Through The Lens of Madness

by WhisperingWillows

Summary

Blake Langermann has been rescued from Murkoff's Elrich Facility, but when he comes to in Miles and Waylon's dirty motel room, his baby isn't there. Overwhelming evidence suggests that the girl was never real, but he just knows she has to be out there, waiting for her father to come save her.

Meanwhile, The Park family and Miles are planning ways to take Murkoff down, but working to destroy an endlessly powerful corporation with seemingly limitless resources and a willingness to work outside law and morality is proving to be much more difficult than any of them could've imagined.
Prologue

Miles Upshur, the man forever on the border of life and death, sat alone on a stained chair in the seedy motel he was temporarily calling home. It was quiet as a graveyard, the only sound being the soft snoring of one of his roommates in the room nearby. In front of him was their new houseguest. A man, whose dark hair clung to his face in greasy strands, whose clothes were torn and filthy, whose mangled hands had only just begun to heal and scar.

Blake Langermann, a witness crucial to his and Waylon’s fight against Murkoff. He was a survivor like them, but he didn’t get out with the kind of luck the other two had at Mount Massive. Blake had been in their little home for days now, but he hadn’t woken up. It was arguable whether or not he was even sleeping, or just stuck in his own mind. Maybe forever.

The room only had one bed being shared by Waylon and Lisa. Miles had taken up the couch, but now it was Blake's. It didn’t bother him, of course. Sleep wasn’t the necessity it used to be since Miles’s death. He just watched, waited, listening to music through a cheap pair of headphones to block out the ever-present static in his brain.

Just as his attention began to waiver, a choked wheeze broke through the 80s-pop tune. Blake was suddenly sitting up, the look in his eyes making him seem more like a frightened, feral animal than anything else.

“Where am I?”

Miles discarded the headphones, peering at him with blacked out eyes that probably weren’t helping to calm the guest down. “So the sleeping prince finally wakes up. I can tell you weren’t aiming for beauty rest.”

“I—”

“You’re safe. Among friends, I promise. Gave us a bit of a scare, though. You didn’t look like you were gonna wake up anytime soon.” He got up, nabbing his sunglasses off the end-table by the couch. “Gonna have to ask you to be a bit quiet. Waylon's a bit of an insomniac, and I don't want to make Lisa angry again.” Not a lot scared him anymore, but the wrath of Lisa Park was absolutely terrifying.

Blake took in his surroundings, squinting at the faded decor in the dark. His breath turned shaky, and he looked over at Miles with glassy eyes. “Where’s my baby? I...I gotta know she’s safe, too. Where is she?”

“What?”

“My baby. I remember her. We were...there was a storm, and she had to have the baby in some dirty building. Then there was a big flash…” His face contorted in pain as a sudden headache overcame the poor man. “She’s all I have now, where is she?”

Miles blinked. “There wasn’t a baby with you. I pulled you out of a facility two days ago, and it was just you in a chair.”

“What’s she’s still out there! I gotta go find her!” He shot up off the couch, and not two seconds later, his eyes rolled back into his head and he fainted. The swarm fortunately caught him before he could smash his head on the corner of the coffee table.
“Shit…” Miles grumbled under his breath as he rolled the man back onto the couch. “You weigh a lot more than you look, huh?”
Blake never thought something as simple as a shower would feel like a luxury to him. How long had it been? Weeks at this point, definitely, but it felt more like years. He spent an hour in the stream, staring at the wall and torn between trying to remember what happened and repressing all thoughts on the matter.

The water sprayed clear, but dripped off Blake all shades of brown, gray, and black as all the built up dirt and grime was washed clean away, the nearly scalding water leaving behind a red tint to his skin. He made a brief attempt to wash his hair, but the mats in his hair were too much of an obstacle. They would need to be cut away.

He stayed in the bathroom long after he finished cleaning up and dried off. He didn’t have clothes anymore. Lisa had offered to wash what he had, but Waylon said it would’ve just been better to buy him a new outfit altogether, so he waited, left to reflect.

Away from Temple Gate, sense and reason had at least partially come back to his mind. By no means, however, would he ever be a perfectly sane man again. He could still hear the voices of the Scalled, the Heretics, and Knoth’s followers as they all tried to hunt him down. He could still feel the crunch of children’s bones under his feet as he was forced to step over them, not to mention all the pain running around that forsaken place put him through. And Lynn...It was all coming too fast to push back into the recesses of his mind.

He curled up on the mildewy bathroom rug and sobbed quietly into his mangled hands, desperate for any sort distraction. One thankfully came as Lisa knocked on the door. “We didn’t really know your tastes...so we just got something practical.” She cracked open the door, one hand over her eyes and the other offering a folded bundle of clothes, which Blake grabbed quickly.

Khakis, a gray t-shirt, a thin, green button up, and underwear.

“So...go ahead and get dressed. We stopped by the convenience store a block down and grabbed a few things. I figured you would like a nice breakfast instead of fast food.” He listened as she walked back down the hallway.

Even armed with new clothes and a long shower, Blake still didn’t feel clean. He wondered if he would ever feel that way ever again. He trudged out of the bathroom slowly, his legs still weak from recent disuse, and was met with the smell of food. It certainly hadn’t been weeks since his last meal, but it definitely wasn’t homemade.

Waylon was at the stove, humming something he’d heard on the radio as he cooked. Miles worked on cleaning whatever dish he was handed, and Lisa set the table. It was almost overwhelmingly normal, as though they were a family just going about an average day. All that seemed off were the tightly closed blinds and curtains over every window.

