Easy Way Out: Season 2 - Life in Jail

by Jak_Dax

Summary

After your loss and Merle's recovery from his injuries, you both decided to return to the group he had left behind. Governor had attacked the prison before and neither you are sure if the residents are alright. If they are, will they be welcomed to Merle's return? Or will their distrust of Merle turn him into the monster they believe he is?
The Prison

You played with your fingers as Merle drove you silently down the road. Two hours had passed and there was no sign of a prison. Apparently that's where Merle's group was stationed, much to your surprise.

"We're either gonna see normal people or biters... I hope it's the former." Merle set his lips in a line. He wasn't joking around for your sake, but you could tell he was bothered. He hadn't seen his brother in a month, so you couldn't blame him.

But you were nervous. Even if the people are there, what would they think of you? Would arriving with Merle ease their thoughts of you? Were they all like Merle? You thought one Merle was enough.

You hoped at least one of them was nice. Merle mentioned that his brother was, so you were putting your hopes in this Daryl. You sighed and looked to Merle, deciding to voice your concern.

"Merle, you think these people will like me?" You asked.

"What? Why wouldn't they?" Merle glanced at you, thoroughly confused.

"I'm a stranger. My father certainly didn't like you at first..."

"Look here, sweetcheeks. You act just the way ya did with me, a sweet angel, and they'll accept you in faster than you can blink. I'm bettin' they'll warm up to you faster than me." Merle huffed, his eyes set on the road.

"Wait, they don't like you?" You sat up. "Why not?"

"Some of them have a right to, some bad business went down with the Governor..." Merle frowned and licked his lips. "But I told ya before, girl. I'm a racist asshole. Most people tend tah not like them."

"Well, maybe we can change that." You offered a small smile, before looking out to the road, again. You heard Merle give a huff, but he didn't argue with you. Not too much more time passed, when suddenly the trees parted and looming down below was a huge prison. A perfect protective home. Merle slowed down the car and drove it up to the gates of the prison.

Right there, in the fields in front of you, stood some people. They had shovels and hoes in their hands, and were breaking up the ground. They were preparing the land to farm. You smiled, happy to see something normal from the group of people.

There was an old man slowly breaking into the ground, a power still in his swing. A younger girl, probably still in her teens that dug into the ground beside him, her blonde hair in a pony. Something that lifted your heart was to see a young boy, maybe barely in his teens, who was working the ground next to them. A large cowboy hat was seated atop his head. And you also caught sight of a baby carrier, where a little bundle sat, their small hands peeking from the blanket. Your heart couldn't take the sight.

The last man had taken noticed of you, as he drove his shovel into the ground and made his way over. He was scraggly and wore an old sheriff's uniform. His hands trailed to his side and you didn't miss the pistol in its holster. You looked back to Merle and he gave you a reassuring glance.
"I might have to talk to Officer Friendly here, sugah. But he'll let ya by. Get in that building 'n find my brother, will ya?" Merle requested as one of the gates was lifted and the man came under. He closed the gate behind him and opened the second larger gate. He seemed to recognize Merle, because his expression became surprised as he stepped up to the side of the car.

"Merle?" Was the first thing the man said, once Merle rolled down his window.

"Long time, officer. Glad to see ya ain't walker chow, yet." Merle greeted in his own way as he nodded his head to you. "Mind lettin' my lady friend in? It's been a long couple of days fer the both of us. You wouldn't believe."

The sheriff seemed to take notice of you and became more surprised, but he didn't approach your side of the car. You opened the door yourself and stepped out, closing the door behind you. You walked over to meet the man in front of the car and he offered his hand. You smiled and took his hand, receiving a firm handshake from him.

"Name's Rick. Rick Grimes." The man, Rick, greeted. "You are?"

"___." You gave him your name.

"It's nice to meet ya, ___." Rick released his hand from yours and coughed awkwardly. "Sorry, but I'm gonna have to ask to check ya. It's nothing personal, we do this to all newcomers."

"Um, sure." You glanced at Merle, as Rick proceeded to pat you down. He eyed your ice picks warily before stepping back from you when he was finished.

"You're all clear." He nodded to your picks. "You can keep them on, but if you even think about doin' something with them. I won't hesitate to put you down."

"I understand." You were relieved that this guy wasn't trying to hide his true intentions. You rather have someone tell you straight to your face that they could kill you, than someone who acts like you're going to be the best of friends. You learned that the hard way.

"Good. You can head on in, but don't get too comfy." Rick stepped closer, his voice becoming a hush. "He ain't hurting you, is he?"

"Huh?" You stepped back in surprise. "Who?"

Rick didn't answer as his eyes glanced over you, he let out a sigh and shook his head.

"Never mind... Just paranoid. I gotta talk to Merle. He ain't on good terms with all of us." Rick explained.

"That's what I heard." You brushed back some of your hair and nodded. "Thanks anyway, Rick."

Rick glanced at you, one more time, before walking back over to the side of the car to talk to Merle. You hesitated, not feeling comfortable about leaving Merle, but you knew you needed to. Besides the others working on the field looked friendly enough. You walked over to them and raised your hand in greeting.

"Hey, it's nice to meet you all." You greeted as you stopped in front of them.

"Well, I'll be. It's nice to see a new face." The old man smiled warmly as he lowered his hoe. "What's your name, young lady?"
"___." You answered, again.

"___, pleasure to meet you. I'm Hershel Greene and that's my daughter, Beth." Hershel nodded over to the young, blonde girl. You flinched at the familiar name, recalling it from the book you were reading with Merle. But this girl was the opposite of the Beth you knew, as she gave a bright, sincere smile your way.

"Hi, ___. You got nice hair." She complimented. You touched your hair lightly and smiled gratefully.

"Thanks, best I can do during the apocalypse." You joked.

"This here is Carl, Rick's son." Hershel gestured to the young boy. The teenager offered you a sideways glare, before returning to his work. Moody much? Hershel's smile softened as he looked to the last little member. "And this is Rick's daughter, Judith."

"I saw her off aways and couldn't believe my eyes." You hesitated before nodding to her. "Could I just look at her? I haven't seen a baby for a year."

"Go ahead, just be careful. She can be fussy when's she tousled around." Hershel began to work at the ground, again, as you kneeled down. You pushed down the blanket a little to look at the soft, pure face of the baby. She was currently napping, but her fingers twitched occasionally. She had a pink onesie on and honey blonde hair that sprouted from her head. She couldn't be more than two months old.

"She's darling." You smiled warmly, feeling something in your heart that you hadn't for the last two days. You stood back to your feet and worked up your next question. "Do you guys know where I can find a Dixon?"

"You know, Daryl?" Beth asked, looking a bit stunned.

"Somewhat. Know where I can find him?"

"I think he's taking watch right now." Beth gestured to the one intact guard tower. "If he ain't there, he's probably out hunting."

"Let's hope he's here then. Thanks." You waved to the group of people, before heading in the direction of the prison. You quickly found your way inside and once you came across some more people, you asked how to get to the watch tower. A nice teen pointed you in the right direction and after climbing a staircase, your steps echoing off the metal steps, you found yourself at the watch tower door.

You hesitated as you reached for the door. Gosh, you hoped that Merle's brother was nice. You clicked open the door and pushed it open. The room was dark, aside from the sunlight that shined in through the tinted windows. A man was sitting alone inside, his gaze going out the window. When you opened the door, he turned in his chair to look to you.

The man had long, unkempt brown hair that began to reach his shoulders. Some of his hair came down and covered his eyes. He also had facial hair to match, though it wasn't clean or groomed in anyway. You noticed a crossbow hanging at his side, ready to pull into his hands at any moment.

"Uh, sorry to intrude." You let the door click shut behind you, not daring to move a foot forward. This guy was intimidating, is this how Merle would've been if he wasn't vulnerable when you first met? You recalled the confrontation you had with Merle in the kitchen. You shook your head of your thoughts and furrowed your brows at the man. "Are you Daryl?"
"..." The man's eyes flicked over you and you saw the caution on him. Like a wild animal, calculating its next actions. Finally the man spoke up with a gruff voice. "Who's asking?"

"I'm ___." You greeted. "I know your brother, Merle."

It was like a wall crumbled down in front of you. Daryl quickly went from guarded to relaxed, as he brushed some hair out of his eyes. Blue, just like his brothers. Daryl gave you a slightly hopeful expression.

"You really know Merle?" He asked.

"Yeah, he's actually outside waiting for you."

"Son of a bitch, he's really alive..." Daryl mumbled as he got up quick, coming over to stand beside you. He strapped his crossbow across his back. With a closer look, you could definitely tell Daryl was younger than his older brother. He didn't have as many worry lines, but was probably just as wise, if not more so. Not saying much, Merle might be street smart, but socially he's a bit weak...

"Yeah, when we found him he wasn't doing so good." And so, while you and Daryl headed down to meet up with Merle, you quickly gave a short summary of how you found his big brother in the first place.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

"What she doing with you, Merle?" Was the first thing Rick asked. "And where have you been for the last couple months. You obviously didn't hand Michonne over, but we all thought you went and got yourself killed."

"I almost did." Merle admitted. "Got drunk off my ass 'n got in a car accident. That girl found me with her father 'n they took me in, fixed me up."

"And where's her father?"

"I shouldn't be the one answerin' that one." Merle leaned his elbow out the car window and moved closer to Rick, lowering his voice. "Gov' came round, shot him up, happened yesterday. Girl's still torn up about it."

"The Governor's still alive?" Rick paled.

"Heard him, clear as day. What? Ya thought he went off 'n got himself killed, too?" Merle scoffed.

"I thought he left this place, not turning back... How far away was this?"

"Just 'bout a two hour drive." Merle shrugged slightly. "But he was alone. Can't do nothin' to ya all by himself. Don't see what the worry is."

"I just want that man dead."

"Don't we all?"

"How'd you convince that girl to come with? You're not exactly a people pleaser, Dixon." Rick glanced over Merle with an accusing glare.

"If you're thinkin' I hurt that girl, ya really are stupid." Merle sent a harsh glare back, as he leaned back in the car. "I tried tah scare her off at first, but she's stubborn. I offered to take her here, she don't got nothin' left. Thought it'd be like a 'thank you' for all the help she's given me."
"Merle!" Both Merle and Rick looked over at the shout. Merle basically beamed as he saw his brother walking over with the girl. Rick stepped back from the car, as Merle opened the driver's door and stepped out. Daryl stopped a few feet in front of his brother, looking as if he didn't really believe the whole situation. Daryl breathed lightly, as he looked to Merle with a determined expression. "Yer really not dead."

"I'm not one of the walkin' corpses, yet, brother." Merle snorted as he watched Daryl. "Is that really how you greet your blood after months of not seein' him?"

"Is it true? Ya saved this girl from that one-eyed bastard?" Daryl gestured to ___, who stood beside him. Merle looked to the girl in surprise, not expecting her to share such information.

"More like I stopped her from runnin' into his gunfire." Merle looked back to Daryl. "Why?"

"..." Daryl sighed. "Yer such an asshole."

The younger brother stepped over to Merle, surprising him with an embrace. Merle glanced at Daryl, not recalling the last time he received such an action from his little brother. The hug was quick and Daryl pulled away from his older brother, averting his face. Merle didn't miss Daryl's hand that rose up to rub at his eyes.

"Can ya at least give us a sign you're alive next time?" Daryl grumbled.

"Sure thing, baby brother..." The corner of Merle's lips rose up a little, as Rick cleared his throat. Time to see if Merle was really welcomed back.

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Something that was new to you and Merle was that the prison had a council. When the news that Merle had arrived back with a strange girl, the prison fell into a commotion. Turns out plenty of the people knew Merle, but they were torn on how they felt about him. So, even though it was decided you were okay to stay, the decision of Merle staying was left to the council.

"This is as stupid as shit." Merle huffed, sitting outside the prison and a shaded lunch table with you. "I don't see why they bother. My brother is on the council, his girl is on the council, 'n old McDonald is there, too. They're all bound tah say yes. One chick doesn't know me, so her opinion is screwy. The only one who would say no is chopsticks!"

And Merle couldn't be more right.

~Third Person~

"No! I can't believe all of you! After everything he's done, you're just gonna let him back in?" Glenn exclaimed, looking at the other four with him.

"He's mah brother." Daryl argued.

"He kidnapped Maggie and me! He brought us to Woodbury! He tried to kill me and he let the Governor..." Glenn fumed as he stood and began to pace.

"What he did was wrong." Carol admitted. "But he might've changed. You heard Daryl, he saved that girl from the Governor."

"Where was that when I couldn't help Maggie?" Glenn snapped.
"He didn't have power then, Glenn." Hershel sighed. "I don't like the thought of him around, but we can't just turn him away."

"Why not?" Glenn asked. "Are we forgetting he almost handed over Michonne to that one-eyed monster?"

"But he didn't." Daryl stated. "He let her go. He was gonna sacrifice himself."

"And what stopped that? Was he afraid?" Glenn challenged.

"Rhee!" Daryl rose to his full height and got up in Glenn's face with a growl. "My brother has been slashed up, shot at, rotted in prisons, faced war itself, killed the dead, 'n had to cut off his own goddamn hand! Merle ain't afraid of nothin'."

"..." Glenn hardly flinched as he leaned his face closer, his tone even. "Except the Governor."

Daryl didn't and couldn't respond, as Glenn turned away and walked over to the door.

"My word doesn't mean shit anymore, I guess. You decide whatever," Glenn opened the door and left. Daryl lowered his head, before taking his seat beside Carol, again.

"Look." Sasha, who had been silent the whole time, spoke up and leaned forward. "I don't know Merle, but from what I've heard he isn't the greatest guy. But Hershel's right, we can't just send him away."

"What do you say about the situation, Sasha?" Hershel asked, glad the meeting had returned to somewhat of an order.

"It's not completely humane, but..." Sasha sighed. "We should let him stay, but for the first week his cell should be locked at night and for the first month he should be monitored. Probably by you, Daryl, since you're the only one he trusts."

"..." Daryl sighed, but nodded. "I don't like it, but I don't got any better ideas."

"I think it's the best way to go about it, too." Hershel agreed, looking to Carol. "How about you, Carol?"

"Merle is full of surprises." Carol shrugged, but smiled a little. "I guess lets just do it and see where it goes from there."

~Reader's P.O.V.~

"Told ya it was stupid." Merle scoffed as he followed Rick with you through the halls of cell block C. Your personal bag was slung over your shoulder, planning to bring your other stuff in after you found your place to rest. Rick sort of gestured to all the cells in the block.

"Take any empty cell. We have another cell block people are stayin' at, but since Daryl's in this one, it seemed better to go about it this way. Most of us are on the bottom level." Rick stopped in front if his own cell. "If you need help bringin' in stuff or cleanin' up the cell, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, Rick." You nodded gratefully, as Merle turned and made his way to the upper cells. You frowned and followed him up. At the top, the side against the wall had a mattress with sheets and everything. The bed was unmade and seemed more like a nest, which was appropriate since it overlooked the cell block.
"Baby brother had the right idea." Merle commented, catching your attention. You looked to him as he nodded to the mattress. "That's Darylina's work, alright. Probably didn't want tah be caged like an animal."

"You gonna do the same?"

"Hell no, livin' in a cell will remind me of the good ol' days." Merle chuckled and went straight to the empty cell that faced Daryl's nest. He dropped what little he had on the lower bunk of the bed. You followed and took the cell to the right of Merle's, setting your bag down on the bed. You stepped back to find Merle leaning on the wall. "Surprised ya followed me up, thought you would want some privacy."

"I'm not sharing a cell with you, we're just neighbors." You rolled your eyes, but offered a half-hearted smile.

"So, followin' me around like a little duckling?"

"Merle, did it ever occur to you that you're the only person I really know around here? If me following you bothers you, I'll stop. But know I do it, because you're the only one I can talk to at the moment." You gave a slight wave to Merle, before heading down the stairs to grab your mattress. You snickered and quickly commented. "And besides, it'd be easier to nap on my nice mattress if we're neighbors!"

"Good thinkin', sweet cheeks!" Merle called back and you could hear the amusement in his voice.

~

An hour passed of you going back and forth from the car to your cell. It wasn't that you were having trouble that it took so long, you just had a lot of stuff to grab. Merle wasn't much help there, he'd went off to speak with some of the other prison residents. Apparently some were from his last group and he decided to go announce that he was alive. Something stupid like that.

Though there was one tough one, the mattress. Luckily someone had heard your trouble and met up with you at the car. You were surprised to see the younger Dixon patiently waiting beside your car. He looked up when you arrived and nodded to you.

"Merle mentioned ya had a mattress to bring in. Thought I'd help ya bring it up." Daryl offered.

"I really could use the help, thank you." You smiled softly at the man, as you opened the back door of the car. You began to tug the mattress out and Daryl came over to lift the other end. He easily hefted up the other side, slamming the car door behind him.

"Ya saved my older brother, I feel like I'm in debt to you." Daryl admitted, as he walked with you up to the prison. "Ya must be the most patient and understandin' girl in the whole world if you've spent two months with him without tryin' to strangle him."

"He wasn't so bad." You shrugged.

"I doubt it. He was probably a pain in the ass." Daryl scoffed lightly. "He didn't make any passes at ya, did he? Cause I swear, if he did, I'll knock his block off."

"Sheesh, none of you have any faith in him."

"Hell no." Daryl offered you a half smile. "I grew up with him... Somewhat. Let me tell ya, he ain't no gentleman."
"Well, he said he doesn't rob the cradle. He tried to scare me a few times, but no flirting or anything like that." You glanced at Daryl. "So, let me guess, he's a ladies' man?"

"That's a weird way of puttin' it." Daryl blew some hair out of his face. "I'll put it the way he would, he's a sex machine."

"No."

"Hell yeah." Daryl raised an eyebrow at you. "You sure you were takin' care of mah brother?"

"He's the one missing a hand, right?"

"..." Daryl sent you a smile, as you both reached the main doors of the prison. You could tell Daryl was grateful, he was certainly sweeter than his brother. The redneck stepped over to open the prison doors, but they clicked open before he could touch them. An older lady stepped out and appeared shocked to see Daryl at first, but her expression quickly became warm as she held open the door for the both of you.

"Thanks, Carol." Daryl gave the woman a nod as he stepped inside, you following.

"You must be the young girl that arrived with Merle." The woman greeted you with the same warm smile, though her eyes seemed to show a hardened woman. You were glad to see she didn't seem upset about Merle's arrival.

"Yeah, I'm ___. It's nice to meet you, Carol." You greeted.

"Here, I'll hold open the doors for you two. Make it easier for you to get to your cell." Carol offered as she stepped ahead and opened the doors for cell block C.

"So, you know Merle?" You asked with curiosity, stepping through with Daryl and heading to the stairs.

"Well enough, I hope. I've spoken with him from time to time." She admitted.

"Ya still need to tell me what you told him when he was first here." Daryl grumbled.

"What we discussed is between us, besides it doesn't matter. I think he's kept his word... For now." Carol shook her head and smiled, walking alongside you. "Merle isn't the best influence, but he has good in him."

"Yeah, I think so, too." You agreed.

"Y'all talkin' about me?" You all looked up to see Merle leaning on the railing above with a smug smirk. "I think I'm all the gossip 'round here. I'm flattered."

"How 'bout you come help your lady friend like you should'a been doin' in the first place?" Daryl growled up at his brother.

"Fine, fine! Don't get yer panties in a twist, Darylina." Merle rolled his eyes, but came down the stairs. He slipped around the mattress and came to stand beside you, gripping the bed with his one good hand. "Let's go, brother."

You all carried the mattress up the stairs, Merle putting his shoulder into it to better aid you two. It didn't take long to reach the top and to walk it into your room. You had already dismantled the bunk and put the two separate beds side by side. The prison mattresses were removed and with the
empty space, you set the bigger mattress across both of the empty bed bases. It didn't quite fit perfectly, but it was a nice mattress in a cell to yourself, you weren't gonna complain.

"Thanks, you guys." You turned and smiled thankfully at them both. "Now, you both, get out. I need to put up the curtains."

"Whatcha tryin' to hide, sugah?" Merle leaned against the cell opening, as Daryl turned and left with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm trying to keep your prying eyes from looking." You teasingly stuck your tongue out as you unpacked some of your extra sheets and began to hang them across your bars.

"I'm hurt, sweetcheeks. If anything, I'm keepin' away all the peepin' toms who'd dare try." He wasn't wrong. Merle could definitely scare someone off if he needed to. But you didn't want to take chances around here. You could do with a little privacy...
A Different Person

Night had fallen fast and you found yourself sitting up in bed, reading your book. You would’ve spent the rest of the night like that, but Carol had come up to greet you through your open curtains. You lowered your book and greeted the older woman.

"Dinner is ready, I came to let you know. You must be starving from your long day." She commented, as you slowly slid out of bed.

"Yeah, is everyone down there?" You asked.

"Yes, but you can come sit with me and Daryl, if you'd like. That way you don't have to worry about sitting next to strangers." Carol rubbed her arm, looking back out into the cell block. "I know the first time I joined with this group I was skiddish, but... You find people here that are just as scared as you are. Or just as lonely. Being in this group sort of brings you together."

"Sounds like you spend a lot of time with Daryl, did this group bring you both together?" You realized how you worded that question and paled, bringing up your hands. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that! I'm not assuming that you two are in a relationship! But if you are, that's cool, too!"

"Oh, we aren't." Carol shook her head, but she smiled in amusement. "I think you're the first to think such a thing. Do we come off that way?"

"I mean... Not in a passionate love way, but..." You thought about it. "You both do seem to care about each other. At least in a companionship way."

"That's a lot more on the nose." Carol sighed. "Daryl's really been the only one who has stuck beside me during the hardest times of this apocalypse... I think the others must've forgot or didn't care, but when I was my bleakest, when I considered things that no one should consider..."

She trailed off and you saw it in her eyes. She wanted to opt out at one point. You felt your chest twist in remorse. You had felt that same feeling only the day before.

"He was there." You finished for her.

"Yes." Carol smiled gratefully.

"I don't think I'm ready to talk about it, but... The same thing happened to me in the last few days. I wanted to escape, too, but Merle convinced me not to. He said that there was still someone in this world that didn't hate me." You told her as you walked out of your cell to stand beside her. "And when I thought about how... That there's still a human, alive, who knows who I am and trusts me. I couldn't leave."

"He said that?" Carol asked in surprise. "But even if there is someone who knows you, what's stopping you?"

"..." It was an easy answer. "I don't want to hurt them by leaving."

Carol didn't say another word and you could tell in her eyes that she understood. You both walked down the stairs, heading out to dinner.

~Merle's P.O.V.~
"Most everyday would be the same routine." Merle explained to his brother, as they both sat back and smoked. They both were in the watchtower, Daryl doing his job of watching for intruders and Merle joining him so he wouldn't have to go mingle at dinner. Merle had enough of people today. The young Dixon wanted to know exactly what happened to make his brother stay away for so long and Merle happily recounted the story. "Sometimes I'd tried tah mix it up, hard with a set of broken ribs."

"They still hurt?" Daryl asked, letting the smoke slip through his lips.

"They're still bruised a little, but I don't feel it unless I mess with it." Merle looked to Daryl with a grin. "So, how are ya 'n your lady?"

"The hell ya talkin' about?"

"Ya know what I'm talkin' about, you and little, miss Carol. I see the way ya look at her and after the stuff she said to me last time, I was sure you two would have made love by now." Merle received a shoved for that comment as he burst into laughter.

"Shut up." Daryl snapped, pushing his brother's chair away with his foot.

"Ooh! Ya got it bad, baby brother. You know she wants ya, I don't see why ya don't just take her. Give 'er the love she deserves, make her yours." Merle stuck his bud between his teeth and smirked. "I know you ain't no romantic, but that woman is pinin' for you. You both deserve to get laid after all this."

"She deserves better, that's what she deserves." Daryl grumbled, flicking some ash off of his cigarette. "She deserves someone who can love her the way she needs them, too... Ya know I ain't into sex like you are. I can't give her that."

"She's an older gal, brother. Maybe she doesn't want it either." Merle shrugged. "All I know is she wants ya."

"Like hell you would know." Daryl sighed, taking a long drag before blowing out the smoke. "I'm glad ya didn't do anything tah that girl, _____."

"Ya think I would've?" Merle cocked a brow. "I might be a jackass, baby brother, but I ain't no monster. 'Sides, her father would've killed me."

"Is that the only thing that stopped ya?"

"Nah, every time I looked at her I thought she was the cutest thing. Young, smooth skin, bright eyes, silky hair, 'n just the smallest hands. If she was older I would've tried something. But every time I thought about it, I thought of this little college girl." Merle scoffed, as he took his cigarette and hung it by his side. "Those stupid professor-student scenarios, ya know? That messed up shit."

"Well, I'm glad it came up. Last thing we need is everyone around here thinkin' yer a pedophile." Daryl rolled his eyes.

"Hey, she ain't no minor. Somewhere in her twenties I reckon. If she consented, than no one should be lookin' at us weird." Merle shook his head. "I've seen weirder shit from the Governor. Lockin' his own biter daughter in his closet, takin' her out tah brush her hair. He had all these containers filled with heads! An older man and a younger girl together should not be the thing turnin' eyes."

"It wouldn't as long as the girl said it was fine." Daryl shrugged. "But it ain't happenin', so no use worryin'."
"Yeah..." Merle rolled his cigarette across the tips of his fingers, watching the embers.

~

After dishing up some freshly cooked deer with Carol, you both found the younger Dixon brother missing from the dinner tables. This didn't seem to surprise Carol, as she led you over to a table where you saw Hershel and Beth sat, along with another young woman. She had to be your age. She had short brown hair and tan skin, she was speaking with Hershel.

"Hello, everyone. Daryl taking late look-out, again?" Carol asked and took the seat across from the brunette girl.

"Yeah, said he needed some time to talk with Merle." Beth chirped.

"Hopefully he's setting him straight, last thing we need is Merle stepping out of line." The brunette frowned and stabbed into her meat. You could tell she didn't like the redneck straight away, probably best not to bring him up anymore. You sat down next to Carol, as the brunette noticed your presence. She gave you a bright smile and offered her hand. "Maggie Rhee, nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too." You took her hand and lightly shook it. "I'm ___."

"Yeah, my father mentioned you earlier. Didn't realize you were so young though." Maggie straightened up, eating some of her food. "Mind if I ask you where you were before all this?"

"From the beginning?" You hesitated, not sure if you were ready to tell all the details.

"Whatever you're comfortable with." Hershel piped in, sending Maggie a warning look. She gave an apologetic look to you, before nodding in agreement.

"Yeah, whatever you're comfortable with." Maggie repeated.

"... I was actually heading up to the mountains with my parents. It was fall break and we rented a cabin up there. We were gonna ski, ice skate, rock climb..." Your hand trails to the ice picks still hooked to your side. "The outbreak started and we quickly joined up with another family on the road to survive... Everything was working out and we found a community, but...

You felt that hollowness begin to build in your chest and you licked your lips.

"It wasn't good... They were horrible, horrible monsters..." It was all you could say, though you didn't meet the shock and sympathetic face of the others. "We lost that whole family and my mother... It was just me and Dad afterwards and... I lost him just yesterday..."

"You deserve a rest from everything then." Beth frowned. "You've been through a lot, you could use some time alone but also with others."

"She's right." Maggie reached across and gently took your hand, giving you an earnest look. "I've lost a brother... And more during all this. You aren't alone. Not anymore."

"... Thanks." You exhaled deeply as you offered an empty smile. "I could really use some time around others..."

"Then it's done." Maggie gave you a sad smile, giving your hand a squeeze before releasing your hand.

"Sorry, everyone. I got busy talking with Sasha." You looked over as a young man stepped over
with a plate of food. He leaned down and kissed Maggie, causing her to smile softly, before taking a seat beside her across from you. He was of Asian ethnicity and he seemed like the cleanest guy you've met in this place so far. But then you remembered Merle's racist comments and felt your stomach drop.

He clearly said that these two hated him more than any other. Why did Merle have to go and pick fights with the nicest people?

"Hey, you must be new." The young man smiled kindly at you. "I'm Glenn, it's nice to see another life joining ours."

"I'm glad to join." You smiled back as you picked at your food. "I think this place is a blessing so far. You all seem nice and all the varying ages... It gives me hope. You guys are doing a good thing here."

"It can get hard, but... We need people. I rather have them than the dead." Glenn hesitated. "But it's hard when not all the people in the world are good."

"Completely agree with you on that one." You nodded in agreement. "You don't know who to trust anymore, that's why I'm glad I was brought to you guys."

"You were brought here? Who was with you?" Maggie asked, looking interested. You hesitated on your answer, but you knew you shouldn't skim the truth. You shouldn't be ashamed about being brought here by Merle Dixon. Maybe the others didn't like him, but the guy you spent the last couple months with wasn't a bad guy.

"I was brought here by Merle Dixon." You answered taking a bite out of your deer meat. You didn't miss the shocked expression of Maggie or the frustrated look of Glenn. You merely smiled. "I saved him with my father. If it wasn't for him, I would have run out and got myself killed by the same man who murdered my father."

You looked down to your plate and cut up some of your meat, eating a few pieces. You brought up the freshly made roll that came with the meal and took a bite, too.

"If it weren't for him, I might've opted out, too." You admitted, darkening the atmosphere even further.

"Are you really talking about Merle Dixon?" Maggie asked, sounding unsure.

"The same one missing a hand? That's the one." You looked to Carol, deciding that maybe now was a good time to change the conversation. "So, you mentioned earlier that you teach the kids around here? What kind of stuff do you teach them?"

"Oh!" Carol was caught off guard for a moment, but smiled warmly as she caught up. "Yes, I do. At the moment I'm working with kids on reading skills. Being able to read will always be important, so it's best they work on it as soon as possible."

You all listened in as Carol started talking about some of the kids. Glenn was surprised to see who had journeyed with Merle, but when he looked to Maggie for an answer, he was surprised to see her looking relieved. Maggie looked back at Glenn and gave him a soft smile, before taking his hand underneath the table. Glenn allowed himself to relax, at least just for this moment.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Time slowly ticked by in the prison, until a week had passed. ___ had settled in nicely, sticking
close to the two Dixon brothers and Carol, but also finding herself reaching out to Maggie and gaining a friendship with her. She was even starting to help out with small jobs here and there.

Merle on the other hand wasn't scolded at as much anymore, but he certainly received the cold shoulder from some of the more prominent residents. Specifically Glenn and Maggie. He did meet with the formal Woodbury residents and they were a bit standoffish, recalling that they did want him to fight to the death against his brother. So, the Dixon found his solitude with his brother or alone. Occasionally the girl would spend an hour or so with him during the day.

"Ya brought that book with ya. The one you were readin' tah me?" Merle asked, as he cleaned his knife.

"Yeah? Why?" ___ had peeked into his cell and he gave her a smirk.

"Just want tah know how it ends soon. Hope that bitch gets what's comin' to her."

But the first week was mostly for the two to settle into where they stood in the prison. ___ was seen as a valuable member, while Merle was seen as potential asset but still risky. Only time would tell where the Dixon's alliance lied.

One bright morning, Merle found himself back in the tombs, looking through a room filled with tools. His blade had been duck taped still and he recalled the girl's offer to fix it. Maybe he'd take her up on it, but he still wanted to find the tools himself. In case if it were ever to break or come loose, again. Merle looked up as he heard a thumping coming down the hallway.

The redneck almost expected a walker, but he remembered the group telling him that they got rid of the ones all inside. Merle gripped his knife, but his hold loosened as he watched the old man walk into the room.

"Geez, old timer. Almost gave me a heart attack." Merle snorted as he turned around and continued to search. "Don't tell me this is the weekly gatherin' of amputees. I don't want tah be part of the club, old man."

"We'd be missing a few members if I was holding such a thing." Hershel smiled a little, as the redneck huffed.

"Damn, there's more? And here I thought I was special."

"You haven't changed much, have you?"

"Oh, I've changed. I've changed more than you could ever know, grandpa." Merle turned around and leaned on a counter built into the wall. "I'm no longer the Governor's little puppet. I'm free as the wind, again, and ain't no way am I ever givin' it up, again."

"That might've changed, but I mean who you are. What you want. That hasn't changed." Hershel stepped in and Merle could see the prosthetic leg peaking under a roll of the man's pants.

"You think ya know me, old man?" Merle looked back up to Hershel to face him head-on.

"No, which does surprise me. You wear your heart on your sleeve, Merle. But sometimes I wonder if it's to hide other things. I wonder if your burning honesty is there to hide something else." Hershel shook his head. "But it's not my right, nor anyone else's to pry. Your the only one who could reveal such things to someone else."

"What are you getting at? Why are you here?" Merle snapped.
"I've never seen anyone defend you, but your brother. But he hardly does that anymore." Hershel smiled warmly. "But you showed up with that young woman and you wouldn't believe the way she stood up for you. I'll be honest, Merle, I don't think you're a good influence. Especially for Daryl. But I heard what you did for that girl."

"What does it matter? I did one thing fer her. Doesn't mean she needs to stand up fer me." Merle scoffed, tapping his gauntlet against the counter.

"You can't change her thoughts, Merle. But from what I can see and understand, she's not defending you because you saved her. She's defending you because she honestly thinks you're a good person," Hershel paused and Merle looked back to the old man, frowning. "She's a kind, young soul. And all I ask... Is that you look out for her."

"She's not mah responsibility." Merle spat.

"I know, and this is only a request. But you do mean something to her, Merle. It's best to keep those people close." Hershel gave a slight nod, before turning to leave.

"Where is the girl, anyhow?" Merle quickly asked.

"Out working the field." Hershel smiled and looked back. "She requested to, said she wanted some fresh air and some normal, mundane work."

"Course she did." Merle rolled his eyes. "What about the black woman I released? Michonne? Haven't seen her around. Not that I want tah."

"She went out on a run a week or so ago, she will probably be back today or tomorrow." Hershel recalled. "I'll warn her of your arrival."

"That's no fun."

"But much safer."

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You dug the shovel into the ground, plowing the earth. Most of the plowing had already been finished, aside from the row you were finishing. This next week you would be planting all sorts of plants to harvest. Tomatoes, corn, watermelons. Your mouth watered at the thought.

Sowing some seeds at the other end of the field was a pair of siblings you had met the day before. Tyreese and Sasha Williams. They both were extraordinarily kind to you and when you heard they were plowing and sowing today, you offered to help. You wanted to pull your weight around here the best you could.

"You doing alright over there, ___?" Sasha called as she straightened up having leaned over for so long, sweat rolling down her forehead.

