possible, though the effort was strained as she shifted uneasily inside. "We gotta get on, you hear me? You can't just keep on fussin' at anyone who ain't Nick." She quieted, though he didn't get the sense it was because he'd gotten through to her.

Straightening, Ellis shrugged the strap up onto his shoulder, stepping back from the car. He turned his head, and Chris was not there.

His heart thrust itself against his ribcage, panic immediately making him take a couple more steps back, spinning on his heel to scan for the younger man. His mouth was poised to start calling, but he held back, aware of the need to stay quiet lest they get attention on them.

His panic was short-lived. Chris was not far.

The man was facing away from him, head bowed as he looked downward. Ellis felt gratitude first, and then a flush of irritation. He circled the open car door, leaving it open rather than risk the noise involved in shutting it, and darted to come up beside the ex-Angel.

"Don't do that, man. Give me a -"

"¿Qué carajo es esto?" Christophe's voice softly pressed, drawing Ellis' head into a small snap. As he stepped up, he looked down to see the Hunter slumped just in front of them. The foreigner crouched down, and Ellis watched Chris set the gun down on the asphalt in favour of getting a grip on the collar of its ragged shirt. He dragged it up with a grunt, causing its head to loll on its shoulders. "Oye, ¿qué carajo es esto?"

Although the majority of its forehead was blown out, just gore and chunks of bone in a mess of black and grey, the lower half of its face was still in one piece. That allowed him a realization: where its mouth should have been, there instead was a slim slit cocked to one side of its face. Ellis had to blink and adjust his focus, fighting the instinct to perceive a normally proportioned set of features, to realize what he was looking at.

The left side of its mouth was sealed shut. It looked almost like the remnants of an acid burn that had melted its lips together, but the flesh was undamaged, if tinged with blood and dirt. It looked like stretched clay, a solid sheet of flesh turning to stretched tendrils of skin where it split apart and lost cohesion further along.

It was as if some fusion of flesh had only just reached that halfway point.

"Whut the shit?" Ellis blurted, despite himself. Morbid curiousity dropped him to a crouch, quickly grabbing both arms around Maggie's carrier to keep her from bouncing against his hip. Once he'd settled, he reached out, grasping the Hunter by the chin. Its flesh was strangely cool to the touch as he pulled its head into a turn so he could look it over more clearly. He might've been unsettled by being so close to the creature, driven by instinctive fear, if it hadn't been missing half of its skull.

"Thing's almost ain't got a mouth no more. Gnarly." he muttered, eyes wide, unable to keep his
own mouth from gawping open. "Ain't never seen the like. Have you?"

When Christophe shook his head, Ellis pressed his thumb up against the creature's merged lips, the flesh rough to the touch. Through what remained of the opening into its maw, he could see teeth and gums coated in dark gore, and the smell that wafted up might've made him gag had he been any less desensitized to it.

"Whut's wrong with it...?" Ellis muttered, more to himself than to Chris.

His eyes darted down and, unthinking, he snatched out to grab its nearest wrist. He lifted its hand, examining the greyed skin and gaunt digits extending off its palm. His chest ached at the blood - Coach's blood - soaked over its palms and covering its fingers. They were topped with gruesome claws, longer and sharper than he'd ever seen before, and coloured an unpleasant yellow that seemed rotted in their own right.

"No se, chico." Christophe mumbled back, tone full of concern. He shook the Hunter's corpse in a gentle wag, as if he might shake out some kind of explanation. All he managed was to jostle it. "It is not normal."

Ellis reached up to pinch at one of those talons, the bloodied one to the left of the thumbnail that had shattered in Coach's neck. He meant to feel the point and gauge its sharpness - but the moment he applied any real pressure and grip, it fractured down the center as if it had contained some structural flaw. The nail split into two separate pieces, the shards dropping silently to the road.

The break startled him, and he frowned at the cold hand gripped in his fingers. "Ain't real strong." he mused, shaking his head. He turned the hand, gazing at the greyed flesh, the dark veins traveling between its knuckles like bruised furrows. "Just... pierced'n'broke off. Probably got lucky it even got in his neck at all, way this looks. Would'uuh been miles worse if it'd held tuhgether worth a damn."

Releasing a sigh, Christophe shrugged his good shoulder, glancing up to look over Ellis' face. "We should show everyone." He said it in a questioning voice, unsure. The man released the Hunter, so he could lean down and grab his handgun again. "They should know, too."

Ellis nodded, straightening up from the ground, hugging Maggie's carrier tight to his side. "Yeah. But... not now. They got enough tuh worry about, without us addin' this on." He patted his hand against his thigh, feeling a sickly, greasy sensation on his fingertips where he'd touched the Hunter. "Once we get Coach fixed up, we'll bring 'em out here."

The Spaniard relented with another shrug, a tired look rising over his face that gave off some reluctance. "Está bien, haré lo que tú digas." he murmured, and Ellis took it as acquiescence.

As they walked back toward the sidewalk, the Southerner couldn't help but glance over his shoulder, frowning back at the warped infected on the road. He spoke up in a thoughtful drawl, head wagging as he did. "Maybe this Hunter's one that just didn't go right - y'know, when it was mutatin'n'all that. Like when yer bakin' cookies, 'n'there's always one or two whut don't come out so good."

Christophe snorted beside him, dubiously.

"Amigo, I think you make some scary cookies."
There were three portions of Rochelle's brain working in unison.

One section - the largest, by far - was focused solely on Coach. She watched his chest rise and fall, watched the tension in his jaw and the flexion of the muscles in his neck. She watched the blood fill the bandages pressed against the wound in his throat. She watched his eyes flutter open and shut in vague patterns, drifting in and out of consciousness.

The second portion lagged behind, trailing, dragging her eyes to flick up toward the door every few seconds. Rhiannon had taken up a position at the threshold, watching them as they worked and watching Ellis and Christophe outside, switching back and forth after small intervals of time. Her post there eased Rochelle's worry, but it would not completely settle until everyone was back inside.

The third portion was like a far-off, pitched whine, like a TV in the next room emitting soft feedback she could just hear through the walls. It was numb, distant. It was also the only thing keeping her from the sort of thoughts that might give her pause: the self-doubt, the fear, the panic.

Nick was scared, so she certainly had no room to be.

They had reached a wary balance, as the blood had only superficially leaked through to the uppermost layer of the packed material, directly under their digits. They'd shifted their grip once or twice before, and each time had caused a small gush of blood up into the gauze. The cessation of any pressure at all was too much.

The bleeding was halted under their grip, but at what point would it stay stoppered if they lifted their hands, if they relaxed even slightly? If he stirred and moved his head, would it burst into new bleeds?

It felt like a waiting game more than anything else. They sat and kept pressure, fingers laced tightly to press together, breaths subconsciously syncing where their sides were settled just as close.

Nick's jaw was rested against her temple, facial hair soft where it grazed at her. At first, he'd leaned away from her, almost skittish at the touch... but it had not taken long at all for his posture to soften. Comfort was exchanged in the contact between them - not so bold as to be quite nameable, but there all the same.

As they sat there, Lena touched her palm to Coach's cheek, a soothing gesture. He did not stir, and she looked up, glancing from Rochelle to Nick in a slow rove. Her lips pinched together as her browline did the same, a sigh panting from her.

"I know you don't want to hear this... but we need to pull the nail out."

Rochelle couldn't help a strained sound of disbelief, gesturing down at his throat with her chin.

"Pull the nail out? Are you serious? We've barely got the bleeding under control. I'm not moving my hands, let alone taking a claw out of his neck."

The biker didn't seem daunted by her protest, her tone remaining matter-of-fact, though not harsh. She focused her gaze entirely on Rochelle, a small curl of discontent warping her expression. "We can't pack the wound right with it in, and he's not going to heal around it. I know it's hard -"
"Hard, my ass." Rochelle's voice pitched higher than she meant, the dam between her and hysteria gaining the subtlest stress fractures. "This isn't hard, this is insane. We have to wait until he's stable, or he's just going to bleed out the second we move it."

Lena reached out, hand snapping to settle against her shoulder, touch delicate to avoid jostling her any. Her head tilted, a sympathetic tone entering her voice. 'Ro'. He might not get more stable than this until we take it out. The nail's holding bleeding back, but it's keeping the wound from sealing shut, too, and stopping us from applying pressure in the right place."

Rochelle didn't want to be angry, but it bubbled up. "We're not taking the fucking nail out." Her eyes darted toward the man beside her, head shifting away from his to better look at him. "Nick? Tell me you agree with me here!"

The gambler did not move. He barely blinked, frame caught in a tense coil. She wasn't entirely confident he heard her at all.

Ellis came in through the front door at a smooth pace, his arms wrapped around the rectangular cat carrier. He talked as if he hadn't even been gone, and his voice was small. The look in his eyes, subtle fear, said he'd caught the tail end of the conversation. "He... ain't doin' okay? I thought the bleedin' was slowin' down... It looked like it was slowin' down."

Christophe was close behind, expression vaguely strained, though he had the presence of mind to soften it when Rochelle glanced at him. His eyes were even softer, sympathetic and worried, urging calm.

That third percentage of Rochelle's brain settled to quiet as the team was reunited. She felt some relief at the ease of her concern, the resolution of one problem - but it didn't take long for it to turn its attention to other matters, calm unable to sink roots in her head.

Unfortunately for her, it chose to supplement the frantic static in the back of her mind.

Rhiannon didn't give up her post at the front door, though she did reach out to close the door behind them. Shutting it sunk the interior into abrupt dim and quiet, sealing them off from the outside. Her voice rasped when she spoke. "Fucker's got a Hunter claw in his throat. He's up shit creek if we don't get it out."

Gaining a deeper frown, Ellis nodded his head softly, fidgeting where he stood in an insecure gesture. He hesitated just a moment, then braved, "Always left things in Keith 'til he got tuh the E.R., but... there ain't no E.R. tuh take him to. All's we got is us, like with Chris."

Jaw gritted faintly, Rochelle let frustration pull her head into a tilt, face shadowed in the gesture. Sweat traced its way down her temple when the motion weakened its tacky grip on her forehead. "I - know. But we can wait a little longer, give him time, or... We have it under control right now, and I don't..." She trailed off, staring down at the bloody shapes of Nick's fingers beside her own, clamped over Coach's neck.

A thoughtful grunt wandered past Ellis' lips, and thought started in his eyes. He looked abruptly at Coach, head tilting a tick to the side. He grew that far-off look in his eyes, the one he tended to get when he was stewing on a plan of action. It was the quiet focus of measurement and estimation, sizing up the situation before him. He sucked in his lower lip and chewed on it, humming just once.

The young Georgian didn't speak, though he did slowly start to lower into a crouch, setting the cat carrier down on the ground. As he freed his hands, he brushed them together, calloused skin
rasping together.

"It's not under control if you can't let go." Lena sighed, and the bluster of the noise betrayed a small flare of frustration. It was harsh in a way that was uncharacteristic of her - from what characteristics Rochelle had gleaned in their time together, at least - and tired. "If we do this, we can get the wrappings on right. It's the best move."

"Then do it." Nick stated, voice flat. His head bobbed, like his neck weakened, before he snapped it upright. His eyes raised, darting smoothly over the rest of the team. "If we gotta, then we gotta. Can't just leave it there, call it a trendy new fucking piercing. It's gotta get out sometime, otherwise we're just plugging the boat with our fingers here."

Lena gazed at him, a gentle quirk bending her mouth into a strained line, almost sympathetic. She inhaled slowly, forcing her eyes back toward Rochelle. "What do you think?" she murmured, softer. Her tone gave the subtlest submission; she wouldn't do anything without Rochelle's say-so. It was intended, no doubt, as a respectful gesture.

*Just makes it feel like I'm pulling the trigger.*

Slowly, warily, Rochelle nodded.

She barely noticed as Ellis moved to circle around them, disappearing behind the couch and into the kitchen. She didn't look after him, eyes staying riveted on Coach's face as a subtle constriction grasped at her heart, tightening her airways and quickening her pulse.

"Okay. How do we do this? Just... yank?"

Lena pressed in close again, tone growing rushed with something too severe to be excitement. "It's in there a few inches, if I saw the other claws right... I'm gonna pull it out as level as I can, trying to keep it straight on with how it went in, okay?" Her hand raised to wave fingertips a few inches above the bundle of bloodied bandage clasped under their hands.

The two survivors had encircled the nail with their hands, and it jutted up an inch or so from the bandages loosely ringed around it. The brunette put her hand flat, setting it at an angle, roughly matching the angle of the claw jutting out from Coach's neck. "You guys keep doing what you're doing, and when it's out, you can put pressure right on the puncture. Easy as pie."

Rochelle let a laugh escape her, and it came out in a vague titter, more awkward than she meant. "Yeah. Easy. Fuck." She turned her head to press her cheek tightly against Nick's shoulder, only distantly surprised when he shifted his chin to settle it against her temple.

"You gotta be with me for this, doll." he murmured. His voice was not built for that gentle register, straining and going almost rusty with the effort. His vulnerability made her relax just a little bit, softened her posture, made her feel less alone. That was a dangerous proposition when her stress made up a significant portion of the support structure keeping her upright.

Rhiannon had not approached, and Christophe had moved to join her. They both leaned against the wall, observing with vastly different expressions. The Spaniard had a frown, distant but concerned. He'd pulled away, but watched every move and gesture with almost frantic attention.

On the other hand, the blonde was seething, fingernails dug tight into the sleeves of her jacket. Her fury bubbled over in small ways, the abrupt clench of her jaw or a sudden jerk of her body, shifting through a few positions against the wall.

Rochelle bit the inside of her cheek and briefly closed her eyes. She inhaled as if she were about to
dive under the surface of some cold depths and needed the oxygen. "Okay. Whatever we need to
do - just... do it quick."

Lena smiled with a sympathetic tension, and her hand settled on Rochelle's forearm for just a beat,
light to avoid adjusting her grip on Coach, squeezing there in a comforting gesture. Her gaze
shifted between the two survivors, but focused on the woman seated in the couch's arm. "He's
gonna be fine, lovey."

Unbidden, Rochelle found herself mumbling, "How are you so calm about this?"
She hadn't meant it critically - but the subtext remained. It felt accusatory, the way it hung in the
air; the bikers had only been with them a relatively short time, after all. It was easier for Lena to be
detached when Coach wasn't almost a father figure to her. That was a fact, not a judgement, but
that didn't soften the implication of it.

The brunette's smile faded, just a little.

"Hey, y'all?" Ellis' voice rose from the kitchen, wary, but edged with an eagerness. "I guess the
power never went off in here, 'cause the fridge is workin'. There's some food in here, 'n' some ice in
the freezerbox."

Rochelle might've felt some frustration at his seemingly conversational intrusion, but she'd come to
know him well enough to know he was rarely eager for no reason... even if that reason was
obfuscated at the start. She gritted her jaw, watching helplessly as Lena's eyes averted, and
prompted him. "Ice?"

Ellis started to rifle through cabinets even as he spoke, voice picking up speed as he went. The
clattering of plastic sounded out sharply, like he'd unceremoniously tossed something to the
counter. "Yeah. There's two trays in here, 'n'I got some Ziplocs, too... I think we can use it tuh - see
-well, this one time -"

Sharp and abrupt, Nick interrupted. "Skip the story, Overalls."

The Georgian paused for only a beat before continuing, drawl clipping into a simpler diction. "Cold
slows yer body down, right? Makes everythin' like... constrict, blood vessels'n'shit. Whut if we put
ice on there?"

Rochelle instinctively looked toward Coach's face, a frown starting on her lips. "On his neck?"

Leaning back, Lena bit at her upper lip, raking her bottom teeth against it. "Well... Messing with
his body temp's not great, but... yeah, reckon that might help." As she spoke, she grew slightly
more animated, warming to the idea with every word. "Sandwich some ice between some cloth,
use it to apply pressure... It might slow some of the smaller bleeds down enough to clot."

She stood abruptly, lifting her arm to gesture toward Ellis over the kitchen bar. "Get a bag and wrap
it up in a washcloth - try to find a clean one."

The increased pace of clattering and shuffling from the kitchen indicated Ellis' urgency, including
the crackle of plastic and ice as he freed the cubes from their tray. It didn't take long for him to
launch himself back into the living room, his hands cupped under a Ziploc bag full of slim icecubes
that was wrapped in a pale blue handcloth.

"This good?" he asked as he dropped it into Lena's open palm.

The biker flashed a taut smile back, turning to nod toward the prone survivor on the couch. "How
much bandages we got left? If we can get the wound to clot, we'll need to change these... otherwise it's a short trip to infection city."

Quick as he'd appeared, Ellis darted away, crossing the living room toward the front door. The backpack had been thrown inside as they'd carried Coach through the threshold, and he crouched down to dig through the main open compartment. "Bit left. Gonna run us clear out, though."

Nobody responded. There was no response to give when there was no alternative.

Lena turned, slipping to her knees in front of the couch. Both her hands settled on Coach's arm, squeezing gently against his forearm and bicep. As she spoke, her right hand drifted down to his wrist, pressing fingertips against his pulse. Her tongue clucked against her front teeth for a moment before she spoke. "He's in a little shock, from the bloodloss, but he's doing good."

At a low mutter, Nick responded, "Considering most of him is soaked into my jeans, I'll take that with a grain of salt." Rochelle glanced at him without moving her head. His body had not relaxed, but the quiet resurgence of sarcasm in his voice was soothing, like the rise of a familiar tide.

Ellis returned with a small roll of gauze in one hand, sliding to come to a squat beside the dark-haired biker, peering sidelong at her. "Can I help?" he murmured, voice rough. "Anythin' I can do?"

She lifted her hand from Coach's wrist, turning her palm over and offering it out to him. He started to place the gauze roll there - but she shook her head and grabbed his other wrist instead, pulling his hand to replace it where she'd just had hers. She pressed his fingertips into the crook of Coach's wrist, settling it where he could feel his pulse.

"You keep an eye on him. If his heartrate starts going up, holler. Okay, sunshine?"

Ellis nodded obediently, focusing furtively down toward the grip he now had on Coach, as if his gaze would help in the endeavour of tracking the pulse tapping against his fingertips. He only snuck small peeks up, watching as Lena pressed in close.

"I'll -" she began, but Ellis interjected.

"Might break." he said, without lifting his head. Lena's body tensed slightly, her attention flickering back toward him for an instant with a faint twitch at the corner of her eye. At the look, he elaborated, lowering his chin. "The claw. Other ones were real fragile. Just be careful takin' it out... if it snaps off in his neck..."

Distaste curled at the edge of the biker's mouth, exhaling a short breath. "Sure as heck can't go digging around for pieces if we lose some. He can't take the stress, or the extra bloodloss." Her head tilted, tensing her muscles as if to crack her neck. "Okay, Ellis, good to know."

He gave a wince, apologetic, aware he'd introduced new tension into her frame.

She held steady despite it, looking up toward the two survivors on the couch, her jaw hardening. "I'll pull it out, we'll put this -" She jostled the bag of ice with a clench of her fingers. "- over everything. You guys apply pressure. We ready?"

Nick shifted his shoulders, rolling them without moving his arms. "Gotta do it whether we are or not, so just do it." he grunted, low. "If he were awake, he'd be telling us to get the hell on with it already."

Lena surveyed him, then Rochelle, then focused down toward the jagged claw. Her right hand
gripped the bag of ice, slumped in her palm. Her left hand slotted against Rochelle's and Nick's, her fingertips encircling the yellowed, almost calcified shape that was implanted in the man's throat.

It was far from a normal nail, even taking into account the length; it was cloudy and misshapen, like jagged slate. The structure of it was layered in a visible grain, building to the rough point that was hidden away in the wound. Her fingertips only-just grasped it, touch delicate, minding Ellis' warning.

She ghosted a countdown, just a soft, "Three - two -", and then pinched her grasp closed and pulled.

More material slid loose than Ellis expected, even knowing how long the others had been. Knowing that detail, estimating the length and how much was buried versus how much jutted out... it didn't prepare him for watching the nail slip free. Though he couldn't see the wound itself, the wet schk as it gave for the claw to be unsheathed was enough to fill in the blanks.

It came out whole.

In an instant, Nick's hands jolted up and off the man by just a few inches, pushing Rochelle's aside. Lena stuffed the wrapped bag of ice between his palm and the wound, and he leaned into the effort of flattening it smoothly against the injury, ice scraping against itself in a rough clatter as he did.

With the nail gone, Nick was able to center his palms on the wound itself, applying pressure straight over the puncture. His tongue darted to wet his lips, and it remained stuck into the corner of his mouth, a mindless gesture.

There was no rush of blood, no sudden leak or spill.

There was a dense silence among them all as they waited, a moment or two passing. Ellis felt the man's heartbeat remain steady against the pads of his fingers, and he looked up, warily nodding when Lena glanced his way. She gave the smallest smile, a gentle reassurance, before looking back toward Coach's covered neck.

They waited longer, silence continuing as if they were afraid to break it, as if the utterance of words might shift some unsteady balance. Minutes stretched on around them - six or seven, maybe, if Ellis' belated internal count was anywhere near correct - before Lena spoke up.

"Should check it. Can't leave the ice on too long, anyway."

It was soft, and Nick didn't react. His eyes were unfocused, gaze elsewhere, focused on Coach and yet looking right through him.

Rochelle hadn't added her hands back into the effort, instead holding her bloodied fingers out in a curl above her lap. Her eyes darted toward Nick's shoulder, arm twitching as if she meant to reach out and touch him - but she seemed to think better of it, considering how dirty they were. She instead simply pressed her chin against the outer edge of his shoulder. "Nick." she murmured.

The gesture disturbed the quiet fugue that had frozen Nick in place, making him blink, as if awakening from a doze. He shook his head, reluctance in the gesture as he glanced amongst his teammates. "Time to see if Tons Of Fun can hack it, huh?"

Then he lifted his hands, digits gently trembling in the air as they pulled away, eyes alert on the outer edges of the bandages and looking for seepage. He used his wrist to brush away sweat where it had beaded up at the edge of his eye, tickling at the soft skin there, and did not seem to notice when it smeared blood against his temple.
The bandages held.

Relief didn't cover the feeling. Gratitude was better. The fear kicked in, late, like the knowledge that he'd taken a turn for the better freed the darker emotions she'd kept locked up tight. She wanted to throw something - or throw up - or just yell at the top of her lungs.

Ellis did it for her, thrusting to his feet and whooping, outright slinging his cap to the ground. Lena immediately stood, arms out to shush him, her eyes darting toward the front door. She didn't get out a word before he'd grabbed her by the elbows and dragged her into a clumsy hug.

"Thank yuh." he murmured to her, squeezing her frame in his arms.

She staggered, at first, but caught her balance. Ellis had a few inches on her, so she was forced to lean up into it, patting his side with her less-bloody left hand. "Welcome." she hummed back.

Rochelle's heart jumped when Nick's arm suddenly looped around her neck, and she choked on a breath when it tightened to draw her against his side. He pressed a kiss against her temple, and mouth still flush with her skin, let out an almost airless chuckle. It was... soft. Precious, maybe, something secret buried between them.

Instinct made her hiss quietly, "Get off, stinky."

He released her and pulled away, lips struggling to remain flat, and she wrestled with that terribly simple adoration that fluttered in her chest. It was easier to funnel it elsewhere, so she leaned down to where Coach remained on Nick's lap, gently brushing sweat from the unconscious man's brow with her wrist.

"You're gonna be okay, papa bear. We got you."
It was a delicate process, getting Nick out from under Coach.

The whole team had all taken a grip on his upper body, fisting fingers in his shirt and grasping at his shoulders, and lifted him up to let Nick slip out. They'd kept him as stable as they could during the move, and they eased him down onto one of the small decorative pillows that were leaned against either arm of the sofa.

Rochelle immediately started to hover, arranging his limbs just-so and double - triple - quadruple checking that they hadn't started him bleeding again. Christophe lingered just behind her, and his worried gaze spent equal amounts of time on Coach and on her back.

Nick couldn't leave fast enough. He found himself in the kitchen a few instants later, fragmented, not quite clear on the details of the distance between.

His body moved stiffly, staggering toward the sink with singular determination. His fingers slipped as he tried to turn the faucet, forcing him to tighten his fist around it until his knuckles ached. The blood on his hands had mostly dried to a tacky layer, flaking like rust, but there was enough wetness there to make grasping anything difficult.

As the water sputtered into a steady stream, he shoved both his hands into the spray. Rather than scrub, he just let the water flow over his knuckles and between his fingers, feeling some rogue splatters dampen the edges of his sleeves.

He watched the water run red into the drain, just for a moment, before closing his eyes.

The window of opportunity to pretend he had no emotional entanglements had long since closed on him, and he mostly knew that. It didn't change what he needed to do, but it made it more complicated.

He inhaled, lungs billowing open beneath his ribs, and the oxygen flooded his system with a tingling sensation. He flooded his brain with a chant, forceful: He's fine. It provided a similar ticklish feeling, nerve-endings reawakening from their slumber and sending out sparks, like tiny test-fires. He's gonna be fine.

Nick shivered, teeth snapping together as it reached the base of his skull, and found a laugh escaping his lips. It was short and broken, and entirely devoid of humour.

He remembered what it felt like, thinking that Ellis was dead. He'd imagined the Georgian's glassy eyes and limp frame and given up. Jerry had called his bluff, intentional or otherwise; losing Ellis had killed him. His will to fight had snuffed itself out, all in an instant, survival instinct maimed and crippled in a corner.

He'd lost enough people in his life that he'd not expected it to gut him so - and neither had he anticipated how much the threat of losing Coach would. The man was their concrete, their brick and mortar. His quiet patience had held them together when they had strained, and his fierce will had urged them onward when they had faltered.

Coach hadn't been the sole decision-maker, their singular leader, but wasn't he the closest thing they had to one?

He and Nick had fought on and off, since the start, yet there had sprouted a fragile attachment
between them. *Sometimes I think he's the only one who actually gets who I am, not the bullshit Ellis and Ro' think, and still... tries.* Their bond had weathered the storm in a way he wasn't used to. *He sees just who I am, and he doesn't like me. But he's still never given up - not even when I deserved it.*

Nick finally started to move his hands, scrubbing stiffly, watching the stream of water over his knuckles thicken and darken.

*Deserve it.*

He couldn't spare enough attention to be startled when another set of hands drifted into his periphery. They grabbed the bottle of dish detergent from beside the sink, tilting it casually to dump a few splashes of thick orange soap over his hands.

On reflex, without thinking twice, he turned his wrists and rubbed his left palm over his right hand. He swapped his hands, spreading the lather in cautious and even swipes, white foam turning bright pink as it absorbed the blood. It stung, flooding his nose with citrus-flavoured gore, and he scrubbed harder.

Rhiannon's head dipped to square one eye at him, sidelong, her brow lifting. He might've almost mistaken her strained expression for concern, her hazel gaze flickering between his face and his hands. "You good, dude?"

Nick looked at first down at his hands, letting his thumb grind into the soft spot between his second and third knuckles, sighing. He then closed his eyes outright, wishing he didn't relish the spasms of pain that scattered over the cuts and scrapes that littered his palms and fingers.

Part of him felt like he'd been fleeing apathy since he'd collapsed at the mall. It nipped at his heels, numbing him further with every graze and near-miss, like some sub-zero temperature had burrowed just under his skin. If he moved too quickly it might burst like a squeezed blister - or leech deeper, like some internal hemorrhage, and ice him over from the inside.

At least the stinging pain over scratches and scrapes proved out his grip on reality.

"He doing okay still?" he muttered, lowering his chin to rub it against his shoulder, chasing an itch in the soft facial hair over his jaw.

"Yeah." she responded. He felt rather than saw her turn around and hop up onto the counter only a few inches beside the sink. Her heels picked up a steady pattern of thumps against the bottom counters as she swung her legs. "Almost had me scared for a minute there. Saw that Hunter hit him, and -"

She bit it back, and Nick didn't miss the way her legs paused in their rhythm of kicks. He resisted the urge to open his eyes, tilting his head to listen over the gush of water from the faucet. She inhaled, self-soothing, and suddenly there was a small grin in her voice.

"You didn't answer my question, fucknut."

Nick let that sit in the air, scrubbing his hands until he could no longer feel the slickness of soap, blindly scraping under his fingernails with the opposing twin. He took just a moment to appreciate the simple joy of washing his hands - and then he opened his eyes.

The stainless steel sink basin was streaked with black and grey and red. Though his hands were no longer dipped in Coach's blood, his own was freshly welling up from any number of small scrapes
and scabs that he'd torn open. That, not to mention the blood semi-dried into not just the belly of his shirt, but soaked into the upper half of his jeans.

He didn't feel particularly clean.

"Whoopsy-daisy." he returned in a nasal pitch, rolling his eyes. He dug his heels in as he reached past her to snatch a handful of paper towel off the roll that was anchored onto the countertop. "Guess I didn't. Try again tomorrow."

She watched him move, and there was a moment where he almost expected her to lunge and grab him as his arm crossed dangerously close to her lower back. The woman was half-feral, more often than not, and something in the depths of his instinct surged up to meet the energy.

He had half a mind to succumb to it.

*I mean, which sister's really more attainable? Sweet-talk Ms. Girl-Next-Door, or get your dick wet with Daddy Issues McGee?* He was so exhausted, but his mind idled like an engine, unrelenting. *Course, I fuck one - or both - of them, with my luck, it turns into a fucking soap opera for the next however-long we team up. Might be more insufferable than the Ellis situation.*

He couldn't shut it off, any more than he'd been able to quiet the surges of dark thoughts. Strangely, those had felt more under control. *Or I get a threesome with two hot sisters. Maybe the apocalypse isn't the death of my bucket list, after all.*

Nick had never really liked himself, as much as he loved himself.

Recently, he hated himself.

He set to drying his hands, turning away and walking back out into the slim hallway that was nestled into the center of the building. He spared only a glance down to dodge the corpse sprawled on the kitchen tile, the hot stench from its decaying form bleaching out what was left of the orange scent from his senses.

*Gotta do something. Anything.*

The house's first floor was fairly open: the entryway poured straight into the living room, and only a counter and an end pillar separated that from the kitchen. Across from him, there was a small dining room, tucked into a squat staircase up to the second floor. Under the staircase housed one open door, a powder room, barely large enough to fit a toilet and a pedestal sink.

On his right and past the kitchen, there was a short hallway with two closed doors. They drew his eye, mouth twitching downward. "Did you guys clear all these rooms?" he called over his shoulder, without looking, and without really waiting for an answer. "Blondie, go get us weapons and come do a sweep with me."

He heard her land back onto the tile, and the three steps between them were completed in a swift few motions. He tensed, anticipating *something* well before it came: the toe of her boot impacted against the heel of his shoe, hard enough to skate it askew on the tile. She barely broke stride.

"Eat me, dick." she grunted, but walked out into the living room and toward the weapons they'd mostly accumulated near the front door. To the rest of the team, still clustered in the living room, she asked, "Need anything?"

Nick focused down the hall, stiffening his shoulders in an attempt to look completely disinterested in Rochelle's response.
"No, I think we're okay... But maybe some blankets, and if there's any kind of... medical supplies." She sighed, softly, a tremor touching her voice. She'd kept her composure so far, but it would break before long. "Doubt there's gauze in here, but some alcohol or something. We need to clean him up at some point."

Lena sounded a little more distant, muffled, like she'd buried her face into something. "Pillows, so we can keep his head elevated. Unless Nick wants to come back in here and hold him up."

Rhiannon snorted, her voice coming back into focus as she returned to Nick. "Aye-aye, cap'n. Bedroom-on-fuckin'-wheels comin' right up." She pushed the handle of the stun baton into Nick's palm, striding past him with her bat swinging in her other hand. "Let's go. Since you were too scared to go alone. Pussy."

He wanted to say he bit back the urge to retort, but he wasn't sure he had the energy to return fire in the first place.

Peering over the kitchen bar, Ellis' brows tangled up, his thumb moving to scratch at his cheek. His nails rustled on the stubble that had started accruing over his jaw and down his neck. He watched the two walk down the hall, opening his mouth to protest - because he and Chris had made sure the house was safe before they'd all come inside -

Rochelle muttered, low, "Don't. Let him keep busy."

Ellis spared a glance toward her, lips tightening into a small frown, and nodded. As much as he wanted to go after the man and make sure he was alright, he knew that his presence was more stress than comfort, for the time being. He couldn't change that overnight, and as much as he'd been enjoying shifting the power dynamic, he mostly just wanted to know Nick was okay.

Softly, Ellis dropped deeper into his squat, putting both hands onto Coach's nearest knee. He surveyed over the man's prone body, swishing the air in his mouth from cheek to cheek in a thoughtful gesture before puffing it out in a sigh. "Coach seems better, now."

Staring down at her hands, Rochelle flexed them, dark skin turned a strange crimson with blood. "Yeah. As long as the bleeding stays stopped, I think we're going to be okay. He lost a lot, though... sure as hell not going anywhere tonight. Not until he's back up."

"Seconded." Lena affirmed from where she'd pressed her face into her shoulder, resting her eyes. "He'll wake back up soon, I think, but he'll need rest. He needs to get some sugar, too, if we can rustle some up."

Ellis nodded.

"Least there's food in the fridge. I think some of it's still good, 'n'we can even use the oven." he mumbled idly, babbled, barely paying attention to the words as they left him. "Kinda dumb, but I'd kill fer somethin' half-normal. Like... meatloaf. Meatloaf with a side 'uh taters'n'peas. You know, I ain't never thought I'd miss peas. Darned if it ain't the li'l things."

Rochelle sighed, placing her palm on Coach's forehead and stroking between his brows with her thumb. It smudged a soft line of red there, joining the red soaking most of his neck and shoulders. "I miss getting dressed in the morning." She fell to a soft tone, Ellis' stream-of-consciousness chatter ever-contagious. "I've never been that much of a girly-girl, you know? Earrings, lipgloss, nailpolish every few weeks. But, sweet Jesus, do I miss rolling out of bed, getting the coffee on, sitting in my closet for an hour. Like choosing any one of my fifty-seven T-shirts was going to
make a difference..."

Lena's head lifted, and she gazed off into the distance, a longing frown warping her features into more of a grimace. "I miss coffee." she whimpered, soft.

Christophe slipped to sit on the arm of the sofa, resting his hand against his knee to slump down and pass a glance across his three conscious teammates. A small degree of frustration flickered across his posture, and he interrupted, "Bonita, you take a second, maybe? Clean up, al menos."

Rochelle lifted her head to look at him, her gaze ticking over his face, taking in the tension there, the exhaustion and the concern - and the small plea in his eyes. She shifted to stand after a moment, holding both her hands in front of herself in a squeamish gesture. "Yeah, that's... not a bad idea. You guys keep an eye on him?"

Both Ellis and Lena nodded, and she stepped away, starting to turn to walk out of the living room.

She hadn't taken more than a step, however, before Chris' arm snaked suddenly to grab around her waist. It startled her, though she managed to swallow the sound that threatened to escape, composing herself enough to offer him a bemused look as he came up next to her.

His arm tightened, flattening his palm and fingers to get a more full grip on her hip, and she obliged him by letting her stride shift over a step closer. They collided into a soft lean against one another, his frame warm against hers. She turned halfway toward him, elbow nudging into his ribs, and broke into a small smile.

"What?" she uttered, drawing the sound out just slightly, plaintively.

Chris tilted his head to match gazes with her, his lighter brown eyes searching her darker pair. Something softened in his features, a not-so-subtle yearning, delicate in its warmth. His attention was not heady, not lustful. It was almost... sad. Sympathetic, at least. Maybe he saw that tremendous well of static just behind her eyes, only just contained.

"Bésame." he murmured, voice faint, that lisp creeping through in a way it only seemed to do when he was unfocused. The way he darted the tiniest lick of his lower lip needed no translation.

He waited, grip softening, as if to enable her potential escape.

Rochelle should have hesitated. She was fairly sure she meant to hesitate, in fact, like some hastily jotted-down reminder in ink on her wrist, sweated and smeared off long before she thought to check it again. Instead, she pressed up onto the balls of her feet and tipped her chin to press her lips against his, shutting her eyes into the kiss.

They were barely a foot from the sofa, and Lena and Ellis' eyes were all but riveted on them. If either of them had any sense that they shouldn't have been onlookers to the situation, it hadn't kicked in yet. They both stared, though Ellis' mouth was propped open in outright shock.

The first time they'd kissed, it had been sudden and short. There had been no space for any sort of reciprocation or evolution of it, no gaining of familiarity with one another. They'd tried again in the mall, but they had eased so tenderly up to it that they'd not managed contact before they'd been interrupted.

She had no intention of repeating either of those mistakes. Even if she also had no interest in public exhibitionism, she wasn't stupid enough to not know what making it a little public meant to him.

She'd rejected him once. Not again.
Her hand darted up, resting her fingertips against his jaw and stroking over the facial hair she pressed a little harder into the kiss, lips parting just-so. It wasn't enough to deepen the kiss, but just enough to meld them against each other and push them past the uncertainty of a soft peck.

"Holy shit." Nick's voice dryly cut across the house, full of faux-shock. He'd stepped out of the far bedroom, it seemed, and the soft snicker that interrupted him said Rhiannon had joined him. "It's an early Christmas miracle. Somebody nutted up."

Too public. groaned in the back of her head.

As if in comfort, Chris' fingers twitched against her hip before abruptly delving up and across her back. His hand slipped under the slim purple hoodie that was cut just at the waist of her sweatpants, fingertips finding the curve and dimple of her spine. They splayed and stroked there with only the whisper of contact, sparking electricity and gooseflesh up her back.

Rochelle shivered, despite herself, and the abrupt flare of warm butterflies in her stomach seemed the right cue to pull back. She kept her body close, though, arching her back in a slight nudge against his palm. She couldn't help but break into a smile, pushing her shoulder against his chest. "Cheeseball."

Christophe cocked his head with a soft hum, uncomprehending, moving in playful slow-motion to kiss her again.

She twisted out of his arm and took the first step away from him at a quick hop, unable to stifle a laugh as she fled out of the living room. The spread of warmth in her chest didn't erase the stress bubbling in the back of her throat, but it did quiet it.

The younger man looked after her, expression utterly lost, arm still half-stretched into the curled grip it had had around her. It was only when she'd disappeared into the tiny bathroom under the staircase, the door clicking shut behind her, that any of them moved an inch.

Chris lifted his hand, pressing his fingers into his eyes and applying pressure there. He released a steady groan, the noise merging with a faded, "¿Qué voy a hacer ahora?"

He managed to sound pained and ecstatic all at once.

The Spaniard's head flicked up to spare a small wink toward Nick, attention abruptly turning to blink at Ellis and Lena. He examined their faces - neither of which had so much as shifted - and jutted his jaw forward just slightly to park a slanted grin on his face. "Payasos, what? Why you look at me like this?"

Lena's mouth opened and closed a few times, but she said nothing. Instead, she turned her head to look at Ellis in a less-than-subtle attempt to throw the onus to respond onto him. He, on the other hand, didn't break his stare at Chris for a second.

"Uh." he uttered, body swaying for just a beat before he shifted to drop his knee to the ground, turning to face Christophe more squarely. Embarrassment bled into his voice and over his face, tenderly pushing himself to speak past a slightly choked inhale of air. "So... y'all're...? Y'know. Like, datin' fer real?"

Chris' grin widened just a tick, gaze softening. "Ah, too early, tío."

Rhiannon practically flung herself around Nick and down the hall, charging to close the distance. Her outstretched arm snagged the pillar at the end of the kitchen counter, gripping the edge to dangle her body off it in a lean, balanced on one foot. "The shitballs does that mean? 'For real'?
You're telling me this is new? These lovebirds haven't been fucking this whole time?"

Both Ellis and Chris looked at each other, hesitating, neither of them quite sure how to respond to that. They were saved the effort of doing so when Rochelle chimed in, voice muffled through the bathroom door. "I can hear you, assholes." She was not nearly far enough away to be out of the conversation. "Right here. Not deaf. Not fucking. Also, not your business."

With a soft and wholly sincere smile, Christophe gave a faintly helpless shrug, gesturing his hand in her direction as if to defer to her response.

Rhiannon blinked, hopping to straighten out her footing. She let go of the pillar in a slow relaxation of her arm, looking first toward the bathroom, then over at Christophe again. She tilted her head, then pointed a pinky at the foreigner. "You sure ain't a closer, huh?"

Lena had just enough time to choke into a rusted-out laugh before Nick grabbed Rhiannon by the back of her leather jacket and yanked.

She was jerked backwards a step, stumbling to catch herself. The startled look on her face warped quickly into fury as she whirled around and shoved his arm away with her free hand. "Cocksucker!" As soon as she'd gotten her balance, she lifted the bat in her other hand, a blatant threat.

Nick put both hands up, stun baton dangling from the wrist-strap looped around his forearm. "Easy, Fireball." he sighed out, exasperated.

Ellis didn't like the twist of nausea that hit him. He didn't like the way it made him feel, how he could feel his face and his gut go cold, lips parting to gust out air like he'd been punched in the stomach. He practically forgot how to breathe for just a moment, lungs chugging to a halt.

That one. That one, more than any of them, had always felt special. He didn't have to try too hard to remember the first time Nick called him that; in the swamps, with Ellis on his back, carrying him over marshy ground. He'd muttered it, soft, like an apology. It had always been soft, though all those nicknames had softened in their own ways.

That one was supposed to be his.

The conman hadn't missed a beat, his brows raising dubiously. He did not look intimidated by her threat, and his hands-up posture read like satire. "Just upstairs, two minutes, and then you can come back here and give them as much shit as you want."

The blonde woman seemed to think on that just a beat, before grunting and turning on her heel to stride past him and toward the staircase. "Fine, dickhole."

Nick watched her go, shaking his head in a gesture that was an inch away from amused, his gaze darting momentarily into the living room. His mouth quirked into a frown, then... but rather than looking at any of his teammates, his attention had settled on the front door.

His arm lifted, gesturing toward it. "Barricade that." he ordered in a thin bark, at no one in particular.

He didn't even wait for acknowledgement before he turned around, following after Rhiannon, both of them disappearing into the sharp curve of the staircase. Their shadows lingered behind them, cast starkly in the dim light from the second floor, before slipping out of view.

Ellis couldn't resist a soft sigh, dropping his gaze to peer at his hands. An uneasy feeling settled
into his gut, as much as he tried to resist it. He couldn't help but stew.

He'd never have said it aloud, but the fact was that Coach had gotten injured because Nick was having some quiet conversation with Rhiannon. Now, seeing her go out of her way to go check on him in the kitchen, seeing them rushing off to investigate the house together... hearing that cannibalized petname get so carelessly thrown out...

And maybe seeing Christophe and Rochelle kiss had made him just a little jealous.

_Hate how he makes me go all stupid all the time._

On instinct, Ellis shifted, tilting his head to sneak a glance at Lena. His jaw flexed against the urge to speak abruptly, but he inhaled first, smoothing out his tone before he asked, "Since when're they buddy-buddy, anyhow?"

Lena gave him a shrug, muddy-green eyes dodging his a little too quickly, not settling to match his gaze. He couldn't help but let his attention linger on her, soaking in the sudden hesitance there. The biker stood abruptly, brushing her palms together. "You heard the dude." she uttered, turning to start toward the front door. "Let's block this dang door. Probably won't stop a Tank, but at least we'll get some warning."

Ellis didn't move, not initially. He watched her leave, slowly letting his chest fill.

It was a stupid thing to be concerned about, when Nick hated Rhiannon about as much as she hated him. Stupid of him, entirely, to be worried about such things when they'd just held onto Coach's life by the skin of their teeth. The last thing he wanted to be was selfish, when he should have just been grateful.

As he steeled himself with his tongue bitten in a clenched jaw, jolting to his feet and marching toward the front door to help blockade it, Ellis tried to clear it from his mind.

If he tried _extra_ hard, he could almost pretend it worked.
Chapter 273

The second floor of the house felt claustrophobic, a slim hallway curling off to the right that was peppered with doorways, five in total. The dim ceiling lamp cast fuzzy shadows against the walls and over the dimpled popcorn texture that left the blue paint strangely mottled.

Rhiannon moved at a casual strafe up to the first door on the right, nosing it open with the end of her bat. The hallway light spilled in enough to drape against the foot of a bed, but not further. She slid up to the doorway and pushed her arm through, stretching to feel around on the wall beside the door with her fingertips. Her hand struck a lightswitch with a click, and a light blinked on inside.

Dim orange light flooded the room, and motion immediately caught Nick's eye - but it was just the fan seated underneath the lamps, starting up its rotation with a sluggish creak.

He frowned at it, watching as it reached its top speed, wobbling uncertainly with every spin.

"Any zombies in here?" Rhiannon called out, spinning her bat in her hand, striding across the bedroom with only a half-hearted effort to survey her surroundings. She struck a slim closet door built into the wall as she passed, rattling the slatted wood, before coming to a stop beside the bed. "No?"

Abruptly, she dropped to her knees, grabbing a handful of the comforter that was draped all the way to the floor. She lifted it up, craning her head to peer underneath. "Dude, hate to tell you, but I don't think there are any monsters under the bed."

Nick didn't plan to settle his gaze on her rear, but there it landed. She was skinnier than he generally preferred, when he had the luxury of preference, but she was a far cry from unattractive. On top of that, her flash-fire anger and aggressive attitude didn't dissuade him from the chase. If anything, it was a bonus. Personalities like hers usually translate to teeth and claw in the sack. Wouldn't mind a change of pace.

That landed flat.

The truth was, after the morning's events, he wanted nothing more than Ellis' tender attention, his gentle and yet electric affection. He wanted to bury his face against Ellis' shoulder and bite into the taut muscle there, to feel the other man's fingers thread against the nape of his neck. He wanted Ellis' hips bucking into his, driven wild, gusting out his name like it was all he knew how to say. He craved it, and staring at Rhiannon just made him crave it more.

Perfectly good tail in front of you, and you still can't stop thinking about a fucking Georgia peach. Christ, Nick, maybe Chris is right. You are losing it.

Rhiannon straightened, using her grip on the bed to thrust herself to her feet. "Only fuckin' monster in this house is whatever the shit is going on downstairs. They seriously weren't bangin' it out?"

Nick, if nothing else, had the presence of mind to look elsewhere, glancing down the hall as if he hadn't been staring - however fruitlessly - at her ass. "Don't think so." he responded, only half paying attention. As the adrenaline petered out from his body, it was harder and harder to focus on anything, let alone form a game plan. "Chris has been hounding her from day one. About time she threw the poor kid a bone."

A bolt of laughter from the blonde made his attention dart her way again. When he let a faint confusion bleed through his expression, she bounced her studded brow in a lewd waggle. "Bone."
He did not laugh. He shrugged a shoulder, instead, with a lazy response. "Not yet, apparently."

She grinned, and what had been vague amusement turned a little devilish, for just a moment. "Cunt thinks he's witty. Never seen that shit before." The biker strode back toward him, tossing her thin, dye-damaged hair over her shoulder with a flick of her head. It was a dismissive gesture, though he couldn't help but notice how much her attitude toward him had changed since he'd positioned himself to leave with them.

Rhiannon undoubtedly did not like him, but they were alike enough in attitude that they'd found a quiet chemistry. He didn't generally get along with women who fell so close in step with his personality, but she'd softened to him, a little. *That, and I think we've been getting along better once we both started ignoring fifty percent of everything the other person says. Was how my ex and I lasted as long as we did.*

Nick's eyes tracked her, thoughtful, as she walked to exit the room. He was half-blocking the entry, and he did not move to get out of her way. "I'm hilarious." he countered, pinching his brows together in mock-upset.

Her posture shifted, taking the half-inch step to the side necessary to let their shoulders collide as she came parallel to him. It was an aggressive jostle, a small bump of contact, and they were so close in height that it was not ineffective, despite her slim body. She couldn't stop herself from the dominant posturing.

It, in turn, triggered a predatory urge that crawled its way inquisitively up his spine. He needed to strategize if he was going to get anywhere. *Not gonna catch this fly with honey. That shit got Ellis, at first - hell, got Carmine. Rhiannon's more of a 'quickie-in-a-bar-alley' type. Besides, I'm not looking to burn her, not if I'm gonna be stuck with her and her sister. Just... clear my head. Make a point.*

"Too bad." she sighed out. Rhiannon crossed the hall, using the pommel of her bat to rap on the linen closet built into the wall. She tapped out an idle pattern, a tiny fragment of a tune. "He'd be a ride, I bet. Hot, for Euro jailbait. I'd'a fucked around with him, arm or no arm."

Nothing burst out from the closet, nor stirred further in the house at the sound. She continued forward, halting at the third and final door in the rightmost branch of the hall. She glanced over the closed face of the door, turning an arched brow at Nick.

He took the hint, pressing forward to join her. As he approached, the blonde snapped her hand into a point toward the sealed room. "Your turn, cowboy."

Nick resisted the urge to roll his eyes, turning toward the remaining door. "I look like a cowboy to you? I'm from fuckin' New York. Leave it to me to go to the Deep South just before the apocalypse." He reached out to grip the knob, twisting and pushing in one smooth motion.

It swung open, gently, uncovering the simple porcelain tiling of a bathroom. The room was dingy, grime caked into the edges and corners of the room, and the plastic shower curtains hiding the tub were blossomed all over with greying water stains - or mildew, perhaps. An open-faced set of linen shelves did not provide any room for infected to hide.

He scanned the room before turning his head to look back at the biker.

"Nada." When she thrust her shoulders up in a shrug and wheeled around to start retracing their steps, Nick was much quicker to follow. He settled into a smooth tone, only the slightest snideness to it. "Chris, huh? I thought you had your eyes on Coach."
Rhiannon let out a quiet snicker of laughter, shrugging her shoulders up. "I keep my eyes open, slick." she returned, mostly a non-answer. "Younger dudes are always desperate to please. Shit, I'd let Ellis take a swing if I didn't think he'd get all mushy about it. Pretty sure he's packing a big ol' -"  

All Nick's good humour faded in an instant. He felt his hackles raise, and it was a strenuous effort to force himself to settle. The moment he'd hushed the anger down to a low hum, he was struck by disbelief. He couldn't shake that jealous edge, the primal irritation that rose at the idea of Ellis touching - or being touched by - anyone else.  

Some hypothetical future partner he'd never have to meet was one thing. Listening to Rhiannon talk about him was an entirely different matter.  

*I'm trying to fuck her. Pot, kettle. Jesus, what's wrong with me?*  

"And what about me?" he interrupted, falling back on a deep-seated instinct, one that drove his lips to curve in a calm smirk. It was the simple sort of expression he could maintain fairly well, despite whatever was happening in his head. "If we're ranking packages."

The blonde didn't pause, didn't even hesitate, in a way that told him she'd been waiting for the question. Her gait widened, swaggering, betraying a languidly self-satisfied energy. "I dated a jackass like you for a few weeks. It was mostly fine, but fuck, was he needy. And he did not know how to make a chick orgasm." Her arms thrust up, exaggerating her disbelief. "Gimme a little help, for shit's sake. City boys are the worst."

Nick hummed, tilting his head. "Can't say I've had any complaints."

She bolted out a laugh, pleasure tilting into a mocking tone. "They all fuckin' say that." she drawled out, continuing down the hall until she came to the two remaining doors.

The two rooms were directly parallel to each other, and both cracked open an inch or so, light dimly filling the interior. She stopped between two doors on either side, and her head jerked toward the one at the right as she turned to face the left.

With a wary shift on his heels, Nick hefted the stun baton dangling off his wrist, getting a grip on the handle. "Give me a chance, doll." he murmured, pushing his voice into a lower tone, letting it catch in his throat just slightly. He followed after her at a calm pace, moving to step behind her in the hallway. "You'd be surprised."

As he came close, she flickered an arched brow at him and abruptly kicked out toward the door. Her bootheel struck the left door knee-height, just at the center. It was already half-open, so the blow sent it swinging free on its hinges. She must've held back at least a little, because it just thudded unenthusiastically into the wall rather than slamming into it.

Rhiannon lifted her bat up, holding it like a shotgun, her left hand cupped around an imaginary trigger and her right hand cradling the tip like a forend. Her posture dropped, her attention roving as she crept forward, practically military. "Put your mouth where your money is, slick." she responded, voice a little rasped, thick and coy in a way that made his head perk up.

He was back on his game. It was just a matter of seeing if she'd take the bait.

Nick watched her shift into the room, scanning her surroundings, and turned away to push his way into the opposite room, unable to bite back the smallest smirk. He found himself in a large - relatively, compared to the other rooms in the house - bedroom. It was flanked by an ensuite bathroom on the right wall, and after a cursory glance over the room, he headed in that direction.
Part of him knew the house was clear. He'd needed, more than anything, an excuse to keep his body moving. Even getting the chance to get Rhiannon alone was secondary, really. He certainly hadn't expected it to work so well.

The bathroom was cleaner than the previous one, though not by much. The same porcelain tile covered every inch of it, the gaps between them filled with an off-grey that might've been mortar and might've been grime. Light poured in dully from a foggy-glassed window high above the sink counter, and he stepped up to the edge of the sink, setting the stun baton down next to it.

He glanced momentarily over the surface, taking stock of the used toothbrushes jutting up from a slim cup near the faucet and the array of makeup lined up inside of a tiny set of plastic shelving to the left of the sink. There was also a near-full bottle of mouthwash, and he couldn't resist snatching it up, cracking the top off with a twist of his wrist.

Sipping a small mouthful of the bright blue liquid, Nick swished it idly, looking around the bathroom as he felt the hot, burning sensation begin over the inside of his mouth. The alcohol stung, the pain rising to a sharp heat prickling at his cheeks and the roof of his mouth, but it was also strangely indulgent.

He threw his head back to gargle it, the burn spreading into his throat and reaching an almost unbearable pitch over his tongue. He ducked low, spitting into the sink, taking a moment to suck against his teeth and spit again.

A flush of satisfaction fluttered up his body, standing there, huffing in air just to feel the cold sensation as the air seemed to freeze against his alcohol-singed mouth. He wasn't sure when the last time was that he'd had half-decent breath, and if he was going to make any traction with the women in the house...

*It's gonna break the kid.* he thought, and suddenly, he looked up to survey himself in the mirror. His gaze matched itself, tracking to notice the heavy lines of burst vessels in the whites of his eyes, the bruising underneath them. He examined the scratches and scuffs over his face, the blood smudged in a few places from his hands. Was he rugged and handsome, or exhausted and broken?

*Are you really up to watching him realize you're not worth it?*

A breath left him, sharply, and before he could think on it, his hands were in motion. He lifted his left hand and set his right hand to undoing the button on his cuff, swapping hands once he'd loosened it. He then reached to the line of button closures running up his dress shirt's midline, starting from the very top and undoing them one at a time.

As the last one popped free, he shifted his shoulders to shrug out of it, pulling it off his arms with some care. Holding it in one hand, Nick palmed the switch on the back of the faucet, a soft grating noise sounding out as the stopper dropped into the drain, sealing it.

He twisted the faucet on, turning it toward the small blue dot that indicated cold water. Water gushed from the tap, striking the bottom of the basin and quickly gathering around the sealed drain, and he didn't waste any time before dropping his shirt into the bowl. He set to gently squeezing at the fabric, letting the cold water soak through it.

The gambler closed his eyes as he kneaded the shirt under the cold water, turning his neck in a half-circle to push against the tension in his shoulder muscles.

"All clear of zombie shifucks." Rhiannon called out, voice growing less muffled as she entered the bedroom behind him. "Nothin' to be afraid of."
Nick didn't turn when he heard footsteps, nor acknowledge them when they stopped near the
bathroom doorway - and then started again. It would've been easy to open his eyes and watch her in
the mirror, but there was a game to be played, and that was cheating. He merely tilted his head,
tracking her as her footfalls turned staccato on the bathroom tile.

She stepped behind him, pausing there, and he could feel her gaze on his bare back. He let his
shoulders roll in their sockets, a completely non-subtle display, and the blonde gave a ponderous
hum as she moved to halt at his flank. She was near enough that he could feel the vague buzz of
her presence in the air between them. His body tensed as fingertips alighted against his back,
pressing into the healed wound near the edge of his shoulderblade, twin to the mark below his
clavicle.

Her touch examined it, curiously, but she did not ask.

"You know, I was fuckin' scared of you for a while there," she murmured in a low admittance,
drawing her fingers into a firm pressure against the scarring injury. "And not in the hot way...
mostly. But we were both ready to fuck each other over, so maybe we're even. Call us square."

It didn't hurt, precisely, but there was a strange tingling through the flesh as it protested the
manipulation. He held his composure against it, curling his tongue against the backs of his teeth
and opening his eyes to glance up at her reflection. There was a pleased grin on her face, hazel eyes
low-lidded.

Nick shifted onto his heels, releasing his grip on his shirt and turning around. Her hand retracted
from his shoulder as he faced her, though she didn't actually step back, and their bodies remained
very close. He moved smoothly, letting himself rest back onto the edge of the counter and settling
his wet palms against it to balance his weight. He tilted his head, allowing a slim smile to cross his
lips.

"Nothin' to be afraid of, doll." he echoed, softening his voice

Her eyes lit up, and he found his breath smoothing out, leveling, as she leaned forward. The back
of her hand grazed against his thigh, her wrist quickly turning to bring her palm flat against the
denim, rubbing down and into the inner curve of his leg. He resisted his body's natural inclination
to lean into it, to arch his hips and encourage her towards better territory.

Better to wait, let her determine where she intended things to go; if he had any sense of her, she
meant to tease him, try and draw him into showing his hand before leaving him high and dry. *I
know a girl who gets off on blue-balls when I see one.* It was smarter, then, to surrender a little
power to her and simply wait... even if the warmth of a hand so very close to his crotch made his
whole body want to squirm.

His enjoyment of the contact made him sluggish to react when her hand suddenly jolted down a
few inches. He had no time, then, to do much more than tense as he felt his Magnum holster tug
taut where it was strapped to his thigh.

Animal instinct darted his hands out to defend himself, but he'd barely caught a grip on her jacket-
front before the cold nose of the handgun pressed under his chin. The muzzle of his own pistol dug
under his jaw, forcing his face to turn upwards, and he sucked in a sharp breath as the abruptly
intense feeling of regret coursed through him.

... *Fuck.*

"Come on, tiger." she murmured, leaning forward, her eyes squarely on his mouth where it had
pursed into a quirked scowl. He froze, body tightining, lengthening his spine as she pressed the 
Magnum tighter into his throat. "You think I'm a slut? Reckon I'm easy? Think you can call and I'll 
drop to my knees, suck your dick? Maybe bend over this counter for you?"

Nick swallowed, despite the way her knuckles were jammed into his Adam's apple. He was sure it 
came off nervous, though he didn't feel more than base anxiety at the nearness of a loaded gun. He 
knew he was under no actual danger from her. It was just a power-play, a hollow threat. He gritted 
his teeth, eyes squinting. "You could've said 'no thanks.' I can take a hint, d-"

The woman's hand shifted, and he heard the distinct click of the safety.

His heart rate spiked, much despite himself, and he knew his expression went cold. He squinted one 
eye shut, watching her and the catty smile spread across her lips with the other. "You call me 'doll' 
one more time, something's happening to your dick. Won't be what you want."

When he was patiently quiet in answer, she curled her tongue against her cracked canine, sighing 
out a small breath. Some of the pleasure drained out of her expression. Rhiannon looked at him, 
instead, with the smallest of frowns.

"Do me a solid here, bud. You keep your cock in your pants with me, and I won't put my fist up 
your ass. And I don't want to, cupcake, because I actually sorta like you... fuckin' funny as that 
seems." She seemed genuinely put-out, strangely insecure in the moment, and she searched his 
expression. "So cool it, cuntstick."

Nick inhaled through his nose, very gently pushing his chin down to contest the way the Magnum 
was driven up under his jawbone. She let him bring his face to be level with hers, their gazes 
matching, and he cut the smallest smirk back at her.

"I'm touched." he responded in a murmur. "Can you put the deadly weapon down?"

She grinned, and as abruptly as it had been placed, the pressure eased off his throat. Setting the 
Magnum down on the bathroom counter just beside him, Rhiannon reached up and patted his 
cheek, turning on her heel and striding out of the bathroom. "I'm gonna grab some blankets and 
shit." she announced, practically cheery, like nothing at all had happened. "I'll give you some 
privacy to deal with that package of yours."

Unable to help it, Nick slumped back into the bathroom counter, reaching a hand up to squeeze it 
against his throat. A sharp ache was forming where the gun had jammed into the muscle, though 
the majority of his pain was in his ego. Win some, lose some. Just wish I'd stop fucking losing.

He sighed, turning back to face the mirror, grimacing at himself. He shouldn't have been 
completely surprised; she was a sadist with a grudge. The woman who'd pulled a trigger on him 
was still in there, however much she'd been humbled, whatever growth she'd gone through. As 
much as she'd changed since their very first meeting, nobody ever changed for good. Nobody ever 
changed entirely. Nick knew that better than most.

Well, at least we're friends, apparently.

He couldn't stop himself from laughing. Whether it was at her or himself, or a symptom of the 
adrenaline she'd surged in him, or a symptom of the entire awful, hopeless day, he wasn't quite 
sure.

Nick just buried his face against his still-wet palm and laughed.
Ellis paused to survey their work, hands at his hips, a vague frown on his lips. They'd removed the corpse in the kitchen, dragging it just outside into the yard. With that mess mostly cleaned up, he and Lena had focused on shoring up their temporary safehouse. There was a bookshelf against the wall, and they dragged it to block the front door, with Christophe worrying around them as more than one book toppled out and onto the floor.

The next best furniture nearby was a heavy flat-screen TV on a hip-height stand, and they'd pulled the TV off and set it on the ground. Freeing the stand to be moved took tearing out a thick array of cords hooked up to a cablebox. The stand had been pushed against the bookcase, adding its sizeable bulk to the effort.

Their combined weight would suffice to keep anything from breaking in through the door, but the living room was faced by a set of windows, and they were as much of a weakness - and there were no curtains to cover them up with.

"Guess we could get some sheets or somethin', hang 'em up." he mumbled, tilting his head left and right as if to get a better view of the far wall. "Wish we could board the windows up or somethin', but even if we had boards, hammerin' away is gonna draw zombies over here."

Christophe gestured up at the windows, flapping his hand in a vague wave. "It will be good, to cover them. And we keep watch, anyway, ¿sí?"

Ellis nodded hesitantly, drawing his lower lip between his teeth and chewing idly. "Yeah." he mumbled, muffled, gaze losing its focus for a moment. He blinked himself back into awareness shortly, however, looking over his shoulder to the couch. Coach was still asleep, and Rhiannon had returned from the second floor to settle on the floor just in front of the sofa.

Her hands fidgeted with the bottom edge of the cami, the fabric ridden up her midsection as she slumped with her legs splayed to either side, and her gaze was distant. Her head was slumped back, and her positioning had the crown of her head settled atop his forearm where it lay against his side.

The biker had quietly returned with a pillow and a blanket, with no sign of Nick. She'd not said a word as she covered Coach over and pushed the pillow under his head, replacing the stiff decorative pillow they'd placed there before. She'd been gentle in a way that made Ellis smile a little, soothed some of his anxiety.

He liked her. He had no reason not to trust her, let alone not trust Lena. He was being paranoid and jealous and it didn't sit well with him - he wanted to be a better person than that. It certainly wasn't Rhiannon's fault for what happened, when she didn't know anything about the situation.

Man, love brings out some ugly stuff, sometimes. Thought it was supposed tuh be all... fuzzy shit'n'bubbles.

"I will go find some sheets, tío." Christophe sighed out, his hand suddenly tapping against Ellis' shoulder in a soft pat. The Spaniard seemed aware of Ellis' distraction, judging by the faint frustration in his voice, but didn't mention it outright. "Maybe you find something to hang it with? Las cinta adhesiva, ¿entendido?"

Ellis hummed affirmation without fully paying attention, and lowered his chin to watch Chris walk across the room. He was tempted to ask the man to go find Nick - but a flare of frustration in his
chest negated that idea. He merely turned, looking instead to the cat carrier pressed against the wall.

They hadn't let Maggie out yet.

"Is Nick gonna come back down?" he uttered, and it came out gritted despite his best attempts to smooth it. He looked toward Rhiannon, immediately, but she didn't even seem to be listening. Her eyes remained unfocused, and she gave no response. "If I let Mags out, she's gonna bolt. Dunno if he wants to be around."

Rochelle and Lena were in the kitchen, digging through the fridge to sort through what food was there and what would be suitable, and Rochelle's head peeped up over the counter she was crouched behind. Her expression drew into a sour one, eyes rolling upwards as she responded.

"Honey, you know him. Don't hold your breath. If he can quarantine himself off for a while, he will... and honestly, I think we're staying the night, so it's not fair to keep her closed up in there." She lifted her arm, gesturing toward the staircase. "Just go ahead and let her out at the stairs... she'll go find him, probably."

The Georgian grimaced, slightly, but nodded. "Alright." he murmured, feeling his reluctance drag at his voice, struggling against the urge to sulk. He forced himself to smile, instead, broadening his tone into a teasing chide. "If she takes muh hand off, it'll be your fault."

"No, it'll be Nick's fault." Rochelle corrected, disappearing back below the counter as she refocused on the task at hand. "Like usual." Lena choked down a laugh, grinning where she stood next to the half-open fridge, a few tupperware containers cradled in her left arm.

Ellis chuckled low in his throat, though it faltered. His nose crinkled, and he resigned himself to padding over to the carrier. He kneeled down, grabbing the handles stitched into the top, feeling it shift unsteadily as he lifted it up off the ground and Maggie moved around inside. She didn't hiss outright, which he took as a good sign.

"C'mon, girl. You can't sit down here all day. Gotta get you out of this box." he chirped down at her, walking through the living room and into the dining room, striding toward the bottom of the steps. As he approached the bottom landing, Ellis dropped down to a squat, setting the carrier down on the carpeted step. "Maybe you can take a piece outta Nick fer once."

Orange eyes peeped out at him from the front mesh, lit above the gleam of teeth from her open mouth. That, on the other hand, did not bode well.

He'd just grabbed ahold of the top zipper, prepared to draw it open and turn the carrier to direct her up the stairs, when a shadow loomed down over the staircase. It made him startle with that instinctive lurch to self-defense, hands tensing at his sides, body ready to run or run for the nearest weapon.

Nick's head cocked, shadow shifting to match.

"Why are you conspiring with my cat?"

He'd gotten undressed, it seemed, and there was a bundle of wet clothes carried stiffly in his right arm. He stood, shirtless, at the top of the staircase, and his lower half was bundled up in a pair of grey sweats that were more than one size too big for him. The cinch in its waistband was drawn tight, though not tight enough that it kept them from slipping low on his hips, hugging the curves of his pelvis.
Sex had never driven Ellis in his pre-apocalypse existence, not that he'd been generally disinterested in it. He'd had sex with two of his previous girlfriends, though the other one had limited their relationship to fondling and the occasional tug or blowjob in his truck that he'd found embarrassing, but pleasurable.

He'd masturbated, of course. Sometimes it had been in response to flashes of nameless want, sometimes to ease an inconvenient erection in the morning. Sometimes he'd simply done it out of boredom, with nothing better to do. He'd never fantasized about someone before. He'd never craved their hands on his skin and under his clothes and on the most sensitive parts of his body - not really, not the way he did about Nick.

He'd never sincerely considered dropping to his knees and burying his face into someone's lap until now.

It was mortifying, and the only reason he didn't redden and stammer his way through a response was because the next thing that flooded him - beyond lust and humiliation - was fury.

Ellis set his knuckles against the carpet, pushing himself up to his feet and thrusting his arms into a cross. He shifted his weight, lifting his shoulders in a defiant posture and jutting his chin forward. "I dunno, Nick. Take'uh damn guess." he spat back, infusing as much irritation into his voice as he could.

Standing at the top of the stairway, Nick couldn't help but freeze. Instantly, his mind leaped to the obvious conclusion: either Rhiannon had come downstairs and shared their interaction, or Ellis had overhead something. Had part of their conversation occurred too near the stairs? Too loudly?

But Nick wanted him to find out. Didn't he? Wasn't that the point of it? And wasn't it optimal, really, for Ellis to find out without Nick even having to be in the room for it? Having the band-aid ripped off for him would've been much preferable.

What did it matter if he'd not actually sealed the deal?

"I -" he started, with very little idea how to continue. Fortunately, Ellis didn't let him even try.

The Georgian thrust his head into a half-turn, chuffing out air with a scoffing edge. "I don't wanna talk tuh you right now, Nick." he bit out, suddenly bending over to unzip the front of the carrier. Nick jolted out of the way as a Maggie-sized projectile of fur and claws rocketed up the stairs, narrowly missing his foot. She disappeared down the hallway, and Chris' delayed shout said she likely just as narrowly missed him.

"Maldición, ¡¿qué carajo fue eso?! ¡Aléjate de mí, demonia!"

By the time Nick recovered his balance and looked back down the stairs, Ellis was gone. There wasn't much to do but work his jaw, bewildered, because calling after him felt like the wrong thing to do.

Whatever his lips were trying to form deflated into a strangled sigh, and Nick pulled his wet bundle of clothing up against his chest, picking his way down the stairs on socked feet. He reached the bottom cautiously, leaning out to look out into the main first floor area, driven to practically tiptoe, as if he were under threat.

Ellis had returned to the front of the house, hands sunk into the pockets of his jacket and attention squarely on the windows pointing out into the yard. His shoulders were high, posture defensive, and he didn't look back.
In the kitchen, Rochelle and Lena were sorting through the contents of the fridge, though Rochelle was turned at the waist to stare directly at him. Her brows were up, expression irritated, and that gave him some amount of pause. If his failed advances had been publicized, he would've expected something slightly more enthusiastic than a glare.

If that wasn't it - then what was?

"Power's on, so I'm gonna try the laundry room." he announced, forcing himself to stride forward, passing the dining set just outside the stairs to the second floor. Rhiannon's head snapped suddenly into view, and she grinned at him, looking unreasonably thrilled.

She lifted her right hand and curled her fingers, except for her index and thumb, forming it into the shape of a gun. Her pretend weapon snapped up as she mimed firing a shot in his direction. He spared the smallest flinch of a brow at her, but did not otherwise acknowledge her nor her mockery. She hadn't betrayed his plans to leave, so maybe she'd kept her silence on this, too.

"I've got a gallon of Tons Of Fun soaked through my brand new fucking clothes, and hand-washing them wasn't doing shit." he explained, undeterred when no one responded. "Anyone looking to do the same - I'm not waiting."

Nick shifted to curve around the corner and into the hallway that extended past the kitchen. The left door in that hallway was another bedroom, but the right door was a small laundry room. He aimed himself in that direction, but didn't miss how Rochelle passed a mutter to Lena and, upon receiving a nod, followed after him.

Alright, Nick. Play it cool. He inhaled, calmly, continuing down the hall at an even pace. He didn't accelerate, didn't slow down, and didn't give off any signs that he even noticed her trailing him. Don't get yourself in the shit for more than necessary.

He turned into the laundry room, shouldering the door open, and used his elbow to nudge the lightswitch just a few inches to the right of the threshold. The glow that blinked on and filled the space was brighter than the rest of the house, a sanitized kind of white, and the tiny space was mostly filled with a stacked washing machine and dryer.

Rather than play dumb and begin loading his clothes, Nick set them down on the small fold-up table squished between the appliances and the wall, and then turned to face the door. He crossed his arms, leaning his bare shoulder back against the dryer, head cocking to one side.

Apparently, neither of them could surprise the other. When Rochelle entered to find him looking for her, she didn't even blink.

She crossed her arms to match him, sliding into the room and settling against the wall opposite him. There was a moment of silence as they squared off, her jaw clenching as she chewed her back teeth together, Nick's brows slowly raising in question. He had no intention of being the one to break it.

That was easy to manage, when Rochelle had very little patience.

"Nick, I really want to crawl inside that big, stupid head of yours, and see how you work." She sounded tired, more than anything, and she let her eyes close as she dropped her chin almost to her chest. "I'm sure there's a manual somewhere, but sweet baby Jesus, it is beyond me. And every time I think we're getting somewhere, it's back to square one."

He shifted, adjusting his weight, feeling a rising discomfort. Her judgement meant something to
him, as much as he'd prefer that it didn't. In the same breath, he felt some frustration; his ego was already bruised and crippled.

He wasn't sure he could take much more.

"So cut me some slack here, Nick. Do me the favour of explaining yourself, okay? Just this once, I seriously want to understand what's going on in your brain." Her hands escaped their cross, flattening in the air. "Why? Why now, and why like that? What did you get out of that?"

Nick's brows flinched together, and he couldn't help but cock his head. Her eyes were still closed, and he took advantage of the fact, examining her face as in-depthly as he could, trying to glean something from her expression. Disappointment flickered at the corners of her mouth, but it was faint, wry.

It just didn't add up. If she knew what he'd tried, she'd have been livid.

"You know, I heard it from the bathroom, but I almost didn't think twice. Not until I came back outside and saw his face, looking like you kicked him in the teeth. 'Fireball'? Seriously?" Her head dropped, shaking, and she gave a half-laugh. "He's been so ballsy, lately, I thought you couldn't put him down, but there you go... surprising me."

His expression flattened with a dull shock, and he straightened his body out. He had to think about it, had to process, before his brain started to actually function at full-steam.

He'd called Rhiannon one of Ellis' nicknames.

In the interim, taking his silence as a refusal to engage, Rochelle's nostrils flared with frustration, and she abruptly opened her eyes. Whatever she was about to say died on her lips, as her gaze landed on Nick's face.

She examined his features, catching him in that moment of thought, and realization lit in her own. Wary, hesitant, she took a half-step forward. "You... look confused."

Nick curled his tongue against his teeth, sucking in air sharply. He barely remembered it, in fact, even after being prompted - and he certainly hadn't made any concrete decision to do it. There was a fog, condensed in the constraints of his skull and blurring at his thoughts, a haze. He'd have called it exhaustion, but it was more visceral than that.

He wanted to protest and affirm his ignorance - but in the same instant, he knew the hypocrisy of it. He could reject the blame and explain that it had been accidental, but what was the point? His goal had been to leverage jealousy to push the Georgian away from him, and if he'd succeeded, why argue?

He couldn't stop thinking about Ellis. It had, apparently, infected more than just his internal dialogue. *If he'd just... left it alone, left me alone, we wouldn't be here. He's so fucking stubborn, so sure he's right, when he doesn't know shit. He forced the issue.*

*I'm just responding."

"Only person who's confused here is Ellis." he returned, finding a languid tone of voice, much better than the rigid frustration that he felt in his chest. "He can stop acting like my wife any day now."

If she'd cued into his initial misunderstanding, that blew her cognizance of it clear out of sight. Her mouth popped open, releasing a puff of offense, her arms snapping right back into their cross over
her chest. "That's low, Nick, seriously. Why can't you be an adult about this?"

His eyes rolled upwards, and she didn't miss it. Rochelle's body language broadened, her chest filling, driven by a prideful sort of anger at the same time that her tone of voice was almost sympathetic. "You know what, suit? I'm so tired of this bullshit. I'm done dancing around you. We're talking about this, whether you like it or not."

Nick should've argued with her. He should've reminded her of their deal, of their agreed-upon truce... but he didn't, and he couldn't have begun to explain why. Maybe he wanted the conversation. Maybe he'd been ready for the conversation for a while.

She thrust her hands into a frustrated gesture, stating, "If you don't want to be involved with him, then just tell him that."

Nick broke into a laugh, harsh, before he could swallow it. He leaned forward to close the distance between them, just a bit, brows going up in disbelief. "The fuck do you think this whole thing has been about? The fuck do you think I've been doing?"

"Being an asshole." she returned, immediately, arching a brow right back at him. "Pretending you don't care about him, just like you pretend you hate Coach, right until he needs you. Like you pretend you don't have any feelings for him until he's in danger, and then you can't stop yourself from running after him. Either of them."

He tried to scoff, throwing his gaze to one side, but it came out in a choke of air that he knew wasn't convincing. She continued unabated, her shoulders shrugging, expression as tired as it was irritated.

"Just be honest with him, either way. That'll go over miles better than sneaking in little digs, making him feel like you're chasing someone else." Suddenly, she was moving, and he startled as her index finger jabbed into his bare chest. "It's Carmine all over again, and you know it. You used her to make him angry because you'd rather be a dick than have an honest conversation for once in your life. Now you're trying to pull the same shit with Rhee."

Nick's body stiffened, but he couldn't muster that much righteous offense. She wasn't wrong, by any measure.

"Whatever the answer is, the guy needs closure. Otherwise you're just going to keep hurting him, and I know you. I know you, Nick, even if you make me doubt it sometimes." Her posture softened, hand dropping away from his chest, eyes averting. "That really isn't what you want. That isn't what you've been trying to do. But... this, right now... leaving him with questions... that's what you're doing. Hurting him."

A dull pain settled in his chest. He knew she was right, but that made it no less difficult to listen to.

"I've.... I don't know what the fuck you want from me. I've tried. I'm trying." Nick's jaw flexed as he parted his lips enough to lick at the corner of his mouth, and he forced an edge into his voice, sarcastic. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were rooting for me to chase him off."

Rochelle's whole body rocked back, throwing her arms up in a bewildered gesture. "I'm trying not to have an opinion, Nick, even though you deserve me whooping your ass. I just want what's best for you - both of you. If you love him but you aren't ready, tell him that. If you don't love him but you care enough to want him to be happy, tell him that. If you don't know what you feel and you're scared... Jesus, tell him that. Tell me that."
He didn't look at her, and when he didn't respond, she let her hands settle gently on his crossed forearms. The touch made him flinch, leaning back into the stacked washer behind his shoulder. Her voice, too, gentled. "This isn't rocket science, Nick. I know you hate being vulnerable, but we're in this together. I'm here for you. And you can't lie to me - the one thing I know for sure is you care about him."

