Armageddon Anthem

by hiddeninyourblood

Summary

“There was a kid. I tried to save him. I couldn’t.”

(Originally on Quotev)
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Notes

Quotev Link: https://www.quotev.com/story/8845619/Armageddon-Anthem-Carl-x-
Reader/1

WARNINGS: Any dark thing that happens in TWD show will happen in here. I try to give
trigger warnings for anything severe, but please proceed at your own risk if you are
sensitive to violence, gore, death, etc.
10:43 PM. You were keeping a close watch on the clock, as it was the only thing in your teacher’s office that was worth looking at.
“When are we gonna leave?” you tried not sounding too worried, but dramatically failed by the shaking of your voice.
“We need to stay here until I know it’s safe,” he muttered, flicking open the blinds with his fingers for mere seconds before letting out a nervous sigh.

“Mr. Wallen, please,” you were practically begging, but you didn’t care. “My family’s at home. I don’t know if they’re safe.”

“Be quiet,” he hissed, footsteps marching in the hallway right in front of the door.

He grabbed your wrist and pulled you to the other side of his desk, forcing you to crouch down as he did the same. You immediately understood why when the door opened and you heard what sounded like the wheezing of a gas mask, a few moments of silence, and then the shutting of the door.

You could see that Mr. Wallen was visibly relieved, moving the hand he had clasped on your mouth as a preventative measure.

“How do you know they weren’t trying to help?” Your voice was barely hovering above a whisper as you tried to steady your nervous heart.

“Rule number #1 for anything that happens? Don’t trust anyone you don’t know. They might get you killed.”

You were stunned into silence by what he said, eyes as wide as plates as you stared at him.

You let out a soft sigh as you awoke to the sound of birds chirping, wondering how they were surviving while humans all around you were dying. It was crazy; the idea of wildlife thriving as people’s stomachs ate themselves away out of starvation. Some things never changed, you supposed.

3 years. 1095 days since the outbreak had started. 3 years of living life without your stepmother, your father, or your stepsiblings. 3 years of scrounging for food, boiling water by the side of a river, and stabbing walkers whenever they got too close.
You hadn’t been alone for that long, thankfully. You had met many people, but they were either
dead or on the verge of death. Somehow, you had managed to scrape yourself out of the situation,
although you had questioned yourself if it was actually worth it. Escaping meant returning to the
habits of a survivalist, which wasn’t something you enjoyed, to say the least. The deafening silence
that constantly surrounded you certainly didn’t help, so days on end, your lips would form no
words and you didn’t have the heart to change that.

Swinging your legs over the side of your bed, you let out a groan and straightened your stiff back,
making it pop in protest multiple times. You slept like a dead man, as your mother used to say;
once you got into a position, you didn’t move and your breathing slowed so much it looked like
you weren’t at all. It was a blessing when you were sleeping on a forest floor or somewhere you
could draw unwanted attention, but sometimes, it got in your way of having a good night’s rest.

The constant anxiety over what you had decided was best to do could easily be a factor as well.

Ever since the dead outnumbered the living, you thought it was best to leave open wounds
untouched. You never mended broken relationships with fellow group members, or lessened hatred
for someone once the fire was fueled, but you knew it was time to thread the needle and head back
out to Terminus.

The day was quiet, as usual. Anything alive around you chose to not show it’s face, and no walkers
were near your line of vision as you went to the river and refilled your gallon container as usual.
You already had three large water bottles in a large backpack filled with non-perishable food items
for a day you might need to run, which thankfully never came. The stove in the cabin still
somehow worked, and since it was obviously a vacation home, it was still stocked with kitchen
items, including a large pot you always boiled water in. Quite frankly, your life could hardly get
better.

It became repetitive; check the snares or find something else for lunch, see if any more berries had
grown on the small bushel about 20 yards away, cook whatever you found as your water is
finishing boiling, eat lunch, check the string of alarms around the house to make sure there isn’t a
breach, and find other things to occupy yourself until you felt tired enough to sleep. Maybe it
wasn’t perfect, but you were living, and that’s all you wanted.

Just as you put a book with no visible title back on the shelf, you fell back into your bed with a
sigh, your two holsters and sash of weapons still on your body as you closed your eyes. You let
your eyes flutter shut for awhile, enjoying the sound of absolutely nothing. Silence was a curse
throughout the day, but at night, it was the greatest gift a person could be granted. No shouting, no
growling, no gunshots… just warmth and peace.
That is, until you heard the roaring of a truck engine.

You knew it wasn’t close, which came as a great relief. It meant you could easily sneak up on any attackers if need be. Your nerves were on high alert as you slung your quiver of arrows on your back, grabbed your bow right beside it, jogged to the door and slipped on your departing backpack before closing the door and sprinting into the direction of the sound.

Thankful you were wearing your jeans, boots, and jacket as the cold night air pricked needles into the tender flesh of your face, you swiftly jumped over fallen tree trunks and rocks, it was times like these your years of experience were useful in dire times.

You slowed down once you reached the edge of a familiar road, and sure enough, there was a small group of men aiming their guns at a woman with a sword, a kneeling man in a winter coat, and a man with a crossbow. You saw a young boy, someone only years younger than you, you supposed, being held into the ground as someone 3 times his size held him there, heart breaking at the sight. You knew it was best to stay hidden, however, as they had to prove they were worth your bullets and possible injury.

“Look, we can settle this,” A white haired, middle age man started. “We’re reasonable men. First, we’re gonna beat Daryl to death. Then we'll have the girl. Then the boy. Then I'm gonna shoot you and then we'll be square.”

“Stop your squirming,” you heard the creep mutter to the boy, sending a chill down your spine. Only a few more moments. Something was going to happen, and it wouldn’t be the kneeling man’s death. You could feel it.

Sure enough, he reared his head back and headbutted who you supposed to be the opposing force’s leader, gun going off right by his ear but coming nowhere close to hitting him.

You watched him stand up and punch the other guy straight in the face, before taking a blow himself and falling to the ground.

“Oh, it is going to be so much worse now,” He sneered as he kicked the man you were rooting for, anger bubbling in your stomach when you heard the man hovering over the child begin to unbuckle his belt.

“Come on,” you whispered to yourself, clutching your pistol in your hand as you raised it. “Don’t
“What the hell are you gonna do now, sport?” The leader smirked as he forced the guy to stand, faces close.

A smirk of your own crossed your face when the man sunk his teeth into the leader’s neck, not needing another weapon as he spat out a chunk of flesh and let him bleed out to the ground.

The woman turned a stranger’s hand around and shot him with the gun still in his hand, taking it from his lifeless grip and taking out another three of the men.

Once you saw the boy’s capture stand up and try to pull a knife on him, you knew that moment was your perfect chance, leaping over the bushes and stealthily sprinting up behind him.

“I-I’ll kill him!” He rasped out as he focused on the only person he saw aiming a gun at him, oblivious to the fact that you were standing right behind him.

“You sure about that?” your voice dripped gratification as you pulled the hammer down with your thumb, the ‘click’ of it locking in place sounding more satisfying than ever before. “You heard the woman; Let. The boy. Go.”

He immediately released his grip and you watched him run to the woman, gripping her tight into a hug.

“On your knees, now,” you demanded, to which he obliged without protesting or any words.

“Thank you,” you heard the stranger whisper despite all the commotion as he was still in the woman’s arms, head resting in her elbow as he hand curled up and rested on the top his hat.

You lost forgot how to speak the moment you heard him say those two simple words, not remembering the last time you heard them. You were sure other people may demand something besides words, like weapons or food or fuel, but that was all you could ever want. Maybe you were lucky that you still had portions of humanity still intact.

You nodded and shared a few moments stare with him, before averting your gaze to the incomer at your feet. Your beloved 8” Dan Wesson revolver was pressed right to the back of his head,
although you had no intentions of shooting. The sicko needed a good scare, and you needed the assurance that he wouldn’t do anything stupid.

The woman once again raised her gun, but had it aimed right at the man’s head just as yourself.

“He’s mine,” Someone you recognized as the group’s partner growled as he stood up, lowering the gun with his palm. In fact, he didn’t even notice you until he began taking a few steps forward, staring straight into your eyes with a questioning look despite his rage.

“You’re the kid’s father, right?” You asked, returning the elongated look.

After a few moments of silence, he nodded, giving you a look that you knew meant you weren’t going to be the one killing this man.

You let out a bitter chuckle and ran your tongue across your top teeth with your mouth closed, leaning over and fully removing the man’s belt and tightly wrapping it around his neck instead, ignoring his sputtering sounds as you dragged him forward by the leather’s surplus, kicking him when you weren’t satisfied by his lack of movement.

“He’s all yours,” you raised your hands to prove you weren’t going to do anything, taking a few steps backwards.

The boy’s father repeatedly ran a machete through his stomach, holding his tied neck as the last ounces of life drained from his face, blood trailing down his chin. Finally, he collapsed to the ground, dead, and maybe the joy you felt should have scared you. Maybe.

“Who are you?” A stranger with a crossbow who you swear you heard being called Daryl growled, not backing down as it was aimed straight at your chest.

“Put it down. She saved Carl,” the blood was still on the outsider’s face as he looked at you. “You aren’t one of the greatest leaders out there. And if you were, why would you be here?”

So that was the kid’s name.

“Because my men are dead,” you stated quietly, replacing your pistol into it’s holster. “People tried taking what was ours—bad, bad people… and I wasn’t about to just give up what we worked so hard for. We went down how we wanted to: fighting. I certainly hope you weren’t looking for the infernals, because we’re gone.”
“And we’re supposed to believe that bullshit?” Daryl challenged, weapon steady in his arms.

“Don’t believe me, Johnny Cash,” you rolled your eyes, “frankly, I don’t give a shit what you think.”

“How old are you?” Carl pulled away from the woman previously holding him, eyes glued to you. He held something none of the adults surrounding him did; innocence. It was admirable.

“17,” you answered, trying to sound kind. “Maybe 18.”

“How many walkers have you killed?”

“Rick, you’re not actually considering this!” The woman objected.

“How many people?” He ignored her protests.

“Somewhere around 15.”

“How do you know my name?” He stiffened, becoming more demanding.

“You ran that prison about a mile or two out, right?” You questioned. “The one that got burned down to the ground by that bastard in an eyepatch?”

“How do you know about that?” The woman’s eyebrows pulled together in a frown.
“Kind of a long story, I’ll tell you tomorrow. It’s fucking freezing out here,” you spun on your heel and began treading back into the woods, not surprised by the footsteps fumbling behind you.

“Answer the question, bitch!” Daryl shouted, but you simply continued walking.

“You can snap at me all you want tomorrow, sunshine, but right now, I’m cold.”

You heard constant murmuring as you continued to lead the group through the forest, all voices ceasing the moment they laid eyes on the house.

“And this,” you turned around, arms spread, “Is when things get interesting.”
“That blue plastic barrel is full of clean water, there’s some canned food in the cupboards, and a pack of jerky on the counter,” You slung your quiver of arrows onto the kitchen counter as you walked through the living room, running a hand through your hair. “There’s two spare bedrooms, so someone can take the couch.”

“Why are you doing this?” You weren’t sure if Rick was disregarding everything you had just said or if he was merely putting his own concerns over your sudden hospitality, but either way, you weren’t about to pick a fight.

“You guys were heading to Terminus, weren’t you?” You asked, slipping your hands into the back pockets of your jeans as you held a long gaze with their leader.

When no one replied, you took it as a yes, letting out a soft breath. “I have something that needs to be taken care of with one of their men.” You paused, contemplating your words. “You know that it’s nothing like they say it is, right?”

“Our people are headin’ there,” Rick stated, seeming disconnected. “We’re willing to take our chances.”

You were about to question further, ask ‘how do you know’ or ‘how you can be so sure it’s worth the risk’, but were simply too tired, so opted to nod instead. “The shower water can get warm- I think there’s an underground heater or something- so if you use it, use it sparingly.” Is the last thing you said to the entire group, grabbing your pocket knife from the counter and shutting yourself away in your bedroom.

“What do you mean, we can’t trust anyone?!” you argued after Mr. Wallen had helped you climb through the window and the two of you were now sprinting down the street behind the school, aspiring to be anywhere but the place of evacuation and murder that the building had become.

“People lie,” he turned around in his running and set his hands on your upper arms once you had slowed down. “-And some will do anything to hurt you. You need to be strong, because once you let them get to you, it’s all over.”

You let out a loud scream when one of the infected, words courtesy of the CDC buzzing around, sunk it’s grueling teeth into your teacher’s neck, watching him sputter to the ground.

Tears streamed down your face as you darted around it, now running as fast as your legs could humanly take you. The sight of your surroundings crumbling to the ground without moving a single inch was one of the most crushing things you’ve ever witnessed with your two eyes. As you bolted down the road and through neighborhoods, you realized this was no longer a suburb right on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. It was a graveyard in the making.

You finally reached the familiar street that you knew held your father’s house, sprinting up the driveway and through the door. Although there was no visible blood or any audible noises, you got a sinking feeling all the same. There wasn’t violence because there wasn’t anything. No death, and no life.

You weren’t sure it that was a good thing.
“Dad?!” you shouted as you jogged past the living room and went into the dining room. The house was as spotless as always, since that’s the way your stepmother liked it, but right now, you’d give anything to see it be messy if it was a sign of their life. Instead, there was nothing.

“Jill?!?” you were now shouting your stepsister’s name as you trudged into the kitchen, looking around for a sign of any movement. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

You ran into the hallway and right up the stairs, into her room. Sure enough, it was completely trashed, clothing and other belongings everywhere. The small bag that was only half full brought you a small sense of relief, having hope that they were at a refugee camp or something of the sort. Still, the fact of not knowing brought tears into your eyes, and you clasped a hand over your mouth to mask a sob.

What you weren’t expecting was strong arms to wrap around you and a cloth forced onto your face.

You checked the six cartridges of your pistol to make sure there was a bullet in each one, letting out a soft sigh as you flicked on safety and set it on your bedside table. You then took of your sash that held plenty of rounds and a few knives, setting it on the ground beside your already removed thigh holster. Setting your hands on your face, you rubbed your tired eyes, not noticing that Carl was standing in the doorway watching your movements.

“Thank you,” he spoke, causing you to sharply look up in surprise. After a few moments, you inquired, “for what?”

“For letting us stay here,” Carl said as if you just give him your right hand. “My dad won’t say it, but I will, so… you didn’t have to. You didn’t even have to step in. You could have ignored us, but you didn’t. Thank you.”

“Oh,” is all you could muster. “It’s not a big deal.”

When an awkward silence settled, you spoke up, “I didn’t mention this earlier, but in the bottom drawer in the fridge, there’s a bag of venison chunks. It’s a little chewy, but fully cooked and still good.”

“Thanks,” he gave you small, closed mouth smile before leaving you alone.

You heard Rick and Daryl’s muffled voice as they were in the living room, but knew it should be kept between the two of them so instead of listening in, you laid down and closed your eyes.

“We’re pretty close,” You spoke intently as you sat on the counter the next morning, sharpening your knife. You had opened a few cans of fruit and the four other people in the room were dishing it out evenly while you were too busy for breakfast. “Just a few miles out.”

“We can get there by sundown if we head out now,” Rick agreed, leaning on the part in front of the sink.

:“There’s an old jeep in the back, I think all it needs is some hot wiring,” You offered instead, finding it stupid to waste so much time on foot when you could simply drive.

“I ain’t spending time in a vehicle with you,” Daryl muttered as he picked at the tip of one of his arrows.
You hopped off the counter, slowly stepping towards him in a calm manner. “So, let me get this right: I not only saved one of your members last night, but let you sleep under my roof and eat my damn food, expecting nothing in return, and you have the nerve to bitch at me?”

“Ryan-” Rick’s tone was one of warning, but you paid no homage, continuing your striking stare with the redneck.

“You might not trust me, and I, you, but at least I didn’t lead people I care about into a death trap.”

“That’s enough!” He was now shouting, clearly not impressed with your words. “Daryl, she’s gonna show you the car, and we’re gonna pack up and leave.”

“I’m coming with,” The woman stood up, her usual strong look on her face.

Since you still had no idea what her name was, you shrugged, saying, “Alright, Ms. Samurai,” watching the two share a glance as you grabbed your quiver.

As you walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, you were a few steps behind the pair, and as you watched them step out the front door, you heard Carl and Rick begin to speak.

“You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“We’ve been traveling for days,” His father objected.

“I ate something last night.”

“...why?”

“Just because you feel like you owe her something doesn’t mean I do.”

You were unsure of how to feel about those words, so you silently continued your track, hoping they were too focused on each other to notice the sound of the door closing.

“Where the hell did you get that bow?” Daryl asked as he laid in the car by the driver’s side seat, legs bracing him on the ground as he dug through the wires.

You proudly looked at your weapon, “Made it myself.”

Sure, maybe it wasn’t the most beautiful bow out there; it was as tall as your head to your waist, the holes melted on either end were sloppy at best and the knots holding the string tight had more the be desired, and each tip branched off longer than normal to two different points sharp enough to stab, but it was easily your most practical method of defense. It worked for both close and far range, and looked badass. What more could you want?

“I don’t see no welding shop around here.”

“Eclipse had one,” you shrugged, trying not to think too much about your fallen camp and soldiers.

Right when Carl and Rick stepped outside, bags in arms, the successful sound of an engine roaring to life filled everyone’s ears, causing the smallest of all smiles to pull at your lips.

“Let’s get going, then.”
Chapter 3

The road eventually ended and the 5 of you were now following the infamous train tracks that led to a supposed safe house, Michonne and Rick being the farthest two along as Daryl was a little bit in front you and Carl.

Silence settled between the two of you, though you didn't find it awkward. The crunching of autumn leaves beneath your boots was enough for you to listen to. That is, until Carl decided to disrupt it.

“Thank you.”
“You don’t have to keep tellin’ me that, kid.” You continued looking straight ahead, glancing down at your feet rather than the boy.

You’d never been a fan of accepting thanks. You may have found it easy to say to others when needed, but if someone spoke the words to you, you never knew what to reply with. Maybe it was because of your selfless tendencies, or your withdrawn personality and emotions. Not being able to pinpoint it wasn’t something you were grateful for.

“I don’t know what would have happened had you not been there,” he continued, which part of you had been expecting. The other thought he’d make a comment, and conversing would be over. Perhaps that was the hopeful side of you.
“Don’t think about that,” you spoke instead of accepting it, finally casting him a glance. “Don’t think about the ‘maybes’. Enjoy the bliss of not knowing, because believe me, sometimes it’s better to just… worry about what’s in front of you. It doesn’t drive you insane, not in the same way.”

By the look in his eye, you could tell he wanted to question your words; ask why you’d say such a thing. It was hard to tell if it was out of curiosity or possible relation to the subject, but when he
merely looked at the ground rather than pressing, you knew he would stay silent on the matter.

“I heard what you said earlier,” you said instead, “to your father.”

Carl’s head perked up at your words, but he remained quiet as a way of saying for you to continue.

“‘You said he feels like he’s in debt to me, like he owes me something,’” you continued, slipping your hands in your back pockets, “And that you don’t. If you don’t feel the same, why are you thanking me for basic shit? Not exactly something who feels clear does.”

“If only said that so he’d stop talking,” His voice was quiet, almost meek.

“You’re afraid of him,” You stated, almost stopping you treads as you spoke. “After seeing what he did last night.”

Once again, Carl remained quiet, seeming intent on keeping his pace up as he followed the others. Daryl sent you a glare at his sudden silence, still wary of you, but turned back around.

Your voice became soft. “I know it’s jarring; seeing the lengths someone will go to protect you. I’ve been there; as the witness and the attacker. He wasn’t as close to me as you are to him. Hell, he wasn’t even my family, not really.”

Although there were no visible signs of him paying attention to you, you knew he was listening, so you continued on, “I know it’s scary, but… it’s something you’ll have to learn to live with. It doesn’t get any easier, but you start to understand it.”

After Rick and Daryl agreed that it would be best to travel through the woods the rest of the way when you said the whole building was lined with fence anyways, the group soon came across exactly what you spoke of: tall, sturdy metal fence with barbed wire lining the top. Your bow slung on your hip as you held it in your hand, keeping it out for convenience in case you needed it. As you closely looked through the spaces in the metal, sure enough, you saw the familiar block letters painted on covered windows, spelling out ‘TERMINUS’. It felt as though the word was a taunt rather than the warm, welcoming arms they claimed the place was.

“We’ll spread out,” Rick began to direct, “Watch for a while, see what we see, and get ready. We stay close.”

You were thankful for the chance to split up, emerging yourself in the pleasant silence you had constantly been in for what felt like as long as you could remember before the 4 came into your life merely days ago.

Daryl didn’t seem to care that no one would have an eye on you, and if he did, he didn’t express it. You decided it was because they simply didn’t have the reinforcement. As strong as they may be, times were dire. It was get bitten or bite back work now, no matter how reinforced your army.

There was a lot of pacing around and scanning the area before it was deemed okay to hop the area
of fence right by the split train tracks running by the building, you being the last one to land on the rough gravel.

The two men were already through and into the building by the time you had regrouped, trotting after Carl and Michonne as they stepped inside cautiously.

Lacing through the long hallways as they followed the sound of voices, you purposely stayed a ways behind, knowing it was best to not show your face in case Gareth was in fact in the room.

“Welcome to Terminus,” You heard his familiar voice announce, a bitter smirk playing out on your lips. Your back was pressed against the cold, metal wall, an arrow in your bow as you held the string between your fingers. It may not have been pulled taught, but you were ready for a fight all the same.

“I’m Gareth,” he continued, and you stood up straight before turning on your heel and officially entering the room, almost everyone stiffening upon seeing you.

The stupid smile their leader had previously been sporting slowly melted away, tilting his chin up at your presence. “I see you brought a guest.”

“That’s no way to speak to a friend, Gareth,” you smirked, rocking your bow back and forth in your hand, as if whatever was about to go down was merely a game.

“We aren’t friends,” he objected, raising his pistol and shooting you directly in the thigh.
It was unsettling; seeing every hallway of Terminus again, only as what it had become over the series of 3 years. Never had you thought that something as simple as the walls would completely change to atmosphere. It was something so little, seemingly pointless, but it’s significance proved you otherwise. The blood stains, the dirt, the haunting echoes of voices bouncing off of them… they told a story. One you didn’t want to hear.

To say it was hard to believe the things they were telling you, specifically Gareth, was a vast understatement of the thoughts coursing through your mind once the words settled into your ears. He told you tales; dark, horrific stories that even you had a hard time grasping as a possible reality. You didn’t want to believe that some worthless men came in and took the beautiful sanctuary this building was. You didn’t want to think that they raped, killed, tortured, and that Gareth was merely protecting the things he once had. That idea made him human, and if you wanted to slip a knife against the skin on his neck, knowing that he was doing something you would made it so much harder.

Watching Carl, Rick, Michonne, and Daryl get led away in a surrendered position made you feel helpless for a reason you couldn’t quite place. Watching Rick and the other adults surrender their weapons, that was easy. You’d seen other people, people who meant nothing to you, just as these did, do the exact same things more than you could place. Nothing about that bothered you. But watching Carl place his hands on the back of his head, looking over helplessly at his father… that’s what made you want to run an arrow right through Gareth’s pretty brown eye.

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“Now, Ryan,” Gareth’s condescending voice was vibrating right into your ear, his lips too close to your neck for you to feel comfortable as he pushed you into a room where a series of eight men were lined up and on their knees, wrists and ankles restrained as a gag sat tightly in their mouths. Four of them were a part of Rick’s group, including their infamous leader himself. Surprisingly, each one was completely silent, besides the whimpering boy at the end. That didn’t surprise you, as he was young and the younger people were, the more likely they were to be afraid.

“A lot of things have changed since you left,” he continued as he forced you onto your knees on the opposite side of the metal basin right in front of their prisoners. You remained as silent as the rest as Rick stared at you with an indecipherable look. It seemed to be a mix of anger and determination, but you couldn’t determine if the prior was directed at you or the person standing beside you.

“-So we should probably chat,” Gareth finished, squatting to his knees as he looked at you.

“If there’s one thing you love to do, it’s chat, isn’t it?” You gave him one of the fakest, most
ruthful smile that had ever had the pleasure of crossing your face.

He let out a dry chuckle, head dipping downwards as his hand slowly crawled its way onto your shoulder. “Lucky for you, we don’t kill women. But if you don’t say the right words, I might just have to make an exception on your behalf.”

“Oh, and here I was, thinking you had no morals,” you began sarcastically, eyes wide as your eyebrow arched to emphasize how useless you found his speech. “That’s why your men here are gonna slit these men’s throats, right? Because you’re such a kindhearted and willing person? Because this is a place of refuge, and not murder?”

You knew whatever cards you still had in the deck, you were playing yours in all the wrong ways. The smart way of conversation was to try reasoning; let us go and you’ll never see us again, and the moment that doesn’t work, you beg. Only thing is, you were never a fan of begging, so you instead chose to push the man’s buttons in all the right ways. That was something you became good at over time as a leader; you always knew exactly the right things to speak at exactly the right times. There was no cloth tied over your mouth, your feet weren’t tied together and your hands were only bound by a simple zip-tie. Maybe you should be grateful, and say all the precious words you knew the man wanted to hear. But that wasn’t nearly as much fun. And it certainly wouldn’t keep you alive.

You were knocked out of your thoughts, quite literally, as Gareth’s hand collided with your face. He was a patient human, sure, but apparently you had taken it a bit too far and pissed him off. Letting out a soft laugh, you spat some blood onto the floor as you were still hunched over sideways from the blow, before straightening your posture again and looking at him with the same unamused smile you had been since he began speaking. “But, with what those men apparently came in here and did, I can understand it. I can see that you’re weary of anyone with a dick that enters this place, or I guess comes within 50 feet of you, but I don’t think you fully understand what you’re doing.”

“Oh, really?” he asked, now looking down at you as he stood up straight. A smirk was on his face, though it wasn’t one out of amusement. Perhaps he felt the same way as you, only high on his ego to go along with it. “And why is that, dollface?”

“You’re not just taking lives,” you stated, as if it was clear as day, because it was, “You aren’t only stopping a heart. You’re creating a mourning widow who’d do anything to get her husband back. You’re putting people through suffering as they have to deal with their friend’s death. You’re turning a child into an orphan. You’re taking a father away from a boy who has damn near nothing left. You know that feeling, right? Knowing that no matter how loud you cry, no matter how much you beg, scream, plead, you’re never gonna get someone you love back, right? You know exactly where you’re going to be putting this boy, don’t you? Of course you do. Your father’s dead. And it was at the end of my arrow.”

Gareth’s smirk was gone and was replaced with a look of pure rage, scrambling his pistol out of it’s holster and aiming it right at your head. For a few moments, he was physically shaking with anger, teeth bared as he stared into your eyes. You stared right back, of course, refusing to let it drop until he put his gun back and let out a sharp sigh. Turning to the men wearing clear, bloodstained aprons, one with a bat and the other with a machete, he nodded, which commenced them to start killing.

The metallic scent of blood reached your nose as you now had a moment to devise a plan. You chose to not look at prisoner’s neck draining the cause of the scent into the bin in front of you and rather the back of Gareth’s head, who was currently crouched in front of both you and Rick alike.
You had absolutely no weapons on you, but you did see exactly where he put his pistol and the knife in it’s sheath hanging off of his hip. He was within leg’s reach of you, which meant the moment you had the chance to snap the tie binding your wrists, you could knock him down and unconscious, as his men were preoccupied and would have no time to react.

“-And a machete with a red handle,” You clearly heard Rick’s voice as you finished your plan, mind clear of deep thinking being the reason why his voice reached your ears. “That’s what I’m gonna use to kill you.”

He had no time to respond to the remark, as there was what sounded like a gunshot coming from outside, then two more following it. Both Gareth and the two other men drew their attention in the direction it was heard from, and you knew it was now or never.

Bringing your arms up and then jerking them down going with the curves of your sides and using your knee as leverage, the zip tie snapped off of your hands with ease, and you were on your feet in less than a second flat. Gareth wasn’t as lucky reflex-wise, because your elbow hit him right in the temple, him toppling to the floor without a single chance to react. You kicked him in the side of his head and removed his pistol from its holster, sniping the two ‘assassins’ making their way around the bin as if it was nothing.

Sadly, you didn’t have a sooner opportunity to jump in, and he only remaining prisoners were all a part of Rick’s group, but you supposed it was better than nothing as you jumped over the basin pooled with blood and slid the gag out of Rick’s mouth and onto his neck, cutting the plastic holding his hands together.

“Is he dead?” Were the first words that came out of the leader’s mouth, not that it surprised you. “Nah. you have time to find that bag and keep your word,” you replied smoothly, moving onto the man you recognized as Glenn while Rick got the other two.

“It sounded like a bomb,” Glenn changed the subject as he tore the strip of cloth off of his neck, jogging over to the table of machetes and other various weapons.

“Sounds like a damn war,” Daryl said instead, a large blade now in his hand as you took the bat from the dead man’s hands, tossing it to Glenn. You opted for the machete the other body had in it’s grip, knowing you’d be able to do more damage.

“There’s a back exit we can take,” you interjected, feeling the body for any other weapons. “It’s not on the way to the rooms with whatever guns they have left, but it’s where we need to go if you want to be sure your people make it out alive.”

Rick’s currently stone-cold features looked reluctant at the idea of you leading them out of the building, but gave you the right to walk out once he gave you an affirmative nod.

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Despite the open bullet wound in your thigh, you managed to run at a reasonable pace. Sure, it hurt like a bitch, but you had bigger concerns at the moment. When you finally came across the room you were looking for, however, you almost regretted your luck.

The sight of human torsos, some stripped of skin while others looked fresh, brought a sick feeling to your stomach. You’d seen things, some dark, shocking, and jarring things, but this was easily a first for you. You had walked right into a human butcher shop. No words could describe how horrid the sight was, even after everything the world had become.
“Cross any of these people, you kill them. Don’t hesitate,” Rick spoke as he looked around, most likely for any other weapons. The darker skinned man you didn’t know the name of picked up a machete from a table, while Daryl broke a metal rod off of a piece of equipment.

“Don’t gotta tell me twice,” you muttered under your breath, looking around and taking the sight in. If you wanted to prevent the image from engraving itself into your mind, you probably should have closed your eyes or distracted yourself, but you thought the day would come when you’d need a reminder. A slap in the face memory of what people could be, what they were.

Glenn cautiously paced his way over to the door on the opposite wall, bat steady in his hands as he watched the walkers paw at a train car through the window. He glanced at Rick, who was now on the other side, staring at the same sight.

“If we run, we can get by ‘em,” He noted, slightly panting from a mix of tiredness and adrenaline. “They’re distracted.”

“We gotta let those people out,” Glenn protested. “That’s still who we are,” he pushed further when his group remained quiet at the expense of his words. “It’s gotta be.”

“Maybe it’s who you people are,” you butted in, checking to see how many rounds were left in your pistol. 6. “-I’m not so sure about myself.”

Rick completely ignored your remark, giving Glenn a curt nod to tell him that they would do as he said. You wanted to protest, say that it was stupid to waste precious time, but they were already out the door before your lips could move fast enough.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, you stalked out of the building as well, only stayed back and listened closely to your surroundings. Footsteps. Not the trudging of walkers, but rather the tapping of boots on pavement. It was faint, but it was there.

You carefully patted around the cart after the crazy man inside got bit by an incoming walker, Rick yelling at you in the form a whisper to stop. Of course you continued, noticing that the footsteps were coming from a group of five people with automatic rifles, shooting away at walkers coming near them.

With your back pressed on the side of the traincar, you held the pistol in firing position close to your chest, peeking around the edge and shooting one of the five in the back of the head. Upon noticing, the others began to yell and freak out, coming back in your direction. This gave Rick the perfect opportunity to jump behind one the crowd’s lagging men, shoving a blade in his throat and ripping the gun from his hands, shooting down the rest of them.

“I told you to stay put,” The man growled the moment you knew it was clear, catching up with the group.

“And I just got you a rifle,” you retorted, not in the mood to fight. Although he looked quite ready to tell you off, Rick instead looked between all of you, saying, “We don’t have to double back,” as walkers began to rip apart the humans he had just shot, the ones still alive screaming in agony.

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Weaving your way through countless walkers, eventually the 5 of you came across the train car
holding the rest of Rick’s group, and once held all of them. You’d never set foot in it, as Gareth had directed only the two men, one boy and the other woman into it after setting their weapons on the ground, not hesitating to bring you straight into the walls of the house of horrors you later uncovered.

“Come on! Fight to the fence!” Rick shouted as he opened the large door, you and the free members continuing to kill off any and every walker that came too close. Deciding to conserve the three rounds you had left, you transferred to the use of the large blade, swinging it like a sword so it took less time to make an efficient kill.

The leader was still going strong with his gun, making the most out of every bullet as the group ran to the lowest part of the fence. You were too caught up in killing to pay much attention to any single person, but you noticed a burly ginger man setting some sort of cloth over the barbed wire and help anyone there over it. As much as you wanted to dart over that fence, haul ass and take off, you knew that you were needed right where you were standing as you slowly crept towards the fence as you killed rather than making a beeline. Turns out, you and Rick were two of the last ones and the only still fighting off walkers, which you were immensely grateful for the moment Gareth and soldiers with rifles just like Rick’s showed themselves, standing on the ceiling as they got ready to shoot.

Though someone was yelling for you to move, that time was precious, you kept your feet planted, reaching for the pistol tucked into the waistband of your pants. There was constant noise buzzing around you: crackling fire, groaning walkers, pained screams, but the moment you sighted the gun and fired, watching Gareth fall to the ground, the only thing you could hear was the blast of the bullet leaving the chamber.

Being pulled back into reality by Rick grabbing your extended arm holding your pistol, He dragged you for a few steps before letting go. You got the message, jogging over to the fence and climbing it with ease after Rick and the other man stumbled over it.

You turned to walk away, planning on heading back to your cabin and devising a plan to leave within a few weeks, but their leader had other ideas.

“Not so fast,” he growled, and you sighed, knowing without turning around that he was aiming the rifle at you.

“Rick, you don’t want to to this,” Glenn didn’t skip a beat coming to your defense, but you still spun around to face him with your hands raised by your head. Not as a real surrender, but rather as a mocking joke without moving your tongue.

“Who even is she?” A dark haired woman asked. You hardly noticed her within the rush of the battle. She looked hispanic of sorts.

A smirk tugged at your lips. “Name’s Ryan,” you mused. “Didn’t think a good ole’ fashion reunion would cause so much shit.”

“Wait, you knew them?” The asian now seemed just as concerned the others, eyes falling back on you as did the rest’s.

“Not a lot of them,” you blinked, “Only the leader. Not that it matters now.”

“But it does,” Rick’s face was hard, emotionless, but voice was rough with spite.

“Oh, but it doesn’t!” you mocked in exclamatory, dropping your hands and stepping forward. “-
because he’s dead now. And I shot him. And you’re not gonna do this.”

“You think that?” he raised the barrel to the middle of your forehead, and the only thing he got from the action was multiple protests.

“We don’t know anything about her, you can’t just shoot her,” An african american woman stepped forward as a way of proving her defiance.

“Rick, she could be useful,” Michonne interjected with her normally calm yet stern tone, looking at the back of his head.

“She claims she’s Ryan Ashling.” His teeth were gritted as he turned his head to look at the woman. “You really think we can trust that?” His words were strong, but the grip on the firearm and the hold on the trigger no longer was.

That moment of aversion was all you needed. Rearing your arm up, you knocked the barrel away from your face and out of his hands completely, grabbing the lapels of his coat and pulling his body against yours so you knew the words you were about to say wouldn’t go through one ear and out the other.

“Yeah, I know you wouldn’t shoot, even if that precious lifeline was still in your arms. I can see it in your eyes and your face. You know I could have let that man slit your son’s throat or even do worse, but I didn’t. You know that I didn’t have to supply you with food and a damn car, but I did. You know that I’ve had so many opportunities to kill you, but I haven’t. Hell, I could’ve pulled the machete on my side on your throat, or run a bullet through your jaw, but you don’t see me doing that. You know that you could very well be as dead as yesterday without me, but you aren’t.” you leaned in close to his ear so only he would hear the last part, “You know that a part of you trusts me, or at the very least, is curious. Just like I do.”

And with that, you took a step back, taking any possible violence no further.

“Let’s go get that damn bag,” is all he muttered as he picked up the gun, walking away from the crowd and into the woods.
By the time the gang had found the bag, an argument immediately broke out when Rick said they had to head back and take out any remaining Terminus members.

“The fences are down. They either flee or die,” a woman you heard Glenn call Maggie stated to their leader, which made him glance around, eyes landing on Daryl. When his gaze still looked set on his own plan rather than majority rules, you decided it was time to step in.

“I shot him. I saw it, you saw it,” you spoke up as your shoulder leaned against a tree trunk, forest growing dead silent at your words. You couldn’t tell if it was because people cared what the newbie had to say, or if it was because they were weary of you, but regardless, you found it annoying. “Without their leader, they’ll fall like dominoes. The remaining aren’t worth your bullets, believe me.”

The look on his face showed that he didn’t seem to care what you thought was best, but when a woman wearing a gut-covered poncho with dirt all over her face slowly trudged her way over to the group, you knew the argument was over. Especially when Rick’s right-hand man ran over and engulfed her into a hug.

You weren’t sure what the respectful thing to do was at the moment, or if there even was one, so you just looked down and kicked at the ground beneath your feet. Rick was speaking to the woman, so softly you couldn’t make out what he was saying. Not that you cared, if you were honest with yourself. The only thing you cared about at the moment was that you were alive.

“You have to come with me,” happy tears were pooling in her eyes as she pulled away from the hug she and Rick were previously sharing, looking between all of you. Either she didn’t notice you or she thought now wasn’t the time to ask about why a blood and dirt covered stranger with a bullet in her thigh was hanging around, leading them deeper into the forest before reaching a narrow, gravel road.

Upon walking on it, you first noticed that there was a cabin at the end of it. Then, a strong looking man exited said cabin, a baby with polar opposite skin color in his arms. Not for a second did you think the child was irrelevant, and your gut proved to be right once again as Rick and Carl both dropped the things they were holding and sprinted the rest of the way down the road. The baby was taken from the man’s arms and right into Rick’s, Carl setting a hand on the back of her head as his father pressed his lips against her hair, eyebrows furrowed as he softly cried tears of joy. One of the ones who stood up when you were about to get shot ran straight into the unknown person’s
arms, holding her close to his body. You guessed family or lover. No way people who were simply friends would react in such a way.

Turns out you were weaker than you thought, once again leaning on a trunk for support, weight being distributed on the same side as your gunshot. The blood was already hardened and dried on the torn clothing, still sticky over the entry. At least it was clotted and you weren’t losing anymore.

“Did you get it out yet?” A dark and short haired woman asked as she now stood by your side, you previously not noticing her presence. She gave you a half smile that looked broken beyond belief, but you were thankful she was at least trying to show she wasn’t spiteful.

“Nah,” you shook your head, “But I can tell that it’s in one piece, so it won’t be a big deal. Just gotta find the time.”

“I think now’s the time,” she forced some laughter, “Doesn’t look like you’ll be able to walk much longer if you don’t. My name’s Tara, by the way.”

“Ryan,” you replied, trying to sound kind but failing. “Find me a place to sit?”

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After finding you an old cooler to place yourself on, Tara was sitting on the ground beside you as you held a pair of long tweezers you had in your bag, declining her offer of doing it for you. You already sliced away worn parts of your clothing and the ends of your shirt sleeves, planning on using the nicer cloth to hold your bandage in place when you were finished.

“Why does everyone keep looking at you like you’re Jesus Christ in the flesh?” She asked, finger tapping on her knee with her foot tucked under her bottom as she sat. “Everyone looks shocked whenever you say you’re Ryan.”

“You haven’t been in this group long, have you?” is what you replied with, “or any group, I’m sure.”

Realizing that it may have sounded harsh rather than an observation when she dipped her head, you considered apologizing, but returned to your injury and decided you’d tell her the full story. “My name’s Ryan Ashling, and the reason why is because I used to be the leader of one of the most successful civilizations in Georgia.”

“No way,” Tara sounded not like she was in shock but disbelief, just as you had expected.

You simply brought the pliers to your thigh and began digging, not feeling pain as strongly due to the tourniquet tied right above the wound. “You see, now you get it: not a godsend, only seen as a damn liar.”

“I don’t think you’re a liar-” she began, but you cut her off.
“The reason why I said ‘was’ and not ‘am’,” you gritted your teeth as you dug around for the metal, “is because someone decided they didn’t like me anymore. Smart bastard. But then, a lot of people decided the same thing. They didn’t want me to be a leader anymore. So, I left. A few weeks later, I come back, wanting to patch things up and see if I can’t work the issues out, but the place was in shambles. Women and children were fleeing, walkers taking chunks out of my men’s- my friend’s- necks. Things collapsed because I was unwanted,” you were pale and sweaty when you finally found the bullet, pulling the tweezers out and dropping the blood-stained offender on the ground with a ping.

“So let me ask you something, Tara,” your attention was now on the girl, who looked like she was in shock. “You haven’t been around these people for very long. So what happens the moment they decide you’re no longer wanted?”

Ignoring the mortified expressing on her face, you took the bottle of rubbing alcohol from your bag and dumped some of the liquid right on the hole in your body, hissing as it burned with each second that ticked by. You wrapped it up with some gauze and tied it with the strips of clothing you had cut off, throwing everything in your backpack and walking away.

“We need to go,” Rick spoke, staring at the black fire unfolding above the treetops.

“Yeah, but where?” Daryl asked, slinging the crossbow given to him by the woman who led the group to where they were standing on his back.

“Somewhere far away from there,” is all he responded with, patting a hand on Daryl’s shoulder as he walked by. The once over he sent your way didn’t go unnoticed by you, as you were sure your now bandaged leg didn’t by him.

Everyone walked in a semi-straight line along the train tracks, Rick being one of the last ones. You were right in the middle, noticing that he was purposely lagging behind for a reason you didn’t know. Not bothering to find out, you ducked and re-entered the woods along with the first half of people, heading caution of the forest floor.

The moment you noticed Carl glance back at you, then begin to fall behind the person ahead of him, you yourself took lesser strides in an attempt to avoid the boy. Now was truly the worst time to talk to you: you were in pain, exhausted, and running a short fuse. Those factors plus you never mixed well.

Eventually, however, he did reach you, baby in his arms as his face looked like he had no care in the world. “This is Judith. She’s my sister.”

“Kid, I don’t think your father would appreciate me talking to you,” you spoke, hands in the pockets of your jeans as you looked ahead.

“You said that you could tell he wasn’t going to shoot you,” Carl continued on as if he didn’t hear your remark. “How? How do you know just by looking at him?”
“I’ve met a lot of people. After getting a gun in your face so many times, you start to be able to tell. It’s in their eyes.”

“You mean in their anger?” he asked.

“Beneath that.”

“I could tell he wasn’t going to, but not before you knew. For a second, I really thought he might do it.”

“So did I,” you admitted, thumbs running across the denim lining of your pocket. “When he put it to my head, though.. That’s when I knew he was trying to convince himself he would as much as he was me.”

You both walked in silence for a few moments, only the sound of leaves crunching beneath your boots was the only thing to be heard.

“You know that I didn’t save you, right?” There was no beating it around the bush at this point. You couldn’t keep going on with that burden hanging over your head, especially not if it was over his too.

“Yeah, you did,” Carl’s words were calm, steady. It took you aback, to put it simply. How could he be so sure?

“No, I didn’t,” you persisted, trying to remain level headed. “There’s no way that man would have killed you. He was trying to use you as an insurance, but he was too damn afraid for it to mean anything. Honestly, he’s lucky I wasn’t the one to kill him. I would’ve done so much worse.”

“You’re not as tough as you think you are.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not abrasive because it’s who you are, it’s because you think you have to be,” Carl rephrased, bouncing Judith in his arms when she began fussing. “I used to be the same way.”

“You don’t know shit about me,” you muttered, ending the conversation.

Later that day, when the sun began to dip behind the horizon and Daryl and Rick left to catch some food, you began clearing a part of the ground of leaves and twigs, setting them aside in a pile. Most of the crowd had separated into their own groups as they set up camp for the night. Glenn and Maggie were close to Bob, Sasha, and the man you supposed to be her brother now that you knew her and Bob were a thing, Michonne and Carl were playing with Judith, and surely Rick would sleep beside them. Carol was cleaning a pistol beside a tree, and you found yourself in circle including Mullet Man, Gingerhead Boy, Spanish Lady, and Tara. You wondered when the right time to ask their names was. It took you reaching the dirt for someone to finally voice their concern, asking “The hell are you doing, girl?”

“Well, ginger,” you recognized him by his voice, keeping busy with your work, “I’m building a fire.”

“It’s Abraham.”
“Okay Abraham,” you spoke as you stood up, swinging your axe over your shoulder, “do you mind getting up? I’d rather not cut you in half.” The fake sweetness in your voice sickened even you.

The man looked disgruntled but moved himself to the ground, as you had asked. After a while of constant hacking, some sweat gathered on your brow and you were breathing heavily, but you had some decent sized pieces of wood. You quartered a few to use as a sort of kindling, arranging them by size in a pile and shoving the leaves and sticks between the gaps. It took a while, most of it being a waiting game, but you managed to get the fire started with minimal smoke release. Orange light was casted from the element and shakily shone on the trees and people around it due to the flickering of the flame. You, however, were staring at one person digging a stick into the dirt next to their side out of boredom; Tara.

Everything you told her was completely out of line. You knew that. Whether she believed them, or even if they were the truth, it didn’t dismiss your inadmissible actions. You had no right to tell her that one day, she would become unwanted. Even if you did think of it as the truth. Then again, you hated apologizing. You knew it was the right thing to do, but god, did you dread it. The conversation was always so awkward, tension hung thick in the air whenever you waited for a response.

“Listen, Tara,” you caved, rubbing the back of you neck nervously. Her eyes were on you upon hearing her name, looking at you expectantly. “I’m sorry I blew up at you earlier. I was pissed, and I said some shit I didn’t mean.”

“It’s fine,” She gave you the same half smile as before, one that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“What did she say to you?” The other woman interjected, standing straight from the tree branch she was leaning her back on.

“I said it’s fine, Rosita,” Tara repeated softly but firmly, assuring she didn’t want things to escalate.

“You better watch yourself, Ryan,” she practically spat your name, correctly assuming it wasn’t your ‘real’ one, “That pretty little mouth of yours will only get you in trouble.”

You, however, let out a soft laugh, rising from your squatting position to a standing one. “What are you gonna do, rat on me? Oh, but then you’d have to be a part of Rick’s group. And you’re not.”

If looks could kill, you’d be six feet under from the glare Rosita was sporting. Wondering why someone hadn’t broken it up was uncovered the moment you felt a strong hand pushing you back by the side of your chest, tightening your jaw when you realized it was the one and only Rick Grimes.

“You just gotta be at someone’s throat all the time, don’t you?” His voice was angry yet contained, staring at you despite your gaze being forward.

Rolling your head to look at him, you smirked fakely, saying, “At least I’m not ripping them out
with my own teeth.”

The argument ended after that.

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“What did Rick mean when he said you saved Carl?” You knew the awkward small talk wouldn’t last long as you and Daryl hunted for breakfast, but you had to admit, his bluntness wasn’t something you expected.

“I thought it was pretty simple,” you shrugged, finger running over the worn string of your bow to the feather of the loaded arrow. “Saving people’s a cut and dry thing nowadays: they live or they die.”

“Listen, I don’t know what went down, but I do know the only reason you’re still here is because Rick thinks he’s in debt to you.”

“That makes two of us,” you let out a humorless laugh. “Doesn’t take a prodigy to figure out he’s not keeping me around for my charm. Seems like he doesn’t have a problem with keepin’ strangers around, though.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on. Abraham, Eugene, Rosita… Tara. He doesn’t know shit about them. Same as me.”

You both fell silent when rustling was heard, aiming your weapons in the general direction of the sound. A badger began to slowly walk out from under a small luck, most likely looking for it’s next meal. Little did it know, however, that’s what it was to you.

Daryl took the shot with ease, arrow piercing right through it’s chest as it fell dead on the ground. As be prided himself, however, you once again heard rustling, then noticed a fairly large squirrel scurry on the branch of a higher tree. In a matter of seconds, you sighted in your bow and released, arrow flying right through the animal’s body.

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Badgers proved to have more meat on them than one would think when Daryl was buturing it and throwing slabs over the fire for it to cook. You left him to take care of the squirrel as well, deciding that not keeping it to yourself was a minor proposal of cooperation. Minor. Rick had sent you a few looks already, but they seemed to be out of concern of what you might do rather than spite, which
you thought was a good start. At the very least, it was better than nothing.

Placing yourself on top of your sprawled black sleeping bag, you unscrewed your canteen and took a sip of the tepid water. You poured some into your hand, merely the smallest amount, and rubbed the back of your neck, feeling good against the dried sweat and dirt-ridden skin. You didn’t realize your eyes were closed from the sensation until you felt the fabric beneath you shift, snapping your head in the direction as your hand went for your bow.

“God, kid,” You breathed out upon seeing it was only Carl. “Can you leave me alone for one damn second?”
“I didn’t bother you last night when you and Rosita were fighting,” he spoke, blue orbs staring right into yours. “Or when you blew up at Tara.”

“What do you want,” your tone came out as more of a demand rather than a question. You weren’t curious on the matter, but rather dismissive.

“You said I don’t know anything about you-”

“Like you don’t.”

“So I thought I could interest you with a deal.”

You looked at the boy in contemplation. “What would this entail, exactly?”

A small, half smile of triumph crossed his lips. “I tell you something about myself, and you tell me the same thing in return, only how it applies to you.”

Thinking it was best to sweeten the deal, you added, “And once you learn everything you want to know, you never bother me again,” you offered him your hand.

After a few seconds, he shook it, hand returning to his lap. “I was born and raised in Atlanta.”

“I lived in New Jersey until my father remarried when I was 12, then we moved to Atlanta. It was where we lived as it all went down,” you retaliated, playing fair.

“Alright everyone, we’re gonna keep moving,” Rick’s announcement interrupted your conversation, but did an efficient job of ridding Carl from your area, taking advantage of the peacefulness you were brought by packing your things up. Only thing was, you weren’t leaving with them.

Chapter End Notes

Like what you've read? leave me a comment! They seriously help me put parts out sooner xx
Chapter Notes

*please read* This part is heavily focused on Ryan's (the reader's) past in the form of flashbacks. They are in italics, so it's easy for you to tell, but I highly recommend you don't skip them. I can tell you right now that later in the story, a part of Ryan's past will come back into play in a major way, and I won't reply to any questions that have the answer in previously written flashbacks in the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You couldn’t lie and say that you completely hated the idea of being a member of Rick’s group, because it’d be exactly that; a lie. A part of you was curious what it would be like to belong somewhere again. Even scarier, a different portion of your head longed for it. Naturally, however, you shoved it aside, and rather than following the last member of the crew, you took your own route. You could hear Rick’s voice echoing in your head.

“She chose her own path. She lives with that. Not us.”

What a way to think.

Instead of dwelling on it, however, you trudged forward, hands gripping the handles on your backpack as leaves and twigs crunched beneath your feet.

///

Astonishingly, it didn’t take long for you to come across something; a mere 3 hours and you were standing in front of a small, white church. This was a relief, as it meant there could be food inside, or at the very least, a safe place for you to sleep. It wasn’t perfect; but, it could certainly be worse so you took advantage of the opportunity and stepped inside with your pistol raised.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” your voice bounced off of the narrow walls, cautiously stepping down the center aisle with your loaded gun pointed outwards. Once you reached the altar and checked the doors opposite from each other close to it, finding no one or nothing, the coast seemed to be clear. It felt good to simply pocket your gun and still feel somewhat secure. You were tired of constantly being on the run. Even when you camped out in the cabin, you knew it would never be permanent. Nowadays, something was always going on. There was no way to avoid it.
Dropping your bag into the fourth row of pews, you laid yourself down on the hard floor and closed your eyes, basking in the unprofound glory. This was it. You’d made it.

That was, until voices were heard from outside.

“Hold up,” One said, southern drawl in his voice. A voice that you recognized.

“Dammit,” you cursed, getting to your feet and standing tall with your hands on your hips.

Sure enough, only seconds later, Rick threw open the wooden doors opposite from where you were placed. His and Daryl’s eyes fell on you as their weapons were slightly lowered yet still ready for fire.

“I really can’t catch a break, can I?” you broke the silence, raising your hands in mock surrender. Your cloth biker jacket was sitting on top of your backpack, leaving you in a cream tank top and blue plaid shirt that was a few sizes too big.

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You woke up at the hands of an unpleasant situation; body crammed into the backseat of a truck that was rattling along on a bumpy road. As your heart began to thud loudly and painfully in your chest, you glanced around, not daring to move an inch. It was late in the night at that point, you guessed 2 or 3 AM, as the sky was still dark and the headlights shone on the pavement ahead. The driver was right by where your head was laying, making it impossible to make out any detail besides a shadow. What you could see, however, was an antique-looking pistol laying right on the close end of the console. Slowly inhaling a nervous breath and closing your eyes, you quickly sat up and grabbed the gun on your way up, placing both hands on the weapon and extending your arms as much as you could. The barrel was aimed right at his head, yet surprisingly, he didn’t seem phased.

“Glad to see you’re up,” Is all he spoke, one hand on the wheel while the other rested on the side of the door. The window was slightly cracked, cool night air sweeping into the vehicle.

“Who are you?” You cursed your shaky hands but kept your grip on the pistol strong.
“You’re Ashling’s kid, right?” You of course noticed the avoidance of his question, but the fact he knew about you was much more relevant in your mind. It sat thick with nervousness in the bottom of your stomach.

“I said who are you?!” You were now screaming, jaw gripped. “If you think I won’t shoot, you have another thing coming.”

“Hey, take it easy, okay?” His voice was crazily rough in an indescribable way, perhaps a mix of exhaustion and his normal voice. “No need to panic, I promise. My name’s Lee.”

“How do you know my last name?” The weapon was still strongly held in your hands. You weren’t about to let your guard down. Not for a minute.

“I used to live up the road from you. You were only 5 years old, don’t expect you to remember me. You bit your lip. If this man really wanted to hurt you, he would have done it already. You knew that.

“What even happened?” You asked you returned the pistol to it’s place, cautiously climbing over the console so you could sit in the front seat. “One second I was in the bathroom, and the next, the world looks like it’s ending…”

“I’m still trying to work out the details, but…” Lee took in a long breath, “I think it’s a virus. Seems like when you’re bit, you die. But I don’t think you stay dead.”

“You become one of those things?” You asked, heart sinking to the bottom of your stomach.

“Exactly.”

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“Were you followin’ us?!” Daryl barks, which almost made you roll your eyes.

“Of course I was,” you remarked sarcastically, “That’s why I got here first, and had absolutely no
intentions of seeing any of you ever again: because I was following you.”

“Look, I know it sucks that we both ended up here,” you continued, lowering your hands. “-But I’m not leaving. And you sure as hell aren’t. So it looks like we’re stuck together.”

“You won’t keep watch by yourself, and always be in someone’s sight, we clear?” Rick told you, leaving no room for bargaining. “I said, are we clear?”

“Crystal,” you plastered a fake smile on your face, grabbing your bow and slinging your backpack around your shoulder.

“How’d you survive here for so long? Where did your supplies come from?” Rick asked the priest that had apparently been living in the church since the apocalypse first began. The idea sounded impossible at first, but the more thought put into it, the more it made sense. The church was in the middle of nowhere, far away from any and being a walker hotspot. He was by himself, which made it easy to keep quiet and hide if need be. As long as he kept finding supplies, which he clearly did, it wasn’t difficult to stay alive.

Rick was now standing right in front of the man, Judith in tow. His back was facing you, but if you had to guess, you’d assume his eyebrows were raised.

“Luck.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it,” you muttered, the bottom of one foot on the back of the pew in front of you.

“Our annual canned food drive…” the stranger continued, having not heard your comment, or simply ignored it, “…Things fell apart right after we finished it.”

You were bored by the conversation and would much rather tune it out, which is exactly what you did. Sitting in the middle of a pew close to the front of the church, you thought everyone would get the message to leave you alone. No one ever spoke to you, and the only reason you bothered to speak up was when you heard that a small group was leaving to clear out an overrun building.

“You’re coming with,” Rick spoke his final words to the priest, making you rise from your seat.
“So am I,” you stated, bow in your left hand as you stood between the bench seats.

“No, you’re not,” Their leader once again tried to be dismissive with you, and as much as you wanted to argue, you knew it wasn’t worth it.

“Fine,” you spoke as you sat back down, “-but when you lose one of your people, don’t blame it on me.”

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“Your said you used to live down the road,” the Sun was now peeking above the skyline to show that it was morning, the car’s console saying it was 7:30 AM. After the conversation about what Lee called “walkers” ended, you weren’t really in the mood to speak more. You and Lee both entered a small town with semi-crowded streets, he decided the best way to keep moving was to ditch the car and walk.

You interrupting the slightly tense silence caught the man off guard, but you continued anyways, “-why ‘used to’? What happened?”

Lee looked like he was contemplating even answering the question, but when a few seconds had gone by, he said, “My ex-wife got the house after our divorce.”

“Oh,” was the only thing you could reply with, unsure what was appropriate to say. Lee simply nodded and began to walk through the cars and onto the sidewalk, but then to your surprise, stepped into an open part of someone’s fenced yard. You followed after him as you felt like you had no choice in the matter, but were still uneased by the idea. Especially when your eyes landed on the pistol in his hand. Though the man also had a limp, which meant he couldn’t do too much damage, right?

“What are we even doing?” You asked, hoping that you’d come across a different change of clothing. The stupid dress you were wearing from homecoming was painfully inconvenient.

“Looking for anyone who may need help.”
“That’s why we’re in their backyards, right?” You remarked, raising your eyebrows. Lee completely ignored you as he pushed his back against the panels of a house, right beside the back door. His pistol was now raised in both of his hands, looking prepared to shoot anyone who may get in his way.

“Hey, Lee?” You asked. He slowly looked up at you, though he didn’t speak. “We should probably check that house over there. They have a treehouse, which means they have a kid. If they have a kid, they’ll probably be more… empathetic?” You couldn’t find the right word for it.

He looked over to where you were pointing, slowly standing up straight.

You shrugged. “Just a thought.”

The moment Lee made sure no one was in the house, you walked inside, almost carelessly, and began to make your way up the stairs.

“Shit-” Lee cursed in pain as he grasped his thigh, before looking up at you with wide eyes. “Where are you going?!”

“I gotta get out of this dress before I go crazy,” you peeked your head back at him. “I’ll only be a minute.” You left no room for protest as you continued to climb the staircase and into the first bedroom you laid eyes on.

Luck was on your side as it turned out to be an adult’s bedroom, with just what you were looking for: a closet. You hoped the woman who had previously lived in the house was average-sized, because even though you weren’t skinny, you almost knew anything bigger than a size 5 would be a dud in your book.

You found a suitable pair of jeans that only needed a belt and to be tucked into the small pair of black combat boots sitting on the floor. After a bit of digging through a bunch of useless dresses and nice shirts, you found a white tank top and an old, worn out flannel that looked more of a cream color than stark white. It had a zipper and rolled up sleeves that could be unraveled. Although it wasn’t the prettiest thing, you took it off of the hanger and laid it over your arm with the other clothing, grabbing a belt before closing the closet door and wrestling yourself out of your current outfit.
After you finished changing, you pursed your lips, picking up the dress and looking at it one last time. It was a pretty dress: a blue, knee-length dress that had a satin layer over the fabric on the waist, cinched at the top to exaggerate the curves of your body. You loved the dress, and were happy you got to wear it, but you said a silent goodbye to not only the article of clothing, but to a part of yourself by setting it on the bed and walking out of the room.

“Hey, I found a first aid kit in the bathroom-” you spoke as walked down the staircase, speaking coming to a halt as you heard what was easily recognizable as a message on an answering machine playing.

“Clementine? Baby, if you can hear this, call the police. 9-1-1,” a frantic woman’s voice was heard playing back. She sounded like she was crying from fear. You felt sick from anxiety just listening to her voice.

“We love you… We love you…” It continued, making you look up at Lee. Tears in your eyes slightly clouded your vision, but you could see that he was frowning in sadness as he bowed his head with closed eyes.

“Daddy?” A staticky and gargled voice, yet one that clearly belonged to a young girl, asked. You found out where it was coming from the moment Lee took a walkie talkie out of his pocket. He didn’t have that when you first met, you were sure… he must have found it looking around the house when you were upstairs.

“...Hello?” Lee slowly trudged over to the screen door the two of you used as an entrance, looking outside.

“You need to be quiet,” she warned, making you glance at the man suspiciously. He seemed to be just as concerned, pressing down the button and asking, “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. They tried to get me, but I’m hiding until my parents come home.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Clementine. This is my house,” the girl replied, sounding strangely emotionally stable.

“Hi, Clementine,” you could hear in his voice that he was trying to sound friendly, “My name’s
Lee. I have a girl with me, only a bit older than you, I’m sure.”

“What’s her name?”

The man looked up at you expectantly. Now was your chance. You could tell them both, two strangers, the truth, or you could leave it all behind you. Admit to them who you really were, or leave the old you buried under the swing set you’d play on in the backyard. Keep to your old self, or pay homage to the people you loved.

“...Ryan,” you eventually said, swallowing the thick feeling in your throat. It was just a name. Only a name…

“Ryan. Her name’s Ryan,” Lee told Clementine. “Where are your parents?”

Clementine didn’t miss a beat. “They took a trip and left me with Sandra. They’re in Savannah, I think. Where the boats are?”

You followed Lee into the kitchen, trying your damndest to ignore the large puddle of blood on the floor. Staring at Lee, you drawled, “Her parents were the ones on the voicemail… Do you think they’re-” your voice cracked as tears once again flooded to your eyes, “Are they even alive?”

He looked back at you with a sad look on his face, before turning to gaze out through the window again. “Are you safe?”

“I’m outside in my treehouse. They can’t get in.”

“That’s smart,” Lee nodded, looking out and into the yard.

“Can you see me?” Clementine pushed open the wooden door, and sure enough, she was holding and speaking into the other walkie-talkie. It was hard to make out her features from a distance, but you noticed she was wearing a pale yellow shirt and a ball cap on her head. “I can see you through the window.”

Both you and Lee smiled, the latter offering her a small wave.
The happy moment was quickly ruined, however, when you heard growling coming from behind you. Your eyes widened and you quickly turned around, backing up in Lee’s direction. When it seemed like you were running out of time, you placed a hand on it’s shoulder and one on it’s chest, trying to shove it away. “Go, Lee! Move!”

He reluctantly pushed past you, slipping on the puddle of blood. You managed to successfully shove the walker away and into the counter, thinking it was knocked out as you slipped by and offered a hand to Lee, who was on the floor.

“Ryan! Look out!” The man warned. You whipped around, only to be tackled to the floor by the walker. Trying as hard as you could to not let it’s mouth get anywhere close to your flesh, you let out a scream. You were fighting a losing battle, and as the seconds felt like hours, you slowly began to accept that this could very well be where you died. You proved to be completely wrong when the growling ceased and the corpse was shoved off of you, Lee now offering you his free hand. Your breath wasragged as he hauled you to your feet, wiping your now dirty hands on your pants.

“Are you okay?” Concern was written all over Lee’s face, and as much as you wanted to assure him you were, you couldn’t bring yourself to utter the words. Your eyes were still blown wide with adrenaline and your heartbeat irregular. It felt like your entire reality was distorted as you looked from Lee to Clementine.

“It’s okay, he killed it…” The little girl trying to reassure you was enduring in a way that you couldn’t quite describe. Although it was pained, you offered her a weak smile of gratitude. She happily returned a stronger one.

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Everyone was told the supply run for food was a success, the words proving to be true as large crates of canned goods were rolled into the church. Apparently there was a few bottles of wine and some glasses left over in the building from communion, now being drunk as a token of celebration. Gabriel wasn’t keen on the idea, but the rest of the group already had glasses full and dinner on their plates, including you. You decided it was best to once again isolate yourself from the other people in the room, as it seemed whenever you had something to say nowadays, it was offensive to at least one person. Better to keep your mouth shut, you supposed. Even though you hardly knew these people, you knew that they earned this. You weren’t about to be the one to ruin their party.

“I’d like to propose a toast!” Abraham announced as he tapped his glass, getting everyone’s attention as they stopped chattering. Many sat down, Carl being one of the few to remain standing.
as he dished a plate for himself. “I look around this room… and I see survivors. Each and every one of you has earned that title.” He paused, smirking ever so slightly. “To the survivors.”

“To the survivors!” the others chimed, clinking glasses and taking a sip. Smiles were on everyone’s faces, joy infecting every inch of the room.

“Is that all you want to be?” Abraham continued, catching you and others off guard. “Wake up in the mornin’, fight the undead pricks, forage for food, go to sleep at night with two eyes open, rinse and repeat? ‘Cause you can do that. I mean, you’ve got the strength. You got the skill. Thing is, for you people, for what you can do? That’s just surrender. Now, we get Eugene to Washington and he will make the dead die and the living will have this world again. And that is not a bad takeaway for a little roadtrip.”

Judith’s soft cooing broke a short silence in the church, Rick shushing her and laying her against his chest.

“Eugene, what’s in DC?” Abraham asked, as if he didn’t already know.

He let out a soft sigh, before answering. “Infrastructure constructed to withstand pandemics even of this fubar magnitude. That means food, fuel, and refuge. Restart.”

Abraham let out a soft breath, one almost sounding like a chuckle. “However this plays out, however long it takes for the reset button to kick in, you can be safe there. Safer than you’ve been since this whole thing started.”

The expression on Rick’s face was sporting all kinds of consideration. His fingers were tapping on his knee as he mentally weighed his options, his baby daughter tucked against his chest.

“Come with us. Save the world for that little one. Save it for yourselves. Save it for the people out there… who don’t got nothin’ left to do but survive.”

Judith once again cooed, causing Rick to chuckle and a few members to laugh. “What’s that?” he asked her, propping her up on his knees a bit more and looking at her face. She once again ‘spoke’, hand fisted and in her mouth as she gurgled happily. “I think she knows what I’m about to say. She’s in. If she’s in, I’m in. We’re in.”

Cheering and clapping along with happy laughter echoed off the walls, and even you were sporting a crooked half smile. Did you believe that DC was the godsend Abraham was making it out to be?
Hell no. That place could be long overrun with walkers, ruining any plan even the ‘mastermind’ Eugene might have. But it was a flame of hope, and it was one you didn’t want to put out.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who has played The Walking Dead game, you most likely recognized the characters in the reader's flashback. However, it is completely okay if you don't know anything about TWDG or the characters in it, as I'll be describing them in future parts. If you have an interest in the game (yet haven't played it), I'll leave you a fair warning: There will be plot spoilers of TWDG in parts of this story to come. If you have no interest in the game, feel free to read Lee and Clementine as if they're OCs :)}
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There are more reader x Carl scenes in this part! Feels like the story was lacking some of those :)
Again, flashbacks are in italics and I don't recommend skipping them.

Much to your dismay, a small, closed-mouth grin crossed your face as Carl took a seat next to you. Although there were good pews to sit on, you were on the floor with your back pressed against the edge, legs extended in front of you. Carl’s legs were crossed as he looked at you, having seemingly finished his dinner.

“You’re not wearing your hat,” you noted, eyes peering from the top of his head to his face.

“I only wear it when I need to be brave. Sounds stupid, I know, but that’s why my father gave it to me.”

“Because you were brave?”

“More like because I needed to be.”

“It’s a good thing to respect something like that,” you assured. “A friend gave me this,” you gestured to the crocheted headband you were wearing. It was a warm tan color and quite thick in some areas, more like winter clothing if you had to be honest. Regardless, it was in the middle of summer and you still wore it with pride, “it wasn’t his - shocker, I know - but it feels like I haven’t taken it off in years. It’s dumb, but a part of me thinks taking it off would do him a disservice.”

“My dad gave it to me after I got shot, right here,” he placed a hand on his lower rib cage. You could only imagine how terrible it looked, as you were sporting a few of your own in hidden places. “It was probably the first time I was fully conscious after it happened. He told me ‘I was part of the club now’, and he gave it to me. I asked him if he’d miss it, and he just laughed and told me ‘maybe you’ll let me borrow it from time to time.’”

The story was short and simple in a complex way, but it still tugged on your heartstrings. You assumed it had been a while ago, simply from the things Carl said Rick told him, but it was still terrible to think he ever went through something like that. You thought it said a lot about Rick that he’d be able to joke and make Carl happy in such a desperate time.

Assuming he saw him sharing the story as a part of your deal with him, you knew you wouldn’t be able to give him a satisfactory answer in return. “Sorry kid, but some things gotta stay with you and only you, ya know?”

The corner of his lip pulled up in a half smile. “Yeah, I get it. Don’t worry about it.”

“I will tell you,” you continued, voice going from solemn to a bit more playful, “-that my parents were never really religious. I think my mom wanted me to grow up in her faith, but when she had no time to go to church on Sundays anymore, the idea for me to kinda got lost in the wind.”

“Mine weren’t either. My mom wasn’t, my dad never was and still isn’t… He believes in things in
front of him more than anything. I think it'd hard to believe in a god if you feel that way.”

“It’s why he’s a good leader,” you noted. “Some people think they are, but the moment they get even the smallest glimmer of hope, they’ll drop everything to keep it shining. It’s a dangerous mindset, especially in this world. I don’t think that there’s such thing as pessimism anymore, just realism.”

“Realism keeps you breathing,” Carl agreed, “but it keeps you from living.”

You were going to question him, wondering how such a profound thing could come out of his mouth with the ease he was displaying, but opted to take a sip of your wine instead. Wine, especially red, was easily one of your least favorite alcohols, but you missed the taste, despite being so young.

A gentle silence soon settled between the two of you, which was soon disrupted by Sasha grabbing you by your flannel and slamming you against the nearest wall.

You couldn’t quite remember who was the reason you ended up at Odin's farm. It was either his sons, some family friends, or one of each. Regardless, you had helped them get their truck unstuck, which was right in front of Clem’s house, and they offered you a free ride. It was silent most of the way, but you recalled propping your arm against the back window and looking out as the sun began to set and giving Clementine a small smile when she was wedged between you and Lee.

“Thank God, you’re okay,” Odin spoke as he opened the door and walked down the front steps.

“I was worried it’d be bad here too,” Shawn admitted, before pulling his father into a tight hug.

“It’s been quiet as usual the past couple days,” The man assured, patting his son’s back. “Ol’ Breckon down the way thinks his mare’s gone lame, but that ain’t nothin’ new.”

You stopped listening to the conversation after that, knowing none of the words would be useful to you in any way. You simply slipped your hands in your pockets and slightly rocked back and forth on your feet.

A certain sentence, however, did peek your interest. “You’ve brought a couple guests.”

“I told them we could help them out,” Shawn explained.

“We’d really appreciate it,” Lee agreed, looking hesitant to even speak. “You’re welcome to stay here, but just for the night. I don’t run a bed and breakfast.”

You were trying your hardest to not get annoyed, but your voice betrayed you anyways. “He just needs help with his leg and we need a place where we won’t get eaten.”

Odin quirked an eyebrow at your words, looking down at you. “And you are..?”

“Ryan,” you chose to comply, “-That’s Lee, and this is Clementine.”
Odin nodded but didn’t looked fully convinced. You guessed right when he bent down, looking at Clementine. “Honey, do you know these people?”

You bit your tongue in anger, trying hard not to say anything. He may have been giving you a place to stay, but how dare he ask something like that to a little girl, in front of you and Lee, no less.

Without even looking over at either of you, Clementine answered “Yes,” with a slight but steady nod, and you’d be lying had you said you didn’t feel a beam of pride in your chest.

He seemed taken aback by her firmness, but didn’t push it, once again standing up straight. At least he wasn’t stupid enough to ask if the three of you were related. You and Clem looked completely different as is: her short and curly hair compared to your shoulder length and wavy at best, olive skin, bright eyes. Throw Lee’s mixed ethnicity of darker skin tones in the mix as well, and things just got crazy.

“Lee, take a seat up on the porch and I’ll see what I can do,” Odin spoke in reference to his injured leg. You, of course, weren’t about to leave his side, following the two men up the few stairs and watching Shawn disappear into the house.

Odin sighed after Lee took a seat, “Yeah, this is swollen to hell…”

“Could be worse.”

“That’s what it sounds like,” he commented, “Seems like things got awful bad in the cities…”

Clementine stood by the post near the stairs, watching the two converse. You placed your hand on the railing as you stood a few steps behind the girl, paying close attention to what they were saying.

Especially after seeing the road clogged with cars, you wondered what would possess people to think going to the cities was a good plan. It was only a suburb, pretty far from Atlanta, and it was already completely ghosted. Anything going on in the city must be indescribable.

Lee mentioned something about a car accident being the reason his leg was injured, which seemed believable enough on your part. When it seemed like they were straying away from topics that you cared about, you let out a soft breath and turned around, taking a seat on the steps. Your face was surely smeared with blood due to the walker from earlier, as your shirt evidently was.

Clem decided to sit beside you, making you retract the hand you were running down your cheek and look over at her.

“Is your name Rylie?” She questioned what seemed like out of nowhere.

Her words caused you to frown. “What?”

“You said your name was Ryan. Is that a nickname for Rylie?”

You let out a soft chuckle. “No, my name’s not Rylie,” you leaned in close to her ear, “Ryan is actually my father’s name.”

Once you pulled away, she nodded in understand before whispering back. “It’s okay, I won’t tell anyone.”
“What are you doing?!” Sasha screamed in your face, hands on your shoulders as she pinned you down. You could tell there was some anger hidden in her eyes, but her face was a giveaway that she was acting out concern for someone or something.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” you weren’t intimidated in the slightest, especially since she had no weapon. You didn’t hesitate to stare right in her eyes. Apparently you were more absorbed in conversation with Carl than you thought, because you had no idea why Rick had his pistol out or why Tyreese was holding a huge assault rifle.

“Like hell you don’t. This is all connected,” she tried keeping a steady tone, but ultimately failed. “You show up, we’re being watched, and now three of us are gone.”

“I told you: I. Don’t. Know,” you returned, managing to stay much calmer than her.

“Where are our people?!” Sasha’s voice broke and tears flooded to her eyes, but determination was still beneath her emotions.

“You’re not thinking rationally,” you warned, raising your eyebrows. “It could be me as much as it could be Gabriel.”

“Come on, she’s just a kid,” Carl interjected.

The words felt like they wrapped their way around your throat and began to strangle you, breath growing ragged.

“Is that true?” Sasha glanced from Carl back to you, hands still holding onto you strongly.

You opened your mouth and tried forming words, but none would come out. “I-I..”

“Answer me!”

“She’s 17,” once again, Carl spoke up. “Let her be.”

Reluctantly, the woman backed up, letting you lean down and press your palms to your knees. Your heart was throbbing and your eyes closed as you tried to ease the panic growing in your chest. It was stupid; having such a violent reaction to a few measly words. You needed to grow up and move on.

You stood up and sucked in a deep breath, before asking, “Which 3 are missing?”

Tyreese decided to take a turn speaking. “Daryl, Bob, and Carol.”

“Daryl and Carol, those two are together,” you pressed a few fingers to your temple, “even if they were taken, they’re together. But Bob… i don’t think he’s with them.”

“How do you know that?” Rick interrogated.

“I heard the door open a little bit after I finished eating. That was him, right?”

“He said he was going out to get some fresh air…” Sasha mumbled, most likely to herself.

“Daryl and Carol, they went out at a different time. If they were taken, there’s no way their taker would stick around and wait for someone else; they’d haul ass. I say we poke around, see if we can find anything.”
Rick gazed at you for a moment, before giving you a curt nod. His hand was lingering on his pistol in a protective matter, and you related knowing you sometimes did the same sort of thing.

“There’s something…” Glenn murmured as he peered out the window, but as realization hit him, he grew more confident, “There’s someone outside lying in the grass.”

Suspicion hung heavy in the air upon hearing his words, Rick and a few others charging after Sasha, who had darted to the door. You grabbed your bow and quiver of arrows from a pew and jogged after them, heart sinking when your eyes landed on a disturbing sight: Bob lying unconscious in the grass, his leg below his knee vanished.

You could both hear and see a few walkers stumbling to Sasha and Tara, Sasha practically begging. “Help me, please, help me.”

Loading your weapon, you shot an arrow right in a walker’s forehead, reloading quickly and hitting another one in the eye. Glenn gaped at you for a moment before taking a walker out with his unsheathed machete, Maggie doing the same with a knife after recovering from shock caused by Bob’s state.

You noticed Rick was about to run a blade of his own through a walker’s skull, but it collapsed to the ground without him getting a chance. You clenched your jaw in worry, especially when the man started shooting into the treeline as he shouted, “Get inside!”

Doing the exact opposite, you jumped the staircase so anyone helping Bob out could get in easily, making you way over to Rick and raising your bow to the same place he was shooting. You couldn’t see anyone, or any visible movement for that matter, and looked over at Rick, cocking your head to the church.

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“It smells like…” Clementine was laying on the makeshift mattress in the barn, you laying on yours as well. Clem was in the middle of the three, Lee still outside. Odin said there was a family in the barn he offered for you all to sleep in, one of 3, but you had yet to meet them. They must have been sleeping on the upper level.

“Manure,” you finished her sentence. Your hand was tucked under your head, body tilted towards the little girl so you could look at her with ease.

“You mean, when a horse… Plops?” She continued, seeming bashful of sorts. It made you smile.

“Yeah, Clementine, like that,” you ran a hand through your hair, looking back at the open barn door. Lee was seemingly pacing, palm pressed to the back of his neck. “Can you give me a second?”

She nodded and gave a small smile. After returning it, you hauled yourself to your feet and stepped outside the barn’s door, carefully closing it shut as to not make much noise. You noticed that Lee was now a few feet from the entrance, back pressed against the wooden panels of the barn.

“Are you okay?” You asked, looking down at the man.

“You should be asleep,” is all he chose to reply with.
“So should you,” you retaliated simply, motioning for him to scoot over. Almost reluctantly, he did, making enough room for you to take a seat beside him.

You pulled your knees up slightly, not quite to your chest. “What’s up?”

“My first run in with one of those… things, was when I was in the back of a cop car.”

You looked from Lee’s to face to the grass paving it’s way up to Odin’s house. Lee wasn’t looking at you anyways, his eyes set dead ahead.

“I was going to jail,” he confirmed a worry of yours, “I was ready for my life to be over. And now, only a day later, I’ve got two other lives I’ve got to worry about.”

“I can’t imagine what that’s like, but don’t you think it’s best to just… put it behind you?” Your tone was cautious, as you were sure that if you said the right words, you could set him off.

“Do you know what I was in for?”

You were quiet.

“First degree murder. I killed a man, Ryan.”

Hearing that Gareth was still alive brought an onset of emotions to your brain that you couldn’t quite describe. One, undoubtedly, was anger. You were furious over what him and his men did to Bob, how they could treat something so monstrous as if it was merely a way to go about living. Another feeling was hope. Hope that you’d get to serve justice for you capture, for the people he killed… it almost made your mouth water.

Bob was now passed out and being carried to Gabriel’s office so he could be laid down on the couch, Rick approaching Gabriel. “Do you know the place Bob was talking about?”

“It’s an elementary school,” he nodded his head. “It’s close.”

“How close?”

When the priest didn’t respond, Rick pressed, “How close, Gabriel?”

He sighed. “It’s a ten minute walk through the woods from here, due south of the graveyard.”

You pinched the bridge of your nose and held your bow horizontally across your stomach, conversation between the group drowning out as you got lost in your own thoughts.

Something that pulled you out of them, however, was Abraham’s booming voice announcing, “Time for a reality check.”

You dropped your hand from your face and looked straight ahead as you waited for him to continue, though you didn’t open. “We all need to leave for DC, right now.”

“Daryl and Carol are gonna be back…” Rick began to walk down the center aisle, walking right past the pew you were leaning against. “We’re not going anywhere without them.”

“I respect that,” Abraham almost cut off their leader, “-but there’s a clear threat here to Eugene. I
need to extract his ass before things get any uglier. So if ya’ll won’t come, good luck to you. We’ll go our separate ways.” his speaking was hurried in not an urgent way, but rather dismissive.

“You leavin’ on foot?” Rick was having none of Abraham’s ‘speech’, that was for certain.

“Oh for god’s sake,” you breathed out, voice coming out as an exhausted whisper.

Abraham stopped dead in his tracks, turning around. “We fixed that damn bus ourselves.”

“There are a lot more of us,” Rick growled, quite literally stepping up to the challenge of an argument as he walked forward.

“You wanna keep it that way? You should come.”

“Carol saved your life,” Rick’s voice was growing more violent by the second, “We saved your life!”

“Well, I’m trying to save yours!” the other man in the fight was now full on shouting. “Save everyone’s!”

“And you’re gonna do that by taking a damn bus in the middle of the night?” You asked, making all heads turn in your direction. “Maybe if you pulled your head out of your ass for one damn second, you’d see how shitty of a plan you have.”

“Excuse me?” Abraham’s face was red with anger.

“I get that you don’t want your angel here to be caught in the crossfire with a bunch of cannibals. But taking off in the middle of the night, when everything is dark, and quiet, and you’re more liable for danger than ever? You’re basically carving out yours and Eugene’s headstones.” You stood up straight, now holding your bow at your thigh, quiver still hung on your back. “I don’t care how deadset you are on your little mission, okay? I really couldn’t care less. But even you have to admit that without these people, the three of you will die. Maybe not tonight, or tomorrow, but you will. You need more than a trio to get to DC. So if you do go out there right now, and you come across a pack of walkers that’s more than you can handle, or worse, the men we’re trying to hunt down? Don’t expect me to bury your corpse.”

Although you had shocked everyone into silence, you could tell that he still wasn’t impressed with the idea of waiting around.

“I have an idea,” Tara spoke up, treading to beside Rick. “If you stay just one more day and help, I’ll go with you to DC. No matter what.” The woman who looked back at Maggie for a reason you didn’t know, breathing out, “Okay?”

Abraham looked over Tara, almost in consideration. A few moments of silence passed, before he added, “Glenn and Maggie too.”

“No,” Rick growled.

“Good luck then. I’m not interested in breaking up what you have here. Rosita, grab your gear.”

“Abraham-” She spoke cautiously.

“Now,” he demanded gruffly. “Eugene, let’s go.”

Eugene didn’t move a muscle, just continued to stare straight ahead as he sat on a pew.
“Eugene. Move it.”
“I don’t want to.”
“Now.”
“Okay.”

You scoffed at the lack of determination in his words, smiling a bitter smile. It was a miracle this man was still alive.

“You’re not taking the bus,” Rick disrupted when Abraham had almost reached the door.

He once again slowly turned around, saying, “Try to stop me.”

“You know, I think an arrow in the eye would do just the trick, don’t you?” Sarcasm infected the air as you raised your weapon and pulled the string taught, arrow in the shaft.

“Put that down!” Surprisingly, Glenn was the one shouting at you.

“Try to stop me,” you stared right at Abraham as the words left your lips, before you smirked. Your aim was still perfectly steady, the only thing left to do was let go.

“You stay--” Glenn continued, in a more civil tone. “You stay and help us, and we will go with you.”

“No,” Rick’s upper lip pulled into a snarl.

“It’s not your call,” Glenn was sturdy in his words, yet his eyes looked filled with despair. He turned back to Abraham, “You stay, help us.”

“Half a day,” He compromised. “Come high noon, we’re taillights. I’m not waiting for the other damn shoe to drop.”

“And we will leave with you,” Maggie reiterated.

Abraham nodded, motion growing firmer as it continued. “12 hours. Then we go.”

You let out a fake chuckle, lowering your bow. “As long as you don’t come anywhere near me, we’re good,” you proved your words to be true as you placed the arrow back in your quiver.

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“You had your reasons,” you replied, knowing it was true. Of course the idea was frightening, and you were curious to learn the story, but Lee had done nothing but help you since the second you met him. Maybe he was a bit violent upon getting you in the truck, but there’s no way you would have simply went with him, and if you were honest with yourself, it wasn’t safe to stay in that house. “You had to have.”

He simply stayed quiet, picking at the dead grass underneath his hand.

“I haven’t even thought about my family,” your voice grew slightly rough and thick with emotion.
“My family kept me alive for so many years, and I have no idea where they are. They could be…” your lip began to quiver, “They could be dead, and I don’t know. I didn’t spare a single second to think about it.”

You didn’t realize you completely crying until Lee’s arm wrapped around you and you were pulled against his chest. It hadn’t taken you long to calm down, as you had always been fairly in-control of your emotions, but you knew that wouldn’t be the end of mourning your family.

“Clem… She’s our responsibility now;” You now sounded shockingly emotionless, as if you hadn’t just been sobbing.

“No, she’s mine to look after. Just like you are.”

“…”

“They think they’re in control,” Rick’s tone was surprisingly soft for the words he was speaking, “We’re in here and they could be anywhere. But we know exactly where they are.”

“Plan’s got stones, I’ll give you that,” Abraham had mostly calmed down at this point, but you kept an eye on him as your back was pressed to the wall of the church, a bit isolated from the rest of them.

“Make our move before they do.”

“That’s right,” Rick and Glenn shared a nod although they were standing right next to each other. “They’re not counting on us thinking straight.”

“Are we?” Rosita’s voice came into the equation. “I’m just making sure. It’s a big play.”

“Remember what these people are capable of,” Their leader was now standing tall, giving what you thought of as one of his ‘speeches’.

Everyone kept any opinions to themselves as some began to load their weapons.

“Tyreese?” Rick spoke up. The man was sitting on a pew, sweat glistening off his skin even in the dim candle light. The bags under his eyes were prominent as his hands stayed folded with his elbows on his knees. He looked beaten to hell and back.

“Yeah?”

“You up for this?”

His sister answered for him as she stood by the office’s doorway. “I’m coming with you.”

“You should stay with Bob.”

“No,” she argued. “I want to be out there. I want to be a part of this.”

After she disappeared back into the room and Tyreese followed after her, you knew a dreaded conversation was about to be shared between the two and were relieved you didn’t have to hear it. Especially considering that you yourself were about to endure a talk you didn’t want to deal with.

You saw Carl disappear into the side room opposite from the one Bob was in once Judith had started crying, which was quite convenient due to circumstances. At least you didn’t have to worry
about his father watching you like a hawk.

Closing the door behind you with your bow strung on your back, you let out a soft breath. The sight of Carl leaning over his sister’s basket and smiling softly was a beautiful sight, and you almost contemplated saying nothing as to not ruin it.

“You can’t stick up for me like that,” you started, crossing your arms. “You’re gonna get yourself into trouble.”

“I didn’t stick up for you. I told the truth, that’s it.”

“Carl,” your tone was warning, though you weren’t about to take it any further than that.

He sighed, looking from Judith to you. “I’m serious. You don’t need someone to ‘stick up for you’. And no offense, but you kind of suck at being civilized. I thought you could use the boost.”

“It’s not your job to do that,” you repeated. “Your father already doesn’t trust me, if you take my side in shit, it’ll only be worse, for both of us.”

“You don’t realize why I’m doing this, do you?”

You blinked in surprise. “What?”

“I owe you, this being the least of it. Why do you think I came up with that stupid game to get to know you? You saved me.” He closed his eyes as he seemed to be gathering his thoughts. I know that you don’t need a bodyguard, but you need to be safe, and we can do that. And because I can’t protect you, I’m gonna do the next best thing: keep you alive. Like it or not.”

Your mouth slightly gaped open at his words. You didn’t expect him to say such a thing, and being so sturdy behind it only made you more surprised. “Kid…”

“Stop calling me that,” he murmured, turning back to Judith. Her hands were slightly failing as she babbled on about something no one understood. “I can tell you hate the word, I don’t know why you keep bringing it up.”

You closed your eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to shake the phrase from your mind.

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“She’s just a kid,” you argued, though it was weak as you were both emotionally and physically exhausted.

*Lee seemed taken aback by your statement. “So are you.”*

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“Your dad’s probably gonna talk to you soon,” you murmured, opening the door. “Be prepared to stay behind.”
And with that, you were back into the light of the many candles.
“I know that this plan is for the better,” Rosita started, wobbling her rifle on the floor, “but it kind of blows.”

You and a handful of others, mainly the ones who couldn’t fight, were all sat in Gabriel’s office. Rosita kept her rifle close to her body, and Carl’s pistol was stowed away in the holster on his thigh. Eugene was sat beside Rosita, though he looked a lot less confident than her. Tyreese kneeled on the floor near Bob, who was looking worse by the minute. His face was shining with sweat, face contorted with pain he didn’t express. Judith was in a basket, looking unamused but not upset. You had caught a glimpse of Gabriel cowering in the corner with a rosary clasped between his palms. You chose not to bring it up.

“It’s the only smart choice we can make,” You replied, not arguing nor agreeing. “If we get this right, we’ll have nothing to worry about tomorrow.”

“And if we don’t?” She challenged, raising her eyebrows.

You looked away, shifting your focus from her to the still door.

“I thought you were the queen,” Rosita said, “The victorious leader. Why don’t you have an answer?” You couldn’t tell if she was trying to embarrass you or attempting to pick a fight. Either way, your answer would remain less than satisfactory.