"It's all good down here." You called back, turning up some more fresh soil.

"For a younger girl, you get the job done." Tyreese laughed heartily, impressed.

"I'm trying to build up the muscle in my arms anyways." You admitted, leaning on your shovel. "I'm a rock climber and I'd like to keep in shape in case I need to scale any steep surfaces."

"Was wondering if you knew how to use those." Sasha nodded to your ice picks. "You're full of
surprises."

As if to top your surprise, the whinnying of a horse caught all your attentions. You looked over to the gates to see a dark skinned woman riding on horseback to the prison. You noticed a sword strapped to her back and in those moments you knew there was no way you could be as cool as that woman. Not that it was a contest, but if it was, you'd gladly hand over the trophy to that woman.

"Who's that?" You asked, as you watched Rick appear from the prison and making his way down to the gates.

"That's Michonne. Probably one of the best fighters here." Tyreese answered, giving you a smile. "She's a bit hard at first, can't blame her, she been through a lot. But she's probably one of the most understanding around here."

"You trying to tell me something, Tyreese?" Sasha raised an eyebrow at her older brother, though her tone was teasing.

"Well..." Tyreese looked away, before nudging his sister. "You know what I mean."

You smiled before looking back over to the woman, as she rode through after Rick opened the gates for her. She rode past your trio and straight to the courtyard of the prison, you recalled seeing a makeshift stable there. She sounded great, you would have to introduce yourself later. You turned your mind back to the work at hand, digging your shovel into the ground.

~

The sun began to drop in the sky when you decided that it was time you turned in for the night. Your arms were aching and the thought of your bed made you hurry your steps back to the prison. As you stepped into cell block C, you weren't all too surprised to see the amazing woman from earlier there. What you were surprised by, was the scene of her holding Judith and cooing at her. Michonne looked up at your entrance and her face fell stoic, having been caught in her act.

"Hey, I haven't seen you around..." She commented slowly, eyeing you suspiciously.

"Um, I'm ___. I got here about a week ago." You answered, already feeling intimidated.

"Michonne." You both looked over to see Carl looking out of his cell, his usual sheriff hat missing. He glanced at you, before giving Michonne a nod. "She's cool."

"Alright..." Michonne nodded a little. She looked back to you stoically, shifting Judith into her other arm. "We don't usually have newcomers in this cell block. Was a little surprised to see you show up."

"Sorry, I should've been better about my approach." You apologized, rubbing your sore arm. "I just wanted to say, I can tell you're very capable. The way you rode in. I haven't seen someone so confident in this apocalypse."

"You get used to... Everything. You know? I guess I've seen so much chaos at this point... I'm not scared about heading out there." Michonne shook her head, but smiled a little as she leaned her forehead against Judith's. "But it's nice coming back home."

"Home..." You whispered the word. Is that what this place was now? Or was that what it could be to you? You blinked and looked to the ground, memories of your parents flooding back. Home...

"I guess I better be more specific." Michonne continued, noticing your drift. "This prison isn't a
home. But the people here... They're my home."

"That's where home really is, huh? Where the people you care about are." You smiled, now understanding why Merle wanted to come back so bad. The only person he cared about in this world, his brother, was his home. He had to come back, even if everyone hated him. Even if he hated everyone.

"Yeah, it is." Michonne smiled a little more, easing up around you.

"Look who decided tah show up." Michonne flinched and you looked over as Merle appeared at the top of the stairs of the cell block. He smiled and held up his disarmed gauntlet, he eyes Michonne as he began to step down. Michonne glared at him every step of the way down. Great, what did Merle do to her? "Long time no see. Miss me?"

"I did, until I heard you were alive." Michonne snapped at the man, standing her ground. "You think just because you let me go, I've forgiven you?"

"Nah, I wouldn't have forgiven myself after something like that." Merle scoffed and leaned on the railing to the stairs. "Still lookin' good. I'm guessin' the Governor never even got a scratch on ya."

"He's lucky I never got ahold of him..." Michonne growled back.

"I'm missing something." You cut in and looked to Merle directly. "What did you do to her, Merle?"

"It's nothing, sweet cheeks." Merle tried to brush off, but Michonne was having none of that.

"The Governor was working a deal. Hand me over and he'd leave the group alone." Michonne glanced at Merle. "The only ones who knew about the deal were Rick, Hershel, Daryl, and Merle. Rick knew the Governor would still continue to bother us, even if they did hand me over. But the bastard here thought we might as well sacrifice me anyway."

"Merle..." You looked back to the man in surprise. "You were going to hand her over... To that killer?"

"Tch, you women wouldn't get it. I was doin' it to protect my blood." Merle growled defensively, his eyes flitting between the both of you. "I let her go, didn't I? I was gonna go put mah own neck out and try 'n stop the Governor myself. But I crashed. Startin' to wish I could've died fighting."

Merle brushed past the both of you and out the doors, causing you to frown. He wasn't lying, you could tell. He was only handing her over to help Daryl. He was even going to sacrifice himself, until he crashed and you found him. You bit your lip and looked to Michonne.

She didn't look angry or upset, but seemed neutral. She looked back to you and you could see it in her eyes. She understood, but she wasn't ready to forgive him. She gave you a little nod, before walking over to Carl's cell with Judith. You looked back to where Merle left, your head spinning.
Monsters

Merle sat on the counter of the engine room, trying to put his gauntlet back together but having no luck. He fumbled with his left hand to hold the knife in place and screw it back into its holder. He grunted in frustration and set the tools and hex bolts aside, leaning his back against the wall. Merle doesn't usually get worked up when pointed out of his wrong doings, but the way the girl looked at him with shock after what Michonne said. He didn't like it.

He wasn't completely sure why he cared what the girl thought. Though he was afraid she'd never look at him the same, again. He might not even get a warm smile from her anymore.

Merle heard soft footsteps approach and he looked over. He was surprised to see the girl step in, a bag hung by her side. He recognized it as the one filled with her snow gear tools. She offered a half-hearted smile as she walked over to him.

"Hey, Daryl said you'd be here trying to fix your bayonet. Did you forget my offer?" set her bag of tools on the counter before bringing herself up to sit beside Merle.

"Thought maybe the offer expired..." Merle mumbled, surprised to see the girl's actions around him were the same. She took the gauntlet arm and brought it into her lap, inspecting the brand of screws and what not.

"I don't have any hex bolts like this, but if you have some I can still screw them in." She stated, as he picked up the bolts he had found and offered them to her. She smiled and pulled out her own wrench, setting it aside with the bolts. She also pulled out a screwdriver. Merle raised an eyebrow at her and she shrugged. "I saw the end of the knife was screwed into the gauntlet like this."

So, she set to work, picking up the knife and holding it in place as she screwed it's end into the side of the gauntlet to hold it in place. She began to put in the bolt as she slowed her movements to be more careful.

"I wanted to talk to you, too, Merle. What Michonne told me, I don't care about what you did in the past. I care about what you do now." paused in her work to look up at Merle. She bit her lip, but sighed and shook her head. "You won't like it, but I want you to tell me every horrible thing you've done. Because I want to prove to you that no matter how bad you think you are, my thoughts won't change about you."

"You can't promise that, sugah." Merle snorted and looked away.

"I can and I will. Merle, I've already met the worst in this world. Nothing you can say will horrify me or make me think that you're a horrible person." shook her head. "And even if you did these horrible things, you aren't doing them now."

"Why do ya want to hear it?"

"Because I don't want to hear it from someone else." stated, her voice firm. "I rather hear it from you, than anyone else."

"..." Merle bit the inside of his mouth as he looked back down at the girl. She was persistent. "You want pre-apocalypse, too?"

"If you think you did anything back then." She smiled, looking unconvinced that that might be the truth. She was wrong. Merle exhaled as he began to start from the moment he knew he was doing
something wrong. Sneaking out of the house, stealing from gas stations, getting into drugs, selling them, fights in the alley with knives, chains, guns. It was small stuff now, but it wasn't good.

As the girl worked on his bayonet, he talked about his alcoholic, abusive father. He didn't miss the girl's glance over his shoulder. He talked about how he left the house, leaving Daryl to his father's abuse. How he regretted it now.

He talked about ending up in prison, a little of his time there. He talked about being shoved into the army and he talked about how he got kicked out by attacking a higher up sergeant.

He talked about how nothing really bad happened until the apocalypse started. He was killing dead people left and right. He decided to skip over the "cutting his hand off" story, save it for another time. He talked about how he was split up from the group, how he was rescued by the Governor and his people. He talked about joining the Governor's little scouting group, just to find out it was a group of men who went out and killed other groups.

Merle swore at this point the girl would look at him with fear, but he noticed understanding in her eyes whenever she glanced up. He had to kill those people to survive, or else the Governor would've put a blade into his head. He wouldn't waste a bullet. Merle talked about the first innocent man he killed in cold blood. He talked about killing bad groups, but also killing groups made up of families.

He talked about how the Governor wouldn't try to kill groups with kids, instead inviting those ones to Woodbury. But he talked about how the Governor would pursue women at the community and how he would grow bored of them.

"He killed one of them... Only because she liked someone else." Merle closed his eyes and sighed. "She didn't deserve it damnit... But that man... He's..."

"Evil." ___ finished for him. "She got out easy... He could've done worse..."

"Yeah, wish I could've said more to her." Merle opened his eyes, looking ahead, memories of the woman pricking his brain. ___ was going to ask who the woman had liked to make the Governor kill her, but seeing the way Merle looked, she knew who it was.

Merle talked about growing to second-in-command, about how he found joy in killing the future groups. Most of them were bad anyways. He talked about hunting down Michonne, but losing her. He talked about killing a fellow soldier so he wouldn't rat on Merle. That was the only time ___ gave Merle a look that clearly said she was bothered by that. He couldn't even remember the kid's name.

He talked about coming across Glenn and Maggie, and about how he kidnapped them. He paused during these parts to see the girl's reactions.

About him beating the crap out of Glenn.

About him almost killing Glenn by siccing a walker on him.

About how he never touched Maggie, but he didn't stop the Governor from doing what he did to her.

"He didn't..." ___ trailed off, looking scared for a moment.

"He didn't rape her... But he might've if they had stayed any longer." Merle admitted, not daring to meet the girl's eyes. He talked about almost fighting his brother to the death, when the Governor
found out he hadn't killed Michonne. He talked about being off with Daryl and how he almost let a family die out on the road, if he and Daryl hadn't come in and helped them. He talked about being brought to the prison and about how he didn't try to get along with anyone. He arrived to the point where he kidnapped Michonne. "And the rest you know, since that's when you come in."

"You say you let Michonne go... What made you change your mind?" The girl asked, pausing to look up at Merle.

"... Before I left, my brother mentioned that all he wanted was, was to have his brother back." Merle set his jaw as he looked at the girl straight on. "The real Merle Dixon wouldn't hand anyone over to that freak."

"Hm." The girl smiled a little, as she finished turning the bolt, tightening the knife's position on the gauntlet. She tried to wiggle the weapon, but it held firm. ___ set aside her wrench and looked back up at Merle. "You know I think I like real Merle Dixon more than the other Merle Dixon. Which one was the one I got to know?"

"You got to know them both, darlin'. I can assure you of that." The side of Merle's mouth quirked up a bit, before he lifted his gauntlet up and jutted its blade end forward. The knife was firmly held in place, just like new. Merle whistled. "Hell yeah. You did a good job, girl."

"Thanks, I've had to tighten a lot of stuff when going up to the mountains. I was hoping I would be helpful here, too." ___ packed up all her tools and extra screws and bolts. "Tell me if it ever loosens up, again."

"Don't need to tell me twice, sugah." Merle ran a finger along the flat of his blade, not daring to look at the girl. "So, if you are scared, you should be. I told ya it would be hard to keep a promise like that."

"Well, you're wrong. It sounds like you've been through a tough life. One where you've had to be mean. Where you had to do things you didn't like." Merle felt a light peck from the girl's lips on his cheek and he looked to her in surprise. She smiled softly, before pushing off the counter and getting to her feet. "You're not bad, Merle. You've just had to do bad things."

Merle didn't try to argue or say anything, as the girl turned and left the room. He flexed his bladed arm and felt at peace for a mere moment. He didn't think the girl believed he was all good, but it was the thought that counts. No one would've given him the time of day after hearing all that, like she had.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

A week had passed after you had basically received Merle's life story. He left stuff out obviously, you still didn't know what happened to his hand, but you had gotten quite a bit of info to last you a long time. You continued to spend some time with him everyday, trying to prove to him that his past actions didn't change the way you thought about him. You had met some real monsters in this apocalypse and he was not one of them. Today you had found yourself clearing the fences with Maggie.

You held your ice picks aloft and looked for vulnerable Walker foreheads. Seeing one, you'd jab in your pick, striking the brain. You placed your foot against the fence and pushed the blade out of the walker's head. It was a slow process, but you needed to clear these guys from the fence so they wouldn't bother you later. Fortunately, they were usually spread out, not putting too much pressure on the fence.
"So, you and Glenn." You started as you stabbed another Walker in the head. You grinned at Maggie as she began to smile a little. "Was that before or after the apocalypse?"

"After. We met during all this madness. We were just 'friends with benefits' at first, but... One day, we both realized that we really loved each other. That we would fight and die for each other." Maggie answered her tone soft. "He proposed to me a little bit after we arrived here at the prison. We didn't have a big ceremony, not like what I wished when I was a little girl, but I was with Glenn and..."

"It was perfect anyways?" You finished for her.

"There's no one I rather be with. He's become strong. We both have, during all of this."

"You're definitely the happiest couple I've seen." You admitted, but then paused in your dispatching of walkers. "But now that I think about it... I haven't seen many couples in cell block C."

"Yeah, just Glenn and I in there. Beth is dating a boy in the other block, but other than that, everyone is single in our block." Maggie paused, frowning a little. "Or widowed."

"Uhuh, I could tell with that one." You thought about Rick with his son and newly born daughter. Judith was clearly born during the apocalypse, so she must have had a mother. One who was gone now.

"But we all have each other, romance isn't exactly high on any of our 'to-do' lists. Family comes first." Maggie smiled, again, and stabbed another Walker in the head with her knife.

"Yeah... It does..." Your frown deepened, as you continued to take out the few walkers hanging on the fence. Family came first. "So, how did your start in the apocalypse go, Maggie?"

"Some parts will sound crazy, but nothing went too crazy until Glenn and the others showed up at my family's farm." Maggie began before starting at the beginning of the apocalypse, the day her brother was attacked and bit by walkers, making him one. How her father, Hershel, thought maybe he was just sick and that he could be sick. And how he was horribly wrong.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle knew his silence between him and the Asian would end one day. It would appear that today was that day. Merle was storing away the wine he had found at the girl's place back in the tombs to cool them down. He also decided to check for drugs that might've been snuck away in some of these back rooms. Didn't take long for Glenn to walk in on the redneck looking for a high.

Glenn narrowed his eyes at the bigger man and his hand wandered to the knife that hung at his side. Merle was unpredictable, he would have to be careful.

"Why am I not surprised to find you doing nothing?" Glenn spat. Merle glanced over his shoulder. He did hear someone come in, but he didn't think it was his favorite Asian. Merle stood up from where he was crouched and glowered at the shorter man.

"Got a problem with that, chopsticks?" Merle growled, hoping the boy would take a hint and get out.

"Everyone's pulling their weight around here, except for you. Even that girl you brought in. She's out helping pick off walkers. What are you doing? Searching around for drugs." Glenn stood strong, not intimidated by Merle.
"Can't do much to help when you only got one hand, slot machine." Merle lifted his bladed arm to prove his point.

"You could still do stuff. Go on runs, go hunt, you could even go and pick off walkers. You have no excuse to not be helping out." Glenn argued.

"Maybe I will go hunting, but I remember the last time I went on a run with you pricks." Merle pressed his blade against Glenn's chest, causing the Korean to hold his breathe in shock. "I lost a hand... If something like that happens, again, you're the one losing a hand next."

Merle removed the bayonet's blade from Korean's chest, before exiting the room. Glenn caught his breathe as he glanced back at the redneck in hate. He was going to end up getting them all killed one day.

~

You didn't want to open up the book you were reading with Merle too soon, afraid it might reopen your healing wounds. You found it ironic, since the book was about a family getting over a death. Maybe you could take some advice from the book. Like taking the time to heal and not allowing yourself to pretend it didn't happen. Because it did and you couldn't forget that.

"She laughs. "Why won't you take anything seriously?" He lies down flat, the hat over his face. "No sense taking the questions seriously, if there aren't any answers."" You read as sat on your mattress in your cell. Merle had joined you by your side, relaxing on the nice mattress that was certainly a lot better than his prison one. He lied on his back, his arms behind his head and his eyes closed as he listened to you read. "'Con. Do you believe people are punished for the things they do?' "Punished. You mean by God?" "Yes." "I don't believe in God," he says.

"That kid thinks he's punished." Merle snorted.

"Hey, he lost his brother. Apocalypse or no apocalypse, that's hard." You elbowed Merle's side, before continuing to read. "... She turns toward him, and the ends of her hair fall lightly against his chest. "What do you believe in?" "Oh, tennis courts, wallpaper," he says, "Florsheim shoes, Miami Beach—" "Liar," she says, her arms sliding around his neck.

"You did not tell me this was a porn book." Merle peeked an eye open and chuckled when you groaned in irritation.

"It isn't! They aren't going to do anything like that! You are the most annoying person to read with." You complained, as you tried to find your place, again.

"C'mon, I must make this story even more entertaining with my commentary." Merle pushed himself up onto his elbow and glanced at the pages of the book. "We almost to the end?"

"Not if you keep interrupting me, we'll never finish this book at that rate." You sighed and finally found your place. "—you," he says, kissing her. "Liar again, but that's nice." And he squeezes her tightly, feeling the sense of calm, of peace slowly gathering, spreading itself within him. He is in touch for good, with hope, with himself, no matter what. Berger is right, the body never lies.

"Merle." You both looked over to see Rick appear at the entrance to your cell. He gave a nod to you, but his gaze went back to Merle. "We need to talk."

"Right now, officer? We just talked about how we can't have anymore interruptions while reading this book." Merle mocked you slightly, as you rolled your eyes and shoved him half heartedly.
"Get going, Dixon. You need to go talk. I need to head to bed, anyway." You waited for Merle to get up and out of the way, before you pulled back your covers. Merle sent you a wink, before following Rick out of your cell. You shook your head, as you drew your curtains closed, obscuring the outside world from your cell. You yawned and climbed into bed, setting the book to the side.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle eyed the sheriff as he took him down the cell block and into the connecting corridor. The door clicked behind them, concealing their voices. The others wouldn't be able to hear them, unless they were shouting. Merle shifted to lean on his side as he watched the broken man in front of him.

"What'd you want, huh?" Merle asked with a huff.

"Merle, you have every right to hate me with all your guts." Rick turned to face the redneck, his own jaw set. "I'm not in charge anymore."

"So, they say. But if this place were to burn to the ground, they'd look to you, again." Merle smirked a little. "That's what people do to the ones they fear. They put them in charge without a second thought."

"You're wrong."

"Who'd they put in charge instead? That old man? He couldn't lead a survival team. My brother wouldn't do it. He ain't a leader, he's a follower." Merle growled out, before he mockingly laughed. "And don't even think about putting one of them women in charge. Some of 'em may know how to shoot a gun around here, but they sure as hell don't know how to be a leader."

"Why do you underestimate everyone, Merle Dixon?"

"Please, I know you people." Merle snorted. "Don't try and tell me you're any different from what I already know... Think the only one who's a surprise around here is that mousy woman, Carol. Never thought she'd give me the shivers, but damn..."

"Look, I might not be in charge, but since Daryl supports you being here, I'm the one they're relying on to kick you out if they get tired of you." Rick spoke seriously, he even sounded regretful at the role he was shoved into. "I don't want to do that."

"Like hell you don't. You want me gone just as much as the others." Merle spat, before turning to face the wall, his anger rising. He needed to cool off before he did anything he would later regret.

"You're a human, Merle. A decent one. I rather have you on my side than anyone else's." Rick sighed, folding his arms and bowing his head. "They haven't decided on it, yet. But I wanted to warn you. Ya need to change your behavior or else they'll kick you to the curb."

"Daryl wouldn't let it happen." Merle argued. But then he saw the look on Rick's face and he knew what was really up. Merle scowled and kicked aside an empty box. "So, that's it, huh? You're scared that if I leave, my baby brother will be leaving, too. Well, you're damn right! We're a package deal, officer!"

"Then how about ___? She hasn't been around too long, but I can tell she's comfortable around you. Something I've only seen with your brother. You'd break her heart if you got yourself kicked out." Rick tried to argue.

"Why's everyone connecting her to me? She only hangs around me, because she knows me! Give 'er time and she'll make new friends and forget about me. She wouldn't blink an eye if I left." Merle
slowly sliced across a poster on the wall. "She wouldn't come running for me."

"Fine. I can't change your stubborn mind. But just don't tell me I didn't warn you. If you want to stay, you'd best start changing your attitude." Rick shot his warning, before stepping past Merle and back into the cell block. Merle wasn't just ready to go back, yet. He was gonna take his frustration out on some of the scraps here first.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

Another week passed and the group had come to trust you enough, they didn't eye your ice picks suspiciously anymore. Actually, they even began to offer to allow you to carry your derringer and father's rifle around. You didn't, but you were glad to know you could. You were allowing Rick to examine and clean up your guns, as he smiled in appreciation.

"You got some nice guns here. Haven't seen derringers since all this started. Could really come in handy." Rick commented, handing the gun back to you.

"Thanks, I only wish I was better at using the guns." You pocketed the derringer, as Rick's eyes widened.

"You don't know how to use them?"

"Oh, no! It's just... I haven't practiced enough, sometimes I fumble here or there." You rubbed your hands self-consciously. "I'm more of a person who stabs with my picks than shooting a gun."

"Hm, maybe we should get some lessons for you in." Rick suggested.

"I don't want to waste any ammo." You quickly tried to shoot down his offer, but he shook his head.

"A little practice wouldn't waste too much." Rick hesitated. "I would offer to teach you, but I'm trying to get away from guns..."

"I can find someone else." You tried to recall all the people you knew who carried around guns. You would ask Merle, but he even admitted he's lost his touch with bigger guns because of his missing hand. Maybe you could ask him about pistols or something like your derringer.

"Alright, you tell me how your progress goes. We could do with another good shooter around here. Could help with hunting." Rick gave you a little smile, before getting up and leaving the cell. You looked to the rifle that leaned against your bed and reached out, rubbing the barrel. Your dad had had this rifle before you could even remember... You were vowing to keep it always.

~

"It wouldn't be any trouble?" You asked Sasha, as she smiled warmly.

"It wouldn't be any trouble. I'm flattered you asked for my help." Sasha shouldered her rifle and exhaled. "I could use a day outside this prison, too. Would be good for an excuse. Driving out for some shooting practice."

"I'm guessing they don't like making too much noise around here. Trying not to attract walkers, right?" You inquired, seeing as how it made sense. You had enough walkers on the perimeter as it is.

"Yeah, just to be safe." Sasha shrugged lightly. "Want to head out tomorrow to practice?"
"That sounds perfect. Thanks again, Sasha." You nodded your head to her, before she headed on her way raising her hand in farewell. You relaxed your shoulders, glad to have that request out of the way.

"What you going out to practice, sweet cheeks?" You looked over to see Merle leaning against part of the fence that caged around one of the exit doors. He came around it to get closer to you after you noticed his appearance. "You ain't lesbian, so I no it ain't anything steamy."

"Gosh darnit, Merle. For a moment, I thought you genuinely cared." You scoffed with a roll of your eyes. "Sasha's taking me out for some shooting practice. I'm sort of rusty with my dad's rifle."

"Is that all? You could've asked ol' Merle to teach ya." Merle grinned as you shook your head.

"I thought about it, but you told me you weren't so good with rifles anymore." "I ain't, but that doesn't mean I couldn't teach you, darlin'." Merle brought up his one hand and rubbed his chin, his grin growing and becoming smug. "Glad you kept me in your thoughts though."

"You're something else, Dixon." You huffed, but a small smile came to your face. "If it makes you feel any better, I was gonna ask you to teach me how to use small guns. I've had my derringer forever, but I'm still wonky with it."

"Ya sure? Haven't ya heard the rumors? I'm a no-good redneck who could make this little shootin' practice into a different activity altogether." Merle joked, leaning his face closer down to yours. "People might start gettin' the wrong idea if they see us run into the woods together, alone."

"Let them think." You pressed your hand against Merle's chest, causing him to step back. "As long as I know what the truth is, that's all that matters to me."

"Their thoughts don't bother ya?"

"No, and they shouldn't bother you either." You gave Merle a small smirk, as you shoved your hands in your back pockets. "Besides, I trust you. If I had to go out to the woods while you took a bath, which was still stupid, by the way, and you didn't do anything there, I doubt you'll do anything here."

"Ya accompany me to one dip in the river and now you're all confident around me." Merle snorted in amusement. "Makes me wonder if ya peeked..."

"I'm the one with standards here, Dixon. You know I didn't peek. There's nothing down there that I want to see." You gagged to prove your point, but you didn't get the reaction you were expecting. A dark glint came to Merle's eyes.

"Trust me, girl. What's down there is better than anything you'll see from anyone else around here." Merle's expression returned to normal, as he smirked and nudged your arm. "Go get suited up for a trip. I'll take you out shooting now."

"Now?"

"Right now."
"That looks like some good targets right over there." Merle pointed out the window and you glanced out, your hands still firmly on the wheel of the car. You saw a group of walkers, spread out in the field. There was maybe ten of them and it sounded like they were going to help with your shooting practice. You turned the car and parked on the side of the road, turning off the engine.

Merle hopped out of the car and slid between the wired fence lines. One Walker was closer than the others and Merle disposed of it with a single jab of his bayonet through the Walker's face. He kicked the creature off his blade and wiped the blood off on his pants. You walked around the car, stuffing the keys in your pocket as you slid through the fence and came to stand beside Merle.

"I pity the one who has to do your laundry." You gestured to the fresh blood on his pants, as you pulled out your derringer.

"What are ya talkin' about? Yer payment for these lessons is that you get to do my laundry for the next month, sweet cheeks." Merle cackled, as he looked out at the walkers that were beginning to shamble over.

"I knew there would be a catch for your help..." You grumbled, as you turned your attention to the walkers, too. "Alright, any advice?"

"Yer little gun there ain't good for any distance shooting. It's a belly gun, basically the knife of the gun family. So, only advice I got for ya is get in close 'n don't hesitate to shoot." Merle patted you on the back, shoving you forward a little. "Well? Don't just stand there! Ya got four rounds! Go take out some biters, girl!"

"You're a horrible teacher." You called back, but you calmly approached the walkers who were making their way over. You walked up to the closest one who looked like she was originally a woman, she was very degraded her flesh was already beginning to peel off and you could see more bone. You frowned as you stopped five feet in front of her. You brought up your gun, aiming for the head. Bam!

The Walker dropped to the ground. You turned to the next Walker, stepped closer and repeated the process. Bam! You continued this with the next two walkers, relieving the world of four more of the undead.

"I don't know what the hell you were talkin' about, sugah. You shoot that thing just fine tah me." Merle clicked his tongue at you as he stepped forward. "Loot these dead ones. I'll slice up any that get close. Want tah save a couple though for the second half of practice."

"Second half?" You raised an eyebrow, but Merle didn't give you an answer. All he did was grin, before slicing off the head of a Walker that got close. He stomped its head in, as you bent down and began to rifle through the clothes of the dead walkers.

You rummaged through their pockets and got nothing, until you found a package of ammunition in the pocket of one. A bullet was missing, but ammo was ammo. You stood up and looked to Merle.

"You knew they would have something like this?" You held up the box of ammo and Merle glanced over.
"Ya never know what goodies you'll find on these geeks. It's never a bad idea tah check, unless yer on a time limit." Merle sliced another walker's head down the middle, causing old blood to spurt up as the body hit the ground. "Damn! That one was like a grape!"

"Do you have no respect for the dead?" You raised an eyebrow.

"Not when they want tah make me their lunch." Merle walked over and took the ammo package, stuffing it into his back pocket. He then removed the pistol that was shoved in the back of his pants. "Now, let's get some real trainin' in."

"You're going to teach me how to shoot that?"

"Hell yeah, what if you're completely unarmed 'n all there is is a pistol? You gotta know how to shoot it 'n know how to shoot it good." Merle shoved the gun into your hands and came around to stand behind you. "Now, what do you think you need tah do?"

You glanced back at Merle, before looking forward at the remaining walkers. Three left. You brought the pistol up, holding it with both hands. You slipped your dominant hand to rest your fingers on the trigger as you narrowed your eyes at the walkers. You carefully aimed the gun, before pulling the trigger. The shot rang out, but missed any target.

"Do it, again, sugah. I'll fix yer form this time." You did as he said, cocked the gun and positioned it, again. Merle came up to stand to the side of you. "Flatten those long fingers of yers across the guard."

You did as he said and he continued to inspect. He cocked an eyebrow and huffed.

"Girl, you're shakin' like a leaf. You need tah steady that gun with yer less-dominant hand." Merle came over and stood behind you, he rested his bayonet arm against your side as he raised up his other hand. He covered your left hand with his, steadying your hold. You noticed for the first time how much bigger his hand was then yours and then realized how close he was. He was back to chest with you and was almost holding you. Your heart sped up as he released his hand from yours. "Keep it steady."

You did and continued to look at the nearing walkers. Merle must've noticed the closeness now, too, as you heard him give a raspy chuckle.

"Not drivin' yer hormones off the wall, am I? You gotta bring yer less dominant hand's foot back a bit." He teased, before he brought one of his legs between your legs and curled it around one of your legs the one on the same side as your less dominant hand. His chest was definitely pressed into your back now. He pulled your leg back with his, before uncurling his leg and giving room between you both, again. "Bend them knees, a little."

You bent your knees slightly, your heartbeat ringing in your head.

"Keep balanced, don't want the recoil tah knock you back flat on your ass." Merle paused. "Or considering the position we're in, we don't want you knockin' into me."

You shifted on your feet and found yourself balanced at the core.

"Now aim with both the front 'n rear sight, 'n shoot."

You centered the sights on a walker that was getting close for a pistol's range and pulled the trigger. Bam! The Walker dropped to the ground in a dead heap.
"Phew! Ya blew that bastard's head off!" Merle laughed, removing his bladed arm from his side. But he didn't forget to blow some hot air into your ear, causing you to jump. He laughed harder at your reaction, bending over from his loud cackles.

"You're such a tease, Dixon!" You snapped at the man.

"Come on, sugah. No hard feelin's." Merle calmed down his laughter as he straightened up and gave you a grin. "I'm surprised I got ya all worked up."

"I've never been treated so disrespectfully."

"Disrespect? That was flirtin', sweetheart." Merle shook his head. "If anything, ya should be flattered."

"I didn't come out here to flirt with you, Merle." You countered.

"Yeah, but ya also came out with me, alone. I keep warnin' ya, girl. Can't trust, Merle Dixon." Merle winked at you before giving you a slap on the back. "I'm just messin' with ya, anyways. You know I'm not tryin' to slip into yer pants."

"You give off many mix signals..." You grumbled.

"You ain't so clear yerself, girl." Merle looked back out to the two remaining walkers. "The way ya reacted, gettin' all heated up. If I didn't know you, I would start thinkin' ya might want me to jump you."

"Yeah, that'd be crazy..." When he said it out loud like that... It was crazy. You shook your head and focused your gaze on the approaching walkers. You lifted the pistol and took aim.

~

Bam! You fired the rifle, putting down another Walker. Sasha smiled at your rapid progression, impressed by your quick learning.

"For someone who hasn't shot a rifle too much, you really learn fast." She complimented as you looked up from the gun.

"Yeah, I got some smaller gun practice in yesterday and I applied some of that training into today's training." You admitted, lowering the barrel of the gun to the ground.

"You're a born survivor that's for sure." Sasha raised her own assault rifle and shot down another Walker that approached from the woods. "I'm surprised you stick around."

"Huh?" You looked to her, surprised. Was that a threat? She noticed your expression and her own fell when she processed her words.

"I didn't mean it like you should leave! It's nice having another capable woman around to put those boys in their place. It's just... You seem like the sort to survive on their own, despite your age. Like a lone wolf." Sasha explained herself.

"I've never truly been on my own. I think I could, but it wouldn't be... It would be surviving, but it wouldn't be living." You licked your lips and looked up at the cloudless blue sky. "Anyone can survive on their own, but know one can live on their own... What's living without others? That's not living."
"You a poet, too?" Sasha grinned, as you smiled back a little.

"I like to read, maybe that has something to do with it." You shrugged a little. "But honestly, I'd go insane if I didn't have anyone to talk to."

"I guess you have a point. I like people, too." Sasha sighed, as she continued with a dramatically sad voice. "Too bad there ain't any five star men back at the prison."

"Pft!" You laughed at her comment, covering your mouth to stop your giggles.

"You're laughing, but I'm serious." Sasha watched you in amusement, as you calmed down.

"Ah... Don't get your hopes down, Sasha. Just think about it. Somewhere out in this world, your soulmate is just walking around, looking for you, too." You tried to reassure her with your sincere thoughts.

"He ain't a walker is he?"

"No! He's a kind, down-to-earth guy. Your paths will cross and maybe you won't see it at first, but you'll come to love him." Maybe you were stretching a bit there, but you were a bit of an optimist when it came to other people's love. When it came to your own... It was nearly non-existent.

"Sounds nice." Sasha searched your eyes for a moment. "When'd you hear about something like that? Thinking about how the one you love is really out there? Living and breathing and waiting to run into you?"

"My mom told me about that, because it's true." You smiled as you thought about your mom.

When she sat down with you on the sidewalk to draw chalk drawings with you. You remember how she teased you, saying the guy you were gonna marry was out in the world right at the moment. He was alive and living a life of his own, and you could only guess what his life could've been like. What scared you was that maybe one of these many walkers was your love, but you found him too late...

"Your man is out there, too, ___." Sasha spoke up and you looked to her.

"You think so?"

"Your guy has to be as strong as you are. No way is he letting the apocalypse stop him from getting to you." Sasha smiled warmly at you, before elbowing your side lightly. "Let's shoot up a couple more walkers before heading back."