Nick inhaled, closing his eyes tightly. "That doesn't mean that -"

"God, I know. You don't think I don't know?" The woman reached up, knuckling against his chin in a mock-strike, just firmly enough to startle his head into leaning back. "Your struggle is not unique, sweetheart. Coach and I both had people who we cared about, but it wasn't enough. The difference is you've still got a chance to do something about it, if you want."

He did not want to respond, precisely. It was not a whim, a choice, to do so. It simply happened, with or without the active participation of his brain. "You don't know what I've done to the people I cared about."

She frowned at him - and there was a genuine flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. She did not know what he meant by it, and her attention scattered for a moment as the phrase threw her off-balance. Only slowly did she recover, her hand sliding to cup against his cheek. He stiffened into the touch, but didn't shake it off.

"I don't need to. This could be a clean slate, if you wanted it, Nick. The only thing that matters is what you do now, to the people you care about right now."

He wanted to laugh at the idea. *No such thing as a clean slate, doll. The mess always goes somewhere.*

"We almost lost Ellis in the mall. And we just almost lost Coach." He shifted his gaze away, looking toward the wall, feeling her hand tighten against his cheek and then fall to her side. "How would you have felt if Ellis died thinking you hated him? If Coach died thinking you two weren't friends?"

Nick felt his expression go slack. He hadn't thought about it, not really. He'd continued off the primal assumption that his team would survive, with or without him - better without him, even... but that wasn't the whole truth. He should have known that. He should have thought it through.

He was supposed to be the cold and calculated one.

Losing the sisters was inevitable; their goals did not align, after all. But if he left, the team would be down to three fully-abled survivors... and one with a missing arm. One less teammate took a significant chunk of their power, not to mention the turmoil he'd leave in his wake. They'd fight and protest and blame each other, blame the sisters.

As much as he wanted to think the team would be happier in his absence, he knew that they'd be shaken by it. Ellis, in particular, would be shaken by it.

*Unless he gives up, first.*

He clung to the thought, and it felt like a lifeline.

It was not something he could escape, not something he could run away from. He'd made his bed, and he'd lie in it, one way or another. The best thing he could do for any of them was to put the issue to rest, and the simple act of leaving wouldn't be enough, not if he left a mess in his wake.
Rochelle's eyes softened, averting, her posture deflating just slightly. "Sometimes things don't work out. You wish they would, but... sometimes it just... isn't what you thought it would be." Her jaw firmed, and she looked back at him. "But you care about him, Nick, and you two could still have a relationship. You can grow from this. You can both grow from this."

Nick's chin lowered, and all he said was, quietly, "Yeah. Closure."

She looked at him with some consideration, and then quiet apprehension, and he couldn't shake the feeling she sensed that he'd wandered onto a different train of thought. The woman seemed immediately suspicious of him.

Her mouth opened, but Ellis' voice shouted from the front of the house, and she snapped into a half-turn before he'd even fully formed the outburst. "Ro'! He's wakin' up!"

Rochelle's eyes darted to the hallway outside before flicking back to Nick's face, and she gave a small sigh under her breath. Her hand raised, finger extended toward his face. "This conversation is not over.” she stated.

Nick shrugged up his shoulder, turning away from her in a smooth motion. "Sure thing, doll." He reached to grab his clothes, still wet and cold against his fingertips, and pulled the washer door open to toss them in. "I'll be here."

Her frustrated little noise, stifled behind a bitten lip, wasn't enough to make her stay. She bolted, and the rise of voices in the living room followed shortly thereafter. They didn't sound alarmed and nobody called his name, so he took his time.

They had it handled, and the last thing he wanted was to reignite the panic he'd felt earlier.

He needed to center himself. He needed to get his head on straight, and get some distance from the words ringing in his ears, clouded by Rochelle's voice. He'd whiffed once, fumbled his way into a mildly humiliating rejection from one sister, and his chances were extremely limited.

Down to, precisely, one.

This is old hat for you. She's a fucking doe-eyed broad from Texas. This is easy street. Get your shit together, Nicolas, and take care of business.

The confidence that bubbled up felt hollow, but it was all he had.
Chapter 275

When Coach's awareness drifted back to him, it came with a dull soreness. He, at first, didn't process much but the protest of his body, his joints complaining like he'd not moved in days. The pain only slowly focused into a particular point, arching up the muscles in his neck, from his clavicle to his jawline.

He figured, distantly, that he wasn't dead - if he were in Heaven, he imagined there'd be less pain.

He released a faint groan, and three or four hands all took separate positions on his frame, gripping his elbow and his knee and against his cheek. It was a disorienting sensation with no sight to put forms to the touches, though he quickly put the feeling to a thought: his family was gathered around him.

He was safe.

Fear might've swept in as his memory tumbled back to him, but he was comforted by the presence of his team. He let go, for just a moment, surrendering to the uncertainty that roiled in his chest. He allowed himself to lay there, eyes closed, and not listen to the voices around him. Someone shouted, and footsteps approached, and he focused on dragging in a steady breath.

That, too, hurt. He remembered most of the incident. He remembered the Hunter taking him to the ground, asphalt unforgiving against his back. He remembered the hot, searing pain, and the hotter gush of blood down his neck. He remembered Nick's hands encircled around his neck, squeezing until his brain went foggy.

He didn't remember much beyond that, though there was something vaguely soft underneath him, so they must've moved him. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, though he knew it had been more than just minutes. Long enough, he was sure, to worry them.

He remembered enough to know he was lucky to be alive. *They did good.* Coach exhaled, then, letting his attention wander to the voices and motion around him. They came into sharp focus as he recognized one in particular.

"Papa bear? You with us, sweetheart?"

His eyes opened, just a flicker of his eyelids, and he found Rochelle's face hovering in his periphery. He tried to turn his head to look at her more clearly, but the hand on his cheek tightened its grip, and her head shook.

"No, no. Stay still, Coach." She was trying for a light tone, but he could immediately recognize the thin veneer over her anxiety. The younger woman was worried, and maybe a little desperate. "We barely got the bleeding stopped, so don't go messing it up now, okay?"

Coach managed a grunt, gaze slipping up toward the ceiling. He forced his right arm to move, tenderly, reaching out in her direction. Though he wasn't initially sure he was aiming it right, she grabbed his wrist and guided it lower, pushing her cheek into his palm. He cradled the side of her face, tightening his fingers against her jaw to express what he couldn't with words.

*I'm a'ight, babygirl. Don't you worry. Ain't goin' nowhere.*

He heard her breath hitch, and there was a smile in her voice when she murmured, "We weren't giving you enough attention, huh? Had to go do something drastic?"
As much as he wanted to chuckle at her, he didn't. Instead, he lifted his other hand and let his half-numb fingers gesture toward his throat, inquiringly. He was tempted to talk, but the tight pressure of bandages against his neck made him wary of stressing them, unsure of how delicate it all was.

Lena suddenly slid into view, leaning over him, her eyes attentive on his features. "Hey there, bud. You should stay down for now, yeah? We got you stable, but if you move around too much it might start again." She reached down, settling her hand against his sternum, lightly inquisitive. "Are you breathin' fine?"

Coach squinted, letting his breath carefully pass into and out of his chest, keeping it slow and smooth. It took effort, but it felt more like the strain that came with sore muscles than anything directly related to the wound on his neck. He could breathe, at least, and he was confident he could talk if he tried.

Rather than put it to the test, he simply gave a close-lipped, hummed affirmative.

"That's good." Lena smiled at him, gently, jerking her chin to gesture around them. "We pulled you into a house nearby. Thinking we'll spend the night, at least, to let you rest. So you just close your eyes and let us know if you need anything."

He tried to communicate a dubious humour through the arch of his brow. *Gettin' the Hunter off my ass was a good start.* When she gave him a cocked and uncomprehending smile, he let his eyes shut, resting his head fully back down against the pillow underneath it. He let his thumb stroke Rochelle's cheekbone, then dropped his arm.

She retracted her hands, tucking them against her lap, her lips curling into a tucked frown. Her gaze went from Coach to Lena, examining the woman, her body shifting with some discomfort. "We should get some food started, right? At least get him something to drink. If he's gonna recover from the bloodloss, I mean..."

The brunette nodded, taking her pinky and pushing her hair behind her ear in a smooth swipe. "Yeah. How 'bout you go see to that, and I'll clean his neck up a little?" Without looking, Lena thumbed toward the backpack, and Rhiannon pushed up from her squat beside the couch to walk over and retrieve it. "Few things in there looked good."

Rochelle didn't miss Ellis' body perking up a little, and she bit back a laugh. Pushing her palms against her knees, she straightened, turning to face him. "Not kidding - there were some chicken nuggets in there, and I think we can salvage some past the freezerburn."

She hadn't seen the mechanic's eyes get that big in a long time.

He gawped at her, and before she could say another word, he was turning and jogging into the kitchen, babbling. "Hoh, man! That sounds amazin' right now. I'd kill fer some barbeque sauce or somethin' - or mustard. I know folks use honey mustard, most times, but I was always partial tuh regular ol' mustard. Did it by accident, once, 'n'it just felt right, y'know?"

She couldn't help but smile, following after him, sparing a glance toward Christophe. She ticked her head to encourage him to join her, and he did so without hesitation, trailing in her wake like it was too powerful a riptide to resist. "How do you use mustard 'by accident'?"

"Well, see -" he started to respond, but quickly halted, shrugging his shoulders. "I ain't totally sure. Keith'n'I were kinda drunk."

"¿Qué busca como cuando estás borracho?" Christophe mused aloud, humming just a soft breath
before he repeated it at a more audible volume. "What are you like, drunk? I just sleep. It is no fun, at parties, you know."

Rochelle snorted, darting a look over her shoulder at the foreigner with a scrunch of her brows. "Sleepy? What kind of college student are you?" She let her lips curve, her voice dipping into a teasing tone of voice as she continued. "I get randy as hell."

Ellis choked out a wheeze, half-formed, and Rhiannon outright cackled from the front of the house. Christophe, on the other hand, frowned, looking between both of them and Rochelle. He had the vague pout of someone missing a joke. "What is this? No comprendo. I do not know this."

Rochelle's mouth opened, but she stalled out as Nick stepped into the hallway, his arms held tight to his sides. He looked as uncomfortable as she'd ever seen him - though he was doing an admirable job of keeping up his defenses, considering how uncharacteristically weak and fragile he'd seemed of late. He passed a cursory glance over them, almost entirely skipping Ellis, and spoke flatly.

"Ella quiere coger."

It was strange hearing him break into Spanish, let alone a full sentence of the language. His nasal accent faded into it, but lingered enough to make his pronunciation warp just a little.

Christophe blinked in his direction, head cocking, but said nothing.

Nick smirked at him, and turned to make his way back toward the stairs. He paused only a moment to look toward the couch, catching a glimpse of Lena and Rhiannon huddled close around Coach's still-prone body. The strained emotion that flickered across his face was edged with relief, though he quickly jerked his head back forward and continued on his way.

"Anyone need me, I'll be upstairs. Try not to need me."

Once he'd passed into the stairway and out of sight, Ellis shot a glance at Chris, waiting for the sound of the stairs creaking his ascent to abate. The Spaniard wore a confused expression... and that seemed a strange, if Nick had correctly translated Rochelle's answer. "Whut'd he say?"

To that, the foreigner threw up a shrug, a gesture he made with more ease than he'd once managed, considering his stumped shoulder. "No se." He looked genuinely bewildered, adding, "I did not want to make him feel bad and ask."

Rochelle's eyes shifted from Chris to the staircase and back. She seemed dubious at the answer and unsure what to make of it, but she had other priorities. Rather than press the issue, she gestured into the kitchen. "Do I have to beg you guys to make some food? I thought this was gonna be an easy pull."

"Yeah, yeah!" Ellis hooted back, bouncing into a lunge to scramble toward the fridge. He dropped to his knees, cracking open the lower freezer door and craning his head to peek inside. Plastic rustled as he dug through the contents. "Oh, man. Coach, there's fries in here! They ain't crinkle-cut, but they'll do."

Unable to resist a tickled laugh at his excitement, Rochelle turned, moving toward the oven. She bent down to pull out the squat metal drawer built into the space beneath the oven compartment, dusting her fingertips over the pans and sheets piled up inside before grabbing ahold of one cookie sheet with raised edges.

It took effort to minimize the noise it made, and even her best attempt didn't stop them from
clattering together. She straightened, setting the sheet tray on the stovetop. Tapping her fingertips against it, she turned to glance at Ellis, watching him dig through the freezer with the smallest of frowns. It was hard not to let her mind wander.

*I'm meddling again, aren't I?*

When Ellis launched to his feet, right arm gathering around a bag of frozen fries and a bag of frozen chicken nuggets, she forced a smile onto her lips. He grinned right back, padding up to the oven to stand just beside her. He set to the task of tearing open the corners of the bags, ripping the plastic open with his nails.

Rochelle felt some surprise - though not a lot - when Ellis murmured, "Whut'd you talk tuh Nick about?"

She blinked at him, shifting her weight on her heels. She'd figured Ellis wouldn't have missed them peeling off into the laundry room, not that she had been subtle about it. She was also not completely unprepared for the question. "Asked him why he's being a dick." she answered, simply.

Ellis' shoulders twitched, and his expression was inscrutable enough that she wasn't sure if it was a positive or a negative reaction. "Okay. And why's he bein' a dick?" he prompted, deadpan, so much so that Rochelle had to bite back a frown.

She was struck, once again, by the uncertainty of not knowing what the right thing to do was. A compromise seemed to be simply to tell the truth. It wasn't, after all, what she'd always done.

"He says he's trying to scare you off, or maybe just make you think he's moved on." she uttered, lowering her voice to mask it from their teammates in the living room. "And his justification is that we, and I quote, 'don't know what he did to people he cared about.' Any insight into that gem?"

Ellis took a hand and shoved it into the opening he'd made in the first bag, frozen fries clinking together like hunks of ice. He carefully retracted it with a handful of them. He didn't speak as he scattered them into the sheet tray, though his jaw worked in and out of a clench.

It was only when he'd gone back for a second fistful that he responded. "Nothin' fer sure. I know he thinks he's bad fer me, 'n'I don't think it's just 'cause he's a real jackass sometimes. Think it's... more'n that."

Christophe's presence beside them had changed, a little, as they spoke. It took Rochelle a moment to really take notice, her gaze darting toward the man where he'd recoiled a half-step. His mouth was pursed, strangled, and she recognized it instantly. He was holding something back.

She narrowed her eyes at him, and it took nothing more to cause him to crumple.

"Coach told me to no -" he whispered, eyes rolling in a gesture that seemed more anxious than annoyed. He waved his hand in the air wildly, as if to indicate the very conversation occurring between them, and then dropped it. His posture dropped, too, a degree of misery in his eyes. "- but I am... I worry. For Nico."

Before Rochelle could summon up a reaction to that, Ellis had turned around, resting his rear against the edge of the counter. "He told me somethin', too." Rochelle snapped her head in a double-take, looking at both men. Something had happened that she didn't understand, didn't have the context for. "But he also asked me tuh give him a day, so he could work on Nick himself."

Christophe was primed to speak, but Rochelle put both her hands up, a plea for them to slow down. "Whoa, whoa. What's Coach doing for a day? And why are we worried about Nick, except the
obvious?" When neither of them moved, she crossed her arms over her chest, shrugging her shoulders. "I think I'm a few steps behind, here."

Ellis lifted his hand, gaze shifting to examine the flecks and fragments of frost that lined his fingertips, before flopping his hand in a quick few wags to shake them off. His attention darted to Chris, brows lowering to a serious pinch. "It's about the mall, ain't it? When we were gone, somethin’ happened."

Rather than respond, Christophe shot a nervous glance toward the living room, body fidgeting and mouth working at words with little success. It was obvious enough the situation.

This has gone on for way too long.

Rochelle reached out and grabbed Christophe's hand, then Ellis'. Dragging them together behind her back as she turned and marched out of the kitchen, she didn't slow when she felt Christophe stagger, and he quickly caught his balance and matched her pace. Ellis was quicker to follow, though his hand was slick with moisture from the frozen food.

They returned to the living room, clustering up just before the closer arm of the sofa. Their abrupt appearance startled Lena into freezing, her eyes shooting up to them, wide. She'd been in the process of delicately cleaning up around Coach's bandages, dampening a paper towel with the contents of their last, half-empty bottle of alcohol.

His eyes were still open, though heavy-lidded, and they drifted up to squint in Rochelle's direction. They held some vague pain.

Rhiannon crouched by his hip, her elbow braced on his thigh, chin held in her palm. Her studded brow arched, lazy curiosity in her posture, and she thrust her fingers out in an imploring gesture. "What's up, shitters? You look like some assholes with something to say."

Rochelle didn't ignore her, precisely, but she didn't acknowledge the blonde outright. Her eyes went instead to Coach, narrowing, her body hunching forward to better meet his gaze. "Sweetie, I know the timing is shit, but you know how this has been lately. Can we pow-wow about Nick? Chris won't spill the beans without you."

His dark eyes lit with uncertainty, right before they dulled, and he rolled them up toward the ceiling. She was fairly certain it was a look directed right at God.

"Really, guys?" Lena's voice hinted toward some incredulity, though she was clearly trying to moderate it. "Kinda busy -"

Her voice broke into a slight choke, an exhale of pained air, and her body flinching was the biggest indication that Rhiannon had shifted her crouch to knee her sharply in the side. The jab halted her protest long enough for the taller biker to interrupt.

"Don't be a bitch, sis. It's obviously fuckin' important." As quickly as she'd moved to intercede, Rhiannon grinned up at Rochelle, voice practically strained to fit into the warm tone she forced around it. "No worries. Need us to fuck off?"

Rochelle gauged the look, and it didn't take a genius to know the woman was hoping to stay. Both the sisters had always been a little nosy into the group's business, though Lena had generally headed the inquiries, and Rhiannon had seemed mostly apathetic. That seemed to have changed when it was about Nick.

She could only hope that didn't have any deeper meaning. She's smarter than to get caught up with
"No, actually. Because you might know something, too." Rochelle jerked her chin toward Lena, but her eyes focused back on Coach. If she'd watched a little closer, she might've noticed the flare of the brunette's nostrils, a faint anxiety touching her eyes at the words. "What do you say, Coach? Huddle-up?"

The football coach's head turned just an inch, mouth scrunching up to one side. He strained, less to speak and more to do so with the least movement of his jaw and throat as possible. "Yeah." he whispered. "Chris knows most of it."

With that, Rochelle turned, taking a few steps back to pull Ellis and Chris a few more steps forward. She released their hands with a squeeze, expression firming, voice doing the same as she carefully looked around at each survivor in the room. "He's on the second floor. He can't sneak back down here on those noisy stairs, but everyone keep your voices down, okay? Last thing we need is another... fiasco."

Ellis' body tensed, eyes darting toward Rhiannon and Lena, discomfort obvious on his face. She was acutely aware of his disinclination to tell them about him and Nick, but Rochelle had no intention of letting the conversation go in that direction.

"So what happened?" she murmured.

There was a moment, where everyone looked at everyone else, trading glances in an awkward shift. Coach's eyes closed, hands shifting to clasp on his gut, and it was his tired sigh that drove Chris to speak up.

"Nico... fell. In the mall. He was very sick, ¿sí?" His hand darted up, flattening the back of it against his forehead, as if taking his own temperature, nervously looking around as there was a stiffening amongst the team. "I found him on the ground in the, ah... ¿cómo lo llamaste? What you say?" He snapped his fingers toward Ellis, eyes narrowing, helplessly.

The Georgian's face had paled, and he mumbled out like an after-thought, "Uh... dressin' room?"

"Sí. Sí. The dress room." Christophe's hand dropped, and he shook his head. "He was confused, y... he thought he was bleeding, but... No vi nada. I think he did not know where he was, at first. He said he was dizzy, then fell. He said he did not know what happened."

Slowly, at first, then abruptly, Ellis sat against the arm of the couch. Without a word, he took his cap off, running fingers through the curly, tangled mess of hair only half-hidden underneath. Keeping the hat between them, he folded his hands in his lap, gaze darting to focus off toward the far wall, mouth hanging just open enough to pant out a few breaths.

"I left him. I left him in there, 'n'he was in trouble. He could'uh been hurt fer real in there, 'n'I let our stupid shit get in the way... I shouldn't'uv left him alone... I should'uv... done somethin'. Anythin'."

"The Witch." Lena supplied, voice distant, startling Ellis' head up.

"He hesitated, there, and the smile faded. His gaze fell toward the ground, examining the carpet, letting his hand drift to scratch idly into the dip of his clavicle. Rochelle reached to settle her palm
against his waist, pressing fingertips into the soft fabric of his polo shirt, a comforting touch, trying to prompt him to continue.

Coach's voice quietly finished the Spaniard's sentence for him, voice so soft that his response was just the hollow outline of words. "Called it a name. Like he recognized it."

Ellis' head dropped until his chin touched his chest, inhaling a sharp breath. "Brett." he interjected, suddenly lifting both his hands to press his palms against his face. He rubbed them, ground them into his cheekbones. He could feel the worry brewing in his chest, sour and unpleasant. All the anger melted away, fading until he couldn't reach it, even had he wanted to.

He should've known something was wrong. He had, truthfully, but he'd ignored it - or wanted to think about anything but it - or been so distracted by their near-miss with intimacy that he'd not thought to consider it a symptom in its own right.

Nick had seemed so off that day, and then in the dressing room... his scalding temperature, his strange behaviour... of course the man was sick. Ellis just hadn't realized he was sick enough that he was hallucinating, and passing out, and whatever else had occurred in the last few days that he didn't know about.

Three nods - one from Chris, Lena, and a tiny one from Coach - were only just visible as blurs of motion in his periphery.

They affirmed, in easy unison, what he'd already come to assume: there was much more to the story that Nick had shared with him. There was no good reason Nick would hallucinate his childhood mentor in the place of a Witch, if there weren't more. He just didn't know what.

"But Nick said he was dead." Coach murmured, softly, and something in Ellis' chest constricted so tightly he thought his heart might pop.

Nick had not mentioned that detail. He couldn't remember if Nick had described Brett's age; how old would the man have been, then? How had he died, and when? If the man had been his only father figure, and his death had occurred when Nick was still a child...

He couldn't help a stunted, "Fuckin' shit-it."

*The hell didn't you tell me, Nick? Whut'm I missin'?*

"Who the hell is that?" Rochelle blurted out in a hiss, pushing her hands onto her hips. "I know you guys think you're explaining things, but..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Do a girl a favour and slow down, okay?"

Lifting his head, Ellis stood, abruptly hopping onto his feet. "I'm gonna go talk tuh him." he stated, flatly, turning to start his stride in the direction of the dining room - but he didn't make it more than a step before hands grabbed the back of his shirt. Rochelle's, he quickly realized, as her voice hushed close against his shoulder.

"No, no, no. That is not happening. That is the worst solution to this problem, okay? We knew that already."

Ellis couldn't deny a stab of hurt at that statement, though he knew she hadn't meant it directed at him, specifically. Confronting Nick face-to-face had never worked to their benefit. He let his body stiffen to a halt. "... I can't just..." he mumbled, quietly, biting at the inside of his cheek. "... do nothin'. I can't just let him hide up there, pretendin' nothin's wrong."
Rochelle's grip on him softened, both hands flattening against the small of his back, smoothing on either side of his spine. "I know, baby. But we can't keep making the same mistake and expecting him to react differently. He's just gonna freak."

His head bowed, shoulders twitching up. She was right, and he was helpless to change that.

He'd learned that much.

Lena settled her hands on her thighs, leaning back, a frown twisting her mouth. Her gaze roved thoughtfully between the survivors standing by the sofa, before settling finally on Ellis. "So who was the Witch? Or... who'd he think it was? Who's this Brett dude?"

Ellis let his arms cross, tightening them over his chest, half-closing his eyes. His voice grew tight, a defensive edge touching his posture, brows knotting. "Somebody important tuh him. I ain't... it ain't important who. And it don't matter none what I know, 'cause I don't think I know the whole story, anyhow. So just let it be."

The woman quieted, shrinking into her crouch, a nod tipping her head in silence.

The Georgian frowned down at the ground, sighing, shifting his weight in an uneasy few steps. He still wanted to go charging up to the second floor of the house, but he knew it wouldn't help, knew Nick wouldn't cooperate. "Whut do we do now? If we can't corner him... Can't talk to 'im..."

Rochelle sighed, settling her arms flat at her sides before rolling her neck, the gesture more tired than anything else. "I think we make food, first, plot later. If he's still sick, then he needs to eat as much as Coach does."

Ellis' fingers curled lightly into fists, exhaling a nervous breath. He looked up, gazing toward the ceiling, eyes drifting like he could somehow aim them toward the gambler. He wished, too, that Nick might feel it.

"Don't think it's that kind'uh sick."
The smell of warming food filled the space, more of a vague, greasy scent than any particular flavour. Ellis positioned himself with his back against the oven, soaking in the warmth through the metal, letting it ease at his sore muscles. He never realized how sore he was until he stopped moving.

His eyes were closed, and his thoughts kept spinning back to a single focus: Brett.

It was hard not to think about. He'd thought of the man as some distant figure from Nick's childhood, but that didn't explain things, not entirely. He was more important than just some role model, some mentor. And his death, surely, had not been without impact on the man.

Or - shit. Whut if Nick was just a tot when he died? Whut if he lost... I mean, somethin' like a dad? I don't even know what he feels 'bout his parents, or if they're alive... 'n'I know he lost his uncle... Whut if he just lost everyone?

Ellis had never really put much thought to what he'd missed in the wake of his father's early passing. That wasn't to say he didn't mourn him - he did. He grieved for the idea of him, missed what the relationship between him and his father could have been. It was more of a soft thing, though, something that took up a portion of his heart but did not ache him.

Nick, clearly, ached over the man's absence, and Ellis was convinced something about the situation sat so heavily on his shoulders that it had taken illness to bring it out, a collapse, a hallucination. Guilt, maybe, because he felt like he should have been able to save his mentor - felt like he'd somehow been responsible.

Ellis didn't have to know what happened to know that wasn't true.

He told me some nice stuff 'bout the guy, but I guess he skipped some things, too. But it ain't like that would'uv been the first time he told me somethin' important - I mean, he told me 'bout his ex-wife before then, even though that was kinda hard. If it were somethin' simple, he'd'uh just told me. Gotta be more'n that.

It was possible - plausible, even - that there were some darker elements at play. He knew enough to know Nick had gotten involved with unsavoury people later in life, the kind of people who would put him in the hospital for gambling debts. He did not know when those connections had started. For all Ellis knew, Nick's gambling had begun under Brett's wing, and the teacher had gotten into a similar situation, but with more fatal results.

Maybe he blamed himself fer not stoppin' it. Stupid, when he was just a kid, but... man, I love 'im, but sometimes, he ain't very smart.

It made him smile, just a twitch.

Footsteps wandered close on the tile, and he listened as they approached. A body slid to tuck snugly against the other half of the oven, perilously close but not touching him. He mulled over who it was for a moment, refusing to open his eyes.

It probably wasn't Rochelle, or she'd have laid a hand on him already, or leaned against his shoulder. Chris would've been more unsteady and clumsy getting to the ground. Rhiannon wouldn't have approached so warily, and sat so cautiously. That left one person.
"Coach is doing great. Little woozy, but fine." Lena's voice murmured to him, quietly, and he felt a twinge of satisfaction at his successful guess. She sounded tired, deflated, like a certain amount of energy had gone to keeping herself upright, and it was expended. "How are you? I mean... considering."

His response felt like something he'd planned - and in a way, he supposed it was. He'd been holding onto the question for days, tucked tightly away for a better opportunity than the ones he'd been given so far. "When did you know you liked ladies?"

She released a sudden burst of air, and he wasn't quite sure at first if it was surprise or offense... but maybe it was neither, as her voice was casual enough when she softly responded. "People always ask that, like it's that simple. Like I'm supposed to say my very first memory was feeling like a lesbian peg in a straight hole."

He opened his eyes quick enough to see her face twist into a grimace. She'd curled herself tightly against the oven, legs underneath herself and hands stuffed between her thighs. Both of them broke into choked-back laughs, his embarrassed and hers at a slight delay, like she'd hoped he wouldn't notice the phrasing.

"What was?" he prompted, shifting his legs to draw them up toward his chest. "Yer first memory, I mean."

Lena's shoulders ticked up in a shrug, eyes narrowing up toward the ceiling. She didn't hesitate at the question, didn't shy away from the intimate nature of it. "Mom brushing my hair in the morning, probably. I'd come in every day and make her do it for me. When she was working the dayshift and wasn't there when I woke up, sometimes Dad would take over. He always griped about it - but he did it, anyway."

He watched her body relax, though her smile was melancholic when she glanced at him. "How 'bout you?" she returned, tipping her head back against the oven's glass. "First memory."

Ellis squinted. He genuinely tried to search back through his memories, to pin down the earliest one he could remember. It was hard when they all blurred together, warm and difficult to get a grip onto. Some snippets and broken patches of sensory recall came to him, but he couldn't nail any of them down as his \textit{earliest} one.

"It's hard, huh?" The biker shifted, leaning forward, thumbs lifting up from where they'd been trapped between her thighs, as if in a tiny shrug. "I'm not sure when I first knew it. It's just always been this way. It's like... if I asked you when you first knew you had brown hair or blue eyes. Sure, you could say, 'the first time I looked in a mirror', and it's true... but kinda dumb. What did you think you were before then? Bald?"

The Georgian let the crown of his head tap against the front of the oven, blustering out a sigh, blowing a raspberry that buzzed at his lips. He whispered back, "I guess I just went a long time without lookin' in a mirror."

He startled when she moved, suddenly snaking her arm between the back of his neck and the oven, looping it over his shoulders. Her head tilted, grinning gently at him, her body slouched into the gesture just enough to lean into him. "That's just how it was for me, sunshine. Everyone's different. And sometimes it takes a kick in the rear-end - like the dang world ending."

Ellis knew he reddened, knew he shrunk into himself, but he grinned back all the same.

If she knew he was gay, what did it matter if she knew he was hung up on Nick? That was his
business. It didn't inherently mean Nick returned the feelings, and it didn't inherently mean they'd been anything to each other. He'd hidden enough for long enough, and knowing that Nick was in some sort of emotional turmoil just meant the stakes were much higher. He needed all the help he could get.

His smile faded, and his voice started of its own accord.

"In the... mall. When Nick saw the Witch. Did he... seem sad? Or... was he... Did he look guilty?" He hesitated, losing steam, shrugging his shoulders subtly under her grip. Ellis shot her a weary grin, reluctance drawing his voice out into a slow sigh. "I dunno. Sorry, it's a dumb question."

Her attention didn't waver, and her voice lingered at a husked tone when she responded. "He looked terrified. And he doesn't seem like the kind of dude who gets scared easy."

Slowly, absorbing that, Ellis nodded. He looked down at his knees, wrapping his arms around them and pulling them tight against himself. The waist of his jeans cut into his hips, almost painful, but not so much so that he was enticed to move.

"I'm worried. You gotta help me keep an eye on him, okay?"

Lena's arm squeezed against his shoulders, a comforting gesture, one he returned by nudging his body against her grip. "Sure thing." she murmured, and he couldn't help but detect a shift in her tone. He peeked up at her face, hovered near to his by their posturing, and there was tension in her jaw.

She was worried, too, though he wasn't confident they were worried about the same thing. He knew she'd never fully trusted Nick after his antagonism toward Rhiannon, and finding out he was unwell likely didn't help her confidence. He couldn't blame her, even if it was easier than admitting she had a point.

Instead, he shifted his body, a fidget that made her retract her arm from behind his neck and settle back into her seated position. "Thanks fer helpin' save Coach. I dunno if he'd've made it if you weren't here."

She laughed softly, head turning to look out toward the center of the building. Her tone was dismissive, gaze wandering, like her thoughts were directed elsewhere and her response was only cursory. "That's not true. You guys handle yourselves just fine."

Ellis grunted at that, lips pouting out thoughtfully.

Lena turned at the waist, bringing her face into a scrunch as she looked into the oven to examine the heating contents. Ellis almost looked, too, on instinct, but she started talking and his attention snapped back to her face.

"But... y'know, I keep meanin' to ask. Almost did when we were riding earlier. You think there's any chance you guys would come with us?" She relaxed back down, tilting her head to glance at him. She flexed out the fingers of her left hand in a vague gesture, elaborating, "To Texas."

His expression fell to a small frown, more thoughtful than anything. He pushed his legs out, heels skidding along the tile until they plopped flat and sprawled outward. "Uh... I mean... I ain't really thought about it, I guess. If we're gonna find our families, we gotta retrace their steps, y'know? I know my family was headin' to the evacs."

The woman exhaled, nodding, and her lips drew into a tight and serious line. "I know. But there's a long-term plan here. If they're safe, maybe getting you guys somewhere safe first should be step
one. Then we worry about contacting the military and getting you guys to your families second.”

Ellis hesitated, working up an uncertain smile. He'd not genuinely considered it before, and the idea settled uncomfortably in his mind. Losing the helicopter had been a blow - to be teased with the chance at rescue and have it ripped away when it was practically in arms' reach - but he'd still not given up on rescue. He knew, one way or another, they'd find it.

He'd find Keith. He'd find his mom.

But what if she had a point? What if the better way forward was to get somewhere, anywhere, that was truly safe, and go from there? Bunkering down in the Texas desert seemed as good a plan as any.

"Government's given up on Texas." he mumbled, freezing the moment the words left his lips. He darted a glance at her, but her expression hadn't shifted from the earnest intensity it had started with. "I-I don't mean that mean or nothin', but... it just seems like goin' away from what we're tryin' tuh get to."

She nodded, putting both her hands against her sternum, her tone growing more insistent. "I know. But it's not always a straight line to get what you want. And we still don't know if there's even anything here for y'all. I don't want to leave you guys in a bad spot."

The woman had made no real attempt to moderate her voice so it wouldn't carry into the living room. As she spoke, Rochelle drifted around the pillar at the end of the kitchen counter and came into view, leaning against the post with her arms crossed over her chest. Ellis peered at her, and recognized frustration in her expression.

She was stepping in to protect him - he just wasn't completely sure what from.

"The concern's appreciated, Lee, and I take your point. But we can't give up that easy. Especially now that we know the military is still in the area." Rochelle shook her head. A laugh intruded into her response, laced with a faintly self-deprecating humour, like she knew her suggestion was far-fetched. "For all we know, that helicopter radioed in before it started to land, and somebody knows we're here."

Lena tipped her head to regard the producer, her lips darting into a quick purse before she put her palms up imploringly. "I'm just making the offer. Just... think about it. You'd want your family to get themselves safe before anything else. Maybe you should do the same."

Rochelle's mouth opened, but the soft creak of the ceiling made her attention dart upwards. The stairs protested the weight placed on them, wood groaning as Nick made his way down them, and there was an instinctual tension that rose amongst them. They were all nervous, on edge, especially after their conversation.

Ellis genuinely hadn't expected Nick to reappear, let alone so soon. It wasn't easy to resist the urge to get up and march over to meet him.

*Maybe I'll just grab him right now, kiss him silly. Wonder whut he'd do.*

He sighed, clasping his hands up onto the top of his head to drag his cap down over his eyes, letting his body slouch against the oven even further. It was strange, to feel such visceral frustration and longing all at once, and it was a sensation he found Nick uniquely suited to bringing out in him.

His posture left the slimmest strip of a sightline over to the stairs, just the foot of them, and was enough to where he could watch Nick's socked feet come into view. "What are we talking about?"
the man sighed out. He sounded disinterested, even bored... and if that was any indication, he hadn't heard enough of their conversation to glean any context.

Nick stepped onto the first floor, then sat down on the bottom-most step. If Ellis lifted his chin just a little, he could see the dark shape of Maggie's tail twining over the thigh of his grey sweats. He'd bundled her into his lap and, likely to avoid getting clawed, was keeping his distance from the group.

It was hard not to think he was also using the cat as something of a shield.

"Food's almost ready." Lena chimed out, suddenly pushing to stand, using her forearms against the front of the stove to shove off and get to her feet. "Hope you're not too good for chicken nuggets, hoss." Ellis felt some surprise at her abrupt movement, and the hurried way she changed the subject.

The conman snorted, a hollow sound, though his voice smoothed out when he responded. He shot her a dry look, slanting a smirk across his face. "As long as they aren't dinosaur-shaped, I'm game."

Lena snapped a hand up toward her temple in a mock-salute, a grin curling her lips up. "Assorted oblong shapes are a-go."

Rochelle darted a glance toward Ellis, and her brow was cocked as she did. The producer's expression said she was thinking similarly to him; there was no real reason not to include Nick in the conversation. He'd had his doubts about hunting out rescue for a while, and he likely had an opinion. He usually did.

Ellis let it go for one main reason: he already had one unpleasant subject he needed to bring up now that the group was together and alert. He didn't see the value in adding more stress than he needed to onto Nick's plate. Rather than say anything, he simply shrugged at Rochelle.

She shrugged right back and turned to retreat toward the living room. Maybe she followed his lead, or maybe she just didn't want to argue with the biker more than she already had.

He watched her go, then returned his attention to Nick. The Northerner was focused down on the cat in his lap, fingers rubbing between her shoulderblades, trying to capture her attention away from her nervous stare at the other survivors. His success was middling, and his touches served to do little but make her body twitch and stiffen.

*Man, you make it real hard tuh think straight. I was hoppin' mad two minutes ago, 'n' now I just wanna bundle him up in muh arms'n'not let go until he tells me everythin'.* Ellis sighed, lifting a hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose. *Gonna work muhself into a headache, this rate.*

He scrambled to his feet, body sluggish to respond. It took a thrust-back hand, catching the handle of the oven's front door, to keep his balance as he reached his feet. He turned, rotating his grip on the handle and cracking it open as he bent forward.

The heat struck him in a blast, hot air fluttering at the curls looped against his ears. He had to squint against it, peering in at the sheet tray they'd piled high with food. They didn't need to cook, precisely, just heat through - and bubbling grease and golden edges seemed as good a sign as any.

Ellis snatched the thick handtowel off the countertop where he'd left it, folding his hand around it and using it to buffer his skin from the hot sheet tray when he reached in and grabbed ahold of it. The oven's heat still scalded at his wrist and forearm, and he moved quick to yank the tray out and drop it on the stovetop.
"Soup's up." he called, bumping the oven door back closed with a jut of his hips. He pushed some amount of excitement into his voice - and it wasn't too difficult to summon the tone. He was genuinely excited. "Cept it ain't soup this time."

Christophe gave a sleepy crow from the living room, half-startled, like he'd been dozing. "I have hunger, I think! I have not really wanted to eat since - ay, a long time."

Rhiannon's response was mixed with a snicker. "Good thing, too, Lefty. You lose much more weight and we'll have to tie you down when it gets windy." That snicker resurfaged, letting her rasped voice get a little louder. "And you gotta store up some energy for when you finally score with Ro'."

Rochelle's faux-protesting, "Oh-hoh!" was only slightly louder than Coach's dull groan from the sofa.

They'd stacked up plates earlier, and Ellis grabbed two with his left hand, reaching out with his right toward the fat ceramic cup by the stovetop that held a few assorted utensils. He flickered between them with his fingertips before snatching a spatula up by the slim neck, tossing it up gently and re-catching it to adjust his grip onto the handle.

Setting the two plates down onto what free space remained on the stovetop, Ellis portioned out a scoopful of nuggets and fries, eyeballing out something around a seventh of the pile each. They hadn't completely emptied the bags - there hadn't been enough room on the small cookie sheet - but there wasn't much left, and he wanted to ensure everyone had an equal share.

He inhaled, setting the spatula down and grabbing the two plates, one in either hand.

The Georgian turned, stepping between Lena and Rochelle, lifting his chin and squaring his shoulders in an effort to look casually confident. The moment he passed into the dining room, Nick's eyes were on him, low and full of nameless threat. There was a warning there, and if he hadn't known the man as intimately as he did, he might've been cowed.

Instead, he continued to walk forward, pushing one of the plates forward as he approached. He halted only an arm's length away, aware of how his proximity had sent Maggie into a nervous curl, tighter and tighter - claws unsheathing... An hour previous, he might've taken a little satisfaction out of the pain that shocked Nick's eyes into a squint.

Offering the food out in a firm jerk, Ellis cocked his head, watching as the older man somewhat slowly raised the arm that wasn't looped over the cat in his lap. He grabbed the plate, pulling it from Ellis' grasp with the guarded caution of someone who anticipated some sort of retaliation, though no such thing came.

If he asked Nick if he was alright, would he answer? If he sat down, would the man move away? If he asked him, point blank, what was going on with him, asked him who Brett had really been... would he tell the truth? If he demanded they talk, and talk honestly, would Nick acquiesce?

Would it help, or hurt?

Instead of putting any of it to the test, Ellis merely flashed him a slim smile and turned back around, heading toward the living room. He intended the other plate for Coach, and only once the injured man was fed would he go about feeding himself.

He tried to call it calculation, waiting for the right time to accost Nick, waiting for the best possible chance at having some kind of productive conversation. He wanted to think he was being careful,
thoughtful. He had an amount of power over the situation.

He just had to figure out how to use it.
Chapter 277

The chicken nuggets were not, precisely, gourmet. They'd been in the freezer long enough that the ice had crystallized into the meat, leaving a slight mushiness behind after they'd been heated up. The fries were better off, but they'd absorbed a subtle flavour, like the smell of chemicals or antifreeze.

It was likely a reflection on their generally poor diet that it still felt like a treat.

Nick had no interest in even examining the contents of the fridge to look for a sauce or something to dip them in, sure that it was all past expiration even before the sparing few weeks it had been since the collapse of society. The house didn't seem well-kept.

Then again, neither are we.

The fries were a little bland on their own, but the feeling of biting into hot starch was appealing enough to overcome his picky nature. There was a bottle of ketchup, but it was separated into a few suspicious layers, and he had no interest in that, either.

The only thing he had any interest in, he swore, was Ellis' little smile. It had been so cocky, so knowing. Like he knew full well that Nick had been anticipating the Georgian to sit down and invade his space, like he'd done back at the café, and knew full well he was subverting that expectation.

Like he knew Nick watched him walk away, feeling just slightly - and entirely against his own wishes - disappointed.

Grimacing, Nick stuffed another rounded nugget into his mouth, using his teeth to catch on a crisped fold in the fried dough coating and tear it in half. He chewed on the slightly soft meat, too smooth and grainless to be actual chicken breast. As he did, he took the other half between his fingers and used his thumbnail to tear out a piece.

Blindly holding it out to the side, just a few inches away from the plate, he felt rather than saw Maggie's fuzzy snout nudge against his fingertips and tenderly mouth the piece away from his grasp. Her chewing was eager, interspersed with nervous, raspy huffs, and quickly followed by an equally eager set of rough-tongued licks.

"Fuckin' gross as shit, dude." Rhiannon barked out, and though Nick could only see portions of the living room from where he sat on the stairs, he imagined she was referring to the generous helping of questionably-tinted pickles Ellis had dug out of the fridge. "That shit's gonna give you the fuckin' runs, and I swear to fuckin' God, if I have to hear your asshole shotgun blasting all night -"

"Pickles last like, ferever, man." The mechanic's voice was half-stifled, likely full of the very food they were discussing. "They're probably fine."

"Hee-haw, that is not true, at all." she mumbled, a smile tickling at the edge of her voice. "Neither part of that is true."

"But Keith -" Ellis protested.
Softly, at a whisper that was just bassy enough to carry, Coach murmured, "I wasn't out so long, Keith turned into no reliable source fo' info, was I?"

Laughter scattered across the room, and Nick grimaced again. He was so glad to hear the man in a joking mood it ached, and it was contrasted sharply with the strong desire he had to get up and go upstairs. Listening to the group chatter just grated at his nerves, but he had something he needed to do. He'd come to a realization, coaxing Maggie out from under the bed.

Ellis wasn't the only one he needed to prepare for his eventual departure.

As much as it pained him, the likelihood of him bringing the cat with him was next to zero. Even if the sisters would've agreed to it in the first place, managing her on a boat seemed difficult, if not impossible. Worse, forcing her onto a sailboat for who-knew-how-many days seemed cruel.

He exhaled, narrowing his eyes, glancing across the dining room at Rochelle. He pursed his lips to let out a short whistle, just a single note. When she turned her head to blink at him, he let his free hand lift, crooking a finger at her.

The look on her face soured, but she pushed off the counter, sliding her plate to rest against her hip as she approached. Her shoulders lifted in a questioning gesture. "Suit, if you whistle at me like that again, I will find some room for my foot beside the stick up your ass."

Nick's eyes rolled just slightly, putting his hand up in a halting gesture. "Easy, easy. Slow."

Rochelle's gaze flickered to Maggie, and she started to move gentler, stepping to close the distance at a cautious pace. She watched the cat's body stiffen, her pumpkin-coloured eyes narrowing, a growl starting to crinkle her damp nose... before Nick proffered another hunk of chicken, and her attention snapped back to his hand.

As the cat busied herself with gnawing at the larger piece, chewing on it without pulling it free from Nick's grip, Rochelle eased into a crouch just in front of Nick. She set her plate on the floor beside her foot, crossing her arms over her knees.

"What's up, Nick?" she murmured, watching the cat's ravenous behaviour, humour entering her tone. There was some mockery there, standard in their interactions, but there was a softness at the core of her expression. "Are you actually volunteering to pick up where we left off? Because I'll eat Ellis' hat if -"

Nick reached out, grasping her wrist, doing so just slowly enough that she could've dodged him if she'd wanted to. "Trust exercise." he explained, cryptically, letting a smirk touch the corners of his eyes.

She didn't resist.

Pulling her arm straight, he retracted his other hand, the softest laugh escaping him when Maggie's mouth snapped at the air in an attempt to grab hold of the hunk of meat. "Alright, brat. Gotta make a choice." he muttered, setting the piece down on Rochelle's palm, where her hand now hovered just in front of his knee.

The cat's body tensed, paws suddenly adjusting on the carpeted stair, taking a step back. Her eyes had tracked the half-chewed chicken nugget the entire way, but she seemed to only belatedly realize her predicament, releasing a quick and panted hiss. Her tail, dark and mottled orange on the pale carpeting, started a ferocious set of twitches that did not quite graduate to a full lashing.

"I am not comfortable with the stakes here." Rochelle hissed out of the corner of her mouth. Even
as she made no move to retract her hand, a genuine degree of tension entered her shoulders. She still had slim scabs over her digits from the last time Maggie had taken a swing at her.

Her voice made the cat's ears flicker, straightening, focusing on her with rapt attention. Nick couldn't shake the thought that she relaxed slightly, softened. Her owlish eyes took stock of the woman, darting between her face and the piece of chicken on her palm, as if calculating the risk against the value of the offered treat.

Then her eyes shifted up to Nick's face, plaintive.

"No, doll." he responded, shifting his weight a little. He let go of Rochelle's wrist, reaching instead to brush his fingertips against Maggie's shoulder, subtle encouragement. She made the smallest move to arch her back against his hand, but when her eyes returned to Rochelle, a low growl vibrated in her throat. "You gotta get over this shit, before they kick you out."

Shifting on her paws, Maggie looked almost poised to run, but hunger proved a powerful motivator. Both survivors couldn't help but hold a sucked-in breath, watching as the cat delicately climbed her front paws onto Nick's knee, using the perch to stabilize herself as she stretched toward Rochelle's hand.

Nose and whiskers twitching, eyes in a constant rotation between Rochelle's hand and face, Maggie leaned out to sniff at her fingertips. The moment she inhaled, her back bristled - but when she lunged, it was just to snatch the chicken up in a smooth bite.

A flash of dark colour against the light carpeting was the only thing Nick saw when she bolted upstairs, growling the whole way up, her own footsteps jostling the sound into a warble. He craned his head back to look up the stairs, finding her crouched at the top, hunched down as she set to devouring the piece of nugget.

"That... went better than I expected." Rochelle muttered, rolling back to let her weight settle back on her heels. She wiped her palm against her thigh to clean off the grease from her skin, brows lifting as she glanced over Nick's face. "Maybe there's hope, after all."

He didn't acknowledge the loaded dryness to her tone, choosing instead to return his attention to his plate. "I think she liked your voice. I guess you don't sound like a Spitter, after all."

Her mouth popped open with a gusted scoff, and she put on a grimace as she struck out to punch his knee. "Hey, prick, remember that the only reason she likes you is because you look like a middle-aged Georgia pawn-shop owner. Not exactly high praise."

A grin tugged at his lips, and he shook his head. "You mean a businessman with a boat? Alright, alright." Nick leaned back, resting his elbows on his thighs, and watched the woman's eyes roll as she turned to settle her back against the wall, just where it cut off to open up into the stairwell. When she looked back toward the living room, he cleared his throat.

"How is he?"

Her posture stiffened, and she responded without turning her head. "Why don't you go ask him?" Nick started to answer, but Rochelle didn't let him get past an inhale. "No, no. No bullshit today, Nick. If you want to know, go talk to him yourself. Admit you care about him, for once."

Nick's shoulders dropped, groaning out a sigh. Talking about Ellis was the last thing he wanted to do, especially after the day they'd all had. He felt completely wrung out, like he lacked any form or structure with which to defend himself. His gaze darted up toward the ceiling, mouth quirking. "I
meant Coach. Y'know, the guy who almost died today."

"Yeah, so did I." When he directed a frown at her, her brows lifted, daring him to argue. "You two need to kiss and make up already. Because you're right - he could've died today, Nick. Any of us could've. Merlin's beard, how many near-death experiences do we need to have before we all stop taking this shit for granted?"

His fingers tightened into a curl, unable to resist the frustrated gesture, even as he calmed into a slump. Talking about Coach was easier, relatively. "What do you want, me to go give him a hug? Or maybe go slap a kiss on him?"

Rochelle snorted, even as she shrugged her shoulders. "That'd be a sight."

Nick sighed, pretending the edge of it didn't have a slight laugh, and turned his chin to glance at her. "Fine." he snapped back, pulling his voice into a childish whine. Her momentary surprise was satisfying, and he stood, moving to push his hands into his pockets - though his stolen sweats didn't have any, and he ended up just hooking his thumbs in the waistband, instead. "Can't say I never tried."

He walked forward, fully aware of the way she scrambled to follow him. She anticipated disaster, he was sure, and he might've felt injured if it weren't mostly deserved.

Circling around the dinner table put him within eyesight of Christophe and Rhiannon, the two seated atop the TV stand they'd set in front of the front door. The Spaniard's expression blinked into mild interest, cocking his head inquisitively, and Rhiannon set immediately to a leer in Nick's direction. She was, apparently, not over her power-play.

Ride that high while you got it, bitch. he tried to communicate with narrowed eyes. She got at least portion of the sentiment, judging by the way her eyes lit up in pleased recognition. The blonde bit her cheek to stifle a grin, right before she curled her tongue up and against her upper lip in exaggerated seduction.

So she likes me, huh? That's a turn.

Nick wheeled around the post separating him from the couch, gaze immediately dropping to focus down on Coach's prone form. He numbed to the awareness that there were more than three sets of eyes on him, now; Lena and Ellis were sitting on the ground in front of the sofa, plates in their laps.

The way the atmosphere thickened made his nails bite into his thighs, like subtle nerves. The Georgian's jaw was frozen halfway through biting a quarter-cut piece of pickle in half, expression flickering through an array of emotions that Nick didn't care to examine. He forged out a slim smirk, cocking his head down at Coach, the big man carefully returning the look without shifting his head.

"How you doin', big guy? Gave us a scare." he prompted, leaning his bare shoulder against the column beside him. When Coach's eyes softened, peering at him from their upside-down position, Nick demurred. "And that's the second time I've had to carry your fat ass out of danger, for the record. Gonna throw my knee out next time."

A choke of a laugh made Coach's body stiffen, grinning even as he lifted a hand and pressed it nervously against the bandages on his neck. "I'm a'ight, Nicky. Ain't no jumpin'-ass son-of-a-bitch takin' me out."
Nick's jaw flinched against a smirk, head cocking further. He hesitated, just a beat, before leaning forward a few degrees. He would've preferred less of an audience, but he also knew he needed to do it. "If I -" The words caught instantly in his throat, like an unpleasant hiccup, but he powered through it rather than let himself peter out. "If you got pounced because of -"

The way Coach's eyes softened betrayed the grim way he grunted, "Son, ain't neither of us enjoyin' this." When Nick's face cracked into a small half-smile, the prone survivor sighed. "Wasn't yo' fault."

Something settled in him, right before something else, something uneasy, rattled to life under his breast. To a degree, the decision to leave the group felt less like a choice and more like an unfortunate circumstance that was occurring to them. Rather than a trigger he was pulling, it was more like an oncoming car he wasn't stepping out from in front of.

He was planning for it, certainly, and he'd begun trying to prepare the team for it - but he hadn't yet so distinctly felt like he was saying his goodbyes.

The likelihood that he could slip away in the middle of the night was next to zero, and he didn't need to wonder how they were going to react when they found out. He knew. It's gonna be a conversation. They're gonna argue. They're gonna be pissed. This whole fucking situation is a goddamn mess.

"Um." Ellis murmured, and Nick's gaze darted up toward him, a brow flinching up. The Georgian's face was pulled into a grimace, and he knew that look; Ellis was going to say something he knew no one would like. "'Bout that... I was meanin' tuh have a word with y'all. Once we got settled."

Nick traded the smallest frown with Coach before crossing his arms and directing his gaze more fully toward the younger man. Ellis' attention flickered less-than-subtly to watch his bare upper body settle into the motion. His rapt focus stirred the laziest urge to preen, right before sense made Nick reject the self-satisfaction.

"That doesn't sound good." Lena observed, leaning her weight back as if Ellis were wielding something dangerous. Her eyes, almond shapes crinkling as she squinted, were faintly amused as she examined him. "Are we in trouble?"

Ellis' mouth twitched upward, knocked free of the fractional fugue he'd slipped into. "Nah, just... We noticed that Hunter was... weird. Any'uh y'all get a look at it?" He wagged his shoulders in a gesture of uncertainty, nodding toward Christophe. "I know we were all kinda distracted."

Rochelle slipped to stand beside Nick, breaching into the living room by just a step and a half. "I didn't get a good look at it, but it sounded sort of strange. Quieter. They're usually growling and screaming, and we get a little warning, but it came out of nowhere."

"Could've done with a manicure." the gambler muttered, eyes still on Ellis. The Georgian had gotten better at holding a straight face - but even so, he remained an open book, most times. The quirk and tension in his expression all-too-familiar. "What's up, kid?"

The Southerner shifted, settling his hands into fists and knuckling into his thighs. He bit at the inside of his cheek before he spoke. "It was messed up. Like, I thought the claws were weird enough, but its whole darn face was gnarly-lookin'." Raising his chin, he patted his fingertips against his mouth. "Like its mouth was half-melted shut."

"Melted?" Rochelle echoed, her head tilting. "That's... strange."
Ellis hummed, nodding. "Yeah. That's what Chris'n'I thought. Y'know, first thing I'm thinkin' is it went face-first intuh some Spitter goo, but it weren't burnt, y'know? I mean, Keith's got plenty'uh burns, so I know whut they look like."

A snort made Nick's shoulders jostle up, and he turned his body, reaching down to tangle fingers in his pantleg. He tugged the hem of his sweats up to bare his calf, displaying the sprawl of mottled flesh that was pinkened with raw, healed flesh. "Didn't look like this?"

Although the Georgian did glance down at the extended limb, he responded before he did. "Nah." Ellis had tended to the wound, after all, and was more than familiar with its appearance. The chemical burn on his forearm from the previous day was nowhere near as deep. "This was like... well, hell, natural ain't the word. Like the skin grew wrong."

With the smallest smile, Christophe offered up, "A bad cookie."

Ellis released a stuttered laugh, shrugging his shoulders. "Yeah." He shifted his weight and let his legs sprawl out in front of himself, slumping into the posture. He nodded toward the front door, expression pinching with vague uncertainty. "I mean, it's still out there. We could go look."

Coach was the one to grunt, the sound displeased. His head turned just slightly to glance toward Ellis, his mouth drawn in a distinct frown. "No one's goin' outside. I'll crawl my ass over there and hold the door shut if I gotta, but ain't nobody goin' outside to poke at a body. Ain't worth it."

At that, Rhiannon leaned forward, thumbing at the prone survivor and biting her tongue thoughtfully. "You see anything, Pops? Cunt was kind of in your face."

The big man shifted his weight, rolling his body a little as if to get comfortable on the sofa. He sighed, eyes closing, hand settling into a more casual grip on his wounded neck. "Don't know. Can't say I was lookin' too close at it - but yeah. Somethin' seemed... different."

Lena had taken a piece of nugget into her hands, working slowly at tearing it into pieces, more a mindless act than anything else. She wrinkled her brows and let her gaze wander over the group encircling the room. "None of them are lookers, if we're being honest. We got car-sized hunks of muscle and little shrimpy Jockeys. What's one ugly Hunter?"

Nick watched Ellis' posture tighten, an inhale flooding his chest into a puff. The Georgian argued, "Sure, but... them claws were wild, too. I mean - whut if they're mutatin'?"

"Into what? I mean, what else?" Rochelle put her arms out to either side in a vaguely confused gesture, advancing a few paces to stand closer to the center of the living room. "What you're describing doesn't sound like an improvement. I mean, sure, its nails did a number on Coach - before they broke off. And why the mouth?"

Ellis shrugged, uncertainty rising amidst his stony blues. He didn't look convinced, himself, though he was visibly worried. Discomfort seemed the best description for his body language - as if he was hesitant to argue. "Dunno. Ain't like they're gonna let us know, 'n'there ain't no manual on zombies."

Christophe leaned his head forward, eyes narrowed, and lowered his voice. "It is too bad that my Witch did not break a nail, ¿sí?"

Rochelle sighed at that, letting a slightly sympathetic tilt touch her head as she passed a squint his way, then deflected. "I definitely don't want them changing anymore than they already have - but honestly, that seems more to me like it was a fuck-up than an evolution." A grimace tilted the
corners of her mouth down. "Who knows how many people mutated into things that couldn't even survive? If a Charger is a best case scenario, the hell was the rough draft?"

"Who's saying the motherfucker wasn't that fugly to start with?" Rhiannon offered up, husky voice low with restrained humor. "Our nana's toenails used to get about that long."

Nick couldn't help but choke on a laugh, quickly raising a hand to tuck his knuckles against his mouth and stifle the sound. "Pretty sad when you're a standout ugly duckling, even for a zombie."
The blonde shot a grin in his direction and waggled her eyebrows up and down, clearly pleased with herself.

So, he added, "Then again, Blondie, who are you to judge?"

For an instant, he thought the anger that flared in her expression was sincere - but then the grin returned, Cheshire-sized. She settled back onto a hand braced against the TV stand under her, tossing her hair with a sharp gesture. "They can change all they like. Fuckholes still go down when you take their head off."

Ellis wrinkled his nose, glancing at her, taking a moment to adjust his hat on his head. "Guess so." he admitted, sounding unconvinced, wary. "Just don't want 'em takin' us down before we get the chance."

Christophe folded his knees slightly, bracing his heels against the bottom of the TV stand and shrugging his shoulders. "We will be more careful, ¿sí? Until we know what we - what is going on. No more argue in the street." He let his gaze drop, mouth tightening. "I do not know... what I do, if I lose you."

The foreigner gestured his hand out, indicating all of them.

Nick couldn't stop his chest from knotting up, a cold sensation rising. He averted his eyes and sighed, harshly. There had been a time when he'd have considered himself immune to guilt.

That time, apparently, had passed.

"Alright, Señor Buzzkill." he grunted, eyes rolling. "How about we talk about literally anything else? Fact is, there's nothing we can do right now."

Rochelle's arms crossed, a frown tugging at her mouth as she turned to face him. "You're right, sure, but to Chris' point... when we go back out, we go careful. We've gotten lazy, comfortable - we let down our guard, and Coach nearly died. Lena nearly died. Chris nearly died. We have to get serious again."

Quietly, humoured, Coach murmured, "Think the cat'll share a few lives?"

Laughter flittered across the team, mostly muffled snorts and faint gusts of air. Nick let his attention drift, hunting the smile that accompanied Ellis' laugh - but instead, he found a pair of blue eyes riveted on him. They dodged away just as fast, surreptitiously embarrassed, and Nick felt a frown creep onto his face.

Ellis looked worried, and Nick wasn't entirely sure it was about the warped Hunter.

"You're assuming she hasn't used up most of them already." he groused, taking a cautious stance with his weight shifting on his heels. "Don't think she's got many left."

He just wasn't sure what it was about.
The TV did not work.

Something crackled when Ellis tried to turn it on, a low-pitched whine the only indication it had done anything at all. He frowned, tilting his head and knocking on the lower edge of it a few times, frowning deeper when it didn't respond.

"There's not gonna be any signal." Rhiannon advised, stepping up to stand just behind where he squatted. He tipped his head back, blinking up at her. "Pretty sure all the newscasters are dead."

"Hey!" Rochelle protested, kicking her heels against the carpet. She'd settled onto the ground beside where Chris sat on the TV stand, resting her cheek against his leg, and he'd taken to petting the slope of her neck with his fingertips. "Not all of us."

The blonde snorted, eyes flickering to gaze over the pair before they returned to Ellis' face.

He grinned up at her, hesitantly, a bashful edge touching his expression. "Uh... yeah. I figured. Just knew there was a few movies in the bookcase, so... I guess I thought we could watch somethin'. It'd be nice, y'know, a break. Somethin' normal fer a change." Disappointment tinged his voice as he gestured toward the television. "But guess that idea's out."

A sigh made Lena slump where she sat against the wall. She'd folded her legs into a cross until her feet touched flat together, and she was rubbing at her knees like they ached. "Shucks, that sounds really nice right about now. We'd need some popcorn, though... illegal to watch a movie with no popcorn."

Rochelle put her hands out, fingers splayed, groaning slightly. "Rude, Eleanor. The discussion of fun things we can't do should also be illegal."

Lena giggled under her breath, eyes warming, a joke lingering inside the sharp inhale she took - though she bit it back and merely responded, "Sorry, Ro'. I'll keep things sad and boring."

Nick hadn't truly committed to entering the living room. He'd taken up a position seated at the dining table, chair pulled out enough so he could see into the front of the house. Maggie had returned, and she lay sprawled on her side, legs stretched as far as she could manage to lengthen her body.

Her tail moved in contented waves, stilling every time he stroked her side or rubbed against her cheek, then twitching until he repeated the gesture. The man had been tremendously quiet, a fact that didn't pass Ellis' notice.

Guess I understand him not sharin' all his past, but... whut'd I ever do that made him feel like he can't tell me he's sick? Ellis sighed, just quietly, looking up toward the ceiling. More sure than ever that somethin' messed him up that I don't know about. A rough childhood'n'his wife don't add up tuh all this.

"It's gettin' dark." Coach murmured, his voice thick with exhaustion. There was a not-so-subtle plea, there, begging for quiet. It made Ellis grimace a bit, realizing they'd been keeping the man awake. "We should catch some shut-eye."
"Yeah, I'm pooped." Rochelle announced, the words leaving her as a yawn while she stood, arms stretching above her head. The arch of her back dragged her shirt up around her waist, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by Chris. "How's about we pick rooms? We can actually have a little bit of privacy this time."

Nick's head lifted slightly, glancing toward them. "Gonna have to pull straws for the master." he stated, dour at first, though a mild humour surfaced in his voice when he countered himself shortly thereafter. "Or let the girls catfight for it."

"Rock, paper, scissors." Ellis instantly suggested, spine straightening much despite himself. His eyes narrowed as he turned, some excitement bleeding into his voice. The idea of a playful contest stirred an eagerness in his chest, and it wasn't dampened even when Nick averted his gaze and retreated at his engagement. "Or -"

"I have a better idea." came in a drawl from Rochelle, the woman letting her arms fall to her sides as she relaxed out of her stretch. She glanced slowly around the room, gauging her teammates, cheek bitten between her teeth.

Then she bolted.

Protesting sounds left both Lena and Ellis, both brunettes scrambling to their feet and charging after her. An equally protesting "Hey -" escaped Nick as their impromptu stampede sent Maggie shooting to her feet, breaking into hissed spits as her fur went stiff into an aggressive display.

The feline stood her ground even as they came perilously close, and stared after the survivors as they disappeared into the stairwell. Christophe followed like an after-thought, his expression pulled in a confused moue, merely shrugging as he passed up and into the upper floor.

The cat's defensive position flagged as he disappeared, and Nick sighed at her in vague consternation, drawing to his feet sluggishly. His eyes flickered toward Coach with a raised eyebrow.

"You want a room, Sam, or are you bunking down here? I was going to take watch on the couch, so -"

The injured survivor lifted his arm, waving his fingers in a vague gesture to cut him off. "Prefer a bed, if there's one. I can walk my ass up some stairs; ain't dead yet, in spite of what this damn apocalypse wants." A grunt escaped him as he started to shift, as if slowly arranging himself to sit up. "Just give me a second."

Nick might've approached to help the older man up, but before he could even think to, Rhiannon was walking up to the sofa. She sent Nick the smallest glare - and whether he understood it entirely or not, he took the hint.

She postured, and he withdrew.

As he followed the rest of the survivor group up to the second floor, Rhiannon bent forward slightly, narrowing her gaze at Coach in blatant judgement. He froze, half-propped against the back of the sofa, staring up with a quickly flattening expression that he tried to pass off as calm expectation. He seemed uncomfortable. Wary.

He'd been wary of her all day.

He'd been acting reserved since she'd flirted with him, that much was obvious. While his initial shock had been enjoyable to watch, his reticence since was far from it. She didn't realize how
much she'd grown to enjoy his company until he'd retracted it - and, maybe, the prickling discomfort in her chest had something more to do with almost losing it forever.

They'd picked up a banter over their time together. She'd grown comfortable around him in a way she wasn't quite used to - though admittedly, he was certainly within the bounds of her preferred sort of sexual partner: older, quiet men who were only just beyond the peak of their prime.

Lena had had plenty of opinions upon finding out most of her partners were their father's age. Rhiannon didn't see the issue. *They get to feel lucky for a few days, and I get no-strings sex with dudes eager to please. Besides, it's not like they're not fucking a chick their daughter's age. We're both fucked up.*

Rather than speak, she extended a hand, and he glanced at it with the slightest hesitance before reaching to take it. The blonde's weight shifted back onto her heels, her body counter-balancing against Coach's heavier frame as he stood.

Only once he'd gotten fully upright did she release his wrist, taking a step back. Her arms crossed over her chest, a frown pulling at her mouth. The expression seemed to only further Coach's discomfort, his frame shifting nervously. The uncertainty was only barely gratifying, considering she didn't *want* to make him genuinely uncomfortable.

The woman wasn't used to people having any real power over her. She did her best to avoid it, in fact, and that only seemed doubly sensible when any of them might die at any time. That left her mostly angry to discover that she'd not only gotten attached, but also scared him away.

Whether she liked it or not, she wanted his attention. She was also a generally impatient person.

She barked, simply, *"Stop it."*

Out of reflex, he recoiled his head back as if her outburst whizzed past his face, eyebrows lifting in a bemused expression. *"... Stop what?"* He was still semi-nervously holding his free hand over the mess of bandages on his neck, so he tentatively wiggled the fingers pressed into his jaw. *"I'm just tryin' not to bleed, girl."

They both knew that wasn't what she'd been referring to, but his attempt at distraction was almost a kindness. She'd usually have taken the bait and let the conversation veer off-track. Seriousness and sincerity was not, as a rule, a strong suit of hers.

Rhiannon's eyes rolled, putting both her hands up, fingertips just touched together in a gesture of strained control. *"Stop avoiding me. It's fucking annoying, alright? Guess I didn't think you'd be a fuckin' pussy about it, but -"* Her posture shifted and her head tilted back with a frustrated sigh. *"Sorry if I freaked you out."

*Coach's eyes softened, abruptly re-examining her in quiet assessment. He let his shoulders droop, glancing down toward his feet with a wry chuckle. "Shit, Rhiannon. Don't apologize. It's my fault fo' takin' it - well... I know you didn't mean nothin' by it. Just... yo' ass is half my age. Kids I taught back in the day are 'bout as old as you now, an' old habits die hard."* He grew a small smile, offering a shrug. *"Guess I just didn't want to send the wrong message."

She did not make any move to relax or acknowledge his words, so he put his free hand up.

*"I know you were jokin' around. It just threw my ass for a loop - and shit ain't been calm enough fo' me to think 'bout it, alright?"* A genuine embarrassment crossed his face, grimacing. *"I didn't mean to make you feel like I was avoidin' you. I'll cool it, if yo' ass cools it with the hanky-panky*
bullshit."

Her body shifted to lean back, brows pinching tightly together. She didn't want to feel relieved to hear he wasn't angry with her, but that feeling was much more desirable than the displeasure that bit at the base of her spine upon realizing he wasn't interested in her, either. It dug in its nails and ground its teeth against her and she grimaced back at him.

He frowned at her, his head tilting in obvious question, so she swallowed down the bitterness lingering behind her teeth and flashed a crooked smile.

"Did you just say 'hanky-panky'? You are so fucking lame, dude."

Coach looked at her with a dumbfounded blankness, right before he burst into laughter, slim and deep in his chest. He rolled his eyes at her with an exaggerated, slow drama, turning to start walking toward the dining room. "How many zombies you gotta kill before people can't call you lame? I took a damn piece of road to the skull once, from a Tank, you know."

Immediately, like she'd been yanked along by the arm, Rhiannon was at his elbow. She practically leered up at him, a blinding grin on her face. She did not match his cautious pace, instead circling him as he walked, bouncing with each step as if giddy. "You're shitting me. That's some hard-ass bullshit right there."

He shook his head, another laugh bubbling up as he shot her a sidelong glance. "I'm a damn survivor. An' yet, here I am, gettin' laughed at. Bein' made a fool of. I got feelin's, you know."

A cackle escaped her, lifting a hand to push her thumb against her broken canine and bite down on it, shoulders lifting to the familiar ache. Her gait turned serpentine as she let her body swagger with each now-backwards step. "Aw, shit. Somebody's a badass motherfucker. Bouncing concrete off your head, catching Hunters with your neck - modern-day John McClane, but with zombies instead of Germans."

Coach snorted, reaching out with his free hand to catch her with a light touch to the shoulder, pulling her into his wake as she almost backed up into the dining room chair Nick had left out. "You sound like Ellis." he muttered, smiling just slightly when she groaned. "Gettin' yo'self riled up over nothin'."

At that, Rhiannon quieted, merely responding, "Come on, Gramps. Gotta get you to bed." She kept pace with him, eyes wandering downward, a slow breath drawing her chest into a billowed expansion. Her eyes narrowed, jaw gritting just slightly as she allowed herself a faint sigh to expel all that air.

Yeah. she thought, pretending her lips didn't falter into a downward curve.

Nothin'.
Nick closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the top of the sofa.

Ellis had gotten the master bedroom. Nick had reached the second floor landing only to come upon a pile of tangled-up bodies, Lena pinning Rochelle to the ground. The two women had been in the middle of laughing themselves to tears, though not without Rochelle's protesting squeals.

"Interference! Unfair! Illegal! Call the cops! Shit - cops are dead - call the zombie cops!"

That left three smaller rooms upstairs, one being a small office, and the small bedroom beside the stairs. The sisters ended up there, with Coach, Rochelle, and Christophe scattering amongst the three remaining. The house fell quiet in record time, exhaustion settling in as they gave their bodies leave to collapse.

It felt strangely isolated to separate, after so many days crammed into the tiny condo or the single space of the Sunset Café restaurant.

It felt stranger, even, to be so clearly partitioned; he hadn't intended on quarantining himself on the first floor with the bikers, but he didn't want to draw attention to it by protesting, either. As much as he wanted to step out from under the dark cloud he'd created for himself, there was no sense in doing so until they had the boat in hand.

There was no telling how they'd react. There was a distinct possibility that they would rescind their offer of help to find the boat, and that would hardly endear him to the sisters. Our relationship started off difficult enough without me rocking the proverbial boat about our literal boat.

A snort bounced his shoulders, and he shifted, letting one leg slide up to rest lengthwise on the sofa. Draping his arm over the back of it, he let his eyes slit open, looking toward the front of the living room. No light streamed through the thin sheets that his teammates had messily pinned up to cover the glass windows, betraying the night looming tall above them.

He'd left only the stairwell light on. It was enough to see by, but not enough to risk highlighting their location from the outside. The book in his hands was only marginally more interesting than staring up at the ceiling, but he forced himself to look back at it, grimacing at the text.

Murder mystery was not his preferred kind of fiction, though it did garner some of his interest when he skimmed ahead and found a remarkably explicit passage involving, as far as he could tell, the bartering of sex for police documents. He perked, just a little bit, and might've started skimming for more if he hadn't heard footsteps behind him, rustling on the tile.

Nobody had come downstairs, which meant it was one of the sisters. The approach was soft, as if trying not to disturb anyone else in the house, which meant it was not Rhiannon.

Nick lifted the book, stretching it behind and past his head as if to extend it out. He shifted his grip in order to flatten it out, displaying the text behind himself, and listened with the smallest smirk as those footsteps hesitated - then drew closer. They paused a few feet away, and there was a moment of silence.

Then Lena choked, voice muffled like she'd covered her mouth with a hand. "Oh, Cheez-Its. Is that what you guys do on watch?"

"Nope, just me." he returned, pulling the book back in front of himself and settling the bottom edge
against his bare stomach. "C'mon, this is basic human instinct here. If I'm gonna fight for my life all day, I'm gonna read some shitty porn at night." He slumped, nestling down into the couch cushions, allowing a lurid note to enter his voice. "Settle in. I'll narrate."

She laughed faintly, and stepped around the sofa. She came into his peripheral vision, and he noticed she'd barely undressed for sleep, still in her slim capri jeans and grey hoodie. One of her arms were tucked behind her back, weight rolling onto her toes in a blatantly coy posture. "As hilarious as that sounds - I come bearing gifts. Couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd come keep you company."

Nick's gaze lifted, catching immediately on her hidden arm, and he arched a brow in question. He didn't have long to wonder at it before she was drawing it into sight, fingers circled around a squat plastic bottle of clear liquid. He also didn't need more than a second to process what he was seeing before he was throwing his novel to the couch beside him and straightening.

"Holy shit." he hissed, unable to hide the excitement in his voice. "Is that vodka? Where the fuck did you get vodka?"

Another laugh made her shoulders jump up, and she stepped closer, shaking the bottle enough to slosh the liquid inside. "Gotta keep some mystique, hoss." She didn't sit, though, the bottle held half-out towards him as a small smile curled at her lips. "Ain't free, though. You'll have to -"

Nick didn't bother to let her finish, lunging to snag the bottle out from her grip. "Deal." he interrupted, an apathetic distance to the agreement. He twisted off the cap with a simple motion, taking a swig. It made him choke and burned at his mouth as he swallowed, showing teeth with a grimace.

It was bad. It tasted bad, it smelled bad, and it tore through him like a steady trickle of acid, burning a ragged hole from his mouth to his gut. He could feel his liver wither away with an audible whimper.

"Holy fuck, I needed that."

The shift of the couch as Lena sat next to him made his attention flicker toward her, even as he took another, smaller sip. She smiled at him faintly, head tilting as if in query. "Dang. Guess the end of the world brings out the alcoholic in all of us, huh?"

Nick hesitated, snorting dully before he offered the bottle back toward her. "You too vanilla to join me in killing myself before the zombies can?"

Her eyes flickered down to the bottle, and she shook her head. "Vanilla is not the worst thing someone's called me." she responded, grabbing the bottle from his hand and pulling it up to take a mild sip. To his surprise, she managed a swallow without much more than a wince, though the face she made indicated it was not an act she took pleasure in. "That is... awful."

Unable to resist laughing at her, Nick's features lingered on a grin, enjoying the painful burn spreading through the muscles in his chest. "You don't drink to drink, you do it for what comes next." he muttered dryly, holding his hand out with his fingers moving in a gentle waggle.

Lena handed the vodka back, curling her legs up onto the couch and wrapping her arms around her knees. She sucked her cheeks in, tilting her head back against the couch's upper cushions and turning her chin just enough to watch him.
There was silence, and he did not initially move to break it. He kept his eyes on the bottle in his grip, steadfastly refusing to look at her just as she steadfastly refused to look away, though he couldn't help but tense under the gaze.

It felt, absurdly, like she had several degrees of power over him. She'd been present at the mall, just like Chris and Coach, to see him fall apart, and she'd not yet given any indication of what she thought about the events. The knowledge felt intimidating, daunting, but he reacted to it much the same way he'd once dealt with every challenge: he puffed up his chest and leaned into it.

"Alright, doll, lay it on me. What'd I get myself into?"

Her eyes flickered over his face, her mouth pinched, and she seemed to lose some amount of steam. A laugh puffed out of her, shoulders hunching. "I was hoping you could tell me that, actually." she countered, attention drifting toward the front of the house. His distant amusement soured. "We haven't gotten the chance to talk. I thought... well, honestly, I thought you owed me some answers. Or at least one."

Nick's jaw tensed. He didn't like where the conversation was going, but his options were limited. The man steadied himself with a less-than-conservative gulp of vodka, thrusting the bottle back in her direction.

"Here I was, thinking all the people I owed shit to were dead." he quipped morosely, tossing his head back and closing his eyes. He relented, however, and he was only partially sure why. He would've liked to say it was tactics - courting her and courting his chance for escape - but that felt like a stretch. "You get two questions. One for taking a Charger for me, and one for the vodka."

Painfully, excruciatingly, he acknowledged that he might've just been lonely.

Lena's legs shifted, her body curling tighter, a faint smile tinting her voice. She seemed surprised, like she'd expected more hostility or protest. "Sounds fair. First one's... probably not a surprise. Rhiannon said some stuff, but I'd prefer to hear it from you." She didn't take the bottle back, and he settled it against his thigh rather than continue to hold it out.