“Because I’m a warrior, not a fortune teller,” You lifted your own rifle, pretending to sight it in. “And my castle is in shambles.”

A thud coming from outside made you hold the butt of your gun to your shoulder, reaching out an arm to gently push Carl back. You didn’t fully grip your gun until he had taken a few steps backwards.

“Well, I guess you know we’re here,” Gareth chimed, faking a tone of defeat, “And we know you’re here.”
You clenched your jaw to prevent a remark from slipping your lips.

“And we’re armed,” Gareth continued, “So there’s really no point in hiding anymore.”

If he genuinely thought that would be enough for you to reveal yourselves, he was stupider than you remembered. You heard feet shuffling, most likely down the side aisles of the church. Even he didn’t believe his sentence coming true was possible.

“We’ve been watching you. We know who’s here.” Your fear had been confirmed when he began dropping names. “There’s Bob, unless you put him out of his misery already. And Eugene. Rosita. Martin’s good friend Tyreese. Carl. Judith. Ryan.”

Your hand slid further to the trigger when your name left his lips.

“Rick and the rest walked out,” Gareth announced, as if the news was alarming, “With a lot of your guns.” The silence irritated him, and without leaving a long pause, Gareth said, “Listen, we don’t know where you all are, but this isn’t a big place. So let’s just stop this right now before things get more painful than they need to be.”

The doorknob began to shake, and when Rosita adjusted her position, you realized that she was now standing by your side.

“You never were one to give up easily,” Gareth said. He didn’t need to specify for anyone in the room, Terminus member or not, to know who he was addressing. “You’re behind one of these doors, and we have enough firepower to take down both. I can’t imagine that’s what you want.”

Again, more silence.

“What about the priest?” Gareth continued on, voice moving slowly but surely. “Father, you help us wrap this up, and we’ll let you walk away from this. Just open the door and go. You can take the baby with you. What do you say?”

You didn’t mistrust Gabriel, yet your stomach twisted into a knot of worry, one so strong that you spared the man a look. He was trembling, eyes shifting from wide open to squeezed shut, both actions out of fear.
Then, Judith let out a cry, and for one of the few times in your life, you felt your heart concave and sink into your stomach.

Carl managed to keep Judith from wailing again, but everyone knew that the damage was already done. Shuffling from outside to door could be heard, most likely the gang switching from one door to the one they now knew as yours. Your vice grip on your weapon somehow grew as you shifted to the side of the door rather than the front, and motioned for anyone directly behind it to move aside.

Eventually, a gun cocked, and Gareth announced, “It’s your last chance right now to tell us if you’re coming out.”

You heard some muttering, and then two gunshots. Two gunshots that did not hit the door, but rather the sides around it.

“Put your guns on the floor,” A familiar gruff voice demanded, and you couldn’t fight the smirk tugging at your lips.

“Rick we’ll fire right into that office, so you lower your gun-” Gareth’s already unintimidating speech was cut short by a cry of pain, which you took as an undirected queue.

You silently slipped from the office, pressing the barrel of your rifle to the back of the nearest man’s neck. “If I were you, You took your turn at cocking your gun, “I’d listen.”

Gareth snapped up to you in surprise, and the look on his face was one of pure defeat. Stretched onto his features was an expression that knew no matter what he tried to do, he wasn’t making out alive. You almost felt blissful.

“Put your guns on the floor and kneel,” Rick repeated, leaving no room for disagreement.

“Do as he says,” Gareth rasped out, now kneeling and slouched over on the floor.

“Will a bullet to the neck make you understand?” You warned one last time, and finally, the man in front of you sank to his knees and reluctantly placed his rifle on the ground.
You snatched the gun and tossed it to Rosita, who was once again by your side. You paced around the man and kept your barrel pressed to his skull the whole time as a silent threat. When you moved to stand in front of Gareth, you didn’t miss the sigh of relief the stranger let out.

“You snatched the gun and tossed it to Rosita, who was once again by your side. You paced around the man and kept your barrel pressed to his skull the whole time as a silent threat. When you moved to stand in front of Gareth, you didn’t miss the sigh of relief the stranger let out.

“Ryan, move,” Rick warned, stepping forward down the front aisle.

“I’m not gonna kill him,” you could read his mind through the tone of his voice, “you can keep your promise. I just want to talk.”

You pulled his head up and back straight by his hair, then crouched down in front of him. “What the hell is wrong with you? Seriously?” You asked, swapping out your rifle for your bow, which was strung to your back. “I gave you an out. I offered you and your people food and shelter. I offered you an alliance. I offered you your life..”

“Now is when you choose to be noble? To be the beacon of light, the beacon of life?” Gareth asked. “Your people are gone, Ryan. You aren’t a leader, not anymore. You killed them.”

“You’re wrong.”

“You might as well have,” he challenged, a painful smirk crossing his face.

“You killed your people, your own children,” You said, “and you fed on them like a pack of wolves. You thought you could survive by becoming a living walker, feeding off of the easy prey.” You pulled an arrow from your sheath and loaded your bow, “and now, you’re dead. So tell me, Gareth, how well did that work out for you?”

“I may be dead,” Gareth rasped out, “but you have nothing.”

You smiled falsely, cocking your head. “I never got to show you what I could do with my mouth,” you said, then took the top of his ear between your teeth. You bit him hard and pulled down, ripping the flesh and cartilage all the way down to his ear canal. You only pulled away when you were satisfied with his screams, spat the hunk of flesh in his face, and said, “He’s all yours, Rick.”

You closed the door behind yourself, feeling uncomfortable under their anxious eyes. “Everyone’s
“What happened to you?” Tyreese asked, referring to the blood covering your lips, chin, and most likely teeth as well.

You reached up and grazed your fingers over your skin, pulling them back. They came back tainted with red. “Someone pissed me off.”

“Sasha?” Bob asked, breathless. “Is she okay?”

You nodded slowly, then in a sharper way. Tyreese stood and was going for the door, only for you to reach an arm out and stop him. “If you don’t like what I look like, you’re gonna hate what she’s doing.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, so you sighed and added in a low voice, “I have something in my bag for Bob. I need your help to keep it a secret.”

This got Tyreese to return to his seat, making you sit beside your backpack that was on the floor. Conveniently, the bag was beside Carl, who now had Judith in his lap.

“You dad’s okay,” You said, seeing the worry in his features, You took a seat. “Seriously. He’s a tough son of a bitch. You have nothing to worry about.”

He smiled wearily, looking back at his sister when she gurgled. “Thanks. You look crazy, by the way.”

You rolled your eyes, though were far from bothered. The ripped up pants you were wearing that exposed blood-soaked gauze didn’t pair well with your stained face. “Whatever. I still look better than you.”

“You wish,” he scoffed, flicking the brim of his hat. You couldn’t stop the chuckle you let out, unzipping your backpack and digging through its contents.

“We should start listening to you,” Carl continued as you dug through your bag for a clean piece of
“Hell yeah you should,” You agreed, coming back empty. You elbowed your bag like you would elbow an annoying sibling.

“Seriously,” Carl said. He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket you couldn’t see, offering the cloth to you. There was no visible dirt on it, which was clean enough for you.

“Anyone can come up with a plan,” you shrugged and began to wipe at your face. The patterned handkerchief made it impossible to tell if you were actually cleaning the blood.

“Not that. Before they left on that food run, you said that we’d lose someone, and that it wouldn’t be your fault. Bob was bitten. And now he’s gonna die.”

You looked down at the floor, unsure of what to say. You couldn’t claim that you hadn’t said what you did, or that you were wrong, because he clearly knew otherwise.

“You’re used to it, aren't you?” Carl asked. “Losing people.”

“Aren’t we all?” you countered, and planned on saying nothing else. People dropped dead nowadays like they were flies, and it didn’t matter how much a person loved them. The only reason anyone was still alive, especially you, was because they adapted. The people who didn’t were walking around with rotting flesh and a brain that no longer functioned.

You and Carl were holding a stare, one that was too long to be comfortable. Still, you didn’t look away, which surely surprised both you and him. You broke away when Rick opened the door and called for his children, but had he not, you wondered how long the look would have held.

Rick pulled Carl - who still had Judith in his arms - close to him. When Rick pulled him back, he still had his hands on his son’s shoulders, which told you he was distracted. Distracted enough to not notice certain things, at least.

You set the handkerchief Carl loaned you on the now empty space beside you before digging in your bag again. This time, however, you knew exactly what you were looking for. And you knew where to find it.
Once finding the capped syringe, you slid it under your flannel sleeve, along with the vial of medication. You quickly glanced around and felt a sense of relief that, if someone had caught what you did, they didn’t care to mention it.

You stood up and walked over to Tyreese, and when you kneeled in front of him, you made sure your back was turned to Rick. “Give him half of a syringe-full every six hours,” you instructed in a whisper while removing the contents from your sleeve. “It should stop him from feeling any pain, from his leg to the bite.”

Tyreese simply stared at you in shock, not moving a muscle despite your offer for him to take the medication. You sighed and took the cap off with your teeth and stuck the needle inside the glass vial. You pulled some of the clear liquid into the syringe, and tapped any air bubbles out of it. You then pinched a part of Bob’s leg and stuck the needle right through his clothing and into his flesh. After pushing down the plunger, you pulled back and wiped off the needle with your sleeve. It didn’t sterilize it, not by any means, but infection was hardly a concern considering Bob’s state.

“What is that?” Tyreese asked while you returned the cap over the needle.

You clenched your jaw in debate, before admitting, “Morphine. And before you ask - no, I’m not a junkie.”

“Then why do you have that stuff?”

“Have to be prepared for anything,” you answered, and when Tyreese still didn’t take the medication, you grabbed his hand and set both the syringe and the vial in his palm. “If someone catches you, feel free to lead them back to me. I’m in enough hot water as is.”

“Why are you doing this?” Tyreese asked, and though his hand was still extended, he wasn’t trying to give you the items back. You considered this to be a good thing. “You could be saving these for yourself, so why give them to a stranger?”

“I’m not as cold-hearted as I look,” you answered.

“Ryan!” Rick said from behind you, which made you set a hand over Tyreese’s to push his hand down. He got the message and pulled what he was holding close to his chest. You stood up and turned around to face the group’s leader.
“We need to talk,” he told you, to which you nodded curtly and followed him out of the room.

Once out of the room, and a considerable space away from anyone, Rick started to speak in a low voice. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to put up a fight earlier.”

“What, about staying behind?” you raised your eyebrows. “I had my fun anyways,” you gestured to your mouth, which you were sure was still stained.

“Yeah, about that…” he continued with a sigh. “Who are you, Ryan? Besides a girl that knows everybody.”


Rick softly chuckled, out of what you supposed to be realization. He was smart enough to figure out that you weren’t an easy person to crack. “Then who were you before this?”

You smirked and glanced down in contemplation. “What was your job, Rick? Before the world went to hell?”

“A cop,” he said, “a sheriff.”

“Well, sheriff,” you continued, “I was a scared, broken girl with half of a family trying to put her back together. And they never got to, because just as everything was starting to get better, it all fell apart. They died before that could happen. So sometimes, I like to think that the end of the world is what made me whole again, because something did. Something had to, or I’d be just as dead as them.”

“You took the world ending as your wake up call?” Rick asked, a small smile of amusement clad on his features. “Then let me tell you, sweetheart: you put yourself back together, and I think a few of the pieces are in the wrong places. I’ve never seen a broken girl do the things you do.”

“We can’t all be nice in times like these, can we?” you returned the smile. “We can’t all be like Carl.”
“What about pissing people off do you find so easy?”

“It comes easily with scaring them,” you answered and walked back into the side room to grab your backpack.

___

Bob was slipping fast, that much was easy to tell. Apparently, it was so obvious that Rick went as far as issuing final goodbyes. Everyone was huddled against the wall while Maggie promised Bob that he was ‘one of them’. You stood separately from the rest of group.

After Maggie finished, Glenn wrapped an arm around her and waved in acknowledgement to Bob. Slowly, everyone began to file out, until Bob said a word of protest to one man in particular.

“Rick…” he rasped out, who immediately turned to look at the dying man. He then began to hand Judith off to Carl, to which Bob objected again. “No, don’t. Let her stay. I trust her.”

Rick nodded in understanding, which lead Carl to exit the room. Sasha promised Bob she’d be just outside, which finally lead you to move from your place.

Once out of the room, you ran a hand down your face. Although you had caught the group at what was no doubt a bad time, you couldn’t help but keep thinking that you were better off. After all, you still had a cabin in the woods, and now, no group to threaten that. You could live - and maybe one day, die - in absolute peace.

The group was mostly taking a seat in the pew, which lead you to keep standing.

“Ryan,” Tyreese quietly said as he approached you. You turned to face him, and after getting close to you, he opened his large hand to reveal the syringe and vial.

“He’s not dead yet,” you said simply, looking from the contents to his face, “which means he still might be in pain.”

“The last dose I gave him wasn’t even 15 minutes ago,” he countered, “and… I don’t think he’s
gonna make another 6 hours.”

You studied his face for any internal conflict, and were shocked when you found none. Still, you took the items in his hands and transferred them to your pocket.

“What was that?” A voice from behind the pair of you asked, which made you close your eyes.

Sasha.

She carefully pushed past Tyreese to face you, and though her eyebrows were furrowed, you wouldn’t describe her expression as angry.

“Say it louder, why don’t you?” You hissed, then sighed. “It’s morphine.”

“Why did you have it?” she turned to Tyreese, who somehow looked calm. You wondered how he could always stay so mellow.

“She let me borrow it for Bob,” He calmly explained. Sasha turned back to you.

“So he can’t feel anything right now?” She continued to interrogate.

“Well, I’m no doctor, but…” you gestured with your hands, “that’s the theory, yes.”

She didn’t move to hit you, kick you, or pin you to the wall again. Instead, she engulfed you in one of the tightest hugs you could remember having.

“Thank you,” she whispered, voice shaking as her grip tightened.

You didn’t reply, but slowly raised your arms to rest on her back. To your pleasure, she pulled away quickly, wiped her eyes, and walked herself and Tyreese back towards the door of the room Bob was in.
You set a hand on your hip and ran the other over your mouth. You grazed your eyes over the room, and soon noticed Carl looking at you. He looked away the moment you caught him staring, but wasn’t fast enough for you to not notice.

Letting your hands fall to your sides, you approached him. You didn’t bother taking a seat on the pew beside him.

“You didn’t see any of that,” you said, not bothering to ask him.

“Finally think you have a reputation to keep up with?” he asked, elbows resting on his knees.

“No, I have a life to maintain,” you disagreed.

“Why would any of us get mad at a group player?”

“You really think that’s what your dad will see it as? The new girl with narcotics is a ‘team player’?”

“Probably not,” he admitted, then grinned to himself. “Then again, maybe you just can’t stand the idea that you’re softening up.”

You scoffed. “I’m sure you and your ‘gang’ are great and all, but believe me, your influence isn’t half as amazing.”

“Whatever, you’re secret is still safe.”

“Thank you,” you said, and took your backpack from the seat beside him.

Chapter End Notes

What was your favorite part? let me know!

Kudos + comments = quicker updates :)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Q (in the eyes of Ryan, your fictional counterpart): What are you looking for?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With Terminus officially becoming your last concern, you felt as though you could once again sleep peacefully. Even when you were alone in a cabin, with practically nothing to worry about, you had trouble resting your mind. So somehow, for the first time in a long time, you fell asleep with no anxiety to keep you waking.

///

There wasn’t much that stood out for what had to have been half of a year. You remembered staying in a pharmacy for half a night, only to flee to the outskirts of the city. The motel must have come into play for awhile, and was temporarily replaced with a second farm.

You could remember that farm. You remembered the way Clementine smiled while petting a cow, how hard you laughed when she tasted a salt lick, and how familial it was to sit at a table while a hot meal was sprawled before you.

You still sometimes felt the horror you experienced when Lee came rushing down the stairs, saying the meat was a man’s legs.

Lee, Clem, yourself, and two other men were locked in a room after the family freaked out. Clem had to climb through a vent in order to let you out. You stuck by Lee the whole time, and somehow, Clementine broke off from you and him. While she most certainly remembered the ‘kidnapping’, if you will, you just couldn’t. So much more important things happened afterwards.

Everyone who made it out from the farm of horrors was back to the motel you had stayed at for some time. On this occasion, the time there was much longer; you counted somewhere around three months.

In those three months, you could almost feel yourself maturing, conditioning to the new world. Too many nights, you went to sleep with an aching stomach and a clouded mind. As you watched
Clementine play with Duck, a young boy who wouldn’t be alive for much longer, you couldn’t feel anything. You no longer saw your step-siblings in her -- all you saw was a person you used to be, but no longer were. Surprisingly, you weren’t even jealous. You just hurt.

One day, you could see that Clem just wasn’t her normal self. For most of the morning, you assumed the hunger was getting to her, and simply let it be. The few times Lee tried to console you for the lacking rations, all he did was annoy you. You supposed Clementine would feel the same way.

After Lee gave her an apple around what had to be noon, you knew that an empty stomach was no longer the viable explanation. So, as she sat beside Duck on the pavement, showing no interest in the chalks, you crouched down beside her.

“Hey, Clem,” you greeted, forcing a closed-mouth smile on your lips. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Ryan,” She returned politely, though sounded far from enthusiastic. “Not much.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” you noted, “you’re always up to something.”

She looked at her hands, which were folded in her lap. “Not today.”

“Why not?” You continued, placing yourself on the ground beside her. You folded your legs across one another. “The sun is shining, but it’s not too hot, which is rare in Georgia. I think it’s the perfect day to be up to something.”

“I can’t talk to my friend anymore,” Clem pouted. She wasn’t sad in a way you found annoying, like most kids were; in fact, you wanted few things more than to cheer her up.

“Your friend?” you asked, hoping to prompt more information.

“On the walkie,” she said, taking it out of her jacket pocket and setting it in the space between you both.

You didn’t know how to reply. Telling her that her friend wasn’t real - as they had used the device many times without success - would only make matters worse. Besides, maybe having an imaginary friend wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Everybody needed motivation to make it
through another day.

Despite the somewhat childish idea, you had to hand it to Clementine: she was using valid logic. The batteries for the walkie-talkie were needed elsewhere, which in reality, would make the communication impossible.

“Why don’t you tell me about your friend,” you offered. Perhaps she would find comfort in the mentioning of them.

“He’s from Savannah,” Clem disclosed.

“Where Kenny wants to go once the RV is fixed,” you recalled.

“Where my parents are,” Clementine specified, which made your heart ache for her. You didn’t know where your family was either, and you still hadn’t come to terms with that. You couldn’t imagine how Clem, a child, must feel about that.

“Has he told you about what’s in Savannah?” you continued to ask.

“No,” Clem shook her head, “but he said he wants to meet me, if we ever get there. He also said he’ll help find my parents!”

You smiled. “That’s some good news.”

“I think so,” she returned the expression.

You were cut off by gunfire.

///

The apocalypse taught you a valuable skill you referred to as ‘your sixth sense’ -- awareness even in sleep. Of course, you couldn’t awake with the refluxes of a ninja, or throat punch people in your sleep, but rather, you could always tell when something was off. The times you had came to just
before disaster of some kind struck were countless.

You blinked blearily with a soft groan. Some of the group decided they would try sleeping on the pews while you opted for the floor. Despite your backpack elevating your neck, your head was already throbbing. You could practically feel your muscles knotting, if only just to spite you.

When no longer preoccupied with incoming pain, you could hear some shuffling and what sounded like a mix of mumbling and whimpering. Minutes passed, and neither sounds let up. You tilted your head to the side and took in a sharp breath.

A few yards away from you, on the floor as well, slept Carl; though, judging by his sounds and actions, you supposed he wasn’t doing much sleeping. He tossed and turned, and even the dark, you could see his eyebrows knitting together and sweat on his forehead.

You weren’t quite sure what to do. Having plenty of similar dreams yourself, you knew Carl could wake up in seconds. However, you didn’t know how long his nightmare had been going on. Extra minutes in nightmares like that felt like eternities in hell. He didn’t deserve that.

Unwillingly, you brought yourself to your feet and walked the short distance to the boy. You lowered yourself to your knees and leaned down so your face was closer to his. “Carl?” you whispered, gently shaking his shoulder. Your eyes were beginning to droop shut. “Carl?” You said again, this time loud enough to startle yourself.

Due to your exhaustion, when Carl grabbed your shoulders, rolled you over, and pinned you to the ground, you let him.

“Woah, hey!” you protested, yet somehow managed to keep your voice down. “It’s me, Carl! Ryan? The bitch who’s been giving you shit all week?” You felt your hands trace up his arms to his elbows, where you gripped him tightly.

“Your eyes are open,” you noted, staring him down. “I know you can hear me.” Your hands clenched him tight, and you didn’t flinch when you felt a tear of his fall onto your cheek.

You felt his hands release from your shoulders, but could see that they were moving closer to your head. A part of you worried he was reaching to choke you, yet waited to see what he was going to do. Eventually, his hands stopped moving and stayed on the floor between your shoulders and face.
His arms began to quiver. You had a feeling it wasn’t weakness as much as it was fatigue, either physically or emotionally. Not knowing what to do otherwise, you breathed steadily beneath him. When he began growing unstable and his face contorted, however, your actions surprised even you.

You reached up and wrapped your arms around Carl. Your back completely lifted off the ground as you hugged him. Your arms remained sturdy until you felt his hands lift off the ground. His head bowed your right shoulder, and as gripped the back of your shirt, you swore you heard him crying.

The two of you stayed like that for what felt like a long time. Still, your muscles didn’t quiver from the position or added weight. A mix of surprise and discipline, you decided.

You moved your arm from his upper back to his side when you felt his body still. Carefully, you rolled both him and yourself clockwise, stopping when your sides touched the floor and your bodies were parallel. You didn’t let go until he did.

“TI’m sorry for waking you up,” Carl spoke after silence fell between the pair you and him made. You had scooted away from him a bit, leaving space between the two of you.

“It’s alright,” you awkwardly assured, setting a hand under your neck with a sigh. “My dream was crap too. Well,” you considered, “not as crap as yours, but still.”

“What were you dreaming about?” Carl asked. His voice sounded distant. You knew the only reason he kept talking was because he didn’t want to leave things on such uncomfortable terms. You understood.

“About a friend of mine,” you answered, staring up at the ceiling. “An old friend. We were young when we met - shit had already gone down. She was like a sister to me, after awhile.” You chuckled to yourself. “I was so much nicer back then.”

“Where is she?” Carl said. “Your friend.”

“I don’t know,” you said, voice becoming unusually soft. You furrowed your eyebrows. “She could be dead, she could be an empress. I just don’t know.”

“How do you not know something like that?” Carl asked. He sounded more curious than accusing.
You smiled to yourself and turned your head to the side. Seeing you in his peripheral vision, Carl did the same.

“You have to do more than have a nightmare to hear that one,” you replied with a smirk, and sat up. You got to your feet. “Goodnight, Carl.”

///

With what seemed like half of the group gone to DC, Rick decided that for the next few days, the church would have to be a viable camp. Because of this, he also decided that a scavenge session was needed to bring in any other resources available. To do that, some of you had to return to the town Bob got bit in. Tyreese, Sasha, Judith, and Gabriel stayed behind, all for obvious reasons. This left you, Michonne, Rick, and Carl to rummage.

Carl came with because he was relentless, and you accompanied because Rick wanted you close to him at all times. He didn’t admit this, but you were no fool. The dots connected like constellations.

“We’ll work our way down each side of the street and meet up halfway,” Rick decided, scratching at his beard. Michonne gave a slight nod. Her communications were sparingly, you began to notice.

“What do I have the pleasure of doing?” You asked, spinning your bow around in one hand. Your skin was so calloused that you couldn’t feel the attempts of rope burn from the string.

Rick looked back at you as if he had forgotten you were even there. “I think there’s a pet store down the road.”

You smirked in response and turned around. You were thankful to be walking in the opposite direction, until you heard Carl mumble “I’ll go with her” and the sound of footsteps grow closer.

“If you don’t like being called ‘kid’, can I call you ‘Rover’?” You asked, swinging your bow so the limbs rested across your shoulders. “Dogs follow.”

“Oh yeah?” He taunted, picking up his pace. Carl walked ahead and in front of you. He turned so
he faced you as he walked backwards. “I lead.”

You snorted, surprised by the sudden boost of confidence. Carl, however, was already quite aways ahead of you by the time you reacted.

The pet store was easy to find. Obnoxious posters of colorful fish in tanks and a sign reading ‘discounted puppies!’ with an arrow pointing downwards still sat in the window. You walked up the short path and pulled on the door. Unsurprisingly, it opened with ease.

“You’re actually listening to him?” Carl asked, surprise evident in his voice. Even he was still standing at the edge of the building’s sidewalk.

“I have a plan,” You simply said, and stepped inside.

The first thing that assaulted you was not a walker, but rather a putrid smell. It was so bad that your nose crinkled and eyes began to water. You slid your tied handkerchief off of your wrist and instead covered your face with it.

“You’re gonna rob a pet store,” Carl observed when he trailed behind you. He responded to the odor by coughing.

You rolled your eyes. “Don’t sound so dramatic. We’ve all done worse things.”

You approached the righthand side of the store, and quickly realized the smell was coming from the fishtanks. While plenty of fish were missing, enough remained floating at the surface under thick layers of dark algae. The water was so green you had a hard time seeing anything through it.

“Ugh,” Carl groaned, pulling his shirt over his mouth and nose. “Fucking disgusting.”

“Woah,” you feigned shock as you began looking on shelves, “leader’s got a mouth on him.”

“What are you gonna do, tattle on me?” Carl asked with raised eyebrows. He looked around the shop, though his eyes never settled on one thing.
You scoffed. “Now you sound like my step-siblings,” you remarked without thinking about it. You were glad half your face was covered, as otherwise, Carl would have seen your smile fall.

“You don’t talk about them,” he noted, sarcasm and playfulness gone.

A bitter laugh crawled out of your mouth like a poisonous bug. “Does anyone?”

“Speaking of things you don’t talk about,” Carl continued, “what do I have to do to hear about your friend?”

You set down the bottle of water purifier you were looking at and stared straight ahead. The conversation hadn’t changed, yet Carl’s tone had. You were impressed by how lightly he could talk about something you knew he recognized as serious.

“I don’t know,” you admitted, deciding he had earned your honesty. “I’ll know when it happens, though.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

You and him continued in silence; he aimlessly looked around while you rummaged your way down the aisle. After reaching the end, you thought you would come up empty. Deciding that wasn’t an option, you thoroughly examined everything in the last strip of shelving by the fish. Afterall, that’s where what you were looking for would be.

“You realign things as you go,” Carl noticed aloud. “They don’t end up in the same places, but you don’t just swipe them onto the floor.”

You hadn’t even noticed the habit. “My father was very particular about things,” you said. “Not in an obsessive way, but… he liked ownings to be organized.”

“My mom could be like that.” he agreed, moving to the far end of the shelf. “She couldn’t cook for her life, so I think sometimes she thought she had to compensate.”
“Stay-at-home mom?” You asked, sparing him a single glance. He nodded in return.

When you dropped to a squatting position to look at the bottom row, you broke out into a smile. “Yes!”

Carl frowned at your sudden excitement. He only grew more confused when you stood up and faced him with a bottle in your hand.

“Fish pills? That’s what we’re here for?” Carl asked, not believing his eyes.

“They’re not just fish pills,” you objected, tossing him a bottle. You grabbed the only other one available.

He looked over the container and rolled it in his hands a few times. He still looked confused.

“Amoxicillin,” Carl noted, reading the word underneath the brand name and drawings of fish.

“Better known as antibiotics,” you added with a grin. You couldn’t contain yourself.

“Oh my god,” his expression turned into one of surprise. “Ryan, you’re a genius! Where did you learn that?!”

Your smile grew wider. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve,” you vaguely informed. You took the bottle from his hands as you walked past him and out of the store.

Michonne and Rick appeared out of houses across from each other shortly after you walked outside. The Sun was high in the sky, making you shield your eyes as you put one foot in front of the other. You could see that Rick was holding something by his side -- a bag, you supposed. Michonne either found nothing or gave her discoveries to her partner in crime.

“Anything good?” He asked. Common courtesy.

“You tell me,” you answered, and threw him the bottle of antibiotics.
“Fish pills?” Rick asked, turning the container so you could see the front. You could hear subtle mocking in his questioning tone.

“Amoxicillin,” Carl corrected after he appeared by your side.

“Antibiotics,” you both further clarified in unison.

Rick cocked an eyebrow and looked back at the bottle. “Hmm,” He simply said, and threw it back to you. “Good enough.”

You angled a leg and bowed deeply after catching the pills. Your arms extended obnoxiously.

“Great,” Michonne said, looking from Rick to yourself. “That’s a great find, Ryan.”

“Thanks,” you replied as civilly as you could. Although you felt embarrassed for receiving praise after such childish actions, Rick’s irritated smirk had yet to not bring you satisfaction. It was worth it.

Sometime on the way back to the church, Carl and Rick took the lead, leaving you and Michonne side by side. The two boys were laughing and occasionally shoving or purposely bumping into the other. It was impossible to miss Michonne’s grin as you both watched.

“You were a mom,” you observed, which shocked Michonne enough into turning her head towards you. “Or, maybe you are. I don’t quite understand how Judith comes into this yet.”

“You think that Judith is mine and… Rick’s?” Michonne asked, almost laughing in disbelief. You must have caught her seriously off-guard; you couldn’t recall ever hearing her laugh.

“So I’m wrong,” you noted, chuckling to yourself. “I won’t be convinced until you stop looking at him like that, though.”
If her skin wasn’t so dark, you were sure her cheeks would be bright red.

The two of you walked in silence for a while, before she said, “I don’t expect you to find a family in us, Ryan. Sometimes I wonder if family is even possible anymore, actually. But regardless, you don’t have to give everything you are up to stick around: you just have to comply every now and then.”

“I’m an all-or-nothing kind of person,” you explained, running the upper limb of your bow between your thumb and index finger. “I don’t float between crowds, and I don’t know how to give only pieces of myself. The last time I committed to someone, they disappeared. The last time I stuck around, everything fell apart. I can’t do groups anymore.”

Michonne considered before asking, “then why are you still here?”

She picked up her pace and caught up with the Grimes, leaving you at a standstill. Why were you still there? You convinced yourself several times that soon, you’d be on your own again, yet felt the incessant need to prove yourself capable in Rick’s eyes. You carried your weight in subtle ways -- from hunting to scavenging to personal resources -- without even realizing your actions. You were adamant about not being a part of the dysfunctionally comfortable group, yet somehow, you already were.

You shook your head and kept walking.

Chapter End Notes

A: Once entering the pet store, Ryan begins looking for pills. Comment letting me know if you guessed correctly (and if the question was fun or completely lame)!

The ‘fish pills’/amoxicillin thing is 100% true, by the way. Of course, they’re made to go in fish tanks, and specifically say on labels ‘not for human consumption’, but… desperate times call for desperate measures, right?

What was your favorite part? Let me know! Xx
By the time you had returned back to the church, Daryl had reappeared. Apparently, unbeknownst to you, he disappeared for awhile, which was also why Rick didn’t want to leave for DC so early. He went missing with Carol, you think. She was the one who helped out back at Terminus… right? Regardless, he didn’t return with Carol, and rather a boy named Noah accompanied him. Now Rick was devising a plan to get Carol back from Atlanta, which was were she currently was.

There was so damn much to keep up with these days. You had a hard time keeping everything straight.

As the group dismantled pews to board up and guard the church, you silently brought boards outside. While walking in and out, you kept an eye on Gabriel, who was sitting towards the front. You hardly saw him move.

You were about to set a pile down beside Michonne and Rick, then realized their window was completely boarded. You instead stood with your arms full and listened to their conversation. You knew they would see you, and thus decided it wasn’t an invasion of privacy.

“Then stay here,” Michonne gently said, “I'll go.”

“I owe Carol,” Rick disagreed, though was clearly struggling to turn down her offer. You weren’t sure why he was considering staying behind. Whatever it was, it had to be important.

“If she goes, I can tag along,” You offered, surprised by how neutral your tone was. “Strength in numbers, and all that.”

“I’m going,” Rick said, settling the conversation between both you and Michonne. However, his answer wasn’t hostile. You supposed that was progress.

“Whatever you say,” you accepted. You walked past the stakes being mantled along the sides of the door and stepped back inside. You dropped the boards you were holding a little ways away from the doorway. Someone would find use for them.
Walking halfway down the aisles, you noticed that Gabriel was no longer in his seat near the front. You slowed your pace yet tried to look oblivious as you continued to walk. When you were a few rows from the altar, you realized Gabriel was on the floor, scrubbing at what had to be a stain.

You walked past him, to which thankfully, he hardly noticed. Without a sound, you slipped through a door extending from the church’s crossing. As you had expected, the room had various uses. There was a sink, but beside it was a wardrobe with elaborate art on it. There was a closet on your left-hand side, and an empty Host container sitting on the counter.

After approaching the sink, you crouched down and pulled open the cupboard below. You fumbled through cleaning products before finding exactly what you wanted sitting in the back corner: baking soda. While putting the bottles back, you continued look at the labels. You were satisfied when one read ‘hydrogen peroxide’.

You placed every container besides your two discovered items back in the cupboard. Then, you collected the soda and peroxide, and exited the room.

Gabriel was still on the floor, scrubbing away with his sleeve. He paused for a moment to spit on the cloth, only to continue the motions. You let out a breath. Sad bastard.

“Here,” you said, offering him the bottle. “This works better than loogies.”

Gabriel looked up at you. His face was drenched in sweat, and his face was contorted into a mix of fear and torment. “How do you know that?”

“Don’t worry, I learned it before… this,” you assured, looking for the right word. You supposed he would appreciate less harsh phrasing than ‘to shit’, ‘hell’, or whatever else you normally came up with.

He continued to look puzzled, until his face flattened and he cleared his throat awkwardly. You couldn’t help but smirk at his realization.

“Thanks,” he replied, offering you a tight and closed smile. It was more than you were used to getting, so you offered a grin in return.

You lowered yourself to his current level and dumped some baking soda over the stains without
saying anything. Once you were finished, the box was set aside, and Gabriel took it as a queue to pour the peroxide. You gave him the handkerchief tied around your wrist and stepped away.

Running your hand across the top of your head, you felt your woven headband. You pulled it from your dirty and greasy hair and looked it at. You had memorized the pattern, the burnt orange color, and the course yet soft feel.

“What do you think of these people, Lee?” you quietly asked no one as you stared at the cloth in your hands. You paused, then said, “Yeah, I miss Clem too.”

///

Rick stayed true to his word: he was going to Atlanta. He stood by the door as he handed Judith off to Michonne, and you watched him hug Carl. You leaned against one of the middle pews -- one of the few still intact -- with your arms crossed. There was no one for you to say goodbye to.

You took your switchblade from your pocket and flipped the knife open. You ran your finger carefully along the sharp edge. Once you reached the tip of the blade, the end of your finger began to sting. You withdrew and saw blood well to the surface. It was sharper than you thought it was.

Instead of raising the damaged skin to your lips, you simply watched as the blood collected at the edge of the cut. A dark drop pooled to the corner, and after a few seconds, it slid down your finger. Most of the blood’s volume settled in the corner of your thumb.

You felt someone approach and stand beside you. Although their presence was obvious, you didn’t acknowledge them. The front door slammed shut, telling the obvious answer that it couldn’t be Rick.

Pale hands took yours and began to wipe at the blood. Carl. You hardly noticed how he untied the flannel from around his waist and dabbed at what was becoming a stain. You dropped the bladel to the floor.

“You didn’t Michonne’s,” He spoke after a few moments passed.

You stood there, asked “What?”, and looked up at him.

“I heard you on the way back. Michonne isn’t my mom, and she isn’t Judith’s,” Carl repeated.
“Oh,” you said, unsure of what was appropriate to say. The clear answer -- that they looked nothing alike anyways -- was flat-out rude.

“My mom’s name is -” he paused, then corrected, “was - Lori. She had Judith after everything, which I guess is pretty obvious.”

“I haven’t seen my mom in years,” you said, trying to keep the conversation balanced. “Even before this shit, I hardly spoke to her. It wasn’t all my fault; she lived in New Jersey and had a job as a waitress, while I was down in Atlanta with my dad. She couldn’t take parental rights to court, so my dad won without a fight. She called, sometimes. I think she kept busy with work to save up money.

“Was she trying to get you back?” Carl asked, “is that why she worked so hard?”

You paused. “I don’t know. I’d tell myself that, sometimes. Other times, I just didn’t care. I thought my life was set, with or without my mother.” You laughed bitterly at your previous ignorance. “God, I was such a stupid kid.”

“You didn’t have to say all that. You hate that game, remember?” Carl said. You cocked an eyebrow, before realizing he was referring to the ‘deal’ you made with him after he wouldn’t leave you alone. When one of you gave a piece of unknown information, the other had to return with something about them regarding the same topic.

“Mm,” you brushed it off, “it’s not so bad.”

Carl grinned slightly. He had stopped wiping at your hand for sometime back, yet continued to hold it with your palm facing upwards.

You looked up to see Michonne staring at the two of you. You didn’t break eye contact as you let your hand drop.

“Judith is the only sibling I have,” Carl continued. He leaned on the pew beside yours, standing a similar position. “She’s the only one I’ve ever had. I wanted a little brother for a long time, but after we didn’t have a house, I didn’t think it was possible.”
“Clearly, you were wrong,” you chuckled. You forgot how advanced a child’s explanation for how babies are created could be. The real explanation was so simple, so boring.

“I’m glad to be wrong,” Carl said, though was also evidently amused. “She’s still little, but she’s great.”

“She’s a snitch,” You rephrased, referring to the Terminus incident. However, your tone was lighthearted.

“I think she got that from me, somehow,” he smiled. “When I was back in school, if something happened, teachers heard it from me.”

“Seriously? You, a teacher’s pet?” you feigned shock.

Carl chuckled, somewhat embarrassedly, and gently shoved your forearm. "Ha, ha. Not everyone can be a cheater."

“I was the most honest kid ever,” you defended with a laugh. “One hell of a student, too. I guess being a suck-up comes with that, hmm?”

Carl looked at you with genuine surprise. “Wait, really?”

You reached down and picked up your knife. You clicked it shut and shoved it in your back pocket. “How do you know that I’m really a bitch?” you asked. Though the words were meant as a joke, they came out somewhat serious. You tossed him the flannel back and continued.

“I never had bio siblings; my parents were too busy fighting to think about a baby,” you began, holding up your end of the ‘game’. “Once my dad remarried, I got step-siblings. 3 of them, all girls. One was year younger than me, the other just starting middle school, and the last was 3 years old. They were suck-ups,” you laughed, only to harden. “Then, one day, I came home to find none of them.”

“That sounds awful,” Carl acknowledged. You recognized it as an informal apology.
You merely shrugged. “It feels like lives ago: has been, really. I’m starting to forget them, what life outside of hell is like.”

He nodded. “I remember a lot of it. Sometimes that feels good, and other times, it sucks.”

You couldn’t tell if he was playing the game or keeping the conversation going. You didn’t quite care. “I can imagine.”

“I just… Don’t want Judith to grow up feeling like this is it,” Carl said. “I don’t want her thinking this is how the world is supposed to be. I don’t want my kids to feel that way.”

“You wanna have kids,” you observed, as it was the sentence’s takeaway. You couldn’t explain dense feeling in your stomach.

Once again, he shrugged. “Not anytime soon, but I think the world needs it. We can’t be all that’s left.”

“Leave it to Carl Grimes to repopulate the Earth,” you announced in the form of a mumble.

“What, you don’t want to?” he laughed. Surely he found your discomfort of the subject amusing.

“No!” your scoff sounded like a laugh. “You’re a lot more optimistic than me. I do think we’re it, and I don’t think things will be what they were ever again.”

You didn’t realize how harsh you sounded until everything stilled. Carl simply stood in place, while you clenched your jaw and tried to come up with an explanation.

“Carl, I didn’t mean -” you began. The sound of Judith crying filled the room.

“That’s my cue,” He said instead as he brushed past you.

You sighed and pinched the skin between your eyes. You couldn’t tell if he was angry, upset, sad, or anything else. Carl sounded nothing short of apathetic when he dismissed you without thought.
“Pick one,” Carl said, disrupting the silence that had settled in the process.

Hours had passed since Rick and most of the group left for Atlanta. Following the awkward end to the conversation with Carl, you walked around the church’s perimeter more times than you could count. You held your bow loaded with an arrow at your side. Nothing had made you draw it. Not yet.

Gabriel gave up removing the bloodstains what you guessed to be an hour ago. He simply sat on the floor, hands keeping him propped up as he leaned forward. His lips moved and his eyes were closed. Praying, you guessed.

You watched curiously as Carl set an array of weapons in front of the priest. By that time, you were beside the closed doors, while they were closer to the heart of the church. Still, You could clearly see what was going on.

Gabriel shook his head silently.

“You need to learn how to defend yourself,” Carl continued, sounding stern with no harsh edge. “We can teach you.”

“Defend myself?” Gabriel asked, clearly in disbelief. He gestured to the mess below him. “They said they would go.”

“They were liars, and murderers,” Carl disagreed.

“Just like us.”

“We protected ourselves,” Carl explained without getting defensive. “They wanted us dead.”

“He’s right,” you agreed, walking down the aisle. You held your weapon with one hand near your hip. “If you had seen the things they did, even you could agree.”
Carl looked up at you, a blank expression on his face. Finally, he nodded his head once. You returned the action.

“You’re lucky your church has lasted this long,” he then said. “You can’t stay in one place anymore. Not for too long. And once you’re out there, you’re gonna find trouble you can’t hide from. You need to know how to fight.”

Both Michonne -- who was watching Judith -- and yourself carefully watched Carl as he spoke.

Gabriel had given Carl his undivided attention. He sat tentatively -- looking helpless -- before he reached in front of him and chose the machete.

“Good choice,” he praised, “but… you’re not holding it right. You gotta be able to drive it down, ‘cause sometimes the skulls aren’t as soft, and you need to be able--”

“I-I’m sorry,” Gabriel interrupted, raising a hand to dismiss himself. He sounded like he was gagging. “No,” he muttered as he stood up. “I need to lie down.”

Carl nodded as Gabriel began to trudge away.

“Not your fault,” you assured, stepping forward. “It’s not anyone’s,” you added in a mutter as you walked past him.

You saw Michonne observe Gabriel until he stowed himself away in the side office.

“I gotta check the panels again,” Carl said, and made his way to the room across from the one Gabriel was in. That was the only non-boarded exit, as there was a twirling flight of stairs that lead to a heavy metal door. The passageway protected itself.

Michonne then watched Carl close the door behind him. She closed her eyes, turned her head, and looked to you.

“I got her,” you nodded, knowing you weren’t the one Carl would want to talk to. “She’s safe with me.”
“Thank you,” Michonne said. She grabbed her sword, stood from the pew, and kissed Judith on the head. She was out the door in under a minute.

The second Michonne disappeared, Judith began to wail. First, it started with a whimper, and some gentle cries. Eventually, it intensified to a full-blown fit.

“Hey, come on now,” you cooed, channeling the part of you that used to be a sister. You picked her up, her chest resting across your collarbone. “None of that. You’re just fine. You hear me? You’re alright.”

Upon being picked up, Judith stopped screaming. However, she was still crying, which caused you to bounce yourself in a soothing pattern. The rhythm helped further calm her, yet you could still hear some whimpering.

Michonne fed her within the hour. She didn’t smell of anything besides sweat and dirt. You patted her back, but she didn’t burp. So, exhausting what seemed like all other options, you sighed in defeat. You began to sing.

Though a gentle song, you weren’t sure it could be classified as a lullaby. Still, your mom sang it to you until you decided you were too old for a goodnight song. You decided that was enough qualification. You first hummed the beat, then faded into the song:

“Your house that sits behind me is covered in ivy green, the windows that we watch from are old and chipping at the beam,” you sang, voice soft. You physical movements aligned with the song’s pattern.

“It takes me away, takes me away, takes me away…” you continued. You sang somewhat louder, but kept your voice gentle.

“The scent you wear moves in lines from your apartment into mine,” you smiled. The next line was always your favorite. “You act like you don’t know me, my god you tempt my anxious mind…”

Judith was silent as you sang the song. If you listened closely, you could hear your voice echo off the church walls. You didn’t notice that both Carl and Michonne had returned, and were watching you from the doorway. If you had caught the smile on Carl’s face, you never would have let him live it down.
It felt as though another hour had passed of you mindlessly walking the edges of the church. Michonne had a brief conversation with Gabriel, Carl was with Judith in the office, and she joined them soon after. You were left by yourself.

In theory, you could have joined them in that office. However, you noticed how stale conversation went when you were in the room. Besides, that office got crammed after too many people joined. You preferred the open space in the body of the building.

You were so bored that when you heard faint groaning, you thought your mind was playing tricks on you. After pressing your ear to a window, which guarded the frame with only a layer of glass and the nailed wood, you listened carefully. Moments passed and nothing sounded. Knowing you had plenty of time to waste, you continued to concentrate and strain your hearing as you awaited something, anything.

The sound grew louder, and had various pitches. Walkers were outside, and they were collecting, quickly.

You cursed under your breath and reached behind to your back. Your quiver felt full. A knife was in your belt, and if all else failed, there were still some boards outside. You had plenty of means of protecting yourself.

You approached the office and knocked on the open door with your knuckles. You got Michonne’s attention immediately, while Carl looked down at Judith, who was gurgling in his lap.

“I heard some walkers gathering, so I’m gonna clear them out,” You explained, eyes glancing to the door that lead to the fire escape.

Michonne seemed reluctant, but she agreed, nodding curtly. You were just about to exit when there was pounding on the door.

“Michonne! Carl! Ryan!” A voice called. They sounded desperate.

“Oh my god, it’s Gabriel,” You breathed out before dashing down to the other end of the church. Michonne followed you as Carl spared a fraction of time to place Judith in her carrier.
You noticed the emergency axe hanging behind a panel of glass next to the second set of doors. You wasted no time ramming your shoulder into the glass, effectively breaking the panel. Because your flannel had migrated to around your waist, your arm began to sting with cuts. You hardly noticed the blood when you reached in to grab the weapon, which scraped up your hand as well.

You placed yourself in front of the protected door. Seeing that Carl was within feet of you and holding a pistol, you raised the axe, but didn’t fully swing.

“Carl, go get your sister!” you ordered. He realized you weren’t joking when you refused to begin in his presence. Although you were confident he was ready to argue, Carl retreated down the hall and disappeared from your vision.

You struck at the door. On instinct, your face turned to the side when the axe made contact. Recovering quickly, you raised the axe and barreled it downwards harder than the last time. Even when the previously building sweat began to collect and stream down your face, you didn’t stop. Your motions only halted once natural light began to break through in a vertical line.

With Michonne’s help, you both fully opened the door. Gabriel tumbled inside, recovered quickly, and fled inside. Michonne swung her sword and easily cut the top of a walker’s head. You took a few steps back and fired your loaded bow, hitting one in the center of the forehead. You fired off three more arrows while Michonne simultaneously lopped the head off of two walkers. Despite hers and yours handiwork, too many were flooding in too quickly.

You ducked down to grab some of your arrows. As you stood up, you ran the weapon through two different walkers’ eyes. You pulled them from the sockets, and ignoring the flesh and blood coating them, you shoved them back in your quiver. You took some quick steps backwards, and caught the arrow Michonne tossed to you.

“In here!” Gabriel called, pointing back to the rectory. After killing a few more, Michonne and yourself retreated up the stairs and into the compact room.

Once inside, you and Gabriel leaned on the door to keep it shut while Michonne pulled up a chair. However, it was short, and barely reached the doorknob. Everyone in the room could recognize that it would hold for less than a minute on its own.

“That’s how I got out,” Gabriel rasped, pointing to the dismantled floorboards in the middle of the room. “It goes out to the back. Just go! Take the little one and go!”
“You’re going too, Gabriel,” you said, gritting your teeth when the undead continued to push on the door.

“What?!” Carl protested, momentarily lowering his pistol. “Ryan, you can’t stay here!”

“I don’t have anyone to lose!” You argued. You closed your eyes and pushed harder on the door. “Now go!”

Michonne quickly pulled the carrier holding Judith to Carl’s front. He grabbed something else you couldn’t see, and stepped down through the broken panels. Michonne told him to wait for her, he nodded, and disappeared with a crying Judith.

Michonne lowered herself into the opening after tossing down her sword, only to worriedly glance up and you and Gabriel.

“Leave,” you breathed out, beginning to grow tired. “It’s okay. They need you.” Gabriel agreed, and with some reluctance, Michonne took off as well.

“I’m not going anywhere until you’re gone,” you told Gabriel, who you couldn’t see clearly. A mix of the rattling door and sweat in your eyes altered your vision.

“You can’t do this alone,” Gabriel argued. For the first time since meeting him, you realized that maybe fear wasn’t the only thing the priest was made out of.

“I have survived so much worse,” you assured, and pushed his arm as a sign that you were okay with the choice. You would be okay.

Gabriel got off of the door, but you didn’t look back at him. You simply kept your eyes forward and focused on keeping your life while giving him a head-start on crawling out.

You felt your strength fading quickly. Your arms were stinging from fatigue while your legs grew sore with pins and needles. Finally, knowing you had no other choice, you spared a brief glance backwards. Gabriel was gone. You were on your own.
By the grace of god, you managed to shed your bow and quiver without losing most of your grip. While your quiver completely made it down the hole, your bow was simply too tall, and rather laid itself across the opening. You could only hope you’d have enough time to reposition it without risking your safety.

Three.

Two.

You pushed off the door and effortlessly made your way to the opening. You snatched your bow and repositioned it on your back before sinking through the floor. You could hear the door fling open as you began to army crawl under the church.

You surprised yourself by your own speed. Of course, it wasn’t your first time crawling in tight spaces -- or even under a structure, for that matter -- though in your mind, that didn’t make it any less impressive.

You could hear talking.

“We have to wait for her.”

“We are waiting, Carl. You have to give her a minute.”

One.

You squinted in the sunlight as you emerged from under the building. “You shouldn’t worry that pretty face of yours,” you remarked, using the side of the church to push yourself fully out. “I always make it out.”

Carl laughed. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

You laughed aloud while still laying on the ground. In fact, you might even have considered it a cackle.
Gabriel and Michonne helped pull you to your feet. Where you weren’t covered in dirt, your skin was stained with blood. The arm you used to bash open the fire axe was, as expected, scratched to hell. After crawling around, the blood caked with dirt, making you especially filthy. But you were alive. That was something you couldn’t find a fault in.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone curious: Yes, that bit with Gabriel was a period joke, and no, that wasn't the only reason I wrote the scene (it was mostly though)

The song you sang to Judith was ’1957’ by Milo Greene. Check it out here, if you're interested: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxBHbOpXCIQ
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Anoesis [an-oh-ee-sis] --
a state of mind consisting of pure sensation or emotion without cognitive content.

“Where did you go?” Michonne asked Gabriel, who had his hands on the fence surrounding the church. You sat with your back to one of the posts, while Carl stood close to Michonne. Judith was in the carrier on her brother’s back.

“The school,” Gabriel answered, shame and regret in his voice. “I had to see. I had to know.”

“Why?” You asked, causing everyone to look at you. Your tone of voice probably didn’t help -- rather than your normal, loud and confident tone, the word came out as meek and confused. “I know you don’t get it, and probably never will, but that church was practically impossible. It’s an honest-to-god miracle you made it for so long in there by yourself.”

Your brought yourself to your feet. “I know what being on your own for so long is like. You feel like you’re the only one left in this hellhole, and wonder if it’s possible for vocal cords to die from lack of use. I’ve been there. But I never had the luxury of knowing.”

Following your rant, you sat back down on the ground with your hand on your face. You were exhausted.

The walkers were starting to break through the church door. Michonne’s hand reached to the handle of her sword while Carl pulled his pistol from its place in his belt. You unsheathed a knife of yours, not seeing the point in arming yourself with your bow.

The boards that had been pounded in with the back of a pistol popped loose and clattered to the ground. The belt tied around the knobs would hold up, though not for very long. You’d have to leave soon, and quickly.

Carl practically read your mind when he said: “Where do we go?”

Then, without any warning, a fire truck came barreling by and broke right through the front patio to
You immediately recognized Abraham as he stepped out. Maggie, Glenn, Rosita, and Tara all followed him out of the vehicle and into the open air.

The first thing Maggie did was take Michonne into a tight embrace. The latter laughed breathlessly with happiness as her arm gripped the other woman. Once they parted, Glenn clutched Michonne’s arm, to which she returned.

“You’re back,” Michonne said, smile still clad on her face. You could see that Maggie and Glenn, however, did not share the expression.

Glenn nodded and momentarily averted his gaze. “Eugene lied. We can’t stop it. Washington isn’t the end.”

“I don’t think it ever was,” you said, making most of the group’s eyes land on you. “Even if he was Einstein, can you imagine how many people had the same idea? To head for Washington? The place is probably overrun. We’d all be dead before that plan could work itself out.”

Glenn pursed his lips but didn’t argue. Most of the group seemed to agree, as they didn’t argue. Or perhaps, your non-threatening tone kept everyone quiet. Regardless, you believed yourself.

“Where is everyone?” Glenn then asked.

Rather than answering, Michonne turned to Maggie and took one of her hands. “Beth’s alive. She’s in a hospital, in Atlanta. Some people have her, but the others went to get her back.”

The longer Michonne talked, the more hopeful Maggie looked. “Do we know which one?” She asked, voice cracking with emotion.

“Grady Memorial,” Michonne answered, and took a step back to give the other girl some space.

Maggie raised her hands to her face in disbelief. When Glenn reached out to her, she began crying, but it was clearly out of happiness.
Beth, you thought. Daughter? No way, Maggie was too young, and by looking at them, you could tell Glenn and Maggie met each other after the dead could live. Mother? Maybe, though you had a feeling that wasn’t quite right either.

“Let’s blow this joint,” Tara spoke with a smile, “go save your sister.”

Sister. Obvious answer.

///

Everyone was loaded up in the truck within ten minutes. Including the front, there were three rows of seats, leaving enough room for everyone. It was a tight fit, of course, and no one would have been able to buckle themselves in, but the proximity was bearable.

You and Carl were beside each other in the last section of seating. You were crammed into the window, as a sleeping Eugene and Gabriel were also in the back. The former was dozing off beside Carl, leaving Gabriel sitting in the other window seat.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Carl apologized. “The whole conversation was stupid. I mean, seriously, kids? We’re not even legal adults yet. Not that that’s really a thing anymore, I guess.”

“It wasn’t stupid,” you disagreed, “my reaction was. It’s good to want things, Carl. Wanting something means you have hope, and the devil himself knows we need as much of that as we can get.”

“Does that make you an optimist?” Carl asked, a faint smile playing out on his lips,

“The hell do you think?” You snorted, unable to fight a grin. You were a realist on your best days. “I’m a pessimist with optimistic tendencies.”

The conversation faded to silence before Carl spoke up. “I had a couple of friends before. They were from school, and honestly, the only reason we got along was because we all sat next to each other. Still, I had fun with them. For awhile.”
You couldn’t help but smirk. Surely Carl had more clever ways to get you to talk about Clementine. “I didn’t have any friends. There was this girl who always sat next to me at lunch, only because she didn’t have anyone either. I was just starting middle school in a different state, and I wasn’t the kind of person to draw a crowd.” You paused. “Did you seriously think that was going to work?”

“What do I have to do?” Carl whined.

You simply looked out your window.

He sighed. “Fine. You wanna go there? I can go there.” He stopped, then resumed. “I had to shoot my mother.”

Your head snapped back to him, involuntary shock written on your face.

“She was in labor with Judith,” Carl continued as he pushed back some of his sister’s hair. “Something went wrong. She started bleeding. Maggie had to cut Judy out of her, and I had to shoot her so she wouldn’t turn.”

That was the worst thing he had ever done. You could recognize that in a heartbeat. So, you began to rack your brain. And, eventually, you remembered something that took you back almost to the beginning.

“I was 13 years old when I first killed someone.”

///

The gunfire turned out to be a group of bandits. Originally, the reason for the raid was unknown. Once they started saying that your group had ‘come up short’, however, it was revealed that someone had been leaving them drugs in exchange for the group’s safety.

Even at a young age, you could see why someone would partake in such a risky agreement. Soon after you were taken from your home and a life you once knew, you realized that people would do whatever it took to stay alive. Months ago, you were staying in a barn with a family that ate human beings just to keep food on the table. Life could not be lost at all costs to people like that.
No matter how hard you tried, though, you just couldn’t seem to justify someone putting you, Lee, and Clem in danger like that.

Lives were lost trying to get rid of the bandits, and when the problem was finally over, everyone was back in the RV and on the road. Goodbye to the motel, goodbye to stability, goodbye to everything. Again.

You sat in the corner of the RV crying that night. Lee tried to talk to you, but even after he couldn’t get you to stop, everyone else knew they’d have no shot. They pretended not to hear you, and you pretended they didn’t exist. All and all, it worked out as well as it could.

“Ry-Ryan?” Clementine asked meekly. Her voice was so sweet and innocent. You could never stay too mad at her.

“Yeah, Clem?” You asked, rubbing at your eyes with your hands. Your eyes were so wet that all you did was move the tears around rather than wipe them from your face.

“It’s… going to be… okay,” She said hesitantly. Her hands were folded in front of her and she nervously shifted.

You forced a smile. “I know it is. You do too, right?”

She smiled. “I do.”

“Good,” you replied, and opened your arms. Clem eagerly crawled into your lap, and you mumbled a song into her hair as she fell asleep.

“It takes me away, it takes me away, it takes me away…” you sang. In a way, you comforted both her and yourself.
The group hit a stalled train, meaning there was absolutely no way to continue the trek while still in an RV. However, Lee managed to get the train up and running, which would eventually lead right into Savannah.

Duck had gotten bit somewhere in the midst of it all, and by the time you were all on the train, he was fading fast. His mother, Katja, held him the entire ride. Lee managed to stop the train in time for Kenny, his father, to say goodbye. Duck and Katja were waiting in a peaceful forest for him. Katja shot herself before they could say goodbye together. Lee ended up being the one to make sure Duck didn’t turn.

Though you didn’t witness any of this, it was the first time you fully understood that there were just some things you couldn’t be protected from.

You cut Clementine’s hair later that night. Originally, Lee said he would cut both yours and hers, as it would merely get in the way, but you offered the idea of you cutting hers, while Clem could return the favor. Lee thought the idea came from you taking Clem in as a little sister, and agreed. In a way, he was right. You never did tell him the main reason was because you didn’t trust he’d be around next time. Afterall, Katja probably thought she’d get to cut Duck’s hair again.

Clem had a hat to cover the mistakes you made. Lee assisted her when cutting yours, which hopefully meant yours didn’t turn out quite as bad. There was no available mirror, meaning you had to hope they weren’t lying to you.

Lee also taught you both how to shoot a gun. It was horrifying at first, and Clem was easily as scared, but eventually, you were both having fun shooting bottles to shards. Lee gave some good tips -- don’t breathe when you’re about to shoot, always know where your finger is, etc. -- and he warned that it wasn’t a toy. That didn’t mean you missed the smile on his face as he watched you take turns, though.

After he left you and Clementine alone in the cargo box, you stepped out to thank him. When you reached a door where you could hear his voice on the other side, you smiled and slowly pushed open the door. What you heard was him telling Ben, a teenage pariah the group had taken in, to keep his mouth shut about him being the one slipping the bandits drugs.

Your smile fell and you retreated back to your own cart.

Along the way to Savannah, A couple helped clear a truck out of the way for the train. In exchange for the assistance, Lee offered them a ride. They seemed nice enough, so you weren’t completely bothered. You just hoped they wouldn’t try to replace the holes in the group.
While the path was stalled, Lee looked around in a station. When he thought it was clear, he let both you and Clem enter. A few walkers appeared, and you raised your pistol as you watched Lee take them both down. The noise of killing them stirred one close to you and Clem,

“Ryan, get -!” Lee ordered, but not before you shot the walker straight through the eye.

That was the first time you had ever killed something.

Clem fell asleep on your lap as you both sat in the sole seat beside the train’s console. Lee and Kenny were talking about something, and you pretended you couldn’t hear them. It was something about Savannah, and the plan for when you all got there. Kenny always had his strong beliefs, which didn’t always align with Lee’s. You had learned to tune them out pretty quickly.

Some feedback sounding from Clementine’s backpack startled both you and the men.

“Can’t wait for you to get to Savannah, Clementine. I’ve got your parents right here!” a man from the other end spoke. “And, you be sure to find me, whether Lee wants you to or not. Now, what I need --”

The line went dead.

“Holy shit,” Lee breathed out.

“I thought that fucking thing was broken,” Kenny remarked, sounding just as concerned.

“So did I.”

“Oh my god,” you gasped. “I gave her batteries.”

“What?” Lee asked, looking at you in surprise.

“I gave her batteries,” you repeated. “I found them sitting on a desk when we stopped. I didn’t think her friend was real. Oh my god.”
“You knew about this and you didn’t say anything?!” Kenny shouted.

Lee began to lecture him, but you couldn’t hear anything they said after that. All you could do was watch as the train approached the outskirts of Savannah.

~

Lee was helping people out of the train and onto the city street, and your heart began to pound. You clutched the pistol Lee had neglected to take in your hand, and after slipping it under your back belt loop, you felt it burn against your skin. Still, this was something you had to do. No one else should have to suffer the consequences.

“Hey, Ben,” you said just as he was about the exit the cart. You slid the door shut behind you, and as you brought your hand to rest by your side, you briefly touched your weapon. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

He forced a smile and stopped in his tracks. “Sure.”

You couldn’t bring yourself to return the gesture. “I heard you talking to Lee the other night,” you instead said, which made his face fall.

“Oh.” He ducked his head, too ashamed to properly look at you. “I-I was trying to keep us safe. I know that… looking back, that doesn’t really make sense…”

“Ben, I’m sorry,” you whispered with tears in your eyes as you raised your gun. You blinked them away as you recalled Lee’s instructions: always aim for the head.

Ben looked up, and his eyes widened. “Ryan, don’t -”

The gunshot echoed for what sounded like miles.
“I was afraid he was going to get us in trouble again,” you shrugged like it was nothing, though the truth was the opposite. Ever since you killed Ben, a boy only a few years older than you, he had to be the one that stuck with you the most. Sometimes you still wondered what would have happened to him otherwise… If he’d still be alive.

“You said your group lost other members before him, right?” Carl asked, recalling some of your story’s finer details.

“Yeah. After the motel, the woman who thought she was our leader went crazy and shot who she thought made the deals. Lee decided we had to go on without her, and left her on the side of the road. I was so upset he thought I never knew what actually happened.”

“A lot of you were dying,” Carl said, bouncing Judith slightly when she began to stir. “You did what you thought was best.”

You nodded, then chuckled to yourself. “Did you really think I’d talk about my friend that easily?”

“Can’t you give me a name, at least? I think I’ve earned a name.”

You smiled, giving in. “Clementine. We called her Clem.”

“Alright,” he replied, and no longer bothered you. The two of you stayed quiet until the fire truck rolled into Atlanta.

Everyone that exited the vehicle was armed with some kind of weapon -- even Gabriel. He stayed towards the back, but you figured that him getting out of the vehicle was a statement enough. He easily could have stayed behind with Carl, Judith, and Eugene.

There were quite a few bodies covering the ground, which left only a handful of walkers needing to be killed. They were easily taken out by knives and machetes, making the automatic rifles some of the members were armed with less necessary.

The group had almost reached the door when it opened, Rick coming out first. He walked down
the few stairs, and when he made eye contact with Michonne, he briefly shook his head. You swallowed thickly when seeing his grave action.

Carol and Tyreese stepped out, the former using the giant man beside her as a crutch. She had a few healing cuts on her face, yet overall, seemed alright. Daryl came out after them, baring far less fortunate news.

He carried a young blonde girl -- one who couldn’t be over the age of 20 -- bridal style in his arms. You could see by the way her head bobbed with each step that she wasn’t close to being alive. Maggie only confirmed this when she let out a cry that sounded like a scream.

You could see through the dirt and bangs covering his face that Daryl was crying. And, even if you hadn’t, the way his grip faltered was telling enough. The girl had clearly meant something to him as well. Maybe not as severe as Maggie… but important.

You stepped forward, and in as quiet of a voice you could muster, said, “I’ve got her.”

Daryl didn’t reply. In fact, he hardly acknowledged that you were standing directly in front of him. However, he didn’t pull away or protest when you slid your arms in place of his. Once her weight was fully shifted onto you, Daryl collapsed to the ground in a similar way Maggie had.

Beth’s head lulled into the crook of your neck, as your grip closer to her shoulders than her lower back. You weren’t phased. When Rick looked at you, you simply looked at the ground.

///

Having nowhere else to go, Rick agreed to take Noah to his home outside of a city in Virginia. Apparently Beth agreed she’d go with him after they got out of Grady Memorial. You were sure Rick felt some obligation to the boy now that she was gone.

The trip was long: over 500 miles, actually. Had the trek been for a family vacation half a decade ago, the drive could be completed in a day. Even then, practically every ounce of sunlight would be used up by the time the destination was reached. Add no guaranteed places for food, siphoning for gas, a small army, and the living dead into the equation, and the journey lengthened.

You were sitting in the back of a station wagon containing 8 people in total: Tyreese as the driver, Noah playing passenger, Michonne, Rick and Glenn all in the middle, which left you, Carl and Judith for the back. While there were no seats, you had enough room to keep your legs straight,
which was nice. Carl was laying down and snoring quietly, while Judith laid awake beside her.

“Your dad reminds me a lot of Lee,” you said, talking to no sibling in particular. In fact, the only reason you said anything was because the one who could understand couldn’t hear you. You had also made sure Rick was preoccupied, and you kept your voice low. “Lee was the leader of our group for a while. He’d never admit it, just like Rick doesn’t. Still, everyone knew. Then again, I think we’re all leaders now, to a certain extent. ‘The end makes an alpha out of everyone’, one of my soldiers used to say. I think he used it to mock my position of power.”

Judith reached for her feet and rocked herself on her back. You chuckled and picked her up.

“He was a really good man,” you told her. You spoke in a higher and lighter voice than normal so she would be amused. “He cared for me after I shot Ben, and the moment Clem went missing, he dropped everything.” you smiled sadly. “He got bit, but wouldn’t stop until we found her. Lee kicked that asshole with the walkie into last Sunday, and when Clem saw her parents in a crowd of biters, he was nothing but sympathetic. And yeah, he left us, but only because he had to. We both know he didn’t want that. And you know what, Judith?” You asked, poking at her stomach. “I think we turned out just fine, in the end.”

She giggled before laying herself against your chest. You smiled crookedly and laid a gentle hand on her back.

“Thanks,” you heard Rick say from the seat ahead, referring to Judith. You felt your heart rate pick up and your breath catch in your throat. How much of that had he heard?

Instead of asking you simply replied with, “no problem.”
Chapter Notes

I have nothing to say really, other than Ryan (you?) does/do some questionable things this chapter.

Stay tuned for more notes at the end. Until then, enjoy!

Virginia -- or more specifically, Noah’s former group -- turned out to be a complete dud. It was clear something used to be behind those worn down walls, but not anymore. Everyone was gone or rotted away to walkers.

You spent a few hours scrounging for things in houses. Rick wanted to make sure all potential resources were exhausted before getting back on the road. You found a pack of matches, a few sticks of gum, a Metallica tee shirt, and a clean flannel. They were discovered in a boy’s bedroom, and you supposed Carl wouldn’t mind a change of clothing.

Tyreese got bit somewhere in the stillness. Apparently any noise he made wasn’t loud enough to alert anyone, so he spent who knew how long sitting in a house, slowly fading away. Of course, the group eventually discovered him, and though Michonne cut off his arm, you all knew in the back of your minds that he wasn’t going to make it. He died a while later, from what you supposed was a mix of blood loss and the virus. You couldn’t imagine how Sasha must have felt.

You all got stuck in the middle of a Virginian forest when trying to get somewhere… anywhere. As expected, the two vehicles the group had separated into ran out of gas, meaning there was no other choice than to walk.

You stayed behind the group as they walked along the bare road. You could hear some walkers moaning and groaning from behind, but Rick had instructed to leave them alone. Everyone was thirsty and starving. It just wasn’t the time to take them down. Still, you wanted to be ready for when that time did come.

You watched Carl pull a music box from his bag and offer it to Maggie. While looking for food or water, he had stumbled across it. You were brave enough to open it, so instead Carl watched and winced when the top was lifted. You ‘gave’ it to him as a joke. You hadn’t realized he had taken it with him.
Rick decided the walkers should be killed and then a break from walking could be taken. You didn’t object to this; in fact, you listened to and followed Rick’s direct orders. Abraham, Maggie, and Sasha stood on one side right before the bridge’s barriers, while he, Michonne, and Glenn occupied the other side. You were placed in the middle of the road and a little ways behind the rows so you could silently observe, and shoot any strays if need be. Your bow was aimed and ready.

You watched as each line had walkers parting towards them, and when one got too close, the person either shoved the walker or stepped out of the way. Regardless, they toppled down the steep hill, and would probably never make it back up. It was an easy and clever plan: much easier than charging head first to take them all out.

Sasha destroyed said plan when she broke from the formation and plunged a knife into a walker’s skull.

“Stay in line,” Rick ordered as he unsheathed a machete and stepped forward. “Keep it controlled.”

Sasha stabbed and swung mercilessly. She reared back her arm to go again, only for her to realize it was Michonne. She grabbed Sasha’s arms and said something you couldn’t hear.

You stood there, wondering what you were supposed to do. When you looked back to see that Rick had one going for his arm, the answer was simple.

You sighted in your bow without trouble and let the string relax. The arrow flew through the air and implanted itself in the walker’s forehead. Rick looked from the walker to you, and gave you a single nod in response. You smirked and lifted your eyebrows.

You quickly pieced together why Michonne was talking to Sasha so much. She broke the pact and put everyone in danger just to get a few kills in, that was true, but you didn’t see that as necessarily concerning. It was a damn good way to let off some pent up anger, she everybody knew that’s what she needed.

When Sasha shot a pack of wild dogs that had stumbled across the trailway everyone was resting on, though… that’s when you fully understood. She was doing far more than letting out some pent up anger. Still, the dogs made for a surprisingly okay dinner.

You laid with your back over the sloping land between the road and the ditch. Most of the group was surrounding the fire, minus a few exceptions such as yourself, Abraham, Sasha, and Noah.
Carl was sitting cross-legged a few spaces to your side.

“I never had a pet,” you said as you ripped at your piece of meat. “Had I, this probably wouldn’t taste so good.”

Carl laughed, the kind with a lot of breath. “Me either. My mom didn’t like most living things.”

“Your mom and I would really hit it off.”

///

Another day spent walking, another day of baking in the sunlight, and another day that felt like wasted time. Truth be told, you almost always felt like you were living off of borrowed hours. There were reasons you shouldn’t be breathing, be alive. And yet, there you were, trudging along and wondering what all that fighting got you.

“What...” you muttered when Eugene, the person walking in front of you, stopped dead in his tracks. You stepped around him and frowned. “-the fuck?”

In the middle of the road sat four gallons of water and ten bottles. Rick lifted a piece of paper to you; ‘from a friend’, it read. Daryl emerged from the forest in time to catch up.

“What else are we gonna do?” Tara asked, breaking the silence.

“Not this,” Rick replied. “We don’t know who left it.”

“If that’s a trap,” Eugene started, “we already happen to be in it. But I for one would like to think it is indeed from a friend.”

“What if it isn’t? They put something in it?” Carol interjected, speaking what almost everybody had on their mind.

Eugene paused, then stepped forward and grabbed a bottle.
“Eugene,” Rosita said, voice harsh and scolding.

“What are you doing, dude?” Tara agreed with her.

“Quality assurance,” Eugene answered before cracking open the bottle and raising it to his lips. Abraham slapped it out of his hand, causing the water to spill out and the bottle to fall on the ground.

“We can’t.” Rick was stern. You could tell he wasn’t going to budge.

But, as always, you had to test your luck.

You leaned forward and took one of the bottles by the neck. As you stood up straight, you noticed how nobody opposed your action. So far, what you had expected. You unscrewed the cap and dropped it on the ground. Still no reaction. You raised the bottle to your mouth, tilted it downwards, and let yourself drink the water.

Your eyes glossed over the group the entire time you chugged the water. Some looked confused, others looked away. After you were halfway done with the bottle, you focused on savoring the feeling of having that much water to drink. Your mouth and throat were no longer dry, and it even felt as though your stomach was filling.

You dropped the plastic bottle to ground. “Someone has to be watching us; there just isn’t anything out here. If it’s poisoned, it’s probably cyanide.”

“So?” Rick asked, missing your point.

“So, if there was something in it,” you stepped forward, “It could take days to kill me, if it even does. So, the rest of you wait.”

Thunder and the falling of rain cut you off, which you were alright with. Much of the group laughed with joy and savored the feeling and taste. You tilted your head to the sky not to drink the
rain, but rather to scrub your face. You also rubbed at your arm, which opened a few of the glass cuts, though for the most part, washed away the dried blood.

“Everybody, get the bags,” Rick instructed, snapping a few out of their bliss. “Anything you can find.”

You tilted up the bottle you had thrown on the ground and pulled a different one from your bag. They would take some time to fill up, time you didn’t have. Looking East, it was clear a massive storm was coming.

“We need to keep moving,” Rick said, noticing the dark clouds ahead. Some were almost black in color.

“There’s a barn!” Daryl shouted.

“Where?”

Once Rick and some others made sure the barn was clear, you all filed inside. The rain had started to look more like sheets of water falling from the sky rather than drops, which was an easy sign that this barn was a godsend. Still, as the day turned to night and the storm lingered, you couldn’t help but stand behind the closed door.

You held a rifle across your chest, your feet were shoulder-width apart, and you were right in front of where the doors ended. You tried counting the time between each boom of thunder. Most of the time you couldn’t even get to ‘1’.

“What was that?” Rick asked, approaching you from behind. “That stunt with the water.”

“It wasn’t stunt,” you said, though you didn’t laugh or smirk. You simply said it as it was. “I felt like I was dying of thirst.”

“We all did,” Rick disagreed, “we all just weren’t stupid enough to accept.”

Now, you laughed. You brought your chin to your chest as you somewhat concealed it. How
“Do you wanna die, Ryan?” Rick asked.

The question should have alarmed you. It should have made your head snap up in his direction. It should have widened your eyes worried your face. It didn’t.

“Aren’t you supposed to buy me a drink before asking questions like that, Richard?” You asked with a faint smirk. You still didn’t fully look at him, not until you could see him extend his hand.

You let out a chuckle when your eyes trailed from his face, down his arm, and to the bottle of whiskey he was holding.

“Abraham’s asleep,” He answered your unsaid question. If you didn’t know any better, you’d say he was smiling faintly.

You accepted the bottle and took a drink.

“It’s not so much wanting to die,” you started, feeling the glass absentmindedly, “as much as it is not caring that I’m alive. I’m okay with getting killed trying to survive. I’m starting to realize I’m just... not a fighter anymore. And I just don’t care.” You took another drink before asking, “how many people have you killed, Rick?”

After a moment, he answered, “I’m not sure.”

“But a few still stand out, don’t they?” you asked, glancing over at him. His expression was neutral. “You can still feel the way you killed them; you still feel the weight: of the weapon, of their life, mostly both. I feel it every fucking second of every goddamn day,” your voice cracked towards the end of your sentence. You closed your eyes, cleared your throat, and felt numb. “When it comes down to it, I chose my life over theirs. And, if they could still be alive, I can’t just off myself. So instead, I live with it, and hope that something will come along, do me a favor, and make me as dead as them.”

You weren’t expecting an answer. If anything, you were expecting Rick to walk off and pretend the last five minutes didn’t happen. You downed the rest of the booze and threw the bottle onto the ground.
“There’s not much honor in living,” Rick said, so quietly you almost didn’t hear him. “It took the end of the world for me to figure that out. You living may never bring them back, but if you die, all of them die with you.” He leaned his head close to your ear so he could whisper, “prove you made the right choice, and live.”

///

The storm proved to be relentless. All night, it shook the barn and rattled the doors you eventually fell asleep with your back to. You weren’t sure how you managed to sleep through the sound of pelting rain and the cracking of the sky.

You blinked awake and were faced with the same circumstances you fell asleep to: a shaky ‘bed’, stiff muscles, and raging weather. Still, you couldn’t help but feel as though you woke up for a reason. Nothing was initially alarming, yet a bad feeling was brewing in the bottom of your stomach.

A particular gust of wind made the door open and slam against your back. You snapped to your feet and pulled the pistol from your waistband. Outside was a crowd of walkers coming closer by the second.

“Shit,” You breathed out, and closed the door completely. You pressed yourself against the opening that continued to try to break free. Apparently, you weren’t doing a good job, because both Maggie and Daryl appeared from the dark and began helping you.

You were so focused on the task at hand that you didn’t notice that, in a matter of minutes, everyone in the group was using their weight to keep the doors shut. You definitely didn’t notice Carl’s shoulder pressing against your own.

The destruction the storm would have been devastating to anyone living on the land. Trees were fallen, almost from the roots, and laid on top of each other. The horde of walkers was either crushed or speared by the newly thinned forest. You were spending the early morning killing the ones somehow still alive.

Maggie and Sasha stepped out of the barn. You somewhat straightened, and when they stood there, you nodded once in acknowledgement. You ran a knife through a walker’s head, and by the time you looked back up, they had walked away.
You had killed a few more walkers by the time the barn doors reopened. This time, Carl walked out. He wasn’t wearing his hat, but he had on the Metallica tee shirt you had found almost a week ago.

“What are you doing up?” You asked, wiping the blade on your sleeve.

“Taking a leak,” he answered bluntly. “What are you doing?”

“Some dirty work,” you answered, bringing yourself to a stand.

“Jesus,” Carl breathed out. He finally realized the mess surrounding the barn.

“Just go take your piss, would you?” you reminded. You pulled your bow from your back and loaded an arrow into it.

“Alright, alright. I’m going,” he grumbled, and walked off to a place of still-standing trees.

You shot an arrow at the ground, making it go oblique through a walker’s skull. You used your foot as a brace to pull the device from its head. As you reloaded the arrow into your bow, you could hear Carl shuffling back from behind you.

“That was pretty crazy last night,” you said, fully knowing he would hear you.

Carl stopped. “Yeah, it was,” he agreed.

“It’s a damn miracle that old thing didn’t come down,” you noted, tilting your head back towards the barn. You aimed your arrow and shot it into a tree that was a bit higher than eye level.

“Mhm,” he said, but when you looked back at him, he appeared confused. You couldn’t blame him. You got vague when you were nervous.

“Carl, can you keep a secret?” you asked, holding your bow at your side.
“Of course,” He promised, stepping forward. “What’s wrong.”

“That thing with the walkers was crazy,” you said, once again referring to the incident. You slid your flannel from off your arms. “It hard to see exactly where you were, you know? We were all just trying to stay alive.”

“Yeah…” Carl slowly drew out. He grew more confused as you tied the shirt around your waist.

“I was blocking the gap for a lot of it. The walkers got close to me more times than I could count. I could feel them grabbing, reaching, brushing against me.”

“Ryan, what are you saying?” Carl said, growing impatient.

You sighed and momentarily pursed your lips. You reached for the hem of your grey tee shirt and lifted it up and over your head. Carl’s eyes widened when the shirt was now in your hands, though he didn’t say anything. You rubbed your hand at your neck before turning around.

A long, dark, and jagged cut extended from the middle of your shoulder blades to the small of your back. The blood that had bubbled and clotted at the top was sticky, and whenever you moved in a certain way, you could feel the thin layer of skin pull apart.

“Oh my god,” Carl gasped. He gently set a hand beside the wound.

You couldn’t feel or hear him. The only thing you knew in that moment was your own heartbeat and a disturbingly simple sentence:

I’m going to die.

Chapter End Notes

There won't be much more for Ryan and Carl. Or... will there? stay tuned, folks.

Sorry about Tyreese's death; I just couldn't find a way to keep in AA, despite how
shitty his show death really was. Also, I know this part was shorter than others, but I like to think it turned out okay.
Chapter 13

Just as a heads up, there is some strong language in this one, some coming from Ryan yourself.

The year after Lee died was high on the list as one of your worst. For the first half, you and Clementine watched as Christa and Omid were in some lover’s paradise. You found it enduring, stupid, and unfair all at the same time. They always seemed to be happy when next to each other, meanwhile you and Clem hardly had any time to grieve your shared and recent loss.

Omid and Christa managed to find a nasty rest stop just outside of a patch of woods you had been traveling through. Christa pulled her jacket around her almost full-term stomach as Omid said they should name the baby after him. She asked for yours and Clem’s input. You stayed silent, and Clementine took your hand.

The rest stop obviously had a women’s bathroom that Clementine and yourself could wash up in. Christa and Omid split off into the men’s one.

“Isn’t it safer if we all stick together?” Clementine asked after you had both checked the stalls. “That’s what everyone’s been saying.”

You snorted. “Believe me,” you wiped at your face, “You do not want to go in there right now.”

“Why? What are they doing?” She asked, sounding both curious and concerned.

“Nothing, kiddo,” you answered, though you were smirking. “Nothing at all. Give me that water bottle so I can clean your face.”

Instead of arguing, Clem offered you the bottle. You reached backwards as you watched in the mirror. You had a faint grip on the cap before it slipped from your fingers, fell onto the floor, and rolled under the farthest stall.
"I'll get it," Clem mumbled, which made you chuckle.

As she opened the door and reached down, you heard the front one creak open. Without hesitation, you quietly stepped back, ushered her fully into the stall, and closed the door. You gestured for Clem to stand on the toilet, and once she did, you stood in front of her. Your arms were somewhat sprawled at your sides as you ‘hid’ the young girl.

A few painful seconds passed as the intruder dug through the backpacks you had both left on the counter. She immediately found Clementine’s pistol and took no hesitation to arm herself. Just as you thought she was about to leave, a face, then a raised pistol, appeared through the crack of the stall.

“I see you,” she remarked. “Get out of there. You aren’t foolin’ me.”

“Who are you?” You asked instead, trying to sound as threatening yet level as you possibly could.

She scoffed. “None of your business.” She opened the stall door and fully extended her arms. “Get out here.”

You exhaled in defeat and stepped down, making sure Clementine was still behind you as you walked out.

“Either of ya got anything on you?” She asked. She pointed the pistol at you in particular as she continued to dig through Clementine’s bag. You made no move.

“Come on, let’s see,” she threatened.

“That’s all we have,” you growled.

“That’s it?” The intruder said with disbelief. “How’d you make it this long? I’m serious! What else you got?”
“That’s it!” You reiterated, voice growing louder.

“Don’t lie to me, I’ll pop you.”

“No one’s lying, sweetheart,” you spat.

She laughed bitterly as she continued to rummage through the backpack. As both Clem’s and your hands were raised in the air, she rambled on about ‘junk’ and ‘shit’ was the only thing either of you had. She also mentioned that the last group she stole from had much better pickings. You couldn’t remember the details, as you weren’t really listening. You were far more focused Omid, who had managed to enter the room and almost fully sneak up on the girl without a sound.

The door the entry fell shut. Omid looked back in shock as the girl turned around. She fired the pistol. The bullet went right into his chest.

Omid fell to the floor. You could hear Clementine crying from behind you. You knew that no matter what, Omid wasn’t going to live through this. However, that didn’t make you cry; it made you see red.

Without being fully conscious of your actions, you slapped the pistol from the perpetrator's hand. She began to make excuses - she didn’t mean to, it wasn’t her fault, etc - but you didn’t care. You grabbed her by a clump of her hair. She screamed as you whipped her body around and threw her downwards. Once her head connected with the porcelain counter, the screaming ceased. You dropped her, and she slumped to the floor. Dead.

///

“Is it really a walker scratch?” Carl asked. There was something in his voice that you couldn’t decipher. His tone was made of disbelief with a glaze of… sympathy? Sadness?

“I can’t think of anything else it would be,” you laughed, which somehow made tears flow to your eyes. You pinched the bridge of your nose. Your reaction was stupid. Not even half a day ago, you told Rick you didn’t care if you died, and now you’re crying over it?

You took in a breath and dropped your hand. You stepped away and slid your tee shirt back on. “Carl, you can’t tell anyone about this,” you reiterated. “I could still have days left, and I really
don’t need someone blowing my head off before then.”

His face went sullen. “I promised,” he reminded, and walked back inside with nothing else to say.

You sighed and sunk to the ground. You momentarily pressed your back against the barn’s wall, only to immediately regret it when your cut began to bleed and ache. A mix of a groan and growl sounded from the back of your throat as you leaned forward. Your elbows rested on your knees as your hands were set on either side of your neck.

“I’m dying,” you whispered to yourself. “I’m dying, and not even fucking Clementine is here.”

///

For six months following Omid’s death, you, Clementine, and Christa were chasing a faraway dream called Wellington. Supposedly, it was a community up north that welcomed all newcomers. But, being in Atlanta, the trek wasn’t easy. Winter was cold, much colder than that in Georgia, which was only intensified by having no shelter. For so much longer than you could ever want, you and the two other girls were drifting. No home was to be found in that.

Christa was trying to light a fire while you and Clem sat on a fallen tree. She was complaining how the wood was too wet from the rain to burn, and that you and her should be the ones doing it in the first place. ‘You have to know these things’, she explained.

“I miss Lee,” Clementine uttered after long overdue silence.

“I do too,” you agreed, and set an arm around her shoulders. She didn’t hesitate to lean into you.

“I’m gonna go look for some more wood,” Christa said. “You two, keep the fire lit.”

You nodded, and she walked off. The fire blew out in a matter of minutes.

You stood up and pulled down your shirt. “Clem, can you get me the lighter?” You asked, kneeling in front of the now gone flames.
She didn’t reply, and instead walked to her backpack and pulled the Zippo lighter with a butterfly print out and handed it to you.

You dug around in your back pocket and felt the edge of a paper-like material. You pulled it out to look at it, and felt your heart ache. It was a picture of your mother and father on their wedding day. You had found it in your backpack a few weeks ago; you couldn’t remember how or when it got there.

You ran your thumb over your mom’s face. She was smiling and laughing, the kind where your eyes crinkle and head throws back. Your dad had a similar expression. Your biggest takeaway was how happy they looked. You couldn’t remember seeing anything like that between them after you turned 5.

You bit your lip and set it underneath a log. You brought the lit lighter to the corner of it. “To new beginnings,” you muttered bitterly. The fire simply crackled in response.

Clem gasped and you quickly rose to your feet when you both heard conflict from behind you. The words were muddled, but you could make out a threatening tone.

“Stay behind me,” you told Clem as you dug in the backpack for the pistol. It was more for show than anything else; last time you checked, there were only two bullets left in it.

You carefully walked along what could have passed as a trail. You were clearly on the right track, because the voice grew louder and clearer. You could even hear multiple tones.

“Where’s the rest of your group?!” One shouted, and behind some brush, someone stumbled into your line of vision. Christa.

“I-I’m by myself...” she lied, raising her hands to her side.

“Bullshit!” He replied.

“She’s lyin’!” another declared.
You picked a rock up from the ground. You threw it, and successfully hit one of the men in the face.

“Christa, run!!” Clementine shouted. She turned around and bolted in the other direction with you hot on her heels.

You lost your footing a few times, yet managed to never fully trip. When Clem almost did, you quickly lifted up her shoulders and urged her to keep moving. You purposely stayed a bit behind her.

“Get the fuck over here! NOW!” the man demanded after somewhat catching up with you both. However, you and Clem managed to slide behind a small pile of rocks before he could see you.

You pointed to another stack almost parallel to you. You carefully pointed to it, to which Clem nodded. You returned the action and held up three fingers. You pulled one down, another, and the final one. She bolted across before your third finger reached your hand.

“Shit!” He shouted, and made a beeline towards Clem. You sprung up, jumped onto the rocks, and threw yourself onto the man while Clem strategically slid under a log propped up by two boulders.

“Fucking bitch!” He cursed as you made him stumble and lose footing. You were relentless as you kicked at the back of his knees and dug your teeth into his ear.

He rammed his back against a tree trunk. You instantly lost your grip and fell to the ground, unconscious.

You awoke what could only be moments later. Still, a lot seemed to have passed, because after blinking a few times, you could see Clem being pinned to the ground by that asshole. He continued to curse and call her names.

You pulled yourself up and found a rock that fit in your hand comfortably. You trudged over to them, finding it hard to focus on anything but your pounding head. Despite this, you managed to ram the stone on the side of the man’s skull, effectively knocking him off of Clementine. You pulled her up as a walker began to feast on him. Good riddance.

Unfortunately, the hell wasn’t over. The noise managed to bring it what had to be at least ten walkers. With no efficient weapons or skills, the task seemed impossible.
“We have to go,” you warned, though there seemed to be nowhere to go. You were both already standing a body length away from a cliff’s edge, and while it wasn’t like falling off of Mount Everest, a raging river still awaited at the bottom.