Blake sat at the table as food was served up, but Miles didn’t join the rest of them, nor was a place set for him. He just finished up with the dishes, then splayed himself out over the couch to examine a map.

He felt so wrong, so out of place sitting with such a seemingly complete family. These weren’t
friends. They were people he had only met hours ago. They referred to him as a guest, but more than anything, he felt like someone intruding on their lives. He had an endless amount of questions to ask, but for now, he just thought it would be best to eat. Waylon made omelettes, with toast and orange juice on the side. The lingering smell of old fast food suggested that this may’ve been the first proper meal they’ve had in awhile, too.

“You should’ve gotten to meet my boys,” Waylon quipped. “They would’ve turned this place into something Kevin McCallister would be proud of.”

“You...have kids?” He didn’t want to talk about children right now, but he couldn’t muster up the mental capacity to tell him that. He just wasn’t all there yet.

“Matthew is my younger son, and he’s eight. Jake is ten.” Waylon had a more dismal atmosphere around him than the rest of his family. He was smiling, but the look in his eyes was one of a much more exhausted, more broken man. In a way, it was comforting. Maybe he felt a similar way about this situation. “We smuggled them out to my mom.” They were safer. In a place outside of Murkoff’s jurisdiction.

“I remember when they met Miles. They must’ve emptied four cans of silly string onto him,” And Lisa laughed. It made Blake feel strange inside.

He really didn’t belong here.

After that, for the most part, they just ate in silence. Blake finished before anybody else, being so starved that within a few, brief minutes, all that was left on the plate was crumbs. No one commented on it. Of course he was hungry.

He tried not to think of the last time he had a nice meal like this. It was with Lynn and her parents, shortly before they left. Her parents, and his for that matter, probably didn’t know anything about what happened after they went to investigate that poor woman’s death, and if they did, whatever they were told probably wasn’t the truth.

The food was finished up. Dishes were hastily cleaned and put away. The air in the room was suddenly a lot more solemn. Lisa and Waylon shared a dim look in their eyes as Miles sat to attention. “We need to talk,” Waylon muttered grimly. “About everything. I know you have a lot of questions, and we can answer some of them, but we also need the information you have on that town. That might not be so...pleasant.”

Lisa guided Blake over to sit on a recliner. “We’re sorry things have to be this way, but you were dragged into this the moment you and your wife poked where you didn’t belong. My husband made that mistake. Miles only followed him. The only difference was that you never had an idea of what you were going to be dealing with. Let me be the first to tell you that you’ve involved yourself with very dangerous people.”

“...Who?”

They looked confused. “You don’t know? The Murkoff Corporation.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit lackluster, I know, but we’ll get to some action-y stuff next.
Thank you for the support so far, I’m really thankful for it!

Note: Blake’s memories are definitely altered, so while several details about his time at Temple Gate are completely clear, the rest is fuzzy at best or missing at worst.
His hands are shaky, barely able to keep the Jeep’s steering wheel steady. He’s thirsty, he’s hungry, he’s tired. The untreated, undressed wound on his leg hurts like hell. He could feel how swollen it had grown under the fabric of his dirty jumpsuit.

Still, Waylon considers himself far luckier than the man in the seat beside him.

Miles kept adjusting the rear-view mirror to look at himself. Waylon would have to pull it back every time, but he can’t blame him. He doesn’t look alive. He doesn’t look human. Not anymore. His eyes were dark, skin pale, and his very veins were black with the sludge running through them. In his shoes, Waylon would’ve wanted to examine the changes to himself as well.

His fingers are also gone, so, there’s that.

His body is aching for him to stop driving. Keeping his eyes on the road was only getting more difficult with the weights of exhaustion pressing down on him. The last time he slept was in a locker, and that was less a restful sleep and more of a terrifying, drug-induced coma.

They’re almost home.

It was dark out when they arrived; no one who shouldn’t see them would catch them here. Waylon lurched out of the car, biting back a scream as he falls, his leg unable to bear the weight of his body. Miles helped him up and guided him to the door. They don’t even knock.

“Lisa!” Waylon rushed over without any hint of hesitation, cupping his wife’s face in his trembling hands. He wasn’t the same man as he was when he left his family. The man they last saw was well-groomed, confident, and certain that wearing sneakers to a professional job wouldn’t cause any trouble. The man in the reflection of Lisa’s terrified eyes was filthy, covered in dirt and blood from head-to-toe. That man had no sanity in his eyes. That man was terrified for the lives of everyone close to him.

He couldn’t help but cry when he felt her soft touch on his sunken, decayed face. Waylon never thought he would have that luxury again. “What’s going on? Where have you been?”

It’s only then that she noticed Miles. Lisa dashed off into the kitchen, coming running back with a heavy pan intended to be stored in the horrifying stranger’s face. Waylon grabbed her wrist. It wasn’t the weak grip intending to stop her, but the emotion behind it.

“He saved me…”

He tried to say something, anything else. A resemblance of an explanation, an ‘I love you’, anything, but nothing comes to his lips. Waylon fainted.

He woke up on the couch, Lisa’s eyes boring into his. Waylon can see the faces of his boys peeking out from their bedroom door. Miles sat on a recliner, peeling away webs of silly string from his arms and hair.

“Oh, baby,” Lisa muttered, “We didn’t think you were coming back.”
Waylon attempted to sit up, only for her to gently push him back down. “We gotta get you to the hospital.”