Her words fell in volume. "Why do you want to leave?"

A laugh left him in a bark, shifting a hand to settle his palm against his bare chest. He rubbed at his sternum, idly enjoying the burning warmth that was lighting him up from the inside. "Look, sweetheart. I realize I seem like a puzzle, but I'm usually pretty simple. I want to leave because I don't want to go where they're going."

The brunette snorted, moving her arm to rest her elbow against the top of the couch, turning her body more to face him. She placed her knuckles against her jaw, a humour entering her tone. "You know full well that's not an answer." Before he could respond, she continued. "Even if you don't have any family, why wouldn't you see this through? If they can find the military, if there's rescue out there, why wouldn't you go to it?"

When he looked at her, he found a quiet intensity. It made him recalculate his concept of her, for just a moment. He'd pinned a simple archetype to her from the start: soft, unassuming. A wholesome girl from the country, with just enough of a rebellious streak to own a motorcycle... but not enough to shake off the gentle sweetness in her nature.

The way she was gazing at him, however, was cold. It was less an alien unfriendliness than it was a mask, disguising her features into a flat look of curiosity. It struck him as odd for a very particular reason: he couldn't read it.
He'd seen her poker face before. He'd watched her push emotion and thought under a rug, observed her throwing up a shield in a social interaction. He tended to take note of these things, taking a measure of the people around him and getting a feel for their proclivities. She was not, as a rule, a good liar.

Yet, just then, he watched her face and didn't know what she wanted.

He felt at a disadvantage, and the increasing warmth and numbness tingling in his body was not helping. Inhaling sharply, feeling his diaphragm jolt into a vague tension as he did, Nick screwed his face into faux thought and shrugged his shoulders.

"You're assuming a lot. Fact is, whether they find one solitary ship or not, I don't think there's some fuckin' magic rescue out there. If the government was in any shape to keep us safe, this shit wouldn't have gone south so fast. Your goddamn psycho dad seems a better shot to me than throwing ourselves at some rag-tag guerilla bullshit that can't even fly a helicopter."

Lena laughed, faintly, though it seemed vague and half-hearted. "Oof. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said about him."

Nick twisted to turn his body and face her on the couch, eyes snapping his attention onto her face, though he caught nothing but a small frown. "Going away from cities packed full of zombies seems like a smart idea, anyway." He let his arm drape over the back of the sofa, head resting against his shoulder as a slim smile curled at the edge of his mouth, lacking humour. "I want to leave, and you two could use extra hands. What's the problem?"

Her gaze flickered to absorb his expression. She hesitated, just a moment, and then spoke. "I just want to understand. You guys are close, that's easy enough to tell. It's... weird, for me, you realize that? Feels like I'm tearing a family apart."

A snort left him, nostrils flaring and eyes going low-lidded. "Trust me, sweetheart, I did that all on my own." When her eyes widened a tick with something like surprise, he sighed, drawing out the sound lengthily. 'I'd be leaving with or without you. You dumbshits just... moved my timeline ahead."

She didn't seem entirely convinced - or, perhaps, she merely hadn't gotten what she was looking for. Instead of responding, she cocked her head, putting her hand out for the bottle. He acquiesced, passing it over with a shrug.

"We aren't anything to each other. We met for the first time at the beginning of this shit-show. We're barely friends, and definitely not family."

To his not-insignificant surprise, she didn't respond. The brunette took the vodka up and sipped from it, grimacing a little as she swallowed and settled her mouth against the plastic lip of the bottle. She didn't speak for a few moments, and the silence might've bothered him more if he hadn't been enjoying the slow blur gathering at the edges of his consciousness, and the way it made her presence feel comfortable. Companionable.

"C'mon. Aren't you supposed to be getting into her pants, not getting fuckin' melancholic? Whining about your own stupid shit?"

But he didn't want to.

He'd barely wanted to get into Rhiannon's, even before she'd pressed a gun into his chin. He hadn't wanted much, in fact, in days, and that was hardly average for him. He was nothing if not greedy,
and everything but restrained, and the apocalypse hadn't done much to temper it. If anything, the stress and anxiety of their day-to-day survival had only made losing himself in Ellis more tempting.

And he'd done exactly that: lost himself.

He'd lost himself in the idea of having a family, in the idea of belonging. He'd lost himself in the idea of deserving Ellis' attention and affection and touch, a gorgeous young man who couldn't see anything but good in him. He'd had something completely out of his usual comfort zone, something wholly good, un tarnished - if only for a moment in time, before his own lack of structural integrity had taken them down into the mud.

It frustrated him, feeling his own lack of interest. How was he supposed to get over Ellis if he couldn't kick his heartbeat into a steady rhythm again? Though that felt like a tiny betrayal of himself, admitting that he was the one desperate to get over the Georgian, not the other way around.

Fuck you, vodka.

"Alright, second question." Lena abruptly continued, talking like there hadn't been a significant break in their conversation. Her voice was so casual, it was hard to focus enough to raise his guard when she asked, "Are you into Ro'?"

When it processed, his first instinct was to choke. His next instinct was to laugh. His third, and fortunately final, instinct was to despise both of his previous instincts and instead tense his expression into a frown.

"If your question is, am I actively inside her... no. If you mean, would I accept an invitati-

He startled at the abrupt impact of a foot against his knee, sluggishly yanking his leg away from the touch, shifting his weight to lean away. That movement brought his center of balance into an abrupt lurch, his sense of verticality threateningly wobbly, and he was forced to appreciate the fact that it had been a while since he'd had hard liquor.

"Jeez, gross!" she protested, and he tilted his head to catch a glance at her, finding embarrassment on her features. He wasn't sure he'd seen that look on her face before, let alone with a flush flirting at her neck and cheeks. "That's not what I'm asking. There's just a lot of tension around here, and - honestly, whatever you want to say, I don't think you'd leave without a good reason. I know what a family looks like... busted and bruised or not."

He didn't respond to that; he wasn't sure what to say that wouldn't raise alarms. If she'd picked up on the tension between him and Ellis, but misread it entirely, then denying it would only turn her critical eye elsewhere. As much as he'd have liked to laugh in her face and end the conversation, he was better off keeping his cards close to his chest.

Lena seemed to take his silence as confirmation, and continued.

"So, maybe you guys had a thing, stuff got complicated... one of you pulls the plug..." The biker waved her hand, vaguely, as if to gloss over the details. "Then Chris shows up, sweeps her off her feet, right? And you're left watching her be happy with him. All the stuff that used to be easy gets hard, and ugly, and heavy."

Pain settled like indigestion in his gut, a sharpness just inside the lower curves of his ribs, the surge of discomfort making his gaze drop to the ground. It felt like he'd swallowed a lightbulb, and she'd given him a swift kick to the stomach and burst it. He scrabbled to drag the feeling back under
control, cram it down into something manageable. It was too close to the truth for his comfort.

He had no idea what possessed him to do what he did. If it hadn't been for the alcohol growing increasingly strong in his system, he'd surely have thought better of it. He'd have, at least, considered what the consequences might have been beyond the moment he sat in.

"She wants me to be shit I'm not." His voice sounded bitter, even to his ears. "I may as well fuck off, make things easier for both of us. They've all got families to find out there, if they're alive, and I'll just be the pathetic fucker hanging on. And if there was a shot for... something, and I can't goddamn do it, I'd rather just pull the fucking band-aid off now."

He didn't look at her, so when the bottle of vodka tilted into his peripheral vision, it surprised him. He bit back a frown, snatching it out of her grip and letting the mouth tip against his lower lip. The moment of anger he felt at himself was quickly soothed by the burn in his chest as he took a sizeable gulp.

Lena's weight shifted, though she did not close the distance between them. "I don't know either of you well enough to argue. But I think you're looking at this the wrong way." He grunted, noncommittally, thumbing at the plastic ring around the neck of the vodka bottle in a way that he knew appeared childish and sulking. She gave a soft sigh, voice quieting to a murmur. "You've never had a friendly break-up, have you? It's sort of obvious."

Another grunt was all he could pull together.

The woman let him hold his silence for just a moment before she reached out and touched his shoulder. It was soft, just her fingertips, and he stiffened despite himself. "You really want to leave, and maybe never see her again? Any of them?"

"Jesus tits." Nick burst out, letting his head loll back suddenly. Frustration flooded him, turning quickly into something closer to anger. The fuck is she getting at? And why now? I get enough of this shit from Rochelle. I don't need another goddamn participant in my fucking misery. "What's with you fuckin' people, deciding you know fuckin' everything? I didn't ask you to come and talk to me, and I don't need you in my goddamn space."

She laughed, faintly, and he darted a gritted look in her direction that she didn't seem to pay much attention to. Her hand didn't lift away. "Hoss, look. If you love each other -"

Something twisted in his chest, painful, and he surged to stand up and escape the warmth on his shoulder. He took a few steps forward - one or two more than he intended, when gravity seemed to yank him forward and he had to counter the sensation - gritting his teeth and struggling to keep his voice low. "You got your two questions. We're done here."

The softest sigh escaped her, and he didn't turn to look back at her as the rustle and groan of fabric announced her standing up. She didn't walk away, though, lingering there a moment before she spoke. "Nick, if you guys are barely friends, then we are total strangers. But I've gotten the chance to see the worst in people, and that's not what I see in you guys. Y'all care about each other. That was rare enough before the world flipped upside-down... now, it's sort of amazing."

He said nothing. He just closed his eyes, tilted his head, and blindly took a sip from the bottle of vodka.

"So, here. Second gift." Something thumped against the sofa, a gentle but flat impact, but he didn't react. "I can't tell you what to do, but I can tell you you'll regret it if you don't leave a door open. Night, hoss."
Nick listened to her leave, waiting until he heard the soft click of the door shutting down the hall. Only then did he glance down at the bottle in his grip, grimace, and turn his head. He didn't know what he expected to see, but he was surprised all the same.

The small notebook sat there, the one that his team had been passing around for days, full of their identifying information. He had not joined the list, and it didn't take a sober mind to piece together Lena's intent: she wanted him to fill it out.

He stared at it, for a long while, like an adversary. If he left, if he abandoned them alongside the sisters and went his own way, what was the point? Even if they survived their respective journeys, even if the world found itself settled back onto some sort of even keel, would they want to find him? Would he want to find them?

Regret was second nature to him, and he rarely gave himself the leniency of allowing it to affect his choices. Certainly, he rarely embraced the feeling in anything but useless hindsight.

It took him a significant amount of time - and a little more alcohol - before he convinced himself to approach. Nick glanced blearily over the first floor of the building before looking down squarely at the journal. Atop it was a slim permanent marker, slanted at a diagonal across the surface.

Numb with the buzz of liquor, uncertain, he picked it up.
He came to awareness in a hospital room -

No.

The hospital room.

He knew that instantly; he knew, somehow, exactly where he was. It was this intrinsic awareness before he'd even opened his eyes.

It was silent, and in that silence, he felt, somehow, calm. He should have been panicked, but all he felt was a soft dread. Resignation filled him more than fear, even though he knew he should have been afraid.

IVs tied him to the bed. A cast protected the broken bones of arm. The sheets strangled his breath, too tight, too clinging, swaddled like bonds on his aching body. He closed his eyes and waited.

They held on, just a little longer - then they were gone, as if they'd never even been there.

He got up.

He started toward the door, its jaws hanging open as if in invitation. When he walked through it, his pace was slow and wary. Every step seemed to stretch on, muscles struggling as if he walked through molasses and not air. His body, he realized, was no longer broken.

The hospital was empty.

Its tiled environs stretched on in either direction, and he stood, refusing to move. He would not obey the dream's designs, would not follow the path it laid out before him, the death he knew was awaiting him inside the darkness around him. He would not walk into its arms willingly.

Then Ellis was there, at the end of the hallway.

He stood there, shoulders low, facing away. He did not move, did not stir, and seemed so still that he couldn't have been real. Nick stared at him, and tears began to streak down his face, breaths becoming painful and damp in his chest.

Nick wanted to hold him. Just one more time.

He was so far away.

The Georgian's head turned.

Suddenly, Ellis was just in front of him - or, perhaps, in the fractured way that dreams played out, he'd moved to Ellis' side. The younger man's hands lifted to cradle his jawline, and though Nick stiffened and tried to recoil, he could not bring himself to complete the motion.

His crying stopped.

Ellis smiled at him, gently, a fondness overwhelming in his eyes.
"Nicolas... it's okay."

Nick surged forward, grabbed him, and they slid into an embrace. Hands slid up to tangle fingers in his hair and he buried his face against the other man's shoulder, squeezing arms against his lower back to bring them tight against one another, pulling the Georgian almost onto his toes.

"It's okay." that soft drawl murmured against the tender skin behind his ear. Turning his chin until it brushed Ellis' neck, Nick opened his mouth to whisper back - "I'm sorry" or "I love you" or "Please" or anything amongst the jumble of desperate things that clamoured for superiority in his head - but words did not leave his lips.

Instead, he bit down.

Blood filled his mouth, hot and coppery, and they fell to the ground. Ellis screamed, fists striking out at his sides, but a second mouthful of skin gave way to wet muscle and pulsing flesh, and he could not stop himself from swallowing. The urge to vomit rose.

Instead, he bit again, teeth sinking deeper to carve out the gash and tearing flesh as his head jerked, sharply.

His hands pinned the other man to the ground, nails digging into his flesh until they, too, pierced and found purchase in cloth and then meat. Blood puddled around them, crawling along the crevices and grout of the tile, gathering in deep crimson as he tore deeper.

"I don't understand." cried out Ellis' voice, screamed it, garbled as blood choked in his mouth.

When Nick awoke, it was almost with a scream of his own. His fingers were clawing at his mouth before he could stop them, and his fingertips slid on blood where it coated his lips and his cheek, friction only reinforced by the stubble on his jaw -

Yet, when he pulled his hands away, it was saliva that glistened on his palm, not blood.

Alcohol still pounded in his system, in perfect time to his panic. Fear made his lungs shudder as they drew in air, skin buzzing numbly, and he scrabbled to shove off the blankets from his body. He barely remembered staggering his way up the stairs and swapping watch with Christophe. Even fuzzier was the memory of the Spaniard's confusion at his state, though he didn't recall having much of an answer.

In fact, he didn't recall doing much of anything but throwing himself onto the bed in limp ragdoll - which raised the question of how the blanket ended up tucked over him.

That answer seemed obvious.

"Fuck." he whispered, feeling his throat crack like dry leather. He could still feel tendon snapping between his teeth, flesh giving way, the warm viscera pressing into his tongue. Worse, perhaps, was the sound of Ellis' screaming still ringing in his ears. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He wanted to lean over the bed and vomit. He wanted to throw himself into the nearest shower and set it as hot as it could go, scald the skin off his bones. He wanted to do anything but feel the sensations that he could not yet shake.

He wanted - needed - to know that the nightmare was just that: a nightmare, nothing more. He needed to scatter the images in his head, replace them with something else, anything else.
Reason urged him to calm, but there was no soothing the fear that had set his heartbeat to a furious rhythm. He fell effortlessly to panic, and panic drove him clumsily to his feet. He tried to run, yet the cloying fog of inebriation only-just giving way to a burgeoning hangover had him stumbling.

He barely had the awareness to try and muffle his steps as he breached into the hallway, dizzied and turned-around in the unfamiliar space. His pulse roared in his ears as he struggled to remember anything at all, let alone the layout of the house. Where was Ellis, and where was he?

The hallway seemed covered in doors, though perhaps that was merely his vision blurring them into duplicate and triplicate. For an instant, his surroundings loomed on ahead of him, and the fear that the dream had not yet ended pierced sharp through him.

Master bedroom. keened a desperate part of him, and he moved, sliding a hand along the wall as he went in an attempt to keep his balance.

As suddenly as he'd thought it, his hand found the door. He did not allow himself the luxury of considering his actions before his fingers circled the doorknob, white-knuckled, and twisted. Thrusting himself through the doorway, Nick found himself momentarily frozen.

Sprawled belly-down across the bed placed against the far wall, Ellis had kicked most of the sheets off himself. His limbs were in a messy disarray, his body diagonally stretched from one corner of the bed to another. His face was not visible in the dark, but for the curly hair tossed by sleep and the curve of his cheek and temple.

His body rose and fell, just gently, bared arms and legs betraying that he'd stripped to his boxers and white undershirt. He slept peacefully, alive and well, his sleep undisturbed by whatever darkness had taken up habitation in Nick's. The gambler's heartbeat eased, fractionally, the heat of his frantic concern falling to a simple, pained cold sweat.

That should've been enough.

Not enough. keened that voice, again, firmly.

Nick advanced, his fingers brushing the doorknob as he went to pull it gently shut behind him. The door clicking shut made his body tense, but Ellis' did not stir.

He didn't know what his intentions were as he staggered forward, crossing the bedroom toward the bed. He was not, precisely, thinking - and certainly not in any meaningful way. He knew he needed some tactile reassurance, just to touch him, feel his breath or his heartbeat, hear a mumbled sigh.

He was, perhaps, afraid of the inevitable continuation of that nightmare if he didn't prove it wrong.

Slipping close to the side of the bed, almost stumbling into it when his knee found the side of the mattress before he could stop his stride, Nick stretched one trembling hand out toward the Georgian's slumbering body. His fingers faltered as they stretched, shaking, the tremor flickering up his arm.

Then his fingertips touched bare bicep, the skin warm, pocked with scabs and scuffs that broke up the otherwise soft surface. A stuttered breath left Nick with a slack jaw as he let his fingertips follow the curve of the muscle, goosebumps crawling their way up his arms and the back of his neck.

Not enough.

Gentle, tender, Nick followed his arm up to his shoulder, tracing the line of his clavicle where his
awkwardly folded arm sat it in sharp relief from his neck. The trembling grew to something almost uncontrollable, his fingers trying to curl, but he managed still to press the backs of his knuckles against the pulse just by Ellis' jaw.

Feeling the other man's pulse was near-impossible over his own pounding in his veins, and he did his best to inhale and calm himself. However, it stuttered in his throat, hitching as if in a hiccup, and the motion carried through his limbs.

Abruptly, like time had been in slow motion and only just now caught up, Ellis' body stiffened. An arm shot out, striking wildly toward the shape hovering near him. The blow was aimed messily, but it managed to skate against Nick's bare side, catching knuckles on his ribs.

It hurt, though there was some distance between him and the pain, alcohol and tangled panic laying a thin veil over his senses. He sucked in a sharp breath before tightening his grip into a cradle against the side of Ellis' neck. "It's me, Ace." he rushed out, haggard, reflexive.

Ellis did not relax so much as freeze.

His head lifted, slowly, pushing against the hand on his neck until Nick's thumb pressed into the soft skin beneath his ear. As his chin came off the pillow, tilting his face up, enough of the low light scattered to glint over his eyes. They were just subtle sparks of wet shine in the dark, peering up toward the older man.

"Nick...?" he whispered, and the sensation of his throat moving under Nick's palm made him shiver, mind twisting with the too-vivid recollection of tearing into that flesh with his teeth. He wanted to pull away, recoil, but he couldn't convince himself to break contact. "Is... is somethin' wrong?"

Nick could not summon breath to respond that did not immediately leak from him in a pant.

That soft, heady sleepiness laid a warmth to his voice that almost overwhelmed his concern, and a breathiness betrayed a subtle embarrassment. "Are you okay...?" he asked with a flustered uncertainty that did not stop him from nuzzling into Nick's wrist, leaning into the touch as his initial confusion faded.

Relief flooded him at a soft delay, finally accepting the stimuli as reality. He tingled as if he'd been running out of air and only now sucked in a breath, and he couldn't stop his other hand from lifting up. He slid both of them to cup against Ellis' jawline, so much like the Georgian had done in his dream, and let his lids lower with a fragile exhaustion.

He could feel the other man's body stiffen further, feel him start to tremble just subtly, feel the strain as Ellis struggled to keep still. He just wasn't sure whether Ellis wanted to push closer or fight to free himself.

"You don't know what it's like." left him, lips numb and tongue stiff. Delirium felt better than panic, by inches. It also came with a loss of control. A dam had broken in his chest, and out poured his insides, puddling like blood on hospital tiles, hot liquid soaking into his clothing -

"It's so fucking easy for you, to just... be fine. To just take it all in, to believe everything's going to be fine. I'm so fucking scared, every fucking day, and you just keep going. You don't know what it's like to fucking fail every time you give half a shit about something. I'm going to let you down, or lose you, or run you out of caring, and I - can't."

Fingertips brushed onto his chest, a touch that almost startled him, and Ellis' digits skated against
the whorling grain of the hair there, a tingling sensation. The intake of air preceded some attempt to speak, but Nick pushed forward, setting one knee against the edge of the mattress to balance himself.

A sharper suck of air made Ellis' body tense, those fingers going curled against Nick's chest, silent at his approach. The angle of the Georgian's chin, now adjusted, tilted up to offer a better view of his face. Even in the dark Nick could pick out a flush threatening the highlights of his features, his parted lips and half-closed eyes seeming to beg to be kissed.

They wanted.

Yet, confusion sat heavy and thick on the younger man's face. His voice cracked when he tried to speak, at first, and he had to pant in a quick, damp breath before trying again. "N-Nick. Yer scarin' me a little. Are you -" Suddenly, his expression softened, just a little, mixing worry with an abrupt flicker of disappointment. "Are you drunk? You smell like -"

The faintest laugh choked at Nick's throat, and he flexed his fingers, letting his palms skate into a softened cradle on the younger man's cheeks, either pinky and ring finger slipping behind his ears. "Yeah." he croaked. "And that's the least of my problems."

Ellis shifted his weight, parted lips sealing into a frown, and he started to sit up. Protest was apparent on his features, but before he could utter it, Nick let a thumb rest over his lower lip. The touch quieted him, even just for a moment.

It was, at least, long enough to allow Nick to finish.

"You'll either fall out of love with me or die because of me, or we'll all die in this fuckin' hellhole, and I can't watch it happen. I can't... lose you, too." He sounded desperate, and he didn't have the strength or focus to attempt to sound otherwise. "Let me... let me choose, this time, Ellis. If I can just... choose, instead of getting my fuckin' hopes up, maybe... I'll make it out. Maybe we can both fuckin' survive each other. Maybe I won't kill you, and you won't kill me."

Shock gentled Ellis' brow, jaw going a little slack. His eyes searched Nick's, and where he had only gently touched the other man's chest, his hand now settled fully against his sternum. He rubbed up and onto Nick's shoulder, gripping, and the touch of that rough palm sent a shudder down his frame.

It was a cruel thing to do.

The Georgian's voice was painfully soft when he whispered. "I love you, Nick, more'n I know how tuh say." Hearing the words, just then, felt like too much. It struck Nick somewhere he'd left undefended, and he forced in a ragged breath through his nose. "You drive me crazy tuh all hell, 'n'yer also the reason I'm still alive. I'm not goin' nowhere, not today, not tomorrow - I ain't givin' up on you, 'n'I told you that already, so stop with the bullshit."

With the faintest smile, Ellis let his other hand raise, settling over one of Nick's where it lay against his jaw. His fingertips only just found purchase to curl around his palm. "Whatevah happened tuh you, before, whut you did or somebody did to you... it don't have tuh matter, if you don't let it. It don't have tuh stop you from bein' happy forever."

Nick wanted to pull away. He wanted to draw back and walk out, with or without the last scraps of his self-respect... and, perhaps, leaving Ellis with his. Instead, he hovered there, breathing thickly through his nose, unable to convince himself to move.
Ellis seemed to take advantage of his hesitance, pushing forward, and it felt like a motion that was somehow frighteningly fast and much, much too slow. His voice was a coaxing drawl. "Darlin', just... can't you trust me?"

Nick's hands found their way to slide around the back of his head, burying fingers in the curls at the nape of his neck, gripping there, unsure if he meant to drag him closer or hold him at bay. Ellis pulled against the grip, even when it drew his hair taut, and a soft intensity thickened his voice.

"We've been trustin' each other with our lives fer weeks. Can't you... trust me, just a little, with... you? I promise, I... I won't hurt'cha. I won't."

Something shattered in him, a soft fracture that he didn't know if he'd survive, like maybe his heart had cracked apart and each dull heartbeat was one more pulse of blood draining into his chest. It was a painful sensation, one only heightened when Ellis' thumb stroked up his neck, soothingly.

"If yuh want me... Yuh got me, Nick."

He gasped out a sigh, closing his eyes, shoulders shivering when Ellis' hand touched his face. Ellis seemed to hesitate before brushing his knuckles against the flat of his cheekbone.

Nick only noticed, then, that there were tears streaked there. He didn't know whether he'd awoken with them or if he was too numb to notice they'd fallen as he stood there. Reflexive, panicked just softly, he reached to grab Ellis' wrist and pull it away. It took effort - actual force - in the instant before Ellis relented.

"I don't. I don't want you." escaped him, almost a laugh, dizzied. "I need you, and that's what fucking scares -"

His words were lost against the firm pressure of lips on his.

He inhaled, sharply, and an exhale puffed against him as Ellis sighed in turn. There was a moment where he'd closed his eyes, but Nick had not, and in the strange double-vision caused by their proximity he saw the way Ellis' brow had smoothed, his features soft and relaxed. He looked relieved.

Had anyone ever looked so whole, so complete, at just a touch between them? Just a kiss?

All at once, their hands darted to clutch for purchase on each other. The younger man's left hand dove to curl around the back of his neck, his right snatching at the waistband of Nick's sweats and clenching fingers in it to urge him close.

Nick followed, body crawling up onto the bed, almost scrambling to get closer. Ellis moved with him, and the flustered sprawl and shift and scrabble of limbs ended with the younger man flat on his back, Nick sliding to nudge between his thighs. Their kiss was clumsy, messy, and only when they thudded flat did Nick get enough leverage to deepen it.

A moan rumbled in his throat, and a softer sound from Ellis responded. His fingers threaded up and into Nick's hair, gripping, holding him close. His free hand slid to splay fingers against the small of Nick's back, a too-familiar plea for friction.

Nick obeyed, rolling his hips, and the thin fabric of sweatpants and boxer provided very little buffer. They both stuttered out gasps, bodies tensing, Ellis' nails biting into his back and his scalp all at once.

Nick had tried cocaine, once. Just once. He'd been younger, then, and more prone to such things...
or, at least, prone to the circles in which such things seemed inevitable. He'd tried it once, and the euphoria and wild, manic, *orgasmic* joy of it had terrified him. The crash of coming off it had been like a subtle death, a wilting, and he'd felt the edge of a sheer cliff just before him come sharply into focus.

He had known he'd never stop once he'd started. He was *less*, just by virtue of knowing the heights it had taken him and how far the drop back down had been, and he'd struggled to feel normal for weeks.

The power Ellis held over him should have terrified him, too, the intoxication of every noise, every squirm, every half-formed whimper that might've been a "Please" or an "I love you" or an "I forgive you" - it should have sent him running, fleeing, because he knew that in its inevitable absence he would never feel normal again.

Instead, he pressed onward.

As their mouths locked, the Northerner's hands dropped low, dipping thumbs underneath the bottom edge of Ellis' already-tangled undershirt. He pushed, palms settling to skate up and stroke at his ribs, soaking in the way Ellis shivered at the touch. He arched his back to press into it, desperate, and not even the painful lurch of what remained of the alcohol in Nick's system could stop a flutter of lust through him.

There was a moment where they disengaged, breaths hot between them, where they had the chance to stop. Their gazes locked, Nick's blurred and red and damp, Ellis' sharp and alert. There was an awareness between them, an unstated ultimatum.

In the face of it, Nick hesitated, body giving the subtlest sway as a wave of dizziness cut through the fog. Something cold twisted in his chest, a pain, and he struggled to piece together more than a few thoughts at once. *What am I doing? What are we doing? This wasn't... supposed to... I didn't mean...*

"I didn't..." he croaked, a shiver passing through him, just subtly.

"Nick." Ellis' voice was soft. So soft, he might've not heard it at all if his pulse had been pounding any louder in his ear. His eyes drifted back into focus, and he stared down at the Georgian, watched his mouth move. It had the faintest curl at the edges, so warm and soft. Trusting, and pleading for trust. "It's okay. 'M here. I got'cha."

*Not enough.* whispered that voice, as Nick pushed the undershirt up, forcing them to part just long enough to pull it entirely off. He could only watch as Ellis flopped back onto the bed, bruised and bare-chested and gorgeous, and lifted his arms up in a beckoning gesture.

*Not enough.*

Chapter End Notes

*IMG SOURCED TO aghxst on Tumblr - DO NOT REPOST ELSEWHERE WITHOUT CREDIT*
Chapter 281

Ellis couldn't stop himself from arching up off the mattress, his fingers clutched in the tangled sheets, a hushed whimper leaving his tightly pursed lips. Nick's mouth was hot and wet against the curve of his hip, tongue skating over a fresh bruise there and spooling up a deep ache... though that was not the only ache he felt.

It was hard to focus, with the older man's breath huffing against his navel, yet his head rang with it -

"I'm so fucking scared."

"I can't lose you, too."

"I need you."

It felt surreal. It felt, more than anything, like drowning. He'd waited so long to hear the words that the moment felt too fast and too rushed. He wanted to turn a dial and slow things down, reverse time, halt it entirely and spend a few moments suspended there together.

But Nick was... himself, and drunk, and there was a rhythm and a pattern between them that had not gotten any less comfortable since the last time they touched one another. As much as he wanted to talk, Nick was more vulnerable and scared than he'd ever seen him, delicate in a way that was almost frightening.

Was it such a price to pay to comfort him? Just for now?

"Oh, hell." the Georgian hummed, knees trembling to spread, though his legs were mostly trapped under Nick's weight. He bucked against the pinning pressure, and the other man's hand stroked up and into his boxers through the leg.

Nick's fingers rubbed into the crook of his hip and then over the fuzz of his pelvis, the edge of a hand only barely grazing the tip of his half-risen erection.

"Shit -"

The constraints of his boxers with Nick's arm trapped inside meant that every motion drew the seam taut along his midline, and the pressure against his stiffening cock made him squirm.

"So fuckin' sexy." Nick husked out, hoarse, lips and nose brushing against his belly and up to the soft, sucked-in divot just below his ribs. "How much did you think about me touchin' you again, huh? You go this long without jerking off, or did you sneak into the bathroom once or twice? You come thinkin' of this?" He punctuated the statement with another brush of his hand, rubbing the heel of his hand against the warm flesh perking up with every touch.

Ellis felt a throb of arousal and the harsh flutter of embarrassment that came along with it. The subtle slur to the conman's voice only made it feel filthier, somehow, along with the not-insignificant scent of alcohol. A pant left him, clenching his fists tighter in the blankets. "Quit talkin' like that." he gasped out. "I-I didn't ."

"No?" Lifting his head, Nick shifted his hand until he could wrap his fingers around the other man's length. The dry touch made Ellis jolt, teeth catching on his lower lip and toes curling. "Not even once? Didn't even think about it? Didn't wake up hard and think about ridin' me?"
He whimpered past the bite, eyes half-closing. "I-I thought about it." he admitted, and his honesty was rewarded with a firm squeeze, his eyes fluttering shut at the stimulation. "But I... guess it would'uh just made me..." He hesitated, and the other man's shoulders stiffened, and he might've not had the courage if it hadn't been for the state that Nick was in. "I couldn't."

Slowly, almost clumsily, Nick retracted his arm from its confines, and lifted onto his hands and knees. He crawled up Ellis' body, knuckles pressed into the mattress to balance his weight, until his hands were fisted beside either of the other man's shoulders and his knees were pinned against Ellis' hips. He stared down, eyes just a glint in the dark, and released a slightly choked laugh.

"I ruin you that bad?" he murmured, and there was something a little strained in it, the tone making Ellis' eyes snap open. However, he could see little from his shadowed position underneath the older man.

Tentatively, Ellis raised his hands, fingertips brushing up Nick's arms. He let them stroke over the man's shoulders, and settle into a loose loop behind his neck with their fingers laced together. "I ain't had no privacy, anyway, 'n'that ain't -" he started, but bit the inside of his cheek and tried again. "It ain't like that. Yer here now. That's all that matters, okay, Nick? You bein' here is all that matters. So quit worryin'."

The man seemed frozen, a tremble flickering through his frame, and the softest frown twitched at the corner of Ellis' mouth at his falter. With abrupt determination, he surged up, using his grip around Nick's shoulders and a jerk of one leg to flip the older man onto his back.

The startled "Tits -" from Nick as he was rolled and struck the mattress was tremendously satisfying.

Taking advantage of his momentary disorientation, Ellis shifted his body into a straddle on Nick's lap, a pleased shiver traveling up his spine as he settled down. He leaned forward, resting his elbows into the niches between Nick's arms and his chest, letting his face lower until his mouth brushed against the man's chest. "C'mon." he murmured, and the way he felt Nick's body shiver made his heart ache. "You trust me?"

He felt, for a moment, a gentle humour - Nick had said the words to him, once, but the tables had turned.

A faint snort said the Northerner did not miss it, either.

"Dumbshit." he hushed, and before Ellis could react, a hand gripped under his chin and pulled him up until their mouths bumped together. The kiss was softer, this time, slower, and Ellis couldn't help but let his body melt down and settle flat against Nick's. Warmth spread through him, along with the sting of threatening tears.

Then Nick's hand pushed, and he found himself broken from the kiss. The gambler licked at his own lips before flashing the smallest smile, and Christ if it wasn't that little stirringly handsome one that appeared sometimes when he was too tired to twist it into his usual smirk. "Lotion in the bathroom."

Heat rose to Ellis' face as he processed the statement over his initially foggy attention, eyes blinking in surprise before he averted them. "O-oh. Yeah. Uh..." Nick's smile turned a little sharper at his embarrassment - then faded when he shifted away. The Georgian crawled up just a pace until he could stretch an arm out and reach toward the slim-legged nightstand beside the bed.

"What are you -?" Nick muttered, voice cutting to quiet as Ellis pulled the drawer open. The
Georgian had fallen to a distinct, hot flush by the time he scooted back down to sit on Nick's lap, right hand gripping the curved, oblong shape of the pump-topped lotion bottle.

It took Nick a moment to process. His eyes suddenly flickered wide, and before Ellis could do more than open his mouth, the older man had hooked a hand behind his neck. He pulled him down, teeth finding his jaw, biting along the soft curve of bone.

"Thought about it, huh? That's more than thinkin' about it." he hissed, between nips, his free hand sliding to stroke down Ellis' bare back with his nails, and the Southerner couldn't help but melt into the touches even as his cheeks burned. Nick's voice got huskier with every word, fingers tightening against Ellis' neck. "You just gonna touch yourself, or did you think about spreadin' yourself open? Sittin' on your hand, fuckin' desperate for it, moaning my name... you need it that bad?"

Ellis shivered, arching his spine softly as Nick's hand traveled lower, circling against his lower back. Shame dictated that he should argue, but his arousal was well-betrayed by the tightness across his boxers as his erection twitched eagerly. "N-Nick, Jesus." he huffed, tilting his head, urging Nick's mouth lower toward his throat. "How drunk're you...?"

He felt the Northerner hesitate before drifting his lips against the curve of Ellis' neck, and felt the tension rise in the way his fingers stilled. He wasn't sure if it was his statement, or something else, and he couldn't help but wonder at it... and certainly did not have the context of Nick's nightmare to parse out the reasons behind it.

"Are you sure -" he started, cut off when teeth scraped against his neck, suction bringing a wet heat to his skin.

It made him squirm, gasping out a breath, and the lotion bottle was twisted out of his grip. Without pulling his mouth all the way away from Ellis' neck, Nick held the bottle up and above the younger man's back, letting his other hand lift to twist the pump-top entirely off. "Shut up, kid. Fuck's sake." he mumbled into his skin. "Yeah."

He threw the top, the plastic thunking lightly against the carpeted floor a short distance away, and the next thing Ellis felt was the cold splatter of liquid against the small of his back - like Nick had just upended the open bottle over him and squeezed.

He stifled a yelp, jolting forward at the chilled sensation.

"Too much!" he protested, already feeling it start to leak like molasses down the dimple of his spine. One of Nick's hands darted to palm over the mess, and his fingers dipped under the waistband of Ellis' boxers, even as he snorted against Ellis' neck after the younger man hissed, "Shit damn, that's cold!"

"Whiny." Nick rasped, chiding, and affectionate.

Ellis had just enough time to brace before the teeth on his neck bit down, and Nick's slick hand stroked between his cheeks, smearing the lotion as he did so. It dribbled lower, even, a ticklish sensation that was shortly overwhelmed by Nick's middle finger stroking directly and firmly against the ring of muscle there.

The distraction of the cold trickling between his legs didn't stop it from sending a thrill up his spine. He couldn't help but buck his hips, leaning into the touch, and he snatched one hand to clutch at the sheets while the other darted to grab at Nick's bicep. He managed to stifle himself into just a faint moan of, "Oh, hell."
While it was better than nothing, the lotion wasn't exactly intended for the purpose. Not even Nick's much-too-liberal application could quite take the bite out of it when his fingertip pressed inside, and the slightest hiss left him as he sucked in air past his bitten lip.

Ellis reflexively leaned back onto it, eager to get through that familiar, initial discomfort. Before he could move much, though, Nick had retracted his hand. He let his head drop to the mattress, hair mussed by the gesture, sparing a strained frown up toward the other man.

He grunted, hoarse, "Don't let me - ... hurt you."

Ellis' heart could have broken right there at that soft pause, so loaded with gentle subtext - at the way his reddened eyes averted, almost in shame. *Poor thing's a mess... Ain't never seen him like this. It'd be sweet if it weren't kinda scary.* In that moment, Nick was a pendulum swinging perilously to and fro, grazing the tattered edges of a breakdown. *If he's drunk now, whut's he gonna think tomorrow?*

That question raised a more intimidating one: *Am I... takin' advantage of him? Whut if he regrets all this when he sobers up?*

They had, however, moved well beyond the point of no return. Ellis could not bring himself to consider turning the man away now, even if he'd been capable of it, and even if he'd thought it would do more good than harm. He felt starved of Nick's touch, starved of Nick's simple proximity. The yearning was a raw hunger, bone-deep, and he wasn't strong enough to deny it.

Whatever happened in the morning, they needed each other. He was more sure of that than he'd been in a long time - and one way or another, he'd convince Nick of the same.

Quickly, Ellis squirmed his hips, eagerly leaning down to brush his lips against Nick's, knees sliding wider apart as he did so. He felt the older man's body soften to him, a sigh escaping the man and one of his arms - lotion bottle still gripped in his hand - settling to loop around the Georgian's waist.

"S'okay. Promise." Ellis soothed. "Just go a li'l slower."

A mumbled affirmation left Nick, just before he lifted his chin to seal their mouths in a kiss. Ellis was the one to melt, then, flattening down onto his chest with a hum. The arm cradling his waist tightened, and he let a soft whimper escape him, deepening the kiss as Nick's fingers slipped back against him.

They circled, massaging, his motions turning into a rhythmic pattern that drew Ellis' boxers tight against his hipbones. The cold edge of a ring startled him at the apex of every stroke, excitement making his body tense and his heart rate spike just a little. He kept himself muffled, even as their kiss weakened to a simple press of their foreheads, and even as the rubbing pressure had his body reacting with gusto.

He bumped his hips forward, rocking into Nick's lap, an urgent noise leaving him. Nick responded by gripping tightly with his looped arm and pushing them into a roll, clumsily dragging Ellis flat onto his back. As the gambler's bodyweight flattened him against the mattress, he couldn't help but shudder.

The Georgian tried to hook his ankles behind Nick's thighs and urge him into a lazy grind - but the older man leaned back before he could. With space now between them, Nick twisted his hand to pry Ellis' boxers away from his body, dragging them roughly up his thighs. Any precise manipulation of them one-handed seemed to be a challenge, though, and Ellis readily lifted his hips
and reached down to help push them down and off his legs.

Ellis tossed them blindly, relaxing back, now completely nude against the sheets. He might've shivered if his skin hadn't felt on fire - and he might've felt embarrassed, in any other moment. Nick was already intimately familiar with most all of him, of course, though that wasn't entirely the point.

He felt, for the first time, completely raw.

He had been vulnerable with Nick plenty of times before. Nudeness in and of itself, the act of sex, was vulnerable. He had been vulnerable with all of them, in fact; wasn't trusting his life in his teammates' hands the peak of such a thing?

This was different.

This was the first time it felt like all their cards were on the table.

There was a moment where Nick sat there, balanced on his knees, and looked down at him and across his body, and though it was too dark to quite see his eyes... there was a wistfulness, a longing, in the way his shoulders slumped. Raw and hoarse, he whispered, "Fuck. You're gorgeous."

Embarrassment did settle in, then, but it was a soft and pleasant thing that made his lips curve. Ellis let his legs settle against Nick's waist, squeezing with his knees and hooking his feet gently at the small of Nick's back. He couldn't help but bite his tongue as Nick dumped a splatter of lotion onto his palm, and then dropped the bottle to the side, smearing the cream between his hands.

Ellis had just enough time to open his mouth before the man made two simultaneous moves. One hand dove to take advantage of the cant of his hips and slip between his legs, the tip of his middle finger easing inside just an inch. The other hand pushed forward, slickly circling around his cock.

He expected, for the most part, how it usually worked: Nick would stretch him, stroking him just enough to keep his mind off any discomfort and get him desperate, make him beg a little. That was not what he got.

Immediately, the gambler's grip tightened, squeezing as he let his hand stroke up from base to tip. Warmed by his hand, the oily slickness gave just enough friction that Ellis squirmed, jaw slackening as he whimpered out a soft, "J-Jesus, God, please -"

The begging came anyway, it seemed.

A huffed chuckle left Nick, tilting his chin as if to get a better look down at the younger man. His upper body wobbled just softly, listing forward, and humour twisted in his voice as he slurred out, "Sweetheart, got my finger in your ass. You can call me Nick."

Ellis wished - wished, so much - that his heart didn't skip a beat.

"Shut up..." he groaned, letting his head fall back, eyes closing as Nick sunk his finger to the second knuckle. His legs tightened, cinching around the other man's waist, and felt his breath shallow as pleasure flooded up his spine, tension faltering throughout him. He wanted to relax and enjoy it, but an alarm clamoured in the back of his head. "Nick, you gotta - gotta slow down -"

Instead of obeying, Nick quickened his movements, fingers circling to a firm fist as he let his ring finger push gently to join the other. The stretch was painless; a thrilling fullness that made him push his knuckles against his mouth to muffle a shaky moan. They eased deeper, curling and
It had been far too long, and it felt far too good. At the rate Nick was going, Ellis would not last... and he wanted to last. He wanted, at least, to have Nick seated inside him before it happened. He wasn't sure how it all managed to be too much and entirely not enough.

"Nick, I can't - I don't wanna -"

Nick's hand lifted away from his swollen length, and past the urgent and animal disappointment, he allowed himself some relief. The cessation of touch did not stop the pleasure nudged up by the fingers inside him, but it did ease the spooling tension of oncoming orgasm. His erection throbbed, almost in protest, and his hips bucked against the fingers inside him in a desperate attempt to thrust onto them.

It was, perhaps, a wild attempt to provoke Nick into advancing. And an effective one, it seemed; he felt the intake of breath, Nick's sides gently expanding against his thighs, a hissed sound that might've been approval - and suddenly, a slick hand had his knee gripped by the side.

Ellis didn't have much leverage to fight, even if he'd wanted to. He could only gasp in air through his nose as Nick lifted the younger man's leg and let it drape over his shoulder, forcing the Georgian into more of a spread.

He had just a moment to glance over Nick's face, examine his features. He saw an odd brand of focused grit there, gilded with a vague consternation. He was holding back, or holding in, something, and Ellis wasn't sure what. The faint grin of dizzy humour was nowhere to be found.

Before he could formulate a thought on it, Nick moved.

To his conflicted pleasure and dismay, after they'd settled fully into the new position, Nick settled his hand back around the erection bobbing from the sudden jostle. He circled his fist around it, letting his thumb play over the tip, the calloused surface rough against the plush skin there. The new position gave him more room, and as suddenly as a second finger had entered him, a third slipped into place.

The lotion was already drying and absorbing in, and friction dragged at both motions. If anything, however, the subtle pull against his flesh brought the sensation into sharper focus, and he found himself writhing his spine against the mattress.

"O-oh -" he managed, voice pitching higher, and he reflexively crammed his fist against his mouth to force it shut. He braced himself, not even quite sure what he was bracing for.

Then Nick's fingers picked up a thrusting motion, leveraged with his thumb pressed into the crook of Ellis' hip. They almost slid out entirely before pushing back in, and the feeling of his body adjusting to the penetration only heightened the tumult of sensory overload rising up as the hand on his cock resumed its strokes, but faster, tighter -

Climax came abruptly, passing through him with such heat and warmth that it spilled all the way to the very edges of him, curling his toes and dragging a stifled cry, guttural against his knuckles. The snap of red-hot pleasure had his hips shuddering down to seat himself as far as he could onto Nick's fingers, riding out the pulses as his come puddled onto his stomach.

He was left panting and flushed... and just faintly disappointed, even as his body rung with the physical satisfaction.

There was still so much separating them; Nick hadn't even taken off his sweats. He wanted the
wild abandon, the intertwining of their limbs, the union between them. He wanted to hear Nick fall to grunts in his ear. He wanted them both to lose themselves in it, and maybe find each other in the familiar closeness.

Before he'd even fully pieced himself back together, he squirmed his lower body, bent knee squeezing Nick's shoulder. "Don't stop - I - you can still - ... I need yuh, too, so, please - jus'..."

Instead, Nick pulled back. There was a measured slowness to the way he withdrew, gently pulling his fingers out, and shifted to let Ellis' leg drop to the bed from off his shoulder. The urge rose to reach out and grab for him, to reject his retraction, but before he could even think to act on it, the older man had slid back and stood up.

His heart ached, confusion and hurt threatening at him - until Nick bolted, and it all warped into thready concern.

"Nick?"

Ellis' body tried to fail him, but he forged through the wobbly collapse of his arms to thrust his elbows back and lean his upper body up, startled, eyes just tracking the Northerner as he moved across the floor. He did not, however, make for the door - instead, he was headed for the bathroom at an unsteady stagger.

The bathroom door was pushed shut behind the man, but did not completely latch, leaving the soft thud of some collision audible...

... as well as - soon after - the unmistakable sound of retching.

It took Ellis a solid few seconds to fully process what was happening. As his frame slumped and his body came down from that initial high of orgasm, his mind chugged sluggishly back to life.

"Whut the... hell...?" he muttered, uncertainly glancing down to wince at himself.

Sitting alone, covered in his own mess and with most of his rear and pelvis smeared with pasty-white lotion, felt more than a little uncomfortable. It brought things into abrupt and unflattering focus, and all the worries he'd kept at bay came flooding back in full-force, along with the unpleasant heat of shame.

It was, then, painfully clear: Nick was so drunk, he'd barely kept himself together long enough to go through the motions. And if that were true, if he was barely in control of his faculties, what did that say about either of them? Ellis hadn't noticed and hadn't stopped things. Would Nick stand behind his words in the morning? Worse - would he remember any of it?

Softly, quietly, he nursed a momentary pang in his chest. He allowed himself a moment of regret, and maybe just an ounce of anger.

"Lord. The hell am I doin'?" he sighed out, forcing himself into a slight roll. He dragged himself to his feet even as his legs threatened to give out, gasping in air to soothe the wave of discomfort that came with his movement. Powering through it, he didn't bother to locate his clothes, moving instead directly for the bathroom.

The idea of knocking occurred to him, but he discarded it. Nudging the door open let him peer inside, and he was not surprised to find Nick knelt on the ground, draped forward over the toilet.

His elbows were braced on either side of the bowl, hands cradling either side of his head as if to keep it aloft over the basin, breaths shallow and quick. He spat into the toilet, and the motion
brought a shudder up his spine, like the beginning of a heave that he fought down.

A sigh slumped Ellis' shoulders, and he found himself mostly drained of anything but a vague sadness. Without speaking, he took a few careful steps forward, keeping a hand out and against the wall to balance himself. Nick's body tensed vaguely at his approach, but he did not break the silence, except for another half-hearted spit.

There was a towel draped over a rail bolted into the wall, and Ellis approached it, grabbing a fistful and yanking it free. He took a moment to clean himself, shakily, wiping clean his belly and blindly dragging it between his legs to bring himself to a level of decency.

He tried not to droop his head, tried not to feel the things that were clawing at him, not to feel used - because that wasn't fair. Nick was drunk and potentially ill, and even beyond that, hadn't even touched himself. He hadn't even undone his sweats. Only other time we've been intimate and he ain't - finished, was... Jerry.

His body stilled, and his head jerked back on his neck just a twitch. He frowned, softly, and found himself turning, soiled towel hung loosely in front of him. His gaze landed on Nick and found him unmoving, slumped bleakly over the toilet.

As if he felt the attention, Nick's hand lifted limply, visibly shaking, and dropped its weight against the toilet flush lever. The toilet began a fairly lazy flush, suction sending its contents cascading off and away, the water pressure middling and struggling. The noise was a low drone, almost a squeal, and it burbled unpleasantly as it began to settle.

Before it had quite quieted, Ellis hushed out, "Why'd you do this? Get drunk, come'n'find me. Why tuhnight?"

Nick's body shifted, and for a moment, Ellis thought it was a shrug and his only answer. Then, the Northerner spat again, shivering with the motion, and responded. "Bad dream." was all he said, and the mumbled slur to it sounded exhausted and small.

Frown deepening, Ellis cocked his head. He chewed on that for just a moment, but merely uttered, "Must'uh been some dream." He tossed the towel to the floor and crossed his arms over his chest, less in frustration and more in encroaching chill. "Nick... why didn't you say nothin'? Ain't exactly how I wanted it tuh go. I wouldn't've wanted tuh do nothin' if you were feelin' sick."

Simply, Nick thrust a shaky hand up, as if in bland indication. Duh, it said, like that were obvious.

He hadn't wanted Ellis to stop them.

His frown softened, then, and a sigh made his chin droop. He felt exhausted, and only some of that was the post-orgasm flagging of his strength. With a steeling of his jaw, he stepped closer, snatching up the bottle of mouthwash where it sat on the sink counter.

He cracked the top open, pouring a splash into the cap and offering it down toward the man knelt just a foot away. Nick's shoulders twitched, and he twisted his head, one reddened eye dimly looking over his bicep at the cup. A grunt made his body shift, and he forced himself up a few inches to grab it.

Ellis looked away as he did, glancing over the counter in front of him. There was a squat ceramic cup that seemed more intended to hold toothbrushes, but when he picked it up, it seemed fairly clean inside. He turned the faucet on, dipping the cup under it to fill it.

He kept quiet as Nick slugged back the mouthwash, swishing it between his cheeks and gargling it.
As the man spat it back out into the toilet, Ellis turned again, the cup of water now offered down.

"Drink." he stated, mildly satisfied when Nick silently obeyed, though he grimaced as he forced down a swallow of the tap water. As the man coughed, winced, and took another sip, Ellis shifted to set his hip against the edge of the sink counter. The cold laminated wood chilled at his bare skin, and he wished he'd thrown on his clothes, soiled or not.

His mouth opened, inhaling to talk, but Nick's quiet voice interrupted him.

"... sorry."

That hurt in a strange pang. A sigh drifted out of Ellis as he leaned forward, reaching to settle a hand under the Northerner's elbow. He gently lifted, trying to coax the man up off the tile. "Ain't no reason to apologize. Yer drunk, 'n' pukin' yer guts out was probably enough punishment, 'n'... I... should'uh known better."

That hurt, again, and he hadn't meant it to. He didn't feel used, he realized, but rather disappointed in himself; he'd fended off Nick's advances once, then doubted his actions, even though part of him knew it would've proven the man right. Given another chance, he'd given in... just like Nick had warned him he would.

Left in the wake of that, one single thought bounced around in the space of his skull: *Is this gonna change anythin'?*

Nick started to stand, gripping one hand onto the side of the toilet and the other onto the tank, but when he'd reached almost his full height, he faltered. His knees threatened to give, and Ellis wasted no time in sweeping forward to loop his arm under Nick's, gripping onto his side and pulling the Northerner tight to him. The older man grunted out a soft wheeze, but leaned into it all the same.

"C'mon, darlin'. Let's get you in bed, alright?" he mumbled, and Nick's stiffening didn't stop him from being whisked into a staggered walk back to the bedroom.

Nick didn't fight, but he also didn't say a word. His eyes struggled to stay open as they walked across the carpet, as if all his strength had drained and he might simply collapse. He was pliable, almost, as Ellis pushed him into the queen-size bed and nudged his limbs into something vaguely comfortable, then dragged the covers over him, careful to avoid the quadrant they'd made a mess of.

He wanted to brusquely find his clothes and leave, but he couldn't, not immediately. He lingered, taking a moment to smooth his palm over Nick's forehead, like he were brushing his hair into place. He was sweaty from the exertion of their dalliance - and the resulting bout of nausea - but not hot or clammy. He did not seem feverish.

The Northerner leaned away with a vague sound of protest, muttering up at him, slur thickened as he pressed into the pillow. "Fuckin' leave me to die."

A frown lingered at Ellis' lips, and he cocked his head down at the older man. It would've been the smart thing to do to leave, to not worsen what was already a confusing situation. He should've given Nick the opportunity to sober up, to feel a little better, so they could talk on more even terms. Maybe things would seem clearer in the morning.

Instead, he leaned forward, bending until he could press a kiss against the side of Nick's head. He felt distantly relieved when Nick did not make an effort to shift away again.

"I know it don't fix nothin', 'n'... I don't think it's a good idea, talkin' while yer drunk. But I... missed
you." Ellis nuzzled into the space behind the man's ear, huffing out a sigh. "Whatever you wanna say in the mornin', you remember this: I wouldn't take any'uv it back. Not before. Not you. Not this."

Nick's face buried against the pillow, a vague inhale making his shoulders rise as he clumsily shoved a hand toward his head, bringing the blankets with it as if in a half-hearted attempt to cover himself entirely. Ellis smiled, just a little, fondness creeping up at the childish move to hide.

_I still love you._ he wanted to say, say it again, keep saying it until Nick realized it was true and immutable and bigger than either of them. He wanted to pour it out and into his lover, fill the parts of Nick that were so clearly empty, warm the parts of him that were so clearly cold. He wanted to drown them both in it until they learned to breathe it like air.

He whispered, "Night, sugar."

The Northerner didn't respond, and, pressing another kiss against his ruffled hair, Ellis straightened. He gathered his clothes, tossing on his boxers and undershirt and carrying the rest in his arms. He tried to move quickly, quietly, lest he rethink his actions.

If he'd crawled into bed, would Nick have welcomed him? Would they inevitably gravitate into each other's arms, curl tightly together in their sleep, as Nick had a tendency to? Would they wake up and hide there, safe in the protection of sheets and pillows, and finally - _finally_ - speak the same language? Would something change for the better in that tender place?

He left, and he was not so proud as to not admit it was driven by some brand of fear.

The answer to any of those questions might have been no.
Chapter 282

With Christophe on watch, Ellis was nervous to make his way downstairs. He'd slipped into the hallway bathroom, quietly wetting a washcloth under the tap to clean himself up a bit more thoroughly, checking himself over for any obvious signs of Nick's affections.

There were a few marks, a soft bruising at his hip and just beside his jugular, but they were barely of note beyond the normal bruising and wear on his body. If he didn't draw attention to himself, it was unlikely anyone would think twice. He was fairly sure they'd been quiet, but with as difficult as it had been to stifle himself, the fear remained.

He wanted to laugh, a little. *Suddenly I'm the one panickin' 'bout us gettin' caught.*

Then the urge to laugh faded.

... *aw, man. Coach'n'Ro' are gonna be disappointed in me, ain't they?*

It would complicate things, and the last thing he wanted - the last thing either of them needed - was more complication. He was already unsure of how he'd navigate the morning, and adding on the team's assorted opinions wouldn't help... especially when he knew what some of them would be. The sisters remaining in the dark was a given, but even the others knowing would make things difficult.

*It ain't like... things're fixed. I know he was drunk and I know we shouldn't'uh done that. I know I... shouldn't'uh. But this didn't mean nothin'. I know Nick better'n he thinks I do; him comin' at me drunk like that, cryin', didn't mean nothin'. I just gotta convince him it'll be okay, no matter how embarrassed he is in the mornin'.*

For better or worse, he needed to handle the situation carefully - so, when he finally made his way downstairs, it was with extreme care.

Christophe was laying on the floor, sprawled out, his arm bent up so he could reach and settle his hand on his stumped shoulder. His digits dug in, curled, massaging into the muscle around his collarbone. He'd clearly turned his head to pay attention to the approach of footsteps, but he hadn't halted the motion of his fingers.

He didn't speak, a slim brow arching up as he watched the Georgian step through the dining room. Ellis wasn't sure how long he'd been on watch, but it was clear enough from his expression that he wasn't expecting to be traded with yet.

With that excuse stolen from him, Ellis settled on a tired smile and a shrug, and a lie. "Li'l weird bein' alone. Thought I'd come'n'settle down here." It was easy enough to feign tiredness when he didn't have to feign it at all; Nick had wrung him out in more ways than one.

The foreigner did not immediately seem to accept the statement, but he did not argue, either. His eyes drifted away, and Ellis took advantage of the silence to shuffle into the living room and crawl unceremoniously onto the couch. He grimaced as he bent and moved his knees and hips in the motion, flopping flat on his belly.

Judging by the pangs already starting in areas he'd rather not think about, there would be several things to regret in the morning.

Fortunately, Christophe made no effort to pry, and no effort to draw closer. He was likely lost in his
own thoughts, or simply cued into whatever subtle-or-otherwise indications Ellis was giving that he didn't want to talk. Whether or not that clashed with his explanation for his appearance either did not register, or Chris merely let it go.

If Ellis had been a little less caught up in the moment and averse to drawing attention to himself, he might have worried about the man. He might have at least noticed the way Chris' breathing was so even and slow as to seem laboriously intentional. As it was - and not out of apathy, certainly - he didn't notice.

The Spaniard, for his part, made no effort to be noticed.

Sleep came quicker than he'd have expected or even desired. He wanted to sit and stew on the night's events, and prepare himself for the next morning. He wanted to put together his words and rally his strength for the task ahead. It felt like he had a war to wage against whatever defenses Nick could summon in the meantime, and their relationship was on the line.

He needed to be ready to argue, to convince, to comfort and reassure. He needed to be stronger than he'd ever been, and strong enough to hold both of them up - even if Nick was determined to refuse his help. He needed to make good on his promise: *Ain't givin' up on you.*

He was exhausted, though, and it felt like his head hadn't so much as settled down onto the sofa cushion before consciousness escaped him. It was less like sleep and more like a clumsy passing out, and the darkness that gripped him and pulled him under did not feel soft and gentle.

It felt cold, and in it, he felt lost.

He'd dreamt of plenty things over the nights they'd spent holed up. He'd had frightening nightmares of teeth and bone and blood. He'd dreamt of fighting his way through an endless sea of bodies, slashing and striking and tearing, only to realize that they were not infected at all.

He'd dreamt of that pile of corpses in the diner, of the tiny limbs gone pale and blue-green with bloat. Sometimes Keith's littler brother, Riley, would be among them.

But, most often, he dreamt of home; either some mundane moment in time or well-worn favourite place, with his mother and Keith never far away. Sometimes he dreamt of his father, who sat stiffly in his memory. He was made of charcoal - only uncomfortably sketched out from what photos he'd seen, his voice gravel and static on the few VHS home movies they had taken.

Ellis had always wished for more scraps, more videos, more glimpses of him. But his father had died before he was barely three, and most of that last year, he'd been in the hospital. Cancer had eaten him whole, sucked the life from him in weeks. He supposed there was a blessing in the fact that he had no memories of his father wilting and dying, even if the few second-hand after-images Ellis did have felt sometimes inadequate.

The dream that consumed him, then, seemed more like a memory than it had any right to. It was simple, and faded, and so painfully detached it almost frustrated him: he stood at the entrance to the kitchen of his family home, unable or unwilling to move. Beside the rusted-out sink, his father loomed, unable or unwilling to look back at him.

His arms moved, just barely, and with every shift of his bicep came the snap and rattle of a vegetable peeler. Beside him, messily-peeled carrots and potatoes laid in a clumsy pile, growing ever larger, just-glistening with the soft sweat of their exposed insides.

It felt wrong.
Something was wrong.

In the yawning darkness of sleep, he felt terribly alone, before even the vaguery of the dream winked out into nothing.

Time surely passed, but the distance between the moment he'd closed his eyes and the moment he'd opened them again seemed thin. When he awoke he felt like he hadn't slept at all, all the same exhaustions like pins through his joints.

The faint uncertainty that flooded him in the drifting moments of stirring was only exponentially increased by the nonsense of Chris' native language. His brain processed it, quickly, and he blinked his eyes open as reality came uncomfortably into focus.

"¿Y tú quién eres, linda? ¿Qué te trae aquí?"

It was too far away to be directed at him, though, so he did not hurry himself to stirring.

He ached. Even just shifting his legs hurt, and there was an odd itchiness between his thighs that confused him right before he thought, Aw, hell. Feels all funny up in my nethers... lotion sucks. 'N'I thought goin' dry was the worst.

Rolling onto his back, he inhaled sharply, crinkling his brow and rubbing at his eyes. He wasn't sure precisely when Nick had woken him so he wasn't sure how much rest he'd gotten afterwards, but when he peeked around himself, he noticed only hints of blushing sunlight filtering in through the blocked-up front windows. The desire to sleep more was, however, tempered by the desire to be awake and alert well before Nick.

"Tengo suerte de tenerte. Y tú tienes suerte de tener a tal semental a tu disposición."

Regardless of his intentions, Chris' continued utterances ensured he wouldn't find rest, and the sound of Rochelle's faint giggling made his head lift up off the couch cushions. She sounded... happy, in a way he couldn't remember hearing in a long time. It shook him out of the last vestiges of sleep and made him pay more attention.

"Jesus, Chris, I can't tell if I should be smacking you or kissing you when you get going like that. Just because I can't understand you doesn't mean I can't see that... look on your face."

"¿Qué? ¿Este?"

He must've pulled some sort of expression, because she started laughing, and the sound made Ellis smile before he could stop himself. He shifted to lift his torso, a grimace fighting against the curl of his lips, and peeked his head up and over the countertop bar that the couch was snuggled against.

Chris had Rochelle half-heartedly trapped between him and the kitchen sink, his palm braced against the edge of the counter. They were not quite touching, a safe distance maintained between their bodies, but his head was leaned in close as if to catch her in a kiss.

However, when Rochelle's eyes caught on Ellis' head poked up over the kitchen bar, her head cocked away. "Voyeur." she accused, grabbing Chris' wrist to pull his hand up off the counter. "You could've told me we had a guest." Her fingers slid to lace with his once he'd relented and shifted his weight out of his lean, and she darted to the center of the kitchen with his hand gripped tight.

He didn't look particularly disappointed, trailing after her with a dazed smile, while her attention was locked squarely on Ellis.
"What are you doing down here, sweetie? Was the master too fancy for you?"

Ellis should've been prepared with excuses, but he had none of any substance. Her concern made him feel... guilty, strangely, knowing how angry she'd be with him if she knew the truth. Uneasily, he crinkled his brow and repeated the lie he'd told to Chris. "Just felt lonely. We ain't slept like... alone fer real, in a while."

He must've sold it, because she laughed out in a gentle huff and nodded. "Yeah. I got sorta nervous, too. It's weird not hearing at least one person breathing a few feet away. We're gonna end up like a pack of dogs with separation anxiety, huh?"

Chris tilted his head, breaking his gaze away to glance at Ellis. "It is good you came down, instead of being alone up there." he stated, simply, with the vaguest curl to his lips. It was pleased - too much so.

He knew.

He knew, like he'd known they were together in the first place. He'd put the pieces together, or maybe he'd even snuck upstairs and peeked in to find Nick missing. Maybe he'd simply heard them, awake on watch. However he'd managed it, he knew.

There was a flicker of humour in his expression, like it was something to laugh at. It was the first time in a long time that Ellis was driven to think back to the far-off, long-dead version of the man, another wolfish grin among a line of cruel strangers. His heart sunk just a little, injured, and he withdrew with a flinch.

Christophe noticed, and as suddenly as it had appeared, his amusement was replaced with a pinched look of pain. He cleared his throat, wetting his lips, and shrugged. "Pues... bonita, I think we were doing something, ¿sí?"

Rochelle hadn't entirely missed the scattered signs of something amiss, but she caught the tail end of the wrong pieces. Her confusion swiveled to Chris, who managed a clueless smile - and by the time she looked back at Ellis, he'd leaned his head down in a partially-feigned yawn.

Her eyes narrowed, though she nodded and did not seem overly concerned. "Yeah, looking for breakfast." She did withdraw, taking just a moment to press a kiss on the Spaniard's cheek before she released her grip on his hand and backed away. "I'll go start kicking everyone awake. You guys poke around... I know there was some cereal in the cabinets."

Ellis lifted his head enough to watch her walk toward the room on the far side of the first floor where the bikers had slept, his mouth screwing into an uncomfortable purse. He was now two losses deep; Chris knew and Rochelle sensed trouble. *Think I might be bad at this.*

He had every intention of avoiding conflict, but any plan to do so was waylaid when Christophe dropped to settle his rear against the arm of the sofa, face drawn in a vague grimace.

"Discúlpame. I did not mean to."

Quickly, Ellis lifted both his hands, waving to try and silence him. "Uh... man, it's... fine." With a wary glance passed down the length of the house, he quieted his voice to a mutter, watching Rochelle mostly disappear down the hallway. "How'd you know? Was it too loud, or -"

Christophe seemed hesitant at first, but despite a strangled attempt to keep it restrained, that humor sparked back in his eyes. He leaned forward in a way that was more submissive than an active effort at quiet, and whispered low, "I have a brain, tío. I... em... arropar a..." Frustration made him
jerkily rearrange his words. "I put him in the bed, ¿sí? When you come down here, I go check, y... he is where you were. You know, it smells, too."

That made Ellis choke, scrambling an inch or two back on the sofa, as if to get distance between them. "Oh, Lord." he muttered, concerned at the implications. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of reeking of sex, and especially not when he was trying to conceal the night's events entirely. "It's that bad?"

"You both smell like... hm." Chris shrugged, waving his hand lightly. "Dulce. O un pastel."

Lowering his chin, Ellis gave a hesitant sniff near his chest, and couldn't miss the definitive smell of vanilla. His face scrunched, and he pushed his hands to tuck under his armpits in a self-hug.

"Jeez, Chris, it ain't funny. Why'd you gotta go pokin' around?"

The Spaniard's face fell to a grin, and he cocked his head. "So you two are...?" His hand lifted up, circling his index finger and thumb, and only belatedly seemed to realize he couldn't complete the rude gesture. His consternation only lasted a moment before he tried - and failed - to curl his pinky enough to poke it through the ring made by his other digits. " Fucking, ¿sí?"

Ellis scrambled to grab at his wrist and push his arm down, releasing a blustered, "Shh! It ain't -"

Scuffled footsteps preceded Rochelle's return, and Rhiannon was close behind. The blonde had a blanket wrapped up around her shoulders like a shawl, and her fingers were clutched in it, drawing it tight and up against her jawline. Grimacing out from it with a scowl, her eyes darted toward the two men now frozen on the couch, taking in Ellis' barely-dressed state in his shirt and boxers.

She narrowed her gaze - then blinked.

"You fuckers jerking each other off or what?"

Ellis pulled back, releasing a strained sigh, and shot Christophe a look that flickered between plea and warning. Don't tell. it said, and Chris' eyes softened into affirmation. The Georgian promptly shrugged, dropping his gaze furtively toward his lap. "Mornin', Rhee." he offered up, blandly.

His attempt at avoiding notice only garnered him more, as Rhiannon swiveled on her heel to face them entirely. Her head cocked, stalking a few steps closer. Genuine concern tinted at her voice when she prompted, "You okay, dude? You look like shit. Didn't you get the best bunk?"

It was, he realized, a strange degree of comforting: it hadn't taken even a half-hour for most of his team to cue into the fact that something was wrong, and he might've been glad for it if it hadn't been completely counter to what he'd wanted.

He winced, turning to slip his legs off the couch. "'M fine, sorry."

The morning was already not going according to plan, and he needed to ensure no one saw Nick before he had a chance to, considering the likelihood of the man being fully recovered was slim. "I'll go wake up everyone else." he murmured, quickly averting his gaze when Rochelle quirked a brow at him.

His left foot touched carpet, and he shifted to settle his right foot down beside it - only for his heel to land on something rigid, an uncomfortable point digging into the arch of it. He lurched reflexively to lift it, flinching away from the painful pressure, and gave a startled glance toward the ground.

There, nestled against the carpet, was the slim black notebook they'd been passing around. And
peeking demurely out from the binding was the slim marker they'd been using, uncapped.

The notebook everyone had signed except Nick.

Ellis didn't know, precisely, but he felt it like a spark of tender hope, his brow softening, his lips half-parting. He'd been consumed by so much uncertainty in the face of the night before that for a moment, this was almost like breaching the surface of some vast pool of water. He inhaled, and it came to him in a daze. He put his stuff in it.

Giddiness flared in him, suddenly, because that felt so much more concrete than drunken words and the hot press of a mouth against his in the dark. In the plain light of day, it felt like proof. Nick - drunk or not - putting a pen to paper and committing himself to them? Writing out a few scraps of himself and leaving them there for Ellis to find?

"Here, take it. Take me. No matter what happens."

Nick had shown him his driver's license, once, and it had felt like a tender concession. This was a confession, in stark black ink.

He bent down and found his fingers trembling as he scooped the notebook up. He was faintly aware of Rochelle saying his name, curiously, but it came to him as buzzing static. His thumb slid to crack open the journal, finding first the familiar hands of Rochelle, Coach, and himself. Next, Christophe's, his one-handed clumsiness etched out in ink.

His thumb pulled the page, feeling it fold under his fingertip before it slid to bare the next. His eyes traced the text there, and simply, gently, his heart sank low in his chest, crushing his diaphragm until he could hardly breathe.

It was a confession, after all. Just not the kind he expected.

Rochelle approached, her head cocking, watching him stare down at the journal in his hands. Her lips curled downward, torn between confusion and worry, and she reached a hand out to rest her palm against Christophe's hip. He glanced at her, but she did not return the look.

"Ellis?" she prompted, softly. "What's wrong?"

His head bowed, just an inch, and he said nothing. There was a frown starting to encroach on his face, slowly, and she wasn't sure she'd ever seen him sour so. His shoulders wilted low, his eyes dimmed and lowered, and for a moment, she thought he might start to cry.

Then his jaw tightened. Then, harsh, he bit his tongue.

As quickly as she'd identified sadness, anger rose instead. The journal dropped from his hands, and before it had even struck the sofa and settled there, he was moving. He barely dodged striking into Chris, rushing past and into the dining room, breaking into almost a run as he went thundering up the stairs.

"Ellis? Ellis!"

She almost started after him, but Christophe grabbed out, hooking his hand on her elbow. She forced herself to stop, scattering a startled look toward the foreigner, and found him nodding solemnly toward the couch.

Rochelle looked, despite the tingling desperation in her spine to run upstairs in Ellis' footsteps, and found her gaze drawn toward that black notebook.
Agitation made her fists clench, and she slipped gently out of his grip, crossing around the end of the sofa to draw near. She bent down, scooping it up, and flipped the cover open to let it fall to the second page.

There, tucked neatly in its own little section, lay an entry only partially familiar.

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Nicolas I. Tobias
Rhiannon Victoria Thompson
Eleanor Bethany Thompson
182 Co Road 235
Haskell, Tx 79521
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Rochelle stared down at it, unmoving, only barely registering the soft slide of Chris' arm encircling her shoulders. He gazed at the journal for a moment... then, softly, pressed a kiss to her ear. It was a soothing gesture, and one that she took with closed eyes.

Reopening them, she calmly lifted her gaze toward Rhiannon, now finding Lena somewhat nervously standing behind her, hazel eyes wide and expression tight with concern. They looked remarkably like the day they'd met - or, in Rhiannon's case, the second day.

Rochelle turned the journal around, facing the text outward, feeling anger tighten her features.

"What the fuck is going on?"
Nick liked to say he wasn't one for regrets.

It was true primarily in the sense that he didn't let them affect his actions, and that he quarantined them well out of reach, saving them for the less-than-rare occasions he felt like letting them run wild in a masochistic kind of purge. It was true, too, that he generally limited his dalliance with the emotion as it related to the things that truly mattered.

Thus, it was very easy to regret his alcohol intake when he drifted to a very painful consciousness... and much harder to look into the blinding regret that surrounded just about everything else.

Fortunately, the skull-splitting pain helped keep his mind off things.

"Oh, Jesus, fuck." he stated, just a groaned huff, and even the act of talking felt like too much reverberation for his brain. His tongue practically stuck to his teeth with how dry his mouth was, cotton rubbing against sandpaper, and he coughed to dispel the sensation that he might choke on it.

That hurt worse, and stirred an awful flavour in the back of his mouth. Tastes like I vomited a pack of Thin Mints. He remembered, vaguely and yet quite viscerally, gargling mouthwash before collapsing in bed. He should've known that wouldn't be enough to soften his eventual landing in a hangover, but he remembered barely being steady enough to stand, let alone to try and brush his teeth.

He remembered a lot of other things, too.

"Fuck..."

Nick eagerly desired to push it far, far into the back of his head, bury it and never look back - but the fraction of his brain that wasn't waterlogged and pulsing managed a cogent point: You fucked your chances of keeping a lid on things, buddy. Literally.

A groan left him. And then puked your guts out in front of him.

Slowly, as if moving might break something that was already fractured almost beyond repair, Nick tried to roll his body onto its side. The shift in gravity made his stomach lurch, and he gritted his teeth against the spike of nausea that followed.

The sound that escaped him was a whimper, and he cracked his eyes open to look out and into the bedroom, forcing a few breaths in through his nose. He wasn't quite sure how much of the pounding in his skull was the hangover and how much of it was rising anxiety, but he figured the difference was irrelevant.

Subtly, distantly, he wished he hadn't finished off the vodka bottle downstairs.

Reaching his arm to push the blankets off him, Nick found his hand brushing a familiar, warm softness. He didn't waste any time before sinking his fingers in Maggie's fur, pressing against her, bone and fur tight against his palm.

She shifted fractionally closer at his touch, and he felt her dry nose graze at his wrist, then the heel of his hand. Her snout found its way to his knuckles, and the faintest set of licks started against his skin. Her tongue was strangely hot as she gently lapped at his thumb, teeth prodding here and there.
The affection didn't salve his wounds or his situation, but he soaked it in all the same.

*Jesus Christ. As if things couldn't get worse - Jesus. I remember about sixty-percent of the shit I said to him, and I'm fucking praying that's the worse portion.*

He'd said it. Not quite a confession of love - that much, he'd never given to anyone, not without taking from them in equal measure - but something that felt harder to admit: "I need you." It had only taken one of the worst nightmares he'd had in a long time, and half a bottle of vodka, to get the words out of him.

*I need him, and I'm not sure how to go back to forgetting what that feels like.*

Love was more manageable, in a way. It was the strange twin to lust, something he could direct and misdirect. A little booze, a long night in a strange bar, a bit of pain to distract him from it all, and he'd forget. Burying himself into someone else's body helped the two feelings muddle together until he forgot the difference.

But this was different. Ellis was different, and the messy, clumsy thing between them was different. He'd tried - tried - to forget how it all felt, to move on, and nothing helped.

Ellis had snuck past his defenses in the dead of night, crept in like slow fog or a gentle tide, and ate away at something in him. Gnawed, like termites, shattering and fracturing. But where, once, he'd thought of it as a simple weakening, a structural failing the man's touch had caused him... he was starting to think that Ellis had ripped and torn and dug out the bad parts of him.

That was not, however, the frightening part of it all - no, that was something far worse, and far simpler.

He didn't know what was left.

Was there a good man hidden in him? Was there something worth saving, or worth loving? If he pried away his skin and dug down to his bones, was there a single piece of him worth what Ellis offered him? Worse, after scouring him down to raw nerves, he wasn't sure Ellis had left him anything to survive off of. Was the hollow feeling in his chest all he'd ever feel, now?

There was a dread in him that had driven sense and logic far underground, a tingle of fear that he couldn't explain. He was afraid in an awful, animal way; it was the sort of fear that made one unrecognizable, unfamiliar, even to oneself. He knew that fear all too well. He had been on either end of it before.

This time, it had started that night on the balcony, smoking a cigarette under a crystal-clear sky and a bright moon with a drop-dead gorgeous man who loved him.

He knew, at least, that he deserved the hot, pulsing agony burning along the seams of his skull. He also knew that no amount of misery and self-pity would ease the pressure clenched around his bladder, and so, lifting his fingers to scratch his cat's brow, he moved.

Getting to his feet felt like slogging through mud. Every tilt and shift of his body made his breathing veer awfully close to a retch, and he could do little to stifle the groan that escaped him. He felt, at best, half-dead.

Staggering upright, wobbling more than a little on his heels, Nick started the less-than-easy walk toward the bathroom. The door seemed to move before him, coyly, not quite in the same place any two times he blinked his eyes at it. He found his way inside with a trepidatiously extended hand, trusting his fingertips bumping into wall and doorframe to guide him more than his depth
perception.

It only took one misstep, one near-fall that he barely saved himself from with a hand to the bathroom counter, for him to determine that sitting down was likely the safer option.

There, for just a moment, he sat on the toilet with his sweats around his ankles and his face pressed into his palms as if to hide. Relief came in time to a wave of tired shame, and he breathed out warmly against his wrists.

This might be rock bottom, he thought, wryly. Here I was thinking I got there a few weeks ago. Not one to be outdone, huh, Nick?