You took a cautious step back, only for your foot to get caught in a divot in the land. When you tried to pull it free, it twisted, which made you simultaneously cry out in pain and fall the ground. Clem picked up a rock and did manage to hit a walker in the head, but it just wasn’t enough. You and she continued to back up in fear. You felt your hands reach for land that simply wasn’t there, and fell backward into the water. Clem descended moments after you.

///

You rose to your feet fast after hearing footsteps. You let the arm raising your knife relax upon seeing Maggie, Sasha, and… a man you had never seen before.

“Who’s the dude?” you asked, raising your chin in his direction.

“Uh,” he took a reluctant step and smiled awkwardly. “Hi. I’m Aaron. And… i think it’s best if everyone hears the story for the second time. There are a lot of you, aren’t there?”

The first thing about this Aaron character was his backpack, along with the fact he looked like he had just showered.

You agreed. “Yeah,” you muttered and stepped back inside.

Everyone took attention when you walked in; a mix of the incoming light and the loud sound of wood scraping was an attentive combination. They relaxed due to realization, and you tucked yourself into the closest corner. You noticed Carl bouncing Judith in his arms. He made eye contact. He looked away first.

“Everyone…” Maggie said, southern twang and hesitance obvious. She stepped deeper inside. “This is Aaron.”

Without a second thought, almost every person rose to their feet and cocked or unsheathed their
weapons. Daryl charged forward, and looked around outside. He closed the door after letting Sasha in.

“We met him outside, he’s by himself,” Maggie paused as Daryl began to pat him down. “We took his weapons and we took his gear.”

“Hi,” Aaron said, holding his hands in surrender. “It’s nice to meet you,” he stepped forward. The people behind him did as well.

“You said he had a weapon,” Rick recalled, speaking to Maggie. She walked over to and handed Rick a pitiful pistol that looked like it was missing half of its barrel. “There somethin’ you need?” Rick asked after pocketing the weapon.

“He says he has a camp, nearby,” Sasha answered, voice swimming in a pool of disbelief. “He wants us to ‘audition’ for membership.”

“I-I wish there was another word,” Aaron said. “Audition makes it sound like we’re some sort of dance troupe. That’s only on Friday nights.”

After hearing his ‘joke’, you didn’t quite care what else Aaron had to say. It was clear Rick was going to handle the situation, and more likely than not, you’d all be back on the road within the hour.

You let yourself sit on the floor and close your eyes. Everything, from the hay you were sitting on to the sound of Aaron explaining something. You were snapped out of your trance when a loud thud startled you. Rick had punched Aaron.

You brought your hand to your forehead and cursed softly. Your fingers came back slick with sweat. Your stomach caved into itself in a mix of anticipation and fear. Hopefully any symptoms would lay off for awhile.

///

Rick instructed some pretty basic things: look through Aaron’s pack, ask him how many people he had brought with him, etc. Aaron countered that Rick wouldn’t trust him no matter what, then offered that he drive the group to his ‘community’. He disclosed where an RV and car should be
parked, and after a debate with Michonne, Rick began to choose who would check it out.

“Abraham,” he said, adding to the list that consisted of Maggie, Glenn, and Michonne.

The ex-soldier nodded slightly. “Yeah,” he raised his gun to his chest, “I’ll walk with ‘em.”

“Rosita,” Rick said.

She agreed. “Okay.”

Rick looked to you, opened his mouth, then closed it. Apparently, your current state was apparent. Shit.

After the selection going for the vehicles left, Rick then began to instruct the remaining bodies. “If we’re all in here, we’re a target.”

“I’ve got the area covered,” Daryl answered.

“Alright, groups of two, find somewhere safe within eyeshot,” he then said, and almost everyone filed for the door.

You adjusted your bow and put your arms behind you, clearly about to move. Rick shook his head.

“Not you; you’re with me.”

You smirked but stayed sitting. “Yes, sir.”

///

You and Clementine were lucky enough to have washed up on the same shore. Of course, you were on opposite ends of it, but you still considered this to be a one in a million chance. Who knows what would have happened if you two had been separated.
You were the first to wake up. You were fully on the sandy shore, though this didn’t mean you were unscathed; your side had managed to be scraped along a rock. The bleeding had stopped by the time you had woken up.

For the next hour or so, after pulling Clementine so her legs weren’t floating, you sat by her side as you waited for her to wake up. You had already made sure she was breathing and had a pulse, so really, the only thing you could do was wait. She woke up with a cough.

“Not dead yet, kid,” you smiled, “neither of us.”

After making sure she was alright and helping her stand, you walked towards the broken dock you had noticed soon after finding Clem. You jumped up and grabbed the wood, feet dangling until you used them to scale where the land dropped. Once getting on top, you reached down for Clementine and pulled her up.

“Woods,” she noticed the thick layer of trees. “Cool.”

“Yeah,” you said, “maybe we’ll find a place to spend the night.”

As a pair, you both explored the forest for around 15 minutes. There was a cleared trail, meaning there were minimal blockages to delay travel. Still, the area seemed to be completely abandoned. That is, until Clementine spotted a dog.

“Woah,” she said, slowly approaching the animal.

“Clem, I don’t know if that’s-” You warned, though you followed after her. Sure enough, when getting too close, it began to growl.

“Easy boy,” Clem said soothingly, slowly reaching out a hand. “What’s your name?” She managed to grab the nametag around its neck, “Sam. Well, nice to meet you, Sam.”

“If he has a collar, he had owners,” you noted. “There must be a camp nearby.”
“Or he has owners,” Clementine theorized. She sounded somewhat worried.

“Only one way to find out,” you shrugged, and followed Sam once he began to walk off.

~

The dog ended up leading you and Clementine to what looked like a long abandoned camp. There were two visible tents, one which was barely standing while the other was completely torn up. A dirty van with an open side door helped create a border of sorts.

“Well,” Clem said, “we should get looking.”

You raised your eyebrows, impressed, and took to one of the tents. You snorted when you noticed Clem grimacing as she dug through the trash.

“Oh my god,” you heard her gasp. She turned around with a wide smile. “Look! A can!”

You returned the expression. “Good find, Clem,” you praised. The commotion excited someone - or rather, something - else.

Raising your knife, you trotted in front of Clem and to the walker making the noise. You sighed with relief when you noticed it was tied to a tree, and startled when you noticed how close Clem was to you. Sam was growling, which turned into a bark when Clementine took a step forward.

“They tried to cut it out,” Clementine observed, as a red-handled knife was plunged into the walker’s arm.

“It didn’t work,” You said. “You could use a weapon, though.”

Deciding to keep your own knife clean for opening the can, you found a fallen tree branch a few feet behind you. After raising it above your head, Clem protested.

“Can I do it?” She asked.
You looked down at her in shock.

“I’ll have to learn sometime,” she reminded, somewhat sadly. “You won’t always be here.”

“Hey,” you protested, dropping the branch and set a hand on her shoulder, “I will always be here: right by you.”

///

A lot of time was spent in silence. Aaron asked you if you too were a prisoner (mostly, he was joking), to which you replied with ‘not really’. You felt yourself nodding off the whole time, really. That is, until Rick shook you awake.

Judith was propped on his knee and facing him. She gurgled and cooed, while he stayed still. “We gotta talk.”

He stood up and stepped away, going to the other end of the barn. Aaron watched carefully as you hauled yourself up, breathed in through your nose, and approached the man.

“What’s up?” you asked, sounding strangely nonchalant.

“What’s up with you?” Rick countered. “I was gonna send you out there, but you couldn’t even stand up.”

“Rough night. Rough day. Rough life,” you shrugged, unable to give a better answer.

“Yeah, maybe…” Rick agreed vocally, though it was said as more of a grunt.

“Okay,” you breathed as you were about to go against your better judgement. “I am a stone cold cunt. And I am aware of that. But I’m a cunt you were going to trust earlier today. So that means something, right?”
He nodded slowly.

“Then I should return the favor,” you said, biting at your lip. “I got scratched, badly. I don’t know what it could be from besides… a walker.”

“Where is it?”

“On my back.”

“When did it happen?”

“Last night.”

“I’m sorry.”


Chapter End Notes

Look at Ryan, finally in touch with their emotions...

Let me know what you thought!
Reluctantly, you handed Clem the branch to kill the bound walker. You knew she was right: she’d have to learn how to fight sometime. Although you didn’t like her reasoning -- because you wouldn’t always be there to protect her -- she was by no means wrong.

“Go for the head,” you instructed, handing her the branch. “Always go for the head. It takes more force than you think, but it’s the only thing that’ll take them down.”

She nodded in understanding and raised the branch over her head. She hurled it downward, hitting the walker in the center of its head. However, the creature continued to moan.

“You don’t stop until it stops making noise,” you further told. It took her two more strikes for the walker to cease movement or sound.

With a smile, you leaned forward and pulled the knife from the biter’s limb. You wiped the weapon on your sleeve before handing it Clementine and saying, “Welcome to the club.”

“What club?” she asked, putting it in her pocket.

“The Apocalypse Kids,” you stated proudly, putting your hands on your hips for emphasis.

“I don’t think we’ll be getting new members anytime soon,” she countered with a smile.

“Maybe not,” you smirked and walked over to a fallen log. You took a seat and continued, “three’s a crowd, anyways.”

“Yeah,” she took a seat beside you and handed you the can. “Maybe.”

You looked at her for a moment. When she made eye contact with you, you took your knife from your pocket. You jabbed the blade into the metal in a triangular pattern, then used the punctures to drag the knife around the circumference. After opening it, you handed the can back to Clem. She looked at you with a mix of anxiety and hesitation.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want first dibs,” you assured, and pushed it closer to her. This time, she accepted by taking the can with a grin. She spooned beans into her mouth, and Sam began to whine.

“Can he have some?” She asked.

“A few,” you ceded, though you felt your stomach growl.

She smiled in gratification as she took some more into her hand. She leaned down and offered them
to Sam, who instead knocked the can from her grasp and began eating feverishly.

“You can’t have them all,” She disagreed and reached for the can.

It happened so quickly. Clementine had the can in her hand for not even a second before Sam growled and plunged his teeth into her arm. Because Clem was in shock, it was easy for Sam to bring her to the ground, his grip only tightening. You reacted on instinct when you jumped forward and plunged your knife into Sam’s throat.

The dog whined as it bled out, but the damage had already been done. Clem was shaking and whimpering, still laying on the ground in a mix of fear and continued shock.

“Shit,” you breathed out upon seeing how torn up Clementine truly was.

///

The sluggishness you were feeling from the worsening infection made it hard for you to perceive what happened over the 8 hours, give or take. Of course, Michonne and the others reappeared with an RV and a car, and you were all on the road. You drove through the night, and you couldn’t remember most of what happened during the drive. You had stowed yourself away in the back ‘bedroom’, you could even call it that. No one bothered you. Then, during the night, a flare shot up, and the path was diverted to a small town where a man claiming to be Aaron’s partner was found under a truck. Everyone in the RV filed into a strange building nearby, where you currently sat shivering and sweating at the same time.

Rick was trying to keep the group safe, which apparently meant keeping Aaron and Eric separate for the night. Once learning the latter had only a broken ankle, you quickly realized something more than a friendship was going on between those two men. Glenn managed to assure Rick everyone would be alright, that they weren’t a risk.

“Do you think he’s a threat?” Carl appeared by your side, holding his baby sister Judith. You jumped at the sudden noise and wiped away some of the sweat dripping to your brow.

“Not really,” you humored him. You left your hand on your forehead when the room began to feel like it was spinning. “He gave Judith applesauce; that’s not really villain material.”

“Probably not,” Carl agreed. He paused, and looked your way. “I always thought that, before I died, I’d think of everyone I was leaving behind. So… I’d think of my dad and Judith.”

“I’m not thinking about anyone,” you muttered, pressing on your temples. You let your hand fall with a sigh. “I see nothing. There’s just… darkness.” You swallowed, “maybe I am supposed to be reflecting: thinking of everyone I wronged and everything I did right. I should be thinking about how I’ll be seeing my family again, but I’m not. Dying doesn’t feel like a release. It feels like nothing.”

“That’s on you,” Carl stated without scrutinizing. “You’re letting yourself think that. And it’s not true. So, if you want to feel something, make yourself feel it.”

You blinked slowly with fatigue. “How do you suggest I do that?”

“Think about the people you helped, not the ones you didn’t,” Carl offered, voice soft. You
couldn’t tell if he was trying to be gentle, or remain unheard.

“I-I…” you wracked your brain, yet came up with nothing. “I’ve fucked so many people over, Carl. I can’t think of anyone.”

“Then think of me.” He was persistent, more so than you’ve ever seen him. In fact, Carl was so determined that he moved Judith to his side and used his free hand to take yours.

The touch startled you, though you didn’t pull away. You decided this was because of surprise, not because you appreciated it. And, for some reason, you did as he asked.

You thought about Carl and how the first time you met, you had saved him from something catastrophic. You remembered how without even knowing him, you could see the kindness in his eyes, and that he was the most genuine person you had met in a long time. You thought about how in the short time you’ve been friends, he’s both amazed and startled you. You had laughed together over ‘fish pills’, and how you had comforted him when he was in the middle of a waking nightmare. You were lucky to have met him, and even luckier that within weeks, a bond between the both of you had grown into a force to be reckoned with.

Your vision began to blur, but you still mustered a smile. “Thank you, Carl,” you said, though he didn’t smile back. In fact, his face flattened and his eyes widened.

You began to see black spots and swayed on your feet. Everything, close or far, grew foggy. You thought you heard Carl ask something, but his voice sounded miles away. He took a step backwards, there were a few shouts, and you fell to the ground.

///

The next couple of hours felt like a few minutes that passed in slow motion. Clementine assured you she was okay to walk, so she stayed a few feet behind you. While she trudged along with pain, your body was filled with fatigue. Still, you managed to kill a few walkers that dared move close to either her or yourself.

Daylight had turned to dusk, which left both of you shivering in wet clothes. You knew a fire had to be started, or you and Clem risked freezing to death. She was already risking an infection every second that cut was still open; the last thing you needed was to turn to ice. The walkers were coming to steadily and quickly to safely settle down for the night. Despite this, Clementine leaned against a random boulder in the forest and slid to the ground. Her heavy eyelids struggled to stay open.

You weren’t killing them with your usual caution. Because of this, a walker managed to sneak up on you from behind and tackle you to the ground. Thankfully, you didn’t feel any part of it break your skin. The moment you wrestled it off of you, you would be safe. Because it was inches away from your face, though, it didn’t feel that way.

Something plunged itself into the side of the walker’s head, effectively bringing it down. You rolled it to the side and looked up to see an older man holding a crossbow, while his young partner stared at you.

“My friend,” you breathed out as the man took a few more out, “She’s back there…” you shakily
pointed to the rocks as you brought yourself to your feet.

“Come on, kid, we gotta get,” you remembered hearing the young one say after the other declared he was out of arrows. The three of you then took off through the forest, the young man carrying Clementine bridal style.

“You’ll be fine, Clementine…” you said as you ran by the man’s side. You knew she couldn’t hear you; hell, you could hardly hear yourself. Maybe you needed to hear what you were saying more than she did.

After the coast was clear, you all slowed down to a walking pace rather than a sprint. Your chest was heaving and your lungs ached as they tried to bring in air. You still weren’t quite used to all the activity.

“What are you two doing out here?” The older one asked, seeming somewhat concerned.

“Where are uh,... the people you’re with?” The one holding Clem added, “there is no chance you made it this long on your own.”

“We got separated from a friend, and now, we’re lost,” you answered bluntly. So far they seemed pleasant enough, and didn’t set off warning signals; you decided the men deserved an answer.

“Well, if he’s nearby, maybe we’ll come across him-” The young man started.

“-she’s not,” you cut him off, voice lacking any trace of emotion. You sounded like you agreed that it might rain, not that Christa was probably dead.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he consoled. After a moment, he said, “well, I’m Luke, and this is Pete.”

“Ryan,” you said, and pointed to Clem. “That’s Clementine.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Luke said, “but for now, we’re gonna take you back to our group, okay? We got a doctor with us, and you look like you could use some -- OH SHIT!”

Luke screamed and purposefully dropped Clementine. You knew it was no accident when her body fell at an angle, rather than straight down. Luke stepping away further proved your point.

“What the hell?!-” You shouted, rushing to your friend’s side. You helped sit her up and put a gentle hand on her back.

“She’s been bit, man,” Luke addressed Pete. “Fuck, fuck, fuck! What are we gonna do here?”

“We-” you said, “are getting the hell out of here. It was a dog bite.”

“I didn’t see any dog...” Pete said with a disapproving tone.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” you protested, “like I need a lecture.” You sighed and rubbed your face. “Are you gonna help us or not?”

“Why should we believe you?” Pete asked, crossing his arms. He didn’t sound taunting: actually, he sounded like he was genuinely looking for a reason.

Clementine pulled up her sleeve and stuck out her arm.

“Jesus, what are you doin’, kid?” Luke yelled. He was in some sort of a panic because of the situation.
“It doesn’t look like a lurker bite,” she said, staring Pete down. “See?” Clementine said when Pete crouched down to look at her wound. “Walkers bite to eat, dogs bite to harm.”

She had an excellent point; the actual ‘bite’ appeared to be more of a long cut. Pete was only certain when he asked if the story was true, and Clem looked him straight in the eye as she said ‘yes’.

As Pete assured Luke he really didn’t think it was a walker, you helped Clem to her feet. She assured you she was alright, despite swaying as you followed Luke and Pete to the edge of a hill. It overlooked a medium-sized house with smoke coming out of the chimney.

“Clem?” you asked, noticing how she was growing more sluggish. Clem’s eyes blinked open and closed slowly, like she was fighting to keep them open.

“Just tired,” she assured, holding her arm with a slumped shoulder.

“Better not be too tired,” Luke chimed in, “I’m not carrying you with that bite on your arm.”

You shot him a glare, to which surprisingly, the man looked away from. Still, Clementine was persistent.

“I’m fine,” she repeated, “I can make --” her words slurred together and drew out before she began to fall sideways.

“Shit!” Luke cursed, and Pete dropped his crossbow. You were too busy catching your friend to realize they were running forward.

“Ryan, do you --” Luke asked as you brought an arm under her knees and the other her shoulders.

“You’re not carrying her,” you spat, looking up at him, “remember? Not with that bite.”

Neither men said anything as you slowly stood up, Clementine unconscious in your arms.

You awoke to sunlight hitting your eyes and a blanket draped over you. You were jostled around slightly, and after fully waking up, you realized it was because you were back on the RV. Whoever put you back in the ‘bedroom’ laid you on your stomach, and you noticed that you were no longer in pain. Maggie, who was sitting in a chair across from the bed, smiled.

“What happened?” You asked, squinting as you propped yourself up.

“Don’t move too much,” Maggie told you, reaching out a cautious hand. “Bend the wrong way and you’ll ruin a stitch.”

“A stitch?” you frowned, disobeying her direct orders as you reached over your shoulder and to your upper back.

“There was some splinters left in it,” she explained, only confusing you more. “A shard of wood was embedded into the cut; must have hurt like a bitch.”

“Yeah,” you nodded, “it did.”

She smiled again, though she obviously felt something other than happiness. “It was just a cut from
the barn door, Ryan. A bad one, yeah, but just a cut. You should have told someone sooner.”

“Hm,” you noted, trying to stay indifferent. “Maybe.”

“Well, I’ll let you rest some more,” she decided, taking a stand. “We’re halfway there. I’ll bother you again when we arrive.”

“Okay,” you agreed. You relaxed yourself back onto the bed, only until Maggie had left. After she did, you swung your legs over and pulled back the blanket.

A cut from the barn door simply made no sense. Why had you developed a fever, had been shivering, and exhibited other infection-like symptoms from a little scrape? Then again, how had said symptoms magically stopped after Maggie dressed the wound? You weren’t sticky or wet with sweat, your body steady, and head no longer spinning.

“Maggie crushed some amoxicillin, mixed it with water, and stuck you with it,” someone from the doorway informed. Your head snapped up to see Carl, and you were suddenly very aware of the fact that you had no clothing on above your waist.

You pulled the blanket over your chest. “Fish pills saved the day, huh?” You asked rhetorically. “Is that all you came here to say?”

“No,” he affirmed. “I came to ask why you told me first.”

“You were there,” you answered plainly with a shrug.

“Sasha and Maggie went out before I did,” He countered. “Convenience isn’t it.”

“Am I supposed to profess my undying love for you?” you asked. “If anything, you’re in love with me.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“You’re wearing the Metallica shirt,” you smirked and leaned back. “I bet you can’t name a single song of theirs.”

He blushed. “That’s not my point.”

“Then what is?”

“You didn’t just think you were hurt, Ryan: you thought you were bit,” he grew quiet, “you thought you were dying. And out of everyone, you picked me.”

“You want an explanation,” you realized, sarcasm leaving your voice. You sighed, thinking of the realest way to put it. “I didn’t want to manipulate you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” You avoided his gaze.

“I just… had to tell someone; someone had to know for when I fell asleep and woke up as a walker. And, if I had to choose one person out of all your people to trust,” you looked up and locked eyes with Carl, “it would be you.” You cocked an eyebrow and smiled crookedly. “Is that enough of an explanation?”

He fought off smile and nodded.
The first things your group had to do inside the walls of Alexandria was surrender weapons. You, along with anyone else wielding protection, was immediately weary of such an idea. However, Aaron had been true about something already: the place did have tall walls and a sturdy gate.

You were back on your feet and already feeling significantly better. Maggie loaned you a white tank top that was a little tight in too many places, as your shirts had been torn through. Your pistol and knife were back on your belt, your bow strung around your chest, and your arrows on your back. You felt invincible again.

“You stay, you hand them over,” an Alexandrian named Nicholas said, clearly repeating a previously given order.

“We don’t know if we want to stay,” Rick growled, his Colt Python hanging at his side. Judith hung on his hip, though she was reaching for the ground. Something about the scene made him appear less threatening. Well, to you at least. Nicholas looked like he was pissing himself.

“It’s fine, Nicholas,” Aaron confirmed.

“If we were gonna use them, we would have started already,” Rick further assured with a bite in his voice.

“Let them talk to Deanna first,” Aaron offered calmly.

Abraham interjected, “who’s Deanna?”

“She knows everything you’d want to know about this place,” Aaron answered. “Rick, why don’t you start.”

~

Rick was interviewed first, and was followed by Michonne and Carl. For an unknown reason, you were picked next. Carl was walking down the stairs when Aaron looked at you and nodded his head towards the door.

“Seriously?” you raised an eyebrow.

“You haven’t told me much,” Aaron admitted, “but you seem like you have a lot to say.”

You smirked and set your hands on your hips. “Fair enough,” you agreed, and began treading up the staircase. As you were walking, Carl stuck out his hand and grabbed your upper arm.

“I think she’s asking the same questions,” he said, “making sure our stories check out.”

“Well, I’m no concern,” you reminded. “I’ve got nothing to tell.”

“Maybe not, but what are you gonna say?”

“One of two things: what she wants to hear,” you leaned your lips close to his ear, “or the exact opposite.”
You smiled with satisfaction when a chill through Carl’s body made him lose grip on your arm. Retreating up the stairs, you didn’t bother knocking as you barged in.

The first thing you noticed was all the accessories. Some were knick knacks, like strange figurines or religious symbols, while others were things such as narrow and full bookshelves. Unnecessary paintings hung on pristine white walls, ones your dirty skin would stain.

“Oh, hello,” an older woman who was cleanly dressed greeted you with a tight smile. “I’m Deanna.”

She gestured for the open entryway to the heart of the house. You walked past her silently, taking careful steps. You felt as though the polished floors were fragile.

“Deanna Monroe is my full name,” she continued. She wasn’t subtle.

“Ryan Ashling,” you answered gruffly, preoccupied with scanning the house. A shiny coffee table was between a cream sofa and a floral patterned chair. “Charmed.”

“Well then,” she said with a smile that you saw from customer service workers before, “let’s get started.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

in case ya'll were curious: I will address Ryan's (the reader's) scratch in more depth, or why she thought she was dying from the scratch. I promise that wasn't just for shock value (*whispers* it'll actually come into play several times in the future).

italics mean flashbacks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Middle school was hard. Moving to a new school at the start of 7th grade, when it felt like your life was just beginning? Harder. Living in a house with a different version of your father, his perfect new wife, and her 3 daughters? Seemingly impossible.

After a long and grueling custody battle, your father was deemed most fit to be your parent: your sole parent. Meaning, you had to uproot the childhood you spent in New Jersey and move down to a suburb outside of Atlanta, Georgia. New town, old souls, and new faces.

It was no secret you wanted your mother to gain full custody. After all, she was the one who had actually been there for you after the age of 7; your father was too busy forming the family you were now seemingly a part of. And when things didn’t go your way, well… you weren’t happy.

You spent the first few months ignoring your dad as much as you could. When you weren’t in your room, you were in your room or at the dinner table without making conversation. You got up earlier than everyone else so you could get ready in silence and spend the rest of your morning alone in your bedroom. Even when your dad decided to drive ‘the girls’ to school, you opted to take the bus.

It got boring, spending so much time on your own. There were only so many books to read, and because you didn’t want to ask for a ride to the library, you ended up reading the same ones over and over again. After almost memorizing all the ones on the shelf, plus the ones you borrowed from school, you knew you had to find something else to do. So, you found a toy guitar in hot pink and with butterfly stickers, and you started playing.

You already had a somewhat impressive baseline of knowledge, as your father used to spend all of his free time plucking away at a guitar twice as old as you were at the time. He always seemed so happy then, you remembered.

Shaking your head and the memory away, you began tuning the guitar as well as you could manage. You already knew the standard tuning and select chords, but with the help of a ‘teach yourself guitar: for kids!’ book, you managed to teach yourself how to play. Progress was slow, and the instrument sounded unusually high (due to the thin strings and short neck), but it was a start. It was something.

After mastering the basic songs in the book, you began dissecting and recreating some of your favorite songs. You spent weeks singing the song to yourself and experimenting chord combinations and transitions. You moved the capo up and down the neck, creating higher and lower sounds to fit songs better. Though the experience was fulfilling and occupied your mind
constantly, there was only one song you could actually remember deciphering. It was a relatively easy song to play with a great sound and breathtaking lyrics, and quickly became your favorite to play. You spent hours each night coming up with the chords, and after that, spent your time practicing -- and nearly perfecting -- the entirety, singing and all. On one particular night, you were so caught up in playing and softly singing that you didn’t notice the footsteps up the stairs, or the lingering figure in the open doorway. You simply sat on the edge of your bed, constantly looking at your fingers to make sure they were positioned properly. You concluded by plucking a single string that echoed with the rest of the melody.

“That was beautiful,” The person from the doorway -- the original Ryan Ashling -- said. You blinked, startled by the sudden disturbance. You swallowed nervously and managed a quiet, “thanks.”

“I’ve been hearing you the past few months, actually,” he continued, stepping into the room with his hands folded behind his back. “It carries through the hallway vent.”

“I’m sorry if I disrupted anything,” you muttered, holding onto the guitar with a vice grip. It’s not that we were afraid, more so that you were holding your own, in a way.

“No, kiddo…” he sighed sadly, “I should be the one apologizing. I didn’t speak earlier because I thought it would only bother you, but… that was just an excuse. Day after day, I kept justifying why we don’t talk, when instead, I should’ve been changing that. I can’t fix what I’ve done, I know that, but… I hope this helps.”

Pulling his dominant hand in front of him, your dad revealed a guitar case you knew like the back of your hand.

“I always thought you left that back at home,” you said, then corrected yourself, “in New Jersey.”

“Nope,” he replied, and took a seat on the empty space beside you. He positioned the case between you and him, but tilted it in your direction. “I’ve had it, all these years. Been meaning to play again, really, just… haven’t gotten around to it. I think you’ll make good use of this old thing.”

“Thanks, dad,” You smiled, and for the first time in a long time, it was genuine.

“Do you mind if I film this?” Deanna asked, bringing you back to earth. You had zoned out after you laid eyes on an acoustic guitar sitting on a stand in the corner.

“You have a camera?” You asked, not making eye contact with her until you finished the question. She nodded, a strange sort of smile clad on her face.

“Don’t know why you’d want to,” you said, “but knock yourself out.”

“We’re about transparency here,” she answered, and momentarily turned her back to grab and assemble a camera. Meanwhile, she gestured to the chair close to you. “Please.”

“I’ll get it dirty,” you replied, crossing your arms.

“Why does that matter?” She asked, taking a seat of her own.
“I suppose it doesn’t,” you said cheekily, already fed up with the way this woman spoke. Though she wasn’t outwardly arrogant, it seemed by the way Deanna dressed and ultimately carried herself that she was always impressed by her own words. “My father would be rolling over in his grave if he knew how filthy I am right now. Then again, he was never buried, just… dead. One of them, maybe,” you pointed to the fence, the one walkers thrived behind.

“Your father?” Deanna questioned, raising her eyebrows at the mentioning of such title. “Tell me about him.”

You snorted. “No.” Seeing the look on her face change, you added, “there are few sacred things left in the world, Deanna. You can conduct interrogations until the fucking sun explodes and swallows us, but there are some things you just won’t know.”

“You’ve been out there for a long time, haven’t you, Ryan?” She said, seemingly unfazed by your mild outburst.

“Not only are there things you won’t know,” you finally took a seat, “there are things you won’t understand.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Doesn’t it?”

She paused, and once again, had a strange, closed-mouth grin. “What about that group of yours? How long have you known them?”

“Weeks, a month at most. We killed together; that’s how we met, really,” you said, folding your hands together as you recalled the events. Rick repeatedly stabbing the gang member, how you bit Gareth’s ear off, and how Rick mutilated and killed him moments later. The whole thing was a sick kind of ritual, a bond over spilled blood.

“You’ve killed,” she noted, saying it outloud as a mental note. “How old are you?”

“18 at most. 17 sounds like a closer bet.”

“You’re a child,” Deanna responded. “If you call me a kid, you might as well call my a prodigy,” you replied, pressing your back against the chair.

“Oh really?” Deanna said, seemingly impressed by your choice of words. “Why is that?”

“I did what damn near everyone else my age couldn’t: I lived.”

Deanna momentarily pursed her lips in thought and tilted her chin up. “Perhaps.” She paused, then said, “What do you want to get out of Alexandria, Ryan?”

“What do you?” You countered, but were genuinely curious.

“Excuse me?”

“This place is as close as you can get to a castle these days,” you stood up and slowly turned around from where you stood. You made eye contact with the camcorder, “you waste memory and time on something naive, and you do all this while pretending to know what the world out there is actually like.” You glanced down and laughed to yourself. When looking back up, you said, “I don’t know what you’re trying to create -- a community, democracy, or even a new World Order.
But I know what this is. It’s a fantasyland. It’s dress up on Fridays and the Lord’s Day on Sundays, because that’s what you think living is. And if you decide to keep us here, I won’t be the only one to tell you that.”

“That’s quite the nasty cut on your back,” She observed, immensely straying from the topic. “We have a doctor here. Her name is Denise. Aaron will take you to her.”

“Great,” you forced a smile on your face and brushed past her, right out of the house and back into daylight.

You winced but stayed silent when Denise poured a disinfectant over your back. Normally, the startling sense would make you at least hiss, but having already peeled away the shirt from your injury, the initial shock of pain had already been felt. Feeling exposed, you pulled your legs up to your chest and rested your hands on your kneecaps, which were now level with your collarbone.

“This is a pretty nasty infection,” she noted, and you heard some rattling coming from the space on the table behind you. “Have you had a fever?”

“It’s hard to tell when you spend your day in the desert,” you answered. Calling the climate a desert may have been a bit dramatic, but when you spent hours baking in the Sun, any term would fit.

“Have you shown any noticeable symptoms?” Denise then inquired. “Chills, blurred vision, feeling faint or nauseous?”

You pressed your lips together. “I passed out.”

“But you’ve been walking around, talking and acting normal…” Denise said, confusion thick in her voice.

“There was no alternative.”

The room went quiet after that. You felt a small prick, and after that, not much of anything. You sat in silence as Denise did her job. You guessed it was 10 minutes later when Denise said she was finally finished.

“I re-did the stitches and dosed you with some antibiotics. I’ll give you a pill version to take for a week or so, and you should take it easy, but… you’ll be okay.”

“Thanks, Doc,” you said, lowering your legs to be level with the table. Once again, you were reminded of the bareness of your torso. Almost as if she knew, Denise set a grey and red flannel shirt beside you.

“Here. Heath left it behind when he dropped a few things off earlier.”

“Thanks, again,” you offered her a small smile, to which she returned. You heaved yourself off of the table and began slipping into the oversized shirt. It reached your mid-thigh, but the fabric wasn’t thick, and with the sleeves rolled up, you knew it would be doable.

“Where are your bruises?” Denise asked as you buttoned the shirt.

You frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You said you passed out,” Denise recalled. You nodded affirmation, which prompted her to
continue. “You were standing, right?”

“Yeah,” you confirmed. Now that you were actually thinking about it… why didn’t you have bruises from falling? At the very least, you should be sore from hitting the ground. You were so confused and distracted that you didn’t notice the door swing open. “I remember falling…”

“You didn’t hit the ground, though,” a voice informed. You looked up to see Tara standing in the doorway.

“What?” You asked. Glancing over at Denise, you noticed she shared your intrigue.

“Carl caught you,” she stated with a shrug. Her eyebrows then furrowed. “You didn’t know that?”

You matched her frown. “Carl was holding Judith. He stepped back so I wouldn’t tackle him.”

“He stepped back so he could hand her off. He got to you just before you touched the floor,” Tara disagreed. “What the hell was that, by the way? Why didn’t you talk to anyone?”

“I thought it was a walker scratch,” you defended, then quietly added, “I thought I was dying.”

“Well,” Denise cleared her throat, “let me know if you need anything. Otherwise, you’re free to go.”

You nodded a thanks and brushed past Tara to reach the door. Once your hand touched the handle, you turned back and said, “Actually, I have a request.” You took the woman’s silence as permission to ask. “Can you get me that guitar from Deanna’s house?”

It took you at least 15 minutes, but eventually, you stumbled upon Aaron, Carl, and Rick. The three of them stood in a line and seemed to be observing two beautiful houses next to each other. Even before the apocalypse, they would be considered luxury. Now? They were the closest thing to heaven on Earth.

“...Anyway,” Aaron said, “Deanna’s asked everyone to give you your space, so they aren’t all coming at you at once. Take your time, explore.”

“You know what, Aaron?” you said, turning your head to look at him. You also caught the Grimes’s attention. “If you weren’t almost twice my age, I’d kiss you right now.”

“I’m not sure Eric would be too happy about that,” Aaron chuckled nervously and rubbed at his neck, “but uh, you’re welcome.”

You gave him a sickly sweet smile and began walking towards one of the smaller house. Just as you reached the porch, you heard Rick call your name. In the shade of the porch, you could clearly see him going for the bigger house. Carl was a few steps behind him.

“You’re with us,” Rick said, waving his arm over before continuing his pace. You smiled, shrugged, and retreated from the second house and followed the boys into the first.

“Holy shit,” you uttered after walking past the doorway. The first thing you noticed were the empty picture frames stacked on a small bench beside the door. The thing that caught your eye, however, was the entirety of the living room. It was an open space with a white couch and a patterned rug. A flat screen TV was sat on an elaborate stand, like a piece of art on a podium.
The kitchen was a somewhat open space that extended off of the living room. There was a brand new oven with untouched burners, and in front of that, an island with a sink. Carl flipped on the faucet, and sure enough, water began to flow freely.

Your eyes widened. “Do you think that means --”

The hot water from the shower faucet felt like liquid gold. You welcomed the stream head-on, constantly dipping your face and hair into it. You scrubbed at your skin until it turned red with aggression, but you didn’t care. You were finally clean again. You were starting to forget what that felt like.

After stepping out, the hairs on your arms stood up straight and your body shivered from the change in temperature. Still, you felt good. Incredible, really.

You swiped your hand over the clouded mirror, and was almost startled by your own reflection. The closest you had gotten to looking at yourself in years was in the reflection of water or polished weapons. So seeing yourself -- not the person you had become -- came as a shock you couldn’t quite describe.

Forcing your eyes away, you peeled off the now soggy wrapping from your back injury. After some internal debate, you decided to simply leave it uncovered. Denise may not have been impressed with this conclusion, but you knew it would be next to impossible to re-wrap it yourself, and you didn’t want to bother her with it again.

“Hey, Ryan?” You heard Carl call. His voice was muffled by the closed bathroom door, plus, he sounded like he was downstairs. You used the other house to shower in because Rick was using the one in the first, so of course, Carl wouldn’t know where the bathroom is.

You wrapped a towel around your body. Your hair, normally slicked back from your face in some way, hung loosely and dripped onto your shoulders. The floor felt cool under your feet as you padded out of the bathroom, down the upstairs hall, and to the top of the staircase. Next to the door, you saw Carl glancing around. He was holding some folded clothes in one hand, and in the other, something familiar.

“What’s up?” you asked, setting one hand at the top of the railing. You felt your raised shoulder brush the side of your neck.

“I came by to --” He started. Once Carl actually laid eyes on you, his words stopped dead in their tracks. “Uh… wow. You look… different.”

“Close your mouth, Carl,” you smirked, taking a few steps down the staircase. “You’ll catch flies.”

“I wasn’t staring,” Carl defended, but he was smiling. Once you reached the bottom, he shoved the clothing into your chest. “Denise guessed your sizes and got some things from ‘the wardrobe’. She also told me to give you this,” Carl said, stretching the hand that held the guitar.

You couldn’t hold back an impressed smile. “Damn, she actually got it for me.”

“Well, she says you owe her a favor,” he added. “Speaking of favors… how’s your back?”
“Fine. I don’t feel anything;” you informed. You glanced over your shoulder, as if you could take a quick glance. “The wrapping came off in the shower, though.”

“Well, do you want to owe me a favor?” He asked. You laughed after he cocked an eyebrow.

Carl found a first aid kit under the bathroom sink. Meanwhile, after getting into some pants, he instructed you to sit on one of the dining room chairs. With some sass and snide remarks (that included ‘you always take control like this?”), you did as you were told. You turned the back of the chair to face forward so your bare flesh would be completely exposed. You draped your damn towel over the back and reached around to set your hands on the top of it.

It took 6 unfolded gauze pads to fully cover all the stitches. You knew this, not because Carl told you -- he worked silently -- but because the painkillers were beginning to wear off. Instead of mentioning this, you simply sat there as you felt Carl’s steady fingers graze over your skin.

It was selfish, really: not mentioning that the drugs were no longer in your system. You could excuse not saying anything as not wanting to burden anyone, but really, you were savoring the moment. You felt a shallow, sore kind of pain, yet was easy to forget with each strip of tape Carl carefully adhered to your skin. You could feel the pads of his thumbs running up the length of each section to secure it. Multiple times, you had to suppress shivers.

Once Carl was finished, and he handed you the shirt he had brought over, you decided the moment was worth disrupting. “How hard did I hit the ground?”

“What?” He asked. He was packing up the first aid kit as you slipped into the fresh shirt.

“When I passed out,” you clarified. “I don’t remember the impact.”

Carl paused his actions. “That’s because it didn’t happen.”


“I… caught you,” Carl said slowly, like his words were handpicked.

“You were holding your sister,” you said. “Weren’t you a little too preoccupied?”

“I handed her to whoever was closest,” Carl answered. “I don’t remember who that was, honestly.”

He was answering your questions, yet you noticed he was trying not to look at you. You grinned smally at this, and stood up from your chair. You set your hands gently on his upper arms from behind. “Well then, I owe you two favors,” you noted. Hesitantly, and very slowly, you moved your chin over his shoulder and kissed his temple. You could see that his cheeks began to burn red, which made your face split into a smile. You raised your hands to set on the tops of his shoulders, and patted him a few times. Then, you stepped away, grabbed the guitar, and exited the house without looking back.

The Sun had set and you found yourself sitting on the front porch, alone in the darkness. You sat up straight at the edge of a rocking chair, the guitar laid across your front. The dull light from the living room poured out through a window, giving you enough light to see what you were doing. The guitar sounded mostly in tune, which saved you a bit of time. The part that proved to be harder, however, was finger positioning.
You closed your eyes and pictured that book you had when you were first learning. On the back of it was a cheat sheet of where to put your fingers for each chord. Having looked at that thing countless times, you knew the mental image was tucked inside your brain somewhere; you just had to find it.

Letting your instinct take over, you stretched your hand across the neck, pushed down on certain string on certain frets, and strummed softly. You smiled in triumph at having produced a G chord. Ironically, it was the first one you had learned to play as a beginner.

You lost track of time as each chord came back to you slowly yet steadily. Each attempt sounded better than the last, and eventually, you were even trying progressions, or switching between chords. You were a little rusty, as some of the muscle memory was gone, but it felt good to be playing again.

“Glad to see that thing is getting use again,” someone from the other end of the porch noticed. You looked up to see Deanna. “I used to play, many, many years ago. Here I was thinking Denise had a hidden talent I didn’t know about.”

“Nah, it was me,” you said, arm resting over the curve of the guitar’s structure. You bit the inside of your lip, then said, “I taught myself how to play a while back. My dad gave me his old one to play. A few days later, he got a new one, and we practiced together.” That story was one of the few about your father you were willing to give up.

“That’s really nice, Ryan,” she said. “Thank you.”

You swallowed, nodded, and looked down at the instrument. You heard Deanna knock on the door, and decided that her attention had shifted and you could relax. The world could end over and over again, and you’d still hate being the center of attention. A few moments later, after some hushed conversation, you heard someone retreat down the staircase.

The lights from inside turned off after a while, leaving you only with the moonlight. Thankfully, it was full, and the sky was clear. After turning your chair to face away from the house, you could see the neck of the guitar just as well as you could with artificial light. You weren’t worried about disturbing the others, as your strums were soft and concentrated. Plus, you wouldn’t be surprised if the walls of those houses were made of concrete; when you were inside earlier that night, you could see people talking on the porch, but with a closed door, you couldn’t hear a word. Besides, the porch was quite large, and you were at the end farthest from the house.

What you could hear, however, was the opening of the front door.

You turned your head over your shoulder to see Rick standing in the now closed doorway. You chuckled and faced forward again. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“Not for a second,” He confirmed.

You reached for the porch ledge and picked up the box of cigarettes you had placed there. You shook the box and then grabbed one with your teeth. You reached out the pack behind you, silently offering Rick one.

“Those things kill you,” Rick said, and you heard him take a seat on the bench pressed to the wall. “Where did you get them?”

“I nabbed them from Daryl,” you said. “Remind me to put them back before he finds out.”

Rick chuckled; it the rough kind that came from the back of your throat. You turned back just in
time to see him take a swig from a bottle of whiskey.

“Guess I’m not the only one with the occasional bad habit,” you observed. Taking the Zippo lighter from your pocket, you flipped open the cap and lit then end of your cigarette. You emitted small puffs before taking a longer drag.

“Lori and me, we used to drive through neighborhoods like this,” Rick stated, tone sounding bland, “thinking ‘one day’.”

“Well,” you said, standing up to turn your chair around, “here we are. Still, I’m not sure this changes anything.”

“Why’s that?”

You paused. “I had an opportunity like this, years ago. Then it went to complete shit. Then it got good. Then hell took over, again,” you said. “I don’t trust much of anything these days.”

“What’s happened to you, Ryan?” Rick asked. “Where have you been? What have you done?”

You laughed sadly. “It was me and her, and it was supposed to be like that forever. Just… me and her, against the world. Me and Clementine.”

“What happened?” He asked, losing the normal edge to his voice.

“We came across a group. They were decent people, and they lived in a cabin in the middle of a forest. For a while, I let myself think ‘okay, this is it. We have a home now.’ And then, the group’s past caught up with them.

“We were on the run for a while. We came across this ski lodge, and there were some more people there. Once that… man caught up with us, they pretty much all died. Turns out, they fled from a community a man called Carver was trying to dictate.

“The people in that group were smart. They made a plan, and they made sure an oncoming herd hit the community in its weakest points. I was the center of a trap: I made sure Carver was distracted when things went down. But when it came time for me to escape, I couldn’t. I did everything I was supposed to do, but rest of the group never showed.

“I didn’t see any of them after that. A girl I considered my sister went missing, and she still is. She could be dead, for all I know. I don’t, though. I don’t know.”

You reached up to touch your face, then realized a tear had escaped. You used the back of your hand to wipe it away. “I picked up the broken pieces. I rebuilt that place; I made it stronger, better. I renamed it ‘Eclipse’, because ‘on the darkest days, the Sun still shines’. It was so good that some of my own people formed a pack and made themselves leaders. I came back a few weeks after being exiled, and the place was burning.”

“You had your very own Alexandria,” Rick said.

“As close I could get without technology,” you agreed. You strummed down on the guitar, chuckled to yourself, and flicked the collecting ash off of your cigarette. “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. But maybe, there’s poison in that water. And maybe it’s the Armageddon Anthem that lulls to sleep, but it’s always what keeps you awake.”

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I did a little 'we are The Walking Dead' thing using the title of this fic, lol. It was too perfect!

Sorry if Ryan's backstory seemed vague; I didn't use flashbacks to finish because I would have had to write A LOT more (i'm talking more than the entire length of this chapter).

How'd you guys like the Ryan x Carl this chapter? Too much, just enough, want more of this in the future..? leave me a comment! Even if you've commented 247024 times already, I love to read each and every one.

Until next time... xx
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warnings: mentions of depression + implied suicidal thoughts (non-graphic)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You walked along the sidewalks of Alexandria, taking in your surroundings. It felt like you had stepped through a hole in reality and stepped back in time; the perfectly paved sidewalks, growing foliage, and sunlight filtered through tree branches reminded you of your walks home from school.

You looked down at the clothing you were wearing. Same outfit as yesterday -- they were the things Carl gave to you. Pulling up the sleeve, you noticed that there were no holes in the fabric, and not a single stain to be seen. The checkered pattern was flawless.

Then, you began to feel your breath quicken.

What if… this was your home? Could this be the street in Atlanta you thought you’d spend your adolescence in? No, it couldn’t be… But maybe… it could. You were clean-cut, well groomed, and ready to take on whatever the day entailed. That was all too close to former morning routine.

Holding out your hands in front of you, you noticed all the callouses. Your fingers were from playing guitar, and your palms from the monkey bars on the playground. No, that can’t be it… From the summer! You spent 2 weeks of the summer at a gymnastics camp. Your hands stung during activities and were sore by the end of the day, but you loved every second of it. You remembered it.

The smile on your face began to fade. There was no trace of dirt, blood, or sweat on you to be seen. There were only faint pink and grey lines; your body’s only imperfection was scars.

You were weak again.

You ran a hand through your hair and continued walking, this time picking up speed. As your heart rate picked up, so did your pace. It wasn’t long before you full-on sprinting, trying to find your way back to the house.
Eventually, you managed to come across it. You jogged up the deck’s stairs, grabbed your bow and quiver propped in the corner, and began looking for the gate’s entryway. Once, again, by dumb luck, you managed to find the exit. However, someone was guarding it. You remembered this man as Nicholas.

“Let me out,” you said, breathless from all the motion. Still you were standing tall.

“Did you get permission?” he asked, frowning. “Because you look a little --”

“Do I need permission?” You asked, wiping the sweat on your brow with the back of your hand.

“I guess not,” Nicholas admitted. He began to push the door back. Right when you had enough room to move past him, you did, and you took off right into the woods.

Once you saw nothing but trees, you decided this place was as good as any. You took the knife you had hidden in your waistband and began carving circles into the sides of several trees. After marking 6, you stood in the relative middle of them, loaded your bow, and closed your eyes. Slowly, you raised your bow and pulled it taut, eyes still shut. Then, you opened them, quickly turned your body to the right, and shot at the first tree.

You hardly noticed you had hit bullseye, as you had already reached behind yourself, grabbed a second arrow, and shot at the tree on your left. You turned on your heel and hit three that were behind you in succession. You then spun 3600, loading your bow while you moved. After planting your feet so you stayed still, you gave yourself one second to aim and hit the final target. You let the string give way. The arrow planted itself in the drawn circle.

Though you were panting, you couldn’t help but grin at your success. Your targets may not have been moving walkers, but you still managed to hit each one in a deadly place. 5 years ago, you never would have dreamed of doing such a thing. You were still a fighter, still strong.

A branch cracked from behind you. Your expression fell flat as you whipped around with a now loaded boy and aimed at the potential target.

The ‘target’ raised his hands in surrender. “Not a walker!” Carl exclaimed, then asked, “what are you doing out here?”
“Talking walkers? Sounds like my worst nightmare,” you remarked as you lowered your weapon. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m… looking for someone,” he answered. The two of you then heard a bunch of growling walkers, which prompted you to raise your index finger to your lips. Carl nodded in understanding and began to carefully walk in the direction of the sound.

You stayed a few steps behind the boy, knowing it was the best way to protect him considering you had a bow ready to fire. Together, you came across the back of a small, white house with missing panels. Carl rounded the corner first, and you noticed his pace picking up. You moved just as quickly, realizing with relief that all he saw was Rick.

A few feet in front of all three of you were several walkers snarling and reaching out. You supposed Rick was the one to initially attract them, but at this point, it didn’t really matter. What mattered was the ease Rick, yourself, and especially, Carl fell into easy attacking position. While the men beside you unsheathed a knife and a machete, you raised your bow.

“Get ready,” Rick instructed.

Only a second later, your arrow plunged itself into the soft skull of a walker. Carl forced one to stumble and proceeded to stab in it in the head, while Rick ran his knife straight through the ear of another. You took a few steps forward and used the sharp tip of your weapon, effectively killing the undead body. Glancing back, you noticed Rick was struggling, as he was wrestling with one while another grabbed his ankle. Before you could help him, however, Carl ran his knife through the skull of the standing walker. They both turned to the one on the ground, which was still trying to grab Rick.

“Ryan,” Rick said, lifting his arm back towards you while staying down. You got the message and took a few steps forward, almost handing him your bow by its grip.

“Dad,” Carl said as he looked as his father, raising his arm in the same manner. Rick slowly lowered his hand with a slight nod. The corner of your mouth pulled up into a faint smile as you handed him the weapon instead.

Carl held the lower limb of your bow as he stepped back and raised it above his head. In a swift motion, the sharp edge of the top limb emerged itself into the walker’s head, causing the creature’s movement to cease. He used the shoulder as resistance to remove it.
“That reminds me,” you said, appearing by his side and accepting the weapon, “I gotta sharpen this thing.”

“Do you know what we need to do?” You said as you, Carl, and Rick all walked back. “We need to find a metallica CD.”

“No we do not,” Carl disagreed. His arms were bloody up to his elbows, yet his hands swung at his sides.

“You listen to Metallica?” Rick asked, who was standing by Carl’s other side.

You shook your head. “Nope, not really. But he has a t-shirt, and you shouldn’t wear a band’s t-shirt if you don’t listen to them.”

“Ryan, I’m pretty sure the world has actually ended,” Carl stated.

“So?” You raised your eyebrows. “Now you have shirts to choose from, so you have to earn that one. Besides, I can only remember one time I wore a piece of pop culture that didn’t apply to me.”

“Oh yeah?” Carl asked, “and what was that?”

“...It was an ‘I Heart NY’ shirt.”

“Hmm,” Carl observed, obviously holding back laughter. “And what did you pair that with?”

“Hot pink windpants,” you muttered. Unfortunately, you were loud enough to hear, because this time, both Carl and Rick laughed.

“That is something I would love to see,” Rick remarked, which made even you chuckle.
“Oh, you’re one to talk!” you countered with a laugh. “You look like someone who yells at kids to get off his lawn; you look like someone my mom would be into. Believe me, that is a sad, sad thing, Richard.”

“The right kinda people dig this,” he replied, gesturing his hands to himself.

“Gross,” Carl grimaced. Changing the topic, he said, “if anything, we need to find a guitar.”

You slipped your hands into your pockets. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“So you can teach me.”

“Kid, I barely know how to play myself,” you replied with a snort.

“That is such a lie!” Carl protested. “I heard you playing last night.”

“You are so full of shit.”

“I did! The window I slept beside was cracked open.”

“Okay, let’s make a deal:” you proposed, ceasing your steps to fully look at him. “If you can find a second guitar, I will teach you how to play.”

“I already found a guitar!” Carl argued with a grin.

“No, no no no no,” You laughed, waving a pointed finger, “you relayed a guitar!”

“A guitar that isn’t even yours.”

“A guitar I was clever enough to obtain,” you corrected.
You were so engulfed in the conversation that you didn’t notice a few yards ahead, Rick was rushing through the Alexandrian gates and to what seemed to be a fight. Carl and you both shared a look before jogging to catch up, slipping inside when a man began to close the door.

Rick was already trying to pull Daryl away from a man he was choking, meanwhile Michonne stepped between Glenn and a guy with a bloody nose. Meanwhile, Glenn appeared to be unscathed. You had to admit: you were impressed. Then again, the people of Alexandria didn’t seem like the fighting type.

“I want everyone to hear me, okay?” Deanna announced when Rick managed to get Daryl away from who turned out to be Nicholas. “Rick and his people are part of this community now, in all ways, as equals! Understood?” Deanna immediately looked over at the man you assumed Glenn had punched.

You could see a conversation playing out between Deanna, Rick, and Michonne, but couldn’t hear a word. Besides, you were more interested in the girl standing a few feet away from Carl, as he wouldn’t stop staring at her.

“Who is that?” You muttered, stringing your bow so the string was across your chest and the body rested on your back.

“You don’t like me, do you?” Carl asked, intentionally loud enough for her to hear. Rather than replying, she simply walked away, hands resting at the base of her backpack’s straps.

“That’s Enid,” Carl answered, watching her walk away.

You pulled an arrow from the quiver on your back as you resumed walking. “That was one hell of a glare. Did you piss her off?”

“I don’t think so,” Carl said, “not intentionally, at least.”

“So she’s just a bitch?” you asked, rubbing the arrowhead on your shirt. The fabric you were wearing was just too clean.
“I don’t know about that, either,” he shrugged. “She was out there for a while, apparently. I think she’s just not used to people.”

“Eh,” you said apathetically, “you’ll get her to come around.”

“What?” He frowned.

“That’s what you do, Carl: you make people a part of something,” you stated. “I don’t think I’d be here if it wasn’t for you, and that’s not some ‘I can’t live without you’ bullshit, it’s the truth.”

“Wait…” Carl stopped and raised a hand, trying to piece together what you were saying. “What do you mean? What did I do for you?”

You momentarily walked backwards, said, “more than you know”, then turned around and continued a straight pace.

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You were sitting in the floor in the living room of what you began to refer to as the Main House, aka the one the entire group had been spending the nights in. The couch was empty, as no one else was to be found, but you decided the floor was simply a better workspace. After all, there was plenty of bedding sprawled, and you pretty much the entire floor to use as surface. So, you boiled a pot of water, removed the arrowheads from the arrow itself, and tossed them in to disinfect and clean.

While the pot sat on the floor - with a folded blanket under it - you laid your arrows out in a line. They were clean and shining after using boot polish you had found in the closet. They were scratched, sure, but at least they weren’t rusting. You were thankful your past self chose to use aluminum rods rather than iron.

As the arrowheads continued to boil away, you moved on to sharpening the edge of the bow’s limbs. The most you could find was a sharpening rod, an untouched one that was supposed to be for kitchen knives. However, you were quickly discovering that a proper workshop would be needed, the kind with a benchtop grinder. The sheer mass and curvature of your weapon was too much to maneuver when it came to sharpening.
You heard the front door swing open, and relaxed when Maggie entered.

“Hey Ryan,” she greeted pleasantly, “I just stopped by to grab a few things.”

A remark including ‘this isn’t my house’ was on the tip of your tongue. You instead said, “okay.”

“You uh…” she started, stopping when she smiled too hard. “You look like Daryl.”

“I’m not tearing a possum up on the porch,” you disagreed, “also, I showered.”

“Okay,” Maggie admitted as she took a seat on the couch, “fair enough. How’s your back doing?”

“Fine, I guess,” you replied. From the second you arrived at Alexandria, it had been one of the last things on your mind. You didn’t seem to care about it as much as the people around you did.

“That’s good. There’s still something that confuses me, though.”

“Let me hear it,” you said, setting your bow beside you. You raised your knees at an angle and rested your wrists on them.

“I talked to Deanna earlier to hear what she had to say, and… she doesn’t know why you passed out. She said the infection isn’t nearly bad enough for that.”

“Doesn’t surprise me; it was just a cut from a door,” you agreed. You weren’t met with the confusion you were expecting -- if anything, Maggie appeared to be more composed than you were.

“Then why’d it happen, Ryan?” Maggie’s voice turned soft. Her southern drawl lingered behind the patience her tone was coated in. Not knowing what to say, you simply didn’t speak.

“Well, now that I know a secret about you, I think it’s only fair you know one about me,” Maggie said, running her palms along her thighs. “When I walked out of that barn after the storm, it wasn’t to talk to Sasha.”
You frowned. “She was with you… you two walked out together…”

“That wasn’t how I wanted it to be,” Maggie specified, “it’s just how it happened. I was gonna walk out alone, find a rope, and a tall tree.”

Despite hardly knowing Maggie, upon hearing those words, you felt all your internal organs smash together to make you feel sick. Sasha had been with her the whole time… but what if she hadn’t? What if there had been no one to see it, no one to stop her?

“At Beth, I didn’t think I could take much more,” she continued. “I really felt like there was nothing left for me besides constant misery. So I told myself ‘this sunrise will be my last’. But then Sasha and I talked, and I found myself telling her all the things I knew I needed to hear. At first, I didn’t believe a single word, because it really is hard to. Then, I actually looked at the sunrise I wanted to watch when I was dying, and I realized something: if the sun can save lives just by getting out of bed every morning, who the hell says I can’t do the same?”

You found yourself staring at the edge of the coffee table by the time Maggie was finished speaking; Looking at her and listening had started to become too much. However, you paid close attention to her every word. Out of the corner of your eye, you could see her move off of the couch and beside you on the floor.

She let out a soft breath. “Rick told me about your friend.”

“Can’t tell that bastard anything,” you mumbled with a soft, almost non-vocal laugh.

“He didn’t tell me much,” Maggie assured, “just the gist of it. I’m sorry she’s gone, Ryan: I clearly know how awful it is.”

“Yeah,” you agreed. For the longest time, you tried to avoid talking about Clementine. Remembering everything -- from her dog bite, to the ‘cabin group’ that got you in trouble with Carver, to the collapse of the society he was trying to build -- was just too painful. “She would have liked it here. She deserved a place like this.”

“Beth would have too. That’s why I’m so involved. I want to see Judith grow up without having to worry about these walls coming down, because if Beth had lived to seen this place, that’s what she would have wanted.”
“Clem would’ve too,” You nodded.

Maggie wrapped an arm around your shoulder. “You’re one of us now, Ryan. You don’t have to keep yourself a secret anymore. You can let your guard down.”

You didn’t coil away. Rather, slowly, shakily, hesitantly… you leaned your head against her shoulder.

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Hours had passed and the same thing was still on your mind. You had dried your arrowheads, pieced them back together to make them ammunition again, and loaded the new-looking arrows back into your quiver. Then, you had spent some time walking around Alexandria again, this time keeping your bow on you in order to keep your grounded. A few adults stared, and children pointed fingers, but you didn’t care. You hardly even noticed them.

After re-entering the Main House, you softly closed the door behind you and kicked off your boots. You pulled your bow and quiver from off your back and set them beside the door. The whole time you did this, you stared at the sheriff’s hat perched on the coat rack. You grabbed it before walking up the stairs.

You knocked quietly on the second to last door in the upstairs hallway. After given vocal permission, you stepped inside, once again closing the door behind you. Upon realizing it was you, Carl sat up on his bed rather than continuing to lay down.

“I didn’t think that hook was a good place for it,” you said, shifting the hat from one hand to the other. “It’s more important than that.”

“Thanks,” he said, extending an arm with an open hand. You set the brim in his palm. He drew his arm back and now set the hat beside him on the bed.

Before you could lose the courage, you spoke up. “I want to talk to you.”

“What about?”
“Terminus, Eclipse… Clementine,” you said, biting your lip and hoping you looked more confident than you felt. “I wanna tell you everything.”

Chapter End Notes

In the comics, Maggie attempts suicide. I'm not gonna get into the details of that scene, but I think it's worth knowing to anyone confused regarding the Ryan and Maggie scene in this chapter.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

This part, as I'm sure you concluded from the end of the last chapter, has a LOT of backstory; the gaps of how Ryan came to be who they are now will be filled. Because I didn't want to bog all of you down with plot, however, there's a scene in here I think you'll all really like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You liked the cabin group for the short time you were with them. You got off on a rocky start, as the group argued that Clem’s dog bite was really a walker bite. They eventually decided to keep you and her in a shed on the house’s land (Clem because she might turn, and you because you were a ‘flight risk’). Of course, that didn’t stop you from helping her; you and Clementine crawled under the house through a broken part of the porch fence. You both climbed into the house by breaking the lock of a panel that you supposed could be used a fire escape. With the help of a young girl named Sarah -- the daughter of the doctor -- you collected the proper supplies to clean and stitch up the bite.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t Clementine's noises of pain that alarmed the house residents: it was when a walker broke through the fragile wall you and Clem initially escaped through. While you forced the thing onto a meat hook, Clementine began to bash in its head. Finally, after seeing you had stitched Clem up without drugs, the group decided you could both be brought in for the night.

Carver visited the house when all of the adults were out scavenging. This left you, Sarah, and Clementine alone. While Sarah hid upstairs, you and Clem managed to stall and ‘convince’ Carver that the house was yours and yours alone. By the time the group returned, however, they knew it was time to move. So, you did.

Eventually, the group came upon a ski lodge at the top of a hill and across a bridge. There was windmill out front, meaning maybe one day, the place could have electricity. You never got to see that happen, as Carver caught up with the group.

Your time in Carver’s base -- which you had come to call Howe’s, because of the former hardware store it was based in and around -- was awful. It wasn’t that you and Clem were immediately given jobs, or even that Carver was a complete and arrogant ass: it was that newcomers were treated so poorly. A part of you understood that you had to be weary of newcomers, but it no way did you have to be treated as prisoners. Maybe the others, as they had initially run away, but not you and Clem. No one should have to feel like they’re being punished for wanting to live, not even in this world.
Upon hearing through the grapevine that a massive horde of walkers was coming towards Howe’s, the cabin group knew this could be the only chance at freedom and completely taking Carver out. So, you devised a plan: some inside help named Bonnie would guard the control room while Clem dropped down into it through the panels of glass on the roof. Meanwhile, you would distract Carver on the other side of the building in order to buy some time. You wished her good luck before parting ways.

You did your job, and you did it well. Carver believed every word of you saying that you wanted his group, that you wanted to be a leader one day. Funnily enough, you did want to be a leader. You just didn’t want to lead Howe’s.

A track advertising the store began to play loudly over both the indoor and outdoor speakers. Without a second thought, Carver bolted to the control room, leaving you alone to find your way back to the cabin group. Unfortunately, you didn’t know the layout of the store. You supposed that was the main reason you never made it back.

You coated yourself in walker blood, you weaved both in and out of the building, and you even tried to circle the perimeter. You then began looking for a road, as someone mentioned the meetup spot would be a civil war memorial a few miles out. Despite your efforts, you couldn’t manage to find blacktop, either. The walkers were just too condensed. You knew it would endanger your safety to try to push through.

There were screams and gunfire, which were things you managed to tune out eventually. However, when you tried to circle back for what felt like the millionth time, you noticed a family that was cornered by walkers. A man with a baseball bat was trying to fend them off. Sadly, he they were outnumbered, and he was clearly struggling. That’s when you stepped in.

Using a shovel that was propped against the wall, you began weeding off the dead from behind. A few realized what you were doing and turned to actually face you, giving the family an out. The woman you supposed was the mother picked up a girl who looked about 6 years old, and the man grabbed the hand of a boy about Clem’s age.

“Thank you!” The man shouted, ushering his family away from the space they had been trapped in.

“Come on!” you said instead, waving over your shoulder, “I know a safe spot!”

The man helped you kill off a few more walkers, which helped you lead the way to a fire escape
bolted on one of the building’s walls. You waved for the strangers to climb, and slowly, they did. You killed a few more of the undead, and when the entire family was either at the top or at least halfway up the ladder, you began to climb yourself.

On top of the roof was a greenhouse, the one you, Clem, and Sarah had all worked in. You knew the only person who would be up there was Reggie, the man who looked after it. By now, he was long gone. The space was completely empty, other than yourself and the flock of strangers you protected without second thought.

The kids and the woman were back by the greenhouse itself, while you stood by the edge, looking out to see if you could find Clementine. “You saved our lives,” the man said, slowly approaching you. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” you muttered, a little too preoccupied to properly respond. To make up for this, you turned to look at him and said. “I’m Ryan.”

“Javier,” he returned. “Back there is Kate, Mariana, and Gabe,” he informed, pointing at each as he rattled off the names.

“It’s nice to meet you,” you said. You offered a nod, as a smile was simply too hard to muster.

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By the time the Sun came up and walkers were still pawing and grasping at the walls, you knew the cabin group was long gone. However, you knew they might still be at the meeting place. This was your only chance. You had to leave.

Right as you were stepping over to climb down the ladder, Javier immediately stepped out from the greenhouse and leaned against the door. “It’s a swarm of muertos down there.”

“I know,” you nodded, “but my group is out there somewhere. I’ve got to find them.”

“There’s more people here,” Javier countered, taking a few steps forward. “More that are trapped, and more that will die without help.”
You could hear what he was implying, and immediately disagreed. “This isn’t my mess to clean up.”

“But you were a part of this place, right?”

“I was at the bottom of the food chain; I was basically a prisoner.”

“And you had nothing to do with why this place is overrun?” He continued, which made you swallow and stay quiet.

“These people are your responsibility now,” he informed, “because most of them are like me and my family. And if you helped this, then you helped kill them.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?!?” you argued, “My people are out there. My friends are out there.”

“You do what they didn’t:” Javier said as he leaned his hands on the edge of the building. “You clean up your mess.”

And so, you did. It was slow progress, and it was difficult making people take you seriously at first, but when you ordered around men to clear walkers, and they listened like you were their mother, it helped. Still covered in walker guts, you and Javier found a few stray people and small clusters of survivors that were in fact trapped. After clearing the way for them, you told them to return the favor by either attacking the ones at the walls or finding people of their own to save.

Eventually, Howe’s did get cleared, and the only thing left was piles of bodies and disturbed members that were still left. With Javi’s help, you had managed to usher all survivors into a mostly empty warehouse, one the control room looked over. Your stomach ached upon remembering who had been in there, who had lead the horde to Howe’s. Rather than dwelling on this, you climbed up the metal stairs and onto the space that looked over the warehouse.

“I know you’re scared right now,” you said, drawing all attention and eyes to your echoing voice, “but this is not the end. This is the beginning. This place will continue to support life, just not in the same way. It will be better. We will make it better. I know right now, everything seems dark. But this is not a new moon; it’s an Eclipse. The Sun will shine again, I can promise you that.”

You looked down to see Javier with crossed arms. A smile slowly grew on his face when the crowd began to agree. You shared the expression.
Growing Eclipse into what is was before the fall was humbling. After your original speech about growing and evolving Howe into something greater, you were unofficially deemed the leader of the place. After all, it was your promise to keep, and you fully intended to keep it that way.

The moment Eclipse’s social class was decided and in place, you began to gain attention from other local establishments. Before, you were simply a child playing castle. When formally creating what could be considered as a method of government, you were then known as either an ally or a threat. Thankfully, you managed to create one exchange deal, and one alliance with Terminus and Woodbury respectively.

When Gideon, the leader of Terminus, was no longer keeping up his end of the bargain, things began to change. For the first week, you let his lack of incoming supplies slide. You told Javier, your second in command, to inform the Head of Trade that Eclipse simply wouldn’t be sending anything out either. When two more weeks of this took place, you decided it was time to pay the group a visit.

Using the bow your welder had helped you create, you and three other people -- including Javier and a man and woman left over from Howe’s -- dropped by Terminus. No one was in the main space, which was the room you normally negotiated in. Upon seeing this, you knew something was wrong. So, you ordered your small militia to kick open doors and see what they could find. The first door you opened held Gideon inside, bloody, bruised, and bitten.

“So kind of you to show up,” he rasped out. His sick smile revealed blood staining his teeth. “You’re a little late.”

“What happened, Gideon?” you asked, kneeling down and lowering your bow.

“Men came,” he stated, “bad, bad men. Men that you could have saved us from, if you only bother to --” Gideon cut himself off with a coughing fit. Blood began to dribble down his chin. You offered him the strip of cloth you always kept in your back pocket.

“Doesn’t matter,” he continued, his voice bubbling as he breathed. “Not anymore. They’re gone now. They are soooooo gone.”
“Where are they?” You asked, “where are the bad men?”

“In our stomachs,” He stated, then began to laugh maniacally.

His words made you feel sick. You felt yourself slowly slip backwards and away from him, your bottom now resting on your heels as tears blurred your vision. In the background, you heard another door kick open, which was followed by cursing and gagging. Footsteps patterned down the hallway, and after they stopped, a groan could be heard.

“Ryan!” Javier shouted, obviously struggling with words, “There are bodies in here, but… they’re stripped. They aren’t even corpses; they’re carcases.”

You raised a shaky hand over your mouth, trying to muffle a sob that turned out to be silent. Knowing you shouldn’t give Gideon the satisfaction of your tears, you rose to your feet and pulled the string of your bow taut. Through your blurred vision, you managed to find your aim.

Gideon’s face grew stone cold. “You were a good leader, Ryan. It’s sad that one day, you won’t be.”

You let go.

“That’s not the end,” Carl said, voice gentle. He sounded more curious than accusing. “You said your own people stopped liking you.”

You remembered that conversation -- it was one you had with Tara after what you considered the ‘second end’ of Terminus. You were fishing a bullet out of your leg as you talked to her.

“Do you listen in on all of my conversations?” you asked, letting out a soft chuckle. The slight connection to your own emotions was enough for tears to spring to your eyes.

Without words, Carl scooted over to where you were now sitting on his bed. He wrapped an arm around the small of your back, leaving no space between the two of you.
“I’m okay,” you assured, wiping away the tears, “it’s just hard.”

“I get it,” Carl said, running his hand over your side. “Some things are hard to talk about. You can stop, Ryan. I don’t have to hear everything.”

“I want you to,” you replied, which was the truth. As hard as it was to recall the events that lead up to you joining Rick’s group, Carl was the one person you trusted with the information.

“We thought Terminus was gone,” you continued your story, “we had every reason to believe that. Gideon was the only man we had found there, besides the remains of their attackers. Still, I left the arrow in his skull and a note that said ‘the deal is off’ in case there were any original members left. I thought everything could go back to normal after that.

“Eclipse had a system of punishment, one that not everyone agreed with. There were different degrees of crime to commit, all with a different punish. Category One called for a set amount of time in labor work, while Category Two was the ‘reset’, or after a term of labor, the accused had to remake their status rather than returning to it like Ones could. Theft was generally a Category One crime, and breaking the Code of Conduct of your job title was Category Two. A man stole from the storage house, and was eventually given Category Two as his punishment.

“He fought that sentence so hard. He bitched and moaned that he did steal, but that was only Category One. That bastard really thought he could get away with it. I’ll give it to him, though, because he convinced 6 other convicted to take the place over as their own.

“They won. I surrendered without a fight, because I knew he wouldn’t be afraid to kill. I ended up being the only one exiled. Javier wanted to follow me, but I told him to stay, if only for his family. God, I wish I had told him to run for the hills.”

“And weeks later, you came back, and Eclipse was ashes,” Carl finished.

You nodded, a few more tears slipping. “Yeah. Turns out, too many people didn’t like the changes those assholes made. They rioted themselves, which destroyed the place.”

“How do you know that if you weren’t there to see it?”
“Someone under a bunch of rubble told me the whole story. I knew there was no coming back from what had happened, so I took off on my own. I ended up making a home for myself in the house we met the cabin group in.”

“The house we spent the night in after…” Carl let his sentence drift off. You nodded in confirmation. “Jeez. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?” You asked, letting your hands fall into your lap.

“Keep living, after all of that,” he said, sounding both in awe and disbelief. “You lost your friend, so you built an empire. You lost your empire, so you saved my life.” He repeated, “I don’t know how you keep living.”

You swallowed the lump in your throat. “I didn’t want to, after a while. It was little things at first, like staying in the church so you and Michonne could get out. Then it was the water, and after that, the scratch. I kept excusing it -- I wanted to be a hero, I was thirsty, the cut was deep -- but right before I passed out, before you caught me, I knew there was no avoiding it. And I think that’s why I reacted so bad, why I thought the cut was from a walker. I wanted to die. I wanted to drop-fucking-dead and fall off the face of the earth.”

“You scared me when you drank the water,” Carl admitted, voice barely hovering above a whisper.

“I can’t imagine watching someone get poisoned looks pretty,” you agreed.

“No,” he shook his head, “that’s not why. I was scared because… I finally felt like someone was on my side, and then I thought they were gonna die like everyone else does.”

You looked at Carl, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He took your silence as a queue to explain himself.

“My dad and Michonne, they try to understand. They try treating me like a teenager as much as they can, but they don’t get it. They don’t know what it’s like to wake up and feel like they don’t fit in anywhere. And I get that -- I’m a lot of things. It’s hard to know what I am. Hell, sometimes I don’t know what I am.”
“I do,” you said so quietly you hardly heard yourself. “You’re from Atlanta, Georgia, you’re a damn good brother, and you get nightmares, just like I do. You’re the person who’s stupid enough to defend a pariah, yet smart enough to know it’s for their own good.” You set a gentle hand on the side of his neck. “You think it’s okay for everyone but yourself to stumble.” You moved your face in closer. “You’re a good man, Carl Grimes. That’s what you are.”

“You’re a good man, Carl Grimes. That’s what you are.”

You felt Carl’s breath on your lips. You were so close that looking directly at him made you go cross-eyed. You let your eyelids flutter shut as you took in the feeling of your hand on his skin and the growing heat between the two of you.

There was a sharp knock on the door. You snapped up from the bed and onto your feet.

“Carl?” Rick asked as he opened the door, “I wanted to talk - ...Hello, Ryan.”

“Rick,” you returned, clearing your throat. “I was just leaving,” you said, then brushed past him and out of Carl’s bedroom.

The stairs leading to the floor’s second house had the kitchen around one corner, which you decided to walk into. You took the whistling kettle from off the unlit stove and filled it with water, the faucet still feeling foreign to you. When the kettle was filled, you turned around, set it on a front burner, and turned the dial around and onto ‘HIGH’. The stove, being electric, didn’t make the same satisfying clicking noise or the sound of fire catching.

The front door creaked open, catching your attention. Sasha stepped into the house, a frown on her face. She seemed to be doing that a lot these days.

“Welcome home,” you said sarcastically, palms now resting on the kitchen island.

Sasha ignored you as she slung her rifle off of her back. “Deanna’s having a party tonight,” she instead said, keeping her gun propped up by setting her hand on the tip of the barrel. “I can only be lookout if I go.”
“Wait, they don’t have a lookout?” You asked, yet somehow weren’t surprised. Everything you told Deanna about Alexandria being a fantasyland may have been harsh, but with every day, it seemed to only be more true. You sighed and shook your head, then said, “I should probably go. I don’t think I’m on Deanna’s list right now either; I could use the suck-up points.”

“What the hell did you do already?” Sasha asked, and surprisingly, mustered something that could be considered a laugh.

“Let’s just say that my interview tape was by far the best,” you smirked, then turned around and began looking through the cupboards. Eventually, you came across a maroon mug and a box of Vanilla Chai tea.

“You know there’s a coffee maker, right?” Sasha said, gesturing to the counter corner closest to the window. She had a fair point - you weren’t a ‘legal adult’, yet had an acquired taste for liquor. Why wouldn’t coffee be the same?

“I’ve never had a proper cup before,” you replied, also referring to the coffee. “My mom worked in a cafe for 10 hours a day, five days a week. On the few mornings I saw her, she always bitched to my dad that she couldn’t relax when she smelled it. He stopped making it on her days off.”

You ripped open the package and unraveled the string from the tea bag. You set the bag into the mug, and almost on queue, the kettle began to softly whistle. Flicking off the stove then grabbing the teapot, you lifted the guard and poured the boiled water into your mug. You set the kettle back on the stove, dunked your tea bag a few times, and paused.

“How loud are your shots?” you asked, turning around to face Sasha again. “If you were about a quarter of a mile out, could they be heard from Alexandria?”

She shook her head immediately. “No, absolutely not.”

You rose your glass to your lips, blowing softly and taking a small sip. “If you exit through the gates and immediately break left, then walk for a quarter of a mile, you should find some trees I marked with targets. Just make sure you’re following my trail the whole time and you should find it. There’s six of them.”

With a crooked smile, Sasha slung her rifle back around her and left. You raised your steaming
mug in a mock cheer as she exited. “Have fun,” you said as she disappeared, and took another drink.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a tease, deal with it ;)

Fans of the game: I hope you're excited for the new familiar face!

What was your favorite part? let me know!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

should honestly just re-title this chapter as "The One Where Everyone Confides in Ryan", lol. There is a lot of conversation in this chapter, not a lot of action. However, the main setting is at Deanna's Welcome party, so... things are bound to be interesting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moments after walking through the door to Deanna’s house, you knew you weren’t prepared for the situation. You wore black pants and a maroon shirt with quarter-length sleeves, so it wasn’t that you were necessarily under-dressed. Rather, you felt like you were once again stepping into the past. Alexandria did that a lot, it seemed.

“Welcome,” Deanna greeted with a wide smile as she approached Carol, Rick, Carl, and yourself.

“Hi!” Carol greeted with a similar expression. You had a hard time refraining from rolling your eyes.

“Oh, it’s so good to see you,” Deanna said to the woman, then glanced to the person beside you. “Hi, Carl.” Her line of vision finally met yours. “Ryan.”

You knew a smile would look to face, so simply nodded instead. She returned this.

“Thank you for coming,” Deanna finally greeted Rick. “You know, didn’t get the chance to interview this one,” She remarked, looking at Judith. “I envy her.”

You didn’t miss the proud smile on Carl’s face as he glanced at his sister, nor Rick’s soft laugh.

“Why?” Rick asked, adjusting his hold on the child.

“She’ll get to see what this place will become,” Deanna answered. She then waved all of you to come out of the doorway and into the house.
“What do you --” You began to ask, turning to your right. You quickly realized Carl was no longer standing next to you. Rather, he had already wandered off and joined into a group of two boys that looked his age.

“And I’m alone,” you muttered, “alone and talking to myself. Great.”

You shook your head and approached the table filled with booze. Rather than filling a plastic a few inches full, like most people would do, you poured a mix of vodka and whiskey until the glass was about \( \frac{2}{3} \) full. You took a long sip and savored each second the burning liquid seared its way down your throat.

Slipping your free hand in your pocket, you approached the first window you found and began to look out. You supposed that if you looked busy enough, no one would disturb you. Unlucky for you, however, the view was of one of Alexandria’s many walls. You took another drink, hoping the alcohol could make the boring sight interesting.

Funnily enough, after lowering your glass, you could see a figure begin to move within the window’s view. They had a backpack on and pants that only reached halfway down their calf. You would recognize that long brown hair anywhere: the figure was Enid.

With a frown, you turned around and decided to begin looking for an exit that you could sneak out of without being noticed. A young boy was standing in your path, looking up at you with a blank expression on his face.

You glanced around, making sure he didn’t think you were someone else. The closest people to either of you had their backs turned, and when you returned your gaze to the boy, he was still staring at you.

“What can I do for you?” You finally asked, crouching down so he could look down at you instead. Your knees jutted to either side while your feet and ankles were pressed together.

“You don’t have a stamp,” he stated. Even his voice sounded neutral. When you didn’t react to this, he showed you the top of his right hand. Pressed into the skin was a red, capital ‘A’.

“I guess I don’t,” you agreed, offered a hand of your own to him. He uncapped a large stamper and pushed the bottom down on your hand until it clicked. He pulled away the object to reveal a letter
identical to his.

“You must be Sam,” you said, the gears in your head finally turning. You remembered overhearing a conversation between Rick and Carl regarding Ron and his brother Sam. You knew that Ron was closer to Carl’s age, and considering that there weren’t many children around, you could only assume this was Sam.

He nodded. When his name was called, he darted in the direction of the sound. His face lit up right before leaving, which made a small grin cross your features. You downed the rest of your beverage, throwing the cup back without a wince. The dull buzz now coursing through your veins helped encourage you to find the back exit of Deanna’s house and cross the grass.

You had to admit -- the way Enid was now climbing the wall was impressive. The place where each panel ended had a series of holes in the metal edge. It appeared that only the top and bottom parts were connected through said holes, because Enid used two metal rods and part of the panel’s frame to scale her way up.

“How long did it take you to come up with that?” You asked, hands on your hips as you stared up at Enid. She said nothing, but she did cease movement. “How long were you out there?” Something about your brief encounter with her earlier told you this wasn’t a sort of teenage rebellion. Plus, every time you saw children, including teenagers, they were with at least one person that appeared the age of their parent. You had yet to see Enid with anyone.

“Too long,” She mumbled, yet you could hear her voice bounce off the metal wall. She turned her chin slightly to the side. “You?”

“Years,” you returned, “a few too many.” You paused, and crossed your arms to make yourself more comfortable. “Were you alone?”

“Yeah.”

“I was too, for some of it,” you said, trying to keep your answers short. You considered that her even talking to you was a miracle; the last thing to keep her talking is to chat her ear off. Besides, you were never really the chatty type. “You stay out there too long, alone or not, and it becomes a part of you.”

Enid once again stayed silent, leaving you enough time to carefully choose your next words.
“The people here, they try to understand. But at the end of the day, they’re just ordinary people living their ordinary lives. They don’t know. I do.” You looked at the ground briefly, “I know it too well.”

You cleared your throat and looked back up. “You gotta do what you gotta do to get through the day: I get that. But if you’re ever tired of pretending that some things never happened, I’m sure you know where to find me.”

You began to walk back of the house. Just before reaching the door again, you could hear Enid boost herself over the top of the fence.

After closing the door and facing forward, you quickly noticed Deanna looking at you. You cleared your throat, adjusted your shirt, and took a few confident strides to meet her in the middle.

“This party is great,” you said, mentally cringing at your own words as they passed through your lips. “Thank you for hosting.”

“That’s why you left? Because it’s so great?” She asked. Though her tone wasn’t accusing, it was questioning either. She seemed to be looking for an answer from you.

“I’m here now,” You eventually settled on saying.

“And I thank you for that,” Deanna replied. You noticed the small smirk on her face before she took a sip of her drink. Someone then asked for her, to which she excused herself from the conversation.

You thought this would be the end of tension for the time being. When you looked up to see Sasha looking startled in a crowd of people, you knew you were wrong.

Brushing your way past several people, you eventually reached her. You could see a woman was talking to her with a kind smile, but over the chatter and your preoccupation, you couldn’t hear her. You grabbed Sasha’s wrist and squeezed hard enough so she looked at you.
“Can I steal Sasha here for a minute?” You asked her, yet began to pull Sasha through the thin crowd without a reply. Passing the kitchen, you found a small hallway, and opened the first door you saw. Thankfully, it appeared to be an empty bedroom. You pulled Sasha inside and let the door click shut.

“What do I have to do?” You asked, a hand still on the doorknob. “What do you have to do?”

“I… I…” Sasha stuttered out, before she began shaking. Her reaction was so bad that you had to help lower her to the floor just to make her sure legs didn’t give out from under her.

Sasha had a vice grip on your arms, her hands holding just below your elbows. You decided it was best to stay still and let her have a momentary freakout. A knock on the door startled you both.

“Ryan?” Michonne asked. “I saw you go in there with Sasha? Are you alright?” She asked, then added, “is she alright?”

“Um…” you drew out, only to eventually cave. “No, we’re not. We’re not alright.”

In less than a second, Michonne was in the room. Her hands hung loosely at her sides, and a slight worried expression on her face molded into a neutral one upon seeing the situation at hand. Someone has to be Sasha’s rock, you thought.

“You can leave, Ryan,” she said, beginning to take your place in front of Sasha as she spoke. “I can handle this.”

Rather than protesting, you let Michonne take over. It was clear she knew more about the situation than you did. Also, it wasn’t like you would have nothing to do; last you heard, dinner would be served soon.

Moments after finishing dinner, you felt as though you had overstayed your welcome. Of course, you didn’t expect anyone to leave with you (Carl was talking to Ron and Rick to Jessie), leaving you to find your way back. The darkness doesn’t matter anymore, you reminded yourself. It won’t
kill me to be alone again.

Thankfully, you managed to slip out of the house without anyone noticing. You stiffened when you realized Abraham was standing on the porch. All he did was raise the bottle of whiskey in his hand without a word. You gave him a nod and walked down the stairs.

Just as you expected, the streets were dark. However, there was enough light from porch lamps for you to see where you were going. Even if there wasn’t, you were sure you could find your way -- you lost track of how many times you wandered through woods at night, knowing that a flashlight would attract walkers. If you could stumble in the woods and make it out alive, surely a flat blacktop wouldn’t kill you.

Nights like these reminded you of the night everything both ended and began. You could practically hear your steps as you ran down the road you had already memorized. This time, your steps weren’t excited to practice guitar -- they were anxious, afraid. They were terrified.

The burning in your legs and stinging in your chest no longer felt like prelude to your music. The soreness in your ankles felt like shackles weighing down your body, and sharp breaths like stinging needles in your chest. You weren’t free. You would never be free again.

You rushed into the house, and began calling for names. No one was to be found. No matter how hard you screamed, how much you begged, the house was empty. You expected Dad to jump out from behind his Lazy Boy recliner, saying it was a joke and wondering why you were crying. He never did.

The first time you remembered the pain of running feeling good was when you were with Clem and Christa. The latter decided she would try to draw away a horde of walkers that had began following the three of you, leaving you and Clementine to fend for yourselves. A part of the horde broke off, meaning the two of you had little left to do but run.

You both managed to come across a gas station, and just before the herd drew too close to survive, you shoved Clementine inside and slammed the metal door behind you. Your chest heaved up and down, yet you managed to let out a little laugh.

“That was not funny,” Clem disagreed. Her palms were pressed just above her kneecaps as she leaned forward to catch her breath.
“Of course it wasn’t,” you agreed, “but now that it’s over, it feels good, right?”

She managed to laugh a little herself. “Yeah, it does.”

You blinked, returning yourself to Alexandria. You continued walking, staring down at your feet as you did so. Despite soon realizing you were walking in the opposite direction to the Main House, you continued your pace. After all, Aaron told you to explore. When else were you going to get around to it?

When coming across the clocktower, you stared up the structure. It almost looked like it could be a steeple, the kind on a church that would hold a massive bell. Churches don’t use the bells, you could hear your father’s voice one day when you, him, and Mom were walking back from service. They’re for show.

You supposed any bell in that clocktower would be rusting away like any other, before or after. It’s sad to think a story ends there, that something exists for the whole point of being forgotten and getting left to rot. You remembered feeling that way. Hell, sometimes, you still do.

You entered the clocktower and began climbing up its many steps. Once entering the main space, the first thing you noticed was a man sitting in front of the cut-out portion of the wall; you could see his face in the dull moonlight. A rifle was propped up beside him. He wasn’t even holding the weapon.

“It’s Spencer, right?” You recalled the name. He was one of Deanna’s two sons, meaning you had a split chance between ‘Aiden’ and the one you went with.

“You gotta do what you gotta do to get through the day’, you had told Enid.

“Aiden told me to take over your shift, I think he wants you for something,” you said. You smirked when he sighed.

“Sounds like him,” Spencer muttered, getting up from his seat. He paused. “You’re from the new group, aren’t you?”
“Yeah, I suppose so,” you said.

“Well then,” Spencer brushed past you to get to the stairs, “you’ll do just fine up here.”

You weren’t sure if you should’ve found the words complimentary or offensive. Regardless, you took his place, and picked up the rifle. In a few analytic moments, you noticed that not only was the scope completely out of sight, but the safety was clicked off.

“These people are gonna get themselves killed,” you muttered, turning the safety on before beginning to sight in the scope.

By the time morning rolled around, Sasha had come to take your place in the watchtower. A part of you doubted that she should be up there alone, especially considering last night. The other part, however, knew how tired you were from staying up all night. Ultimately, you wished her a good shift and began retreating down the steps.

You easily found your way back to the Main House, especially considering that most of Alexandria was still waking up. By the time you got through the front door, you had only seen 3 people outside, only one of which who waved.

You let out a sigh the moment you arrived. When kicking off your shoes, yours eyes didn’t shift from your bow and arrow, which sat on the kitchen island. Your gaze did shift, however, when you heard clattering a few feet away from it.

You walked past the living room and into the kitchen, seeing the source after passing the corner that hid half of the kitchen from the view at the doorway. Your shoulders tensed and jaw clenched together when you saw who it was.

“Oh,” Carl said after looking over his shoulder. He was setting a few mugs on saucers. “I didn’t expect you to be up this early.”

You leaned your shoulder against the closest wall. “Normally I wouldn’t be; I was on-watch last
night.”

“You’re allowed to do that?”