"Yeah, okay." You smiled and brought your gun back up, scanning the line of trees for walkers. Your guy might really be out there in this messed up world. Made you wonder what he could be doing now,

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle snored as he took a deep nap on the girl's mattress. She was really a doll to let him take naps there during the day. He had been sleeping for an hour or so, when his younger brother appeared at the entrance of the cell. Daryl raised an eyebrow at his older brother, before stepping over.

"What the hell, Merle. Get up." Daryl snapped, raising his voice. Merle grumbled and turned onto his side. Daryl huffed in irritation, before grabbing ahold of the back of his brother's shirt and tugging him to the edge of the bed. Merle turned to see what was going on, but scrambled to grab
the bed before his lower half hit the cold hard cell ground. Merle cursed as he glared up at Daryl.

"Ya gotta be shittin' me. Get the hell out, Darylina. I need mah beauty sleep." Merle pulled himself back onto the bed, rubbing his side that hit the floor.

"What are ya doin' sleepin' in that girl's bed anyway?"

"We made a deal. She gets tah keep the mattress and if I'm ever tired durin' the day, I get to nap on it. Seems fair tah me." Merle rolled his shoulders and looked over Daryl. "What'd ya want?"

"I was out checkin' some of the traps. It ain't abnormal tah see signs of deer, but... I noticed a lot more deer tracks today than any other day. I was thinkin', you and I, we should go out next week and spend a week tracking 'em down. Bring back a buck or two." Daryl suggested.

"Just like our old campin' trips back in the mountains, huh?" Merle grinned, before getting to his feet. "Let's see what the old man has tah say about this idea."

~

Week five at the prison...

"Ya know, I don't usually mind ya, old man. Ya got some good morals, beliefs. You can shoot a gun better than all the rookies. But this idea is awful." Merle followed the old man around, as Hershel went about his business.

"She has proven herself capable with a gun. But shooting a walker and shooting a human is two different things entirely. A walker will walk right into your gun fire, while a living person will think and try to avoid it." Hershel gave Merle a warm smile as he stopped at an exit door. "A hunting trip can help hone her skills. If she can shoot an animal, she can shoot a human."

"But she doesn't know what she's doin'. Do ya want her tah scare off all the game?" Merle huffed. "This is a joke. It's gotta be."

"Tell you what." Hershel scratched the top of his head with a sigh. "Take her on the trip and if she ends up scaring away all the game, you and Daryl can take a second day to yourselves to hunt."

"You willin' to risk that much time without us?" Merle folded his arms, being careful of his blade. "More specifically, mah brother?"

"We can probably survive two days without Daryl and Merle Dixon." Hershel chuckled lightly. "Get some rest, you'll need to set off at dawn tomorrow."

Merle waved off the old man's concerns, as he turned around and made his way back into the cell block. He heard Hershel exit the building as he made his way up the stairs to his cell. Merle stepped into his cell and began to inspect the contents of his hunting pack, making sure everything was together. He heard light footsteps and looked over to find the girl standing at the entrance to his cell.

"Hey, I was thinking about it and since you're going on this big trip tomorrow, you should get the mattress tonight. You need it more than I do if you're going out all day tomorrow." The girl offered.

"Didn't ya hear? Old Man Peg-Leg wants you tah come with us, girl." Merle raised an eyebrow. "Didn't he tell ya?"
"He said he thought it was a good idea. I didn't think he'd actually send me out..." ___ frowned, before looking to Merle with furrowed brows. "I won't be any trouble, will I? I don't want to intrude."

Merle really did think she was going to get in the way, but he remembered Hershel's offer of a second day. Then he saw how the girl looked, guilty and self-conscious. He also remembered her offer of a nice mattress for the night.

"Ya want honesty, sugah? I rather have ya tailin' us than any other bitch 'round here." Merle sat down on his bed.

"You really know how to flatter a girl, Merle." ___ rolled her eyes, but smiled a little. "I promise to try and keep up, and keep quiet."

"Too bad. I'd like to cause ya to make some noise." Merle rolled his jaw before smirking at the girl. He never ceased to shock her with his comments, but she always seemed to get over them quick. Her eyes had widened in surprise, but she just as quickly sighed and shook her head.

"I swear, Merle." ___ sent one last tired smile. "Sleep well, Dixon."

"You, too, sweet cheeks." Merle sent the girl a nod as she turned and left. He still didn't like thinking about her with them during the hunt, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad. She was a mountaineer after all.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

The warm morning rays of the sun peeked through the trees, as you and the Dixon brothers quietly tread through the woods. Daryl moved in front of you, his steps completely silent, as his gaze seemed to pierce the forest. Merle strolled behind you, he quieted his own steps but he wasn't fully focus on the hunt like his brother was. You walked between the brothers, your ice picks in hand as you listened for any signs of others in the forest.

"There's some tracks." Daryl called back though his voice was low to not scare off game that might be in the distance. He gestured ahead and the three of you stopped to examine the tracks.

"Damn, these tracks go in all sorts of directions. Can't tell what's fresh or not." Merle cursed as he looked through the trees. "Could be anywhere."

"Huh..." You knelt down and felt around the tracks. Most of them were hardened, but you found a pair of tracks where the ground was still soft. They were fresh. You pointed in the direction they were headed. "These tracks are fresh, I think they might've went this way."

"We don't need 'I thinks' right now. We need 'I knows'." Merle scoffed, but Daryl stepped in the direction you point at. "What are ya doin', brother?"

Daryl ignored Merle's question as he brushed his hands along the bark of a tree. The tree had slashes in it, like a buck had marked the tree. He stepped up to a tree that was further ahead and noticed something sticking up from the bark. When he removed the substance, he found it to be deer hair, probably from one brushing against the bark.

"She's right." Daryl released the hair and looked back to the other two. "Bucks been markin' its territory. They have tah be up ahead."

Daryl turned and began to follow the trail. You sent Merle a smirk as he only looked back at you unamused, before following his brother. You laughed silently to yourself as you tailed behind.
You all walked for a while longer in silence, until Daryl motioned back at you two to silently approach. You did so and looked through the trees into a wheat field. You didn't see them at first, but you slowly spotted the small blurs of brown ducked down in the wheat, eating. Merle licked his lips as he dropped down and removed the rifle from his back, beginning to set it up over a fallen log.

"How many are we gonna catch?" Merle asked. "Cause once I shoot this mother off, they're all runnin'."

"I'll pick off some of the strays." Daryl said, hushed as he began to move silently across the tree line. "You two stay here and keep watch of the herd, I'll send ya a signal once I pick off all the strays I can find."

"What kind of signal?" Merle looked to Daryl expectantly. The younger Dixon rolled his eyes, as he began to unstrap his crossbow from his back.

"An owl. You'll know it's me when ya hear it." Daryl disappeared into the woods, leaving you with Merle.

"Anything you need me to do?" You asked as you knelt down beside Merle, who had situated himself into a sniping position, lying his body low to the ground.

"Just stand there 'n look pretty, darlin'." Merle chuckled as you shook your head.

"I'm being serious."

"I'm bein' serious. Ya can't do much right now, girl. If ya shoot that rifle, you'll scare off all the game. I've been shootin' longer than you've been alive, so it'd be smarter for me tah be the one who takes the shot than you." Merle scoffed lightly as he lowered his head to take aim with his game. You frowned, before beginning to set up your own sniping spot a few feet from Merle. "What the hell are ya doin' now?"

"You get the first shot, that's only fair. But I'm taking aim at a different buck. I'll fire right after you do and see if I get lucky." You explained as you got down and began to search out the field for potential bucks.

"It's gonna be a waste of a bullet."

"I'll find more." You argued back as you steadied your breathing.

Moments ticked by as you kept your eyes out on the field with the small herd. You noticed one deer at the edge of the forest drop to the ground with a gentle thud. He was far enough away, the rest of the herd didn't notice and you knew it was Daryl's doing. Seconds ticked by, until you heard a sound that resembled the hoot of an owl echo through the trees.

Merle grinned as he steadied his aim on a big buck. You followed his lead, taking aim at your own buck. Yours was just barely growing in his antlers.

There was a click and the big buck went down, startling the other deer. They began to bolt and you took your shot. The buck you aimed at cried out and crashed to the ground.

You got up with Merle and entered into the clearing, as Daryl entered in from the side. The younger Dixon Walker up to your kill.

"Ya got this one, ___?" Daryl asked as he unsheathed his knife and knealt down. You approached
and noticed why, you had only shot the creature in the leg. Daryl quickly put it out of its misery.

"Yeah, that was me." You admitted, strapping your gun across your back.

"How many of 'em do we got?" Merle asked, as he examined his large kill.

"Two bucks and a doe." Daryl nodded to the doe he had killed. He then looked to you. "Your kill was the smallest, you gonna be able to carry that back?"

"I'll get it." You waved off Daryl's worry and knelt down, heaving up the buck onto your shoulders. He was heavy, but you'd manage. Daryl helped Merle get his own kill across his back, since the latter was missing an extra hand to do so himself. Daryl then easily got the doe around his shoulders as he nodded back in the direction of the prison.

"We made a killin' today, best we head back." Daryl began to lead the way back through the forest, you and Merle following behind him.

"We setting up some more traps after we get these back, Daryl?" You asked as Merle came up to walk by your side.

"Yeah, you said ya had some traps you wanted to set up?"

"I did." You smiled a little to yourself, as Merle cleared his throat. You looked to the man with a quirked eyebrow.

"Ya proved me wrong today, girl. I really didn't think you'd be this helpful." Merle nodded to the animal limp against your back. "Ya even managed yourself a kill."

"I went rabbit hunting with my friends a lot back in college. First time I managed a deer, but I'm no stranger to hunting." You admitted.

"That why ya could track them down?"

"Yeah, I think I prefer doing it in the winter though. Easier to track them." You sighed lightly. "I'm not mad at you for doubting me, Merle. I wasn't sure if I'd keep up either."

"What made ya doubt yerself?" Merle raised his own eyebrow.

"You're a lot more capable than I am, Merle. And I heard Daryl was the best Hunter anyone's ever seen. I wasn't sure if I could hold my own compared to you both." You gestured to Merle's missing arm. "You hit straighter with a missing arm, than I can with both."

"Ya haven't had the decades of experience that I've had, sugah." Merle nudged your shoulder with his elbow. "Ya gonna show those bitches back at the prison that you can kick ass. They'll have tah step up their game."

"I'm not in this to brag, Merle." You chuckled lightly at his comment.

"That's a shame. Ya look sexy with that gun on yer back 'n that deer around yer neck. Look like a feral dominatrix." Merle sent you a sickly grin as you gagged.

"Gosh, the moment I think I know how you work, Dixon, you go and prove me wrong..." You shook you head, trying to rid your imagination of the disgusting imagery that came with Merle's words.

"No one knows how mah head works, sweetheart. Better that way."
You both continued to chat as you walked, Daryl ignoring your chatter to listen to the sounds of the forest. Lucky for the three of you, the day was going to be filled with peace. When you arrived at the prison, it would be filled with praise.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're liking the story so far. I appreciate any feedback that you guys can give me.
Funny Fact: I started working on this story back in September and back then there was little to no Merle X Reader fics. The moment I start uploading this series, suddenly there are frequent uploads of them. Where were these back in Fall when I was in my writing slumps?
Nevertheless, I am glad to see more Merle Dixon X Reader fan fics. Just wish there was less explicit ones. I rather have a good story with slow burn, than the same boring sex scene over and over.
Taking the Bullet

Merle licked his fingers as he made his way through the cell block. Daryl and ___ had gone out to set up traps in the forest and the nearby river. Merle busied himself in their absence by deciding to explore the tombs. As he made his way to the tomb doors, they suddenly swung open, slamming into Merle. The redneck stumbled back in shock, as the pain registered and struck through him.

Merle's chest flared in pain and he was reminded of the car accident. Damn, he hope nothing was broken.

"Holy shit! I'm sorry, man!" Merle looked up to see the black man Daryl had pointed out when he arrived back. Tyreese? Reminded him of that bastard T-Dog from the beginning. Merle rubbed his sore face as he glared at the black man. He wasn't intimidated by his height.

"Yer gonna be sorry, prick." Merle growled out, before lifting his leg and shoving his foot out. The black man reeled backwards as he was kicked in the chest, nearly losing his footing. Merle stepped into the tombs after the man, his rage rising as he jabbed at him. Tyreese ducked his head out of the way of the blade, before throwing a fist forward and nailing Merle across the jaw. The redneck reeled as he felt blood begin to fill his mouth.

This bastard was a dead man. Merle spat some blood out of his mouth, as he brought his hand back to slash at the man. The sound of a click halted his movements as he heard the tomb doors behind him close, again.

"I'm about to put a bullet in your leg if you don't lower that arm and step away from him." A woman's voice hissed. Merle huffed, before he lowered his bayonet and turned to look at the woman. It was the same one who had taken the girl out for shooting. She must've been the sister of this punk that Merle was about to disembowel. The woman held up a rifle and, true to her word, she was aiming at Merle's thighs.

"Fine, didn't want tah dirty mah blade with his blood anyway." Merle taunted. Now that his anger was fading, Merle did realize the mistake he almost made. He did want to kill this man, but that would risk him getting kicked out for good.

"The others will hear about this." The woman continued. "Don't think that either of us will turn a blind eye to this."

"Go on, tell everyone. Mah reputation here is shit already. Another sin added tah my list won't surprise 'em." Merle eyed the gun that still hadn't been lowered. "So, yer baby sister has to fight yer battles for ya. What a pussy."

"Get the hell out of here, before I change my mind about shooting you." The woman growled out as she glared at Merle. The redneck merely shrugged with a chuckle, before making his way past the woman and out the doors. Merle entered back into the cell block and felt the slight fear he had diminish. He wasn't too sure if that girl would shoot or not. She could've and most everyone wouldn't have cared.

She could've gotten away with it.

Merle made his way up the stairs to his cell and collapsed on his bed. The Dixon was really beginning to realize the seriousness of his situation. Back in Woodbury, no one could even give him a strange look without receiving consequences. But here... He had no power here. He could be
cut up, shot at, even killed, and no one would blink an eye.

He needed to change that.

The redneck lied in bed, trying to think up ways of how he could move up in the group. He knew he would have to start making nice with some of the members. His brother couldn't always save him. Merle also supposed he would have to start helping around here, too. Where to begin...

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"When I said I wanted tah help out, this is not what I meant." Merle spoke to his brother, glancing over at the Asian man. "And of all people tah send me out with..."

"That wasn't mah choice and I thought it was stupid, too." Daryl grumbled, before stopping his pace to speak with his brother. "Look, ___'s goin' with you. I suggested that, since she can keep an eye on the both of ya. Glenn won't try to rile ya up if she's there."

"What's stoppin' him?" Merle rolled his eyes. "Why couldn't ya have gone with?"

"I promised Carol some more shootin' lessons today." Merle gave Daryl a suggestive look, as the younger brother looked away in embarrassment. "It's not what ya think, idiot."

"Don't let me stop yer love makin', brother." Merle made some kissy faces, before cackling. "Man, ya make it so easy."

"Just don't talk tah Glenn unless you have tah, alright? Everything will go fine otherwise."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. At least this isn't a week long run..."

"Good job lookin' on the bright side." Daryl rolled his eyes, before patting his brother on the back and leaving. "Good luck."

Merle sighed and looked back over to the Asian man who seemed just about finished loading the truck with boxes to fill with scavenged items. Glenn hopped out of the trunk and brushed off his hands as he looked to Merle. He frowned, but knew he shouldn't start a fight.

"Is ___ here, yet?" Glenn asked.

"Ya have eyes, don't ya? Course she's not here, yet." Merle scoffed, before looking over as the prison doors clicked open. The girl came running out, her ice picks at her side and her derringer peeking from her pocket.

"Sorry I took so long. One of my picks went missing." ___ smiled as she nudged Glenn's arm. "Your wife thought it would be funny to see me scramble about looking for it."

"Of course she would." Glenn shook his head as a small smile grew on his face. "Forgive her, she likes having you around. Said you make her feel like she's hanging out with one of her old friends, again."

"Tell her I feel the same. It's nice being around someone my age, again."

"We ready tah go, yet?" Merle piped up in irritation. He wasn't sure what it was, but he didn't like seeing the girl so buddy-buddy with the Asian kid. It wasn't jealousy, but Merle knew how Glenn worked. He knew he was probably trying to manipulate the girl into his way of thinking. Merle was no saint, he had already sort of done the same thing.
But the last thing he needed was the girl giving him cross looks all the time.

"Yeah, he's right. We need to get going." Glenn opened the back door for ___, who smiled graciously before climbing in. Glenn closed the door behind her, before heading around the front of the car to get to the driver's seat. Merle huffed as he walked over to climb into the passenger's seat, already done with this day.

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A high school. Merle could smell the sweat and anxiety already. He never liked this place and he wasn't happy to be back. Lucky for him, it wasn't HIS high school. The prison was starting to sound nice now.

The group pulled up to the school and parked outside, before getting out of the vehicle. Glenn walked up and tried the front doors, finding them locked.

"What do we need from this shit place anyhow?" Merle asked, glaring at the building.

"It's untouched, it doesn't look like anyone's scavenged here before. Who knows what could be in there." Glenn answered, trying to peer through the windows.

"I'll tell ya what's in there, a bunch of teenage biters filled with rotting meat and angst." Merle scoffed. "This whole run is a joke."

"Do you have any better suggestions?"

"Don't scavenge a school. Yer welcome."

"Come on, you two." ___ cut in as she stepped forward. "Glenn's right. If it hasn't been scavenged, some good stuff could be in there. The cafeteria? The nurse's office?"

"Hmph... You're a lot more convincin' than chopsticks here." Merle relaxed his shoulders as he began to make his way around the side of the school. Glenn rolled his eyes, but followed after the Dixon with ___. They came to a single side door, where Merle tried it. One strong pull and the door swung open, allowing entrance into the building. Merle led the way in as the two entered in behind him, checking the darkened hall.

The group heard the sound of scraping down the hall and knew that walkers had to be about. Merle walked up to a locker and tapped his prosthetic against it loudly.

"Come 'n get some dinner, skinheads!" Merle shouted.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Glenn hissed, trying to keep his voice down. Though it was apparent his efforts didn't mean anything, they all were beginning to hear grunts and groans coming their way.

"I'm not gettin' attacked in the dark, slot machine. I'm lurin' them to the light, so I can slice their heads open without squintin'." Merle rolled his eyes. "Is this yer first run?"

"You wish." Glenn unhooked the gator pro from his side, holding it aloft in his hands. ___ removed her picks from her sides and watched through the darkness. Soon enough, walkers began to step into the light making them easy picking. Merle sliced a head open as the three easily cut down the walkers that made their way over.

Glenn finished off the last one and they all listened for a sign of anymore. Complete silence. Merle
wiped his blood off on one of the walker's torn shirts, before beginning to loot the corpses.

"Told ya, I know what I'm doin'," Merle mocked, as he went from body to body. Glenn frowned and didn't say a word, not wanting to feed the redneck's ego.

"Did we bring any sort of light?" ___ asked, lowering her picks.

"Hold on..." Glenn removed his backpack off his back and carefully removed a lantern from its confines. He pulled out a matchbox and quickly lit the lantern, illuminating the area. "We didn't want to waste our batteries, so..."

"It will work." Merle stood up. "Damn teens, didn't have anything good."

"Let's go. We should check all the rooms we can, there could be small things that could help out." ___ stepped ahead as the men glanced at each other before following after her.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

The classrooms didn't provide a lot of help. They found a candy bar or two (which did begin to add up), gum, tic-tacs, and feminine products. The men didn't need to question why you were stocking up on those. You had come to an art classroom and after admiring some of the leftover art, you began to pile supplies into your bag.

"Ya secretly an artist or something?" Merle raised an eyebrow at your actions.

"Not for me, for the kids." You admitted, grabbing left behind sketch pads, boxes of charcoal, anything small that you could smuggle out. "Give them something to do."

"Yer such a softy."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

You all found the cafeteria and after clearing out a few more walkers, you made it to the kitchen. Everything was spoiled in the fridges, but in the back storage room, you found preserved foods. Heat-and-go type stuff. There was about four large boxes full of the stuff. You looked incredulous at the cookable turkey and potatoes meal.

"Alright, darlin'. Ya watch our backs. Chinese kid 'n I will make two trips with these out as you protect us." Merle stepped forward, but stopped as you grabbed his elbow.

"I think you're forgetting something." You tapped his metal gauntlet, causing him to frown. You released his elbow and stepped over to one of the large boxes, hooking your bloodied picks to your side. "I'll help carry a box for the two trips. Oh, and he's Korean."

You heard Merle grumble as you and Glenn bent down and heaved up each your own giant box of food. Merle didn't argue as he followed behind you both, poised to cut down any walkers who might try to interrupt your journey back outside. Once back out into the open air, Merle made his way to the front of the school and drove the truck back around to the side where you were at. You packed the trunk.

"That's trip one." You smiled and stretched your arms. "Let's go get the rest."

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle handed ___ over a couple more first aid kits, that she strapped across her chest. The three
had found the nurse's office and it was loaded with basic medical supplies. The girl smiled at Merle, as she patted the kits.

"I'll run out with these. See if you and Glenn can find anything else useful in here." The girl requested, before turning and exiting the room. Merle watched the girl go, his eyes having travelled down to her legs. Those were new pants, right? He had never seen pants that tight on the girl before...

"Don't look at her like she's a piece of meat." Merle was broke out of his thoughts by Glenn and as he glanced at the Asian, he found him glaring at the redneck. Merle rolled his jaw as he turned to face Glenn.

"Ya don't know what you're talkin' about, chopsticks." Merle tapped his knife against the metal table. "If ya got any brains left in yer head, I suggest you shut yer mouth."

"Fine, but leave her alone, Merle. She's a good, young lady. She doesn't deserve to get hurt by someone like you." Glenn frowned, before he reached up and opened the cupboards above. He didn't get long to look, before he was suddenly slammed back into the wall behind him. Merle gripped Glenn by the throat with his one hand, pressing him against the wall. Glenn struggled in Merle's grip, but halted his movements as Merle brought his bayonet up. Merle pressed the flat of his blade against Glenn's cheek as he leered at him.

"Told ya tah shut up, didn't I? Maybe it's 'bout time I cut your tongue out. Guess no more Frenchin' with the wife anymore, boy..." Merle growled out, as he cut off Glenn's oxygen for a moment. He released him for air after a minute as Glenn gasped and sputtered. Glenn kept his eyes on the redneck as his hand lowered to the pistol shoved in his back pocket. "Open yer mouth, boy. Ya don't need that tongue anymore."

Glenn turned his head away as his grip came around his Colt. Merle growled, as he forcibly brought Glenn back to face him with the he side of his knife.

"It's either the tongue or I start tah cut yer face up, your choice!" Merle shouted. Glenn just spat into Merle's face, finally bringing the redneck over the edge. Merle growled in anger as he brought his knife back, ready to impale this Asian kid.

"Merle!" The redneck froze, before looking back to see ___ in the doorway to the nurse's office. She looked horrified as she looked between the two, but she didn't run. Instead she stepped forward, as she looked directly to Merle, their eyes locking. "Merle, let him go."

"..." Merle stared back at the girl, as his anger slowly began to ebb away.

"Merle, please." ___ took another step forward. "Whatever you two were fighting about, it isn't worth killing each other over."

"..." Merle sighed, before he looked back to Glenn and released him. The Korean man gasped and backed up, bringing up a hand to rub his redden neck. Merle looked back at the girl, glad she had showed up. So much for trying to gain trust in the group... "I let mah anger take control of me."

"I sort of suspected. I'm still not happy with you, but I know you can work on it." ___ exhaled, a small smile coming to her face. Merle stepped forward to talk to the girl, but her relaxed expression became fearful in seconds. "No!"

Before Merle could open his mouth to ask what was up, ___ rushed past him. The redneck turned in time to hear the ringing of gunfire and for the girl to shriek, collapsing to the ground. Glenn
lowered his pistol in horror as he watched the girl drop to the floor. ___ rolled onto their side and held her leg, the leg of her pants beginning to turn a dark burgundy color. Merle quickly processed what happened.

Glenn was going to shoot Merle, but ___ had run in. She hit down the gun, but Glenn still fired. She was either grazed in the leg by the bullet or he shot the bullet into her leg. Either way, Merle dropped to the ground and carefully scooped the girl up into his arms, being careful with his knife. The girl cried out in pain from being moved, as blood began to leak through her fingers.

"We're leavin' now." Merle ordered, sending a sharp look Glenn's way. "We need tah get her back and patched up."

"I-I d-didn't mean... That bullet was m-meant for you." Glenn stuttered, as his hands shook slightly. He couldn't believe what he might've just done.

"I don't give a damn who that bullet was for! She needs help, dumbass! Let's go now!" Merle roared. Glenn nodded and the two men rushed out, ___ being carried away with them. Merle held tighter onto the girl, as they burst out of the school and into the light.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

The pain was like a hot flash and it continued to sting the same after that. After Merle had gotten you into the truck, he checked to see if the bullet had gotten into your leg. You all were relieved to see it was just a graze. Didn't make you feel much better though.

The drive felt like it took forever as you did your best to keep pressure on the wound. The pain was driving you insane and you bit the inside of your cheek, drawing blood, to try and distract from your pain. But you finally made it back, Merle being quick to carry you out and into the prison.

People were quick to notice the commotion and familiar faces passed you by in blurs. They were asking what happened, why you were hurt, was it bad. You didn't answer anyone as you couldn't focus. Soon enough, you were lied down on a mattress that was set up for injuries like this. Hershel's face came into view and after some comforting words, he began to work on fixing you up.

You listened to what he said, but his words melded together. It didn't take you long to pass out from shock.

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When you woke up, again, you found yourself on your nice, soft mattress. The cell block was dark, indicating that night had fallen. You sighed and buried your face into your pillow, as you felt the slight sting from the wound on your leg. It didn't even feel like you fell asleep, so all your memories were fresh in your mind.

Glenn had tried to kill Merle, but you stopped him.

As you turned to lie on your side, you noticed a shift in the darkness. You squinted your eyes, looking into the dark, noticing a person sat back in the chair you had set up in the room. You tried to make out who they were, but they answered that for you.

"Sugah...? You awake?" Merle's voice was raspy and dry, he must've been asleep until he heard your rustling about.

"Yeah... What are you doing here, Merle?" You asked softly. You heard a scratching sound and
suddenly a match was lit in front of you. Merle lit one of the candles on your desk, illuminating the room. He waved the match, diminishing its flame as he brought the chair closer to your bed.

"The old man needed someone tah keep an eye on ya, make sure ya didn't get a fever or whatever. He also wanted someone here tah check on ya when you woke up." Merle frowned as you saw his eyes go to your leg. You looked to find half your pant leg cut away and a bandage wrapped around your thigh. You touched the bandage, frowning yourself. "Yer damn lucky that it was just a graze."

"I was scared about that..." You sighed and leaned your head against the cold, prison wall. "What happened after all that?"

"Everyone worried about ya. Weren't happy when they heard why ya got shot..." "You told them." You looked to Merle, surprised. "You told them everything that happened."

"Glenn 'n I told our share, we didn't leave a thing out." Merle admitted as he rubbed the back of his neck. "We're both in deep shit. Mostly me, but what's new?"

"So, why'd you volunteer to watch me?" You asked, turning in your bed to face the man better. You flinched a little as a sting was sent up your leg from the graze.

"Wanted to talk tah you." Merle watched your eyes for a moment, before shaking his head. "Why the hell did ya do it? Why did ya take that bullet?"

"You're kidding, right?" You were incredulous. Could the guy be this dense? "Merle, you're my friend. I wasn't gonna let him shoot you!"

"I about killed that Chinese kid! Makes sense tah me," Merle growled back.

"But you didn't kill him. Look, you shouldn't be asking why I did it. I did it, you can't change that now. I was trying not to get shot in the leg, but beggars can't be choosers." You reached out and placed a hand on Merle's knee. "Not everyone hates you. Maybe I hate what you do, but I don't hate you."

"..." Merle glared at you, the candle lighting his eyes in an intimidating way. "One second earlier, he would have shot ya in the head. Ya think I want that? Think yer doin' me a favor there?"

"I wasn't thinking when it happened, Merle." You sighed and retracted your hand, sliding down back into your bed. You rested your head on your pillow as you continued to look at Merle. "I'm sorry if I worried you."

"Worried me?" Merle scoffed, as he rose to his feet. "You don't mean a damn tah me, girl. I just don't need yer blood on my hands."

You were shocked at Merle's harsh words and didn't respond. Your heart clenched, you felt embarrassed and hurt at the same time. But this was Merle Dixon, really, what were you expecting? Merle's form made its way out and stopped in your doorway. He grabbed one of the cell bars with his one hand, glancing back at you before turning and leaving.

You shifted to get more comfortable in bed as you tried to diminish your thoughts of Merle's words. They seemed to be burnt into your memory and it took a while for you to shake it off and get some sleep.

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That next morning, the first person to greet you stood outside of your cell. Glenn was leaning against the wall between cells. When he saw you step out, limping slightly, he frowned and stepped forward making himself known.

"...Christ, I'm sorry." The Korean apologized to you, as he looked to the ground in guilt. "I feel awful. That's not what I wanted to happen... I made a mistake..."

"What did you want to happen?" You asked, glancing over Glenn. "You wanted Merle dead, as far as I can see."

"That was my mistake. I was just so done with him and... If you weren't there he would've killed me. You and Daryl won't always be there to calm him down, ... I was just thinking..." Glenn shook his head and closed his eyes. "It wasn't right, to try and kill him. I'm turning into the monsters that we're trying to avoid."

"We've all thought that way before, Glenn." You frowned. "My father wanted to kill Merle so bad... Everyday he saw him as a hindrance, a danger. But then one day he realized that Merle wasn't so bad and that he could help."

You sighed and ran a hand through your hair. Glenn did look like he was genuinely sorry and he did seem to regret trying to kill Merle.

"I think Merle still needs time to show everyone who he really is." You remembered Merle's harsh words from last night and you looked away in pain. "He's not the nicest guy... But he's been hurt, like all of us."

You brushed past Glenn, but stopped as you remembered why the man was there.

"And don't worry, Glenn. I'm not mad at you." You sent him a small smile as you made your way down the stairs. "Just don't do it, again."

"I promise, I won't." The man sent you a small smile back, as he seemed slightly relieved.

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Even after a week of healing, the group hadn't allowed you to go out. They feared that something could go wrong and they rather wait until your completely healed. But since it was a graze, you were healing up fast. You sat in Hershel's cell as he inspected your scab of the graze.

"You won't be needing bandages anymore." Hershel smiled softly as he sat back in his chair. You stopped staring at his prosthetic that interested you beyond belief. This was a tough, old man, that's for sure. You were grateful to have him around, even if he did remind you of your father...

"That's good, get some blood flowing more." You smiled a little. "Think they'll finally let me out of this cage?"

"I don't see why not. But if they don't, remember there's much to do around here, too." Hershel noted as he got to his feet. "I heard Carol needed an extra hand with cooking tonight, she could use your help."

"You don't even know if I can cook, Hershel." You pointed out.

"You know how to fish and track animals, I have a feeling you know how to at least cook meats." Hershel noted himself. "Though you're right, I have not a clue of your baking skills."
"They could use some work." You admitted, as you got to your own feet. "Thanks, Hershel. I guess I'll check in with Carol."
"Alright, taste it." You offered Carol the fork that had a piece of the fish's meat on it. You had gone out with Daryl to check your nets and to your delight, they were filled with perch. You recalled the way Merle had cooked the bass back at the old house, but you decided to rely on what you already knew about cooking. So, you wrapped the fish up in banana leaves, coming from an unopened bag since the others weren't sure what to use the leaves for. You placed the fish in the grill's fire that Carol helped make and cooked them.

Carol took the offered fork now, trying the finished fish. Her face lit up and she looked to you incredulous.

"It's delicious and it's even got a little banana taste!" She exclaimed.

"That's what the leaves are for." You smiled a little. "Think the others would like them?"

"Do we have enough fish for forty people?" Carol asked.

"With the two nets we hauled in? We should have enough."

"I'll help you make them, you'll have to guide me through it though. I don't remember everything from that first run." Carol straightened out her shirt and walked over with you to the cooler full of fresh fish. You picked out two of the perch and handed one to her.

"The first thing you want to do is gut them." You picked up a knife and got to work, Carol following your lead.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle noticed the girl finally walking about a lot more after her injury. Everyone was coddling her, but he just did his best to avoid the situation. She no doubt hated him after that last confrontation. So much for gratitude, she must be thinking. She saved his life and he spat in her face.

It's not that he wasn't grateful. He does prefer being alive. But he wasn't one to go around and give "Thanks" to everyone who saves his skin. That and what she did was stupid, there was no questioning that.

Merle sharpened the blade of his bayonet, trying to find some way to bide his time. After that run, the group hadn't even allowed him out to hunt. So, he was wasting away inside this prison, not seeing anywhere he could be useful and enjoy his time. He doesn't do laundry or cooking or cleaning. Those were women jobs and he wasn't about to stoop so low.

Made him wish that girl would find time for him, again. Daryl was busy for most of the day, since he was a "valued member of the group". Merle was both happy and angry for his brother. He found a purpose that made him happy, but it was with a bunch of pricks.

But if that girl went out of her way, again, Merle could talk with someone else in his free time. Or finish that damn book already. This was an easy situation to fix, all Merle had to do was apologize. But apologizing was harder than giving thanks. So, until it drove him mad, Merle was holding his ground and waiting for the girl to come to him.
The redneck heard the door to the cell block open and click close, as footsteps approached the stairs. Merle was sat at his brother's "nest", sharpening his blade with his brother's knife sharpener. He might have to steal it away, Daryl didn't use his knife as much as Merle did. But Merle glanced down at the one entering to find the sheriff's boy.

Carl stepped into the block and spotted Merle. He sent the older man a glare, before heading to his family's cell. Merle really didn't like that kids attitude.

"Boy, be careful how ya look at others. One wrong look and ya lose an eye." Merle shouted down, making the sharpening of his blade echo across the room.

"I'm not scared of you." Carl called back, before emerging from his cell.

"Ya should be scared, kid. Ya don't know what kind of shit I've done." Merle sneered down at the boy. "Are ya some tough guy, now? Or is that just angst?"

"Shut up."

"Yer a teenager, right? Ya still got that baby face. Oh, but I forgot, you've got pain like no other. Huh?" Merle mocked, his tone becoming sharp and harsh. "Ya killed yer mom, so now no one understands ya. No one knows the pain you've been through."

"Shut up!"