Alcohol had seemed like a good idea at the time; numb the pain and put himself to sleep at the same time. It was a fickle friend of his, and seemed to delight in tormenting him as often as it saved him. Often, whatever relief it offered didn't compare to the mess he was left with.

The fuck am I gonna say now? Fuck am I supposed to do when the kid can't leave me alone, and I can't leave him alone? He sighed, closing his eyes and leaning harder against his palms. Why didn't I try to seal the deal with Lena? Why'd I let her run me around like that? Get me drunk, pull out a little sob story... Jesus, that's my fuckin' move, and she didn't even do it to fuck me.

He was suddenly thinking that he'd miscalculated which of the sisters was the dangerous one.

Grabbing onto the edge of the counter with one hand and yanking his sweats up with the other, Nick dragged himself back to his feet, coming to a shaky halt in front of the sink. He did not look at himself in the mirror, tying his sweats tighter around his hips before hunching forward to nudge the tap on and run his hands under it.

After a quick scrub, he let water pool in his palms, dropping his head low so he could splash it into his face. The cold made him gasp in a sharp breath, blinking through the blur of water in his eyes. He lowered the tap to a trickle and stood there a moment.

Maggie leapt up into the counter, crouching down into the basin, greedily shoving her face under the faucet to start lapping up water. She did not seem bothered when the water dampened her front paws and spilled over her cheek.

He watched her, making a sluggish mental note to take better care of the scrawny feline.

Yeah. Rock bottom.

He hadn't gotten enough of tempting fate, it seemed, because the door to the bedroom flung open with enough force to strike the wall. It made him jump, startled, and he grabbed for Maggie, reflexively trying to pull her close. Before he could, she was gone, tearing across the bedroom to hide under the bed.

For an instant, his brain tried sluggishly to determine whether or not there was a weapon in close proximity. Had he seen Ellis' shotgun in the room last night? Would he even be able to reach it before whatever was invading the room reached him? Was he strong and coordinated enough to swing around the porcelain lid of the toilet's tank?

He didn't have time to act on either of those thoughts before Ellis came into view - no, stormed. His hangover didn't impede his ability to see, immediately, that the younger man was trembling
with anger. It was more familiar of a sight than Nick had ever wanted it to be.

His nearness was soothing, his presence a relief, and his fury was a minor detail.

*Maybe I just want to keep fucking things up so he won't leave me alone. Maybe I don't want him to. Maybe if we just stay here, stay fucked up, stay halfway to nowhere, I never have to lose him and I never have to give him anymore than I already have.*

Looking at Ellis, water still trickling down his face and down his neck and dampening his hairline, Nick was tempted to laugh. It was hard to take the younger man seriously, standing there in his boxers and grey undershirt, hair mussed and body toned and gorgeous.

*Don't you fucking realize I don't have anything left?*

"Nick, I ain't never asked you fer much." Ellis' voice trembled, too, and he suddenly lifted his hands to rub fingertips against his browline as if to massage his forehead - and, maybe, hide his face behind his palms. "Let you do whut you was gonna do, fer a long while. Ain't done nothin' but cared fer you. Kept us a secret best I could, even when it hurt me, even when we wasn't together no more."

Nick lifted his chin, trying not to let the pain coursing through his body show. He gritted his jaw to fend off a sigh, eyes drifting low. He wished there was anything but listless exhaustion in his voice, wished the words he spoke didn't sound like cardboard. "Look, kid, last night was -"

"Don't you dare." burst out of him, and abruptly, Ellis' hands were down and clenched in fists, teeth practically bared. "You say, one more goddamn time, I'm a mistake, I will lay you the hell out."

Shock made Nick stiffen, eyes widening, and he took a half-step back. He didn't choose, precisely, to go silent, but his throat closed up of its own volition. He was not used to Ellis facing him with such rage. *Did a number on him this time.*

In the moment that followed, Ellis took in a harsh breath, chest expanding as he held it. His eyes shut just gently, his exhale shaky, his shoulders lowering as he managed to pull himself into a tight coil of controlled emotion. When his eyes reopened, his expression had stiffened to a calmer sort of fury.

It was, simply, frightening.

"I wanna think you didn't do it tuh hurt me." His voice was a whisper, shooting a chill up Nick's spine. His eyes averted as shame tapped against the back of his skull. "'Cause I wanna give yuh the - I wanna think you were just too drunk tuh think straight, that you were really scared, 'n you'll tell me you meant it. You meant whut you said, 'n' we can just... quit fightin', quit -"

Ellis bit his lower lip, silencing himself, eyes ticking to trace Nick's form in one slow pass. He hesitated, and a faint disappointment in the way his chin dropped said part of him knew he was wrong. For the first time the Northerner could remember, there was no stubborn disbelief in his eyes, no agitated conviction that he could make the man see sense.

That hurt - mostly because, as much as Nick wished it weren't so... he had meant every word, even the ones he shouldn't have said.

Softly, bitterly, Ellis asked, "You're leavin'?"

It took Nick longer than he'd have liked to admit. He knew, instantly, what the question meant, but his brain chugged and struggled against *how* Ellis knew. His immediate instinct was to search his
memories of the previous night, aiming strictly for the parts he remembered least.

"They asked us tuh go, 'n'I didn't think nothin'uv it, but... they asked you, too, didn't they?" Ellis' jaw flinched with the force that he gritted it, a harshness twisting at his inflection. "Only you're gonna go. Yer plannin' tuh leave."

Then he remembered.

"Fuck." escaped him in a burst of air, head dropping to hang low. The decision to put his name down in the journal beside the sisters' felt far-away, and he couldn't remember more than the vague concept of it, couldn't even remember whether or not he'd considered the consequences in the moment. Jesus fuck. The fuck was I thinking?

Suddenly, Ellis thrust his arms up. When Nick forced a glance up, he found the Georgian's eyes boring into his, anger and some distant embarrassment inlaid there. "You didn't think I should know that before you came in here last night?"

Footsteps started up the stairs, and he flinched, taking a step forward to place himself in the doorway of the bathroom. He glanced over, gaze latching on the door to the bedroom. "Does everyone know?" left him in a hiss, panicked, and Ellis let out a growled sigh.

The younger man didn't respond at first, just turned and walked to the bed, sitting down on the corner of it and hunching forward. He pressed his palms against his temples, rubbing there.

"Goddamnit, Nick. Why, after all this time, you ain't scared'uh zombies half as much as you're scared'uv us?"

Nick found himself deflated, gaze turning back toward the Georgian, taking in the defeat in his posture. He looked tired more than anything, and Nick had never felt like such a disappointment.

Softly, quietly, he stepped back to rest his hip against the edge of the dresser standing against the wall. His hands settled against his thighs, and he closed his eyes, surrendering to the dull pain in his chest. He regretted it. He regretted everything.

The list of things he regretted stretched on and on, piling high, and what could he do but let it drown him?

"You have exactly five seconds." Rochelle's voice was not what he wanted to hear at that moment, and it came roaring into focus as the approaching footsteps thundered down the hall and into the bedroom. "At the end of those five seconds, I'm gonna beat your ass. You are welcome to explain why I'm beating your ass to me, but it's happening either way."

He didn't open his eyes, at first - not until something struck him. He reflexively darted up a hand to grab for it, finding himself slapping the black notebook to his own chest, barely catching it there. Realizing belatedly that she'd thrown it at him, Nick forced his mouth into a vague scowl.

"Ro' -" he tried, but she was suddenly marching toward him, and he was forced to raise his arm and fend off a blow. It was more of a smack than anything intended to hurt, but he wasn't going to take it silently. "Fuck's sake!"

"Don't 'fuck's sake' me, you sorry sack of shit in a suit." she snapped, jabbing at the soft curve of
his side with curled knuckles. That *did* hurt, and spawned a wave of nausea as he jolted away. "Is this a joke? Because the girls won't say a word, and that leads me to think it's not a joke."

Like a slowly - or very rapidly - unfolding nightmare, three bodies pushed into view. Christophe stepped into the room and to the side, looking vaguely ill, and Rhiannon and Lena drew tentatively into the doorway without quite breaching it.

Neither of them looked at him. He wondered, abruptly, if they were still on his side.

"You tried to leave once." Rochelle muttered, lower, her arm faltering slightly in the air. Nick couldn't help but see a similar defeat, there, though her voice was sharp enough to cut. "You seriously trying again? Looking for the next bus out, wherever you can find it?"

*Think I finally wore them out. Guess they had a limit, after all. Isn't this what I wanted? Burn them out so they won't give a shit when I leave... Wasn't that the plan? So why do I feel so fucking awful?*

He forced his jaw to move, though it felt like he had to break it free from half-set cement. "I'm not in a suit." Before she could react - and most likely strike out - he slid off the dresser and took a couple steps back. "What do you want me to say?"

Her mouth gaped in a moment of disbelief, and she collected her focus with a pitched half-laugh. "Say it's a joke, for one!" She pushed the heel of her hand against her cheek, shaking her head. Her anger seemed to shift into something only faintly sad, and he wasn't sure if he could take disappointment from both of them at once. "Christ, Nick, you're serious?"

The gambler didn't say anything, mostly because he had no idea what to say. He merely gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes.

Lena took a step forward. Her hand darted up to wipe at her mouth with her wrist, a nervous gesture. "Ro'." she muttered, quietly. Her voice was taut and urgent with a frustration in it, even as she tried to smooth it into something soothing. Though Rochelle wheeled around, an angry twist pulling at her mouth, it was Ellis who suddenly spoke up.

"How could you?"

There was something pitiful in the way he said it, and Nick stiffened, teeth clamping on the inside of his cheek. He darted a glance toward the bed, and the fact that Ellis was peering at Lena instead of him didn't make his gut twist any less.

*I... really tried, kid. I know it doesn't look like it, but...*

"How long did y'all know he was gonna go with? Was that what y'all kept whisperin' about all the time? When were any of you -" There, his gaze scathed its way from Lena to Rhiannon to Nick and back. "- gonna tell us?"

The sisters shared a glance, and Rhiannon didn't do much to hide a pointed frown.

With a sharp inhale, Lena looked forward, pinching her lips together for just a beat before she lifted her shoulders. "If I had my way, you'd all go." she murmured, simply, a distance entering her eyes. It was, no doubt, an attempt at neutrality, dodging the ire building up in the room.

All it did was flare Rochelle's anger hotter, and forced Nick's head to snap toward her in turn. His eyes narrowed, and the brunette's expression tightened, a pleading edge to her frown. *Ellis wasn't kidding. They were trying to get everyone to go? Didn't fucking tell me that.*
"That's not -" the producer started, but Nick's reaction caught her eye, and she rounded back on him. "Jesus. Bullshit. If this was about you not wanting to go to the military, you wouldn't care whether or not we came. No, Nick, this is you running away from your problems instead of facing them. Like always."

Movement at the bedroom door marked Coach's stirring, and he stilled next to Rhiannon, eyes roving the scene. He said nothing, and either ignored or did not notice the way the blonde hunched beside him. His expression did not hold much surprise, not even when it finally landed on Nick.

Whatever he hadn't overheard already, he was quickly caught up on.

A muscle jumped under Nick's eye, teeth going on edge, an unvoiced warning creeping up in his voice. They crept closer and closer to conversations he did not want to have. "You ask me, I'm facing things just fine - including the reality that our little merry fucking band was never going to last forever. I'm just looking out for me."

Rochelle blew out a harsh breath, thrusting her hands toward him in something like mock prayer. "Oh, yeah, right. It's all about you. Sorry, I always forget the sun and moon revolve around your goddamn -"

Nick didn't intend to break, but he did. His voice raised, his head tossing back, and the pain that pulsed through him only heightened the frustration in his voice. "I gotta ask, Ro', if you hate me so fucking much, then why aren't you beggin' them to take me?"

It was more sincere than he meant.

He felt the tension spike - saw Chris' posture in particular go stiff. The only person who didn't flinch was Rochelle. She gazed back at him, hands still out, and shrugged.

"If you hate us so fucking much, why did it take alcohol for you to get the guts to tell us you wanted to leave?" Rochelle's voice held a cruel humour, but her eyes softened. She let her hands drop to her sides.

"Go ahead, Nick. Lay it on me. What's your big plan? Sail away to Texas and live out the rest of your days in some prepper compound? Hope the military takes the U.S. back before the food runs out? Hope the zombies don't get bigger and meaner and deadlier, until you guys get overrun?"

"Fuck you." Rhiannon spat, just faintly, almost half-hearted.

Nick had let his jaw close for too long, it seemed, and the cement had re-set. He wanted more than anything to argue, but she wasn't wrong. As much as he didn't think they'd find rescue with the military, either, what point was there in traveling to Texas, just to be even deeper in zombie-infested territory?

Coach sighed, his breath rumbling, raising his voice. "Nicolas, you ain't in no shape to be makin' decisions. Let's sit down and talk like adults, a'ight? Figure shit out."

That cornered feeling rose, shooting cold up his spine. He tried to lick his lips, but his mouth was still so dry it did nothing but agitate the discomfort. "You're all fucking kidding yourselves. And none of this is up for debate, so there's nothing to talk about." he spat out, dumbly.

"God, fuck, stop arguing." Rhiannon hissed, shoving forward and pushing past her sister with a heavy strike, one that had Lena grabbing for the doorframe to catch herself. "You cuntshits haven't stopped arguing since we joined up. What the fuck is up with you guys? What fucking happened to you?"
"All I hear you fuckin' say is how you don't have any family to look for. Are you blind, or just fucking stupid?" Her hand thrust up, burrowing fingers in her slim camisole and clutching there. "I spent most of my life trying to figure out who my family was, and here you are, up to your fuckin' nutsack in people who give a shit about you, and all you want to do is fuck them over?"

"Rhee." her sister muttered, a less-than-subtle urge for silence. "You're not helping."

Rhiannon looked furious - but when Coach's hand brushed her shoulder, she lowered her chin, expression softening and the clear urge to protest dying in her eyes.

The eldest survivor advanced, stepping more into the room, drawing his arms into a tight cross. "I'd disagree. Nearest thing to the truth I've heard today. What do you think you're doin', Nick? You decide runnin' was better than bein' honest? Runnin' is better than dealin' with yo' problems? We ever done anything to make you think we ain't here fo' you?"

Nick gritted out a sigh, clenching his fists at his sides. He spoke before his brain could process the words, lashing out. "Not interested in advice from the bottle-blondie who's been trying to fuck her dad since she was sixteen, or her next target."

Why did he feel obliged to turn everyone in a room against him?

Before Rhiannon could do more than flare her nostrils, however, Lena thrust up an arm and raised her voice. "Okay, guys, come on. We're all running a little hot here, so let's -" 

"Let's whut?" Ellis stood, taking one long stride to approach them.

His shoulders were up, posture aggressive. He was angry.

"Honestly, Lee, I dunno why you two're in here. How could you not tell me, 'n'then stand in here like -" He stumbled, fumbled, and blustered out a sigh. His gaze averted, and his anger strangled into a frustrated injury. "I thought we was friends. I asked you tuh help me - keep him safe, 'n'... instead, you... whut? Y'all just gonna lead us on 'til we found yer boat, then take him?"

There was a strained moment of silence, where Lena's gaze sat fixed on his face. Her expression slowly - tenderly - fell, hazel eyes gone weak. "I'm sorry." she murmured, teeth worrying at her lower lip as she jutted her chin forward. Apology bled genuinely into her eyes, the soft curves of her face down-turning as she gazed at her feet. 

"I am sorry, sunshine." Her voice strengthened, however, gaining a tightness that was unyielding. "But this is bigger than that. It's easy for you guys to boil this down to a bunch of hurt feelings, but you know what this is for me? You want to know why I didn't just run to you, tell y'all about it when he asked?"

Spreading her arms, Lena glanced among them, fingers limply splayed. "We ain't gonna make it to Texas alone. We're going to die. I'm gonna to watch my baby sister die, and I'll probably die right after." A wetness sparkled at her eyes, even as her voice did not waver. "So, yeah. If Nick - or any of you - wants to join us, I'm not going to say no. I thought I could... work things out, make it all moot, but..."

It sat there, blunt, in her eyes. Nick didn't need to try terribly hard to read it: she was strained very nearly to the breaking point. He'd put her in an unpleasant situation, and a better person might've felt guilty.
"I can't force y'all to come any more than I can force him to stay. You can hate me if you want to, but I'm going to make the right choice for my family. I can't fix yours."

There was a dreadful sort of silence afterwards.

Ellis' posture softened, his chin lowering, and he glanced gently around himself, looking between Christophe and Rochelle with a tense uncertainty. The foreigner looked pale and a little lost, and Rochelle gave him the softest frown in return. Neither seemed sure of how to react.

His gaze shifted toward Rhiannon, and Nick couldn't stop himself from joining in. The blonde's gaze was furious and cold on the carpet. She didn't agree with her older sister, that much was clear - and a strange revelation. *Not the sides I expected.*

Only then did Ellis look back toward Lena, gaze settling on the woman's face, jaw rolling subtly in a tense gesture. "Lee, I - don't hate you. But you gotta know it ain't right. This ain't just hurt feelin's. There's shit you don't understand, okay? I -"

"I understand just fine." she interrupted, and where he had faltered, she grew firmer. The biker took a step forward, lifting her shoulders to match him. "I'm not kidnapping anyone here - if you want to convince somebody, talk to him." Lena nodded her chin toward Nick.

He, in turn, snapped his gaze to the side when Ellis reflexively glanced in his direction.

"If he wants to go, he goes." Her eyes averted, grabbing her left forearm and rubbing her thumb into the crook of her wrist. It was a gentle kind of anxiety, soft and wary. "Don't ask me to turn down help when I need it, and don't act like it's about right and wrong. We've all got to look out for ourselves."

Nick didn't enjoy watching Ellis struggle to work together a response. Watching the kid's composure fall apart brought him no joy, and he didn't even really have adrenaline to see him through it. He wasn't angry enough to convince himself that seeing the Georgian's eyes go pained and vulnerable didn't kill him just a little.

Rochelle stepped forward, anger flecking over her face, placing a hand against Ellis' bicep. "We got this far - got you this far - because we all looked out for each other." When he weakened into her touch, that anger heightened.

Lena flinched just subtly, eyes flickering to take in the woman's posture. She did not respond. Nick had known Rochelle long enough to recognize when a protective rage overtook her general kindness - and he knew enough to feel honest dread when her gaze landed back on him. She spoke, still, toward Lena: "So, I think that's some cop-out bullshit, honestly... but I agree that we're arguing with the wrong person."

His stomach tried its hardest to punch through the softer parts of his lower back, and he curled his hands into fists. "Nothing to fucking argue about." he stated, words stiff, a lame bleat the best he could pull together.

Ellis turned on his heel, breaking away from Rochelle's grip, and before Nick could do much as blink, pushed abruptly into his space. The few inches Nick had on him didn't seem to mean much; they did not feel, at least, like an advantage.

He felt small.

"Whut did last night mean?"
The following silence was so loaded, it felt more like an awful, shrieking din. Nick didn't miss the flash of awareness across Coach and Rochelle's posture. He definitely didn't miss the complete lack of surprise on Chris' face. He tried as hard as he could to block out thoughts of the bikers from his mind.

They were watching, and he didn't want to know what they were thinking. Didn't want to see the look in their eyes, the curiousity, the realization.

He felt his body tremble, just once, before he locked his gaze on Ellis'. "Means I'm leaving." he said, tone measured, words careful and forced. Ellis, despite a flare of irritation in his expression, did not jump to interrupt. Nick aggressed, pushed the issue, got a little louder despite the way it pulsed pain through his skull.

"Not sure if I can make it any clearer than writing it down. Would charades help? Pantomimes? Interpretive dance?"

Quietly, Ellis cocked his head, gaze flickering over his face, taking in his expression. There was calculation there, consideration, before his attention rose back up to Nick's eyes.

"Ain't talkin' 'bout the damn book." There, flat and blunt in his eyes, Nick saw the one thing he did not want to see, even more than the misery and hatred and hopelessness: defiance. "Talkin' 'bout you comin' in here last night, drunk, 'n' -"

Like flash-fire, Nick found himself reaching up, grabbing a fistful of the Georgian's undershirt just at his sternum. He pulled, fingers knotting in the fabric, feeling Ellis' weight strain against his hold. The younger man's chin tilted up, and his stone-blue eyes went low-lidded.

He looked... smug, and Nick wasn't sure he'd ever felt so completely outgunned, so completely vulnerable, so raw and injured and drowning.

Or, maybe, he'd felt that feeling a million times over, in gasps and sputters and sometimes floods, but this was the only time he couldn't truly run away from it.

"Out." he stated, just quietly. His free arm lifted, pointing toward the door - but his grip on Ellis' shirt did not loosen. Holding fast, he darted a glance up over the man's shoulder, gritting his teeth as he found the clustered survivors staring at him.

The combined heat of their gazes sent his skin crawling, and a subtle panic threatened to tunnel his vision into a fuzzy aura. It was hard to even quite process them, or put meaning to their expressions, unable to think much at all in the moment.

If the sisters found out, would he still be able to go with them? Would they let him, and would he be able to stand the feeling of their knowing? Two women that should have been conquests, instead privy to the one thing he'd wanted kept under wraps... it all couldn't have gone worse.

"Nick..." Rochelle uttered, voice approaching that coaxing flatness that he recognized more than he wanted to, like a soft attempt to talk someone off a ledge. "Easy. Let's just... take a breath, okay? I don't think you two should -"

"Out." he repeated, less quietly, a snarl that rumbled dangerously in his chest, breaking in his dry throat. He tightened his grip, shifting Ellis just an inch closer, and they might've come into contact if the Georgian had not been fighting back, leaning away.

Ellis' head turned, glancing backwards, eyes taking a careful scan over his teammates. His lips managed a gentle curve, reassuring, and he murmured, "S'okay. Y'all go downstairs, okay?" His
tone seemed extraordinarily calm.

Nick realized it, then: _He's not afraid of me at all, huh?_

At the door, Rochelle took a careful inhale, shifting to dart a glance toward the other survivors. Coach was staring directly at her, frown intense, and she shied away from quite meeting his gaze. Chris, on the other hand, reached to touch her elbow and nod toward the hallway.

"Es bueno." he murmured, softly and just between them, and she couldn't resist a surge of doubt. "They need to fight, ¿sí? All the... sutileza, em, all the not... They need to fight. Es bueno."

"Doesn't feel bueno." escaped her in a hiss, but she straightened, regardless. Ellis wanted them to leave, and she, unfortunately, was sure he knew better than her. The fact that the bar was terribly low made her uncomfortable, but there was no real alternative. She'd barely kept Nick with them the first time.

She couldn't do it again, and the only option was to trust Ellis to manage.

Trying to get across her uncertainty in a glance, Rochelle received a tighter smile from the Georgian, one that pleaded, just softly. It begged her for faith, and beyond a distinct sadness, he seemed calm. Strangely, she understood it: no part of her thought that Nick would do him any harm.

_Physically, at least._

Releasing a sigh, Rochelle turned on her heel, lifting her hands. Her voice was strained and precise, head shaking. "I think we all need to breathe, anyway. Let's just go downstairs, regroup. Maybe not talk for a little bit."

"Sounds fuckin' good to me." Rhiannon muttered, jaw gritted and voice thick with frustration.

Lena, however, was first to move, and the glint of something streaking down her cheek betrayed the beginnings of tears. Coach shifted to let her past, some sympathy flinching at his expression, then looked up at the rest of the group.

They filed out, Rhiannon first, but the blonde didn't proceed down the stairs after her sister. She waited, awkward in her stance, as Rochelle and Christophe stepped out to join her. They stood, only Chris really looking at anyone's face, his own drawn in a nervous moue.

Coach closed the bedroom door, jaw flinching with obvious discomfort. There was no immediate burst of motion or sound inside, and the silence was, perhaps, more eerie than if Nick had started to shout.

There was a moment where they hesitated, Lena's footsteps fading as she reached the bottom of the stairs, and said nothing. It was tense, uncomfortable, and Rochelle wasn't sure what to say. She was just as angry at the bikers as she was at Nick - trust had been broken, and trust felt like a precious commodity.

Rochelle frowned, wishing she didn't feel so genuinely injured. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Maybe it showed on her face, because Rhiannon snuck a glance up, hazel eyes squinted past a stray strand of rough hair, and her shoulders wilted. Her voice, that pleasantly husky sound, went low. "She's my sister. And I've fucked shit up enough times and she's always had my back - I'm not gonna -"
She faltered, and Rochelle found Coach's hand settling against her elbow. When she glanced up, he was frowning, and there was no anger there.

Just... sadness.

"Let's go." he murmured. "Ain't time to give Nick the satisfaction of us fightin' 'mongst ourselves."

Christophe nodded, eagerly, moving suddenly to clutch at the big man's shirt, just at his hip. "El jefe is right. Vámonos, ¿vale? No good to stand up here and be angry. Y... they need some time, maybe."

"They don't know what they need." Rochelle growled out, thrusting her hands up in a helpless gesture before striding to and down the stairs. She didn't bother to wait for the rest of her teammates to join her, and by the time she'd reached the first floor, Lena was nowhere in sight.

She'd retreated to their chosen bedroom.

The stranger part, to Rochelle, was that when Rhiannon entered the dining room, the last to come down, she chose to sit herself on the kitchen's tiled floor. She leaned against the cabinets, elbows on her knees and head in her hands.

Neutral ground, she supposed.

*Neutrality's done more to fuck us over than anything else. I'm more than a little done being neutral.*

Rochelle sighed, and wished she found more comfort when Chris settled behind her, his chin on her shoulder and his arm wrapping loosely around her waist.

*You better know what you're doing, Ellis.*
There was a moment - and not a short one - after the door shut and after footsteps receded down the
stairs, where neither Nick nor Ellis moved. They stood frozen in the bedroom, Nick's grip a
stranglehold on his shirt, drawing the collar of it almost painfully tight against his shoulders.

He was brought halfway onto his toes, and only held tension kept distance between them. Ellis
should have been intimidated, or at least nervous, yet he couldn't bring himself to feel much but a
quiet anger. He could not reach sympathy, let alone regret.

He'd never wanted anyone he loved to feel pain, but pushing Nick into a corner felt undeniably
satisfying. Finally, he'd reached the end of his rope, and it was freeing in its own way. He would
not hide - he would not lie. He would not swallow down the way he felt anymore.

Nick was staring at him with bloodshot eyes, gaze running a marathon that looped from his eyes to
his mouth and back. Fury cut dangerously close to lust, the line blurring, and Ellis wasn't wholly
sure what he should have been bracing for.

Rather than wait to find out, he acted.

His hand darted up, circling Nick's wrist with his fingers, pulling downward, hard.

Although he wasn't able to quite disentangle the man's digits from his shirt, he was able to return
his feet flat to the ground and take a half-step back. The Northerner's eyes widened, relenting
without letting go.

"C'mon then, Nick. I know you wanna yell at me, so just get on with it." Ellis murmured, a grunted
half-laugh escaping him, then a snort. "I mess things up? Were you hopin' the sisters wouldn't
never find out? 'Bout whut, exactly? Afraid they'll think yer gay?"

Nick's fingers tightened, knuckles digging against his sternum, and Ellis let his fingers skate up
until he could grip the back of the man's hand.

The touch of their hands felt intimate, despite it all, and both of them allowed it to masquerade as
that previously-violent gesture. Both of them pretended the touch of skin-on-skin was some battle
for dominance, and not a desperate attempt to stay anchored together.

"I'm not -" escaped Nick, a strangled sound, but Ellis' patience was dwindling.

"Stop. Just stop. I don't wanna hear it, Nick." A harshness drew his voice into a gritty tremble,
anger surging over his self-control. "You wanna act like yer so wounded? Like I did you wrong?
We're both bleedin', Nick, 'cept I'm tryin' tuh fix it'n'you ain't done nothin' but make it worse."

He saw the hurt glint across Nick's face. It should have given him pause.

"All you ever do is hide, 'n'pretend like no one can see you. Act like it's the damn end'uh the world
if I loved you, like the world ain't already ended. If you tried tuh let me in half's hard as you been
tryin' tuh keep me out, we'd be okay. Don't you get that? You ain't dumb, Nick, so why does this
get you so worked up? Why're you bein' so damn stupid?"

Nostrils flaring, Nick cocked his head, teeth on edge as he spoke. "That's fuckin' rich - if I'm so
stupid and we're so miserable together, then why are you still fuckin' here? You think you're the
smart one for hanging around so I can keep hurting you?"
Anger flared too high for Ellis to fully process what he was doing before he shoved himself forward. The strike of his body against Nick's chest forced the man into a stagger, and as Nick's hips bumped into the dresser behind him, Ellis lunged forward to set his hands atop the surface, trapping Nick against it and between his forearms.

There was no space between them, then, flat to one another from the belly down. Nick arched back in reflex, shocked into a choked sound, releasing Ellis' shirt entirely in order to brace himself with both hands jolted behind himself.

_Gotcha now, li'l gator. Now's the hard part._

Lips drawn into a grimaced frown, Ellis tilted his chin, unable to stop his voice from raising. "Why do you keep sayin' that like you don't got no fuckin' choice in it?!"

Nick's jaw tensed, eyes low-lidded. "Ellis -" he started, but Ellis spoke over him.

"I'm so damn tired of hearin' you talk 'bout us like we're already over. Who says? And why? Why are you tryin' so hard to piss me off'n'push me away? You said you needed me, last night, so whut's the damn problem? Can't you see I need you, too?"

Nick's body trembled against his, just subtly, and Ellis watched a strange mixture of emotions crawl through his eyes. Most of them were recognizable, some even outright familiar. One, however, eluded him; it seemed so conflicted and so muddled, that he couldn't quite discern if it was fear, or guilt, or something else.

It was easy to be angry, but that did not make it hard to feel tender grief.

"Tell me somethin', Nick. This ain't about yer ex, is it? So what is it about?" He did not miss the way the older man's eyes followed his lips. He hoped it also meant he was listening; this was, perhaps, the most important question. The one that really mattered.

Everything else felt... hollow, in a way. It was all things they'd said a million times before, in a million different ways, and to what end? What good did any of it do if they never made progress with each other? Without baring those raw wounds, maybe Nick was right: maybe they were nothing, after all.

"Who's Brett, really?"

He saw the betrayal as much as he felt it. Nick's posture stiffened, surging back against the dresser in an attempt at escape, and his chin lowered until it touched his chest. His gaze flickered around the room, or maybe it just did anything to avoid Ellis' face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." he muttered, hoarse and stiff. "Or the fuck that has to do with anything."

The Georgian shifted his right arm, hand sliding over the wooden drawer, thumb brushing against Nick's waist. He slid it just above the waistband of his sweats, touching the curve of his hipbone and smoothing over his skin in something like comfort. "You never told me he was dead." he whispered. "Whut happened, Nick? How'd he -"

He couldn't finish the sentence before the wind was knocked out of him, both of Nick's hands coming up to strike flat against his chest. With the blow unexpected, untelegraphed, Ellis was shoved back off his footing and forced to stumble to keep himself standing. He managed, but only just.
Unlike Ellis, Nick stayed frozen there and did not advance, hips resting against the dresser. His eyes were wide, lips barely parted to exhale the quick pants that shivered his chest in shallow motions. He spoke sooner than Ellis expected, voice rushed.

"Coach -" He cut himself off, however, eyes slitting with an abrupt intensity as he collected himself just a little. "You know what, Ellis? You can go right ahead and fuck yourself. You and everyone else keep digging around for the little sob story that'll make everything make sense. You've all got yourselves convinced there's an easy answer, and you're missing the fucking point."

Thrusting his arms out wide, Nick released a huff, a laugh that only came halfway to fruition. "It doesn't fucking matter. You think pulling the skeletons out of my closet is how we work out? You think if I just tell you all the shitty, fucked up things that fucked me up, they'll stop being shitty and fucked up? You think I'll stop being fucked up?"

Ellis felt his heart-rate pick up, his throat trying to constrict, his mouth going dry. "You ain't fucked up, Nick. Just scared. We can deal with it together - I know you, sugar, 'n' -"

"You keep saying that." Nick's voice chilled, suddenly, like ice spreading in crackling fractals over wet glass. His body shifted, taking an unsteady step forward, his fists balling up. Then another. "You keep fucking saying it like saying it means anything. You know me? What do you know, kid? C'mon. Wow me."

A frown clawed at Ellis' expression, gaze flickering to watch Nick's incremental advance. "I -" he stumbled out, lost for an instant before the words started of their own accord. "I know you got a real sharp sense'uh humour. I know you care so much it scares yuh sometimes. I know you'll do near 'bout anything fer the people you -"

The Northerner took another step. "Bullshit." he spat, harsh. "I'm not talking about my fucking horoscope. What do you know about me, Ellis? Do you even fucking know who I am?"

Confusion threatened at Ellis' composure, his body stiffening as the distance between them dwindled yet again. "I-I know you were born right before Christmas. I know you grew up in Bronx. I know yer uncle is a drunk'you had tuh take care of him when you was li'l, 'n' -"

He faltered, because something like humour flared in Nick's expression, and he knew he'd gotten something wrong but did not know what.

He forged ahead.

"I know yer parents weren't well-off, 'n'I know you gamble fer money. I know you get in over yer head with it sometimes, with bad folk. I know you were married, 'n'she didn't love you, but you loved her enough tuh keep hangin' ontuh the ring. I know I never would'uh hurt you like that."

There, the humour faded, and Nick stopped moving. His head tilted just a half-inch to the left. Did he look a little sad?

"I know you got real scared the first time you ever liked a guy, and you ain't never really stopped bein' scared of it. I know -"

"Stop." Nick said it flatly, lifting a hand, discontent curling at the corner of his mouth. His advance started again and did not stop, shoulders lowering as he approached, and Ellis couldn't keep his heart from beating a little faster. There was something aggressive in the way he moved. "You know what that is? You know what that all was?"

Ellis retreated despite himself, blindly stepping backwards. He was not afraid, precisely, but there
was an anger in Nick's posture and a calm hollowness in his eyes that reminded him of the night everything had fallen apart. It was the consequences of it all that worried him, more than the immediate situation.

The edge of the bed suddenly bumped into the backs of his thighs, and he watched Nick draw closer. As he came within arms' reach, the gambler's hands lifted.

Ellis felt himself tense, and his body drew to its fullest height as Nick's fingertips touched onto his jawline. A breath left him - a whimper - and the Northerner pulled his chin up an inch or so with a thumb cradled just underneath it. It took everything he had not to let his eyes drift closed.

It was hard not to wet his lips, let them part, because it felt so good to be touched so gently. There was no veil of night to blur the mortification he should have felt at his own desperation, yet he only felt a yearning.

"That's the sob story." Nick murmured, and if he weren't so close, Ellis might've missed the downward flicker of his mouth.

The Georgian couldn't pull himself together quick enough to respond before the thumb under his chin pushed his face up, and lips came down bruisingly hard against his. There was a sour taste to it, but he barely noticed. Ellis sucked in a breath through his nose... and then his eyes did flutter shut, body desperate to succumb.

He did not obey it.

Pushing his hands up, he planted his hands against Nick's chest, applying just enough pressure to force him back an inch. The contact between their lips broke, and when he re-opened his eyes, he found the older man gazing at him, hands unmoved.

"No." Ellis stated, just whisper, sure that the trembling of his voice betrayed how difficult it was.

A smirk dragged at Nick's face, humourless, as he let the pad of his thumb drift against the younger man's cheek. "Dumbshit. You don't know anything." he husked out, and how did it sound so much like a sweet-nothing? "If you did, we could've saved a lot of time."

Ellis stiffened, allowing his jaw to tighten and forcing the words out past gritted teeth. "Then tell me." An inner piece of him screamed to retreat, to pull away, at least physically.

That smirk widened a twitch, and he felt like he'd stepped into a trap. Nick's head tilted, gaze flickering over his face, and he let out a short breath. Alcohol lingered on it, as well as something more unpleasant. "Let's start with a few things you do know. Gambling? Sure. I gamble. Gambling turns into other things real quick, though. Gets you in the wrong circles."

His hands dropped, releasing Ellis' face, and it felt like a loss.

"So gambling, yeah. Then I got into debt. And when you get in debt, you gotta find money. Sometimes it's loansharks - but I was smarter than that. Interest is for morons, right?" A laugh made his shoulders jump, but it was forced. "So you find work. And when you need more money faster than a fucking nine-to-five gets you, you get desperate. And when you're a fucking piece of shit, maybe you get dirty."

Ellis watched his expression, warily, feeling his heart rate pick up even further. He didn't know what he expected, and didn't know how to prepare himself for it. He just... braced, and felt a gentle sympathy spool in him.
"See, I got into some low-level gang shit when I was a kid. Nothing wild, just breaking into some houses for cash, joyrides in someone else's car. Nothing that stuck - and I stopped, sooner than later, tried to get something like a real job. But I knew some people who didn't stop."

His words brought a soft frown to Ellis' face, more worried than anything, though he tried to quash the expression as quickly as he could.

Nick's lips curled, again, and it was a stiff smirk. The hollow tone to his voice became crueler. "By the time I got back in touch with them, they were hard. They ran drugs. I didn't get into that, much, but collecting? Sure. Got my ass out of a few jams by breaking someone's arm. You ever need money from someone, try throwing a Mollie in their backyard. Suddenly, they pay up."

It was hard not to lean away, and harder still not to let his expression display unease. Hearing Nick talk about it felt surreal, somehow, and he fought to rein in a subtle panic in his chest. He'd never considered the other end of it: Nick had told him about getting assaulted over debts, but he'd never imagined the man on the other side.

Still, his instinct protested it, and he spoke past a dry mouth: "You were desperate. Folk do crazy shit when they're desperate. It don't -"

"Don't what?" Nick interrupted, green eyes glinting as he tilted his head the other way and parroted back Ellis' Southern diction. "Don't mean nothin'? Sorry to break it to you, sweetheart, but it does. It matters. Me being the sort of person who'd leave you to die the first day we met matters."

Ellis' eyes widened, gaze searching Nick's, uncomprehending.

That made Nick's arms lift, gesturing to either side of the room, a half-laugh escaping him. "I never told you, did I?" he uttered, at first, low, in a tone that said he was not surprised by that fact. Then his voice raised again. "First day we met. You got nabbed by a Smoker, and I had your gun. Only reason I came back to get you was because you had all the fucking bullets in your fucking overalls."

Hurt flecked in Ellis' expression, teeth clamping on his tongue as he re-assessed that memory, feeling it weaken and crumble at his touch. The first time Nick had ever saved him - only for convenience?

"Quit it!" Ellis burst out, unsure if he meant to direct it at Nick or himself. He curled his hands into fists and raised one, patting his chest with it. "That don't matter, man. It's been so long, 'n'so much has changed. You ain't the same person from then."

When Nick leaned forward, there was a breathiness to his voice. He seemed almost eager, like he'd picked up on the falter, like he wanted Ellis to break. "It's been weeks, kid, a month or two. Barely. People don't change, and not in weeks. People don't goddamn fall in love in weeks."

Anger made Ellis' fists tighten, but he couldn't summon words before Nick laughed again, nasal and sharp. He raised a hand to rub at his forehead, the gesture so erratic and stressed that he aborted it halfway through.

"You want to know what happened to Brett? Do you want the sob story or the truth?"

As fast as it had come, the anger faded, and Ellis found himself nervous. He swallowed, bracing again for the unknown, and lowered his hand back to his side. "I want everythin'. I wanna know."

Nick's eyes raised, staring out from under his palm, a coldness touching his expression beyond a faint surprise. His voice lowered and there, once again, came that indescribable flush of emotion
over his face. It was clearer that time, by degrees: shame.

"He trusted me. He thought he loved me. And I killed him."

Ellis didn't move, gaze flickering over every minute detail of Nick's face, hunting out an explanation. He did not want to believe either of the implications in that statement. When he didn't find an easy answer in the man's expression, his right hand lifted to brush a stray curl away from his own temple.

"You...?"

Releasing a tight snort, Nick jerked his chin up. "Not literally. Not with my bare hands. But you take enough things away from a guy, pull his life apart piece by piece, and what do you expect? Put someone half-decent with a fucking greedy, worthless motherfucker like me, and what do you expect to happen?"

A shiver touched his frame, and on reflex, Ellis reached to settle a hand on his hip in an attempt at comfort. As quickly as it had touched down, however, Nick snatched it by the wrist and yanked it up to hover it beside his head. The grip was just tight enough and pulled his arm in enough of a weird curl to hurt.

"But if you need literal, I got that, too."

There was a strained edge to his voice that made Ellis' spine snap straight. It was clearer than ever how hard Nick was struggling - but it was difficult to discern whether that struggle was to keep things in, or force them out.

"Whut the hell does that mean?" the younger man pressed, swallowing down the anxiety plucking at his composure. "Nick, quit, yer scarin' me." he whispered, gaze darting over the older man's face. "Just... stop, okay? You ain't thinkin' straight, 'n' - this ain't makin' no sense, so -"

Something desperately unpleasant twisted on Nick's face, and he pushed just a little harder, sending a pang of pain down Ellis' forearm as it turned a few centimeters too far in its rotation. He didn't get the sense that Nick meant to hurt him, but the man was too distracted to notice that his elbow was twisted wrong.

The Georgian wanted to protest, but he bit it down and did not fight.

"You don't understand? Let me make it simple for you." Nails bit into Ellis' wrist as the taller man leaned forward, lowering his voice, a harsh derision in his tone. "I'm a fucking felon, you backwoods dumbass. Two years, manslaughter, before I got out on parole. It's illegal for me to even have a gun, not that that means anything anymore."

Ellis felt a faint illness crest the edge of his awareness, a nervous nausea, a discomfort he couldn't shake. His skin numbed with it, breath turning shallow. "Yer... a...?"

An abrupt snort made Nick's shoulders jostle, and in a reversal of his previous advances, he pulled Ellis' arm sharply forward, as if to pull the man closer to him. The move released the painful tension on his elbow caused by its overextension backwards, but Ellis did not allow himself to be displaced. His heels dug in and his expression tightened.

Nick only applied a little force, before it became clear that he could not easily overpower the younger man's resistance, and he stopped trying. Instead, he continued unabated, tone casual in a way that did not match how he closed his eyes.
"I cheated a guy out of a pot. He got wise, followed me home, tried to put a knife in my spleen. I pushed him down some stairs, and he split his skull open. Might've gotten self-defense if they hadn't had cameras in the parking lot."

Ellis' lips moved before his mind processed. "Was it?"

Nick hesitated, and suddenly, his eyes softened. He seemed to examine Ellis' expression in full, taking it in, and maybe he saw the genuine fear in the younger man's eyes. A doubt emerged in Nick's, a weariness - and then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed, and if Ellis weren't already split into fragments, he might've thought it a heartbreaking sound. It sounded miserable.

"He came at me, so maybe. But the jury changed their minds after the cops showed 'em a video of me sitting on the stairs for thirty minutes, smoking a cigarette and watching him bleed out."

The feeling Ellis had had, standing in the night-time air, listening to Nick tell him they were nothing - that had been a unique misery, a complete and utter evisceration. He'd nearly drowned in it, nearly suffocated in it, and it had taken him days to come up for air.

It had made him feel like shattered safety glass: a hundred thousand hairline fractures held together only by the faintest spiderweb of plastic fibres. He sat roughly in his original shape, yet was indelibly broken. He'd come back together over the last few days, slowly, but it wasn't until that very moment that he truly appreciated how delicate that healing was.

Ellis felt himself fall apart, again.

Suddenly, Nick released him. The younger man found himself sidling to get his back toward the bedroom door, getting distance between them. He didn't mean to retreat so brazenly, but it was an animal need to get space, like otherwise he couldn't quite breathe.

He grabbed at his elbow, digging his fingertips against the still-twinging muscle there, gaze averting sharply toward the ground. "Why -" he whispered, throat constricting as tears welled in his eyes, blurring his vision. "That ain't you, Nick. None'uh that's you. That ain't - this ain't fair. Yer just sayin' all this 'cause you think it'll hurt me, 'n' -"

"I told you once." Nick stated, words stiff as they left him, a nausea twisting his mouth into something ugly. "Only people left around in an apocalypse are lucky, or they thrive in it. Which exactly do you think I am? You think some bullshit post-Rapture attitude adjustment changes what I've done and who I am? You don't know anything about me. So who are you in love with, exactly?"

All the blood drained from Ellis' face. A dizziness swallowed him up, placing his hands against his chest as if his fingers could hold himself together by force. They trembled before he gripped them tight, tangling in his shirt, digging against his sternum.

It killed him, faintly. It killed him mostly because he knew there was some truth to it.

"You want to say it doesn't matter. You want to say it doesn't change anything. But it does - and you can't." Nick accused, voice deflated to a quiet and factual mutter. "So do us both a favour and fuck off."

The Northerner listened, watching only in his periphery, as Ellis took one step back. Then another. Then two more. Each impact of his heel on the carpet felt like it was striking directly on his chest, instead. Rather than the relief he hoped to feel, he felt an overwhelming misery.

Part of him was glad Ellis said nothing as he fled the room.
Part of him wished Ellis refused to.

In the silence that followed, Nick felt - more than ever - like he stood on a precipice, the earthen edge crumbling just past his toes. He'd been trying for weeks to jump or, at least, allow himself to fall. Now, finally, there was no one to catch him. You got what you wanted.

Nick turned, and did not choose to sit on the edge of the bed as much as his knees collapsed. He set his elbows on his thighs, leaning forward, and felt a surge of cold crawl up his spine and curl at the base of his skull. His breath left him, and he struggled to regain it, lungs shivering with each attempt to draw in oxygen.

_Happy?_

Fur brushed against his lower back. Unthinking, he reached one arm behind himself and grabbed a hand under Maggie's belly. She struggled when he lifted her, but quickly settled when he clutched her to his chest. Burying his face against her shoulder, Nick closed his eyes into her fur, shuddering into the tender warmth emanating from her.

Tears came before he could stop them, and they turned harsh, a crushing pressure threatening to collapse his ribs. He sucked in air, but all it did was fuel a sob that made him bend forward, a gentle hyperventilation jolting at his diaphragm. It was a quiet weeping, shoulders trembling from the pain spiked through his midsection.

He suffocated himself into the furry shape in his arms, feeling her front paws dig into his shoulder, toepads spreading into a knead. Her coarse breath shifted, lengthening, and a purr crackled in her throat.

She'd never purred before.

"Tryed so fuckin' hard to lie to him, convince him I didn't care, so he'd give up." he husked against her, voice muffled, suddenly choking out a laugh with the same breath that his lungs turned into a whimper. "And look at that, Mags. All I needed to do was tell him the truth."

Nick fell apart.
Chapter 285

The first floor was silent - until it wasn't.

Christophe was the one to break it, talking like he was continuing a conversation that had already been taking place. He'd paced the length of the living room at least twenty times since they'd settled there, and he spoke with teeth gritted, rubbing his palm against his forehead.

"I did not think he would leave. Nico... he loves Ellis. Yo sé que lo hace."

With her hands cradled against her face where she sat on the couch, Rochelle muttered a muffled, "I'm starting to realize making bets on what Nick's going or not going to do is a mistake. I doubt he even knows." Her thumbs pressed into her eyes, squeezing them shut. "Baby, stop pacing. Please. You're making me anxious."

The Spaniard flinched to a halt, then turned to face her, his arm crossing loosely over his chest. His slim features strangled into a faint frown as he glanced from Coach to Rochelle and back. "Maybe they are talking. Nico looked sad. Maybe they -"

"Y'know, I have a question." Rochelle's head abruptly lifted, interrupting him, her attention twisting to glance at Coach. The big man stood near the front door, leaned against the TV stand they'd set there, his eyes closed. "You two knew something was going on with him since the mall. Why'd you take this long to tell us? You don't think we could've caught this sooner if we'd been on him?"

Coach released a breath, eyes slitting open but not looking toward her. He'd settled his palm against the bandaged wound on his neck, absently holding pressure, more a nervous gesture than a necessary one. "Babygirl, don't start. Chris followed my lead, an' I gave Nick some time. Thought he'd come around."

"Oh, my God." Thrusting her hands forward, Rochelle practically spat out, "You guys are hopeless! Name one time Nick's come around. Name one time he's actually taken a chance we gave him and done the right thing with it. Name -"

But, softly, Coach interrupted. "Every day since the day we met him." His gaze lifted and matched hers, mournful.

It silenced her for a beat, and she deflated slightly into the sofa, looking down toward her lap and gathering her hands together in a tight clasp. "Damnit." she muttered, anger flooding into her voice along with a helpless sarcasm. "Maybe we should just go with the sisters. That'd piss him off."

"It is, maybe, the right thing." Chris mumbled, tone hesitant. "You know? If we stay together, I mean. If we do not see the military... it is better to be a big group."

Coach shrugged his shoulders and lowered his chin, thoughtful. "We just got off gettin' damn-near buzzed by a Navy chopper. I ain't throwin' in the towel, yet. My ex ain't in Texas. My li'l girl ain't in Texas. If there's a chance some evacs got out, stickin' with the guv'ment's all we got. We had this conversation a million times before."

"You ever think that your best chance at reuniting with your fuckin' people is to just stay safe, however you can? That may not be fingerin' each other on the beach making S.O.S. signs out of zombie limbs."
Where Rochelle's nostrils flared in an angry exhale, Coach let himself snort, gently humoured. He shrugged, again. "Unlike some of y'all, I ain't given up hope yet. Even if our military got caught off-guard, there's a whole world out there probably bandin' together to stop this shit."

Quieter, Rhiannon muttered, "Hopefully the plan isn't carpet-bombing the States."

With a sudden groan of frustration, Rochelle stood up, her hands framing her face. "I actually don't want to hear it. None of this is about what the right move is for survival - don't you get it?" She circled around the couch, strides lengthy, shoving her shoulder against the post at the end of the kitchen counter. Her head tilted until she could look in, seeing Rhiannon on the floor, sitting upright and almost fetal.

"He's using you guys as a shield. He's just... trying to run."

Slowly, softly, Rhiannon's head lifted up from where it had been tucked almost between her knees. A laugh made her slim frame surge, and her head tilted. The smile that cut wryly across her face seemed more sad than anything else. "You don't think we're using him?"

Rochelle hesitated, blinking, like she didn't know how to respond to that.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Ro'." With some discomfort flashing across her face, Rhiannon leaned back, flattening herself against the cabinets behind her. "Sometimes you gotta choose between keeping what little you have, and getting something new. Sometimes it's worth it. Sometimes it isn't, and you just lose everything."

A frown twisted at Rochelle's features, and she sagged against the post with a soft exhale. That hit closer to home than she wanted it to, though understanding did not necessarily change her mind. "Never know which it is until it's over, huh?"

Grinning just a little, the biker raised both hands, curling her fingers into loose finger-guns aimed up at the other woman. "Smart girl." Then her grin faded, and she sighed, eyes slitting half-shut and head striking the cabinets behind her. "If it helps, the dick came to us. Not the other way around. Lee was just reacting."

"It doesn't." Rochelle returned, immediately, but she offered the smallest laugh - a gentle apology - when the blonde darted a glare in her direction. "Just so we're clear, I'm not letting him go. And if you and your sister are half the people I know you are, you'll help."

Rhiannon did not move. She just closed her eyes, a soft monotone touching her voice when she responded, "If he wants to come, he comes."

Rochelle's head tilted, glancing over the woman's expression with a gentle resignation. No reason to keep arguing. She's gonna follow her sister's lead, and I can't really blame her for that. She sighed softly and took a step back rather than respond. Her body turned, shrugging as she found both men in the living room watching her closely.

Her mouth opened, but the softest sound caught her attention before she could form the words she meant to say. It was nothing abrupt, nothing loud, but more the gentle swell of some distant white noise to a volume that finally pierced her perception. Something she'd been hearing for a while, but had not yet noticed.

A pattering of rain built outside, striking the roof, now softly growing in intensity until the strike of it against the building was audible. More than that, even, came the subtle sound of burbling water as the gutters began to fill and then drain out.
She'd once enjoyed the rain. She found it soothing, and a convenient excuse to wear something fluffy and baggy and cook something warm. Now, it just made her think of Witches, and Chris' blood staining her hands, and the worst few days of her life.

Her eyes darted to the Spaniard, and found a tension in his jaw that mirrored her own. She wondered if he was thinking of the same things.

Without a word, Rochelle advanced, darting across the living room. She slipped up to the windows they'd covered up with thin cottony blankets, and leaned in to nudge one aside just an inch or so. Looking out into the street revealed a grey morning, overcast skies only providing some dull and gauzy light.

Scanning carefully, she didn't miss the vague flickers of movement amongst the buildings around them, infected wandering sluggishly in and out of sight. They did not seem affected by the rain dampening through their torn and muddied clothing.

The longer she looked, the more she saw. It was hard to keep count, and harder still to reconcile their sleepy wandering with the inevitable screaming horde they'd stir up amongst themselves. It didn't worry her, precisely, but she felt some discomfort.

Without looking away, she murmured, "I think the mess we left at the mall caught up with us."

Coach grunted out, "Swarmed?", frowning when she nodded. He barely moved, though Christophe jolted to scooch next to her, peering out through a different gap in the makeshift curtains.

"I have seen worse." he announced, faux-cheer in his voice to badly cover the fact he was nervous. "But it is not a good time to fight. Maybe we stay here until -"

Lena's voice cut quietly across the room, firm. "If Coach can move, we should move." It almost startled Rochelle, but she stifled the sharp inhale that betrayed her tension. When she turned to look, she found the brunette standing in the hallway, her large duffel-bag hanging from her right hand.

Her eyes were red, a puffiness settled around their sockets. She punctuated the statement with a quiet sniff, wet. Her chin was turned low as if to hide the clear signs of crying, though her voice was untouched by any emotion at all.

A frown settled on Rochelle's face. She tried for some calculation, weighing the value of pettiness over magnanimity, but her stores of the latter were not at their highest... and the idea of succumbing entirely to the former saddened her. Instead, she jutted her chin forward and avoided indulging in either.

Simply, factually, she stated: "I don't think it's the right call."

Inhaling through her nose, Lena shifted her gaze to focus on Rochelle completely, her jaw softening. Maybe she knew, acutely, the line that the other woman had chosen to walk, and responded in kind. Her voice remained careful. "We didn't plan to stop in the first place. The longer we take, the less chance anyone who survived the crash is still alive - let alone close enough for us to find 'em."

That made Rochelle's head tilt, and a tentative question touched her tone. "You still want to help find the crash?"

The brunette snorted, chin lifting up a half-inch. A dull humour etched into her expression, raising a hand to flatten it helplessly against her sternum. "Do you still want to help me find a boat?"
For a moment, the two women stared at one another, and it felt somewhere between the tender pause before a breakdown, and the loaded beat before someone threw a punch. Neither happened.

"I'm good." Coach announced, pushing to straighten off the TV stand. He glanced around the room, face crunched in an agitated look. He seemed equal parts concerned and frustrated. "But I ain't worried about me. You think stickin' them boys in a car together is gonna happen right now? Or that it should?"

Rochelle put a thumb against her forehead, pressing there with a wince. "Can't make decisions based on them. They'll work together whether they want to or not. They have so far."

A small sigh bounced Coach's shoulders, eyes rolling lightly upwards. He stepped to the side, bending down next to the wall. They'd piled most of their weapons there, including their backpack, and he started to dig through it as if to take stock of what was in it. "Ellis put the man's dirty laundry out. Shit ain't gonna be the same."

The producer hesitated, glancing for an instant toward Lena, her mouth pursing. She did not miss the slightly sad smile on the brunette's face, nor had she missed the summarily unfazed attitudes both of the sisters had displayed throughout the altercation between Nick and Ellis.

"Yeah, well. I get the feeling his panties were already out on the line." she muttered, half to herself, and turned to face Christophe. "Baby, can you dig through the kitchen and start gathering up anything worth taking? I'll go -"

The sound of a rapid descent was suddenly audible through the far wall, footsteps on the staircase, and all eyes turned to the dining room. The footsteps almost reached the bottom before they slowed, and when Ellis came into view, he looked... dazed. Pale. There was a vague glaze to his eyes, lips idly parted.

Immediately, on instinct, Rochelle darted forward. She halted herself a few steps in, however, and merely lifted a hand. "Sweetie?" she questioned, tone soft. "What's up? What happened?"

As if in afterthought, Ellis' head shook, and he carefully walked himself around the dining table until he reached a chair. He grabbed the back of it, just to steady himself - and Rochelle thought he was going to pull it out and sit down.

Instead, he turned on his heel and abruptly walked into the bathroom, shutting the door behind himself. He did not slam it, but the sound seemed painfully loud in the otherwise silent house.

Rochelle couldn't help but flinch, both at the noise and what it no doubt meant.

"Shit." she muttered, darting forward. "Someone want to go check on Nick and see if he's still breathing? And if he is, make him stop?"

The last thing she expected was for Rhiannon to stand, suddenly pushing against the cabinets to get herself to her feet. The blonde wordlessly crossed the kitchen, ducking past them and trotting toward the stairs. The more she considered it, however, the more she felt a weird sort of relief.

"Nick and her get along - ... for some reason. Not sure when that happened, but maybe he'll respond to her better than us, especially if he thinks she's his way out."

Rubbing at her temples, Rochelle turned her attention to the closed bathroom door, ignoring the way Coach, Lena, and Chris were all staring directly at her. Squinting against the headache trying desperately to sink claws in her brain, she walked forward until she could press herself gently against the door.
Without looking, she pointed toward the kitchen, and she could hear Chris' sheepish footsteps start in that direction.

Resting her cheek against the doorframe, Rochelle settled a hand just next to the doorknob, flat against the wood. "Ellis? You wanna come out here, or should I come in?" She was quite sure her tone gave no indication that there was a third option - so when Ellis did not respond, she pressed. "Okay, I'll reword. Either you come out, or I -"

"C'mon."

It was so soft, so hoarse, she might've missed it entirely had she not been pressed so close to the door. Frowning, she snatched her hand around the doorknob and twisted, pushing to slip through the smallest gap she could manage, as if to keep his privacy from the main room.

Absurdly, she was reminded of quite nearly every middle school dance, every social and every prom, every time spent crying or being cried on in the school bathroom - and it made her a little melancholy. Then, frustrated.

How much energy had they put into fighting amongst themselves and fighting Nick that could've been spent getting them to rescue? How many times had they been delayed, when a few more minutes might've let them catch sight of the boat, or flag down the helicopter, or...

*Unfair,* she accused.

The lighting in the bathroom was dim, but enough. Ellis sat on the toilet, leaned back against the tank, his arms draped limply down into his lap. He was staring down at his hands, tears starting to pool against the corners of his eyes. The slow, rigid rise and fall of his chest said he was trying to calm himself out of it.

Rochelle froze, but for the motion of her hands to pull the door closed behind her, unsure of whether or not to approach. She watched him carefully, eyes following as he lifted a hand to knuckle against the bridge of his nose, his mouth curling unpleasantly as he braced himself against a visible shiver.

"He told me I was gonna die." he muttered, faintly.

Seeing red did not quite describe the crushing fury that burnt a ragged hole through Rochelle's insides. Bewilderment and confusion came only slightly secondary, but before she could open her mouth, he continued.

"He said y'all were dead already, 'n'he'd take his time with me." His voice, quiet, quavered just softly. "Make me cry."

As quick as she'd angered, Rochelle deflated, understanding dawning on her; Ellis was not talking about Nick. She couldn't stop herself from advancing, dropping to her knees just beside him, her hands darting forward to cup over his. The momentary panic of being unsure if the contact was appreciated quickly ended as Ellis' fingers shifted to loosely lace with hers.

"Baby -" she whispered, but he shook his head, and she quieted.

He inhaled, deeply, and steadied his shoulders to sit more in line with his body instead of the slump he'd been in. "He was gonna cut me up. He had me pinned down, so - I grabbed - I got his knife, 'n'put it right in his leg. He let me go just enough so I could get away. I ain't never hurt nobody before... I mean, not like that. Just zombies, 'n'... y'know, shootin' Keith with paint-balls'n'shit..."
Rochelle felt that anger rising back up. Directionless, it did little but choke at the base of her throat like foul air.

"Y'know -" A subtle, puffed laugh left him, one brow scrunching. The motion freed one gathered tear from his left eye, and he darted to brush his cheek against his shoulder, nudging it dry. "When we was kids, we'd grab up sticks'n'play slaps, 'cept with like, switches. Cut our hands up good. Went until someone wussed out, 'n'Keith ain't no wuss."

When he didn't get a laugh or much of a reaction at all, he hesitated, then drooped his head. His lips pursed, frame tensing. "... I got away, a minute, until he caught up. But he was - enjoyin' it. Tried tuh shoot muh legs out rather'n kill me, I guess, so I couldn't get away."

Rochelle's hands tightened on his, and she hoped her horror didn't show on her face. She'd been avoiding imagining precisely what had happened, and Ellis had been reluctant to offer details. Now, she wished she'd pressed sooner. *Maybe he wasn't ready until now.*

"But his gun blew up in his hands. All the heat'n'shrapnel came back at him, 'n'he died, real nasty. Bleedin' from the face'n'neck like a stuck pig - I think the shock just knocked him clean out, y'know? I tried tuh... I wanted tuh help him, but... happened so fast, 'n'I was scared, 'n'..."

Her thumb stroked against the back of his hand, struck by the sharp urge to cry. She'd made efforts not to think too hard about what Jerry had done - or intended to do - to Ellis, but she'd known it had been nothing good. She just hadn't known to what degree.

"I wouldn't never hurt someone if I could help it. I gotta keep believin' shit's good, y'know? That people are good. 'Cause..."

When he hesitated and faltered, Rochelle leaned forward, just softly, chin tilting to get a better look at his face and the frustration therein. He looked agitated, and a little lost. "Sweetie. You know I'm here for you. But what does this have to do with Nick leaving?"

Ellis' gaze lifted, softly landing on hers. His mouth pulled into a purse, nostrils flaring with a deep inhale, then popped his lips. Only hesitantly did he mumble, "I don't think I know him."

She stared, a rapid set of blinks fluttering her eyelids.

He seemed to deflate, shoulders drooping, eyes watering as his eyes half-slitted and forced the dampness to their corners. "I-I mean... I do. But I don't... know the important stuff, maybe. 'N'maybe... things only worked 'cause I didn't. Like... shit was kinda simple. I know that seems dumb, but -"

"It really, *really* doesn't." Rochelle stated, firmly, tightening her fingers on his. "What did he say?"

The Georgian's expression fell, an anxiety creeping up into his eyes. Only warily did he turn his wrists, lacing their hands completely together and squeezing.

"He... went tuh jail, Ro'." he whispered, voice coarse and hushed. "'Fer killin' somebody. I-I know it's... I know things're complicated, now, I know he kinda killed Jerry'n'you kinda killed Brenda - but... way before the Flu started, he... He watched the guy die, Ro'. He didn't even try tuh call somebody. If it was an accident, why wouldn't you call somebody?"

She wished she could have felt shock - but that wasn't quite what she felt. Disappointment, maybe, and disheartenment, but not shock. It was not a wild revelation to think Nick had some criminal past, though she hadn't pegged him as a murderer or a felon.
Instinctively, immediately, she imagined there was more to the story. The only times she'd seen him lean into true violence had been rooted somewhere in a protectiveness, whether that was precisely protecting Ellis or protecting the team as a whole. Even his recent behaviour had been, in his opinion, an attempt to keep Ellis safe.

She hadn't known what he'd meant by that.

Now she did.

*It's not my job to hand him excuses. It's not my job to pick up the pieces after Nick shits the bed. I did that way too many times before, and I'm done helping Ellis get hurt. So what the hell do I say?*

She returned the squeeze against his hands and leaned back in her crouch. "What do you want to do?"

Ellis looked at her with a tiny, frantic exhale, shrugging his shoulders up tightly. "I-I dunno. He just scared me. I... I needed tuh breathe. Still feel like I can't. I felt like I knew him, y'know? Felt like no matter what happened, we'd be okay, somehow. I... dunno if that's... stupid."

Rochelle shifted one of her hands, pulling it free from the tight clutch they had on each other, and raised it to settle her palm against his cheek. "Love takes work, and compromise, and that's from both of you." She petted her thumb against his cheekbone, softly. "The end of the world doesn't leave a lot of room for that."

At her touch, he frowned, and his gaze averted. It went distant, as if in intense thought. "I know I should be angry. I should be... I should feel used, or somethin'. He touched me last night, knowin' full well he was gonna leave. He... kept all this from me fer so long. I should feel pissed."

Watching his face shift gradually into a sad frown, she murmured, "But you don't."

Ellis leaned his cheek into her palm, eyes drifting shut, a few streaking lines of wetness darting freely down his face at the motion.

"I thought I could fight enough fer both of us. I wanted tuh fix things. He just wants tuh break 'em worse. Every time I try anythin', I just push him further away. Every time somethin' half-good happens, it's like he... aims tuh ruin it." His face screwed up slightly, confused, sour. "He said he needed me, Ro', but now he's leavin'? Whut'm I s'posed tuh do? Whut's he expect me to do?"

She sighed, letting her hand drop away from his face, feeling the slickness of tears clinging to the side of her palm. "Honestly? I don't know. And I don't think he does, either. I think he's a cornered animal, and they bite. Whether or not he cares about you or needs you or - whatever... That isn't necessarily the important part."

Ellis' eyes flickered to watch her, his jaw tightening, silent as she shrugged her shoulders.

"You can't always fix people. You can rarely really change them. And when someone's in a crisis, sometimes they just won't let you help them, even if part of them wants you to. It's... not always clean, or simple, or... easy to do the right thing."

He mumbled, then, "Screw doin' the right thing, I don't even know whut the right thing is."

She smiled just a little, sadly, tilting her head. "You've given him a lot more love than I think he's ever had before. That might... not be the solution. You're just... dumping glue on broken glass."

At that, his head lifted, and he searched her face for a moment. She tried her hardest to ensure it
was transparent, displaying nothing but an honest gradient of emotion - some disappointment, some uncertainty, and perhaps too little hope for comfort.

"I can't convince him, can I?" left him, a breathy few syllables that gusted out of him, less like words and more like a sigh. His face fell gently, and she wondered if she'd gone for too much honesty. "Can't force him 'round."

He spoke like he knew the answer. Rochelle shrugged, gently, a sympathy leading her voice to soften. "I think you tried, so hard. If you still want a relationship with him... maybe what he needs is some room to breathe, instead. There's still time before we find them a boat. Just let him come down a little - he's so panicked right now, I don't think he can even hear you."

Ellis' head bobbed, gently, eyes drifting to the floor. "He was so sweet last night. I really thought shit was gonna change. Stupid." He had been absolutely heartbroken after Nick had ended their relationship. This time, there was a calmness to his attitude that somehow worried her more. "But it's all the same... him gettin' drunk or scared or whatever, but can't just kiss me'n'tell me he loves me."

Frowning, Rochelle felt a sigh pull insistently at her chest. She straightened, suddenly, and the motion made Ellis reflexively look up to follow her. She crossed her arms, lifting her shoulders as if to fend off cold.

Maybe I'm stupid, too, but part of me wonders if he didn't keep all that from you because he knew you'd get scared off. Now, telling you the truth... maybe part of him hoped you wouldn't care.

"Do you care?" she asked, abruptly, and when he darted an uncertain frown at her, she clarified. "About the jail time. Does him having that sort of history change your feelings about him? I know it seems... I know the right answer feels like 'no', but..."

Ellis sucked in air through his teeth, holding it in his chest for a moment before puffing it out. He seemed to think, genuinely, rolling the thought around in his head before speaking.

"I-I dunno. I mean, no, 'course not... But I... gotta know more, y'know? I wanna know... whut happened'n'why. I don't care whut he's done, I care why he did it, y'know? Or... whut he thinks 'bout it now, at least. That's whut matters." A quiet sadness twisted at his mouth. "I-I just panicked. Fer a minute, I -"

When he hesitated, Rochelle reached out and touched his shoulder, a comforting nudge. "You saw Jerry instead of Nick," she supplied.

That sadness duplicated, and before she could quite process, he'd straightened and grabbed her into a hug. She was quick to reciprocate, circling her arms around his midsection and gripping tightly, her cheek nestling against his neck.

"I love you, El."

The utterance made him stiffen. She thought for a moment that it might've been the wrong thing to say - hadn't she said it to him before? Surely she had... it felt like something she'd have said before - before he lunged forward a half-step to bring their hug to a crushing tightness.

"Love you, too." he whispered back, and she held him as tightly as she could manage.
The walk up the stairs was enough time for Rhiannon to think, but not enough time for her to reach any meaningful conclusions. She did not know her aim, did not know her motivation. She did not even immediately know why she felt so angry.

Did she want to talk him down, or throw fuel on the fire?

Did she want him to come at all?

Those questions felt too complicated, and the feelings around them even moreso, and she did not have the time or the energy to parse through it.

The considerate thing would have been to knock or, at least, to gently open the door and offer some amount of time for Nick to pick himself up. It was only proper, especially when he was almost certain to be in some sort of compromising position or, at least, disinclined to want company.

Rhiannon did not strive, generally, to be considerate. The small kindness she extended was in letting her footsteps be heavy, and thrusting the door open a few beats before actually stepping in.

It was enough time for the man seated on the bed to whip his head up and arrange his features into something resembling a scowl, but not nearly enough time for him to wipe the tears off his cheeks. His face was red, eyes bleary, and for a moment, she paused.

Whoa. Fucker has tear ducts, after all.

Then her momentum returned, and she marched a straight line toward him. The faint blur of dark motion that darted under the bed indicated the cat's retreat from wherever she'd been, and the vague pain in his eyes said it had not been a graceful bolt.

Bereft of a game-plan, Rhiannon leaned on instinct; if the man was vulnerable, it only made sense to attack.

"Time to powder your nose and put on your big boy pants, faggot." she announced, halting barely a foot from him. "Got two tons of zed on our doorstep and -"

She saw the tension bristle up his body, fingers clenching into fists, nails digging into his palms. He was upright in an instant, and what had been a foot between them became barely inches. She actually hadn't expected him to rise so instantly to the offered challenge.

"The fuck did you call me?" left him in a snarl. There was a fury to it, but something sharper, too, like fear.

A smile twitched at her mouth, lifting her chin, angling it as if to align for a kiss. The proximity seemed to throw him off, and she took advantage of it to press a little harder. "I said, get your ass up and let's go. Unless you'd rather we leave you here, maybe leave you some Astroglide in case a Tank shows up with a foot-long. How's that sound?"

She could feel the anger rise off him like heat. She could feel the pressure in the air of his urge to strike out, sensed the paper-thin restraint stopping him from doing so. In response, she lowered her voice to a murmur, curling her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

"Aw, what? Wanna tell me you don't like dick? Maybe Rochelle just wouldn't put out, so you got
El to bend over for you? Nice enough ass to pretend, and I bet he sounds like a girl if you close your eyes."

He was, suddenly, so close their noses almost grazed. His hands jerked forward but did not make contact, and he barely maintained a level tone. The risen hackles and fury in his eyes would have been attractive, under different circumstances. "Shut the fuck up."

Rhiannon's hand slid forward, darting between them to brush knuckles against his stomach. He seemed to flinch away, a far cry from the way he'd leaned into her touch previously, but he did not retreat completely. It was most likely stubbornness more than anything - a game of chicken she'd won once before.

"You know, honey-pie, that'd be so much more threatening if you weren't in here bawling over your boyfriend."

Then, just as suddenly, she jabbed the tip of her thumb against the soft spot a few inches above his navel, just at the nexus of his ribs. The sharp motion made him suck in air, clearly pained by the nail thrust into the yielding muscle there. His jaw clenched around a response, but she didn't let up long enough to allow the interruption.

"And I don't think you've got a leg to stand on 'bout shutting the fuck up, dickhole. You blew our cover real good, you know that?"

That seemed to disarm him, his brows twitching up before he wrangled them back under control. The anger did not diffuse right away, but he did seem to reel himself in as she shifted the focus toward the bigger issue at hand. It was a little bit of a calculated threat. A reminder, less-than-subtle, that he'd endangered what good will he had with her and her sister.

It was a message that seemed to land, and he stood a half-step back... and then took one to the side, slitted eyes averting. "Blame your fucking sister, if you're going to blame somebody. She got me wasted."

Rhiannon let him retreat, her lips curving now in a firm grin. "'Got' you? Oh, yeah, bet you didn't have any choice, huh? Can't say no to the lesbian half your size?" If he was disarmed before, he flat-out staggered then. His head rotated so fast she imagined his neck barely survived the motion, eyes widening as he read her expression and the smug honesty therein. "Guess that explains why you can't say no to that blue-eyed piece of ass downstairs."

A vague pleasure spooled in her as he stared her down, shock slackening his features. The gambler did not speak, barely moved, and she snorted.

"Didn't know? She likes pussy more than you do, I bet." She raised her hand, spreading her index and middle finger in order to stick her tongue between them in a quick, mocking flick. "Oh, yeah. She had you and the kid pegged from the start, by the way. I didn't believe her."

His posture wavered, faltering, and he abruptly took a step back and dropped onto the edge of the bed, practically dead weight as he sat down. Nick's hands settled onto his knees, and he released a long breath that warped abruptly into half of a laugh.

"Seriously?" he ghosted out. "Of all the fucking - conniving little bitch."

Rhiannon grinned widely, now casually resting her chin in the cradle made by her fingers. "Please tell me you tried to jump her like you did me - last time we were out drinking, a dude grabbed her tits, and she knee'd him in the balls so hard he choked up his own dick. Probably the only blowjob..."
She tilted her head, watching as he reached to grab a handful of tousled blankets and buried his face into them. He spent just a few seconds in a half-hearted attempt to clean himself up, rubbing down the length of his face and squeezing the cloth against his nose with a snorted, wet exhale.

"Gross." she added.

Nick ignored her commentary entirely. "Wasted my charm on you. Didn't feel like going for seconds." he muttered, dryly, like he knew the pathetic humour of it all. "Lucky fucking me."

Rhiannon's grin broadened, then faded, a serious edge creeping into her expression as she observed him idly. *You know, fucker's halfway to cute when he's given up. Can't keep up the hardcore, big dick shit when you're covered in snot, huh?*

She took a step closer before dropping to sit on the edge of the bed beside him, looking forward rather than at him, even when he darted a twitching frown at her. "Look, dude. Level with me. Why are you trying to come with us, actually? You sold me some line about how you don't give a fuck about these guys, and that's pretty bullshit. All of us just got fisted wide open, so how about you just fucking explain it to me?"

Nick's chin lowered as he tossed the soiled blanket corner to the side, staring down toward the ground. "You really need me to spell it out?"

There was a moment of silence, then, and she couldn't shake the feeling that he'd offered her some surrender. Perhaps his guard dropped just a little, knowing Lena's orientation, or perhaps he'd simply been run entirely out of energy. *Dunno if it's... real, or if he's just desperate to get out of here. Guess it doesn't fuckin' matter.*

Her eyes stayed focused away, but she reached out, delivering a knuckled punch against his bicep that she hoped hurt. He didn't let on if it did. "What? Fucking zombies are knocking at our door, and you think anyone gives a shit about what hole you've left your jizz in?"

Bewilderment made him shift away. She bit back a snort when he thrusted his hands up, palms out, an almost pitchy confusion twisting at his voice. "You... literally just called me a -"

"Some of my favourite people are fags." she interrupted, shifting her weight to lean in toward him, gaze flickering to examine his face. She moved quick enough to catch the discomfort there, like a wound, like he was only just catching air past something that had his throat constricted. He tried to muffle it into a tight frown, but she knew that look. She knew that agony.

It inclined her towards patience - and it might've even drawn some sympathy from her if she'd been in the mood to entertain the emotion.

"I'm not fucking gay." he muttered. "I like women. I was married. Hooker once asked for my number so we could meet up off the clock. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not -"

Slapping her hand against her cheek, Rhiannon uttered a faux-gasp, rolling her eyes. "Holy shit, congratulations. You just invented bisexuality. A bunch of dudes just found out they can get a dick in their ass while *their* dick's in a pussy, and it's all thanks to you."

"Fuck you - Jesus." His posture tightened, irritation making him exhale out a sharp noise. "It's not like that. It's - not that simple. And it's not the point, anyway."

With a shrug, Rhiannon offered up, "So what is the point? You're not crying because we found out
you were pounding it out with the twink." When he let off a frustrated noise in blatant protest, she shrugged her shoulders. "Call 'em like I see 'em, sweet-cheeks. Fuck that shit, alright? Just tell me - what the fuck are you cunts fighting about?"

Nick did not speak for a moment, lacing his fingers together between his knees and staring down at them. It took him a fairly long moment before he'd cooled himself off to the point where he could focus. He pieced together a response, and when he did speak, it was hard not to notice the hollowness in it. He seemed exhausted.

"You know what's fucking stupid?"

She sat there, arching her studded brow, raising a hand to wipe her wrist against the corner of her mouth. She let the silence hang until he spoke again.

"I'm fighting to throw away the only good thing that's ever happened to me."

They lingered in that silence again, her eyes flickering on and off him, her cheeks slowly inflating to a heavy puff. Nick did not move, eyes anchored onto his hands, tension building slowly in his shoulders. It was insecurity, and the sort of emotion that tended to build to a breaking point. She couldn't tell if it would be a good break or a bad break.

Thoughtlessly, Rhiannon let the trapped air in her cheeks burst out in a popped sound, and stated: "That's gay as shit."

It was an unexpected - but not unwelcome - development when Nick barked out a strained, nasal laugh, quickly stifling the tail-end of it like it embarrassed him. He lifted a hand to press the heel of it against his forehead, grinding there. A sigh made his shoulders drop. "You're an absolute fucking moron. How did you and Lena come from the same gene pool?"

She grinned just a little, before shifting her weight. She threw her arm over his shoulders, feeling him bristle under the touch, his tentative humour melting away instantly. Rather than let off, she squeezed at his bicep with the hand that was now draped against it, tilting her head to get a better look at his face.