“No...No, Lisa, we need to leave. We don’t have time, and hospitals...hospitals have records that can be tracked. H-How long was I out?”

“Only ten minutes...You still haven’t told me what’s going on? What happened at Mount Massive? With your contract?”

“Miles didn’t tell you anything?”

“She wouldn’t listen to me...And your kids attacked me.”

“I wouldn’t listen because what you’re saying is impossible! I need...I need to hear from my husband.” Lisa braided her fingers between Waylon’s. “What he’s saying can’t be true, Way. I sure as hell didn’t believe what Blaire told me; all that bullshit about you resigning...But all my life, I have known that some things are just medically impossible, and ethically…” Her voice trailed off.

“What—” He groaned, “What did he say?”

“I told her about what I saw, and what I know you saw, Mostly about the engine, and about Project Walrider. Not much else. I figured you would fill the gaps when you woke up from your little nap.”

“Listen, Lisa, whatever he said, he wasn’t lying.”

“He’s saying he’s dead. That’s not physically possible.” Her tone was defiant. Could anybody blame her? What they were telling her should be the stuff of bad dreams, of horror movies.

“There’s something inside him. Keeping him walking, and talking, and even breathing. If you searched for a pulse, you wouldn’t find any.” Waylon swore under his breath, cradling his aching head in his free hand. “They were working on this...this thing...The Walrider. The patients were being subjected to experiments...My job was maintaining the Morphogenic Engine, where the bulk of everything went down. They were trying to find a permanent host for it. They caught me emailing Miles. I was inducted into the program, but hell broke loose before I…” He choked, remembering the variants. He could’ve become one of them.

“They found a host,” Miles continued, “Billy hope. He was just a fucking kid, but he was what they were looking for. The Walrider escaped, and that’s when I came. That’s what allowed your husband to, more or less, get away with his sanity intact. The patients got loose, and they took over the damn place. I don’t even know the body count. I tried to shut down Billy’s life support, and I did. I thought that would end everything, but it didn’t kill the Walrider. It just found me...That’s why I’m still here.”

Lisa squeezed Waylon’s hand in distress. She could believe him, maybe, with her partner’s word supporting him. “So you’re possessed by something responsible for dozens of deaths? I just want to know if I need to order caskets for my two sons tonight. You still haven’t told me how you helped Waylon, let alone everyone.”

“It was Blaire. He...He did this…” Waylon weakly gestured to a fresh spot of blood on his abdomen, one of the only places where the blood was his own. “Miles killed him. Or, I guess the Walrider did.” He forced a smile on his face. “It’s a good thing he got to that man before you, huh? I know you wouldn’t have nearly been so merciful.”

“Wait, how long has that been bleeding?”

“...Too long.” He could say the same for his leg, too. Waylon wasn’t exactly in the best shape right
“Baby, you need stitches. You need a hospital. That could get infected.”

“I can’t. I said we needed to leave, and I meant it. Murkoff is going to be coming after us, and we need to leave before they come sniffing around here. They can track us down easy at a hospital, and I’d be held up too long.” Waylon closed his eyes, breath suddenly shaky. “You have suture supplies in that first aid kit, don’t you?”

The room was silent for a moment. Lisa leaned in. “Waylon, I know where you’re going with this. Are you sure? You know I only ever practiced on fruit, on y’know, meat. We don’t even have good painkillers outside of aspirin. And we don’t even have a lot of that.” She was a nursing school dropout before going into law, but her grades weren’t the worst.

“I don’t want to lose the leg. I’m sure.”

Lisa pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine, fine. Miles, my first aid kit is in the leftmost cabinet. I need you to grab that for me, and a clean kitchen rag. Then I’m gonna need you to get a clean outfit for my husband and help my boys pack for a long trip.”

She wandered over to a closet, pulling a flask out of her purse. “Need a drink? This is gonna hurt.”

“God, yes.”

Half the flask was gone by the time Miles brought over the supplies. Lisa was definitely a prepared woman. She pulled out everything she needed from the kit: a suturing needle, thread, gauze, scissors, tweezers, gloves. With the leftover alcohol, she disinfected her supplies.

“So what’s the towel for?” Waylon asked.

Lisa winced. “It’s...it’s in case you need to scream. Which do you want me to do first?”

“Get—” He was starting to get dizzy. “Get the leg first. It’s in much worse shape.”

Lisa rolled up his pant cuff. “It won’t be as bad as you think, I promise. I’ll be quick—” She cut herself off with a gasp. The wound looked like a chunk of meat picked at by vultures. “I gotta...I gotta clean this, now. How did this even happen?”

“I was being chased. I jumped down an...an elevator shaft, and the ladder gave way.” Waylon leaned back, gasping for breath like he’d been held under water. At least if he fainted again, he wouldn’t have to feel it. He shoved the rag in his mouth.

“Jesus, I’m glad the boys are in their room. Keep still, okay?” But Waylon couldn’t help but twitch and groan as wooden splinters were tweezed from bleeding soft tissue. A muffled cry escaped past the towel when an alcohol-soaked paper towel was applied to the gash, his back arching slightly in pain. “I know...I’m so sorry. It needs to be clean.”

Feeling the needle jab at the edge of mangled skin sent black spots over his vision. Waylon let out a whine at the sensation of the thread pulling through. “It only needs four, maybe five,” Lisa muttered in-between apologies. He could do that, maybe, but then there was the wound in his gut that still needed attention. A pit of nausea settled in his stomach. He felt hot, and Lisa’s voice faded to static in his ears. Just like that, he was out.