"Guess what, kid? We've all lost someone. We've all had tah kill someone. Ya ain't anything special, so stop actin' like it." Merle scoffed, as he raised and blew on his blade. "Yer mother was a two-timin', oblivious bitch anyway."

"I said shut up!" Carl shouted and Merle glanced over. The boy was shaking in anger, his fists clenched at his sides as he glared harshly up at the man. But Merle didn't miss the tracks of tears that ran down the kid's face. He struck a chord. "What do you know about losing someone?"

"I got separated from mah brother, didn't I? Last person I cared 'bout in the world." Merle paused. "Scratch that, he's the only one I've ever cared 'bout. Because no one else did. The only reason my heart is still beatin' is because I'm makin' sure that boy doesn't get into any trouble without me."

"But you didn't lose him. You didn't have to shoot him in the head." Carl shook his head, as his expression went from angered to depressed. "Because of you ___ almost went and killed herself. Why would she go out of her way to help a jerk like you? You don't even care that she almost died."

"I don't care? Ya didn't give that girl the time of day until she came back rollin' in her own blood." Merle spat, narrowing his eyes at the kid below. "You've never even spoken a word tah that girl and you're tellin' me that I don't care? You've passed annoyin' and are headed for being an asshole kid."

"How would you know if I talked to her or not?"

"Because I actually do talk tah her, kid." Merle scoffed. "It's not rocket science. But she's told me about how ya give her the cold shoulder. How yer looks are cold and unwelcomin'. She knows ya don't like her."

"..." Carl didn't say a word as he clenched his fists and looked to the ground.

"The only reason you cared about her bein' okay was guilt. You felt bad for yerself 'cause you
didn't even try to get to know the girl. I 'n a select few others were actually concerned about that girl. You?" Merle shook his head. "Yer a fraud. A joke. Don't tell me who I do or don't care about. The only one who really knows is me."

Carl couldn't respond, he couldn't because he knew Merle was right. And he hated that. He didn't try to get to know ___ and he did feel guilty when everyone thought she might not make it. He was being selfish and the most selfish person in the whole prison knew it.

Merle resumed to sharpening his blade, as Carl turned and left the block. The block fell back into silence, besides the sound of the sharpening blade in the air.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You helped pass out the plates heaped with cooked perch and freshly-cooked, sliced bread. The people of the community thanked you and praised you for the meal, making you feel really good after a long, hard week. Actually a long, hard year. You had only been praised by your father this last year and it's different receiving praise from a parent than it is receiving it from a stranger. You did long for your father's praise though...

You shook your head from your thoughts and finished setting down the plates you had. You returned to the little catering set up where Carol was cooking the next rounds of food. Some plates of finished food were already set up and you whisked them away to get them to their tables.

You noticed Rick arrived with Carl, Judith, and joined by Michonne at a table. You decided to head their way, carrying the plates. Michonne noticed your approach and gave you a polite wave.

"Hey, ___. How's your leg?" She asked, as you set down the plates for everyone.

"Eh, just a scab now. I'm glad the injury wasn't too serious." You smiled at the others, before turning to walk away. Before you could, your wrist was grabbed and you looked back, surprised to find that Carl was the one who had stopped you. "Carl? Is something wrong?"

"..." The boy was hesitant and gulped as he tried to find his words. He released your wrist and averted his eyes. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? Sorry for what? You've never done anything to me, Carl."

"That's exactly it. I've ignored and avoided you since you've arrived, and... I wasn't being fair." Carl huffed as he let the words tumble out. "I acted like I cared when you got shot, but that was just guilt... I'm sorry for being cold and rude. It's just hard to trust people after everything."

"Carl." You smiled and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, causing him to look up at your action. "It's hard for me to trust people, too... You don't have to force yourself to talk to me, but a greeting every once in a while wouldn't hurt. But hey, if you ever need to just talk, I'm always open to that."

"So... You don't think I'm an asshole for acting that way towards you?"

"What?! No!" You laughed a little, releasing Carl's shoulder. "I never thought of you like that! Carl, what spurred all of this on?"

"I was arguing with Merle and he pointed out that I wasn't treating you right." Carl admitted, removing the hat off his head for a moment to cool off.

"Why would he care?" You asked, starting to frown. Doesn't take much to dampen your mood, all you have to do is mention Merle.
"He didn't answer that straight..." Carl shrugged lightly. "He just pointed out something I needed to correct. Though he wasn't exactly nice about it. But it's Merle, so..."

"Did Merle say something to bother you, Carl?" Rick spoke up, concern flitting across his face.

"I... I don't want to talk about it, Dad." Carl lowered his head. "It's not something I want to think about while eating."

"What did he say? You can't hide this away, Carl." Rick urged his son to confess.

"He... He brought up Mom, that's all." Carl fell silent as he began to shove food into his mouth so he wouldn't have to talk. You saw the expression of remorse fall across Rick's face and you knew whatever Merle had said was not good. Like a burning knife slicing through skin not good. Anger filled your chest and without a word, you turned around and stormed back to where Carol was setting out more food.

"Maggie." The brunette looked up as you addressed her, just finishing up her dinner. She saw the angered expression you wore and was surprised, this being the first time she had seen it. She knew this must be serious. "Could you take over handing out dinners for me?"

"Yeah, of course." Maggie rose to her feet and walked with you over to the little catering stand. She picked up some plates as she tried to read you. "What came up?"

"Nothing, just thought I'd bring some dinner to Merle." You said a bit too sharply as you picked up a ready plate. "He's too lazy to come out here still, so it looks like I'm going in."

"Alright, if he gives you any trouble, come get me. Together, we could really kick his ass." Maggie gave you a small smile as she nudged your arm and walked off. If you weren't so fueled with rage at this moment, you would've laughed, maybe felt some ease. But your frustration was too strong. You turned and made your way back towards the prison, heading for cell block C.

~

Your steps echoed through the hall as you stepped into the cell block. You didn't hear anything, but you knew the redneck was around. You also knew he knew you were there, those weren't quiet echoes. You made your way up the stairs and turned to face the cells.

And there he was, lying back on his mattress, unharmed arm behind his head. He wore his bayonet still, he did mention that he felt vulnerable without it. You kind of wished it was off, so Merle didn't feel like he had a shield to hide behind. Because he shouldn't and especially not now.

Merle looked up, having heard your approach and a smirk stretched across his features. You frowned, as you walked over with his dinner.

"Hey, sugah. Been a while. Decided ya missed ol' Merle? Haven't had yer daily dose fer a while, huh?" Merle pushed himself up so he was sitting up on the bed.

"I helped make dinner. Was gonna let you starve, but I guess I changed my mind." You held out the plate to him and he gingerly took it from your grasp.

"Ya know the way tah a man's heart, don't ya, sweet cheeks?" Merle chuckled as he began working at the perch. Only took him one bite to show his appreciation, as he hummed. "Went primitive with this cookin', huh?"

"Yeah." You decided to not hold it off any longer, as you folded your arms. "What did you tell
"Hm? Did that kid finally man up 'n apologize to ya? I did put him in his place 'bout how he was actin' around ya." Merle admitted, not lifting his eyes from the food he was cramming down.

"You said something else to him though. Something that hurt him"

"Oh. Yeah, I mentioned his whore mom 'n he got all upset about it. Don't know why, she never gave a damn 'bout him." Merle rolled his eyes.

"..." You ran both hands through your hair, brushing all of it out of your eyes as you looked at Merle, incredulous. "Merle... Why do you have to be such a dick?"

Merle looked up in surprise. He wasn't expecting that. You have always been so clean spoken and uptight. Dick wasn't really a bad word, but it was something extreme for you.

"What the hell are ya talkin' about?" Merle asked, his voice and expression becoming hard.

"Why? Why is it you want everyone to hate you? Why do you hurt everyone around here, when all they want is to help you?" You sighed in frustration as you closed your eyes. "Why would you stoop so low as to hurt a kid? Did you enjoy that?"

"I was tellin' the goddamn truth!" Merle argued.

"And sometimes the truth hurts, Merle! Sometimes it shouldn't be brought up, especially when you do it to hurt someone." You held your arms as you hesitated with your next words. "Were you going to do that to me next?"

"Do what? Tell ya the truth?" Merle scoffed, as he set his food to the side and turned so his legs were now off the bed.

"Yeah, like tell me that my father was a paranoid jerk. Right?" You felt your chest tighten as you said it. You didn't want to think about it, but you wanted to make a point. "Or are you going to say something honest about me? Like I'm some sort of suicidal freak."

"Girl, he was firin' shots, I just fired right back. Unless ya were doin' the same I wouldn't jab at ya." Merle narrowed his eyes at you as he gripped the bed with his one hand, his bladed arm tapping the metal bed frame.

"Why treat me differently?! Daryl I get, he's your brother. But why go soft on me of all people? Why can't you give everyone else the chance you've given me?" Your voice wavered as the thoughts of your father clouded your mind. You couldn't help the couple of tears that appeared at the corners of your eyes. But despite seeing your obvious distress, Merle was fueled up on the anger at this point and he rose to his feet. He stepped towards you, causing you to back up a little as he snarled.

"I don't treat ya differently, girl. You ain't special. Stop believin' that you are." Merle hissed lowly. "Do what the kid did. Start assumin' what I can and can't feel. Go on and tell me who I care about 'n who I don't. Because y'all will never know."

"Do you have any idea who I care about, Merle?" Your question silenced you both as he looked put off by your question. He didn't know what you were talking about. You exhaled slowly, your shoulders lowering as your turned back to leave his cell. "Maybe you should start looking at that, too... See who cares about who and why... Maybe start with your brother. Because some of these people are his friends, too. Maybe you can finally see why."
You left the cell, your footsteps echoing off the cell block. Merle glanced at the plate of food and if he wasn't in the middle of the apocalypse, and starving, he would've pushed it away. But he did pick it up and begin eating, again, as his thoughts delved elsewhere.

~

Your scab of the gun graze was finally gone and all that was left of the incident was a scar. Though your relations with Merle have really soured. You both avoided each other, finding any excuse not to see or talk. No one really took notice, except for Daryl, the only one who really saw the interactions you two had. He wondered what burned the bridge between you both, but he didn't ask, not wanting to meddle in his brother's business.

But that didn't stop Daryl from interacting with you. You didn't let his little acts of kindness slip pass without notice, feeling grateful for the younger brother's help whenever he offered it. He was unconditionally sweet and it made you wonder how he was related to someone like Merle.

You didn't let Merle's absence put your spirits down. You wouldn't let him have that. You found yourself helping out a lot, again, and even spending the day with Maggie. You liked how grounded the woman was, she had a straight-head on her shoulders and she knew what she was doing. But she was kind and still had a snarky sense of humor, something you liked being around.

The farm girl was becoming your first best friend after the start of the apocalypse and you were thankful for her presence.

You had noticed that Carol spent most of her days watching over the youngest kids and you didn't miss the days where she looked exhausted from the very moment the sun came up. You knew the woman had been through a lot, and she of all people deserved a moment to stand back and breathe. So, that's what you offered her.

"What? No, ___. I don't mind watching the kids. It gives me something useful to do around here." Carol tried to put down your offer, but you shook your head.

"Carol, everyone deserves a day off every once 'n a while. Even you." You folded your arms and noticed the tired look in her eyes. She needed this next day off, desperately. "Come on, I'll take the kids for the day and you can relax. And if you don't want to do that, you could always spend time with Daryl."

Something that you did gain from Merle and didn't stop doing, was hinting at Daryl and Carol's relationship. Personally, you weren't sure if they did have romantic feelings for each other, but they were awfully cute when spending time with the other. You saw those subtle half-hugs and leaning on each other. They were the only ones who could make each other smile and laugh, and if that wasn't enough evidence, you weren't sure what was.

"You're crazy if you think any thing's there." Carol shook her head, but smiled a little. "Alright... I'll take a break tomorrow. But if you start to need help, come grab me."

"I won't let you down, Carol. You'll have a trouble-free day tomorrow. But if I do need to get you, should I check the nest?" You teased as Carol shoved you lightly.

"Goodnight, ___." Carol walked off towards the cell blocks as your grin grew. You were never gonna let down this teasing, were you? You decided it was best to head to bed early. You might have a long day, taking care of the kids.

~
To your relief, most of the tweens and teens were spending time in the safe areas of the prison or helping outside. So, all you were covering was the youngest of the kids. You held Judith in your lap, as you sat back in a chair in the library. There was four other kids you were watching over.

Molly and Luke, a pair of young siblings. Eryn, a little girl who had an older sibling. And Mika, a young girl you had spoken to once or twice before, who had an older sister. Mika was a doll, but her sister set you on edge at times. She just had this cold look in her eyes. It reminded you of Gareth's eyes.

You stiffened at the thought and feeling your discomfort, Judith began to cry. The three girls who were playing with their stuffed animals looked up at the sound of Judith's distress. Luke set down his book and scurried over, looking to the baby in concern. The young boy looked up at you, as you regained control and began to gently rock Judith in your arms.

"Is everything alright, Miss ___?" Luke asked.

"I'm fine... Just thought of something scary." Scary was an understatement, but you weren't about to give these kids details.

"Like the biters?" Luke asked, look convinced that that must be it. You wish you were this kid. You wish you thought the only evil out there was the dead walking, rather than the living. The alive ones scared you a lot more.

"Yeah, like the biters." You nodded in affirmation. "Are you scared of the biters, Luke?"

"Kind of... They don't look scary to me anymore, but what they do scares me. Why would anything want to eat us? I don't want to be eaten." Luke said it so innocently, but it resonated completely with you. You really REALLY didn't want to get eaten. Never. By anything or anyone. Anyone.

"We won't let them get to you, Luke. We got a fence and good people to protect us." You assured, as Judith's cries reduced to whimpers. You took notice that the girls were back to playing and Luke was on his own. "You're not playing with the girls."

"I don't like playing with dolls." Luke shrugged lightly, but smiled a little. "I like drawing... Thanks for getting those coloring supplies, again. I missed crayons a lot..."

"I figured that some of you might." You smiled a little. "Want to help me take care of Judith? She's not so easily entertained by dolls either."

"Can I? I'm not sure I'm that good with babies..." Luke looked to Judith, nervously.

"I'll do the holding and carrying her around part, but if you could help me keep her happy, you'd be a life saver." You laughed silently to yourself at the boy's distress.

"Okay... I'll help." As Judith began to calm down, Luke began to play peek-a-boo with her. The young Grimes' girl gradually began to giggle at the boys actions and you felt some ease rest in your chest.

You could do this. You could live a normal life, again. You still needed time to heal, but it could happen. You knew it could.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle walked along the fence, casually stabbing the heads of biters that tried to reach through. Considering he didn't have the freedom to leave whenever he wanted, the redneck let out his
frustration on the undead that lined the prison. After going around the perimeter of the prison three times to clear the area, Merle grew bored and began to make his way back to the prison. His brother stood in the field and began to walk alongside him.

"I'm surprised tah see ya helpin' out." Daryl admitted.

"Helpin' myself out. I'm dyin' of boredom here." Merle scoffed as he wiped off the Walker gunk on his pant leg.

"I'll see if the others will let ya out on hunts with me, again. But there are little jobs here 'n there. Ya just have tah ask." Daryl opened the prison doors for him and his brother as they both stepped in.

"I'm not goin' to willingly offer mah help tah these people." Merle shook his head, when suddenly both Dixons halted at the sound of a screech.

"What's goin' on?" Daryl called out as he and his brother walked over to the cell, home to Beth. The youngest farm girl looked up from her suitcase she was rummaging in through and looks up at the Dixons. She saw Merle and her expression turned harsh as she rose to her feet.

"You. You stole my huntin' knife, you thief." Beth pointed at Merle, before looking to Daryl. "It was here this mornin' and I can't even think of anyone else who would be conniving enough to take it."

"What the hell would I want with yer knife, bitch?" Merle growled as he held up his bayonet. "I already got mah own."

"Merle." Daryl gave him a warning glance, before looking back to Beth. "Merle wouldn't have done it. Maybe you just misplaced it."

On the upper floor of the cell block, Lizzie watched the three begin to argue. She frowned, as she slipped away and went to find help. She frowned, as she slipped away and went to find help. She slipped the knife she borrowed into the back of her pants as she left.

Chapter End Notes

Remember, the more feedback the more frequent the updates.
You were helping Luke build a tower of hard-covered books as Judith watched in amusement. Lizzie, Mika's older sister, came running into the room.

"Miss. ___! Miss. ___! I need your help!" Lizzie exclaimed as she stopped in front of you, nervously glancing at the other children.

"Lizzie, what's the matter?" You asked as you sat up.

"I... I made a mistake." Lizzie frowned, before pulling something from her back pocket and revealing it to you. Your eyes widened in shock, seeing the sheathed hunting knife in the little girl's hands. You quickly took the weapon and slid it into the back of your pants. "I just borrowed it for a little bit... But Beth got mad when she saw it was missing."

"Does she know you took it?" You asked as you bent down and picked up Judith, holding her to your side.

"No, she thinks Daryl's brother did." Lizzie looked to the ground, looking ashamed. "Are you mad at me?"

"You shouldn't have taken Beth's knife, Lizzie. Not for anything." You sighed. "But you can make things right and promise never to do this, again."

"I do. I promise not to do it, again." Lizzie nodded, determinedly.

"Alright, let's go return it to Beth before things get out of hand." You walked with Lizzie to the library doors, when you remembered the rest of the kids. You couldn't leave them alone, you glanced down the hall and spotted a familiar teen walking down. "Carl, could you watch the kids for a minute? I need to go help Lizzie with something for a moment."

"Yeah, sure." Carl nodded as he stopped and looked to Judith. "You got my sister?"

"I'll be fast, it won't hurt to take her along." You smiled at the little, baby girl in your arms, before looking back to her brother. "Thanks, Carl."

"No problem." Carl headed in and you heard the kids greet him as you followed Lizzie down the prison halls.

~

It didn't take you long to hear the raised voices echoing off the prison halls as you approached cell block C. You frowned as you cooed to Judith to keep her calm. Lizzie walked closer by your side as you walked past yours and Merle's cells and appeared at the top of the block's stairs. You spotted Merle and Beth arguing as Daryl hung back from the fight. The younger Dixon noticed your approach and raised an eyebrow.

"Merle Dixon, you are a lying, manipulative, thieving, son of a bitch." Beth spat at the older man, as she clenched her fists. Merle didn't look as angry, but he did seem incredulous and slightly pissed off.
"Trust me, girl. I want nothing to do with you or yer stupid little pussy of a knife." Merle snapped easily back.

"Maggie and Glenn were right about you. You're a danger to the group. You're heartless and all you care about is yourself. I don't even think you care about your brother." Beth accused. You frowned at her harsh words, surprised at how fast the youngest Greene girl could jump the gun. You decided to finally intervene as you stepped forward to catch Beth's attention.

"Now, if there's one thing I know about Merle Dixon it's that he loves his brother." Merle looked over in surprise at your sudden appearance, as Beth's form seemed to falter. "Merle would do anything for Daryl. He would search the whole world for him, never giving up."

"You don't know that... He could give up one day..." Beth argued, though her resolve was quickly shattering.

"I doubt it, even with broken ribs and a gun to his head, he was determined to get him back." You glanced at Merle as he watched you, his expression emotionless but his eyes sparked with curiosity. "So, what's this all about?"

"Merle stole my knife, but he won't admit it."

"I'm sorry, Beth. But why would Merle need your knife? He's already got one." To emphasize your point, you took ahold of Merle's bayonet with your free hand and lifted it up.

"That's what I was tryin' to tell her, sweet cheeks." Merle chuckled and you could feel his heated anger die down.

"He could've stole it to annoy me or to slowly take all our weapons, leave us defenseless in the middle of the night." Beth argued.

"Enough, Beth. I'm getting bored." You released Merle's bladed arm and pulled out the sheathed knife, holding it out to her. "Take your knife and take a nap."

"W-where? H-how?" Beth stuttered as she took the knife. You glanced at Lizzie and noticed the first emotion you'd ever seen in her eyes. Fear. You frowned and looked to Beth.

"I took it. There was a jagged piece of wood sticking out in the library and I decided to cut it and smooth it out. My picks couldn't do it and I didn't think you'd mind." You quirked an eyebrow. "But I guess you do, so never mind me borrowing from you, again."

"Merle, I'm sorry!" Beth quickly apologized to Merle, looking very embarrassed.

"..." Merle glanced at you and your eyes met for a moment. His lips quirked up for a moment, before he looked back to Beth. He raised up his hand promptly flipping off the young girl. "Don't go 'n mess up yer mascara, farm girl. Save yer crocodile tears fer later."

Daryl rubbed his head in irritation as Beth's jaw dropped in surprise at Merle's action. You looked to Lizzie and motioned with your head. She got the idea and scurried off. You went to turn and leave, but a strong arm without a blade came around your waist, leading you back to the stairs instead. You looked up at Merle with furrowed brows, as you held Judith closer to your chest.

"Ya really held out the tension fer your big reveal, huh?" Merle smirked as he leered his face closer to yours. His eyes looked over your face for a moment, before he moved his head back and looked ahead. "Surprised ya did stand up fer me... Don't deserve it after what I did to ya."
"... Are you trying to say you're sorry?" You asked, a grin beginning to pull on your lips.

"I might be..." Merle murmured, as he glanced at you with amusement. You both walked up the stairs to the upper part of the block, but you pulled away from him at the top. You hesitated.

"I forgive you." You shifted Judith into your other arm, as she grew bored and reached up to play with your hair. "You didn't deserve to be accused and talked to that way down there... And I'm sorry for talking to you like that last week."

"Eh, I deserved it when ya did it tah me." Merle leaned on the railing, as he looked you over. Judith got a good grip on some of your hair and tugged it, causing you to yelp in surprise. You reached up and got Judith's hands out of your hair, giving her a scolding look. You heard Merle laugh a little and looked up to see him biting his lip, his gaze on you half-lidded. Your chest began to burn and your hands became clammy to your confusion.

"What's got you so amused, Dixon?" You leaned on one leg, as you looked at him with a half-hearted glare.

"Nothin'. But ya do look kind of sexy holdin' onto lil' ass kicker like that. All mature like. I'm just enjoyin' the view." Merle's smirk turned sultry and you scoffed, as you averted your gaze to look at Judith. But your own smile slid onto your face.

"I think you're just losing your mind, Dixon. Try not to get into any more trouble, alright? I don't want to always be the one to bail you out." You looked back and gave Merle one more half-smile, before heading past him to the doors out of the block and into the halls of the prison. Merle watched you head out as he pushed off the rail and made his way to his cell. You walked down the corridors, heading back to the library where the kids were. You smiled at Judith, feeling a heavy weight lift off your shoulders. Yeah, you could live a normal life, again.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle was about ready to tear that little farm girl down with words mercilessly, until the girl stepped in and put her in her place. To be honest, Merle felt nice to see someone bash someone down for him. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't turned on by the act. Unfortunately, it only reminded him of how long it's been since he's had a woman to keep him warm at night. Not that he'd take that girl, still way too young for a sex buddy.

But nevertheless, Merle wouldn't forget the way she stood up for him, despite everything he did to her. The least he could do was treat her a little better, she deserved it after all the crap she'd taken from him.

So, later that night, Merle was happy to see that the girl wasn't too surprised when he showed up at her cell. She looked up from sharpening her pick and gave a small smile.

"Hey. It's been a while since you've shown up like this." She set her sharpener and pick to the side of her bed and sat up, though she hesitated for a moment. "Did you want something?"

"We never did finish that book." Merle leaned on the entrance of the cell and looked down at the girl, his lip beginning to quirk up. "I'm gettin' restless, darlin'. Thought maybe we could finally finish it."

"Yeah, I think it's about time, too." The girl smiled before getting down and rummaging through her bag. She was back on her feet quick as she sat back down on her bed, Merle sitting down on the chair across from her. She flicked to the page they were last at. "So, what spurred this on?"
"Ya know. That book has a bitchy Beth in it." Merle leaned back in his chair. "I guess our bitchy Beth reminded me of the one in that book."

"That's hardly fair. Our Beth is young and can you blame her for being scared of you?"

"I think she was more afraid of ya." Merle smirked. "Guess she ain't used tah bein' put in her place by someone who's well liked 'round here."

"You think I'm well liked around here?"

"The others seem tah like ya." Merle admitted, as he fidgeted with the metal gauntlet around his arm. "And ya even got this old Dixon to like you, so ya must be doin' something right."

"I wish I knew what it was." She smiled a little, looking back down at the book. The girl decided to stop asking questions and get on to reading. "In a letter that she wrote to his grandmother she said, "The Aegean is bluer than the Atlantic, and rough and bumpy. It looks just the way the boys drew it on those funny school maps." For she had saved them all—the maps and papers and a construction-paper valentine trimmed with Kleenex-lace that he had made for her—and packed them away in a box he had found in the basement, when they had moved out. Do you save stuff like that if it means nothing to you?"

"The author tryin' to make us like that bitch or something?" Merle scoffed and the girl realized just how much she missed his inappropriate comments while she read.

"Maybe he's just trying to show that she's still human... Even if she is still a huge jerk."

"That's an understatement." Merle hesitated. "Ya know, that book of yers doesn't have anything on its cover. I'm not even sure what the hell the title of that book is."

"It's called 'Ordinary People'."

"Is that suppose tah be a joke? None of the people in that book is ordinary."

"It's suppose to be ironic, and..." The girl paused, trying to find the words. "Everyone seems ordinary when you first meet them... But when you get to know them, you learn that everyone is a little broken. There are no ordinary people."

"Was I ordinary when ya found me, sugah?" Merle smirked.

"That blade arm of yours told a whole other story." She smiled for a moment, but her smile faltered. Merle opened his mouth to ask, when he saw tears begin to run down her face.

"Hey, now." Merle brought his chair closer as he reached up and brushed away the girl's tears with his one hand. "What's the matter? What's got ya all worked up?"

"I lost my parents... Both in less than a year... I've tried to be strong, but..." ___ closed her eyes and let out a sob. "This book... It says you can't just return to normal life after you lose someone. I've been just as bad as Beth about it..."

"I lost my parents... Both in less than a year... I've tried to be strong, but..." ___ closed her eyes and let out a sob. "This book... It says you can't just return to normal life after you lose someone. I've been just as bad as Beth about it..."

"No ya haven't. Ya haven't forced everything to be normal. You've just tried tah stay strong. No harm in that, only to yerself." Merle grabbed the book and set it to the side as he had the girl look at him. "Look at me. If that book is so right, what's gonna make ya feel better?"

"Talking about it... That's how Conrad was able to heal..."
"Then talk tah someone. Talk tah someone you trust, sweet cheeks. There's people 'round here who like you 'n will hear you out." Merle wet his lips, as he released the girl. "You've been getting close tah that love bird girl, right? I'm sure she'd hear ya out. I'll go grab her."

Merle stood to go get the farmer's daughter, but wasn't too surprised when the breaking down girl grabbed his wrist. Merle grit his teeth.

He wasn't a guy who comforted people normally, he's already seen this girl break down before. What help was he there when she needed someone? Someone who could feed her false comforts and hold her in a way she could relax? He had a blade for an arm, he wasn't exactly the most welcoming arms to be held in. But he wasn't gonna upset the girl more by pushing her away.

"Merle..." The girl's voice faltered, as Merle looked back down at her. He could feel her shaking a little, as she began to speak up, again. "I don't want to think about it, but... I need someone else to know. Now that my dad is gone, I need someone to know what happened to my mom."

Merle didn't say a word, as he sat back down and focused his gaze on the girl. He didn't want to be the one to be trusted with this information, but he was curious. He has been wondering where this mother disappeared to.

"Merle, she was eaten by them... Right in front of me and my dad..." ___ shuddered, as she choked on a sob and bent over. Merle could only imagine the image of the girl's mom being torn apart by biters and he sympathized. He hadn't lost anyone close, since Daryl's the only person he's been close to, but he's seen a lot of descent men go down that way. Merle, since his only hand was grabbed, leaned down and pressed his forehead against the girl's head in a sign of comfort.

"I can't imagine it bein' easy losin' someone tah them biters..."

"Merle, you don't understand." The girl gently lifted her eyes up to meet Merle's. "She wasn't eaten by walkers..."

Merle stared at the girl confused, as his mind clicked away. But when he finally realized what she meant, his mouth dropped in horror.

~

Terminus. The name rung through Merle's head. He definitely wouldn't forget it, making a mental note to never go there. He wanted nothing to do with cannibals.

The girl spilt out every detail she could of the place. The deranged leader, Gareth. How they lured in people with false offers of peace, to end up using them as slaughter. How her mother was killed, cooked and eaten in front of her. Merle had killed his fair share of innocent people, but eating them?

Merle didn't get much sleep that night, for two reasons. The first the unnerving thought that cannibals were just right around the corner. But the main reason being the girl. After letting out all her fears and troubled memories, she couldn't rest easy either.

"I won't be able to sleep tonight... Not with this on my mind." The girl admitted, as she looked to Merle with hesitant eyes. "Merle... Could you spend the night here? I would feel a lot better seeing someone I trust beside me."

"Ya sure that's such a good idea? The others might get ideas about you." Merle pointed out, as he rubbed his eyes tiredly.
"I don't care what the others think. Please, Merle."

And Merle couldn't say no to that. He helped the girl put sheets over her cell bars so no one could see in unless they peeked. The last thing they needed was others to get ideas, and see the girl distressed with Merle. Merle unclasped the metal bayonet from his arm and slid it off, setting it to the side. The girl slipped into her bed, pushing herself to the wall-side of the bed, leaving room for Merle.

Merle exhaled, looking down at the girl in the bed. It's been a year since he shared a bed with a woman. Been a decade since he shared a bed with a woman he knew well. And he wasn't even going to screw her. The world really has changed.

Merle slipped into the bed next to the girl, before turning to blow out the candle left on the side-table the girl had brought in. Merle rested on his back, staring up at the ceiling. ___ rested on her side, facing Merle and sighed as she closed her eyes.

Merle felt the girl's smaller hand brush against his but as her hand flinched away at the contact, the redneck took her hand in his. He didn't interlock, not wanting to give the girl the wrong idea, but he knew she needed some form of contact. It reminded Merle of the nights when Daryl was just a kid and needed someone there in the dark, lonely nights. He felt the girl's hand curl under his hold, but she didn't pull away.

And the night went on like that. They lied there in the silence, listening to the other's light breathing. At one point, Merle felt the girl's hand go lax and her breathing become deep, revealing that she had fallen asleep. Merle turned his head to look at the younger girl's relaxed expression and allowed himself a small smile. It almost looked like the girl hadn't seen horrific things in her life with that ease on her features.

Merle stayed up longer with his churning thoughts, but at some point in the night he did drift off. But it felt like he was asleep for only a few short seconds, before he opened his eyes, again. Light shined through the sheets, morning already upon the two. Merle looked back down at the girl, releasing his grip on her hand. He pushed himself up onto his elbow and looked down at the girl, before nudging her awake with his stump.

___ peeked her eyes open tiredly and looked surprised to see Merle for a moment, before she relaxed again, remembering the night before.

"Mornin', sunshine." Merle greeted her, his raspy voice hushed as to not make it out of the cell and alert others where he was. "'Bout time we both woke up. Mind checkin' fer anyone out there?"

"Of course..." ___ yawned, before sitting up and climbing to the end of the bed. She pushed away the sheets and walked out of the cell, before coming back moments later. "Everyone's gone. Better hurry out, before anyone catches you here."

"Thanks, darlin'." Merle grinned as he got out of the bed. He grabbed his gauntlet as he moved to the entrance of the cell. As he passed by the tired girl, Merle grabbed her shoulder gaining her attention. "Hey. You can trust the people 'round here. They'll listen tah ya. Probably comfort ya better than I could."

"I don't think anyone would've stayed like you did..." The girl said softly, as she smiled a little at Merle. "I'll think about it, it's just hard..."

"I can see why now..." Merle smirked a little as he released the girl's shoulder. "I'm always a cell over if worse comes tah worse."
"I will keep that in mind... Now, get out." ___ lightly pushed Merle out of his cell, causing him to snicker as he stepped out of it. To his relief, no one was there to see him exit the girl's cell. Merle stepped down the stairs, as the troubled thoughts of cannibals resurfaced in his mind. This world really has gone down to shit.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

To your relief, you didn't need to sleep beside Merle like that another night. Just that one night were you most distressed. But as the week went on, you did notice that Merle was a little easier on you. Though that didn't stop him from teasing you here and there. Things just fell back to normal and you welcomed it. Fortunately, you were even invited to get out of the prison for another run. After a couple of weeks being stuck in the prison, you welcomed the opportunity to get out and stretch. Your run group consisted of Michonne, Daryl, and Tyreese. But Rick was the one who insisted that you go with them.

"You were the one always keeping me in, what made you change your mind?" You asked the former police officer. Rick smiled a little as he stood from the plants he was tending to.

"No one likes feeling caged... There's two kinds of people around here. The ones that need some semblance of normal life... And ones who can't forget what the world is now. I know you don't want to forget what happened outside of these fences." Rick brushed the dirt off his hands. "Keeping you in would only hurt you."

"You're not wrong." You touched the ice picks at your sides and smiled a little. "Thanks, Rick."

"It's no problem."

"So, what kind of person are you?" You asked, as Rick seemed to hesitate on his answer.

"... I need something normal right now... Before I lose the person I used to be." He answered, before getting back down on his knees. You knew what he meant. People could forget who they were with this changing, corrupted world. You couldn't risk losing who you were or you would turn into an empty husk.

So, you found yourself in a truck with your three other runners and rolling down the street. You knew Merle still wasn't welcomed on runs, but you didn't see why not if his brother was around. You knew that Daryl had a way of keeping his older brother out of trouble. You were still surprised by the striking difference of the two brothers, though they both were extremely stubborn. But Daryl had slowly become family to you. He looked out for and checked on you, though he tried not to make it obvious. He was almost like an older brother to you, though it made you wonder where Merle fit into the equation. The older Dixon was no brother, you didn't even really see him as family. He was more like that annoying best friend you wanted to punch in the face sometimes.

Though he was the only one you trusted with telling the details of your apocalypse experience. Is that something you shared with a friend?

"What the hell?" Your thoughts were broke by Daryl who sat up in the passenger seat.

"What is it?" Michonne glanced over from the driver's wheel.

"That run down shack over there, I saw something scurryin' 'round the fence linin'. Can't see a
damn thing through all that tall grass." Daryl narrowed his eyes, trying to better see through the truck's window.

"Think it's safe enough to pull over?" Michonne asked.