"You know, step one to fixing a fuck-up, is stop doing the fuck-up."

He hesitated, gaze flickering to hers, and she was thrown by the soft frown that arose on his lips. "Doll, you're missing the point. The fuck-up was... getting involved in this in the first place. I'm trying to... stop. That's all I was trying to do. I just... I think -"

Nick's expression fell, and for a moment, the exhaustion and the hangover and the argument all seemed to build to a weight that he could not quite stand under. A shiver touched his frame, his eyes half-closing, and he murmured, "I just finally ripped the band-aid off. Should be over."

Rhiannon fidgeted only a little, lips flattening. "So you were aiming to make the guy lock himself in the bathroom?" she offered, dryly.

The very last breath of the words was yanked out of her in a gust when Nick pushed abruptly to stand, shrugging out from under her arm in a sudden shudder of irritation. She let him go without a fight, watching him turn away, his hand brushing over his mouth in a nervous gesture.

A sigh left him, strained, before he shook his head. "Didn't do anything except make him realize what I've known a while now. Kid's too... himself to give up on somebody. I just made it easier on him."
She frowned, then, allowing her voice to harshen to a curtness. She liked Nick - but she liked Ellis, too. That was part of the problem, and part of the complex series of emotions that had her fairly uncertain of what side she was on. "Guess I'm not the only moron cunt in the room."

His head turned, and there was a moment where he looked at her, and she swore that she could see the flicker of neutrality enter his expression. A switch flipped, and distance built between them, tangible friction in the air. Something closed in his posture, though she'd not fully processed that it had been open.

"You have a fuckin' impressive amount of opinions on something you've been in on for about an hour." escaped him, and it felt somewhere between a flat-out snub and an accusation. He lifted a hand, thumbing against his nose. "You asked me to explain it. I did. We done here?"

A smile twitched at Rhiannon's face. She tucked her hands together and set them in a frame under her chin, batting her eyelashes gently. "Easy, sweet-cheeks, don't be mad at me. You twisted your own balls here."

Nick hesitated almost imperceptibly before he turned away, reaching down to adjust and straighten his sweats on his hips. The defusal of his anger felt like the closest she'd get to an admittance she was right. "Do me a favour and go get my clothes?" As if he instantly knew that she'd take issue with some part of the request, he quickly asserted, "It's better for all of us if I stay up here, at least for now."

Rhiannon considered an outright refusal, but decided instead to go with an arguable amount of truth. "Shit out of luck on that one, dude." His brows flinched in irritation, gaze tilting to look at her from over his shoulder. "There's a mosh pit building up out there, and we need to move."

He inhaled, sharply, mouth tightening into a thin line before he shook his head. An obvious flicker of panic flared in his eyes, though his tone remained fairly even. "Coach is -"

"Coach is fine. Guy's made of steel." she responded, haltingly, her shoulders lifting. "We're leaving, dude. And you're going to have to look your boyfriend in the eyes sooner than later, so tighten up your nutsack and let's go. As fun as watching you guys fight is, we have shit to do."

Nick's body was stiff, and he almost seemed frozen there, his mind scabbling for an escape plan and coming up with nothing.

Rhiannon spared a faint roll of her eyes, then pushed to stand, offering her left hand toward him. "Wanna hold my hand, sweetie?" she cooed, wiggling her hips. "We can go together. I won't let them yell at you."

Anger lit dully in his eyes, and he sighed, tilting his chin up to glance toward the ceiling. "Fine, Jesus, I take your goddamn point, Blondie. Just... go get my fucking clothes, okay? And Mag's carrier. If we're going, I gotta get her packed up."

She grinned lightly, dropping her arm and turning toward the door. As she walked, she thrust her arms to either side, letting out a short burst of a whistle. "Well, shit. You didn't use up all your charm, after all. I'm so horny right now I can barely stand it." she uttered in a loud monotone, her amusement strictly inward.

Nick watched her leave the room and kick the door shut behind herself. He calmed only incrementally, slowly wrapping his arms around his torso, tightening them until he almost felt like his arms might hold him together. He exhaled, and it shook.
Realizing, in hindsight, that Lena had known *exactly* what they'd been talking about when they'd discussed his supposed relationship with Rochelle... it had a strange effect on him, and not one he'd have anticipated. Was it getting a little easier to talk about, every time he talked about it? Did it hurt a little less, to be known by someone, every step he came closer to them?

It was an infantile sort of realization, perhaps, and pathetic by virtue of its simplicity, but he sat with it for a moment. He sat with the awareness that, once again, his privacy had been shorn from him and, once again, he found that he'd braced for something far worse than what truly unfolded.

Talking to Rhiannon had been something weirdly close to cathartic.

This time, at least, when he turned his head and glanced longingly toward the small window built into the side of the master bedroom, his urge to open it and climb out felt less sincere.

*Even if that'd still be a hell of a lot easier.*
Coach sat with their weapons in an array around him, thoughtfully checking the guns and ensuring they were fully loaded, as much as they could be. It was a necessary action, but also one that soothed him. He could do very little else, after all.

Context had been slow to come to him. He felt like he was consistently a few miles behind his teammates when it came to learning information and, more critically, understanding it fully. It had taken him a long time to come to terms with everything that had happened, and while he finally felt like things were within his grasp, he'd ended up more confused than ever.

He wanted to protect everyone involved, but was that even possible? And how was he to manage that when he didn't know what the optimal outcome was?

He knew, more acutely than most, that two good people weren't necessarily good for each other. He also knew that without conflict and strain, there was no room for growth. Both of his friends were at a pivotal moment in their development, and whether or not that development would lead to a renewed relationship... it would lead to somewhere new.

*Wish I knew how to lead 'em there. I ain't no Moses.*

Rochelle was frustrated, and he understood that. He'd been angry and lost his temper more than once with Nick; he just hadn't been expecting that the whole conflict would turn such that he felt just as bad for both men, and Rochelle's sympathy had run dry.

Nick was, charitably, unwell. The stress of everything had clearly taken its toll on all of them, but Nick perhaps most of all.

*Thing is, Ro' was right. He don't have a plan. Ain't that wild? If he were calculatin' out his best odds, goin' with 'em to have a better shot at survivin', I'd almost be less worried. But he ain't. Ain't even thought through what he'll do, or how. That ain't the Nick I know.*

He was unsure why Rhiannon had hurried to be the one to rouse Nick to attention, but he had his doubts. Still, he was hardly a good candidate for the spot; Nick was doubtlessly furious with him for betraying his trust.

And for all that, what had they gained? Ellis and Rochelle, locked away in the bathroom, speaking in whispered tones. Nothing good, that much was clear, and so Coach gritted his jaw and sorted through some of the smaller pockets of their shared backpack.

He found a few twenty dollar bills, folded messily against one another. He found a box of tiny band-aids with a variety of cartoon characters. He found a very compressed bag of soft candy sharks. He found a coin-roll of mints, unopened. He found a few loose scraps of fabric that he only belatedly recognized as Nick's old suit jacket.

He returned most of it to where he'd found it - except the money, which he crumpled in a hand and tossed aside.

A laugh huffed behind him in response, but he paid it no mind, zipping up the various pockets he'd examined and turning his attention to the two main sections. As he unzipped the biggest of them, Lena shifted to kneel beside him, her hands tucked primly between her thighs.

Coach did not acknowledge her, pulling out the limited supplies they still had stowed away. He
counted out a few ounces of hydrogen peroxide, a roll of bandage tape and a roll of Scotch tape, two small bundles of gauze, and a few palm-sized adhesive patches. There was a box of tampons tucked in the bottom, and he allowed himself a moment to process that before he added them to the 'keep' pile.

The stitched pockets in the inner wall of the backpack held a few pill bottles: a few days' worth of the antibiotics and painkillers Chris had been taking, a small bottle of ibuprofen. Tucked away in the far left one was the empty bottle of the celecoxib that had his name on it: his knee pills.

He'd been unable to throw them away. Seeing his name printed on a label was soothing, somehow, and made him think of the day he'd picked them up. It felt like a good memory. It felt like some stubborn proof that his previous life was not a figment of his imagination.

His knee pain probably should have sufficed, but that felt pessimistic.

"We should look for a store." Lena advised, quietly. "Pick up some basic stuff, even just a bunch of Advil. And... see if we can find a clinic. Even a vet would work. Getting some actual medical supplies would be a lifesaver."

Coach didn't nod, didn't look her way. He pulled out an empty Ziploc bag crumpled near the bottom of the backpack and started to fill it, organizing the gauze and medication inside of it. As he did so, he simply grunted, "Don't much like the idea of walkin' our asses into a hospital. I'd think it'd be damn crawlin' with zombies."

A snort bounced Lena's shoulders, cocking her head. "And the streets aren't? If anything, it's evac zones you have to worry about. That's where things got crazy."

"Maybe." he hedged.

He wasn't particularly angry with her. He knew how manipulative Nick could be, and if he blamed anyone for the situation, he blamed himself. It had been his injury that had waylaid them, and his lack of awareness that had allowed Nick to sneak such a plan under their noses. If he'd been a little more attentive, a little more forceful... maybe he could've avoided it all.

If he'd pushed the issue at the Sunset, would they have ended up where they were?

Footsteps down the stairs drew both of their attention, and neither of them spoke as Rhiannon came bounding out of the dining room. She didn't pay them much mind, either, darting right down the hallway and swinging into the laundry room at the far end of the house.

Coach and Lena blinked at each other, his brow raising subtly in a blatant question. She shrugged, gently, and they returned their attention toward the laundry room in unison, watching with unspoken and almost tongue-in-cheek bated breath.

When the blonde returned into view, it was with Nick's clothes draped messily over her. The jeans were almost straddling her neck, either leg dangled down over her chest, and she'd tied the shirt around her waist by the arms. She'd tucked the socks in the left zipper pocket of her black pants, stuck out like tongues.

His boxers were dangling from her right hand, fingers pinching it by the waistband and holding it arms' length.

From the kitchen, hidden from Coach's view, Christophe let out a whistle. He called out, a laugh threaded into his tone, "¿Es la ropa de Nico? ¡Y parece que explotó por todas partes!"
Rhiannon grinned into the kitchen, waving the boxers like a flag as she walked back toward the front room. "I'm gonna assume that was a joke and say 'hah.' Hey fucknuts." she uttered, pausing at the end of the couch in order to bend down and snag the strap of Maggie's carrier where it had been tucked under the couch. She dragged it free, and started to turn away, intent on returning upstairs.

"Everythin' a'ight?" Coach grunted, raising his voice enough to carry, watching as the blonde stutter-stepped to a halt and glanced back at him. Her mouth flashed to a twisted little frown.

"Nicky still alive up there?"

She shrugged a shoulder, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. That question seemed to give her pause, but she eventually answered, "Alive. Dude needs a cigarette, though, and probably a fuck. Guess that's out of the question now, though."

The slightest choke of air caught in Coach's throat, and he quickly cleared it, sparing a glance at Lena. She gave him a helpless look, her mouth just-faintly curled, and he returned his attention to Rhiannon. "That hanky-panky shit got us in this mess." he retorted, tiredly.

Rhiannon laughed, airily, flashing a wink in his direction. "Too much, or not enough, big guy?"

She spun back around on her heel, returning to her stride, disappearing back into the stairwell.

Coach couldn't help but chuckle after her, shaking his head, focusing down toward his hands. He didn't let the silence linger, gaze settling onto the backpack he hadn't yet finished with, and directed his next comment toward Lena.

"You mind lookin' fo' some batteries? Last thing we need is to run these radios out of power in the middle of a crisis." he uttered, attention shifting to the smaller main pocket of the backpack. It was full of what remained of their lighter food, a few snack bags and a handful of granola and oat bars. There was some trash and empty wrappers there, too, and he took a moment to clear it out.

Lena hummed, but didn't move to obey. She leaned forward, reaching out a hand to settle against his wrist, and he was forced to bring his nervous momentum to a halt. When he looked at her, she spoke.

"Coach, if there are hard feelings between us, I'd like to deal with them. You were -" Her voice fumbled, and she somewhat awkwardly forced the words out in their proper order. There was an edge of desperation to her voice, and it bemused him. "I need you to understand why I'm doing this. And I know you do, deep down, because I know you'd do anything for them, and - Rhee's my 'them', and -"

"Why?" he interrupted, before he really thought it through. His arm dropped out from under her touch, and he half-turned, appraising her with a tight frown. "Why do you need anythin' from me?"

She hesitated, a similar frown pulling at her mouth, before she released a soft laugh.

"That girl don't need shit from nobody. Neither of you girls do." He began to re-pack the supplies, satisfied with its cleanliness. "Ain't angry at you. Just angry at the way shit works out sometimes."

Angry 'cause I can't go upstairs or go in that damn bathroom.
Why did he feel so repeatedly, constantly, overwhelmingly useless?

Coach felt her gaze on him, so he stood up with a grunt. "Nick's been tryin' to make his way out, since before y'all girls showed up. You didn't make the boy go wild, an' you fo' sho' didn't give him no idea he didn't already have. Don't go takin' on our mess like it's somethin' you did. I'd be lyin' if I said you were helpin', an' I ain't happy with yo' ass, but you didn't cause shit. So quit watchin' me do work, and go find me some damn batteries."

His voice did not have an edge, but it was firm, and she stared at him with enough surprise to stifle any response she might've summoned. The silence was fine with him; they'd make no progress between the two of them, anyway.

The big man turned away, settling his palm against the bandages taped into the crease of his neck, placing some pressure against the dull ache there. The windows were still covered, and he stepped up close to them, nudging a corner just far enough to the side to enable him to peek outside.

It was still raining. There was still a sizeable amount of infected milling in the perimeter of where he could see. It was still, overall, an awful morning.

He might've not found any pleasure in the sight, but looking outside eased some gentle claustrophobia in him; as not eager as he was to get on the move again, he needed fresh air. The situation was closing around them with iron jaws, and while an open sky over their heads would not solve anything, it might make things feel less dire.

Coach sighed, and almost turned away - but something caught his eye.

Standing in the center of the road was a single infected. At a glance, it seemed like an average zombie. The proportions and the posture were near enough to human, minus a few missing chunks of flesh that were leaking black in the rain. There were no tentacles or sagging belly or oversized limbs, and no shock-green acid or wispy smoke.

However, unlike its nearby counterparts, it was not wandering. It did not stumble and stagger and grip its head. It stood almost perfectly still, staring ahead, almost directly away from Coach's view.

He watched it, driven by some instinct, noticing its aberrant behaviour against the backdrop of the other zombies' erratic movement and motion. The apocalypse made people paranoid, perhaps justifiably, but having his neck torn open by a strange Hunter had made him especially nervous.

The infected rotated at the waist, scanning the street to its left, and then to its right.

The thing seemed to be searching, and that was a far cry from the behaviour of commons, who did not actively seek out the survivors except when disturbed. Noise caught their attention more than sight - sometimes they were so focused in whatever misery made them clutch their foreheads and claw at their stomachs that they didn't notice anything further than a few yards from them.

If its left elbow hadn't been exposed to the bone, black material clotted and dribbling in thick sheets against the bloodied meat of its anatomy, he might've even taken a moment to wonder if it was an injured human. As it was, he recalled the strange infected that Nick and he had encountered in the yard of their previous base.

The creature they'd seen then had been a little too human for comfort. It had run in a strange show of self-preservation, much like some of the heavily mutated infected tended to do, but it had lacked any such physical mutations.

This another one? Ain't sure what to make of them. Ain't too dangerous, just... little too smart fo'
Standing in the street, it turned, head cocking, and began to scan the houses around it. Its mouth
gaped open as if its jaw were broken, and its lips trembled with failed efforts to close against one
another. The rain pattered against its skin, eyes wide and damp as they took on rainwater, the
yellow glint of them only barely visible in the low light of the wet morning.

He was not concerned. It would never see him, not from that distance, and not with rain and soft
fog obscuring the view. Plus, the gap in the curtains that he peeped out through was small enough
that he would never catch its notice.

Then it saw him.

The way it glanced and caught sight of him made him startle, jolting back an inch, and he found
himself frozen as it wheeled around with sudden interest. Its mouth moved in a shriek, but the
sound was dampened by the rain so much that Coach could see nearby infected failing to react.

It screamed a second time, head snapping forward with the force of it, and two zombies did take
some notice, but they only scrambled a few yards closer to it before losing interest again. They
were agitated now, though, more focused than they'd been before, even if most of their ire was
directed at the zombie that had disturbed them.

It, on the other hand, had not lost sight of its target.

"Shit." he uttered, watching it break into a sprint. It did not sprint directly at him, however. It ran
parallel out of sight, and quickly disappeared toward the right side of the house.

There was no back door to the building, but the first floor bedroom had windows. If it was
sprinting to break into those, he'd hear it shortly. Fortunately, nobody was back there... but he still
cursed himself inwardly; the last thing they needed was a disturbance when they weren't ready to
run.

Christophe's voice inquired softly at him, footsteps approaching as if drawn by his outburst. "¿Jefe?
You are okay?"

With a sharp grunt, Coach stepped away from the window. He did not charge across the room, but
he moved at a quick pace, returning to the wall where he'd left the weapons. Dropping into a bend,
he scooped up his double-barrel shotgun, tucking it into the crook of his elbow along with a
handful of shells, pushing those into the pocket of his slacks.

"No." he stated, words stiff, a slight embarrassment making him curt. "Caught someone's eye. Lee,
stay with Chris. Don't see nothin' comin' from the front, but who knows."

He was relieved to see the brunette biker come jogging back, taking him seriously and
unquestioningly, and a little relieved to see Chris snatching his machete up from the ground as
well. The Spaniard waggled it in his hand, flipping it up and catching it by the handle, a grin
crossing his face as he winked in Lena's direction.

He seemed more confident than he'd been in a while. Maybe there was something positive to his
and Rochelle's dalliance, after all. It would've been a nice change.

Coach focused, however, on striding toward the back of the house. If the infected was going to
burst the back window and attempt to invade, he'd meet it with a faceful of buckshot.

That was the plan, anyway.
In actuality, he hadn't made it halfway through the hallway, hadn't even passed beyond the kitchen, when the very last thing he expected - or needed - to hear sounded out. It felt like a kick to the gut, and he couldn't help but cast a frustrated thought upwards.

Just outside, as if from the neighboring house to their right, came the whoop-whirl of a car alarm.

It could be heard even through the rain and the walls, and it started so suddenly, he jumped fresh out of his skin. His eyes swiveled in its direction, instinctively, even though he could only see the interior wall of the house, and he sucked in a sharp breath.

The source of the alarm's triggering and the cause of it escaped him, but he couldn't help but notice that the infected still had yet to break in. The only sound in the air was the alarm, and the zombie had almost certainly had enough time to close the distance between it and the back window.

Its absence nagged at him, a concern he would not disregard, but his immediate attention shifted to listening.

The rain could not fully disguise the roar that rose up around them, some far-off or muffled by the storm and others awfully close, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. The horde would be drawn to the sound next-door, but then they'd hunt for life. At best, they'd be trapped. At worst, the horde would zero in on them.

"Shit." he repeated, settling his index finger squarely on both triggers of his shotgun. He glanced over his shoulder, watching Lena pull into a tight position at Chris' flank, her heavy brush-hook gripped in her hands. The bathroom door swung open, and Ellis and Rochelle tumbled out, both looking startled and uncertain.

He caught Ellis' eye, and nodded toward the weapons. The other Georgian stiffened his jaw and bolted in that direction, and Rochelle was close behind.

They were not ready, but when were they ever ready? And when had they truly, actually, let ill-preparedness or strife affect their reaction to crisis? When had they - when it was down to the wire - ever done anything but put their makeshift family unit first?

Coach did not have faith in much, anymore, but he had faith in his team.

When he spoke, it was grim, but unafraid.

"Keep yo' shit tight, kids. It lookin' to get nasty in here."
Ellis hunched into the wall just in front of the front door, his pump shotgun held against his chest. The car alarm had squealed to a fever pitch, and with it, the horde grew to a shrieking climax. The flow of bodies around the house was hard to hear in the rain, but he could pick out their howls as they flooded around the neighboring house.

Glass and metal shattering seemed to mark their attempts to destroy the car, much like they'd done at the mall, and the car alarm modulated higher as they doubtlessly piled atop it. None of the horde had paid any attention to the house the survivors were in, but that would not last.

"Maybe we should run for it." he wondered aloud. "While the car's got 'em distracted. We could bolt fer the car, get movin'."

Lena was opposite him, standing at the window, her brush-hook wielded low. She shook her head, just once. "It's not going to keep them that distracted. And I'm a pretty good driver, but driving a motorcycle in the rain is dangerous. Running away from zombies on a motorcycle in the rain is just plain stupid."

"We can take them." Rochelle responded, easily, 9mm pistol gripped with both hands. She'd taken the backpack onto her shoulders, and stood just beside the couch, eyes wary. "Open the door, start taking them out while the car alarm is here to cover our gunshots. We move once things look clear enough."

Coach grunted an affirmation, his attention focused toward the back of the house. "Agreed. Ellis, clear the door. Y'all girls get his back. Only other way in is the bedroom - so we'll bottleneck 'em in the dinin' room." When no one argued, his voice tightened. "Now where the hell is -"

The noise and chaos made it hard to hear the footsteps as Nick and Rhiannon came barreling down the stairs, but their presence was quickly apparent. Ellis did not want to flinch, but he did. He did not want to dread the man's presence, but he did.

It wasn't that he didn't want to see Nick. Part of him wanted to, terribly - in fact, part of him wanted to draw the man into his arms and kiss him and tell him none of it mattered. He wanted to move on, forgive and forget, just stop, because the alternative was to keep fighting and keep hurting each other.

But that wasn't the right thing to do.

That wasn't the thing he needed to do.

"What the fuck -" left both of the approaching survivors in eerie unison, but where Nick halted, the blonde did not.

"- shitballs is going on?" Without waiting for an answer, she lunged to grab her bat from where it was braced against the wall. Tucking that under her armpit, she grabbed her stun baton as well, using the wrist-strap to tie it loosely to one of the beltloops in her pants. The baton was then secured there, dangling against her thigh, freeing her to get both hands on her baseball bat. "Turn my back for two fuckin' seconds, and you guys get in the shit?"

Nick had not come past the dining room's boundary, and when Ellis turned his head, he found the man's gaze squarely focused on him. He hung on it, frozen there, like not even the encroaching horde could distract him.
He seemed desperate and almost hesitant, Maggie's carrier hugged to his chest. He seemed - raw, roughened. Ellis didn't want to hope, but was the redness and flush to his face exertion or the aftermath of tears? Had he cried?

It put a shiver up his spine, and he felt like there was an overwhelming pressure crushed against his chest in that moment. How could he say everything he wanted to in a look? How could he communicate how he felt without words? How could he put his heart into something so fragile as a glance?

He knew he couldn't, and he did not try - but there, struggling with the soft melancholy that came with facing down danger, the answer felt obvious.

*I don't care whut you done. I don't care who you were. Not really. I care 'bout who you are, now, 'n'even if I don't know everythin' about you... I know who you are. I know who I'm in love with.*

It hurt.

*I love you. But you gotta figure out whut you want, 'cause I can't... make you want me. You gotta decide if we're worth fightin' for, instead of fightin' tuh quit. You gotta decide that, 'cause... I don't think I can make you. Wish I could. Thought I could just grab on, hold tight enough... maybe love you enough tuh make up the difference. But I can't, can I? I'm just makin' it worse.*

Strangely, he felt a calmness, then.

*But I'll wait, darlin'. I'll wait 'til you figure it out. I don't got a lot, but I got patience'n'I got time. You and me, we can figure this shit out, if you want. If you want me.*

The car alarm screamed out - then halted. It was hardly silent afterwards, as the infected surrounding them continued to shriek and the rain had only intensified, but it was such a difference that it felt like his ears started to ring.

"There goes that plan." Coach muttered. "Glad they didn't come after our car, at least."

Ellis averted his gaze, staring down at his hands where they clutched his shotgun before he turned toward the front door. "Y'all get ready. I'm gonna take some shots." He barreled forward, pushing his arm through the strap of his gun and letting it fall against his back to free his hands, immediately crouching so he could grab the TV stand by the front edge.

"Careful, sunshine." Lena's voice broke through his concentration, and he nodded toward her without looking.

Pulling hard, he felt its feet slide across the carpet with some resistance, and he only drew it back far enough to give himself room to work with. Hopping up and over it, he grabbed the bookshelf that was blocking the door, leveraging it into a twist to pull it away.

"He did not remove the bookshelf entirely, either - just rotated it away enough that he'd be able to open the door a foot or two. As he settled in front of the mostly-revealed door, he glanced over his shoulder, attention drifting toward Rochelle as he held a hand out toward her. "Can I get that pistol?"

She obeyed, darting to close the gap between them and turning the handgun around to offer the grip out to him. Their fingers brushed in the gesture, and he gave her a small smile. He tried to say *I'm okay.* but it was hard to know if it came across.

Rochelle smiled back, at least, and Ellis turned back around.
He wasted no time, shouldering against the doorframe and opening the front door with his left hand. He nosed the pistol quickly into the gap, giving himself a few inches to see through at first. His gaze darted to assess what he could see of the front yard and the road.

With the car alarm halted, there was no longer one discrete location drawing the infected. While most of them were still shrieking and howling to the right of the building, an additional stream of bodies flooded into the street, still chasing the stimulus of activity. Their advance was less focused, however, and some even slowed or drifted in their path.

Ellis nudged the door open a few more inches, letting his left hand stabilize the pistol as he cocked his head and let his gaze focus through and past the sights.

He focused on one in particular, a female infected that had staggered to a stop on the sidewalk. She screamed, the sound barely discernible amongst the chorus of voices around her, and flared her arms out in a gesture that might've been anguish.

She was still for just long enough -

The Georgian tensed his arms as he pulled the trigger, feeling the gun kick gently in his hands, the harsh snap of the gunshot echoing out and into the morning air. He couldn't resist a grin as she jolted, blood splashing out from the base of her neck as the bullet hit home.

"Gotcha!" he breathed, the familiar scent of burnt gunpowder acrid in his nostrils. She did not go down, but she stumbled forward, grabbing at her throat and bending low as if trying to choke in air.

The second shot found a home in the bared top of her skull, hair and flesh torn asunder by the penetration of the bullet, and she went suddenly limp.

His excitement was temporary, as four of the nearby infected in sight snapped their gazes toward the gunshots, and a hitch in the screaming to his right preceded it heightening and pitching up. His attempt to catch their attention had worked, though perhaps too well.

Bracing his feet into a wider stance and stabilizing his upper body, he focused in on the few infected he could see, bringing his gun to bear on their approaching forms.

It was easier to hit a target running straight for him, and he struck dead-center in the nearest zombie's chest - but it kept running as if nothing had happened. Only when the next bullet struck it in the shoulder did it even stagger, and the momentary slowdown caused the infected behind it to crash into it, knocking the wounded zombie to the ground.

He flicked his aim up, sights coming into focus on the new target as it trampled over its injured fellow. When he pulled the trigger, its head snapped backwards, gore spraying from the back of its skull in a black-red gush.

It collapsed, body shuddering, convulsing with whatever life remained.

Ellis could've taken a few more shots at approaching infected, but shrieks and footsteps thundering close on the right side of the building drew his attention. Rather than risk it, he jolted back, grabbing his shotgun with one hand to flatten it against his side. With it secured, he hopped his weight up to seat himself onto the TV stand blocking him in, then swung his legs to throw his body up and over.

His balance did not quite straighten out, and he landed hard on his hands and knees, quickly scrabbling to get back to his feet, shouting as he did. "They're comin!'"
The pistol was plucked out of his grip before he'd even stood entirely, and he spun to face the door, bringing his shotgun up to hip-height. His hand settled on the pump-action lever, his shoulder brushing Rochelle's as she came to stand flanking him, her pistol raising.

Behind them, Christophe drew close, his machete wielded carefully in his hand. "Once more, amigos." he murmured, almost too quiet to be heard over the approaching noise.

They were ready.

Then the windows burst inward.

Two bodies threw themselves into the house, lunging through the window, throwing glass and getting tangled in the makeshift curtains they'd hung over the glass. Lena shrieked, swallowing the tail end of it into a choked sound as she spun on her heel. Glass sprayed in, only barely muffled by the blankets, and more than one fleck caught against her skin and threatened to cut.

She raised her brush-hook, bracing her heels into the carpet as she put her body weight behind the weapon, holding it up and diagonal like one might a defensive spear.

One of the infected fell onto it, and the tool's heavy blade sheared straight through its ribs, aided by its own weight. She struggled to hold it up on its feet as its legs went limp, and she was forced to let it drop to its knees against the carpet. The large male zombie scrabbled its hands at the shaft of the weapon, screaming out, blood sputtering from its twisted mouth.

The other infected crashed in, falling into the television they'd left near the window, knocking the slim screen over as the zombie landed with a shriek on its side. It was quick to surge to its feet, and it might've jumped at Lena had Rhiannon not been abruptly next to her, leg swinging with the momentum of her last, long step.

The collision of her boot against its chin sent it into a half-roll backwards, a sickening crack sounding out. It seemed, however, to hurt her about as much as it hurt the infected, and she bowed forward with a blustered curse.

"Fuckshit, fuckshit cunt."

Her voice was mostly covered by the scattered gunshots from the door, tremendously loud in the enclosed space, and her ears rang as her not-yet-healed ankle protested the rough treatment.

"Dick ass!"

Wielding her bat tightly, she wheeled to her full height with her face strained in a frustrated expression. Getting a two-handed grip on the weapon, she let her upper body coil back before slamming the bat down against the zombie's body. It was more of an irritated gesture than one meant to kill, and it took a few blows before the infected stopped moving.

Lena twisted her weapon, jamming the brush-axe a little deeper, and blood guttered around the blade. The infected shrieked, squealing as its attempts to surge forward and claw at her only drove the weapon deeper into its chest cavity. It slowly faltered and slumped against the weapon, its death almost agonizingly protracted as its heartbeat pulsed out blackened blood.

Both sisters pulled away from their kills, panting. Rhiannon was speckled with blood all down her front, and Lena's hands were stained a greyish-red from what had gushed down the brush-hook.

They blinked at one another, silently taking stock, and an apology bled into Lena's eyes.
Rhiannon's mouth cut into a severe line, and she turned as a third infected sprinted toward the now blown out windows, launching itself through the hole created by its predecessors. She lifted her bat, putting her weight behind a swing to meet it as it came into arms' reach.

The way its skull split under the blow was intensely satisfying.

The front door managed, at first, to funnel them down. With the bookshelf blocking the door from opening all the way, the zombies could only cram themselves through one at a time. That made them easy pickings for Ellis and Rochelle, with Chris darting in to keep them at bay or finish fallen ones off while one of them was reloading.

However, they'd restricted access to the door well enough that the infected began to abandon that point of entry entirely. Most of them ran to the left and spilled against the windows, drawn to the screams of their fellows, and Rochelle started to split her attention between the two openings and carefully peppered shots at a safe distance from the sisters.

A not-insignificant amount of them ran in the other direction, and they struck wildly at the outside of the house as they went. Their bodies and fists beat against the walls, dull thuds in strange contrast to the insistent pattering of rain over the whole building. The sounds marked out their rapid path around the perimeter of the house in search of a way in.

The feeling that things were under control was quickly being overtaken by the feeling they were being surrounded. Trapped.

Coach's body prickled, and he lifted his shotgun up to aim down the hallway. It came as no surprise to him when he heard glass shatter in the first-floor bedroom.

"Nicky." he barked, short but soft, making the man startle where he stood.

The gambler had picked his katana up, twisting Maggie's carrier straps and looping his arm through them a few times until she was strapped almost flat against his side. The carrier was rigid enough to keep its shape, though the positioning had it tilted at an angle that was undoubtedly unpleasant for the feline.

In the middle of a horde, however, keeping her close seemed more important than the cat's immediate comfort.

Still, that didn't entirely explain away his behaviour; Coach could tell he was shaken, and it was a subtle hollowness that had crept in since he'd arrived downstairs. Was it the argument, or the aftermath of it? Had the consequences of his actions finally settled in, and he'd realized the uncomfortable position they all now stood in? Or was it something else?

Coach felt like he'd missed something, because Nick gravitated toward him obediently, eagerly, and that was not the behaviour he'd exhibited upstairs.

Without a word, the eldest survivor strode forward, presuming - correctly - that the other man would follow. He led with the nose of his shotgun, rushing across the kitchen to reach the hallway, only slowing slightly as he entered the slim T-intersection that contained the laundry room and the downstairs bedroom.

It was sparsely decorated, just a simple bed tucked against the wall, with a few piled blankets just beside it on the floor indicating where one of the sisters had slept. The cramped space was lit up by the window on the far wall, though that light was dampened by the infected currently crawled halfway through the windowframe.
Coach's mouth crunched up in a frown, and he raised his shotgun, taking two long steps into the room before letting his finger curl, one barrel blasting out a shot into the creature's upper body.

The damage was significant, bone revealed as the flesh was removed in chunks, and the infected seized in an attempt to shove itself through the window. It managed to crawl into the room, landing hard on its chin against the carpet, scrabbling its nails for purchase against the fibres.

It was wet, soaked by the rain, and it puddled water in as it ungracefully landed.

The zombie's head lifted as it pushed against the floor to haul its upper body up, mouth open in a snarl. However, the sound never made it past its teeth, mostly because they were abruptly scattered amidst the gore that burst against the wall, along with flecks of bone and fleshy material.

Coach lowered the shotgun, quickly breaking open the breech ends and feeding in two more shells. As he did, he took a step back, watching Nick slip around him and step up to the window. Another infected was right behind it, hopping the short distance from the ground to the window to grab onto the windowframe.

Glass speared through its hands, but it did not falter, kicking itself up to get an arm hooked through the opening. It shrieked out a protesting sound as the Northerner slashed out with the katana, drawing a ragged line across its face that nearly split its jaw apart.

The infected slumped, piled atop the first intruder, and Nick straightened where he stood. A third was close behind, scrabbling at the exterior of the house until it managed to hook fingertips on the broken window.

"Too bad they don't make a habit of coming in one at a time." he muttered, voice shaking just faintly. Coach lifted his head, and he moved to respond.

The words weren't formed in his throat, though, when a thick shadow snapped into his vision. It made him flinch long before he processed what it was; a Smoker tongue, propelled like a dart through the open window.

His reflex to stagger sent him just to the left of its aim, and its tip struck the wall, slapping wetly against the surface as a few coils of flesh followed behind. The tentacle collapsed, sliding toward the ground with a sluggish, wet glide. He, however, knew better than to relax.

Coach jolted back, thrusting himself flat against the wall, just as it drew abruptly taut. Its musculature squirmed, and the seizure of flesh that caused it to start reeling back in also caused it to start flailing in wild lashes and circles. It seemed to seek out a body - and it found one, snapping hard in the air and landing against Coach's foot.

He couldn't avoid it in time, though he tried.

The tongue continued to reel in, but its tip violently curled against his ankle, sliding up just enough to get a loop around his leg before it yanked. He almost tried to shoot at it, but the room was small enough and Nick was close enough to him that he couldn't get himself to pull the trigger. The chance of shooting the man was too high.

So he braced.

His leg was pulled out from under him in the very next instant. He only just kept himself from cracking his head on the wall behind him as it took him to the ground, flat on his back. Still, the impact knocked the wind out of him, and he saw stars in the few fragments of time that it dragged him toward the window.
His momentum died out, however, leaving just a burning sensation at the base of his spine where his shirt had been scraped up and the carpeting had left a bit of rugburn on the exposed skin.

His knee stung, too, like the tongue had twisted it a little too far out of joint in the process of dragging him. The pain came in a strange reverb to a pulsing, and he wasn't certain if his kneecap had slid out of place again or not. Rather than move, he opened his eyes.

Nick had the katana sunk tip-first to the carpet, his eyes widened slightly as he panted out a breath, more nerves than exertion. The tongue was still wrapped around Coach's ankle, but it ended in a ragged and oozing severance just beside the blade, the remaining section slapping enthusiastically against the window frame before being pulled out entirely. Glass scattered as it was retracted, and a thin shriek from outside made Nick's head lift.

He was staring, frozen where he stood as if in shock. His body stiffened, and Coach couldn't help but scrabble at the carpet to force himself upright. His knee protested, but he managed enough of a staggered kneel to see outside.

There, just in front of the fencing around the neighboring house, stood two figures.

One was lanky and hunched, its face and shoulders bloated into a twisted set of boils that seemed to consume its neck entirely, building into greasy-looking rolls of grey flesh despite the fact that most of the rest of its body was lean and bony.

A Smoker stood there, its body writhing as it sucked up what remained of its tongue, gagging on the flesh as if it barely fit down its throat at all.

Its features were barely perceptible past the mutations, even gender rendered mostly moot; as with most of their kind, it was often hard to tell. Witches had been the only dominantly female mutation, until the mall. The rest were generally warped out of recognition, the fat and muscle mass of their bodies reappropriated until the difference between them was hard to discern at a distance.

He'd seen female Hunters and male Spitters, but most of them were hard to categorize. It was like they followed some sort of pattern in flesh and bone - and their bodies shifted to match it, whatever they might've looked like before.

It was unremarkable, on the whole, as was the infected standing next to it.

Standing.

Just... waiting there, watching, and that was far from unremarkable. Smokers and Spitters tended to keep their distance, even running from danger - but the second infected at the Smoker's flank was nothing special.

The zombie stood next to the Smoker with a certain calmness, watching the infected flooding close to the window, another set of hands finding purchase in the windowframe. It hung back, almost taking a step to put itself behind the Smoker as the lanky creature gagged out a squawk of pain, swallowing down its stumped tongue with a shudder.

Coach didn't understand, at first.

Only when it shifted its gaze up toward the window and gave a ferocious snarl at them did Coach recognize it as that very first infected that had noticed them.

It cocked its head, rearing it back, and let off a subtle shriek that got lost in the cacophony just outside the window. It seemed angry, furious, but it still did not charge forward, nor did it move...
from its spot when the Smoker turned to sprint for the fence and clamber over it, out of sight.

The strangely normal-looking infected screamed out a little louder as its gaze dropped back to the crowded infected clawing at one another in a frantic attempt to get to the small window, higher-pitched. Coach couldn't shake the awful feeling that it was trying to communicate.

A sinking feeling pulled at his gut, and he knew without having to ask that Nick felt it, too.

*This is somethin' we ain't seen before.*

A human scream - Rhiannon's, rasped out and howled - made both of them jolt. It was pain, anger, and the rising shouts of nearly the entire rest of the team did not offer any comfort.

Coach moved before he thought, and his knee tried to give out as he reached his feet. He stumbled, leg crumpling under him, and Nick's free hand was under his elbow in an instant.

But he hissed out, "Go."

Nick hesitated, fingers tightening. He might've even argued, but Coach lifted his shotgun and aimed it at the window. Even as he got a bead on it, he started to gently move backwards, pushing Nick firmly away as he did.

"Ain't broke. I'm comin'. Just go."

His leg could only bear a bit of his weight at once before the pain spiked and he felt a cold pressure beneath his patella, but it was enough to walk with, if slowly. Nick's fingers softened on his arm, and the man was shortly bolting back out into the hall.

Coach gritted his jaw and loosed a blast at the window. It did more damage to the wall than the infected crawling up into the windowframe, but losing a few fingers slowed the creature's progress. It satisfied something in him, though a rising fear had overtaken most other feelings.

He wasn't going to watch any one of his team get taken out. That included Chris. That included the sisters.

*Whatever happens, I gotta keep them safe.*

He couldn't stop himself from darting a glance out the window, and he found that zombie's eyes piercingly focused on him, even in the instant before he stepped past the point where they could see each other.

*You ain't takin' 'em from me.*
There was a surreal mindset that activated in the depths of a horde. Adrenaline kicked in, spiking and staying at that feverish high. It was the cold shock of a car crash, drawn out into five minutes, ten, fifteen - where the definition of a second felt negotiable, and the only thing anchoring them was pain and exertion and sweat.

There were times where the stream of bodies felt endless and continuing to resist felt like madness, but there was not room or space to do anything but persist. Hesitating was not an option.

Time slowed, but so did everything else. Somehow it felt like they had tremendous control over those ticking seconds, yet it also felt like there was an unstoppable force oncoming that they could not stop, let alone get out from in front of.

They all saw the Spitter lurch out from a house across the street, gangly limbs kicking and flaring as it sprinted out. They all saw the green shape burst from its mouth, whole body trembling as it put great pressure behind it, spit gushing from its mouth with the same force. They all saw the orb approach, sailing over the horde with the wobble and flow of a water balloon.

They could not do much, however, but see it.

Its arc took it up high, and when it breached the window it was aimed to strike the outside of the kitchen's cabinets where they hung above the bar. Past experience informed them it would burst and splatter, and Rhiannon tried to duck and rush forward, but there was so little time, and the way forward was mostly blocked by infected bodies.

Unable to even halt her offensive efforts, the blonde felt the liquid splash against her back, hot at first. The sensation was dull in the instant of impact, and, wildly, she thought it might be inert as it touched her.

Then the pain started.

She knew she shouted, knew sound left her lips, but animal instinct kept her moving. She continued to strike out, bat swinging, even as the movement caused her shoulder muscles to flex under the acid as it began to chew at her flesh.

One infected went down as the end of her bat broke the structure of its face, another knocked away as she bashed the pommel of it into its chest - but there, her frame weakened, the sizzling audible to her ear as the pain widened and broadened and deepened. It knocked the wind out of her, making her hands tremble.

If she was lucky, it was going to chew through layers of her skin, fading to a green gunk before it quite reached the fatty muscle underneath.

If she was unlucky...

Rhiannon tried, releasing a gritted half-scream of frustration, to focus herself. There were too many infected in the way to rush outside and throw herself into the rain in the hopes it might dilute the acid, and it was too far to reach a shower or bathtub. The damage would be done either way.

She couldn't get it off and couldn't make it stop, so all she had left was to fight. The biker lifted her arms, hands gripped tight around the handle of her baseball bat, ready to meet the next infected to come within arms' reach.
Her vision had narrowed, tunneling, such that she barely noticed Ellis' approach. Even when part of her acknowledged the movement, it was filed away as something safe, the movement and shift of her team rather than that of the infected. She didn't have energy to spare on it, and couldn't look away to even process what he was doing.

A zombie lurched forward, hands grabbing at her forearms, nails digging in - but Chris was suddenly beside it, and his machete sunk into its skull with an awful squelch. It went limp, sagging to the ground, taking his machete with it. His eyes darted to her, and they widened, and she wasn't certain what the expression was supposed to convey.

Then the water hit her.

It was undoubtedly room-temperature, but on her skin, it felt frigid. It hit the back of her neck and poured over her shoulders and down her back, soaking through her slim cami in an instant. Some of it waterfalled to her front, too, and reduced her shirt to a sheer gauzy texture over her petite chest.

Where it washed over the places that acid had started to eat away, however, there was agony - and then relief. Instead of pinpoint fire burrowing into her skin, the water scattered it and sent it trickling down her body. It clung to her like hydrophobic grease, continuing to burn, but at a fraction of the intensity.

Her eyes fluttered half-shut, and then blinked wide open. She tilted her head, and found Ellis standing behind her, the cooler they'd had filled with water held up over his head - and now empty.

There was panic on his face, and it seemed split between the lingering fear over her safety, and a newfound horror at his actions. His gaze flickered down to her body, taking in how the water had soaked down into the fabric of her cloth pants, too. He'd drenched her, like some high-school prank.

*Only this faggot could save my ass and look sorry about it.* crossed her mind, a spark of manic humour catching in her chest.

Nick sprinted into the living room, katana held low, darting to rush beside Rochelle and strike out at the next infected crawling over the TV stand. His blade sunk into its neck, head abruptly snapping to the side as the musculature holding up its skull failed.

"You okay, Blondie?" he shouted, hoarse. "That Spitter fuck you up?"

She glanced down, seeing the pink blossoming throughout her camisole where the water had taken blood with it. Her shoulders flexed, and pain seared across her back, the skin over her shoulderblades raw and screaming. The sensation almost distracted from the squishy feeling of her clothes clinging and sticking to every inch of her.

"Fine!" she shouted back, determined for it to be true, though Ellis' worried grimace - the only one of the team who had gotten a view of the damage - did not bode well.

She gripped her bat weakly and turned to face the window. Lena and Christophe were keeping the infected back, but only just. The Spaniard grew frantic and less confident when forced to the front of the line, and he was losing ground faster than Lena.

His machete caught in the shoulder of one infected, clipping harshly into its clavicle, and then did not release. His hand slipped, wet with gore, and he lost his grip with a shout. In an instant, it was torn from him, and he stood defenseless. Fear spiked his shoulders into a raise, sundered one flexing to match its whole twin.
Coach charged into the room at a staggered pace, one leg swinging more than flexing, and lifted his shotgun. "Chris." he shouted, and the foreigner darted backwards a few steps, making way. The instant his aim was clear, Coach fired into the zombies making their way through the windows, taking down the one bearing Chris' machete as well as the two flanking it. Christophe whooped aloud in celebration, but there was a dread in his expression. A disappointment, maybe.

Rhiannon tried to give a test swing of her bat, but the pain of her shoulders flexing made her cry out and her balance wavered with a queasy headrush. Ellis abruptly threw the cooler down in favour of grabbing for her, the plastic making a hollow thud as it struck waterlogged carpet.

His arm slung around her waist, clutching the damp waistband of her pants. "She ain't fine." he announced, gripping her tightly to his side, even when she strained to push away. "We gotta push."

The act of fighting against his grasp, however, shot yet more pain up her back, and she felt her skin split in a few places, like burst blisters. The fact she couldn't see her own back was a blessing - but amongst the spectrum of sensations occurring throughout her body, she could feel hot streams of something down her back. It could only have been blood.

"Huddle." Coach barked, voice strained. Rhiannon didn't miss that he was limping, her eyes trained on him even through blurry vision. She realized, with some frustration, that it was the haze of tears. "Rhee, Chris, in the back."

The team constricted, Rochelle sidling back as Coach and Nick pressed forward, the three of them taking the brunt of the horde's attention. Ellis pulled Rhiannon behind himself and Lena drew closer, brush-hook lifted. Steam rose off her shoulder where the small amount of acid that had splattered on her had been repelled by her leather jacket.

Rhiannon tugged on hers where it was tied around her hips, angrily pulling it loose and sliding one arm into one sleeve, then the other. A strained sound of agony leaked from her with every motion. The act of putting it on over her shoulders felt like rubbing sandpaper on an open wound - which was not far off, she supposed.

Christophe hovered close to her side, and Rhiannon pushed the bat into his hand, untying her stun baton from her beltloop and holding it up. It would prove a much better last-ditch defense with much less mobility necessary.

Every turn and twist and stretch of her shoulders ratcheted up the pulsating pain, and she found herself breathless, body shivering. She didn't know if it was the pain or the cold settling into her soaked clothing, or both.

The survivors' defense gave ground with their compacted formation and lessened fighting power, but as infected began to crawl up and over the TV stand and pile into the room, the tightened line they held presented a formidable challenge for the infected. The flow of a horde was a familiar rhythm.

Nick's katana sawed ragged lines through the oncoming bodies, sending gushes of black blood scattering against the walls and the carpet. Limbs were severed or torn half-off, tendon and bone exposed around them.

Rochelle stood behind him, aim steadied with both hands as she finished slapping a new magazine into the bottom of the grip. She picked up a pattern with him, shooting as he straightened from a swing, and her shots rarely missed skull or throat.
Ellis and Coach traded off firing and reloading, the pump-action much more agile than the double-barrel, and Lena lashed and jabbed into the horde to fend off the last quadrant, taking chunks of flesh with every blow.

It was hard to see past the flurry of bodies, and hard to hear past the screams and gunfire that felt so deafening. If Rhiannon hadn't been detached from the fight, she might've not even heard it.

A bellow sounded out, animal and furious, a roar she knew entirely too well.

She screamed it - "Charger!" - and did the only thing that seemed sensible: she grabbed hard onto Christophe's shirt and pulled him with as she thrust herself toward the wall. It was the closest she could get to escaping any direct line from any of the openings, though she couldn't tell where it was coming from.

The abrupt cessation of gunshots said her teammates listened, though she didn't look before crushing herself into the wall and drawing Chris after her. He flattened against her, and the contact of his chest to her shoulders made her vision go white.

When she finally collected enough sense to look, blinking past the tears streaming from her eyes, the outcome was not what she expected.

The Charger came through the double windows in the front of the house, broad shoulder taking a chunk of the frame with it. The three feet of wall beneath the window did not fare much better, chunks of drywall blown out by the impact of its thighs and knees.

It didn't completely destroy the wall, however, and the remaining structure caught its shins and made it stumble. Momentum barely kept it upright as it staggered through a few steps and caught its balance, though its sprint was brought to a halt.

The wall was not the only casualty; the creature had run straight into the back of the horde, and where it was dangerous to the survivors, it was fatal to the more fragile infected. It crushed more than a few bodies into the side of the house, and as it stumbled to a halt in the middle of the living room, several infected were thrown to the ground by its weight.

When it recovered, a rumbled shriek of anger left it, and the Charger swung out its bloated fist. Rough-skinned knuckles struck the skull of an infected trying to get to its feet. The creature's neck cracked, falling limp.

It seemed frustrated - and then it refocused, looking around the room.

The rest of the survivors had followed Rhiannon's lead, and they were all pressed against the nearest wall, shock freezing them there. Even the nearest infected were stunned, picking themselves up off the ground or gathering their balance on fractured limbs.

It centered its attention on Coach, the nearest survivor to it.

The first to react was Christophe. His hand circled around the stun baton in Rhiannon's other hand, twisting violently to pry it free, and he suddenly pushed away from her. His intention was clear: reckless, careless, he was going to attack the Charger.

"Asshole!" she shouted, more driven by fear than anger. Both her hands scrambled to snatch for his back, trying to hook fingers in his shirt, but he was already sprinting out of reach, and pain made her sluggish. "Get back -"

Sprinting forward, darting into a low lunge, Chris jammed the end of the baton into the soft and
fleshy armpit of its almost vestigial off-arm. His thumb flicked the switch, and instantly, the Charger bellowed.

It couldn't quite straighten, its posture hunched by the flaky callous that had overwhelmed its right shoulder and arm, but it did surge and stagger away from the pain. There was too much bulk to quite be immobilized, and though its movements became stilted, it managed to swing its weight around.

It punched out, and its massive fist collided with Chris' chest. He released a pathetic sound, a whined exhalation of air, and crumpled backwards. As he hit the ground, the Charger turned to face him, its heavy feet striking the ground in an irritated kick. It peered down at the prone man, his body vaguely drawing in on itself, a weak groan leaving his lips.

Its attention was narrow and easily drawn, and though the Spaniard's actions hadn't strictly hurt it, they had soundly drawn its ire.

Then two shotgun blasts went off in tandem, and the Charger screamed out hoarsely, back arching, arms flailing as it wheeled back around to face the survivors behind it. The infected struck out, the blow just skidding off Ellis' shoulder as he dodged backwards with a yelp.

With its posture open and turned toward them, Coach's second shotgun blast sent chunks of its skull flying. The Charger stood there a moment, body shivering, before it slumped to the ground.

The urge to celebrate was tempered by the presence of what infected remained, and Chris' prone state. Immediately, Ellis and Coach darted forward, and Lena joined them in taking advantage of the way the Charger had scattered the remnants of the horde.

"Jesus Christ, people." Nick darted amongst them, one arm holding Maggie's carrier tight against his side, other arm wielding his katana to stab down and drive the tip into what few infected were still half-alive on the ground. "You're fucking magnets for trouble."

There was room to breathe, their surroundings quieting to the simple pattering of rainfall and the squelch of weapon-on-flesh, the familiar rattle of breath as the zombies around them faltered and passed - just one of a hundred different things that should have been disturbing, but instead felt... normal.

Both Rochelle and Rhiannon surged forward to drop to their knees next to Christophe, though it was Rochelle who reached out and grabbed either side of his face. Her thumbs stroked over his cheeks, her gaze darting over his face as his eyes gently rolled before coming into focus on hers. "Baby, you okay? ¿Bien?"

That seemed to startle him, his head lifting just an inch off the ground, before he fell into a glazed-over smile. "If I say no, will you talk more, like this?" he crooned up at her.

Both women snorted.

Rochelle pinched his cheek hard enough to make him yelp, and leaned back with a frustrated sigh. "You pull a stupid move like that again - I'll cram you in Maggie's carrier." Her gaze darted over her shoulder, grabbing one hand on his elbow and the other on his shirt, pulling him up as she stood. "C'mon, guys. No telling how much more attention we're gonna get."

The blonde settled a palm against the foreigner's back, supporting him as they rose, though it made her shiver with another flush of pain. "Stumpy needs a -" Dizziness made her hesitate, closing her eyes, taking just a moment to collect herself. There was no posture and no movement that did not
hurt, nerves frayed and erratic with the pulse of slowing adrenaline through her veins.

"... babysitter." she finished, quieter.

When a hand touched her elbow, she reopened her eyes, and found Rochelle's gaze intent on her face. "You okay, stringbean?" she murmured, and the blonde managed a smirk.

Blood was trickling down her back, growing tacky against her jacket, and she had no clue how bad the damage was. The pain wasn't immobilizing her and she could still move, so it couldn't have been terrible - but she wouldn't know until somebody took a look, and there was no time.

"Never better." was her response, though she knew the tears streaked across her cheeks plainly demurred. "Can we get the fuck out of here?"

Coach stepped around the Charger's fallen corpse, setting his shotgun against his hip. "Let's move, people. Sittin' ducks in here. Got a Spitter and a Smoker, plus... whatever the hell else is out there." He surveyed the team, exhaling through his nostrils. It was agitated, though partially relieved; injuries were unfortunate, but injuries could be recovered from.

As their heightened sense of urgency drove them to move, Coach played shepherd - or sheepdog - and walked at the back, watching as Lena took a stance beside the open hole made in the front of the house and offered a steadying hand through it.

Rochelle was the only one who did not accept it, though her hurried clamber through the broken wall was followed immediately by turning and joining Lena in helping Christophe and Rhiannon through. The Spaniard took only a moment to find and recover his machete from the corpse of an infected.

Nick split the difference and climbed over the TV stand and through the front door, under the unspoken guise of checking around the corner of the house and ensuring it was relatively clear. He had the cat carrier still hugged protectively to his side.

There was no sign of the Smoker, nor the strange infected that had stood so distant from the horde.

Their absence was not a comfort.

The rain was thickening, pace increasing, the droplets striking the road and turning into a dewy mist that collected around them. Even if there had been any desire to loiter, the threatening rain would have hurried their escape.

Rhiannon, Chris, and Nick ran to the car, but Ellis and Rochelle lingered under the front awning of the house, watching for danger and waiting for Coach to join them. Only once they were all clear of the window did he move.

He climbed somewhat stiffly over the corpses layering the carpet, knee protesting when his ankle turned slightly too far to one side. A growl of frustration left him as the misstep thrust him into a stumble. On reflex, loathe to let his bad leg twist, he went down onto his good knee, hand catching onto the stiff shoulder of an infected corpse.

The contact was unpleasant, but his stomach had become hard to turn.

He was aware of Lena's voice catching in a muted gasp, a reflexive suck of air, and her immediate shift to approach. Coach intended to wave her off, but when he lifted his hand to do so, she grabbed his wrist. There was no polite way to resist, so he let her help him to his feet.
She clapped a hand onto his forearm as he got upright. "We literally haven't left the house yet." she uttered with a soft laugh. When he looked up, he couldn't miss the tremble of worry at her jawline. "Let's not all fall apart."

A small smile crinkled at the corners of his eyes, and he gestured around widely. "Days that start like this, I usually just get my ass the hell back to bed." he responded, dryly.

"Amen." escaped Ellis in a grunt.

"I'll take the bike alone. Limit the risk, driving in this weather." Lena stated, reaching down to pull her jacket up and display the radio attached to her belt. "Should stay out of the rain, but if we get separated, don't fritz it out. Get warm and dry and make sure water hasn't leaked inside - I won't panic if we can't get in touch immediately, and you don't either, alright?"

Coach nodded, taking just a moment to zip up his windbreaker, patting where his radio was safely zipped inside one of its inner pockets. "Agreed. But don't get separated."

The brunette smiled, slimly, her left hand flattening plaintively. "You guys are piling into a five-seater with six people and a cat, and enough emotional baggage for a U-Haul on top." All three of the survivors around her stiffened, like those particular details had previously escaped them.

She noticed, and grimaced.

"Don't kill each other."
The rain forced them to rush into the car, and there wasn't much time to argue over seating arrangements. Nick rushed into the front passenger seat, intent on interacting with the rest of the car as little as possible.

His teammates piled in, and the sound of their bodies shoving into the car, wet shoes squeaking on the floor mats and damp clothing screeching against the cloth seats, was distant and muffled. He inhaled, closed his eyes, and tried to focus on the smell of the rain.

It was earthy and clean, dampening out the usual smells of the apocalypse. There was a must, an oil-slick scent, but it was halfway pleasant, and he tried to lose himself in it.

An effort in vain.

Ellis had finally given up on him, and it should have felt like being freed. It should have been a relief, a victory, a triumph. Nick should have leaned back and been mirthful, with a smug, 'I told you so.'

Instead, he sat there with his head ground into the car seat's headrest, and a prickle behind his eyes threatened with tears. He sucked in air through his nose, the sound stuttering, and blew it out sharply. Stupid fucking piece of shit.

I didn't want to feel this, feel like fuckin' trash. Never wanted to see him look at me like that. I didn't want to - watch him realize - I didn't want to be the one who... lost. I spent so much fuckin' effort trying to be somebody he could hate, because... because that's easier than being someone he can't love.

He didn't want it to be true, but he knew it was: he'd almost believed that Ellis wouldn't be dissuaded. It had been equal parts infuriating and comforting. It was why leaving felt like the only option, though it was clear, now, that that was untrue.

Here, finally, Nick had located the 'one-too-many' - the step too far. He'd seen it coming. He'd felt it hovering at the edges of them since the very first day, and it was nothing unique to their relationship. It chewed at his heels and kept him moving, kept him running.

Me in the closet with all my fucking skeletons. Jesus Christ. What a way to fucking die.

Ellis had known him in ways nobody else had, as fleeting as their time had been, and all things considered. They'd been raw to one another, the simple side-effect of a life or death situation. Nick had hurt him and been hurt for him. He had confided in him and been surprised, every time, to find acceptance. It was alluring, and intoxicating, and firmly under false pretenses.

He never gave out the full story, the complete context, and certainly not when it came to the situations that truly mattered to him. It felt like offering more and more rope to the hangman, so he kept it all held close to his chest.

It was easy to paint himself as a murderer, and easy to abandon the hollow concept for someone else to fill.

Harder, to explain how it felt to have a knife lodged against the small of his back until the tip just pierced him, shoved into the brick exterior of an apartment building so roughly that the skin of his cheek was scraped and bleeding.
Harder still, as the man pressed close and groped into his pockets and huffed threats in his ear, to describe the realization that his body perked and responded.

*It was the alcohol, or the adrenaline, or something. I didn't - I wasn't -*

Impossible, to unravel the moments that followed, where they both froze with the knowledge. Where the knife twisted and drove into the muscle of his back with searing pain, and the man's hand sought out his belt, and the threats changed entirely.

Pushing him down the stairs hadn't been intentional, strictly, and the choice to watch the life drain out of him had not been a choice at all. Doing anything but sitting there, sucking in cigarette smoke like he could fumigate his own body with it, had seemed impossible.

Was it panic, to feel nothing? Panic felt like an excuse. It felt like a miserable little word he hid behind, when the truth was, panic involved fear and he had not felt fear.

He'd felt nothing.

If he could barely get himself to voice it when it might've made some difference in his criminal sentencing, why would he voice it now? Why would he submit himself to the pity and the sympathy he didn't want, when it didn't change what he'd done? He didn't deserve it.

*Why's it matter, anyway? Why should I care what he thinks about me? I'm trying to leave. This is a good thing. I don't fucking care what anyone thinks.*

But he did. He *cared*, and the feeling of caring was almost too much to process where it clamoured and clanged under his ribcage. It burned until he went numb, but not nearly numb enough.

Selfishly, cruelly, he'd been comforted by the idea that no matter what, Ellis would love him. Running away from it, cutting free from it and leaving it to die on his own terms, felt like the safest outcome. He, simply, didn't have to discover whether or not there was hope for them. Abandoning the chance to hope felt cathartic.

Instead, he'd proven to himself there wasn't any hope at all.

In that moment, all he could feel was grief.

The driver's side door flung open, and Nick couldn't repress a startled flinch when Ellis threw himself into the seat and slammed the door behind him. It felt like a joke, though by whom, he wasn't sure.

"Bless the Lord, it's pickin' up fast." the Georgian hooted, wearily, scrambling to put the keys in the ignition and turn them. The car rumbled to life, and when cold air blasted from the vents, Ellis quickly twisted the fan speed dial to 'OFF'. "Least you ain't the only one who's soaked, now, Rhee."

A weak snort from the injured woman in the backseat preceded the back doors flinging open, and in a raucous burst of harsh swearing and urgent yelps, the rear of the car was suddenly packed full.

Coach sat on the left, Rhiannon squished in the center seat by his ingress, and Rochelle took the remaining seat with Christophe clumsily crammed into her lap. There was a held breath as they slammed the doors behind them, and then a tentative slump as the four bodies tried to find some semblance of coexistence in the cramped space.

Groaning and pale, leaned away from the seat cushion behind herself, Rhiannon muttered under her breath, "You fuckshits are damp at best."
The absurdity of it set in, and Rochelle's barely-restrained giggling pushed Coach into a soft chuckle, despite himself. He leaned forward, rapping the ceiling of the car with a knuckle. "Ellis, get us movin'. I only got the patience to be in this car fo' so long."

The mechanic moved to obey, lips loosely curled, and swiveled his attention forward. Nick couldn't stop staring, even as he saw that half-smile fade, saw the stress blossom in the twitch of Ellis' jaw. Nick knew better, but he did it anyway; he opened his mouth.

Unfortunately - or very fortunately - Ellis saw, and did not give him the chance to speak.

"I think we oughta just let it lie." he stated, and it might've even passed as non-confrontational if the Georgian's knuckles hadn't been white on the steering wheel. He was trying, visibly, to remain calm. "Ain't no talkin' we can do now, whut we ain't done this mornin'. So let's just focus on movin'."

*Listen to him. There's nothing you can do, and nothing you even want to do, so -*

Nick muttered, "Ellis, advocating a silent road trip? Times have changed."

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

The flutter of tension through the car's occupants was not insignificant. Ellis, strangely, was the least surprised of any of them - Nick included. He simply pushed the gearshift into drive and started to roll the car forward, slowly, waiting for the motorcycle to join them.

The Georgian spoke softly, and yet with a bitter sort of edge. "I can talk if yuh want me to, Nick, but I don't think you do."

He didn't. But he also desperately did - needed him to, more than anything. The argument was better than nothing, because the clock was ticking down, and the more real his intention to leave became, the more he found himself coming to an unpleasant realization.

They'd argued over whether Nick was trying to protect Ellis, or himself. Both had felt true at times, because both were true.

*If you're gonna stop being in love with me... least you could do is help me do the same.*

Nick put a hand on the dash, leaning into it with a dry snort. "Fuck's that supposed to mean?" he muttered. "Sorry, I thought we were fresh out of shit to parade in front of the whole crew. Didn't realize I was still under blackmail."

The scoff that resounded in Ellis' throat was... hurt, like that had caught him off-guard, but whatever emotion darted over his expression was quickly clamped down into a curt frown. "I ain't blackmailin' anybody. I did my best, Nick. You went'n'did this all tuh yerself."

Abruptly, Rochelle's voice interjected, "Guys, as much as I want to figure all this out, maybe now's not the best time." Her tone was gentle but insistent, and sharply frustrated. "We can't give each other a whole lot of space, physically, but we can at least - give it emotionally. Let's just ease off, okay?"

"Please." droned the biker beside her, head drooping, a grimace on her lips. There was no sympathy to be found in her attitude. "I can only take so much in one morning. Who put them up there together, anyway?"

A beat of silence passed before Coach shifted indelicately, then released a heavy sigh that was
slightly embarrassed. His brow furrowed as he muttered, "Leave it, y'all. Damn."

They all knew he’d have been driving if it weren't for his knee.

The blurry shape of Lena on her motorcycle buzzed into view on the road, rain scattering off her jacket and the visor of her helmet. She waved at the car, a blurry motion in the hazy windshield, and then started down the street. Ellis followed suit, flicking on the windshield wipers, their pace slightly too quick, the rubber squeaking and catching on the glass.

"It was pretty straight-on from here - the bridge, I mean. Shouldn't be too long." Ellis was trying, valiantly, to move on, and to ignore the man seated beside him. He was putting in significant effort to focus on the task at hand, tone measured and pointed.

Nick didn't know what he wanted from the situation, but he couldn't settle, and couldn't bring himself to leave it alone. There was a trigger, somewhere, and he wanted to pull it - wanted it pulled, and didn't know how.

"C'mon, kid." he rasped out, thrusting his left arm up in a half-shrug. His voice sounded distant to his ear, as if he'd filled them with cotton. "Let's really blow this one up. Go on. Gimme your best sh-"

When Ellis interrupted him, it was nearer to a whine than a shout. Exasperated, his palm smacked the steering wheel, head tossing back as he groaned, "Goddamnit, Nick. You done everything tuh keep me from talkin' fer weeks, but the one time I -"

He halted, shifting in his seat, and the silence in the car was dampened by the patter of rain against the roof and the bassy rumble of tires on wet asphalt. Nobody moved to interrupt him, though the atmosphere in the car was terribly dense.

Then he continued, and it thickened.

"I'm done, Nick. I'm done lettin' you treat me like this. I had muhself thinkin', fer a minute, you really tried tuh fix things last night." A softness touched Ellis' voice that he undoubtedly did not intend. "But that ain't really it, is it? It's just the same shit it's always been... you bein' sweet tuh me, right up 'til you ain't. Right up 'til you decide not to."

There was a fidgeting from the back seat, uncomfortable, and Chris' voice just-barely started to hum out a syllable, but Ellis was undeterred.

"Yuh get so stubborn, it drives me nuts. I think you know full well yer wrong, but somethin' keeps you goin'. Like you get so damn stuck under whatevver bullshit you cook up, you can't even argue yerself out from under it. Like you'd rather be stubborn 'til the end than change yer damn mind fer once. You'd rather be alone than be with someone who knows you, the good'n'the bad."

Every word took a piece out of him, raw and ragged, torn out. It should've hurt. He should've been angry, or upset, or any of the emotions he'd felt just minutes before - instead, he just felt exhausted. He felt like giving up.

"So, shit, Nick." Ellis' free hand thrust up, pinching at the bridge of his nose, and the gentle glisten threatening at his eyes spoke to more upset than his frustrated tone admitted. "I ain't fightin' you no more. I can't keep doin' this, if yer gonna get meaner and meaner every damn step I take. If yer so damn determined tuh -"

Nick muttered, "Fine.", and it came out spiteful and small. He wanted it to cut, but he barely even got the word vocalized when his throat tried to constrict.
That made Ellis tense, and he suddenly gritted his jaw around a sigh. His gaze flickered toward Nick, a quiet disappointment in the stone-blue. "That's all you got tuh say? 'Fine'? Whut do you think I'm tryin' tuh say, Nick? 'Cause sometimes it just don't seem like you hear me."

Nick snorted, furtively focusing down on the carrier in his lap. If he turned it, he could see inside, the light scattered through the mesh door. The cat curled up inside looked positively miserable.

Some rain had gotten through the mesh in her carrier, and her fur was partially slicked to her body and partially mussed in every direction. She'd crammed herself into the far corner, and her mouth hung open, pink mouth and white fangs exposed. Her eyes flashed toward him, and she managed a croaked hiss.

It was a relatable sentiment.

"I hear you, alright." he stated, unable to stir more than a wry sourness. "I'm a jackass, and I'm too much trouble, and you've seen through my fucking bullshit. And I ran the... I ran goddamn Ellis, of all people, out of fucks to give. "Just glad you finally listened to me for once."

Ellis did not respond with anything but an angry huff of air, like half of a laugh. He stewed in his seat, body shifting in a stretch that seemed mostly like a desperate release of energy, considering he was otherwise trapped in his seat. His quiet fury was unusual, and the rest of the car seemed afraid to speak under it.

Silence crept in again, immensely uncomfortable.

That was it, Nick supposed; that was the end.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head into the cold glass, and wished he felt nothing.

The Georgian kneaded his hand on the steering wheel, strangling it softly between his knuckles, and they sat in a stifled and twisted quiet as the car rumbled along the road. Buildings loomed in close, some boarded up, some with broken windows, some still lit by flickering signs that spread odd colours over the rain-smeared windows.

They drew some infected after them, but the weather kept their passage from gaining too much attention, and they were largely able to avoid them. When one came close, the dark shape that was Lena buzzed to cross the street and intercept it, drawing the creature's ire long enough to prevent it from reaching the car as it passed, then speeding to catch back up.

The streets were not so clogged with cars as to completely block them off, but Ellis did have to take them up onto the curb to avoid a truck flipped onto its side across the center of the road.

The bumpy climb stirred a strained yelp from Rhiannon, along with Chris mumbling timidly, "Eh, sorry."

She groaned out a hum, body leaning forward until her forehead pressed into the shoulder of Nick's seat. "Fucking shit bitch hurts." she blustered, and the genuine pain in her voice startled Coach into placing a hand on her arm. "Ellis, how - how bad was it?"

The Georgian's rigid and angry posture melted just slightly, his eyes darting up to look at her in the rear view mirror. His mouth twisted into a frown. "I... only got a little look. It weren't... I mean, I didn't see bone or nothin'."

A shocked bleat of laughter escaped the blonde. "Oh." she managed, airily. "Good."
Coach's grip tightened, shifting as if he meant to coax the jacket off her shoulders. He nodded his head toward her. "Lemme see, girl. If we gotta stop and take care of you, we will. At least get this jacket off it."

But she didn't cooperate, and he did not force it. Her eyes narrowed into a wince, turning and burying her face into the front seat. "No. Fuck it. Just... fuck it. It's feeling better than it was a few minutes ago, and if you cunts go touching it, it'll just get worse. Leave it. Let's just... get over the fucking bridge."

Coach watched her, displeased, but maintained his silence. His hand relaxed to settle more gently around her forearm, squeezing in a soft and consistent pattern, monotonous in its rhythm. It was a soothing stimulus, and judging by the way her eyes closed and her breathing slowed, it had some effect.

Meanwhile, Rochelle pressed her face against Chris' shoulder, groaning quietly. Her arms tucked around his waist, and he settled his palm on her wrists with a comforting pat. "Shittiest road trip ever." she mumbled. "And I'm including the time someone had an assault rifle to my head."

Rhiannon's head darted an inch up, expression abruptly bewildered, eyes slanting to stare at the other woman.

"... What the ass?"
Ellis was angrier than he ever wanted to be. He hadn't meant to get angry, hadn't thought he had much anger left in him, but Nick's attitude got under his skin in an instant. It hurt, more than anything. It hurt, to try to explain how he felt, and get nothing in return.

And the anger made it harder to explain.

And then it was over.

Nick pulled away, and Ellis sat and gritted his teeth and rolled the conversation over and over in his head. *I just want him tuh give half'uh damn. Is it so crazy, wishin' he'd just try a little? Try at all? I gave him so much damn time tuh figure shit out, but all he did was yell at me, 'n'plan some damn getaway. I ain't askin' much.*

He sighed through his nostrils, shoulders jolting up slightly.

*I ain't askin' that much, goddamn.*

He was not a person who enjoyed fighting, not sincerely and with people he loved, but he wanted to fight. He wanted to pull over and drag the man out of the car, push him until the anger between them burst, take a punch and throw two. He wanted to do anything but sit there, and he definitely wanted to do anything but continue to try and piece together his emotions into a cohesive set of sentences. It would've been a pain he could handle, a pain he would've suffered, if Nick could have met him halfway.

Anger gave way to delicate sorrow, and he found it increasingly hard to focus as Coach spoke to him.

"Yeah, yeah, straight-on. Next left. We should be comin' up on it."

Shifting his hands on the wheel, he nodded his head. "A'ight."

He was so tired.

As they drove, the left side of the island thinned, until the rolling hills separating them from the beach was just a block or two away, though the actual shoreline was still some ways off. It should've been exciting, but Ellis couldn't bring himself to feel it.

In contrast, Christophe released a soft cooing sound, and he leaned into view in the rearview mirror, squinting over Rhiannon and Coach and looking toward the beach. "¡Ah! Incluso un día en la playa no es un día en la playa, con vosotros." he mumbled, a wistful edge to his voice, along with a laugh. "Maybe we go, when it no rains? I -"

Rochelle pinched his side, making him yelp gently, before she tightened her arms around his waist to pull him more flush into her lap. "Chris, cool it." she soothed, gaze flickering toward the front of the car. "Too much energy."

His mouth flinched into something like a pout, but he nestled into her grip regardless. "Vale, vale." he responded, then dropped his voice to a mutter, just between them. "I try to -"
"I know." she interrupted, much softer. When he glanced at her over his shoulder, she smiled faintly.

Silence was not the desirable option, but it was the only one available to them. Coaxing either man out of their respective corners was not a simple task, and any attempts to divert attention were liable to start it up all over again.

Fortunately, the bridge was not far. They'd managed most of the travel required to avoid the traffic clogging up the streets around the mall, the frozen remnants of whatever evacuation had been attempted there, the day before. The first hint of the bridge was from over a building, steel towers peeking just over the roof of a boarded-up storefront.

Then they turned the corner, and it was before them.

Ellis pressed his foot on the brake, reflexively slowing the car, leaning in and blinking through the blurry windshield. He couldn't resist the urge to suck in a breath.

It was not a tall bridge, but it was longer than he expected, from what he remembered of the look he'd gotten off the mall roof. The ground simply ended, shored up by thick pillars of wood and cement, a manmade canal cutting into the terrain and funneling off to the right.

It went inland a couple hundred yards, and then split into two. One fork lead even further into the distance, breaking off into curves and swirls of estuaries, while the other lazily curled in and deeper into the city, yet more pillars and concrete crafting a structured path for boats to take, disappearing behind some buildings and warehouses.

Boats that sailed under the bridge - when it was lifted.

It sat at street-level, now, but as he scanned the four towers of metal and steel surrounding it - one at each of its corners - he realized the entire midsection could raise. There was a squat structure set closely to one of the towers on the other side, and he figured it was a control tower, spindly legs raising it up off the ground.

"Well, shit." Coach grunted, and the source of his frustration was fairly apparent: the bridge was blockaded.

A sedan sat flipped in front of it, and an SUV was parked in a few feet. The more serious issue, however, was the boxtruck parked at an awkward diagonal, broad tire marks highlighting where it had almost swerved off the bridge entirely. The nose of it had broken through the barrier on the side of the bridge, and one wheel sat off the edge, cab slightly lopsided from the position.

There was barely enough room to get the motorcycle through, but they'd never get the car through.

"We could push it." Ellis offered, pointing toward the back of the boxtruck. An uncertain twist touched his mouth, trying to ignore as Nick straightened up from the door and seemed to drift into focus on the conversation. "It's already almost off, if we put it in neutral'n'all got behind it..."

Rochelle winced, tilting her head so she could set her chin on Chris' shoulder and look toward the Georgian. "No offense, sweetie, but I don't think pushing a truck full of who-knows-what off a bridge in the rain is exactly our best next move."

"Abandoning our car in the rain is?" Nick muttered, lowly, a frustrated resignation to his voice. "We're gonna run into a fucking Witch out here."

The weather did not show signs of clearing - if anything, it had worsened, the rain falling at a
diagonal as it was blown by the ocean breeze. From where they sat, in the moments where the windshield wipers cleared his vision, Ellis could see the water tossing and roiling in the canal with the shockwaves caused by the tide further out.

Ellis opened his mouth, but something striking the window in the driver's door made him - and the rest of the passengers - jump.

He twisted around, leaning away from it, instinctively afraid of an infected punching through and shattering it. Instead, the glazed black of Lena's helmet visor stared in at him. She thrust her hands up in a pointed shrug.

Exhaling in a quick breath, soothing himself out of his initial shock, Ellis glanced over his shoulder. He found a frown on Nick's face, and worried pinches on both Coach and Rochelle's. Rhiannon looked more dazed than anything, and Christophe blinked back at him with a helpless expression.

Well, shit. he thought, before he stiffened his jaw and grabbed the handle of his door. He thrust it open, and the storm came abruptly into full focus, the rain cool against his face as it sputtered and spilled into the space between the car and the opening door.

As he jumped out entirely, coming to stand on the road, he felt it starting to seep into his clothes, denim jacket growing heavy against his shoulders. He'd be soaked through before long.

Lena straddled her motorcycle, both feet on the ground to stabilize it, and she'd waddled it backwards to give him the space to open the door. She was curled in close to herself, shoulders high, motorcycle jacket keeping her upper body dry, though her capris and shoes were soaked though.

She didn't raise her visor, an impassive sheet of plastic facing Ellis down. "What's the plan?" she shouted, voice muffled by the rain and her helmet.

A car door slammed - then another, then two more, and suddenly there was a messy cluster of bodies huddled close around them. The only outlier was Nick, who remained an arms' length away, leaned forward to bend over Maggie's carrier where it was held to his belly, like he could shield her from the rain.

"We can't just turn 'round." Ellis shouted back, blinking away the streaks of rain that followed the curve of his brow and tried to blur into his eyelashes. "That crash's all we got connectin' us tuh rescue. And Nick's gotta find his boat."

He shouldn't have said it, but it came out anyway. The moment it left him, he found himself wishing the rain would drown out the sound of his voice.