His body ached even worse than hours before when he came to. Stitches in his torso tugged with every breath. Lisa had done a clean job of fixing her husband up while he was unconscious. A
glance to the side showed Miles helping her fold clothes and stuff them into a suitcase. His sons looked at him curiously, a twinge of terror and concern in their big eyes.

“You always did have a thing about needles.” Lisa’s smile was half-mirrored on Waylon’s tired face. She kissed his forehead. “There’s a change of clothes in the bathroom. Shoes and all. Clean yourself up the best you can, we’re almost packed.”

Miles clipped the suitcase shut. “No, we are packed. Your kids are ready, too. You need help up, Park?”

He nodded. As Miles helped him to his feet, one of the boys nervously tugged at his sleeve. “When are we gonna be back? Mom wouldn’t say!”

Cringing as he tried to put weight on his sutured leg, Waylon let out a sigh. “We won’t be coming back. This place isn’t safe for us anymore.” If you asked him, Waylon thought they’d already spent too long at home. They were quiet, not prodding for more answers at the moment thankfully. Lisa ushered them out to the Jeep.

Miles would wait outside the door while Waylon dressed and cleaned his hands and face. “Do you have a plan? You’ve got a family. Those kids are in more danger than any of us, y’know.”

“Driving away from here is my first priority. This is the first place Murkoff’s hounds are going to check. As for my boys, I’ll probably ship them off to my mom. I don’t know about every place they have their hands on, but I at least know their reach doesn’t extend to Korea.” He came out of the room, limping, but otherwise looking like a human being again. Much better than when they arrived. “I’ll put them on the first plane I can. I’m taking suggestions on ideas for where we go, though.”

“Let’s focus on getting out of town. Are you ready to leave?”

“Almost.”

Murkoff would get nothing from this place. Waylon, with some help, wandered into the family’s unused garage, grabbing the emergency gas container from a shelf. He scattered fluid over the walls, the floor, then trailed into the main parts of the house. “I have lighter fluid in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. Help me out, would you?”

“You’re gonna burn this place down?” Miles plucked a dusty, old family photo from a shelf above the mantle. “I mean, it’s smart, but...This is a real nice place. It looks like your family really settled here. Doing this means destroying that life.”

“It’s not safe. It’ll never be safe again.” He grabbed the lighter fluid for his accomplish and shoved it in his hands. “I don’t want to risk Murkoff finding anything that could be used against us. I gotta burn it all.”

Everything he and his wife had worked so hard to build was rendered moot the moment he sent that email.

Miles made a face. This situation felt far too familiar to one of his experiences at the asylum, but he went along with it. “Okay...You have matches? A lighter?”

“In the drawer by the dishwasher.”

The house was in flames by the time Miles and Waylon piled in the Jeep, the latter at the driver’s seat this time. Lisa said nothing, but the pain in her face was impossible to not notice. The boys had their faces pressed to the window, eyes locked on the site of their old home until it was gone on the
“And now we’re here,” Waylon had his hands folded in his lap. “I...sorta lied about us being an immediate target. If I laid low, Murkoff would’ve probably thought that I died with the rest of the asylum’s personnel, but I got in contact with a man named Simon Peacock, and that’s when I uploaded everything I caught on tape. We’ve been on the run ever since. We never stay anywhere longer than a couple weeks. We just...keep going, trying to figure out what our next step is. That’s what you were. A step.”

“Me? Or my footage?”

“You’re more useful than you think, friend.” Miles pat his shoulder. “Context is an important thing. You’ve experienced the madness the corporation just loves to spread to the people, and that makes you a very valuable man. We haven’t gone over what you filmed yet, but I know everything you’ve caught is gold.”

Blake nodded his head absentmindedly. “So...Murkoff was responsible for what happened at the town.”

“And for your hallucinations, and your wife’s...phantom—”

“The baby is real,” Blake hissed. “I held her in my hands. I know.” Miles put his hands up defensively.

“Touchy subject. I’ll come back to it later. My point is, I’m surprised you didn’t know about their involvement.”

“I mean...Ugh, you got something for this headache?” It wasn’t just dehydration anymore, he knew that. Lisa had practically been forcing water down his throat since he woke up. “I might’ve...seen some things. I don’t remember much about being in that facility, and what I can come up with is fuzzy at best. I really just thought they were a shady pharmaceuticals company before...before...” He sighed. “Still not really believing that you’re dead. That goes against a lot of what I’ve been raised.”

“You could look for a pulse, Blake. You won’t find any. I don’t even sleep or eat.”

“So...where are we going next?”

“We don’t know. We usually just drive until we find somewhere we haven’t been. Everything we buy is in cash or counterfeit. We try our best not to leave any sort of trail. Speaking of which...”

Lisa came in through the door. “The car’s started. Wanna draw straws on who has to drive this time?”

Chapter End Notes

I had someone from Tumblr beta-read this, and they were so sweet!
He’s quiet for so long, looking out through the car window at the expanse of desert. The view was making him sick. Every detail of Temple Gate was so deeply ingrained in his ruined mind that even the landscape threatened to drive him back into those memories. Blake finally resolved to look down at the floor for the rest of the drive, however long that would last.

Waylon piped up after a moment, desperate to break the silence for his own sake. “I think you two are cheating. This is the third time I’ve been stuck behind the wheel.”