“Technically, no,” you chuckled, “so if Deanna asks, I was sound asleep from 8:30 PM to now.” You felt your smile fade as you decided a certain topic needed to be discussed. “Look, Carl: about the other day…”

“It’s so stupid,” Carl said. He didn’t laugh, but he didn’t sound upset either. “We were both so… vulnerable,” he eventually chose his phrasing. You could see from the side of his face that even he didn’t the word. Admittedly, you couldn’t think of a better one yourself.

“Even if it had happened, it wouldn’t have meant anything,” he continued, “i mean, what would we do? Date? I don’t think that’s even possible anymore.”

“You’re allowed to do that?”

“Yeah,” you agreed, then cleared your throat when you voice sounded thick. “Yeah,” you repeated, still trying to process his words. Something about them -- though you couldn’t tell why -- stung. Not in a sharp, jabbing way, like they were meant to shoot like bullets or tear like knives. No… it was more of a deflating kind of pain, the kind a child feels when they aren’t allowed dessert.

You felt disappointed. You didn’t know why.

“So… are we good?” You proceeded to ask, standing up straight.

Carl turned around, a half smile on his face. He wasn’t wearing his hat, which meant you could see his eyes better. He held two steaming mugs in each hand, presumably of coffee. You also immediately noticed that Carl was wearing the Metallica t-shirt. This made the corner of your lip pull up faintly.

“You’re allowed to do that?”

“Yeah, he assured, nodding his head faintly. “We’re good.” Before an awkward silence could settle, he then said, “Oh, I forgot: Denise wants to talk to you. I think it’s about the guitar.”

You forced a small smile. “I guess I’ll figure that out. Thanks, Carl,” you said. You slowly turned on your heel, almost expecting him to say something else. He didn’t.
You left without another thought.

You walked in to the infirmary, and immediate felt a strange sort of tension. You looked around to see Denise leaning against the counter, while Tara sat on one of the few beds. After remembering that Tara was the only who interrupted you and Denise originally, you smiled smugly. They weren’t subtle.

“Ryan,” Denise observed. The smile she had while speaking with Tara faded into one that was meant to be polite, yet held no genuine joy. They really weren’t subtle. “What can I do for you?”

“Carl told me you wanted to talk to me,” You returned.

“Carl told you, huh?” Tara asked, head falling to the side as she smiled innocently.

You plastered a shit-eating grin on your face. “Keep your nose on your face and out of my business, Lesbian Queen.”

“You know, I’m the Queen.”

You rolled your eyes and flipped her off. Following these antics, you looked back at Denise, who was clearly containing laughter.

“I wanted to know how your cut was doing,” she disclosed, “and Deanna wants to know if you’re making use of her guitar.”

“I saw Deanna last night,” you frowned. “Why didn’t she ask me then?”

Denise shrugged.

A few moments later, you reached a hand over your shoulder. “The cut’s fine; it stopped doing anything days ago.”
“Good: I was hoping to get those stitches out by the end of the week,” Denise said. “I’ll let her know you like it, then?”

“Yeah, sure,” you nodded. You had been getting decent use out of the instrument. When you turned to leave, you halted. “I still owe you a favor, right?”

Denise pushed up her glasses using the space that sits between her eyes. “I suppose so, yes.”

“How would you feel about having an apprentice?”

Chapter End Notes

How do you feel about becoming a doctor in training? I know it's not exactly a cliffhanger haha, but I thought this would spruce things up a little.

How did you feel about Carl's response? Was it harsh, honest, right or wrong? Let me know.
“It wouldn’t have meant anything,” Carl had said. He could taste the words, feel them in the back of his throat. They slithered on his tongue and dripped from his lips like molasses; he thought the thick, black-brown liquid would drown him.

Of course it would have meant something, Carl mentally scolded himself, it would have meant everything.


You just had to go and open your mouth, didn’t you? You had to say what sounds right instead of what feels right.

“So…” you began to ask, eyes peering down only to look back up. “Are we good?”

Maybe you were ‘good’, but things didn’t feel good, at least not to him. Because now, Carl knew his bittersweet words were choking him. He could feel his throat quivering, desperately trying to rid the substance from his body. He could feel the bubbles of oxygen escaping through the pool of burning words in his mouth.

Carl could still feel his hand on your back, your grip on his cheek. Your handprint was branded into his flesh, your smile in his head, your brain in his chest. Carl could feel your weight in his arms from the night both him and yourself thought you were dead. Hell, he even was wearing the shirt you gave him.

So, maybe… maybe you were okay.

But he wasn’t.

“Yeah,” Carl said, the hot mug in his hand beginning to burn like the words left unsaid. “We’re good.”

The second you left, he turned around and slammed the cups on the counter. The hot coffee sloshed on both of his hands, physically burning him. With gritted teeth, Carl flipped on the faucet and ran his hands on under the cold water.

“Carl?” Michonne asked, entering the kitchen beside the wall that hid the staircase. “What’s going..?” her words faded the moment she actually stepped into the room; the tight energy was so thick, she could cut it in half.

“Nothing,” he answered, turning the faucet off and using the towel hung on the oven’s handle to dry his hands. “Everything is… perfect.”

“Do you really think I’d leave it at that?” She asked, pulling up a chair at the island. “What’s wrong, Carl?”

Carl now used the towel to wipe down the sides of the mug. He carefully placed one on the island in front of Michonne, whos body was turned outward to face him.
“It doesn’t matter,” he assured, picking up the second one before sitting by the other end of the island. “It’s stupid.

“It’s bothering you,” Michonne observed, taking a sip of coffee. “So… it matters.”

“What would you do if you thought you were in love with someone?” Carl asked, refusing to look at her as he said the word ‘love’. “In this world, I mean. Would you tell them? Would you try to work something out? Or would you ignore it?”

Her face softened. “I…” she gathered her thoughts, eventually deciding on, “I would make sure it was love before bringing it up.”

“Okay…” Carl nodded. “…how do you know?”

“Some people think you ‘just do’, which I always thought was bullshit,” She replied, and smiled when he chuckled. “The way I knew with Mike was when I realized we did everything together: we were partners, even before the romance.”

Carl stayed quiet. Michonne sighed.

“Sometimes, Carl, these things have a way of working themselves out. You’re still young; you’ll figure it out.” She smiled, “I’m glad to see you worried about something normal for once.”

“I’d rather be worried about walkers,” he muttered. “This is exhausting.”

Michonne laughed and stood up. “Like I said,” she set her hands on his shoulders, “you’ll figure it out.” After leaning down to kiss his cheek, Michonne grabbed her jacket off of the living room couch. “But for now, I’ve got a shift to work.”

“Good luck,” Carl offered, taking his first sip of coffee. He managed to suppress a grimace. The taste reminded him of the wine he drank at the CDC; strong and bitter.

As Michonne was about to leave, he spoke up. “Hey Michonne? If you see any guitars, do you think you could borrow it for me?”

She frowned. “I’m walking around Alexandria, not going on a supply run to a music store.”

“I know. Just… if you see someone play one, or on a porch or something.”

Michonne raised her eyebrows, amused. “You continue to confuse me, Carl.” She opened the door and faced forward. “Hey, Ryan.”

You weren’t sure what you made you officially decide that you wanted to train under Denise. You supposed part of it was that Deanna hadn’t given you a job -- apparently, you were still a child in her eyes. Of course, Denise was more than capable, but surely these days, people would use all the help they could get.

Ultimately, the real reason lingered in the back of your mind and your heart: you wanted to help people. Your giving nature had disappeared sometime after Lee’s death, perhaps a little before. Despite having roughened around the edges over the years, you knew there was still unsung
kindness left in you. Besides, being a slayer and a doctor? The ultimate package.

For now, though, you needed some sleep.

After reaching the doorway, you raised your hand to open it.

“If you see any guitars, do you think you could borrow it for me?” You heard from inside. The voice was recognizable as Carl’s, which made you smile.

You heard whoever he was speaking to reply. When you reached for the doorknob, it turned itself.

“Hey, Ryan,” Michonne greeted. You noticed she was wearing her new uniform jacket.

“Good morning, Constable,” you greeted in return, which made her roll her eyes fondly. After brushing past her, you grew a little more serious. “Could you keep an eye on Sasha for me? She’s on watch today.”

Michonne’s features also hardened. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Thanks,” you said, and stepped deeper into the house as she walked outside. You breezed by the kitchen, and after turning the corner and being greeted by the stairs, you heard Carl call out, “sleep well, Ashling!”

“You know it, Grimes!” You returned over your shoulder, and jogged up the stairs and into your bedroom.

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Had it been many years ago, the entire room would be decorated with posters from shitty magazines and ugly decor stickers you found in the clearance bin at Target. However, this wasn’t many years ago: this was you, post-apocalyptic, post-family, post-...everything. So, your walls remained a startling white color, and the bed in the middle of the floor had clean sheets neatly tucked around it. The bookshelf in one corner was empty, while your closet had a total of 5 items arranged orderly. The only form of ‘decoration’ to be seen was the lace curtains over the window and the guitar you had tucked in the far right corner of the room.

You tossed the shirt you had worn to the Welcome onto the floor and stepped out of the jeans, leaving them in a pile at the foot of the bed. This left you in a white tank top and camouflage-patterned underwear that looked closer to shorts than actual underwear. With a long exhale, you flopped on the bed face first, not bothering to crawl under the covers. After adjusting your positioning and ignoring the sunlight behind your eyelids, you managed to fall asleep.

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You sat at one of the many rectangular tables throughout the cafeteria. Daylight poured in through the long window frames that lined the far wall. Thankfully, it was close to noon, meaning there was no light directly in your eyes.
“You know what I want to do?” You said as you fished a baby carrot out of a small plastic bag. You snapped the end off of it with your front teeth. “I wanna take up archery.”

The girl across from you snorted. “Yeah, right,” she remarked, picking at the salisbury ‘steak’ on her tray.

You laughed. “Seriously! I mean, it’s self-defense, but it’s not a gun, so… win-win.”

“Archery is not self-defense,” She disagreed, “martial arts is self-defense.”

The girl looked familiar, like a hidden figure scratching in the back of your mind. She’s the person that lived down the street from you with her father Lee, the one you ate lunch with everyday… She was Clementine. Clementine, your childhood friend. Who else?

“I would suck at martial arts,” you said through a mouthful of food. “Maybe I would be good at this.”

She chuckled to herself and stood up, picking up her tray. “Maybe.”

You were walking home, earbuds in as your favorite playlist flowed through it. You appreciated that your stepmother burned a bunch of songs onto your MP3 for you, saving you from spending a single cent. As you walked, you couldn’t help but bob your head to the music.

As much as you loved walking home with Clementine, you also loved the days she stayed behind at school to walk home with her dad, who was a teacher. There was something so soothing about stepping down the sides of quiet streets as you felt the comforting autumn wind blow past you. Watching trees sway and birds fly simply added to the masterpiece.

What didn’t, however, was looking up to see two boys crowded around another, who was sitting on a bench and looking on the ground. You took your earbuds out and slung them over your neck just in time to hear the two kids that were standing cackle. The one sitting sank lower in his seat.

“Hey,” you spoke up, and when the bullies looked over at you, you immediately recognized the one farther from you. His name was Nick; you had him in your English class, and knew he was trouble.

“What do you want, Ashling?” Nick growled. His sidekick tried to look tough as well, but being over a head shorter than you, it didn’t come off as scary.

“To stop being an ass,” you answered smoothly.

“Yeah?” He threatened, pushing his friend aside to fully face you. “And what if I don’t?”

“The police station is only 3 blocks down,” you said. Something popped into your mind, like it was a sudden realization. So, you added, “ - and his father is the sheriff.”

Just like that, the boys darted off down the road and in the direction your back was turned to. You smiled in satisfaction, then looked at their target.

“Hey,” you said softly, which made him look up. The first thing you noticed was a striking blue
You woke up with a gasp, having to blink a few times to realize where you were. Alexandria; a place you may call home. But, it wasn’t. Not now, anyway.

You sat up and pressed your hand to your forehead. After retracting your fingers, you noticed a cool collection of sweat beginning at your hairline. Thankfully, your entire body didn’t feel damp like it normally did after having a bad dream.

Was that really a bad dream, though? The majority of it was pleasant, especially compared to the things your absent mind has conjured up in the past. In another world, one that wasn’t so cruel, you could see the dream being reality.

Perhaps that’s why the dream sucked -- because it wasn’t real.

“Ryan?” You heard a voice from the hallway ask. You ran a hand down your face, got off the bed, and opened your door.

“What’s up?” you asked, coming face-to-face with Rick.

“Glenn and the others are gettin’ ready outside,” He informed. It took a second the remember ‘the others’ were Nicholas, Noah, Aiden, and Tara.

You raised your eyebrows as you rested your arm on the frame. “So?”

“He wants to talk to you,” Rick added.

“Probably shoulda lead with that,” you said and stepped back fully into the room. You opened your closet, and grabbed the first bottoms you saw, which happened to be beige cargo shorts. You also grabbed the jacket you had hanging on an end bedpost. You slipped into the sleeves and patted Rick’s shoulder as you glossed passed him.

“Don’t do anything stupid!” He told you as you walked down the stairs.

“No promises!” You returned, pulling your jacket up and around your shoulders. You left the house and padded down the porch steps. After not seeing Glenn in your direct vision, you sighed. Looking around, your eyes landed on a bike that was in the lawn beside the Main House’s. The handlebars were tilted sideways, which let it lay flat in the grass. You made sure there were no preying eyes as you brought it upright and slung a leg over it.

It took you to the end of the road for your technique to grow steady. Originally, your hands were shaking and as a result, the front tire was wiggling back and forth. Your pedaling was at an even pace, but the movement was jittery as well. Eventually, though, your childhood autopilot took control, and you were riding smoothly. The morning light reflected off the metal spokes and your arms got goosebumps from the fresh air.
You weaved through more streets than you could count, looking for what they considered the City Hall. You supposed that if one of Deanna’s sons was involved, that would be the most likely place to find them. And, being the ‘City Hall’, you knew it was somewhere close to the center of Alexandria. You turned a corner, and sure enough, you could see Aiden and Glenn talking on the steps. You got off the bike, kicked up the kickstand, and left it on the street corner. You walked down the sidewalk and greeted Glenn.

“Rick said you wanted to talk,” you stated, standing at the edge of the staircase.

“Hello to you too, Ryan,” Glenn greeted, and dismissed himself from his conversation with Aiden. Placing a gentle hand on your upper arm, Glenn guided the two of you back halfway down the road, away from the rest of the group.

“I rode a bike here for you,” You said, taking a few steps forward so Glenn was no longer beside you. “This better be important.”

“I need you to come with me,” he told you, no trace of sarcasm in his tone.

You frowned, looking past him to see both Tara and Noah putting a box in the back of the van. Eugene was sitting on the staircase Aiden still stood on, looking over a map with furrowed eyebrows.

“You already got quite the crew…” you noted, returning your attention to him.

“I need more of us,” Glenn clarified in a low voice, which you quickly understood. You thought back to a few days ago, when he and Aiden got into a fight. You remembered overhearing that the fight was because of something that happened on their run, it supposedly being the Alexandrian’s fault.

“You need a fighter,” you rephrased, sliding your hands into the deep pockets of your shorts.

Glenn clenched his jaw, but it clearly wasn’t out of anger. Rather, it appeared to be an anxious action. “I saw the way you dealt with Terminus. The way you responded... we need that out there. And they…” Glenn paused, glancing back at Aiden and Nicholas, “they aren’t it. Eugene, we need him too, but he can’t kill, not like we can.”

“Well, as flattered as I am,” you started, “I’m pretty sure Denise will need me here today.”

Glenn snorted softly. “You had to make me compliment you just for you to say no?”

“Interrupting people is rude,” you pointed out with a chuckle. Your mouth flattened. “You already outnumber them, Glenn. Out there, you’re smart enough to make up for their ignorance. You’ve got this, man.”

He smiled with slightly pursed lips. “Thanks, Ryan.”

“Pretty much why I’m here,” you responded, and smiled one last time before returning to the bike.

You ended up heading to Denise’s office after speaking with Glenn, and spent a total of 3 ½ hours
working with her. Because you obviously had no previous training, Denise started with easy emergent techniques, from the procedure to minor sprains, infections, and even minor traumas. Denise was nice enough to let you try sticking an IV in one of the critical patients, which in her words, you ‘nailed’. As you worked and observed, it felt like your head was beginning to fog and fill with new information, but in the best way possible. You missed the feeling of learning.

You ended up walking the bike back because the heat of the high Sun and the motion riding it would make you sweat a little more than you preferred. So instead, you simply kept it by your side until you reached the Main House. You dropped it back in the yard you found it in before approaching the porch.

Upon seeing Carl sitting in the rocking chair with Judith in his lap, you smiled. The porch’s overhang gave considerable shade, which took your eyes a moment to adjust to.

“Hey,” he greeted as you pulled up a chair beside him, “how was work?”

“I don’t think I can call it work,” you corrected jokingly. “You know, child labor laws and all that.”

“Weren’t you the one who said that stuff doesn’t matter anymore?”

“Probably,” you admitted with a soft laugh. “ Doesn’t mean I can’t joke about it, though.” You paused, then asked, “what about you, Carl? How have you been spending your days?”

“Sitting here, mostly,” he responded after awhile. “Sometimes I’ll see Ron and Enid.”

You frowned, crossing your arms and leaning them on the top of your legs. “That’s all? When’s the last time you fired a gun?”

“Since we were outside,” Carl answered, adjusting his grip on his sister. “Actually outside.”

You understood his response intellectually, yet were baffled by his words. “Are you okay with that?”

“I have to be. I don’t think it’s possible to be domestic and wild. The moment I stepped through those gates, I gave up being wild. We all did. We had to.”

“So you must hate what Enid does,” you noted, and felt that sinking feeling in your stomach return. It reminded you a little too closely of the last real conversation you had with him.

“I don’t hate it, per se,” Carl disagreed. “I understand why she does it. I just think she’s making it harder on herself,” he stopped, then added, “by trying to be both, it only makes things harder. Sometimes, to get what you want, you have to give some things up.”

“Things like what’s out there,” you realized.

“Yeah.”

A silence fell between the two of you, only disturbed when Judith began to gurgle. Carl laughed while you smiled. You reached a hand out and ran your thumb down the side of her small, soft cheek. This made her giggle and hide her face in her brother’s chest.

You chuckled at this and looked up past the porch railings. You saw the neighboring houses across
from the Main House, but past that, noticed a figure walking towards the wall. Now that it was the second time around, you recognized this figure as Enid.

You glanced over at Carl, who was also watching the girl. Rolling your eyes fondly, you stood up and offered him your hand. “Come on; be a little wild.”

With a grin that made you chuckle, Carl bolted inside and quickly explained to Carol that he remembered he had to do something. You took this moment to grab your bow and quiver, which was propped in the corner close to the front window. A few moments later, Carl, returned, and without hesitation, he grabbed your hand.

The two of you began running past the houses and down the street. A massive cloud was now shading some of the harsh sunlight, which meant every time you looked back at Carl’s face, you could see him clearly. Every time you did glance back, you began running faster, and your smile grew wider.

Once you both reached the front gate, you ignored the guard (who normally opened and closed the gate for people), and threw open the gate. You grabbed it before it slid out of arm’s reach, and let Carl pass you as you stood somewhat in the opening. You stepped forward and fully closed the gate, making sure it was secure before catching up with Carl.

The moment you stepped foot into the forest, your excitement was no longer vocal. In fact, you even raised a finger to silently tell Carl to be quiet. He nodded in response, and kept the lead while you lingered behind.

With each step he took, you cringed. Carl didn’t bother looking where he walked, meaning twigs and leaves were crunching beneath the souls of his shoes. He also let his feet hit flat on the ground rather than setting his heel down first.

“If we were running from someone, we’d be dead,” you whispered, gripping your bow as it was slung across your chest.


“Because you’re loud as fuck!” you hissed. “Seriously, who raised you? Giants?”

“Oh, whatever,” Carl replied, clearly annoyed.

“Are you two a thing?” A different voice asked. Out of instinct, you raised your bow off of your back and loaded it with an arrow. Seconds later, your mind connected that it was only Enid, meaning you didn’t raise the weapon.

“You fight like an old married couple,” Enid continued. She appeared from a tree to the right, making you and Carl snap your heads in that direction. “Did you come to rat me out?”

“No,” you shook your head and removed the bow from you arrow. “Just a little curious, is all.”

“What do you do out here?” Carl asked, phrasing your statement into a question.

“Same thing as you,” Enid responded, and began to run. You and Carl began to chase after her.
Turns out, Enid spends her time running and reading comics, and uses a kitchen timer to distract any walkers that get in the way of this. Because she had only two comic books, you ended up spending your time once again trying to sharpen your arrowheads. You also ended up shooting a crow, which you decided had good feathers to add to future arrows. After what you supposed was an hour, the three of you agreed it was time to head back.

Carl ended up growing impatient of how slow and cautiously you and Enid were walking, and thus was a few feet ahead of you both. This left you and her basically beside each other with almost nothing to say.

“What happened to you before getting here?” you asked. You could feel the crow you had killed thumping against your leg as you walked, as you had used some rope to suspend it from your belt loop. “You’re alone, right? That’s because of something.”

“Does it matter?” She asked, not bothering to look at you.

“Of course it does,” you replied, “it’s why you still come out here. You don’t want to forget.”

She didn’t reply.

“When I first met him, Carl and I played this game,” you explained. “When he said something about himself, I had to share something similar about me. So… I don’t know where my parents are. I can only assume they’re dead.”

Enid still stayed quiet, long enough for you to think she was ignoring you. After a few more steps, however, she murmured, “I know mine are dead.”

“Aaron was watching the group I was in for awhile, until he decided to stop stalking and start talking,” You said. “That’s how I got here.”

“I came across this place after wandering for... I don’t know how long.”

The brush was beginning to thin out, and before you knew it, you and the two teens were back at the entry to Alexandria.

“I’m still not sure I trust this place,” you admitted as you stood in front of the closed gates. You turned to look at Enid.

“Me either,” she replied, and caught up with Carl, who was waiting right by the entrance. Once inside, they broke off in opposite directions, while you walked straight ahead. You rubbed a hand over your neck, hoping a walk would clear your clouded mind.

“We need help!” You heard Glenn call from behind you, back by the entrance. You turned around to see him and Eugene carrying an unconscious Tara, while Nicholas lingered behind, looking nervous.

Chapter End Notes

Mutual pining, one of my favorite tropes. As is the 'what could have been' dream sequence.
What was your favorite part? Let me know! I love hearing from ya'll :)
“How sturdy did you keep her neck?” You asked as the men set Tara’s seemingly lifeless body on the bed in the infirmary. Denise was already tearing into some surgical tools while you peared a flashlight into the wound.

“As sturdy as we could,” Glenn answered.

“That might not be good enough,” you muttered under your breath. You couldn’t see anything with all the blood still left in the wound. “Put your hands on either side of head and don’t move,” you spoke to Glenn, who was standing close to you. He immediately obeyed.

“Denise, what do I rinse this out with?” You asked.

“Water,” she replied, setting her instruments on a tray. “There’s bottles on the counter that were filtered and boiled. But you have to make sure it all drains from the wound; I’m not gonna trap water in her head when I stitch her up.”

You quickly grabbed what she was referring to and quickly devised a plan to follow Denise’s instructions. If the wound hadn’t been so close to Tara’s hairline, the water would all drain itself. However, the injury was at the perfect angle where you knew it would pool.

“Okay, okay, okay,” You muttered to yourself. “Eugene, get over here and help me turn her on her side.”

“I am not sure I can be of adequate assistance -”

“Do you want to help your friend, or not?!?” You cut him off with a shout.

Eugene scrambled to the bedside, and on the count of three, the two of you hoisted Tara on her side while Glenn continued to keep her neck straight. You reached your arm across her shoulder and haphazardly dumped half of the bottle over her scalp. You instructed to return her to supine position and and peered into the wound again.
This time, you could clearly see the cream color of her skull, but noticed no fractures or internal bleeding; the injury appeared to be mostly superficial. You lifted her eyelid with your thumb and moved the flashlight from the corner of her eye to the front. Her pupils didn’t retract.

“Her pupils are dilated,” you observed aloud to inform Denise. “I think she may have a TBI of sorts.”

“Let’s hope it’s a minor contusion and not a hematoma,” Denise muttered, which meant there was nothing else you could do. “Ryan, take Glenn’s place so I can stitch her up.”

“I saw the grenades. I tried to stop him.”

Glenn was sitting on the porch steps, his back pressed against the post. You stood off to the side while Rick crouched beside him.

“He was gonna run,” Glenn continued, referring to Nicholas, “but we made him stay.” He paused, clearly on the verge of losing it. “Couldn’t get Aiden out of there without help. All he had to do was hold the door. But he panicked. Noah, I had him. I had his hand… I tried. I watched him die.”

You felt your posture stiffen at those words, arms across your chest as you waited for him to continue. Rick did the same, closely listening.

“I almost left him out there, could’ve told a story,” Glenn proceeded, making you swallow thickly. “Wh-what, you think I should have?” He asked, speaking to Rick.

“They don’t know what they’re doing, any of ‘em.”

“We’ll show them,” Glenn replied.

“I don’t know if they can see it: how things really are. I don’t know if they can yet. They haven’t caught up.”
“We have to be here,” Glenn pushed, “we have to.”

“And we’re not leaving,” you intervened, causing both men to look up at you. “Okay? We’re not going anywhere.” you sighed and nodded your head back to the door as you looked at Rick, silently telling him that you could cover the rest. He took his queue and stood up, walking off to give you and Glenn some space.

You lowered yourself into a cross-legged position where Rick was previously. You held your ankles in a vice grip as you tried to gather your thoughts. “I should’ve been there,” you settled on saying. Though you did partially consider yourself to blame, you weren’t looking for sympathy nor forgiveness. You simply knew what Glenn needed to hear. “You told me that these people can’t handle what’s out there, and I didn’t listen. I’m sorry, Glenn.”

“No one saw this coming,” he disagreed, “not even me.”

You nodded. “Maybe. But from now on, you gotta let me take care of Nicholas. God knows what kind of story he told Deanna, and if he tried to leave your ass high and dry already, he’ll try again.”

“Aiden said half of their last group died because of him and Nick,” Glenn said, “told me they freaked out and things got bad. I think Nicholas watches out for himself most, yeah, but… I don’t think he knows what he does.”

“Not everyone is cut out for what’s out there,” you agreed. “Not everyone can be your ally.”

You sat at the dinner table, holding a hot mug in one hand while the other was pressed to your forehead. You had spent all night and the early morning replaying the events Glenn had recalled. Your couldn’t stop creating the mental image of Aiden shooting the grenade attached to the military uniform a walker wore, and your mind was plagued by the idea that if you had gone with, nothing bad would have happened.

Glenn, he’s good at that sort of thing, but he’s also a good guy. He cares far more than you do about some things, perhaps almost too much. You couldn’t blame him: people are built a certain way. Aiden, the liar, Nicholas, the coward, Eugene, the genius, Tara, the warrior, and Glenn, the one who cares. But you… you’re the rationalist. If you had to shoot Aiden just to stop him, you would’ve, and maybe that would have prevented everything.
“You’re up early,” Rick’s voice chimed beside you. He was grabbing the belt to his uniform, which had apparently been sitting on the table next to you. You didn’t notice.

“So are you,” you discerned before taking a sip of the coffee you had poured. You grimaced at both its temperature and bitter taste.

“I have reason,” Rick replied, stepping into the kitchen to get a cup of his own.

“So do I,” you countered, but your playful mood quickly evaporated. You ran your finger around the brim of the mug, which was already collecting condensation. “Rick, am I letting go?”

“Of what?” He asked, not missing a beat as he poured coffee into a clean mug from beside the maker.

“Of who I was,” you said quietly, eyebrows furrowing at the thought. You didn’t look up at the man as you spoke. “Weeks ago, I would’ve dropped everything to go on that run. Now yesterday, I was too busy? That’s such bullshit.” you clenched your jaw for a moment before continuing. “Carl said that we can’t be happy here if our hearts still live outside those walls. I didn’t think he was right. But now…” you pinched the space between your eyebrows. “I think maybe he is. Maybe we can’t be them.”

Rick leaned back against the counter. “These people are only alive because of dumb luck. Not just once -- over and over and over again, this entire place has dodged bullet after bullet. And yeah, they’re still alive: but what happens when someone rolls up to those gates and decides they want a piece of paradise? You’ll be ready for it, and they won’t be. It’s as simple as that. They have no instinct, Ryan; you do. No matter how long you’re here, that doesn’t change.”

“I thought you were supposed to the fearless leader with unshakable faith,” you leaned back in your chair. “Isn’t that why we’re here?” Although you were joking, you had to admit you didn’t expect such cynicism to come from his mouth, even it was regarding Alexandria’s people.

He chuckled, shaking his head before taking a sip of coffee. “Michonne is why.”
Enid mentioned that she always heads about between 2 and 3PM, making it easy for you and Carl to schedule accordingly. Denise said she wanted to spend her time monitoring Tara, and though you were becoming more concerned about her wellbeing than her patient’s, you decided to let it go for now. You didn’t know Denise well enough to argue that topic with her. Besides, you had been itching to step outside since the conversation you had with Rick earlier. Surely an extra hour or two of Denise monitoring Tara wouldn’t hurt either of them, especially if she didn’t want your help to begin with.

You were walking back from the infirmary and to the Main House when you were stopped by Michonne.

“Ryan, can I talk to you?” She asked. She embodied the phrase ‘authority figure’, decked out in her Constable outfit that included a badge.

“Yeah, sure,” you said. After seeing motion in the corner of your eye, you peered around Michonne and noticed that Carl had stepped outside and onto the porch, and urgent look on his face as he looked back and forth. Finally, his gaze landed on you. He looked expectant.

“Go on!” You shouted, “I’ll catch up with you in a minute!”

Though evidently confused, Carl did as you told and re-entered the house, only to exit with a backpack a few moments later. He began walking in the same direction you both did the day prior.

“You’re a good influence on him, right?” Michonne asked. Had she sounded antagonistic, you would have been considered. However, she mostly sounded curious, if a little concerned. “You don’t let him do anything stupid?”

Upon hearing the part she added, you had to take a mental step back. If letting him go outside the walls wasn’t irresponsible, surely encouraging it was, right? Then again, you knew almost better than anyone that Carl could handle himself. He wouldn’t end up like Aiden if he tried.

“I guess, not that it’s my job,” you said. “I’m not his sister: I’m not even his family.”

“Maybe you’re not responsible for him,” Michonne agreed, “but he looks up to you, and I think he deserves something good to come out of that. Don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” you concurred. You felt the air grow a bit thinner and remarked, “by the way: good luck finding that guitar.”
You were surprised when her eyes momentarily widened. “How much of that conversation did you hear?”

“The whole thing,” you shrugged. “The kid wants a guitar. We should find him a damn guitar.”
You wondered why it mattered ‘how much you heard’.

She laughed, the tinge of worry disappearing from her features. “We should.”

You grinned faintly and brushed past her, signalling the end to the conversation. You grabbed your bow from off of the deck again, and made your way over to the wall like Carl had moments ago. As you had expected, Carl was nowhere to be seen, but had conveniently tossed the rods used to climb over. They were relatively close to each other in the grass.

Despite this being your first attempt at climbing over the gate, you managed to climb up and hoist yourself over without complications. You were lucky to have developed a skill for climbing so quickly early on, as you had witnessed multiple occasions where people died because they lacked the ability.

You climbed halfway down the other side before deciding to jump down the remaining length. You removed the metal rods from empty sockets in the walls, as you were securely standing on beams running across. You tossed the rods down on the ground before launching yourself away from the wall, using the wall itself as a counter force. Though you felt some of the shock in your ankles, it wasn’t enough to fracture or even cause pain that was more than momentary. You landed roughly a yard away from the wall.

You found Enid and Carl’s fresh tracks moments after approaching the forest’s edge. A small distance away from their trail was the one you had made when you had also made the targets, and the ones Sasha freshened by going out to shoot them herself.

“Sorry Carl,” you muttered to no one, and began to follow the tracks with a lonely end. “Not today.”

You found your way back to Alexandria with sweat dripping down your face. After growing bored with shooting the same trees over and over again, you began to either sneak up on or attract
walkers. As targets, they were far more interesting. Sometimes you launched arrows to kill, other times you used the bow’s limbs to perforate their soft skulls. You occasionally aimed for where vital organs would be, as you never knew when the practice could come in handy one day. Perhaps against your better judgement, you left the bodies where they were. After all, you had killed them - how dangerous could they really be?

The person on guard pulled the door open moments before you actually reached it. You stepped inside without looking back, hearing the rattling and slamming shut behind you. You planned on heading back to the Main House to get washed up. That was before you heard a lot of commotion from three streets down.

Your bow was loaded and ready as you stealthy weaved your way closer to the sound. You turned a corner and some of your anxiety was soothed; it was only a bunch of people crowded around a bloody Rick. Then, he turned, and you caught sight of the pistol in his hand. This got you moving quickly.

You pulled the string of your bow taut as you listened to Rick. You hardly noticed that Carl was by your side, Enid being beside him as well. As the boy’s father continued on about how Deanna’s way of leading is lethal, Michonne snuck up on him and punched him, efficiently knocking him out. As you lowered your bow, you shared a look with Michonne. Both of you knew the damage had already been done.

“Maybe I’m going soft,” you muttered as you stuck the arrow back in your quiver and stepped forward, “but at least I’m not going crazy.”

“You okay, just… hold his neck, Rosita. The last thing we need is headrush reopening those cuts,” you said as you flicked on the shower hose. By the grace of god, you, Rosita, and Michonne managed to get Rick in the infirmary’s bathroom and his head over the tub. You and Rosita collectively decided that the amount of blood coating his face and hair was simply too much to clean out without the help of a faucet. Getting Rick off of the stretcher that now laid on the bathroom floor proved to be a challenge, so you could only hope the trouble would be worth it.

You made sure the hose was on a gentle setting before carefully running it over the man’s face. You also moved one of Rosita’s hands so Rick’s face was at a slope, which prevented water from rushing into his nose. Using a damp cloth, you blotted away Rick’s stained skin. While some of the cuts were bothered, you noticed that blood was sparing, meaning they weren’t fully open again. You took this as a good sign.
“He good?” You heard Abraham ask from the doorway. When Michonne had left to handle something -- probably Deanna’s worried mind -- she had promised to send him over. Admittedly, you could use the muscle: Rick was heavier than he looked.

“Yeah, we’re done here,” you agreed, tossing the rag into the bathtub below where water was draining.

After making sure Rick was on the floor, Abraham took the man’s ankles and pulled him onto the stretcher in one swift motion. You were almost jealous of his seemingly effortless strength, yet you were also grateful for the help.

With you and Rosita on the end with Rick’s head, the three of you maneuvered out of the bathroom and back to the main part of the Infirmary. With Rick now on a bed and ready to be stitched/patched up, Abraham was alright to leave. You and Rosita thanked him on his way out.

As you gathered the supplies needed to fix Rick, you noticed Rosita beginning to look over at Tara abnormal amount. Denise had been absent ever since you had got there, meaning someone had probably convinced her to take a short break.

“Go on,” you assured, moving your head in Tara’s direction. “I’ve got this covered.”

Without saying anything, Rosita took your offer and began checking up on the unconscious patient. You smiled smally as you snapped on a pair of disposable gloves. Rosita… she’s gonna make a great doctor.

“I don’t know what the hell you were thinking,” you said quietly as you began to dab away the blood beginning to bead inside thin cuts. Between your soft voice and Tara being on the other side of the room, Rosita didn’t notice. “But…. I think I know why. You’re too used to making everything your responsibility. You think that you have to fix everything that’s broken.”

You tossed the dirtied gauze into the trash and tore into the Steri-Strips you had sitting on your tray of supplies. “You’re not the leader anymore, Rick, and that’s okay. You’re allowed to take a break; you’re allowed to surrender every once in a while.”

You sighed as you looked over your handiwork. It seemed like half of his face was now covered in bandage, but all of his cuts seemed to be covered. “Doesn’t matter now,” you reminded as you took the gloves off and tossed them in the trash bin. “I’m pretty sure your ass is gonna get kicked to the
The front door closed with a ‘thud’ after you stepped inside. You had decided to bring your bow inside, so it now hung relaxed by your side. You toed off your shoes and approached the kitchen, a big glass of ice water on your mind.

After setting down your bow and grabbing a glass out of the cupboard, you pressed it to the dispenser of the fridge, which grumbled until it began to spit out ice. You then filled it with water from the tap and turned around, only now noticing Carl in the living room. He held Judith in his arms, who was reaching for the music box Maggie seemed to have left out.

“I hope you washed that thing,” you remarked, taking a massive gulp of your drink. “Not even god knows what was on that if it was in the woods.”

Sensing that you were joking, Carl rolled his eyes. You noticed the small smile he was sporting. You also noticed when it began to fade. “How is he?”

Your grin flattened as well. “Denise took over for me. She said he should be awake by tomorrow.”

“That’s good,” Carl said. You could hear something in his voice, something that wasn’t settled by your response. You set your glass on the kitchen island and took a seat on the couch in the living room.

“Talk to me,” you said, crossing one leg over the other. Your tone wasn’t demanding -- in fact, you thought it left enough room for him to argue. Still, Carl took a seat beside you.

“I’m not leaving this place,” Carl mumbled. He looked down at his sister. “She’s not leaving this place.” He paused. “Since I saw Dad in the road, all bloody, I knew he was gonna get in trouble. And I knew that no matter what, I’m not going anywhere. Does that make me a bad person?”

You shook your head. “No, it doesn’t make you a bad person: it means you’re trying to do what’s right, even if it feels wrong.”
“No, it… it doesn’t feel wrong,” he disagreed. “It feels like us sneaking out; like it’s supposed to be wrong, but I just don’t feel it.”

“That means you want this,” you said, setting a hand on his back, “and no one can tell you that’s a bad thing. You and Judith deserve a place to grow up - you deserve Alexandria.” You bit your lip and quietly added, “you deserve good things, Carl.”

“Yeah,” Carl said, though you could hear he didn’t quite believe it. “Maybe.”

“I respect your father, but if he tries to guilt you into leaving with him, I will put him in the ground,” you added. “That goes for anyone else who may try to convince you, too.”

This got him to smile. “Thanks, Ryan.”

“I got your back, man,” You reassured, wrapping the arm you had on his back around his side. You pulled him into a sideways sort of hug, the tough brief yet firm. You then steadily pulled away from touching him and stood up. “I smell like shit. We can talk after I shower, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Carl agreed.

You nodded and picked up your bow, walking up the stairs. I really have to look into getting pajamas, you reminded yourself once you reached your bedroom door. I’m getting sick of sleeping in the same clothes. You opened the door and stiffened once you looked at your bed. Enid was sitting on the edge, staring at the wall. She hardly turned her head when you entered.

“How did -” you started, looking at the window. It was closed and seemed completely undisturbed. “How did you get in here? How did you know this was my room?”

“The fire escape on the widow at the end of the hall,” She answered, “and… process of elimination.”

You nodded slowly, still very much confused. “Okay… what are you doing here?”

She glanced over with a soft breath. “How do you do it?”
You tossed your bow to the side with a frown. “Do what?”

“I saw you practicing earlier,” Enid said, which seemed out of the blue. “We both did. So… how do that, but come back inside, and act normal? How do you do both?”

You opened your mouth to question rather than answer, only to close it when you realized what was happening. Enid was taking you up on the deal you had offered her the first time you met her.

“I don’t,” you told her, which was nothing short of the truth. “I don’t do both, not really.” You took a seat on the bed beside her, palms pressed flat on the space next to your thighs. “Every time I step out of here, I become the person I think I am, the person I had to be to survive. But… that’s not me: that’s not any of us. We all just got a little too comfortable with running, I think.”

“So, this -” Enid said, gesturing to you and referring to you inside of Alexandria, “- this is who you really are?”

“It’s who I was,” you corrected. “This is the person who, other than the occasional sass, did well in school, who played guitar all weekend, who felt pain, but wanted the best things out of life.”

“What are you trying to say, Ryan?”

“I’m saying,” you leaned forward in emphasis, “that everyone here is doing exactly what I am: they’re trying to bridge the gap between what was then, and what is now.”

“My parents…” Enid whispered, “I don’t want to forget them.”

You smiled sadly, knowing her pain. “Then you don’t have to. That’s part of the past you keep, only you adapt it so the memory can move forward too. You remember them, but you live on, because that’s what they would want.”

The girl reached a hand up to cover her mouth, masking the silent sobs that began to rack her body.

Silently, you wrapped your arms around her and pulled her against your chest.
believe it or not, but this actually brings the events of season 5 to a close. I am SUPER excited for what comes next -- some of my favorite events are coming up!

What was your favorite part? let me know!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

from here on out, this story will no longer follow the canon of the show. So, don't be surprised when some twists and turns come your way! Even within these next 3 parts, this fic has become a mix of the comics and the show, with some of my own decisions and ideas thrown in. So, I think that things will get really interesting!

Maggie was the one who told you all about how Rick killed Pete. She recalled it in specific detail, knowing that without it, Rick sounded like he was in the wrong. Ultimately, you remembered it as:

1. Rick showed up to the meeting discussing his ‘residency’ with a walker body
2. Pete tried to kill Rick
3. He instead killed Deanna’s husband
4. Deanna instructed for Rick to kill Pete.

A part of you was disappointed you missed such action, but all in all, you were grateful to not be a part of something so messy. After all, it was tiny, in the grand scheme of things. Much worse was ready to come.

Alexandria was in a strange state of leadership following Pete’s death. While Deanna still seen as the official leader, it was clear Rick was doing all of her dirty work and heavy lifting. Despite the work being done without credit, you could understand why they kept things that way: Pete’s death continued to shake native Alexandrians. If they had caught wind that the man who killed one of their clowns was now running the circus, things would go south quickly.

The first occasion you remembered Rick publicly acting as the leader was when a group you had named ‘The Hybrids’ rolled up to the gates. You and Sasha had been in the middle of changing shifts, which unlucky for them, meant there was an extra sharpshooter. This also meant you had to the perfect view of everything that was about to play out.

They began making demands for the leader to show themselves. After getting no reply, they revealed they had a hostage -- a man who was already looking for Alexandria. Particularly, he was looking for Rick. You remembered Carl saying his name was Morgan, and that apparently, Morgan was the first person Rick saw after waking up in a the post-apocalyptic world.

The threat to kill Morgan got Rick to the gates. You could hear the Hybrids beginning to make
demands to be let inside, one which Rick obviously didn’t obey. There was quite a bit of back and forth regarding that topic, but after Rick asked who they were, your attention was peaked.

“We are the Saviors,” one answered clearly. “Those freaks with the W on their heads are what the cat dragged in. But… the Wolves are what lead us here, along with your friend, so we can’t be too mad at them.”

The Wolves and the Saviors; the Hybrids just had a better sound to it.

After Sasha took out their sniper, chaos ensued. The man holding the gun to Morgan’s head fired, and in return, Rick killed him in the blink of an eye. He then offered that everything could be over. You heard someone shout it wasn’t good enough. You blew their brains out, and shortly after that, a bullet grazed your neck.

You were lucky -- almost a little too lucky. Though the wound seemed to bleed profusely while you sat in the watchtower trying not to pass out, it managed to miss any vital arteries or veins. In fact, the worst it did was take a hunk of skin out of your neck.

Carl didn’t want you back doing guard shifts, especially so soon. He argued this quite greatly, even going to his father in an attempt to lessen your amount of time spent monitoring Alexandria. You couldn’t blame him: the Hybrid attack was scary as hell. Watching you use Sasha as your crutch while your face paled and your balance worsened must not have been too pretty either. You still felt bad he saw you in such a state. Still, it could have been worse. It could have been so much worse.

Walkers from miles around heard the commotion between Alexandria and the Hybrids. Though all of them were dead and burned, the walkers didn’t seem to understand or care. They simply collected in a massive herd and was heading straight for your home.

By the time the herd had actually caught up, it was too late for Sasha to get out of the watchtower and back through the gates. She had pushed her luck a little too far, as she kept shooting walkers already along the walls rather than getting the hell out of dodge. Before she knew it, the undead completely crowded around the city, which included the entire watchtower.

That caught you up to present day, where you stood on the stands to the wall, close to the gate. After finding some thin dowels in Aaron and Eric’s garage, you managed to sharpen them and shoot them well enough out of your bow. Your accuracy was sub-par compared to normal, but you could shoot walkers without losing any arrows. Win-Win.
You looked down by your feet, looking for the pile of dowels. Turns out, you had already went through all of them, meaning you were no longer of use. Sasha was instructed to no longer use her ammo on walkers, at least until she could be evacuated from the tower. This meant she was indirectly put on watch all day, which you were sure she didn’t mind. Before climbing down the ladder, you waved to her. You gave her a closed-mouth smile when she returned the action.

“What the hell are we gonna do?!” One of the more blunt Alexandrians shouted.

Rick was holding a town meeting outside, one that you couldn’t imagine going smoothly. Sasha had only been in the tower for 6 hours at most, yet it was clear most of the population was growing antsy about the herd. You’d think walkers were pounding on the front doors by how worried some of them were; you thought you even saw a woman crying earlier.

“We need to stay calm, all of us,” Rick answered, “and from here on in, we need to be as quiet as possible.”

Someone voiced the concern of food, when apparently, there wasn’t one. Olivia informed that even without rationing and nothing coming in, there would be enough to last entire town at least a month. You had to admit that the idea of being trapped in Alexandria for 4 weeks gave you some anxiety similar to the people around you.

Rick also got into the idea of Abraham assembling a construction team to make sure the wall is completely sturdy, as the last thing needed was a panel coming down. He instructed Michonne to organize and schedule a nightmen watch ‘program’, and finally ended with saying the armory would be open to anyone that wants to be armed. It was only then when you wondered where exactly Deanna was.

“No going outside, then,” Enid concluded as she appeared by your side. “What are you gonna do?”

You smiled smally and rubbed her head fondly. “You know the drill, kid: Fake it ‘til you make it.”

Enid shoved away your arm with a smile. “Worst advice ever.”
She momentarily stared past you, which prompted you to turn your head in the direction she was looking. Your face fell flat when you saw Carl observing the two of you, only to pull down the brim of his hat and walk off.

“When’s the last time you talked to him?” Enid now asked, her voice softer this time.

“Since the attack,” you answered flatly. You didn’t sound angry, just clearly didn’t want to get any more specific.

“That was four days ago,” she deadpanned, in obvious disbelief. “How did you avoid him for that long? Don’t you live in the same house?”

“I don’t talk first. The person who talks first after an argument is clearly the who’s wrong.”

“And you’re not wrong.”

“Exactly.”

After Carl tried to rationally explain to you why you should cut back on shifts for what felt like the hundredth time, you finally snapped. You didn’t want to hear about how unsafe it was to be in the watchtower, or how every time you tried to help, you were risking your life. All you wanted to do was help in the only way you knew possible. At the time, you told Carl that if all he had to do was whine, then he might as well not talk to you at all. Since then, he had done exactly that.

“You were harsh, Ryan,” Enid said. The two of you were now walking back to the house she shared with Olivia.

“Yeah, well… it’s whatever,” you shrugged, unable to come up with an excuse. Truthfully, you had been a little too abrasive the last time you spoke to Carl. However, he had said his share of unwarranted things as well, which mostly involved that there were people ‘more qualified’ than you to handle things.

Enid snorted, unimpressed. “I never thought you would be so petty; you really are a teenager after all.”
You flipped her off.

“Whatever,” she hummed, opening the door to her house, “that’s all the more time him and I get to spend together. Alone.”

You rolled your eyes and groaned in disgust as you stepped inside. Over the few weeks since the conversation you had with Enid about living in Alexandria without forgetting the past, the two of you became fast friends. As much as you loved Carl, you sometimes had a hard time relating to him. Meanwhile, you and Enid had several shared traits, like both of you being orphans, and being guarded because of it.

“What do you want to do, then?” You asked, shedding your jacket after setting your bow on the armchair.

“Actually, I was hoping you could teach me to shoot,” She answered, slowly closing the front door.

You frowned, slinging your jacket on the back of the chair. “Okay, sure. Why, though?”

She shrugged. “I can already shoot a gun and stab, so I thought I might as well add to the list.”

“Jack of All Trades,” you noted as you pointed at her. “Respectable.”

Enid agreed in the form of a smile. When someone knocked at the door, she seemed excited, while you remained confused. She opened the door to meet with a face you knew all too well.

“Carl!” She exclaimed, quite obviously awaiting his presence.

“You said I left a comic book here…” Carl said, as if he needed an explanation for her attitude. Upon seeing you, however, he stiffened. “I think I’ll come back for it --”

As Carl turned to leave, Enid grabbed his arm and dragged him into the house. She then stepped outside, and you heard a clear ‘click’ after the door shut. Carl chuckled softly to himself as he reached for the doorknob, expecting the obvious: that you can’t lock someone inside a house. He fiddled with it for a moment, proving Enid did the impossible.
You approached the door and nudged Carl aside, trying to open it yourself. You quickly noticed the keyhole slightly above the knob, one that was clearly added to the house. If Enid hadn’t installed it for this sole purpose, you could relate to her paranoia.

“Come on, Enid, let us out,” you demanded, pounding your fist on the door.

“Not until you two make up,” She disagreed, voice stern. “I’m tired of this shit. You guys are friends, and you need to start acting like it.”

You pounded on the door a few more times in protest, then stepped away with gritted teeth. She really wasn’t going to budge.

You guessed it was a solid hour that you and Carl spent in complete silence. He had decided to sit down on the loveseat while you paced around the living room, refusing to say a word. After growing tired of walking, you pressed your back against the jutted wall that disconnected the hallway from the living room.

“You could have died,” Carl finally muttered. His head was slightly bowed and his fingers tapped the armrest anxiously.

“I didn’t,” you replied gruffly and ran a careful hand over your still healing wound. The dressings needed to be changed again.

“You could’ve,” he persisted.

“What do you want me to do, Carl? Just sit around all day, occasionally go outside to convince myself I’m still a survivor? I’m not you.”

“You don’t have to be a guardian all the time! You’re a teenager, Ryan. You can act like one,” Carl argued, standing up.

“You don’t know anything, do you?” you scoffed, straightening your posture. “Yeah, you were out
there, and yeah, you’ve done some horrible things, and horrible things have happened to you, but you don’t know shit.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Carl challenged, taking a few steps forward.

You turned to face him. “It means that even at your worst, you were never alone. You had your parents from the start, and when your mom died, your father was there. Even when you thought you lost Judith, you got her back. From the first day of this fucking world, I had no one. My family was gone, and I was stuck with a convict and a girl I barely knew. I cried myself to sleep every damn night, wondering if my mom and dad were out there. And when I got to know Lee, he died, and when I started to love Clem, she disappeared.”

You paused when you realized you were screaming, and ran a hand down your face to get rid of the tears that were now streaming. You clenched your jaw to ground yourself. “I can’t ever be like you, Carl. I can’t let my guard down, I can’t let people protect me, because whenever they do, I lose them. My room still looks exactly like it did the day we got here, ‘cause I’m afraid that I’ll just have to pack everything up and move. I don’t get comfortable -- I protect the things I care about.” You took in a breath, suddenly realizing how close you and him were standing; you must have approached him in your angry rant. “That includes you.”

Carl responded in a way you didn’t expect: he hugged you. The action stunned you, meaning it took you a moment to wrap your arms around him in return.

“You’re strong, Ryan,” Carl agreed, tone sounding muffled as he spoke over your shoulder, “but you scare me sometimes.

“I’m sorry,” you confided with a whisper.

“Don’t be sorry, just…” Carl pulled away yet kept his arms around you, “be smart. Stay safe.”

You grabbed the brim of his hat, took it off, and brushed back his hair. “Yeah,” you smiled, “I will.”

You grew more aware of the physical contact the two of you were sharing, and lightened the mood by putting his hat back on in a way so it covered most of his face. With a laugh, he shoved your shoulder and fixed it.
“See,” Enid called through the still-closed door, “that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“Just open the damn door, Enid,” you returned.

You spent the whole night tossing and turning, desperate to get some sleep. The only thing on your mind was Sasha, or more specifically, the way she was trapped up in the tower with nowhere to go. Though the two of you weren’t necessarily friends, you couldn’t help but continue to mentally put yourself in her place. The air gets cold at night, and she didn’t have any extra cloth than what she was wearing. Sasha ate like a bird, meaning she probably didn’t go up with much food to begin with. Not to mention the increasing anxiety of listening to walkers moan and groan in a swarm only a few stories below you.

And yet, there you were, sleeping on your new mattress with washed sheets and the central heating kicking in and out.

With a sigh of defeat, you pulled back your blankets and swung your legs over the edge of the bed. You padded out of your bedroom and down the staircase, deciding that maybe a cup of tea would do the trick of lulling you to sleep.

Knowing the whistling tea pot was too risky this late at night, you settled on using the regular kettle. Apparently a house needed one of each. God, you still weren’t used to the strange, domestic tendencies of Alexandrians.

“Can’t sleep either?” You heard a voice from the living room asked.

Your eyes snapped over to the knife holder sitting on the counter. Once your mind caught up with your racing heart, though, you realized it was only Glenn. A breath of relief and irritation fled from your lungs.

“Sorry,” Glenn said, a trace of humor in his mouth as he appeared from the darkness in front of you and into the moonlit kitchen. “Didn’t mean to frighten.”

“Just light those candles, yeah?” you tilted your head to the center of the island, where a few candles sat in a wooden bowl.
“I think those are meant for decoration.”

You set a large box of matches on the island and scooted them towards him. “Ask me if I give a shit.”

Glenn smiled. “Fair enough,” he said while sliding the box open and striking a match. You put the kettle on the stove while the orange light flickered behind you.

“Why are you still up?” you asked, opening the cupboard and grabbing a pair of mugs.

“You first.”

You stiffened as you reached your hand out for the box of tea already sitting on the counter. “I’m worried about Sasha. She’s tough, but… being up there, all on her own… that’s gotta suck.”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m awake trying to think of a way to get her supplies.”

“Yeah?” you raised an eyebrow, ripping into two packages of tea bags and placing one in each mug. “How’s that going?”

“Not very well,” Glenn admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “Any way of distracting them risks bringing more to the gate, which is the last thing we need.”

“Fair point,” you agreed. The two of you stood in still and silent air while the water in the kettle boiled. When steam billowed from the spout, you poured a hearty glass into each mug. You turned around and set one down in front of Glenn, close to the lit candles.

You pondered for a second, then asked, “who says we need to use the door?”

Glenn frowned. “What does that mean?”
“Does anyone here have hiking gear?”
The plan was stupid -- that much you could admit.

Turns out Nicholas, of all potential Alexandrians, had gear similar to rock climbing. He a rig that looked similar to a massive fishing hook tied to a rope, and even had a pair of harnesses. Collectively, the three of you decided to present the idea to Rick. You could tell Glenn was less than impressed Nicholas would be involved, but he knew without him, the plan wouldn’t be possible.

“We can’t leave her up there with nothing,” Glenn argued when Rick tried to shut the idea down. “It’s as bad as letting walkers get to her.”

“It’s too risky,” Rick countered, a hand on his holster. You noticed it was something he did when talking about anything remotely serious; it must be his security blanket. “What happens if the cord breaks, or the attention draws more over? We can’t risk another broken panel, and we definitely can’t risk lives.”

You looked past the two men and to the parked pickup truck next to the wall. Apparently, earlier that morning, one had begun to loosen. You could see up to a few walker’s forearms, but no full bodies. You supposed that was the best that could be done at the moment.

“She’s risking hers every second she’s up there,” Glenn said. “We owe this to her. You know that: I know you do.”

Rick briefly pinched the bridge of his nose. “So what’s the plan? You climb over there and just come back? Couldn’t we just send a pack across the rope and be done with it?”

Glenn lowered his voice. “These walkers have to go, sooner better than later. Once we’re over there, Ryan, Sasha and I will come up with a plan to lead them away. Nicholas will help.”

“You don’t… You don’t have a plan yet?” Rick hissed.

“We’re smart people,” you intervened, stepping forward while Nicholas stayed a step behind, “and we’ve done stuff like this before. Maybe not to such a large extent, but we can’t exactly practice. We’re the best you’ve got, Rick.” You remembered Nicholas was standing behind you
and muttered, “well, most of us are.”

Rick sighed in defeat. You and Glenn must make a good team, because you could tell Rick knew he wasn’t going to win. “You have 20 minutes to pack for her and a few things for yourselves.”

Glenn threw the hook across the wall and to the guard tower. Though he did manage to catch it on one of the roof’s metal panels, you weren’t sure it was completely secure. You anxiously ran your hands along the straps of the backpack you were wearing. Nicholas, who was standing beside you on the platform, didn’t do as good of a job hiding his worry.

“That’s as secure as it’s gonna get,” Rick affirmed, tugging on the rope one last time. “I’ll tell when each of you can cross. Glenn, you wanna start?”

“I will,” you volunteered, raising your hand as if you needed to be called on. “It was my idea.”

“I’ve got this,” Glenn assured, his voice final yet somewhat kind. He hugged Maggie goodbye, the two talked for a moment, and they pulled away from each other.

“I think it’s best for everyone I don’t watch this,” Maggie explained as she approached the ladder. “Good luck, Ryan,” She offered before descending. You gave her a weary smile in response.

Glenn brought one leg over the wall and took a brief moment to look at you. You could almost hear him telling you that you didn’t have to do this, all without him saying a single word.

“I’m right behind you,” you stated, arms crossed in determination. He nodded slightly, and looked at Rick when the man patted him on the shoulder. Then, Glenn fully crossed over the panel and out of your view.

Taking a few steps forward, you looked over to see Glenn inching along the rope’s length. He was already a good yard away from the wall, which both impressed and concerned you. You noticed how much the rope was already sagging under his weight, but decided not to mention it. When he was about halfway across, Rick gave you the clear to go.
You put one leg over, similar to how Glenn did, and let out a breath. “Well, Mr. Grimes… if I die…”

“You’re not gonna die.”

“- Tell your brat of a son he can have my guitar.”

That got him to laugh, which made you smile. “And…” you added, clearing your throat, “Tell him he’s my best friend.”

“I think he’d rather hear that from you,” Rick informed.

“Probably,” you agreed, “but I’ve never been good with that mushy shit.” You sighed dramatically, “Whatever. This isn’t the last you’ll see of me, Richard.”

“It’s Rick,” he corrected as you carefully climbed onto the rope so your hands and legs wrapped around the top. “And I sure hope not.”

You grinned to yourself, surprised you had managed to rub off on the man. You then began to slowly inch across on the rope, growing more confident with each move you made. You supposed the more you picked up speed, the more you looked like a caterpillar on a leaf, but you were making excellent time. In fact, you were almost caught up to Glenn.

You felt a hand grip your backpack while another brush against your side.

“Shit!” you cursed, lifting your core so it was lined up with the rope. “It’s too much weight!”

“I’m almost there, Ryan! Just sit tight!” Glenn called back, and in a few moments, you could feel your body lifting slightly. The walkers below were still too close to comfort, but at least they couldn’t touch you anymore.

Much more hesitantly, you crossed the length of the cord until you reached the wall of the tower. Glenn offered you a hand up, which you used along with the edge of the roof. You hoisted yourself upwards and onto the roof, heart rate beginning to slow.
“Thank god,” you breathed, the mix of anxiety and strain starting to make your hands shake.

You looked up to see Nicholas was beginning to cross. His motions were surprisingly smooth; he seemed quite calm. He made it halfway across and the rope was sagging, but not as badly as it had moments ago. You thought he was in the clear.

That is, until the rope snapped.

Nicholas was hurled into the side of the watchtower. He began to frantically climb up the remains of the rope. Without hesitation, you and Glenn began to pull on the rope, but quickly found it difficult. Between the full body weight of Nicholas and the lack of access rope to grip, you were struggling to raise the man in a timely matter. Just when you thought Nick would become the roamer’s next meal, the job of lifting him suddenly became easier. You looked over your shoulder to see Sasha standing behind you, pulling the cord with easily as much force.

You and Glenn scurried to pull Nicholas up the moment he was in sight, you grabbing his legs while Glenn pulled his shoulders. The three of you fell back, heaving messes. Alive, breathing messes.

“I lost a shoe,” Nicholas murmured, eyes glancing down to his feet. Sure enough, only a long, black sock covered the limb.

“Good plan so far,” Sasha noted, looking over the herd, then back to the three of you. “Now what?”

You all eventually decided the best way to go about leading away the herd away was to first use a distraction. The backside of the tower had very few walkers compared to the front, meaning with the use of the rope, it would be the best escape route. Said person would use noise, like gunfire, to lead walkers away from the tower. Then, the rest of you could safely evacuate and a pair would begin to distract walkers from the gate and broken panel. The final person would use a car to lead the hoard, the other three people helping direct the walkers to the right path.

It wasn’t foolproof. In fact, there were many, many things that could go wrong. You heard Glenn’s story of how Nicholas freaking out got not only Aiden killed, but the group of Alexandria’s
scavengers as well. The idea of trusting him with any of the tasks at hands made you and Glenn weary, to say the least. Because of this, Nicholas was given the job he could least fuck up -- he was in charge of using a car to create a trail. The worst you decided he could do was just drive off, which would make the job harder for you, Glenn, and Sasha, but it wouldn’t risk much else. Perhaps too much was already at stake.

Glenn and yourself sat on the far end of the roof, using Sasha’s rifle and your bow to clear the few walkers. The escapee would need the clearest path possible; besides, Sasha needed to eat something and you were pretty sure Nicholas was pacing.

“How’s Enid doing?” He asked, catching you off guard.

“What?”

“You seem to talk to her a lot now,” Glenn observed, tone sounding neutral. At least he wasn’t accusing you of a crush or something.

“Well, yeah,” you said bluntly. “I mean, why do you care?”

“Us orphans gotta stick together, you know?” He laughed halfheartedly, the kind that was clearly somewhat sad and bitter.

“You’re a -?” You began, only to cut yourself off. Pretty much everyone you knew was an orphan these days. It was something you managed to forget, as there were few living people your age, and you had always unconsciously decided the cut-off age for the term. Now, though, it didn’t matter if the person was 5 or 105: a person without their parents is just that. An orphan is an orphan.

“I think she’s one of those people who occasionally need a kick in the ass,” Glenn continued. “You been handling that?”

“I mean, I pretty much bully people into being my friend, so… yeah, sure,” you shrugged. “That still doesn’t explain why you care, you know.”

“Conversation with you can never be boring,” Glenn said, which you silently agreed to with a smirk. You always had preferred to skip over the boring bits.
“I… see a lot of myself in her,” Glenn ceded, pausing to shoot a walker. “Back in Atlanta -- where I was when all this started -- I came so close to giving up. I had a group, a city I knew to scavenge, and I was miserable for every second. Too many times when I was on runs, I thought about just locking myself in a building and never coming out. But one day, I saw a police officer who managed to trap himself in a tank. I saved him.”

Your mouth partially opened in surprise. “Rick Grimes was your kick in the ass.”

Glenn chuckled. “Yeah. Yeah, he was.”

“Well, don’t feel too pathetic: Enid managed to lock me in a house yesterday.”

“What? How does that even happen?”

“Paranoia and the right circumstances,” you answered, “and now, we both have embarrassing stories to hold against each other.

“Excuse you: I’m the hero of my story.”

You snorted. “You needed a scrawy white boy to convince you life was worth living. That does not make you a hero.” You took aim and shot a walker dead in the eye.

“Maybe not,” Glenn agreed with the remnants of a smile.

“Holy shit,” The two of you heard Sasha curse from behind. You turned to look at her and noticed she was staring out at Alexandria, her hands hanging at her sides. “Guys… come look at this.”

You rose to your feet and walked across the small stretch of space. You glanced at her face and followed her gaze over the gate and into the city. You clenched your jaw in anxiety. “Fuck.”

The panel that had broken earlier that day had completely given way. Walkers began to flood past the truck they were using for support and into Alexandria. Despite the efforts of a few people, such
as Tobin and Carol, they were simply coming in too quickly.

“Okay, we’re doing this now,” you said, and grabbed the hook. You moved back over to where Glenn and you had been sitting, attaching it to the ridge of a massive vent. It wasn’t the sturdiest thing ever, but neither was the original crossover. Besides, this time you would only be scaling the wall.

“Sasha, Glenn, start trying to lead the herd away.” You said, pulling a pistol from your waistband and another from your backpack. “We might already be too late.”

“What are you doing?!” Sasha protested, checking the clip on her rifle.

“I’m going in,” you said, sounding breathless already. You knew you had stolen Enid’s metal pegs for a good reason. “We can still help them.”

“Good luck,” Glenn offered, deciding there was no time to disagree.

You nodded. “You too.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Nicholas chimed in. His worry was starting to become evident.

You looked down at your pistol in one hand. Between the other one you were holding and the bow resting across your chest, you decided you could live without it. You made sure the safety was clicked on before tossing it to Nick. “Stay alive.”

You carefully stepped over the roof and began to ‘walk’ down the wall. You set one foot fully against the wall before bringing the other down. Thankfully, there were no walkers at the bottom; they had crowded were now distracted by the break. You collected a few of your arrows before approaching the other side.

You used an arrow to stab the few stray roamers and reached the wall in great time. Rifling through your backpack, you quickly found the pegs and inserted one about the height of your waist. You stepped onto it, gripped the jutted framing, and reached down to remove it once you were secure. You repeated this process several times until you reached the top.
The climb down was much easier, as the walkers had not reached the other side yet, combined with the fact that you could jump down half of the length, saving you a few precious minutes. As you approached the broken panel, you cocked the pistol and blew the heads off of a few walkers that got a little too close to some people. One of those people ended up being Rick.

“How did you -?!” He began to shout, trailing off when he knew it didn’t really matter. Deanna had her arm slung around his shoulders and was pressed to his side. You assumed she had been injured.

You caught up with the pair quickly and helped keep walkers off as you tried to find somewhere -- anywhere -- that was safe. Thankfully, Michonne, Gabriel, and Carl caught up. Ron appeared as well.

When you tried to pull the trigger, your gun simply clicked. You cursed and slung your backpack to your side, shoving it inside and grabbing your bow and arrow. You used the sharpened limbs to stab a few and soon realized the process took more time than it was worth.

Walkers were beginning to surround the small group you found yourself in. Just when you thought there was no way out, several roamers from in front of Rick began to drop. After mostly thinning out, the culprit turned out to be Jessie.

“Come on, I have Judith!” She screamed and ran up her porch, all of you following suit. Everyone formed an unintentional straight line, Jessie and Carl at the front while you and Michonne came last. You closed the door after everyone had entered and slid the first piece of furniture you found in front of it. You didn’t realize said piece was a heavy table with multiple frames of glass in it, the kind that would be used as a display case.

By the time you turned around, everyone had disappeared into the house somewhere. You could hear Rick shouting questions and Jessie answering them from upstairs, so you supposed both Deanna and Michonne were up there as well. You couldn’t see Ron anymore, and after a moment, you heard Judith begin to cry out. You then saw Carl walking down the staircase, shushing her softly.

You sunk to the floor in exhaustion, yet managed to laugh. They eventually turned into a cackle of sorts, your mouth wide open and turned towards the ceiling as you laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Carl asked, Judith still crying a little too loudly.
“I never thought I would find that sound beautiful.”

For the most part, things seemed to calm down quite quickly. The walkers were still filling the streets, and Deanna was still injured, but the initial excitement of all the events unfolding had died down. You were left to hold Judith and watch the street from the kitchen window. You heard someone approach you from behind, and you guessed correctly by the footsteps.

“Deanna got bit,” Michonne said, confirming your guess. She approached you on the side opposite of where you were holding Judith.

“That blows,” you acknowledged, unsure of what else to say. You had hardly even conversed with the woman, so to say you would miss her simply wasn’t true. “Poor Spencer; he doesn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“Yeah,” Michonne agreed, sounding unbiased. Sounding uncompromised seemed to be her default.

“It was only a matter of time, right?” you asked rhetorically. “All of this. With or without us, this place had an end.”

“This isn’t the end,” she argued. “We can come back from this.”

“How?” you returned. You asked in what sounded like a cross between a laugh and a scoff. “How the hell is this something we can recover from?”

“We can rebuild Alexandria,” Michonne persisted, “and with the experience we’ll get for the next time something goes wrong… we might even make it better.”

“The last time I heard those words, I was the one that said them,” you recalled and began to hand Judith off to Michonne. “And a little bit after I said them, everything I knew turned to ashes. So… good luck with making this place better,” you finally offered, and walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs.
You made sure you were a decent space away from anyone who may hear you when you stowed yourself away in the room at the end of the hallway. Apparently it was a guest bedroom, not that it really mattered.

You took your bow and quiver off only to throw them across the room. Your weapon clattered and the arrows spilled out. You bite your thumb as hot tears began to drip down your face in a similar way that you slid your back down the door. You only dared to open your mouth when you knew your sobs would come out silent.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took less than two hours for all of the doors on the main level to be busted through. You supposed all of the original screaming along with Judith’s somewhat regular cries, the noise was bound to draw them in. Not only had they broken through and flooded the garage, but the walkers also managed to shatter the glass on the front and back doors. Sadly the furniture you all had used as makeshift barriers were beginning to loosen. Eventually, walkers broke through completely and everyone had to retreat upstairs.

That’s where you were now. Only, everyone was in a spare room, tearing into walkers and spreading the insides on bedsheets. You were rather in what you assumed to be Ron’s room, Deanna lying in the bed while Judith sat in the playpen. You planned on simply grabbing Judith and leaving; Deanna planned otherwise.

“What’s happening out there?” She asked, so softly that you almost dismissed it as you hearing things. You turned around in the doorway and let Judy rest her head on your shoulder.

“They’re getting in. The rest of us… we’re gonna have to go. I don’t -- I don’t know how we can help you,” you answered honestly. No point in lying anymore.

“You won’t,” she answered, not in a way to spark inspiration. She simply stated a fact, one that was of her own choice. “I can’t leave: I’ll slow you down. But I’m not ready yet. When I am, I’ll do it myself.”

“I’m sorry, Deanna,” you said, clenching your teeth together nervously. You weren’t sure what else there was to say.

“Why the hell would you, of all people, be sorry?” She asked with a laugh, one that obviously pained her. “You are what this place needs. Not only are you the future of civilization: you’ll be the one leading it.”

You shook your head in disagreement. “That’s Carl, not me. I… I don’t lead. Not anymore.”

“Ryan and Carl, the leaders of Alexandria,” Deanna continued as if she didn’t hear you. “You and him… has a nice ring to it.”
That’s how things already were, right? At least, to an extent. Over the past month or so, the two of you have grown not inseparable, but reliable to the other. You always thought that was better: it’s how you and Clem were.

You smiled so smally you weren’t sure the expression was even visible. “Yeah. Maybe.” You adjusted your grip on the toddler in your arms before saying, “you deserved a better end than this, Deanna.”

“Don’t we all?”

Michonne and Rick decided the first place you would all hit was the armory. Though quite obviously the smartest choice, you felt it was also the only choice -- what else was there to do? The hoard wasn’t thinning out (which lead to your concern regarding Glenn and Sasha’s safety), and only god knew how many Alexandrians were dead or locked in their houses. Now wasn’t the time to rescue them, either, because simply knocking on doors could be deadly. So instead, all of you draped yourself in blood-soaked blankets and began weaving through the undead crowd.

Carl and Rick were at the front, who was followed by Jessie, Ron, and Sam. Deciding not to break up the family, you were at towards the back. You were in front of Gabriel, who had Michonne behind him. Deanna stayed behind at the house, probably dead already. It was her choice, so you didn’t dwell on it.

Not long after you had gotten outside, Rick pulled everyone aside to a blank area of grass next to the pond. You immediately felt and heard mosquitoes and other bugs whizzing around your ears.

“Flares won’t be enough,” Rick said in a hushed tone as to not alert the walkers. “New plan.”

He then began to describe exactly the plan you, Glenn, and Sasha had come up with back on the watchtower. It was then you wondered if you should bring them up, to which you ultimately decided against. Rick had enough on his plate; he shouldn’t have to worry about if Maggie was a widow.

Jessie brought up the valid concern of what would happen to Judith. Rick contemplated for a moment, clearly not having thought about it. It was then Gabriel offered to take her back to the
church. This also caught Carl’s attention, who was holding her. You noticed the hesitation on his face.

“He wouldn’t let himself get killed,” you spoke so lowly only he could hear you. The adults were caught up in their own conversation anyways. “Yeah, he’s a coward, but a self-preserving one. And… I don’t think he’s the kind of man to just leave her behind. She’ll be okay.”

“Alright,” Rick eventually consented to Gabriel’s idea. This prompted Carl to approach the man while Rick carefully helped lift Carl’s makeshift poncho. Your back was turned in guard as Judith was traded off. Jessie asked for Gabriel to take Sam with him, which was ultimately settled and Sam remained. You watched as Gabriel slowly walked off, eerily fitting in with the sights around him.

Rick asked Sam for his hand, which made you reach out to the two people closest to you: Carl in front of you and Ron behind.

Night fell quickly, a little faster than you had hoped. Everyone was in the same order taken after Gabriel left, which had to be at least an hour ago. You were starting to wonder if Rick was leading the line in circles. Was Jessie’s house really that deep into Alexandria?

Maybe it was your hyperactive mind, but it seemed that the darker it got, the louder the herd got. It was bad enough you couldn’t seem to get used to them surrounding, suffocating you. To become more aware of their grinding jaws, their rotting insides, leather flesh, and milky eyes… you felt like you were a kid being chased home by one again.

Turns out, you weren’t the only who was beginning to panic. You looked ahead to see that Sam had let go of Rick’s hand and was now standing aside.

“Sam, you can do this,” You heard Jessie tell him. If you could hear her speaking, surely the walkers could.

There was a very real chance Sam would get all of you killed.

You observed for a few more seconds before being plagued with a terrible sight. A walker first bit into Sam’s shoulder while another went for the other side of his face.
“Mom!” you could hear him scream. His voice echoed off of the houses, maybe even the gates themselves. Ron stumbled back in shock while Jessie sobbed. The woman made no effort to pull away, despite both Rick and Carl’s coaxing.

“Come on,” you heard Carl plead, “We have to go.”

You watched as walkers then engulfed Jessie. She sunk into them as they tore her apart, yet she made no sound. It seemed to take her a moment to understand what was happening. When she did, her screams were louder than Sam’s.

After recovering from your initial shock, you could hear Carl struggling. You passed by Ron to see that Jessie was still gripping Carl’s hand. You placed yourself behind him and wrapped your hands around his forearm. Both his and your force didn’t seem to be enough, because Jessie still wouldn’t let up.

You saw Rick unsheath his axe. You buried your face in Carl’s shoulder, not wanting to watch what you knew was about to happen.

After a few grueling seconds, you felt the building power release. Carl stumbled backwards, which caught you so off-guard that the two of you fell backwards and into the grass. You rolled away from each other and were quickly back on your feet.

You approached Rick, breathing heavily with a mix of relief and anxiety. “Rick…” you whispered, only to realize you had no idea what to say. You had seen the way Rick and Jessie spoke; you saw that there was more than a friendship between them. And maybe Jessie was only his domestic bliss, and maybe they never really would have worked out, but -

You followed Rick’s absent gaze. It was on Ron, who was holding a pistol as tears streamed down his face.

“You,” you could read his lips, “you.”

Michonne appeared from behind him. Her katana ran right through his chest. Ron sunk back and shot a stray round. You could see that it was unintentional, as his eyes were already glossed over with death. Michonne removed her sword and let his body fall, which walkers swarmed around in seconds flat.
Rick nodded to Michonne, which she silently returned. You noticed Carl turning his head to look at his father, then you.

Your lungs shriveled up inside your chest and your stomach exploded when you saw that half of his face was bloody. His right eye was nonexistent and was instead replaced by a bloody mess of tissue.

“Dad?”

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you, Javier,” you said as you walked into your ‘office’. As much as you hated sharing a space that was formerly Carver’s, the speaker room was simply too good to give up. It looked over the warehouse many of Eclipse workers spent their days in; it allowed you to see pretty much everything. “I’m just not cut out for this.”

“You’re not cut out for the thing you’ve been doing since day one of this place?” he asked, crossing his arms at the now closed door. “Ryan, you made Eclipse what it is. And now you want to step down?”

You took a seat in the wheeled chair by the desk. Pinching the space between your eyebrows, you sighed. “I have so many plans for Eclipse -- so many hopes. I can see this becoming an honest-to-god government. I just don’t see myself being the head of it.” You paused as he simply stared at you. “It’s hard to put in words, but… I don’t feel like a leader. I know people look up to me, and I know that I’m the one who started all of this, but I can’t feel the accomplishment. All I see is the things that can be done better, the things I did wrong."

“You can’t give up like this,” Javier disagreed. “I can’t think of a single bad idea you’ve ever had. People don’t just follow you: they respect you. That is so hard to get these days. And you’re gonna give that up because, what, you don’t feel good? Because you had a bad day? That’s bullshit.”

“How dare you,” you said, so quietly you almost didn’t hear yourself. “How dare you discredit me like that.”
“What?”

You stood up, growing so angry that your skin heated up and you almost felt yourself begin to shake. “You know me, Javier. You know that I don’t give up easy, so you must know how much this is killing me.” You felt tears spring to your eyes, yet you persisted. “Then again, maybe you don’t. Because maybe I’m giving up, but you’re the man that told a child they had to clean up the mess other people created.” Tears were streaming down your face. You reached out and pushed Javi’s chest as you screamed, “you’re the fucking reason I’m alone!”

Javier reached out and pulled you close to him. You let out a sob, your hands balling into his shirt. You felt his lips press against your scalp.

“You’re not alone,” his said softly, “you never will be. I won’t let that happen.”

“Then why are my friends dead?” You asked. “Why does everyone around me die?”

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“Carl,” you gasped, his name getting choked in your throat. Time moved slower as you watched him slowly begin to fall.

Your legs turned to jelly, yet somehow, you managed to step forward. That single step turned into you bolting forward without truly realizing what you were doing.

You managed to catch Carl, your arm reaching right under his shoulders. You instinctually slid your other arm under his knees and heaved his unconscious body against your own. The weight of your worry replaced his physical weight, as your arms hardly responded to the teenager now in your arms.

“We need to get to the infirmary!” you shouted, no longer caring the a very alive herd of walkers was still surrounding you. You looked up to see Michonne already clearing a path, which you began to use.

Carl’s arms and legs dangled lifelessly with each shaky step you took. About halfway to the infirmary, you leaned the side of your head to his mouth. You felt a small gust of breath hit your skin. You laughed happily, though it sounded more like a sob.
“Stay with me, Carl,” you whispered to him. The infirmary came into view. “Don’t die. Please.”

Denise opened the door and stepped aside. Michonne let you pass her as you brought Carl inside, setting him on the cleared table Denise pointed to. You carefully set the boy down and turned to see Rick step in. You took in a shaky breath as you looked at him. He simply stared at his son, in obvious disbelief he was still alive.

“Please…” you heard him say as you walked towards him. You lifted the dirtied cloak over his head, which he hardly noticed. You tossed it on the floor where no one would trip on it. “Save him.”

“Dammit,” you heard Denise curse as she began blotting the wound with a towel. “Stop bleeding, stop bleeding… Spencer, I’m gonna need a unit of blood.”

“There was none in the fridge when I got the saline,” He answered.

“Check again!” She demanded. “I need to stick an IV.”

“No,” you said, which made almost everyone look up at you. “Keep working. I can stick him.”

“Ryan, I don’t think -” She began.

“You’re the doctor here,” you hissed, moving closer to the table and away from Rick. “I can do the field work.”

Reluctantly, Michonne handed you an already prepared catheter. You rolled Carl’s arm so his palm was facing upwards and began flicking the skin at the edge of his elbow. A bright blue vein appeared visually, which you bounced up and down under your finger to be sure it would be a good hit. You took the cap of the needle off with your teeth and inserted it into the vein, then pulled the needle out and hooked the tube up the catheter that was now intravenous. You hung the IV bag and watched Denise stitch up the wound.

“Rick’s out there,” Michonne breathed out, which made you realize he had left.
“Just a second,” Denise responded calmly.

“Go, Michonne,” you stepped in. You walked around to the other side of the table and took her place in helping him. “Go help him. All of you.” you glanced up to look at Aaron, Heath, and Spencer.

Michonne kissed your cheek in good luck, squeezed Carl’s hand, and left. The men trailed out behind her, Spencer going last.

“No blood,” you heard Denise mutter to herself as she finished the last suture, “there’s no damn blood.”

“Oh my god,” you said to yourself in realization, “I’m a universal donor.”

Denise perked up upon hearing this. “You’re O negative blood type?”

“Yeah,” you said, then more confidently added, “Yes!”

“Ryan, if you’re wrong, you could kill him. Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes,” you persisted, already searching for a vein on yourself and looking around the room for a transfusion kit. “It was my father’s; he always joked it was the only thing I inherited from him.”

“Alright then,” Denise agreed and got to looking for the proper supplies.

»»———– ◄———««

You lifted another body and threw it into the back of the truck. Abraham and Darryl had returned from their run in time to help Glenn and Sasha round up the walkers inside of Alexandria. Apparently Nick died helping, which you had to admit was a better end than you thought the man could ever have. Glenn claimed Nick is the reason he was still alive.
Of course, all of that was already a day and a half ago. It was now early morning, and you were helping a crew clean up the walkers that Rick and a group of Alexandrians helped him clear when Carl was originally brought to the infirmary. Nearly 36 hours ago that was, and he still wasn’t awake. You were slowly beginning to lose hope he ever would.

“Hey,” you heard a voice from behind you say, which pulled you out of worrying thoughts -- mostly.

You turned around and smiled halfheartedly. “Hey, Enid.”

“Anything new?” She asked, which you swiftly understood as ‘anything new about Carl’.

You shook your head and rubbed the sweat blossoming at your forehead. “No, not yet.”

“No news is good news,” Enid replied. “At least, that’s what my mom always said.”

“Smart woman,” you noted, and got up on the truck to pull down the heavy door. You slammed it shut, jumped down, and knocked on the back two times to signal everything was ready to go. Last you heard, Abraham had a series of bonfires burning bodies a few miles out. “I was actually about to head over and check in on him. Wanna come?”

“Can I take a raincheck?” Enid asked as you jumped down. The two of you began walking beside the other. “I promised Maggie I would have breakfast with her.”

“How is she doing, by the way?” you asked, indirectly confirming the raincheck she had mentioned. The two girls had stowed themselves away in the same house when Alexandria had been overrun. You supposed the pair bonded, because they seemed to be spending a lot of time together. You were happy for Enid: she deserved the company.

“I think she’s had Glenn in a chokehold ever since he got back,” Enid laughed. “But… she’s good, I think.”

“That explains why he wasn’t out here helping this morning,” you chuckled in agreement. There were no designated ‘jobs’ for the clean-up crew but Glenn was the kind of person who helped out wherever he could. After all, he was the first person to jump on your idea of climbing across to the watchtower.
“Yeah,” Enid agreed. A comfortable silence that fell between you was disturbed when Enid asked, “Ryan, are you okay? And I don’t mean that fake smile, ‘of course I am’ bullshit. I mean, are you really... okay?”

“Of course I am,” you replied, which got you a punch to the arm. You laughed, which died in your throat rather quickly. You swallowed and said, “no, not really. But I slept for more than 4 hours last night, I’m not starving or thirsty, and Carl isn’t dead yet. So... give me some time, and I will be.”

“Fair enough,” Enid said. She purposely bumped shoulders with you, to which you did the same. She broke off to walk up the path to Maggie’s house.

“See you later,” you told her with a wave goodbye.

“Be smart, Ryan,” she said, and disappeared inside.

You carried on to the infirmary, which was roughly a block and a half away. You opened the door and stepped inside, knowing Denise wasn’t bothered by your unannounced entrance. Besides, odds were, she was still asleep. Looking up, you noticed Rick sitting up in his seat. He was beside Carl’s bed in what looked like a dining room chair.

“Did you spend the night here?” you asked, walking to the end of the bed. Carl looked peaceful, his mouth slightly open, eyes shut, and his hair brushed away from his face.

“I guess so,” Rick responded, his voice rougher than usual.

“Go home, get some real sleep,” you said, sitting on a clear part of the foot of the bed. “I can watch him.”

Rick didn’t respond. You let out a small breath. “You know, when he wakes up -”

“If,” he interrupted you.
“- when he wakes up,” you proceeded, “He’s gonna need his father, not some… ghost.”

Rick ran a hand through his hair in contemplation. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” he ceded, standing up and adjusting his belt. You realized he was wearing the same clothes from the night the accident happened. Perhaps you were starting to lose your sense of smell, because your nose hardly noticed.

“See you then,” you wished him farewell as you took his place in the chair. A few seconds later, you heard the door rattle shut. You glanced behind your shoulder to confirm that he had left.

You let out a small laugh, the bitter kind that left a sour taste in your mouth. “How the hell did we get here?” you asked without expecting an answer. “How did any of this ever happen? And how did I change so much while you stayed the same?” you reached out and took his cold hand in your own. “You’re good, Carl, so much better than I’d ever tell you to your face. Ever since the day I met you, I envied you. I didn’t get how you could be so kind but so broken. I didn’t understand how you could be afraid, but still be alive. I think… I get it, now. I understand. Because, I’m alive, Carl, but I’m so damn afraid.”

You cut yourself off before a sob could escape. You gave yourself some time to recompose yourself. “The people here, they’ve been living what I wanted from the start — they knew so little that they got to pretend. It’s something I can never do, because… I think death follows me. Yeah, it follows everyone now, but sometimes I feel like I’m especially cursed. Maybe it’s karma, maybe not. I guess I’ll never really know. What I do know is that after all of this, not even Alexandrians can pretend anymore. So I won’t either.”

You let out a shaky breath. “I won’t pretend I’m okay, not after everything I’ve lost. I won’t pretend that I don’t think about Clementine every waking second, or that I see so much of her in you. I won’t pretend that that you’re the only reason I’m alive, or that I’m alive for myself either. Frankly, I don’t know why I’m alive anymore; I just know that one day, I want you to know every part of me.

“When we first got here, I said I owed you a favor for catching me. I probably owe you so much more than one by now, but… I returned it. I caught you, before you could hit the ground.” You brought his hand to your cheek, supporting the back using one of your own while the other gripped his wrist. “This time, I’m asking you, Carl: catch me again. Prove me wrong; prove to me that I can have one good thing in this shitty life.”

You let yourself go. Your mouth contorted and your eyes squeezed shut, and you let yourself cry silently.
You swore you felt something brush away one of your tears.

You forced yourself to breathe, which sounded something like a gasp. Pulling Carl’s hand away from your face, you carefully set his arm flat on the bed. He didn’t move. You were so desperate for comfort that you were making up sensations. That’s what you thought until you looked at his face to see that he was staring at you.

This time, you actually gasped.

“Not dead yet, Ashling,” he whispered, voice gritty and soft from lack of use. “So what are you crying for?”

*I won’t pretend anymore*, you reminded yourself. “I was afraid,” you answered honestly, wiping your face.

“Bullshit,” he replied. “You’re not afraid of anything.”

You stood up from your chair and instead sat on the side of the bed. You set your hands on his cheeks and leaned in. You whispered, “believe me: I am.” Then, you closed your eyes, and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

AHHHHHH! Believe me, none of you are as excited about this as me, I swear! Haha, this slow-burn has been killing me, and I'm so happy you guys have stuck with this story for so long.

As always, what was your favorite part? Also, what do you hope to see for Carl and Ryan's relationship? *eyebrow wiggle* I'd love to know!

Until next time... xx
“We’ve been going at this all wrong. Or rather, I’ve been going at this all wrong.”

The entirety of Rick’s original group and select Alexandrian natives were all sat in the Main House. You were sitting on a dining room chair that was turned backwards, while almost everyone else was seated on the furniture or standing close to it.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what was can accomplish here now that I’ve seen what we can do when we all work together,” Rick continued. “I gotta say… my mind is racing with possibilities. Just thinkin’ about the the easy stuff first -- we could create an obstacle field of cars other things in the roads leading to us. A maze could give us a heads up on any new herds or unwanted vehicles. Any other ideas?”

“We can reinforce the walls by packing dirt behind them,” Abraham suggested. “We could get the dirt by digging a trench around the outside. Nothin’ too deep, just enough to trip up dead bastards.”

“Everyone comfortable with weapons should carry them, even inside the walls,” you spoke up. “Abraham and Daryl had a second encounter with the ‘Saviors’; the last thing we need it them attacking again when we aren’t ready.”

“I can teach people how to shoot,” Sasha added. “If we’re talking theoretic attacks, we can use all the help we can get.”

“And I can teach close-range fighting, like knives and how to throw a good punch. Stuff like that,” Rosita said.

“I’m done recruiting people,” Aaron spoke up. It wasn’t exactly the kind of thing Rick was referring to, though it served well enough. “It’s just too dangerous. We lucked out finding you and your people, but after the Saviors turned up at our gates like that, I’m not sure anyone out there is good anymore. Besides, our time is better spent improving what we have here.”

“All great ideas,” Rick approved.
The meeting ended after a few more propositions were made, such as bigger run teams being sent out so more ground could be covered and the idea of more town events taking place. Everyone began to file out of the house, most likely wanting to return to their jobs. After all, a lot of work still needed to be done; the walls didn’t reinforce themselves.