The way the Northerner flinched, the way he twisted around to look at him through the rain gathering and spilling down his features, caught Ellis off-guard. He didn't even spit something angry back, which felt like the clearest indication that it had hurt - instead, their gazes matched, and why did it feel like it cut both ways?

A clenching feeling in his chest teased at regret. I don't... I didn't mean that. I don't want'cha to go. I...

But he didn't utter it. If Nick wouldn't apologize, why should he? At what point did it become self-sabotage to continue to make excuses for the other man's behaviour? At what point was anger the appropriate response? If Nick did not want to work through things, what was he supposed to do?
"I don't know what'cha want me tuh do."

Terse, Rochelle thrust an arm up, her clothing plastered to her body by the rain. "If we're gonna go, let's go! We can find a new car, or come back and get this one if we need to. Let's just get over the bridge, and out of the goddamn rain!"

There was a moment, a hesitation, and then Coach started moving. It was hard to do anything but follow him, and in an instant, the entire team was in motion. Lena started to push her bike forward, and Ellis moved to bolt to the other side of it, shouldering his shotgun and grabbing one hand on the handlebar and the other on the seat.

They pushed together, picking up an easy jog together as they hurried after Coach, angling toward the side of the bridge that would aim them toward the gap left between the end of the boxtruck and the side of the bridge.

Christophe started forward, a grimace on his face, but he hadn't made it more than a few steps before Nick suddenly grabbed a fistful of the back of his shirt. The foreigner flinched, looking up toward the gambler, confusion sparking on his face.

Abrupt, as quiet as he could be to be heard under the storm, Nick said, "Here."

Before Chris could react, Nick pulled the carrier off his shoulder and shoved it into the other man's chest. The moment Chris reacted and lifted up his arm as if to hold it, Nick grabbed the strap and raised it, holding its loop open for him to stick his arm through.

He hesitated, but obeyed. With the strap settled on his good shoulder, he shrugged her close and held the carrier to his chest, his expression squinting against the rain. "Nico, I no can fight with her. It is hard enough -"

"I can fight better with two arms than you fucking can with one." Nick immediately retorted, expression grim. There was something cold in his voice, yet it was not anger; it seemed more like a hollow misery, plastered all over his face like the soaked-in rain.

It would never make sense, how two people so blatantly in love with each other could do anything but embrace it. He couldn't help but think of Rochelle, and it seemed obvious: especially with the world fallen apart around them, what was there to lose? And what was there to gain from denying it?

A hundred words jumbled together in his mouth, and very little of it contorted its way into something close to English. Nick hurt, and Ellis hurt, Chris hurt for them.

Son perfectos el uno para el otro - los dos sois igual de estúpidos y cabezotas y no sabéis cuando abandonar, es lo que eso significa.

"I'll cover you. Just stay with me."

Chris frowned, body shivering as the chill rain started to take its toll on him. He'd been so much more fragile since the Witch, like some portions of his body had yet to process the shock, while others powered on through adrenaline and cardboard bravado.

"Just... for fuck's sake, kid, I need you to watch her. Keep her safe."

He didn't want to. He both genuinely didn't want the responsibility, and genuinely didn't want to be reduced to carrying their things, cowering rather than pulling even some of his own weight. He wanted to fight, as much as he could.
But Nick's eyes held a plea, and he owed Nick his life. It was, in a way, a gesture of trust, and it made Chris' resolve weaken.

So, he steadied himself on his heels and hugged Maggie's carrier to his front, feeling her weight shift within. "I do it." he stated, aware of the way Nick's posture faltered in relief. "Even if you are a pussy bitch."

Christophe did not wait for a response, though he saw the Northerner's face go slack in shock, and he took some pleasure in it. He marched forward, passing Rhiannon, who was not so sluggish and pained that she did not lift her hand, knuckles facing outward.

He grinned, turning his body in order to bump fists with her without pulling his arm away from Maggie's carrier.

He owed Ellis plenty, too.

They clustered together as tightly as they could, three main groups forming: Nick caught up to walk close behind Christophe and Rhiannon, sword held low as he kept at their heels, attention alert behind them as he pulled up the rear of the group entirely.

Ellis and Lena were in the center as they pushed the motorcycle together, and in front of them, Coach and Rochelle had taken point. He walked with some stiffness on every other step, and they had not made it more than a few feet before Rochelle tuck close beside him, her hand catching his and linking fingers between them.

They moved in a distended pack as they circled around the two cars in their way, pace picking up, though not so quickly as to separate. Rhiannon was not slowed by her injury, but she did not move with her usual fire, either. Her movements were stilted, as if moving - or focusing on her movement - was a struggle.

As Coach reached the corner of the boxtruck, he did not continue, beyond a quick look beyond it to ensure there were no infected on the bridge itself. He stepped beside it and pulled Rochelle with him, out of the way of the few feet of space between its end and the slim steel barrier lining the bridge's sides, and looked back at the other survivors approaching behind him.

Careful, cautious, Coach lifted an arm, gesturing to shepherd Ellis and Lena through it.

As his arm raised and as he turned, a bright red light blinked on at the top of either of the two towers flanking the bridge's far side. They flashed on, red piercing through the fog and the mist, and then off. And then on, and just below them, clear yellow spotlights joined them, aimed out toward the city behind.

And then their flashing rate picked up, beginning a solid pattern, on and off.

In the instant that Christophe's head jerked up, staring up toward the lights ahead of them and feeling Rhiannon and Nick halt beside him, Coach's voice jerked up to look in the opposite direction.

The Spaniard twisted his head, looking over his shoulder, finding two lights atop the two towers behind them. They stood almost in the middle of the bridge, now, and there was a moment where nobody moved. Fear best described that moment, the bitter tang and the sharp twist.

The unknown had long ago become something worth fearing.

In soft concert with the flashing lights, a warbled siren kicked up, a smooth wail that accelerated to
a pitchy song. The sound reverberated from both ends of the bridge, and as it escalated, several things happened all at once.

First, slim barriers erupted on either end of the bridge, rattling up to almost chest-height. Then, the structure underneath them shifted, a lurch affecting the very road beneath their feet and making all of them stagger and spread their arms as if to balance themselves.

It rattled the cars around them, too, and the SUV behind them gave a threatening chirp of its car alarm.

Then the bridge jostled again, beginning to raise and separate from the road itself. The lights on the SUV started to flash as its shriek joined the siren, screaming out into the rain and echoing in the space around them.

The answering roars of infected were an inevitability, a howl that surged up and beyond the howl of the storm. The bulk of it came from in front of them and across the bridge, and the reaction seemed obvious. They all responded the same way, with no communication required: they started to retreat.

Ellis and Lena outright abandoned the motorcycle, letting it crash down onto its side, and they all bolted to retrace their steps.

If they could get off the bridge before it raised, it would raise up and beyond the reach of the horde ahead of them. The infected might even run themselves off the edge and into the water below, if they were lucky, and they could hopefully fend off the infected coming from behind them.

They'd deal with next steps after they survived.

However, they only made it to the SUV before that plan, too, fell apart.

The rain was not so thick as to obscure the broad, inhumanly massive shape bursting out into the street from behind a building, though the usual tell-tale rumbling of its passage was impossible to pick out beyond the rumbling of the bridge's ascent under their feet.

The Tank stopped and beat its fists against the road, roaring, anger directed wildly toward the sound and lights. It had not immediately taken notice of them, specifically, but it dropped low and began its ape-like gallop toward the bridge all the same.

All at once, there was nowhere to go.
Nick wasn't sure the best way to say it. 'Between a rock and a hard place' seemed apt, but also insufficient as a metaphor. 'Completely fucked' certainly applied, but lacked creativity. 'Up shit creek without a paddle' felt better, but not quite there.

When Christophe muttered, "¡Cágate, lorito!", Nick only caught part of it, but he was fairly certain the Spaniard had vocalized his desired sentiment better than he could manage. He was, at least, not the only one trying to put their situation to words, as if defining it might lessen its impact.

There was a horde ahead of them, and a Tank behind them, and the bridge continued to raise underneath them. Each inch brought a shudder to the concrete, the structure protesting, clearly not meant to raise with so much weight on it.

It was dark, the sun blurred over with storm clouds, a haze of grey-yellow all that remained of its light.

"Where the fuck-shit-ass did a Tank come from?" Rhiannon's voice was strained, hoarse to the point of breaking. "We can't fight a fucking Tank right now! I can barely feel my fucking arms!"

"No fightin'. We run." Coach barked out, shouting past the storm's continued howl, already taking a few steps back. Retreating into the arms of a Tank was not an option under any circumstance, that much was apparent. "This shit gets high enough, we're gonna be stuck up here. We gotta push and get on the other side!"

Nick gripped his katana, tightening his fingers against the wet leather that made up the handle, and shrugged his sniper rifle closer to his neck where the strap was draped over his shoulder. "Then push." he shouted, voice harsh. "Now!"

He could see the fear, scattered. Fright sat heavy in everyone's eyes, panic drowning out any other emotion, and it bubbled up like acid in his throat. Feels like my fault. Why's it always feel like my fucking fault? If I didn't start things with Ellis, and then fuck things up with Ellis, I wouldn't have been trying to leave - and Coach wouldn't have gotten hurt - and we'd have been over this bridge fucking yesterday -

Despair was an easy emotion.

He'd wanted to disappear, and hoped the team would be better off without him. It became clearer and clearer that his chance for that had passed, however; he'd done irreparable damage, and continued to do so. He was the bull amongst the glassware, and the longer he stayed, the worse things became.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

They ran, because running was the only option. They barely made it past the boxtruck, dodging around the fallen shape of Lena's motorcycle, before the horde ahead of them had reached the bridge. The flood of bodies on the street below merged in with the fog of rain, and it was hard to pinpoint just how many there were.

A wave of infected climbed over the slim barrier set at the end of the road and easily circumvented the two-foot gap between the street and the raising bridge. They flooded over it, wasting no time before they were sprinting at the survivors, shrieks and calls heightening as they finally located a tangible target.
The moment the survivors breached the funnel created by the boxtruck, they fanned out, bracing for impact just before it came.

Nick turned to face behind them, hearing the sounds of weapons meeting flesh reverberate through the air, pushing water from his eyes with his wrist. The horde ahead of them was only part of the problem; there were still infected behind them, and they were being pinchered.

Two zombies sprinted through the gap between the truck and the edge of the bridge, and he lifted his katana, readying it.

The moment one came in reach, he lashed out, slicing a harsh diagonal line across its chest and bringing the tip up high. Rib bones were bared under the strip of split flesh, and it shrieked, staggering a half-step. The stutter in its movement gave him the time he needed to twist his wrist, letting the blade fall back onto it, and it struck into the side of its skull.

Bone and flesh scattered from the blow, its ear and the socket of its jaw torn through by the edge of the sword, and it was thrown to the ground with a sputtered shriek. It struggled, clawing at the ground, but its limbs did not seem to respond with precision.

Nick kept walking backwards, kept moving, lashing out as the second infected leapt over its compatriot and lunged for him. It got too close too suddenly, and he lifted the hilt of his katana instead, striking it bluntly toward the creature's face.

He made contact, but the impact only shook it slightly before it recovered and was lashing out, nails scraping against his shoulder through his shirt. He gritted his teeth, shifting back on a heel so he could kick out, the toe of his sneaker catching the zombie's knee just beneath the patella. The sensation of something crunching made his nose scrunch, and its left leg collapsed.

It shrieked at him, trying to scrabble up to hobble toward him, but he merely slashed out and caught it in the throat with the edge of his katana. He continued his retreat as the zombie's head tipped perilously back, flesh sawn open, blood guttering from the wound.

Three more ran through the gap, a taller female lurching ahead with broad strides, and Nick's pulse accelerated. He risked a glance over his shoulder, and wished he hadn't.

Ellis was swapping between loosing shots and using his shotgun like a battering ram, bashing the stock into any portion of an infected he could reach. Rochelle had Chris' machete in her right hand, her handgun in her left, and she was taking hunks and pieces with every swing.

A Jockey's cackling broke through the din, but was suddenly silenced, its rain-slick pinkened form caught by a shot from Ellis before it could make it out of the crowd.

Lena and Coach were close together, his shotgun filling in the moments where her strength with her brush-hook wavered. When the horde grew too thick for him to have the room to reload it, Rhiannon was suddenly behind him, pushing her stun baton into his hands.

She and Christophe did not join the fray. Rhiannon held her bat at the ready, pushing closer to the foreigner in a move that seemed more protective of him than nervous. He had Maggie's carrier clutched tightly to his chest, attention focused on keeping out of danger.

His team was holding firm, making ground, even - but not for a lack of effort on the zombies' part. The simple fact was, the bridge was pulling out of easy reach, and the horde had to climb the barrier and pull themselves up instead of simply throwing themselves over the barrier wildly. It slowed them, causing strife as the zombies behind them clawed and struck at their backs, as if
impatient.

That complicated things, from more than one angle.

The window of time they had to easily get down was closing, rapidly, and the chance they'd get injured in the jump was increasing. Even a rolled ankle could be a disaster, especially with a Tank on their heels. Coach's knee could give in entirely, if he landed wrong.

They needed to get down, but the way the horde slowed and built up at the end of the road meant they'd be jumping straight into the mass of it. They'd be torn to shreds, as surely as the Tank behind them would crush them against the concrete.

Worse, the higher the bridge raised, the more its structure and the lifting mechanism seemed to protest the weight. The infected making their way onto it added yet more pounds, and though he would not think it would be enough to make a difference - there was, no doubt, a limit... one already tested by the presence of the truck and SUV.

It was, no doubt, not meant to raise with any weight on it at all.

The panic built in his gut, blurring his attention, and he couldn't think straight. What the fuck do we do? We can't stop, and maybe we can't even go forward, but what the fuck else can we do? There's nowhere else to go!

Manic, wild, a part of him laughed: They could jump in the river, if it weren't for me.

The three infected reached him, and he could not react past the blind need to fight. He struck the first one across the belly, gore pouring out from the gash created from its hip to its sternum, a coil of tar-black intestine escaping as it grabbed for its own stomach.

It might've kept its footing, had the next infected not struck it from behind, shoving it to the ground and lunging for him. Nick darted to the side, dodging it, and cut low - his blade slit across the back of its left leg, cutting a deep line through its hamstring. It tried to turn and lash out for him, but its leg did not obey and it crashed to the concrete with a wet slap.

He kicked out as it fell, shoving it into a roll to get some distance between them, though it stopped itself by clawing against the bridge's hard surface. Its nails broke against the asphalt, fingertips scraped raw as it halted its own momentum.

It started to crawl toward him with a shriek.

He could feel the distance between him and the others growing, but he was the only thing keeping the infected from Christophe and Rhiannon, and neither were in a shape to help him. All he could do was hold his ground, keep them at bay.

The time he'd bought himself by downing the second zombie was just enough to turn and lift his katana to meet the third zombie as it charged him.

Nick's body protested, arms aching, fingers cold and stiff in the rain. When he struck, the blade turned in his wet palm and hit with the flat instead of the edge, cracking against the zombie's chest. The blow sent a shockwave up his arm, and he gritted his teeth, darting back a step to try and regain space, and give himself the time he needed to wind back up.

Lightning flashed, cutting a harsh line in the sky that pierced the cloud-cover, and it seared colour and light in his vision.
He froze - and the infected froze, too.

No.

There was a vacuum of sound, just before the thunder crashed, like his ears knew it was coming and braced for the noise. It was the rending of air in the sky, a crack and not a rumble, sharp with the proximity of the lightning strike itself. It deafened him, just as the light tried to blind him.

*It can’t - fucking -*

It was hard, at first, to tell. Her hair was plastered flat to her face in the rain, her skin greyed and mottled by plump veins just underneath the surface. A deep gash cut from her jaw down to her sternum, revealing muscle and flesh amidst blackened coagulation. Broad holes in her clothing bared the swell of her left breast, that, too, torn until fatty viscera glinted in the light.

Blood and dirt was mixed and muted by the rain soaking her, but not even the downpour could rinse her completely clean. Instead, it turned everything dark, shades of black on shades of purple.

He could've dismissed it, at first, even as his katana slid over the delicate, torn ruffles of a once-vibrant purple blouse. He could've dismissed the likeness as a coincidence, or a mistake, even blamed it on whatever malfunction of his perception had caused him to hear Brett Sullivan's voice in the maintenance hall of a shopping mall.

But her eyes - bloodshot in the whites, and irises taking on a yellow-green opalescence as the light faded and they returned to their eerie backlit glow - met his, and it did not feel like a hallucination.

Brenda stood in front of him, and the rain bit coldly into his skin.

He could not move, could not think. Panic could not reach him where he stood - he was beyond panic. His heart pounded in his chest until it hurt, his ribs straining to contain the pulsing of it. He didn't realize he'd begun to hold his breath until his lungs began to hurt, too. His vision blurred, from the rain as well as adrenaline.

The glow from the lightning strike faded, his vision darkening as it did, but he could still see her head tilt. He could see her chin lower to look down at herself. He could see her left hand raise, settling over the blade frozen against her chest. He watched her fingertips slide against the edge, skin splitting against the steel when she applied too much pressure, blood washed away in an instant by the rain.

Brenda touched the blade like she remembered it, and she looked up at the sniper rifle hanging from his shoulder like she remembered it - and when her glowing eyes met his, she looked at him like she remembered him, too.

There was no reaction, no emotion, just animal recognition, enough stimuli to stir some far-off interest. Her head cocked and her jaw moved, and the sound that left her was a guttural whine, wheezed as air escaped the damage in her throat. It fluttered into a snarl - and then rage pulled at her features, blunt and animal, the same fury and agony that stitched itself into every zombie's face.

Fight or flight pulled hard at his reins, but shock simply snapped them. He tried to shout and could not even recall how.

A plea for help withered and died on his tongue. Before he could break through the cement thickening to rock in his joints, she lashed out. Her fingers wrapped around his throat, and her body-weight pushed into his. She was strong - too strong - and he could not stop from slipping on
his heels.

He fell before he could catch himself, landing hard on his tailbone. His body was caught in the whiplash, the back of his head cracking into the concrete as he flattened into it. The pain was a blinding flash of red, jarring him, and where it should have stunned him - it woke him up.

There, finally, his voice returned to him, and he yelled out a hoarse few syllables, incoherent. He let go of his blade in order to reach up and grab at Brenda's forearms in a feral attempt to pry her hands away from his neck. They did not give, however, nor did her greyed flesh yield as easily as it should have.

He dug in nails as she dug in hers, but her grip closed around his throat and crushed his windpipe with a thumb placed just below his Adam's apple. The force turned his shout into a whimper, and he kicked up his knees, trying to get leverage to roll them over.

He did not manage anything but a buck of his body underneath her weight.

The rain poured down against his face, blurring into his eyes and filling his mouth as he gaped for air. Brenda lowered her head, curling into him, releasing a gargled sound that clicked and rattled in her mouth. It was almost inquisitive, past the fury, as her lips drifted close to his cheek, the scent of rot and blood cutting through his senses.

She huffed, faintly, as if to breathe him in.

His vision was fading, blurring, and his fingernails broke skin as he scrabbled at her forearms, desperate. He could not tell if the pain was constriction or her nails piercing him, too. He didn't know if he'd crossed some critical point, where his windpipe had collapsed, and it would not recover - and the thought of it pushed him firmly into terror.

His chest surged, and the single breath he managed was more water than air. He'd drown, maybe, before she'd even gotten the chance to strangle the life out of him.

Movement flashed above them, and her hands were suddenly ripped from his neck, nails scrabbling and leaving gouges behind. She was thrown away and off of him as if by a blow, but he couldn't look to see from what, vision drawn almost to a pinhole.

The release of pressure against his throat made him gasp in a breath, chest surging to fill his lungs. He was forced to choke and gag when they could only do so half-heartedly. His body curled in a pathetic reflex, and he could barely work his throat enough to reject the water pooling in his lungs.

Then, abruptly, a hand was on his leg, and it clawed into his shin with a sharp stab of pain even through his denim. A distant part of him knew that the zombie he'd downed had reached him, but he was barely able to move to escape or fight it off.

Past the agony curling through his chest, the screaming of his body as it begged for air, he sputtered water and saliva and bile. The cold draw of some hard-wired survival instinct had him scrabbling to grab for the Magnum holstered at his thigh. His fingers did not obey him, cold and stiff, and he only got it free as the infected grabbed nails in his thigh, crawling up his body.

He aimed half-blindly, pushing the gun forward and directing it toward the shape next to him, then pulled the trigger. His arm jolted with the force, and he felt the infected jerk and then collapse beside him.

Nick forced himself up onto an elbow, shuddering with a hacking set of coughs. The way the rain continued to pour down his face and chest made it feel like he was full of water, like he was under
the surface, and there was no air left for him to breathe - but then he breathed.

It hurt, sharply, rattling as his lungs protested it. It surged him into another rush of coughs, vision blurring as his entire body ached, throat burning as he choked past the clenched pain in his neck. But he breathed, and with the oxygen came enough focus to turn his head.

Coach stood barely a foot away, stun baton lifted, facing away from him. His shoulders heaved, and he was frozen there, staring at the infected standing in front of him.

Head cocked, jaw dangerously cocked in its socket as if the left mandible had broken free, Brenda's fingers curled and uncurled. She released a shriek, modulated by her ruined throat and now-ruined jaw, gurgled through blood.

*She's real. This is real. Isn't it? If it wasn't real, he'd have just killed it. He wouldn't be hesitating. He wouldn't be -*

She charged, and when Coach swung out with the baton to catch her in the neck again, she lunged her body lower and dodged it. The move caught Coach off-guard, and she was suddenly in his space - and Nick couldn't see past his body at first, but he shouted out in pain, and when the man staggered back a step and half-turned, he saw.

Brenda - or what remained of her - had latched onto his upper arm, biting into his bicep. It was an awful sight, the way her jaw tilted with the force applied, unable to close evenly with the left side of her jaw broken. The bite still, clearly, hurt.

Coach tried to twist his shoulder and then his body, trying to pull away from her, but she did not let go. Her fists battered at him, one clawing up toward his neck, and he was forced to jerk his chin away to keep her nails from reaching his face. He couldn't swing the baton with her pressed so close, but he tried to lift it, pressing its end against her face.

When he discharged its taser-like burst of electricity, the sound crackling, he roared; the shock only forced her jaw to close tighter against his arm, her muscles jolting tense.

Nick's body did not want to move, but he did not give it a choice. He stood, legs threatening to fail, katana clutched in a loose grip and tip dragged against the ground.

His periphery was enough to see the rest of the team was getting overwhelmed. Without Coach, they had closed in on each other, and the horde was beginning to circle them. A line of infected was beginning to separate them from the rest of the team, and Ellis and Rochelle had yet to notice, they were so focused on holding back the infected near them.

Lena was expending all her energy protecting Chris and Rhiannon, but she spared a desperate glance in their direction, and shouted something he could not hear.

Nick marched forward, raising his Magnum, and he did not shoot until he was so close he could almost press the nose of it directly against her temple, until even his shaky hand couldn't possibly angle the bullet and hit Coach.

There was a moment, before he pulled the trigger, when her eyes flickered up and met his. He saw once more the blood-soaked woman lain against the concrete, bleeding steadily out from her gut. She'd gazed at him with such calm, like they'd simply finished a game of chess and she had lost.

He'd felt no pity, beyond the desire to put her out of her misery.

Here, now, why did it feel like a second chance to do so? And why did he feel - past an absolute
terror - a strained and uneasy grief? Carmine didn't deserve it. And you didn't either, you fucking crazy bitch.

The hole that tunneled through the curve of her eyebrow seemed too small, too clean, to kill her so quickly. Her body stiffened, and then her eyes went distant, and her legs crumpled beneath her.

Coach stepped back, staggered, and grabbed immediately for his arm as her mouth dropped away from it. He and Nick both stared down at her as she slid first to her knees, then collapsed onto her side, striking the bridge's surface as dead weight. Her eyes stared sightlessly ahead, gore dribbling across her forehead, the contents of her skull spread out behind her in black and red speckles on the concrete.

It was washed away in an instant, blooming into thick and rippled rings of colour, the downpour trying and trying to clean it. The rain beat down upon them, droplets fat and cold, and pooled against the curve of her neck and within the soft part of her half-torn lips.

Nick's gaze shifted up, shoulders slumping, and found Coach staring back at him. The horror there sat as quiet affirmation: they'd both seen her.

I wish I was crazy.

The sound of crushing metal rent the air, and with it came a second shrieking car alarm to join the first. It felt surreal, for a moment, to turn and find their sedan sailing up and through the air in their direction. It struck the boxtruck with a wheel as it flipped over it, and the jolt was enough to bounce the truck forward.

It jostled further forward until its right front wheel joined the first in rolling over the edge of the bridge. With that wheel now no longer holding it somewhat steady, the truck began to ease forward on its back wheels, undercarriage squealing as it scraped against the edge of the bridge's structure. It eased its way closer and closer to a crucial tipping point - but it halted, catching on the hitch connecting it and its cargo, and teetered with a groan of steel.

The sedan did not stop, however.

Colliding with the boxtruck sent it into a sharp tailspin, suddenly dropping, and the car hit the bridge. It did not bounce, but rolled, catching only feet of air between each strike of a corner or a side against the concrete below. The sound was awful, each strike crushing more and more of its chassis.

Coach and he both bolted, breaking into a sprint toward the edge of the bridge to escape the sedan's path. They ran toward the barrier separating them from the edge, pressing close to it, and so close to one another that they flattened into the contact, side by side.

The sedan struck hard onto its belly on the next impact, and its momentum died out in one last flop of metal and rubber. It laid in the center of the bridge, alarm shrieking - the alarm likely the only thing still functioning inside of it.

There was a rumble beneath them, a stuttered motion before a sudden halt. A slope became just-barely tangible under their feet as the back half of the bridge did not continue to raise, but the front half did.

The impacts and the added weight had done it no favours.

"Holy goddamn shit." Coach uttered, and Nick almost took it at face-value, until the ex-football player struck out to grab Nick's sleeve, fingers clumsy on the soaked fabric. The Northerner looked
toward him, instantly, and instead found himself looking over the edge.

He could just see bodies in the water, some floating, some in the process of sinking, and some floundering in the tossing waves beneath them. It took Nick a moment to understand where they were coming from, and even then, yet another to understand why.

The bridge had passed out of reach of the horde entirely. Rather than stop, the stampede continued to push, continued to crush in toward the bridge - and they were shoving each other over the edge. Given no alternative route to reach them, the horde simply spilled into the ocean.

Better, the flow of bodies up onto the bridge had been cut off, and the rest of the team was close to the edge.

It felt like a streak of hope, a shock to his system, because they had a chance. All at once, the balance tipped in their favour: if the horde below cleared out, they could jump down in relative safety, even if they took some injuries in the process.

"Fucking go!" Nick grabbed Coach in return and pushed, screamed, voice broken, before he'd even truly processed the revelation. Desperation clawed at him, an urgency, because nothing mattered more than his team getting to safety. He raised his voice until it cracked, trying to carry to the survivors. "Jump!"

They sprinted, charging ahead, and Nick felt some clenched relief when Lena darted to grab Maggie's carrier from Chris' grasp and hold it under her arm. They traded shouts as the entire team backed toward the edge, and then suddenly the brunette turned and leapt off.

It made a sick feeling lurch in Nick's stomach, watching her drop out of sight.

There was a loaded moment, where Christophe and Rhiannon looked down - but she must've made the landing, because her sister took the step after her. She reached back as she did, gripping Chris' hand by force, and he had no choice but to fall after her when she pulled him along.

Ellis and Rochelle were the only ones left, and they pressed back to back, fending off the infected now circled close around them. They were wearing down the horde, and even when there was an opening to bolt, they did not budge. It was obvious enough their intention: they would not jump unless they all went together.

Stupid. buzzed in the back of his mind, glazing over the tight warmth in his chest.

The Southerner twisted his weight on a heel, blasting a hole in the midsection of a zombie with his shotgun, and glanced urgently in their direction. "C'mon, guys!" he shouted. "We gotta -"

His eyes widened, head lifting, and Nick didn't need more warning before he looked over his shoulder.

The Tank's meaty fists gripped the far edge of the bridge, pulling its massive body up. Even had that end continued to rise in unison with the other end, the creature's reach was long enough to close the gap, and it clutched stubby fingers against the concrete to drag itself forward.

The Tank's weight, and the increasing difference between the height of either end putting more and more pressure on the structure, proved to be too much.

The sound of concrete and rebar giving way was deafening, every crack and fracture vibrating through the material under their feet. The worst of the split formed just behind the boxtruck, the bridge shearing apart, and both Nick and Coach both staggered as the ground beneath them shifted
in a sympathetic jolt.

Metal shrieked as the truck suddenly shifted, tipping into a half-roll as the fracture formed beside it caused it to sink into the divot, crashing down onto its side against the bridge. That blow sent the cracks spreading in a violent shudder.

All at once, the broken section of the bridge tore free, and both it and the boxtruck plummeted. As the vehicle fell with a gentle spin, it clipped against the edges of the ragged hole it had created, knocking chunks of concrete loose and widening the gap.

Worse, was the sound it made as it all hit the water below.

The bridge was not completely split in half, but the few feet of asphalt still linking its two halves did not look like it would last long. The damage had followed the subtle fault line of a piece of framing, and didn't seem to be spreading further toward them, but Nick couldn't help a mindless, animal fear.

"Go!" he shouted, even as he started to move again, rushing forward and grabbing at Coach's shoulder to push him forward. "Just fucking go! We're right behind you!"

And the way Ellis' eyes shifted, matching his, and narrowed at him through the rain in a stubborn, resolute fury - an angry refusal - why was it a relief? Why did it comfort him, just subtly? He felt lost when they flickered away, refocusing on the infected around him, Ellis swinging out with the stock of his shotgun.

I need to know you care. Even if... I just need to know you're out there, somewhere, that someone cares... at all. I can't... lose that, even if I lose you... I -

Something struck his hip, and then writhed to loop around his midsection. The shout that left him was drawn out into a weak and rusted-out sound, diaphragm crushed as the tongue drew taut. He tried to turn and lash out with the sword gripped awkwardly in his left hand, but the tongue yanked his body back, and as suddenly as he'd attempted the swing, he was falling.

He hit the ground harder this time, and wrong. His shoulder took the brunt of his weight, body twisting as the Smoker's grasp pulled him into a roll. Something popped, deep in the joint, and the pain that lit up was searing. It hurt from his shoulderblade down to his armpit, and then a burning pain speared up to his collarbone.

He could not keep his fingers curled to maintain his grasp on the katana, and it was left behind.

Being dragged forward on it threatened to black out his vision entirely, and he felt like he might've shouted, but he could not be sure. He felt like he heard shouting from behind him, too, but it faded into a distant hum.

All he could hear, then, was the rain thundering down around him. It struck the asphalt, struck his body, struck the roiling ocean beneath them. The sound of water filled his ears, and he caught the barest glimpse up at his attacker in the moment before his face struck the concrete and his vision went blurry.

The Smoker stood on the opposite side of the wide strip taken out of the bridge, its heels braced to reel in his weight, pulling him closer and closer to the gap. He'd slide over the edge, and there would be no saving him.

Behind the Smoker, the Tank had gathered itself, and stood now at its full height. It roared, thrusting its arms out to either side, bloated musculature slick and glistening in the storm. The
sound was somehow deafening and muffled by the sirens around them.

Realizing that he was going to die should have scared him. He should have been afraid, screaming, gone wild with panic as the edge tumbled closer. He should have cried and pleaded and kicked.

Instead, he tried numbly to get his Magnum in a position to fire ahead of him, like he might somehow catch the Smoker with a bullet. But the act of aiming, let alone hitting anything, while the tongue dragged him along was impossible.

When he lost his grip on it and saw it clatter away, he was still not afraid.

He felt nothing.

"You have to do this, Nicky."

His mother knelt down, taking his face in her hands, looking intently into his eyes. Her nails, manicured to blunt rectangular edges, caught against his jaw and pulled his chin up.

"I can't get my usual third shift, and we can't leave you home alone all day. And if you stay with Uncle Ollie, you'll be going to a better school than the one by us, anyway. This is good, okay? This is a good thing for all of us."

He didn't want to go. He didn't want to live with a man he barely knew, far from his parents, to go to a school with people he'd never met. He didn't want them to drive away and leave him there.

He didn't want it to be a good thing.

The palm that settled against his shoulder was huge, the thick and firm grip of his father's hand, jostling him gently. "C'mon, Champ. You'll do great here. You won't even miss us - and Oll can bring you by all the time." He knelt, too, and Nick wanted to hug around his rotund neck and refuse to let go.

"I -" His breath hitched, and he was going to cry, despite his best efforts not to. "I don't wanna live here, Pop. Uncle's mean. I wanna stay home. Why do I gotta live here?"

With an exaggerated frown, his father rapped a knuckle against his forehead, and it hurt. It wasn't supposed to, and he wasn't supposed to let it, but it did. "Don't talk about family like that. Oll's doing you a favour." When Nick's lower lip trembled, when his body shivered, his father intoned, "Here I was, thinking I raised up a son. Where's my tough little guy at?"

It took effort, but it got easier every time, and the smile that crossed his father's face when he managed to blink away the beginnings of tears was worth it.

"There he is."

His mother pulled at him, pulled his focus back to her, and she smiled at him slimly. "Don't make this a big deal, okay? It's only for a few months." She said it like it were true, and he believed it, though it would not turn out so temporary.

He would never completely forget how she exhaled a breath, impatient, like she was eager to leave.

She pulled him, too hard, and he did not want to go.

"It's time, Nicky."

The edge of the gap seemed to slide underneath him, rather than the other way around. There was a
moment where he floated, and some absurd set of sensations coalesced such that he thought he might hover there, suspended amidst the rain.

Then he fell.

The fall hurt in its own way, gravity yanking on his body and pulling his stomach up so fiercely that he gagged, choking with the violent sense of vertigo. Closing his eyes was not a choice, but an instinctive reaction.

Reaching the end of the tongue hurt more.

It was tangled mostly around his midsection, so the majority of the force encircled there, crushing his ribs inward in a blinding crash of pain. His shoulder screamed out, and when he reflexively shifted, body curling, even the slightest attempt to move his arm resulted in nothing but further waves of agony.

It was broken, maybe, but did it matter? *I'm dead.* he thought, and it felt so easy to think. He felt relieved. *Body just hasn't gotten the memo yet.*

The tongue crawled up his chest, continuing to constrict around him, and its grip began to close around his frame. He breathed as if through a straw, choking in air, and his eyes flickered up.

Looking up toward the underside of the bridge felt... strange, an out of body experience that his body was unfortunately chained to. He gazed up, jaw gritted as his thoughts fogged, and all he could think was: *This is good, isn't it?*

*It's good for all of us.*

He'd found the trigger, finally, and he hadn't even had to pull it.

Nick wished he had the strength to feel shock when Coach's frame leaned out, staring down at him, shaded and silhouetted in the rain. He wished he could affect the situation, force the man to run, or slow the Tank down where its thundering footsteps began to charge along the bridge.

He wished he could do anything but gaze up, low-lidded, and use the last gust of air in his body to croak, "Run, Sam."

He wished he could have said, *I'm sorry.*

He wished he could have said, *You meant everything to me. I just wanted you to be safe.*

He wished he could have held Rochelle in his arms, squeezed her until she laughed. She'd punch out at him and protest, but she'd press into it, and she'd smile long after it.

He wished he'd drunk a little less, the night before, so he could better remember the way Ellis looked at him. He wished he could have gotten one more kiss, one more touch - but it was better.

It was better that Ellis' last words to him were fury.

It made it easier to let go, didn't it? Wouldn't it? Wouldn't anger be better than grief, when Ellis realized he was gone? Hate was so much easier to swallow than the alternative.

*You don't have to love me, and I don't have to live without you. Break-even.*

He hated it. He hated it all, and he hated himself more than anything. He hated that he'd found the only scrap of goodness in an otherwise miserable circumstance and squandered it.
Shit goodbye.

Darkness came quicker than he expected. His vision stopped working first, blown with stars and pinprick points of green, the echo of light left under his eyelids. He was conscious for longer, by seconds - but then it all faded out.

Coach watched him fall limp, dangling down from the bridge, cocooned in the fleshy and fibrous tentacle that drew ever tighter.

He knew it was over, the knowledge sitting cold in his chest, a cancerous growth that ate at him from the inside. The Tank was seconds away. There was no time to pull Nick up, even if he could've done so alone, and the ocean below was a death sentence regardless of his consciousness.

Tears streaked down his face, pain sharply prickling in his jaw as he gritted it against the urge to gasp in air, suck in oxygen. His shoulders slumped, and for just a moment, he did not move. For a moment, he simply stood, held firm against the desire to collapse.

The screams from behind him were not zombies'.

Rochelle wailed out denial, a rage burst into the air. It was agony, and not the kind that came with any physical wound. It was a wail that shifted from Nick's name to his - from grief to fear, soaked through with something visceral and broken.

The sound that left Ellis was nothing Coach had ever heard before.

It was inhuman.

It did not hit him - it broke against him, the sound shattering like so much fine glass, shards lighting slivers of hot pain over every inch of him. Raw and guttural, Ellis screamed out as if some part of him was being torn from him... as if he, too, were dangled from the bridge.

He screamed like he knew it was hopeless, even, to scream.

Coach's heart, already broken, split and shattered in his chest. His gaze raised, settling on the two infected across the gap, feeling the bridge tremble under his feet as the Tank's massive body crashed down with every step. The Smoker was frozen where it stood, straining against its own tongue as it held Nick aloft.

He spoke, airless, just a whisper, just for himself. His teeth chattered as he spoke, partly cold and partly fear.

"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength."

His hands shifted, gripping his shotgun, raising it. He settled the stock against his shoulder, bracing it against the softness under his clavicle, steadying it against the trembling of his hands.

"They will run and not be weary."

He aimed high, pulling just one trigger, and the clap of the shotgun firing was followed by the wet pop of flesh bursting open. The straining sacs lacing the Smoker's collar exploded, a grey haze pouring out as if under pressure. It shrieked, staggering, and its tongue was ripped loose from its internal moorings.

Nick fell, and it should have been louder. It should have been slower. He shouldn't have dropped out of sight in a flash, gone, eaten up by the storm like he was never there at all.
"They will soar on wings, like eagles."

Standing there just a moment, Coach turned his chin up, glancing toward the sky, chest heaving as he made no effort to stop the tears mixing in with the rain on his cheeks. He inhaled, filling his lungs, sucking in air with a stuttered gasp.

Coach released his grip on his shotgun, let it clatter to the ground. He closed his eyes, feeling the earthquake of the Tank’s approach.

He did not jump.

He fell, letting his body tip forward and over the edge, collapsing into the pull of gravity.

*Amen.*
Chapter 293

It was not a feeling. It was a physical sensation, a mortal wound, the shift and crush of something in his chest until Ellis could not breathe - until he wasn't sure that his lungs could even function anymore. He screamed, because the alternative was to think, and that, he could not do. The alternative was to cry, and that, he had no time for.

He hadn't even heard the Smoker, or heard the initial impact of its tentacle with Nick. He hadn't realized what was happening for a moment, not until he saw motion and took the time to look. Coach had sprinted, tried - but it all happened too fast, and there was no outpacing the pull of a Smoker's tongue.

And then they were gone. Both of them disappeared over the edge of the bridge, and the storm was so loud, he couldn't even hear the sound of them striking the river's roiling surface.

The process was so slow, it felt like he should have been able to do something. He should have run, or shot, or seen the Smoker step into view and yelled. He should have forced Nick to stay closer, instead of letting him drift to the back of the group. He should have done something.

You can't... do this tuh me. Neither'uh you. You can't - I won't let you.

Ellis started to run, bolting as if to sprint down the length of the bridge. The Tank's presence would not stop him; he'd rush ahead and dive into the river after them, pull them to safety. There was no other option. There was, simply, no other choice.

He'd faced the idea of his friends dying more than once, at the hands of an infected or not. He'd never truly bent to the fear, never truly believed that they wouldn't find each other again. They had always made it through. Regardless of the danger hanging over them, they had overcome and survived.

This ain't no different. We're gonna be okay. We're gonna be fine. They're gonna be fine. I'm gonna - Coach's gonna get Nick'n'I'm gonna get 'em, 'n' -

And then the Tank stopped, squat head cocking as it seemed to regard the gap in the bridge. Rather than continue forward, it turned, reaching out thick-fingered hands to grab ahold of the shrieking SUV parked just behind it.

He would have kept moving, if it had been up to him. He'd have charged ahead, whatever the consequences, because turning and running would have been allowing reality to cement itself around him. Doing anything but throwing himself into the river and joining his teammates would have been like admitting they were dead, or soon to die.

This ain't happenin'.

Rochelle's hands grabbed him, circling around his waist, and her weight pulled against him so hard she must've lifted her feet half-off the ground and hung off him. "N-no! You can't!" she shouted, and her voice broke with the ragged sound of an inhale, trembling with the beginnings of hyperventilation. "We have to -"

She was pleading, and when his gaze darted back to hers, he saw desperation. Terror drew her face into a fearful pinch, and her mouth was trembling. Her words barely collected themselves into a coherent arrangement - they broke down, instead, to a begged cry.
"Please, baby!"

The Tank roared, twisting its weight, lurching to drag the SUV forward and fling it as if it were some oversized Frisbee. The car's wheels squealed as its axles bounced with the pull right before it got air, spinning only lazily in the arc that it made toward them.

If Rochelle hadn't been there, maybe Ellis would have continued forward. Even with her there, he was stronger than her. He could break free of her grasp. He could bolt to the left, dodge the car, let it roll past him and sprint to the edge of the bridge before the Tank reached him.

But what if all he did was die, and get her killed, too? She wouldn't leave without him, and he wasn't going to pull her with. There was a fragile moment, only a fraction of a second, where his thoughts ground to a halt like so many stuck gears. *God - whut'm... I supposed tuh do? Whut would Coach tell me tuh do?*

He thought it like he didn't know, like he couldn't hear Coach's voice.

"Get her out, son. Can't do shit, now. Just get 'em out."

That thought made him weaken just enough that she got traction, pulling him into a stagger, and he found himself yanked backwards. His body obeyed before his mind could reconsider, and the distance between them and the undamaged end of the bridge evaporated in a few long strides.

He had only the moment before the jump to regret it - but the collision of steel with the concrete mere feet behind them, and the rapid approach of the SUV's screaming car alarm, struck a chill up his spine. The car might just roll and crush over them. Instinct kicked in, and all he could do was flee.

It would have been smart to lower themselves down off the edge, but there was no time and no space to do anything but throw themselves over. Air whipped past as they fell, the ground abruptly coming into view, along with their remaining teammates.

Ellis tried to ready himself, prepared to catch his weight and roll, but his limbs could not coordinate in so short a time. He managed nothing but putting his arms up, and when he struck the concrete, the blow sparked pain up both his forearms. He gasped, white stark over his vision for just an instant, before he regained enough focus to lift his head.

Rochelle was crouched next to him, halfway knelt but weight balanced down on her left arm. Pain was sprawled on her features as she lifted her arm to reveal blood mottling her elbow where she'd landed on it. He could tell there was similar damage covering his palms and the undersides of his wrists, but he barely felt it. He barely felt anything except the jagged hole settled just where his heart had beat, moments ago.

*Darlin'... Nick, I-I love you, so much, please don't - ... Coach... we can't do this without y'all.*

Above them, the SUV screeched to a messy halt, car alarm still shrieking, mere inches from the edge. It did not tip over but it did settle there on its side, an easy projectile for the Tank to punch off the edge or throw towards them.

Hands grabbed him, two grasping his left arm and one hooking on his shirt, and he tried to get his legs under himself as they hauled him up. He choked out a gusted noise of discomfort when one of the hands grazed a gash on his arm, reigniting something like sensation with a flare of hot pain, and swiveled his gaze to find Lena and Chris flanking him.

He looked around them, scanning a glance across their surroundings, driven by instinct - but he
found nothing. There were no infected on the street. The horde had spilled into the canal and there was nothing left of it except the Tank, whose roar grew louder above. The half-formed gap in the bridge clearly did not stop it, though the mechanisms working within the towers flanking its entrance shrieked in protest with every thunderous step.

Rhiannon was similarly pulling Rochelle up, and the gesture made both women grunt out in pain, but the blonde warped it into a broken, "How -?"

The moment she'd reached her feet, Rochelle was staggering forward, grabbing hands on the other woman's waist in some half-baked embrace. She clutched at the biker, leaning into her, voice soaked-through with something beyond horror. "Smoker. Came out of nowhere. God... God, Rhee..."

Wordless, shivering, Rhiannon looped an arm against her back and pulled her closer. Past the hair plastered to her cheeks and forehead, Rhiannon's expression screwed slowly into something that approached sorrow before veering sharply into fury.

Christophe flinched, curling his arm into his chest where he'd taken Maggie's carrier back and held it close. There was an emptiness in his expression, whole body shivering, soaked through. He seemed absent entirely, a passive observer of his surroundings, only slowly following the flicker and shift of movement.

Shock didn't describe it, nor did Christophe or Lena seem surprised - they had seen it all, no doubt, from their position underneath the bridge - but something faltered, there in that moment, as if they all realized it as one:

_They're gone._

Ellis couldn't help a sob, a choke of air, pushing suddenly to turn. He wanted to sprint to the edge of the road, unsure if he wanted to see his teammates in the water, or wanted to see nothing at all. He could do nothing at all when Lena's arms were suddenly around his midsection, digging her heels in hard against his momentum.

"We have to go!" she rasped, husked. "We can't do anything! I - I know it's -"

This time, he fought, though it was hard to commit the entirety of his force behind it. He twisted, elbow pushing into the inside of her shoulder, trying to shove out of her grip. "I ain't leavin'!" he shouted, voice hoarse. "We gotta help! Nick can't swim, 'n'Coach's knee - they'll drown out there! They'll die, if we don't help!"

Lena's grasp on him only tightened, her voice hushing against his ear. She was trying for something like a comforting tone, but anxiety made it rushed, frustrated. Stress strained at her voice and made her grasp bite against him. "We throw ourselves in the water, we'll all die. And if we don't go, the Tank's going to kill us. They wouldn't want you to -"

Without quite disengaging from Rhiannon, still clung to her waist, Rochelle's gaze snapped toward Lena. Anger flooded into her expression, _despair_, and she bit off, "Don't you fucking dare tell us what they want. They aren't your goddamn family."

Ellis felt the biker's grip loosen, surprise weakening her, but when he shifted to push out of her arms, he only moved a step away. His fists curled, body stiffening, gaze lifting to the bridge where it had finally halted its excruciatingly slow ascent. It groaned and shuddered with the Tank's movements.
Then, there was a wheedled grating and squealing of metal, along with a roar from the giant infected.

A dark shape flew overhead, and amidst the rain, it was hard to identify it as Lena's motorcycle until it was past them and halfway to the ground. The bike hit a storefront just to the right of the road leading away from the bridge, flattening into the side of it with a shriek of metal.

It screeched as it skated down the paneled side of the building, crashing down onto the sidewalk with a tremendous crunch. It was just crumpled metal, their duffel bag only loosely lashed to its back with bungee cords. The bike was barely holding itself together, the connection between the handlebars and the front wheel fractured and bent.

The motorcycle was first - and then the crumpled remnants of their sedan was airborne, again. This time it flew to the side, flipping off the bridge as if it had been punched aside. Its impact in the river was loud enough to carry through the storm, a slap and crack of water.

The Tank was almost on top of them. It would plow into the SUV where it sat teetering on the edge, and lob it down at them where they stood, a glorified pack of sitting ducks.

He could not know for sure what would happen if he leapt in the river, neither to him nor to his teammates. He could, similarly, not know for sure what would happen if they ran. He didn't know if any action he took would truly impact the situation. There was a timer, or some far-off percentage representing Nick and Coach's survival, and he did not know how to affect it.

He just knew, with complete certainty, that they would die if they stayed.

*This ain't it. This... can't be it. Coach'll get them both tuh shore, 'n'... we'll find 'em. They're gonna be okay'n we're gonna... make it out tuhgether. This shit ain't gonna take us down. That ain't how this ends.*

The hollow feeling in him clamoured and reverberated until he felt he might not survive it, the cutting pain of an abscess, but he gritted his teeth against it. He gritted his teeth, yet could not stop the shiver up his spine, the flood of tears. He did not know how they'd continue, how he'd continue. He did not know how to move in a space that did not include all of them.

A wild thought crossed his mind; would Coach and Nick get pushed into the canal, or drawn out to sea? Would the storm pull them down into the depths, or buoy them up? It was difficult to remain focused past the grief crystallizing in his chest, but he tried, and let his feet carry him forward.

*I'm... sorry. 'M so sorry. I hope I'm... doin' the right thing.*

Ellis turned, lurching into a run, stumbling only slightly when his right hip twinged in some quiet complaint where it had twisted wrong in the impact with the ground. He bit his cheek though the pain, gaze darting to search for the best escape route amidst the unfamiliar territory. He could not cry and could not break, not with a Tank on their heels.

The road off the bridge continued on straight, but there was a turn that followed along the man-made river they'd crossed. It led off towards a fenced-in area, chainlink fencing bordering it and a small security gate that sat closed, tucked well away from the main road. It was, perhaps, a way to access the small canal that curved off the main one.

As much as moving away from the bridge entirely made sense, the gate wouldn't slow the Tank at all. They needed to get off the street, cut through a building, and get out of its sightline entirely. Down the road, the storefronts thickened, the alleys between them providing an optimal escape.
point; they might've even been too thin for the creature to get into.

Ellis shouted, "C'mon. Over here! Off the road!" He heard his team shift to follow him, but glanced to make sure they were all in motion - and immediately noticed Lena's steps turning. She began to peel off from them, running toward the motorcycle.

"Whut the hell!?" His voice broke with concern, skidding into a slowed jog, twisting around to look toward her. "Lee, it's busted! Even if it weren't -"

"Can't leave our stuff." she shot back without missing a beat, strides lengthening as she bolted to the storefront and the crumpled motorcycle. "Keep going!" At her instruction, Ellis gritted his teeth, unable to fight a sense of frustration - if they left a quarter of their team behind, what value was a bag?

He was not going to lose anyone else.

When the Tank's roar cut harshly through the air, he whipped around, finding it standing just at the edge of the bridge. Its hands gripped either end of the SUV, and it lifted the vehicle over its head with a shuddering amount of effort, howling out a strained bleat of rage.

When it threw it, it aimed it straight down the center of the road, and the team instinctively scattered to either side. The momentary panic that caused the survivors to spread out put Ellis near enough to Lena to grab her arm. He gripped tightly, digging fingertips into her bicep, feeling her stiffen.

The SUV struck the ground with the tremendous shatter of glass and crunch of metal, rolling violently forward, but quickly losing momentum. The moment its movement became manageable, Ellis yanked on Lena's arm to drag her along with him. This time, he let his full weight lend itself to the gesture, and she was pulled almost off her feet.

"Forget it!" Ellis shouted when she started to fight him, wishing he didn't feel the subtle spite, the small degree of anger toward her. He wished a fractional part of him didn't consider it only fair; it wasn't her fault, and they'd all suffer the lost supplies. "It ain't worth it!"

Lena fought him for just an instant, coiled and twisting against his grasp - and then she was running along with him, sprinting, the team clumsily meeting back up the moment they'd outrun the SUV where it skidded to a halt on the road. They darted up the street, ducking into the very first alleyway they came up to.

The Tank's weight struck the road with a crash of flesh on asphalt, its roar faintly pained as it made the jump. It moved, immediately, to follow them.

They'd escaped Tanks a few times - but few of those times had been on foot, and never without a distraction. There was no bile bomb to throw and no forest to disappear into. If they hid in a house, would it lose interest, or break down the walls? How far could they run before they would encounter infected that hadn't been drawn in by the bridge sirens?

*Can't outgun it. Can't outrun it. Gotta outsmart it. That's whut I do, ain't it? Come up with the harebrain schemes, wild ideas. Save the day. That's whut I'm s'posed tuh do. That's whut Nick'd ask me tuh do. S'whut Coach'd expect me tuh do.*

But he had nothing, except the urge to run, and an overwhelming grief and guilt at doing so.

*Why can't I fuckin' think?*
As if by some small miracle, the alley they'd ducked into was, in fact, too small for the Tank to enter. It tried, reaching the entrance and pushing a step in, but its broad shoulders could not fit and it was not so smart as to attempt to sidle in.

Instead, it roared, and disappeared out of sight with a wide step, propelled by its knuckles against the ground. There wasn't even enough time to consider its absence before the crunch of wood and rigid panelling announced its attempts to scale the side of the building.

It could not follow them, so it would climb to stay atop them.

The survivors huddled, on instinct, in the very center of the alleyway, as far from either end as possible. The gutters overhead funneled rain away, except for a strip of open air in the center that poured down water in a deluge, splattering them like the spray of a sour-smelling waterfall.

The Tank's ascent was deafening, a window breaking as if it had punched through it in order to get a grip on the frame. The sounds echoed up higher until it reached the roofline of the single-story shops nestled tight together, stomping up until it felt like it was directly above them.

It was a dark shape, shadowed above the gap between the two roofs, and it was hard to tell if it was peering down to see them. Even if it couldn't see them from where it was, it would see them leave the alley in either direction, and there were no doors into either building inside of it. They were trapped.

The Tank roared, almost lost in the crack and roll of thunder.

Ellis felt nails dig into his wrist, sparking pain where they caught on the scraped-raw skin there, and Rochelle was suddenly pressed against his side. "Baby, we need to move." Her voice was stronger, now, more focused. She'd stuffed it all down, like they all had. "It's not going to just lose interest."

His voice went harsher than he meant. "I know!"

He wasn't angry, and certainly not angry at Rochelle. He was simply... full. Full of buzzing anxiety, full of bloated concern, full of grief and guilt and tension. Fear cramped into what few spaces remained, and there was no room for anything else, least of all concrete thought.

He froze, and freezing scared him worse.

Rochelle's hand didn't let go of him, though she didn't respond directly to him, either. She flickered a glance at him, an undeniable degree of hurt flickering across her features, but she turned on her heel. Her lower lip sucked between her teeth, attention strained. "We need to make a break for it."

The Tank roared, fists beating against the roof it stood on, footsteps pacing back and forth overhead. It was fury and rage, a fearsome energy driving it to vent out its anger in chuffs and growls and howls, and it showed no signs of calming.

Sharply, Lena lifted an arm, gesturing ahead of them to the opening of the alleyway onto the next street. "The alleys are our best shot right now. If it spots us, we can keep hiding, but... at some point it's gonna draw in more zeds. We have to lose it."

"It's right on top'uv us. Can't just go runnin'." he muttered, feeling himself start to move, but only
taking a half-step forward before he bobbed back onto his heels, like a fractional pace. As if to
concur, the Tank snarled a few guttural sounds, footsteps pacing above them before it started to
claw at the gutters on the edge of the flat roof it perched atop. "We gotta... distract it, or..."

Water dumped down in a stream just a foot ahead of them, making them startle. The Tank's broad
fingers got a grip on the thin metal frame of the gutters and bent a section open, causing a deluge
as the contents of it began to pour down.

Grimacing up toward the roofline, Lena muttered low. "If we can get it to stay focused behind us,
we can just stick close to the buildings and run. It might not hear us under the rain."

The storm was loud enough to suit the purpose, although saying it made Ellis suddenly perk to the
fact that the bridge's sirens had shut off. Perhaps they only shrieked as it moved, but now that it
stood at its apex, they'd halted - or the alarms had broken, much like the structure of the bridge
itself.

Christophe shifted, clearing his throat past a rough wetness before he uttered, "I can - I can run -"
He nodded over his shoulder, toward the opposite end of the alleyway where they'd come from.
"Meet up, down the road?"

He'd barely gotten the full sentence out before Rochelle was suddenly next to him, releasing Ellis' 
wrists in favour of grabbing both hands on the foreigner's jawline. He startled, leaning away in some
reflex as she cradled his face and stared into his eyes with abrupt desperation, but she tightened her
grip to hold him still.

"Chris." she hissed, and there was a rawness to her voice that made his body stiffen. "No one's
going anywhere. No one's doing anything. You're staying, right here, with me, okay? No more
running at Chargers, no more running out into a horde, no - no more. Nobody else."

Her body trembled, and no one spoke.

"Nobody else throws themselves off a fucking bridge." she repeated, harsher, voice thickening as
that composure threatened to fail. "I need you here."

Christophe's gaze darted to soak in her expression, and his softened in kind, his arm tightening
against Maggie's carrier. His chin tilted, leaning his cheek into her left palm, his shoulders

Ellis felt the pull of something like misery, watching them, for just a moment. It wasn't that he
didn't want to see the soft touches between them. Rather, he wanted to rush forward and grab them,
*shake* them, because they were wasting time with half-baked confessions and subtlety. If he
could've gotten one more chance to hold Nick, to speak with him, to make him listen...

*He thinks I gave up.*

It came from nowhere. It felt a bit like the moments before they'd jumped from the bridge, when
the SUV had been close on their heels, and if they'd stopped for a moment it would have struck
them.

He'd stopped, for just a moment, and it struck him.

*Us fightin' was the last thing - us fightin' in the car. He thought I was... givin' up. I made him think
I was -*

Ellis couldn't breathe, nor move. He tried to suck in air but his ribs were frozen there, half-
expanded, and he thought he might choke on his own tongue. Did it hurt more than watching two members of his family disappear over the edge? Would it hurt more, knowing what their last exchange had been, if Nick never came back?

**Was it my fault...?**

"Hey, hick."

His head jerked, chin raising, and he found himself staring into Rhiannon's eyes. He didn't know if she'd seen something in his expression or his posture, but her hazel gaze on his was gentler than it should have been. She did not, however, comment on it.

Instead, her arm lifted, pointing further into the alleyway. He hesitantly followed the gesture, only half-processing when his gaze landed on a couple plastic trash cans tucked next to one another in the alley. One was full to the brim of recyclables, bottles and cans stacked high.

"We throw that shit out in the street, it'll get the dumb fuck's attention for at least a few seconds. Help?"

He didn't want to move. He wanted to fall to his knees and break into tears. He wanted to grab his head and sob, like it might drain the pressure building up inside him, like it might ease the pain spiked through his midsection. He definitely did not want to move another step, another foot, another yard, away from the river.

"Okay." he whispered in a voice he did not recognize, moving his legs despite the way they protested and wobbled. He approached the bin alongside her, and they both reached to grab under its rim. His arms lifted of their own volition, and he only vaguely noticed her gasping in pain as she did the same.

Together, they raised it up, and began to sidle it toward the opening of the alleyway. They both moved as tenderly as they could, trying not to rattle the content as they moved, keeping it out of the spray of water from the gutters above.

Lena spared a frown toward them before nodding toward Rochelle and Christophe. Her chin was low, gaze lower, and her voice was taut. "Y'all ready to run? We need to get to the next block over, at least. And then maybe inside a building, hole up until it leaves."

Rochelle let her thumb slide over the mostly-healed scar on Chris' cheek, pushing suddenly to press a kiss there, too, damp lips skating over his equally damp skin. His eyes shut for just a moment - and then they pulled away from one another, both turning to face the other end of the alley.

"I'd rather kill it." she stated, brusque, shoulders shivering just gently. She wanted nothing more than to see the Tank's bullet-riddled corpse, collapsed on the asphalt. She wanted revenge, though on what? On whom? Even if they'd had the guns and ammo for it, what good would it have done? Make me feel fucking better.

The frown on Lena's face deepened, her body shifting. Anger drifted into her expression, an unfamiliar twist of frustration at her mouth. "Unless you've got a fully-loaded AK stashed in your sweats, Ro', I -"

Rochelle's gaze turned cutting, dangerous, and the brunette's lips sealed. Instead of continuing the conversation, Rochelle shifted to pull Christophe's machete out from where she'd tucked it into the backpack strapped on her shoulders. She traded it for Maggie's carrier, taking the strap and looping
her arm through it, pulling it tight against her hip.

She spared a glance into the mesh, and found two owlish orange eyes peeping out at her from a mess of waterlogged fur in the vague shape of a cat. Maggie was gripping into the canvas of the carrier with all four paws, claws out and tangled in the fabric, and her pinkened mouth flashed as if to mime out a silent cry.

It was a strange addition to their grief, to realize that there was no one amongst them who could handle the cat, who could offer it any comfort.

Rochelle's gaze lifted, finding Christophe looking at the cat carrier, too. His gaze seemed so far-away. He seemed to become cardboard and paper before her eyes, soaked through and flimsy in the rain. He'd experienced so much loss - how much more could he take before something broke beyond repair?

How much could any of them take?

She'd seen Nick, in those few seconds before he'd been pulled over the edge. She'd seen him give up. She'd seen his half-hearted attempts to save himself, and the way he'd gone limp when his weapons had both been taken from him. He'd surrendered to it, instead of fighting tooth and nail til the last second.

Both men had simply let themselves fall - but Nick had not intended on seeing the other side.

That hurt like nothing she'd ever experienced before. The thought gutted her, clawing around in her chest until she couldn't quite breathe, until she couldn't do much but run that same thought over and over, along with one more: I should never have let things get so bad. I should have protected him. I should have helped him.

"You fuckshits ready?" Rhiannon hissed, lowly, and the producer was forced to look toward her. Ellis and the biker had positioned themselves near the mouth of the alley, the bin held carefully between them, and they were poised to throw it out into the street.

All she could think was how angry Nick would be at them, how stupid he'd have found their next move. They were pathetic, in that moment, caught at their weakest and with no better plan than tossing a garbage bin as distraction. It was laughable.

It was all they had.

She reached out and caught Chris' wrist, circling her fingers around his hand - a gesture he could not return without letting go of his machete - and pulling. She tried to communicate something in that grip, digging her fingertips in tight, a silent reminder that she had no intention of leaving him behind.

All at once, they moved: Rhiannon and Ellis threw the bin out, putting as much force as they could behind it, lobbing it out into the street. The moment it left their hands, they were sprinting back down the alley, all four of them close on Lena's heels.

They'd not made it more than a few feet before the bin struck the road with a loud clap of plastic, only just audible over the storm above. The impact sent its contents flying, and the mixture of glass, aluminum, and plastic striking the asphalt was far from quiet.

The Tank roared, and Rochelle felt a flood of relief when its footsteps thundered above, moving counter to them. It had taken the bait, at least for a moment.
None of them uttered a word, sprinting as carefully as they could, the strike and splash of their footsteps covered by the rain. They were all breathless and barely huffing in air as they ran, darting out of the alleyway. Re-entering the street went against all normal instinct, passing back into the sheets of rain outside, a cold shock.

Lena led them across the street, their pace accelerating when they all heard the tremendous thud - felt it, underneath their feet - of the Tank’s weight hitting the street. For an instant, Rochelle thought it might’ve jumped down after them, but when she darted a glance over her shoulder, the street was empty. It had jumped down to investigate the garbage, and for a moment, she felt a surge of adrenaline.

It was not triumph, precisely, but something more grim. Determination.

*We can do this.* she thought, and it was fragile, but the closest she could come to believing it. *We're going to fight. So you fight, Nick. Coach - you fucking fight. We spent so much time acting like all that mattered was finding rescue, getting home to people that might be dead already, we never took the time to look at what we had, right here. We took it for granted.*

The world was no longer the same. Nothing was real beyond what she could touch, and feel, and hear - and she would hold out hope for more, but fight for what she had, and fight to get them back.

*Fight for us. For me.*

The next alleyway was a block down the road, and their speed picked up even further, breaking into a reckless sprint. Getting more than one building between them and the Tank would not completely ensure their safety, but it was a step.

*Please.*
Two things made them stop running.

First, Rhiannon stumbled, striking the edge of the building they passed with her shoulder. She gasped in air and almost went down, kept upright only by a hand on the wall. Her body shuddered, pain apparent at a glance, and Lena darted back from her place at the front to tuck an arm against her waist and support her as they moved.

They kept going, seeking out a little more distance from the Tank, whose roars were still too close for comfort. They took a turn, circling around the boarded-up front of a building, and were abruptly faced with infected. The rain did nothing to discourage the zombies from flocking onto the street, staggered shapes crossing back and forth.

Agitation brought shrieks and snarls from them, moving with more interest and energy than they typically did. They weren't drawn toward the sounds of the Tank, but it stirred them up, roused them.

They were not the second reason the team stopped, however.

It was the lithe shape sitting in the middle of the road, proportions terribly off, talon-like fingers scraping against its bony arms and up to cradle its face. It sobbed, curling in on itself in the rain, shivering as if with cold. It sat there in the street, unmoving beyond the shudders of its wailing.

The chance of disturbing it by fighting nearby was not a risk any of them were willing to take. Wordlessly, without any coordination necessary beyond their mutual fear, they all skidded to a halt and backed up until the corner of the building was between them and the next street.

Christophe hushed out a frustrated noise, cracking the flat of his machete against the side of his knee. "Is no good, out here. Esto es una trampa mortal. We die, like this."

"Shit." Ellis muttered, both at the obstacle in front of them and the undeniable threat behind them. The Tank was not presently approaching them, but its movement was just loud enough and just scattered enough to make it clear that the creature was searching for them.

He couldn't shake the feeling that it had known to go in the opposite direction of where they'd thrown the garbage bin.

"Think now's the time tuh hole up." he uttered, louder, swiping the soaked denim of his sleeve against the side of his face. His voice stayed steadier than he expected, but he was acutely aware of the pressure building just behind his teeth. "We're just pushin' forward fer nothin'. Tank won't find us if we're quiet, 'n'I don't wanna... get too far from the canal."

It built further, pressure crushing his throat into a clench, but he blinked rain out of his eyes and pushed his cap down tighter on his head. He turned, starting to scan the buildings around them. "Anyone see a good -"

Lena jerked her chin, nodding further up the road. Her tone was inlaid with a pointed certainty that suggested she'd scoped it out as they'd been running. "That one." He quickly twisted to follow her gesture, seeing a slumped brick building that looked densely boarded up from the inside, wooden planks and grey tarp layered against the slim windows.

It wasn't uncommon to see boarded-up windows and tarped entryways; CEDA's instruction had
been to take such measures back when the infection had simply been a rapidly escalating epidemic with a collection of excruciating and destructive symptoms, and not a mutating force that upended civilization as they'd known it.

Still, the building seemed particularly defensible, with limited windows and a small entrance. A visible side entrance was tucked into the far corner, leading into a tiny parking lot. There was a sign that had been covered in graffiti, black and green spray paint applied in wide splashes.

It might've formed words, at some point, but it had peeled and scuffed off in the weeks since its application.

As a result, Ellis could read neither.

"Let's go." he muttered, bolting into a jog to cross the intersection in front of them - sparing a glance to ensure the Witch was still seated in the street - and continue down the road. They moved in slim single-file, except for the sisters, footsteps splashing in the rain pooling on the sidewalk.

The front door had a small set of stairs leading to a tiny stoop, and Ellis took them in one long stride. He tried the handle, but though it twisted, the door itself only opened a half an inch.

"Somethin's blockin' it." he announced, setting his shoulder against the door and leaning into it. He felt it give a few centimeters, and heard the tiniest squeak of furniture scraping the ground. An irritated pinch drew his brows together, and he was aware of Rochelle's voice blurring out a protest when he took a step back and lifted his right foot.

He still had his workboots, and they were reinforced around the ankles as well as the front of his foot - but he'd have been lying if he pretended that factored into his choice to kick out, heel-first.

The door shuddered with the blow, and something jolted and then crashed, as if he'd knocked whatever was leaned against the door over. The move only gained him a few inches of space between the doorframe and the door. It was a loud noise, but not so loud that it would draw any attention over the storm, muffled inside the building.

The barricading furniture falling over meant the bulk of the weight would now be focused low against the inside of the door. He shifted his weight, prepared to kick with his toe instead, letting his leg swing back. Anger flooded him, souring in the back of his throat, and he growled out, "Stupid -"

A hand swiped to grab his elbow before he completed the motion. He stiffened, turning his chin to find Rochelle gazing at him, worry apparent in her eyes.

"Don't hurt yourself." she urged.

Ellis couldn't help but feel frustrated. His eyes slitted, shrugging away from her grip, and he gestured out in a vague wave of his hands. "Or whut? Think tuhday's gonna get worse if I stub muh damn toe? You rather stay out here?"

She started to respond, agitation flaring in kind on her face, but he moved before she could.

One fierce kick jammed the door back, and the awful squeal of the blocking furniture scraping back preceded a sizeable gap opening in the doorway. It was enough to sidle through, and that was exactly what Ellis did; he shoved his head through, shoulders crammed in halfway, and got a look into the building.

It was, he realized with some surprise, the remnants of a small gift shop. It was full of glass cases
and shelving, but they'd all been shoved against the walls, and a lot of their contents had been scattered to the floor. Some of it was glass that had shattered and broken on the ground, unrecognizable in its fractured state, but most of it was kitschy T-shirts and canvas bags and purses all emblazoned with a variety of logos.

There was a section near the back with a table full of glass jars, full to bursting with rocks, stones, shells, tiny shark teeth, and fishbones, all alongside a basket full of palm-sized bags. A sign announced cheerily, '$4/bag'.

There was a back room that was closed off - and led, no doubt, to the second exit - and a restroom to the left.

It wouldn't be the most comfortable of places to bed down, but after the horde had burst through the front of their previous safehouse, the security of brick walls and a secondary escape route felt... better. Ellis felt like gathering them all inside and barricading the doors and never leaving again, in equal measure to the way he felt like turning and running back out into the street, retracing his steps, finding his way back to the river...

Instead, he pushed, squirming through the gap and stumbling slightly as his body slipped free. He caught his balance, glancing more thoroughly around the room, gaze settling on the heavy wooden cabinet that had been placed against the door and now sat on its belly on the ground. It was open-faced and, judging by the few that had been flung out and sat scattered on the ground, was full of beaded jewelry and earrings.

Ellis exhaled sharply, bending down to hook a hand on one of the gently sculpted edges of the cabinet's top, digging his heels into the ground as he pulled it a few more inches away from the door.

The rest of his team piled in after him through the opening. Rochelle, the last through, shut the door behind her, and they were left in relative silence.

Rain battered the roof of the building, thunder rumbling overhead, but the patter of water against the floor from their soaked-through frames was almost as loud. They all huffed, breathing hard, a mixture of huffs and sniffs and a heavy cough from Christophe.

The cold crept in now that they were no longer running, the dry air inside a harsh contrast to the water chilling to their bones. The rain itself had been colder than usual, temperature dropped by their proximity to the ocean, perhaps.

They were safe. Temporary and bittersweet as it was, they'd reached shelter, and had time to think. Ellis did not want to think.

His shoulders bounced, and he knelt down, grabbing the cabinet with both hands. He grunted as his raw and bloodied palms protested the contact, pushing hard, trying to lift it up off the ground. It was heavy, taller than him when upright, and did not give easily.

He strained and pushed harder, but it only began to move when Lena pressed next to him and joined the effort.

Together, they got it upright, and nudged it back against the door with a heavy screech of wood on wood, leaving marks in the floor. His boots crunched on the layer of bead-and-gemstone jewelry scattered in the space where it had lain.

With the door secure, he turned, inspecting the room. They'd need to clear the floor to have more
room to sleep, but the back room was a more pressing concern. "Gotta make sure the other door's blocked." he muttered, shortly.

Nobody else moved. Rochelle and Rhiannon were staring at him, a mixed set of emotions across their faces. Christophe was staring at the ground, his body wavering gently where he stood. Even Lena had frozen, her hands in fists, staring at the front door rather than look anywhere near the rest of the team.

Ellis breathed, and it felt like huffing against a glass surface, feeling the damp air of his own exhale flutter back against him; there was a bubble around them, claustrophobic and constricting. It was ready to burst.

"Got shit to do." Coach's voice reminded him, gently. "Clear it. Get secure. No time fo' whin'gin'."

It scared him, for just an instant, to feel so bluntly like he'd heard the man's voice. Am I losin' it? Somethin' go wrong in me? Couldn't take it no more?

"Miracle we aren't all fucking crazy." Nick demurred, but it felt more like a memory of something he'd said once before, and it felt like a comfort. He clung to it, let it reverberate in his head, preferring it to his own thoughts.

Maybe it was just easier to pretend they stood just out of sight, just behind him, that he might turn and find Coach wearily bent over, Nick patting his back. "You good, big guy? Last time I saw you run that hard, was when we saw that Burgertank."

He'd groan, wave off the gambler, huffing. "Shut up, Nicolas. Don't make me think 'bout goddamn burgers right now."

Nick would laugh, start rattling off a list of condiments and toppings, and Coach would give him that look -

He'd been wrong. There was no comfort, there, just hurt that felt numb until it suddenly didn't. His lungs emptied and it was difficult to fill them again without shuddering. The hole in him grew wider, a chasm, and he knew if he didn't keep moving he'd fall in.

Ellis turned on his heel, marching forward, boots crunching on glass that he stomped thoughtlessly over. He swerved around a glass case, about shoulder-height and full of brightly-coloured mugs and bottles, and crossed to the door in the back.

It was unlocked, and gave no resistance.

The next room was darker, windowless entirely, and seemed to have been a storage room. Cardboard boxes sat piled around the walls, full to bursting with merchandise in bags. Most of them had been pushed around the squat back-door, but they did not sit flush with it, enough room left for the door to open.

In the space left in the center of the room, there was the clear fingerprint of someone's presence.

Food wrappers were strewn about, along with a small amount of blood - dried almost brown - on the front of a nearby box. A candle sat burnt-down in a lid of a jar, wax puddled and solid around the stub of a piece of blackened thread. There were a few scraps of fabric and bullet casings, but all of it was bluntly outlining a fairly even rectangular empty space, as if a folded sheet or a sleeping bag had taken up that room.

It made something in him uneasy, uncertain. It didn't look like the den of someone who'd holed up
and died. The blood stains seemed minor, no more than the ones he'd left on the cabinet or the door handle from his injured palms.

It looked like the echo of someone who'd rested and then moved on.

"That's not a good fucking sign. Careful, Ace. Last thing we need is more friends." buzzed the tiny voice in the back of his head, Nick's, and it hurt. He pressed a thumb into the space between his brows, digging his nail in as he screwed up his brows.

Stop, please. I can't...

Rather than continue that thought, he stepped over the mess, approaching the back door. He knelt down, starting to grab boxes and push them back into place against the door, some heavier than others. His motions grew desperate, only pausing a moment when footsteps shuffled just in the doorway behind him.

"Shitfuck." Rhiannon muttered, her voice shifting as if she'd turned around. She sounded thready, and a soft shiver had taken control of her cadence. "Some cunthole slept here. Apparently we aren't the only geniuses who thought this shit-brick-house looked like a good place to hide."

Ellis had only just arranged a stack of boxes tight up against the door - it wouldn't stop entry, precisely, but it would make a fair amount of noise if it was all toppled over - when Rochelle's voice came softly from behind him.

"Ellis."

She'd glazed over the room, it seemed, and focused entirely on him. He turned his chin just a few degrees, enough to look back and see her leaning in, pressing just beside Rhiannon. There was a frown on her lips, eyes dark and damp.

"That's... enough. You -"

He knew that tone. It was her arresting, pointed, 'we're talking about this' tone of voice, and he'd never hated it before. It had never made him so angry before.

He didn't want to talk about it.

"We gotta clear some space." Ellis stated, words stiff and posture stiffer. He stood up, brushing his hands together and wincing when that hurt. He crossed the small room again, and when he reached the threshold, he didn't have to try very hard to pool frustration in his eyes.

The two women stood in his way, and he'd push past if he had to.

Rhiannon shifted on her heels, but couldn't back up with Rochelle in her way, and the blonde's expression twisted into something slightly stricken. Behind her, Rochelle mirrored that frustration back, her voice almost firm beyond a quiver that matched a tear spilling down her left cheek.

"Ellis, just... slow down. We need to talk... about this. We can't just -"

"Just whut?" he returned, and the fury that it left him with did not feel like his own. He felt caught, pulled in the wake of something bigger than himself, with no brakes even had he desired to find them. "I'm tryin' tuh get the fuckin' buildin' secure. If you don't wanna help, then don't."

He saw the hurt, the shock, on both of their faces.
They moved when he advanced, a jolt to make room as he nudged through the doorway. Ellis immediately refocused, looking first behind the tiny podium that held the register, then walking toward the bathroom.

"Need a broom." he muttered, mostly to himself, ignoring the four pairs of eyes on him. It was a raw feeling, to be watched, nobody moving but to track his motion with their gaze. It felt like they were waiting for something.

The bathroom was a swing-door, but a latch had been screwed on to let it be locked, the room containing a single toilet and sink in the relatively large space. It was an odd design for the building's purpose; it felt like the bones of the store had been meant for something else, and its trappings were just gauzy paper mache over the structure.

On instinct, he swiped a hand to feel for a lightswitch. When it clicked under his fingertip, nothing happened.

He frowned slightly, but there was enough light to see by if he opened the door all the way. A tiny utility cart was pressed into the corner - there was no broom, just a wet-mop formed of noodled material. When he approached and lifted it, it seemed stiff, mostly stuck together.

_Better'n nothin',_ he supposed, and strode back into the main room with it in hand.

He kept his eyes low, and started to sweep the mop against the wood, tilting it to take advantage of where its stiffness formed a flat edge along one side. Most of the glassware was small figurines or shotglasses, and most of it had broken cleanly, enabling him to sweep it into rough piles.

Glints here and there betrayed specks and shards stuck in the spaces between the slats of wood.

"Nobody go barefoot." he stated, unable to stop the words. Why couldn't he keep his silence? Why was he struck with the urge to speak, when the idea of talking cut pain across his chest? He didn't want a response, but he could not handle the loaded quiet, broken by the scrape of glass and the still-present patter of water.