“We drew straws, dear, you’re just unlucky.” Lisa and Miles sat in the back together, watching the footage on Blake’s camera. She was busily scrawling notes on every visible detail she could retain. Blake admitted he hadn’t mentally prepared himself enough to review what he filmed, but he’d suggested that the others go ahead. Of course, the two of them were all too eager to get their hands on the secrets in his camera. The audio was muted out of respect for him, though.

He learned Lisa was a secret weapon of her own, in spite of her lack of direct experience with the horrors Murkoff inflicted on people. She was a lawyer, and one that wouldn’t be deterred in case of attempted bribery, threats, blackmail…You name it. She had a binder filled to the brim with papers: Miles and Waylon’s documents and journal pages, printed internet research, and her own diligent writing. A planned court case was a start, at least.

But the idea of just Lisa against such a supermassive corporation like Murkoff? It was just another thought that added to Blake’s almost constant nausea.

“You know,” she muttered, “we weren’t actually expecting to find you in that little rescue Miles pulled.”

“You weren’t?”

“We’re reporters. Me and Waylon,” Miles chimed in. “We thought we’d find another reporter. We thought we’d find your wife.”

Blake scratched at his arms in discomfort.

“I watched her last broadcast so many times over. I can show you my notes if you want. I don’t think they contain anything you don’t know already, but I’d love if you helped me clear up any discrepancies in my writing, but something struck me as...off about the footage and your claims.” Lisa turned the camera off, handing it to Miles and setting her hand on Blake’s seat. His breath hitched with his mounting anxiety.

“You told us Lynn had her baby that night, and that’s how she died. The broadcast aired two weeks before you two disappeared-”

“Stop.”

She didn’t stop.

“The woman in front of that camera...doesn’t look like she’s eight or nine months pregnant. She doesn’t look like she’s going to be having a baby at all.”
“It happened while we were there. All of it. It...it was conceived and born that night.”

“That’s impossible. The fact is, no one’s body can support such a quick fetal development, including Lynn.”

“Lot’s of impossible things have happened to you!” The tension in the car was thick enough to cut with a knife. Blake’s nails dug into his own skin. “We...we’ve got a dead man travelling next to us. That’s supposed to be impossible, too, but look at him. He’s there, walking and talking. I held my daughter in my hands. I held her. I know she’s real.”

“Miles’ condition has an explanation, a reason to it. He’s held together by technology, by the Walrider. That thing in him functions like life support. There’s nothing that can begin to explain how your child could’ve grown in the span of a few hours, especially with all the stress she must’ve experienced.”

His arms started to bleed.

Waylon stepped on the brakes and pulled over on the side of the highway, deciding he should finally intervene. “Lise...let’s let up on him for now.” He put the car in park and reached over to remove Blake’s hands on his arms. Maybe a change of subject would be healthy… “We’ve crossed into Nevada. There’s a small town another 45 miles from here I was eyeing when I went over the map. It looks like a place to relax for a couple weeks. Why don’t we just stay quiet until then?”

Lisa still mumbled. “I always dreamed of a second honeymoon in Vegas. The kids would stay with their nana while we went casino hopping. Well, the kids are off, and we’re in Nevada, but there’s no cocktails in my hand.”

“Lisa, please…”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet starting now.”

She slipped her notes in her growing binder and got their ever-shrinking first aid kit out for Blake to bandage himself up. They would restock on supplies in town. For now, Lisa would spend the last stretch of the drive trying to nap.

Waylon’s wish was granted. Until they pulled up to another motel, there was silence in the car. Blake was asked to go check out the room while the others retrieved their minimal luggage. They were trying to be as easy as they could on him. Especially so in Waylon’s case, as he felt awful about Lisa confronting him.

They seemed to be taking their time downstairs, leaving Blake totally alone for the first time since before Murkoff’s ‘rescue’. Save for the sound of a kitchsky, cat-themed clock ticking on the wall, it was absolutely silent, and that was painful beyond belief. He kneaded at his scarred, deformed hands, trying to force his mind to be blank because it just hurt that bad attempting to conjure up pleasant memories. Everything led back to Lynn, or to Jessica, or to Temple Gate. Would his life be this much of a nightmare until he finally died?

“There’s a shop down the street. 7/11 really has become our savior through this mess, huh?” Miles opened the door, suitcase in hand. Lisa and Waylon followed behind, their belongings with them.

“You were...gone for too long.” He was met with confused eyes.

God make them stop staring.

“It only took around five minutes to have things settled.” Lisa moved past to put her binder and her
and Waylon’s shared bag away. “Lord, does the decor in these places have to be so tacky everywhere? Did a bunch of old women choose the theme for this room?”

Waylon set a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you and Miles go get dinner? Then you can rest as long as you want.”

Blake tried to protest, grumbling under his breath about how he wasn’t hungry, but Miles was dragging him out the door before he could put up a real fight about it. It was a lie anyway, and Blake really needed to work on eating. After that first breakfast yesterday morning, his appetite was dismal at best. Even the feast of ramen and frozen pizza they returned with was better than nothing. Waylon, Lisa, and Blake ate silently in the kitchen as Miles took his place on the living room couch, and when they returned…

Miles seemed dead. Really dead. He was even paler than before, he was completely limp, and the blackness in his veins had faded into a much softer gray, but no one else seemed to be concerned. Lisa and Waylon actually ignored him entirely and sat together on the loveseat beside the couch, flipping through channels on the old motel television.