“Ryan,” Rick said your name, which made you turn around. You already had one hand on the open door, Rosita exiting in front of you. You turned to look at her.

“Can you tell Denise I’ll be a little late?” you asked Rosita. She nodded and left behind the others. You closed the door behind her and faced Rick again. “What can I do for you, Richard?”

“Daryl and I are goin’ on a run,” Rick explained. “It’ll last all day.”

“Okay…” you drew out, not understanding his point. It didn’t sound like an invitation, and if you were honest, you would turn down the offer if it was.

“I need you to keep track of Carl for me.”

“Oh,” you said, and your eyes slightly widened with realization. He didn’t - no, he couldn’t -

“I know you two get along well, that you’re friends,” he continued and sighed. “I know he tells you things he doesn’t tell me.”

You hoped the breath of relief you let out wasn’t audible. “Yeah, of course. I’ve got this,” you assured with a nod, one that may have been a little too enthusiastic.

“Thank you,” he said, and you could tell it was sincere.

The attention on yourself made you feel a little awkward, yet you managed to smile a little. “Don’t worry about it: I bug him anyways.”

“Hey, Ry,” you heard from behind Rick. It was Carl, though half of his face was covered with white bandages and he wasn’t wearing his hat. “Can you help me?” he asked, then pointed at the pad of gauze over his eye.
“Why else would I be here?” you said, but you were already shedding your bow and other accessories. “Not to play some music, maybe a read a little.” Despite your joking, you were grateful for an easy end to yours and Rick’s conversation.

“Hey, you can’t talk to sick kids like that,” Carl said as you followed him up the staircase.

“You’re not sick,” you said with a laugh. You had to admit, there wasn’t really a better way to put it. ‘Disabled’ was a fitting term, yes, but in this world, it almost seemed to invalidate what a survivor Carl was. Meanwhile, ‘crip’ sounded too vulgar/demeaning, at least to you. Maybe ‘sick’ was the best way to put what happened into words.

You followed the boy into the bathroom and closed the door. “Okay, man,” you said as you turned around, “you got me alone. What do you -?”

You were cut off by Carl’s mouth pressing against yours. It wasn’t in the gentle, hesitant way things happened when he woke up -- this time, it was desperate, starved, needy. His hands beginning to explore your body only proved this.

Reaching your hands up to neck, your thumbs rested a few inches from the corners of his mouth. You kissed him back with just as much fervor, and pulled away only to breathe.

“What the hell was that for?” you asked, though it came out as more of a pant.

You heard him turn the lock on the door you were now pressed against. “My dad’s got prepping to do for tomorrow,” he replied. “We’ve got the house to ourselves.”

“Oh, do we now?” you teased as you fixed his shirt’s crooked neckline.

The initial accident -- and thus, the initial kiss you both shared -- was already three weeks ago. And, in the three weeks following, you and Carl had only grown closer. When the two of you were alone, you had to be touching the other in some way or another. Sometimes it was simply you resting your leg against his, while other times, he’d take your hand and you’d take his. Of course, this lead to more kissing, but they were never this… passionate.
Trying to describe the way you felt around him (or even about him) made you feel childish. You felt like a hormonal teenager that was turning something physical into something else. Maybe you were supposed to feel worried about every step you take and everything you say. That’s what teenagers did, right?

“Carl,” you laughed, which sounded a little too close to a giggle. He was still kissing you, his hands reaching up to unbutton your shirt. “Carl,” you repeated, a little more firmly. You touched his chest, but to push him away gently.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, a confused grin on his face. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no,” you assured, “you did everything right, I promise. I just…” you looked up at him, and suddenly saw the same kid from your dreams. You saw the Carl with an eyepatch, the one you defend from bullies on your way home from school.

You felt sick to your stomach. “I-I have to go.”

“Ryan, what’s going on?” Carl asked, though it came out as more of a statement.

“I have work to do,” you lied. Without another word, you opened the door and exited the bathroom, anxious to get out of the house.

You ended up walking from Alexandria to an abandoned shop two miles out. A small group led by Abraham cleared the area earlier, so you weren’t worried about encountering anything you couldn’t handle.

You found what you were looking for within moments of stepping inside the stuffy building. Unfortunately, finding the bench grinder and welding mask was the least of your problems — you’d have to find a way to make it move without electricity. Like always, though, you had a plan.

The workshop had at least five abandoned vehicles around the perimeter. Some of them had broken windows or missing tires, but all of them had inches of dust and years of weathering. Despite the obvious signs of age and possible misfortune, you held out hope that your hope could hold true. You found the most promising vehicle — a car with an ugly shape and keys still in the ignition — and got to work.
You set your findings and your bow on the ground before opening the car. You immediately reached over to the passenger side and popped open the glove compartment. After ruffling past insurance papers and other useless things, you found the owner’s manual to the car. You smiled in triumph, opening it and flipping through until you landed on the page you were looking for.

When diagram of the car battery and several wires appeared in the manual, you dumped out the contents of the backpack you brought with you. A pair of pliers, a screwdriver, a set of gloves, and a power converter tumbled out and onto the floor of the vehicle. You moved the converter to the driver’s seat and next to the manual, leaving the other tools by the pedals.

You managed to remove the plastic cover on the steering column with ease, tossing it outside and out of the way. You pulled out three bundles of wires hidden beneath the cover, and with the help of the manual, were able to identify them. You recognized one of the bundles as the one powering the battery, which was the only set you needed.

Picking up the pliers, you began to remove some of the insulation from the battery wires. You slipped a hand into your hide gloves before twisting the metal ends together. You reached up and turned the key, laughing with glee when the car battery sounded.

You swiped the manual off of the chair and took a seat, taking one end of the power converter and plugging it into the port on console. You then leaned down and picked up the welding mask and grinder you left on the ground before entering the car. You plugged in the grinder, flipping the switch to test it. It began to spin quickly, which made you grin with excitement.

Between the grinder and the converter’s cord lengths, you managed to bring the device outside of the car while keeping it plugged in. You found a rusted trolley leaning against the shop and dragged it closer to the vehicle. You set the grinder on the edge, grabbed your bow, flipped down your mask, and turned on the grinder.

Sparks began to fly the moment you touched the edge of your weapon to the grinder. You pressed down with moderate force, the whirring sound turning into a high whining one. You sharpened the top in short bursts, making the two points each end came to so sharp they could pierce skin.

Then, you packed up your bag, closed the door, and began to walk home.
You were back by that part bench, only this time, you weren’t young; you weren’t the age you were when you met Clementine. This time, you were the same age you currently were, and there were no bullies. In fact, there wasn’t anything in sight besides a park bench and the boy that sat on it.

He turned his head up to you. He didn’t look grateful like before. If anything, the boy looked betrayed, if a little sad. His eye was once again covered with an eyepatch that looked more like a costume.

“Why didn’t you save me?” Carl asked, speaking as though his voice would shatter his own body. “You could have saved me.”

Your breath caught in your throat. You eyes filled with tears, every emotion you ever felt rushing through you and clogging your throat.

“You saw this coming.”

Now, Carl was standing a few years away from you. He wore the sheriff’s hat his father gave him, but it wasn’t enough to block the wound that replaced the eyepatch.

You blinked and he was closer. You could hear the growling and crunching of walkers around you, though you couldn’t see them. The fear instilled in your body didn’t come from the unseen creatures smothering you — it was the boy you had been through hell with. Guilt managed to crawl through the cloud of terror filling your insides.

Carl moved closer again, too quick for you to actually see.

“It should have been you.”

“I wish it was,” you whispered, tears streaming freely down your face. “I’m so sorry, Carl.”

“You could have stopped this!” he screamed, face inches apart from yours in the worst way possible.

As much as you hated the action, you began to slightly cower.

“I’m sorry!” you shouted back, which came out as a sob.
“You can’t save anyone, can you?” he taunted, voice back to normal but gaze still dead. “You couldn’t save Clem, you couldn’t save Nick, and you couldn’t save me. What good are you?”

“I don’t know,” you admitted in the form of a whimper. You were completely crouched down, arms folded to hide your face. “I don’t know.”

You felt a hand on your shoulder, which made you bolt upright. Carl was the one who had touched you, only it was really him. You were back in your bedroom, back in Alexandria, back in reality.

“Hey, it’s me,” he assured, a look of concern clad on his face. “Are you okay?”

You set a hand on your chest when you noticed how uneven your breaths were. Your shirt was damp with sweat. “I think so.”

He reached out again, and despite how awful you felt for it, it was hard not to flinch away from the contact. All Carl ended up doing was brushing away the tears that had accumulated on your cheeks. You were thankful for his gentle touch and even managed to lean into it briefly.

“What was it about?” He asked gently. You could feel his thumb brushing over your cheekbone.

“You,” you swallowed, “...and your eye.”

You noticed that Carl stiffened for a moment, but managed to relax just as quickly.

“I saw it happen, Carl,” you whispered.

“Of course you did,” he answered. “You’re the one that brought me to the infirmary.”

“I mean before then,” you said, “before it actually happened. I had a dream that we were kids, and that you had an eyepatch.”

“Ryan…”
“I should’ve known,” you said with a sad laugh, fresh tears beginning to fall. You squeezed your eyes shut in an attempt to stop anymore from coming. “I should’ve protected you.”

His grip moved from your face to your shoulder, his other hand moving up to rest on the other one. “Nobody saw this coming. No one could have stopped this, not without getting hurt themselves. You carried me across the city, Ry. You caught me before I hit the ground, you got me to a doctor, and you gave me your fucking blood. You didn’t just protect me: you saved me.”

Though you didn’t fully believe everything he said, you mustered a miniscule smile and reached over to hug him. It felt good to take in his scent, his warmth, his presence. Knowing that he was alive and well, not a walker or a ghost in your dreams, brought you amity.

A noise came from the stairwell.

The two of you snapped away from each other, and without hesitation, you handed Carl the pistol you kept on your nightstand. Your bow was always tucked in the space between your bed and the small table, making it easy for you to grab and follow him out with.

Thankfully, Carl left the door open a crack, which meant he could slowly push it open without any sound. He looked over his shoulder to see that you already had your bow loaded and slightly lifted in defense. You gave him a curt nod, which prompted the boy to move forward and out of the room.

Both of you pressed your backs to the wall before turning the corner. Carl lifted his free hand to count down from ‘3’. You knew what to do when he reached zero.

Carl was the first to turn, you moving swiftly from behind him and to the space next to him. You managed to find your aim less than a second after he did. It was clear that the intruder wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon, between the multiple weapons aimed at him to the fact that he took a painting off of the wall to look at it.

“What the hell are you doing in our house?” Carl growled as he cocked his gun. If you were on the other end of the gun, you’d choose your next words carefully.

“I’m, uh, sitting on the steps looking at this painting, waiting for your mom and dad to get dressed,” the man stated calmly.

Carl’s head moved to the side curiously. He glanced over at you, and all you could do was frown.
“He ain’t talking about me,” you shrugged. The two of you then returned your attention to the stranger.

“Hi,” he said, turning his gaze to look between you both. “I’m Jesus.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure finding a car with a working battery, plus hot-wiring it, plus being able to power something following said hot-wiring isn’t the most realistic thing ever, but this is The Walking Dead. Realism isn’t a thing in this universe, lol.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I love Paul (Jesus) Rovia. That's all folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How’d you get out?” Rick asked.

Jesus sat at the end of the dining room table. Michonne and Rick were opposite of each other and in the seats next to him. Carl sat by Michonne, and by the look on his face, didn’t seem phased that he saw her and his father walk out of the same bedroom half naked mere moments ago. Glenn sat on the other end, and Abraham stood beside him. Daryl was restlessly pacing, while you leaned against the wall by the window.

“One guard can’t cover two exits… or third floor windows,” Jesus answered. “Knots untie and locks get picked. Entropy comes from order, right?”

“Right,” Daryl answered gruffly.

“I checked out your arsenal,” Jesus continued after brief silence. “I haven’t seen anything like that in a long time. You’re well-equipped, but your provisions are low. Very low for the amount of people you have.”

Following a few minor spats involving Alexandria’s population and the cookie Jesus ate, it was clear he was ready to get to his point. You, on the other hand, were a little preoccupied with wondering why Rick didn’t tell you he had a prisoner.

“Look, we got off to a bad start,” Jesus said to Daryl, “but we’re on the same side — the living side. You and Rick had every reason to leave me out there, but you didn’t.

“I’m from a place that’s a lot like this one. Part of my job is searching out other settlements to trade with. I took your truck because my community needs things, and both of you looked like trouble. I was wrong. You’re good people, and this is a good place. I think our communities may be in a position to help each other.”
“Do you have food?” Glenn immediately asked.

“We’ve started to raise livestock. We scavenge, we grow.”

“Tell us why we should believe you,” Rick interjected.

“I’ll show you,” Jesus said simply. “If we take a car, I can get you back home in a day, and you can all see for yourselves who we are and what we have to offer.”

“Wait,” Maggie frowned, “you’re looking for more settlements. You mean you’re already training with other groups?”

With a smile, Jesus leaned back in his chair. “Your world is about to get a whole lot bigger.”

Within the hour, Rick had chosen a small group of people that would be traveling to Jesus’s community. You were a part of said team, and were thus helping pack things into the RV and instructing others on what to do when Rick was gone. As you were helping Olivia and Maggie with rations, you looked up and across the porch you stood on to see Carl standing on the road. He was filling up containers of gas and stowing them away in the back of the vehicle.

You watched Rick approach him, Judith in his arms. The young girl waved to her brother, which made the corner of your lip turn up. Maggie and Olivia’s voices faded away as you watched the three of them interact. Rick handing Judith off to Carl made you frown, but it seemed to end their conversation.

“...Ryan?” Maggie asked, waving a hand in front of your face. Her eyebrows were raised. “You with us?”

“Yeah,” you nodded sharply, bringing your attention to the woman. “Of course.”

“So what do you think?”

“Sounds good,” you agreed, even though you had no idea what she was talking about. “It could work.” You looked over to see Carl beginning to walk down the street. “I’ll catch up with you two
You didn’t wait for a dismissal to walk down the stairs and cross the street. You caught up with Carl easily, setting a hand on his shoulder. “Where are you going?” you asked, letting your hand drop as he turned around. “We’ll be leaving any minute now.”

“I’m not going.”

Your eyebrows pulled together. “What? Why not?”

Carl gestured to his eye with the hand that wasn’t holding Judith.

“Oh come on,” you deadpanned, “that’s the worst excuse ever.”

“I don’t want to scare anyone. What if there are kids?”

“It’s not your job to make people comfortable,” you pointed out. “Besides, aren’t you at least a little curious to see if our Lord and Savior is telling the truth?”

Carl chuckled softly. “You’re so going to hell.”

You raised a finger to your lips. “Children!” you hissed, pointing at the little girl in his arms. Judith simply giggled and reached out for you. You smiled, carefully taking her from Carl’s grip. “C’mon, I’ll drop her off with Gabriel and you can go get your stuff.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he returned, taking off further down the street. You snorted and adjusted your hold on Judith, who stared at you with big eyes.

“He’s gonna be the death of me,” you told her, which she clearly didn’t understand. “But you know what?” you asked, poking at her stomach. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She laughed and nuzzled her forehead into your neck.
The drive was long and mostly silent. Jesus sat right behind Michonne, his hands tied and sat in his lap. Abraham sat directly behind Rick, who was driving, and you and Carl were beside the burly ginger. Maggie was asleep next to Jesus, and Glenn reached out to set a gentle hand on her stomach. If there were any two people brave enough to raise a child in the mess everything was in, it was those two.

Abraham leaned forward, speaking to Glenn in a hushed tone. Your back was pressed to the bench seat you sat on, and past Abe’s curved back, you saw Michonne’s hand resting on her own knee. You also saw Rick reach across and take it in his.

You purposefully slouched, turning your head to speak to the boy beside you. “Are you okay with them? Like, seriously okay?”

Though you were sure Rick found a moment to explain him and Michonne to Carl, you thought he could make use of your unbiased feeling regarding the topic. Your dad once asked you several times if you were okay with living under the same roof as the woman who ended up becoming your step-mother. Each time, you smiled and said you were fine with it. On the inside, though, you wanted nothing more than to scream at him for taking you away from your mom and finding the love he once had for her in someone else.

Carl shrugged. “It doesn’t really affect me.”

“Of course it does,” You disagreed. “He’s your dad, and Michonne is your friend before she’s your… whatever she is now.”

“I guess it’s sorta weird,” he admitted, “but I’m also kind of… happy for them. I don’t know. They both deserve something good.”

When you saw the way he was looking at you, you shoved his shoulder to hide the smile on your face.

The first thing you saw after stepping out of the RV was a massive wall. It wasn’t made of sheets of metal, like back in Alexandria, but was rather a collection of logs. If you had to guess, you’d say the people of the community simply cut down trees and arranged them to their liking.

Jesus took the lead, walking up a dirt road that was wet with rain. Rick decided to cut his hands free of rope. No one wanted to lower their guns on him, but Jesus’s bound hands mixed with their
weapons wouldn’t make a great first impression. His freedom was a compromise, of sorts.

Everyone was coming up to a metal gate when you heard a sentence you heard many times before.

“Stop right there!”

This prompted everyone in the group, excluding you and Carl, to raise their guns up at the voice. Jesus immediately turned around with his arms stretched.

“You gon’ make us?” Daryl threatened. His automatic was aimed right at one of the two people on each edge of the fence.

“Jesus, what the hell is this?!” One asked.

“Open the gates, Cal,” Jesus replied calmly. He turned to the group. “Look, I’m sorry about these guys, they —” Jesus spoke louder so they could hear him, “ — get ansty standing up there all day, doing nothing.”

“They give up the weapons,” Cal persisted, “then we’ll open the gates.”

“Why don’t you come down and get em’?” Daryl said.

Jesus sighed. “If they want to hurt anyone, they would’ve started with me. Lower the spears.”

“Look,” Rick said to Jesus, stepping forward. “I’m not taking any chances. Tell your guy Gregory to come out here.”

“No,” he replied instantly. “Don’t you see what just happened? I’m letting you keep your guns. We ran out of ammo months ago. I like you people; I trust you. Trust us.”

After a moment, Rick waved his hand back and forth over his head to call everyone off.

“Open the gates, Cal,” Jesus instructed again.
This time, he listened.

As the tall panels swung open, you felt yourself being pulled to the inside by curiosity like it was magnetism. You saw several huts to the side of the dirt road extending into the community, one of them being a blacksmith’s. A few people were walking around, some holding various animals on a leash. To the far right was a series of trailers — you guessed there was at least 15 of them. Farther up ahead, you could see what appeared to be a garden, and the garden seemed to be doing well. And, most obviously, there was a three-story high building that looked sort of like a mansion.

“That’s called Barrington House,” Jesus said, pointing up towards the building you were ogling. He was speaking to Michonne, thankfully; she must have asked him something. “The family that owned it gave it to the state in the 30s. The state turned it into a living history museum. Every elementary school in 50 miles used to come here for field trips. Place was running a long time before the modern world built up around it. I think people came here because they figured it’d keep running after the modern world broke down.

“Those windows up there,” he gestured to the highest floor, “let us see for miles in every direction: it’s perfect for security. Come on, I’ll show you inside.”

The minute you stepped into Barrington, it felt like you were living in a movie. An elegant staircase curved across the open room. The walls were decorated with expensive-looking paintings. The floor was dressed in an amber rug. You forgot places like Barrington existed.

Jesus explained that most of the house was converted into bedrooms, and that they planned to add more onto the building.

A set of doors to the left swung open. An older gentleman in a tucked-in button down and suit jacket stepped out. You already didn’t trust him; what kind of respectable person dressed up like they were going to church in times like these?

“Jesus, you’re back,” the man said, then scanned the room. “ - With guests.”

“Everyone, this is Gregory,” Jesus introduced. “He keeps things running around here.”

“I’m the boss,” Gregory stated. You had a hard time refraining from rolling your eyes.
“Well, I’m Rick,” your leader said, stepping forward. “We have a community —”

“Why don’t y’all go get cleaned up, hmm?” Gregory suggested, interrupting Rick in the process. You could see Carl stiffen in your peripheral vision.

“We’re fine,” Rick returned after a short silence. You felt the air thicken with tension.

“Jesus will show you where you can get washed up,” Gregory persisted. “Then come back down when you’re ready.”

“We’re not savages,” you interjected, making Gregory and Jesus look at you. Apparently everyone in Rick’s group were no longer surprised by your rough edge. “We have showers back in Alexandria. Do you have showers here, Gregory?”

He smiled, though not out of amusement. He took a few steps forward, coming face-to-face with you. “It’s very hard to keep this place clean…”

“Ryan.”

“Ryan,” he repeated, placing his hands on his on his hips. “Bit of a man’s name, isn’t it?”

Carl took a step forward. You put your hand out to block him, silently telling him that you could handle it.

“Gregory… bit of an oxymoron, isn’t it?” You countered.

He briefly glanced around as he chuckled, as if someone was going to butt in and tell you to stop. No one did. “How’s that?” he proceeded to ask.

“‘Gregory’ means ‘watchful’,” you informed, “but you clearly can’t see who we are or why we’re here.”
“I’ll show you guys upstairs,” Jesus spoke up, trying to break up the situation.

Gregory’s face flattened and he retreated to his office.

Most of your group was up the stairs within a few moments, Rick speaking to Maggie in a low voice as they walked. Daryl was the last one to step up, and Carl was about to follow him. He didn’t move when he saw that you stayed in your place.

“You’re not gonna go?” He asked, watching you back up towards the wall and take a seat on the floor.

“I don’t like it when a guy tells me what to do,” you said as you set your bow beside you. “Especially a guy like him.”

“He seems like kind of a prick, doesn’t he?” Carl agreed. He slid down next to you.

You nodded. “But that doesn’t matter. What does matter…” you drew out, taking off his hat, “is that we’re alone.”

A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Why does that matter?”

“Because now, I get to do this,” you said before kissing him.

You moved his hat so it blocked your interlocking lips. He leaned into the kiss, making you lean back slightly. You set a hand on Carl’s chest before pulling away.

“I can protect myself,” you told him.

Carl sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. His other hand was pressed to the floor beside your waist. “I know, I just — I get so angry when people talk to you like that; like you’re a child.”

“People talk to you like that.”
“Yeah, but… you’re you.”

There you went again, hiding a smile from him. This time, you used Carl’s shoulder to mask your happiness from him. You weren’t sure why you felt the need to hide the expression from him. Perhaps something about smiling made you feel weak.

As if you weren’t already weak when it came to him.

“It’s pretty hot when you do, though,” you ceded. Your arms trailed up so your elbows could rest on his shoulders.

He didn’t hide his smile from you when he kissed you.

As you and pretty much everyone else expected, Gregory wasn’t very willing to set up a trade system. Maggie was the one who had talked to him, so you knew that the demands were reasonable without knowing the specifics. The group and Jesus debated in the front room.

“We need food. We came all this way,” Rick said. “We’re gonna get it.”

Jesus promised that he could wear Gregory down, and after Michonne agreed to a few days lenience, so did Rick.

Someone barged in through the front door. By his body language alone, you knew he wasn’t bearing good news.

“They’re back,” the unannounced stranger told Gregory after the man erupted from his office.

Everyone filed outside and into the setting sunlight. The Sun lined up with the top of the fence, so you used your hand to mask some of the rays from hitting your eyes.

“Nathan, what happened to everyone else?” Gregory asked as he approached a trio of dirty and
worn out people. “Where’s Tim and Marsha?”

“They’re dead,” Nathan informed. You hung back by Michonne and Rick: close enough to hear conversation without getting in the way.

“Negan?” Gregory asked.

“Yeah.”

“We had a deal.”

“He said it wasn’t enough,” Nathan argued.

“They still have Craig,” a woman said. She seemed to be the most worried out of the three.

“They said they’d keep him alive, return him to us, if I deliver a message to you,” Nathan spoke as he stepped closer to Gregory. Something about the action made you feel uneasy.

“So tell me,” Gregory said, too engrossed to keep any distance.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan whispered after setting a hand on Gregory’s shoulder. You understood why when he plunged a blade into the man’s stomach.

Rick, Michonne, Maggie and Jesus all rushed forward. The first two pulled Nathan off of Gregory, while the latter supported the now stabbed man. Rick didn’t seem too keen to let this go; he kicked Nathan in the stomach and shoved him to the ground.

While Rick sent punch after punch into Nathan’s face, you noticed a dark-haired man creep up on him. Within seconds, it was clear to you that the man was not there to make friends with Rick. In a split-second decision, you barreled ahead, knocking the man off of his feet and onto the ground.

You wrestled the man for a moment. He got in a punch or two, you got in a few good scratches. Somehow, though, he managed to get on top of you. One of your worst fears came true when his hands wrapped around your throat.
All you could hear was your own heartbeat and a ringing that didn’t go away. Your vision was starting to blur, so when attacking his face didn’t seem to work, you moved your hands down to the man’s wrists. You dug your nails into his flesh as hard as you could. Sadly, he didn’t seem to let up.

Then, as quick as a bolt of lightning, you were able to breathe again.

You sat up with a gasp, instinctually reaching up to feel your neck. The soft flesh was tender already, so you could only imagine the bruises that would develop later.

“Don’t you ever touch her!” You heard Carl shout. The fog in your eyes disappeared in time for you to see Carl on top of your attacker. He looked angrier than you had ever seen him. “You don’t touch her like that. You hear me?”

The man had a bloody and most likely broken nose, which you knew wasn’t from you. Carl had moved from the punishment phase to the lecture one in mere seconds. Still, you crawled over to them, knowing it wasn’t worth getting up to walk the few steps.

“You’re not alone,” you rasped out, voice hoarse. You hated how pathetic you sounded, how weak. Then again, maybe it wasn’t the attack that made it that way. Maybe it was just him that did that to you. “I’m okay.”

He looked up at you, and even through the bandage on his face and the shadow of his hat, you could see the adrenaline pumping through his body. The moment he met eyes with you, though, you could also see it fade into nothing.

“You’re not alone,” you urged, setting a hand on his shoulder. “Let it go. Help me up.”

Carl rose to his feet, taking your hands and helping you do the same. Upon standing up, you stumbled slightly, discovering it was hard to find proper footing. Carl helped you, grabbing your arms just below your elbows and making sure you remained upright. He also did something you didn’t expect.

Carl leaned in and kissed you. As self-conscious as you were, worried that your secret was now exposed, you kissed him back. You leaned into his body, back slightly arching as you moved your arms up to rest on his neck. You pulled your mouth away to catch your breath, yet stayed close to
him.

You couldn’t help but glance around. Everyone seemed preoccupied with something the two of you apparently missed, as they were walking inside with their backs turned. Maggie and Jesus were helping Gregory in. Abraham, Daryl, and Glenn followed behind them. Michonne and Rick were the last ones in line, the sword-wielding woman close to him. Whatever you missed, it was clearly something big, because Rick’s entire front was covered with blood.

You knew this because he was staring right at you.

Chapter End Notes

Things seem to be going pretty well with Carl and Ryan... trouble in paradise coming up, perhaps?

Without spoiling too much, I will say that the All Out War arc is coming up, and it will be quite different from both the show and the comics. I know I've warned about this before, but I think it's worth mentioning again.
I'm gonna get all cheesy here, but I just wanted to thank you for not giving up on this story. It's been a wild ride so far, and it's only gonna get better from here. The final scene is one I've been awaiting pretty much ever since I started writing AA, and I hope you enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing. <3

You, Carl, and Judith were sitting on the Main House’s porch. There was one blanket beneath the three of you and one sprawled on top. You sat so close beside Carl that Judith was able to sit in both of your laps. Carl’s arm wrapped around his sister, while you set your hand on the surface behind him so his shoulder was in front of yours.

The two of you had returned hours ago, back when the sun was in the sky and there weren’t so many stars in the sky. You came back with crates of food, at least enough to feed the entirety of Alexandria for a week. Jesus seemed conflicted yet eager, as ‘not even Negan got so much upfront.’

You spent the entire ride home thinking about that name. According to Jesus, the man with a strange name ran a group of people called the Saviors. Also according to Jesus, Negan literally beat the entire Hilltop into submission. And now, to pay the Hilltop back, Rick said Alexandria would take them down.

It shouldn’t have surprised you that cruel and moral-less people still exist. You weren’t stupid — you knew that the end brought out the worst in everyone. And yet, a part of you hoped that the savages and warmongers had reached the end of their lifespans by now. You hoped that they killed each other off, and that the only folks left in the world were ones that wanted to live more than anything else.

It was foolish, really.

“Do you think this is the wrong choice?” Carl asked. You hadn’t noticed that he stopped pointing out constellations to his sister and was looking at you instead of the night sky.

You stared at him for a moment. “What?” You asked dumbly, too focused on his illuminated-by-candlelight face.
“You were a soldier,” he stated, adjusting his grip on Judith. She squirmed but made no sound, as she was sucking on a pacifier. “You led people once. Do you think we made the wrong choice trying to stop the Saviors?”

“Well, my enemies were once my friends,” you replied, referring to the death of Eclipse. “And in my case, there wasn’t much of a war. At least, if there was, I wasn’t there for it. I did what I thought was best: I surrendered right off the bat. It ended up doing a lot more harm than good.”

“But before Eclipse was Eclipse, it was someone else’s, right?” Carl asked. “You said a guy named Carver ran the place.”

“Yep,” you nodded. “Eclipse is what rose from the wreckage, per se.”

“You and your friends made the choice to take down Carver,” he recalled. “What made you choose that?”

“There wasn’t any other way: Carver was a bad, power-hungry man.”

“Do you think Negan is?”

“Probably is,” you shrugged, then sighed. “Carl, why are you asking me all of this? Nothing’s even happened yet.”

“Something’s about to,” Carl stated, “and I want to be ready for it.” He swallowed. “The first time I saw war, I was a kid. I thought everything was black and white — I thought we were the good guys, and everyone against us was bad. The second I found out that wasn’t true, I had no idea how to feel. Still don’t, really. But you… you’re better at this. You do see things as black and white. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I don’t see things as black and white,” you disagreed, “I pretend I do because it’s easier that way. If I stopped to think about all the innocent people that die because of fights like this, I’d never be able to live with myself. So, I tell myself that I’m on the right side, that I’m fighting for what I believe in. No matter how rough things get, I always make sure that I believe in what I’m doing.”

“Why?” Carl asked softly. You didn’t realize how close your mouth was to his until you felt his hot breath on your lips.

“Because without cause, there’s no fight; there’s just war,” you whispered, “and if all I’m doing his fighting in a war, I’m no better than them.”
“You’ll always be better than them,” Carl disagreed. His hand made its way up to your cheek. “Always.”

Someone from behind you cleared their throat.

You turned around to see Rick and Michonne standing on the other side of the porch. You had no idea how long they had been standing there. You ducked your head to hide your face. Judith began to squeal upon seeing her father, her chubby hands grabbing for him. You cringed when Judith disappeared, knowing Rick was behind you and that Carl handed her off to him.

“Ryan,” the man spoke, tone surprisingly patient. “Can I talk to you?”

You looked up at him, feigning confidence with a smile. Carl, however, still seemed uneasy. “Sure,” you said, sounding unusually chipper.

Rick walked back to where he was previously standing, Michonne coming to whisk Carl away and speak with him. You stood up and offered Carl a shrug before the two of you separated for your interrogations.

You shoved your hands into your pockets, biting your lip for a moment before facing Carl’s father. Despite the young child in his arms, he was completely focused on you.

“I trust you, Ryan,” Rick first said, which caught you majorly off-guard, “so I trust that your intentions are good.”

“I don’t -” you started, then shook your head and laughed at yourself. “I don’t really have… intentions.”

Rick tilted his chin up as his face went blank, and you realized what he really meant.

“I’m not using your son,” you stated slowly. “Carl’s not just a - a good time for me.” Both Rick and yourself faintly cringed at the phrasing, but you knew it was what he wanted to hear. “I mean, I can’t speak for Carl, but to me, we’re not just killing time. And for the record, we aren’t…” you sighed and vaguely gestured. “…making pancakes.”

“That’s uh, that’s good to know,” Rick mumbled after clearing his throat. It felt like the awkward conversation was on the verge of causing physical pain to both of you.
“We’re not doing anything stupid,” you continued, “and we aren’t about to start, especially with everything that’s about to go down.”

He nodded in response.

You briefly pursed your lips. “I don’t normally do this,” you blurted out, surprising Rick and yourself in the process. “I don’t seek people out, I don’t get attached, and I definitely don’t find happiness in them. But Carl… he’s all I have. My entire family is dead, god knows what happened to my friends, and Eclipse is probably dust at this point. I don’t plan on screwing this up.”

Rick simply looked at you. “You’re a part of this family, and you have been for awhile now. This doesn’t change anything.”

Rick pulled you into a hug, and though it felt strange, you found yourself reciprocating. He had only one arm around you, as he didn’t want to crush Judith, yet you wrapped both of your arms around Rick.

The touch reminded you of your own father. You hid your tear-filled eyes in the man’s shoulder.

Maggie’s sonogram was sitting on the table when you entered the house beside the one you and the Grimes lived in. She showed you and Carl on the ride home, and though you smiled and offered the couple congratulatory words, it didn’t feel real. It felt like lifetimes ago since you saw a similar picture, so the grainy, colorless photo didn’t have much meaning to you. The more you looked at it, though, the more it began to settle in.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Maggie said, grabbing your attention. You were standing behind the seated woman, holding a pair of scissors and even a hair-thinning blade you found in Jessie’s old house. Enid was in the seat beside Maggie; she had been staring at the picture too.

“Some days, it feels more like an alien in me than a baby,” she chuckled and sat a hand on her stomach. Just by looking at her, you would never guess she was pregnant. Perhaps that’s how she kept it a secret for so long.
“Didn’t Carl’s mom die during childbirth?” you asked absentmindedly, only to realize how dark your words were. “Oh my god, I’m so -”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said with a sad smile. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately too. Especially since I was the one who delivered baby Judith.”

“You’re not Lori,” Enid reminded Maggie softly, taking the mom-to-be’s hand. “Things’ll be different with you.”

When you saw Maggie’s shoulders relax, you began you first cuts of her hair. It was nice to see her and Enid interacting so pleasantly — she moved in shortly after Carl got shot, but you didn’t know they had gotten so close. Now that you seemed to find a second version of your family, you were glad Enid did too.

“Ryan, you better not make me ugly,” Maggie teased, indirectly referring to the amount of hair you were cutting off.

“You said you wanted it short,” you chuckled.

You weren’t originally sure why Enid seemed to be more secure in your hair-cutting skills. However, the more you worked on Maggie, the quicker you learned why. When you got off most of the length, you knew exactly where to use the thinning shears. By the time you were done, the thickness in Maggie’s hair was concentrated at the crown of her head, meaning the places it would be most annoying (base of her neck, by her ears, etc.) were wispy strokes of hair.

You handed her the mirror and internally panicked when she gasped.

“Are you sure you didn’t do this for a living?” Maggie asked after a few moments of watching herself, which made you relax.

You laughed slightly, running your fingers through her hair like a real stylist would. “I unfortunately didn’t have a career at the age of ten,” you joked. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Wow,” Maggie spoke to herself, still admiring the fresh cut. “New hair, new house, new family member on the way.”
“New house?” Enid asked with a smile, though she was simultaneously frowning. “You’re moving again.”

“We are,” Maggie disclosed, looking to the girl. “This time, to one in Hilltop.”

You felt the air stiffen, and seeing Enid’s expression change from confusion to disappointment. “When were you gonna tell me?”

“We didn’t expect this, Enid,” Maggie said, reaching for the girl’s hand. She rejected the touch. “Hilltop has an OB, and we need to be close to him. We have to know that the baby is okay.”

“Yeah, got it,” Enid said harshly. She pushed away from the table and stormed out of the room, despite Maggie’s protests. When she began to get up as well, you told her to wait, that you’d go after Enid.

The day was an unusually cloudy one. The moment you stepped out the door, you weren’t faced with the normal blinding sunlight you had grown used to. “Enid!” you called after her, jogging slightly to catch up.

“I knew it,” she said, stopping so she could turn around and look at you. “I knew this was gonna happen.”

“Knew what?” You asked with a frown. “Enid, what’s going on?”

“That I would be phased out,” Enid answered. You could see tears beginning to form in her eyes. “The minute I found out she was pregnant, I knew they wouldn’t want me anymore.”

“Okay, back up and slow down,” you said, moving your hand to mimic your words. “What do you mean, they don’t want you? Maggie just said the word ‘we’, which is good. ‘We’ means ‘you and I’, Enid.”

“No, it means me and my husband and my new baby,” she said, wiping her nose. “An orphaned teenage girl doesn’t fit into this equation.”

“Did she tell you that, or are you assuming? Have you even talked to her about it?”
“No,” Enid admitted. “This is my first time hearing it.”

“So maybe you should sit down and discuss things instead of freaking out for no reason,” you suggested. You wrapped an arm around Enid’s shoulders when she nodded. “God, kid, you don’t always have to be so cynical. You can want good things — you deserve good things.”

“So do you,” she replied.

You kissed the girl’s temple and rubbed her back with your hand.

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You were helping Carl make the bed in his room. Now that the news was out (at least to Michonne and Rick), the two of you decided to try spending the night in the same room. Of course, Carl was the only one with a parent to ask, but you agreed that if the door was kept open, Rick probably wouldn’t have an issue with it. Tonight, that was enough for you.

“What did Michonne say to you today?” you asked, shaking out a sheet from one side of the bed. Carl was standing by the other side so he could grab the corners when you were done.

“She wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting into,” Carl said, taking the sheet and laying it out neatly. “Told me that there aren’t many people my age left anymore, so if I screw this up, pretty much no one is left.”

“In those exact words?” you said as you rearranged the pillows.

“I’m paraphrasing.”

You smiled, collapsing onto the bed and on top of the blankets. “So she said you’re stuck with me,” you summarized. “How do you feel about that?”

“I could spend the rest of my life being stuck with you,” Carl said as he laid down beside you. You
didn’t hesitate to wrap your arm around him. “Just as long as you don’t get old,” he continued, which earned him a punch to the shoulder.

“Hmm,” you hummed to yourself after you were both finished laughing.

“What?” He asked, turning his head to look at you. “What are you thinking?”

“I’ve never pictured myself growing old,” you replied. “I always thought I was gonna die before I really lived. But, who knows: maybe that’s changed.”

“Maybe it hasn’t,” Carl said quietly. “Maybe we’ll die child soldiers.”

“You’re still thinking about that?” You whispered sadly. You turned onto your side, setting a hand on his cheek.

“I can’t get it off my mind,” he confirmed in a low voice. “I’m afraid that one day — one day soon —, I’ll look up to find you shot, on the ground, bleeding out. Or maybe it’ll be Michonne, or my dad. Or maybe Judy will be in trouble, and I won’t be able to save her.”

“I don’t want you worrying about me,” you said, brushing back some of his hair from his face. “I’ve told you: I can take care of myself. And Rick and Michonne are strong. Hell, I’m sure even Judith could take down a walker; she’s got the right genes.”

Carl cracked a smile, which was exactly what you were looking for. You grinned in return, reaching up and pecking his forehead. “And you know what?”

“What?”

“I have,” you kissed between his eyebrows, “a good way,” his nose, “to distract you,” the corner of his mouth.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, a goofy grin on his face. “And what’s your idea?”

You climbed on top of him, your knees on the bed and next to his hips. “A whole lot of this,” you said, and began to make out with him.
You couldn’t stop replaying the events leading up that single moment. You put the entire week
under a mental microscope, dissecting that happened, that could have happened, that should have
happened. Every choice, every word, every second was burning its way into your brain, desperate
to be analyzed. You began to realize, though, knees on the ground, soaked in sweat, that no matter
what, everything was leading up to that moment; it had been that way for awhile.

That was the most painful part.

It took exactly 3 days to pack up Glenn, Maggie, and Enid’s things. Most of their belongings were
in a trailer the RV could tow, though some things did make their way inside the vehicle itself. It
wasn’t that they owned a lot, but rather that they wanted the Queen-size mattress their room
originally came with. Especially with Maggie being pregnant, you could understand their desire for
something that could now be considered luxurious.

A week’s time had gone by since the first trek to Hilltop, which made Rick think it was time to
reconvene with Jesus and get some proper dirt on the ‘Saviors’ he spoke of. Naturally, this meant
he was taking a small army with him, one that included you and Carl.

You wondered how different it would have been if you were never there.

Every path to the Hilltop had been blocked. Not by fallen trees or abandoned cars, but by things
that seemed impossible.

First there was a group of Saviors. They gave your group the option to surrender, that things didn’t
have to get messy. Rick, not being one to surrender, told everyone to get back in, and you drove
away.

Next, there was a wall of lumber that had been set on fire. A bridge went over the road, and a
walker tied to a noose hung from it. Once again, Rick instructed the driver to turn around. However, everyone knew that nightfall was coming, which meant choices needed to be made.

You wondered if they were good ones.

When it became too dark to drive safely and the perimeter was cleared, Rick miraculously let you and Carl share the first watch shift. He hoped to have only three 3 hour rotations, and when Carl’s alertness mixed with your aim, it was clear you made a good team.

You guessed the two of you were almost through the shift when you first heard a noise. The two of you sat on top of the RV, pointing out constellations like you had before with Judith. You spoke in hushed tones and didn’t dare laugh, knowing that the noise could get everyone killed.

Silence wasn’t enough to keep you safe.

You stood up with your hand around your bow, but you were too late. Mere moments after you and Carl tried to find the sound’s source, a gun was shot and set of bright lights flicked on. The sudden change almost made you stumble off of the roof and onto the ground. Everyone was out of the trailer in seconds flat, yet they weren’t quick enough.

Though it felt like hours while it happened, everything was a blur when you tried to look back. You and Carl got off the roof, and it felt as though magically, everyone fell into a line on their knees, facing a trailer almost as dingy as the one you spent the day in. Out of the trailer came a man in a leather jacket and wielding what appeared to be a baseball bat wrapped in some kind of wire.

“In a few minutes, you are really gonna regret crossing me,” Negan warned, then smiled maniacally. “Yes you are.” Then, he turned his head back towards the trailer. “Marteen, Ash, get out here!” He called, then mumbled, “you’re gonna wanna see this.”

Two sets of boots stepped out of the trailer, just like Negan had. This time, though, you noticed that one pair was larger, most likely a man’s, and the other was smaller, closer to yours or Carl’s. Even when their faces were shadowed, you could see that each of them were holding an automatic rifle of some kind across their chests. Their arms were covered and protected from the cold air, unlike some of the Saviors. This led you to believe they may have special privileges that the others didn’t.

Then, they stepped out of the shadows, and it felt like the air had been kicked out of your lungs.
“Oh my god,” you whispered. The two seemed just as shocked as you.

“What?” Carl returned, voice low. He looked at the pair, who were easily in as much shock as you were. “Ry, who are they?”

You swallowed thickly, eyes bouncing between them.


Chapter End Notes

It feels like I’m getting a huge secret off my chest by posting this, haha. The Clementine reunion has been in the works since way back in Chapter 6, ever since Lee was introduced. I hope ya’ll are excited for the (re)introduction of these old friends/new characters :)

(for any of you that haven't played/seen TWD game, you can re-read the major flashback points in Chapter 6 and Chapter 17)

What was your favorite part? I’d love to know!

Until next time... xx
Chapter Notes

I know I've given this warning 127948649172 times already, but the events of Something to Fear and All Out War (Saviors War) will be different from both the show and the comics. This fic is based off of TWD, but is definitely not a carbon copy, so don't be surprised when a few twists and turns come your way.

With that being said, enjoy reading!

You couldn’t hear anything else Negan had to say. You knew that he was trying to scare everyone, trying to psych them out into doing or saying the wrong thing, but his actual words were lost on you. Once, the man even crouched in front of you, spouting vague threats and whatever bullshit he came up with. Even when he moved to Carl, you couldn't feel anything; you couldn't move your mouth or startle your vocal cords into saying something you might regret. And the entire time, Carl simply stared at you, wondering when and how you were going to break. You, however, were looking to the friends you thought were dead.

Javier looked away when Abraham was chosen. Clementine closed her eyes and turned her head. As Abraham was being clobbered, blood pouring down his face, you felt angry. Not just at Negan, and his audacity to hunt your group down like animals, but towards Javier and Clem as well. Rage boiled in your stomach knowing they made the choice to become Saviors, yet had the nerve to look away when they learned what it meant.

Daryl acted out for a reason you could not decipher, which earned him a beating from the baseball bat Negan referred to as ‘Lucille’. You had an aching feeling that the bat was named after someone. It made you wonder what the original Lucille would think of Negan’s actions and the way he used her name to carry them out.

Even when Daryl was a bloody pile on the ground, you couldn’t help but feel jealous of him, which almost made you afraid of yourself. You envied the way he was stupidly brave enough to stand up and punch Negan square in the face. Then again, that stupid bravery is what got him killed. Maybe that’s why you were jealous.

After warning Rick one last time, Negan called all of the Savior’s off and told Rick he’d be back for the first ‘offering’ in one week. Before he could reenter the trailer, though, Negan was pulled aside by Javier, who spoke to him so quietly it looked like he was only moving his lips. Their conversation ended when Negan smiled and said ‘that’s why I like you, Marteen: you’re thorough.’
Soon enough, all of the Saviors besides Clem and Javi were gone and you and your group were left to pick of the pieces — or, more accurately, the bodies — they left behind. Sasha, Eugene, and of course Rick seemed particularly beat up.

While everyone else gathered blankets and kept a watchful eye on the ‘Saviors’ that stayed behind, you stayed on the ground and stared down. When Carl sat a gentle hand on your back, you finally snapped, rising to your feet and barreling forward.

“You sons of bitches,” you spat, clenching your fists at your sides. “You fucking assholes.”

“Ryan, don’t!” you heard someone from behind you shout, voice filled with terror. Their tone only pissed you off more — you hated what the Saviors were doing to your people, and as far as you knew, Javi and Clem were Saviors.

“I thought you were dead!” you screamed, shoving Javi. He stumbled backwards a few steps, but he didn’t retaliate; he still looked heartbroken and in shock. “I thought both of you were dead!”

“We thought you were dead,” Clem said softly, which made you do a double take. Not only was she much taller now, reaching your shoulders, but her voice dropped at least two octaves. She wasn’t the little girl you took under your wing anymore: she was growing up.

Clem carefully set a hand on your arm, and when you didn’t resist, moved in to hug you. You returned the touch, pulling her close and squeezing her as hard as you could without breaking her bones.

“I’m so sorry, Ry,” Clem whispered, voice cracking. “I wanted to find you.”

After a few moments, Javier set his hand on your shoulder, which made you pull away from Clem and hug him as well. You never knew Javi as well as you knew Clem, but you were still glad to see he was alive and well.

“I promise you,” Javi said when you pulled away from him, “that we can explain this. We can explain all of this.”
“It better be a damn good story,” you laughed sadly, wiping away the tears as they started to fall. “You two have a lot to tell.”

“We do,” Clementine agreed, “and we will.” She then chuckled happily, covering her mouth before pulling you into another hug. “God, it’s so good to see you.”

“You too, kid,” you agreed, setting a hand on her head as she hugged you.

When you and Clem separated again, you noticed that pretty much everyone was staring at you. Sasha looked pissed, Maggie confused, and Rick indifferent. The bodies had already been wrapped up and placed in the RV, which meant they were waiting on you.

“I know it looks bad,” you said after clearing your throat. “It looks bad and confusing. But these two and I, we go way back.”

“This is the first time we’ve seen a… line-up,” Javier explained. “Yes, we’ve been Saviors for awhile, but we had no idea how bad it really was. And… we wanna help. I know it’s hard to believe, but Negan has a hold on our people too.”

“You’re right,” Sasha said, hands shoved in her pockets. “It is hard to believe.”

You looked to Rick, who moved his head up and to the side. You took this as a sign to dismiss yourself and approach him. You wondered what he had to say.

“Do you trust these people?” he asked, tone low with hesitation and concern. “Do you trust them with your life?”

“There was a time when I did,” you answered. You looked back at Clem and Javi, who were now engrossed in a conversation of their own.

“That means nothin’,” Rick persisted. “Do you trust them now?”

You took in a breath and glanced away. “Yes,” you eventually answered with a slight nod. “I trust them. The Saviors already know where Alexandria is, so I was hoping to bring them back and
spend the night in an empty house with them. There’s a lot of gaps they need to fill for me.”

“They can come back,” Rick reluctantly agreed, “but you have to be responsible for them. If anything happens, it’ll be on you. You understand?”

Again, you nodded. “I understand.”

The Saviors left a pick-up truck behind so Clem and Javi could drive themselves back to the Sanctuary. However, you chose to drive, and it was to Alexandria rather than wherever the Saviors congregated. According to them, Negan set up shop in a factory about five miles out.

Even through the guilt, you took precautions, as if Clementine and Javier were your prisoners. You made sure your pistol was out on the ride back rather than in a place harder to reach, and after reaching Alexandria, you made sure they were in front of you rather than behind. You knew they weren’t stupid: they had to be catching on. Still, they said and did nothing. Maybe, even after all these years, they were still your friends.

You set two glasses of water on the coffee table. You took a seat in the armchair across from the couch Javi and Clem were already sitting in.

“Shit, it’s like you live in Narnia,” Clem commented, looking around in awe. “I was starting to think running water was a myth.”

“If you want, you can go upstairs and take a shower,” you offered. You gestured to the two piles of clothes on the coffee table. You picked a change of clothing for each of them before entering the house.

“I’m already taking your water,” Clem said, “I’m not taking your clothes.”

“If you come back with nothing, Negan will be suspicious,” you said quietly. “I’m sure you guys have taken much more than a shirt.”

The room went silent.
“Just go take a shower kid,” you urged, yet tried to sound kind. “I know you want to.”

She broke into a smile, which made you want to just wrap her up in your arms and never let her go. You wanted her back, even if she wasn’t the same person you once protected. You managed to contain yourself, though, and waved her goodbye as she walked up the stairs to find the bathroom.

“You’re separating us, making sure our stories are straight,” Javi noted. His voice was steady, lacking any particular emotion. “It’s smart. But so is she.”

“I know she knows,” you stated, picking up the notebook on the coffee table and uncovering it. “And I know she’s smart: that’s why she didn’t say anything.”

Javier laughed at the slight dig you took at him. You couldn’t help but smile.

“Did she ever tell you about me?” You asked softly.

He shook his head. “She doesn’t talk about the things that’ve happened to her. Shocker, right? I doubt anyone really talks anymore.”

“How did the two of you meet?” You inquired, grabbing a pen.

“I was in a car accident,” Javi informed. “I told her I needed to get back to my family, and she said she would if she could have our van. She needed a car.”

“Why were you in a car and your family wasn’t?”

“I was caught looking for supplies, they weren’t. I got knocked out, and I woke up in the passenger seat of a semi truck.”

“Where were you when this all went down? Did Clem take you back there right away?” You said as you scribbled the words ‘met by: car accident.’

“A Salvage yard. And no: we were attacked by a group, and Clem thought they would still be
there. She took us to a place called Prescott to spend the night.”

You wrote ‘Salvage yard, then ‘Prescott’’. “What happened in Prescott?”

“Clem accidentally shot some asshole who traded her faulty bullets. One of the leaders, Tripp, locked us outside for the night and said he’d drive us back in the morning.”

“Did that happen?”

“Yes. We spent the night and he drove us back in the morning. I found Kate, Gabe, and Mariana, but they showed up again.”

“Who showed up again?” You asked as you wrote ‘spent the night’, then drew an arrow to the word ‘Prescott’.

Javier took in a breath. “They were called the New Frontier. They got mad that I killed some of their friends trying to escape the night before.”

“What did they do, Javi?”

“...They shot Mariana.”

You swallowed. As you lead Eclipse, you had gotten to know Javier and his sister-in-law pretty well, which meant you became friends with his niece and nephew. You were sad to hear she didn’t make it out alive.

“That’s horrible,” you empathized. “I’m sorry.”

He ran a hand down his face and shrugged.

You interviewed Clem about an hour later. Javi was washing their old clothes in the kitchen sink,
knowing Clementine had used all of the hot water. You promised that next time, he would get the chance to shower. He smiled at you, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Their stories lined up almost exactly. Clem confirmed she wanted their van, but when Kate got shot by the New Frontier and they had to rush to Prescott, the idea was lost. Still, after helping bury Mariana, she returned to Prescott with Javi’s family and Tripp.

And, just as Javi said, she mentioned that Kate wasn’t doing very well. She had to be transferred to a much larger community called Richmond, as they would have the supplies and resources Prescott lacked. Before this could happen, the New Frontier decided to invade Prescott. They brought a truckload of walkers with them, and let them enter after breaking down the doors. Javi and his family, Clem, Tripp, and a Prescott doctor named Eleanor all managed to escape, and they were on the road to Richmond.

The New Frontier had hold on Richmond. Many members had the same crest branded into them, the crest Clementine had as well.

“They offered me and AJ safety, safety we didn’t have,” Clementine explained. “They were… okay people when I joined them. Then, they took him from me, and I left.”

“And then you were on your own,” You said.

She nodded. “And when I was on my own, I came across Javi.”

The New Frontier weren’t as powerful as they claimed to be; Richmond was also a part of Savior’s collection system. So, when their leader called a town meeting and was shot by an insurgent, the place didn’t grow from it’s mistake — it fell apart. Well, the New Frontier fell apart.

Clem and Javi — with some help, of course — managed to repair the break in the wall that was allowing walkers to flood in. After clearing the ones in Richmond, people were able to come out of hiding. However, instead of cleaning up the mess and returning to ‘normal’, they kept the city in physical ruins.

“We thought we’d be able to fool the Saviors, make them think we were the only survivors,” Clem said.
“Did it work?”

“It did work,” she disclosed. “Then, that prick Simon took me and Javi back to the Sanctuary while the other Saviors searched the area. We aren’t dead, so apparently it worked: they thought Richmond went under.”

“Why didn’t you go back after that?” You asked. “If you could hide an entire society, why couldn’t you escape?”

“He took a liking to us,” Clementine informed. She cringed at her own words. “He thought it was so amazing that we lived. If we tried to escape, he would’ve gone looking, and his first place to look would be Richmond. All of it would have been for nothing.”

“So, as far as you know, Richmond is still thriving,” you said. “Thriving... and hiding.”

She smirked in agreement. “Thriving and hiding.”

You closed your notebook and set it aside, deciding to compare your notes later. “Where were you after Hardware? Who did you end up with?”

“I bounced between groups. It had to be… what, 2 years? 3? I think I went through five groups of people,” she recalled.

“Five groups is a lot,” you observed, “especially in 3 years.”

“Not many people want a crying child with them. The Richmond folk love him, though.”

Javier appeared in the doorway. He used the razor you left on top of his clothes, as he was now clean-shaven and dressed cleanly. You guessed he was done washing his and Clem’s old clothes.

“Why are you guys here?” You said, gaze shifting between the seated girl and the tall man. “I’m not humoring myself: I know you didn’t charm Negan into following me back here so we could catch up.”
“You underestimate the power of friendship,” Javier joked as he returned to his seat besides Clementine. He looked to the girl, who looked back and bobbed her head. “We’ve been looking for a way out for a long time. It’s been awhile since Negan’s taken another community: he’s seized most of the area already.”

“Everyone’s too afraid to take a stand,” Clementine continued, “everyone but Alexandria.”

“You need fresh blood,” you concluded. “You need fresh, fighting blood to take the Saviors down.”

“We need fresh blood,” Javier repeated, “and we need Richmond.”

You paused, but ultimately agreed. “I’ll do pretty much anything to put that bastard in a shallow grave.”

“Great. Now all we need is an actual plan,” Clem remarked. She let out a breath and rubbed her eyes. “We haven’t gotten to that part yet.”

You angled your head and pinched your bottom lip in thought. After a moment of thought, you smirked and crossed one leg over the other. “I have an idea.”

You spent the entire week leading up to Negan’s arrival plotting with Javi and Clementine. The first night, they returned before the night guards would become suspicious. When night fell each day, the two snuck out, and you met up with them through the Alexandria sewer system. Though you respected Rick and the people that helped you get to Alexandria, you decided it was best to leave them out of the plan.

Not being able to tell Carl is what killed you the most. The plan was your creation, yet every day you didn’t tell him, you felt like you were lying to his face. You thought back to your promise, how you told him you would stop pretending. It didn’t take you long to break that promise.

Negan showed up early, and this time, you weren’t too preoccupied to feel the anxiety. You were
nervous about the plan, yes, but the way Negan spoke made your stomach turn and set your throat on fire. Now that you weren’t in shock in seeing ghosts of your past, you had the time and state of mind to get angry.

You and Carl watched from the porch as Negan strolled along the road with Rick by his side. He came with an army of Saviors and an empty truck, which meant Saviors rushed around and took pretty much whatever they wanted.

You turned your head to look at Carl. He was wearing his hat, which he normally didn’t do inside the walls. His hands hung by his side, and the one closest to you was clenched into a fist.

“I forgot to say this earlier,” you started, letting your hands fall to your sides, “but I’m glad you aren’t dead. I’m glad it wasn’t you.”

He didn’t reply audibly; rather, he took your hand and closed his eyes. You leaned your forehead against his shoulder and let your eyes fall shut as well. You opened them in time to see a Savior walk up the staircase. You knew exactly what he was going for: your bow and quiver. It was sat on the bench by the front door and looked inviting as ever.

“Turn around,” you warned, stepping away from Carl and in front of your beloved weapon. Your boyfriend was at the ready, his grip hovering over the sheathed machete on his leg. “There’s nothing here for you.”

“What, here?” The man scoffed, looking around the porch, “or this entire place?”

“While we’re at it, both,” you said.

“You think you can tell me what to do?”

“Actually, I do,” you challenged, taking a step forward.

“Ryan, it isn’t worth it,” Carl said. He tried to the bend of your elbow, but you wouldn’t budge.

The Savior laughed harshly. “Get out of the way before I make you.”
In the blink of an eye, your bow was in your hand and loaded with an arrow. Your aim was focused directly at the Savior, who went from cocky to afraid.

“I’d really love to see you try,” you taunted, string pulled taut.

You felt Carl touch your shoulder. “You’re gonna get yourself killed,” he hissed.

You briefly closed your eyes, then glanced at him. “If we have to live like this, then what’s the point of living at all?”

The man took your moment of distraction as one of opportunity. In your peripheral vision, you could see him moving closer, right at you. On instinct, you let go of your bow’s string.

The arrow shot right into his stomach.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Just as a heads up, this part is very plot-heavy.

As always, italics = flashbacks.

“What?” Clementine asked, leaning forward in her seat. “What’s your plan?”

“You’ll have to find someone who’s willing to get shot,” you answered, which shocked both of them.

“Something tells me that’s not gonna happen,” Javier stated.

You rolled your eyes. “I don’t mean literally — I’ll use my bow, a dull tip, and I’ll switch out the string so there’s less force. But still, there’s risk to it, and we need someone, a Savior, willing to accept it.”

Clem and Javi shared a look. “Siddiq,” they said in unison.

“He’d be willing,” Clementine added. “He’s always hated being a Savior and is looking for a way out, just like us. I think he’d jump on this plan.”

“But what’s the actual plan?” Javier asked.

“When Negan comes to collect next week, Siddiq can try to take my bow. I refuse, and when he persists, I shoot him. The two of you will have to be close to me so you can swoop in. Clem can drag me away, Javi can help get Siddiq into the back of a van. You’ll tell Negan you’re taking us back to the Sanctuary.”

“When really… we’ll be going to Richmond,” Clementine finished.

“We told you, Ryan: if we go missing, he’ll know where to look,” Javi reminded.
You pursed your lips in thought. “Then we stage your deaths too.”

Clem frowned. “How the hell are we gonna do that?”

“At the halfway mark to the Sanctuary, we’ll set up a scene. There’s an old van by the south wall that we can hide in the forest until the day of. We’ll find three walkers, tie them to trees, and use them as decoy bodies. As we’re driving to Richmond, we can set the old van on fire, draw some skid marks, and burn the bodies beyond recognition.”

“Then it looks like only you escaped,” Javi said.

“If walkers aren’t attracted to the sound by then,” you confirmed. “This is gonna take all week to prepare, and we have to be quick, but… It should work.”

The two friends shared a look, and eventually nodded.

“Yeah,” Javier agreed. “That sounds like the only way.”

“But what if it doesn’t work out?” Clem said. “What if Javi and I can’t find a van? What if Saddiq doesn’t agree?” She paused, then added quietly, “What if Negan wants to kill you?”

“If Saddiq doesn’t agree, then you can take his place,” you said, then added, “if you want to. Otherwise, we can work that out. And as for Negan… tell him whatever you have to. Say that I’m leverage, a good shot, his wet dream, whatever. Just make it work. I know you can.”

“This is our best shot, mija,” Javier muttered to Clementine, setting a hand on her shoulder. “It’ll work out.” He looked up to you. “It has to.”

“It will,” you assured. “This will work.”

Someone pulled you down the steps. They took both of your forearms and pulled them behind your
back. Javier rushed up the stairs, where Carl stood and an ‘injured’ Siddiq collapsed onto. You knew without looking that the person holding you was Clementine.

“I thought they were your friends!” Carl exclaimed. His eyes were wide with terror. It broke your heart.

It hurt, but you growled out, “me too.”

He followed you and Clem down the road, and you wanted more than anything to turn to him and explain that it was a hoax. You wanted to take him into your arms and promise that you would be okay, and that you’d never leave his side. But you couldn’t. You couldn’t because you weren’t okay, and you weren’t okay because you were leaving his side.

You almost made it to the van without being stopped. Clem was about to shove you in the back of the vehicle when Negan finally realized something was going on. Javi was just turning the corner as well, Saddiq leaning on him in an incredibly convincing way. He had an arm slung over Javier’s shoulders, his weight pressing against the man’s side. The arrow you shot appeared to be stuck in his stomach, and blood was starting to soak through his shirt. Your idea of taping a half-full bag of blood to his torso seemed to be convincing.

“What the shit is goin’ on here?!” Negan shouted. Rick appeared from behind him, appearing more confused and concerned than angry.

“She didn’t want to give up her bow,” Javier explained, “so she shot him.”

Negan stepped forward, staring you dead in the eye. “Give me one good reason I shouldn’t kill you on the spot.”

“Because you like me,” you immediately answered. “You like how stupidly bold I am, taking down one of your men right in front of you. But it also pisses you off. Whipping and beating people into submission is kind of your thing, right?” you challenged. “So why kill me when you could do that instead?”

“You’re awfully desperate to live, sweetheart,” he smiled. “That’ll change.” He looked to Clem and moved his head towards the van, allowing her to proceed.
Rick and Carl immediately began to protest. Javier first helped Saddiq into the vehicle, then threw Clementine some rope to tie your hands. You felt the rope on your wrists, but you also felt how purposely loose the knot was.

“I’m sorry,” you said to the Grimes as Javier forcefully pulled you up. Once inside, you looked back at them. “I’m sorry. I’ll—”

Negan slammed the doors shut.

“ - fix this,” you whispered, slipping out of the binding on your hands. You slid down the locked door in defeat. “I’ll get you back.”

Besides occasionally arguing about directions, the ride to Richmond was silent. Even at the halfway mark, when it came time to get out and stage a car accident, no one spoke. You all silently worked to brush off camouflage used to hide it for a few days. Everyone pushed the vehicle in unison, not needing the words to motivate. Even as you torched walkers so they were unrecognizable and set a fire in the front of the van, you refused to speak. As you quickly fled and drove away, you didn’t flinch when you heard the explosion from behind.

You couldn’t stop thinking about Carl. Over and over in your head, you relived your apology to him, and how half-assed the goodbye was. You kept reminding yourself that it wasn’t your last goodbye, that you’d see him again. But in the back of your mind, there was something nagging, warning you that maybe, you missed your last chance.

If there really was a war waging against the Saviors, there’s no telling when someone would make the first move. Though the Saviors wouldn’t be the first to strike, it was obvious that Alexandria would be the ones behind it. If Alexandria was behind it, that meant Carl would be in the crossfire. The idea of that happening in your absence made your stomach turn.

Javi and Clem weren’t kidding — the second the van rolled up to Richmond’s entry, it appeared as though no one had been there for years. The front gates were still technically in-tact: if halfway into the ground and rusting to no end could be considered ‘in-tact.’ They did keep walkers out, though, as there was a crowd forming, reaching out and overtop of each other like they were at a concert.
You wondered if concerts would ever exist again.

To avoid the mass of walkers, Javi parked the van parked about 10 yards away and said the back entry should still be open. There was what appeared to be a trail through the forest that went along the entire perimeter of the fence. However, Javier turned out to be right; in the back, there were unevenly placed wall panels that created a gap towards the bottom. The four of you had to crawl through on your hands and knees, but it was a way in.

The inside of Richmond looked better than the outside, but not by much. Several of the buildings were in ruins, and the ones that weren’t were smeared with dirt, moss, and blood. The only visually good thing was that there wasn’t a single walker in sight.

“What do we do now?” you muttered, keeping your voice low out of nervousness. You felt that if you spoke too loud, a mass of walkers like the one outside would turn the corner and kill you all.

Javier whistled a short tune, and Clementine repeated it moments after him. They waited a few seconds, and when no one repeated it, they whistled again. This time, several people appeared, even from the buildings that appeared to be destroyed. You recognized two of the faces, though you weren’t sure they recognized you.

“Oh my god, Javi!” The woman shouted, running towards him with a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. A younger boy, close to Clementine’s age, followed her. You met both of them several years ago — they were Kate and Gabe, Javi’s sister-in-law and his nephew.

Kate flew into Javier’s arms, while Gabe approached Clementine. You and Saddiq simply stood there, not knowing what to do.

When Kate was done hugging him, Gabe took her place. “We thought you were dead,” he mumbled, gripping the man so hard you could see his knuckles turning white.

With each second that passed, you felt more awkward. Watching the tearful reunion felt like you were seeing something you shouldn’t, something that should be just between the family. So, you stepped forward and approached one of the now many people standing in the street.

“Javier told me people still lived here, but… this is just plain impressive,” you stated, shoving your hands in your pockets. “What do ya’ll do? Camp out in the basements?”
The woman you were speaking to looked hesitant. “You’re not… one of them, are you?”

“You mean a Savior?” you asked. “God no. I’m part of a community called Alexandria.”

Her muscles relaxed and her expression lightened upon hearing this. “We live in the structures themselves, but yes, the basements are altered to safely house us if need be.”

You frowned. “So how many people live here?”

“Anywhere from 200 to 300.”

“And how often do you go outside the walls?”

“Only a small selection go outside,” she explained. “We have a team of scavengers that leave, but other than that…”

“When’s the last time you were outside the walls?” You asked softly.

She contemplated. “It’s been months now. In fact, it’s been days since I’ve even stepped out of the building. But that’s the cost of living these days, right?” She chuckled sadly.

You couldn’t believe what you were hearing. Though you understood their fear the Saviors and didn’t blame Richmond for stowing themselves away, you simply couldn’t fathom living the way they did. The people of Richmond willingly kept themselves hostage because they thought it was the only way to live. You were thankful you found a group of fighters rather than a group of flighters.

You stepped back from the woman and took in the continually growing crowd. If her guess was correct, you could assume that most of the population had now taken to the street and was silently watching Javier and his family reunite.

“You’re afraid,” you said, which made the small amount of chatter come to an end. “You’re afraid of living because you think it’ll kill you,” you said louder, catching everyone’s attention. “You’re afraid of rebuilding the city because it puts your people at risk. But the funny thing is that living isn’t dangerous: people are. If it weren’t for the Saviors, Richmond would be thriving right now, not living in shadows.”
“There’s nothing we can do,” a man protested. “We’re outnumbered.”

“Not if we work together,” you calmly countered. “I come from a community called Alexandria, and a few miles out from us is a place called Hilltop. If the three of us combine our resources, we could easily come up with 200 soldiers.”

“Why should we, though?” Someone else challenged. “And why should we believe you?”

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t consider living in fear to be truly living,” you said. “There may be no government anymore, but this is still America. We still have to fight for our freedom.”

you pondered for a moment. “I have no idea how to make you believe me. But I promise that I will find a way to earn your trust.”

Everyone stared at you, so you continued. “The road to the front gates isn’t blocked off. Is there any reason for that?”

“The infected ward off intruders,” a member of the crowd answered.

“That’s true,” you acknowledged, “but walkers are loud, and walkers love noise. The longer they stay out there like that, the more sound they make. The more sound the make, the more walkers they attract. If they stay pressing against the wall like that, they’ll knock it down, and that’ll happen sooner rather than later.”

“So what do we do?” You heard Clem ask from behind you. You turned around and smiled at her with a closed mouth. She returned the expression.

“First, we lead the horde away and slowly thin it over a mile,” you said. “We leave the bodies on the street as roadblocks. About every quarter of a mile, we add a second obstacle, like a speed bump or nails. We can leave whatever path you guys are actively using untouched.”

“What happens after that?” Javier encouraged.

“Anyone that wants to fight the Saviors, fight for your freedom back, will join me at Alexandria. Whoever wants to stay behind can, and they can help rebuild Richmond. In order to heal a cut, you have to stitch it up, right? Making Richmond inaccessible is the way to heal it, at least for now.”
And that’s what you spent the next two weeks doing. With many people’s help, you were able to boobytrap all but one of the routes leading to Richmond. It turned out that Richmond used to have a huge military sight, which meant there were deadly weapons available, including grenades. Apparently the Saviors took most of the explosives (which made you feel sick with worry), but they managed to hide a box and keep it for themselves. A Richmond citizen that just so happened to be a veteran helped you rig tripwires to set off a grenade if need be. Tripwires were placed within a quarter mile of Richmond: close enough to know if someone is coming, but not close enough to harm the city.

A father and son duo that used to work in construction were the leaders of reconstruction. They proposed plans to you, drew up the blueprints, and suggested people that would be good leaders. The three of you were planning out a recreation of City Hall when Clementine interrupted.

“Just wanted to pop in and say goodnight,” she said with a grin.

You checked your watch, and were shocked to see it was nearly midnight. A sudden wave of fatigue rushed over you.

“Well boys, that seems like a good place to stop,” you said, rolling up the prints. “We can pick up where we left off tomorrow, yeah?”

They agreed and wished you and Clem a good night as they walked out and back to their living quarters.

“If you’re not careful, you’re gonna burn yourself out,” She warned, stepping into what was starting to become your office.

You sighed and sat in the chair close to the table you were previously working at. “I’m being careful,” you assured. “I get at least 5 hours of sleep a night.”

“You know 8 used to be the default, right?” Clem asked rhetorically. “Man, have some things changed.”

Brief silence fell between the two of you. Clem decided to interrupt it.
“Javi told me you used to do this,” she continued, “that you took over and recreated Hardware when it collapsed. You had to be my age then.”

You nodded in recollection. “I think I was fifteen.”

“And they let you lead,” Clementine said in awe. “It took what, a year for anyone to protest? Everything had to have been rebuilt by then.”

“The protest is what killed Eclipse,” you said quietly. “I was a coward that didn’t take a stand, and it got people killed.”

“No,” Clem disagreed. “The cowards are the people who waited for you to do the heavy lifting until they swooped in took the credit. It sucks that innocent people died, but they had it coming.”

You didn’t say anything in response, but eventually spoke. “What the hell am I doing, Clem?” you asked, pinching the bridge of your nose. “I’m not cut out to be a leader, or at the very least, I don’t want to be one. Am I in over my head? Was this whole plan a waste of time?”

“It wasn’t a waste,” she assured, pulling up a chair and sitting beside you. “I think you make a damn good leader, but pretty soon you won’t have to be one anymore. You’re days away from finalizing plans and putting plans to action.”

“Which means we’re days away from heading to Alexandria with an army,” you said with a nod and an involuntary smile. “God, I can’t wait to see Carl again.”

“What’s going on between you two, anyway?” She asked.

You simply shrugged. “He’s my right-hand man, my partner in crime… Probably the only person I could ever fall in love with.”

Her eyes widened, which made you regret your words.

“If you ever tell him that, I will throat punch you and bury you alive,” you threatened.
“What?! No, I’m not gonna tell him,” she assured, then laughed softly. “I’m glad you found someone that makes you happy. You deserve it.”

“I guess so,” you said, then more confidently added, “yeah, i do.”

Because the only usable path to Richmond was in the opposite direction of the Sanctuary, it took twice as long to get to Alexandria. It didn’t help that it took eight vehicles to fit all of the volunteer soldiers, which made you excited, but also pissed you off. Whenever there was a single hiccup, each driver had to stop and the information had to be relayed. Even the shortest stops took 10 minutes, and you got angrier each time something was stalled.

It took half the day to get to Alexandria, and when you finally arrived, you couldn’t recognize the person watching guard. However, you did notice the massive rifle they were aiming directly at you.

“Is Negan with you?” they interrogated, which made you roll your eyes.

“We aren’t Saviors,” you answered curtly. “Just tell Rick to let us in, alright? I’m an… old friend.”

“Let an unknown army into these walls? Yeah right. Better run along, miss: unless you’re really lookin’ for trouble.”

“Jesus Christ,” you muttered, trying not to get too angry. “My name’s Ryan. Go get Rick Grimes and he’ll tell you the same thing I’m telling you: to let me in.”

“What’s going on?” a voice from the other side of the fence asked. When their face came into view, you felt your heart stop.

“Open the gates,” Carl demanded after recomposing himself. “Open the goddamn gates.”
He disappeared under the top of the fence again, and when the door fully opened, your theory was confirmed. Carl was standing in front of the gates, a blank expression on his face.

Your body went on autopilot as you approached him. Your movements were slow, cautious, as if he might break or explode at any moment. “I’m sorry, Carl,” you said, slowly reaching out a hand.

You felt stupid for acting like he was a wild animal that might bite, but you didn’t know how to express yourself around him. If you found out Carl had lied about something so important, you weren’t sure what it would take to forgive him. As glad as you were to see him, you knew he needed some space to sort his emotions out.

Rather than taking your hand, Carl pushed your arm away and engulfed you into a hug. He held you so tight you thought he might crack a few of your ribs. Despite the surprise and bone-crushing touch, though, you reciprocated.

“I’m so sorry,” you repeated.

“Don’t talk,” Carl said. There was a certain pain in his voice. “Just… don’t say anything.”

You didn’t.
Explaining the plan to Rick was weirder than having Javier and Clem back. Though you still felt like a member of his group and an Alexandrian citizen, you were also starting to feel like an outsider. By bringing an army and convincing a fellow leader that you and your people were trustworthy, you sounded as though Richmond had been your home for the last 3 years. Funnily enough, you were starting to feel that way too, in some ways.

You, Clem, Javi, and Rick all sat at the dining room table in the Main House. You sat on the side with your friends, as you knew you would be the greatest influence and the one he wanted to hear from most. You of course started with the escape plan, then got into the details of Richmond. You explained why you were gone for so long and why you felt the need to hide Richmond from him.

“The more people that knew, the greater the risk of Saviors finding out,” You said, bouncing your foot up and down anxiously. “They have no idea Richmond is still afloat, and they have no idea how much stronger we are now.”

“We’re your hidden weapon,” Clementine agreed. “Plus, Javier and I have gotten an inside look at the Sanctuary. We know the layout, the population… the weak points.”

Rick looked between the three of you, staying silent as he contemplated and took everything in.

“There a three free houses on the East side,” Rick eventually disclosed. “It’ll be a tight fit for all Richmond soldiers, but it should work.”

“Believe me, three of these houses is more than enough,” Clementine assured.

Javier nodded in agreement. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Grimes. We’re grateful for your alliance,” he said, offering Rick his hand.

“It’s Rick,” he replied, shaking his hand, “and I’m glad you and your people are here. Tara’s outside; she’ll show you to the houses.”

Clem and Javi thanked him one last time. You followed them to the door, only to be asked to stay.
“Ryan, can I speak with you?” Rick asked, standing up from his seat.

You looked back and Clementine and Javier, the latter one already opening the door. “You guys go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

They bid you goodbye and left the house.

“You look like you did when I met you,” he said. There was a few feet of space between the two of you, now lacking the formality of folded hands and proper posture.

“Richmond isn’t as advanced as this place,” you chuckled, running a hand through your greasy hair. “God, I miss showering.”

Rick chuckled, folding his arms. “Then I won’t keep you for long.” His smile faded and his face grew solemn. “We thought you dead, Ryan,” he said quietly, refusing to look at your face. “We caught wind of a Savior car accident, and when your friends didn’t show up with Negan the next week…”

“We were awfully convincing, huh?” you laughed sadly. “I knew it had to be done, but I didn’t like the pain it caused. It killed me to not tell someone, whether it be you, your son, or just…. Anyone. Keeping that secret was awful, and I never want to do it again.”

“Good, because this is war, and we need soldiers, not pariahs,” he remarked.

You nodded. “I understand.”

His strict demeanor changed to a more lighthearted one. “Go talk to your boyfriend: I know you want to.”

Your face heated up as you waved a finger. “I hate that word,” you said, but smiled and dismissed yourself.

Carl became a guard in your absence. Rick didn’t want him working night shifts, so during the day, Carl paced the streets with a rifle slung across his back. You assumed that they mostly wanted
guards during the day in case something broke out and citizens needed instruction and protection. You also assumed that Carl would take on any role needed. He was a good man that way.

You found him patrolling the center of the city. He stood tall as he walked along the sidewalk, monitoring the people outside and on the lookout for anything suspicious. You tapped him on the shoulder, causing him to snap around and look at you.

“Hey,” you said with a grin.

He didn’t return the expression. “Hey,” he mumbled after turning forward and continuing walking.

Your smile turned into a frown. You quickly recovered, catching up to Carl and walking beside him. “I’ve been meaning to track you down, explain everything…”

“Yeah?” he asked, though didn’t sound very interested.

“Yeah,” you agreed slowly, then stepped in front of him. “Can we talk?”

“I’m working,” he stated, trying to step aside. You stuck your arm out to stop him.

“When you’re done working?” you suggested.

He sighed, looking away. “I don’t want to do this, Ryan.”

You blinked, then grabbed his bicep and began dragging him backwards. You pulled him up the ‘city hall’ steps and opened the door, only to shut it when you brought him inside.

“Talk to me,” you stated simply, stuffing your hands in your pockets. “Say whatever you want to say. I won’t interrupt you, tell you you’re wrong… anything goes. Just talk to me.”

He sighed again, running a hand down his face. “I think you’re the most self-deluded person I’ve ever met.”
You felt yourself stiffen, but you didn’t say anything.

“I think that no matter the situation, you will always put yourself before anyone else. Maybe you don’t mean to be selfish; maybe it’s a self-preservation thing. That doesn’t matter, though, because whatever you do, you’re the top priority.”

You looked down in shame.

He laughed bitterly. “I mean, you fucking left, Ry! You didn’t tell anyone, you didn’t leave a note: you just left, and you let everyone think you were dead. You’ve spent years wondering what happened to your friends, but instead of learning from your pain, you just gave it to someone else. You did the exact thing they did to you, and you had a choice. You made the choice to put us through the same thing you went through.”

You nodded slightly to show him you were actively listening.

“I don’t understand you most days,” he said quietly. “I don’t understand what’s happened to you, and I definitely don’t understand how you haven’t grown from it. I don’t know why you can’t trust me, why you can’t confide in me the way I do in you.” He paused, then whispered, “I can’t love someone who doesn’t trust me.”

“Who said anything about love?” You scoffed, sitting on the floor in a mostly bare living room. Maggie and Glenn apparently moved to Hilltop a few days after the lineup. Enid had yet to explain why she didn’t go with them.

She was sitting on the couch, playing with your hair. “Maybe he didn’t mean now -- maybe he meant later, in the future. These days, things are always a long haul, right?”

You stayed silent.

“He’s just blowing off steam, Ry,” she said softly. “This doesn’t mean it’s over. He’s upset, that’s all.”
“He has a right to be,” you scoffed at yourself. “I chose someone else over him. He deserves to not want me anymore.”

“Stop being so melodramatic,” Enid scolded, smacking your head before returning to her gentle strokes. “It’s a bump in the road, nothing more. I’m sure Carl’s just waiting for you to say what he wants to hear.”

“I don’t know what he wants to hear,” you said, raising your hands in defeat. “I let him talk, say whatever he wanted to, but I think it only pissed him off more.”

Enid sighed.

“What?” You asked, though it sounded like a statement. She clearly knew something you didn’t.

“He wants you to choose him,” she said simply. “Eventually, he’ll come around and understand why you made the choice you did. For now, though, you have to let him know that you’re not going anywhere. Choose him.”

“I choose him every day,” you muttered.

“Then tell him that,” Enid reaffirmed. After a moment, she stopped touching your hair. “What’s up with that new girl, anyway?”

“You mean Clem?” you asked, turning around to look at your friend.

“Yeah. She seems super intense.”

You shrugged. “She’s been through a lot.” You smirked. “That’s how I like my women, anyways.”

She set a hand on your cheek with a grin. “Me too.”
You ultimately decided to give Carl some space for the night. Between helping the Richmond people settle in and trying to find a place for Clem to sleep, you had more on your mind than bugging someone that didn’t want your presence.

Though there was enough room for Clementine to stay in the Richmond house, you could tell it wasn’t what she wanted. She was too considerate and prideful to ask you if she could sleep close to you. You made an excuse to Javier, saying you needed her help with something, and escorted her to the Main House. You silently laid down a few blankets and pillows on the floor beside your bed.

You were wrapped up in your covers, but you couldn’t sleep. You stared at the ceiling, the scenery unchanging and hardly visible in the pale and dim moonlight. A feeling that crawled in the back of your mind told you Clem wasn’t asleep either.

“I’m sorry for ruining your friendship,” she mumbled, the words hardly audible.

Though Alexandria had (very) pressing matters to attend to, you knew it wasn’t a place immune to gossip. Virtually all of the original Alexandrians were still alive and living out their lives in modern palaces, and though the statement was rudely blunt, they weren’t fighters. Apparently, people did one of two things now: they talked or they fought.

“You didn’t do anything, kid,” you assured. You were in no mood to stroke anyone’s ego, but you wouldn’t put the blame on someone who didn’t deserve it, either. “This one’s on me.”

“I know I haven’t asked a lot of you… You’ve been allowed to live here without giving anything in return,” Rick stated.

Considering the arrival of Richmond, the community no longer fit inside of the church when it came to town meetings. So, Rick was standing on the back of a truck, voice projecting over the crowd. You stood between Clem and Enid, the three of you closer to the Richmond people than Alexandrians. Carl was close to the front, close to his father.

“But now, our way of life is threatened; our lives here could end. We have to do something about that… and I need your help,” Rick continued. “I need some of you to come with us. You know who you are…” His eyes brushed over the crowd, briefly landing on you, “...and I appreciate the risk you’re willing to take. The rest of you need to be prepared.”
He derailed into an assuring yet realistic speech regarding the impending war -- none of the people you stood beside were soldiers, but life without enemies was possible. Things could be peaceful, and everyone present was a protector of that idea. You’d fight to the death if it meant the Saviors and their ideology was eradicated. You knew a lot of others around you felt the same way.

The meeting was over, and Rick announced for any fighters to join him at the front. The majority of the Richmond mass approached the truck Rick now stood beside, and you moved to join them. You felt a hand grab you before you could walk further.

You looked down at the hand before your eyes trailed up her arm and onto her face. Enid held you tightly, a blank look on her face.

“You’re not gonna go, are you?” She asked. Though she wore no expression, her voice was a mix of disbelief and desperation.

“Of course I’m gonna go,” You stated like any other idea was preposterous. “Enid, this is war, and I brought a hell of a lot of soldiers. I can’t just send them into battle while I stay behind, drinking lemonade on a shaded porch.”

“There are other ways to help,” she persisted. “You can help reinforce the walls, or keep guard. You can ration food, bullets, supplies.”

“Olivia can handle rations,” you countered, “and Carl’s been keeping watch. He doesn’t need my help.”

You pulled yourself out of Enid’s grasp, but this time, she took you by the shoulder and forced you to spin around. You were so taken aback by her action that words couldn’t seem to roll their way off your tongue.

“Do you want to know why I know what you should say to Carl? Or better yet, why I’m not with Glenn and Maggie, because you haven’t bothered to ask yet?”

You stared at her, or more specifically, the tears brewing in her eyes.
“Because we thought you were dead. I’m not with my family right now because I thought you died, because I chose you over them. I chose you every night I fell asleep in an empty house, when I sharpened your spare arrowheads, and when I held Carl because he was sobbing his eyes out over you. I knew what to tell you because I feel the same way he does: I want you to choose me. Choose me over this war. Choose me over the Saviors. For once, just… choose me.”

You stayed silent. Tears fell down her face as she laughed in disbelief. Enid proceeded to storm off, but you didn’t chase her.

“I can look after her,” Clementine offered as she stood a few feet behind you. “It’s too risky for both me and Javi to be there.”

“Sorry you had to see that,” you mumbled, then nodded. “Thank you.”

“I can look after her,” I blurted out, which seemed to catch your attention. “It’s too risky for both me and Javi to be there.”

I could see relief wash over your features. “Sorry you had to see that. Thank you.”

I nodded and watched you catch up with Rick and the rest of his soldiers.

I could spend the rest of my life trying to pay Ryan back and it still wouldn’t be enough. Of course, Kenny and the rest assumed you were dead, and I was too shocked by the idea to disagree. I could have disagreed, insisted to check back and make sure you were actually gone. Instead, I let them lead me away from the destroyed building and convince me you were dead. Not to mention, by the time I finally met you again, I was aligned with some of the worst people the world had to offer.

I had a lot of making up to do.

When the main truck of soldiers drove off, I walked forward, opposite of Enid’s direction. I didn’t intend on breaking my promise with you, but I knew she needed her space right now, and I was probably one of the last people she wanted to see anyway.
Carl stepped away from a woman in dreads, one I thought I heard you call ‘Michonne.’ She watched him step away from her, and as he walked closer to me, her gaze shifted to me. Moments later, she walked off herself.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked, and though he was walking right towards me, he seemed slightly surprised by my words. Carl avoided my eyes as he contemplated, a sign I recognized as him trying to decide if he wanted to be rude or not. Because he was a good man, though, he agreed.

“Sure, but I’m on watch.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

We stayed in absolute silence as we walked block after block, seeing nothing out of the ordinary and not noticing anything suspicious. Other than Carl greeting a few citizens and warning a group of kids to stay off of the streets, nothing happened between the two of us. The tension was growing so thick I thought one of us might choke on it.

“I’ve never been an easy person to talk to,” I started, wanting to get the conversation rolling. “I’m not a great listener, and I don’t always know what to say.” When he didn’t reply, I said, “it must be weird, seeing all these new faces.”

“Yeah,” Carl agreed, then hesitated. “I’m still a little worried you guys will turn on us. Maybe not as a whole, but all it takes is one person, you know?”

“I absolutely do,” I said with a humorless chuckle, “and I can’t blame you for that. Trust is an earned thing, no matter who it is or what situation you’re in… and even then, it’s easy to break.”

Carl smirked. “I guess that’s something you and I have in common: broken trust.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, clenching my jaw out of nervousness. “Funny how our problems are opposite of eachother.” I paused, clearing my throat. “It’s not any of my business, Carl, and I know that, but I just hope you know that her choice wasn’t an easy one.”

His smirk disappeared into a flat expression.
“Ryan… she didn’t pick me over you. Actually, in some weird way, she did all of this for you. All she wanted to do was keep Alexandria safe, and that includes you.” I laughed to myself. “I mean, do you really think she’d just run off with a couple of Saviors? That’s not her. And for the record, she was thinking about you the entire time. I could tell she was distracted by something, something that wasn’t war.”

Carl stopped walking and turned towards me. “You know Ryan, right? You knew her for years before the two of you got split up?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s what happened.”

“So you must know that this is what she does.”

I pursed my lips.

“I don’t know what it is, but for some reason, she gets these ideas in her head, and for the life of her, she doesn’t let go. She convinces herself that things are always black and white, that once she’s caught in the middle of something, she has to go at it alone. If she would just come to me and talk to me, she’d realize how wrong she is. She isn’t alone.”

I observed him. “You’re afraid she’ll never let you in.”

He bobbed his head vaguely. “Sometimes I feel like we’re never gonna be a real team. So… I get angry. Not at her, not at you, but at the things that created her. I get so angry, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

I stood motionless for a few seconds, then turned around and started walking away. I knew Carl would follow me, and sure enough, he was beside me within seconds.

“Where are you going?” He asked.

“We’re gonna find Enid.”

“Then what?”
I grinned. “Then… we’re gonna kill some walkers.”
The Alexandrian group of soldiers met up with the Kingdom and Hilltop ones before heading to the Sanctuary. All of the people filled too many vehicles for you to keep track of, but you guessed there were at least six truckloads of warriors heading straight towards the enemy. Your blood boiled with excitement and anxiety.

You switched from a truck to an RV when the troops met up at Hilltop. The drive from Hilltop to the Sanctuary was short, so you mostly spent your time pacing in the vehicle and trying to mentally prepare any and every possible outcome. Most of the other people in the vehicle were either from other communities or Alexandrians you didn’t recognize, which meant they didn’t have the guts to tell you to stop. Eventually, though, you stepped over the front console and returned to your passenger seat.

“You finally done?” Javier asked curiously. He didn’t take his eyes off of the road.