His fingers trembled, and he realized, slowly, that his arms were mostly numb. It came unbidden, cruel: _If I'm shiverin', they must be freezin' out in the water._

Some comfort sank in, a quiet calm, when motion stirred among the team and he was no longer the only one working. Rhiannon moved to sidle around Rochelle, motion stiff as she did, starting to bend down and grab a few things off the ground. She tossed the soft objects aside, setting a few large shards of glass on the table in the far corner, silently tidying.

Christophe joined with mechanical attention, like he'd only now stirred from a doze, and jolted to mirror their behaviour to mask his disjointed awareness. Lena started to move, walking toward a glass case that lay half-fallen but braced against the wall, moving to straighten it.

That lasted but a few seconds.

Rochelle advanced a step, toe striking loudly on a mug that sat on the floor, sending it rolling and clattering forward. The sound made Ellis jump, and his gaze lifted.

"Stop." she croaked out, and it felt like a betrayal. He was running as far as he could from the feelings stewing in his chest, and she seemed intent on dragging them to the surface. "Fucking stop. What are you _doing_ right now? What is this? We're just going to settle in and make ourselves
at home, like nothing's happened? Like Nick and Coach aren't missing?"

Lena was the one who stiffened, turning slightly, her voice soft. "Hun, I think... a minute to think is - ... Ellis is just trying to process -"

It was like setting off a firecracker. Rochelle's arms went up, and a choked laugh left her right before fury staggered her a step forward, pointing in the biker's direction. "I am not talking to you, and you can go right the hell ahead and not talk for him. This isn't about you."

Ellis' mouth twitched downward, suddenly flickering his gaze between both women, watching both of them tense and stiffen, as if they were feeling the moment out, unsure whether it would bubble over. Christophe looked anxious, acutely present, arm drawn tight to his side.

Rhiannon was frozen where she stood.

Rochelle advanced another step, and suddenly her attention was riveted on Lena. "You've done everything you can to get in the middle of things, and this is where it gets us. Why is it everything got miles worse the minute you pushed your way in all this?"

The Texan pushed out air through her nostrils, and pain flared over her eyes even as she spread her arms. "S- ... Seriously? I didn't - Nick came to us. We didn't do anything. And we were coming over here to find your helicopter, not -"

Sharply, Rochelle interrupted, venom entering her voice. "Don't 'we' this, Lena. This was all you."

Rhiannon tensed, further, turning her head a few inches. She moved stiffly, gaze darting to scan the room, focusing squarely on her sister. Her eyes narrowed, attention hardening behind a strangled frown, and she said nothing.

"Like any of us forgot your dock's over here, too. I mean, Jesus. Wasn't two seconds after they were gone and all you could focus on was getting to your goddamn duffel - let me guess, the boat keys were in there? Because that's all that matters to you."

Something shifted in Lena's expression, a frustration. She curled her hands into fists and returned, "And y'all don't give a lick about rescue, huh? I'm the only one who cares about -"

Rochelle's voice broke. "I care about the people I just watched fall in a fucking river!" She stood there, trembling now, and her fury did not stopper the flow of tears that began. "I care about the tiny handful of goddamn people I can trust, who're even alive out here, and that number just - I just lost -"

Her anger did not dilute, even as her focus scattered. "You've been using us from day one, and you aren't even sorry about it. You aren't even sorry about it when it just got them killed."

Ellis couldn't get himself to move. Pain seeped in, and not the least of it came from those words: 'got them killed.' Hearing them spoken so bluntly spiked pain through his skull, but the pain also slowed and sobered him. Clarity came very slowly, a light just-barely peeking from behind the muggy clouds choking out sense.

He was not the only one suffering, and his being angry was only churning them hotter and hotter. He'd fed into Rochelle's anger, and given it nowhere else to go. Minutes into their faltering new team dynamic, and he'd already let them down.

"Ain't time fo' this bickerin'." Coach chided him, softly, but he didn't know how to stop it. He didn't know how to stop his own anger, let alone everyone else's, but he tried.
Ellis raised his hands, dropping the mop entirely, shoulders tense. It felt half-hearted, his body lacking the energy to intercede, his voice even weaker. "G- ... guys, please, quit -"

Lena pushed her body to a tight stance, but did not give ground, nor did she let Ellis distract her. She shivered, and it was perhaps both the cold and a gentle wound. "How was this my fault?" she spat back, bitterly. "You think I wanted this to happen? Any of this?"

"Chica..." Christophe mumbled in a faint attempt at interruption, tenderly taking a couple of steps towards the dark-skinned survivor, his hand raising plaintively. He'd taken some strength from Ellis' attempt to intercede, it seemed. "Is too much."

Rochelle spared him no attention, either. "Of course not. Because you had a fucking use for Nick, didn't you?" She had closed the gap between them now, and when she gestured forward angrily, it was a hair's breadth from making contact with the other woman's sternum. "But you didn't know Nick's been trying to figure out how to kill himself for weeks, and you were helping him."

If the spark of the argument had been a firework, that felt like a bomb dropped out of the sky.

Ellis' chest clenched, and he couldn't help but think of that moment in the mall, when Nick had spat out some joke about killing himself. It had been morbid, and that was not unusual, but he'd been too sincere about it. It had come out wryly, and that wasn't the same thing.

But Nick hadn't jumped off the bridge. He'd been pulled. There was no choice in it.

Was there?

All his anger melted, there, and he was left with nothing but a stunned and hollow feeling. He couldn't even find grief, not really, nor guilt. It was just an all-encompassing sense of realization, like placing the last piece of a puzzle and seeing the whole picture.

Did he...? Did he let himself...?

Lena's expression went slack as her spine went stiff, and she blinked in a rapid flutter, eyes gaining a subtle sheen. She spoke like the air had been punched out of her, yet she pulled anger up to fill the rasped, "What's that supposed to -"

"You think he was going with you because he thought it was his best chance?" Rochelle's posture tightened in turn, and if the tears pooling against her cheeks were any indication, the words hurt her as she spoke them. "He just pointed himself in a direction and ran. You flagged him on because it benefitted you instead of telling us the minute you knew he was trying to leave, when we could've fucking done something. You were playing a game."

Lena stood there, eyes tracking away, like her brain moved faster than she could follow. Her genuine breathlessness, speechless in that instant, shook something loose in Ellis' brain.

They were close to some dangerous point of no return, a collapse, and nothing made that seem more real than the pale terror on Chris' face. He'd been through more than one such collapse, after all, and knew the signs better than most.

I... I can't do nothin' fer Coach'n'Nick right now... but if we go fallin' apart, there ain't gonna be no team tuh find'em. We... gotta hold it tuhgether. I gotta hold it tuhgether.

Ellis shifted uncomfortably on his feet, feeling glass crunch under the toe of his left boot. He cleared his throat, inhaling a sharp breath through his nose, wet and sore. His voice did not break when he tried to speak.
"Ro'. This ain't helpin'."

Rochelle pressed a palm to her mouth and inhaled harshly against it, her shoulders trembling, her brows screwing up. She barely acted like she heard him at all.

"He took Coach with him." she ghosted, and the words broke into a sob, shattering just past her teeth. Her chin lowered as she gritted her jaw against the sensation, and she looked like she might lose her balance entirely, as if the weight of it struck her, there. "Jesus. We lost both of them."

She did not protest when Christophe darted forward, moving with more fervor now, circling his arm against her back. She leaned into him, eyes going wide and distant, tears falling freely now, skating down her damp features.

"I don't know... how to keep going without him." Rochelle gasped out, her tone faltering, breaths winning out in a wheeze, as if she couldn't quite control her inhale and exhale. "Coach was... Coach is... he's the rock. He's my rock. How am I supposed to...?"

Christophe's arm tightened, drawing her closer, palm settling against the back of her neck to urge her to bury her face in his shoulder. "Chica." he murmured, even as his own voice grew thick. "They are not gone, until we are sure. Maybe -"

"You knew." came, whisper-quiet, from Rhiannon.

There was a tension that built, like the sudden rise of a static charge, when the blonde suddenly turned on her heel. Her fists were curled at her sides, shoulders high, and she focused a tight gaze on her sister.

Lena's defenses collapsed, a softening, and tears welled in her hazel eyes. "I -"

Rhiannon's body trembled with every step, a mixture of pain and something else. "You knew from the fuckin' start they were on the outs, that it was a whole... shit-ass mess. You had the breakup pegged from day one. You knew he wasn't just trying to run from some fucks he didn't give a shit about."

Lena's voice was raw when she spoke, her jaw shivering, like she might crumble under her sister's attention. "Rhee, you know it wasn't - I was tryin' not to get involved, I - you're the one who told me he wanted to -"

"You always fuckin' meddle." Rhiannon's next motion pushed into her space, and they were suddenly nose-to-nose. Lena barely kept standing, the tears flowing freely now, a desperate tremble pulling at her lips. "You stuck your fat ass in the middle of Mom and me for years, and for what? You pushed these fuckers til they snapped, and for fucking what? They could be dead. Coach could be dead right now. And nobody's coming on our fucking deathmarch to Texas, boo-hoo."

Airless and husky, stumbling the words past a hiccup of a sob, Lena tried for a response. She only got out, "I was trying to -", before Rhiannon moved.

The blow was a surprise. Everyone flinched as Rhiannon struck out, knuckles cracking against her sister's cheek, but Ellis couldn't stop himself from surging entirely to his feet in instinctive defense. The brunette staggered, clutching at her mouth, a blatant pain making her buckle over.

The taller woman took one step back, and as suddenly as she'd lashed out, her eyes widened. Her nostrils flared, a tiny admittance that she hadn't fully intended the outburst.
Still, furious, she spat out, "You fucked up. We all fucked up, duck. But you can't fuckin' sit here and pretend you didn't. You fucked up. And if Sam's fucking dead because of you, I might not be going on the goddamn fucking stupid boat."

Eyes swimming, clearly dizzied from the blow, Lena pulled her hand from her mouth and revealed a watery trickle of blood tracing down her chin out of the split in her lower lip. She rolled her tongue against it, hissing, and then husked out plaintive utterance.

"Ryan, you can't be serious -"

There was a strange dichotomy, in that moment.

Rhiannon and Christophe were the first to react, both of them straining at shocked expressions that broke through the tears on their faces. Rhiannon recoiled, and Christophe's gaze riveted on her back, his brows tangling into a sorrowful pinch.

Lena, Rochelle, and Ellis did not react, at first, partially out of some genuine assumption they'd misheard, or - in Lena's case - a failure to realize what she'd said.

And then it struck them, too.

Rochelle looked startled, gaze darting between the sisters, her lips parting in half of an utterance. Ellis rocked back on his heels, sucking in a sharp breath, feeling the cringe of discomfort that came with hearing something he shouldn't've.

Oh. he thought. Shit.

Silence did not describe the moment thereafter, because silence implied a degree of calm, or the absence of stimuli. Silence most assuredly did not describe the way Rhiannon's posture deflated, a practically audible creaking as all her anger petered out, no less tangible than the water pooling around her feet.

Her eyes darted low, staring at the floor, not meeting Lena's eyes as horror dragged both of the brunette's hands to her mouth. Lena did not speak, but her posture spoke volumes, her body frozen there as if she'd been encased in a dense layer of ice.

Quietly, without a word, Rhiannon turned and strode across the store. Only when she reached it did she mutter in a hoarse croak, "Stop fucking arguing. Won't help the shits fucking swim.", before she disappeared into the bathroom, shutting and latching the door behind herself.

In her absence, there was bloated stillness, as if none of them dared to move.

Ellis gazed at the bathroom door, and concern cut through the fog in his head, his priorities re-asserting themselves. He needed to keep the team stable, like Coach used to do, or they'd all lose it. He wanted to chase after her and ensure she was okay, but he had no idea what to say, and certainly had no idea what she'd want to hear.

'Ryan'? buzzed in his head, feeling at the unfamiliar name and its implications. However, his brain only half-heartedly picked at the realization before he rejected it, determined not to lose himself in the thought. It was neither his business, nor his biggest concern.

His attention shifted, gazing first at Lena, who'd fallen to a slump, clenching fists against her eyes until it must've hurt. Her shoulders trembled, and only trembled harder when he moved to carefully approach her.
He was fully aware of Chris' and Ro's eyes on his back as he stepped next to the biker, placing a hand on her elbow gently, and he felt a quiet relief when she did not surge away. She didn't lean into him, either, but he'd take the compromise.

"Let's just... get the floor tidied up, okay?" He tried for a soft tone, though it was hard to manage with his hoarse voice. He tried, too, to say the next part with clarity: he was trying to give her some space, not chase her away. "You can go straighten up the back room in case... she wants some decent privacy or somethin'? Instead'uh hidin' in the bathroom?"

Lena's head twitched in a nod, and she said nothing. He could see enough of her face to know she was barely holding back tears, and when she pushed to cross the room, she did so in a rush. She made no effort to make eye contact with any of them.

The back room door clicked shut behind her, and suddenly they were alone. Neither Rochelle nor Christophe moved, at first, both of them still held close together. She'd faltered to an exhaustion, and regret sat muted in her frown, eyes low-lidded.

Only eventually did she mumble, "... I'm sorry."

Ellis closed his eyes, for just a beat, gathering something like strength. He exhaled, and turned on his heel, grabbing for the mop again.

It was the only thing he could control.
Chapter 296

The shop didn't take too long to clean, although that was mostly due to the fact there was only so clean they could get it. They focused on a central area, pushing everything to the walls, including the shattered glass and strewn knick-knacks that had taken up most of the floorspace.

It had remained quiet through the process. Exhaustion had kicked in more than anything else, and with both sisters locked away, there seemed little point in any discussion. They didn't have much to say that hadn't already been said.

Rochelle had already said more than she should have.

Working in close concert with Chris, she couldn't help but keep an eye on Ellis. He seemed to relish the chance to focus single-mindedly on the task at hand, but he visibly lost steam. By the time they'd gotten the floor cleared, he'd fallen to shivering, giving into the cold trying to soak into him.

It was when his teeth started chattering that Christophe suddenly broke off to approach him. He spared a look toward her as he did as if seeking approval, and she gave a faint, affirming nod.

His spine straightened, coaxed on.

"Desnúdate. ¡Vamos!" he ordered, firmly, and Ellis didn't need a translation to understand when Chris' hand gripped on his denim sleeve and pulled. When the mechanic blanched, reflexively, the Spaniard shot him an unimpressed look. "You have seen me - now, viceversa. ¡Desnúdate!"

Rochelle kept her feet moving, pacing the center of the room, trying to get the light to glint off shards of glass they'd missed - but her attention mostly drifted to the two men. The windows and their boarded-up state, nailed into the wall and trapping squares of tarplike plastic in place, limited the light.

The ex-Angel had been mostly quiet, and this felt like the loudest he'd spoken, the most aware his gaze had been on his surroundings. It comforted her a little, and it clearly caught Ellis off-guard.

We need to, if he's gonna bottle this up.

Only hesitantly did the Georgian begin to obey, slowly stripping just his jacket off. It was difficult to peel it away from his arms, and as he was forced to drag it over his scraped wrists and palms, his eyes watered gently. He glanced down at them, and Rochelle caught a glimpse; they were still raw and bleeding, though it was hard to discern when they were damp all over.

Shit. We both need bandages, and Rhee, too. crossed her mind, eyes darting to the backpack she'd placed on the podium that held the shop's register. Not enough for any of us, probably.

Ellis twisted his mouth in a frown, perhaps doing a similar calculation, but he didn't vocalize it. Instead, he grunted out, "Chris, whut're -"

With a sigh, the foreigner stepped to the side, gesturing to the slim rack of T-shirts that they'd pushed against the wall. It was standalone, made of thin aluminum poles, the shirts hung with fragile plastic hangers. "Can... dry the clothes, ¿sí? And wear these?"

That made Rochelle halt, blinking at the gaudy shirts from where she stood. The thought had never occurred to her, but it made sense. Staying in their drenched clothes was uncomfortable at best and
dangerous at worst - both for their health and their morale. She wasn't sure which was more in peril.

"Yeah. Good idea. We'll catch a cold like this." she murmured. "Go on, Ellis."

The brunette seemed only vaguely convinced, but a shiver betrayed him, and he grimaced down at his clothes. "...Okay." He shrugged out of his jacket entirely, and Chris took it from him, loosely folding it and draping it over his shoulder. He stood there as Ellis moved to pull his undershirt up and off his frame, too.

Ellis shifted to undo his jeans and start shoving them down his legs. He had to shuck his boots to do so, stepping carefully away from where the worst of the glass had been. He must've been satisfied with the dryness of his socks, because he did not remove them, replacing his boots the moment he'd shed his jeans. The Georgian's very situational bashfulness would've amused her, on a better day.

Rochelle exhaled weakly, turning away from them before he'd re-dressed in one of the T-shirts. She stepped over to the side of the room where she'd set Maggie's carrier down, dropping to a crouch until she could peer into the canvas bag.

Part of her wished they'd never picked up the cat. Part of her felt comforted by the little leftover piece of Nick's softer side, still with them.

"Hey." she murmured, finding two glints of light turned and focused at her. Her voice was raw, sorrowful. "Can't leave you in here, huh? Not fair to any of us, and definitely not when we can't feed you. Granola's not gonna cut it." She didn't miss the way Ellis hesitated, stiffening, and she glanced toward him - but the Georgian didn't speak. They all knew it was true.

Rochelle looked back down to the carrier, softening her voice further. "Nick let you out. I know he's... not here anymore, but... we're going to find him. Him and Coach." She didn't know where the urge came from, not to say the words, and certainly not to say them to a cat who could not understand her. She spoke as if to a child, but she also spoke to herself; maybe she just wanted to hear somebody say the words.

"So, Maggie, it'd mean a lot if you came back. We're going to look for them, okay?"

She didn't want to cry. She didn't intend it, or foresee it, but as suddenly as she'd said the words, the tears started again. They began as a blur, just a visual distortion as they accrued against her eyelashes - but she forced the rest out. "So if you go running off, and you're gone when he gets back, Nick's gonna... be really sad."

She also didn't expect Ellis to turn.

He frowned, softly, his eyes low under the curls of brown hair plastered to his forehead where he'd shucked his cap in order to get the T-shirt on over his head. Its bright red fabric and neon-glazed orange text, sloppily announcing 'Tybee's For Me!' only partially distracted her eye.

He chewed his lip, just softly, before he murmured, "So you - don't think they're gone?"

His composure scared her. He was a strong person, but he should have been crying. He should have been a mess, like he'd been in those instants after it happened. She didn't know what to think when he wasn't.

It made her feel weak, when her jaw trembled and her voice cracked softly. "I... don't know. But - like Chris said. I'm not... We're going to look for them, until we know. For sure." There, she
dropped her gaze, struggling to keep her shoulders steady. "We didn't come this far to just... lose them, without fighting."

She wasn't sure she believed it.

Ellis didn't respond. He just gazed at her, teeth still working on his lips, and she shifted into more of a squat, letting her attention land firmly on his face. Why couldn't she read him? When had he ever been hard to read?

Christophe's relative numbness was no surprise to her; his capacity for conflict had been whittled down to a fragile, burnt-out wick, and he'd been through more trauma and loss than most people experienced in a lifetime. It was natural that his coping mechanism would be to distance himself from it all.

With Ellis, in that moment, it felt like pushing against some unyielding force. He was as stubborn in this as he was in most things, it seemed.

So, she continued: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things, not to Lena. Not... at all." she whispered. "I didn't... I shouldn't be picking fights, and... I shouldn't be throwing around the 'd' word."

He nodded, reaching up to scratch his fingertips against his hair, soaked even where his cap had covered it. His shoulders slumped slightly, and he winced one eye shut, but it still seemed distant, not quite sincere. "It's okay." he mumbled, reaching out to take his clothes from Chris' arms. "Just don't want us fightin'."

The Spaniard waved him off with a strangled gesture of his shoulder, turning away to start loosely draping them over the shirt rack. The aluminum creaked warily under the weight of the wet clothes and denim, but it held. "Vamos, vamos." he muttered.

Ellis frowned at him, as if subtly perturbed, but let him work. In nothing but the T-shirt and boxers that only peeked out from under it on every other step, he turned and walked toward Rochelle.

"Do you really blame her?" he asked, and Rochelle startled slightly, her head hunching forward with a flash of strained regret. She did not inherently wish the argument hadn't happened, but she certainly wished it had been more private. Before she could respond, he continued.

"Did you mean it all, 'bout her playin' us, or... was it just.... hollerin'?"

She found a scab on the side of her arm when she rubbed it, and caught a nail against the edge, reflexively prying it away. It didn't hurt - at least, no more than her entire body did already, her elbows still raw and bleeding.

*I blame all of us. I blame her, I blame you, and I blame Nick. But I blame myself the most.*

"... Not in the way I said it." she hedged.

His lips twitched downward, but he didn't press. Instead, he stepped forward, dropping to a crouch next to the carrier. His left hand flicked out, grabbing the zipper on the front flap of it. "We'll let her out when it ain't rainin' so hard. Ain't far tuh go in here." he ghosted, eyes focused squarely on the floor.

Maybe it was procrastination; putting off the painful task of watching the cat disappear out the door, leaving just an empty carrier behind, to match the space where Coach and Nick were not. Maybe they'd wait to let her go, and maybe they'd never do it.
Maybe they'd find their lost teammates, and maybe they wouldn't - or maybe they'd find something they didn't want. Maybe if they never made a choice, they could dodge reality. Maybe time would freeze there, events locked in place, forever only just unfolding. *Schrödinger's paradise.*

Rochelle reached out, setting a hand on his.

Ellis didn't look at her.

"Okay." she whispered, even though she wanted to say so much more. *You can't bottle it up. You can't just act like you're fine. It's going to come out at some point, and the longer you wait, the worse it'll get. The worse it'll hurt. I'm here for you.*

Instead, she watched as he opened the zipper, and they both leaned away as the flap fell open.

For a moment, nothing happened, and it seemed Maggie might refuse to move. Tenderly, slowly, her face poked through the opening of the carrier, twisted harshly to rivet her gaze on them, her eyes tracking every minute shift of their bodies.

Rochelle expected her to bolt. Instead, after a momentary pause, her whiskers perilously stretched forward as she huffed in air through an open mouth, Maggie slunk forward. Her belly almost touched the ground as she crept out of the carrier.

It was slow, cautious, and it felt like the closest she'd ever been to the cat without Nick there to buffer. Even with him present, it had been touch-and-go.

For an instant, she assumed the change in behaviour meant the cat was injured. The thought struck her with such terror that, on reflex, she leaned in to glance over her bedraggled limbs and mussed fur, seeking signs of an injury.

*That* made her bolt.

The black-and-orange cat disappeared in a flash, under the cabinet that they'd blockaded the door with, not even a hiss to announce her retreat, just the scrabble of claws on wood.

Frowning slightly, Rochelle's head tilted. She thought of Nick convincing Maggie to eat from her hand, and past the twist of pain, she couldn't help but wonder if they had made some progress. It was wishful thinking, she was sure.

"Poor girl." she mumbled, sighing, turning her gaze toward Ellis. He was looking after the cat, staring at the space under the cabinet, and the pinch to his brows was frustrated. It was subtle, but on his typically bright features, the emotion put the storm overhead to shame.

Rochelle meant to prompt him, but he spoke before she could.

"Why is it he won't open up t'un someone who can actually talk back?" he muttered, and it was more bitter than hurt, more angry than anything else. "Why's it feel like she'd know more than me, iffin she could understand English?"

That pulled at her gut sharply, like she'd swallowed a hunk of lead. Her lips pursed, head tilting, her hand tightening on his. Encouraging anger didn't feel right, but she didn't know how else to handle him.

"I think it's the part where people hear what he's saying that scares him." she ghosted, and saw the dull tension it sparked in Ellis' face. "You did your best, baby. You really did. You always did."
He grunted, just once, and lowered his chin. His tone was dark, and just the faintest bit spiteful. "Didn't help none. I should'uh been the one tuh jump, at least, instead'uv Coach. I can swim better, 'n'... it's my mess."

Rochelle gazed at him, and in that moment, she missed Coach terribly. He'd have advice, in that frank and simple way he always did. He'd rumble out a few words and Ellis would laugh, and smile, and then maybe shatter.

Shattering would have been preferable.

"It's all of our mess," she whispered, a sincere guilt pulling at her mouth. "I wish I'd... been a little softer to him. And I wish I'd kept less from Coach, trusted him more. I thought he'd just... confuse things, but sometimes I think that if we'd all been on the same page weeks ago, maybe... things could've been... better. I took both of them for granted."

Ellis crouched there, expression difficult to discern, but it shifted enough that a pinched tremble broke through. He stuffed a wrist against his nose, breathing in sharply, then letting it out in a puff.

"I wish I'd gotten that fuckin' whirlbyrd tuh land." he stated, and his tone was weaker than before, softer, despite the harshness surrounding the swear. "And I wish I could remember the last damn thing I said tuh Coach."

He stood, then, abruptly, rubbing his palm against his face. "You should get changed, girl." he mumbled, and as quickly as his defenses had lowered, they'd risen back up.

_God. He's acting like Nick._

"I'm gonna go check on Rhee, make sure she's okay."

That made Rochelle perk up, and a worried grimace twisted at her features before she could stop it. He didn't see it, fortunately, but Chris did. The Spaniard went from clumsily trying to work his way out of his soaked polo to shrugging it back into place, grabbing a shirt off the rack and pushing into a quick-hopped stride.

He moved and talked with a familiar cadence, the one that lilts on at such a pace that there was little time to argue. "I will go, tío. She and I are... swell together, ¿sí? You sit."

Rochelle tried to pass him a grateful look as he walked by, winded, and he tipped his head faintly. Neither she nor Ellis were equipped to offer comfort - Rhiannon clearly felt conflicted over their plan to leave with Nick, and if she blamed her sister, she no doubt blamed herself. That made both of them difficult to talk to, she imagined.

Christophe was not truly neutral, but he came off closer to it.

At least she was fairly certain she could get him to open up, later, when things were quiet and they could talk. Ellis felt like an equation she'd yet to solve, and she had very few resources to draw from, emotional or otherwise.

Chris walked hurriedly up toward the bathroom door and Ellis stood there, unmoving, before relocating to one of the boarded-up windows to find a place he could peek through. Watching them both, Rochelle didn't have a lot of optimism on her chances.

_Chris has lost too many people, and I don't think Ellis has ever lost anyone like this. And neither of them are dealing._
Shit.
Chapter 297

Christophe was not nervous, precisely, when he knocked on the bathroom door. He did not have space for nerves, it felt like, despite the fact that his body moved with all the grace of an empty cardboard box.

He couldn't find grief. It sat beyond him, a concept he could only peer at through thick glass, fogged up with his breath and smeared at his touch. He'd cried, but they'd fallen with all the weight of the rain still collecting on his skin in trickles and droplets. They'd felt like a simple, reflexive mirroring of the emotions around him.

They were dead. He knew that with certainty. They were dead, like Sean and Jerry and Brenda and Brock and, no doubt, all the others. His family in Spain was dead. Everyone's families likely were, and they were likely to follow.

It was a simple enough proposition: he'd live, until he didn't.

They'd all live, until they didn't.

Every moment he spent alive was borrowed - no, stolen from the lip of a pill bottle or the muzzle of a gun. He'd survived by happenstance and luck, and the kindness of his new team... a team now two members short.

Control had never been within his grasp. He'd been a victim to the current of events since the very beginning of the apocalypse, carried on by the will and whim of those stronger than him. His success, his value, was measured most by the willingness of others to keep him around. It was a lesson he'd learned early, and maybe even a lesson he'd learned long before the end of the world.

He loved them. He loved Coach, and he loved Nick, and he'd have given his life if it had meant they would endure. His life, for theirs? For Rochelle and Ellis to keep their loved ones for a little while longer? It was not a question. He wouldn't have thought twice.

But they were gone. And even had he been willing to acknowledge the agony brewing in the base of his skull, there was no room for it, and no room for his emotions added atop the others'. If there was any use for him now, it was not as another lit fuse.

It was easier than it should have been to bury it down deep. He felt at home in the grief - not comfort, but familiarity, just like the pain of his stump had become familiar. Well-practiced, he took the awful cold crawling up his spine and wrapped it around himself like a shield, used it like motivation. Rejecting the urge to feel anything made it easier to focus.

He put a placid look on his face as a thump announced Rhiannon's body leaning into the door from the other side. She did not unlatch it, and her voice came dully through the wood.

She sounded exhausted.

"Sorry, only fags and fuckups allowed in here."

Christophe cocked his head, and he did not quite stifle his laugh. Humour came easier to him than anything else; it was, consistently, the only comfort he could offer. He lowered his voice to hum, "I am one of these things, tía, at least."

A snort answered him from the other side. There was silence for a moment, and he thought he'd
made no ground. After a moment, however, the latch did suddenly click, the door swinging open just enough to permit him entry. Rhiannon was not in sight, as if she stood behind it.

He couldn't help a wry glance over his shoulder to Rochelle, who was trying and failing not to blatantly watch him, and offered a small smile back to her. She returned it, but in a fractional way. He forced out a sigh as he stepped into the bathroom, immediately aware of the fact that it would be nearly pitch black with the door shut.

Then the door shut.

Darkness had become a strange and upsetting territory for him. In the dark, that neural pressure that pulsed on and off down the length of his missing arm became terribly, awfully believable. He could not glance down to verify that it was absent, and could not detect the difference between the pain of his phantom limb and the near-chronic pain of his stumped shoulder.

It made him anxious, and that made him talkative.

"Chica, you are okay? It is not like you, to run away. A ciencia cierta, is not like you to punch your hermana." He gestured, reflexively, despite its ineffectiveness, and he tried to soften his tone into sympathy. "I have never seen you like this before."

Rhiannon's voice, disembodied in the dark until she moved a step to the side and her outline became a little easier to discern, barked out a small laugh. It was injured and petty and struck a sadness through him. "Yeah, and you didn't know I was a dude, before, so ain't today a day for fuckin' surprises?"

His lips twisted, slumping his shoulders, unsure how to react to that. He didn't piece together more than a mumbled, "Pero - you are not -” before she was talking over him.

"I don't usually punch her in the mug, that's for fuckin' sure. Bet she's fucking pissed." He was sure her voice faltered with a strained insecurity, there. "Bet the whole club's mad at me. Or at least gawking. Y'know, usually ran out of bathrooms when people found out I was trans, not into them."

She rattled off the words with an anxiety not unlike his own, and, perhaps, a fear of letting him speak lest she not like what he said. She charged on with brute force, unrelenting, and even her momentary silence was broken by the sharp strike of her heel on the tile floor.

"Fuck. Such a fucking hypocrite."

It wasn't a surprise to learn she was hiding in the bathroom out of discomfort and not anger. She was more delicate than she portrayed herself to be, though he was not so simple-minded as to equate delicacy with weakness. He, himself, was delicate.

Nick had been delicate.

Rhiannon was certainly delicate - but so was glass, and its delicacy only furthered the damage it was capable of when it shattered. They were all glass, now, and their breakage had casualties. If they weren't careful, their team would end up no better than the floor they'd only barely gotten cleared.

"Is Lee pissed?" she spat, suddenly, and Chris could not waffle in silence any further.

"She... is hiding, too, but I no think so." he tried, softly, unsure if the words had any effect without being able to see her expression. It was harder than ever to communicate without any facial expressions or physical cues to guide him. He could follow most of what she said, except for the
odd word that threw him. "Em... why would they be angry? You did not do anything."

The scoff that left the biker was quiet, and her footsteps suddenly moved away, scuffing as she carefully felt her way to the wall. The scraping and rustling that followed turned out to be her sitting on the floor, as when she spoke, it came from much lower than before.

"Usually a mixed bag when people find out you've been lying to them." she muttered, and that time, the insecurity was nowhere near subtle. He frowned, tilting his head as he did his best to keep up when she spoke faster. "She's never done that before. Messed up a few times, y'know, fuckin' habit - but it was never in front of anyone. I mean, it took me a while to get used to the new name, but it's been... years. You almost forget, until you don't."

He'd lost track in the middle, and focused mostly on the pieces he'd understood.

A frown touched his lips, and he shifted to lower into a crouch. There was a moment in the middle of the gesture where his balance was weakest, and he wished he could splay his arms to steady himself. Instead, he planted his palm on the ground as he tipped too much to the left and went down clumsily. He recovered with a grunt, and then sighed.

"Chica, you know, en España - it is..." He flapped his hand, promptly frustrated with the knowledge she couldn't see him. "Em, simpler, ¿si? Puedes follarte a quien quieras, besar a quien quieras... you be who you are, be with who you want. Some people are not so nice, but... you know, people are people. I think it was... a few years behind, you know? They changed the law so you can change the gender on the - ah - your documents."

The smallest smile touched his face, genuine, as he nodded his chin up. In the dark, he let his eyes close, thinking for just a moment on that far-away and oft off-limits subject: life before. "My compañero de clase, back home, he was a chica, you know? Now he is more guapo than me, ¿si? He -"

Rhiannon suddenly grunted, interrupting him. She sounded agitated, though he didn't sense that it was truly directed at him. "Look, stumpy, I get it: you're trying to be nice. But if you're just in here to fluff me with some fuckin' go-get-'im bullshit, let me stop you right now. I don't need a pep-talk. I just need to..."

The blonde stopped, and he didn't know why until she spoke again, and it was muffled slightly as if she'd buried her face into her hands. Her jaw was clearly gritted against emotion, the gesture making her voice thick.

"I need to know if I lost more than two fuckin' friends today."

Christophe couldn't help it. He approached immediately, scooching forward in an awkward crawl on his knees and his hand. He might've nudged right into her if he'd paid less attention, pushing forward until he could just feel the buzz of her closeness as his knees brushed against the toes of her boots.

He grimaced, winced, and regretted for a moment jumping so quickly to take over from Ellis. His inability to put his thoughts into words with confidence was frustrating enough when the stakes were not quite so high.

"You think they'd...?" he muttered, uncertainly. "You cannot think Ellis and Ro' are this way. Ellis is -"

"You think any of that shit matters?" she returned, immediately, harshly. He could hear tears
threatening at the edges of her voice. "You think being part of some fuckin' spectrum makes a difference with this shit? It changes things. It makes my fucking skin crawl, y'know? I don't want anyone fucking knowing my shit, when it isn't their fucking business. I -"

She hesitated, breaking off, a shiver to her voice that she tried to contain. Her sharp exhale was frustrated, then, agitation leaking into the rest of her utterance. "Whatever. It's fucking stupid. And I'm a stupid cunt-ass bitch for being upset about it. Pity-party for fucking me, huh?Fuck Coach. Fuck Nick. Let's all feel bad for fucking me."

Chris reached out, finding her leg with his hand. It landed on her shin, as if she was sitting with her knees close to her chest, so he merely kept it there rather than attempt to move it upwards. His fingertips tightened, squeezing, relieved when she didn't shift away.

"It is okay, to be scared, and angry. You know? But... tía, we have just each other now." he whispered, softly, his voice more fragile than he wanted it to be. He did not want it to be true, but truth would not bend to his preferences. "I do not know what they would say, but... they want you to be okay. I do not think it... makes it different, now."

There was silence for a moment, and he didn't know what to do inside of it. He felt ill-equipped and ill-fit for the job, and he did not know if he had helped, or only made it worse. It was a familiar feeling, of late. The burgeoning tension he felt at the thought rippled across his skin like a harsh breeze that rose up gooseflesh, making him stiffen up, unsure of the efficacy of his words.

He should have stayed quiet, but he couldn't. He mumbled, "I am always your friend, ¿sí?"

When she shifted her weight, her shin pressed harder into the palm of his hand. He didn't know if it was intentional, but he very deliberately left his hand where it was. She didn't respond to his question, but the gesture seemed answer enough.

A sigh left her, along with an inhale through her nose that sounded wet. "I miss them already." croaked out of her, voice strained and trembling just faintly. His eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to see her outline, but little more. "Coach was... nice, y'know? And I was gonna tell Nick, myself, when... shit calmed down. Thought it'd make him loosen up if he thought... he wasn't the only shitfuck faggot with issues."

She hummed, for just a moment, before suddenly falling silent for a few moments. He could hear her head thump dully down against her knees, a sigh leaving her in just a wheeze of an exhale.

Slowly, she mumbled, "My fucking shoulders hurt so bad."

Christophe cocked his head forward, reflexively looking toward the silhouette of her shoulders in the dark. Her injuries had almost slipped his mind, and being reminded of them solidified his resolve. If Coach was not present to tend to the team, then he would try and step in, try and fill his shoes - even partially.

At least I still have two legs.

It was enough to make him want to laugh, right before a tug of emotion stabbed sharp between his ribs. He inhaled, and tried to exhale smoothly. If he'd learned anything, it was that when the apocalypse decided to take, there was no arguing it down. There was no negotiation. There was, most often, simply nothing to be done but to continue on. Wasn't that more comforting than the alternative? Didn't it feel, somehow, like a form of control?

He lowered his voice as he murmured to her, softening it to something soothing. "We go. I look at
your back, y... make sure you are good." He did his best to let a smile leak into his tone, brightening it. "You see that they are not mad, that we are all still friends. I go with you and it is okay. ¿Vale?"

Her body jolted faintly with a snort, suddenly shifting her knee in a mock-kick to shake him off. It was gentle, but firm. "I don't need babysat. I'll put on my fucking big boy-girl pants and go out. I just don't want... I just..." Rhiannon's voice faltered, there, and he waited as patiently as he could.

It took her a few moments before she started to softly stand. He pushed himself back to get out of her way, listening to the scuffling as her palms braced against the wall to keep herself steady as she rose. He could tell she was trembling by the stutter of her breath and the quick chatter of her teeth.

"I just want things to go back to fucking normal." she whispered, and then released a raspy little laugh, punctuated by a sharp sigh. It hitched like the beginnings of a faint sob, though just one, bubbled up from under her self-control. "Dunno when you cocksuckers became my new normal."

Chris' mouth tried to twitch upward, but he couldn't quite manage it, watching the flicker of her silhouette in the dark as she moved towards the door, sliding her hand against the wall to guide herself to it. He followed, keeping close.

_No sé, tampoco._
The lack of something to keep busy with let Ellis come dangerously close to thinking. He'd managed, so far, to avoid the thoughts trying to crowd in. With nothing to put between him and them, however, they resurged.

He stared out into the rain through a slit in the boarded and tarped window he was leaned into, and all he could do was replay those last few seconds in his mind's eye: Nick, dragged out of sight. Coach, tipping over the edge, gone in an instant. It looped, endless, until he dug his nails into his palms and shut his eyes and gritted his teeth.

*You didn't even try.*

He saw it, clear as day, in the fabricated version of it that played out in his head. Nick barely resisted. He barely even struggled in the moments before it was over.

*You let it take you. How fuckin' could you? How could you? All we done, all we been through, 'n'you just let it pull you in like you don't matter? Like we'd just leave you? Like I wasn't gonna care?*

It hurt, most of all, because it felt like his fault. The last things they'd said to each other had been part of a fight.

*How'd I never convince you I cared? Whut'd I do tuh make you think we'd just... keep goin'? How could you think I'd just be able to keep goin'?*

A cruel part of his mind, the part that couldn't let go of those images even as they crushed the air out of him, surfaced the thought of how long they'd have lasted. Would the impact with the water's surface have knocked them unconscious?

*You hit water like that, s'like hittin' concrete. But maybe, it bein' all blown up by the storm, maybe... But even if that carried any validity, the waters had been a mess of debris from the road, and the vehicles tossed down into it. Not to mention the fact Nick could not swim, and Coach could not carry them both, not with his knee out.*

*Maybe they...*

But he came up blank, and the void in place of any believable circumstance where they had survived terrified him. He choked rather than breathe, and it was such a visceral and pinprick terror that he couldn't even summon tears.

He'd just fail to breathe until he suffocated, perhaps.

The only thing that he could grab onto, the only feeling that gave him any leverage against hopeless and empty grief, was anger.

*Fuck you. Just... fuck you.*

But he was not thinking of Nick or Coach when the words formed.

*I fuckin' asked you, fer one thing. Didn't never ask you fer nothin', not fer me. I ain't never once in muh life asked you fer nothin' fer me. I just asked you tuh keep 'em safe. Keep both muh families safe. But you can't do nothin', can you? You let all this happen, fer whut? I try so hard not tuh - I*
'I ain't never thought you was all-powerful, or nothin', 'cause bad shit happens all the time'n'I didn't think you was... behind it or nothin', but...

His hands were shaking.

_You ain't shit, are yuh? You can't do nothin'. Or I'm just nothin' to you, 'n'verjust whut's it matter, then? Whut's it matter if you'd just let Coach die, when he ain't done nothin' but show the best'uv you? Whut's it matter if you'd just... take Nick from me, like this, 'n'

Suddenly his palms were pressed into his face, his upper body collapsing in some gentle falter, like his spine had rotted out then and there.

He'd missed his mother, and he'd missed Keith. He'd wished they were there, and wished that he could have heard their voices, beyond the fleeting dreams he had and shortly forgot. He'd never truly **worried** for them, because it was as apparent to him that they were alive, as it was that he was.

He didn't worry, then, and he didn't wonder. Those two emotions carried with them uncertainty, and in their own way, some kind of optimism. Wondering involved multiple outcomes - the chance for something better than nothing.

In that moment, for the first time, he did not even have the hope required to wonder. They may as well have all been dead, because without their presence, without the ability to reach out and touch and hold them... what did it matter?

_Fuck you._

Rochelle had been watching him like a hawk and noticed his sudden shift, and he heard her start to stand. The sound surged frustration in him, shoving himself onto his heels, trying to collect his composure before she tried to talk to him. He gritted his teeth, and swung himself around, and he didn't know what showed on his face.

He just knew she stopped, and her eyes widened slightly, and she looked daunted. She'd changed into a T-shirt, but her soggy sweats were still on, and she grabbed at them nervously.

**Did he look angry?**

**Did he project his despair?**

The bathroom door opened and both of them snapped their heads to the side to look. Rhiannon came first, followed shortly behind by Christophe. They were both still in their wet clothes, though they'd settled into a simple dampness rather than the active dripping of collected water.

Ellis gripped onto concern like a life-line. Worry was a safe harbour compared to what awaited him in the outer fringes of his thoughts. He could escape it. He _would_ escape it.

He started forward, and Rhiannon grimaced in his direction as if to discourage him from saying anything, or maybe approaching at all. He obeyed in a half-measure, only crossing a few steps closer to her before he stopped.

She muttered, "You look like a fucking dumbass."

He choked out a sound that might've passed for a laugh, on reflex, more a simple social transaction than any genuine response. He pushed his hands against his stomach, flattening the cheap T-shirt against his belly. "I'm dry, at least." he responded, trying to return her caustic humour.
The way she smiled just a little, just a flicker, said she appreciated the effort. Then it disappeared, and she turned her gaze sharply downward. Her mouth twisted, and she lifted a hand to pat weakly at the front of her left shoulder.

"Can you... help?" she muttered, her voice cracking gently in the middle. "I think my back's fucked."

Her disinclination to discuss the argument was not surprising, and Ellis wasn't about to press the issue. He caught a glance from Chris, and the Spaniard gave him a soft smile, encouraging. It communicated some faint confidence as if he'd had some success in talking with her.

Both Ellis and Rochelle approached, her footsteps slowing to fall in step behind the Georgian. Rather than face them, Rhiannon turned away, reaching up tenderly to grip her jacket and start to carefully peel it off. "I... don't know what we have..."

It wasn't the first view Ellis had gotten of her injury, but it was the best.

The acid had settled in a splatter across her shoulderblades, and the worst of the damage was near the back of her neck. Splotches of pink and red flesh, irritated, sat in stark contrast to the skin around them - the soft ridges surrounding them, about a fingernail's depth of skin, revealed how the acid had stripped away a layer of dermis. The skin itself was roughened, yellowed slightly, and bubbled here and there like pus sat just under the surface.

Blood had smeared between her skin and her jacket, staining down her back and turning her white cami off-pink. It seemed to have mostly stopped, but there were a few places where it had eaten deeper, where gauzy pink sat exposed, glistening in the low light and weeping blood.

The sight made him hiss out a sympathetic noise, and he was startled when her arm swung out and struck against his arm blindly.

"Don't fucking make that noise, shitbag." she growled out, fear staining the edge of her voice. "Y'know how much fucking confidence that does not in-fuckin'-still in me?"

He grimaced at her, reaching up to gently push her hair off the back of her neck with the pad of his thumb, clearing his view. "Sorry." She shivered at the touch, and he didn't know if it was pain or cold. "It's... not so bad. I -"

Déjà-vú seemed very near to agony, as the memory of tending to Nick's Spitter-burnt leg surged up, the so-similar exchange of words, maybe more or less similar in his fragile recollection. It took effort to push through without faltering more than he already had.

Rochelle was watching him, still, and he wished she'd stop.

"I think we still got some anti-biotics, at least. Can get the worst spots'n'... try'n'... find more stuff... when the storm clears." His words accumulated together to form the bones of a plan for the remainder of the day, as if their next actions were not defined solely by a desperate attempt to find the rest of their team. His next inhale hurt, but he forced it. "Ro', go -"

But she was already moving toward the backpack, speaking over her shoulder. "We can't bandage it, that's for sure. We should try and keep it clean. I know it's wet, but you might be better off staying in that top, since it's got a low back."

Rhiannon puffed out a sigh, her brows knotting together gently. Her pain came through clearer, now, as her composure whittled thinner and thinner. She feigned disappointment, rasping out, "Oh, no. I was so desperate to Donald Duck it with Ellis."
The slightest smile twitched onto Ellis' mouth at that, and it was almost sincere. He settled a hand against her elbow, tightening his fingers into a squeeze. It was an attempt at a comforting gesture, an affectionate one, but she seemed to stiffen at his touch.

She glanced at him, sidelong, and there was a hesitance in her eyes. He intended on changing the subject or forcing out a joke, but suddenly, anger flared in her eyes and she nudged her chin up.

"Can we get the awkward bullshit out of the way?" she hissed out. "I know you fuckers love dancing around shit for days, but can we just rip the fucking Brazilian wax off my asshole and move on? There's enough shit going on without you looking at me like that."

Ellis' eyes widened, taking a half-step back, retracting his hand as if the touch had caused her outburst. He frowned, despite himself, gaze still on hers. "I didn't -"

"Here, I'll take the easy ones off the list." she snapped out, and energy built up in her frame until she shivered. Chris reached out to touch her arm, but she whipped herself into a twist to dodge it before it could land. "Yes, no, no, and only if you plan on fucking me. I miss any?"

Rochelle had stopped partway into unzipping their backpack, head turned to watch them, concern rising in her expression. "Hey, whoa, slow down, string-bean." She stood, both her hands lifting, fingers splayed. "Nobody cares, Rhee."

The blonde's anger flared up, a reflexive reaction, but Rochelle was quick to continue before she could interject.

"I don't mean that like - 'we have bigger issues', or 'let's just not talk about it', I mean... we don't care." She turned away, slowly, crouching back down to dig into the backpack, quickly finding the sorted medical supplies Coach had put together.

She gazed at the antibiotic tube she'd fished out, hand shaking just a little - and then she stood. "I don't care, and I know Chris and Ellis don't. You're the same person to me as you were half an hour ago. And I happen to like her - she's as good as family. And with the rest of my family..." There was a pause, a falter, before she continued. "In... danger right now, I don't want to fight."

Ellis watched her, a somber frown lingering on his lips. Her presence was a relief, there, as he felt slightly out of his depth when it came to this. Some guilt crept in on the heels of that relief, because he'd been acrid and avoidant to her, and he knew it.

"She's just tryin' tuh take care'uh us. Problem is, I'm just tryin' tuh keep muh shit tuhgether, 'n'she just wants me tuh lose it."

Rhiannon's posture softened, just a little, weakened. She looked first at Rochelle, and then to Ellis, and he tried for a reassuring smile. She stared too long at it, gauging, but perhaps she knew its instability was not directed at her. She seemed to accept it, either way.

Her gaze lowered to the ground, and she sighed. All her anger petered out and left just a tired sort of upset in its place. She mumbled, "You think Coach will?"

A sad snort made Rochelle's shoulders twitch, and she approached, waving both Ellis and Chris to take a step back. "Go ahead and change, Chris. You're shivering." They obeyed, the Spaniard quietly retreating to change out of his polo and into a dry shirt, and Rochelle halted just behind the biker.

She carefully started to squeeze out a dollop of antibiotic gel onto her thumb, gaze critical on the back of Rhiannon's head before she refocused on her wound. As she leaned in, looking for the
deepest places to start tending to, her voice lowered. "He likes you, too, Rhee. You know that. What's it matter to him, anyway?"

She didn't miss the flinch that touched Rhiannon's features, but it was easy enough to explain it away, as her thumb grazed against a stretch of raw skin. She carefully spread the gel, working in that all-too-familiar way, as quick but as careful as she could. The sight of raw muscle fibre peeking through the deeper burns did not faze her like it once might have.

Rhiannon's voice carried a pained edge when she hissed back, "Guess we're just pretending they're okay, now?"

Rather than respond, Rochelle collected another moderately-sized strip of gel on her thumb and took a step to the side, adjusting her angle to get a better view of one of the deeper, slightly oval-shaped patches of burnt skin. "I think you'll live. But take it easy, okay? Maybe you should just lay down for now."

The blonde grunted - and if they hadn't been facing backwards, they might've missed the back-room door opening across the mostly-tidied storeroom. Both of them froze on instinct, tension built as Lena opened the door and stepped into the threshold.

Strange, how they'd been in such a similar position just hours before.

But things were so different, now.

Lena hesitated in the doorway, chin low. She stood in a red hoodie that almost matched Ellis', except there was no text emblazoned on the front, just the vinyl imprint of a set of waves crashing onto a shore. Her pants were gone, too, replaced by loose shorts that seemed a few sizes too big judging by the way she'd pulled the gym-short strings tight around her hips.

She must've found more clothing in the boxes in the back - but not shoes, as her feet were still shod in sneakers, squelching with every step.

The silence between that moment and the one where she moved felt excruciatingly long. Then the brunette advanced, crossing the short distance between her and the other two women. Rhiannon shifted, backing up out of the way, as if recognizing the fact that her sister's eyes were firmly locked on Rochelle.

For an instant, the producer thought she might be in some danger - a reflexive reaction of her hair-trigger sympathetic nervous system, more than a true belief that Lena had any ill intent - and it took effort to keep herself from flinching when the older sister was suddenly in front of her.

Lena held out her hand, palm down, clutching something in the loose cage of her fingers.

When Rochelle tentatively hovered her left hand underneath it, thumb still glistening with antibiotic gel, she found a pair of keys dropped abruptly in her palm. It only took her a moment to recognize them as the boat keys.

She didn't get the chance to do more than widen her eyes before Lena spoke, quietly.

"I'm sorry." Her gaze shifted away, like she could look at neither of them. Her voice was stiff, like she'd planned the words before attempting to speak them. "I want you to keep them - and you can give them back to me when we get them back."

Rhiannon's attention flickered between them, worried, and it was clear that the presence of the keys was just as much of a shock to the blonde.
Rochelle found herself gently slumped where she stood. She gazed at the keys for a moment, and did not look up when she responded. "You weren't trying to get the bag for these." She said it like a question, but it was a statement, and an admission.

"I'm not trying to make a point, here, or make excuses. You were right to yell at me." was Lena's immediate response, and Rochelle looked up to frown at her. Her expression was a gentle grimace, hazel eyes squinted. "I'm not very good at trusting other people. I make a plan and I don't... involve anyone else, because I just assume I have it all under control. And right now, that means... people getting hurt because I thought I was... clever."

She focused, then, matching gazes with Rochelle with some faint hesitance. The more she spoke, the faster the words came, and her eyes watered past a stiff jaw that kept her tone firm.

"I honestly... wanted it to work out. I wanted all of you to come with us, and not just because it helps our chances. But I should've told you. And I should've just told him no, until he'd talked to y'all, and -"

Rochelle stepped forward, foot sliding to settle between Lena's, and pulled the woman into her arms. Lena stiffened, at first, before allowing herself to lean into the embrace. Her chin pressed into Rochelle's shoulder, and her arms came up to loosely snake around her waist.

"I'm sorry, too." she murmured, turning her face to let her cheek press into Lena's ear. "I'm sorry I yelled - and I don't think it's your fault. It's... everyone's fault, or it's no one's. I'm just scared."

Rochelle's arms tightened, rather than respond, and Rochelle felt something knotted and gnarled in her chest loosen just a little. She was gladder than she'd anticipated to know they'd be okay, and more desperate than she'd realized to feel secure in the ties she had left.

Rhiannon's voice cut in, dryly, before the moment could continue. "You guys gonna kiss or what? Chris, close your eyes."

A slight laugh passed between the two women, and they stepped apart, but Rochelle didn't completely take her arms from around the Texan. She sighed gently, steeling herself to speak, though Lena's eyes held a gentle resignation that said she knew what was coming.

Their trade of apologies was not the only one that needed to happen.

Chris, half-muffled as Ellis pulled the T-shirt over his head, babbled, "No es mi esposa, puede besarla. Ella puede besar a quien quiera." Then, quieter, "Sólo espero que ese sea yo."

Rochelle couldn't resist a glance over her shoulder, a smile tugging at her lips - she didn't understand most of it, but caught 'not my wife' and could extrapolate from there - but returned her attention forward just in time to watch Lena pull free from her grasp.

The brunette turned, looking toward her sister. Rhiannon met her gaze, jaw tightening, her shoulders lowering. They did not speak, and maybe it was a silent communication, or maybe it was just a stubborn stand-off.

Lena frowned gently, shifting on her heels, and only when she opened her mouth did Rhiannon abruptly interrupt.

"Honestly, I'm fuckin' over it." she muttered, quietly. Her body turned, offering her back up Rochelle, and the producer quickly scrambled to return to her with an apologetic pinch on her face. "I already punched you. Can we just move on?"
Lena's frown didn't weaken, but she nodded softly. It was, perhaps, the sort of conversation that needed to unfold more privately - and Rochelle didn't make any effort to force them. Settling Rhiannon's concerns about how the team would react was, she hoped, enough.

They had to stay strong, if they were going to find Coach and Nick.

They had to stay strong, in case they didn't.

"There's more clothes in here." Lena's voice was tender, and she thumbed over her shoulder toward the door she'd left ajar. "Just shorts, though. Beach cover-up stuff. And..."

Rochelle blinked, startled a moment when the biker looked down, reaching behind herself to pull something off the back of her shorts. As she brought it in front of herself and held it out, the air left Rochelle's lungs entirely.

The walkie-talkie.

She didn't have time to even inhale, to think about speaking, before a flash of red entered her periphery. Ellis was suddenly there, charging forward, and he'd snatched the radio out of Lena's hands fast enough to make her jolt in surprise.

He just held it, for a moment, cupping it in his hands and staring down at it. Rochelle thought he might turn it on and try, start yelling into it, because that seemed like something he'd do - but he just held onto it. When she looked at his face, his expression was torn, flickering between a quiet shock and a fleeting misery, thumbing over the controls.

"They fell in the ocean." he mumbled. "Theirs is probably - broke, or..."

Lena reached out, touching his wrist. His chin dropped, and his shoulders trembled when she murmured, "Might not work, but it also might. Worth a try, right, sunshine? But we may not hear anything until the storm's cleared. When they get a chance to recover, get somewhere safe, too."

He nodded, softly, and it was the first time Rochelle had seen his face settle into something that didn't look half-furious. "Okay." left him in a fractured tone of voice. "Yeah. That... sounds good."

When Lena circled her fingers more firmly around his wrist and lowered her voice, he looked up at her.

Her voice firmed, somewhere between comforting and assertive. "Coach wouldn't have jumped if he didn't think he could do something. Our part was getting ourselves safe so we can go look for them. We're halfway there, but until it stops pouring, we're no good out there. Definitely no good if a Witch catches us."

Ellis nodded, faintly, and although he fell quiet, Rochelle couldn't help but feel like it was a more balanced and steady state than he'd been in before. He turned away, gripping the radio, unable to tear his eyes off the currently-unlit LCD panel.

It's not apathy, she realized, gaze shifting back to Lena. It's never really been. She's just trying to compartmentalize all this shit into a bulletpoint list she can attack. I've done my fair share of that, and we've all done our fair share of locking shit away.

Lena caught her staring, and pulled her expression into something tired, a wince. Rochelle returned it, and the biker almost smiled.

I need her, right now. We need the help. We need the straight-forward, level-headed focus. And
maybe we need a little calculation, a little big-picture foresight. Maybe with all of us pulled together...

Suddenly, quietly, it felt like they had a shot.
Chapter 299

It was an hour before the storm settled.

With the tumult indoors quieted long before that, the wait was not as uncomfortable as it could have been. Lena and Rhiannon had slipped into the back room, but the door remained open, and it felt less like an attempt to escape this time. Their voices hummed distantly, on and off, a soft conversation.

He was a little curious, but they'd already meddled enough in the sisters' business. If there was any chance they were mending their own relationship, he didn't want to go anywhere near them. She'd been unwillingly outed by her sister, much like Nick had at his hands - twice.

That bothered him, and he couldn't recall if he'd ever flatly apologized for it - but there was no more room for guilt in his head, and he pushed the thought away before it could take root.

They'd all changed as much as they could, and Rochelle and Lena had taken some of the extra shirts and used them like towels, laying their clothes against the shirts and wringing them out, absorbing the worst of the water. It would've been easy enough to trade their clothes out for the tourist-shop gear, but the fact was, their wet clothes provided much more protection. Every extra inch of fabric was helpful, and the thicker the fabric, the better.

Any help against the nails and claws used against them was an increased chance to avoid a wound that needed tending. If it was possible to salvage them, they needed to. And if they had to go back out with mostly damp clothing, they would.

Ellis had found a balance with the radio in his hands, some tender quiet that felt miles better than the frantic anger he'd felt before. He'd seated himself near the front door, and he was alternating between staring down at it and staring at the display case that currently hid their shy feline companion.

He was, however, afraid.

When should he try? If he tried too soon and got silence, would he be able to handle it? And what if he unknowingly missed them because he was scared to turn it on? Worse, what if he turned it on and ran the battery down, and then had no way to contact them at all?

In a way, he'd focused his worries. He would not think on their survival, and he would not think on what he could have done differently, and he would not think on the last words he'd said to the man he loved before he lost him. He would simply stare at the walkie-talkie and try to estimate how much battery power it had left.

It was a better cycle for his mind to loop on and worry through than the previous one, but still, he frowned.

When he turned his chin to glance again at the display case, he found orange eyes peering at him, glinted yellow-green in the darkness. It was the first real sight of the cat he'd gotten since it had disappeared under the cabinet, and her attention made him stiffen. She blinked at him.

He did not move, afraid to scare her. He held still and spoke gently, watching the cat's eyes widen and flicker, ears faintly perceptible shapes in the dark as she focused intensely on him.

"Hey, li'l bit." left him in a whisper. "You wanna come out?"
She shifted on her feet, not quite approaching but not quite retreating - and a hiss escaped her, completed with a vague smack of her lips that stifled the sound. He couldn't shake the feeling her mouth moved again afterwards, but no sound came out.

Her meow seemed a strained and intermittent thing, and a little worry bubbled up. *She ain't mute or nothin', but she don't talk much. Ain't heard her cry once. I mean, it's good, I guess, but... ain't normal. I'd feel better if she went on hollerin'. Feel better if I went on hollerin'*. 

"We both know full well yer gonna take a hunk outta me if I move, so you just go on'n'figure it out, a'ight?" he hushed, keeping still, adjusting his gaze to look across the room. Rochelle and Chris were both looking at him from where they'd seated themselves on the ground in the middle of the room and leaned back-to-back. "I'll just sit here."

He didn't expect her to move - so when she stayed stubbornly still, he was unsurprised.

Then she moved.

It was just a tentative step closer, leaning out from under the display cabinet in order to sniff in his direction. One tiny black-tan-orange speckled paw led the way, balancing her weight on splayed toes. Her mouth opened, baring her teeth, huffing in sharply.

He saw her stiffen, saw her posture rankle with aggression, and he did the only thing he could think of: he talked.

"C'mon, you ain't so mean. I saw you snugglin' up tuh Nick before, so why're you hasslin' me?" She flinched at his voice, and suddenly her eyes and ears were directed squarely at his face again. Her whiskers trembled, even, and a strangely desperate energy entered the way she shifted her weight. "I ain't done nothin' to you. Heck, I voted tuh keep yer li'l tail with us. Bet'ch'yuh didn't know that, huh?"

He didn't know if it was his tone or cadence or the simple act of talking at all, but he was shocked to discover it worked. Her posture relaxed by degrees, but he could tell fairly easily that he was still in harm's way if he were to move.

She liked talking, and he'd always been good at talking.

Why did it feel like a struggle?

"Muh buddy Keith had'uh cat once." he mumbled, finding it easier than usual to keep his hands still as he spoke. He did not feel animated. "I mean, the cat kinda had him, y'know? It was this stray whut just walked intuh his house one day, like bolted intuh the door when he was goin' in, 'n'he'n'his parents was chasin' it around with brooms'n'shit, fer hours."

It was absurd, perhaps, to think the cat was listening, but she did seem to relax. Her attention wandered, eyes flickering over his seated body, gingerly taking another step forward. Her nose led the way, mouth open again to huff in air and breathe deep as she stretched her face towards his bare leg.

"Whut, I stink?" he muttered, just an aside before he continued, "Next thing they know, cat finds this hole in the wall, climbs right in! Took 'em all day tuh get it out, 'n'by then, it was kinda like.... squatter's rights, y'know? I mean, Keith's parents are real stern, but they got like, a code of honour."

Rochelle snorted from the center of the room, and Maggie's eyes darted toward her, jaw suddenly snapping shut. Abruptly, Ellis seemed to become the least of her concerns, and his eyes widened a
little as the cat shuffled to face into the room. The posture put her hindquarters so close to him that when her tail lashed, it struck his thigh.

The touch of her fur was strangely comforting.

"Jeez, Ellis. She might be the first person who likes your stories." Rochelle teased, gently. Her voice was a little raspy, as if the tears she'd shed had left her tired and hoarse. When he squinted at her, limiting his protest to that lest the cat realize how close they'd gotten, she laughed. "At least she's warming up to somebody."

Ellis returned his gaze to the cat, a frown pulling at the edges of his mouth as he watched Maggie stare at Rochelle. He wanted her to warm up to him, so he could provide some amount of comfort, and so she might be more willing to stay with them.

He also just wanted Nick to return.

The producer shifted, adjusting her weight to kick her legs out, and all at once, the cat scrambled to dart back under the display cabinet. There was a moment where her feet scratched against the wooden floor, gaining no traction, and Ellis reacted without thinking.

He put out a hand, touching her hip, as if to steady her or push her along.

When she lashed out at him, he didn't even see her move. He just knew there were suddenly teeth embedded in his hand and at the juncture where his pinky connected into the joint of his knuckle. The pain made him yelp, though he managed to rein in the urge to shake her off. Despite how much he wanted to react more vigorously, he merely leaned away with his face drawn into a grimace.

It hurt. It was not a warning bite.

Damp breath huffed against his skin, but she made little more than a strangled squeak as she struggled to get her paws under herself. She released him, suddenly, and as she disappeared under the cabinet, he pulled his hand close to his chest. "Ow, ow, shit! Ow!"

"Jesus, Ellis!" Rochelle gasped out. "Sorry, I didn't mean to -"

"'M fine." he hurried out, only partially a lie. He tilted his wrist, and found a formidable crescent of teethmarks bit into the top and bottom of his hand. Her fangs had sunk in, and blood welled up in the tiny divots. He was lucky she wasn't a bigger cat... even with her small mouth, she'd managed.

He gazed down at the wound, trying not to let it upset him, trying not to let it feel like rejection. He tried, most of all, not to feel even more like he'd failed both the cat and Nick.

You gotta come back, sugar. 'Cause I dunno how either'uv us're gonna get on without'cha.

Christophe was suddenly in front of him, stretching down his hand in offer. He'd only stripped down to a slim set of briefs for a few minutes - causing Rochelle to shut her eyes - and had Ellis help him wring the water out of them before putting them back on, but he'd also taken one of the hoodies Lena had found. The empty left sleeve hung limply at his side.

"Tío, you are okay? She is la semilla del diablo. She maybe takes off your arm, and we are mellizos, ¿si? Ah..." He paused, that familiar distance entering his gaze as he thought on his words, then compromised: "The same?"

His chatter didn't make Ellis laugh, but it did force him to dispel his thoughts. He hooked the
radio's beltclip onto the bottom inch of his shirt and stood, instead, pushing his unbit hand back against the wall to support himself as he rose. It hurt in its own way as his scraped-up wrists protested the flexion, and he was wincing by the time he stood.

"Y'all think the storm's let up enough tuh get a move on?" he mumbled, gaze shifting to look toward Rochelle, deflecting Chris' concern as best he could. The foreigner gazed at him a moment, just long enough to make it clear he noticed - and then turned to look toward Rochelle, too. "I wanna start checkin' out the canal. Fer all we know, maybe they got pushed up intuh that lil shippin' area, y'know?"

Ellis didn't believe it, but neither did he believe anything else. He chose neither, because believing they were dead brought on a grief he did not know how to handle, but believing they were alive felt terrifying. It felt like a risk he didn't know how to take.

He wasn't sure who he was anymore.

Rochelle exhaled, a slightly frustrated edge to it, and pushed to stand up. She walked over to the wall, peering out through a gap in the boarded-up window. "We're not going to waste the day sitting in here, that's for sure. It's not raining, but that Witch is probably still out there, and who knows where that Tank is." she responded, worriedly tucking her hands together and scratching at her palm. "We'll have to be quick and quiet. Maybe just make a run to the river, maybe try and leave a message for them, in case they come looking and their radio doesn't work."

That felt like a plan, or something close to it. Ellis nodded his head. "Yeah. Sounds good. We'll duck out, take'uh look 'round. We gotta find some supplies fer Rhee's back, anyhow, 'n' hopefully some extra." His chin turned, glancing toward the display cabinet with a small frown. "If we let her out, she'll prolly come back here. I mean, she came back tuh the café, so I think she gets it, y'know?"

He knew his teammates shared a look, and he knew it was dubious. He raised his voice before they could argue. "Maybe she'll run off'n'go find Nick. Bring him back her damn self."

Ellis felt his hot air run out almost immediately, felt his faux-gusto falter, and he wasn't sure what he'd have said next if Lena's voice hadn't suddenly called out. It jolted him to attention, buffering him from the dark places he'd begun to peer into, making it hard to focus on anything but the way the sisters suddenly re-entered the room.

"Are we going by the bridge? If we can get that bag back -"

Rhiannon puffed out a growl, rolling her eyes sharply. It was obvious enough by the close way they walked that they'd softened to one another, and regained at least the beginnings of their united front - though not, apparently, on this matter.

"Fuck-ass, Eleanor." The brunette's face flinched into a sour squint, but Rhee kept going, undaunted. Frustration made her palms turn up, moving gingerly so as to not strain her shoulders. "Let it go. We can... find more. And I'll live until we do, shit. I'm not gonna turn into a fuckin' pumpkin."

The shorter sister gritted her teeth slightly, shaking her head, frustration making her voice taut. "If we're going to be right there -"

Turning slowly to face them, Rochelle took a tentative tilt to her head and reached up to scratch at her temple. She glanced at Ellis and Christophe, but both men shrugged. "Uh... What's going on? Who's turning into what?"
Lena's mouth opened, but Rhiannon cut in, dryly.

"I'm a were-boy. My dick will grow back if I don't complete the daily ritual."

Ellis, Rochelle, and Lena all choked on their next breath. It was not a graceful reaction, and suddenly, the blonde's frustration turned into a slight grin, as if their shock entertained her past her discomfort. It was more hesitant than her usual shit-eating smiles, however, like she was still uncertain about the new situation.

"I... had enough estrogen pills for a few weeks in our bag." she explained, lower, thumbing gently against the studs in her brow. "But I'll be the first fuckin' person to say it's not worth walking our asses back to the spot where there's a bitch-ass Tank wandering around."

Clearing her throat to fend off her wary humour, Rochelle slid her hand to rub at her jawline with her knuckles, shaking her head. Her gaze darted to Lena, and she spoke firmly. "If it's important to you two, we go. Besides, wasn't there still some food in there? We aren't going to be any help to the boys if we starve."

"Few things we could use, for sure." the older biker affirmed, chin lowering. She reached up to catch a strand of her hair and start twirling it around her knuckle. "Some food, a couple waterbottles we had tucked away. Some other supplies I was saving."

Rochelle's foot tapped against the ground, and she glanced suddenly toward Ellis. Her expression was clear enough in its questioning pinch.

He nodded his head, then dropped his chin with a frown. "Good place's any tuh start lookin', anyway. I don't wanna get us lost tryin' tuh circle back around a different way, so... if we can pick us up some supplies, too, more's the better."

With a faint sigh, Rochelle placed her hands against her stomach and nodded. "Okay. As much as I hate to say it, we should gear back up, get ready to go. We'll take a loop and then come back here." Her voice grew stern, then, with a huff to it that felt on the verge of upset. "If we hear any sign of the Tank, we bunker down. We move slow, and keep an ear out for Witches. And nobody breaks off from the team."

Ellis turned on his heel, frowning down at the dark shadow underneath the display cabinet. He'd procrastinated long enough. He just had to hope he was making the right choice by letting her out, and that she'd find her way back.

He stepped forward, gently grabbing the display cabinet by the slim rim around its midsection. His body strained, jutting his hip into the piece of furniture in order to get more leverage, and he pulled it to carefully angle it away from the door. He moved slowly, skating it flat against the floor to ensure that he didn't hurt Maggie where she was hidden underneath it.

Once there was enough room to open the door, he did so, tilting his head to peek outside. He intended on giving their surroundings a once-over to ensure it was moderately empty, somewhat safe, before he released the cat. It was the smallest bit of security he could manage to pull together, to at least think he'd let her out into a cleared street.

He hadn't even gotten a good look out into the street before a flash of black slipped through the crack in the door, and the cat was gone, footsteps whisper-quiet as she bolted immediately out of sight. She didn't stop to look back at them, and he couldn't even quite determine where she'd gone to from the angle he stood at.
Ellis felt a surge of anxiety - and then nothing at all.

Rochelle's hand touched his back, gently, a soothing sort of contact, and did not speak. She gave him that moment of silence to process before she tried to pull him back in so they could change back into their half-dry clothing and prepare to leave.

It was painful to realize the truth, standing there. It wasn't that he didn't recognize himself - no, he saw himself very clearly, and with such abrupt and unfamiliar clarity, it made him dizzy. It made him feel ill. It made him feel desperately, terribly alone.

*It's all hogwash. It's all just... bullshit, ain't it? Always been bullshit. Always been by the skin'uv our teeth. We ain't special. We ain't nobody. We could die, just like the next person'n'the person before us. We ain't even here 'cause we earned it or won it or fought for it, it's all just...*

Soft, faint, like the tenderest of whispers against his temple, the private murmurs in the moments where Nick had forgotten he wasn't supposed to feel safe, he heard it.

"*Just luck, Fireball. And luck runs out.*"
Chapter 300

It started, first, as a crushing shade of black.

It was not a shade that could be contained behind his eyelids. It must have been a void, a great expanse, stretching out miles and miles and perhaps forever onward. The blackness - the nothingness - loomed large in every direction until he was surely infinitesimal against its canvas.

But that seemed wrong, somehow. Was it instead a sheath, cocooned around him, no larger than a hair's breadth beyond his outline? Perhaps he was swaddled in it, so tightly wrapped that he could not breathe, sheer darkness melded flat against his skin until it became him.

If he struggled, would it break? Or would he?

Only gently, only slowly, did some far-off shape come into brief focus, back-lit only by its inarguable something compared to a yawning, endless nothing.

He did not know what it was.

There, in the dark, he was suddenly afraid, and the fear was a cold shock. His eyes flung open and he screamed, but the darkness rushed to fill his mouth and his chest and crush him from the inside out. He could not scream any longer.

It expanded in his lungs, and swallowed him whole, bleeding into him like stained ink blossoming into fabric. There was no pain, no sensory awareness of it, just events unfolding in a distant fashion. It simply encroached into the space that he had previously inhabited, and there, in the dark, he might've died.

A hand touched him, grip starkly real against the fiction of his surroundings, and the vastness around him turned into motes of light, particles of sand, collapsing in on itself and falling ever downward. Gravity had suddenly regained control. The surge of weightlessness was a punch to his stomach, and then he, too, fell - or rose, perhaps.

Reality re-asserted itself into shapes and borders he could not define, not at first, until it all snapped into focus.

He was eighteen, leaned into the railing of their apartment balcony, and his uncle looped an arm over his shoulders, pressing into him. He was drunk, but yet to lose his faculties completely. He smelled like ash and sweat and a particular citrus-sharp cologne.

It made him homesick.

"Saccente. So proud of you." he muttered, and squeezed his arm around Nick affectionately.
"Always knew you'd make it. You tried so hard not to graduate, didn't you, little bastard? Why? You want to be a fuck-up like me? Like your pop?"

He gazed down into the street, the motion of cars and people barely perceptible past the edges of the darkness gathered around them. He struggled to perceive more, further, but he had no control.

"You're gonna make it, Nico. You're gonna get out of here and make somethin' of yourself. You won't remember me or this fucking town, and don't look back. That fucking stronzo is in the ground - dico che è una liberazione. You are going to be fine, figlio mio."
Three hours later, after his uncle had fallen asleep, Nick climbed over the railing and jumped. The moment before he hit the concrete, he realized he didn't want to fall. He didn't want to die. He wanted to stop it, but gravity had decided for him the moment he'd released his grip on the railing, and all he could do was curl away from the ground flying up to meet him and scream out.

He woke in the hospital with broken bones. His uncle would think it an accident, or simply decide not to admit what it might've otherwise been. His parents never found out. It was the first and last time he'd try.

Reality re-asserted itself.

He was twenty-five. Clammy and hot, listening to the roar of voices around him, Nick closed his eyes. He couldn't take the sound, and couldn't take the way his father stared at him across the visitation table, and couldn't take the empty spot where his mother should have been.

"You should'a been there." he grunted, and his eyes were cold. "You should'a been there, Nicolas. Now I gotta bury her, and you're in here? You didn't make Ol's funeral, now your own mother? This how you got raised?"

"How would you fucking know?" he snarled, and the guards stepped in before they could go much further, on alert for conflict. His father left, and did not return. It was one of the last times they spoke.

Reality re-asserted itself.

He was thirty-three. The hotel room was plain, claustrophobic. She was there and sobbing into her hands, and he approached to draw her into his arms, and she did not resist. It was the only time they'd ever felt real.

Angel's mother died of lung cancer. They hadn't even known she was sick until she was in the hospital, and it had all happened so quickly, there was barely time to react. She hadn't gotten word until things were critical, and they'd scrambled for plane tickets, and arrived too late.

"I'm sorry, doll." left him, syllables rising from his lips as faint bubbles in the darkness. He knew how it felt, and he'd wanted it to be different for her, and he'd failed. "I'm so sorry."

She buried against his chest and wailed, and she didn't leave his side all day, all week - and the way she touched him felt real. He convinced himself that something had changed, maybe for good. It was the start of something between them, a new beginning in a year-old marriage. They'd figure it out.

Reality cracked, bled, and suddenly the darkness became freezing cold.

Water flooded his ears and blurred his vision, and something cut against his cheek as he lifted his head. Sour-tasting grit stuck in his teeth and against his tongue, and he was vomiting before he could stop it, rejecting the fluid in his lungs and mouth. He shuddered, body arching as he struggled to find something to grab onto, but his left hand found only sludge and his right arm did not move.

Trying to shift it earned him agony, a splitting pain tearing from his shoulder down to his bicep. He choked out a gasp of air that only drew more water into his lungs and drove him to a wracking, heaving set of coughs, tears streaming down his face.

His knees found ground, or something like it, and he felt them sink an inch into muck and silt. It was the slightest stability, the faintest sense of an anchor, and he stiffled with it. He straightened
against them, and found himself waist-deep in water, though before it had felt like it might have been infinite around him.

His body slumped, gasping in wheezing breaths, left hand trembling as he reached up to touch his right shoulder. Pain, again, made him choke - and he sat there for just a moment, breaths rattling in his chest, instead trying to use the heel of his left hand to clear his eyes. His skin was muddy and wet, however, and the attempt stung ferociously.

Nick was left to blink, jaw slack as he heaved in air, staring ahead as his vision was nothing but blurred grey and green, unable to see clearly and unable to clear his vision.

It was real.

*This is real.*

His thoughts ticked by, slowly, coming together piece by piece, collecting themselves. The difference between the gauzy memories and the moment he now sat in felt faint, but they were there. The pain of his whole body, torso and legs shivering with waves of a pulsating ache, and the razor-sharp agony of his shoulder, were too overwhelming to be a dream.

As he blinked the water from his eyes and slowed his breathing, his surroundings became clearer. He knelt at the edge of a cluster of reeds, with a slim upcropping of earth beneath them that almost breached the surface of the greyed water.

The sky above him was grey and thick with clouds, dampening the light, and there was a distant grey haze in the air that seemed to mark the storm where it had crawled inland, passing over and beyond him. It had petered out, though far-off blinks of light in the sky continued, lightning strikes barely perceptible.

If he turned his head, looking over his shoulder, he could see Tybee in a dim silhouette behind him. He could not tell how far it was.

He'd washed ashore, like flotsam, in the silt marsh of an estuary traveling away from the town. Although he'd stabilized himself, he could feel the water by his feet sucking gently at his limbs, a current trying to pull him back toward the ocean. It had dislodged him from the marsh, perhaps. But how had he gotten there in the first place?

The shivering started to take hold of his entire frame, and every twitch and shudder surged further pain through his arm. He glanced down, gently, staring at it where it hung limply at his side.

His shirt was drenched and stuck to his skin, and the ball of his shoulder was not seated properly in the joint. It was not aligned as it should have been with his neck, and he did not know if it was broken, or if it was something he could fix.