“What’s...happening to him?”

“He’s sleeping,” Lisa replied. “Oh! Go back, Jeopardy’s on.”

“But I...thought he didn’t sleep.”

“It’s not sleep, really. It’s more like he’s in a coma. The Walrider probably sensed something off and went to go investigate. There’s enough of itself left to keep him alive in the most basic sense, but until it comes back, he’s down for the count.” He flicked back a couple channels, then wrapped his arm around Lisa’s shoulder. “90% of the time, all the fuss is just over a raccoon. That thing hates them for some reason…”

“How does it keep him alive anyway?” Blake pursed his lips in discomfort. With nowhere else to sit, he leaned against a wall, looking awkward about the whole situation.

“I don’t know all the science behind it...but from what I do understand, it keeps his brain functioning. That’s why he still breathes; the brain needs oxygen. The walrider keeps the blood pumping for him, what’s left of it anyway, so his heart doesn’t beat. From what I understand, other than his mind and...most muscles, nothing else really works. He tried eating when he got out, y’know? A ton of unhealthy shit from the nearest fast food place we could get our hands on. Three hours later, he was huddled over a toilet, throwing it all up as this half-rotted, black-”

“Baby, I don’t want to remember the details, and I don’t think our guest is interested in them, either.” Blake could agree with Lisa on this one. Those last words had already left him visibly green.

“Oh...okay...anytime he eats, he’ll just throw it up later. His digestive system doesn’t work. I don’t know how it keeps him from wasting away, but it does. I’m not quite sure what else goes on in his body…”

And it’s quiet again, but not to that excruciating point Blake can’t handle thanks to the ramblings of Alex Tribec. “I...I’m going to go to bed now. Er, I would, but...I don’t think I can handle it just being silent. Not anymore.”

Waylon thought for a moment, then sighed as he got up and Lisa spread out over the seat. “I got a solution. Get comfortable, and I’ll go see you in a minute.”
Lacking any nightwear (or really anything other than what he was already wearing), Blake resolved to just remove his new cargo pants and call it a night after Waylon brought his ‘solution’ over. After a moment, he arrived with a laptop and a charger, setting the former on the endtable by the bed and plugging the latter into the wall.

“...Is that safe? What if they can track you through it?”

“Oh, they could with my old one. They did. I had that beautiful piece of work destroyed in front of me.” He seemed lost for a moment after, the look in his eyes similar to what Blake saw everytime he looked in the mirror. “I got this from a thrift store. It’s older. I keep pretty low on the radar, but just in case...all my information is encrypted and protected tighter than government information. I’ve...I’ve learned you can’t be too safe.” He swallowed dryly.

“How would it help?”

“I was just gonna throw something up on YouTube...Got any suggestions?”

“I, uh, actually think I could take it from here then.”

Waylon nodded, wishing him goodnight before leaving the small, square room. Blake undressed and twisted over, fingers drifting over the keyboard and slowly typing before he even thinks about it.

L...y...n...n...L....a...n...g...e...r...n

Her face popped up in each thumbnail. She was neat, and clean, and smiling. He almost forgot how she looked without dirt and blood smearing her form. The cursor hung over a video for an uncomfortably long time. Blake thought about how much he missed hearing her voice, how much he longed for it. It was a click away, but...he couldn’t. He’s trying to sleep, and thinking about the situation made him realize that he wasn’t ready to listen to her. Instead, he put on a playlist of old music he liked and turned it down.

If it weren’t for the quiet sounds of alternative rock drifting around the room, he’d hear Lisa through the thin walls of the Motel, humming as her own way to ease Waylon through his insomnia so he could rest.

Miles stayed dead still on the couch until the early hours of morning, before the sun was even up. As the Walrider shifted back into place, he stirred, joints and head aching like mad. On the upside, it found something bigger than a raccoon for once. They would have work to do in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Holy heck I’m really sorry to have kept you guys waiting! I’ve been busy with a lot personal projects and getting ready to sell at the local Convention coming up! The next chapter will have a bit more action in it, and I’m looking forward to writing it!

Thank you to Dracofelid for giving it a preread!
I want to thank you all for being patient and offering support. I appreciate every bit of it and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

His sleep was plagued by nightmares.

It was a given, really, with everything he went through and the resurgence of repressed memories. Fanatics echoed their mantras behind his eyes, and the bugs. Bugs biting and burrowing in his hands as he helplessly called out for aid that would never come.

“Blake.”

Cool hands gripped his wrists, and he wasn’t dreaming anymore. The dry landscape of Temple Gate was replaced with the offly decorated motel room he fell asleep in. There was Lisa, fingers coiled around his arms. He slowly rationalized what happened, and the dream was already starting to fade as he realized he was awake and okay, though his hands still hurt. There were no bugs, but he was bleeding again.

“You were picking at them,” she explained. “Get your clothes on and meet me in the living room. I have just enough bandages left over to dress you back up.”

Lisa left. Waylon’s laptop had been left on autoplay all night, and he couldn’t even recognize what the current video playing was supposed to be about. He shut the computer, and ended up getting a look at the exact damage he did to himself.

Blake moved around in his sleep plenty, at least, according to Lynn. Some mornings she would laugh about how he rolled off their bed, or how he would mumble about things he was guilty about. It was innocent back then, though. He didn’t think about what happened in school in those days, and what would slip out would be the secret oreo stash he kept from his wife or the time he started filming with the lens cap on. Did he still talk now? Did he say anything he’d rather have stay buried?