“Probably not,” you admitted, leaning back in your chair. You pulled your legs up and crossed them, one calf over the other as you sat crosslegged. “We’re gonna create a line, but there’s too many of us to make it single-file. You need to stay in the back where Negan won’t see you.”

“What about you?” He inquired. “Gonna put on a show?”

“In true Ashling fashion,” you smirked. “As narcissistic as this sounds, I feel like he needs to see me. As far as he knows, you and Clem are dead, but you died Saviors. If it looks like I escaped, I don’t know… maybe it’ll prove something.”

“Starting off a war by seeing ghosts,” Javier remarked. “I like the way you think.”

“I guess you don’t think he’ll take the deal, then,” you concluded.

Javier let out a breath. “I know Negan, I know the way he thinks. All he’s gonna do is ramble on about how he keeps people alive, tell Rick to suck his dick, and start a war.”

“Javier Garcia: always the optimist.”
He laughed. “What does that make you?”

“A realist with pessimistic tendencies,” you answered.

Alexandria on its own may not have been the most impressive conglomerate in history, but when it combined forces with other communities in the area, the result was a force to be reckoned with. With everyone banded together outside of the Sanctuary in a packed yet neat line, you felt absolutely unstoppable.

There was no viable way to get around the chainlink fence, which probably worked in your group’s favor anyways; walkers were already gathering at the edges. Rick fired two shots in the air, then shouted for Negan to show himself.

“What the shit is this?!” He exclaimed, loud enough for the entire group to hear.

“A peace offering,” Rick answered. “In front of you, there are three communities, banded together against you and saying no more. We won’t give you our supplies, we won’t bend to your will. Those days are over. But this doesn’t need to be bloody. We both have people that aren’t a part of this, children that have nothing to do with this. So… we’re giving you a chance to surrender.”

“Yeah?” Negan laughed. “And what happens to the rest of us? What happens to the killers that’ve been keeping you safe?”

“God, don’t you get it?” You shouted, finally fed up with his bullshit. “We don’t need you to keep us safe! We’ve survived without you, and we’ll continue to do just that. Then again, if you don’t give in now, you won’t be around to see just how well we do without you.”

You were satisfied by the momentary shock on Negan’s face.

“You’re the kid’s plaything,” he said, recovering quickly. “That’s a shame, girlie: I really liked you.”

“I really don’t give a shit,” you retorted.
He shook his head with a sinister smile.

“So let me get this straight:” Negan continued, “I surrender myself and my men, and you put us to death, but they’re families live happily-fucking-after without them? You really think we’ll go for that? What happens if we refuse?”

“I made this rule a long, long time ago… If you kill, you get killed,” Rick answered. “And if you refuse, everyone out here fights their way in there. Then, whatever happens, happens, and it won’t be pretty.”

“You seriously humored the idea that your group of lawyers and accountants and housewives and playthings could tear down these walls actually accomplish anything if they got inside? That’s rich.”

“Get ready,” Rick murmured, “it looks like things are going the way we expected.”

“Surrender — as you damn well know — is not an option,” Negan replied. “I have a different plan.”

Negan pulled someone out by the arm. The ‘someone’ was Gregory.

“The Hilltop stands with Negan and the Saviors,” Gregory announced, though he was obviously petrified. “If you stand against us now, you will no longer be welcome.”

“And?” Negan urged.

“Your families will be thrown out and have to fend for themselves.”

“And?”

“Go home now, or you’ll have no home to go back to.”
“You heard the man!” Negan shouted. “Go home before you have no fucking home!”

You saw Rick turn to Jesus. “I’ll understand. Really.”

Jesus smiled, though he obviously wasn’t happy. “All I have at Hilltop is a bunch of books.”

You looked over the rest of the crowd in time to see a few men walk off. You could hear them muttering excuses, but frankly, you didn’t care. You didn’t think the men were cowards, but you didn’t care to hear their reasoning either. Facing Negan again, you grinned in triumph.

“I counted 8 guys!” Negan screamed at Gregory, which you could hear clearly. “You said it would be half!”

Gregory bowed his head and spoke so only Negan could hear. Negan then said something to the man before pushing him off of the platform they were standing on.

“I’m man enough to admit I thought more lives would be saved by that,” Negan proclaimed.

“The offer still stands,” Rick returned. “There doesn’t have to be bloodshed. None of your people would be harmed.”

“I’ve considered your kind offer... and the answer is somewhere between fuck no and go fuck yourself.”

A bullet went through the head of a man standing beside you.

The drivers lined up their vehicles so they were parallel with the Sanctuary. This allowed for everyone to take cover behind them. You ended up behind the trailer Javier drove less than an hour ago, while Rick ducked behind a truck. You saw that Ezekiel, Jesus, and Javier were all behind the same truck.

“Zeke, get your men to go for the windows,” Rick instructed. “Everyone else… open fire.”
Carl plunged his knife into the walker’s soft skull. With only a slight yank, he freed the blade just in time to turn around and kill the one behind him. He supposed he should be more careful, but with both Clem and Enid helping, Carl wasn’t too concerned.

“You were right,” Enid panted, though Carl could hear the smile in her voice. “This really helps.”

Clementine chuckled as she kicked a walker down by its kneecap and lopped half of its head off with a machete. “I know.”

Carl was too focused to make light conversation. He was starting to get a bit cockier, letting the walkers stumble towards him and even occasionally grab him before killing them. Carl wasn’t trying to test his limits — he was just trying to distract himself. Distract himself from you. And so far, it was working.

Three walkers were making their way towards Carl, their legs bending strangely and bodies jolting unnaturally as they advanced. Normally, he would ask for some help, but not today. All he could see was red, not risks.

Carl approached one of them, forcing it to the ground. He then grabbed the one farthest to the right by the neck, dragging it away from the one he tackled. He stared at the being with gritted teeth for a moment, then ran his knife through the bottom of its jaw. Carl took back his weapon and spun around, killing the third walker that was slowly making its way over to him. He let the body fall to the ground and picked up a rock, then dropped it on the tackled walker’s head.

With a tired breath, Carl loosened the flannel tied around his waist and pulled it back onto his arms. He turned to Enid and Clem, who were finishing up with their last kills. He took the spare time to clean off his blade on his jeans.

“Not bad, guys,” Clem congratulated as she looked around at the piles of walker bodies. “Good work.”

“I say we head back and get cleaned up,” Enid purposed, wiping some sweat off of her forehead. “I feel nasty.”
Carl half-smiled and nodded. “Agreed.”

The first battle against Negan went as well as anyone expected: there were casualties, but not a startling amount. Even after the Savior snipers were taken out, everyone continued to fire at the windows, creating a ruckus that would draw walkers for miles.

“We have to do it now!” you shouted from behind a school bus. Occasionally, you turned towards the Sanctuary and fired a few rounds.

Rick nodded in agreement. “Ezekiel, clear everyone out. Javier, follow me. Ryan and Jesus, cover me.”

Without a signal, the four of you fled from your covers and approached the pick-up truck parked in front of the Sanctuary. It was closer to the gates, so there was no protection from incoming fire. Almost more alarming, though, there were walkers steadily approaching.

“Shift it into neutral!” Rick shouted, tossing Javier the keys to the vehicle. Meanwhile, you and Jesus fought off the roamers that dared to come too close. You mostly used the serrated edges of your bow, while Jesus utilized Morgan’s old staff. You were impressed — but not surprised — by his grace with the weapon.

When the truck was shifted into neutral, Rick began pushing, and Javi got out to help. Your back was turned towards the men, but you could hear them struggling to break through the fence. You glanced back to see their feet slipping out from underneath them.

In a split-second decision, you slung your bow around your back and bolted forward to one of the two operable vehicles left. Thankfully, the three-seater pickup was closer, which meant the five of you would instead get to take the white van home. That is, if you made it out alive. It may just be the four of them going home. You’ve accepted that, though. You accepted it the moment you left Jesus’s side.

Despite calls of protest, you slammed the door behind you just in time to stop the few walkers you spiked the interest of. The key was left in the ignition, so you simply turned it, slammed your foot on the break, and shifted the gear into drive. You looked up to see that Javier and Rick had stopped pushing the car and were instead helping Jesus, though the three men tried to catch your attention
as well. You simply nodded your head to the side.

They took your silent advice and thinned the growing hoarde long enough for the three of them to clear it. Of course, a few stragglers tried to go at them a few times, but for the most part, they were safe.

That’s when you slammed your foot on the gas.

“You’re gonna have to tell her eventually.”

You stirred, slowly waking up. You weren’t sure how, but you were back at Alexandria, and you were laying in the infirmary. Your head was throbbing, yet you managed to make out an exchange of conversation that had to be happening outside.

“I will,” a different voice returned. “Just not now. There’s enough going on.”

“She’s gonna figure it out,” the first voice said. “Plus, you know Ryan. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s already figured it out.”

“She’s been unconscious for the last day and a half. She doesn’t know anything.”

“What don’t I know?” you asked loudly, only to regret it. Not only did it make your headache worse, but you could practically feel your vocal chords scraping together. You winced and rubbed your throat.

The door swung open. Two familiar faces were by your side moments later: Clementine and Carl.

“Don’t ever do that again!” Carl shouted, which made you wince even more.

“Okay, Jesus,” you grumbled. “Only if you stop yelling.”
“You scared the shit out of us,” Clem agreed, her arms crossed as she observed you.

“Sorry about that,” you rasped out, then frowned. “What did I do, exactly?”

“You ran a truck through the Sanctuary’s gate,” Clem answered. “The airbag didn’t go off, so you were knocked out cold on impact.”

“Shouldn’t I be dead?” You asked.

“Yes,” Carl growled, “you should be. Javier coated himself in walker guts, climbed onto the bed of the truck, broke the back window, and pulled you out.”

You felt guilty for making your friend risk himself like that, but despite that, you smiled. It felt good to know that Javier would still take a bullet for you, especially considering you’d take one for him without a second thought.

“I’m sorry he had to do that,” you said to no one in particular, “and I’m sorry I worried everyone. I’m just… sorry. For everything.” You looked at Carl when you said that last part.

You could tell Clementine wanted to disagree, but when she glanced at Carl, she instead pursed her lips. Her demeanor reminded you of a phrase your mother used to tell you: ‘don’t poke the bear.’ Feeding into Clem’s actions, you cleared your throat before speaking again.

“Clem, can you go find Javi for me?” You requested. “And Rick, too, probably. I’m sure he wants to talk.”

She nodded and excused herself from the room.

“I saw you before I crashed the car,” you told Carl moments after Clem left. “Or maybe it was during, or after, or when I was passed out. I don’t know; it’s coming back in pieces. What I do know, though, is that I saw you.
“I saw us on the road to Terminus, I saw you in that church’s candlelight, I saw you when you had that nightmare and I calmed you down. I saw everything we’ve been through, and it made me realize something: I choose you.”

You could see his features soften ever-so-slightly, and for the first time in a while, you felt like you were saying the right thing.

“I know I haven’t been acting like it lately, and you can add that to the mile-long list of things I’m sorry for. But even when I’m not around you, I’m thinking about you, wondering if you’re safe. It feels like, no matter what I do or what I say, I’m always gonna come back to you. Not seeing you as much as I want ruins my day, so knowing you’re upset and angry with me… It kills me. And I don’t blame you for it, and I don’t want you to feel guilty for it, but,” you shrugged like there was nothing you could do about it, “It kills me.”

“I miss you,” Carl said in simple response. “I miss the girl who was bold enough to make jokes about my eye but was kind enough to help me bandage it. I miss the double-edged sword of a person you used to be, how you were sharp enough to cut anyone that came to close, but slowly opened up to the people in our group. Now, it’s like you’re this… shell, just roaming around with a bow in your hand. I don’t know if it’s Negan, or this war, or all of this change, but you’re not you anymore, Ryan. I miss you.”

The ghost of a sad smile tugged at your lips. “I miss me too.”

You closed your eyes when you felt his lips press against your forehead.

While you were unconscious, Rick arranged for different groups of soldiers to take out the Sanctuary’s watch posts. While the group he led was successful, things with Ezekiel’s raid got hairy, and they had to flee without completing the mission. Saviors from the outpost escaped, which surely meant they were heading back to Negan to give him the news. Rick was expecting retaliation at any moment.

“There isn’t much else we can do but prepare and wait,” Rick spoke to the small crowd fit into the church.

The mass of people was mostly composed of the front fighters, like Jesus and Ezekiel, along with
the group you began to call “Team Family”, which was composed of Rick, Michonne, Carl, Abraham, Rosita, and pretty much anyone else you arrived at Alexandria with. You considered Maggie and Glenn a part of this ‘team’ because you knew they would be at the meeting if they weren’t at Hilltop. There were a few other people, too, mostly determined Richmond men like Javier. Clementine decided to show up too.

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“Eugene and the others are working hard to make bullets; a new batch came in this morning,” Rick said.

“Eugene and the others are working hard to make bullets; a new batch came in this morning,” Rick said.

You frowned at the news you hadn’t heard, then began to put things together. The shop a mile out from Alexandria you sharpened your bow at was filled with machinery and tools itching to be used. Eugene was no fighter, but he was a genius. Even without electricity, he could come up with a way to pump bullets out like it was as easy as baking a cake. And if you had to bet, you’d bet that shop was exactly where he was creating said magic.

“We need shooters in every building leading up the gate,” Rick continued. “Michonne, you can select who’s going where.”

“We need shooters in every building leading up the gate,” Rick continued. “Michonne, you can select who’s going where.”

“You gonna be one of them?” Carl asked after turning to you.

Normally you’d be standing, but considering the fact that you had a concussion and wanted to please Carl in any way you physically could, you were sitting beside him on a pew. You shook your head, almost reaching to wipe your nose before remembering how bad it hurt the last time you did. Considering Denise said you almost broke it, though, you should be thankful the bruised and tender flesh wasn’t accompanied by two black eyes.

“Nah,” you answered. “I asked Michonne if she could leave me out of it. I think she might have a soft spot for me -- she said she would.”

“Nah,” you answered. “I asked Michonne if she could leave me out of it. I think she might have a soft spot for me -- she said she would.”

He rolled his eyes at your joke, but you could see the relief flood his features. The brief moment of peace you felt was cut short by a few warning shots.

“That’s the signal,” Rick thought aloud. “Dammit, they’re already --”

He was cut off by the stain glass windows on the southside of the church shattering completely.

Without even thinking, you pulled Carl to the ground and threw yourself over him, shielding his entire body with your own. You only dared move when the sound dissipated and you could hear
“Was that… an explosion?” Michonne asked in disbelief.

“Of some kind,” Rick confirmed. “We have to get eyes on the other side of the wall. Now!”

“Are you okay?” you whispered to Carl. You grabbed his face, examining his completely clear pale skin. He seemed to be unscathed.

“I’m fine,” he assured, gently pushing away your touch so he could examine your forehead. When his fingers came back bloody, you realized one of the stitched cuts on your head had re-opened. “You need to get that fixed.”

You shook your head as you untied the handkerchief holding back your hair and instead pressed it to the wound. “We need to get people to the center of Alexandria. You stood up and took off before he could disagree.

You could hear Negan demanding for Rick outside of the front gates, but you didn’t care. You knocked on doors and ushered people out of their houses and towards the heart of the city. Thankfully, the grenades only hit empty houses, but you weren’t about to risk people’s lives by assuming more wouldn’t be thrown.

“Come on, towards City Hall,” you informed as a frantic father and two of his older children rushed out of the door. You looked inside to find their mother trying to coax the youngest, who couldn’t be more than four-years-old, out the door. However, it was clear she was petrified, which wasn’t doing anything to help soothe the anxious child.

“Stay here!” He screamed. “I wanna stay here!”

“We can’t stay here, baby,” she tried to bargain through a shaky voice. “It’s not safe.”

You stepped into the house, tying the handkerchief across your wound so it sat at an angle on your forehead. With the wound being covered and your nose hidden in the lack of light, you approached the child and crouched down to be on his level.
“Wanna play a game?” you asked, which seemed to both confuse him and catch his attention.

You offered him your hand. “You get to knock on everyone’s door, yell as loud as you want. And I can carry you if you want.”

He contemplated. “What can I yell?”

The mom looked at you, so you nodded your head to the door. You picked up her son and followed her out of the house, telling her there were only a few houses left and that you’d keep him safe. Then, with the toddler on your hip, you jogged up the next staircase and pounded on the door, which the child proceeded to do. It seemed that anyone in the house had already evacuated, but just to be sure, you opened the door and yelled inside.

“Is anyone here?!” you asked, then told the boy in your arms he could ask, too. He grinned and repeated you, voice just as loud.

There was no response, which for right now, was good enough for you. When someone else’s life wasn’t literally in your hands, you’d scale back and check the houses more thoroughly. For now, though, you checked three more houses before reaching City Hall.

The boy’s father was waiting for you at the doors. You handed him off, told him you’d be back to play more games soon, and that for now, he had to be good for his mom and dad. The father thanked you before walking inside to reunite with his family.

You ran a hand down the back of your night as you walked down the staircase. You looked from side to side, seeing if Carl was in your field of vision. You were grateful to find him at the corner of the street. You mustered a smile and a small wave, which he returned. Then, he grabbed his side and fell to his knees.

Your sense of relief morphed into one of panic as you rushed to his side.

“Carl?!” you shouted, nearly stumbling over yourself when you stopped to kneel beside him. “What’s wrong? Was it the explosion? Dammit, I knew you weren’t okay!”

“I’m fine,” he assured, waving his dismissal. You weren’t fooled, though. There was no color in his face, sweat was dripping from his temples and soaking through his shirt, and his voice was
weak. “I’ve been running too much, that’s all.”

You set a hand on his forehead. “Jesus, you’re burning up,” you said. You grabbed one of his arms and slung it over your shoulders. “The infirmary’s just down the road.”

The two of you slowly walked down the sidewalk, Carl trudging along as you carried some of his weight. You could tell he was trying to keep himself upright without your help, but it was obvious that without your help, he would fall over.

You occasionally leaned your neck forward to scan his frame, looking for whatever injury was causing all of this. Eventually, your eyes found a fresh blood stain on the lower half of his rightside ribcage. You guessed that a shard of glass found its way into his flesh, and when paired with the excitement and his constant movement, the pain could easily be the source of his symptoms.

There were only a few explosions before you reached the infirmary, and even then, the only effect you could feel was the ground slightly rumbling beneath your feet. You pushed open the door and turned your body sideways so you could enter while still helping Carl.

“She was coaxing a man with burns on his face to hold a washcloth to the area. Still, she spared a moment to look up at you. “Exam room 3 is open,” she answered clearly, though seemed hesitant. “Should we switch places?”

The thought of doing so made you sick. “I can handle this,” you assured, “Thanks.”

You helped Carl down the short hallway and into the room. You flipped on the light to reveal two moveable countertops with a draped table between them. Grabbing the pillow that sat on the chair in the corner of the room, you set it on the end of the table that was pressed to the wall. Then, you walked Carl to the edge and told him to lie down.

“‘M fine,” Carl grumbled out, though it was very clear that he wasn’t.

“I’m not arguing with you, kid,” you said in a voice that lacked any bias. You switched into your Doctor mode, the one you’ve been practicing for the weeks you’d been working under Denise. You
focused on scrubbing your hands in the makeshift sink instead of the mess of a boy behind you.

Thankfully, by the time you turned around, Carl had laid down. He dropped his hat on the floor, and his eyes were closed. For a moment, you almost thought he was sleeping. He swallowed and furrowed his eyebrows, though, which told you otherwise.

You slipped into a pair of disposable gloves after assembling all of your tools. You practiced stitches a few times, mostly on the canned pig’s feet no one in Alexandria was brave enough to eat. You knew the technique, just not how to make it pretty. You didn’t think Carl would mind the scar; it would look like nothing when compared to his eye.

With a deep breath, you reached for the hem of Carl’s shirt and began to raise it. You turned away to grab the syringe full of medication that would numb the area while picked out shards of glass. When you faced him again, though, you didn’t see a cut with glass shards in it. Instead, you saw what was unmistakably a set of teeth marks. You looked from the wound to his face in shock.

“I’m sorry, Ry,” Carl whispered, eye open ever so slightly. “I’m so sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not gonna say much more than that really enjoyed writing this part, and that you’ll definitely want to stick around for the rest of All Out War.
We all have things we do involuntarily. Some of said things are routine, like sliding your shoes off at the front door or brushing your teeth when you get up in the morning. Most of the time, we aren’t even in control; our body goes on auto-pilot and makes the motions before our minds can catch up. We don’t do them to stay alive; we do them because we told ourselves day after day, year after year, that we had to. We get lost in it, until one day, we find ourselves trapped in a cycle that’s bound to repeat. A dramatic way of putting it, yes, but not inaccurate. Not in the slightest.

Then there are the habits that are truly involuntary, like blinking, breathing, and a heart beating. You can’t control your heart, but you can control your eyes and your lungs. Only when you become aware, though, like when someone points out that your tongue never sits flat in your mouth.

Now was one of those moments you were aware. You knew you should breathe, that you had to breathe, but you couldn’t. As you slid to the floor and curled up into a ball against the wall, your chest quivered, begging for air. You couldn’t humor it — all you could do was sit there, your mouth open, as you silently screamed a pitch that didn’t waver.

Eventually, your tear-filled eyes began to blacken around the edges, and you finally managed to force a breath in. It didn’t feel how it normally would: a release. It felt like your organs were slowly shriveling up inside of your body and oxygen couldn’t do a damn thing to fix it. It hurt to breathe.

It hurt.

Carl’s gonna die.

It hurts.

“What are we supposed to do?”

Denise found you curled up in the exam room and Carl pleading you to get up hours ago. It was longer than you realized because the Sun was starting to come up and the Saviors were long gone. Apparently, over half of Alexandria had been shipped off to either the Hilltop or the Kingdom with the help of Jesus, Ezekiel, Rick, and even Glenn and Maggie. They apparently made a surprise
Someone — either Clem or Denise — managed to put a cup of coffee in your hands. You’d been nursing it for as long as you’d been out of the exam room, taking robotic sips every once in a while. Clem was kind enough to heat it up whenever it got cold.

“There isn’t much we can do,” Denise answered Clementine’s question. Her words were careful, like she was afraid that if she said the wrong thing, you’d snap. That didn’t really matter, though, because you were already broken. Your eyes stayed in the same place, the tracks of tears down your face dried long ago. You were nothing more than an empty shell.

“The bite’s on his trunk, and even if it wasn’t, it looks like it’s days old by now. The infection has already spread. The most I can do is make sure he’s not in any pain.”

You tried to tell yourself that was enough.

“It is days old,” Clem mumbled. She was sitting on the armrest of the couch, right beside you. “It happened when you were at the first battle. Carl was pissed, so was Enid, so I thought we could could outside the wall for a little bit and kill some walkers. I told them to speak up if too many were coming at them too fast. Carl wanted to take them all on on his own.”

Just like when you woke up from the car accident, your memory was slowly starting to piece itself back together.

“You’re gonna have to tell her eventually,” Clem said. She tried to keep her voice down, because even though you were asleep in the next room, Denise or someone else might choose to walk in at any moment.

“I will,” Carl grunted, “just not now. There’s enough going on.”

“She’s gonna figure it out,” Clementine persisted. “Plus, you know Ryan. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s already figured it out.”

“She’s been unconscious for the last day and a half,” Carl retorted. “She doesn’t know anything.”
“What don’t I know?” You shouted from behind the closed door.

“Ryan, I’m sorry,” Clem whispered, setting a hand on your back.

You shrugged away her touch.

“Shut up,” you told her.

“What?” She asked in disbelief.

“I said shut up,” you repeated. “This isn’t anyone’s fault, it just happened. Don’t even start with that self-loathing bullshit.” You paused, then said, “I’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime.”

“Okay,” Clem promised. She stood up, and you thought she was about to walk away. Instead, though, she took a seat on the cushion beside you. “Then I’m sorry you’re losing him.”

This time, you initiated the touch. You leaned your head against her shoulder, and when you felt another wave of emotion starting to wash over you, you pressed your forehead to the crook of her neck to hide your face. You only moved away when you heard the door open.

Rick rushed in, looking frantic. Sweat was drenched through his shirt and his eyes were wide with a dull, buzzing panic. “Where’s Carl?”

You wiped your eyes and cleared your throat, not wanting to add to the father’s urgency. “He’s just in there, Room 3,” you answered, pointing down the hall. This didn’t seem to calm him, though.

You thought back to a few hours ago, when Carl was begging you not to tell anyone.

“Let me tell my dad,” Carl pleaded as Denise tried to coax you into standing. “Please, Ryan, let me be the one.”

You rubbed at your running nose. “He’s okay,” you lied, which finally got Rick to relax. “It’s just... there was a kid. I tried to save him. I couldn’t.”
Rick approached you, setting a charred hand on your cheek. He leaned in, pressing his lips to the edge of your hairline. You reached a hand up and set it in the crook of his elbow, closing your eyes.

“Go home, Ryan,” Rick instructed gently. “Pack your things. We’re going to Hilltop.”

You nodded faintly, pulling away as he did.

“I can bring you to him,” Denise told Rick.

He nodded and let her lead him into the hallway.

The moment he disappeared, you cupped one hand over the other and rested your forehead against them. Clem rubbed your back as you began to quietly sob.

You packed your entire room in no time, as you hardly had anything in it to begin with. All of your clothes fit into one bag, your bow and arrow around your back, and the headband Lee gave you on… well, your head. Ultimately, you decided to leave the guitar you took from Deanna in the corner of the room behind your door. Memories were attached to it you’d rather keep happy.

You put your stuff into the bed of a truck other Alexandrians were packing. The various bags and boxes were loose, but you knew they’d be secured before leaving. Because of this, you simply tossed your bag over and let it land wherever it chose to.

“It’s good to see you up and about again,” someone mentioned.

You looked up to see Javier packing a few things into a different vehicle a few yards away from the one you stood next to.

“Without you, I wouldn’t be,” you remarked, walking around and bridging the gap between the two of you.
“You’re welcome for that,” Javier chuckled as he pulled you into a hug.

Your arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” Javier said softly, all amusement leaving his voice.

You held him tighter. “Thank you.”

You pulled away in time to see Rick walking by.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Javi,” you promised, which he nodded in agreement to.

You stepped away and caught up with Rick, who seemed to be walking back to the main house. You caught a glimpse of him, and you had to admit: he was handling the news better than you were. It was impressive, considering he was Carl’s father, the man who raised him. You’d known Carl for mere months, but if you were taking the news so poorly with such little history, you could only imagine what kind of state you would be in had you known him your whole life.

“You packed and ready?” Rick asked, briefly looking at you.

You shoved your hands in your pockets. “Yeah. My stuff’s in the silver Dodge.”

He nodded. “I just gotta grab the rest of Carl’s things.”

“How is he?” you asked.

“He’s doin’ good. Denise said you did a good job stitching up the cut. She thinks it might be infected, though, so he’s supposed to take it easy.”

You frowned, but when you realized what was going on, your heart rate began to pick up. Your heart dropped and your throat tightened. Rick was told the story you thought was the truth before...
you realized what really happened.

Rick didn’t know his son was dying.

Carl lied.

“I’m gonna go see if Enid needs any help,” you dismissed yourself.

“Hey, Ryan?” Rick asked before you were out of earshot.

You turned around at the sound of his voice.

“Thanks for taking care of him.”

You painted on a smile and nodded before walking off.

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You closed the door behind you after entering Carl’s room. Denise was kind enough to move him into the spare bedroom on the first floor, which meant he was laying in a bed rather than an uncomfortable table. Sheets were draped around him and tucked into the edges of the mattress. His eye was exposed, and you could see why: he was sweating bullets. A thick bandage and piece of gauze absorbing that wouldn’t do him any good.

“You lied,” you said, stepping away from the door and taking a seat in the rocking chair beside the bed.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“To your dad,” you clarified, slowly rocking back and forth. “You didn’t tell him it was a bite.”

“Your story made enough sense,” Carl answered plainly.
“No, it didn’t,” You disagreed with a shake of the head. “You weren’t bleeding enough for the cut to be fresh, there’s no way you could have done all that running if a shard actually cut you, and your shirt was intact. It didn’t make any sense at all.” You laughed breathlessly. “It doesn’t make any damn sense.”

“Ry -”

“Why does it have to be you?” You cut him off. “Why now? I’m trying not to make myself the center of this situation, but I swear, it’s like things can’t be too good for me for too long. I got Clem back, then you and I got into a fight. I come back, we make up, and then I find out I’m gonna lose you. What kind of bullshit is this?”

You stood up and began to pace around the room.

“Ryan, look at me.”

“This is so fucking unfair,” you muttered. “To you, to me, to Rick, to Michonne… oh god, to Judith…”

“Ryan.”

“You have to tell him,” you persisted. Your hands gripped the edge of the bed frame as you leaned your weight into it. “He deserves to know. We can’t be sure how much time you have left, but whatever you do, he needs to spend it with you.”

He just looked at you for a moment. “I’m sorry,” he then said, which caught you by surprise. “You don’t deserve this. I’m sorry.”

“What about you?” You asked. “Don’t you feel cheated? Aren’t you pissed off that you’ve survived so long only to get taken out by the things you’ve been running from? Don’t you feel anything for yourself?”

Another pause.
“All I can think about is you,” Carl said, which gave you a sick feeling in your stomach. “I’ve thought about my family too, obviously. Of course I’m angry I’ll never get to see Judy grow up, but Dad has Michonne now. The three of them will find a way to get over me. It doesn’t feel like a good ending, but it doesn’t feel incomplete. You, though… there’s so much I wanted to do with you, Ry.”

You moved to the edge of his bed. You sat close enough to Carl so you could run your fingers through his hair.

“I wanted to wake up beside you every morning; I wanted to move in with you — really move in, not just live down the hall. I wanted to marry you, propose to you with a nice ring and have a ceremony by Alexandria’s Lake at Sunset. One day, I wanted to have kids with you, and through the madness of it all, I wanted to be able to look at you and feel nothing but love. Well, I guess one of those things came true. The rest of it didn’t, though, and now, it never will.”

Tears were flowing freely down your face. When you saw a single one trail down Carl’s cheek, you took a moment to wipe it away.

“So yeah, I feel cheated,” Carl agreed, attempting to clear the emotion from his voice. “I feel cheated out of the life I had planned with you.”

You curled up next to him, momentarily planting your lips on his. “It was gonna be incredible,” you whispered. “I don’t have to live it to know that.”

You managed to convince Carl to tell Rick before leaving for Alexandria. He was still busy with rounding up citizens and their belongings but by noon, only Team Family, a few Richmond soldiers, and Jesus were left in the city. You managed to track Rick down and lead him back to the infirmary. You refused to be there for the conversation.

You found yourself monitoring the walls, shooting the few stray walkers with your bow. You’d have to collect the arrows within the hour, otherwise there was no way you’d get them back. All of the walkers that were heading to or at the Sanctuary were retracing their steps and heading for Alexandria. The sooner everyone could get out, the better.

You heard someone climb the ladder behind you. You didn’t bother turning around, as you weren’t in the mood to talk to anyone. Maybe they’d take the hint and leave you alone.
“Do you think they’re laughing at us?” A voice you’d only heard on a few occasions asked.

“Who?” You frowned, turning to face Paul, or better known as Jesus. “The Saviors? Probably not. I heard you played a little trick on them, sent a live grenade over the gate and back at them. Clever.”

Jesus smiled, one corner of his mouth raising higher than the other. “Not really, but thanks. Dwight was a massive help: he threw undetonated ones over to me. We have 6 of their own weapons to use against them.”

Your frown deepened as you shot another arrow right through the rotted eyes of a walker. “Who’s Dwight?”

“You missed a lot when you were gone,” Jesus observed. “Let’s just say Clementine and Javier aren’t the only Saviors that don’t agree with Negan’s methods.”

“We have an inside man,” you thought aloud. “Not bad.”

“I didn’t mean the Saviors, by the way,” Jesus said, taking a step forward and resting his hands on the top of the metal wall. “I meant them.”

“You think the walkers are laughing at us?”

“I think they would be if they could,” he confirmed. “It’s their job to kill us, so what do we do? We kill each other. We’re making it easy for them.”

“It’s not that simple,” you pointed out. “There’s more to it than that.”

“Maybe,” Jesus ceded, “but maybe that’s what it comes down to.”

“Maybe,” you repeated.
“I heard the news about Carl,” Jesus stated, which made you tense up. “It’s sad you have to lose him like that. It’s sad you have to lose him at all.”

“It’s not just my loss,” you shrugged, trying to convince yourself you were indifferent. “It’s the world’s loss.”

“I don’t doubt that. I haven’t known him for long, but he seems like a good man.”

“He is,” you assured. “He’s the best.” You paused to consider his words. “You said Dwight gave you six grenades?”

“I did.”

“Mind if I borrow a few?”

Your plan wasn’t genius. In fact, it was actually kind of stupid. But when it came down to it, you would risk your life if it meant taking down the Saviors. After all, you didn’t have much to live for anymore. The boy you loved was dying before your very eyes, and there wasn’t a damn thing you could do to stop it.

“So I’m thinking we rig the remaining fence posts,” you said in a low voice. You were holding a sleeping Carl’s hand (you knew he was sleeping because you checked every few minutes for his breath or pulse), and Clem stood by the other side of the bed. “We can wrap them around each pole and connect all the pins by one string. If we bind them tightly enough, there should be enough force to set the trigger once the pin is out. Then, the Sanctuary is no more.”

“You really think that could work?” Clem asked, eyebrows knitted together. “It seems kind of risky.”

“I don’t care about that anymore,” you answered. “All I care about is doing to Negan what he did to me. He took away my fucking home, Clem,” you said, carding your fingers through Carl’s sweat-dampened hair. “I’m just returning the favor.”
“And what happens if it kills you?” Clem spoke, her tone growing low with anger. “Will it really have been worth it?”

“All anyone does in this world is die,” you muttered, staring at Carl’s gentle features. “Now, we die sooner than ever.”

“That don’t mean you have to die tomorrow,” Carl rasped out. You looked at Clem and pointed to the glass of water on the counter beside her. “What are you trying to do, Ashling? Win the race?”

You thanked her for the water and coaxed Carl into sitting up. You carefully raised the glass to his lips, tilting it back ever so slightly as to not startle his senses.

“No matter the context, I win,” you joked, setting the water on the empty space beside you.

“Not this time, sweetheart,” Carl returned, then coughed. “I’m already at the finish line.”

“Maybe not, if this plan works,” you pointed out.

“If you’re really going through with that plan of yours, I’m gonna be there,” Carl insisted.

You immediately shook your head. “I’m not letting that happen.”

“You can’t stop me.”

You snorted. “Wanna bet? You can’t make it out of this bed on your own. How exactly can’t I stop you?”

“I’ll tell Denise when she comes in for her nightly checks,” Carl retorted.

“And what if we’re gone by then?” You asked, briefly glancing at Clem.
“Then I’ll sick Jesus on your ass.”

“Considering he’s the one that gave me the grenades, I don’t think he’d be down for that.”

Carl let out a breath, momentarily resting his head against the headboard. “You said you chose me,” Carl recalled. “It was one of the first things you said when you woke up.”

You ducked your head in embarrassment.

“This is me choosing you, Ryan,” Carl said, taking your hand and squeezing it as hard as he could. “If you’re gonna die, you bet your ass I’m gonna be there for it.”

You looked to Clem, then back at Carl. “I guess we better get going, then.”
Getting ready to raid the Sanctuary took a lot less time than you thought it would. Of course, you already had most of the supplies gathered; the only thing you were waiting for was Clem’s approval. The task you found most challenging was getting Carl out of the house without anyone noticing.

You peeked into the room Rick and Michonne were staying in to make sure both of them were fast asleep. Michonne rested her head and hand on Rick, which lead you to believe she spent some time coaxing him to sleep. The thought made your chest ache with both admiration and grief.

You returned to Carl’s room. You were the one to help sit and stand him up while you instructed Clem to grab things, like painkillers and an extra blanket. Carl insisted he didn’t need such things, but you didn’t budge. After a few moments, the three of you were heading into the dark hallway, Clem leading the way. You exited through the front door, leaving the house behind. You left something else behind, though: a note for Rick saying Carl would be back soon.

Clem offered to drive while you sat in the back with Carl. The few supplies you had were able to fit in the passenger seat beside her. She shook her head slightly as she drove.

“This is stupid,” Clem remarked, clenching her jaw. “So stupid.”

You pressed your lips to a sleeping Carl’s forehead.

The gate to Alexandria was blown off during the Savior’s attack, so getting out of the town was quite easy. Clem occasionally had a hard time seeing things in the dark, but the moment she got out of Alexandria, she flipped on the headlights and could see everything clearly.

You decided that being within a quarter mile of the Sanctuary would be a good time to turn off the headlights again and drive less than 10mph. It took another half-hour to get to the Sanctuary at that speed, but you’d rather be safe than sorry. Going so slow hardly even the walkers could hear the car was just safer.

Clem putting the vehicle in park was enough to wake Carl up. His head turned in your lap and his hand reached up to rub at his eye.
“How long was I out?” he asked, voice coming out as more of a grumble.

“Well, we’re here,” you said with a soft laugh. “Do you wanna sit up?”

He nodded slightly, which prompted you to help lift by the shoulders. Carl winced as he moved, and when fully upright, he curled into the corner against the door. You got out on your side and closed the door as quietly as you could.

“There’s two guards,” Clem informed when you walked to her side of the car. How are we gonna distract them?”

“What do you think I brought my bow for? Decoration?” You answered her question with another question.

She disregarded your sassy remark. “The minute you shoot one of them, the other one freaks out. How do you plan to kill them both with one arrow?”

You smiled, looking over at her. “That’s what you’re here for.”

Clementine stumbled across the field leading up to the Sanctuary’s gates. She rubbed blood off of her forehead and cradled her arm like it might fall off at any moment. One leg trailed behind her, lacking any sort of movement or life.

One of the guards frowned. “Ash?” He asked curiously. However, his rifle was still pressed to his chest.

“Oh, thank god you guys are out here,” Clem said. Her eyes practically rolled into the back of her head with relief.

“Jesus, what happened to you?!” The other guard asked, taking a few steps forward as he lowered his weapon.
“I got in a nasty accident,” She answered, “but I managed to find a cabin in the woods and hid out there for a few weeks so I could get my strength up.”

“Shouldn’t you be dead?” the first guy said.

“Probably,” she said with a laugh. Then, she fell to the ground.

Just as you had hoped, one of the men ran faster than the other. You shot him first, the arrow implanting itself in the center of his forehead. The person further ahead turned back to look at his fallen partner, which is when you shot again. This time, the arrow went through the back of his skull. He fell to the ground face forward.

With a grin of success, you strung your bow on your back and trotted down the hill. You met up with Clem, who was now standing and brushing herself off.

“So far, so good,” you remarked. “We need to get their bodies back by the gate, or what’s left of it. Looks like they repaired some of it, but it’s not entirely closed off. Hopefully the walkers will find them themselves.”

Clem nodded, wiping some of the blood off of her forehead. “At least the scar from this won’t be visible; you know how to carve a girl up.”

“I know how to do a lot of things,” you retorted, then tilted your head to the Sanctuary. “We should get going.”

You started first by dragging the guards up the slope and by the car. Once finished up at the Sanctuary, you and Clem would drive the bodies out aways and place them on the road as a threat to the Saviors. For now, though, you simply left them on the hill and got down to the more important business.

You demonstrated to Clem how tightly the grenades had to be wrapped with the wire. There was a reason you brought nearly 50 yards of it: you wrapped each grenade at least 20 times in order to feel comfortable with the force being created. If the coils were too loose, the grenades wouldn’t be set off by the pulling of the pin, and all of your work would be for nothing.

Clem seemed to do a good enough job, just as you expected. Soon enough, the two of you were
connecting the pins using a new spool of wire. Each time it looped through a new pin, you each had to knot it several times to ensure it was steady. Despite there being two of you, it was a time-consuming process, so time-consuming that you sat outside the car on the cool ground for a while.

“Do you remember Ben?” Clem said out of nowhere.

You stopped making knots for a moment. You didn’t look up, though, and proceeded to the next grenade with ease. “Yeah,” you answered easily. “What about him?”

“I was young, so I don’t remember a lot about him,” Clem remarked. “All I remember is Kenny being mad at him all the time, and how one day, he kind of just disappeared.”

“He didn’t disappear,” you said. “I killed him. I heard Lee talking about how he made the deal with the gang, and I knew we’d never trust him again. I did what everyone else was too afraid to.”

“Kill a kid?” Clem asked.

Despite the sick feeling in your stomach, you nodded curtly.

Clem paused. “I asked Lee about it a few days after it happened. Really, I wanted to know why everyone was treating you weird. You know Lee: he was nice about it, but he told me as it was. After hearing what you did, I held a grudge against you for it for a long time. Did you know that?”

You frowned and shook your head. “You didn’t act like you were mad at me. I had no idea.”

“That’s because I wasn’t mad at you,” Clem amended. “I mean, I tried to be, I really did. Eventually, though, I thought I could fix it by being the person you weren’t.”

“By not killing the kid,” you rephrased.

She nodded.

You observed her for a moment before getting back to your knots. “I never knew Ben dying
affected you that much,” you mentioned. “I didn’t know the two of you were close.”

“That’s the funny thing:” Clem said, returning to her work, “We weren’t. I hardly knew the kid. I don’t know why it bothered me so much, either. I guess I just thought killing made you the bad guy.”

“In that case, then,” you said, setting down a knotted grenade for a new one, “we’re all bad guys.”

“Maybe we are,” Clem agreed, which surprised you enough to look up. “Don’t get me wrong,” she continued, “I think Negan is a waste of life that can rot in hell. I don’t agree with what he does or the way he does it. But we could go up against Satan himself and it wouldn’t necessarily make any of us good.”

“You don’t think good people exist anymore?” you asked.

She didn’t reply right away, which you supposed was because she had to find the right words to say. “I think we’ve all done things to get where we are,” she eventually said, “things we aren’t always proud of. But in some ways, you’re still the girl I spent years idolizing. You’re still the little girl that carried me when no one else would and fought for me when I couldn’t fight for myself.

“I don’t think you’re a good person, I don’t think I’m a good person, I don’t think any of us are good anymore. What I do think is that knowing what pain you’re going through right now makes me wanna kill that bastard even more.”

You laughed sadly. “It’s not his fault,” you reminded. “I mean, god, I would blame him for that if I could. I’d blame him for practically anything. But I don’t want to tie Carl to him. I don’t want to give him that satisfaction, even if he never knows about it.”

“I always wanted to know what love felt like,” Clem said. “I guess that’s it.”

“Only good people get love,” you joked. “I’m not good.”

“Maybe you’re not good,” Clem repeated. “Maybe you’re the best.”

You and Clementine finished planting the grenades just before dawn was about to break. For the most part, you kept them low to the ground, as the grass had grown high enough around the fence
to hide most of the explosives. Occasionally, though, you’d have to use something to cover it up. At the first glimpse of sunlight, you and Clem ran back up the hill and disappeared into the car. She took the passengers seat as you began to drive. You threw your arm behind Clem’s seat as you backed up, sparing a few moments to look at Carl. You could tell he was starting to wake up.

“What’s going on?” he asked, squeezing his eyes shut after briefly opening them.

“We’ve got bodies in the trunk,” Clem answered dryly. “We’re gonna plant them, give the Saviors a little gift.”

“When they find out what we did to their guards, maybe they’ll think twice about hitting up Hilltop,” you agreed.

“Do you seriously think that’s gonna work?” He deadpanned.

“No,” you said honestly, “but it’s worth a shot.”

While planting the grenades, you and Clem came to the conclusion that the Saviors got out of the Sanctuary by clearing a path in the back. They managed to section off walkers from said path, but the rest of the building’s fenced yard was flooded with the undead. Clem suggested the only reason guards were at the front gate was to be sure no one would bombard them in the night. So, if you really wanted to make an impression (and you did), it would be best to put the bodies on the only clear route they have.

So that’s exactly what you did.

The Sun was fully in the sky by the time the three of you got back up to your original trail. You couldn’t have been luckier that a road looking over the building perfectly was one they didn’t have access to. Of course, you still hid the car in some trees and covered the tracks, but all you, Carl, and Clem had to do to disguise yourselves was sit behind a bush. Clem, forever the thorough one, was walking around the forest and checking the perimeter.

“We had a bit of a problem setting up the trap,” you said to Carl. He wasn’t drifting in and out of consciousness like you thought he would be; he was pale and obviously in pain, but he was even able to sit up by himself. A fighter to the end.

“What kind of problem?”
“The wire wasn’t long enough. I underestimated the length it would take to wrap them tight enough and connect them by the pins.”

His eyebrows knitted together. “What does that mean?”

“It means the wire is maybe three yards long, which means whoever pulls it won’t have enough time to get out before explosions start to go off.”

He looked ahead blankly. “I guess I’m the one who does it, then.”

“No,” you disagreed. “You’re going home today, Carl.”

“Why, so I can live a few more days of agony?” Carl asked. “So I watch my dad, Michonne, and you cry over me? Maybe this thing’ll kill me in my sleep, but I might not be that lucky. And if I have to watch what happens after I break your heart… my death will never be peaceful. At least this way, I can do something. Let me do something.”

“Only if I do it with you.”

He snorted. “Now you’ve really lost your mind.”

You took his hand and gripped it tightly. “I choose you,” you stated firmly, “and you choose me. That’s all this comes down to.”

“You have to go,” Carl persisted and even attempted to pull away. “I’m already gonna die. You can still live.”

“I choose you,” you repeated, not letting up on your grasp for even a second.

“Get out of here,” Carl said. “As soon as they leave, promise me you’ll leave and never look back.”
“I choose you.”

“Why?!” Carl finally snapped. “Are you really that fucking stupid?!”

You let go of his hand, but your heart stayed in the same place. “I choose you,” you said softly.

“I’m gonna die, Ryan,” Carl growled. “I’m gonna die. This… thing,” he gestured to the bite, “is gonna kill me, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You can keep pretending that it isn’t happening, you can swear to yourself something’s gonna change, that I’ll be the exception. You’re wrong. You’ll always be wrong.”

You felt tears form in your eyes. “I choose you,” you said, voice beginning to tremble. You set a hand on his shoulder, which he didn’t shrug off. “I choose you.”

He bowed his head, and for a moment, you thought he might erupt again. Instead, though, which was almost more painful, he let out a sob. You wordlessly wrapped an arm around his shoulders. When his head dipped further down, you pressed one side of it to your chest.


“It’s okay,” you soothed, pressing your lips to the back of his neck. “You’re gonna be okay.”

It took much longer than you thought it would for the Saviors to leave. By the time they finally packed everything up and were blazing down their only clear trail, the Sun was beginning to set. It was smart, waiting everything to go dark before planning an attack. What wasn’t smart, though, was how many of his soldiers he took with him.

Guessing by the amount of vehicles alone, you could guess that the majority of the Savior army was heading for Hilltop. Truck after truck and car after car sped by, some with people standing in beds of pickups or on a larger vehicle’s tailgate. They really thought they could win. You could feel excitement pumping through your body at the fact that the bastards wouldn’t have anything to come back to.

“We better get going,” Carl mumbled as he sat up straighter. You’d been giving him painkillers
throughout the day, but you kept the dosages low, as he hated to be constantly drifting in and out. He said he’d rather deal with some pain than with no memory, and you couldn’t argue with him on that.

You nodded, standing up and helping him to his feet. “We need to get the car,” you said, slinging his arm over your shoulders.

He looked over at Clem. “Wanna be teenage martyrs with us?”

Clem, who’d been gripping an assault rifle for the last 8 hours, stiffly nodded. “Sure,” she said, as if she was agreeing to go out for ice cream. “Why the fuck not.”

The walk back to the camouflaged car was short, but it was long enough to make the silence feel awkward.

“Look at us,” you said to Clem, slightly panting as you had to focus on both carrying Carl’s weight and making sure the two of you didn’t trip over a log. “The Apocalypse Kids found a new member.”

“The Apocalypse Kids?” Carl repeated.

Clem merely snorted out a laugh. “Ryan used to call me and her that,” she explained, “mainly because we thought we were the last teenagers on earth.”

“We never thought another one of us was out there,” you said.

“Well, I’m honored to be in your club,” Carl joked, “but I won’t be a member for long. I have some other… commitments.”

The valves of your heart knotted themselves up upon hearing his words. Still, you forced a soft smile. “That’s okay,” you assured. “We’ll be a club again. Someday.”

Relocating the car and uncovering it was easy. You guessed all of the preparation, between walking from the hiding spot to finding the car to de-camouflaging it, took less than ten minutes.
After Clem cleared off the rest of the branches, you helped Carl into the passenger seat. You leaned over and buckled him into place, which he frowned at, but didn’t protest. He especially didn’t protest when you leaned in to kiss him.

Your thumb grazed over his cheek as his lips moved rhythmically against yours, unlocking only to lock and closing just to part. You pulled away and pressed your forehead to his, a bitter smile making its way onto your face.

“I’m sorry,” you whispered.

Everything happened quickly after that. Clem flew into the driver’s seat after you locked and slammed the passenger door. She shoved the key into the ignition and the engine roared to life. You stepped back to give her some space, but you could hear Carl screaming and pulling at his seatbelt. He wasn’t quick enough, though: Clem sped up back onto the road and out of sight.

You ran a hand through your hair as you began walking in the opposite direction. You felt the pockets of your cargo pants, feeling oddly comforted when your hands met the outline of a dead grenade. Between the massive pocket and the jacket covering it, you knew it was hidden from sight.

Breaking into the Sanctuary was simultaneously easier and harder than you thought it would be. You simply walked around and to the clearing in the back, but you weren’t stupid enough to walk through the open garage. Instead, you climbed the wall beside it. You bounced between using a fallen fence and missing bricks to make your way to the top.

Thankfully, there was a window about halfway up the building. However, you couldn’t seem to find a way to open it. Even when you stole a few glances of the inside, you couldn’t find any levers or handles. So, really, it was a glorified pane of glass in the side of a wall. In some ways, this was better.

You managed to shimmy your bow off of your back, only weakening your grip for a few moments at a time. You were panting with anxiety and exhaustion by the time you got it off, but your fatigue was quickly replaced by adrenaline. Taking one of the sharp, curved limbs of your bow, your swung it out as far as you could without falling off the wall and rammed it against the glass.
It busted through and shattered easily. You used the ‘hook’ of the bow to pull large pieces of glass out of the frame, stopping when you knew it was enough room for you to climb in. you brushed off as much glass from the ledge as you could, but when you shimmied yourself over and hoisted yourself into the Sanctuary, you couldn’t feel whatever fresh cuts were on your hands. You were too focused on the unstable platform you were on and the people staring up at you. More importantly, you were focused on the few of them that held weapons.

“I’m surprised they left you any guns,” was the first thing you announced. If you were about to talk to these people, you thought they should know who you really are.

“Go get the guards,” one of the men with a shotgun aimed right at you growled.

“Actually…” you sort of sang, digging into your pocket, “don’t.” You pulled out the grenade and held it up for everyone to see. “Mind putting the toys down, boys?” you asked innocently. “I just want to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

before anyone criticizes me: I'm well aware the grenade thing probably wouldn't actually work. I just need it for dramatic affect, haha.

What was your favorite part? Are you excited for the conclusion of All Out War? Let me know! xx
The guarded Saviors begrudgingly lowered the guns. “I think you’re in the wrong place, lady,” one of them stated.

“I disagree,” you said. “I think I’m in exactly the right place.”

“You’re not gonna find Negan here,” a brave woman shouted. A man beside her tried to silence her, to no avail.

“I’m not looking for Negan,” you stated. “I’m just looking to hurt him. Really, really bad.”

“You’re looking to kill us?” one of the armed men asked. “Good luck with that. Jumping out that window could kill you as much as that blast.”

“I’m not trying to kill any of you,” you said, which caught most of them off-guard. You couldn’t help but snort. “How many of you actually like that prick, anyway? Does anyone like the way he runs things?” you continued. “The way he works you like slaves, treats you like dirt, and burns you if you dare disobey? Are any of you actually drooling over that?”

The Saviors looked back and forth at each other. Some ducked their heads. Others whispered. Regardless, no one loudly expressed their support.

“Okay, here’s an idea,” you started. “How about whoever supports Negan takes a knee, and whoever wants him to rot, raise your hand.”

“Why the fuck would we do that?” Someone asked.

You smirked. “Because I’m your savior now.”

You looked over the mass of people. While no one kneeled, not everyone raised their hand. You
supposed anyone in support of Negan didn’t want to face the ridicule or shame that would come with it, now that they were the minority. Still, the flock of even minorly raised hands was enough to make you know you did the right thing.

“Are there any vehicles left?” you asked, walking down the short staircase extending from the platform. You no longer wanted to be above them.

“There’s a school bus a crew’s been workin’ on,” a member of the crowd answered.

“Nah,” a different voice spoke up. He was parting the crowd with ease, and you soon realized the unfortunate reason why.

The man held a pistol up straight to your head as soon as he was clear of everyone else. “We’re waiting for Negan to get back. Ain’t nobody going anywhere.”

In the blink of an eye, the man was tackled by two other people that came out of nowhere. As they wrestled the gun out of his hand and kept him pinned to the ground, you took it as a good time to finalize things.

“Anyone that wants a better, fairer life,” you shouted, “come with me. The rest of you…” you looked down at the man pinned to the floor. “I hope you’re willing to burn with your beliefs.”

The person who suggested the bus -- his name being Jonathan -- was kind enough to help escort everyone outside. In no time, men, women, and even children filled up the bus seats. There were so many people that a few had to stand or sit on the floor, but they didn’t seem to mind.

“I’m gonna check on Dom, Hazel, and the guys outside,” Jonathan said as he stepped off of the bus. You followed him back inside silently. He met up with Dom, one of the people who tackled the man that threatened you. The other person, Hazel, was apparently upstairs talking to some of Negan’s ‘wives.’

“Wives?” you interrupted Dom. “As in… plural?”

He simply blinked. “It’s worse than it sounds.”

You shuddered.
Jonathan went outside to talk to the guards and see if they were coming or staying. As Dom waited for Hazel to finish, you knelt to the ground, where your attempted attacker was laying. They managed to tie his hands behind his back, but he still laid there helplessly.

“What’s your name?” you asked.

“Chris,” he snarled.

“Well, Chris,” you remarked, “are you going to stop being a dick and wisen up?”

He spat at your shoes.

You rose to your feet with a chuckle. “What happens to you next is your own damn fault.”

A few moments later, both Hazel and Jonathan were done rounding up the last few people in the Sanctuary. Hazel returned with 5 women in dresses that were too nice, and Jonathan with a pair of men that were all too eager to give up their guns.

“Jonathan and Hazel, get them on the bus,” you instructed. “Jon, when you’re done with that, there’s a piece of wire hung on the left hand fence post. I need you to tie that somewhere on the outside of the bus. Dom, take whatever gas you can find and fill the tank. Whatever doesn’t fit, set inside the bus.” you paused. “Bring me at least a gallon, too.”

You drenched the floor of the Sanctuary in gasoline. Chris was shouting at you the whole time, but it wasn’t about bringing him with, so you tuned it out. Eventually, you and Dom coated the entire floor, and as you stood at back door, you started to comprehend what you were about to do.

You took the grenade out of your pocket for a second time. This time, you pulled the pin out, set the trigger, and threw it across the room and at the other door. You and Dom ran out, hearing and even feeling the explosion behind you. The two of you made it to the bus, though, and Jon pulled the lever to swing the door shut behind you both.

“Okay,” you said to yourself, taking a seat in the driver’s chair. “Just like driving a car, right?” you looked up to Jon for confirmation. He gave you a shaky thumbs up.
Your foot found the gas pedal, and slowly but surely, you started taking off down the road. You briefly felt the wire become taut before it gave way. For a few seconds, you thought it had simply snapped and all of yours and Clem’s work was for nothing. Just then, the ground shook, and your rear-view mirror lit up with what was unmistakably fire.

It took about an hour to reach the Hilltop, as you refused to go over 30mph for multiple reasons. You didn’t want to attract whatever walkers were still roaming around the forest, and if the engine decided to crap out, you and at least 50 people would be stuck in the middle of nowhere. Slow and steady won the race, anyway.

When actually coming up on Hilltop, you parked the bus behind the hill that lead up to the gates. Anyone in Barrington House would be able to see you, but the Saviors wouldn’t. You could explain it to Hilltop, but if the Saviors ever found out…

“What’s the plan?” Jonathan asked, his hand on the dashboard as he leaned forward to see what was happening.

Even the people in the back of the bus knew shit was going down; gunshots could be heard for miles. They surely heard the grenades, though, which lead you to believe that Negan cared more about taking down Hilltop than he did whatever else was happening.

You swung open the doors and stood up. “You’re gonna roll up to Negan and tell him I burned down the Sanctuary.”

“He’s never gonna believe you let all of us go,” Hazel interjected.

“But I did,” you insisted, “because it makes me a good person. I can go to war against him and no one else. Tell him I’m something to fear.”

Dom chuckled softly and crossed his arms. “Yes, ma’am.”

“So what are you gonna do?” Jonathan asked.
“I’m gonna find a way inside and see my boyfriend,” you answered as you walked down the steps and into the night air.

You had to shoot an arrow without a tip through a window in Barrington House to finally get someone’s attention, but eventually, Michonne and a few Hilltop guards threw down a rope and helped you inside. The minute you were inside the walls, Michonne punched you in the shoulder.

“We thought you were dead!” Michonne yelled at you. “Again. You gotta stop with this.”

“I know,” you agreed.

She sighed and pulled you into a hug.

“How is he?” You asked after pulling away.

Michonne’s features grew solemn. Still, she held you arms. “I’ll show you to him.”

On the short walk to Barrington’s front door, you could see how much damage was done. Several of the wall panels had been knocked down with vehicles the Saviors left there. A few walkers managed to sneak their way through the gaps and were stumbling around.

“It’s bad,” Michonne muttered as the two of you stepped inside.

“Not as bad as the Sanctuary,” you remarked. “I lit that shit up like it was a Christmas tree.”

She smirked in response.

You softly closed the door behind you. Barrington didn’t have electricity like Alexandria did, so you could only see Carl through dim candle light. He had a bandage around his forehead, but not his eye, so you concluded it was to catch sweat rather than mend any wounds.
“You lied to me,” was the first thing he said after you stepped into the room.

“I chose you,” you replied, taking a seat on the chair beside the bed. You leaned back with a sigh, suddenly realizing how tired you were. Between the lack of sleep and everything that went down in the last 24 hours, you were exhausted. “I knew I wasn’t gonna die today. I knew you weren’t either.”

“The day’s not over yet,” he pointed out, then coughed.

“Don’t talk like that,” you whispered. You laid his palm in your hand and pressed the back of it to your cheek.

“Did it work?” Carl asked quietly.

You smiled. His eyes were closed, but he smiled too. You realized he could feel the expression on his hand.

“Like a charm,” you promised. “The Saviors have nowhere to go but down.”

“Perfect.” He paused. “A lot happened when you were gone.”

“I wasn’t away for that long.”

“Not today. The first time,” he clarified. “When you were with Clem and Javier.”

You stayed silent. In those two weeks, you thought about Carl a lot, but you didn’t think about Alexandria or the way they were preparing for battle. You were so preoccupied with your own arm to worry about a second.

“I snuck onto a Savior’s truck the second time Negan came to collect,” Carl stated. “I knocked out a few of his guards, stole their guns, killed a few of his men.”

You could feel your stomach begin to tighten with anxiety and impending rage. “What happened?
What did he do to you?"

“He showed me around, made me watch him burn someone,” he answered. “Their skin just… melts off. I still see it sometimes. I think it’s burned into my brain.”

“What else happened?” you prompted gently. You didn’t know Negan that well, but you knew that wasn’t the end of it.

“He made me sing to him,” Carl said. He clenched his jaw, like he was embarrassed to talk about it. “He made me sing as he swung his bat, like he did when he killed Daryl.”

You squeezed your eyes shut with guilt. “Jesus.” You basked in the silence for a while before asking, “what did he make you sing?”

He swallowed. “You are My Sunshine. My mom used to sing it to me.”

You cleared your throat and wrapped your free hand around his arm. “The other night dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you in my arms,” you sang. “When I woke awoke dear, I was mistaken, and I hung my head and I cried:

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are grey. You’ll never know dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

“I didn’t know you knew it.”

You smiled. “It was the first thing my dad made me learn to play.”

“Where is your guitar, anyway?”

“Back at home.”

“Hm,” he huffed diligently. Then, he patted the space beside him.
You crawled onto the space beside him. It took you only a few moments to fall soundly asleep.

Negan decided to roll up the the gates in the middle of the day. You weren’t sure why he chose broad daylight again over early morning or dusk, but then again, you didn’t understand a lot of things he did. Understanding Negan was probably one of the most impossible things on earth, at this point.

“Send Rick out here!” He demanded. “Let’s formalize this shit.”

It took Rick a moment to respond; you guessed he was receiving words of good luck. Eventually, though, he slid over the wall and onto the top of a truck used to block a break.

“Let’s call it a day, go back to the way things were,” Negan offered.

You peered around a bush to see Rick jump from the truck and onto the ground.

“Let me put this into words you’ll understand:” Rick said. “Fuck. You.”

You could hear the two of them talk for a moment, then saw a look of shock that crossed Negan’s face. You smiled, knowing the plan was working.

“What the hell are you fighting for?” Rick asked.

“Mostly, I’m defending myself from a bunch of ungrateful fucks,” Negan said. “When I’m not doing that shit, though, I’m restoring order. You see, Rick, I know what it takes for people to survive…. It’s someone like me.”

“You’re just stupid enough to believe that, aren’t you?”
They went back and forth for awhile. You knew it would take some time for Rick and Negan to hash things out, so you didn’t push it. You were glad any bloodshed was being put off for the time being.

“You’re suggesting we set up a barter system?” Negan asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting,” Rick confirmed.

They debated more. You could see Negan growing softer. Whatever Rick was saying, he was warming up the idea of it.

“We can do so much more together… united,” Rick summarized.

Negan nodded his head in agreement.

Then, Rick stepped forward and slit his throat.

You bolted out from behind the bushes, Javier, Jesus, and Clem hot on your heels. Your bow was loaded and ready to be aimed and fired, but you didn’t see the need to. As you looked across the mass of Saviors, you saw many of them with guns pressed to their heads. The ones that didn’t were kneeling to the ground and setting their weapons down in surrender.

“The hell is happening?” Javier asked. “What are they doing? They’re saviors.”

You shook your head with a smile. “No, Javier: they’re us.”

“We have a doctor who can save his life!” Rick announced. “If you surrender, we won’t kill him.”

You took a few daring steps forward, picking up the barbed-wire wrapped bat laying beside Negan. You could hear him choking on his own blood, and you knew if he was going to live, someone had to act fast.

You were about to raise it, but in the corner of your eye, you saw someone break through the crowd with his hand reached out. You looked up to see Jonathan silently asking you for the bat.
You immediately handed it off to him -- the Saviors in support of Negan sure as hell wouldn’t listen to you.

“This war is over!” Jon shouted. “Negan has fallen! If you want to survive, you will follow me as you followed him!”

They hesitated.

“We don’t have to be afraid of him or his rules anymore. Things’ll be better. You’ll see.”

The remaining Saviors lowered their weapons.

While Denise and Doctor Carson rushed outside and to Negan, just as Rick instructed, you slipped back inside Hilltop. Denise was calling for you, asking for your help, but quite frankly, you didn’t care if Negan lived or died. All you wanted to do was go back to Carl and tell him it was over.

You rushed into Barrington House and trotted up the staircase. You found his door with ease, a wide smile on your face.

“God, you won’t believe it, Carl -” you started. After actually swinging open the door, you realized he wasn’t in the bed. You frowned, looking around the room. “Carl?”

Your eyes trailed over the floor, and you spotted his feet. This made you realize he was laying on the floor opposite of the bed.

“Carl?!?” You asked again, this time in a frantic tone. You rushed over to him, crouching down to find him seizing. “Oh god,” you whispered to yourself, breath quickening. His eye was rolling back and his mouth dripping with foam, like he was rabid. “Fuck! What do I do?!!”

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When I was a little girl, I thought my life would be perfect. I thought my parents would stay happily married, my mother would become successful, and my father would make a living off of being his creative self. I thought I would go to college and learn how to be a scientist or a doctor, or really
just someone who helps other people. I thought I would find someone to love, that we would marry, and we’d have children of our own. I thought I’d own a house with a white-picket fence, and I’d push one child on the swing while the love of my life helped our toddler walk on the grass. I thought I’d look at them and feel my heart explode with admiration. I thought my life would be so sweet, even I could hardly stand the taste.

I thought everything would be perfect.

I was wrong.

A lot of people were dead. So many people that for the next day and a half, you spent your time digging graves or carving names into tombstones. Grave after grave, Body after body, and everything only started to get heavier. Your work was lightening, but your heart was so low you thought your stomach may swallow it.

You patted dirt on your last grave. Clem gave you some flowers to lay down on it. You thanked her, wiping the sweat off of your forehead with your arm before setting the bouquet in front of the wooden tombstone. You stood up, dusting the dirt off of your hands. Your arms were smeared with it, telling you that you were a kind of dirty only a shower could fix.

You stepped back. Javier pulled you into a hug. You held him tightly.

“So you’re saying you’ve seen this before,” a voice asked.

You had a towel around your neck to catch the water your hair was dripping. You practically rubbed your skin raw, but the redness was going down and was replaced by an even tone of cleanliness. You felt a lot better in fresh clothes and clean skin.

“Yeah,” someone responded, “but I don’t know what it is.”

You stepped into the room. Your gaze bounced between Clem and Denise, the latter refusing to make eye contact with you. In no time, though, your eyes were pulled to the exam table. It was like a magnetic attraction was forcing you to always look; like if one day you didn’t, the sight would disappear.
Carl was sitting at the edge of the table. His shirt was off, and the bite on his ribcage was scabbed over and free of blood or puss. It was healing itself.

“Allright,” you breathed, looking up at Clem. “Tell us everything you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Carl's death in the show was so stupid and there were so many opportunities that could have been taken advantage of, but weren't. In so many ways has AA been the way I've envisioned the show and the way I would write it if I were on the staff, and Carl being 'immune' is no exception. I've created a coming arc completely out of scratch, and I'm so excited to both write it and for you guys to read it.

For now, though, let me know what you thought, and I'll see you next time xx
Notes: I think I've mentioned that the Whisperer arc is my favorite in the comic series, but some of my favorite issues are actually the ones in-between All Out War and the Whisperer War. Something about the atmosphere really attracts me; I would honestly have loved for at least twice as many issues focusing on the way the communities changed and grew. But, this is The Walking Dead, so we don't always (read: never) get what we want.

Enough of my ramblings — enjoy the update!

Life after the war was the kind of life you never thought you could have in a post-apocalyptic world. A few months after Alexandria’s reconstruction was finished (and a consequential year after taking down the Saviors), you moved to Richmond to help run things with Clementine. You offered Javier a place to help if he wanted it, but he politely declined the offer.

You felt terrible for him. Not only was he mourning Kate’s death, but he lost his nephew as well. Kate had gotten shot in one of the Hilltop battles, and Gabriel refused to leave her side, even after she turned. The bite in his neck killed him quickly, and he wasn’t in much pain. Still, you didn’t know how he dealt with it. You would have jumped at the idea of running a civilization if you had lost Carl. Instead, Javier spent his days either working labor jobs or stowing himself away in his Richmond home.

Carl stayed in Alexandria, and you couldn’t blame him: his family was there. While it hurt to know you would no longer see him every day, you knew that he still chose you, which was enough. Besides, the drive to Richmond was a short one, and you saw him at least twice a week. Sometimes you slipped out to go on simple trade exchanges, sure, but you got to see him. And yes most of your time seeing him was either sneaking away to his bedroom or finding a supply room with a lock on it, but you got to be with him.

“Alright,” Rick said, throwing some papers down on the table. “First things first.”

You tilted your head to read the written title at the top. “Agriculture report.”

“The Alexandrian orchard is thriving; most of the trees that were transplanted three weeks ago are expected to survive,” Rick responded.
Clem threw down some of her own papers, also labeled as 'agriculture'. “Our farmers are expecting an even better turn out for corn and soybeans this year. We’ve had a few more down cows past month than usual, but nothing too startling. Besides, we can always use the meat.”

“We absolutely can,” Rick agreed. He slapped down another collection of papers. “Construction.”

“The first complex in our blueprints is nearly done,” you answered, absentmindedly crossing your arms. Clem nudged her file against your arm. You ignored it. “If everything goes according to plan, the entire lot will be done by the end of summer.”

“Why do I even bother to write this shit,” Clem mumbled as she tossed the report on the table.

It was rare that both you and Clem made it over for weekly reports, but whenever you did, this is generally how they went. Clem was definitely the more technical and perfection-oriented leader between the two of you. You, on the other hand, just liked to get things done. You supposed being complete polar opposites in this way was why the two of you made such a good team.

You, Clem, and Rick exchanged information on Richmond and Alexandria for roughly fifteen minutes. The weekly evaluations of each community were kept brief, as more in-depth assessments — like import/export, budget, etc — were saved for the ends of each month. As short as the discussions were, though, you enjoyed them. It felt good to prove to yourself that you were accomplishing things, and it was nice to know you’d get to see Rick for more than a few seconds.

Clem and Rick were looking through each other’s reports when you heard the door swing open. Since you were standing around, bored, you were the first to look up and greet them.

“Hey Jesus,” you said, a small, genuine smile crossing your lips. You forgot how much you missed some of the Alexandrians and Hilltop residents, now that you didn’t see them on a regular basis. “Here for weekly?”

He nodded. A few strands of his hair had fallen out of the knot he had them in. He was wearing his black leather coat, and it was filthy. You assumed either the trip to Alexandria was rough, or he’d had a busy week.

“I’m here for weekly,” Jesus repeated you, “but I actually wanted to talk to you, too.”
You looked back at Rick and Clem, who were clearly still busy with trading information. “We’ll be a few minutes,” Rick assured, while Clementine tilted her head to the door. You extended your hand to the door Jesus just entered through.

“After you.”

You followed Jesus out of City Hall and down the building’s steps. The sidewalk was big enough for both of you to walk side by side. The trees separated the walkway from the road and also offered some cooling shade. It was only Spring in Virginia, but soon enough the hot southern sun would burn its way back into everyone’s lives.

“God, I miss this place,” you said with a sigh as you looked around. Almost all of the houses that were destroyed from the grenade attack were reconstructed, and when you took all the other additions into account, the city was somehow the same as it was before the war yet a better version. You loved running Richmond and working with Clem, but you’d always consider Alexandria your second home.

“It’s pretty incredible,” Jesus agreed. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “How’s the merger going?”

You practically groaned at the mention.

Thanks to you, there was no Sanctuary for the Saviors to return to after the war ended. Because they were your rivals for so long, you didn’t consider them as being anything but the enemy. Because they surrendered, though, you couldn’t just kill them or tell them to live out on their own. And, if you were honest with yourself, you felt as though the Saviors and the people of Richmond were the most likely to get along. Each group was headstrong, yes, but they could also be reasonable. Also, Richmond was by far the most work and labor-oriented division of the trade route, which is what the Saviors were used to.

At the start, things were surprisingly good, though it mostly had to do with the fact that the Saviors were in a separate part of the city. They worked alongside Richmond men and women, but they had a self-designated complex, and they spent most of their free time in it. Unsurprisingly, it was Clementine who thought something should be done about it.

You knew the system wasn’t flawless, but it was working out. There were no concerning altercations and either side only occasionally made formal complaints about the other. For the most part, everyone got along as well as could be expected. However, Clem thought it could be better.
“This ‘separate but equal’ thing won’t do any good in the long run,” Clem said to you one night. “If Richmond natives and Saviors keep living in silent, bitter tension, it’s only gonna keep adding up. And one day, it’ll explode, any d it could hurt everyone.”

“‘Separate but equal’ is a dramatic way of putting it,” you scoffed. “We’re not forcing the Saviors to live with each other, and they have the same opportunities as anyone else in Richmond.”

Clem stared at you. “You won’t let them leave.”

“I wanna keep my eye on them!” you defended.

“You don’t trust them, Ryan,” Clem stressed. “They trust you, though, and I think they’ve earned yours by now.”

The more you thought about it, the guiltier you felt. There had been a few work issues involving Saviors and reports against them, but in most of the situations, nothing terrible happened. In fact, it was mostly Richmond workers that tried to start fights or debates. Any Saviors involved were simply standing their own ground. You couldn’t blame anyone for doing that.

It took months, but eventually, you got rid of all Savior-only living and workspaces. You set a new policy — informally named “the merger” — that in any given task, Saviors would not be outnumbered by Richmonders and vice versa. There were plenty of people that tried to bypass the rule, and it even led to some physical fights, but neither you nor Clem revoked it. Several meetings to discuss behavior later, and it seemed as though everyone was actually getting along; you’d even dare say some of them were becoming friends.

Even better, with Jon’s help, you were able to start relocating any Savior that wanted out of Richmond. You set up jobs for them in new communities, found them places to stay, and even helped said communities set up their own ‘tiers’ for incoming Saviors. For example, any Saviors that moved to Alexandria had to work without any incidents for a month before they were allowed to officially move into a house. Meanwhile, in Hilltop, a Savior had to live in Barrington House for three months, and if they got into any sort of altercation (even after the three-month period), they were banned. Though some of the rules were stricter than others, you and Jon tried your hardest to collaborate with leaders and give Saviors room to grow.

“I think everyone’s finally settled,” you said. “Nearly half of the Saviors have moved out of Richmond and are peacefully working and living in other communities. It was exhausting, but ultimately worked to our advantage.”
“We just got a few Saviors over at Hilltop. They’re excellent workers,” Jesus agreed. “They’re not allowed to work as riders until their trial period’s over, though, and Maggie doesn’t want them to outnumber any Hilltop construction workers.”

“Why can only construction workers work as riders?” you frowned.

“Anyone can be a rider,” Jesus corrected, “it’s just that the construction workers happen to be our best riders.”

“Oh,” you said in realization. “So really, you need riders. ...is that why you wanted to talk to me?”

“You can read people like they’re books, Ashling.”

You smirked. “Or maybe you’re just not as subtle as you think you are.” you paused. “Are you looking for occasional work, or for people to relocate?”

“Even occasional work would be alright,” Jesus said. “At this point, I’m taking whoever I can get.”

“I think I have a few men who’d be interested in occasional work,” you told him, “but there’s someone in particular I think would do great. He can even move to Hilltop.”

“Really?” Jesus asked, happily surprised. “When can he start?”

“When can he relocate?”

“Whenever he’s ready, we’ll be ready.”

“We could get his stuff moved out by tomorrow, end of week tops.”

“That would be… perfect,” Jesus chuckled.
He offered you his hand. You shook it without hesitation.

“What’s his name?” he asked. “I’ll start getting things settled as soon as I get back.”

“You really can’t stay away, can you?” a voice from up the street shouted. You couldn’t fight the smile off of your face upon hearing it.

You started to walk away from Jesus, though it was really more of a jog. You could hear him crack up from behind you. When you were at least halfway up the street from him, you heard him shout at you, “Can I get his name?”

You turned around but continued to take steps backward. “Oh, uh…. It’s Javier!” you called back, then spun yourself back around before he could say anything else.

“Of course I can’t stay away,” you said to Michonne. She was smiling widely, and without hesitation, she pulled you into a hug. You hugged her back with a laugh, taking in her clean scent and gentle touch. You only pulled away at the sound of someone else’s excitement.

“Auntie Ry!” Judith squealed from the top of the porch stairs.

“Judybug!” you called back. You spread your arms out for her, and picked her up and spun her around when she came barrelling down the steps. “How’s my girl?” you asked, resting the young child on your hip.

“I’m good,” she giggled, and laughed loudly when you began to tickle her stomach.

“Just good?!?” you asked, smiling wide as she continued to cackle.

“I was drawing!” She explained.

“Oh yeah?” you asked, walking up the stairs and onto the porch. “What were you drawing?” You set her down so she could show you to her easel in the corner.
“There’s daddy,” she said, pointing to a figure with a bushy beard, “mommy,” she pointed to a woman with dreadlocks and dark skin, “Carl,” to someone with a tall brown hat, “and you!” to a girl with a bow in her hand. You made sounds of approval after she pointed each person out.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” you praised and pointed to the flowers drawn around everyone. “Ooo, and those colors are so pretty!”

Judith giggled again. “Mommy said you’d like the flowers. She likes them too.”

“Mommy does like the flowers,” Michonne agreed with a smile. She was standing by the door but approached the two of you. “Carl should be up in his room. He’s been waiting for you all day; he has some… news.”

You kissed Judith on the cheek. “I’ll see you later, ‘kay bug? I’m gonna go talk to your brother.” “Maybe he’ll finally stop talking about you,” Judith remarked. Both you and Michonne stifled a laugh.

You let yourself into the house. It looked like most of the other houses in Alexandria, but by Apocalypse standards, it was a mansion. Hell, even by Richmond standards, it was incredible. You pushed back basking in the building’s beauty and trotted up the stairs. You recognized Carl’s door as the second one on the right and let yourself in. You were sure to open the door softly, as you had a general suspicion of what he may be doing.

One of your favorite things was just watching him whittle, even though Carl found it weird. You couldn’t help it; you loved seeing how focused he was, how he bit his lip when he concentrated, how his furrowed brows relaxed when he carved something the way he wanted to. You were in the presence of an artist whenever you watched him, and it felt like an honor.

Sure enough, Carl was so busy with his craft that he didn’t even notice you stepping in. His lamp was concentrated on his hands and his desk was covered in shavings, some so fine it almost created sawdust. He’d occasionally trade a bigger knife for a smaller one. You didn’t know much about the techniques, but you knew he used the end of the small ones to sketch in detail.

“When are you gonna make me one of those?” you asked, leaning against his doorway.

He set down his tools, the piece he was working on, and slowly stood up. “When are you gonna stop feeling the need to make an entrance?”
You grinned. “Never.”

“Hmm.”

You pulled the door shut as Carl filled the gap between the two of you. His hands anchored on your hips as yours reached up to his neck. Your back was pressed tight to the closed door, and your breath grew hotter as it mingled with his.

“I have... something… to tell you,” Carl said between kisses.

You shook your head, pulling away to take off your shirt. “Later.”

He swallowed and nodded, letting you push him back onto the bed. You crawled on top of him, and any thought in your head turned into a blissful blur.

There was hardly a better feeling than being in bed with him, legs intertwined and skin covered only by the sheets. His arms stayed wrapped around you and yours around him. Most of the time, you found yourself tracing over Carl’s bite, wondering how it never killed him and how the hell both you and him got so lucky. Clem had a story to tell about it, but it was just that: a story. You’d probably never know how it happened. You were just glad it did.

“Can I tell you my news now?” he asked. His lips were pressed into your hair, your cheek resting on his bare chest.

“Is it gonna ruin this moment?” You inquired.

“It might.”

“Then don’t tell me.”

You propped yourself up to properly look at Carl. He was at least 18 years old by now, which was obvious by the stubble on his cheeks and the muscle he easily put on. Within the last two years, Carl was slowly becoming the scrawny kid you met on a set of train tracks less and less; he was becoming a man. A man that girls in every community wanted to chase. That didn’t matter,
“I love you,” you said, running a hand through his hair, “but I hardly see you anymore. Whatever moments we have together now, I just want them to be perfect. Which is stupid and unrealistic, I know, but…”

“I understand,” Carl assured, setting a calloused hand on your cheek. “I can tell you before you leave. And for the record, I love you too.”

You smiled, turning your face and kissing his palm. You appreciated his patience.

For a while, you simply ran your fingers through his hair. He wasn’t letting it grow out as long as he used to, but it was still shaggy; some strands reached passed his earlobe. There were plenty of men that had long hair in the communities. The main difference between them and Carl was that they did something with their hair. Carl, on the other hand, simply washed it and let it be unruly and in his way.

“You should let me cut it,” you remarked, continuing to run your fingers through it. “Get those bangs out of your face.”


Your eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

“You said you wanted to cut it,” he said. “It’s time for a change.”

Less than half an hour later, and there you were with a scissors in your hand and Carl sitting in front of you. You told him he had to take a shower and wash his hair before you started, and somehow, you managed to convince him to take it without you. You were too excited for a second round: you had tools to find and a ‘stage’ to prep.

You managed to find a pair of nice scissors and even some thinning shears underneath the main-level bathroom sink. You stole a backless, adjustable stool from the kitchen counter and lowered it to a point you knew would be short enough. When you heard Carl walking down the staircase, you
smiled, spun the chair around, and gestured to it dramatically.

“God, you’re really gonna enjoy this, aren’t you?” he laughed, using the towel around his neck to rub his hair dry.

“When I’m done with you, you won’t have to do that anymore,” you said, pointing to the towel. He shook his head with a laugh and took a seat, allowing you to spin the chair so the dining room table could be to the right of you. “Besides,” you said, wrapping your arms around him and leaning in from behind, “I’m gonna make you look so good.” You briefly bit at his ear, and grinned when you felt him shiver. You then pulled away to get started.

You started out by taking off as much length as you thought was needed. You’d pick up strands, run them through your fingers, and cut them off small sections. More and more hair slowly fell from his head and onto the towel draped over him.

“Mom’s going to love this,” Carl remarked. “She’s been wanting it for awhile.”

You frowned. “She mentions your hair?”

“No, but she complains about it getting stuck in the drain.”

You snorted out a laugh. You ran your fingers through his now cropped hair, shook out the towel, and picked up the hand mirror on the table. “Well, I don’t think that’ll be a problem anymore.”

You walked around so you could see his reaction, which was mostly shock. You grinned as he adjusted the mirror to get different views.

“I left it longer on the top,” you said. “Thought it would look better that way.”

He nodded, clearly too enveloped in looking at the cut to pay complete attention. “Where did you learn to do this?”

You shrugged. “I didn’t — I just tried my best.” Then, a bit more hesitantly, you asked, “do you like it?”
“I look like a different person,” he observed. His face slowly split into a smile. “I love it.”

You sighed with relief and kissed him. “If the girls weren’t already all over you, they will be now.”

“The only person I want all over me,” Carl said, pulling you into his lap, “is you.”

You kissed him again.
“You said you’ve seen this before,” you said, repeating her words from mere moments ago. “Does that mean you’ve seen someone with a bite... heal?”

Clementine nodded solemnly. “Her’s was on her arm. She flaunted it around, always had it showing. It was kind of their thing.”

“Who’s thing?” Carl asked.

Clem sighed, crossing her arms. “They called themselves Genesis. From what I heard, they started out as a group of survivors that were as ordinary as anyone else. Then, the leader’s daughter got bit. It freaked everyone out, which of course brought out the worst in them. One guy even threatened to kill Fareess himself if her dad didn’t. He shut it all down, though; for some reason, he really wanted his daughter to die without infliction.”

“But she didn’t die,” you completed.

“She didn’t die,” Clem confirmed. “She fell asleep, started shaking really bad. Then, she woke up and acted completely normal. Even her dad didn’t trust the way she just snapped back from it; they thought she was in a state of shock or something. They realized the fever had broken, though, and everything else about her health seemed fine.”

“What happened next?” you asked, pulling up a chair. “There’s no way that was the end of it.”

“It absolutely wasn’t. They treated her like she God after it happened,” Clementine said. “They called her their ‘prophet’, that she was the cure sent from whoever runs this shitshow of a universe. Fareess is how they got their name, actually: they believed mankind itself was starting over at page one, and that Fareess was the reason why.”

“That sounds... freaky as hell,” you admitted. “How old even was this Fareess girl?”

“She was 16 when I met her, and I think she was 12 when she got bit,” Clem answered. “To be honest, they were probably the closest thing you can get to a cult these days. They weren’t bad people, though. Just a little... out there.”
“How did you come across these people, anyway?” Carl asked. Denise was almost finished redressing his wound.

“After Ryan and I got separated, it was just me and Kenny for awhile. He died in an accident, and I was on my own. Genesis traveled a lot; they walked for miles each day and set up camp in a new place every night. I came across them in the woods when I was looking for food.”

“Why’d you leave?” You inquired.

“We tried leading a pack of walkers away from the camp, but it was bigger than we expected. I got separated from the group and was stuck in an old trailer home for a day. This girl Ava was on a run with her group, she brought me back to Richmond with her, and I think we all know how the story goes after that.”

As interesting as it was to hear about Clem’s life after you and Kenny, now wasn’t the time to get nitty gritty with the finer details. All you really wanted to know was how the hell a random boy from Atlanta can survive the one thing that eventually kills everyone.

“Do you know anything else about Fareess? Where she’s from, how the bite went down, how it healed, or literally anything else?”

Clem shook her head. “Nothing important. I talked to her once, but all I asked her was if the scar was real and if she really believed she was the cure. She said it was, and that she did. Honestly, it never really set in until now that maybe she wasn’t crazy, and maybe she actually did get bit and live to tell the tale.”

You rubbed at your forehead.

“Sorry I don’t have anything useful to say,” Clem muttered.

“It’s fine,” you assured. “I doubt the first thing you thought when meeting her is that you’d come across something like this again.

You didn’t blame Clem, but feeling the one lead you had slip right out of your hands made you
want to storm out of the room and scream into a pillow.

You were interrupted by the front door swinging open. You immediately stood from Carl’s lap and cleared your throat, taking a step back from him. The distance wouldn’t fool anyone. It certainly didn’t fool Clementine, who just so happened to be the one entering the house.

“We’re gonna have to leave soon if we want to make it back before sundown,” she deadpanned. “Denise said she wants to talk to you first, though.”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan.” You agreed. “I’ll go do that.”

She nodded plainly. “Nice ‘do, Carl,” she complimented dryly. “Ryan’s just full of surprises, isn’t she?”

“Uh… yeah, she is,” Carl agreed, though with some hesitation. He seemed just as confused as you were by her curtness.

“I’ve got work to finish up,” Carl said, standing up. He reached out for your arm, grabbing your attention. “Catch me before you leave, yeah?”

You nodded, smiling crookedly. “Will do.”

He kissed your cheek before retreating upstairs. Clementine, on the other hand, didn’t even wait for you before walking out the door. You had to jog down the porch and up the road to catch up with her.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” you asked bluntly, hands moving to your back pockets as you walked.

“I met up with Jesus,” she said. “He asked me if Javier was really ready to move to Hilltop.”

You shrugged. “A change of pace would be good for him. He doesn’t work at Richmond: all he
does is stay inside that little apartment all day.”

“We don’t need the help,” Clem defended. “We have plenty of workers.”

“Hilltop does need the help,” you returned, “and he’s damn good at whatever he does. Do you really think it’s okay that he doesn’t do anything anymore? Our “you get what you put in” system aside, are you okay with it?”

“He’s grieving!” Clem exclaimed. “It’s not my business what he does.”

You stuck an arm out, stopping her from walking so you could actually talk to her. “He’s our friend, Clementine,” you said slowly, “so it’s our job to help him. Spending that much time to yourself isn’t good for anyone.”

“He’s your friend?” She challenged. Her eyebrow was cocked, and if she wasn’t actively speaking, you knew her jaw would be clenched. “When’s the last time you talked to him? Or, even better, the last time you saw him?”

You couldn’t form a reply.

“I know you know what he’s going through,” Clem continued, but her voice was softer. “What you don’t know, though, is how he’s dealing with it. Maybe diving into work is what you need after something like this, but maybe it’s not what he needs. You don’t get to decide how he heals himself, Ryan.”

She walked off without another word.

You sighed, running a hand down your face. When it came to the people you loved, you only did what you’d want if it were you. However, sometimes you forgot that not everyone around you wanted the same things you did. Clearly, this was one of those situations. You weren’t sure how you missed it.

Deciding not to dwell on it, you made a right turn at the next intersection, knowing it would take you to the infirmary.
You stepped into the building without knocking, and the sight that faced you almost made you
gasp. After the war but before running Richmond, you spent nearly all of your time training under
Denise. It was a good six months that you spent most of your day in the infirmary, so you had
gotten to know the layout pretty well. Now, though, it was completely different.

It used to be that only the far wall was lined with three beds. Each one had a cart next to it that was
stocked with various supplies. That was still the case, but in addition to the carts, there was a set of
monitors on the previously bare side. Also, the wall to the right now had three gurneys, each of
which had their own supplies and monitors next to them as well.

You saw Denise walk into the room in your peripheral vision. You were too gobsmacked to
personally address her. “Jesus, this place is incredible!” you almost shouted. “I guess that hospital
raid in Roanoke did you guys well.”

“It absolutely did,” Denise agreed. Then, she walked from the opposite side of the room and pulled
you into a hug. “How have you been?”

You returned the hug, smiling. “Oh, you know me: swamped with work,” you answered, then
pulled away. “Clem said you wanted to talk with me?”

“There’s a bit of an… issue,” Denise started. “Why don’t we go sit down?”

You nodded and followed her through the walkway out of the main room and into the one beside
it. The Infirmary used to be a house, so there was a kitchen and mostly furnished living room
extending off the main room. It was originally going to be converted to more medical space but
was ultimately left untouched for any family that wanted to stay close to someone injured. Also,
Denise did sleep on the second floor, so it made more sense for her to just live there rather than
have a house she barely spent time in.