"If it isn't, we got some of the best fighters here. What could go wrong?" Tyreese assured, giving you an optimistic smile. It was nice having someone around who could look on the bright side.

"It looked more animal than walker or human. Pull up, but stay behind. Keep some guns up in case things go bad." Daryl pulled his crossbow into his hands as Michonne pulled up by the shack.

Daryl slipped out of the car and made his way to the fence of the shack. Tyreese took out his gun and rolled down his window, aiming the weapon out and checking for anything or anyone else.

You watched as Daryl carefully made his way over the wired fence. You watched him lower his crossbow, before putting it over his shoulder.

"What do you think he found?" You asked. But your question was answered as Daryl bent down, a squealing sound filling the air. You all watched as the redneck rose, a piglet squirming in his arms.

"There's a whole family of pigs over here! Pull the truck over!" Daryl called out, as the three if you gaped at the scenario. Michonne pulled the truck over. The three of you piled out of the truck, as Tyreese went around to open the bed of the truck. You hopped over the fence and beamed at the sight.

There was two fat, older pigs and about a dozen little piglets running around the area, half filled with grass but most of the pigs were playing in the muddy other half near the fence. Daryl set down the piglet in his hands and it scurried off to its family with a squeal. Michonne watched the animals in amazement.

"What are we going to do with them?" Michonne asked as she watched the pigs, her hand straying to her katana.

"We could eat the two bigger ones." Daryl nodded to the older pigs. "But the little ones don't have enough meat tah feed a group of people."

"What are you suggesting?"

"We take 'em back. Raise 'em. When they get big enough, they make their own piglets 'n we eat the ones that are big enough tah feed the group." Daryl suggested.

"Is it worth sacrificing food to keep them alive?"

"These things eat slop, leftovers of food. We can make it work." Daryl took out some clippers from the truck and snapped the wires of the fence, making it able to walk through. Daryl paused as he looked to Michonne. "Could start a farm, just like how Hershel 'n Rick want tah. We need some animals besides Flame tah make it a real farm."

"My girl, Flame, is the only animal we need... But a couple pigs wouldn't hurt." Michonne smiled a little, before reaching down and picking up a piglet. "Close up the truck, Tyreese, we don't want the pigs to slip out."

"Good point." Tyreese closed up the back of the truck as Michonne set down the first pig. Tyreese made his way over and whistled at the sight of all the pigs. "Daryl, let's get one of those big mothers."
Daryl nodded and walked over to wrestle down one of the older pigs with Tyreese. You slowly stepped over to one of the piglets, before scooping it up with one quick movement. It squirmed and squealed in your arms, but he was cute little guy, if a little muddy. You smiled and held him close, trying to calm him down as you walked back over to the truck. You set the piglet in, before climbing into the bed of the truck.

"I'll make sure they don't hop out." You offered as you watched the piglets run around frantically. One hesitantly approached you, his snout shifting as he looked for a sign of danger. You reached out and patted the pig's side, glad to see it wasn't running away. "They're awfully cute."

"Don't get attached." Daryl huffed out as he helped carry over one of the big pigs with Tyreese. They carefully tossed the big pig in and the trunk shifted from the weight. It would hold though, this truck was designed to carry heavy loads.

"I won't, usually they outgrow their cuteness." You paused as you watched the older pig step over and collapse against the side of the truck, ready for a nap. "I'm okay with losing a couple pig friends. Can't risk losing anymore human ones..."

"Even if we aren't all cute?" Michonne joked as she set down another pig in the bed of the truck. You smiled and shook your head.

"I got lucky. I ended up with a group of people where most of you are pretty good looking." You admitted, not ashamed to compliment the others. "And I do mean each of you, too."

"You're not bad looking yourself, girl." Tyreese complimented, as he hefted up another pig with Daryl.

"Save the compliments fer the young men at the prison." Daryl directed to you, as he rolled his eyes at the small talk. "They're too scared tah approach ya, since ya hang out with all of us older people."

"You guys ain't old. And I like spending time with you guys. You all know what you're doing. Everyone my age around the prison barely know how to take down a walker." You licked your lips and played with one of your ice picks. "And I'll have you know, Daryl. A relationship is not what I'm looking for right now. Maybe after a year of peace."

"Not a bad idea." Michonne dropped down two more piglets. "Don't rush into anything that you might regret."

"Women." Daryl shook his head, as he hefted the other pig in with Tyreese. "I'll never understand the bunch of ya."

"We could help you understand, Daryl. Especially if you have a certain older woman in mind." You hinted, a grin coming to your lips. The redneck halted his movements and turned to look at you, his eyes narrowed. You didn't have time to react before Daryl bent down, scooped up some mud and tossed it your way. He easily nailed you with his skill at "hitting anything with anything". You gasped and looked to Daryl incredulous, before a bright smile came to your face. "You're so dead, Dixon!"

You climbed out of the truck and scrambled to get some mud, as Daryl easily hit you a second time. Michonne and Tyreese watched in amusement as they gathered up the rest of the pigs. You and Daryl relentlessly attacked each other with mud. You all forgot about the fallen world around you, as you eased up and let out some laughter.
Being so far in the story, it's fun looking back and seeing how far the characters go. Let me just say, the main two change a lot over time. Whether that's good or bad is up to your interpretation.
"You were at it for hours, you must be exhausted." Merle looked over from the empty plastic table he sat at, as Carol made her way over. She had a bottle of water in one hand and a protein bar in her other hand, both Merle graciously took. Carol eyed the bloodied rag that Merle had used to clean his blade with and frowned, as he guzzled down his water. "How many walkers do you think you managed to kill?"

"At least two dozen." Merle held the cool water bottle against his head. "Lost track of time is all..."

"Uuhh... This isn't you stressing about the absence of your brother, right?" Carol asked, mildly curious.

"Why you care? Thought ya didn't care much 'bout mah little brother." Merle raised an eyebrow, a smirk coming to his face.

"I never said I didn't care about Daryl. I do. He's been my closest companion during all... This." Carol sighed lightly as she shook her head. "But I didn't say anything about liking him romantically like you seem to imply."

"I only say what I know." Merle leaned back against the table, setting the water bottle down and began to carefully tear open the protein bar. "This isn't the first time Daryl's gone out while I've been here 'n ya didn't see me stressin' then."

"Him and ___ then?" Carol knew she got it right, when Merle's cocky grin washed away and was replaced by a scowl. "You're scared for them both, since they're the only ones you really care about."

"Who said I cared 'bout that girl?" Merle snapped and looked at Carol sharply. The woman set her mouth in a straight line, easily seeing through Merle's mask.

"You do, Merle. Even if you don't want to believe it. I only wonder in what way you care about her." Carol paused as Merle's expression hardened. "I just don't want you to hurt her."

"If we are anything, 'n ya didn't see me stressin' then."

"Well... Good." Carol shifted so she could better face Merle. "I think it's good you're opening to someone else. I know it makes you feel vulnerable, but if I've learned anything about opening up to others... It gives you a reason to live. Something to fight for. Something more than yourself."

"Why'd ya think I cut off mah hand? Why I worked for someone like the Gov'ner? Why I killed innocent people? I did it so I could see my brother, again." Merle harshly looked over the woman, as he bit into the protein bar. "That's why my heart's still beatin', too. You better be damn sure that I ain't dyin', not until I know my baby brother is in good hands."

"I hope you stay longer than that, Merle. But maybe one day you'll realize that Daryl's already found that." Carol watched the older Dixon for a moment, when they both spotted a familiar truck heading towards the front gates. Carol smiled and rose to her feet. "Want to go greet them with me?"
"Sure, why the hell not?" Merle stood up, finishing off his protein bar. He grabbed his water bottle and walked down the field with Carol, but not before nudging her. "But seriously, get mah brother laid. He really needs it 'n I can tell ya really want it."

"Merle Dixon, I swear." Carol huffed, though a small grin came to her lips. The truck rolled into the front of the prison with the help of Rick opening the gates. Merle wasn't really surprised to see the girl and Daryl in the back of the truck, covered in mud. But he was a bit shocked at the reveal of the pigs.

"I didn't realize we were havin' bacon tonight." Merle looked down at the truck bed filled with pigs.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, knucklehead." The girl stood up, some of the pigs scurrying away from her.

"We got an idea fer them, if that's what you're wonderin'." Daryl hopped out of the truck and made his way over to Rick. Merle looked back to ___ to see her trying to get out of the truck.

"Here, sugah." Merle stepped over and offered his one hand to the girl. She smiled thankfully as she bent down, took his hand and braced herself on his shoulder with her other hand. She hopped out of the truck, most of her fall being diminished by Merle. They found each other chest to chest, before ___ released her hand and backed up.

"Thanks, Merle." ___ brushed off some of the dried mud from her shirt, which Merle nodded to.

"Ya look like ya got attacked by a mudslide."

"Your brother and I got into a little bit of a brawl. No hard feelings, teasing just went a little overboard." ___ smiled a little as she folded her arms. "We'll need to set up a pen for these pigs, but I really want to go shower off. Think you can help them out for me in my stead?"

"Helpin' out these pricks isn't something I really do 'round here." Merle glanced at the others with a frown.

"If you do, they might let you out on a run soon." The girl nudged Merle as she began to make her way to the prison. "Just think about it."

Merle watched the girl go, taking note of the dried mud strewn through her hair. She was caked in dirt, his baby brother did not go easy on her. But he was just as covered, so it must have been fair. Merle sighed and looked back at the retreating girl.

"Fine! But ya better have some truth tah yer words, sweet cheeks!" Merle called to her, before walking to the others.

Michonne watched the exchange with mild interest and was surprised to see the redneck give in and come over to help. He seemed out of character and it made Michonne uneasy. But maybe this revelation could be good.

~

Merle finished helping set up a temporary pen for the pigs to stay in as Rick and his loyal son worked on a permanent pen for the pork. Merle was going to go and assist with gathering the materials in the prison for the pen, but was stopped by Michonne. He looked to the quiet woman and narrowed his eyes.
"Somethin' wrong, mute?" Merle spat.

"..." Michonne wasn't phased by his attempt at intimidation, as she released his shoulder. Her tone was soft and non-threatening, taking Merle back as he listened. "You've assisted us enough. You can continue to do so, but I know you. You're free to return to your own activities."

"Hey, I'm not doin' this to be everybody's pal. I want out on a run. Need some fresh air from this cage." Merle hissed.

"Then consider it done." Michonne adjusted the sword over her shoulder, but gave Merle a sincere look. "I'm going on a run tomorrow. Remember Sasha? She's coming with, along with your brother. If you promise not to be a pain in the ass, you can come along."

"... Ya got yerself a deal, Nubian Queen. I promise tah be on mah best behavior." Merle smirked as he turned and made his way back to the prison from the field.

"I am curious. What are you doing right now?" Michonne asked, as she watched the older man walk away, amused at how quick he was to get away.

"Just goin' tah go prove someone wrong. Nothin' tah worry yer head over." Merle waved it off as he entered into the prison doors.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You lost track of time as you took your shower. The shower was cold, but you didn't mind, it was better then nothing. The prison showers were opened and meant for multiple people showering in them at once. Thankfully the group did put curtains over the area, so others couldn't just stroll past and see too much. You had just finished up washing your hair and soaping up your body, as you finished humming a song.

You turned off the water and grabbed your hung up towel, wrapping it around your body and covering yourself up. You push aside the curtain to go put on your dry clothes, but you jump upon seeing the familiar figure of Merle.

"Merle! What the heck are you doing here?!" You exclaimed as you drew the shower curtain back closed. From the quick glimpse of Merle, he was undressed, a towel around his waist. Gosh, this situation could be read so wrong. But in reality, it was weirder than what you had imagined.

"Remember what ya said a month or two ago? When I mentioned ya peekin'? Ya said you didn't and said ya probably weren't missin' out?" Merle's answer is not exactly the one you were looking for, but you did remember the conversation.

"I remember. What about it?" You hesitantly asked. You didn't get a verbal answer, as the shower curtain was pushed aside. Merle watched you carefully, his lips set in a line as he loosened the towel around his waist.

"I want to make this clear. I'm not doin' anything to ya, darlin'. So, don't go gettin' ideas now. I just want to prove a point." And with that, Merle pulled away his towel. You only caught a glance, before you covered your eyes with one of your hands, the other still holding your towel. Your face began to burn a bright red, the image of Merle probably now permanently burned into your brain. "Now, I know ya saw. So, what do ya think?"

"... Pfft." You burst into laughter as you braced yourself against the wall. "I think you're crazy, Merle Dixon!"
"That's not the answer I was lookin' fer, sugah." Merle chuckled lightly, as you remained in a fit of giggles. "I hope those giggles are a good sign."

"Merle, you're the only one I know who would flash someone to try and prove a point." You snorted as your giggles calmed down.

"Hey, flashin' is when someone shows off their stuff for a brief moment to try 'n scar some innocent bystander. I am freely showin' myself for a long period of time 'n we know each other. Just a friend lettin' another friend see their body." Merle brushed off the strange event casually, throwing his towel over his shoulder.

"Okay, so you're streaking in front of me with reason. This is still one of the weirdest things that has happened to me." Your cheeks hurt from the big smile on your face. "You're such a weirdo, Merle."

"I still want tah know yer honest opinion of the goods."

"You want a virgin's opinion. Great." You huffed and tried to put words together. "You're not bad, Dixon. Especially for someone your age. I'm honestly impressed. Now can you please put that towel back on?"

"Good answer, sweet cheeks." You could hear the grin in Merle's voice. You heard some rustling. "It's back on. Though I don't see what the problem is. Ya know what it looks like, coverin' it doesn't mean it's gone."

"It's the thought that counts." You uncovered your eyes and sighed in relief to see the covered Merle. You shook your head and smiled. "I've seen more of you today than I've ever wanted to see, Merle Dixon."

"You'll take that back when ya realize I'm the best package 'round here." Merle wetted his lips, his grin wide.

"Hopefully you're the last person who flashes me around here." You stepped past the man out of the shower area and walked over to your set out clean clothes.

"So, do I get a peek in exchange for seein' me?" Merle taunted, obviously joking about the suggestion.

"Nope. It's going to remain a mystery to you, Dixon. I guess you'll just have to use your imagination." You taunted as you picked up your clean clothes, heading into one of the bathroom stalls to change.

"Trust me. I am usin' mah imagination very thoroughly." You heard Merle cackle as you rolled your eyes and stepped into a stall, locking it behind you. You heard the shower kick on as you changed into your clothes.

You weren't sure you reacted appropriately to this situation. Most girls would have shrieked and shooed Merle out altogether. But to be honest, you were not surprised at Merle's forwardness. Him showing his junk to you so bluntly was so... Merle. You were just glad that after all the dark conversations, he still treated you like he always had.

You finished changing and stepped out of the stall. You glanced at the drawn shower curtain where Merle was showering and recalled the scarring memory of him. You were honest, he wasn't bad. He was actually the best you'd ever seen. But you didn't need to boost his ego further.
You grabbed your dirty clothes and left the shower rooms.

~

Week ten at the prison...

Hershel and Rick happily accepted the family of pigs and with some help from you and the others, you constructed a durable pen big enough for the whole family. Like Daryl had said, you fed the pigs leftovers from food and the prison's farm was really coming together. While Rick took a lot of time tending to the fields and taking care of the pigs, you found yourself taking care of Judith during the days when Beth and some of the other girls needed a break from it.

This day you found yourself being aided by Carl in taking care of his sister. Judith sat a few feet in front of you, directly in front of Carl and eyed a stuffed cat you had picked up on your most recent run. You cleaned it up and thought it perfect for the little one. She begun to crawl a little, so you decided to help her practice with her brother's help.

Judith slowly lied down on her stomach, reaching out for the doll as her older brother watched in amusement. Gradually, the little babe pushed herself onto her hands and knees and began to crawl forward.

"That's it. You can do it, Judith." You cooed as the little Grimes girl giggled. Finally she reached the doll and promptly pulled it towards herself, burying her face in it. You laughed lightly as you reached out and gently picked up Judith, setting her in your lap.

"She's learning fast." Carl smiled as he watched Judith begin to chew on the plush cat's ear. "She's going to be walking soon at this rate..."

"Feel old?"

"I feel different." Carl frowned a little, looking down as he played with one of the belt loops on his pants. "Sometimes I'll be reading or taking a nap and it feels like... I'm in my old room, again. Like none of this ever happened. But then I see my dad or Judith and... I know all this happened. I'll never be able to look at Judith without thinking about the end of the world... That's not fair to her."

"It's not." You agreed. "But that's why we need to do our best to make things better. We can only go up from here and we need to. We need to for Judith."

"You're right..." Carl seemed to drift into thought for a moment, before extending his arms. "Can I hold her?"

"Of course." You carefully passed over Judith, who beamed being brought into her brother's arms. Carl smiled a little at her as gently sat her on his lap. "Do you ever feel like you're back at home some days?"

"No. Back in the early days of this I did, but I haven't for a while. Not since I lost my mom." You looked to the wall, noting the thin cracks that ran through its stone. "I can't imagine a normal world without my parents... But this isn't bad. I met you all, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I guess so..." Carl nodded a little, though he half-smiled and teased. "Too bad you had to be introduced to us by Merle."

"I couldn't have picked a better person to find me." You defended, though your own grin slipped onto your face. "He may be a jerk and a knucklehead, but he's the first one to make me genuinely laugh after I've lost so much. He's a light I didn't realize I needed within all my darkness."
"Gross, is that poetry?"

"Metaphors, but yeah. I guess it is poetry, in a way." You shook your head. "Merle may be obnoxious at times, but I'm glad he's on our side."

~Merle's P.O.V.~

After a week full of runs, it was nice to take a breather. Not that Merle's complaining, he loved being outside of the prison, but he needed a day off every now and then. This was his day and he found it outside. Mostly because he got kicked out when he was found smoking. Merle took a drag as he leaned back on the outpost that was being used as a stable for the mute's horse.

He had spent the morning clearing biters at the fences, but now was taking some time to get some edge off. He hadn't smoked in a week or two and it was killing him. He was starting to itch, so this day off really was a blessing. Merle exhaled the smoke through his teeth, as he glanced into the outpost.

Michonne's horse was a beautiful auburn color, but strangely enough, the creature seemed to only like his rider. Merle attempted to go on a joyride with the creature, but with the horse's irritation plus Merle's one-hand situation, he would need to put off the joyride. Merle glanced up as he noticed the familiar figure of the mute mentioned coming towards the outpost. She raised an eyebrow at Merle, who only grinned and brought his cigarette back up to his lips.

"Howdy, partner. You goin' fer a ride?" Merle mockingly asked, as Michonne ignored him and entered into the outpost. The redneck rolled his eyes and glanced in, watching as the woman tended to her horse. After filling the trough with hay and filling up the creature's water trough, Michonne began to brush down the horse. "Huh, ya do the whole song 'n dance."

"If I want him to stay nice and healthy for solo runs, feeding, cleaning, taking care of him is sort of essential." Michonne spoke up, not sparing a glance at Merle.

"Sort of expected the farmin' folk tah do that sort of work." Merle admitted.

"They taught and showed me how to take care of him, but he's my responsibility. If I have questions, I go to them. But he's in my care, not theirs." Michonne finished brushing down Flame and setting the brush a side, now facing Merle. She stared at him for a second, before exhaling. "You've changed... Since the time you tried to hand me over to that man... Something changed you in your absence."

"It's called turnin' over a new leaf, sweetheart."

"I know what it is. I just didn't expect it from you..." Michonne pursed her lips, before grabbing a hook hanging from the wall to clean the horse's hooves with. "I still don't trust you, not after everything you've done. But... I forgive you, for what you did."

"..." Merle puffed out some smoke as he lowered his cigarette, he was a little awed at the woman's forgiveness. "I don't deserve yer trust. I really don't deserve yer forgiveness... But I 'preciate it."

"Don't get your hopes up too high, Dixon. I could still slice your head off from your body in seconds." Michonne warned as she climbed over the small posts surrounding her horse.

"I'm sorry 'bout almost takin' you to the Gov'ner. It wasn't anything personal against ya. I was thinkin' about my brother, if I'm honest." Merle confessed as he rolled the cigarette between his fingers. "I'd do anything tah protect him."
"And that girl?" Michonne added as she watched Merle carefully.

"Would I do anything tah protect her?" Merle becalmed confused as he noticed Michonne's unflinching expression. "Tah an extent, sure."

"..." Michonne shrugged as she turned her attention to her horse. "It's better than nothing I suppose. I was wondering if that girl is the one who's changed you."

"No one can change me, but me."

"You're not wrong, but sometimes you find yourself changing for others. It's not something you do consciously. Maybe you've done it and you haven't even realized it." Michonne urged her horse to lift up one of its legs and it did. She took hold of the leg and began to clean around the hooves. Merle watched with a frown. He wasn't sure what the woman was implying, but he hoped that he hadn't become vulnerable to her.

"Michonne!" The two looked over to see Rick appear at the entrance to the outpost. He seemed confused by Merle momentarily, but quickly shook it off as he looked to Michonne. "Glenn 'n a few of the others just got back from a run. They noticed a pack of horses in a field just a little ways over. They were thinkin' of roundin' some of them up. We could use a couple more for short travels."

"Count me in." Merle snubbed out his cigarette, stuffing the rest of the bud into his pocket for later. "I always wanted a horse."

"Bullshit." Michonne set her equipment aside and hopped back over the posts.

"Ya caught me, I always wanted a lady tah make love tah everyday 'n was low maintenance." Merle cackled as he folded his arms, being careful of his blade. "But a horse is good, too."

"Maybe you should sit this one out, Merle. We don't want to scare all the horses away." Rick suggested.

"Please, where'd ya think Daryl got his animal whisperin' from?"

"Most animals die at the hands of your brother."

"Details. I promise I won't approach the horses if I think I'll scare them off." Merle declared as he made his way out the door. Michonne and Rick stared at him, before looking back to each other. Doesn't look like they could change his mind.

"I have one idea," Michonne spoke up as she gave Rick a small, reassuring smile. She walked past him and through the entrance. The sheriff exhaled, but knew he could put his trust in Michonne.

~

Merle sat in the back of the truck. The interior of the truck being filled up by the Chinese Kid's group, much to Merle's dismay. He looked over as Michonne made her way over, along with the girl. Merle raised an eyebrow at that as he patted the side of the truck to get their attention.

"Hey, darlin'. Didn't know you'd be joinin' us." Merle watched as the girl smiled and ran over, climbing into the trunk with Merle.

"I didn't think I would be either, but Michonne insisted. Luckily, Rick wanted an hour or two with his daughter. So, it works out for all of us." The girl shared her story as she took a seat across from
Merle.

"It was the Nubian Queen's idea, huh?" Merle glanced over at Michonne who got into the trunk with them. He knew what the woman was playing. Bringing ___ along was to test her theory. See if she was the one who tamed Merle. She better not get her hopes up. "Ya know anything 'bout horses?"

"I've ridden them a couple times. My mom knew how to tame them better than I ever could... Mostly because I've never done it. But I know how to." The girl rubbed her shoulder. "I hope the horses are already somewhat tame."

"'s long as we get a few of them, that's all that matters." Merle leaned back against the wall of the trunk and stretched out his legs. "You've been keepin' yerself busy, sugah?"

"Yeah, just helping out here and there." The girl played with her fingers. "This place really feels like home now. At least, as homey as you can get during the apocalypse."

"Sheesh, if ya can call a place with nuts in it like this home, I don't want tah know how yer home was before the apocalypse." Merle joked.

"I had some crazy roommates in college. Besides, as long as we can all unite and work together, I don't care how crazy any of you are." The girl smiled as the car started up and drove out of the opened gates. Merle glanced out of the trunk and the rolling road beneath them as they headed in the direction of the open field.

Thinking about it, Merle's gotten used to the prison, too. He wouldn't call it home, but he would call it a shelter. He certainly felt more comfortable here than he ever did at Woodbury. He always felt like he could be stabbed in the back there. Which was certainly a possibility.

He didn't like being caged and he didn't like how the walls and bars reminded him of his own time in prison. But it could always be worse. Merle glanced back down at the girl who sat next to him, to see her watching the trees go by. He did have this sweet, little thing to pass his time with, that was a plus.

Merle looked back to Michonne to find her watching him. She had a straight expression, though her eyes glinted with confidence. Merle scowled as he looked ahead, again.

She had no idea what she was accusing him of. She didn't have a clue.

Merle would know if someone was changing him. Wouldn't he?

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this back in September, before Carl was killed off. It was kind of sad reading through it, again, realizing he wouldn't be with Judith anymore.
The group watched from the tree lines as the small herd of horses fed on the tall wheat crops that grew from the ground. Merle glanced at the group accompanying him on this little rendezvous. The Chinese kid was the only other male with him. The Asian's lover was there, along with the mute, ___ , and a woman he didn't know but she seemed to be in her thirties. Merle really wasn't found of this grouping.

Michonne glanced at the unknown woman and nodded to the horses. Without a word, the two women stepped into the field and carefully approached the horses. With swift movements, they both hopped onto a horse of their own. The horses they board panicked and began to race around the field, but the women clutched onto their manes, patiently waiting for the creatures to slow. The horses eventually slowed and Michonne led the pair of the horses back to the tree line.

"Easy as that." Michonne smiled, as the farmer's girl stepped forward and patted the side of the horse.

"Amazing, you both know what you're doin'." The love bird looked to her lover. "Think we need anymore horses?"

"At most, two more. Five horses is enough to take care of." The Chinese kid glanced out into the field.

"Looks like I'm up." Merle smirked as he moved forward into the field.

"Merle," Michonne hissed, but the redneck ignored her warning. He heard small steps follow up beside him and glanced over to see the girl pace up to him, keeping her movement minimal.

"Slow down... You need steady movements around them..." ___ softly said.

"Go on, sweet cheeks. Show me how it's done." Merle challenged.

The girl looked to him before making her way forward, she approached one of the horses. She quickly climbed onto the horse, almost slipping off but hurriedly grappled onto the mane. The horse reared up and tried to throw her off, but the girl held on. Once the horse dropped back down the girl leaned against the horse and reached down, rubbing the horse's neck to calm it down. It seemed to work as the horse huffed and remained still.

The girl smiled over at Merle, who rolled his eyes and approached a strong looking horse. Following the example of the others, Merle rapidly got an arm over the horse and was able to throw one of his legs over it. As he got situated, the horse whinnied in fear and immediately took off running. Merle held on the best he could with his one hand, but despite the tugs on the mane and digging his heels into the horse's side, the creature wouldn't slow down. Merle had no control of the situation.

The redneck gritted his teeth as the horse veered towards the trees, knowing this ride was about to
get rough. Merle tried to think of anyway to stop the horse, but besides evacuating the steed, he didn't see any way out of it. Just before the horse could break into the trees, someone rode up beside Merle and lassoed a rope around his horse's neck. The rider coaxed their horse to press against Merle's and gradually slow it down. Before he knew it, his horse trotted to a stop and he was able to loosen his grip on its mane.

"You alright, hun'?" Merle glanced over to see that the rider was the woman he didn't know. She smirked at him and Merle felt something churn in him as he caught the look in her eyes. Pure lust. This woman must be as sexually frustrated as he was.

"I'm fine... I don't believe we've met before." Merle returned with his own lecherous smirk. He decided to get a better look at her. Short blonde hair in a pixie cut, blue eyes, fair skin, and a nice rack. Everything Merle wanted in a sex buddy.

"I'm Emma. I've seen you around the prison, but I guess this is the first time we've been able to interact." The woman, Emma, maneuvered her horse to circle around him. "You have caught my eye plenty a time..."

"Can't say the same... But ya certainly have mah attention now, sugar tits." Merle cackled a little as the woman's smirk only curled more.

"Merle! Are you alright?" The girl rode up on her horse, concern etched across her face. She looked to Emma and gave a grateful nod. "Thanks for helping him. You have a way with horses."

"I would hope so. I worked on a farm during the summers before all this shit went down." Emma glanced back at Merle. "If you ever need help with horses... or anything else, Merle, I'm always around."

Emma tossed the end of the rope over to Merle, before turning her horse and racing back over to the others. ___ watched her go before looking back to Merle.

"She seems nice." The girl commented as Merle felt his dormant sex drive begin to buzz. It's been a year, a year too long since he's slept with someone. He really needed this and he was taking it under careful consideration. He was always up for sex with no strings attached.

"Yeah, she's seems real nice." Merle grinned as he looked back to the girl. "Let's head back. We got what we came here for."

The girl nodded as they urged their horses back over to the others.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

A week passed by and you spent a lot of time with the horse you had tamed. She wasn't a beautiful fiery red like Flame, but she was gorgeous nonetheless. Your horse had a white coat with cream colored hair. She seemed to be the most docile of the horses the prison had and you appreciated it. You decided to name her Blizzard to go with Michonne's element theme of horse names.

With help from Rick, Michonne, and Maggie, the four of you constructed a make-shift stable to fit all five horse in one of the empty outposts. It kept the horse's safe and kept you at peace knowing they wouldn't be in the open. But they were easy to get to if you needed to ride out.

You helped take care of Merle's horse, too (though he never rode the big guy, Daryl had begun to more than his brother). The dork decided to name the poor horse Harley. You knew why, seeing as the Dixon's knew their motorcycles but it grew on the horse. A sturdy black steed with a grey
mane. Merle did check on his horse daily, but he was still hesitant about riding him, even though his younger brother didn't mind the horse at all.

Night had fallen one day as you finished brushing down Blizzard. She whinnied and nuzzled her head into your hair as you smiled and patted the side of her face.

"Good girl. You rest tonight, we're going on a run with Maggie tomorrow and you'll need the energy." You stepped out of Blizzard's personal stall and clicked it shut behind you. You stepped out of the outpost and noticed the familiar bonfire lit in the dining area outside. About a month ago, Beth had decided to start up a little sing-a-long every other night. It was used to boost morale and keep people's spirits up. It was also a way to recall old favorite songs from the life before.

You had joined in on nights when you weren't busy and sometimes you would hear a song you know and if other people joined in, you would too. Beth occasionally asked others to lead in a song they remembered and you were always a bit afraid she'd pick you. The last thing you need is to sing solo and try to lead others in a song.

You went through what else you had to do today and found your plate completely empty. You guessed it wouldn't hurt to join in the sing along going on at that bonfire. Be a good time to get nostalgic and relax for an hour or two. You stepped over and found about half of the prison members out around the campfire, mostly families with kids. They were finishing up a folk song when you showed up and Maggie noticed your arrival.

"___!" Maggie motioned you over, a bright smile on her face. You returned the smile as you stepped over and sat down beside her on the same bench. Glenn looked over from the other side of Maggie and gave you a kind look before going back to speaking with Hershel.

You glanced around, looking for any other familiar faces. Beth, of course, Hershel, Rick, Carl, Judith, the other kids you had taken care of, but you were surprised to see the Dixons hanging around the back. They weren't paying attention to the sing-a-long and they were seated facing the fields, a space between them and the group. It was clear they were trying to be no part of this, but you were glad they were attempting to be around the group. Especially Merle, since Daryl was already comfortable being around most of the group.

"Does anyone know the song "I Know My Love"?" Beth asked the group of people and a few older members murmured in acknowledgement.

"Start singing, some of the lyrics repeat, so others can tag along." Maggie suggested as Beth smiled and nodded.

"I know my love by his way of walking and I know my love by his way of talking and I know my love dressed in a suit of blue and if my love leaves me what will I do..." Beth began to sing as the light from the flames flickered over form as she rose from her seat. "And still she cried, "I love him the best and a troubled mind sure can know no rest." And still she cried, "Bonny boys are few and if my love leaves me what will I do?"

Maggie began to clap to the rhythm of the song as others began joining in to sing along with the old Irish song.

"There is a dance house in Maradyke and there my true love goes every night. He takes a strange girl upon his knee. Well now don't you think that that vexes me?" Beth approached a young boy who seemed to be around her age and offered her hand. He became sheepish, but he took her hand and she pulled him up into a dance. You recalled the name of the boy being Zach, you talked to him once or twice during your stay. "And still she cried, "I love him the best and a troubled mind
sure can know no rest." And still she cried, "Bonny boys are few and if my love leaves me what will I do?"

Some of the group laughed as Beth pulled Zach along and for a moment it felt like you were out with a group of people just for fun. You weren't just survivors, you were a community of people who could laugh and spend time together.

"If my love knew I can wash and wring. If my love knew I can sew and spin, I'd make a coat of the finest kind. But the want of money sure leaves me behind." Maggie joined in with Beth, raising her voice to meet her sister's. They harmonized and no doubt their voices were able to reach to everyone.

"And still she cried, "I love him the best and a troubled mind sure can know no rest." And still she cried, "Bonny boys are few and if my love leaves me what will I do?"

"And still she cried, "I love him the best and a troubled mind sure can know no rest." And still she cried, "Bonny boys are few and if my love leaves me what will I do?"

"What will I do?" Beth finished as she released one of Zach's hands and bowed to the group of people. Some of the other survivors clapped at the end of the song as Beth exhaled, exhausted from the energetic song. Her eyes lingered over to you and she smiled brightly, again. "___, how 'out you take over while I rest my voice? I don't think we've heard you sing us one of your favorite songs."

"Me?! No! No. Someone else can take over." You quickly turned down the offer.

"Come on, surely you know a song that others might know." Beth sat down with Zach as others looked to you expectantly. You glanced at everyone, before sighing. You had one song in mind, but you didn't want to drop the mood of the group. It was too real, but it was popular back when the world was normal.

"Welcome to your life. There's no turning back. Even while we sleep, we will find you..." You started out slowly, but you saw some people recognize the lyrics and before you knew it, a lot of people joined you in the chorus. "Acting on your best behavior. Turn your back on mother nature. Everybody wants to rule the world."

Having everyone sing to the song you had thought up gave you a little more confidence. So, you smiled and raised your voice that was held up by others as well.

"It's my own design. It's my own remorse. Help me to decide. Help me make the most..." Your heart raced as the lyrics floated into your mind and you remembered the most recent time you had heard the song. You had your phone at the beginning of all this and it was one of the many songs you had downloaded. You listened to it when the world had ended and you realized how much you didn't appreciate that song and music in general until now. You would be lucky to listen to recorded music nowadays. "Of freedom and of pleasure. Nothing ever lasts forever. Everybody wants to rule the world."

You stood up at the bridge and with others you began to belt out the words.
"There's a room where the light won't find you! Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down! When they do I'll be right behind you!" You looked over and felt your face become red when you saw you had even caught the attention of the Dixon brothers. Seeing they had your attention, Daryl gave a small smile and a nod while Merle smirked and leaned back against the bench he sat on and watched you. Getting over your sheepishness, you continued singing. "So glad we've almost made it. So sad they had to fade it. Everybody wants to rule the world."