He got blood on the blankets and on his clothes as he got ready for the day. Disgusting. At least the white motel sheets could be bleached, but these were new clothes. These were his only clothes.

Maybe he was dawdling for too long, because as he thought about the situation, Lisa called for him. He wouldn’t keep her waiting.

As it turned out, she was right outside the door, and as he exited, she grabbed and dragged him over to the kitchen sink. “Clean up,” she told him, scrounging through her sparsely packed first-aid kit. Lisa finally, triumphantly pulled away a thin roll of bandages, and the red pooling around the drain turned clear after a minute of washing.

“I’m making a store run today,” she announced, taking Blake’s left hand first to treat, then the right. “You need a couple extra changes of clothes, and I need to restock the kit. The way you and my husband go through supplies is crazy…”

“Where, uh, where is Waylon? And Miles?” New names still felt unfamiliar to him.
“Trying to work out a plan in the living room. They found something, or someone, of interest. Two someones, really.” There was this dark look in her eyes, like she wasn’t telling the whole story. “All done. You can go and get caught up.”

She sat down at the table and picked through the remnants of the kit, writing down a list of the things they needed. So, pretty much everything.

Blake met with the others. Miles was messing with a package of...plastic wrap?

“You know it’s the easiest way to deal with these people. They won’t have a chance to tell anyone they saw us.”

“Look, I want us all to be safe...but I want Lisa’s case to be safe, too, and if any connection is made between the killings and us...it’s all done. Besides, Miles, I don’t...I couldn’t do something like that again.”

Again?

“You wouldn’t have to do anything. The Walrider can handle it.”

“Maybe the tear it went on at the asylum wasn’t as noticeable with all the blood already everywhere, but that things isn’t the best at killing things cleanly. Think of Blair, or for god sakes, the cat. The alleyway looked like Jackson Pollock turned into Dexter.” The beloved stray Waylon and Lisa had taken to feeding almost joined them on their adventures...until the Walrider got ahold of it. “All the plastic wrap in the world couldn’t cover up what it would do.”

“Besides,” Lisa called, “They won’t say a thing knowing they’ll die either way. If they know anything on the Walrider, they’ll know it’s purely a killer. It doesn’t torture. Compliance won’t yield any mercy.”

“What if they leave before we can figure out another solution? Can we afford to let that happen?”

“We’ll figure something else out, Miles. Just...keep an eye on them until then.”

And Blake noticed then, that even though Miles was relatively normal compared to his state the other night, he was still shaky on his feet, eyes dim and every movement sluggish. He seemed to accept what Waylon told him and sat back down on the house. Blake finally decided then to talk.

“What’s...going on?”

“We found a pair of Murkoff officials right here in town. Bigwigs by the looks of the suits they had on. That custom tailored shit that puts you out several grand. If we can get anything out of them, it would be a huge win for us.”

“I don’t think...I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“That’s three to one, Miles,” Lisa hummed.

“I get it. I get it...You got your shopping list done already?”

“Yup, it’s all finished.” Lisa did a double take from her list to the kit, then came into the room to look over Blake. “Think I did good with what I got you the first time. I’ll go with the same sizing as last time...Unless you’d like to come? I figured you may not be ready to, y’know, be around people…”

“Is anyone else staying?”
“I try not to go out unless it’s night, so I’m staying.”

Blake bobbed his head to the answer. “Then I’d like to stay. Yes.”

“Alright, Waylon and I will be back in a couple hours.” Just today, she longed for that semblance of normalcy shopping could bring her. Her and her husband, getting food for the day, yet her boys weren’t there to beg for that sugary cereal they loved or extra bags of m&ms. Blake heard her suck in a breath before they left the motel room.

Blake turned on the tv as soon as they were gone to ward off the silence he so desperately feared. He didn’t really care what was playing, so long as it made sound.

“Do you like ants?” Time was a little off, and he’d zoned out. Was it a few seconds or minutes before Miles said anything? Either way, the mild shock sent chills surging over his skin.

“What?”

“Ants...you never played with them as a kid or anything?”

He blinked. “I don’t remember. Ah, probably not. I’m not a fan of bugs. I never have been.” Blake looked over, and Miles was fiddling with a tiny, black ant. It weaved its way around his hand and fingers without a care in the world. He approached and noticed a thin, darkly colored haze surrounding it.

“They’re real convenient little tools. Tiny, and resilient, and numerous...So handy. It doesn’t take much to operate them like little robots. I can’t control when the Walrider wants to go out on its own, but most of the time, I can limit it to these guys. It’s...not like sleep, y’know? When it sends me into that darkness?”

“Like last night?”

“It was scariest the first time. It really isn’t like sleep. More like sleep paralysis. I actually had issues like that after coming home from...Afghanistan. I can’t move, can’t do anything to stop it other than wait, and it’s so, so painfully dark.” His voice took on a tone that had been previously unknown to Blake. Miles, despite his condition, seemed to be the most well adjusted mentally of the three of them.

But really, that was a ridiculous thought, wasn’t it?

Because he sounded so shaky right now.

“I knew Lise and Waylon would help if they could, but, uh, we’ve all gotten used to it now. I just...wish it didn’t feel so, so cold.” Miles sighed and sank into the couch. “But I’m rambling now, I actually had a point I meant to make. Something I’ve been wanting to get off my chest.”

He smiled, but it seemed strained.