“What’s up?” You asked, taking a seat on the couch beside her.

“Well, as you know, Dr. Carson relocated to Richmond a little while after the war,” She started.

You nodded in recollection. Richmond had a doctor before Carson relocated, but she was
overwhelmed with patients. Originally, he was going to stay for only a few weeks to help out. You,
Carson, and even Rick soon realized that his help would be needed indefinitely, so he officially
relocated to work in Richmond.
“And of course, the Kingdom has Dr. Steinman, and Hilltop has Siddiq.”

Again, you nodded.

“Well, the Kingdom’s population is steadily growing,” Denise explained. “Over the last year, they’ve taken in the most groups and the highest birth count.”

“Believe me, I’m well aware of that,” you chuckled. The few times you met Dr. Steinman, the number of patients he treated was the first thing he felt the need to tell you.

“Well… Ezekiel’s requesting a second doctor,” Denise said. “Dr. Steinman is starting to get overwhelmed, despite his three apprentices. He’s requesting someone with more experience.”

“I doubt I’m more experienced than his apprentices,” you immediately replied. “I’ve been out of practice for at least a year.”

“Don’t worry: Saddiq offered to move to the Kingdom,” Denise assured. “Unfortunately, that leaves Hilltop without any aid.”

“So… you need me to move there,” you concluded.

“I’m willing to relocate to Hilltop if you’d be more comfortable at Alexandria,” she told you, “but… we could really use your help. I know this is a very, very big decision, and I understand if you need time to consider. Just let Rick know your answer when you come to it.”

You nodded, slowly rising to a stand. “Yeah, I’ll do that,” you uttered. “It was nice seeing you, Denise.”

“You too, Ryan.”

By the time noon rolled around, both you and Clem knew it would be nearly impossible to make it back to Richmond before dusk. The original plan was to take a vehicle to Alexandria and ride
horses back, as Richmond had a newly appointed stable runner that wanted to replace the two horses the city lost over the winter. However, taking a horse would take at least half a day, and you didn’t want to cut it close. So, you and Clem instead decided one of you would travel back on a bike that night, and the other would ride back the next morning. For now, though, you took a seat across from Carl in the dining hall.

The first thing you noticed after sitting down was a group of girls a little younger than you -- most likely Carl’s age -- sitting at the table diagonally behind you. You only noticed them because they were giggling, and when you turned to look at them, the giggles turned to whispers. You quickly realized it wasn’t you who they were staring at.

“Called it,” you said simply, digging into the spaghetti on your plate.

Carl frowned. “You called what?”

You nodded your head in the clique’s direction without looking at them. “They love you.”

“God, would you stop with that?” Carl groaned. “I don’t care. I love you.”

“I’m not jealous,” you defended with a laugh, “I just think it’s funny.”

“I think it’s annoying,” Carl huffed. "They only fawn over me because they think I look good. The minute I take off these glasses or talk about how my mom died, though, I’m not nearly as attractive. But you… you get it. You get me.”

Your heart swelled in your chest at his remark. Because you didn’t want Carl to tease you for the giddy smile on your face, you leaned over the table and took off the pair of glasses he was wearing. You always hated them; they were a pair of sunglasses with one framed popped out. The frame that was in mostly covered the scar across his face. Though you respected the idea that they made Carl feel more comfortable, you didn’t like the way they made him look. To you, they made him look like he was hiding a piece of who was instead of a scar that wasn’t very appealing.

“What’d you do that for?” Carl asked. However, he wasn’t looking around for prying eyes or curious stares. He just looked right at you, nothing but affection in his gaze.

“You look better without them,” you replied. Then, you did something you avoided doing in any
You pull away in time to see Carl’s eye slowly flutter open. “You should do that more often.”

You laughed, throwing your napkin at him. You ate in silence for a bit, silently smiling and laughing to yourself. Eventually, you grew more serious and looked up at him. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“You said you didn’t want to know if it would ruin the moment,” Carl recalled.

“It won’t,” you promised, briefly setting your hand on his.

He took in a breath, moving his hand over and lacing his fingers with yours. “There’s this amazing blacksmith at Hilltop, and… I’m going to be his apprentice.”

It took awhile for the words to sink in. “Hilltop is nearly a day away from Alexandria.”

“Yeah,” Carl said softly. “I’ll have to move there.”

You continued to hold his hand, but you found it hard to look Carl in the eye. The cogs in your brain were slowly starting to settle and click into place. “You’d be at least a day away from Richmond,” you thought aloud, “probably two if I went by horse.”

“Yeah,” Carl repeated, unsure of what else to say. “Is that… okay?”

This made you look up at him. “This is you we’re talking about, Carl. What I feel is irrelevant.”

He scoffed. “You can be really stupid sometimes.”

You frowned.
“Ryan, I choose you,” Carl said, pulling his hand away so he could poke you in the chest. “I’ve only told you about a thousand times. If living in Hilltop would put a wedge between us, then I’ll stay in Alexandria.”

“Well, that’s really sweet of you, but it’s also really, really stupid,” you deadpanned. “Carl, this is your career we’re talking. This is you making a big impact. I love your art, of course I do, but I know it’s not the only thing you want to do. I also know that whenever you want something, you go for it.” You picked up his hand and put your free one over it. “Is this what you want?”

It took him a few moments, but he eventually nodded. “It is.”

“Then we’ll figure it out,” you responded simply. Your kind expression eventually morphed into a frown. “Oh my god, I’m so dumb.”

“Don’t call yourself that; only I get to call you dumb.”

“No, seriously,” you said, “I’m an idiot.” Your frown turned into a grin. “Denise said she needs a doctor at Hilltop.”

Carl perked up at your words. “Wait... so that means...”

“We don’t have to figure anything out,” you completed.

He looked momentarily relieved. The look of relief diminished when he furrowed his eyebrows. “Do you want to be a doctor, though? I mean, you love leading Richmond.”

He wasn’t wrong: you loved your current position. The more you thought about it, though, the more you started to realize that it wasn’t something you could see yourself doing long-term. People clearly saw leadership values in you — there’s no other way they’d let a pair of teenage girls call the shots —, but whenever you were the headman in a situation, you never felt at peace. You were good at running Eclipse and Richmond, yet you eventually started to feel like a little girl from New Jersey in both situations. You came to realize it was because you weren’t a natural born leader: you were one forged from a dire situation. You started to feel like a little girl from New Jersey because, when it came down to it, that’s all you really were. The persona you projected to your friends, to Deanna, to Eclipse, to Richmond, and to pretty much anyone around you was the person a cruel world turned you into.
“I’m ready for some change,” you replied.

Carl smiled, kissing the top of your hand. It was clear that whatever was going through your mind was also going through his. The idea of living in the same house, waking up in the same bed, seeing each other every day rather than every week… it was like the life you shared at Alexandria, only better.

Then, you tilted your head to see Clementine sitting at a different table as she spoke to Jesus and the Kingdom’s representative. Your smile slowly faded.

“How are you gonna tell her?” Carl asked gently.

You sucked in a breath. “I’ll figure it out.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After clearing off your plate and putting in the bin to be washed, you walked back through the dining hall to meet up with Clementine. She was finished eating but still seated and talking with Jesus.

“Hey,” you said, taking a seat across from her and next to Jesus. “Can I talk to you?”

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” Jesus said before Clementine could reply. He stood up and grabbed his plate, dismissing himself from the impending conversation.

“What’s up?” Clem asked, resting her arms on the table.

You rubbed at your neck. “I’ve been thinking of stepping down,” you blurted out, getting right to the point. “They need a doctor over at Hilltop, and Carl actually wants to become a blacksmith. There’s a great one in Hilltop, and Carl’s gonna be his apprentice. And when I get back to Richmond, I’m going to convince Javier to take the job, which will cut the ties I have to Richmond as cleanly as possible. And…” you looked up to see Clem smirking. “…you knew this was coming, didn’t you?”

“I’ve known for a while,” she admitted. “I think it’s why I got so angry at you earlier. I know you, Ry; I know that you start forgetting things when your heart isn’t in it anymore. It was little things at first, like how you started to work more in your office and less hands-on. Then you hardly spoke to anyone besides me and Jonathan, and it was starting to make sense.” She sighed. “I wanted to be angry at you, but this is probably for the best. Richmond deserves a good leader, and if you’re not in the place to be one, it’s okay. Besides, you and Carl deserve to be happy.”

You smiled softly, reaching across the table and taking her hand. “What about you?” You asked.

She shrugged but returned the smile. “I’ll be okay. Jonathan can help me run things. And it’s not like I’ll never get to see you again.”

“Do you want to run Richmond, though?” You asked. “I mean, we stepped into the role because it made sense, not because we wanted to. Do you want to be a leader?”
“I guess I never really thought about it.” She admitted. “You’re right: being the one to help settle things made sense at the time. Now, though… I don’t know. It’s finally starting to sink in that I could actually have a life outside of surviving.”

“So maybe, you could take a break, and be a leader on another day,” you offered.

“Yeah,” she nodded, slowly at first, then quicker. “I might do that.”

You smiled crookedly, squeezing her hand.

“Go,” She said, cocking her head to the door, “get out of here. You have things to see and people to convince.”

You let go of her hand yet stayed seated. “If all goes well, Javier and I will be on the road by tomorrow morning,” you said. You paused. “You should help us move him to Hilltop.”

“What, and leave Richmond unattended?”

“We can put Jonathan in charge,” you suggested. “People listen to him more than they listen to me.”

“They listen to me just fine,” Clem said.

You rolled your eyes as you stood up. “Leave in the morning like you planned, but don’t be surprised if you meet us at the halfway mark.”

“There’s no way to know if you’ll convince him,” Clementine said as you walked away.

“I can be very convincing!” you called back, ignoring the few looks you got.

Carl was waiting outside, sitting in the shade the building produced. You snuck up behind him,
wrapping your arms around his shoulders. You leaned down to kiss his cheek. “I gotta get going,” you whispered.

He turned his head to look at you. “When’s your next visit?”

“Hopefully, tomorrow,” you grinned, “so you better pack your things. As of two minutes ago, I’ve officially resigned.”

“Clem took it that well?” Carl asked. “She seemed pissed with you this morning.”

“She was,” you assured, “but we got it sorted out.”

“Good,” he said, then leaned in to peck you on the lips. You let go of him so he could stand up and give you a proper hug.

“See you soon,” you promised, pulling away from the hug to kiss him one last time.

“No one wants to see that,” A voice called out.

You pulled away from Carl to see Rick walking up the pathway to the dining hall. You stepped away and gestured your arms to the building, bowing slightly. “Enjoy your meal, Mr. Grimes,” you said, purposely keeping your gaze away from him.

Rick huffed. “Stop with that shit,” he scolded, which made you laugh as you stood up straight.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Rick,” you wished him goodbye, granting Carl a wave.

“So soon?” He called after you.

“I’m very hard to get rid of,” you replied, walking away.
“We know!” Carl called.

You stuck out your middle finger.

The trip back to Richmond was an easy one. It wasn’t Winter, so there wasn’t a thin blanket of snow on the roads. Driving back took three hours at a safe speed, but there were a few rest stops along the trail that you were able to take a break at. The people manning the stops were pleased to both see and assist you. Mostly, though, you enjoyed the time to yourself. It was very rare you got more than a few minutes alone, so the multiple hours of being in only your own company were refreshing.

You got back a few hours before people would start preparing dinner, which is when you expected to return. Of course, the guards let you in with no problem, one of them offering to take the bike from you. You let them take it, as inside the walls, you’d have absolutely no reason for it. A part of you wanted to keep it anyways, though.

Normally after getting back from an evaluation, you’d head straight for City Hall to get a rundown of what happened while you were gone. Hardly anyone knew you were back, though, which meant you had a few minutes to do pretty much anything you wanted. So, you took a right where you would normally take a left and took off to Javi’s complex instead of your own.

He lived on the second floor, which made it easy for you to recall and locate his apartment number. His was the second to last door on the left, the one with a brass ‘#12’ pinned to it. You rapped the back of your knuckles on the door.

“Come in,” a voice acknowledged, one that was none other than Javier’s.

The door creaked as you opened it. You smiled softly when Javier looked up at you. “Hey,” you said.

His gaze shifted back to the book he was reading. The words ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ were in a massive font towards the top.

“Weren’t they making that into a movie?” You asked, closing the door behind you as you invited
“There was an animated version made sometime in the 40s, I think,” Javier replied, “but it was going to be made into a live-action version before the world went to shit.”

“Hmm,” you hummed in response, taking a seat on the couch. You didn’t want to smother him, so you sat in the far seat rather than the one right next to him. “It’s weird to think about that, how people made a living out of acting and singing songs. It all seems so… futile now.”

“Maybe we’ll get back there,” Javier said plainly, “one day.”

You had a lot to say on the topic, but you bit your tongue. You weren’t here to debate with him.

“Do you think Kate and Gabe would want you to spend the rest of your life in a sad, tiny apartment?” You asked. Your words were blunt, yet your tone remained soft.

“They don’t want anything: they’re dead.” He turned the page in his book. His reaction was calm, like you told him it might rain overnight.

“That’s true,” you admitted, “but that doesn’t mean you can’t live on for them. Or, at the very least, that doesn’t mean you can’t live.”

He stayed silent.

“There’s a position available at Hilltop for you,” you told him. “Jesus needs more riders, and I told him you were the perfect man for the job. I know you haven’t ridden horses that much, but it’s easy to learn. Besides, you end up mastering whatever you do, so…”

Still, Javier said nothing.

“I’m moving to Hilltop,” you continued, perching your elbows on your legs. “Clementine might be too, or maybe she’ll end up moving somewhere else. Regardless, she’s probably not staying here.”
Javier continued reading, acting as though you weren’t even there.

You sighed. “I’m not Clem: I’m not good at this shit,” you conceded, “but this could be really, really good for you, Javi. I know I’ve been a shit friend lately, and believe me, I’m working on that. This is me working on it.”

He still didn’t react. Growing frustrated, you snatched the book out of his hands and threw it across the room.

“I’m gonna tell you everything Clem is too nice to tell you,” you said, “so you better listen up. Sitting around and doing nothing all day isn’t okay; if you want to reap the rewards of the barter route’s success, you’re gonna have to start putting something in. And you know what? I believe Kate and Gabe are watching over you, and I also believe they’re ashamed of you. You used to fight, Javier: you used to care. If you don’t care about yourself right now, then care about the person you’re gonna be in 20 years? What are you gonna say? How the hell are you gonna justify it? But you know what? You’re a grown man. You make your own choices. So if one day, you look up and see that all of your friends have moved on to better things while you kept yourself in the same damn place, don’t say that no one gave you an out. I did. You just didn’t take it.”

And with that, you stood up and left without looking back.

“You look like hell.”

You stepped into Jonathan’s office and took a seat in one of the armrest chairs in front of his desk. His office was smaller than the one you and Clem shared, but you’d dare say it was nicer. His had nicer furniture, as he was the person Richmonders spoke to for pretty much any reason. Before coming to you or Clem, someone had to go through Jon, quite literally -- you had to walk through his office to get to your own.

“I need a piece of paper,” you replied. You leaned forward to clear a space on his desk for you to write on. His random knick-knacks were shoved aside, some even falling on the floor. However, Jonathan didn’t say anything. He simply set a piece of lined paper in front of you.

“Rough day?” Jon asked as you began to scribble words down on the paper.

“What makes you say that?” You remarked sarcastically.

“You never write anyone letters,” he replied.
“Well, if I don’t write this one, Clem will be in Alexandria indefinitely.”

“Is this something I should know or care about?”

“Absolutely not,” you said.

He raised his hands. “Then I’ll say no more.”

You finished the letter with a long breath. You folded the piece of paper up and shoved it in the envelope Jonathan was kind enough to get out for you. Not bothering to write anything on the front, you tossed the closed envelope back to him. “Make sure that goes out with the morning mail tomorrow.”

Just as you were about to walk out of his office, someone stood in the doorway. You wanted to roll your eyes -- this was the last thing you needed.

“You didn’t bring me a horse,” Davino, the stable runner, huffed. A scowl was clad on his face. “You didn’t bring me a horse, and now that damn Javier wants to take two of them.”

You frowned in confusion. “What does he need a pair of horses for?”

“He was loadin’ his shit into a buggy,” Davino said, “told me he needed them to take him to Alexandria. Know anything about that?”

The smile on your face both confused and angered Davino further. You couldn’t care less.

“Jonathan, you can rip that letter to shreds,” you corrected, “and you’re in charge until one of us comes back.”

You darted down the hallway and past Davino, who was shouting at you to get his horses back. The reason you were running would really set him off: you were going to help Javier pack.
You and Javier left moments after the break of dawn. The wagon was already loaded and ready to go, so after grabbing a quick breakfast, the two of you hooked up the horses and were on your merry way. It took at least an hour into the trip for either of you to say anything.

“People don’t always want it,” Javier started, “but you really know how to kick people in the ass when they need it.”

“Yeah,” you agreed. “It’s half the reason I stick around.”

“What’s the other reason?”

You glanced at him, tightening your grip on the reigns. “Who do you think?”

He chuckled softly. “Is he why you’re stepping down?”

You frowned, once again looking over at him. “How the hell did you know about that?”

“I knew the second you came to talk to me,” Javier said. “You’re not great at talking, but you don’t like to leave anything unfinished. It’s something I’ve always respected about you.”

“Right,” you said sarcastically, “you’re just that tuned in to the people around you? You can just sense when something’s coming?”

“...Clem and Jon may have made a bet on how soon you’d quit.”

“That is so messed up!” you shouted, but you were smiling. “I’m gonna kick both of their asses the next time I see them.”

“Don’t be too hard on them,” Javier joked. “I may or may not have gotten in on it.”

You looked over at him with your mouth hung open, which made him belt out laughter. You shoved his shoulder, being careful to not steer the horses away. “I need better friends.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re all you’ve got; it’s slim pickin’s these days.”

“Excuse you: I have Carl,” you stated dramatically, “who, for the record, isn’t the only reason I’m moving to Hilltop. They need a doctor over there.”


“What about you?” you asked. “Why are you moving?”

“You were right: Kate and Gabe wouldn’t want to see me mourning them for the rest of my life,” he answered softly.

“I’m sorry you lost them,” you said quietly, almost to the point of whispering. “I don’t think I’ve ever really told you. I’m sorry.”

He ran a hand down his face. “It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not,” you agreed, “but it still sucks.”

Javier nodded. “It blows.”
You arrived to Alexandria a little bit before noon. The guards let you in with ease. When a guard promptly took the reigns from you once inside the gate, you frowned as you got off the wagon.

“What’s going on?” you asked, looking around for anyone that could give you an answer.

The man that took the reigns was now sitting in the wagon, looking down at you. “We were told that Mr. Grimes wanted to see Ms. Ashling and Mr. Garcia as soon as they arrived, ma’am. He’s at City Hall, waiting for you.”

You took a few moments to process what he was saying. “Uh… okay. Just… bring his luggage to Rick’s house, yeah?”

“Do you have authorized permission from Mr. Grimes?” He asked.

You stared at him, eyebrows raised. “Do I need it?”

He cleared his throat, looking away. “No ma’am. We’ll get on that for you.”

You forced on a sickly smile, teeth and all. “Perfect! Thank you.”

You spun on your heel and began walking deeper into Alexandria, Javier right behind you.

“I think you scared the poor guy.” He said with a laugh.

“If Mr. Grimes can request to see me the second I walk through these gates, then Mr. Grimes can have a few suitcases on his patio,” you said, exaggerating the title both times you said it. Some people were insistent on holding Rick to a higher standard, which you understood, but it was still annoying.

“Hey, at least he doesn’t call himself a ‘King’,” Javier pointed out. “I know Ezekiel says he does it mostly for show, but a part of him has to enjoy it.”

“A part of him lives for it,” you corrected.

The walk to City Hall was too short. On an average day, you could walk around Alexandria for hours, taking in the surroundings. Since you spent the entire morning sitting in a wagon, you wanted nothing more than to walk around and stretch out your legs. You supposed the little time you got would have to be good enough.

“Whaddya need, Chief?” you asked as you swung open the doors and stepped inside. Just as you expected, Rick was standing at the other end of the building. However, Michonne, Carl, Clem, and Jesus were around him.

“We got a few new additions yesterday,” Rick answered.

You shoved your hands in your back pockets as you approached the small group. “So many that we need a small army to interview them?”

“There’s five of them,” Jesus said. “I found them yesterday when we were trying to lead away a herd.”
You couldn’t mask your shock if you tried. “Wow. Five? How did they survive for so long?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Michonne spoke up. She handed you a pad of paper and a pen, similar to the ones Jesus, Rick, Clem, and herself were holding. “You’re going to help us interview them.”

“Why do all of us need to help?” You asked curiously, looking through the pad’s pages to find all of them blank. “I thought it’s usually done by one person who talks to each interviewee separately.”

“That’s normally how things go,” Rick confirmed, “but these are special circumstances. We’ve never had so many, we’ve never had a group.”

“We’re interviewing them all at the same time,” Michonne informed. “They’re all in separate rooms right now, waiting for us. We wanted to make sure they had as little time as possible to coordinate a story. We’re hoping that, if their story is fabricated, one of them will slip up.”

“What if we get their stories messed up?” You asked.

“That’s the biggest risk we’re taking by doing this,” Michonne admitted, “but we still think this is the best way.”

“Plus… that’s why we have the notes,” Clem pointed out. You had to admit, you felt a little embarrassed she had to point that out. Maybe you’ve been in your own head for longer than you realized.

“So… you in?” Rick asked.

You looked up at him, a smirk splitting on your face. “Hell yeah, I’m in,” you agreed. “I have one more question, though — if there are five people in this group, why are there seven of us?”

“I want to know what Javier is capable of,” Jesus informed. He was staring at Javier, and Javier was staring back, and you felt a weird type of tension growing between the two of them. Not a bad kind, though. Not bad.

“And I thought it would be good for me,” Carl mentioned.

“Javier’s going to be helping me out,” Clem said, “and Carl’s pairing up with you. …If that’s okay, of course.”

“I don’t know,” you said, crossing your arms, “I might have to think about that one. I really can’t stand him. He’s incompetent, really.”

Michonne stifled a laugh while Rick snorted with a crooked smile.

“Alright,” Michonne cleared her throat, composing herself. “I’m interviewing Magna, their leader. Rick’s taking care of Luke, Javier and Jesus are assigned to Kelly, Clem’s with Connie, and we’ve put you and Carl with Yumiko,” she said, reading from her notes the entire time she spoke. “Kelly’s in room 2, Connie is in 5, and Yumiko’s in 8.”

“Eight is on the second floor, right?” you inquired.

Michonne nodded in response.

You stepped forward, hip-checking Carl as you walked passed him. “See you in a few!” you called
to the group that was now behind you.

Carl caught up with you easily, climbing the staircase with ease. “I’ll get you back for that one,” he remarked.

You laughed. “For what?” you asked innocently.

“‘He’s incompetent’, ” Carl quoted.

“Wellllll, you drew out, slowing down once you reached the top of the staircase. You took a few exaggerated steps, flipping your hair over your shoulder as you looked back at him.

“I’m a lot of things,” Carl said, gripping your waist, “but I’m not,” he pushed you against the wall, “incompetent,” he slammed his lips against yours.

You clawed at his shirt hungrily, holding him close when he broke away too soon. It was always too soon.

“At least, that’s not what you thought yesterday,” Carl said under his breath. His words sent a tingle through your body, one that could only be relieved the next moment you had with him alone. Truly alone.

You brought your lips to his ear, momentarily catching his earlobe between your teeth. “Let’s get to work,” you spoke breathlessly, then snuck past him and continued walking. You didn’t turn to look at him, and you didn’t see if he was following you after opening the door. You knew he was following you. You could feel him.

You smiled briefly, pulling out one of the two chairs on your side of the table. Yumiko was sitting on the other side, her posture perfectly straight and her gaze watchful.

“Hi. I’m Ryan,” you introduced. Carl pulled the chair out beside you. “-and this is Carl. We’re gonna be the ones interviewing you today.”

She blinked. “You’re young. Both of you.”

You nodded. “Do you have a problem with that?” you asked, genuinely curious. You had no reason to unleash your sass — yet.

Yumiko slowly shook her head. “The world’s changed a lot over these few years. I guess the people had to change with it.”

“How did you and your group change?” Carl asked. “How have all of you survived?”

You were not only surprised by the way he smoothly transitioned into the conversation but also by the way he carried himself. Carl somehow made himself both available to talk to without letting down his guard. You were impressed, so much so that you wondered if he was choosing the wrong career path.

“You want… the details? Or the general idea?” Yumiko asked.

“Almost everyone is dead by now,” Carl spoke, “so if you’re not, you did something special. We need special: special keeps Alexandria changing. It gives us ideas, teaches us new ways to live.”

“Or it tells us that you’re lying,” you added. “Either way, we need to know. And, for the record, details are preferred whenever you remember them.”
“I lived in North Carolina when everything started happening,” Yumiko started, “and I think Magna is from southern Virginia… not that it matters. We both ended up at a retirement home, one in Slade county. We all did.”

“‘We’ as in…” Carl prompted.

“Magna, Kelly, Luke, Connie, and myself. There used to be more of us. A few died.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Carl sympathized. Meanwhile, you scribbled down ‘from North Carolina’, ‘retirement home’, and ‘slade county.’

“What drew you to Slade county, exactly?” you asked. “Did you stumble across it, were you looking for something — or someone — else?”

“I was originally planning on passing through Virginia to get to New York,” she explained. “I have family up there. Had. I had family up there. So… I guess I did stumble across the home. I don’t consider that a good thing, though.”

“And why’s that?” you inquired after writing down the word ‘New York’ with an arrow on the left pointing to the word.

She sighed. “Things started out good: there was protection, clean places to live, and even a greenhouse that grew food all year long. The more people that started showing up, though, the worse things got. So, a few of us left.”

“How long ago?” Carl asked.

“7 months, give or take a few weeks.”

“How many people did you leave with?” You asked, writing ‘greenhouse — year-round food?’ and ‘7 months’ on your paper.

“Nine. Obviously, it’s just the five of us now,” Yumiko answered.

“How did they die?” You continued.

Yumiko looked down at her hands.

“I know it’s hard to think about,” Carl consoled, “even harder to talk about. Take your time.”

“One of us wandered off into the woods,” Yumiko answered eventually. “He was bitten and turned. We think he was drunk. That was Ted. Then there was Michelle and Aubrey. Magna, Luke, and Kelly were helping them clear a department store; they never saw it coming. Bernie died when your people rescued us.”

“I’m sorry for your losses,” you genuinely offered.

“How many people did you encounter after leaving the home?” Carl asked.

“None,” Yumiko replied.

You looked up in surprise. “None?” you asked.

She shook her head. “No people.”

You wrote ‘NO PEOPLE’ in all caps.
Everyone finished meeting with their interviewee at roughly the same time, Michonne of course taking the longest. After she returned, everyone handed off their notes to her so she and Rick could look them over and compare the information.

“Ryan, can I see you later?” Rick asked. Javier and Jesus had already left, leaving you, Clem, Carl, and Michonne in the room.

“Yeah,” You nodded. “When’s a good time?”

“Sometime after dinner would be great,” Rick answered, “thanks.”

You nodded, then felt Carl tugging at your wrist. You looked back to see him nod his head towards the door.

“See you later,” you told Rick, letting Carl pull you away and outside.

Chapter End Notes

We LOVE a good power couple. Also, enjoy that steamy scene — that’s the closest this story will be getting to smut, lol.

What was your favorite part? let me know!
Once out of City Hall and in the sunlight, Carl moved his hand from your wrist and instead laced his fingers with yours.

“You’re not wearing the glasses,” you noted, finally finding the right time to point it out. “Any reason in particular?”

“I know you hate them,” Carl said, smiling crookedly.

“That never stopped you before,” you snorted.

“Alright, you caught me,” he laughed. “You’re not the only reason.”

“What are the other reasons?” you prompted.

He took in a breath. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately, mostly about what I’ve lived through,” he squeezed your hand. “What we’ve lived through. And, I don’t know… I feel like I need to own it. If I hide the parts of me that made me who I am right now, then it’s like I’m the kid that grew up in Atlanta playing with plastic green soldiers. I’m not that kid anymore.”

“No,” you agreed, leaning into him, “you’re not. But I think the kid that grew up in Atlanta and played with plastic green soldiers would be awfully proud of the man he became.”

“Hmm,” Carl contemplated, “maybe.”

You smiled, then hesitated for a moment. “This doesn’t mean you want to tell people about…?”

Any trace of happiness left his face. “About the bite?”

You nodded. The only people that new about Carl’s healing process were the people that knew about him being bit, which you could count the total of on your hands. The more the communities and trade route kept growing, the more anxious you were that the story would get out. All you could think about were the worst-cast scenarios, which wasn’t a healthy mindset, but you couldn’t help it. You thought you’d lost Carl twice now; if you actually lost him, you’d never be able to move on.

“No,” Carl affirmed, bringing you as much relief as it could. “That’s still our little secret.”
“I know you hate hiding it from everyone,” you said softly, “but if the news got out, it could be bad. Really bad.”

“But it could be good,” Carl pointed out. “It doesn’t have to be bad.”

“I don’t make decisions off of the benefit of the doubt. I don’t like telling myself things will be alright — I always consider everything, then make the best choice. And I think the best choice is not telling anyone.”

“I know you do, and I think I do too,” Carl agreed. He sighed. “I just… get tired, you know? I get tired of having this… secret. It feels like I’m lying to everyone I meet. And what if I’m some sort of missing link or something? What if someone knows things like what Clementine knows, and they just haven’t shared it? What if someone out there knows the things we don’t, and we can actually learn from this instead of sitting around in fear?”

You stopped walking so you could look at him properly. “If someone knows about a person surviving a bite, I think they would have mentioned it at this point. Besides, I’m not afraid of this,” you said, setting your hand over the covered scar. You trailed it up his chest so you were touching his neck. “Are you afraid, Carl?”

“Not as long as you’re here.”

You smiled softly, gently pulling him down and into a kiss.

“Come back to the house with me?” Carl offered. “You can get your other work done later.”

“I promised Clem I’d meet up with her and Javi so we can talk,” you replied. “But I do need to grab a few things, and if the guard listened to me, my bags should be sitting on your front porch. I could use an escort… if you’re willing.”

Carl stuck out his arm for you, elbow pointed as his hand laid at the bottom of his ribcage. You tucked your arm through his, resting your head on his arm as the two of you walked off.

The staircase leading down into the cellar was steep. To make matters worse, there were no functioning lights, and very rarely were the candles lit. With your duffle bag resting on one shoulder and a candle in the other, you carefully, stepped down, hand clutching the railing to be sure you wouldn’t fall.
After being certain your feet were on the ground, you shrugged off your bag and let it fall to the floor. Without paying attention to the person on the other side of the room, you got to work at lighting the candles that sat in holders on the walls. There were quite a few, so you decided on lighting every other one. When you were done, you grabbed a chair from the wooden table tucked into the far corner. You pulled it across the room and picked up your bag along the way. You didn’t stop moving until you were mere feet away from the jail cell.

“Came just to see me?” The prisoner taunted. He sat in the corner away from you, back against the wall and with one leg propped up. “I feel special.”

Despite your unamusement, you smirked and unzipped your bag. “You shouldn’t.”

Negan shifted in his seat, moving to the edge of his rickety bed to get a better look at you. “Why’s that?”

You shrugged, grabbing the handle of something in your bag. “Don’t really know,” you feigned innocence. “I just don’t think you’ll like why I’m here.” you dropped your duffle to the floor again. As the bag fell, it slowly revealed the main contents: a baseball bat with wire wrapped around the end.

Negan hardly reacted. “What’re you gonna do with that, sweetheart?”

You reached into your bag again, this time pulling out a pair of pliers. “I’m not going to do anything,” you replied, standing up and approaching the cell. You slipped Lucille through a gap in the bars, let it fall to the floor, and then through in the pliers. “You’re going to take it apart.”

He chuckled softly, no amusement in his voice. “And if I don’t?”

You took a seat, reaching into your duffle one last time. You returned with a pistol. “Then I guess we’ll be here for a while.”

It took some time for Negan to start pulling apart Lucille, probably because he wasn’t taking you seriously. He thought the gun was mostly for show, as Ryan Ashling wouldn’t dare cross Rick Grimes or any of his plans. After cocking the gun and pointing it at him, though, Negan realized you didn’t intend on leaving until the job was done. Whether or not he actually thought you’d shoot him, you didn’t know. It didn’t matter, not really.
Negan worked slowly as he pulled apart his once beloved weapon. The blank look on his face didn’t grant you much satisfaction — you couldn’t make out a single emotion — but you had a feeling the action was killing him just as much as you thought it would. Either that or the barbed wire was just that deep into the wood. You couldn’t be sure.

“Did the Mr. do something you didn’t like?” Negan asked. It was the first time either of you said anything since he got to work.

You frowned. “What does Carl have to do with this?”

“This is more than revenge,” Negan stated, “I can see it on your face. You’re looking for the same thing I was: a power trip. So… who did what?”

“No one did anything,” you said. “Carl and I are fine.”

“That’s good news, considering the move and all,” Negan responded. He’d unwrapped three coils of wire at this point, most of them breaking off halfway through tearing them off.

Your frown turned into a hard expression when you realized what he was doing. Negan wasn’t making polite conversation: he was looking for a sense of control. Manipulating you was virtually the only way he could control you in this situation, and he wasn’t about to miss the opportunity.

Negan paused to look up at you. “What?” he asked, grinning. “Cat got your tongue? Don’t you want to know how I know?”

“I don’t care how you know,” you mumbled. Thankfully, he couldn’t hear how fast and hard your heart was beating. “Word travels fast in this place.”

“Not down here, it doesn’t,” Negan corrected, continuing to pull at the wire. “You’re a smart girl, so you know that anything I hear is straight from the source.”

Rick would never tell Negan anything about his family. Michonne rarely checked on Negan, and even when she did, she didn’t speak to him. Clem, Javier, and Jesus had absolutely no reason to tell him about yours and Carl’s plan to move.
“It doesn’t matter,” you spoke, mostly to yourself.

“Oh, but it does,” Negan assured. “It bothers you that Carl told me. It bothers you even more that I’m his only friend.”

You didn’t have to feign the snort that rose from your throat. “Don’t flatter yourself, Negan: he’s Carl Fucking Grimes. He can be friends with anyone he damn well pleases.”

“But he isn’t friends with anyone: he’s friends with me.”

“And that’s why he’s moving miles away from you, right? Because the two of you are so buddy-buddy?” You asked, rising from your chair. “You can cut with the crap. I know what you’re doing. And you know what? You can play all the games you want because when it comes down to it, I get to walk up those stairs and live whatever life I choose. I’m free. You’re in a cage and taking commands.”

Anger briefly passed over Negan’s face. He quickly recovered, replacing the snarl with a smirk that didn’t match the dead look in his eye. “Ask Carl about Anna sometime.”

You stared at him.

“Who is Anna, you might ask?” Negan proceeded. “She’s the… friend Carl has when you’re not around.”

The shock hit you physically before your mind caught up, which ended up working in your favor; it gave you a mere second to formulate your own reaction. You simply looked down at the bat in Negan’s hand, which was halfway stripped of wire. Splinters and deep gouges were left behind.

“Good work,” you observed. You used your foot to slide the duffle bag against the wall. You used one hand to slip your pistol in your waistband. Licking your index finger and thumb, you used your free hand to put out the candles on the wall. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Negan.”

You retreated up the stairs, lit only by the candle you held. Before closing the door, you heard a loud ‘thud’ from the cellar. You guessed Negan threw the bat at the wall.
You were going to miss walking into Rick and Michonne’s house like it was your second home. You wouldn’t say that out loud, because they’d immediately insist that you could visit and stay whenever you pleased. You were of course grateful for this, yet a part of you knew it wasn’t realistic. You considered Rick and Michonne your second set of parents, but the one true thing tying you back to the house was coming along with you to Hilltop. That didn’t mean you wouldn’t return, though. If anything, you’d come back to Alexandria just to see Judith’s bright little face.

You knocked on the door to Rick’s office. He refused to work in a space larger than one his house already had, meaning he turned down the idea of spending his days in City Hall. The city’s general population thought it was proof of Rick’s humility and self-awareness. You knew him, though, which meant you he wouldn’t be able to function in such a wide and empty space. Not to mention, everyone was already breathing down his neck, whether in a good or bad way. If Rick had a central location outside of his house, he’d never be left alone. He was smarter than to surround himself in the idea of wealth and power.

Rick looked up from his seat. He was nearly hunched over a file of papers, reading them in the dim light of a small lamp.

“You said you wanted to talk to me after dinner,” you recalled. You leaned against the doorway, not wanting to sit down.

“I thought you’d like to know that the stories all added up,” Rick said. You supposed the notes everyone took during the interviews was what he was looking at. “Magna and her group will go through the same process as anyone else: if they make it two weeks without slipping up or missing work, they can have their weapons back.”

“That’s all you wanted to say?” You asked, eyebrows raised. It was good news, yes, yet you had a feeling it wasn’t all Rick had to tell you.

Rick sighed as he stood up. “It took a long, long time for me to convince myself Carl moving is a good thing,” he started. “Carl’s been talking to me about it for months. I kept putting off, telling myself that if it happened later, it wouldn’t happen at all. Then, one day, Denise said we’d need a new head doctor, and it made too much sense for me to keep putting it off.”

“You knew I’d take her up on her offer,” you noted. “God, did everyone know how much I hated my job?”
Rick chuckled softly. “You did a good job of hiding it — Clementine was the one to tell me.”

“That kid can read me like a book,” you muttered, crossing your arms. You paused for a moment to think. “You finally told Carl he could move because you knew I’d be moving with him.”

“Carl can take care of himself, I know that. And even if you weren’t moving to Hilltop, there are plenty of people there to make sure he’s safe and keep him in line.”

“...But,” you prompted.

“...but,” Rick repeated, a small smile on his face, “the last few months have been killing him. Carl’s not himself when you’re not around. He loves you, Ryan: we can all see it. And the two of you are growing up. He’s not my little boy anymore, and you’re not the girl we met on a set of train tracks.”

“Well, as sweet as this conversation is,” you said, stepping into the room, “is there a point to it? I mean, you know we’re gonna be fine.”

Rick scratched at his beard in thought. “The two of you have a lot of… history. Whenever you can, use it to your advantage.”

You nodded along slowly, still not understanding exactly what he was saying. “Okay…”

“I’m sure it’s hard to understand right now, but when you’ve been to hell and back with someone, it either pulls you together, or it drives you apart. Carl’s my son, yes, but you’re my family too. I’d hate to see either of you get hurt.”

“We’re gonna be fine,” you repeated. However, you stepped forward and hugged him. Rick was the closest thing you had to a father these days, and you were going to miss seeing him on a regular basis.

He hugged you tightly, then pulled away. He gestured to the door. “Go, get some sleep,” he said. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”
You smiled, walking back to the door. You turned around one last time. “Goodnight, Rick.”

“Goodnight, Ryan. Sleep well.”

The plan was to leave early the next morning. After all, the trailer wasn’t loaded until after dinner, which meant sundown would be within the hour. The trail to Hilltop was of course cleared daily, but there was no sense in spending the night on the road if it wasn’t needed. The few hours of travel that would be made between loading and setting up camp to sleep just wasn’t worth it. So, Rick suggested everyone stayed the night at Alexandria and woke up early for the expedition. You couldn’t argue with his logic, but you wouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Grimes wanted as much more time with his son as he could have.

Your body was a clock, so you woke up before both the Sun and Carl. You didn’t mind; in fact, it was preferred. You loved seeing Carl at such rest, even if it was only for a few minutes. Somehow, he always woke up moments after you, no matter how little you moved. You wondered if he had a sixth sense in that respect, if he knew when he was being watched.

“I think I feel too safe,” Carl said sleepily. His eye slowly opened, shifting slightly as it focused on your face. “If you were a bad guy, I’d be dead.”


Carl ran his hand over your hair and kissed the top of your head. “Me too.”

It didn’t take long for everyone to eat and get ready. Michonne and Rick were kind enough to let Clem, Jesus, and Javier spend the night in the house. You knew for certain Clem slept on the couch, which meant Jesus and Javier shared the room. You almost wondered if they shared the bed — all morning, the two men refused to look at each other. You didn’t pay any attention to it, though. It wasn’t any of your business. Besides, more important things were happening.

The Sun was starting to rise when the horses were getting situated with the trailer. The horizon was
a mere red hue with blue and purple streaks above it but within half an hour, the world would be bright again. Not wanting to waste any daylight, everyone thought it was a good idea to head out. So, after saying a somewhat emotional goodbye to his parents, Carl hopped into the buggy next to Javier. Jesus was the one holding the reins, and he waved for you to get going. Clem was already sitting on the horse she’d be riding, which meant the riderless one was waiting for you.

The ride to Hilltop felt both longer and shorter than you thought it would. You knew that, even leaving at dawn, you wouldn’t arrive until dark. Jesus broke as little as possible, only stopping for more than five minutes when everyone was hungry or one of the horses started getting fussy. Other than that, you moved at a steady pace beside the trailer, fast enough that walking would tire a person out, but slow enough so the horses didn’t get exhausted.

The guards had been awaiting your arrival for hours by the time your small group actually rolled up to the gates. Maggie and Glenn were asleep by then, but the men on watch followed the strict instructions they were given when it came to you, Carl, and Javier. Two men escorted the three of you to Barrington house, splitting up only to show you and Carl to your shared room and Javier to his, which were on separate floors.

Barrington House was more incredible than you remembered. Of course, the building was impressive before and during the war, but it was clear great progress was made in the time since. The rooms on the highest floor were now designed to fit a family rather than a few people, and when you looked out the bedroom window, you could see that a whole new building was being constructed.

“I forgot how impressive this place was,” you said. Your eyes glanced across the carpeted floor, up the clean walls, and to the ceiling with an operating electrical light. “It’s like taking a step into the past.”

“Nah,” Carl disagreed, “it’s like taking a step into the future.”

You smiled, approaching the boy. His hands instinctively rested on your waist, your arms reaching up and perching on his shoulders. “A future where we’re together,” you said softly, almost whispering. “Maybe even one where I bitch at you for not taking the trash out, and you complain when dinner is too cold.”

Carl laughed. “I don’t want that; I want Ryan Ashling, the girl that would tell me to make my own meal and take the trash out herself.”
“Hmm,” you hummed, stepping closer. “I think I can settle for that.”

His smile only broke when he kissed you.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Inspo Song: Mansion by NF (feat. Fleurie)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Similarly to Alexandria, the people of Hilltop had the choice to either eat at a community meal or to eat in their own home. Unlike Alexandria, they only had such meals occasionally, and their meals were set up outside and in a help-yourself style. Meanwhile, Alexandria had people that served the food, and focused more so on lunch and dinner than breakfast. Hilltop seemed to have a good morning crowd, though, far more than you expected.

“We should figure out how to grow melons,” you remarked, taking a bite out of your apple. “Melons are my favorite fruit. I haven’t had them in years.”

“As long as my food isn’t freeze-dried, I’m happy,” Carl replied. He cut into his pancakes, shoveling a massive forkful into his mouth.

“Things are different now, Carl,” You said sarcastically in a sweet voice. “I can want things. I can complain.”

He snorted, balling up the pancake in one cheek. “Because we live together now, or because we live inside a set of gates?”

“We’ve lived in a set of gates for the last three years,” you reminded. “Maybe I’m just naturally a needy, whiny bitch. Maybe you just don’t know who I really am.”

“Do you think you’re ever going to be who you really are again?” Carl asked.

His words surprised you so much they almost caused you to choke on your apple. The conversation you’d been having with him that morning was so lighthearted and almost juvenile. What Carl said shocked you not only because they were so suddenly serious, but because it made you realize how strange and out of character you’d been acting; ‘lighthearted’ and ‘juvenile’ weren’t words people usually associated with you.
“I don’t know,” you admitted, setting your apple down and instead picking up your coffee. “I think I’ve been through too much to ever be a shy girl from New Jersey again. Lately, I feel more… I don’t know, genuine, I guess? Something about getting to decide things for myself again, having a say, having a choice… it makes me feel good.”

“It’s nice to do something because you want to, not because you have to,” Carl agreed. “And I can tell you’re happy: you don’t have an… edge anymore. I feel like, whenever I talk to you, you actually think about what you say, and you actually feel what you say. I’ve liked you ever since I met you, but I can see that you’re a different person now: you don’t put yourself first anymore because you don’t have to anymore. I love the person you are when you’re not afraid for your life.”

You blinked. “If you want to get laid, all you have to do is ask.”

Carl shoved your shoulder, most likely to distract you from the way his face flushed. “I will say this: you wouldn’t be yourself if you didn’t feel the need to ruin the moment.”

“There’s no version of me that will ever be good at taking a compliment,” you retorted. You lifted your hand up and gently grabbed his chin, tilting his head towards you so you could kiss him.

“Sorry to interrupt,” a voice with a slight southern twang mentioned.

“We can always come back,” a second voice suggested, “leave the lovebirds alone.”

By the time he said that, you had already pulled away from Carl and were on your feet. “Maggie! Glenn!” you said happily. You hugged the latter first, as she was closer to you. By the time she pulled away, Carl was already standing as well and greeting Glenn.

You stepped backwards and to the side to Carl could greet Maggie, taking the opportunity to reunite with Glenn. “God, what’s it been — 3 months? 4?” You asked as you hugged Glenn. Even after pulling away, you held his arms.

“3 or 4 months too long,” Glenn said with a soft chuckle.

“We’re really happy you’re both moving here,” Maggie said. Her arm was wrapped around Carl’s shoulders, his hand reaching around and resting on her waist. The sight made your heart warm. “We missed seeing you crazy kids.”
“Speaking of kids,” you remembered, “where is that handsome son of yours?! He must be so big by now.”

“Enid was going to bring him down after she finished feeding him,” Maggie informed, “but something tells me she wanted some one-on-one time with him.”

“I guess we’ll just have to hunt her down, then,” you remarked. You picked up your tray of food, almost entirely gone. All you had left was your apple, which you could finish without utensils. “I could stand seeing Enid again.”

“You’re going to see Enid?” Clem asked, practically materializing at your side. “Mind if I come?”

You crossed your arms, trying to hold back an amused smile. “Have you eaten breakfast yet, Clem?” You asked innocently.

She knew you too well; Clem looked at you with a deadpan expression. “I’ll get something afterwards.”

“Sure,” you shrugged. You walked over to the trashcan and set your tray on the table beside it. You walked back, then tossed your apple with a bite taken out of it at Clem. “Have this for now, keep your sugars up. Hate to see you... pass out, or something.”

Clem challenged you with a silent stare. She took a bite out of the apple, not bothering to avoid the dent you already created.

“Are you going to torture Clem all day,” Carl started, “or can we go see the baby?”

“And Enid,” you added, casting Clem a wink.

Carl rolled his eyes. He told Glenn and Maggie to lead the way. You and Clem followed after them.
“Knock knock,” Maggie said aloud as she opened the door. Enid was facing the window. Sure enough, when she turned around, there was a baby boy in her arms.

“Hey,” Enid greeted, “how was breakfast?”

“Delicious as always,” Maggie replied. Glenn stepped in after her.

“We’re good here, if the two of you want to get to work right away,” Enid said.

“Actually…” Glenn said, stepping aside, “we have guests.”

You were the first one that walked in, meaning you caught Enid’s first reaction. Her mouth dropped open, and she was too surprised to notice Hershel Jr. was playing with her hair. Carl stepped in as well, and she stayed stunned. Clem came into her view, and her face split into a grin.

“Clem!” She exclaimed. She cleared her throat, eyes shifting between you and Carl. You waved and smiled. “Carl and Ry,” she added, smiling widely. “What are you guys doing here?!”

“I’m here for a visit,” Clem explained. She closed the front door behind her, stepping out of her shoes and lining them against the wall. “Carl and Ry, though…”

“We’re moving,” you finished. You also took of your shoes and made sure they were lined up. “Well, we did move. We live here now.”

“That’s… incredible,” Enid said with a laugh of disbelief. “But what about Richmond? And Carl, what about your parents?’

“Richmond’s gonna be fine without me,” you assured. You looked over at Carl.

“They’re less than thrilled, especially my dad,” Carl said, “but this is what I want. It’s what’s best for me. All they want is what’s best for me.”

Enid nodded. She handed Hershel off to Maggie when she approached her. “So where are you
“Earl needs an apprentice,” Carl said. “Carving metal is like carving wood, only less fire and mallets.”

You stepped deeper into the room, approaching Maggie. “And I…” you said in a sweet voice, reaching for Hershel, “am going to be a doctor!”

Maggie handed him to you. Your hands wrapped around his small ribcage before you pulled him to your chest. You slung the child on your hip, using your free hand to tickle his neck.

“A… doctor?” Enid said. Suddenly, you felt someone hug you from behind. “That’s perfect!”

You tilted your head to look at her after she pulled away. You smiled, but you were confused. “Why is that perfect?”

She blushed, clearly embarrassed by her own reaction. “I’m training to be a doctor,” Enid explained, grinning brightly. “Siddiq’s been teaching me for the last couple of months.”

“That’s great!” You turned to Maggie and glanced at Glenn. “I wonder why it took so long for that to come up.”

Glenn chuckled, shifting his feet. “We thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“I’m not surprised at all,” you told him. You looked at Enid and set a hand on her arm. “You’re gonna be a great doctor. Actually, I’m sure you already are.”

Enid smiled, resting her hand on yours. “There’s always more to learn.”

Everyone sat down and talked for a bit. After probably 15 minutes, Enid excused both herself and Clementine. The girls probably expected you to tease them, but you let them go with only a
goodbye. Truth was, you felt bad for Clem; she was on friendly terms with the people you considered family, but she didn’t know them that well. After sitting and only listening for quarter of an hour, she deserved some time with someone she knew.

You sat on the couch with Hershel in your lap, rattling a toy with a bell on it in front of him. He giggled and snatched it from your hands, and whenever he lost interest, all you had to do was pick it up and he’d take it right back. When he started putting it in his mouth, Maggie switched the toy out for a teething ring.

For awhile, it was just the four of you, until Glenn got pulled away for some business two men needed him for. He kissed his wife and son goodbye before leaving.

When Hershel began to get riled up again, Carl stood from his rocking chair and walked in front of you. He was wearing his glasses again, had been since breakfast. You wanted to tell him he didn’t have to, yet you knew in this situation, wearing them was probably for the best. It would be heartbreaking if Hershel grew afraid of him for the scar on his face. You’d of course understand why, Hershel being so young, but if you were Carl, it would hurt to no end.

“Alright, little man,” Carl said, reaching down and taking him out of your lap, “why don’t we play a game and let the ladies catch up?”

You opened your mouth to say something before realizing what Carl really wanted to say: ‘I want some time with the baby.’ It was sweet, so sweet you almost wanted to say something, but you ended up holding your tongue. There was a reason he didn’t ask outright — he was too embarrassed.

Maggie turned her head to you, a knowing look on her face. Still, she asked, “want something to drink, Ryan?”

“Actually, I could really go for some coffee.”

The kitchen overlooked the living room, but by the time Maggie made you a cup and the two of you were sitting at the table, Carl and Hershel were off in their own little world. They were playing some weird sort of peek-a-boo for awhile, Hershel sitting on the floor while Carl laid on his stomach. Carl lifted Hershel’s blanket in front of his face before pulling it down and making some sort of face or noise. Hershel erupted into a fit of giggles each time he saw Carl’s face again.
“He’s good with kids,” Maggie observed quietly. “He was — and I’m sure still is — great with Judith from the time she was a baby to now.”

“Yeah,” you said in agreement, to distracted by the sight to form a more intellectual reply. A soft smile was on your face as you watched Carl toss the thin blanket over Hershel’s head, only for Hershel to pull it down with a laugh.

“I’m sure he’d be great with any kids the two of you decided to have,” Maggie pointed out.

Your head snapped back around so you could look at her with wide eyes. Maggie simply drank some of her coffee. She didn’t seem mischievous, or like she was trying to tease you. In fact, she seemed just as surprised as you were.

“What?” She asked with a soft chuckle. “Don’t tell me you weren’t thinking about it just then.”

“Thinking about it, maybe,” you agreed, “but definitely not considering it.” You glanced back at Carl, not wanting him to overhear the conversation. “I mean, we’re still kids. We can’t have a kid of our own.”

“But Ryan…” Maggie said slowly in a tone you never heard her use before, “you’re not a kid anymore.”

You stared ahead as you tried to process her words.

“You’re probably 21 by now, and Carl is at least 19,” she continued. “You’re still young, yes, and I’m not trying to put an idea you don’t want in your head, but… All I’m saying is that, if you wanted to, you could. Or, if one day you wanted to, you could. That’s it.”

You stayed quiet for a long time, letting the words sink in. “We’re not even married,” you finally said.

“Well, if you want to do that, you could,” Maggie said. “Of course, me and Glenn did. But marriage isn’t what it used to be. Now, it’s whatever you make of it. It’d be for you and Carl like it is for me and Glenn: two people that love each other.”
The more you started to picture it, the less sense it made. You imagined yourself in a white dress walking down an aisle coated with flower petals. Carl was standing at the end, wearing a tux, his hair slicked back. He smiled, and you smiled back, and it felt perfect. Until you realized there wasn’t anyone to walk you down the aisle. You saw Carl asleep on the couch with your baby on his chest, the one the two of you created. Then, the baby was in your arms, crying, and you knew you had no mother with helpful advice to turn to. There was no one. Everything Maggie said made sense until it didn’t, and when it didn’t make sense, it made you feel sick.

You cupped one hand over your mouth. After a moment, you asked with a scratchy and small voice, “Where’s the bathroom?’

Maggie watched you carefully. She pointed down the hall. “Second door on the left. Ryan, are you—”

You were already on your feet and bolting down the walkway. You slammed open the door Maggie directed you to, quickly finding the toilet and uncovering it. You dropped to your knees in front of it, and the second you opened your mouth, the contents of your stomach began to make a reappearance.

“Ry, are you okay?!” You heard Carl shout. Then, you heard his quick footsteps approaching—he ran to the bathroom as well.

“M fine,” you mumbled, “I’m… dammit…” you felt another wave of nausea hit you. It wracked your entire body, starting in your stomach, then to your chest, and finally, to your throat. You managed to pull back most of your hair in time before vomiting again.

You felt Carl’s leg brush against your own, meaning he was kneeling beside you. A pair of hands wrapped around the hand you were using to hold back your hair. They were calloused yet smooth, strong yet gentle. They were the hands that carved away at wood and laced perfectly with your own. You knew those hands: you memorized those hands. And you let them take over.

“What happened?” Carl asked gently. You felt him gather up the strands you missed and hold them at the nape of your neck. He only let go when you took a seat on the floor.

“I guess breakfast didn’t agree with me,” you smiled weakly. With a shaky hand, reaching up to wipe away the sweat collecting on your forehead. You hated getting sick.
“I’m sorry, Ryan,” Maggie said. She was standing in the doorway, holding Hershel. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Carl frowned, ready to interrogate. You raised a hand, waving away her apology. “You didn’t cause this, Mags — my stomach’s been turning ever since I finished eating.”

“What did you say?” Carl asked, more curious than angry. He looked from Maggie to you. “What were you guys talking about?”

You took in a breath. You felt your stomach tighten again, this time with nervousness. “Well…” you started, “we were talking about -”

“Get on the ground!” A scream from outside demanded.

The three of you caught eyes for half a second. Then, Maggie darted down the hall, you and Carl following suit. Carl had to help you up, and insisted you stay behind, but you told him they might need a doctor and pushed passed him. A woman at the bottom of the staircase was holding Hershel. She held the door open for the two of you, despite being in obvious shock.

Carl caught up with you by the time you were outside. You stopped almost dead in your tracks upon seeing what was really going on: there was a man covered in black matter, holding a knife and moving wildly. There was a circle of guards around him, none of them actually spearing him because he had yet to hurt someone.

“Set the knife down,” Glenn said, “let’s talk. No one has to get hurt.” He was holding raised hands that were empty. He always had the habit of seeing the best in people, one you wish you had. If you were in his position, your bow and arrow would be loaded and drawn.

You brushed past some of the crowd, slowly creeping your way to the front. You eventually stood right behind one of the guards. You tried to step to the side to get a better look at the man. Really, you just wanted to know what he was covered with. The guard blocked you.

“You need to step back, miss,” the guard warned, turning his head slightly so you heard him.

“My name’s Ryan,” you retorted, “and I can take care of myself.” you once again tried to look around him, which he deflected. “Who are you trying to impress?!” you growled, pushing his arm
aside. You thought for a moment he might push you down. However, the minor scuffle seemed to intrigue the mysterious man.

He began to approach the two of you, the hand holding the knife slowly falling to his side. It seemed like he tried to say something, but it came out as nothing more than a hissing sound. Whatever black sludge he was covered in partially blocked his mouth. However, the closer he got, the more you could smell it. The more you could smell it, the sooner you recognized it: rotting flesh and organs. He covered himself in walker guts.

Glenn took the distraction as a cue. He signaled one of the guards to step forward. After Glenn nodded, the guard used the blunt end of his spear to knock the knife from the man’s hand. Meanwhile, Glenn rushed forward and clasped the man’s arms behind his back. Jesus quickly aided him with a pair of handcuffs.

Glenn looked at you. “They probably need you in there,” he said, pointing his chin to the building extended off of Barrington: the infirmary. You nodded and rushed off.

You stepped into the infirmary, immediately finding a box of blue rubber gloves. You washed your hands before slipping into a pair. “What’s the situation?” You asked Enid, who was at the bedside of an unconscious man.

“Marco Van Watts, 32 year-old male,” Enid answered as she wiped away at the mud on his face. “He came back with the new prisoner in-tow. They think he got separated from a group while on watch. Seems like he hasn’t eaten in two days, and he’s definitely been on his feet for at least that long.”

“What have you done so far?” you asked, stepping closer to the bed. You looked over Marco: he appeared to be in rough shape.

“Checked heart-rate, blood pressure, and hung fluids,” Enid said. “Heart-rate was in the 80s and blood pressure 120 over 80.”

“Blood pressure is a little high,” you noted. You found a small white flashlight on a countertop. You used your thumb to pull back one of Marco’s eyelids, then shone the flashlight at his eye. You repeated the technique for his other eye before putting the flashlight in your pocket. “His pupils are fine, so there’s no immediate sign of brain damage. I think we have to wait and see what happens.”
“There’s nothing else we can do?” Enid asked as you slipped out of the gloves.

You tossed them into the trash. “Nothing I can think of. What about you?”

She stared at you for a moment, then shook her head.

You sighed. “It sucks, but sometimes waiting is just part of it,” you said.

“God, how did this happen?” A voice from behind you asked. You finally noticed that Maggie was in the room, sitting on a chair against the wall.

“I’m sure it was just an accident,” you assured, “and accidents happen all the time. Sometimes, they don’t end well. But for right now, Marco’s stable, and we’ll be able to help him more as soon as he wakes up.”

“Uh, Ryan?” Enid asked. She was leaning over Marco, examining his features. “I think he is waking up.”

You approached the bed again. You quickly noticed the way his eyebrows were furrowing and his head slowly rocked back and forth ever so slightly.


Marco’s eyes snapped open and he sat up so quickly you thought he was attacking Enid. “KEN!” he shouted, “Someone - Someone has to find him! I left him… Oh god…” He collapsed back into the bed, “I left him to die.”

“How far out?” Maggie asked. “We can send someone to find him.”

“So far out… We were so far out… West… a barn on a hill… I left him to die… and there were so many… but they didn’t see us.” Marco gripped at the pillow under his head, covering his ears like he was trying to block out a sound. “There were whispers, and I was afraid.” Marco rolled to one side. “It was the dead. They were speaking.”
Enid took an involuntary step back. She looked at you with wide eyes, clueless on what she was supposed to say.

The door behind you opened. You turned around, seeing Clem in the doorway. “Ryan, we need you,” she said.

“Uh…” you said blankly, trying to gather your thoughts, “can it wait? I’m a little busy right now.”

“Not really,” she persisted. You glanced between Enid and Clem, deciding to walk to the door.

“What the hell could possibly be more important than this?” You asked. You tried not to be mad with Clem, but she was pulling you away from the work you came to do.

“The new guy is asking for you,” Clem said, face expressionless.

You frowned. “The guy covered in guts?”

She nodded.

“Does he... know me?”

“You’re ‘the one who calls herself Ryan’, right?” Clem answered your question with one of her own.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Go find out.”

You sighed. “Alright. But you have to help Enid out.”

Clem seemed reluctant. “This isn’t really my forte.”
“Doesn’t matter,” you told her, already walking away. “This is a lot bigger than practicing medicine.”

The prison was in the far corner of Hilltop, hidden from the rest of the civilization. It was short in height and long in width. From the outside, it seemed pathetic. After stepping inside, though, it became daunting.

There were no windows, torches lined on the wall instead lighting the room. There were only eight cells in total, and one interrogation room at the end. All of them were closed off with metal bars and locked on the outside. The main difference between the interrogation room and a regular cell was that it was larger, and rather than having a bed in the corner, there was a table in the center.

“Is that her?” A voice asked. “I want to see her!” It demanded.

“If you want to see her, you have to calm down,” Glenn rationalized. “We’re not letting her in here if you’re a threat.”

“I’m not a threat to anyone, especially her!” he argued. Then, more defeated, he muttered, “I just want to see her.”

You recognized the voice, but you couldn’t associate it with a face. It was like your brain was slowly trying to connect the dots, paging through faces like a jukebox flips through album covers.

“I’m here,” you said numbly after reaching the room’s door. You set your hands on the bars, letting them fall when Glenn told the guard beside you to unlock it.

The man had his head bowed down, showing his thinning grey hair. You stared at him, trying to think of who the owner might be and how you might know them.

He raised his head. You felt all the air leave your chest, the blood in your veins stall.
“Missy?” He asked.

You choked the first time you tried to speak. Eventually, though, you managed to spit out a single word: “Dad?”

Chapter End Notes

the future is scary, but sometimes the past is even scarier.

Why would I write petty relationship drama when I can write unresolved family drama? As some of you may remember, Ryan has her name because she used it in remembrance of her father. So... what do you think her real name is?
Before you knew what you were doing, you approached your father, who was now standing. “I thought you were dead,” you said, almost hesitantly, as if he might suddenly drop dead at the suggestion. “I told myself for years that you were dead.”

“I’m not dead, Artemis,” he said softly. You could see the tears forming in his eyes. “You’re not dead either.”

You shook your head, tears of your own springing to your eyes. “Not dead,” you assured, then let out a soft laugh, which turned into a sob. “Daddy,” you cried.

You broke the distance between the two of you, your arms flinging around him. When he didn’t reciprocate, you quickly realized why — his hands were still tied behind his back. You took your pocket knife out and sawed away at the rope. When you finished cutting it, he engulfed you in a hug so tightly you thought it might suffocate you. It felt good.

“My baby girl,” your dad cried. He kissed your forehead and rubbed your hair. “I missed you. God, I missed you.”

You sat across from him, one leg pulled up onto the chair. You rubbed at your lips in thought. “Why the guts?” You asked, glancing up at your dad. “Why cover yourself like that?” From the short glimpse you got of him earlier, you’d guess it was weeks, maybe even months, of walker blood, organs, and flesh coating his clothes and body.

“It’s how I stayed alive,” he answered quietly. “After a while, your scent is completely masked, and you can walk among them like you are one.”

You had a lot more questions regarding the practice, but you felt as though there were more concerns to address than your curiosity. “Are there more of you out there?”

“More… human walkers?”
You nodded slowly.

“You mean whispers,” he continued. “I’ve heard them. I’ve heard the whispers.”

You frowned. “So you aren’t a… whisperer?” You asked. “You weren’t part of a group?”

He shook his head. “I've been on my own for the last 2 years,” your father said. “Mostly, I traveled in a pack or cluster of roamers; they’ll take you to food if you follow for long enough. One day, I heard two of them talking about what they were going to do when they got back to camp.”

“Did you follow them back?”

He nodded. “I split off from the pack and followed them on my own. They lived in a valley, and it was… massive. They had fires, shelter, and at least a hundred people down there.” He paused. “I think they do something with the walkers they lead home.”

“Like what?” you asked softly.

Your dad looked at you, clearly hesitant to say anything. “They skin them,” he eventually said, “and sew strips of flesh together to use as masks.”

The thought of shedding a walker of its skin just to put it on your face made your stomach turn. You put a hand over your mouth in an attempt to keep down whatever of your breakfast was still in your stomach. You swallowed with a shudder, closing your eyes for a moment.

“What happened to Jennie?” you asked. Of course, you wanted to know what happened to your family, but if you talked about wearing walker skin for even another second, you’d actually vomit again.

Your father smiled softly, longingly. “You remember Jennie?”

“And her three daughters,” you added. “Where are they? What happened?”
Your suspicion was confirmed when he looked down at the table.

“Dad, I’m sorry,” you whispered. It hurt to know such beautiful presences and souls were gone, but it didn’t hurt as much as you thought it would. Over the years of telling yourself they were dead, you did eventually come to believe it. Maybe it was selfish, but knowing your father was still alive was all you cared about at the moment.

“It’s okay,” he assured, setting his hands on the table. The tears were returning to his eyes. “I haven’t lost everything.”

“Ryan,” Glenn said, alerting both you and your father. He glanced between the two of you, unsure of how to address you now that there were two Ryan Ashlings. “You can stay if you want,” Glenn said, looking at you, “but it’s time I interview him.”

“I’m not saying anything unless she stays,” your dad immediately replied.

“It’s okay, dad,” you assured, reaching for one of his hands. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Glenn gave the one remaining guard an order, which prompted him to open the cell door before taking off outside with the keys. Glenn closed the door behind him, locking itself with a threatening ‘click’. You guessed Glenn told the guard to find someone to take his place, probably Maggie or Jesus.

“Your name is Ryan Ashling, correct?” Glenn asked your father as he took a seat beside you.

“Yes,” he answered easily.

“And that makes you…” Glenn proceeded, turning to look at you.

“I was born as Artemis Jamie Ashling,” you answered. “Artemis is kind of… weird, so most people called me either Missy or J.”

“…Okay,” Glenn replied, still unsure of what to call you. “For the time being, you’re still Ryan,” he said, then looked to your father, “and you’re Ryan Sr.”
“Works for me,” you shrugged.

“‘Senior’ makes me sound old,” your dad complained. When Glenn looked absolutely dumbfounded, the two of you broke out into laughter.

After settling down, the three of you got to work. Glenn started by asking your father to go through each group he’s been in, which was the small total of three. After the houses in the neighborhood were evacuated, your dad said he broke out with Jennie and her kids to trying looking for you. Unfortunately, by that point, Lee had already taken you out of the city, and you were starting your long new life consisted of days without your dad. Ryan Sr. said he couldn’t return after breaking out, not that he wanted to anyways; the city-sanctioned ‘safe spots’ were a corrupted mess. So instead, he scavenged as much of the city as he could before taking off with Jennie and her daughters.

He said they mostly tried to travel north, particularly, to DC or New York. Of course, they ran into families and smaller groups, and thankfully, they melded together rather than fighting for dominance. Your dad recalled there being as many as fifty in their caravan, sharing food and supplies and safety. Unfortunately, accidents still happened.

Maddie was the first of Jennie’s daughters to die. She was the youngest and didn’t quite understand what walkers were or why you were supposed to stay away. In the middle of the night, she purposefully stayed up and wandered into the woods, looking for a walker so she could form her own opinion on them. They found her half-eaten body the next day. The group left quickly after that, but it wasn’t enough for Jennie and her other two daughters, Megan and Trinity, to move on. Your dad guessed they were somewhere in Kentucky when the three of them died.

They came across a cherry tree earlier that day, and by the end of the night, Jennie killed her two daughters and herself with the cyanide in cherry pits. She fed it to them in sodas she found in a gas station they raided earlier in the day. Ryan Sr. was busy helping clear the area and setting up tripwire for the night, leaving the girls alone in a tent. When he came back, he found a note tucked under a bowl of cherries and their dead bodies. Jennie said she didn’t want to raise her children in the cruel world they lived in, and that they missed Maddie too much to keep going. Finally, Jennie said that if he wanted to live with them and Maddie again, all he had to do was eat a few seeds, and they’d all be together again. Before Ryan Sr. could take her up on the offer, someone from their group checked in and ended up throwing all the cherries into a fire.

As your dad told his entire story, you held his hand. When he stopped in the middle of his sentences, you squeezed his hand reassuringly. Neither you or Glenn spoke the entire time, letting speak or stop whenever he wanted. If you weren’t there, you had a feeling your father would have stopped talking a long time ago.
“We eventually came across a civilization in New York,” your dad said with a sigh. “We were close to Syracuse, that much I remember. It was like a whole world inside those walls — it wasn’t massive, but the people there could take care of themselves. They made clothes, grew food, built things from the ground up… it was incredible.”

“Why’d you leave?” Glenn asked.

He pursed his lips. “They made changes, ones I didn’t agree with. I knew it was time to leave, find somewhere else.”

Glenn looked hesitant, but he eventually scribbled something down in his notes.

You managed to find both a topographic and regular map of the area. Barrington House was a landmark back when maps were still made, which made it easy to find on the map. You found the weekly patrol reports in Maggie and Glenn’s shared office, and a massive panel of glass in a tent full of supplies. You used a roll of tape to secure the topographical map to the glass.

You heard the front door open, and in entered Carl. “Hey,” he greeted. He was wearing stained white tank top and black pants. Between the dirt, ash, and sweat, his arms, neck, and face were filthy. Carl wasn’t wearing his glasses, either, which you took as a good sign. He looked around the room, frowning. “What happened in here?”

You scooted the couch across the living room floor, so far it was closer to the kitchen than the other furniture. Between the rearranging and the mess you had made on the floor, you could understand his suspicion. “I’m just… working a few things out,” you answered.

“I heard about Marco today,” Carl said, approaching you. “He said the dead were… speaking?”

“Whispering,” you corrected, “and — as crazy as this is going to sound — I don’t think he’s losing his mind. I think… I think what he heard was real.”

Carl looked at you carefully, studying your features. “Walkers don’t talk, Ryan,” he said slowly.

You rolled your eyes. “I know that,” you said. “I think there’s a different explanation.”
“I’m all ears.”

“You know that man Marco brought back with him?” You asked.

Carl raised his eyebrows. “The one covered in walker guts?” He contemplated for a moment. “Was he in a group?”

“That was my first thought,” you agreed, “but he said it was just him. He also said that he followed the Whisperers back to their camp and got a glimpse of who they are and what they do.”

“Wait,” Carl said, raising a hand. “You think we’re talking an entire group of these people? How do they do it, anyways?”

“He said they skin walkers and make masks to wear,” you answered. Recalling the thought made you mildly sick.

“That’s… fucking disgusting,” Carl remarked. “What else did he know?”

“He guessed there was a hundred of them,” you answered, “and he said they lived in a valley. So,” you pointed a line you drew on the regular map, “I marked off the area we have cleared, then I lined it up with this one,” you pointed to the topographic map, “and made a dot for each valley outside of our area.”

Carl nodded in approval. “Good idea. You might want to mark areas that are overrun, too; maybe they like to hang out in crowds.”

"Hmph," you agreed, "good point." You smiled, setting a hand on his cheek. "Thank you," you said genuinely, then leaned in and pecked him on the lips. your smile turned into a grimace as you pulled away. "You need to take a shower."

“What, you don't love a working man?” Carl teased.

"I don't love a stinky one," you rebutted.
Carl lifted his arm to smell himself. He too grimaced. "Fair enough," he said, admitting defeat. Still, he grabbed your waist and pulled your body against his chest. "Maybe you can join me in the shower."

You attempted to push away from him, purposely keeping it weak. "I'm working."

"You're always working," he said, kissing the space below your ear. "Maybe we can work together."

You actually laughed at his phrasing. "Let me finish here, and I might just end up surprising you," you offered.

"I don't like surprises," Carl returned. Despite his words, you could see a look of intrigue in his eye.

"Trust me," you assured, running your hands up his chest, "you'll like this one."

Carl smirked as he let you go, instead briefly taking your hand. He then began to walk out of the living room, not letting go of your hand until his arm was fully extended. You watched him disappear down the hallway with a faint smile on your lips.

Just as Carl suggested, you continued your work by marking off the areas patrolmen mentioned had a higher count than usual. You also looked ahead in their reports for updates on the overrun areas, which seemed to naturally thin themselves out. However, you didn't think it was a coincidence that the overrun areas were close to the perimeter, and that the perimeter was close to the deeper valleys.

A knock on the door interrupted your thoughts and progress. You pulled down on your shirt as you walked across the living room, opening the door once you reached it. You were a little surprised to see who was behind it.

"Maggie?" you asked, slightly frowning. "What are you doing here?"

"Just thought I'd check in," she shrugged, trying to seem casual. "Mind if I come in?"
"I mean, you can..." you replied, stepping aside so she could enter.

Maggie looked around the apartment like she'd never seen it before. her eyes inevitably ended on the mess you made in the living room.

"Whatya doing here?" she asked curiously.

"A little research," you said, taking on the role of acting casual.

She examined the topographic map, which was secured to the panel of glass. "What do you need the glass for?"

"I'm gonna tape the other map over it once I'm done marking them," you explained, returning to the living room. "That way, I can shine a light through the glass, and hopefully see the way the points overlay... or the way they don't."

Maggie looked impressed. "Clever," she praised. The glass was resting against an armchair, so Maggie had to move it aside when she sat down. You took this as a queue, instead sitting on the floor, as the other arm chair was an awkward distance from the one she sat in.

"I wanted to check up on you," Maggie repeated, this time seeming more serious. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," you said, "I'm feeling a lot better. Well, that's an exaggeration: I haven't thrown up since this morning. I think I might be coming down with the stomach flu or something, which would suck."

"Try eating more ginger," Maggie suggested. "It tastes alright in tea. It should help settle your stomach. I learned that when Hershel made me morning sick."

You nodded slightly. "I'll have to try that. Thanks."

She smiled softly. The smile soon faded, though, and she adjusted in her seat with a sigh. "Glenn
told me," Maggie said finally.

You weren't expecting those words exactly, but you had a feeling she wasn't just dropping by. You averted your gaze, the sympathy in her gaze almost unbearable.

"He told me about..."

"My father," you finished, looking back at her.

She nodded.

You took in a breath, running a hand over your hair. "Yeah," you said dumbly, "I'm still not sure how I feel about it. For so long, I just accepted that he was dead, but the whole time, he was breathing, /living/, and he was looking for me. It's kind of like seeing a ghost." you hesitated. "Don't... tell anyone about this, okay? Please."

"It's safe with me and only me," she assured, "but... why? Why not tell anyone? Why does it matter if people know?"

"Well, for one, I'm this town's doctor now," you reminded, "and I don't need families doubting my judgment because I've got personal shit going on. And just because I love and trust him doesn't mean everyone else will. Hell, we both know the kind of impression he left this town -- they think he's crazy, Maggie. It's up to him to convince them he isn't. If people think he's dangerous, he has to prove them otherwise. And he can do it: I really believe he can."

"But if the word gets out that he's your father... you're afraid people will think we're favoring you over them," Maggie finished.

"I wouldn't be surprised if people thought me working here is you pulling some strings," you said. "If you choose to let him live among us instead of in a cell, they think you'll trust him because you trust me."

"That might not be true," Maggie suggested. "Maybe they'll surprise you."
You sighed. "Maggie, you're a leader, and a damn good one at that. But I can't ask you to ignore your instincts for me. I can't ask you to take in a stranger because he just so happens to be my father. I believe in my dad, and I think one day, you could too. For the time-being, though, treat him like he's anyone else. If he doesn't listen, don't give in. If he disobeys, punish him. If you let him in as a member of Hilltop and — god forbid — he hurts you or anyone else, I'd never be able to live with myself."

"But it would be my choice," Maggie insisted. "You shouldn't feel guilty because of a choice I made."

"You would have made that choice because of me," you disagreed softly. "That's what it comes down to. That's what it would always come down to."

“Alright,” she finally agreed. “This won’t get out.” She looked down the hallway, noticing the faint sound of the shower running. “Have you told him?”

You shook your head. “I don’t know what good it would do,” you muttered. “As much as I love him, he just wouldn’t get it — he’s been by his father’s side for his entire life, before and after everything. Meanwhile, mine’s been missing for over a decade and showed up looking like a walker. I don’t want him to look at me differently, like I’m some broken girl with daddy issues. The sympathy looks from you are bad enough. If they came from him, I wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“Sorry,” she muttered, looking down in embarrassment.

“It’s okay,” you assured, “I get it. But I don’t like it, and if I can avoid it, I will.”

Maggie nodded. “Fair enough. But if you ever need someone to talk to, Glenn and I are always available, okay?”

“Okay,” you agreed, smiling softly.

You kissed Carl on the cheek before you got out of bed. Just like always, you woke up before him, when the air was still quiet and the sky was still dark. You got ready in the dark, slipping into a
shirt, some jeans, and a jacket. All the while, Carl still slept peacefully. When you first started sharing a bed, Carl always woke up moments after you or vice versa. The more the two of you adjusted, though, the easier it was to sleep without each other’s presence. This made you a little sad, but realistically, it was for the best.

“I’ll see you in a bit, babe,” you whispered before walking out of the bedroom.

“Good morning!” you greeted the guard standing outside of the prison.

“Good morning,” he replied hesitantly. “I don’t mean to be rude, ma’am, but… what are you doing here?”

“Oh, did no one tell you?” You asked, frowning. “I’m your replacement.”

“I thought Damion was supposed to take my place…”

“Damion came down with something — they think the stomach flu is going around,” you answered.

“Yikes,” he muttered. He rubbed at his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Melissa,” you told him, “Missy for short.”

“Thanks, Missy,” He responded, handing over the keys and his spear.

“No problem, Josh,” you returned. “Sleep well.”

“Thanks,” he said with a brief chuckle before walking off.

The moment he left your vision, you tossed the spear on the ground and turned around. You jammed one of the various keys in the door, guessing right on the third try. You closed the front
door behind you, looking in each cell as you walked.

“Dad?” You asked softly. By the time you were halfway across the prison, each cell remained empty. You supposed they put him in one of the last ones, as it kept him closer to the interrogation room.

Sure enough, when you reached the last cell on the left, you saw a figure sleeping in one of the beds. You smiled with relief, setting your hand on one of the bars. “Good morning,” you said, this time louder. He appeared to be sleeping, and you felt bad having to wake him up, but this was the only time you’d get to talk to him without someone else there.

He rose, moving to a sitting position. Your dad kept his head, not even greeting you. Instead, he mumbled something, something you couldn’t hear.

“What?” You asked, the enthusiasm leaving your voice.

He turned his head up, and even though you knew he was the same person he was yesterday, a part of you wondered if he really was. The look in his eyes was dead, completely detached. He wasn’t the man that fought to see his daughter, the one that fought to stay alive. He was a man the world killed but decided to keep around.

“London Trials are falling down,” he repeated, this time louder.

Chapter End Notes

No, you’re not crazy: “London Trials” have never been mentioned in the show/comics before. This is actually the start of a plotline I made entirely out of scratch. So... stay tuned to see how that goes.

Also, Ryan's name is Artemis!!! How do we feel about it??
“What?” the simple question came out of your mouth before you could stop it. “What does that mean? Dad, what are you saying?”

He stood up, slowly approaching the bars you stood on the other side of. They changed him into a blue jumpsuit, his skin and clothes clear from the matter that previously consumed him. Still, right at that moment, when he looked as close to human as physically possible, is when you most feared him.

"London Trials," he said as he walked towards you, "are falling down."

"What does that mean?" you repeated, taking an involuntary step back. Your father felt more like a hardened criminal in that moment than he did your dad.

"London Trials are falling down," Ryan Sr repeated, speaking as if he couldn't hear what you were saying. "London Trials are falling down."

"Dad..." you said cautiously, "it's me: your daughter. Artemis? Dad, it's me... Just talk to me..."

"London Trials are falling down," he said. He mumbled it under his breath, like he was telling himself something. "London Trials... London Trials..."

"Dad, it's me!" you said again, this time desperately. "You won custody and moved me to Atlanta, and for a long time, I hated you for it. But I learned to love life in that city. I loved you, and Jennie, and even her daughters. I loved the new family you created for me." You didn't realize you were crying until you heard a sob you let out after speaking. Still, you begged him. "Dad, please... Just talk to me!"

Ryan Sr shook his head, first slowly, then more quickly. He placed his hands on either side of his
head, squeezing his eyes shut as he continued to shake his head. It was like he was trying to dismiss the thoughts filling his head.

"London Trials..." he growled, quickly rushing forward, "are falling down!" The railing of course stopped him, so he grabbed the bars and began to shake them. "London Trials are falling down! London Trials are falling down! London Trials —"

You didn't hear the last part of the phrase, as you ran out of the prison and slammed the door behind you. You heard the lock click, which brought you a sense of comfort. you slid down the door, covering your mouth as tears began to fall silently.

"Good morning!" Damion greeted as he approached the prison. He immediately frowned after taking a look at you. "Hey, are you okay? Did something happen?"

"What? No!" you asked then assured him quickly, "everything's fine. I think he's still asleep," you informed, then handed him the keys.

"Well, thank you," Damion offered, accepting the keys. You nodded slightly as you stepped aside. "Hey, what's your name? I don't think I've seen you around at all."

"Artemis," you mumbled, already walking off. "My name is Artemis. I'm Artemis. Not Ryan... Artemis."

Damion probably didn't hear what you were mumbling, but you wouldn't be surprised if he ended up telling either Maggie or Glenn about you. You couldn't bring yourself to care, though. As you walked aimlessly around Hilltop, the Sun just beginning to rise, the only thing on your mind was your father and the words he spoke.

It was as if Ryan Sr was a broken record, the pin in his brain reaching up only to sit back down on the same words. You guessed he was in a state of shock, one that easily could have been prompted by the questioning he went through the day before. You loved your father to pieces, but you knew a person had to be a certain level of insane in order to coat yourself in walker guts and roam around for years. Maybe his insanity was finally starting to catch up with him in that prison cell.
It took you some time to realize that a pair of boys were following you. When they first began to trail behind you, you assumed they happened to be walking in the same direction as you. When they began to speak to you, though, you realized that wasn't the case.

"Hey, where you goin'?" One asked, finally prompting you to turn around.

"Yeah," the other agreed, "why in such a hurry, babe?"

Normally, some snarky remark would come out of your mouth, but today, that just wasn't going to happen. You simply stared at them for a bit, gaze bouncing between the two of them. Then, you turned back around and tried to walk away.

"Hey," the second boy repeated, this time in the form of a growl, "he asked you a question."

His hand reached out and grabbed your arm, which made you quickly realize that this was going to end in a fight. Unfortunately for them, they weren't going to be the winners.

You looked at the boy's hand, then trailed your gaze up his arm and to his face. "You have no idea who I am, do you?" you asked.

Before he could reply, your open hand clapped over his ear. You put most of your strength into the hit, which was a good choice; he stumbled aside, reaching for that side of his face. His friend first called his name, then moments later, charged after you. Before he could get close, though, you kicked him in the middle of his chest.

The first boy went stumbling back just as the second regained his footing. He launched forward, fast enough that it took you off-guard. you momentarily lost your balance, but quickly recovered. He was trying to turn you around, probably so he could hold you in place while his friend did whatever he pleased.

His hands were holding yours firmly, making it hard for you to do anything besides struggle. The smirk of triumph on his face was enough to light a fire in you, though. You reared your head forward, smacking it right into his.

You easily felt as much pain as he did — you could feel your forehead split open and your head begin to throb — but the blow was enough for his grip to falter. That's all you needed.
Your hand balled into a fist, one that collided with the bottom of his chin. You hit him so hard that is caused him to fall back and hit the ground. The other boy watched dumbly as the two of you collided. When he realized his friend wouldn’t be getting back up anytime soon, he tried to close in on you and win the fight for the two of them. Unfortunately for him, you had already drawn your pocket knife out and flipped it open. He didn’t see this, though, so when he was mere inches from you, you put the tip of the blade to his throat.

“You really thought you could take me on?” you asked. Between the laugh you let out and the blood running down your face, you must have looked insane. Like father, like daughter. “You really thought you could beat me? Yeah, right.”

You reared your free hand back and punched him square in the face. There was a sick crunching sound as your knuckles collided with his nose, most likely the sound of bones breaking. You could see blood begin to flow from his nose before he even hit the ground. His body landed flat on the grass, his eyes shut; you knocked him out cold.

The still conscious boy was beginning to sit up, his eyes wide as he realized what he missed. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered, then looked up at you. “Crazy bitch, you could have killed him!”

“I almost did,” you said calmly, “and if you call me that one more time, I might just kill you.”

You walked off without another word. This time, no one followed you.

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You stood in the infirmary, looking in the mirror above the sink. Unlike Alexandria’s infirmary, the main room wasn’t filled with multiple beds. Instead, it was an open space with one exam table in the center. This was because most of the supplies and equipment in the entire building lined the walls of the main room. The sink was against the left-side wall, so when Enid walked in, she could not only see you, but your reflection, which showed the thick trail of blood down your face.

“Where the hell have you been?” Enid asked, “and what happened to you? I could’ve used your help earlier — these two boys came saying some psycho beat them up.”

You ran some water, cupping a hand under the stream. You brought the water to your face, rinsing off as much of the blood as you could. “I got into a slight… altercation.”
Enid’s frown turned into a blank expression. You took this as her realizing what happened. “Ryan, come on… you didn’t.”

“They harassed me, grabbed me,” you said easily. “All I did to them was what they were gonna do to me — what they did do to me.”

“They said you threatened to kill them,” Enid said.

“If they said the wrong thing, I would’ve,” you confirmed, grabbing a box of butterfly bandages off the counter beside you. “But they didn’t, because they’re pussies. Pussies that are too afraid to admit they got beat up by a girl.”

“You think this is funny?!” Enid asked, furious. “I don’t know what Alexandria’s like now, but this isn’t how we settle things here. We don’t pull knives on people, we don’t kill them when they wrong us. We aren’t out there anymore, haven’t been for years. Things are different now.”

After applying the bandages, you looked at her. “Things are different, but people are the same. If I reported this, it either would have been swept under the rug, or god forbid, paint a couple of boys in a bad light. If this was settled your way, they would’ve tried it again, or with a girl that can’t protect herself the way I can. This way was the right way, the only way.”

“You think that, and maybe even I think that,” Enid said, “but if everyone followed the rules they thought were right, this place never would’ve survived. None of this would be here if we all followed our own rules.”

You wanted to say something, mention that they’d never try this again because of what you did, but a sudden wave of dizziness washed over you. You leaned against the sink for support, closing your eyes and bowing your head.

“Ryan?” Enid asked. There was no anger in her voice anymore, just concern.

“Get me a chair,” you said weakly.

The moment Enid dragged a chair over to you, you collapsed into it. You momentarily lulled your
head backwards, face towards the ceiling, before you remembered some advice you were once given as a child. You leaned forward, crouching your head down so it touched your thighs.

“Does that help?” Enid asked. “Is it helping?”

“Kind of,” you answered. “I think it’s supposed to make blood rush to your head.”

The two of you remained in silence for a few minutes. You only sat up straight when you no longer felt dizzy, and even then, you took it slow in case another bout hit you. Thankfully, one didn’t. You were about to stand up, but Enid set a hand on your shoulder to keep you down.

“Just... take it easy,” she told you. “What was that about, anyways?”

You shrugged, pinching the bridge of your nose. “I think I’m starting to get sick. Or maybe it’s just from headbutting that kid.”

“You feeling shitty is ironic, being a doctor and all now.”

“Yeah,” you said, laughing softly, “I guess it is.”

“Come on, in here!” A frantic voice shouted. The doors slammed open, and five different men came into your line of vision. Two of them were carrying a man, and you could see blood dripping onto the floor from his midsection. You immediately stood up, slipping into some gloves.

“What happened?” you asked as you laid the exam table flat. Meanwhile, Enid was getting out some basic supplies — IV, saline, gauze, bandages, etc. You helped them lift the wounded man onto the table.

“Multiple stab wounds to the stomach,” someone answered. “Jesus brought him back. He was on the team looking for Kenny.”

“What’s his name?” You asked, grabbing a stethoscope and flashlight off of the counter. You plugged your ears and pressed the circular end to the man’s chest, listening for a heartbeat.
“Darius,” he said, “his name’s Darius.”

“He’s still alive,” you muttered, taking off the scope and swinging it around your neck. You looked to one of the men. “There’s a room full of filing cabinets in the last room at the end of the hall. Find Darius’s and get me his blood type.”

He nodded and rushed out of the room.

“What can I do?” A different man asked.

You pulled back Darius’s eyelid, flashing the light into his eyes. His pupils retracted, which was a good sign. “In the basement, there’s a freezer with different types of blood in it. Get me a bag of O-negative.”

He ran out in search of the blood. Enid kept herself busy, hooking Darius up to various monitors. She took his blood pressure as well.

“You,” you said, pointing to one of the two men still available, “find as many clean rags and towels as you can. There should be some stacks floating around in here and the storage room, 3rd door on the right.”

You got busy with some work yourself, gathering tools you knew you would need. You found a set of surgical instruments, which included forceps, scissors, a scalpel, and both regular and dissolvable stitches.