Most of the group was singing at this point and you don't think you'd seen this many people join in before. Was it because the song was popular? Or was it because of what the song talked about?

"I can't stand this indecision, married with a lack of vision. Everybody wants to rule the world. Say that you'll never need it! One headline why believe it? Everybody wants to rule the world."

You allowed your voice to soften as you let the others take over for the end of the song. "All for freedom and for pleasure. Nothing ever lasts forever. Everybody wants to rule the world"

The song faded out and the group of people let out light claps. The thick air of the song settled and they were faced with reality, again. The song was ahead of its time, who knew it would resonate this greatly now? Many of the people gave you looks of appreciation as you nodded your head to the group, before stepping out of it.

You pushed past the people and back out into the open air. You let out a shuddering breathe, before turning and heading towards the prison entrance to cell block C. You heard heavy footsteps fall behind you and you looked over to see Merle make his way up to you. He smirked at you as you felt your face heat up, again.

"Damn, ya know how tah slap reality into someone's face with a song, darlin'." Merle laughed as he slung his bladed arm over your shoulder. You glanced at the knife, before looking back to Merle.

"It's the only song I could think of." You sighed. "If I picked something lesser known, I'd be singing on my own. Last thing I need is to hear my horrible singing voice in silence around a group of other people."

"If it's any consolation, girl." Merle brought his face closer to yours with a grin. "I thought yer little performance was better than any I've seen from that blondie."

"Thanks, Merle..." You smiled softly, as you both walked into the prison.

~

Week twelve at the prison...

"Alright, sugah. Open yer eyes." Merle stopped you and released your shoulders. You were hesitant that day when Merle told you the day before to clear up your schedule. You weren't sure what he was up to, but when you opened your eyes you began to get the idea. In front of you sat a motorcycle, it was obviously worn but in still good, running condition.

"Is this your bike? The one Daryl held onto?" You asked and you stepped over and ran your hand across the handlebars. Seeing some of the faded white supremacists stickers on the bike answered that question for you. "Yeah, I could definitely see you riding this."

"A beauty, ain't she?" Merle chuckled as he stepped up and threw a leg over the bike. You stepped to the side as he stuck the key into the ignition, revving up the bike. Merle smirked as he looked to you. "Hop on, girl."
"What are we doing, Merle Dixon?" You asked as you warily eyed him. You didn't really like the idea of riding a noisy motorcycle during the apocalypse with a guy with only one hand driving.

"Goin' out fer some fresh air, take in some views, another bullshit excuse tah do nothing fer the day." Merle patted the space behind him as he looked to you expectantly. "So, you comin' or what?"

"You have such a way with words, Dixon." You sarcastically remarked as you stepped over. You hesitantly climbed onto the bike, sitting behind Merle. You were careful with your ice picks and made sure they were hooked on right, so they wouldn't slip off. You placed your feet on some slots sticking out as you tentatively wrapped your arms around Merle's waist. "You sure you can still drive this thing with one hand, Merle?"

"Don't ya think I would've considered that?" Merle called back, a smug tone to his voice. "Fixed up this baby, made it easier fer a one-handed bastard like me tah get 'round. Now, hold on, sweet cheeks."

The bike suddenly lurched forward as Merle brought his feet up, steering the motorcycle around and headed towards the gates. You didn't dare wave to anyone as you departed down with the redneck, too afraid to let go of the only thing keeping you on the bike. It made you wonder when you got so comfortable with being in close proximity to Merle. You didn't mind holding onto him, though you were worried he was going to tease you about it later.

"Hey, Officer Rick. Mind openin' up the gates?" Merle called out as he slowed down at the entrance.

"Where are you two headed?" Rick asked with a raised eyebrow, as he walked over and pulled the reinforced gates open.

"Gonna drive around 'n see if there's any good places tah loot. Mark them on a map for ya and we can start sendin' runners out that way." Merle lied through his teeth, though he sounded completely honest about it. Man, you needed to be careful about some of the stuff this guy told you...

"Alright, be careful 'n try to get back before sundown. It's not safe out there in the dark." Rick reminded.

"Please, ya think the mountaineer 'n I can't handle our own? Those biters should be watchin' out fer us." Merle chuckled, before revving the bike and riding out. You heard the prison gates close behind you, as the redneck took off down the road. The wind whipped back your hair as you watched the trees rush past you.

"Is it too late to mention I've never ridden on a motorcycle?" You called over the roar of the wind.

"Ya shouldn't have told me that, darlin'." You didn't like how he said that. Merle sped up the bike and roared down the road. Your heart raced in panic as you held on tighter to the man in front of you, as the scenery alongside you blurred. Merle drifted slightly on the bike as he took a sharp turn.

"Merle! If we crash, I am not helping you heal your ribs this time!" You shouted as you closed your eyes and leaned your head against his back. Your vision was spinning and by obscuring your vision from the rolling world around you, you were able to calm down your dizziness.

"I'll keep ya to it, girl!" You road in silence after that. Your heart began to calm down and you decided to peek out at the rows of trees that blinked past. You looked ahead and couldn't see any
sign of a direct location, but you hoped Merle had an idea of where he was going.

You glanced at the man you were holding onto. His hair had really begun to grow out while you'd been around him. The blonde hair on top of his head had gain around an inch and you noticed the way it began to curl. Different than Daryl's flat, brown hair that hung in his eyes. But the scruff across Merle's face was getting long and in no time you could say he officially had a beard and mustache.

Your eyes darted to his neck where at the base of it, you recognized the familiar silver scarring. You frowned and only guesses ran through your head of its origin.

Merle suddenly began to slow down the bike and when you looked ahead you saw why. An old campground. Merle rolled in and passed by the different camping lots. Soon enough, you saw the distant view of a lake. It wasn't a big one and you could tell that it was getting dirty from the years of no one being around.

"Saw this on one of mah last runs. Thought it'd be a good idea tah loot 'round at some of the small log cabins." Merle spoke up as he slowed to a stop at deserted cabin. "Afterwards we can head out 'n sit by the lake. Just take a breather, forget 'bout all this shit."

"Sure, sounds nice." You smiled as you carefully got off the bike. A chill ran down your spine from the cold forest air, the shadows and distance from the lake not helping. You missed the warmth Merle provided, but shook away any further thoughts of it.

"Keep a pick ready, we don't know if we need tah burst any Walker heads goin' in." Merle warned as he parked the bike and climbed off. You both stepped up to the small residence and Merle clicked open the front door. It was only a ground level log cabin and you both quickly swept through. You found one Walker who was stuck reaching through some heavy chairs and you disposed of them with a quick swing of your pick. You found some snacks to grab and headed back to the entrance.

"I'm heading out!"

"Be out in a minute, sugah!" Merle called back. You hesitated, wondering what could be taking him so long as you stepped back out into the open air.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

It's been too long. When Merle had stepped into the small washroom and spotted the razor and shaving cream, he knew he was taking advantage of that. The redneck never liked facial hair, finding it gets in his way. So, after months without having the option to shave, he was taking it.

It didn't take long. Merle had been doing this for decades, and as he washed off the remaining grime from his face, he admired his shaven appearance. He rubbed his hand along his jaw and smirked. He never doubted he could get into bed with that Emma girl, but he knew this was going to be a deal breaker. He was ready to get rid of all that sexual tension building up on him.

Merle grabbed the razor and shaving cream, to use for later, and made his way out. He stepped out of the cabin and found the girl sitting on the porch steps up to the door. She looked over and her jaw dropped upon seeing Merle.

"Merle, you..." She trailed off and got to her feet. She became visibly flustered and brought a hand up to smooth back her hair. "You look..."

"Sexy? Strikin'? Ya don't need tah tell me, sweet cheeks. I know." Merle laughed lightly as he
made his way down the steps and to his bike. He tossed the shaving supplies into his bike's bag and grabbed ahold of the handles. He began to push the bike down a trail leading to the lake, the girl following from behind him.

"You took the words out of my mouth, Dixon." The girl chirped as she kept her pace up with his. "So, we're really just going to sit and relax by the lake?"

"Hell yeah."

"Seems counter-productive."

"It is, but I really needed tah get away from that place." Merle huffed as he noticed an old wooden bench about ten feet away from the lake. He pushed his bike over and parked it behind the bench before walking over and dropping down on the worn wood. The bench creaked a little, but held firm and steady. It would take more than a person sitting down to take out the old wood bench. Merle lounged back and stuck his legs out with a sigh.

"You really don't like the prison, huh?" The girl sat down beside Merle, keeping a personal bubble of space between them.

"Don't like the building itself, that's all... Too many memories..." Merle sighed and rummaged in his pocket, pulling out a box of cigarettes. He slid one out and offered the box to the girl. He wasn't surprised when the girl gave him a look, as he snickered and stuffed the box away. Merle stuck the cigarette in his mouth and pulled out his lighter, lighting the cigarette. He took a nice, steady drag before blowing out the smoke.

"Is that where you got that scar?" The girl's eyes widened as the words left her mouth. She brought up a hand to cover her lips as she looked away. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to blurt that out..."

"Which one?" Merle asked. This stunned the girl into silence as she looked at Merle with wide, shocked eyes.

"Which one?" She hesitated before placing her hand on the space between them. "Merle... How many scars do you have?"

"Lost track 'n kinda hard tah tell with how many on mah stupid ass backside." Merle took a puff from his cigarette as his lips curled into a smirk. "So, ya did peek, just not where I thought you would've."

"We don't have to talk about this, Merle. It's not any of my business to know." The girl sighed and rubbed the back of her neck, leaning forward. "It's just... Been bugging me for a while."

Merle glanced at the girl. She did look ashamed for asking, though he wasn't sure why. He supposed maybe ____ thought scars were sensitive things to talk about. In Merle's eyes, they were marks of living. He has had the tar beaten out of him many a time, but he was alive and breathing. Those scars were there to prove he's come back from death time and time, again.

His biggest scar to show his brink of death ventures would be the stump hidden by his bayonet at the moment.

"..." Merle watched the smoke that left his lips swirl up into the air and disappear, as he rolled the bud between his fingers. "Where do ya want me tah start?"

"Are you sure?" The girl asked, looking weary.
"Darlin', they're scars. They don't hurt me no more." Merle looked to the girl and gave her a softer expression to show he was serious. "They're just for show at this point."

"... Okay." The girl let out a big sigh as she leaned her elbows on her knees and looked to Merle earnestly. "The earliest you're comfortable with telling me."

"From the beginnin'? Phew, this is goin' tah be a long afternoon." A devilish smirk wormed its way onto Merle's features as he turned to better face the girl. "Good, let's see how much time we can destroy out here today."

The girl snorted at that as Merle gathered his thoughts.

"Started with mah asshole of a father. Since the day I was born he treated me like shit. Started beatin' me at the age of five, whenever I'd get him angry. He took it out on Daryl, too, when he had reached that age." Merle scowled at the thought. He should've known better than to think his father would've gone easy on Daryl. His baby brother might've been quieter, kinder but that still didn't change how much of a bastard his father was. "I mostly got bruises from him, but I got a couple cuts from beer bottles he'd smash on or near me. That's why I am the way I am. Got into trouble, just tah get away from him. Took drugs tah get away from all of it, 'specially crystal. Even got myself thrown in prison."

"Merle..." The girl's voice was soft and it made Merle angry, as he lowered his cigarette and shot her a glare.

"I don't need yer goddamn pity, girl. Don't do that." Merle growled, his defenses coming up.

"Merle, I don't pity you." Merle looked to the girl and searched her eyes. She had a stone expression, hard and cold at the moment. She lowered her gaze, before reaching over and taking Merle's bayonet arm. Her fingers lightly touched his skin as she held his elbow. Her eyes closed as she let out a soft sigh. "I'm just grateful... Grateful and amazed that someone like you, like Daryl, came from all of that hurting... I'm not pitying you... I'm absolutely stunned and blown away at how strong you both are. Most people, most people would've broke with a childhood like that."

Merle felt paralyzed. He wasn't sure whether to move away or if he should get up or if he should stay. He wasn't sure whether he should be thankful or frustrated. So, the redneck just did nothing, allowing the girl to hold onto his amputated arm.

"... Pfft." The girl snorted, causing Merle to furrow his brows.

"What's so funny?" Merle asked, an edge to his voice.

"Nothing." The girl looked to him, a smile coming to her face. "It's just... You're right. No one can break Merle, except Merle."

"Sugah, it's no one can kill Merle, but Merle."

"I know what I said."
A/N: There is definitely a lot of reference to sex in this chapter (and the next couple chapters), but the act will not be written out. So, a lot like the show, you hear about it and catch some glimpses of it, but you never actually see it all the way through.

You hummed lightly as you stabbed your ice pick into the walker's head. You pulled it out as the Walker collapsed to the ground and you moved onto the next one. You couldn't fight the small smile that came to your face as you thought about the last couple days you spent with Merle.

The prison had a lot of downtime, the walkers weren't too bad this last week and you found a lot of your afternoons spent with the Dixon. You would either do some work with him, go out riding on his motorcycle, or just chilling in your cells. You've long since finished Ordinary People and you wondered if you should find a good book from the prison library...

But every day, you found yourself looking forward to the time spent with Merle. A lot of the others have long since figured out how close you were with the redneck and though a view of them voiced their concerns, you never let their opinions of him get you down. Maggie, who had especially grown to like you, was the most worried and you couldn't blame her after her experience. But her words did not sway you, if you trusted anyone's opinion of Merle it was Daryl. The younger Dixon didn't show it too much, but he did express that he was grateful that you kept Merle out of trouble.

You found yourself humming a song you used to listen to all the time, the typical "girl loves boy" song. You smiled brightly as you jabbed into another biter.

"I don't think I've every seen you so chipper puttin' down walkers." You jumped and looked over to see Hershel. He smiled kindly at you as he carefully stepped over to you. You'd never stop being impressed with the old man, he's the toughest one you've met and despite all the trials he went through, he remained strong, faithful, and optimistic. You wish you could do the same.

"Its just been a good, quiet week." You lowered your pick and shrugged lightly.

"No, it's something different..." Hershel looked lost in thought for a moment. "What were you thinking about?"

"Just some of the stuff I did this last week..." You hesitated to say that you were thinking more specifically about Merle. Hershel didn't mind Merle, but you knew he might mention this to Maggie. But the thought of the time you spent with Merle brought your smile back. You thought about an evening where you were in your cell and he told you about joining the army and how he socked a sergeant in the face. It wasn't even for a good reason and he got you to laugh, seeing as the man has and will never be changed.

"That look." Hershel caught your attention, again, as what seemed to be a mischievous glint appeared in his eyes. He knew something you didn't. "That look right there. I know it, no mistaking it."

"What is it?" You were mildly curious.
"You're in love." Hershel stated, as you choked. You?! In love?!

"No, no, no!" You raised your empty hand and waved it. "I'm definitely NOT in love. That can't be it."

"Well, were you thinking about a boy?"

"I-well, yes... But that doesn't mean I'm in love." You tried to argue.

"But that smile, that smile is only a smile that can be brought to a person by someone else." Hershel chuckled lightly. "Did the thought of this person make you smile?"

"Of course, but..." Merle flashed through your mind and you shook your head. "We're just friends!"

"Many friendships lead to love."

"This isn't one of those relationships. I mean, why would I like him like that?" You hooked your pick onto your side and folded your arms. "He's ignorant and hot-headed and stubborn..."

"But is there anything good about him? You were smiling for a reason, weren't you?"

"He's all those things, but... He's passionate and funny and... He acts like a big jerk, but that's because he doesn't want to be seen as weak." You rubbed your elbows as your gaze lowered to the ground. "But it's really nice seeing him lower his walls to me. He can be considerate, even though he'd deny it."

"He trusts you with his vulnerability, doesn't that tell you he cares, too?"

"What?" You looked to Hershel, incredulous. Could you be in love with Merle? Sure, you could see it. But Merle in love with you? No way. "He does not think that way about me."

"Maybe he hasn't lowered his walls enough for you to see." Hershel stepped closer and placed a hand on your shoulder. "I know what I know, ___, and I know that the person you're thinking of... You care for them a great deal. Maybe it isn't romantic love, but it is still love, nonetheless."

"..." You thought about it, you really did. But you couldn't grasp it.

"You seem unsure, think of it this way. How would you feel if you saw them, out there, in a position where they couldn't save themselves and you couldn't save them?" Hershel asked, nodding to outside the fences. You looked out at the small group of walkers at the fence and imagined Merle surrounded by them. No escape, no assistance, you couldn't do anything but stand and watch. You felt your heart twist and your chest become empty, and that's when you knew.


"I would be empty..." You admitted.

"He means an awful lot to you then." Hershel rubbed your shoulder. "It's a blessing and a curse. Caring for someone. It gives you a reason to keep living and fighting, but you also have to worry every second of your life for them. At least, in this world..."

Something to live for...

"You got me, darlin'. But I'm not forcing ya into anything. You choose your life and I choose mine. I'm just sayin'..." You remembered Merle say, as he leveled his hard blue gaze with your own. "You got someone in this world who doesn't hate you. If that's something worth livin' for."
"Think on it. If you really feel this way towards this man, maybe he deserves to know it, too."
Hershel gave you one last warm smile, before releasing his hand from your shoulder and turning
back to head to the prison. "Have a good rest of the night, ____.

"You, too, Hershel!" You called back, as you turned to look back to the walkers grabbing onto the
fence. Who knew one conversation could change your whole thought process? You loved Merle,
but what were you going to do about it? Would it be okay to tell him? Should you talk to someone
else about it?

You decided this was a problem for later, as you unhooked your pick from your side. You jabbed
into another Walker, as you let out a sigh. Even if you did nothing or something, you knew one
thing for sure. You would do everything to your best ability to keep the Dixon alive.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

It was that rare blue moon when Merle would take off his bayonet and clean it. He sat on the cell
block's stairs as he worked. He did his best to clean through the cracks and check for any debris
hanging onto the contraption. He wanted to get this over with fast, he felt weak without the
gauntlet and the last thing he needed was to be vulnerable to these pricks. The Dixon heard some
footsteps entering into the open space and looked up to find the farmer's oldest daughter step in.

Maggie wasn't too happy to find the man in there, but she simply ignored him and walked over to
her cell to grab some things. Merle noticed something sticking out of the girl's pocket and a vicious
smirk lit his features.

"I knew you love bird's were gettin' ahead of yerselves." Merle mocked as Maggie stiffened up.
Her hand went to the pregnancy test in her pocket and she knew she was caught. Her face turned
red in anger as she turned to look at the older man.

"And so what? We weren't planning on havin' any. This is just a precaution, we both agreed we're
not ready, yet." Maggie tried to defend herself, wondering how the redneck would play this game.

"You're really considerin' bringin' a baby into this world? Have ya seen Officer Friendly? The
man's lost his mind." Merle scoffed at the idea. "You're just puttin' yer own neck on the line."

"Glenn's not like Rick." Maggie frowned. "But you're right, it wouldn't be fair to the baby... Maybe
if things begin to turn out good for a long while, but now isn't the time."

"It will never be the time. Not until that Gov'ner is dead. Not until we have enough offense 'n
defense 'n resources tah provide fer what we have now." Merle shook his head. "That's years,
honey."

"Don't call me that." Maggie folded her arms as she glared at Merle. "I don't know why I should
care what you think though. You couldn't handle raisin' a kid in all this. Hell, you couldn't do it
back in the normal world."

"Ya think I ever wanted a kid?" Merle rolled his eyes. "Kids have never liked me, havin' one
sounds like a counter-productive way tah work."

"There's one other thing I didn't consider." Maggie hissed as her voiced lowered into a dark, harsh
tone and she stepped over. "Someone would have to be stupid enough to like a bastard like you to
even consider keepin' the baby."

"Ya don't know what yer sayin', lovebird." Merle rolled his jaw as he met Maggie's fiery eyes with
his own cold gaze. "I've slept with more women than you can count with yer fingers 'n toes."
"How many stayed?"

"..." Merle set his mouth in a firm line, knowing she had him there. Maggie scoffed as she backed up.

"You're all talk, Merle Dixon. You're one of the most pathetic, ignorant, and lonely creatures I have ever met. Your lucky you have your brother, otherwise there wouldn't be a soul out there who cared about your sorry ass." Maggie shook her head as she unfolded her arms. "You should feel grateful for him. Without him, that Governor would have your head on a platter. You wouldn't be welcomed here."

"Tch... And if all that is true, what does it change?"

"You have a thin line keepin' you here, Merle. I'd watch where you step." Maggie warned, almost threatened. The cell block doors clicked open and the two looked over to see ___ step in. She seemed surprised to see them both there as she froze in place for a moment. "___?"

"Huh?" ___ broke her gaze away from Merle and shook her head. "Sorry, it's been a long, slow day. Uh, what's going on here?"

"..." Maggie glanced at Merle, but looked back to ___ and gave her a soft smile. "Nothin'. Just some stupid arguin'."

"Uuh..." ___ seemed unsure as she looked between the two. Merle wondered what was up with the girl. She usually despised this kind of situation to walk into, but she seemed lost and a little dazed. Maybe she was just tired.

"Did you need something from one of us?" Maggie asked further.

"I did want to talk to you..." The girl waved it off. "It can be saved for tomorrow. We could talk at lunch."

"Sounds good, I'm lookin' forward to it." Maggie gave a bright smile as she walked on past ___. She gave the girl's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, before heading out if the cell block. The girl looked to Merle, a slight frown on her features. She stepped over and noticed the remove bayonet.

"The fight wasn't that bad, right?" She asked, as she sat down beside Merle. The redneck laughed as he shrugged slightly.

"The usual bashin' back 'n forth. Nothin' special." Merle answered, as he looked down at the girl beside him. He thought about what the farmer's daughter said. "Sweet cheeks, random question, don't take it to heart, but... If the group was considerin' kickin' me out, would you go against them?"

"It depends on why they're kicking you out." The girl stated bluntly.

"Aw, come on, darlin'. I was expectin' a little more support than that." Merle chuckled as he playfully shoved the girl with his elbow. She smiled back as the tension eased up.

"But even though you're rude and arrogant and hot-headed... I know you wouldn't do anything that horrible to get yourself kicked out." ___ rubbed her arm as she looked to her shoes. "I don't think you're the same Merle who would have stabbed Glenn through a couple months ago... I think you've grown since then."

"That's puttin' a lot of hope in ol' Merle."
"I've always had hope in you, Merle." The girl stood to her feet and headed up the stairs. "If you need me! I'll be talking to Sasha!"

Merle rolled his eyes. Women. They'd always be a mystery.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You knew telling Maggie about your feelings for Merle was off the table. But that wouldn't stop you from telling her that you were attracted to someone. So, the next day at lunch accompanied by Sasha, you sat down with the two and prepared your words carefully.

"I... I think I'm in love with someone." You blurted out, as you looked sheepishly down at the meal table. When you looked up, again, you were met with the shocked expressions of both girls.

"Yer not pullin' our legs?" Maggie asked carefully. You shook your head. It took a moment, but both girl's faces lit up. Sasha reached over and took your hand as she beamed at you.

"You're really in love? And you came to us first? ___, I'm so happy for you." Sasha chirped as she squeezed your hand.

"So, who's the lucky guy?" Maggie grinned as she leaned on her elbows.

"I don't want to say..." You sighed, but managed a half-hearted smile. "I really love the guy, I do. But I'm not sure he returns the feelings."

"What does that have to do with you telling us who he is?" Sasha frowned a little, confused by the turn of events.

"Well, if things turn sour, I don't want you guys to go and abuse him verbally or physically." A headache formed at the thought. If they knew it was Merle and they heard he rejected you, they would hang that man by his toenails.

"Fine, but if things turn out sweet, we will found out who it is eventually." Maggie teased.

"So, is there a reason you came to us two?" Sasha questioned, tilting her head slightly.

"You're both close to my age, I was hoping you'd have good advice about this." You rubbed the back of your neck and exhaled. "I haven't dated since my early years in college and that was what? ... Four or five years ago?"

"Now, that all depends. Where are you tryin' to go with this man?" Maggie relaxed her shoulders as she took a bite out of the roll sandwhich. "I mean, are you lookin' for a companion? A lover? Just a boyfriend?"

"Geez, there's different approaches for all of those?" You were feeling overwhelmed and the thought of sleeping with Merle, which really made your thoughts swim. You hadn't even thought about that and if this man was anything like you guessed in a relationship, love-making was probably a high priority.

"Of course, you don't want to give him the wrong signals." Maggie began to smirk a little. "Trust me, I made it fairly clear to Glenn what I wanted from him."

"We know what you want from him, Maggie. Trust me, you've both made that apparent." Sasha huffed, though she grinned at Maggie's flustered expression. The sharp-shooter looked back to you, her expression neutral. "She's right though. If you aren't looking for a lover. You'll need to make
that clear."

"I'm not sure what I want... I don't want sex. I'm not ready for that. But something like a companion." You decided to let your thoughts drift and speak your mind. "You know, it'd just be nice after a tough day of facing the undead... Just to come back and just be held by him... We could talk for hours, maybe kiss... Something like that. I don't want to jump so quick into love-making!"

"Aw, that sounds so cute." Maggie smiled softly, as her whole expression became gentle. "You really care for this guy, huh?"

"More than I ever thought I would." You admitted. "I just don't think I'm his type. I'm not sure this whole thing is a good idea... I just know, even if he doesn't feel that, I want to stay friends. I don't want to lose him, not over something silly like that."

"___, you're honest and humble and incredibly helpful. There's no reason this guy shouldn't like you." Sasha reassured, but you knew better. This was Merle, he wasn't like any other guy ever.

"I wish you were right... But this guy is pretty complicated. Very passionate."

"And you don't want to be lovers with him?" Maggie raised an eyebrow. "You're playin' with some serious fire, darlin'."

"I know. I've known for a while now." You smiled a little. "So, do you think that you two could help me?"

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle grumbled a little as he stepped into cell block B. His brother thought it would be a good idea for Merle to help out more, so he decided to set him out to gather the dirty laundry from the cell blocks to carry off to the laundry room. Daryl assured his older brother he wouldn't be doing the laundry, but Merle still thought it was stupid that he was gathering it up anyway. A guy with a knife for a hand isn't exactly what you want near your clothes.

But the residents didn't seem too bothered by it, though some of the original Woodbury residents did send him hesitant looks. Let them hesitate, wouldn't change the fact that Merle couldn't care any less. As the redneck finished gathering up the laundry into a basket from the cells below, he made his way up the stairs and stopped in his place.

In the cell closest to the stairs was Emma. She was propped up at a make-shift vanity, running a comb through her short hair. She looked over at the movement and smirked a little when she saw Merle.

"Hey, I've never seen you around these parts. I thought you always stuck in block C." Emma stood from her seat and leaned on the table set up in her cell. Merle smirked a little at the woman.

"Mah baby brother is makin' me do some chores, couldn't stand his whinin' fer much longer." Merle licked his lips, as he looked over Emma. Those clothes were pretty tight, was that such a good idea in the apocalypse? Eh, who cared.

"I guess I'm gonna stop dancing around the question." Emma raised a hand and gestured Merle over to her cell with a finger. The redneck dropped the basket of laundry to the side and eagerly made his way into the women's cell. Emma didn't hesitate to place her hands on Merle's chest, running her fingers up to rest against his shoulders. "I think we both know what's really going on here... Merle, right?"
"And don't ya forget. Ya might have tah scream it later." Merle darkly smirked, as he let the woman touch him. "But do tell, what is goin' on 'tween us?"

"We both haven't been pleased for a long, long time... Not since this world fell apart." Emma began, her gaze drifting from Merle's eyes to across his face and back to his chest. "We really need some sexual release... Just need to get rid of all of this built up tension... We both need someone who can help us feel good, real good, with no strings attached."

"I do like the sound of that." Merle growled lightly.

"Cause let's be honest, we aren't attracted to each other by anything except physical pleasure. Lust. So, what do you say? How about we plan little... 'Meetings'." Emma suggested. "We'll meet up at a location, away from the others, and just give each other a good time."

"Yer awfully confident. Just how experienced are ya?" Merle quirked an eyebrow as he glanced over the woman. "I'm not just settlin' fer any broad."

"Oh, Merle Dixon. I've had lots of experience. I can take you any which way, in any style you want." Emma laughed lightly, as she reached up and traced her finger across Merle's lip. The redneck narrowed his eyes at the woman's teasing. "I'm not up for all kinks though, I have some standards."

"No kinks, no toys, just straight, hard sex." Merle bluntly stated as he stepped away from the woman. "Find some free time this next week, I'll find the place."

"You're such a charmer, Dixon." Emma folded her arms and rolled her eyes, but smirked. "I'll look forward to it."

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You were surprised when after dinner you were ambushed by Maggie and Sasha. You knew they were planning something, but you didn't think they would come up with it so quickly. You were dragged to Sasha's personal cell as you three all sat down together.

"What's going on?" You laughed a little, seeing the grinning faces of both the girls.

"We were thinkin' it over and we think we thought of a great way for you to confess to your man." Maggie began as she sat on the edge of her seat.

"Well, what is it?"

"Next week, you're gonna go up to him and confess, straight on. You'll have to catch him alone though, just in case..." Sasha trailed off and you knew what she meant. In case, he didn't feel the same way.

"But the catch is, we're gonna spend this next week gatherin' things together to doll you up." Maggie added.

"Doll me up? Doesn't that send the wrong idea?" "You asked, unsure about the idea. You knew Merle really could take it the wrong way.

"We aren't dressing you up like a hooker." Sasha rolled her eyes, but smiled. "We'll find you a comfortable, modest dress, see what we could do about your hair, and maybe some light make-up. You aren't dressing up to get him to sleep with you, you're dressing up to show him that he means something more to you."
"If you guys think it will work..." You sighed, but a smile began to pull at your lips. "Alright, let's do it."

"We promise, we're gonna make you look and feel great." Maggie assured you, before she stood to her feet.

"Get some good rest, you'll need to start building up that confidence to confess." Sasha placed a hand on your shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze, before releasing it and standing up. You got up, too and made your way out of the cell with Maggie. You bid her goodnight as you made your way back to the stairs of the cell block. You stepped to the upper floor and walked over to your cell, sitting down on your mattress.

You were really going to confess to Merle in a week's time. You brushed back your hair and exhaled. Were you even ready? Was this all a big mistake?

You heard the cell block doors click open and a whistle filled the cells, echoing across the cement walls. You recognized the whistle and glanced out of your cell to see Merle walking up the cell block stairs. He seemed chipper if his whistling was anything to go by. You smiled a little as he walked over to his cell.

"What's got you in such a good mood?" You asked.

"Adult stuff, you'll understand it when yer older, sugah." Merle chuckled, ceasing his whistling. He leaned across his outside cell bars and looked over you. "I haven't seen ya too much this last week, ya avoidin' me?"

"No, just... Been busy. Talking a lot with Maggie and Sasha."

"Women powwow? Don't tell me yer not makin' some feminist group."

"If we are, I wouldn't tell you." You teased, as the redneck rolled his eyes.

"Yer killin' me, girl." Merle shook his head, though he did offer you a slight smirk. "I think everything's really settlin' into place now. I'm gettin' less glares, gettin' out more, and it looks like people don't mind me bein' around."

"That's what happens when you don't go around threatening everyone every chance you get." You joked, tapping a finger on the cell bars. "Maybe we can hangout tomorrow, so we can clear up this 'avoiding' situation."

"I'll have tah see, sweet cheeks. Might get busy tomorrow, dependin' on circumstances." Merle pursed his lips in thought as he scratched his cheek, his scruff already beginning to grow back.

"Hope things work out then." You shrugged, stepping back to the entrance of your cell. "Goodnight, Merle.

"Night." Merle grinned, nodding to you before slipping into his cell. His smiles made your heart flutter, but something felt off. A little sliver of worry entered into your heart. You remembered Merle telling you about how he liked older, experienced women. Something you weren't.

You stepped into your own cell and brushed your hair back. Could he like you? Despite your age and experience? You sighed and sat on your bed, lying your head in your hands. Why was that man so hard to read?
Maggie finished up the blush she was applying to your face, before stepping back with a smile. Sasha stepped over and smiled, too, folding her arms.

"You look good, you're going to knock this guy off his feet." She chuckled lightly, as you turned to look at the large mirror placed in Sasha's cell. Reflecting back at you was a beautiful young women. Your hair was thickly curled with the use of a curling iron that the girls had found a month ago. Your had on a light layer of blush, eye shadow, chapstick, and a little mascara.

You wore a beautiful double front coat dress in a lovely shade of navy blue. The dress had been found by Sasha on a run in the past week and after cleaning it for extra measure, she brought it to you. It was a perfect fit. You wore black flats that were being borrowed from Maggie. You brushed down the dress and looked to the two girls.

"You really think I look good?" You asked, unsure.

"You look amazing." Maggie admitted and gave you a genuine smile. "The man would have to be a fool to turn you down after you did all this for him."

"I don't want him to just like me for my looks though." You sighed. "This is to show him how much I care for him, not to flaunt my body."

"It sounds like your close, he probably does care more for your brains than looks anyway." Sasha commented and shrugged slightly. "But this will definitely sell the point."

"If you say so..." You took a deep breathe, relaxing your shoulders. "Okay... I think I'm ready."

"Go get 'im, darlin'." Maggie encouraged as Sasha laughed lightly.

"Whatever happens... Thank you both, for all of your help." You sent both girls a grateful smile, before stepping out of the cell. You took another hesitant breathe, before walking to the center of the cell block. The block was empty except for you three and you supposed Merle was elsewhere in the prison.

It was strange though, Merle was usually back to the cell block after the sun sets. You frowned lightly, before heading to the door that led to the corridors and tombs of the prison. The door clicked open and your steps echoed off the empty halls of the prison, as you walked down the narrow stretch. This continued on for the next five minutes.

You checked the other occupied cell blocks, some of the storage rooms, even the showers, and there was no sign of the Dixon. You frowned lightly, before stepping out of the cell. You took another hesitant breathe, before walking to the center of the cell block. The block was empty except for you three and you supposed Merle was elsewhere in the prison.

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You checked the other occupied cell blocks, some of the storage rooms, even the showers, and there was no sign of the Dixon. You began to grow nervous, your built up confidence beginning to diminish as you still couldn't find the redneck. Why is it the one time you were actually looking for Merle, he seemed to be completely out of reach? You huffed, beginning to give up hope of finding the man. But then you heard him shout.