“I see whatever it sees. Like it’s a projector and my brain is the screen. The Walrider can’t talk, so that’s how it communicates. Enough ants can give me a good range and plenty of images to go off of. Like unedited footage all jumbled together. It’s useful as all hell. I even got them to take care of some hounds sniffing about my old place. Really wish I burned it down like the Parks, but I didn’t have the chance. Besides, these suckers can really bite and they made my intruders put on a great show.”

“Is that what you wanted to—”
“I did something I’m not sure about. With this thing in me, I need to be sure about everything I do, and hesitance at this point in my life just...tears at my chest like nothing else. You should know when that affects you...What’s the last thing you remember about Temple Gate?”

“I don’t know if I want to remember…”

“Well, I need you to.”

Blake remained still and silent for a few moments. It felt like years to him. He was holding her—

“I remember a big flash.” He interrupted his own train of thought. “And then I slept, and I woke up on the couch back when we were still in Arizona.”

“That settles it,” Miles muttered, “I’m the reason you went into that coma.”

“...How?”

“The ants...I had ‘em chipping away at the radio towers pulsing at the town. It blew up. All I saw was the light before it killed all the poor bugs. I can’t think of any other reason we found you like that.” Miles squeezed his arms in discomfort. “I never wanted to hurt anybody in that town. I was only half aware of what they’d become, but I knew it was horrifying. I never wanted Walker to die at the asylum, and Waylon never wanted to hurt that...one fella.”

Was that who he meant when he said ‘again’? It certainly brought some relief to think that instead of the possibility that he was a bona fide killer.

“I had thought that maybe without the engine, they could at least start to heal...or maybe they would all die, like pretty much everyone at Mount Massive. Like me. If Murkoff new people found out about it, they’d send in the troops.” He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I saw the reports at Elrich. Everyone did die. Not to Murkoff, but to each other. Fucking sick, and sad...I don’t envy you, but I at least wish I hadn’t sent you into your head.”

At least he dreamed. Relived one of the happy times, however brief it was.

“Maybe I could’ve found some way to help them if I hadn’t chewed everything up. I didn’t have the time to do anything to help the patients at the asylum, but...yeah. That hesitance...I should’ve listened to it and left it be. I’m...sorry for what it did to you.”

Blake felt uncomfortable. Awkward. He hadn’t really thought of those...people as victims. He could only focus on how they hurt him and...and Lynn. He couldn’t think of them ever having been normal, regular townsfolk living their lives.

*Killing their children.*

Going to their jobs everyday.

*Throwing their diseased away.*

He shook his head.

“If it helps...I don’t know what those people would’ve done to me if I was awake. I was probably better off dreaming before you rescued me. Gentle doesn’t seem like their way of doing things.” He tried to laugh, but he choked.

*He was holding her.*
“That flash took her away.

It robbed her from your arms.

“I need some water.” His head suddenly hurt like hell. Would he get these for the rest of his life? Lynn had migraines, and now he felt even worse for each one she had to experience in all their marriage. “But I’m fine. With you, I mean. No skin off my back, it just hurts. Remembering.”

Miles’ shoulders slumped a bit in relief. “That’s a weight off me. I had to tell you, you know? Lisa and Waylon don’t know yet, and I needed a trial run before telling them…”

“Why would they be upset?”

“Because they would agree with me about all the loss of life that came with the ceasing signals. I’m not even sure they’d feel mad, more guilty. Just as guilty as I am.”

Without knowing them as well, Blake had no words of comfort or consolation to offer. He filled a glass and used the last of the aspirin from the kit to ease his head. He knew it had to be on Lisa’s list, right?

They didn’t talk anymore. Miles zoned out, and Blake took the opportunity to put on cartoons. They were old, definitely the kind he was familiar with as a kid. He was drawn to them in some way he couldn’t place, and so they stayed on the screen until Lisa and Waylon returned.

Waylon got straight to work putting away general groceries, even putting the new clothes for Blake in his room, but Lisa came right over and dropped a dark bag onto Miles’ lap. He sighed and poked through the contents. “Did good, right?”

“Did great.”

“What is it?”

“Take a look for yourself, Langermann.” Miles carelessly tossed the bag over, earning a harsh glare from Lisa.

Blake looked in and felt funny. Inside were a few unlabeled vials, prescription bottles with printed words he couldn’t even try pronouncing in his head (not with the lingering ache, at least), and plenty of unidentifiable pills.

“Quaaludes, LSD, prescription-strength benadryl...etcetera. Everything we need for one hell of a mind-altering cocktail.” Lisa seemed so proud of herself. Blake scrambled to get the mix of illegal and half-legal drugs off of his legs.

“How...did you get all this stuff?”

“Miles scrounging around the city, stealing from some dealers and pharmacies. Things they won’t notice gone until it’s pulsing through the veins of a couple assholes.” Lisa closed up the bag and handed it to Waylon. “Stash this under our mattress, would you, baby? Anyway, he let loose enough of the swarm to pull some inventory from places we weren’t at. Nobody can even trace it to us.”

Miles mumbled something under his breath as he slowly, sluggishly got to his feet. “Sure this’ll work?”

“If I get my dosages right, they’ll be fine, and nobody will believe them if they say they saw us. If they aren’t fine, well, it’s a lot cleaner than what the Walrider could ever pull off. It’ll be peaceful,
and painless.”

“Then let’s get them over here,” Waylon piped, looking unsure of the situation…

…but knowing this may be their only option.

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