He just knew it was agonizing.

His head lifted, sluggish against the protesting crackle of his neck, and he did not understand. *How... didn't I...? How am I alive? Why aren't I dead at the bottom of the fucking river?* He was not so aware as to be relieved, nor disappointed. He was still coming to terms with his physicality, with his surroundings, let alone his survival.

There were pieces of furniture scattered amongst the reeds around him, sofa cushions, slats of aluminum that might have been cast-off from a car. It had all come to rest against the reeds and the edges of the marsh's deeper sections, much as he had.
There were bodies, too, and the sight of grey skin surged a brief fear in him before he recognized they were unmoving.

I... should have drowned. He should have been a corpse among the corpses, collected here to rot. He touched his chest, fingertips catching in his soaked shirt, eyes widening, his breath catching and quickening. I was supposed to fucking drown. Why am I still fucking here?

He'd wanted to die. From the moment the tongue had grabbed him, to the moment his vision had blacked out and his consciousness had been ripped from him, he'd surrendered to it. It had been a relief to feel the choice taken away, to be allowed the blessing of letting go.

Now, here, agency had returned to him, and it was terrifying. His jaw gritted as he choked out a faint sound, and it felt like the punch of a sob in his diaphragm. He had to make the choice, now, to pick himself up and fight, and he did not know how.

Why couldn't I have just -

And then he saw it.

There was a car cushion a few feet deeper in the marsh, nestled tightly against a thick bushel of reeds, and it took him a moment to make sense of what he was looking at. His vision was still fogged, and when he blinked, grit was disturbed from the corner of his left eyelid and sparked sharp pain in his eye.

Through the renewed flush of tears, he realized: there was an arm tucked over the top of the cushion, hung limply. The hand was dark-skinned, and a bright red windbreaker was tugged up to its forearm, mud and dirt scraped into its skin, and he knew.

He did not remember, but he knew.

Panic cut everything out of him except a singular pain, his chest tightening until his heart struggled even to beat, and he was moving before he could stop himself.

His knees struggled to pull free of the muddy sand beneath him, and the very first step he took had him staggering, splashing as he struggled to get his feet under himself. He slapped his left hand down to dig nails in the silt, trying to crawl forward, his right arm shooting a shattering pain up his shoulder with every motion.

"Sam!" he shouted, the agony in his voice completely unfamiliar to his own ear. He pleaded, he begged, and the cold of his drenched body was nothing compared to the cold that sliced into his chest. "No, no, Sammy, please - please don't -"

This is what you get. This is what you do. You crawl out of the shit, every time, while nobody else makes it. You can't even fucking die right.

"You can't do this. You can't do this to me." He couldn't stop, even when it hurt, even when his voice tried to break between his teeth, even when he tasted blood at the back of his throat. He collapsed down into the knee-deep water, digging his knees again into the ground and reaching out with his one working arm to grab the man's wrist.

But the furious, desperate desire to check his pulse, to see if he was even alive, was a useless gesture. He could not feel anything but his own shivering, and his own pulse jack-hammering in his chest and his limbs.

"Please. Please." he whispered, straining, leaning forward. He scrabbled instead to grab the edge of
the car cushion, pulling it off of the man, but maneuvering anything one-handed felt clumsy. Coach was halfway in the water, unmovable, his face slack.

He looked dead.

*He's dead, because of you. And you couldn't even have the fucking decency to go with him.*

"Please, Sammy," gasped out of him, and his breathing turned to shuddered heaves. "$P-please -" But it strangled into a groan, shouting out a furious and animal noise, summoning what little strength he had as he dove his arm down and into the water to loop it under Coach's body. He had to scrabble nails against the muck to get his hand wedged in, and he found the man's belt with his fingers.

Another shout fueled him as he started dragging Coach in deeper into the reeds, pulling him into the shallower water, kicking his heels against the mud and feeling his sneakers struggle and pull against the vacuum built by it. He splashed down shoulder-first, the water crashing up into his face and reeds battering him as he struck down and crushed them under his weight. The last yank secured them both on the nearest thing they had to dry land.

Gasping out a breath as the urge to vomit came hot and sharp up his spine, he kicked his legs, dragging himself forward enough to settle against Coach's side. He buried his elbow in the muck and scrabbled his hand up, patting the man's cheek, grabbing the side of his face.

He felt cold.

"Sam, say something." He was babbling, now, like if he kept talking, he wouldn't have to accept what his eyes told him. "You gotta say something, baby. This isn't fucking fair. You can't make me fucking stay here, and then leave me. You can't fucking do this to me. I can't do this without you. I can't - I'm not gonna make it."

His breaths stuttered, tone sharpening, growing more desperate, forcing himself forward with a squirm until he could bury his forehead against the man's jaw, huddling close.

"P-please... It should'a been me. It was just... supposed to be me."

It became a sob, and he could not help it. He couldn't stop himself, and couldn't stop the tears that started to flow freely now, eyes burning as they watered and streamed. He should have felt shame, but it seemed pointless beyond the anger and the grief and the desperation. He could not bring himself to care.

"I didn't want - I didn't want this. I didn't. I'm so fucking sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, Sammy. I -"

A cold, wet hand settled against the back of his neck. Fingers curled against the nape of his neck and drew him tighter, closer.

He had not felt the motion, had not heard the shift of water amidst the lapping of water and hush of reeds. It was a frigid shock, and then a harsh relief that tingled through him, and his body wanted to collapse. He wanted to go limp, and sob, and surrender to the misery coursing through him.

He wanted to stop a moment and feel that relief, until he could scrub out the stain of what he'd felt before.

"S'alright, Nicky." croaked dully from the man, a weak rumble in his chest, slurred with a pained exhaustion. He sounded dizzied, but stirring - had been stirring, perhaps, a few moments before.
Nick shoved up, instead of slumping, drawing himself up onto his trembling left arm and away from the touch, palm sliding off Coach's cheek to instead strike into the muck next to his head. He knew his face was flushed red and covered in tears past the mud, and he knew there was no piecing together his composure.

He did not care.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" left him hoarsely, in what might've been a shout if he'd had the air to shout. "What the fuck were you thinking?! I thought you were fucking -" But it hurt, even, to say, so he did not. "Did you jump? Did you fucking jump after me?"

The eldest survivor's body shifted, subtly, and pain fluctuated over his face with a ferocity that made him gasp. He spread his fingers as he sought a grip in the waterlogged muck beneath him, struggling to straighten up. "Jus'... hold on, Nick, 'm -" he grunted, but Nick could not bite back an interruption.

"Did you fucking think about them?" His voice was gaining strength, anger boiling up from nowhere like bile at the back of his throat, fueled by a panicked terror. It kept the tears at bay, kept them from continuing, though his face was already streaked. "You think about how they'd fucking make it without you? You could've gotten out, you fucking - you could've -"

Coach sat up, then, and his eyes were bleary and half-closed when they focused on the Northerner. He coughed, shoulders wracked with it, and exhaled a rusted-out sigh.

"What was I thinkin', Nick?" Coach was so exhausted, his voice thin and frail, but he continued on. "I was thinkin' I can't lose you. I was thinkin' they can't lose you. I was thinkin' none of this shit's worth it if it ain't all of us, Nick."

The Northerner wanted to cut in, again, but the other man did not allow him to.

"I was thinkin' I'd rather die, too, than keep on movin' without you. I was thinkin' I don't leave family behind." A grief tugged his brows together, his right hand lifting to pluck at the collar of his shirt, trying to wipe the soaked fabric against his eyes. "An' what were you thinkin'? You want to die, Nick?"

Nick felt the air leave him, felt his face go slack, felt the twist of agony in his chest. It felt like a betrayal. He felt rubbed raw, chafed, scraped until he bled. He shivered, and did not know how to speak, though he wanted so badly to stop the man from speaking.

"I saw it. Saw the way you looked at me."

Trembling, clutching against the silt in his grasp, Nick forced himself to utter a few broken syllables of an argument. "The Smoker -"

Coach's head shook, and he closed his eyes, chin dropping against his chest. His voice lowered, softened, both a weakness and a gentleness entering it. "No, Nicolas. We both know that's bull. We both know it. We both know you been slowin' down, gettin' clumsy. We both know you didn't fight. Don't lie to me."

They sat there a moment, and Coach collected himself, touching his palms gently against his body as if seeking out injuries. When his hands settled against his knee, gripping around his patella, he stopped, slumping his head entirely.

He might've spoken, but Nick did, instead.
"You ever wonder if the... common denominator in every shit thing that happens is you?" he whispered, gaze going unfocused when Coach's eyes reopened and landed on his face. The softest frown touched his lips, but he did not interject.

It felt like moving through sludge to continue, but he did. "Like somehow everyone else manages to make it through life without breaking everything they fucking touch, but you just... you're just acid? And you spent so fucking long using it like a weapon, you can't stop, even if you want to?"

The older man's expression trembled, and maybe it was that soft weakness that brought it out. Maybe it was the surreal moment they sat in, hidden amongst the reeds, lost and alone, that pried it from between Nick's teeth.

"I don't fucking deserve him, but I wanted him." ghosted out of him, every word hooked and serrated as they passed from his lungs. "And I don't know how to fucking love him, but I don't know how to let him go. And you were... all of you, were all I had left. I didn't... know what to do, anymore. It felt... like the best..."

Coach gazed at him, softly, and then looked upwards at the clouds. There, with a slow and pained sort of resignation, his eyes watered. Tears collected at their corners, and his sigh drew them to close, loosing streaks down through the mud on his face. Regret tainted his voice when he spoke.

"I been wrong, Nick. I been wrong this whole damn time."

The gambler shivered, again, and closed his eyes. He listened, even as it began to sink claws in him, gnawing at his control, draining out his anger and leaving him with nothing else to lean on. The idea scared him.

"Whole time I've known you, I been out here, treatin' you like my son." Coach almost chuckled, but it faltered. "Chased you all day tryin'a get you to behave, to fix you up. Lettin' myself get disappointed when you didn't listen, like you owed me somethin'. Like you should trust me, 'cause I knew you better - 'cause I knew you better. Holdin' everything over you like it'd make you listen, when all it did was tear you an' me apart."

Bullshit. he wanted to argue, but could not summon words. Like I'm fucking blameless. Like I made it easy.

But the older man's attention settled back down on Nick's face, and it was patient and exhausted and sincere. "We ain't been speakin' the same language, an' I let you push me away. I let it keep on goin', let us keep fightin', so we never got nowhere. I looked you dead in the eyes an' told you how you felt, without ever listenin' to what you were sayin'. I never tried to learn you. I just figured I had you puzzled out. I didn't try."

It started again, first as the shaky beginnings of a sob, and then the flow of tears down his face. His body betrayed him, shuddering, and a stifled exhale preceded the ache around his eyes. He could not breathe evenly.

"I was wrong, Nick, and I'm sorry. I did wrong by you."

He could barely breathe at all.

Coach's hand touched at the side of his head, and he collapsed into it without thinking, and his face was suddenly muffled into the man's shoulder. Fingers threaded against the back of his head, and Coach's mouth buried into his temple, and their wet and muddy clothes squelched as they pressed into one another.
"You ain't my son, Nick, an' I gotta learn that."

Before that could feel like some rejection, some chastisement, some distance between them that Nick did not want, Coach murmured, "You're my brother."

Nick did not want to sob, but it felt like all he could do. It was agonizing, every inhale jolting his shoulder, but all the pain did was push him into heavier breaths, sucking in air and forcing it out in too-sharp, too-quick breaths. Every choked exhale brought on another wave of tears, and he curled in on himself, fingers catching on the other man's sleeve.

It was grief, and more grief than he could contain in the damaged borders of his body. It was misery and regret and guilt, and perhaps it was also much more than that. Shame and anger - but relief, too. Every word broke him down a little more.

"I wanna whoop you as often as I wanna kiss you, but I gotta learn to work wit' you." The man's tone softened, weakened, trembling, even as his grip on Nick tightened. "We gotta learn to work together. I gotta let you be who you are, even if it ain't what I want all the time, 'cause it don't matter what I want. It matters what we want, Nick, you an' me together."

Nick spoke, and it left him in a wheeze, a gasp, a desperate sound past the shuddered whimper that caught at the edge of his voice. "I-I'm sorry, Sam. I fucked up. I... fucked... everything..."

But Coach's head shook, sharply, a refusal.

"Tell me what you want, Nicky, an' we'll get it. We'll do it. I ain't gonna let anything stop you, a'ight? I got you." His voice broke, there, and the older man's shoulders shivered in kind as tears became more audible in his words. "You're my brother, Nick, and I ain't gonna let you go. I ain't gonna watch you hurt and not do everythin' I can to keep you safe. I'm here fo' you, an' I'll always be here, no matter what. Even if you fuck up."

Coach's other arm curled to settle around his waist, and how did he feel so small? How did he feel so fragile, so breakable, so broken - and how did he need the touch so badly, despite the way that touch made it all feel so much worse? He felt like he shattered as the man's embrace tightened, and he pushed into it, even as it became an agonizing pressure against his immobile right arm.

"I want us to be good, Nicky." the man whispered. "I just want us to be good."

Nick sobbed into his shoulder until he could not breathe, until he choked and gasped and struggled, wept as if some iron-clad, years-old gate in his chest had been flung open and he could not get it shut again. He cried, and felt tears in the shiver of the man's chest.

"I got you, Nicky."

It felt like a promise. It felt like a confession. It felt like the second time in his life someone genuine had told him they loved him, and the second time a tender and secret part of him truly believed them.

"I got you."
"Just fucking do it."

Nick spoke between gasps, head bowed where he knelt in the marsh. Coach had moved behind him and was tenderly feeling at his shoulder, thumbs digging into the swollen muscle there. Every touch hurt, spasming a tingling numbness up his neck, and he wasn't sure he could take much more of the manipulation.

His injury gave them an easy excuse for a reprieve from their previous conversation. His breakdown was not far from his awareness, but it was not such a crushing weight against him, either.

They'd both cried, and that felt like an equalizer. It made it harder to feel shame about having broken down, about the things he'd said. The wounds were open, now, and there wasn't much to be done. And if it was gonna be someone, I'm... glad it was him.

"Sam - for fuck's sake, please, just -"

Suddenly, the older man pushed back, coming to kneel beside him instead. He had only enough time to bark out a shocked sound of protest before Coach gripped a palm against his sternum and pushed him back. He struck the muck beneath them gently, the back of his head squishing into the inch-deep layer of water over the marshy ground.

They'd already flattened and broken most of the reeds around them, but a few rigid stalks pressed uncomfortably into his neck, and his eyes widened up toward the sky. He might've mustered upset at being pushed into the mud if he wasn't already covered.

"Never dislocated a shoulder before." he whispered, all-too-aware of how nervous his voice sounded. "Fucking hurts."

"Yup." When Coach grasped his bicep with one hand and his shoulder with the other, gently lifting his arm up off the ground until it was roughly perpendicular with his body, he expected something violent. He expected a shove, a jerk, and a crack. He braced for it.

Instead, the hand gripping his shoulder began to gently squeeze at the muscles just around the worst of the protruding bone, and the hand on his bicep started to massage up to the base of his arm. They both kneaded in alternating motions against the wet cloth of his shirt, avoiding directly touching the shape of his dislocated shoulder.

It hurt, but it did not hurt like he expected, and between the flashes of pain and tension it was almost soothing. He also did not see it making any progress in actually getting his arm back into place. He couldn't help but shift his gaze to Coach's face with a confused pinch, though he tried for a joke. "Are you comin' onto me?" he rasped out.

"Me jumpin' off a bridge fo' yo' ass wasn't romantic enough?" The older man grunted, a heavy harrumph. "Relax, Nicolas."

Nick's eyes half-closed, and his breath stuttered, trying for a laugh that came out choked. "This is the least fucking relaxing -" He gasped, despite himself, as Coach's grip tightened, pulling his arm up toward the sky just a half-inch, as if to lift him by it. It was just enough to put a fraction of his weight on it, drawing his shoulder taut. "Jesus, just fucking do it!"
The man frowned at him, an unimpressed arch touching his brow. "I shove this back in place, you're gonna tear somethin'. Just breathe, Nicolas. Relax. Talk to me." His voice softened, there, and his massage on the Northerner's arm slowed even as it grew firmer. "C'mon. Still mad at me? You had some shit to say?"

It was bait, an olive branch, and he wanted to take it. Coach gave him the chance to fall back into a comfortable pattern. *Let's fight.* he offered. *It's okay if that's easier, just for now.*

Instead, Nick whispered, "How'd we make it?"

He felt the man's body still, before resuming the digging and probing motions of his fingertips. He followed the lines of muscle and tendon that surrounded Nick's shoulder, trying to soothe the swollen joint. "Li'l blurry, if I'm bein' honest. We got lucky. I snagged you, kept us above the surface. There was a lot of shit in the water, an' some of it was floatin'. Car seats an' shit. Current did most of the work otherwise."

Coach in a fight for both their lives, with Nick no more than dead weight against him, was not pleasant to imagine. But it was over, and he was too tired for guilt.

"Why didn't it suck us out to sea?" It was infantile, perhaps, to mumble such soft and single-minded questions, but it was all he had the energy for. Coach did not seem to mind.

The big man hummed, thumb stroking a few circles against the muscle just above his clavicle, the touch far away from his injured joint and a welcome counter-balance to the rest of the contact. "Storm surge, most like. Water level rises, the tide pushed us in. Now the storm's passed over, it's dumpin' rain upstream, an' it'll be pushin' back the other way."

Nick's eyes closed, then, submitting to his exhaustion. It was easier to relax with his eyes closed, and he couldn't tell if the pain eased because of it, or because the numbness tingling in his shoulder was encroaching further.

He thought of a faraway night, when Ellis had crept onto the bed behind him and rubbed his shoulders, and a subtle misery settled a knot in his throat. Why did the tiny flush of tears that tickled his eyelashes feel just as pathetic as the sobs that had wracked him moments before?

"Did you... see her? Brenda?"

Coach didn't still this time, but it took him a moment to respond. He kept his fingers moving, letting his grip on Nick's elbow tighten, drawing his arm a little further in its extension. The feeling in his shoulder joint was faint and tense, like a bubble of air was trapped inside it and grew closer and closer to popping.

"Yeah. I did." he murmured, and there was a tremble to his voice, an unease that Nick wasn't used to. "Don't know how, or... why, but... yeah, I saw her, too. Got the bite to prove it. Guess Chris wasn't hallucinatin', after all."

Nick's chin lifted, feeling the silt conform to the back of his head with an unpleasant *shluck*, and he forced out a hollow laugh. He'd almost wanted Coach to say he hadn't, but there was some comfort to be found in knowing he hadn't imagined it. "Maybe all three of us were."

The grunt that left Coach was unconvinced. "I don't think there's any good in us talkin' 'bout that, Nick. I don't got no answers, an' neither do you."

"You told me to..."
"I told you to yell at me." the man countered, before Nick could go any further. He shifted on his knees, drawing himself a little straighter, pulling with fractionally more force on the Northerner's arm. "Not worry 'bout shit we can't solve right now."

Nick inhaled sharply when he felt something shift in his shoulder, the motion frightening him more than actively hurting. It did not pop into place, however, and he forced himself to speak rather than tense up. "Not gonna yell. I should be... glad you saved me." he muttered, and that was the closest he could get to admitting he wasn't.

Coach's hand shifted on his shoulder, stilling and tightening in a squeeze, and Nick deliberately did not open his eyes even though he knew Coach's were on his face. "I got that covered, if you still wanna feel some type'a way 'bout it." he responded, wryly, a soft worry at the edge of his voice. "But now you gotta get yo' shit together. Help my ass get home."

Nick didn't want his lips to twitch up, didn't want the grin, but it didn't ask before it landed on his lips. "Fair." he admitted.

If Coach hadn't been there - or, worse, if Coach hadn't survived, the gambler might've let the current grab him. It seemed distant and far-away, now, like he'd come to his senses in the moments since, but he could still recall the feeling. He wasn't sure he could have pulled himself together.

It was moot, now, he realized. He could not leave Coach alone, even if it felt like a part of him was still in the water. It was a reason to move when he wasn't sure he had any other.

Ellis doesn't love me anymore, and fine - that's fine. And the rest of the team'll side with him, and that's fine. He needs them. He was too tired to keep it at bay. It settled in, as truths often do, quietly and patiently. But I need them, too. I need... somebody. I needed...

And then his shoulder popped.

He could feel the slide and snap of muscle fibres regaining their normal position, feel the suddenrightness of the joint. It hurt, but only tangentially, a shockwave of soreness that made his teeth grit. Still, it was nowhere near the visceral pain he'd expected, and he was left to pant gently.

The tingling was worse, pins and needles beginning throughout his arm, and it still hurt when he shifted his shoulder. It felt... weak, somehow, as if it had atrophied in a cast.

Coach didn't release his arm, softly lowering it and settling Nick's hand onto his chest. He patted it in clear indication, and the prone man reflexively grabbed it with his free hand, keeping it there, unsure if he could manage to maintain its position without the grip. The hand on his shoulder tightened again and pulled him, and they both grunted as he was drawn upright.

The feel of muddy water trickling down his back was unpleasant, but no more unpleasant than the rest of his body felt.

"A'ight. Hold still." Coach started to pull off his windbreaker, but he'd only gotten his right arm free when he went to pull the other side off and froze. His eyes darted down, and before Nick could ask, he'd reached down and grabbed at a boxy shape protruding from within the jacket's flank.

The fucking radio.

Their gazes met, widened, and suddenly the older man was scrambling to unzip the inner pocket an inch above the lump. Nick bit the inside of his cheek, feeling his heart rate pick up again, unable to do much but watch as Coach pulled the walkie-talkie out of the pocket and drew it into his hand.
His thumb smeared mud against the side of it.

He did not, however, turn it on.

Nick was prepared to lunge and take it from him, one-handed or not, but the other man shook his head and cleared his throat.

"Shit ain't waterproof. Neither is my jacket - not the linin', anyhow. It's probably got seawater in it, an' if I turn it on now, it'll fry fo' sho'." he sighed out, frustrated. The way he stared down at the radio spoke to well-disguised restraint. "We gotta get back to town, dry it out first. Best case, we find some rice or some shit."

The Northerner frowned, despite himself, and lowered his chin. He glanced at his shoulder, trying to gently shrug it just to see if he could - and it moved, but a blinding flash of pain followed the motion, and he winced. It braced him, a little, for when he muttered, "We don't know if they -"

He didn't see the hand coming before it had grabbed the side of his face, palm against his ear, and that made his eyes widen as he glanced up. Coach was staring at him, intently, lips drawn in a tight line. "They got out." he responded, firm. "They got out, an' they're lookin' fo' us. Best plan we got is pickin' our asses up and makin' our way to the helicopter."

It was intense, and Nick wasn't sure to which of them the intensity was directed. He hesitated, before tilting his chin to pull away from the touch.

"Fine. Jeez." A sigh scraped up his throat, and he watched as Coach buckled the radio onto his hip, and then returned to removing his jacket. "Bet Ellis is puzzlin' out how he can just find you, though."

He didn't truly believe the words, and that fact made him wince when Coach's nostrils flared, and an irritated roll of his eyes flashed in his periphery. "I can't believe yo' ass still don't get it." he muttered, and it felt like the beginning of a tirade.

But the rest never came.

Nick wasn't sure if he was relieved or not.

Coach tied the sleeves of his jacket together, putting the loop over Nick's head and nudging his injured arm into the cradle made by it. It formed a loose sling, though it wouldn't hold up against much more than the dead weight of his arm. It was, at least, enough that he was able to let go of his forearm with his left hand.

Nick glanced up, and found Coach frowning down at it, wheels turning behind his eyes. The man blinked as the Northerner's attention landed on him, and he twisted his mouth before vocalizing his thoughts.

"You ain't in fightin' shape. You fall, and that's gonn' pop right on back out. You need rest, but we ain't got time." His head twisted, and he gazed around them, clicking his tongue. His eyes held calculation, along with a slow panic. "Don't see no zombies back here, but that don't mean there ain't any. Best we can do is follow the river back to town, an' get our asses somewhere safe. Can't just go runnin' around hollerin'. Doubt they killed that Tank."

Abruptly, sharp, Nick muttered, "Fuck." When Coach glanced back at him, he grimaced. "It's - all gone. My sword, Magnum, rifle... even if I had two fucking working arms, I have shit-all to fight with."
The older man nodded, quietly, gaze drifting toward the ground. "Mm. Nothin' made it through the fall. Might be somethin' in the debris out here - if all the wood ain't waterlogged." A sigh made his shoulders drop, and he turned, offering down his hand toward Nick. "C'mon, brother. You ain't gettin' better in the next ten minutes, so let's get movin'."

Nick allowed himself a renewed grimace, reaching up to grasp Coach's hand, trying to ignore the squelch as their muddy skin struggled to gain traction. He let out a pained sound as he was pulled to his feet, mostly by the other man's strength, and as he wobbled to stand with his sneakers half-buried in the silt beneath them, he forced a weary smirk.

"We're going with the 'brother' thing, huh?"

The big man smiled, just a little, knowingly. He canted his head before turning around, giving the ground a scan before he started to pick his way toward another stretch of shallow water. The raised portions of ground came in swirling peninsulas, and to keep near the main dip that formed the river, they'd have to cross in and out of knee-deep water.

The reeds coated their pantlegs in wispy seeds, topped with sharp hooks that snagged in the fabric. The scratchy sensation began to worsen as they moved through the marshy underbrush. The oppressive cling of their clothes was bound to drive Nick mad, the caked mud sure to harden where it had soaked into their clothing and onto their skin.

"I mean, I can call you 'baby', if you -"

But Nick put up his good arm, waving his hand. "No, no, that works." he muttered, dryly, feeling a flash of regret to know for sure how much Coach had heard - and then something else, something that might have been affection, or some strange cousin to it. "Brother's fine."

The other man chuckled.

In the quiet moments as they walked, Nick felt himself fall to a quiet misery, a subtle frown, and he couldn't completely shake the feeling he might cry again. Now that he'd given his emotions leverage, they chased him eagerly.

Glancing up and watching Coach's back, watching him power on, Nick let himself fall into the man's wake. There was a comfort, there, and a safety, and a few tears came when his thoughts wandered too far off track.

He'd barely pieced together some semblance of a way forward, allying himself with the sisters and positioning himself to go with them when they left. It was short-sighted, but a plan all the same. Now, that felt much less feasible.

Now, he had no plan at all.
Chapter 302

The rain had settled, leaving puddles sprawled out over the streets, gathering around the grates built into the concrete where bodies and debris had mostly clotted them shut. The quiet was jarring compared to the noise they'd left behind, and all of them were on edge.

They'd struck a balance between their own clothes and their new ones. Christophe hadn't given up his dry hoodie, and Rhiannon had helped him saw the empty sleeve off a few inches past his stump.

Ellis had slipped reluctantly back into his damp jeans and jacket, but he'd kept the T-shirt in place of his wet undershirt. He could already feel the chafing starting against his thighs, and he couldn't help but wince as he darted to flatten himself against the wall of the next building.

Behind him, Rochelle and the sisters slipped close. They'd all returned to their normal clothing, the fabric in varying states of dampness.

They were down weapons. The stun baton and the katana were gone along with the sniper rifle and Coach's shotgun, which left them under-equipped. They'd scattered the weapons they did have amongst themselves, which put Chris wielding the pistol and Rhiannon holding Ellis' shotgun.

Quiet, single-file, they darted from alley to alley, avoiding most attention except for a short scuffle with an infected that had slumped into one of the alleys and caught them off-guard. Rochelle had Rhiannon's bat, however, and it only took one quick strike to the skull to silence it before it could shriek.

Ellis led them, stopping at every alley exit in order to crane his head out and gaze down the street. He was perked to listen for the Tank, but as they retraced their steps, they found only evidence of its passage.

It had continued after them, but then taken a turn and wandered down a street and deeper into the second portion of Tybee. It was a relief for the short-term, but that placed it heading right for the site of the helicopter crash. There was no reasonable chance they wouldn't see it again; the remaining segment of city was not so large that they could avoid it forever.

Still, it was out of their immediate path, and that was something.

It was a longer way than it had felt the first time, now that they were moving slower and with more care. By the time they turned into the street that lead up to the bridge, Ellis' heart had begun to pound in his chest.

Silly, to hope they might turn the corner and see their missing teammates. Ellis could not quite stifle the longing and, instead of succumbing to it, he settled for reaching to the radio at his jeans' waistband and pressing the ON switch. The walkie-talkie gave a gentle chirrup as it came to life, and the sound drew the team's attention to Ellis' back.

He could feel their gazes - but nobody said anything, a fact he was grateful for.

"Okay." he mumbled. There was a few yards between them and the bridge's entrance, the bridge itself still raised up. The sight of it punched a hole in his gut, stirring up a clenched anxiety. "Let's grab the duffel and get movin'."

Even from where he stood, he could see the bridge. It was still raised up, but more of it had fallen
apart. As if the built tension of its two sides sitting at varied heights, it had cracked further down the middle, and only strips of a denser metal remained connected on the left side.

He wondered what the water below it looked like. Serene, no doubt. No doubt the rain had washed away all evidence of the horde, and the vehicles tossed in by the Tank, and their lost teammates.

It was absurd to think, all things considered, but he could not shake the feeling that they might look over the edge and see bodies. He could not get rid of the mental image, could not convince his mind to leave it alone - the idea that he might catch sight of his loved ones, just two more bodies in the pile -

Ellis started moving with a wobbled misstep, and Rochelle came up gently beside him as they moved at a brisk pace toward the bridge. Her gaze tilted up to examine him, and a small frown twitched at her mouth. She did not speak, however, but merely reached out, offering her left hand.

With a soft sigh, Ellis humoured her, shifting the bat into his other hand so he could grab hers. The contact itched at him in a way he wasn't used to; he did not want comfort, he wanted action. Answers. He wanted his family back.

But she wanted to comfort him, and he let her.

They covered the distance at a jog, and as they came around the corner, Ellis skidded to a stop, using his grip on Rochelle's hand to draw her to a halt alongside him. He tilted his head, looking around the corner, only to find the street clear enough for their purpose.

The road running along the canal, perpendicular to the road they stood on, emptied directly into a fenced-off area. Past the single-armed security gate was an empty parking lot, but it curved to the left and behind a brick building, a wider space that opened up. A few infected milled inside the lot, and one was angrily bashing its fist against the chainlink fence, a mindless bout of rage.

Every clatter and rattle sent a flicker of unease through the infected near it, but they remained mostly docile.

"Hurry," he hushed, and Lena was first to dart around him, Rhiannon following sluggishly behind. They crouched beside the crushed remains of their motorcycle, working to loosen the bungee cables enough to pry the duffel-bag off of it. The bike's frame had twisted and crunched enough to where it was difficult to untangle them.

When it took more than a few moments, Rochelle let go of his hand and advanced, darting to join them. She muttered as she crouched down, voice low. "Here, you grab - no, crap, that's stuck - maybe -"

They hushed back and forth, the rasp of metal sounding out as they rocked the crushed motorcycle in attempts to get enough of the cabling loose that they could slide the duffelbag free from its place holstered onto the rear. They worked quietly enough that the infected down the road took no notice.

There was time enough to break away and move to the edge of the canal, to survey their surroundings, but Ellis couldn't coax his body to advance from where it stood rooted.

Ain't gonna change things, whether I go look or not. he told himself, but he remained stationary all the same.

Ellis glanced to their right, eyes tracing the small control tower positioned just to the right of the bridge. He'd noticed it before but paid little mind, and he would've paid it just as little mind the
second time if it weren't for one detail: through one of the paneled windows built into the side, he could see movement.

If he squinted, he could just pick out a figure, stepping toward the window.

That, in and of itself, might have done little but register in his head. An infected had likely found its way in, or was trapped in after someone locked themselves in and then turned. It was not noteworthy, except to note that an enemy might appear from that direction.

But then it stilled - and then it dropped to the ground, suddenly, crouching out of sight.

_Hidin'. Zombies don't hide._

Instantly, his attention sharpened, and he turned on his heel. He did not want to alert his teammates on a false alarm, but he did not want to keep it quiet, either - so he compromised, and reached out blindly to grab Chris' side.

The Spaniard jolted in surprise, but obediently stepped closer the moment he'd collected himself. "¿Ay?" he muttered, instinctively following the other man's gaze. He searched, but didn't react with any indication that he'd seen anything of note. "What is?"

"You see somebody up there?" Ellis murmured, pointing up toward the control tower. Christophe squinted, craning his head, but gave a negatory sound. Insistent, urgent, Ellis took a step forward, lifting his cap bill up away from his face as if it might improve his vision. "I think... I saw somebody. I think there's somebody up there, 'n' -"

Slow, and then all at once, he realized it.

The bridge hadn't raised all by itself. Even if it were some sort of automated process, it would have at least attempted to lower in the time since - and what were the chances of it happening just as they were crossing? It wouldn't trigger off movement across its length, and even if it had, surely infected or fleeing survivors would have triggered it well before their arrival.

It didn't make any sense.

_Unless it weren't automated._ he thought, and an ill feeling twisted in his gut. _Unless there's someone up in that tower, someone who saw us crossin' n decided tuh try'n' stop us... someone who set the sirens off'n watched us almost die, watched Nick'n'Coach - they pushed a button._

He felt the urge to run. He wanted to charge forward, sprint and find a way up, break in the window and confront them. He wanted to... _hurt_ them, seek _revenge_, felt rage boil up in his chest, and perhaps it was that unfamiliar sensation that held him still.

Instead, he compromised. He tightened his grip on Chris' side, and lowered his voice, gritting out the words, "There's someone up there."

The anger must've come through in his voice, because there was a beat of silence before the women crouched behind him suddenly stood, abandoning their efforts to free the duffel-bag in abrupt unison.

"Are you sure?" Lena pressed, sidling to come closer, squinting as she gazed toward the tower. "The windows are kind of dark, I don't -"

It was harder to miss when movement flashed past one of the other windows. This time, it was silhouetted enough against an otherwise dark space that Ellis could pick out the shape of shoulders
and a head, peeking up through the window before darting back down.

Motion flashed, and then the window was even darker, as though curtains had been drawn flush against it.

Rochelle blustered out a faint huff of air. "Holy shit." Then, quieter, with a dawning sort of disbelief in her voice, she muttered, "... holy shit. That's... That tower operates the bridge, doesn't it? There are probably controls in there. If there's someone in there... they must've... raised the bridge."

Like a dull collision, it struck them all at once. He felt the tension spark, the silence full of a sickened comprehension, a shock that drew his teammates a step closer together out of some instinctive pack instinct. For an instant, he felt a shade of regret, fear - what if he was wrong? What if he'd scared them for no reason?

Worse, what if he was right?

Rhiannon started forward, grabbing Ellis' shotgun from where it was slung loosely on her shoulder, bringing it to bear. "I'll fuckin' kill 'em." she snarled, low, dangerous, her stride long enough to take her out of Rochelle's reach when the woman tried to grab her arm. "I'll fuckin' kill 'em."

Ellis should've tried to stop her, but his legs moved before he could, and he surrendered to the urge to advance, his anger amplified in the face of hers. He did not know what either of them meant to do, fury blinding him. They both bolted.

Although it was at a delay, the sharp footsteps of their teammates followed.

Rochelle tried for reason, or something like it. "Don't - nobody jump to conclusions here, okay? We don't know anything yet, and we're not killing anyone." she hissed, but her pace picked up to match Ellis', an edge surfacing in her voice. "Just... maybe kicking the shit out of them."

"If they tried to kill us - if -" Lena's voice clung to a high-strung concern, tight with nerves. Despite her protests, she moved with them, her body turning to scan behind them and ensure the infected were still undisturbed. "Not sure a house-call is the smartest move! What if they set off the sirens again?"

But Ellis' head shook, teeth gritted, responding even as his gaze darted over the tower's structure. "Whut if Coach'n'Nick come back, 'n'they set the siren off on them?" There was a ladder up to the slim platform that extended a few feet before it ended at a door into the structure, but it had been retracted, and it was just out of reach. "We ain't walkin' away."

If someone had done this to them, he would look them in the eye. He'd hear why. He needed to know.

They skidded to a stop just beneath the ladder, and instantly, Ellis turned on his heel. He dropped down to a knee, setting the machete down and bracing his arm against his thigh as he laced his fingers together. He bit out, "C'mon. Somebody. I'll hoist you up, 'n'you pull the ladder down."

Rochelle traded a glance with Christophe, and a frown with Lena. The blonde standing next to him stiffened, and did not move to cooperate. There was an instant of hesitation where Ellis felt a strained fear that they might refuse, that even Rhiannon had reconsidered their actions.

Lena uttered a sharp sigh under her breath before darting forward. She set a hand on Ellis' shoulder, stepping up one foot onto his cradled palms. "This is not a good idea." she muttered, but braced herself with a nod, one hand stretched up in the air. "Get me up there, sunshine."
The scuff of her shoe-heel against his scraped wrists made him wince. "Y-yeah. Go easy, girl." It was with a faint grunt that he straightened, gritting his teeth as he stretched to lift her up. The woman wobbled as her weight was pulled up off her other foot, and Rochelle darted forward to grab her waist and steady her.

The brunette's fingers brushed the bottom rung of the ladder, and with a strained noise, she stretched the extra inch to grip it. She pulled, hanging her weight off it, but it did not budge more than a squeaky groan of metal. Something was locking it in place.

Ellis glanced up through one squinted eye, trying to see what sort of mechanism had it locked. Before he could speak, however, Lena pushed up, jumping her weight vertically to jostle the ladder.

Between the sudden way her weight dropped back down on him, and the pain that shot up his arms as her shoes ground against the cat bite dug into the meat of his palm, Ellis couldn't keep his hands laced together. His arms gave, and he might've dropped her outright had Rochelle not still had her by the hips. As it was, he slipped and struck onto his rump, pain flashing through his tailbone as he landed, and Lena's foot slipped off his hands.

The sound of her heel striking the ground, her body tumbling into his lap and knocking him back onto a bracing palm, was quickly overwhelmed by the loud rattle of the ladder suddenly dropping to its full extension. It did not reach the ground, but it hit the end of its length with a loud clang of metal, the sound echoing up through the structure itself.

He wanted to nurse his wounds, wince and gather himself, but the scream of infected from behind them made them all stiffen.

Before he could react, Lena grabbed the lapels of his denim jacket, getting her feet underneath herself and yanking to draw them both up. He gasped out a startled noise, struggling to catch his balance and reflexively grabbing her forearm in kind. She spared him a nod as they both got upright.

"Sorry."

Rochelle turned away, watching as the infected that had been previously cooped up in the fenced-in area were clambering over and crawling under the security gate, charging toward them with abrupt focus. They'd been too loud.

"Go, Ellis." the producer ordered, despite a blunt uncertainty in her voice. There was trust there, too, in the way she relinquished control. "We'll take care of these assholes. If there's someone in there, get them talking. If they set off the sirens on us, that Tank's going to come right back here, and probably more."

Ellis' body refused to obey him, for just a moment, protesting the idea of not fighting alongside them. He knew she had a point - there was no storm to hide in, and no storm to muffle the bridge's siren. If it went off, it would echo farther than the first time, and draw in even more infected. They'd gotten lucky, and might not again.

The grip of a gun was pressed into his hand, and he startled, grabbing it and turning to find Christophe beside him. The man crouched and picked his machete up off the ground, wielding it low with a frown. He said nothing as he stepped to flank Rochelle, bracing his weight on his heel.

He seemed uncomfortable.
Sucking in a sharp breath, Ellis twisted around, and did not allow himself another thought before he tucked the gun in his jacket pocket and started to climb the ladder. Blood had trickled onto his palms, his wrists reopened, and he grasped the rungs tighter to overcome the gentle greasiness it caused, though it was quick to coagulate and turn tacky.

His boots gave him a solid grip, the divot in the middle of the tread fitting snugly as he stepped from rung to rung, going as fast as he could manage. The ladder wobbled from his weight, and it felt like the entire tower moved just faintly.

It was not much more than twelve feet to the top, and he made it up just as the shrieks and squeals of the zombies turned into snarls, met with the wet impact of flesh on weapon. It drove a nervous energy to a whine in the back of his head, but he had no reason to doubt his teammates.

As the ladder ended above him and his head crested above the platform it connected to, he got a better look at the tower itself. It was not terribly large, square in dimensions and perhaps the size of a small bedroom. The windows were built high enough that he was able to slide himself onto his belly and get to his hands and knees without breaching above their lower edge.

There was a door a few feet ahead, and Ellis carefully crawled forward to settle beside it. He hesitated, just momentarily, before he drew the gun from his pocket. It felt heavy against his palm.

Leaning his head in, Ellis pressed his cheek against the door and flattened his ear to the metal surface. He could not hear anything from inside, and certainly not over the sounds of combat from the ground beneath him.

Gritting his teeth, feeling a surge of uncertainty, he did the only thing he could think to do, even as it seemed terribly absurd: he lifted his left arm and used the side of his hand to rap against the door, just two firm bangs. He knocked, and in the moments that followed, felt like an idiot.

Something scuffed against the other side of the door.

Reflexively, eagerly, forgetting his anger for just a moment, Ellis tightened his arms against his side and leaned tighter into the door. "Hello? Someone in there? We ain't zombies. 'N'we ain't here tuh hurt'cha, neither."

The blast of a shotgun from beneath him made him jump, slightly, but his teammates had not yelled or shouted, and he knew they would have had something gone awry. The single clap of a gunshot muffled, but did not completely disguise, an utterance from within the control room. He couldn't make it out, and he wasn't entirely sure if it was meant as a response at all.

Then, louder, the voice buzzed through the metal door: "You wouldn't s-say if you were. Snake in the grass, wolf in the..."

It was a man, he thought, with a reedy and strained intonation. The stifled nature of his statement couldn't hide the way his voice trembled. He was nervous, manic, and hummed a few unintelligible, mumbled phrases before he barked out a louder command.

"Go away."

Ellis’ teeth caught on the inside of his cheek, and he tried to maintain a calm tone, even as frustration tangled itself painfully in his stomach. "Man, we're all tryin' tuh make it out here, okay?" Try as he might, he could not quite moderate his tone into something soothing, coaxing. It came out agitated and urgent. "I ain't tryin' tuh mess with yuh, but I gotta know you ain't gonna hurt us or nothin'."
The stranger babbled, and Ellis tentatively replaced his ear against the door, straining to listen. "How am I supposed to - too many. Too many. Can't keep them out. Tried to. Can't listen. Don't listen. Better safe than..." There was a shuffle, a sudden strike of something against metal and a strained snarl of air, and it made Ellis' body jerk back on reflex. He was not afraid, but it was difficult not to feel intimidated. "What are you doing here?"

Shit. This guy ain't right in the head. He should have felt some sympathy, and it should have tempered his anger. This was no Jerry, in full control of his faculties and willful in his violence. This was someone alone and driven to a breaking point, and that much, Ellis could empathize with.

Still, he couldn't feel much beyond his fury, even as he swallowed it down and collected his composure. Ain't no use in harassin' him, when he's already on edge. Firm. Just be... firm, but don't scare him none.

"I know you set the bridge off." he stated, unable to hold back a bitter edge from his voice. "I ain't lookin' tuh cause trouble, but we gotta get shit straight, okay, bud? I gotta know you ain't gonna do that again. We - lost - friends, 'cause'uv you. I gotta know you ain't gonna do that again."

Two thuds, almost in unison, struck onto the door, as if the man had planted his palms against it in some abrupt slap. Ellis was not startled that time, frowning as the man's voice turned into a hiss. "You keep coming. I learned my lesson, already. Had to stop you. But you keep coming, and the helicopter, and the ship, and if you keep coming, they'll keep -"

A cold sensation pinned Ellis there, eyes widening, voice raising before he could stop himself. He did not know if he felt excitement or fear, or some bloated mixture of both. "Ship? Whut do you mean, 'the ship'?"

"Don't remember the name." He spoke as if mostly to himself, mumbling. "Knew it once, maybe." The sigh that sounded from the other side of the door preceded the man quieting, voice growing tired, a tremble returning to it. "There's a ship, pacing. Up the coast, down the coast. Every... week, maybe? Few days? Don't remember. But I don't think they're... I don't know if they're..."

Ellis could not help but press, leaning closer, an agitated tension clutching at his shoulders. He couldn't control the desperation that entered his voice. "You've seen a ship? The same ship, passin' by? When was the last time?"

"An ark, or a Trojan horse." the man murmured - he laughed, then, a soft set of giggles that fell to a listless silence soon after. Only with a grunt did he continue, frustration rising as if to match Ellis' at a delay. "Can't trust you. I can't trust anyone. So I'll make you leave. Again."

Panic shot Ellis' spine straight, and he could hear the shuffle as the man stood, pushing off the door. He could only assume the worst; his intent was to set off the bridge once more. It was unlikely to lower, as broken as it was, but the sirens would likely still function. He could not let it happen.

"Wait -" he shouted, driven to his feet as desperation quickened his voice into a flustered, "Wait, man! The Tank'll get you, too, if you bring it over here! We ain't gonna kill it!"

But the man did not speak again.

Ellis, only half-cognizant around the terror flooding him, grabbed for the door handle and twisted. The door opened, but quickly jammed against something blockading it from the inside. The fact it wasn't locked came as a shock, and he barely allowed himself time to process before he was turning his shoulder forward.
"Stop, please!" he shouted, voice trembling, but received no response. The Georgian reeled back a step before he slammed his body-weight into the door, grunting as the impact sent a shock through him, pain sparking in his shoulder.

Whatever was blocking it was not so heavy as to be immovable, and it only took the one blow to knock it back just enough to open a space he could squeeze through - but he hesitated. There was no way to know if the man had a weapon, or a gun. If he was willing to kill them by proxy, it was not so far a leap to cause them harm directly.

*I can't let him set off the sirens. We can't handle this.*

There were two options before them: run and hope to escape before the arrival of the Tank and whatever infected were alerted, or stop him. The former was not only unlikely, but it also did not take into account the risk of their lost teammates returning to the area. With that thought, he knew there was no alternative.

*I gotta make sure it's safe fer them.*

Inhaling sharply, Ellis reached to brace his fingers against the inside of the threshold, and shoved through the gap. A slim table had been lodged beneath the handle and braced against the steel-panel floor, but it was knocked aside as his body pried the door open a little more. It was only a half-hearted attempt at a barricade, considering the ladder had restricted access to the platform entirely.

"Stop -" he gasped out, but any further word died on his tongue.

The control room was dim, sheets and tarps drawn messily over the windows that encircled the top half of the building. He could only just make out the clumsy assortment of plastic lawn chairs drawn into a loose gaggle, covered over with blankets as if to form something like a bed.

The stench was overwhelming. It was rot and waste, acrid ammonia stinging at his eyes and nose. The air itself felt heavy, and he couldn't fight the urge to recoil at the density of it, as if the smell itself might precipitate against his skin. He staggered, his free hand going reflexively to his mouth as if to stifle it.

The scream that sounded out made him stiffen, and he raised his gun as the darkness ahead coagulated into the outline of a shirtless figure, sprinting the few strides between them. "*No! You can't be here!*"

It was the fear on the man's face - pale, but human - that made him hesitate. He couldn't convince himself to shoot, even as his survival instinct drove a desperate feeling into the back of his skull, an alarm blaring through his nerves, demanding he fight back. The man's approach was too wild, too much like a zombie charging toward him, and his finger twitched but did not settle against the trigger.

Then the man's left arm swung out, and a steel length of pipe cracked into the back of Ellis' hand. He yelped, the gun dropping from his grasp as he jerked his arm back from the blow, yanking his hand to his chest as pain sparked through his fingers and up his wrist.

The stranger advanced, shrieking with a desperate fury. "*No! Get out!*"

He gripped the pipe with both hands and shoved it flat against Ellis' chest, like he were trying to force him back through the doorway. It was less an attempt to injure him, and more a panicked attempt to get him to retreat. The man was thin, but adrenaline seemed to lend him awful strength.
"Ain't lettin' you set off a damn horde!" Ellis shouted, and scrabbled out with his uninjured hand, catching his nails on on the man's forearm.

He dug in, clawing, trying to shove the other man away in the same motion he tried to keep his own balance with the grasp. He did not mean to sink his nails into skin, but adrenaline tightened his grip, whether he wanted it to or not. He felt them tear and felt blood gather against his fingertips, and the way it made his skin crawl didn't stop him.

When the stranger howled out a startling sound of agony and jerked backwards, ripping out of the Georgian's grip, Ellis threw his elbow up to defend himself from another blow.

It never came.

Panting, they both stood but a few feet apart, the gun sitting between them on the ground. Ellis tentatively lowered his arm from in front of his face, just an inch, eyes wide and unsure as he peeked over his forearm. He watched as the other man's jaw trembled, and his posture collapsed, and tears flooded his mottled and bloodshot brown eyes.

"It's too late." he moaned out, lifting his left arm and gazing down at the streaks where Ellis' nails had torn crescent marks into the skin. The wounds on Ellis' wrists had left tacky blood smeared where he'd touched the other man, matted into the hair there, mixing with the fresh-smeared ruby colour. The half-formed handprint sat like blunt evidence against his skin. "All for nothing."

It took a moment for it to click. Ellis was so winded and flushed with adrenaline that his brain moved sluggishly - but it all made sense, then, and he stumbled a step back as he realized what he'd done. Dread cut cold through him, a sick and dizzy feeling; where they had had only good intentions in meeting Carmine, ignorant of the contagion as they spread it, he knew this time. He'd known, and not considered the consequences.

"Y-you..." Ellis whimpered, almost airless, terror making his fingers tremble. "You... ain't a-a... Carrier?" His voice caught in his throat as he forced out a babble, urgently. "You don't know - we don't know nothin', you might be - it's been weeks. It might be okay! You would'uh gotten sick by now! Maybe it don't -"

Surging into motion, the man suddenly dropped, grabbing for the pistol Ellis had dropped on the ground.

The Georgian shouted out denial, panic driving him to scrabble backwards rather than rush forward to try and beat him to the weapon, putting both his hands up as if he could somehow defend himself from the oncoming shot. He couldn't get through the door fast enough, would never get outside in time. He could feel only the hot clutch of regret, the gasped inhale of shock like his body had struck a frigid pool.

The distance he put between them in the motion meant there was nothing he could do but stiffen when the man straightened, glanced up at him, and set the muzzle of the gun against his own jaw.

He whispered, hoarse, gaze distant and glassy. "Better safe than sorry."

Ellis did not close his eyes in time to miss the flash of gunfire, lighting up the man's face as the bullet shattered up through his jaw, splitting the meat of his cheek and bursting into the hollow of his eye. The red that gushed in to fill the void was replaced with darkness, and the thud of his body striking the ground made Ellis' stomach turn. Worse, was the soft sucking sounds as he inhaled a few wet breaths, alive just a moment longer before he stilled on the ground.
The gore was different. It wasn't the same as the stripped-open meat of infected, and the smell of raw, fresh coppery blood struck him amidst the smell of waste. He turned, and all he could do was cover his face with his palm, huffing against it as his breath turned shallow and high in his chest. Shock froze him there, spine crawling with the urge to vomit, the urge to run. He could do neither.

The tower shook gently beneath his feet as bodies rushed up the ladder, and he could hear his teammates yelling - knew he should yell back to confirm he was alive - but he couldn't get out a word. The muscles of his throat sat paralyzed, until even the inhale and exhale of his breath rasped through a strained windpipe. *I didn't mean to. I didn't mean - I didn't know -*

His eyes flickered open, filling with tears and widening, reflexively shifting to take in the walls of the control tower as they came into blurry focus. They looked anywhere but the corpse just a few feet in front of him. His vision had adjusted to the dimness of the control tower's inner space, and he could suddenly make it out.

Some of it was in marker. Some of it was scratches into the metal of the tower's internal walls by some sharp implement. Some of it was painted in blacks and reds and substances he did not want to think on.

It was everywhere.
Better safe than sorry.
Moments blurred together.

Ellis remembered, vaguely, being pulled out of the tower. He remembered taking the ladder, one rung at a time, his hands and knees stiff as styrofoam. He remembered settling down on the road, inches away from the ruined corpses of the infected his teammates had dispatched.

He did not remember what Rochelle said to him.

He did not remember when Christophe had sat next to him, but the man was there, his arm wrapped around Ellis' waist and cheek settled on his shoulder. He did not remember if they'd said anything to one another; it felt like he hadn't talked in days.

The world moved slowly around him, light skating in dizzy tracks that burned into his vision, and it took everything he had to remember to breathe.

"I killed him." he mumbled, and he wasn't sure if he'd said it aloud or not until Chris' arm tightened against him. He felt numb, and that numbness translated to a sparking pain when Chris' touch intensified, like the sting of a pinched nerve. "I didn't mean tuh - I didn't think about... I broke intuh his base, 'n'he wasn't a Carrier, 'n'... I didn't think. I killed him."

The Spaniard stayed quiet, head turning to bury tighter into his shoulder. He did not know how to respond, perhaps, or knew there was nothing to say.

Ellis closed his eyes, brows scrunching as if to fend off tears, but they did not come. He couldn't bring himself to cry. The emotion sat at a distance from him, packed so tightly with shock that he couldn't dig his way to it. It seemed wrong to not cry.

Everything seemed wrong.

"I... I killed him, Chris. It ain't like Jerry, 'cause that was an accident, it's... he shot himself, 'cause I cut him, 'n'he figured he was gonna turn." He could not stop talking, like it was all tied together in a string and buried deep in his chest. He'd begun pulling it out, and there was nothing to do but keep pulling and drawing it free, because the alternative was to choke and suffocate. "He tried tuh stop me from comin' in but I fought him - I fought him like'uh damn zombie, Chris, I - "

Hands touched onto his shoulders, and he jolted at the touch that was clearly not Christophe. Fingers gripped against him, tight enough to ache at his sore muscles, and Rhiannon's face was suddenly craned down next to his, like she was bent down behind him.

"You didn't do shit, dude." she murmured, and her voice was the closest to soft he'd ever heard it. "It's not your fault."

But he twisted, pulling suddenly away from both of them, scrambling forward to sit on his knees. He fisted his hands against his jeans, gritting his teeth and shaking his head, ignoring the way his right hand ached. "I was angry. Couldn't even talk him down. All I did was set him off, 'n'... Why'd y'all let me go up? Why'd I think I could fuckin' - "

Ellis lifted his hands, staring down at the blood caught under his fingernails. Anger punched a hole in the numbness filling him up, but it wasn't what he'd wanted to find. It didn't make him feel better, but at least it made him feel.
Neither of them continued to push.

"I can't keep doin' this," he whispered, and wrapped his arms around his chest, leaning forward and ducking his head. "I can't. All I did was make things worse. I-I dunno - I dunno whut I'm doin' anymore. I can't hardly... think. I can't hardly -"

He finally ran out of breath, sucking in a sharp inhale and grimacing his eyes closed. He shivered, despite himself, because the darkness behind his eyelids were stamped with images he did not want to see. Closing his eyes was trading one hell for another.

So he reopened them, and he stood.

Ellis' body barely held, legs quivering with his weight, as he took a half-step forward he gazed out toward the bridge. He could hear the shuffled discontent behind him, as if both his teammates started to stop him and then withdrew when he advanced no further.

"I dunno whut tuh do."

It felt like giving up. It felt like he'd finally surrendered. He spat out the truth and it sizzled on the asphalt beneath his feet, and there was nothing to do. There was no way out. There was no solution. There was no certainty, nor sense, nor reason.

There had always been a way out, always been a way forward. He'd always seen his way through any situation, even if that had been to doggedly continue until a solution made itself apparent. He did not give up.

But who was he, anymore?

He reached down blindly and grabbed the walkie-talkie off his hip, lifting it up to stare down at the controls. His jaw was glued shut until he was forced to huff in and out through his nose, and he couldn't help but shiver, could barely stand to look at it. I'll just mess it up, like I mess everything else up.

Thrusting the radio back over his shoulder, he shook his head. "Somebody else take this. I can't." he forced out, aware that his hand was trembling.

He felt weak.

He wasn't sure who took it from him, and he did not look to confirm. He started walking, stepping into the road and turning to advance toward the canal. He could feel a presence behind him, but they made no move to stop him, and he made no attempt to acknowledge them.

The end of the road frightened him, the broken bridge looming over his head, but he did not allow himself the chance to hesitate. Ellis pushed forward, gripping onto the waist-high security gate that barred access to the edge, and leaned in to stare down toward the water. The ocean breeze tugged at his clothing, the salty air humid and tacky against his skin.

It was calm, comparatively, to when they'd last seen it. The water slopped idly against the walls of the canal, ripples and waves echoing in on each other, but ultimately forced into a gentle pull out to sea. The tide caused gentle whirls as both forces collided near the mouth of the shore, but the outward current won out.

Detritus floated along the edges, where pieces of wood and torn fabric had gotten caught against the barriers. There were no bodies, however, and certainly none in the shape and colour of their lost teammates.
It was just... water, and, staring down at it, Ellis felt something crumble in his chest.

He crossed his arms atop the barrier and buried his chin against his forearms, tucking his face low enough that his capbill hid everything but a sliver of moving water. He had not wanted to find anything, but finding nothing felt strangely hopeless.

*I dunno whut tuh do. I dunno whut we're gonna do if we don't... find 'em...*

Closing his eyes, Ellis buried his face tighter against his arms, and did not move. It was a few minutes before voices sounded behind him, and he listened without lifting his head.

"There's... nothing in there." Rochelle sounded shaken. She and Lena must have gone up to investigate the tower, he realized, putting the pieces together only in hindsight. "Seems like he holed himself up for a while, but he ran out of food. It's... it's not good."

Lena's voice carried a hoarseness to it when she agreed. "Yeah. Seriously gross. I don't think he was all there before this all happened."

Duller, Rhiannon's voice cut in, agitated. "What's it fuckin' matter? He tried to kill us. Twice. Good riddance." Ellis could hear the sucked inhale of protest, the beginnings of a disagreement from one of the other women, but the blonde sharply continued on. "Don't give me that shit. You and I both know Ellis doesn't get in a shouting match with a cocksucker who can get talked down."

There was a beat of silence, and suddenly, Rochelle choked out a laugh. When she spoke it was soft, and a little fractured. "You sound like Nick."

Nobody responded.

Subtle, gentle, footsteps came up behind him. A hand settled on the small of his back, and he knew it was Rochelle without looking. She stood at his flank a moment before she spoke, and when she did, it was at a whisper. "What happened, sweetie? Do you want to talk about it, or -"

And he didn't. He didn't want to explain the events a second time, and certainly not when he felt more in control of himself. He'd have to think through and compose the words rather than allowing them to pour out of him, and he didn't know if he had the energy to do so. It would hurt more, this time, and he couldn't do it.

"He saw a boat." Ellis interrupted, muttered into his forearm, and he felt Rochelle's hand stiffen against him. He lifted his chin, staring forward and up at the broken shapes of what was left of the raised bridge. "It's patrollin', I guess, along the coast. He didn't say much more'n that, but... it's probably the same boat the other guy saw, huh?"

Suddenly, driven by excitement as much as surprise, Rochelle pulled away from him. He glanced over his shoulder to watch her put her knuckles against her mouth and take a few stuttered steps down the road. "Seriously?" she hushed in a gently awed tone of voice. "That's... that's good news, right? When did -"

Before she could continue, Ellis shook his head, a bitterness jutting his jaw forward and muffling his speech when he responded, "He said it... passed by every week or so. That's all he said. Before - y'know." His right hand gestured loosely toward the tower, as if to indicate the scene within.

He felt the weight of the silence that followed, but Rochelle spoke before it could escalate to something uncomfortable. She started to pace a few steps back and forth across the asphalt, her eyes narrowing. "If they're patrolling, whether it's the government or not, they have to be looking for people."
"You'd think." Lena admitted, her voice low. When Ellis glanced at her, he found some uncertainty on her features. "But just because they've been looking doesn't mean they'll look forever. If you guys want to catch their attention, you have to assume the next time might be the last time."

His mouth tightened, working its way toward a frown. The implication was clear; if they saw the boat before they saw their teammates again, they might surrender the chance for rescue. Their choice might well be binary: escape and abandon their friends, or not.

"There ain't no world where we go anywhere without 'em." he responded, harsh, though he didn't intend to direct it at her. "Not while we... ain't sure. Not while they could still be out here."

The biker nodded, firmly, her eyes softening. "I know. And I'm not arguing with that, just... being realistic. If that's the call, that's the call." She splayed her fingers in a plaintive gesture, apologetic, as she gestured to indicate her sister. "We'll do whatever y'all need."

Rhiannon's eyes narrowed as she nodded her chin up, just once.

Rochelle's body twisted, facing Ellis abruptly, a thoughtful purse to her lips. "Every few weeks. And he didn't say when the last time it was here was?" When he shook his head, she waved a hand up. "We need to get oceanside. We need to start watching for it, if we're going to have any hope of figuring this out."

It was Christophe who piped up, his body shifting uncomfortably where he stood. "This is good, but... we look for the others, first, ¿sí?"

Clasping her hands together, Rochelle bit at the inside of her cheek. "We have no idea where they went. "We need to get oceanside. We need to start watching for it, if we're going to have any hope of figuring this out."

It was Christophe who piped up, his body shifting uncomfortably where he stood. "This is good, but... we look for the others, first, ¿sí?"

Pushing off the gate, Ellis blinked, lifting his hand to rub at his cheek. The motion stung, and he withdrew the touch in order to gaze at his fingers. His hand was swollen, first at the heel where the bite-mark from Maggie had settled into a light flushed colour, and then at the knuckles where the pipe had struck him.

It hurt, and flexing his fingers hurt worse.

"... Okay." he agreed. When he looked up, Rochelle's eyes were on him, both expectant and concerned. He steadied himself, and dropped his arm. "That... makes sense tuh me. If they don't turn up, then we keep lookin', but... headin' tuh the crash sounds like whut Coach'd say."

There was the smallest smile at the edges of her expression, just for a moment, before Rochelle turned away. She pushed her palms together and forced out a sharp breath, nodding. "Okay. Let's sweep the buildings around here for supplies, go from there. I'd still like to leave a message for the boys."

With a dull snort, Lena thumbed over her shoulder. "Tower dude had some paint." she suggested.

Ellis' nose wrinkled, and his head tilted to one side. He started walking up the road to come parallel with Rochelle, falling into step with her. "Pretty sure that weren't paint, girl." he countered.

"Let me have my denial, sunshine." the elder biker intoned, wearily, and the sour look that crossed her face almost made him laugh.
Moments blurred together.

It took some time for Coach to speak. He allowed Nick some space, some time, but neither extended infinitely. As they halted near a cluster of reeds clotted up with broken furniture and Coach began to kick through it, hefting a wooden chairleg with a critical eye that found it wanting, he did not speak.

When they continued on, their footsteps disturbing crickets and tiny fish hidden away in the reeds they crushed underfoot, he did not speak.

When they halted, suddenly, and Nick's attention was jerked upwards to spot a few infected wandering in the marsh ahead of them, he did not speak. He did, however, grab Nick's sleeve and pull him closer, leading him at a diagonal to cut away from the river itself and give them a berth.

It was only as they got some distance between them and that cluster of infected that Coach finally talked.

"You know, I think my ass finally gets why my wife left me."

The statement was so startling, so out of nowhere, that Nick couldn't do much but stare in surprise at the man's back. He'd taken to holding his injured arm, bracing it even further in its makeshift sling, trying to keep the jostle of movement from hurting more than it needed to.

"I mean, I always knew. She told me. It wasn't me gettin' old an' fat, much as you'd wanna blame that. Nah, it was us, you know? She didn't feel like I listened, or didn't feel like I cared, an' all the love we had got stale. She needed someone who was softer, I thought, who'd go'n give her roses, cry. She told me I didn't talk to her anymore, and I thought, damn. Our asses is talkin' right now."

A laugh choked out of Nick, and he swallowed it as quickly as he could, unsure if it was the right response. He stepped carefully over a sheet of corrugated metal lodged halfway in the muck, like a panel off a tin roof, a few shattered fragments of other pieces of thin metal nailed to its edges.

It was easier than the last time they'd slogged through muck and water. At least this time, they could see safety in the distance, the estuary marshlands flat enough that not much was blocking their view.

They still had a ways to walk, especially with Coach's leg slowing them atop Nick's injury. He didn't seem to be in tremendous pain, but his balance suffered on every other step. His knee was acting up, no doubt, after the strain of the fall and swimming in the canal.

"But I get it, I think. Easy 'nough to nod an' say 'yes ma'am' when she asks fo' somethin', shake yo' head and say 'no ma'am' when she asks if you need somethin'. But where's that leave either of you? When does shit change?"

Nick wanted to shrug his shoulders, but didn't risk it. He settled for trying to inject it into his tone. "When you get divorced."

It was Coach's turn to laugh and then summarily stifle it. He glanced over his shoulder with a sour look, though it softened, as if Nick's exhaustion was palpable enough to stir his sympathy. He continued, as if the other man hadn't spoken. "I thought I always did us a kindness by bein' no trouble. Thought I was easy, an' that was a virtue. Problem is, when you let all the bad shit just roll
off, I think you don't never get to the good shit. Ain't real. We just coasted."

Frowning, Nick directed his gaze down to his feet - or what he could see of them between footsteps, submerged in the marsh. It was tempting to listen in silence, but it was too late for reservations. He spoke at a mutter. "And what if you're so used to living waist-deep in the bad shit, you don't know what the fuck 'the good shit' is even supposed to be?"

The big man sighed out of the corner of his mouth, just a puff, and rubbed his face with a dirtied palm. "Well, ain't gonna find an answer on that one out here." He chuckled, faintly, and Nick couldn't help the smallest smirk in return, though the other man didn't see it. "Tell me, Nick. What was wrong wit' you and yo' ex? Fo' real."

Pain twisted in his gut. He did not want to discuss the subject. He didn't want to put himself on display any more than he already had, and it was easiest to recoil into a wry humour and mumble back, "My ex-wife, or Ellis?"

But Coach's response was a stoic, "Either.", and that deflated him. They walked quietly for a moment, and in that silence, Nick found himself genuinely torn.

Coach was the most likely to be honest with him, after all - Rochelle was a close second, but she believed in him a little too much. Coach was skeptical and hard-eyed and wouldn't give him any bullshit, even if the answer was hard to accept. *I mean, shit. Worst to worst, I tell him the fuckin' truth, and he just agrees with me. At least then I'll have somebody on my side.*

His mouth started moving before he could fully land on a decision. He wasn't sure if he'd chosen the cowardly option or not.

"She was... a lot of things. She was beautiful. Also a raging bitch." he muttered, and the soft sigh that left him was tired. "But she was honest. She never loved me, and she never pretended to. We were... fuck-buddies with a piece of paper to make it official. She married me so she'd have a parachute when she got sick of me. And I... let her do it, agreed to it, because I'd just got loaded and I wanted some arm-candy."

Coach didn't say anything, and Nick was sure it wasn't because he didn't have anything to say.

"So, what's there to explain? We were two shitbags who deserved each other. Shockin' nobody, we didn't last." He wagged his chin, as if to gesture toward some unspoken pile of words he did not say. "Some... shit happened, the well ran dry, and she bolted. People like us, we don't do the through-thick-and-thin shit."

With a measured tone, Coach gestured over his shoulder, but did not look back. "Nick, I could say a lotta shit 'bout you, but fair-weather ain't one of 'em, much as you try an' convince us and yo'self otherwise." That was a startling sentiment, and if he hadn't continued, Nick might've had to respond. "Guessin' you loved her."

And that was, perhaps, harder to respond to.

The other man must've sensed his reluctance, because he laughed under his breath and offered a wry, "Don't take a genius, Nicky. Otherwise you wouldn't sound so damn bitter 'bout how she felt."

A snort escaped the gambler, and he glanced at his shoulder, shifting his grip on his forearm despite the way it hurt. His shoulder ached in a wave of heat and tingling sensitivity, like his joint was still coming to terms with the damage done. He couldn't blame it.

"I... don't love people, Sam. I want things they can give me, that's all. Loving someone takes shit I
Coach halted, and the sudden way he turned to face the other man had Nick drawing up short in a reflexive defensive gesture. His eyes widened and darted to avert, feeling trapped, despite the open air above and around them. Coach, however, merely frowned.

"Love gets thrown yo' way whether you got the stones for it or not. You don't choose that shit, an' ain't nobody built from the ground up deservin' it. Shit comes at you an' you gotta shape up. You ain't got what it takes? Well, shit. If you want it, you best start diggin'. If you think you ain't got what it takes to push that rock up the hill, starin' at it sure ain't gonna make it move."

A heat burned at Nick's face, jaw clenching, eyes remaining far away from Coach's. Numbness, resignation, sunk into his chest, and he felt like he was mechanically regurgitating a series of well-memorized lines when he grated out a response. "That's bullshit. I'm not made for it, Sam. Someone always gets hurt, whether it's me or someone else, and it was... fine, before, but... I can't... it's gonna kill me, watching Ellis realize he was wrong about me, watching him -"

The ex-football player took one step closer, and it was enough to close the gap between them. He lifted his hand, index finger jabbing out to land squarely on Nick's sternum, hard. His eyes narrowed, and the Northerner had no option but to startle his face up and match gazes.

"That. That right there. You feel that? That feeling you just got, sayin' all that?"

Nick wasn't sure he felt much of anything, yet, but he could nod his head on the hypothetical - and Coach's gaze softened on him.

"You ask me, I would'a eaten my damn shoe before thinkin' I'd hear you say some shit like that." The man's head tilted, scalp gone rough-stubbled as his hair tried to grow back in, and he examined the other man's expression even as Nick forced it into a frustrated pinch. "But you mean it, don't you? You'd rather get on some boat or fall off a damn bridge than hurt him?"

Tilting his head low, narrowing his gaze down toward the marshy water collected in a grey foam around his ankles, Nick muttered, "It isn't like that." He could muster no larger protest, exhaustion drooping his shoulders. I thought it'd hurt me less, too. "You make it sound... romantic, or some shit."

Coach snorted, and its derisive edge made Nick startle again. "It ain't." he retorted, with a shrug, and the digit pressed into his chest jabbed a few times in a pointed gesture. "It's damn stupid, fo' one. Bein' selfish or playin' martyr ain't the only options, boy. The hell you think you were gonna do to us? You think Ellis ain't grievin' you right now? You think he'd've just picked up an' moved on? Any of the last week made you think that?"

The Northerner's mouth opened, but no sound came out, and Coach didn't let him try a second time.

"You love sittin' in yo' own mess, bein' all pity-me, but you gone an' fucked it up this time." His tone was blunt but unaggressive, and Nick couldn't find it in him to be offended. It was the truth, after all. "You got a family, now, whether you like it or not - an' a young man who loves you - an' you don't get to just bow out. You gotta see this one through, wherever it goes. You walk it up to the damn line, Nicolas."

"What if it's worse?" he spat out, quietly, hoarsely. He knew the frustration in his expression gave way to something weaker, more raw, but there was nothing to do about it. He took a half-step back, just enough to recoil from the fingertip prodded into his sternum. "What if I try, and it's even worse when it all fucking comes down?"
Coach's shoulders shrugged up, and there, the man raised a hand to catch fingertips on the soft shape of his own facial hair where it had thickened on his jaw and cheeks. He rubbed there, and sighed when his fingernails scraped off half-dried muck, and the next words he spoke were laced with a quiet unease.

"You think anything's gonna be worse than them watchin' you die? Can't tell if you're that selfish that you'd rather get off the hook and let 'em suffer, or that much a damn fool, thinkin' you ain't worth nothin' to us."

That stung.

*Or, a little of both, huh?*

A harsh breath escaped Nick, like a scoff, and he jerked his chin away. He thrust himself into a turn and staggered around Coach, walking past him, forcing his rusted joints into enough fervor that his steps kicked water up his heels. "You sure I ain't dead?" he muttered over his shoulder. "This isn't some fucking Georgia mire Purgatory? Because I didn't think my fucking guardian angel would be Tubs Mc-"

"Nicolas." Coach cut him off sharply, drawn into a stride after him. "Don't do that shit. Talk to me like a damn adult."

"I'm fucking done talking." he stated, harshly, but not even the anger he'd managed to summon up could quite convince him to genuinely outpace his teammate. He was fairly defenseless, after all. "Let's just fucking -"

With a frustrated little noise, Coach accelerated his steps. The pace exacerbated his limp, and even in just listening to the splashes, Nick could pick out the way one leg lagged behind. "You ain't hardly said shit, Nick. You're done listenin' is what you are, but you don't get to bury yo' head in the sand on this shit anymore. I kept my nose outta this shit, an' that was a damn mistake."

Nick expected the tirade, but he didn't expect the hand that grabbed at the back of his shirt. The fabric pulling taut yanked at his injured shoulder, and he yelped despite himself, the pain flashing hot and tight up into the muscles of his neck. It triggered an instinctive slump of his upper body, surrendering into the pull and halting as if that might ease the pain.

There, halted again, Coach's voice lowered. Nick did not look back at him.

"I don't care if y'all kids work things out. I don't. Honestly, I ain't sold on the idea of you an' Ellis, 'cause I think you beat on him too damn much an' he ain't had the steel to push back 'til you drove him half-wild wit' all this shit. But I don't care. All I care 'bout is both of y'all comin' out the other end. I want both of you on the other end of this, Nicolas, even if y'all can't stand each other."

There was a pause, there, and the fingers curled in his shirt softened in their grip, loosening, as Coach's voice weakened. "I'll be there, either way." It was, perhaps, the most frail he'd ever sounded. The word was not one Nick would have applied to the older man lightly.

"Don't know how much that matters, but it's all I got. I... ain't gonna watch you crawlin' into a hole, fallin' apart. I'm right the hell here, Nick, an' we're talkin'. So don't act like you ain't got nobody. Don't act like nobody cares. Yell at me all you want, Nick, but don't act like I don't care."

The water lapped against the denim of his jeans, already soaked-through, the sensation becoming almost white-noise. He stared down at its swirling and curling current, and muttered in a gasp, "You don't get it."
Maybe it was the way it punched out of him that made Coach take it seriously.

As Nick turned to glance back, the man's brown eyes flickered over his frame, considering him quietly. Nick hissed out, "I don't - I don't have anyone but you guys. Do you realize what the best case is for me, Coach? Do you realize what the happy ending for me is?" When Coach said nothing, Nick thrust out his left arm, abandoning his injured right one to hang loosely in its sling.

"It's you fuckers never finding your families - because the minute you do, I'm out. And maybe that's a fucking pipe-dream, because they're all fucking dead, and all you guys get is me as a fucking consolation prize. So I'm the fucking piece of shit who's glad you guys have nowhere else to go and no one else to go to. I'm the fucking piece of shit who couldn't find people he cared about until fucking Armageddon."

The sigh that left Coach was so near to exasperated, that Nick flinched on instinct.

"Nick, you are the dumbest muthafuckin' person I know. An' I taught boys' health class, so that's sayin' a damn lot." There was no anger in his voice - just exhaustion - when he shook his head. "It wouldn't change nothin'. You could tell me my wife an' daughter were standin' right behind me, and the second thing I'd say to 'em is introducin' you. You think you'd get pushed out? Naw, Nick. You ain't gonna get rid of us so easy."

The Northerner's gaze fell, landing on the mess of reeds stretched out around them, body slumping into a loose curve where he stood. He didn't want to feel relief, didn't want to feel the warmth that crawled tenderly into his chest. He didn't want to feel glad, or grateful, or any of the little squirming sensations that filled him up to his teeth.

He didn't want any of it, and that raised the next obvious question - why did it feel so caustic to him? Why did he want to reject it so badly, like he'd rejected Ellis, like he'd rejected them all?

I do want them, he realized, in a quiet way - the subtle and comfortable way that a truth settled in when it was nothing new. I love them, like I've... never... felt about anyone. I really do. Just doesn't mean fucking shit when I have no idea how to... do anything but fuck it up. It's just... worse, to know that I had something special and... ruined it.

God.

I ruined it.

He choked out a laugh, because it released some of the pressure pinned dangerously tight against his heart. "Got rid of Ellis just fine."

There, again, he saw a flash of agitation - but Coach didn't digress this time. His jaw pinched, eyes narrowed, and he thrust his shoulders up in a shrug. "If you're so damn sure Ellis is upset wit' you, why don't you do somethin' about it? If you're so damn sure he's wrong about you, why don't you step the hell up and start tryna be half what he thinks of you?"

It shouldn't have been so easy to say. It shouldn't have spilled out of him like he'd simply loosened his jaw and found water pouring from his lips, and he exhaled and his lungs squeezed yet more up - and maybe it wasn't easy. Maybe it was more like drowning, where it couldn't have been more unnatural, but his body did not have the cognizance to do otherwise.

"I don't know how."

Frowning, Coach didn't relax so much as falter. He shook his head and reached out to settle a palm against Nick's uninjured shoulder, a squeeze tightening his grip. "I meant what I said, Nicky. You
tell me what you want, an' we'll get it. I'll help, if you let me. An' you best believe I ain't lettin' yo' ass off easy, so you can quit worryin' 'bout whether or not you'll manage."

It was a soft threat, yet comforting. Nick leaned into the touch before he could help it, gaze lifting to warily match with Coach's.

The man almost smiled, and for the briefest of moments, it felt like some long-lost memory, of the days when things had been easier between them. It felt familiar, and Nick craved familiarity more than anything.

"Think right now, what we both want is findin' 'em again, right?"

He nodded, and once again felt a childish collapse, a surrender. He had never needed to be led as much as he did in that moment - and Coach seemed to instinctively recognize that he'd reached the end of some tether. He nudged, guiding him into a turn, and they fell back into a slow advance through the knee-high water.

Nick didn't believe him, and he did not believe in himself - but it was nice, for a moment, to pretend they might forge through the reeds and end up in some better place.

It was nicer than the alternative.

End Notes

I have a Tumblr!

We have a Discord!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!