Panic filled your veins as you ran down the corridor in the direction you heard his yell. It was unmistakably his, the rasp was clear. Though it sounded like he was shouting something, but you didn't quite catch it. You turned a corner and found a closed storage room, he had to be in there. You reached out to grab the doorknob, but you halted at another noise.
This one was the brief shout of a woman.

Your hand hovered over the doorknob, as you listened carefully. The faint sound of moans came through the door and you brought your hand down. He couldn't be...

"Emma! Damnit, woman..." You heard Merle groan through the door. Your assumption was confirmed with those words. Your heart shattered, the pieces dropped into your stomach as you stepped back. You frowned and shook your head.

What were you thinking? This is Merle Dixon. You should have known better. He wasn't a settle down kind of guy. He never was and you were a fool to think otherwise.

You felt hot tears begin to build up in your eyes, but you pushed them down. This wasn't the time to cry. Besides you couldn't idle around here. You wanted to be alone. You desperately wanted to be alone.

You turned and quickly, quietly walked back down the corridor.

~

The cold, night air pricked at your skin and you were glad that your dress was partly a coat. It's thick material kept your torso and arms warm, but your legs began to gain goosebumps. You shivered and rubbed your legs. You sat on the roof of the prison, looking out across the prison yard.

You sighed and averted your gaze to the ground. You felt the hot tears trail down your face now, you felt better knowing you were alone to allow them to go free. After the warm liquid ran down your face, their trails would freeze slightly, making you just a little bit colder. Your shoulders shook from your silent sobs and you scolded yourself. You shouldn't be hurting yourself over this guy.

But it just hurt so much.

You jumped at the sound of a door clicking shut and you looked up in surprise. Daryl was barely seen with the help of the moon above as he stood in front of the rooftop door. You couldn't see his expression, but he slowly began to step over. Once the younger Dixon stepped closer, you could see him clearer. He had a slight frown, his eyes filled with concerned.

"What happened?" He asked softly, his voice still rough, not budging from his standing position in front of you.

"It's... It's nothing..." You shook your head slightly, leaning your back against the wall that bordered the edges of the prison roof.

"I doubt yer dolled up like that fer nothing. And yer tears tell a whole different story." Daryl sighed, before slowly getting down beside you. He sidled up against the wall beside you, setting his crossbow down at his side before turning his head to look down at you.

"... What are you even doing up here, Daryl?" You asked, a bit harsh, as you wiped your tears away forcefully.

"Was on watch with Glenn, but spotted ya out here all huddled up, alone." Daryl shifted slightly, his growing hair falling into his eyes. "Told Glenn I was gonna go scout the perimeter of the buildin'. But really came here tah see what was up. Didn't expect to find ya cryin'."
"Well, I'm fine. So, you can just go." You ran a hand back through your hair, messing up your curls.

"What's with the tough act, huh?" Daryl suddenly bit back angrily. "I thought you were smart, but what now? Yer catchin' my brother's stupid or somethin'?!

"Maybe I want to be alone, Daryl! Maybe I'm hurt and I just don't want to be bothered! Maybe I don't want others to see me vulnerable like this!" You shouted back, your voice cracking near the end as you let out a slight sob.

"... Nobody wants tah be alone."

"But I do, right now."

"Maybe that's what ya want, but it's not what ya need." Daryl sighed as he lowered his head. "Do you know how I was... When I thought that son of a bitch was dead?"

"..." You stayed quiet. You talked with Daryl from time to time, but he was the last person to express his feelings to anyone. Maybe to Carol, maybe even to Merle, but that was it. If he was gonna spill something to you, you weren't gonna stop him.

"I found the car he crashed... The one you saved him from 'n found the guns he had leftover... The only sign he was there was blood and with the walkers millin' about..." Daryl turned his head away from you. "I thought he was dead for sure... The only one who can kill Merle is Merle..."

You felt more tears prick into your eyes, as you saw the slight shake of Daryl's shoulders. You could hear the hurt in his voice, his breathes becoming shallow. You never thought you'd ever see a Dixon this weak before, but Daryl was miraculously showing it to you.

"I cried like you are now 'n I could barely walk... And when I made it back, I was angry. I went back in the tombs 'n punched the walls until my knuckles began tah bleed... I hated him for doin' what he did and I hated myself for pushin' him away..." Daryl sighed as he took control of his breathing, calming down. "I was beatin' myself up and I didn't want anyone around... But even though I shouted at her, threatened her... Carol stayed... And she listened..."

Your eyes widened at that, as Daryl raised his head up to look at the sky.

"I didn't want her... But I needed her... More than I ever knew..." Daryl let out a shuddered breath, before looking back down to you. "So, maybe you don't want me around, but you do need me around."

"..." You bit your lip and looked down, playing with the end of your sleeve.

"What happened?"

"..." You sighed and looked back up to Daryl. You couldn't tell him about your feelings to Merle, but maybe he was right. You needed someone to vent to. You took a deep breathe and straightened up. "The reason I'm all dressed up is because I was telling a guy tonight that I loved him..."

Daryl waited for you patiently, his expression softening up. You choked on your words a little, but forced them out.

"But it turns out that he doesn't feel the same... But I should've known." You let out a sob, tears trailing down your face. Daryl opened an arm up to you and without much thought, you scooted closer and pressed your face into the younger Dixon's shoulder. He rubbed your back, ruffling your
hair a little and allowed you to cry on him.

"Who was the dick who did that to ya?" Daryl asked.

"I won't say..." You choked and shook your head lightly. "I'm upset, but I don't want you beating him up about it."

"If he hurt you this bad, the bastard deserves it." Daryl slightly growled and it reminded you of Merle. Oh, the irony, if only Daryl knew...

"Maybe he does... But tearing him up won't make me feel any better..." You sighed, your sobs calming down and falling to silent tears. "I just want to forget tonight, Daryl... Please..."

"... Alright..." Daryl let out a soft sigh as he rubbed your arm. "Don't beat yourself up over this, okay?"

"I won't. After I'm done crying, I won't..." You both fell into silence, as you sat together on the prison rooftop.

You stayed there into the long hours of the the night. At one point, Daryl nudged you, noticing your droopy eyes and made you get up. He helped you tiredly make your way back to the cell block. You collapsed on your mattress and immediately fell asleep.

You awoke to the rays of the sun peeking through the bed sheets that hung over your cell doors. You blinked your eyes open and stared at the sheets covering the bars. You frowned, the memories of last night flooding into your mind. You got to your feet and carefully stepped over, pulling the sheets over any cracks of light.

You noticed you were still dressed in the coat dress and decided to shed the clothing off. You set the dress to the side, pulling on some sweatpants and a t-shirt. You still had a few thick curls in your hair, but they were beginning to return to your natural hair with time. You dropped onto your bed and pulled the covers over your form. You wanted to lie here and sleep away the day.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle was feeling pretty good that morning. His muscles were loosened up and he felt a lot of tension leave him that night. The redneck smirked as he began to walk to the fence lining to get rid of a few walkers. He was surprised to find his brother along with two of the other women speaking with him.

"No, she wouldn't tell us who he was either." The Asian's lovebird frowned at Daryl, before noticing Merle's approach. She glared at him as the other woman spoke up.

"How upset was she?" The black woman asked. Daryl sighed and brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck.

"She was pretty hurt... Never seen her so upset." Daryl noticed Merle's approach and looked over, giving him a slight nod.

"What the hell are y'all talking about?" Merle asked, narrowing his eyes at the trio.

"Nothin' you'd care about." The farmer's daughter hissed, before turning around and making her way down the fence line.

"It really isn't your business." The other woman sighed lightly. "But if you want to know, it'd
probably be best to hear it from your brother."

Merle watched the other woman turn and catch up to the farmer's daughter, before he looked to his younger brother.

"What the hell is goin' on?" Merle watched as his younger brother shift, looking uncomfortable.

"It's not my place to say it, but... I found ___ all dolled up last night on the prison roof, alone. She was pretty upset and I went to those two to see if they knew more." Daryl adjusted the crossbow over his shoulder, as he avoided his older brother's gaze. "Apparently, she went to go confess her feelings to some guy in the prison, but he turned her down."

"What?" Merle hissed, feeling an anger beginning to boil in the pit of his stomach. "Who the hell is this f***er?"

~Reader's P.O.V.~

A week painfully rolled past. The main group at this point in time had caught on to your beaten down behavior. You didn't talk much, laugh, or even smiled and it really worried the others. A few knew why, those being Maggie, Sasha, Daryl, and to your surprise Merle. You were caught completely off guard when he came storming into your cell one night after the incident.

"Tell me who did it. And don't play dumb with me. I know what's up." Merle had growled as he stormed into your cell. You frowned, figuring Daryl must've told him.

"I'm not saying, Merle." You turned over to face the blank prison wall, away from Merle. "Just leave me be..."

"You've been hung up in here for a day 'n a half! You can't hide forever!" Merle's tone rose with his anger. "You're just gonna let this son if a bitch get off scot-free?"

"Yes, I am." You sighed and shifted onto your back, turning your head to face Merle. "Merle, I'm not mad at him. I'm mad at myself."

"I'm mad at him, can I at least know the name of the guy I want tah beat into a pulp?"

"Why do you even care so much?" You frowned, furrowing your brows. "You're getting pretty worked up over nothing."

"Usually I wouldn't care, but I heard what ya did. Getting dolled up fer nothing." Merle shook his head as he leaned back against the cell wall. "He hurt ya. Thought maybe if I hurt him, we'd both feel better."

"..." You smiled with an empty heart. "I wouldn't feel better seeing him hurt... I just want him to be happy. With or without me."

"Yer too easy on him, you know."

"I know." You nodded slightly, turning your head to look up at the ceiling. "I just need some time to heal, Merle. Don't you worry about me."

"Fine... If yer so sure." Merle sighed, running his one hand through his growing hair. You glanced over, wishing you had a good excuse to run your hands through those curls. "I'm sure you looked good, sugah."
"Yeah... You probably would've liked it."

And so a week passed, you got visits from the four, mostly to drop off food. Sometimes they’d stay and have a small conversation with you, but they were short-lived. After five days of sitting in your cell, you decided it was time to get up and get work done. You couldn't freeload like this forever.

So, you got out and got working. You helped clear the fences, gather the fish that would get trapped in your nets, and help cook meals. By the end of the week, you managed to smile a little, again. You were healing, it would just take time.

"___." You looked over as Daryl approached you after breakfast one day. He nodded to the front gates. "Glenn and I were wonderin' if you wanted to go on a run with us."

"You don't think I'd be a hindrance?" You asked, unsurely. You hadn't been out for a week, you weren't sure you'd be able to handle it, yet.

"Nah. We could really use someone who's good with melee weapons. Yer kinda scary with those ice picks." Daryl smiled a little, as he glanced at the picks hooked to your sides. You unconsciously touched the handles of your picks, before slowly nodding.

"It'd probably be good for me to get out and get some air." You admitted as Daryl nodded in agreement.

"We're leavin' in an hour. Be ready." Daryl turned and made his way to the back area where all the vehicles were kept. You turned and headed for the prison, deciding it would be a good idea to take your derringer.

~

Glenn smiled as he saw you make your way over, now geared up with your picks, small pistol, and a thick coat to keep you warm and safer from Walker bites. You returned his smile with a small one of your own, as you stopped beside the truck they were loading.

"Glad to see you're joining us. I feel better in groups of three." Glenn set down an empty box, to be filled with supplies on the run, into the bed of the truck.

"It will be good to get outside these walls." You exhaled and seeing Daryl make his way over, you climbed into the truck. You sat in the middle as the other two men hopped in. Daryl took out a map and spread it across the dashboard, running his finger across a stretch of road.

"Saw some dirt roads 'round here. Might be worth checkin' out." Daryl stated as you took a close look at the road. Something was familiar about its long stretch, but you couldn't quite put your finger on it...

"Sounds like a plan, let's go." Glenn started up the car and took down the road.

~

Panic coursed through your veins as you recognized the familiar road. Images of normal people offering you a home flashed through your mind, which melted into knives which changed into flesh. Meat and organs spilling... Your hands gripped the edge of your seat, your knuckles turning white. Daryl placed a hand on your shoulder and you flinched, being dragged back to the present.

"Hey, you alright?" The redneck asked, noticing your shook form.
"Terminus..." You shook your head. "We can't head up this road... Is there a diverging path close by?"

"Yeah, here." Glenn pointed ahead to a narrow, dirt road. He turned onto the road, leaving the normal road behind. Your senses didn't calm, but you felt slightly safer.

"Terminus, what is that?" Daryl asked, dragging your attention back to him.

"It's a bad place. Never go there and never let them know you're out here." You didn't say anything more, not wanting to think about it. Daryl must have caught on, because he didn't ask anymore. Glenn drove up the road and stopped upon finding a couple old houses seated at the end.

"They might be cleaned out, but it wouldn't hurt to check." Glenn turned off the truck, opening his car door and hopping out.

"You alright to go in?" Daryl asked, as you nodded your head slightly.

"I'm not staying out here alone." You stated, before following Daryl off the truck. As you calmed down your senses, you fell into the usual run procedures.

The three of you split off through the building, taking down any stray walkers and keeping an eye out for anything useful. You managed to scrape up a box of matches, some brand new toothpaste, and even a full set of unused socks waiting to be opened. A nice pair of socks sounded like heaven at the moment. You stuffed the items away into your bag before taking a moment to slow down.

You felt better, but it still scared you to know how close you really were to Terminus. It was still an hour drive away, but that was too close for you. You wondered if you should ask Merle to warn the others about Terminus, since you weren't ready to speak up about it, again. You hoped the others would listen to him if he did eventually have to warn them.

~

"___." You shook your head from your daze, finding yourself in the truck, again. You looked over at a slightly frustrated Daryl. "Can ya stay with us, girl?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." You rubbed your eyes. "I'm trying not to think about it, I promise. Just give me a moment."

"You haven't been well at all lately." Glenn glanced over with concern. "This has been going on for a while now. Is it something we should all know about?"

"What happened in the prison and what is happening right now is two different things." You quickly shot down Glenn's suggestion as you rubbed your temples. "Now is not the time to discuss either one..."

"Are you sure...?" Glenn trailed off as he looked ahead with furrowed brows. "Is that guy... Alive?"

You and Daryl looked ahead, and were surprised to see a man walking alongside the road. A torn in half RV was blocking your view of him previously, but seeing the guy coming closer, he did look alive. Him turning to look over as Glenn slowed the truck confirmed your suspicions. But it didn't settle your worries.

"Should we ask him the questions?" Glenn asked.

"Wouldn't hurt." Daryl shrugged, as he rolled down the window, keeping his crossbow close.
"Hey! Is it just you alone 'round here?"

"Yeah, it's just me..." The darker skin man answered as he eyed the vehicle closely. Seeing you caused him to raise his eyebrows. Must've been a while since he's seen a woman around.

"We got a couple questions for ya." Daryl wetted his lips as he leaned out of the window. "How many walkers have ya killed?"

"You mean those things milling about?" The man shifted his feet. "Lost track... I've killed lots."

"How many people have you killed?"

"One." The man answered with almost no hesitation, though you could see a sadness in his eyes.

"Why?"

"Mercy. She asked me to do it for her... I didn't want to, but she begged... So, I did." The man sighed and ran his hand across his sweaty forehead. Daryl looked back at Glenn, who nodded in return. You smiled a little. You'd never seen anyone initiated into the group before, it was cool to observe it. Daryl looked back out the window.

"What's yer name?"

"Bob. Bob Stookey." The man answered and you could tell he was being genuine.

"Alright, Bob. We got a real nice set-up. Good people, plenty of supplies, a place to rest easy fer the night. We don't open it up to many strangers, but you seem decent." Daryl began, leaving details out to keep the prison safe. "Would ya want to join?"

"I'm not sure... I might be a burden." Bob looked down with a downtrodden expression. The guy seemed like he been through quite a bit.

"Hey." Glenn called out, catching Bob's attention. "We'd rather have you around than another one of the dead."

"Yeah... Same here..." Bob smiled a little. "It's nice seeing some livin' folks... You really won't mind me tagging along?"

"Shut up, Bob, and get in the trunk." Daryl gestured to the back. "But I will have to ask to take that rifle. Safety reasons. Some people at home are skittish."

"Take it, gun's been out for a while anyway." Bob unstrapped the gun from his shoulder, offering it to Daryl through the window. Daryl took the gun and carefully slid it in, as Bob went around back and climbed into the bed of the truck. Once he settled in the back, he rested his bag beside him and leaned back against the truck with a sigh. You smiled a little and looked to find Glenn smiling, too.

"Well, let's head home, guys." Glenn switched gears and drove the truck forward, before performing a U-Turn. The truck began its way down the street, heading back to the prison. You'd be returning with not three, but four people.

~

The group welcomed in the newbie Bob Stookey with open arms, happy to know there was another good man out there. Bob was a little overwhelmed, but he had been without anyone for a while, so you couldn't blame him. Dinner was going to start up soon and most of the group was already
sitting down by the building bonfire, speaking with one another. You sat at a table away from the fire, alone, glad to have your thoughts on something other than Terminus.

"Can't believe ya drug in that spear-chucker." You rolled your eyes and looked over as Merle made his way to you. He gave you a grin, but when he glanced at Bob with the others, his expression was disappointment.

"Do you hate every new face?" You asked, leaning your elbows on the table.

"Not if they got a cute face like yers." Merle poked you in the cheek as he sat down beside you. "So, where'd you pick up that garbage?"

"Please, Merle. He's a nice guy, almost harmless."

"So, he's completely useless then."

"Do you have an 'Off' button?"

"Nah, but I got an 'On' button." Merle smirked and wiggled his eyebrows a little. "But seriously, where'd ya find him?"

"On the side of the road... Don't joke about it." You sighed and ran a hand through your hair. "It was the same road I ran into people from Terminus on... That place is an hour and a half away... It's closer than I thought..."

"That cannibal haven? Shit." Merle became serious as he looked to you with a pondering expression. "No one else saw ya, right?"

"I don't think so, but I can't be sure..."

"How'd ya handle it?"

"I kept losing track of time, I wasn't the best assistance for Daryl and Glenn."

"Don't blame ya. I couldn't concentrate with cannibals on my back either..." Merle scratched his chin and let out a sigh. "I know you don't like talkin' 'bout it, but someone needs to tell this prison's stupid council about Terminus. Warn everyone about it."

"The council wouldn't tell everyone. They wouldn't want to start a panic."

"Panickin' would be an accurate and human reaction to knowin' cannibals are your next-door neighbors." Merle rolled his eyes and looked at you seriously. "I'm tellin' the council and if they don't tell, those deaths are on them."

"... Alright." You nodded and exhaled lightly. "Gosh, today's been crazy..."

Chapter End Notes

Anyone catch the title drop for one of my other fics?

Anyways, hope that wasn't too much for you guys. This chapter definitely has a lot more to take in.
Week seventeen at the prison...

Nine... Ten... Eleven... You picked off each Walker one by one. Many of the others worked around you, picking off the hordes of dead. Tyreese's newly acclaimed girlfriend, Karen, worked quickly right beside you. She stabbed another Walker in the head with her knife.

"This has to be the biggest herd I've ever seen at the fence." Karen panted slightly, as she looked to you. "We're gonna be at this all day."

"But it will be worth it. I rather mindlessly work all day to save the group, then let the problem get worst." You stabbed your pick into another walker's head, before kicking it off through the fence.

"No... I feel the same, just wish things would get easier." Karen gave you a half-hearted smile before continuing her work. You hated being the realist, but you were worried. She was right the herds of walkers have gotten worse and you weren't sure what to make of it.

"Sweet cheeks." You looked over to see Merle walking down the field, stopping at the fence that sat between you both. He grabbed the fence with his one hand, the blade of his other arm resting against the metal links. He grinned, seeing he caught your attention. "Headin' out on a run, wonderin' if you wanted to join us."

"Sorry, Merle. But they need me here." You nodded to the piling walkers.

"Whatever, yer loss." Merle rolled his eyes, before looking at you seriously. "Seen the council say or do anything, yet?"

"No." You shook your head, frowning a little. Merle did tell the prison council about Terminus, but just like you thought, they kept it on the down low.

"If anything goes on while I'm gone, tell me." Merle just about ordered, as you merely nodded in response.

"I will." You promised as Merle turned and left to go join the others on the run.

"I can't stand that man." Karen shook her head, pulling her knife out of another walker's head. "Him and Emma are both disgusting. You're lucky they don't meet up in your block."

"... They that bad, huh?" You asked quietly, feeling the happiness slowly drain from your veins.
You began to swing faster and harder at the walkers.

"They don't screw each other in our block, but the way they talk and act, they might as well." Karen glanced at you. "Your friends with Merle, right? You're the only one I've seen him act decent to."

"Yeah, we're friends... We've been through some stuff together and... I guess he treats people differently depending on first impressions." You shrugged lightly. "Merle Dixon is a mystery to me, even though sometimes I feel like I can read him like a book."

"An enigma for sure." Karen smiled a little. "I'm glad there are some people who can understand him though."

"Understanding and knowing him are two different things..." You stabbed into a walker with a quick swing. "I'll never understand, Merle..."

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle glanced over at the Big Spot discount store surrounded by fences along with the other runners. The place surrounding the store showed wear and tear, obviously walkers had been shambling through here. But strangely enough, no biters were in sight, not even in the distance. Daryl stepped back and the others turned around to face him. Merle glanced once more at the store, before doing the same.

"Army came in and put these fences up. Made it a place for the people to go. Last week when we spotted this place, there was a bunch of Walkers behind this chain-link keeping people out like a bunch of guard dogs." Daryl explained to the group, though he oddly didn't seem phased by the lack of walkers.

"So they all just left?" Bob, the black man ___ had picked up the week before, spoke up. Merle didn't hate the guy, at least not yet, but he did find him a burden aside from his military medic background. The man had seen war like Merle might've, he could understand that. Didn't mean the man had to be such a coward.

"Give a listen." Daryl smiled a little, as everyone fell silent. Merle listened carefully and then he caught it. The distant sound of music. Merle smirked as he slapped his younger brother on the back.

"You drew 'em out, baby brother! Looks like my brains did rub off on ya!" Merle cackled as some of the others rolled their eyes.

"I have a feeling that Daryl didn't get that from you." The Chinese kid spoke up, sending Merle a slight glare. Merle raised an eyebrow, but didn't bother to retaliate. The kid wasn't worth his time. "Let's make a sweep. Make sure it's safe. Grab what you can. We'll come back tomorrow with more people."

The group split off, as Merle followed his brother up to the store, accompanied by the mute and blondie's boyfriend. They sidled up to the walls of the store as Daryl unstrapped his crossbow and began to get it set for action. Merle huffed and glanced in the darken windows of the store. He saw some slight movement and knew they would be accompanied by some biters.

"Ok, I think I got it." Blondie's boyfriend, Zach, spoke up.

"Got what?" Michonne asked, furrowing a brow.
"What do you got, shrimp?" Merle asked, leaning against the window of the store and folding his arms. He made sure his knife was still visible.

"I've been trying to guess what Daryl did before the turn." Zach admitted with a gulp, eyeing Merle's bayonet warily.

"He's been trying to guess for, like, six weeks." Daryl added with a huff.

"Yeah, I'm pacing myself." The boy quickly defended. "One shot a day."

"Alright, shoot." Daryl nodded to the boy, as Merle rubbed his head. Was now really the time for games?

"Well, the way you are at the prison, you being on the council, you're able to track, you're helping people, but you're still being kind of... surly. Big swing here. Homicide cop." The boy stated, confidence radiating off his form. Merle didn't hesitate to burst into laughter, soon followed by Michonne. Daryl looked to the both of them with a slight smile.

"What's so funny?" The younger Dixon asked.

"Nothing. It makes perfect sense." Michonne grinned. Merle fell into more fits of giggles as he steadied himself against the store. The man was trying not to fall over from his laughter.

"Actually, the man's right. Undercover." Daryl said with as much seriousness as he could muster. Zach eyed him for a moment.

"Come on, really?" Zach asked, sounding unsure himself.

"Yep. I don't like to talk about it 'cause it was a lot of heavy shit, you know?" Daryl smiled a little, as Merle finally began to calm down from his snickers.

"Dude, come on, really?" Zach watched Daryl as the redneck stared silently in response. "Okay. I'll just keep guessing, I guess."

"Yeah, you keep doing that."

"Phew! Kid, yer a riot." Merle grinned as he rolled his shoulders, trying to get the tension out. "Do me. Think ya got any idea what I did before this?"

"You?!" Zach asked, incredulous. "I've never thought too hard about it... You might not like some of the stuff I come up with."

"Anything's got to be better than thinkin' Darylina is a homicide cop." Merle rolls his eyes, before looking bored at the kid. "I'll give you one free pass to guess what I was before all of this."

"One free pass?" Zach hesitated, before straightening up a little. "Okay, I had one idea, but only because I feel like I've seen your face before... Professional baseball player."

"Really?" Merle cocked an eyebrow as Michonne collapsed back into laughter, being joined by Daryl's slight snickers. "Do I look like the kind of jackass who swings a bat around?"

"More like a first baseman. I don't know. Felt like I saw a baseball player who looked like you once." Zach shrugged slightly.

"Gotta give the kid credit, you did play baseball with your friends when you were younger." Daryl noted.
"Yeah, when I was twelve. That was decades ago, baby brother." Merle rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Never mind, kid. You did have a worse answer than homicide cop. Now watch yerself from now on. Wouldn't want to knock ya out of the park."

"Yes, sir." Zach smiled a little, though he was still visually nervous.

"We're going to do this, Detective?" Michonne asked, as she nudged Daryl and approached the store doors.

"Let's do it." Daryl motioned some of the others over and Merle was joined by the war medic, the sharp-shooter and her brother. Merle ignored them as Daryl burst through the store doors, shooting a bolt into the skull of the Walker closest to them. Merle smirked as he moved forward and stabbed a walker, deciding to dispatch of them while the others worried about the supplies.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

Another Walker hit the ground, as you wiped some sweat from your forehead. You've been at it for hours and you were becoming a sweating mess under the hot Georgia sun. You stabbed another Walker as you noticed the approach of someone to you. When you looked over, you frowned. Emma stepped up to you and offered you a small smile.

"Hey, Hershel said you've been at it for a while. He asked if I could switch off with you." Emma nodded to the walkers. You panted a little, your hook dangling from your grip, Walker blood dripping off its blade. If you continued, you'd no doubt pass out soon. But if you gave up, you'd be losing some pride to Merle's friend with benefits. Emma must have noticed your hesitation. "Hey, I get it. Merle said you could get stubborn about stuff like this."

"Merle... Talks about me to you?" You asked, slightly surprised.

"He did that time the others noticed you were upset. After that, I've asked about you." Emma nudged your arm. "He really cares about you. You know that, kid?"

"..." You let out a big breathe and relaxed your arms. You were going to hurt yourself if you kept going. You looked to Emma and frowned a little. At least she wasn't a total slut, she was decent at least. "Alright, I'll take a break. Thanks for taking over."

"Don't mention it. I want to help pull my weight around here the best I can. Besides you need the rest. These people need you." Emma smiled, before lodging her knife into a walker's head. You watched for a moment, before walking along the fence line to head back to the prison.

Right now, all you wanted to do was wash your picks, grab a snack, take a shower, and then take a nice long nap on your bed. You smiled at the thought, as you hurried your walk to the prison building. You hoped that the run the others were on was going well.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle took down the last Walker, when the sound of wood snapping and glass shattering rung through the room. Merle looked over to see dust fly up from shelves collapsing and he cursed under his breathe as he headed over. Merle came over to find his brother kneeling beside Bob, who was caught under the shelves.

"What the hell? You tryin' to kill yourself, boy?" Merle hissed at the scrawny black men.

"He's alright, just caught." Daryl defended, giving Merle a look. The younger Dixon looked over at Tyreese. "Come help me get this up."
"What happened?" The former football player asked as he kneeled down and began to help lift the shelves up. Merle would help, but he was a little short-handed.

"I was moving fast, man. I drove right into the drinks." Bob explained, though he answered a bit too quick for Merle's liking. The redneck narrowed his eyes at the black man and Bob noticed, paling slightly.

"Man, you lucked out. If this thing had come down on you the wrong way..." Tyreese trailed off as they got the shelves up a bit, but not enough. Suddenly, the ceiling creaked and a walker fell through it, hanging from its entrails. One by one more biters began to fall through the room and crash into the store. Soon enough the whole ceiling would come down on them.

"Get Horse-Gums out of there. We can't hang around." Merle shouted as he approached some of the near walkers. As the dead man tried to get up, Merle stabbed him through the head. The Dixon gritted his teeth. They were on a timer now.

~

The store was filled with the sound of gunshots as everyone hurried around either killing walkers or gathering as many supplies as they could carry. Merle stabbed another Walker as the ceiling met out a low creaking. Merle cursed as he looked over to see his brother jump off some fallen shelves and race back over to Bob who was still stuck underneath piles of wood. Zach joined Daryl in helping Bob out as Merle took out some walkers on the floor nearby them.

"More, more." Bob urged, before he was freed from the fallen shelving. He slipped out and hurried to his feet.

"Come on, time to go." Daryl pushed the man forward, as Merle joined his brother's side on running out.

"Let's go, now!" Glenn shouted, running to the front of the discount store.

"Come on! Go!" Michonne opened the front doors as one by one the others began to stream out. Everyone froze though, hearing Zach's scream. Merle glanced back with the others to see a Walker drag Zach down and dig its teeth into Zach's neck. Merle set his jaw, before pushing Daryl forward. Everyone reluctantly turned and ran out of the building, as it collapsed behind them.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You wanted to take a short nap, maybe an hour long at most. So, when you were woken up by the slight shaking of your shoulder and opened your eyes to find the cells dark from the night sky, guilt filled your core. You looked to see who had woken you to find Merle taking a seat on his usual chair. Though it had been a while since he hung out in your cell.

"Sorry to wake ya, darlin', but I wanted to know if ya heard anything today." Merle stated, sitting back in his chair.

"Nothing, but I can't say much. I guess I was asleep all evening." You brushed your hair back, as Merle smirked a little.

"Worked yerself to the bone, huh?"

"Pushed myself a little too hard today, yeah..." You rubbed your eyes a little. "How was the run?"

"... Blondie's boyfriend got bit."
"Zach?" You frowned, shocked by the news. "How did Beth take it?"

"Don't know, Daryl was picked tah go tell her." Merle chewed on one of his nails with a frown. "I didn't care much fer the kid, but I feel like he didn't deserve to die. At least, not like this."

"You alright?"

"Course I'm alright. I'm always alright." Merle rolled his eyes. "I got over the walking dead pretty fast."

"I know, but we all break down some days." You yawned and rested back, again. "Is that all you wanted to ask and tell me?"

"I was gonna say you should find another book to read. Kind of miss hearing the silly stuff written by people back when the world was 'normal'." Merle smirked a little. "Guess I just like bein' around people who don't hate me."

"Maybe you should stop giving people a reason to hate you."

"What can I say? Old habits die hard." Merle chuckled, before he pushed himself up to his feet. "Get some rest, sugah."

"Way ahead of ya." You smiled, before curling up and closing your eyes. Merle glanced at you, before slipping out of your cell and heading to his own.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle got up early to help in the morning and then stuff any work through the afternoon and evening. He was suppose to have another night with Emma tonight, but after seeing a kid die yesterday his mind wasn't settled, yet. Something was off about everything at that store, but Merle couldn't pinpoint it.

Merle let his thoughts drift as he took over the girl's usual job. Stabbing and watching the biters drop. He could see why it was a stress reliever for her, it certainly took his mind off some things. But not everything. The build-up of walkers was especially bad today, they were literally climbing on top of each other to get over the fence.

Merle didn't take any mind to the persistent walkers, until the fence began to bend inward. He cursed as he launched forward and began to stab at the base of the dead. Others ran over and held up the fence, stabbing at nearing biters. One Walker almost made it over, but a gunshot fired and the Walker fell back into the group of dead. Merle looked over to see the sheriff's son lower a gun.

"Since when were you a badass, boy?" Merle asked and was slightly pleased to get a little grin from the kid. But that grin disappeared as Rick stepped over, giving Carl a scolding look as he held out his hand. The boy sighed and handed the gun over. Merle still wasn't sure what was up with all that. Rick opened his mouth to say something, when gunshots sounded from the prison. "What the hell?"

"That came from cell block B." Rick paled along with the others. Aside from a select few, everyone began to run in the direction to the prison. Merle also followed behind, hoping those gunshots were for walkers and not men with eyepatches.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You were woken by gunshots this time. You shot up in bed, panting as the gunshots rang in the
distance. Okay, so the firing wasn't happening in your cell block, but it was definitely happening in the prison. You grabbed your ice picks and derringer, and hurried out of your cell. You didn't bother to change into clean clothes, these ones were probably going to get dirty anyways.

You ran through your cell block and pushed your way into the corridors. Your steps echoed off the walls while you ran and soon enough, you could hear the distant sounds of screaming. What was going on? You reached cell block b and kicked it open.

People streamed past you and out of the block as you watched in horror at the event. Walkers were in the block and had already bit into a few of the other survivors. Some of the others had arrived, taking down the walkers. Daryl flew over, shooting the walkers in the head one by one with his crossbow, picking up a kid and hurrying them away. Rick and Glenn set to stabbing the walkers in the head, doing their best to conserve ammo.

You shook your head and launched forward, dispatching the walkers. You made your way to the upper floors, finding a couple walkers at the top.

You got the last one you could see on the upper floor and lowered your picks with a sigh. Suddenly a hand lashed out and grabbed your arm, tugging you closer to the cell. You looked in shock as the cell's occupant was a Walker and your hand got dangerously close to his mouth. Suddenly a bullet slammed into the walker's head, followed by its ringing as the body hit the floor. You quickly stepped away and looked over to see your defender.

Merle lowered his pistol held in his left hand and glanced at you, beginning to grin.

"Yer damn lucky I've gotten good shootin' with my left hand." Merle remarked, as he exaggeratedly blew at the barrel of his gun. You smiled thankfully as the grunts and groans of the walkers ceased in the cell block. The invasion was over. You and Merle looked over to see Rick, Daryl, Hershel, Bob, and another survivor, one you recognized as a doctor make their way over.

"We have them up here, too?" Rick asked, though one glance around answered his question. Daryl stepped over to the cell of the Walker who had attacked you and pulled it open. Rick stepped in and examined the dead man.