“Enid, get us some glasses, gowns, masks, caps, and whatever suction tool you can find.”

“You don’t think…” she said slowly.

“If he got stabbed more than once, I’m willing to bet at least one organ got nicked,” you said. “And if an organ got nicked, we have to stitch it up.”
“Is there anything I can do to help?” The final man asked.

You looked at him for a brief moment. “Stay out of the way.”

You and Enid slipped into the gear pretty quickly, making sure each other’s hair was tucked into the cap, that their gloves went on over the sleeves of their gown, etc. you flicked on the light and positioned it so you could see everything once you pulled back Darius’s clothing. You had already removed his armor, leaving him in the dark underclothes of his uniform.

“I’m probably gonna have to make a proper incision once we peel back his shirt,” you told Enid. “I want to get a clear view of what I’m looking at.”

“Okay,” Enid nodded. She chuckled nervously to herself. Now probably isn’t a good time to ask this, but have you operated on anyone before?”

“I’ve helped Denise before,” you informed, “but not on my own, no.”

“Great,” Enid said, breathlessly.

“Just do whatever I tell you to, okay? We’ll get him fixed up in no time.”

She sucked in a breath before nodding again.

You cut away at Darius’s shirt, peeling it off and throwing it into the trashcan beside you. The stab wounds were mostly clotted up, but a few small streams of blood began to flow at the disturbance. You reached over to the tray on a stand beside you, grabbing the bottle of betadine and dousing his stomach with it. Then, you picked up the scalpel, and with a deep breath and silent prayer, you dragged it along his skin.

The closest thing to this that you practiced under Denise was an appendectomy. This time proved to be different, though because instead of being greeted by mostly healthy organs, you were faced with more blood clots than you realized were humanly possible.
“I need you to rinse and suck these out until I tell you to stop,” you instructed Enid. “Just pour in some water, suck it out, and repeat.”

She nodded, shakily dumping some water from a bottle into the sight. She used the only suction tool available — an emergency manual one — to evacuate the water. Once you saw fresh blood begin to flow, you told her to stop.

There was a nick in his left kidney, one that wasn’t small enough to heal itself. You picked up a pair forceps, using one to hold a needle that was already threaded. Slowly, you began to stitch up the organ, telling Enid when to flush it with water or dab the blood away with a clean cloth. You cut the remaining thread and used the excess to tie a knot that would hold the stitches in place. When your handiwork didn’t fall apart, you let out a sigh of relief.

“This isn’t so hard,” you said aloud. Your voice was shaking. You looked up and towards the men who brought him in, who were now done with their tasks and simply waiting to see if he would survive.

“Are any of you o-negative?” you asked.

They looked among each other and either shook their head or otherwise informed you that they weren’t.

“Find me someone that is,” you directed. “This blood won’t thaw in time.”

You worked at a few more of the minor lesions you could find, your technique slowly growing better and better. You also managed to clear out most of the free clots, meaning the ones remaining were clogging an injury. Unfortunately, you could see they were making a line, which meant they were probably covering a deeper cut.

The men managed to find a woman with O-negative blood that was willing to donate. Enid was the one to complete the transfusion, and after thanking the woman and giving her something to drink, she was back in your makeshift OR and ready to hang the blood. You gave Darius’s blood pressure a chance to rise before getting back to work.

The moment you had Enid try to flush out the bloodclots covering some of the large intestines, a lot blood began to flow. Without thinking, you set the forceps aside and used your fingers to
manually close the wound.

“I need you to do this one,” you told Enid calmly.

She looked at you with wide eyes. “Are you crazy?! I can’t do it!”

“Have you stitched skin before?” You asked.

“That’s entirely different.”

“It is,” you agreed, “but it’s a similar technique, and it’s a technique you need to learn.”

“Why can’t you do it? You’ve been doing great so far — what if I mess it up?”

“My hands are where you need to stitch,” you said, “which already makes things easier for you. You won’t mess up: I won’t let you.”

After a bit more hesitation, Enid picked up the forceps and slowly brought them to where your hands were. You could see that she was shaking.

“Take a breath, and just follow my instructions,” you said calmly. “You’ll do great.”

Just as you expected, Enid did an amazing job. She kept her hands steady and stitched exactly where you told her to. Her handiwork could be better, but it was something she’d learn with practice.

After one final check to make sure there was no bleeding or foreign objects, you were able to close the incision and instead work on the lacerations on his skin. Compared to stitching up organs, the flesh wounds were an absolute breeze. Before you knew it, Darius was all stitched up, his heart rate was strong, and his blood pressure was getting better each time you checked. As far as you were concerned, there was no reason he wouldn’t survive.

You threw away your gown and mask, slumping into a chair with a sigh.
“I just operated on someone,” Enid said in shock, “and I didn’t kill him. He’s gonna live.”

“He’s gonna live,” you agreed, smiling. “Good job, kid.”

Your’s and Enid’s victory was cut short by shouting outside. You frowned, standing up and walking outside of the room.

“She’s a fucking monster!” you heard a man you didn’t know shout.

“She’s in there saving someone’s life!” Someone else protested. This time, it was a voice you knew: it was Carl. “Is that something a monster would do?”

“Of course you’d say that,” the original voice said, growing clearer and louder the closer you walked to the door they were behind. “She’s your whore.”

You opened the door in time to see Carl punch a man at least a foot taller than him right in the throat.

Chapter End Notes

That's the first and last time I'll ever write anything remotely surgical. I had my fun, but I'm clearly no doctor lol. Ryan and Enid kicking ass as lady doctors, though?? I couldn't gloss over that. Also, we love Carl (and Ryan) standing up for Ryan. Well, at least I do.
Maggie and Glenn managed to drag Carl and the man apart before you had to intervene. They were so distracted that they didn’t notice you were in the room. That is, until you spoke up.

“What the hell is going on here?” you asked, crossing your arms.

An older woman, who was attending to the man Carl punched, snapped to attention. “You tried to kill our sons, that’s what happened!”

“That’s an exaggeration,” you scoffed.

“You attacked them,” the woman roared. She tried to go after you, which Glenn blocked.

“They touched me first,” you said, “so I touched them back. Ya know, maybe you should’ve taught your boys how to respect, and they wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“They were defending themselves!” She shouted, “from you!”

You wanted to laugh. In hindsight, you could admit that maybe you went a little too far, but you didn’t do anything those boys didn’t deserve. If Carl hadn’t shut that man up, you guessed he’d be just as bad as her, and then you’d really say something you’d regret.

“Okay, everyone, take a breath!” Glenn demanded. He stood between the two of you, arms stretched out like he was holding back two animals. “Tammy, take a seat. Ryan, go take Enid’s place in the cellblock. Tell her to come here so she can look at Scott.”

You wanted to argue, say that you deserved to defend yourself, but you didn’t trust what might come out of your mouth. Besides, as long as Carl was there, you knew things would be kept fair. So, you walked out of the room and building with a scoff.

You wrapped your arms around yourself like you were trying to block out a nonexistent chill. You walked to the cellblock as fast as you could without running, and the minute you opened the door, you collapsed against it with a shaky breath. Tears began to flow freely from your eyes, but you
managed to keep any sobs silent.

“Ryan?” Jesus asked, sounding both confused and shocked at seeing you leaning against the door. “Are you okay?”

You stood up with a sigh, rubbing your nose. “I’m fine,” you said, which came out squeaky. You cleared your throat. “I’m okay. I’m here to take Enid’s place — they need her in the infirmary.”

Jesus stepped aside you could look into the open cell. You laid eyes first on a young girl with long blonde hair tied to her seat, then to Enid crouched beside her. She had a decent amount of a first aid kit laid out in front of her. You guessed she was just about to start on stitches.

“What could they need from me that they can’t -,” Enid started, then cut herself off. You nodded grimly, confirming her suspicion. “I already numbed her up,” Enid said, snapping off the gloves on her hands. She brushed by you and Jesus without another word.

You took Enid’s place with ease, threading a sterilized needle with some medical-grade thread. “You might feel me tug or pull, but it shouldn’t hurt,” you told her, then got to work.

“Where do you live?” Jesus said, picking up where you presumed he left off.

“Everywhere,” the girl answered.

“That’s…” Jesus pinched the bridge of his nose, exasperated. He let out a breath. “Why did you attack us?”

“You crossed our border,” she answered simply. “You were in a place you weren’t supposed to be.”

Jesus said nothing, just stared at her. You occasionally glanced up, wondering when or if he’d ask another question and ease the growing tension.

“Explain this to me, Lydia,” Jesus told her. He rose one of his hands, which held a mask that looked straight out of a slasher film. Random bits of flesh were sewn together, and even some hair
was threaded into the top.

“The skin makes the dead leave us alone,” Lydia answered. “We travel with them, they protect us... and we protect them.”

“Why?” Jesus asked, which is exactly what you thought.

“The only thing that’s left anymore is for us to live and them to not. We live together, or we don’t live at all. You either learn... or you die.”

“Good god,” you muttered under your breath. “How old are you?”

“Ryan, let me ask the questions, please,” Jesus interjected.

“I’m seventeen,” Lydia told you. She looked at her shoulder, then at you. “-and thank you.”

You were just finishing up dressing her wound. You knotted the stitch after cutting the thread and smiled smally. “You’re welcome.”

You began to pack up the bag, zipping it shut while you still knelt on the floor. When you looked up, you saw three people walk by, one of them being Carl. you immediately stood up and followed after them.

“Why does Jesus have a girl tied up?” Carl asked, looking at you.

You ignored his question, brushing past Glenn and Maggie to hug him. “Thank you,” you told him softly. When you pulled away, you looked between the two Hilltop leaders. “What’s going on?”

Neither of them answered, so Carl stepped in. “I took the fall for everything,” he said. “I told them I came across those boys attacking you, and that I came to your defense. Considering what I did to Harold, they believed me.”

“And they want to see you locked up,” you said finally. You looked at Maggie. “You know what
actually went down. Are you really gonna let this happen?”

Maggie clenched her jaw. “You’ve put us in a really difficult position, Ryan,” she said, “one that someone needs to be punished for. As much as I hate Carl lying for you, I hate that you got us into this situation to begin with.”

“I was defending myself!” you retaliated. “What was I supposed to do, lay down and let them hurt me?”

“I’m glad you can take care of yourself,” Maggie said, this time softer, “but you did more than defend yourself, and you know that.”

“They deserved it.”

“Maybe they did,” she agreed, “but you can’t just kill anyone that crosses you. You did what you had to do to get out of that situation, and you should have stopped after that. Justice isn’t for you to deal whenever you please.”

“I’m the one who did it,” you said. “Let me be the one punished.”

“It’s too late for that,” Glenn spoke up. “If we retrace our steps, say Carl actually wasn’t involved, it’ll only make things worse. Besides, you’re this town’s doctor now, Ryan. If you admit to assaulting two community members, you’d be lucky to live here anymore, let alone practice medicine.”

You looked down in shame.

Maggie wrapped an arm around Carl’s shoulders, escorting him to an empty cell. She unlocked the door, and he stepped inside without a fight. She closed it behind him. “It’s just for the day,” Maggie assured. “We’ll sort this out.”

“Thanks, Maggie,” Carl said.

Maggie nodded. She walked past you, meeting up with Jesus to ask him about Lydia and the
interrogation.

“I’m sorry,” you whispered to Glenn, who was still standing beside you. “I never meant for it to get this out of hand. I just… acted. I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

He set a hand on your shoulder. “I believe you,” he assured. “I’m sorry those boys attacked you. They’ll be punished too, and I promise, they’ll never come within 50 feet of you again.”

You managed to smile. “Thank you,” you said softly.

He squeezed your shoulder before meeting up with his wife.

You walked to Carl’s cell, setting one hand on the railing. “I really fucked this up, didn’t I?” you asked quietly.

He set a hand over yours. “Not really,” he replied. “If I was actually there, I would’ve done a lot worse than what you did.” Quietly, he added, “I think I would’ve killed them.”

His words probably should have concerned you, but they really brought you a sense of relief and protection. “I guess it’s a good thing you weren’t, then.”

Carl smirked. “Probably.” he paused, then said, “I heard what you did for Darius. I wish I could’ve seen it.”

“I was a mess,” you laughed softly to yourself. “I thought I was gonna kill him.”

“You didn’t, though,” Carl replied. “You saved him. That’s worth taking the blame for.”

“I don’t deserve you,” you whispered, reaching a hand up and cradling his cheek.

He shrugged. “You can make it up to me later,” he smiled. His voice and smile dropped when he proceeded to ask, “seriously, though: what’s up with the girl?”
“You know how I told you about the whispers? How there are people that disguise themselves as the dead?”

Carl stared at you. “No way.”

You nodded.

“But she’s our age, isn’t she?”

“She’s younger,” you confirmed. “She’s seventeen.”

“Jesus,” Carl mumbled. “She had to have grown up like that.”

“She must’ve,” you agreed. You looked towards her cell, which obviously wasn’t visible from where you were standing. The most you could see was Jesus, Glenn, and Maggie standing outside, talking to her. “It’s sad,” you continued, “hearing the way she talks about it. She talks about their group and way of life like they have no choice, like it’s living with the dead or not living at all. They brainwashed her into thinking the world can’t change or that humanity doesn’t exist anymore. I just hope they aren’t reproducing. The new generation is supposed to be better than the last, and believe me, there is nothing better about the way they live.”

“Shouldn’t we help her, then?” Carl asked with a frown. “Why do we have her tied up in a cell when we could be helping her?”

“She attacked the group Jesus was in,” you replied. “She help killed our people. Kid or not, I’m pretty sure that makes you a prisoner.”

“Hmph,” Carl exhaled, “maybe.”

You found your way back to the infirmary with ease. By the time you returned, Tammy and Herold were either gone or in a different room, much to your relief. You stepped into the main room, the one where you and Enid preformed an operation a mere few hours ago.

“Hey, Enid,” you asked, stepping into the room, “which — oh.”
You stopped speaking the moment you looked up, finding Clem and Enid kissing. Enid pulled away, staring at you in shock. Clem looked surprised, yet smug. You pursed your lips, holding back a smile. “Which room did we put Darius in?”

“Uh, 7,” Enid answered, clearing her throat. “We put him in room 7.”

“Perfect,” you remarked.

“I better get going,” Clem said. You waved your friend goodbye as she walked past you and out the door.

“How long as this been going on?” you asked after Clem disappeared.

“Ever since I started coming to Alexandria with Jesus for annual reports,” Enid answered, cheeks flushed.

“That was like, 9 months ago,” you frowned. “And you weren’t there for the last 2.”

“We broke things off for a while,” Enid informed. “I was tired of seeing her once a month, twice if I was lucky.”

“What changed?”

“She’s here now, isn’t she?” Enid pointed out. “Once she gets things sorted at Richmond, she’ll be moving here.”

You nodded. A smile slowly crossed your face.

“Say whatever you’re gonna say,” Enid sighed.

“Are you happy?” you asked. “Does she make you happy?”
Enid paused, taken aback by your question. “Yeah,” she answered, then more confidently, “yes. She makes me happy.”

“Then I have nothing to say about it,” you said.

“Really?” Enid asked in surprise. “You have… nothing to say about me dating one of your closest friends? Or the fact that…”

“She’s a girl?”

Enid nodded meekly.

“If the two of you are happy, I’m not gonna judge that. I won’t even poke fun at it,” you assured. “The most annoying part about living in Alexandria while dating Carl was the opinions people thought they should voice to us.”

“People were that bad?”

“I think they were trying to be nice,” you said, “...most of the time. It got annoying, though. Teenagers idolized us, creepy men said Carl did a good job, middle-aged women said we’d make beautiful babies. It was so goddamn annoying. And for that last part... The world is trying to die. Both it and the people in it have bigger problems than a couple of teenage girls dating each other.”

Enid smiled. “Thanks, Ry.” She then grimaced. “Beautiful babies, huh?”

You snorted, taking a seat on the exam table. “Isn’t that horrible?”

She took a seat beside you. “At least Clem and I will never get that one.”

“Be grateful,” you chuckled, “because those comments are the worst. Why do people think that kids are always the next step? Carl and I aren’t even married, which doesn’t mean a lot anymore, but still. The best time to have a baby would be now, when there are walls and shelter and food. Even then, though... I don’t think this world will ever be good enough for a child anymore.”
“Do you think you’ll ever have one, though?” Enid asked. “I mean, feel however you want about the world, but if you want to be a mom, you shouldn’t let anything stop you. At least, that’s what I think.”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it,” you admitted. “I always saw it as part of my future because I thought it’s what I has to do: I thought people fell in love, got married, and had kids. But in that world, the dead stayed dead.” You sighed. “Maggie and I were talking about it a few days ago, and she made me realize if I wanted to, I could. Carl and I aren’t kids anymore; kids are a near future for us, if we decide to have them.”

“Yeah,” Enid agreed, “a lot sooner than any of us probably realize.” She smiled. “It would be neat to have a baby around again. I mean, Hershel’s still young, but the little shitter is growing like a weed. And those weirdo women were right: you and Carl would make cute babies.”

You grinned. “We would,” you agreed. However, your grin quickly faded. “How did Maggie know she was pregnant?”

“I think it started out with her missing periods,” Enid answered. “Then, she had morning sickness. She’d vomit up her breakfast like, ten minutes after eating it. Why?”

“Did she ever feel dizzy?” you asked.

“Uh… I don’t think so. I’m sure dizzy spells could be a sign of pregnancy, though.” She paused. “Ryan, what are you trying to get at?”

You swallowed thickly and felt your hands begin to shake. “Where do we keep the pregnancy tests?”

One pregnancy test and two pink lines later, you and Enid sat on the bathroom floor. Your back was pressed to the cupboards below the sink, legs bent at the knee and feet pressed to the tile below. Enid was beside you, legs angled to the side with one ankle tucked under her.

“What are you gonna do?” Enid asked. The positive test was to the side, staring back at you like a rival on the frontline.
“No fucking idea,” you said blankly.

“How do you feel about it?”

“No fucking clue.”

Enid slumped back, trying to process the information. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” you muttered, running a hand through your hair and down your neck. “It’s hard to find condoms now, and even when we can, they’re probably expired. I tried to time it: I kept my cycle on a fucking calendar. I didn’t think much of it when I missed a period — they only started coming regularly after the war. I thought I missed it because of stress, the same reason I probably missed all the other ones. I just wasn’t… active before, I guess.”

“Guess not,” Enid said simply. “Wow. This is just… wow.” After a moment, she asked, “are you gonna tell him?”

“Carl’s sitting in a jail cell right now because of me,” you reminded. “This won’t exactly brighten his day.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe he wants this. You won’t know until you tell him.”

“I will tell him,” you affirmed, “just not right this second. I’m not gonna tell my boyfriend I’m pregnant when I haven’t even told him the man sitting in the jail cell next to him is my father.”

Enid was quiet. “Wait… what? What does that mean?”

“The man Marco brought back, covered in weeks of walker guts… is my dad. My biological father, the guy that won a custody battle against his ex-wife, the man who raised me, Ryan Sr., whatever you wanna call him. He’s my dad.”

“He’s the reason you lashed out, isn’t he?” Enid whispered. “What did he tell you?”
“It’s more about what he didn’t tell me,” you replied, a few tears streaming down your face. “I went to talk to him this morning, and the only thing he said was ‘London Trials are falling down’, whatever the hell that means. I think talking about something in his past triggered like, a PTSD attack or something.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Enid agreed quietly. “Spending that much time alone with walkers is enough to drive anyone crazy.” She sighed. “God, Ryan, why didn’t you tell me? Why have you kept this to yourself?”

“Glenn knows about it,” you told her, “but I told him not to tell anyone. I didn’t want the word getting out that I have a crazy father or the idea that he’s being favored — I wanted to earn Hilltop’s trust, fair and square.” You laughed to yourself. “I just screwed that up, like I screw everything else up.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that,” Enid scolded gently. She scooted closer and wrapped an arm around your shoulders. “Carl will be out by tomorrow, and Maggie and Glenn will settle the entire thing.”

“What do we do about the thing growing inside me?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Enid said simply, “like we figure everything else out.”

Just as Maggie promised, she released Carl after spending a single day in the cell. Tammy and her husband were far from happy about it, but she didn’t budge after telling them she wasn’t going to keep him locked up while they figured things out. You and Carl thankfully weren’t there for the debate.

Days passed, and you didn’t tell him about the pregnancy. You wanted to, but you were too busy feeling simultaneously grateful and worried — grateful he was back, and afraid Tammy and Herold might take things into their own hands. The two of you remained on your best behavior for the next three days, giving Maggie and Glenn no cause for further punishment. In fact, you heard some rumors at community meals that people were doubting you and Carl had anything to do with it.

You spent the morning in bed with him, missing breakfast and not caring. Earl gave Carl the day off, and Enid could handle whatever came into the infirmary on her own. So, the two of you had all the time you wanted to yourselves. You didn’t have sex, though — you weren’t sure it was the best idea considering your… state. So instead, you enjoyed his presence and the sound of his heartbeat underneath your ear.
“Why didn’t you tell me that prisoner is your dad?”
You sat up quickly, staring at Carl. A million questions were running through your head, but you managed to ask one single thing: “he told you, didn’t he?”

“He thought you already did,” Carl answered. “I didn’t know he was talking about you at first: he called you ‘Artemis’.”

Your real name coming out of Carl’s mouth startled your heart. You leaned against the bed’s headboard, crossing your arms in an attempt to make yourself smaller. “It’s hard to explain why I didn’t tell you,” you whispered.

Carl sat up as well, looking over at you. “Do you not trust me?”

You immediately shook your head. “That’s not it at all — I promise. I just… I don’t know. Ever since we met, I’ve been the fucked up girl with a lot of issues. It’s taken years, but I finally felt like I was someone outside of my past. Telling you that my father, who I assumed was dead, is back in my life… it’d ruin that.”

A thick silence fell between the two of you. Eventually, Carl broke it by doing something you didn’t expect — he laughed. “You read too much into everything, don’t you?”

You frowned. “What?”

“I get not wanting to preach this to the entire community,” Carl said, “but does your father being alive have anything to do with who you are? This doesn’t change what you’ve been through; you’re not the little girl he raised anymore, and you probably never will be again. But there’s nothing wrong with that. It just means you have some catching up to do.”

You stared at him, then looked away in embarrassment. “I do read too much into everything.”

“It’s okay,” Carl assured with a laugh. “I still love you.”

You snorted. “Because that was a concern of mine,” you said, but kissed him anyways. “Thank
“You’re welcome,” he returned. He studied your features. “Artemis, huh? I never would’ve guessed that.”

“My parents were young when they had me; they probably thought giving me a goddess’s name would give me… power, or something. I honestly couldn’t tell you what they were thinking when they named me.”

“It’s not that,” Carl said. “You found power all on your own.”

You smiled softly.

“So what’s it like having him back?” Carl asked.

“It’s fuckin’ weird,” you laughed softly. “It was really good seeing him the first time, but a few days ago, I snuck in at night to talk to him.”

“Did he say something that made it... not good?”

“It was like he was… possessed,” you stated. “He kept saying the same thing: ‘London Trials are falling down’. It wasn’t just that, though. I was afraid of him, of whatever he became.”

“That’s horrible,” Carl said quietly, taking your hand. “Have you talked to him since then?”

You shook your head. “I want to give him some time to find himself again. It isn’t easy reliving your past, especially when you’ve been avoiding it for so long. I think he just needs a few days to process everything. He shouldn’t have to worry about his daughter in the meantime.”

Carl leaned his head against your chest. “In the meantime, I’ll worry about his daughter.”

You smiled, reaching a hand up to stroke his hair.
“I don’t have to… Call you Artemis now, do I?”

You laughed. “Call me whatever you want.”

The two of you sat like that for awhile, you running your hand through Carl’s hair while his cheek was pressed to the space below your collarbone. You eventually felt his eyebrow furrow against your skin.

“What are you thinking about?” you asked gently.

“Lydia,” Carl admitted.

“Wow, I feel so loved,” you joked.

“Not in that way,” Carl said, sitting up. “The two of us talked when your dad fell asleep. I feel bad for her — she only believes the things she does because they were fed to her. If we can show her a different way of life, that there are choices, I really think she could be a good person.”

“I have more faith in her than I would anyone else in her group,” you admitted, “but can we really trust her?”

“She’s done everything we’ve asked her,” Carl said. “She’s answered questions, didn’t resist the restraints, and respected everyone’s she come in contact with. She’s proved as much as she can from that cell.”

“So what do you want to do?” You asked.

Carl paused. “I want to be responsible for her,” he eventually said. “I want to let her out of the cell and show her Hilltop, show her what’s it like to live among people and not walkers. I think if she just sees what people can still do, she’ll never want to go back to the life she was living.”

“You want to be a walker girl’s designated tour guide,” you summarized.
“Pretty much,” Carl agreed. “Are you… okay with that?”

You set a hand on his face. “Carl, you have a massive heart, and it’s one of the many things I love about you. Even besides that, though, I trust you; I trust your judgment. If you think Lydia could learn how to be human again, and maybe even become a member of this community one day, I trust that.”

He set a hand in the crook of your elbow. “Thank you.”

You smiled, pulling away and taking his in yours. “As long as she doesn’t sleep on the couch, I’m fine with it.”

“If I can help with anything,” you called after him.

“No, no. Everything’s fine.”

You checked in with Enid after lunch, making sure things were running smoothly. She was eating with Clem when she told you that Darius was still stable and the only new patient she had the entire morning was a kid with a bloody nose. She asked if you could cover the evening and spend the night to watch Darius, as she slept over the night before. You agreed, and when you mentioned you had to go talk to Maggie, Clem said she’d come with.

“I thought for sure you’d spend every waking moment with Enid before you leave,” you mentioned, shoving your hands in your pockets.

“I’d love to,” Clem agreed, “but it’s just not realistic. So I thought that if I take care of everything now, like the packing and goodbyes, I can spend actual time with her.”

“That’s why Enid wants the evening off,” you concluded with a chuckle. “Smart. What do you need to talk to Maggie about, anyway?”

“I wanted to talk to her about permanent living arrangements,” Clem answered. “You?”

“I need to apologize,” you informed. “I was a complete bitch, beating some kids up and making her stick her neck out for me. An apology won’t right all my wrongs, but… it’s a good place to start.”
Clem nodded in agreement. “How have you been, by the way?”

You frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, “it’s been a while since we last talked, and Enid said you’ve been feeling sick the last few days.”

“I’m okay,” you said. “I’ve been feeling better.”

“That’s good,” Clem agreed. “And by the way, peppermint helps with nausea. My mom used to take these capsules when -” she cut herself off.

You stopped dead in your tracks. “When she what, Clementine?”

“Don’t be mad,” Clem said softly.

“Oh my god, she told you!” You said, shouting in the form of a whisper.

“She’s worried about you,” Clem defended, “and frankly, so am I. I don’t know much about... pregnancy,” she whispered the word, “but I know prenatal vitamins and ultrasounds are a thing.”

“Clem, I’m this town’s doctor now!” you exclaimed. “I can’t just mosey on back to Alexandria or Richmond every few weeks for a check-up.”

“Then let Enid help you,” she suggested. “It would be a good learning opportunity for both of you.”

“It would be me scarring her for the rest of her life,” you countered. “Seriously, Clem: do you have any idea how awful childbirth is?”

“No, and frankly, I’m glad I don’t,” she said, then sighed. “Just… let us help you, okay? I’m only
gonna be gone for a few days, a week tops. Sort things out with Enid and let Carl take care of you while I’m gone.”

At the mention of Carl, you looked away.

Clementine stared at you. “You haven’t told him yet?!” She asked, slapping your shoulder.

“It’s not like I’m never going to!” you defended. “I’m waiting for the right moment.”

Clem rubbed at her temples, taking in a deep breath. “Jesus Christ. Okay, whatever, do what you want. Just tell him soon, alright? I really hate knowing this when the damn father doesn’t. He is…”

Now you smacked Clem’s shoulder. “Of course it’s Carl’s!” you hissed. “Who do you think I am?!”

“Apparently, a mother,” Clem mumbled, “or rather, mommy-to-be.”

You groaned. “Don’t even get me started on that.”

“Do you want to be a mother?” Clem asked, voice growing gentle again.

“I don’t think I have a choice,” you laughed humorlessly, “but even if I did… I don’t know. It’s like I told Enid: after spending so much just trying to survive, I forgot it was even a possibility. I forgot ordinary things, like falling in love and starting a family, were still possible.”

“Who knew Ryan Ashling was a domestic housewife at heart?” Clem teased.

“Yeah,” you laughed, “something like that.” When Clem stopped at one of the trailers near Barrington, you frowned. “Who lives here?”

“Gregory,” Clem answered. “Maggie stopped by the Infirmary before you did to tell Enid she’d be here.”
“Why? What would Maggie want to talk to Gregory about?”

“The parents of those boys you beat up are pretty upset,” Clem explained. “Gregory told her he’d talk things over with them, help settle the situation. I’m sure that’s what they’re talking about now.”

“Because Gregory is the most rational man in this damn place,” you muttered.

Clem either didn’t hear you or chose not to respond, simply walking to the door and knocking on it. When no one replied, she knocked again, this time harder. Still, no one answered. She looked at you with a frown before rapping on the door again. “Maggie?” She asked this time, loud enough to be heard over the knocking. Still, no response. Clem grabbed her pistol before slamming the door open.

You followed her inside, shocking by the sight you were faced with. Maggie was on the floor, seemingly unconscious, while Gregory stood with his back turned to her.

“Get on the ground!” Clem shouted, clicking the safety off as she pointed the gun right at his head. Meanwhile, you rushed to Maggie’s side, turning her over and pressing two fingers to her neck. You felt a pulse — it was weak, but it was there.

“What the -” Gregory said, turning around. His eyes widened. “She just passed out! I was going to run for help!”

Clem pulled the hammer back. “Get on the ground,” she said calmly, “hands behind your head. Now.”

You put a hand in front of Maggie’s mouth, pleased to feel the soft breaths she emitted. You sighed with relief, getting the flashlight out of your pocket to check her pupils.

“...she’s alive?” Gregory asked hesitantly.

You scoffed, looking up at him. “You’re a fucking dead man,” you simply said.
“Haven’t you made enough death threats, Ry?” Maggie asked, voice hoarse and quiet.

You laughed softly, brushing back some of her hair. You turned your head to the open door, shouting for Jesus. “You scared the shit out of me, girl,” you told Maggie softly.

She smiled slightly, eyes closed. “Not dead yet,” she assured.

“What’s going - Oh my god,” Jesus said in shock. He looked at Clem, who was still holding a gun on Gregory, to you, crouched beside Maggie.

“We should get her in the chair,” you said. “I can’t lift her up on my own.”

Jesus stepped forward immediately, slipping an arm under Maggie’s knees and shoulders. He momentarily held her bridal style before setting her on the armchair a few feet away.

“We can’t leave him here alone,” Maggie mumbled, head slightly lulling to the side. “Lock him up. We’ll have to search this place later to find out what he gave me.”

“Come on,” Clem said, grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling upwards, “let’s go.”

Gregory stood up without a fight. “Maggie, you have no reason to -”

“Shut the fuck up, Gregory,” Maggie cut him off. “You really wanna be the leader here? You can’t even poison someone right.”

He hung his head and walked out of the trailer without another word.

Maggie tried to stand up, which both you and Jesus stopped her from doing. “Take it easy, Maggie,” you said softly, keeping a sturdy hand on her shoulder.

“I have to make sure he’s locked up, make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else,” Maggie persisted, yet
slumped back into her seat.

“Clem’s got it,” you promised. “You know she can handle it.” You looked to Jesus. “I’m gonna go find Glenn. Wait here with her?”

“Of course,” Jesus replied.

You squeezed Maggie’s shoulder reassuringly before stepping out of the trailer.

It took a lot of looking around to find a single person, let alone a guard of any sort. The only one spoke to told you to go inside and stay out of the way, which you of course ignored. Instead of taking his advice, you found your way back to the main gates. They were open, and when you realized why, you also realized why the entire community was in hiding.

“I propose a trade,” an unfamiliar voice offered. You tried looking around Glenn, who was the only person standing outside. Well, the only person from Hilltop. A few yards away from him stood what appeared to be a line of walkers.

Whisperers.

“I appreciate the care you’ve given Kenny,” Glenn called back to the woman who offered a trade. She was completely bald, and in a weird way, pretty. If she wasn’t the leader of such insane people, you might even consider her beautiful. “We need ten minutes to gather Lydia and her things.”

“That is agreeable,” the woman replied. “Make this trade and stay out of our lands, and there will be no more trouble between you and my people. That is my promise to you.”

Glenn nodded respectfully before turning around and re-entering the gates. A few of the guards closed them for the time-being.

“Someone should go find Marco, tell him Kenny’s okay,” you remarked.

“Ryan, do you have any idea where Lydia and Carl might be?” Glenn asked instead.
You contemplated before shaking your head. “I have no idea,” you admitted.

Glenn gestured to a small fleet of guards behind him. “Spread out,” he instructed. “Find her.” He turned back to you. “Mind getting Maggie for me?”

You pursed your lips. “She’s… busy,” you said.

He frowned. “Too busy for this?”

“It’s hard to explain,” you said. “Let’s just get this over with. Then we can talk.”

“No,” Carl immediately said. “No damn way.”

You, him, Lydia, and Glenn stood in the Barrington library, where one of the guards found them. Lydia stood close, her body turned from Glenn like she was hiding from the conflict.

“What are you talking about?” Glenn asked.

“They’re not nice people — they hurt her. And she doesn’t want to go back,” Carl argued.

You leaned your back against a beam separating two shelves. You mostly watched the conversation play out, wondering how it would go if you didn’t intervene. You wanted to see how far Carl would go to protect a girl he didn’t know.

Glenn ran a hand down his face. “Carl, I’ve got a small army of people at our gate,” he explained. “They have Kenny, who I thought was dead, and am very happy to know he’s still alive. And they’re offering a trade.”

“We can work something else out,” Carl suggested. “She shouldn’t have to go back. She doesn’t want to go back.”
“Carl… stop,” Lydia protested softly. “I’ll go.”

Carl looked as though he was a puppy that had just been kicked. “What?” he asked softly. “You don’t have to do this. We can protect you. I can protect you.”

Lydia leaned in and kissed him.

You supposed thousands of emotions should have been swarming through you, but really, you felt nothing. It was like you were watching a movie, trying to convince yourself that a set of strangers felt something for each other. Maybe they did; maybe they felt something for each other. You’d never really know, because Lydia followed Glenn out.

It took Carl a long time to say anything. You couldn’t tell if he was ashamed, guilty, neutral… you couldn’t tell what he was feeling. You couldn’t tell what you felt either, so you took it as an opportunity to say whatever you wanted.

"Who's Anna?" you asked.

Carl frowned, looking at you. "Anna? You mean that girl back in Alexandria?"

You nodded. "Did you and her ever... do anything?"

"You mean did I ever cheat on you?" Carl asked. His tone changed into one you couldn't decipher.

"It's a fair question," you shrugged, "considering what I just watched."

"Don't be mad at her," Carl said meekly. "She didn't know better."

"Why didn't she know better, Carl?" you prompted, voice low. "She's young, but she's not a child. And she's definitely not stupid."
"...I didn't tell her about us," he eventually said.

The words struck you right in the heart, so hard you had to sit down. You pulled out a desk chair and took a seat, managing to keep your face blank as your insides crumbled. "Why wouldn't you tell her about us?"

"It didn't really come up," Carl said, purposefully avoiding your gaze.

"That's... surprising," you told him. "The entire time you talked to her, I didn't come up at all? Not when you told her about your living arrangements, your friends... your family? I didn't come up once?"

"I mentioned you," Carl argued. "I just... didn't get into the specifics."

Something about that was almost worse. To a certain point, you could understand why Carl wouldn't tell her about the person he's dating — it's self-righteous to assume someone is attracted to you and can't have you. But to mention you in passing, like he didn't pull you off the edge, like you didn't stick by him after he got bit, were nothing more than his roommate... that broke your heart. It made you feel like you were nothing more than a object to him, a dried-up girl he'd eventually cast aside for younger, fresher one. Because why else wouldn't he tell her?

You paused, trying to take in the words and block out your hurt. "What about Lydia do you like so much, anyway?" you proceeded to ask. "What can you find in her that you can't find in me?"

"Ryan, I'm not trying to cheat on you," Carl told you. "I'm shocked you think I would actually do that."

"Is it shocking, though?" you asked, tears threatening to pool in your eyes. "When I heard about Anna, I let it go. We were long distance, and I couldn't expect you to not make friends and just wait for me every day. But then Lydia came along, and you said you saw something in her. I pushed away my instinct — I trusted you. But what I just saw..." you laughed bitterly, wiping at your eyes.

"I don't know why she kissed me," Carl stated, leaning against a shelf. "I don't know what I said that made her think that was okay."

"It's not what you said, Carl," you said, standing up and shaking your head. "It's about what you
didn't say."

You tried to walk out of the room. Carl caught up to you and grabbed your arm, gently so it didn't hurt but hard enough so it stopped you.

"Come on, Ry," he pleaded softly, "let's talk about this."

You turned back to him, tears flowing freely down your face. "We just did," you said quietly, "and I can't even look at you right now."

You escaped his grip, and this time, Carl didn't follow you. you walked down the hallway, into the lobby, and out the door. You saw the gates from where you were standing: they were closing. The trade was over. Lydia was gone.

You wished that made you feel better.
When you got back to the infirmary, you found Maggie sitting on the exam table in the main room. Glenn was standing beside her, and a few paces away from them stood Jesus.

“Can you make sure she’s okay, please?” Glenn asked. You could tell he was irritated, most likely a mix of at you and Gregory.

“I don’t think there’s much I can do anymore,” you admitted. “Whatever was in her body has clearly run its course.”

“I told you,” Maggie said, looking to her husband. “I’m okay.”

Glenn still seemed hesitant.

“Why don’t I take some vitals anyways?” You offered. “You know, check oxygen levels, blood pressure, pulse… the basics.”

Maggie sighed in defeat. “Fine,” she said, pointing to Glenn, “but you’re gonna go talk to everyone, explain what just happened.”

“Is this really worth worrying everyone?” Glenn asked.

“It’s worth telling people their families are safe. It’s worth telling the guards exactly what happened and what comes next.”

“Alright,” Glenn said, raising his hands, “I’ll go settle things.”

Maggie smiled smally. “Thank you.”

Glenn kissed the top of her head.
“I’ll join you,” Jesus said, wishing you and Maggie goodbye before following Glenn out of the Infirmary.

You reached over, grabbing the stand the blood pressure gauge was attached to. You rolled it over the table, rolling Maggie’s sleeve up before wrapping the cuff around her bicep.

“You’re really gonna play doctor with me?” She teased lightly.

You grabbed a stethoscope with a smile. You plugged your ears with it before pressing the hollow end to the crook of Maggie’s elbow. “Excuse you,” you said, pumping up the cuff, “I’m an unpaid professional. I take my job very seriously.”

She chuckled. “I can tell.” She paused, long enough for you to finish reading her pressure and seeing that it came back as normal. “Enid told me about how you saved Darius. She said you were incredible.”

“You should’ve seen her,” you replied, slinging the scope around your neck. “She handled the pressure like a pro.”

“Don’t do that,” Maggie said softly.

You frowned with a confused laugh. “Don’t do what?”

“Invalidate yourself,” she replied. “You saved a man’s life, Ryan — you deserve some credit for that. You deserve a lot of credit for that. No one else in this town could’ve done that.”

“I suppose not,” you ceded. You grabbed a portable pulse-ox monitor and clipped it to the end of Maggie’s finger.

“To be able to do that so young, let alone without going to school for it… it’s incredible. I think you were destined to be a healer.”

You laughed softly. “I was destined to be a lot of things.” You looked at the small screen on the device, observing her pulse as steady and oxygen levels healthy. You took it off and slipped it in
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

You sighed, pulling up a chair and taking a seat. “It feels like whenever my life is starting to be somewhat normal, something changes.”

Maggie seemed empathetic. “Is this about your dad?” she asked gently.

“Yeah,” you admitted, “he’s part of it. I haven’t talked to him in days. How awful is that?”

“You love your father,” Maggie said, “and he loves you. But that doesn’t fix everything. He’s going through a lot of adjustments right now, as are you. It’s okay to take some time to process change.”

“So much is changing,” you agreed quietly. You briefly pursed your lips. “I… I’ve been wondering if Carl loves me as much as he says he does.”

“What’s making you wonder?”

You felt embarrassed for even admitting it. “Negan said Carl had a ‘friend’ when I wasn’t in Alexandria, and before you say anything, I know he’s the least reliable source in the goddamn country. But then…”

“…Lydia came along,” Maggie finished.

“Yeah,” you said, “and she’s gone now, so I shouldn’t be worried, right? But I am, because it was never about Lydia alone — it’s about every girl like her.”

Maggie’s eyebrows furrowed in thought. “I don’t think I understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying that… maybe…” you let out a breath, “Carl’s been waiting for someone else to come along, someone who’s new and exciting, and… not me.”
“You think he’s bored of you?”

“I think he still loves me, and I still love him,” you clarified, “but… we were so young when we met, Maggie. We thought we were the last kids on earth. Then we met Enid, and Clem, and Lydia, and we learned that we weren’t. So what if, this whole time, we’ve only been together because of proximity?”

“I think proximity is part of it,” Maggie agreed, “but that’s how it was for me and Glenn, too. And look at us — years later, we’re still together.”

“You were adults when you met,” you pointed out. “Carl and I were kids: we didn’t know what it was like to have a serious relationship. Now that we’re older, I don’t know… maybe he realized he’s not into girls with a shit-ton of issues.”

“Hon, are you sure you’re not reading too much into it?” Maggie asked. “I mean, we all have a shit-ton of issues. And I’ve seen the way you talk, the way you look at each other. There’s no denying that something is there.”

“I love him,” you repeated, “and I really think he loves me. But maybe he loves other people, or what they can do for him.” You rubbed at your face, tired. “Maybe I’m reading too much into this, but he could find someone else to love, someone that isn’t me. I could just be the girl he knocked up.”

Maggie couldn’t hide the shock on her face. “Ryan, you’re not…”

“I took a test a few days ago,” you muttered, barely audible. “I don’t know if age affects the way it works, but… it was positive.”

Maggie moved from the table so she could pull up a chair beside you. She wrapped an arm around your shoulders, and you leaned against her. You didn’t cry, though. You felt like you should, but you didn’t feel sad, or angry, or confused. You felt nothing.

“If it was right, and you are…” Maggie hesitated, “pregnant, then we’ll help you, Ry. If that means we have to move another doctor here so you can get proper care, we can do that.”
You stood up, moving away from Maggie’s touch as though it had burned you. “That’s not happening. I’m not making people uproot their lives for me.”

“Young,” Maggie said, raising her hands like you pulled a gun to your head. “We won’t do anything you don’t want to.”

“I want everything to stay the same…” you said to no one in particular.

“It’s not going to, though,” Maggie stated. “You’re having a baby. That changes everything.”

“I know,” you said. You felt your stomach sink. “Fuck.”

You went to go see your father after that. There was no one at the infirmary that needed your help, and in case someone came in needing help, you took Maggie’s walkie-talkie and settled it in the waistband of your pants. You’d be back by the evening to spend the night in case Darius decided to code or bleed internally.

Whoever was guarding the prison door let you in without question. When you walked inside, you discovered why — Jesus and Glenn were interrogating Gregory. He probably knew you were one of the people to find Maggie, and thus assumed you’d be involved in the questioning process. Instead, though, you walked by the two men without a word.

You continued onward to the end of the cell block, only stopping when you reached the last cell on the left. You saw your father sitting on the edge of his bed, perking up the moment he saw you.

“Missy…” he whispered, standing up and approaching the bars that separated the two of you. “I’m so sorry.”

You took a seat on the cold concrete floor. You crossed your legs, thighs resting over your ankles. “What are the London Trials?” You took a pad of paper and pen out of your back pocket.

“I don’t know what got into me,” Ryan Sr muttered. He took a seat as well, right across from you. “It’s like the minute I started talking about everything, it all came rushing back. I’m sorry you had to watch it.”
“What are the London Trials?” you repeated, trying to sound indifferent. “You kept saying ‘London Trials are falling down’. That means something, doesn’t it?”

He stared at you. “Yes,” he answered reluctantly, “it does. It means something.”

You stared back. “You didn’t just leave that civilization in New York, did you?”

He lowered his head, breaking the gaze he shared with you. “No. I didn’t just leave — people came. Very bad people came.”

You tilted your head back to Jesus and Glenn to be sure they weren’t listening in. “Why didn’t you tell Glenn when we interviewed you?”

“Because this is more than just history, Artemis:” he said gravely, “this is more than just my past. This… this could change the entire world.”

Though the words initially shocked you, a sense of doubt soon settled in. Still, you told him to proceed. “Then tell me everything. What kind of bad people came, Dad?”

“They burned the damn city down,” your father murmured, eyes moving side to side like he was watching something on the floor. “They came in while we were sleeping, and they tried to burn us alive.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” you asked cautiously.

“I… I don’t remember. We never really figured out, but there were rumors, theories as to who did it. I kept hearing the same word over and over again, something… biblical…”

At first, it didn’t hit you. The declaration hung in the air like a broken chandelier hanging onto the ceiling by a thread. When it finally clicked in your head, it was like the chandelier came crashing down, the shards breaking and flying across the room. One punctured your throat, forcing all the air out of your lungs.
“G-Genesis,” you gasped out, “did they call themselves Genesis?”


“It doesn’t,” you replied, “not to you.” you contemplating what he said. Then, you asked, “what are the London Trials?”

Ryan Sr rubbed at his neck. “I don’t know much about the Trials,” he admitted. “All I know is that they’re named after Henry London.”

“Who’s Henry London?”

For awhile, he didn’t say anything. “The man who knows how to cure it,” your dad whispered. “Or, at least, that’s what they say.”

“Cure it?” you whispered back. “Like… cure…”

“…whatever turns us into walkers.”

You scoffed. “That’s bullshit,” you said. “No one can do that: it’s impossible.”

“That’s what I thought,” he agreed, “but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made.”

“The more you thought about what?” you frowned. “What part of the story are you leaving out?”

He stared at you again. “The best part about living with New Yorkers was the stories,” he said. “Everyone had a different perspective; everyone knew something the next man didn’t.” He hesitated. “About six months before the fire, we let in this small group — two men and a woman. They went through our trial period and proved they were sane and capable, so we let them live in our society.

“A young man named Tristan really took after the girl; I think her name was Rochelle. They spent a lot of time together, working with each other whenever they could. One day, Tristan told
Rochelle about his uncle, a man who supposedly worked for the Pentagon before everything went down.”

“He mentioned that… casually?” you questioned.

“I think he wanted to impress her,” he said with an indifferent shrug. “The news got out, though, and the council took him in for questioning. He seemed pretty spooked about the whole thing, so he didn’t say much. The next time he talked to Rochelle, though, he told her everything he knew.

“He said that his uncle, a man named Henry London, not only worked for the Pentagon, but was a doctor involved in a ‘top-secret’ project. When he was a child, his parents got a phone call from Henry; he told them he quit his job and that he was pursuing the project on his own.”

“What kind of project?”

The little light left in his eyes disappeared. “A war virus,” he said calmly, quietly.

“Is that what the London Trials are?” you whispered. “Henry London’s version of the government’s war virus?”

“That’s what The council decided,” your dad confirmed. “They thought Henry London was either the man who created the epidemic or… the man who can cure it.”

You took a moment to consider what he said. “They thought it was a possibility that Henry London either did what the government couldn’t, and consequently killed everyone or that he made — what, a counteracting virus?”

He nodded in agreement. “Those were the biggest theories. The council never got the chance to question Tristan further: the city was burned that night.”

“By Genesis,” you answered.

“By Rochelle and the people she came with,” he said. “It was late at night when they let the rest of their group in. I think that’s when they wrote those things on the walls.”
“What things?” You scribbled down key words as he spoke, including ‘Rochelle’, ‘Henry London’, ‘Pentagon = virus?’.

“‘The end is the beginning’, ‘the cure is within us’, ‘London Trials are falling down’... it was like their own propaganda, supporting whatever the fuck it is they believe.”

You frowned. “But why burn down the city? Why kill so many people for no reason? And what does any of this have to do with the London Trials?”

“I’ll never know for sure,” your dad reminded, “but… I think they saw us as a threat.”

“Why?” You asked. “The group sounded like Alexandria, which was a dream come true. Why would they see that as a threat?”

“We knew something they didn’t,” he replied. “Or maybe it’s not the knowing part that bothered them, but what we knew.”

You considered his words. “You think they were threatened by Henry London.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense; I can’t think of another reason they would wait so long. They seemed like such normal people, and I thought they trusted us. Hell, I thought I could trust them.”

“You think she was waiting for a reason,” you said, “and that knowing about the London Trials was a reason.” You contemplated for a moment, resting the pen and paper you were holding in your lap. “That makes… a lot of sense, actually.”

Ryan Sr looked at you, disbelief in his eyes. “Really?”

You nodded, the jumbled puzzle pieces in your mind starting to fit themselves together. “Genesis was founded on the belief that an ‘immune’ girl was the new prophet,” you explained. “If it really was them that burned your city to the ground, it adds up. The idea that people can be cured ruined their belief that Fareess — the bitten girl — is the only one that can survive the thing that kills everyone else.”
“...That does make sense,” your dad agreed.

A small smile of triumph crossed your features. For so long, Genesis and Fareess were a far-away idea to you, nothing more than a war story of Clementine’s. As tragic and infuriating it was that they may have burned a city to the ground, it made their real motives clear. The smile on your face fell when your body filled with dread.

If Genesis was capable of murdering an entire civilization because there were rumors floating around, only God himself knew what they would do if they found something to actually fight. Something to fight lived under the same roof as you, slept in the same bed. Because Fareess wasn’t the only immune person in existence; Carl was bit, and he lived, just like their prophet. And Carl wouldn’t just be something to fight — he’d be something to kill.

Your stomach turned, and for the first time in a long time, it wasn’t because of morning sickness.

“I gotta go,” you muttered, stumbling as you rose to your feet. Jesus called after you as you rushed out, but you could hardly hear him. All you could think about was Carl, Carl being burned alive, Carl’s remains being buried six-feet under.

The minute you got outside, you knelt in the grass and vomited the entire contents of your stomach.

Carl was back at the ‘apartment’ the two of you shared, just like you expected. It wasn’t late, per se, but the sky was dark and the community supper was coming to a close. You charged through the door and slammed it shut. When you entered the bedroom, you saw him standing by the edge of the bed. You rushed forward and pulled him into a hug without saying anything.

“Woah, are you okay?” he asked, but hugged you back.

You pulled away enough to see him, arms still around his back. “I have to talk to you,” you said. However, your eyes drifted to the bed, and your eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What are you packing for?”

His eyes refused to meet yours. Your heart sank, and you felt yourself take a step away from him.
“You’re leaving,” you said, “and you’re going after her. Aren’t you?”

“I have to,” Carl muttered.

“No, you don’t,” you replied, voice somehow steady.

“She deserves better, Ryan,” Carl said quietly, “and we can give her a better life.”

“You,” you corrected, “you can give her a better life.”

“Hilltop can give her a better life,” he said. “I swear on my life that this isn’t personal.”

“But it is,” you replied, taking another step back. You didn’t even want to be in the same room as him. “Whether it’s about her or what you can do for her, it is absolutely, 100-hundred per-fucking-cent personal.”

“We’re supposed to help people,” Carl replied. He finally looked up at you, and a part of you wished he hadn’t. His eye was shaded in the dim lighting, so much so that it seemed like he had two scars instead of one. He didn’t just look dead — he looked like…

“What is this about?” You whispered. “If you had an affair, if she didn’t just kiss you, just tell me.”

“I didn’t cheat on you!” Hepersisted.

“Then why are you doing this?!” you shouted. Your voice broke, prompting you to clear your throat. “Why go after a girl you barely know? It doesn’t make sense, Carl, and I know you know that.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” Carl said gently. He took a careful step forward. “I’d never lie to you. You know that.”

He set a hand on your arm. You swatted away his touch the second you felt it. “Then fucking talk
to me!” you replied, which sounded closer to a growl than a scream. “Explain yourself.”

Carl sighed. He stared at you for a moment, then took a seat on the bed. He laced his fingers together and rested his hands on the back of his neck. “It’s hard to explain,” he muttered. “It’s not Lydia that I’m trying to save… it’s… I don’t know, everyone like her? I guess?”

You stayed quiet.

“I’m putting myself in her shoes,” Carl continued, “imagining how I would feel if I was in her situation. You didn’t talk to her, Ryan — you didn’t see how much she loved this place. And she’s not like her people: she deserves this.”

“This isn’t just about her,” you said. “If you go after Lydia, you won’t just be rescuing a girl; you’ll be putting this entire community in danger. Everything we’ve done in the last 2 years, everything your father has done, will be at risk. Is it really worth it? For a single girl?”

“This isn’t just about Lydia,” Carl repeated your words. He stood up, briefly pacing around the room. As he walked around the room, you took a few steps back, tucking yourself into the corner near the nightstand.

“She reminds me a lot of myself,” Carl eventually spoke. By the stiffness in his shoulders, you thought he was about to say something much more shocking. “She dresses up, pretends to be something she’s not. But it’s what she has to do to survive, so she does it.”

You stared at him blankly. “Is this about the bite?” you paused. “Did you tell her about the bite?”

“No,” Carl murmured, “but I didn’t have to.”

“Carl, you’re not a walker,” you said softly.

“And she isn’t either,” he agreed. “She just feels like one.”

You took in a breath. “I know that what happened to you is confusing, and I know how angry it makes you,” you told him, “but we will find answers. Lydia isn’t the answer, Carl.”
“You don’t!” Carl shouted, which made you recoil in surprise. “You don’t know how I feel! You walk around acting like you do, but you don’t know! You have no idea how hard it is for me to keep this between us, let it fester. It was bad enough losing my eye, but this? This is a whole new level of freak.”

“Then talk to me!” you shouted back, sounding more desperate than angry. “Make me feel what you feel, and then maybe, I’ll get it.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said, re-approaching the bedside, “you won’t.” He continued packing things into a backpack, which made your heart rate pick up.

“And she does?” You asked brokenly.

Carl stopped for a brief moment, only to continue packing. After finishing, he slung the backpack around his shoulders and looped a thumb under the base of one strap. You were shaking, and tears were streaming down your face, but he still set a hand on your waist and kissed your cheek.

You watched Carl make his way across the room and to the door. You finally found the courage to speak up.

“You said you’d always choose me,” you spoke, voice coming out louder and steadier than you thought it would, “but if you walk out that door, you’ll be choosing her.”

Carl opened the door. “I’ll always choose you,” he returned. “This is just something I have to do.”

You watched him walk out the door.
Enid checked up on you at least twice a day after Carl left. The news was all over Hilltop by the following afternoon, and originally, she didn’t think it was true. Then, she remembered you wouldn’t miss work if you had died.

She found you lying in bed, your back towards the door. The windows were covered with blinds, only a mere strip of light visible in the otherwise dark room. Enid set her bag on the floor before crawling on the opposite side of the bed. She sat up with her back against the headboard, only setting a hand on your shoulder. The two of you stayed that way for a long time, saying nothing and doing nothing. When Enid finally pulled away, about to leave, you grabbed her hand and didn’t let go.

Enid cooked dinner that night and pretty much every other night the rest of that week. At the start, you simply sat in the kitchen where she would watch you. You ate the meal she prepared robotically, and she washed the dishes while you sat in the living room. Occasionally, tears would stream down your face, or you let out a silent sob, but you never spoke.

For the first few nights, Enid fell asleep next to you. More than once did you fall asleep with her hugging you from behind. Even when she wasn’t directly touching you, though, you felt comfort. It was nice to have weight on the other side of the bed, even if it wasn’t the weight you were used to.

One morning, you woke up and cooked breakfast for the two of you before Enid woke up. By the time she got out of bed, coffee was brewed and poured, and you had made eggs and toast. She came over again that night, but she didn’t sleep over. She trusted you to be on your own for the night.

Even after returning to work, Enid visited every morning and walked to the Infirmary with you. Sometimes you’d make breakfast, and sometimes she would. Other times, the two of you just drank coffee. Enid would either talk to fill the air, or she wouldn’t, but regardless, you enjoyed the company.

“‘We can’t keep sending men after him,’” One guard muttered under his breath. “‘We just can’t.’”

Another guard, Kurt, sat in an infirmary chair. His gear was shed and on the floor, revealing his bare chest. Enid was checking the response of his pupils, making sure the gash on his head was just a gash and not head trauma.
“I’m okay, Roy,” Kurt argued.

You picked up your tray of tools and instruments. You set the tray down on a rolling trolley before grabbing a stool and setting it on Kurt’s right side. You lowered the light to get a better look at the cut, which was superficial. It would still need stitches, though.

“No, you’re not,” Roy growled, “you’re clearly not fine.”

“It’s my fault the horse got spooked,” Kurt replied.

While you got to work cleaning out the cut, Enid carefully prodded Kurt’s bruised ribs to make sure none of them were broken.

“The horse never would’ve spooked if weren’t out there looking for that damn kid!”

“Roy, why don’t you go outside and cool off?” Glenn said, interjecting. Both him and Maggie were there, mostly to make sure Kurt was okay.

Kurt could tell he still wanted to argue, so he spoke up as well. “Have a beer on me, man.”

Roy’s shoulders sunk in defeat. Before walking out, though, he pointed to both Glenn and Maggie and said, “something needs to change around here.”

The leaders looked at each other after Roy walked out, sharing a look only two people in power could.

“He’s not wrong,” Kurt said quietly, meekly. “I hate to throw gasoline on a fire, but… we can’t keep going after him, Maggie. Someone’s gonna get hurt — really hurt.”

“We’re working on it: I promise,” Maggie told him. “We just need to figure something out.”
“There’s nothing to figure out,” you said. The room fell silent, shocked by your sudden break of silence. It took you a moment to realize this happened because it was the first time you spoke to any of them since Carl left. Everyone simply stared at you, too shocked to reply. Not only did you speaking catch them off guard, but your lack of empathy or interest was alarming.

You continued on with your work. “Carl’s not a kid: he knew exactly what he was doing when he left,” you added, “and he knows how to survive outside the walls. If he’s starting to put the community or the people in it at risk, then we need to stop looking for him.”

Again, everyone was stunned into silence. Eventually, Glenn cleared his throat.

“If we leave Carl out there and he finds the Whisperers, they might think he’s a spy and come after us,” he explained.

“And if you go after him, you’ll be in enemy territory,” you pointed out. You began to stitch Kurt’s forehead, the wound clear of blood and dirt. “There’s only so many times they’ll let us off the hook for that.”

You didn’t look up to see Glenn’s nor Maggie’s reaction. After a while, you heard them talk quietly before walking out, most likely to discuss the matter in private. You and Enid worked quietly and efficiently, ultimately deciding to let Kurt go home when the two of you were done.

“We should probably get some lunch,” Enid said, snapping off her gloves and tossing them in the garbage.

“I’m not hungry,” you muttered, getting up from your seat to put the instruments in disinfectant.

“You’re not just eating for yourself anymore,” Enid softly reminded.

“They said if I play nice for the rest of the week, they’ll let me out of this cell,” your dad said as you took a seat.

Ever since Jesus saw you talk to your father only to promptly rush out of the cellblock, you weren’t left alone with him. Each time you saw your dad, it was formal: the two of you were placed in the
interrogation room, his hands were cuffed to the table, and someone stood outside monitoring the
two of you.

“I heard,” you replied, a small smile crossing your features. It didn’t match the constant pain in
your eyes, but it eased some of the weight in your chest. “They’re clearing out a trailer for you
today.”

“I think I’ll get a job in construction,” your dad said. His fingers tapped against the table lightly. “I
was always handy with that sort of thing.”

“They’re short on men right now. I’m sure they could use the help.”

Ryan Sr nodded in agreement. The look on his face softened. “And how are you?”

“I’m… okay,” you said slowly. “I’m surviving.”

It took you a few days after Carl left for you to visit your father in his cell. By the time you finally
dragged yourself to the cell block, you broke down in tears the moment you looked at him. You
told your dad the entire tear-filled story: the happy years you and Carl spent together, how you
moved to Hilltop together, and now, how he left you alone with your thoughts and a…

“Baby’s doing okay too,” you whispered. “Well, I think it is.”

The tension left his shoulders. “That’s good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah,” you muttered, “it’s just perfect.”

“If I ever see that kid again…” your dad seethed.

“He wasn’t trying to hurt me,” you said quietly, “and he didn’t know: I didn’t tell him.”

“But he did hurt you, AJ,” Ryan Sr replied, “and no matter what, a real man wouldn’t up and leave
like that. You deserve someone who’ll stick around.”
“...maybe,” you eventually agreed.

“You do,” your father insisted.

He laid the back of one hand flat on the table. You set your fingers in his palm.

Everyone crowded around the wooden post, the one that hung a noose. You watched as Gregory was prodded up and onto the platform, then onto the stool sitting in the center. The men leading him strung the loop around Gregory’s neck. He screamed and pleaded, saying he was innocent and that someone needed to do something.

“This is not the start of something,” Glenn announced, “and this isn’t something we want to do. But here, we have a set of rules, and if you don’t follow them, there will be consequences.”

“We know that many of you trusted Gregory,” Maggie continued. “He used to be in power, and he used to keep you safe. When the Saviors came, he proved he wasn’t equiped to be a leader. Last week, he wanted to prove otherwise: he tried to kill me.”

“Acts of treason have no place in Hilltop or the surrounding communities,” Glenn said, “so such acts are punishable by death.”

Maggie and Glenn walked onto the platform. They stood side by side, hand in hand, looking up at Gregory.

“Do you have any last words?” Maggie asked loudly.

“Don’t do this!” Gregory screamed. He already sounded as though he was struggling, voice choked and face red. “Don’t let them do this!” He begged.

Simultaneously, Maggie and Glenn kicked the stool out from under Gregory’s feet.
“Everyone’s gonna be there.”

“Another reason I don’t want to go.”

Enid sighed, collapsing onto your bed in defeat. You were folding laundry when she invited herself in and began to tell you all about the fair at Alexandria and how you should go.

“It would be good for you to get out, Ry,” Enid said.

“This town needs a doctor,” you pointed out, folding up a pair of jeans.

“I can do that!” Enid argued. She flipped over onto her stomach to look at you. “You can go to the fair, get out of town for a bit, and I’ll hold down the fort.”

“I appreciate the offer,” you said earnestly. “I really do. But I came to Hilltop to escape some things and to be a doctor again. So that’s what I’m gonna do.”

“Bury emotional trauma and submerge yourself into work?”

“Exactly.”

You didn’t have to look at Enid to know she was rolling her eyes. You hung up a shirt before walking over and taking a seat next to her.

“I’m okay, Enid,” you assured. “I’ve finally started adjusting to the change; I’ve found a way to live with it. I want to accept it, not run away from it. And, if I’m completely honest, I could really do without seeing Mr. And Mrs. Grimes right now.”

“I understand,” Enid ceded. She re-positioned herself again, this time so she was sitting beside you. “I just… I worry about you,” she admitted quietly, looking down at her hands. “It was hard not seeing you for so long when you ran Richmond, but I knew you had Clem and Carl to take care of you. Now, it feels like I’m leaving you alone.”
“I don’t need anyone to take care of me,” you replied. “Besides, I’m not gonna be alone — I have my dad. But when you come back, I’ll let you mother me.”

“You’re not gonna ask how I found out?” Javier asked. You chuckled softly. “Thank you.”

You wished Maggie, Glenn, and Enid goodbye when they took off for the fair in Alexandria. They left with a massive crowd of Hilltop citizens, thus taking most of the horses and buggies with them. Jesus was put in charge while the two leaders were gone. The three of them shared a few final words before Glenn and Maggie took off.

“I would congratulate you,” Javier said as the two of you watched Jesus and the others, “but I don’t think that’s in order.”

“I disagree,” you said politely.

He looked at you. “Really?”

You nodded. “It’s taken me some time to realize it, but… this is a good thing.”

“Well, in that case… congratulations.”

You chuckled softly. “Thank you.”

A brief but tolerable silence fell between the two of you.

“You’re not gonna ask how I found out?” Javier asked.
“I told Maggie, Maggie told Jesus, and Jesus told you,” you concluded.

Javier quickly recovered the involuntary look of surprise on his face. “Who said Jesus told me?”

“Me,” you said easily. “You haven’t left the man’s side since we got here.”

Javier’s cheeks flushed slightly. He didn’t say anything after that.

You looked in the body mirror that hung on the closet door. You stared at yourself for a long time, standing with your shoulders straight and posture stiff, like a soldier at attention. Your shirt was loose enough where it hid any of the details of your skin. The moment you took it off, though, that changed.

On your lower stomach, right before where the waistline of your pants sat, there was a bump. Well, you wouldn’t describe it as a ‘bump’: it was more of a curve. Pretty soon, you’d have to either find baggier shirts or bite the bullet and let the community find out. You were too keen on the second choice, but you supposed they’d find out sooner or later.

Both Maggie and Enid suggested you see Dr. Carson back in Richmond, which you objected to both times they mentioned it. You knew seeing a doctor and getting an ultrasound was a good idea — the situation it put you in, on the other hand, wasn’t so good. In order to get to Richmond, you’d have to stop at Alexandria, and as far as you knew, Rick had no idea Carl was ‘missing’. You didn’t want to be there the moment in inevitably found out.

You raised a hand, then lowered it. You continued to stare at yourself, this time turning to the side so you could properly see the curve your stomach was beginning to create. You lifted your hand again, this time setting it on the slightly protruded surface.

“You better be okay,” you said, running your fingers along your own flesh. You added quietly, “please, be okay.”

The infirmary was slow when Enid was gone. After all, most of Hilltop had gone with her; the fair had been highly anticipated since Rick first introduced the idea. Some of the only people left in the city were guards, their families that didn’t want to leave them, and of course, you and your father.
The worst you saw was a broken ankle from a kid trying to climb the fence.

You spent a few nights in your dad’s trailer after helping him move in. You wanted to spend every night under the same roof as him — if only to get away from the apartment, which now felt haunted — but he always insisted on you taking the bed while he slept on the couch. You understood why, but it made you feel guilty, so you limited your overnight visits to once a week.

You were sitting in the infirmary filling out various reports when Marco barged in. He was sweating, his face pale. He looked like he did the same day he said he heard the dead speak.

“Marco? What’s going on?” you asked immediately, setting down your pen.

“They need you at the Junction.” The Junction being the ‘crossroads’ of all the communities.

“Why?”

“Something happened.”

You rode to the Junction on the back of a horse, completely alone. Marco offered to escort you, and your father insisted on coming, both of which you shut down the idea of. Of course, your father put up more of a fight, but you managed to convince him you’d be okay, as it was only a few hours away. Not to mention, ever since Marco told you that you were needed, you had a bad feeling in your stomach. It felt like your muscles were constantly contracting and releasing, sending anxious pains through your trunk. This told you exactly one thing: whatever was about to happen wasn’t going to be good.

You arrived at the Junction before sunset; the horizon was streaked with a variety of red, orange, and purple hues. A guard in what you recognized as Alexandrian uniform helped you dismount and took care of the horse you rode in on. You thanked him, throwing the light bag you packed over your shoulder.

“Ryan,” you heard in Enid speak in relief. She was making her way across the grass, Maggie following behind her. She greeted you with a hug.

“What’s happening?” You asked as you pulled away.
Maggie and Enid shared a look, which ended with Enid shifting her gaze to the ground.

“See for yourself,” Maggie said, stepping out of the way.

You looked past her, your eyes landing on a fence. It appeared ordinary at first, following along the contours of the hill it stood on. Your gaze followed on the posts, and you soon realized something was horribly wrong. Families were crying beside them, comforting each other or simply collapsing to the ground as they sobbed. You took a closer look, and the painful anxiety in your stomach returned.

Heads. There were heads on the posts. Some were already taken down, some were covered, but some were still there.

“Oh my god,” you whispered. “Fucking whisperers.”

“That’s not the end of it,” Maggie muttered.

“There’s more?!” You asked in disbelief.

Enid finally looked up, and the expression on her face was not an optimistic one. “Carl’s back.”

Your eyes widened. You whipped your head around, searching frantically for him. You weren’t sure why — you didn’t know if you wanted to see him, or avoid him; slap him, or hug him. You still had no clue how to feel about him, but regardless, you wanted to see him.

Sure enough, after enough searching, you laid eyes on Carl. He stood quite far away from you, far enough that you’d have to shout for him to hear you. He wore his hat, and just like how he left, nothing was covering his eye. You knew by the surprise on his face when he also saw you. You also knew because he started walking towards you.

The pain in your stomach returned. This time, it was enough for you to collapse to the ground.

“Ry?!” Enid asked, fear making her voice shake.
The two women rushed to your side, lifting you by the arms. You continued to wince, grabbing at your stomach like it somehow fix the pain. They began to lead you to what you vaguely remembered as the Junction’s infirmary, which was in the opposite direction of Carl.

‘Infirmary’ seemed like too important of a word: the area of healing was nothing more than a tent with a few foldable beds and crates holding supplies inside. Still, Maggie and Enid led you inside, closing the flaps behind. They set you down on one of the beds, and you immediately laid back, still clutching your middle.

“What’s going on?” Enid asked. She almost sounded like she was pleading. “Ryan, how do I fix this!?”

“Pray it’s not ectopic?” you offered weakly. The idea made your heart beat faster, but the logical, doctoral side of your brain also kicked in. “No, it’s not ectopic,” you assured. “I’d be in a lot more pain.” The more you calmed down, the less it hurt. “I think it was a panic attack.”

“Are you sure?” Maggie asked reluctantly.

“I’ve been feeling the pain all morning,” you said, slowly sitting up. “It’s starting to go away.”

“That’s one hell of an anxiety attack,” Enid said with a nervous chuckle.

You smiled halfheartedly. As you began to stand, Maggie offered you an arm to hold, which you accepted. Your legs shook a little as you put more weight on them, but not so badly you’d fall over. You eventually let go of Maggie, trusting your body to carry you.

You felt something gush between your legs.

All you could do was look down. You knew what it was without seeing its deep red color or smelling its metallic aroma. You could feel it running down your thighs, staining your pants, eventually dripping on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Enid asked. Her eyes trailed down your body, eyes growing wider as she looked. “Ryan, you’re bleeding,” she mustered.
“I’m miscarriying,” your corrected, voice emotionless.

There was rustling at the door. The three of you looked up.

Carl was standing there.
“It takes me away, it takes me away, it takes me away…” you sang to yourself. Water rushed over you, saturating your hair when you tilted your head back. You weren’t ‘performing’, but you sang loud enough for your voice to bounce off of the walls in the single shower stall.

“Would it be much better if I knew nothin’ about you?” you continued as you washed your hair. You paused to rinse out the shampoo, water flooding down your face.

“What are you so happy about?” Carl asked from outside the stall. You grinned, tilting your head to the sound of his voice. You could see through the curtain that he was getting undressed. You waited until he joined you to respond.

You traced your hands over his chest and ran your fingers through his hair, dampening it in the process. He rested his hands on your waist, pulling your body closer to his. “I don’t know,” you admitted, “I just… feel good. Being here, alone with you… it feels good.”

He smiled, tilting his head down to kiss you. “I know how to make you feel even better.”

You tilted your head back as you laughed, lightly hitting his chest. “Must you cheapen the moment?”

“Is that a no?”

“…no.”

Mostly, you went on pretending like nothing happened. You spoke to Maggie and Rick about how the communities would take action, but you refused to speak to either of them alone. Really, you didn’t speak to anyone without at least one other person present, because by the end of the day, everyone you cared about knew. They cared about you too, so they wanted to talk about it. Talking about it was the last thing you wanted to do, though.

Three days passed, and you still didn’t properly speak to Carl. After spending three whole days in the Junction, Rick finally decided everyone should come to Alexandria so things could be sorted
properly. You were unpacking your things in the bedroom of an empty house when he finally managed to corner you.

“Are you okay?” was the first thing he asked.

“My dad and I talked a lot while you were gone,” you replied, which wasn’t exactly an answer, but it’s what you wanted to say, so you said it. “We caught up, mostly; shared the traumas we went through when we didn’t see each other. He’s starting to feel like my dad again.”

“That’s… good,” Carl said, clearing his throat and shoving his hands in his pockets. “That’s really good. I’m happy for you.”

“He told me about this group he was in, up in New York,” you continued without acknowledging him. “He originally told Glenn he left the group because he didn’t like the way things were being run. That’s not what happened, though: people, bad people, came in one night and burned the whole place to the ground. It wasn’t out of spite, though, it was out of fear.”

He frowned. “What were they afraid of?”

You threw a t-shirt onto the bed. “They were afraid because someone in the community was related to a man who might know of a cure. Who would be afraid of that? Who does that sound like to you?”

He ducked his head in shame. “Genesis.”

“Exactly.” You took a step forward, not because you wanted to face him, but because you needed to know that he heard you. “I was afraid of what would happen if people found out you got bit and lived: I can admit that. But I wasn’t cowering in fear. I wasn’t sitting on my ass, twiddling my thumbs, hoping things would magically change. I found you a fucking lead, and you know what you did?” you poked him in the chest. “You ran off with some walker bitch because you felt sorry for yourself.”

He didn’t say anything, which you were actually grateful for, because it meant he was smart enough to know nothing he could say would fix anything. You took in a deep breath, attempting to keep your emotions at bay.
“What happened, happened,” you said quietly, “but you don’t get to come back and act like nothing’s changed. You don’t get to grow from this.” You laughed bitterly, glancing at the ground before looking back up. “Wasn’t it you who said you couldn’t love someone who doesn’t trust you?”

He nodded solemnly.

“That’s what I thought,” you agreed. “Come talk to me when you grow up,” you said, brushing past him. “Until then, have fun fucking your zombie girlfriend; I don’t give a shit.”

Despite it being your room, you walked out.

You returned hours later, long past dinner and even sunset. Mostly, you took it upon yourself to assure angry, grieving family members that something would be done about the whisperer attack. Normally, it would be the last thing you’d want to do, but it felt good to feel someone else’s emotions for a change. You were getting sick of feeling your own recycled, rotten ones.

You tossed a pile of written complaints and requests on the kitchen counter. Knowing you’d still be up for awhile, you began to brew a fresh pot of coffee, and took a quick shower in the meantime. When you came back to the full pot, you poured yourself a cup and walked into the living room with your papers. You finally noticed Carl asleep on the couch.

You wanted to be angry. You wanted to push him off the couch and tell him to go find somewhere else to sleep, that your place wasn’t a hotel service. But you were tired. Tired of being angry, tired of telling yourself what you were allowed to feel and when you were allowed to feel it.

So, you smiled. It was subtle, so small that Carl would be the only person able to catch it. Still, it was real, not forced or ungentle. You didn’t wake him up. You didn’t kick him out. You didn’t scream, or cry, or shout.

You put a blanket over him before going to work in the bedroom.

“Carl and I have been catching up.”
“Really?” You asked, not bothering to glance up from your work. “Good for you.”

“He has a lot to say,” Clem continued, “if you ever choose to listen to him.”

“Don’t,” you said, looking up from your seat. “Don’t spin this around on me.”

You were sitting at the table replacing the altar at the front of the church. It was only you and Clem inside the room, which would soon be filled with members of various communities. People were starting to get antsy, and Rick decided it was time to give them the few answers he, Maggie, and Glenn had.

“I’m not trying to,” Clem assured softly, taking a seat beside you. “I’m on your side. Always. And I think it would be good for you to sit down and talk to him.”

“I have nothing to say to him,” you muttered, scribbling a few things down.

“You have plenty to say,” she disagreed. “You just don’t want to say it.”

“What good will it do?” You asked.

“Make you feel better?”

“Nothing can make me feel better.”

“Not if you don’t try.”

You set down your pen with a sigh, turning towards your friend. “I don’t know how to talk to him anymore,” you admitted. “I don’t even know how to look at him without feeling angry, or guilty, or resentful. This… loss is something I’ve never dealt with before, so you know what I do? I blame it on him. Which is selfish, and stupid, and unfair. But I do it. I tell myself it’s his fault, that I lost it because he isn’t father material, or because he left, or whatever stupid excuse I can come up with. Because I don’t know how to deal with the fact that the one thing that’s been carrying me this entire time — my body — betrayed me.”
“He blames himself too,” Clem said quietly. “He told me exactly what you did: that maybe if he had stayed, or treated you better, or never took Lydia under his wing, this never would have happened. But you know what, Ry? It’s not his fault. And it’s not your fault either. No matter what, things were always going to end up this way. But you can make choices now. You get to choose what happens from here on in.”

Clem stood up. She set a hand on your shoulder, then leaned in to kiss your temple. “I hope you make the right choices.”

“We’re going to organize a patrol along the border,” Rick announced. “We’re working on a plan to lead a small expedition across the border, a group that can be unseen and gather intel. Once we have that information, we’ll decide how to act further.”

“That’s fucking it?!” a man from the crowd shouted.

“Marching a group into unknown territory is a suicide mission,” Michonne defended.

“Not if we strike first!” Someone else interjected. “Where do Maggie and Glenn stand in all of this?”

“We agree with Rick’s plan,” Glenn spoke up. “It makes the most sense.”

Everyone began to murmur to each other.

“Where’s Lydia?” Rosita asked. Her arms were crossed and she wore a grave expression. You remembered hearing her and Gabriel were a thing, and you also remembered hearing that Gabriel’s head was on one of the pikes. “What have you done with Alpha’s daughter?”

“She’s gone,” Rick informed. “I caught wind of some… plans for her and got her out before anyone could do anything stupid.”

You couldn’t help but look over at Carl when you heard this.
“You callin’ us stupid?!” A man roared.

“I lost my wife to these maniacs, and you sent away our only advantage?” Someone else chimed in.

“Okay, everyone needs to calm down,” Maggie spoke up.

“After what happened, we’re supposed to be pissed,” another person said. “We’re all supposed to be pissed. So why are you all so fucking calm?”

“I can assure you, we’re doing everything we can to —”

Rick cut himself off when he ducked from a flying glass. It hit the wall behind him, shattering into smithereens.

“You’re not doing a fucking thing!” The man continued to shout.

“Okay, we’re done here,” Jesus announced. “Everyone needs to disperse in an orderly fashion.”

“You heard him:” Maggie also spoke up, “this meeting is over.”

“No! It’s not over until we have a plan!”

The same man who threw the glass was getting ready to throw something else. Jesus interjected, jumping down and grabbing him by the shirt. The man proceeded to punch Jesus, which was when all hell broke loose.

It seemed like everyone began to pick a fight with whoever was closest. You saw Aaron try to rationalize with someone, which only lead to him getting attacked. Rosita intervened to pull the man off of Aaron. A man made a lunge for Rick, which both Michonne and Glenn diverted. A random fist hit Javier, which made Jesus almost completely lose it.
For a long time, all you could really do was look on in horror. When you snapped to your senses, though, you did the only thing you knew would work: you took the pistol out of your waistband, aimed it towards the ceiling, and shot a few rounds.

“Next person to punch, I’m putting them in the fucking ground,” you said, turning your aim to the crowd. “Understood?”

No one dared to even move. You let your arm fall back to your side, clicking on the pistol’s safety.

“We’ve all lost something in these last few days,” you said, “some of us more than others. And I promise, to those of you that lost your family, you will receive justice. But it will take some time.”

Still, everyone remained silent. You tucked your gun away, no longer seeing the need for it. “You’re scared, you’re angry, so you’re lashing out. And maybe you’ve all forgotten what it’s like to be at war, but I haven’t. We will see justice, which means we’ll see war, and if we’re going to war, we need to work together. We can’t start killing each other while a common enemy watches from the sidelines.” You clenched your jaw and briefly closed your eyes. “Take your anger, hold it close, and use it for something worthwhile.”

You were outside, sitting on the porch steps. It was probably close to or below freezing level, but you wore a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. The only thing keeping you warm was the cigarette hanging off your lower lip.

“Those things will kill you, you know,” someone from behind you mentioned. You turned around to see Maggie standing behind you, holding a folded blanket.

“I was hoping the hypothermia would get to me first,” you returned.

“I don’t think it’s cold enough for that yet,” she replied. You felt soft fabric wrap around you before Maggie took a seat next to you — the blanket. “The worst you’ll get is pneumonia.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, right?” You offered dryly.

She chuckled sadly. “Somethin’ like that.” Maggie paused. “I wish I knew what to tell you, Ryan.”
“You don’t have to tell me anything. In fact, I’m getting a little tired of people telling me things,” you said, then exhaled smoke through your nose. “And before you say anything, I know that you guys have good intentions. I just… I don’t want to talk about it right now, to anyone.”

“I’ll tell them to back off,” Maggie said softly. “You can be harsh sometimes, but I know you’re too nice to tell anyone yourself.”

“Thank you,” you whispered.

“Of course. We love you, Ry, which is the only reason we keep bugging you,” Maggie said. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her jacket. “I think we’re amazed, mostly. We don’t know how else to offer help because… it seems like you’re doing okay. Not great, not good… but okay, like you’re managing. Which is so admirable that I don’t really know how to put it into words.”

“Since when is feeling nothing admirable?” you asked. There was a harshness to your voice, but mostly, you were curious. “I’m distracting myself in any way I can: I work my ass off, I stay pissed at Carl, I ignore every kind thing anyone says to me. I feel… so much, all at once, that instead of letting it happen, I push it away. I’m curt with my friends, I try to smoke or drink my problems out of existence, and I pretend the one person on earth who knows how I’m feeling doesn’t exist. Strong people don’t do that. Not even people who manage do that.”

Maggie looked at you for a moment, studying your features. “I don’t know anything about what you’re going through,” she finally said, “which is why I don’t know what to tell you. The idea of losing Hershel… it’s unfathomable. If I was in your shoes, I’d fall apart, and I don’t think I’d be able to put myself back together. So to see you working so hard for people you don’t know, fighting a battle that isn’t your own…. It’s like you’re invincible. And I don’t know what to say to that.”

You had to break away from her gaze when a sudden wave of guilt washed over you. You flicked some ash off the end of your cigarette, staring at the ground. “What would you say if I told you that most of the time, I wish I was dead?”

“I’d say that’s pretty normal, at least for right now,” Maggie said sadly.

You wiped a few stray tears with the blanket now wrapped around you. You felt a familiar weight settle around your shoulder — Maggie’s arm. You only broke away from her touch when you heard someone shout for help.
Without hesitation, the two of you bolted off of the stairs and in the direction the sound came from. You had a bit of a headstart on Maggie.

“Was that Michonne?!” she asked.

“I think so,” you mumbled, fully knowing she couldn’t hear you.

You and Maggie found her in the garden. She was crouched over someone, and without getting a good look, you knew it was Rick.

“I don’t know what happened,” Michonne said helplessly. “I just woke up and he wasn’t next to me. I went looking for him and found him like this.”

While Maggie immediately went to comforting her friend, you tried to assess the situation with logic. Michonne’s back was turned to a man sitting in a massive puddle of blood. One side of his neck was almost entirely ripped out. You pressed your fingers to the good side of his neck, and unsurprisingly, found no pulse.

You turned back to Rick. He was unconscious, but you could see his chest slowly rising and falling. His face and chest were smeared with blood, and when you opened his mouth, it too was coated. You found a waterspout a few yards away, filled the watering can next to it, and returned. You tore off some of the dead man’s shirt, drenched it in water, and began carefully wiping Rick’s face.

A few cuts and bruises were hidden under all the blood, but it seemed like the worst injury he sustained was a broken nose. You rung out the rag with a sigh.

“We need to get him inside,” you said. “It’s freezing out here.”

“How are we supposed to carry him?” Maggie asked.

After a moment of consideration, you took the blanket off your shoulders and spread it on the ground. You looped your arms under Rick’s. “Maggie, get on his other side,” you instructed. She of course listened, and when she put one arm under his middle and the other under his leg,
Michonne did the same. On your count of three, you all lifted Rick up and set him down the blanket.

“One of you grab the corners by his feet,” you said. “I need one of you up here.”

Maggie stayed by Rick’s feet while Michonne moved closer to you. You gave her one corner of the blanket. With careful steps, the three of you were able to carry Rick back to the house him and Michonne shared. Ideally, you would have taken him to the infirmary, but it was halfway across the city, and frankly, you didn’t think any injuries he had were life-threatening. It wasn’t worth the effort.

Once inside the house, you decided on clearing the living room floor and setting Rick down. You grabbed a few throw pillows off of the couch and propped them under his head. Michonne found the first aid kit for you while Maggie collected more water and towels.

You cut the soaking shirt off of Rick, washing away the blood that covered him. Just as you expected, there wasn’t a source to the blood, meaning it wasn’t his.

“He ripped that man’s throat out,” you mumbled in realization.

For hours, you all sat in the living room in silence. Michonne sat at Rick’s side, refusing to move. You took a seat at the end of the couch; you were tired, but there was no way you would fall asleep. Maggie, on the other hand, slept peacefully.

By the time 5:30 AM rolled around, you exited the house and found the one you knew Javier and Jesus — among other people — were staying in. You vaguely remembered him mentioning that he took one of the bedrooms upstairs, and by process of elimination, you managed to find it.

“Javier,” you spoke, relieved to see his face in the dim light. “I need your help. Do you know where Jesus is? I could use him too.”

“What do you need?” someone asked, someone that wasn’t Javier. You opened the door further to see Jesus on the bed next to him.
Both men snapped awake in realization. Jesus got out of bed and slid into a shirt while Javier refused to meet eyes with you.

“I need your help,” you repeated simply, looking between them. “Both of you.”

With Jesus and Javier’s help, you, Michonne, and Maggie were able to get Rick upstairs and into a proper bed. He was still passed out, but there didn’t seem to be any signs of trauma. You guessed he was just exasperated and his body was taking all the rest it could get.

Maggie finally managed to convince Michonne to get some sleep. You were sure Carl being awake to take her place was the only reason she felt comfortable with leaving Rick’s side. Regardless, she turned in, and Maggie did too. You were left sitting alone in the kitchen.

You weren’t sure why you stayed. Though you were slightly anxious something might happen to Rick, rationally, you knew everything was okay. Still, you sat at the island, sipping some coffee and staring out the window.

You heard footsteps coming down the stairs. You continued to look out the window, even when Carl came into your line of vision.

“We have to do something,” Carl said, “or someone’s going to end up dead.”

You set down your mug and mustered the courage to look at him. “We will,” you promised. “We’ll do something. We just have to figure out what.”

Carl nodded. He set a hand on the counter, but didn’t sit down. You could tell there was something more he wanted to say.

“When are we gonna talk about it, Ryan?” he asked quietly. “Actually talk about it?”

“Never?” you asked with a sort of laugh. You glanced down. “I don’t ever want to talk about it.”
“You’ll have to, eventually.”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

You snorted. “Says you? You really think you have that authority over me, especially now?”

“I know what I did,” he said calmly. “I regret it every single second. But you don’t just get to shut me out for the rest your life.”

“Why can’t I?” you challenged. “You destroyed me, Carl, but you know what? I fixed myself, and I won’t let you or anyone else break me again. You really think you can just come back, act like a man, and everything’s fixed? Nothing will ever be the same again, and you’re partly to blame. So I’m pretty sure I get to do whatever the hell I want.”

For a moment, you thought Carl was going to back down. His jaw was clenched, but he turned away from you and refused to make eye contact. Then, he let out a breath and continued to speak.

“No,” he said, “you don’t get to do whatever you want. Because like it or not, we’re stuck with each other from now on. I could run off with Lydia again, and you could find someone else, but it wouldn’t matter. When all is said and done, that baby was mine just as much as it was yours.” He closed his eye. “And I’m trying to live the fact that it will never be ours.”

“How?” you asked, voice cracking. The sudden change of sound prompted him to look up. “How do you live with it? Because I’ve been trying so hard, and I just don’t know how to do it. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do it.”

Tears flowed down your face freely. You got up, stepping off your chair and brushing by Carl to bolt up the stairs. You didn’t want him to see you like this — not now, not ever.

You sat on the shower floor. Your back faced the flowing water; the heat felt like small pin pricks in your flesh. Your hair hung in wet strands, feeling cold against your face. Your legs were pulled up to your chest, your chin resting against your knees.
“It takes me away,” you sang softly. The water and your meek tone drowned out most of the sound, making your already broken voice sound even more disposable. “It takes me away,” you continued, now resting your cheek on your kneecap. “It takes me away…” You closed your eyes.

“Would it be much better if I knew nothing about you?”

You looked up in shock. Somehow, Carl had not only entered the bathroom without you noticing, but he also pulled back some of the curtain.

You closed your eyes again. A faint, almost invisible smile tugged at your lips. “Would it be much better if I knew nothing about you?” You returned.

You felt Carl step into the tub. He took a seat behind you, resting the insides of his legs against the outsides of yours. He looped one arm around your shoulders, lightly pinning your back to his front. His other arm rested across your stomach.

“It takes me away, it takes me away, it takes me away…” he continued to sing. His voice was gentle, but his mouth was next to your ear, so you could clearing he what he was saying. “It takes me away, it takes me away, it takes away…”

You reached up, setting your hands on his arm and gripping it. He never tried to move away. Even when you began to cry, he held you.

He never let go.

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