'No bites. No wounds." Rick looked to the doctor, frowning a little. "I think he just died."

"Horribly, too. Pleurisy aspiration." The doctor said, kneeling beside the body to better examine it.

"Choked to death on his own blood." Hershel explained seeing everyone else's confused looks. "Caused those trails down his face."

"That's screwed up." Merle frowned, leaning on the entrance of the cell. "And I thought, losin' an arm was bad... Nah, that was still livin' through hell."

"I've seen them before on a walker outside the fences." Rick ignored Merle's biting comment, as he added in what he knew.

"I saw them on Patrick, too." Daryl admitted as well.

They're from the internal lung pressure building up-like if you shake a soda can and pop the top." The doctor explained though he grimaced. "Only imagine your eyes, ears, nose, and throat are the top."

"It's a sickness from the walkers?" Rick asked.
"No, these things happened before they were around. Could be pneumococcal. Most likely an aggressive flu strain." The doctor stated as he stood to his feet.

"Yer tellin' me we need to get our flu shots? I think that's not a possibility anymore." Merle snorted, though he was obviously pissed off.

"I could try and find a cure, but for now we need to separate the ones who are or could be infected and keep the clean ones away. We will need to set up a space for the patients as well." The doctor shrugged slightly.

"We were in here. Does that make us..." You trailed off as you realized the severity of the situation.

"We could all be infected."

~

"Yeah, I'm not goin' to sleep in death's row with a bunch of walkin' plagues." Merle scoffed as he stood outside with you. He lit a cigarette and brought it to his lips, as you sighed and leaned against the prison wall.

"Fortunately, Rick says we don't have to unless we start showing symptoms and so far it looks like we're in the clear." You frowned a little, trying to remember everything that happened in the cell block. "We weren't there long, so I think we both should be alright... Do you think they will be able to find a cure?"

"Who's tah say?" Merle shrugged as he took a puff of smoke. "They better hope, I heard two more were found sick."

"Promise to put me down if I get sick and turn?" You asked, startling the older man.

"You ain't dying."

"You can't promise that."

"I am, right now." Merle scowled a little at you, his stance unmovable. "You ain't dying. Not to some dumb pussy illness."

"Alright, if you say so, Merle Dixon." You smiled a little. "But can you promise me that? That if I turn, you will put me down?"

"Fine, but don't ever talk like that, again." Merle sighed, though his look was pointed.

"Okay, I won't."

A sudden sting struck through your stomach and you placed your hands over your stomach to ease the pain. "Ugh... That stung..."

"Ya alright, sweetcheeks?" Merle asked, lowering his cigarette and looking at you with concern.

"Ya just paled."

"Really...?" You placed a hand on your forehead and didn't notice anything different, but you didn't feel too good.

"Feelin' alright, girl?" A look crossed Merle's face and you knew he was thinking what you were thinking. You might be infected. You shook your head and managed a small smile, straightening up.
"I probably just slept too much. I'm going to go stretch my legs, maybe get rid of a few walkers. Don't wait up for me." You patted Merle's shoulder as you walked past, heading to the fence border.

"Alright, darlin'. But if you don't get feelin' better, get some rest. Workin' yourself won't make ya feel any better." Merle watched you go, a frown tugging at his lips. A chill ran down your spine and you prayed that you weren't sick. Walkers were one thing, but a sickness? It was the last thing you wanted to worry about right now.
You knew you were screwed the moment you woke up and felt like you couldn't breathe. You inhaled for air, but nothing came and you turned onto your side. You gripped the bed as you finally managed to breathe in some air. You coughed, your lungs burning as you stumbled onto your feet. You heard the sheets covering the entrance to your cell shuffle in movement and looked up to find Merle.

"Shit..." Merle frowned, thinking the same thing you did. You felt a shiver rack down your spine and you shook from the chill. Merle moved forward and placed his stump around your waist, guiding you out of the cell. You were surprised to see him without his bayonet, but you figured you must have woken him from his sleep with your coughing. He helped you down the stairs as Hershel appeared from his cell.

"___, your skin is unhealthily pale." Hershel's eyes widened as he took your hand and Merle released you. Hershel lifted a hand up and placed it against your forehead. "You're feverish."

"Yeah... I have a feeling I got that bad sickness." Who were you kidding? Of course you were sick.

"It'd be best to get you away from the others." Hershel nodded and looked to Merle. "I would change into some clean clothes and wash yourself down. Being in close proximity to the sick might have made you ill."

"Then what are you doin', old man?" Merle quirked an eyebrow.

"What's right. Please, take my advice. Being sick won't help her." Hershel began to lead you out of the cell block and you glanced back at Merle. He was frowning, but seeing you look back, he sent you a smirk. He really didn't think you had a chance of dying. You wish you could be so confident. You were led down the corridors and tombs, until you reached cell block A with Hershel. "I won't be able to go in with you, since the doctor wants me to stay healthy while I can. Find yourself an empty cell and lock yourself in."

"Lock myself in?" You questioned, looking to Hershel.

"It's a precaution, in case..." Hershel trailed off and you got the point. If you or someone else was to turn into a Walker, it'd be safer for everyone for you to stay in a cell where you can't be reached by anyone besides an intelligent human who can use prison keys. "A group is going out today to get the medicine we need. I know you'll pull through, ___."

"I hope you're right. Thanks, Hershel." You sent the kind old man one more smile, before pushing open the door and stepping into the cell block.

You were greeted by thick air and lots of coughing, sneezing, groaning, and sobbing. You frowned, but shivered again and made your way up the stairs. You found an empty cell that was in between two other vacant cells and decided this would be good. You stepped into the cell and clicked it shut behind you. You stepped over to the prison mattress, instantly missing your own, and collapsed on top of it.

You were out like a light, your fever, shivers, and burning lungs dragging you into sleep.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

This week was an absolute mess. First the kid gets killed in circumstances he shouldn't have, then
everyone in the prison starts dropping like flies, one by one. It didn't bother Merle too bad, until he found the girl in her cell. She looked almost just like a Walker, dead-looking skin, sweat from head to toe, the way she was hunched over... The only reason he knew it was her was because she still had a fire in her eyes. She was still kicking, despite her symptoms.

If Merle was honest, he'd come to like the kid the six months he's known her.

She still stuck by his side, despite knowing all the terrible stuff he did and she seemed to trust him more than others. And he didn't mind her company either, only person he liked talking to besides his brother. He wasn't sure if he'd be upset at her death, but he knew he was close enough that losing her would leave him empty for a while.

"Hey, you." Merle looked over and noticed Emma approaching him. She smiled at him, placing a hand on his chest as she got close enough. "I haven't seen you around for a while."

"Lots of shit has happened." Merle glanced down at the woman. "As much as I like havin' "fun" with you, I'm gonna have to put it off for a while. Never feel right sleepin' with anyone after lots of death."

"I get it, I can wait." Emma frowned a little, but nodded in understanding. "You want to just sit and talk about it?"

"... As much as Merle enjoyed the sex he had with this woman, he had had a couple conversations with her before. She could be sensitive to some of his comments and she certainly never bit back. In short, she was a bore. "That's alright, sugartits. Maybe some other time."

"Alright, if you say so." Emma said, though Merle was distracted by something behind her. He noticed his little brother loading up with three of the others. They were going on a run? After all of this? But then Merle remembered what the doctor had said. "Merle? Something wrong?"

"Nothin', just gonna speak with my brother." Merle brushed past Emma and quickly made his way over to his brother and the vehicle they were piling into. Daryl noticed Merle's approach and paused from getting into the vehicle. Merle licked his lips. "Are you goin' out to get those antibiotics?"

"Yeah, why?" Daryl asked slowly, surprised at Merle's interest. Merle didn't give an answer, instead opening one of the back doors and nodding for Bob to move over.

"Scoot over, horse gums. I'm comin', too."

"Merle, you can't just force yourself into comin' along." Daryl growled as he walked over and pushed his brother back. Daryl got in Merle's face, getting defensive. "This is a serious run. We aren't playin' around and we need to be quick. People's lives are relyin' on us."

"You don't think I know that?" Merle hissed back, getting up in Daryl's face not face by his brother's intimidation. Merle's tone became serious. "Let me do this, baby brother. For once, I do want tah help those pricks in there..."

"... Stall for just a moment and I'm leavin' ya behind." Daryl threatened as Merle grinned in response.

"I'm holdin' ya to it, little brother." Merle turned away and slipped into the car beside Bob, as Daryl made his way back to the driver's seat. Daryl put the keys in and started up the car, taking off down the familiar prison path. Rick pulled open the gates as the group headed out, making their way towards a college in hopes of finding a cure.
"___. ___, dear." You blinked your eyes open to reveal a dark room. You coughed, your throat and lungs dry. Your eyes adjusted to the darkness as the familiar sounds of coughs and heavy breathing filled your ears. You looked over to find Hershel standing in front of your cell. He wore a bandana over his mouth, probably to keep the sickness out, and he held a cup in his hands.

"Hershel...? You shouldn't be in here, you could get sick." You coughed as you pushed yourself to sit up in bed. Your arms felt weak and your body felt like a bag of lead.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take. I made some tea for everyone, it should help with the flu. It won't cure it, but it should ease your pain." Hershel offered the cup through the bars and you slowly stood up, walking over and taking the cup.

"Thank you, Hershel." You took a sip of the thicker tea and as it slid down your throat, it did feel as if your throat was cleared. You decided to drink the tea slowly, to maybe prolong the effects of it easing the sting in your chest.

"Have your symptoms bettered or worsened?" Hershel asked as you sat back down on your mattress. You frowned a little, shivering from the cold of the floor.

"Worsened, I think..." You stared at the cup in your hands. "Did you already send someone out to get antibiotics?"

"Five of them left to a college nearby where vets used to train. If things go smoothly, they should be back tomorrow morning." Hershel answered and though you couldn't see his smile, you saw the hope glitter in his eyes.

"I hope things go smoothly then..." You smiled back, before taking another sip of the tea. You sighed at its warmth as you leaned against the cold cell wall. Hershel moved away to attend to the other patients, leaving you with your own thoughts. You hoped whoever went out was quick, but safe.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

The sun was beginning to lower in the sky, turning it from blue to different shades of red and black. Merle leaned against the car door, muffling out the arguing going on in the car. Apparently sharpshooter's brother was pissy because he found his girl fried. Merle could understand, he'd want to bash a few heads in, too, if he found out someone at the prison had killed his brother. What Merle couldn't understand was why the guy couldn't push his anger down for a moment to focus on the situation at hand.

"Hey, I know you weren't running off. The thing is, that trail went cold. You know that, right? If it was any different, I'd be right out there with you." Daryl answered back at Tyreese, causing the black man to huff and sit back in his seat. Daryl sighed, looking ahead on the road. Merle frowned. His brother had grown soft, caring too much for others. But Merle wouldn't change that.

"Hey, Yo-Meister." Merle called across to Tyreese, receiving a hard and hateful glare in return. Merle raised his hand and stump in defense, offering a slight grin. "I don't like the thought of a murderer livin' under my roof either. After we pump these people with medicine, how's about you 'n me go bust some heads?"

"Someone's finally speaking my language." Tyreese's glare faded, as he gave Merle a respectful nod and then looking out the window. Daryl fidgeted with the radio, seeing if there was any signal.

"Would you hand me one of them CDs right there?" Daryl nodded to Michonne, who bent down to
grab one of the CDs. Just as she sat up and handed over the case, something crackled through the radio.

"...find sanctuary." A faint voice sounded through the radio.

"Was that a voice?" Michonne asked, her eyes widening in shock. Daryl shushed her as he turned up the volume of the radio.

"...determined to survive... keep alive." The voice continued, as everyone focused on listening to it. Daryl was so focused, it was too late when he looked up and saw the walkers. The car hit a couple and Daryl hit the breaks, causing the tires to squeal. The growls of many walkers reached their ears and everyone stiffened up.

"Go to the left!" Michonne shouted, but it was futile as the car slowed down and more walkers came into focus. Daryl finally came to a stop and with the trouble of some fog, the group could barely make out a huge mob of walkers in front of them.

"We're jammed up." Daryl growled as walkers began to approach the car. Daryl pointed out the window to the tree lines, directly at the openings in the tree line. "Make a run for the gaps right there."

"Don't need to tell me twice, brother!" Merle reached over with his left hand and clicked the door open, swinging it outside. He slammed the door into an approaching Walker, before stabbing it in the head with his knife. Merle sliced out at another Walker, as Bob scurried out of the car. The two, with Michonne, made their way around the car and to the woods. Daryl followed, but he noticed Tyreese wasn't following.

"What the hell?" He grumbled, as Merle grabbed ahold of his vest.

"If he wants to die, that's his choice. But we gotta live." Merle spat into Daryl's face, trying to snap his brother out of his sympathy. "Don't your pals need ya back home, baby brother?"

"I can get him." Bob stepped forward, looking determined. "You three, you make a run deeper into the woods and you don't stop for nothing, you hear me? Now!"

"Move!" Michonne ushered the Dixons forward as Bob turned back to get Tyreese. The three made their way deeper into the woods, but keeping their line of sight still on the road. They were far enough they could see and hear a walker getting close, so they all slowed and watched the street. They heard distant shouting and Merle watched with a grimace, spitting on the ground.

"We can't be wasting time like this. People are dying and he's worrying about the ones already dead." Merle rolled his jaw as he saw the two familiar figures circling the car, but it didn't look like they were heading over just yet. Merle glanced at Daryl. "Was I this bad at the beginning?"

"Just as bad, but there was one thing you two didn't have in common." Daryl glanced at Merle, his expression neutral. "He's acting this way because he cares about someone. You acted that way, because all you cared about was yourself."

"Come on." The three heard Tyreese shout, as he and Bob made their way over. Tyreese seemed to be in a blind fury, already covered with Walker muck. He shouted back at the walkers. "Come on and get me!"

"Go!" Daryl tugged Tyreese forward, as everyone darted into the trees. Daryl brought up the rear, as the growling of walkers was left behind them. "Come on!"
Daryl sighed as he lifted himself from the open hood of the car, rubbing his hands off on his pants. Merle quirked an eyebrow, pushing off the newly acquired vehicle as his brother inspected its engine. Daryl met Merle's questioning gaze and shook his head.

"We gotta find us a new battery." Daryl spat on the ground as some familiar snarling erupted from inside the car. Merle looked boredly at the biter struggling inside of the vehicle. The Walker rubbed its hands against the window as Daryl scowled. "Got some friends inside."

More growling and groaning was sounding near in the air and everyone not working on the car, turned to the advancing walkers. They had outrun the group, but some outliers were still able to reach them. Michonne unsheathed her sword and held it aloft.

"Come on. Let's clear a path, see how many we got." Michonne easily sliced the heads off of three approaching walkers, all the bodies hitting the ground. Bob hesitantly withdrew a knife and quickly stabbed one close Walker in the head. Merle stood at his brother's side, stabbing any walkers that managed to get close, keeping an eye out for his brother. Tyreese grunted as he swung his hammer in a blind fury.

"Hey, man. Go easy." Bob glanced at Tyreese, though the bigger man wasn't going to listen to anyone. Merle came back to the car and grabbed the door handle.

"If we're gettin' rid of biters, might as well get rid of this fella." Merle suggested, a smirk growing on his face as he glanced at Tyreese. "Want tah do us the honors?"

"We don't know what we're dealing with." Bob warned Tyreese. The former football player, on the other hand, smiled at the challenge, hefting his hammer. Merle licked his teeth at the spirit, before swinging the door open. The car rattled as the Walker stepped out, launching towards Tyreese. With a heavy, fast swing, the Walker was on the ground, it's head smashed open.

"Hell, yes. That was good." Tyreese huffed, panting slightly from his exertion of energy. Bob made the mistake of approaching Tyreese and grabbing his shoulder.

"Tyreese, maybe you should calm-" Bob didn't get to finish, as Tyreese grabbed him by the collar and hefted him off his feet. Bob gasped in surprised, grasping at Tyreese's hands. "Tyreese!"

"Ty!" Michonne shouted, approaching the two to intervene.

"Ty, let him go." Daryl warned, looking up from the engine as his hand lingered on his crossbow. Bob gasped for air and after a minute, Tyreese finally released him. Bob coughed, hunching over to catch his breathe.

"Why the hell didn't you let go?" Bob asked, looking at Tyreese incredulous. Merle rolled his eyes and stepped forward, gaining everyone's attention.

"Why the hell are we all standin' around wastin' time? We got people dyin' back home. Think we need tah change our priorities." Merle pointed out, earning a glare from Tyreese.

"You're a lot of talk, Merle Dixon. All of us have or had someone we cared about catch that flu. We're doing it for them. But you're doing this for the praise." Tyreese spat out, giving a harsh look towards the redneck. "You don't care about nobody in that cellblock, bastard."

"That's a lot of big assumptions there, prick. Maybe I am doin' this for the praise, but would it be so hard to believe that I am doin' this for someone?" Merle countered smoothly. Tyreese looked at the
man curiously, not sure what he was up to. Merle waved it off, looking back to Daryl. "Let's go, Darylina. The sun's comin' up soon."

Daryl nodded and bent back over the engine, continuing his work. The group fell into silence as early morning fell upon them.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

After fully awaking and spending sometime pacing your cell, it didn't take you long to notice two others who have joined you and the sick. Glenn was the first you saw, who was ghostly pale. He was helping Hershel tend to the infected and greeted you kindly. Sasha had joined you as well, but she wasn't quite as good on her feet and decided to rest in the cell next to you. Luckily, it gave you someone to talk to so you wouldn't lose your mind.

"I feel like shit." Sasha groaned as she rested her head back against the cement wall of the cell. You chuckled at her comment, looking back at her.

"Me, too." You rasped out, wincing as you felt your lungs constrain in pain.

"Wish there was windows in here... I don't even know if it's the next day, yet..." Sasha sighed and looked back over to you. "Alright, what should we gossip about?"

"That's what you want to spend our time doing?" You raised an eyebrow at that.

"Or we can ask each other personal questions." Sasha smiled a little bit, before pondering for a moment. "Okay, easy question. What's your favorite hobby?"

"You know this one. Rock climbing." You smiled a little and nodded back to Sasha. "How about you?"

"Just relaxing and jamming out to punk rock." Sasha grinned, though her complexion was still pale. "I miss some of my old songs... Rebellion and empowerment and such. Now, you ask a question."

"Did you have a job before all this?"

"Firefighter." Sasha mused and closed her eyes. "I miss those days... Easier times... It's bad when flames are nowhere near a threat anymore. You?"

"Just a college student. Never got to a career." You sighed and looked across the room to Glenn. He was feeling for a man's pulse and by the frown in his face, he found none. Glenn withdrew his knife, putting the man down. You felt hollow and looked to your feet. "Think we'll get better?"

"... I hope so."

~Merle's P.O.V.~

The group made their way through the woods, quiet with their footfalls. Merle watched for signs of animals, walkers, and humans, finding mostly walkers. This place was treaded a lot by the dead. Fortunately it wasn't long until the group stumbled upon a small gas station.

"Wouldn't be a bad place to look around for a spare battery or another vehicle altogether." Merle rolled his shoulders, as he held out his bladed arm.

"We'll take a quick look around inside, see what we can find." Daryl suggested, as the group stepped over to the building, quickly slipping inside. They searched the smaller building, finding
no walkers in the vicinity. They began to search for a car battery, stuffing away supplies they could carry.

"Tyreese." Michonne started softly, as she approached the bigger man. Tyreese didn't spare her a glance as he rumbled through boxes. "I know what's happened to you and it's not fair. But you need to get a grip and calm down."

"What the hell are you trying to tell me?" Tyreese growled, turning on the usual mute.

"I just don't want to see you die. Is that what you're trying to do? Do you even know what you're trying to do?" Michonne asked, raising her voice. Tyreese held his ground, but he didn't argue back. Michonne sighed lightly and shook her head. "I know you're pissed. And you have every reason to be. But anger makes you stupid. Stupid gets you killed."

"Aren't you still angry about the Governor? What he did?" Tyreese argued. Merle looked over in interest at the mention of the Governor, pausing in his search for a battery.

"If he was here right now, I'd cut him in two. 'Cause that's how it needs to be. But I'm not angry. I was." Michonne answered, averting her gaze.

"Then why are you still going out looking for him?" Tyreese challenged, knowing he caught Michonne there.

"I don't know." Michonne answered honestly, not daring to look back. Merle raised an eyebrow at this. He did not know the Nubian Queen was out looking for the cyclops.

"You really still out lookin' for him?" Merle asked, as he approached the two.

"On some occasions, yes..." Michonne answered, watching Merle cautiously.

"Should've told be earlier, honey. I would've been right with you." Merle bit the inside of his cheek as a scowl worked its way onto his face. "Nothing I'd like more than to gut that man raw."

"You did have more time and pressure from him. Sometimes I forget that." Michonne frowned, sympathy shining through her eyes. "If I do go out, again, you may come along. But only because you deserve to take the shot."

"Hey, we got what we need. Let's go." Daryl called over, Bob standing beside him. The three glanced at each other, before following the other two out of the store. They passed by some bushes and greenery that had outgrown and wrapped around the sides of the gas station. A pair of walkers were tied back in the vines, their hands clenched together and some strange stain with chunks covered the ground in front of them. They grunted and reached out for the survivors, hunger in their eyes.

"That's puke." Daryl nodded to the stain on the ground, frowning at the walkers. "Those douchebags in the vines took themselves out, holding hands-kumbaya style."

"They wanted to go out together same as they lived. That makes them douchebags?" Bob countered, looking at Daryl, albeit defensively.

"It does if they could have gotten out."

"Everybody makes it, till they don't. People nowadays are dominoes. What they did, maybe it's about not having to watch them fall." Bob answered, looking at the couple of walkers with empathy.
"Right..." Daryl glanced at the dead, still not sure how he felt. The walkers growled and let out raspy breathes, trying to stretch out their arms. Merle sighed and approached the walkers, giving them both a good stab in the head. He looked back to see Bob watching him jawdropped. Merle scowled, rolling his jaw.

"Don't look at me like that, horse gums. I just released those two tortured souls from their bodies. It's better to have a dead Walker, than a live one." Merle felt up the side of the bodies with his one hand, seeing if they had any goods on them. Nothing. He drew back, dusting off his hand and looked to the others. "Sides, I'm sure you've all done worse at one point."

"Come on." Daryl grunted, nodding back down the road. "We got about all we're gonna get here. We should move on."

~Reader's P.O.V.~

After asking questions for a couple hours, Sasha had grown weary and you suggested that she rest. She was quick to fall asleep on her mattress, leaving you to your thoughts. You pushed out the sounds of coughing and wheezing that filled the air, and tried to think of other things. Anything.

You couldn't focus on any thoughts from the distractions. One moment you were thinking about rock climbing and the last time you did it, but then it fuzzed. And then you thought about your parents and how much you missed them, but then it fuzzed. And then you thought about Merle and your lungs tightened, causing you to cough. You pushed him out of your thoughts, as your gaze flitted around the room.

Your eyes fell on Hershel, who hovered over one of the infected men. He looked distraught and you realized that the man must be dead. He raised a knife to the man's head, but his hands shook and he lowered it. The old man reached down and pulled the sheets over the man's head, obscuring his face. With some reluctance, Hershel stabbed through the sheets, killing the man.

Your heart went out to Hershel. He was a kind, old soul and you weren't sure if you had the strength yourself to put down someone you recognized. Your heart clenched, but you didn't have time to worry about it as another fit of coughs shook you. You leaned your head forward against your legs, feeling like your chest was bruised and your eyes began to sting. When would this pain end?
Daryl was hard at work putting the new battery into the car engine. Merle would be right over, helping out, but his stump proved more of a burden than assistance. The redneck fumed as he paced nearby the car, frustrated he couldn't help exchange a simple car battery. He felt useless at the moment and he hated it.

"Hey." Merle stopped his pace and scowled at Michonne who approached him. She pursed her lips at his threatening gaze and stopped in front of him. "You really need to stop beating yourself up over stupid things."

"Sides from Daryl, I know the most about vehicles out of the five of us, but I can't even help with that." Merle huffed as he nodded to the katana strapped across Michonne's back. "It's like if you lost your hands and couldn't use the weapon yer best at. It's a nightmare, it's own kind of torture."

"So, you do everything you still can do." Michonne sighed and glanced up the road. "If we thought you couldn't help in anyway, we would have left you in the dust at the prison."

"Ya tryin' to compliment me, mute?" Merle smirked a little, earning a roll of the eyes from Michonne.

"To you? Hell no. But look. You can fight and strategize." Michonne took a breathe as she searched for the appropriate words. "Maybe your head doesn't work towards acting around people, but it sure knows how to deal with walkers, getting into places, and getting out of them, leaving a trail of bodies behind. We're safer with you around."

"Ya feel safe around Merle Dixon? What has the world come to?" Merle teased with a slight chuckle.

"I don't know, I was put off myself when I realized it." Michonne allowed a small smile to come onto her face as the engine of the car roared to life. "I think it's even safer, knowing that you're fighting for something yourself."

Merle narrowed his eyes at this. He hadn't forgotten what the woman had said, about him going soft for the girl. Michonne eyed him, clearly knowing they were thinking about the same thing. She turned and walked over to the running car as Merle watched her go. This wasn't over, he'd prove to her that her assumptions were wrong.

Merle was in charge of Merle. No one else.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

It happened fast. One moment, the only sounds were the coughing and wheezing you'd been hearing all day. You lay on your mattress, staring up at the ceiling as you thought about different things. Music, stories, people...

But then screams filled the air and you hurriedly sat up on your mattress. You looked around the cellblock and on the lower floor you saw the familiar walking of the dead. Infected fled from the walkers, desperately trying to find an open cell to get into and lock themselves away in. You pushed yourself back against the wall of your cell, closing your eyes. You couldn't help them, not without your picks or a gun and you were too weak.

You heard the thuds of bodies and the shouts of people as they succumbed to their symptoms and
turned or were bit and turned. You hoped the others would be back soon, so all these events could be stopped. So, you wouldn't be trapped in a cell with dozens of walkers reaching through your bars. Gunfire echoed off the cement walls of the prison.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

The sound of rushing wind filled the space of the car as the group sped down the road. Daryl slowed the vehicle as the college made its appearance in front of them. Some empty cans left on the ground rattled as the wind blew them around. But Merle could still hear the growls of walkers ahead as Daryl pulled the car to a stop beside the road. Daryl glanced back at Tyreese.

"Is that it?" He asked.

"That's the one we want." Tyreese confirmed with a nod of his head. The group carefully opened the doors of the car, stepping out. The car doors creaked as they were closed shut.

"Come on." Daryl softly ordered as he took the lead, raising his crossbow. The others followed him, walking to the entrance of the college. Some walkers were banging against the entrance, but another door to the building sat on the corner of the structure. The group quickly approached it and Daryl clicked it open, slipping inside. "Come on."

"Move, move." Michonne ushered as she held open the door. Everyone stepped inside and Michonne quietly clicked the door shut behind her.

"All right, let's make this quick." Tyreese huffed as he pulled out a flashlight and flicked it on. Merle noticed a faded directory and examined it. He tapped the section of the map labeled "Medical Classes".

"Looks like this is the place we want to hit." Merle glanced at the others, nodding down the hall. "Come on. We got some drugs to nab."

~Reader's P.O.V.~

Hershel was doing his best to conserve his ammo as he swapped from shooting to stabbing and back, again, depending on the situation. You watched carefully, shouting out when a Walker was approaching him without his notice.

Your condition was beginning to worsen. You struggled to breathe at moments, your vision would occasionally fog up, and you were sweating through your clothes. The sweat stains under your arms, knees and across your back were apparent, a dark contrast to the dry areas of your clothes. You were able to slick back your hair, you were sweating so much.

When Glenn dropped to the floor, choking sounds escaping his shaking form, you began to panic. As he rolled onto his side, you noticed the blood spilling from his mouth. He was choking on his own blood and he needed help immediately.

"Hershel!" You called out to the old man. He looked up at you and you pointed to the collapsed body of Glenn. "Glenn! He's choking! He needs help!"

Hershel lifted his shotgun, taking down another Walker before hurrying up the prison stairs. He got down by Glenn and quickly inspected him.

"The symptoms are becoming too severe. He'll die if we can't do anything." You heard the pain in Hershel's voice and you gripped the cell bars.
"Is there anything you CAN do right now?" You asked, your knuckles becoming white as you leaned against the bars to keep yourself up.

"I'll need an airbag, but the last one I saw..." Hershel trailed off, looking down the stairs to a cell where a walker stuck its arms through.

"Hershel, let me help." You began to offer, but Hershel quickly waved you off.

"You can barely stand. Killing a walker is out of the question for you, right now." Hershel sighed and gripped the shotgun in his hands. "I'll retrieve the airbag, but keep an eye out for me, won't you?"

"Of course..." You frowned, wishing you could do more. Hershel nodded, before hurrying his quickest back down the stairs. You watched as Glenn writhed around, struggling to breathe. For the first time that day, you began to feel that maybe there was no hope to this situation. You and many others might die.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

When finding the classrooms and storage rooms, Merle easily busted the doors open allowing everyone to take their own room to scavenge. Merle stepped into a room with Daryl and Bob filled with drugs in the cabinets. Merle glanced at the list given to Daryl from the old man, but huffed and cracked open a cupboard. He didn't have time to memorize names.

"Anything ending with -cillin or -cin, C-I-N, grab it. We'll dissolve the pills in the IVs, put 'em right into the bloodstream." Daryl sounded, giving Merle a better idea of what meds to grab or not.

"Dosage will be tricky but considering the time we lost..." Bob trailed off and frowned as he grabbed bottle after bottle of pills, helping stuff them away into Daryl's open bag.

"Think there's any good stuff in here, little brother?" Merle jokingly asked, receiving a glare from his brother. "Hey. I'm only jokin', baby brother. I got enough alcohol at home tah get my mind off the world."

"Yer an ass, Merle." Daryl commented, causing Merle to laugh. After ten minutes of scouring, Michonne and Tyreese rejoined them, their bags bulked from their fill.

"How'd you do?" Daryl asked, zipping up his bag.

"Bags, tubes, clamps, connectors. Everything on the list." Michonne named off, looking slightly relieved.

"What about y'all?" Tyreese asked, nodding to the bags they lifted back onto their shoulders. Merle hefted his bag over his shoulder and glanced at Bob. Did he even put any medicine into his bag? At least he helped gather what they needed, but Merle was planning to keep an eye on the small black man.

"Yeah, we got it all." Daryl answered.

"Yeah. We're good." Bob added, smiling a little.

"All right, let's roll." Michonne took the lead this time, turning and heading out of the classroom. The boys followed behind her, but she halted in her tracks and held up a hand. She softly shushed them, keeping her focus ahead. The sound of snarling reached their ears and everyone with a weapon drew it or held it up. "Up ahead..."
Michonne led the way, her steps silent as she held her sword ahead of her. Merle's eyes adjusted to the dark hallways, but noticed the light filtering through the cracks in the doors. It had to be the afternoon, they were running low on time. They walked down the hallways, coming to a new door. Bob tried the door, but it didn't budge.

"Hey! Door's busted." Bob exclaimed. Tyreese pushed him out of the way.

"Hold up." Tyreese stepped back, before ramming himself into the door, snapping it open. They quickly made their way down the corridor, the sounds of walkers growling and snarling behind them.

"There." Michonne pointed ahead at an exit sign. They followed the dimmed exit signs until they reached a sign that said, "Fire Escape." Snarls and grunts rang from outside the door. Daryl cracked the exit open and peeked out.

"How many?" Tyreese asked.

"I can't tell." Daryl answered, earning an annoyed huff out of his older brother. Merle pushed Daryl out of the way and looked out himself. A metal platform led out to the rooftop of one of the other buildings outside. Some walkers stumbled across the rooftop, but most of the noise was coming from down below, where biters were scratching at the buildings walls.

"There's got to be a dozen or so on the rooftop." Merle answered, stepping back from the door. One of the walkers must have noticed them, because the sound of rumbling metal reached their ears from the fire escape.

"We can take 'em." Tyreese insisted.

"No!" Daryl quickly cut in. "They're infected. Same as at the prison. We fire at 'em, get their blood on us, breathe it in."

"We didn't come all this way to get sick." Michonne scoldingly looked over Tyreese and Merle. The redneck huffed, folding his arms, his knife glinting slightly from the light leaking in from outside.

"How do we know the ones in there aren't any different?" Tyreese asked, becoming impatient and his chest heaved from his breathing.

"We don't." Daryl answered honestly.

"Well, it's gotta change sometime." Tyreese answered softer. He and Daryl looked at each other for a moment, before facing back towards the door. Snarls from the closest Walker rang out to them. Merle noticed what the two were up to and smirked, grabbing the door handle, ready to open the door for them to charge through.

"Ready?" Daryl asked.

"Do it!" Tyreese shouted. Merle swung open the rooftop door and the two charge out. Tyreese connected his hammer with the skull of the first Walker, as Daryl charged over and began to knock bolts into the heads of the other walkers. The biters took quick notice of the survivors and began to stumble over, growling and snarling. Merle slipped forward with a grunt and easily stabbed a biter between the eyes.

"Heh, dumb as a post..." Merle kicked the Walker off his blade as another snarling biter approached. With a swift swing upwards, Merle lodged the knife up through the jaw and into the
brain of the biter. Merle smirked, sliding the knife out, flicking the blood off its blade. "Dead as a
door nail."

"Come on." Daryl killed the last Walker on the rooftop and gestured the others over. They all
followed quickly, ready to get back to the car and head back to the prison.

~

"Come on, move it!" Daryl shouted as the group ran across the rooftops of the college. The group
had been searching for a ladder of some sort to get down, but were having no luck. Daryl noticed a
ledge off to the side and whistled, gaining everyone's attention and pointing down to it. "Jump
down to the walkway below."

"Let's hurry! There's still a couple on the rooftops that might follow us if they see us drop down!"
Bob exclaimed. Merle glanced back to see a couple snarling walkers, but nothing he couldn't take
care of. After Daryl jumped down onto the roof below, demonstrating its sturdiness, everyone
jumped down after him. Merle dropped down with a thump and braced himself against the wall of
the building. He glanced down, catching sight of a few walkers.

Bob dropped down last, but lost his footing and almost stumbled off the walkway. Daryl caught
him by the shirt, as Bob's bag flew over his shoulder and dangled down. Biters below immediately
grabbed ahold of the bag and began to try to tug it and Bob down. Bob grabbed ahold of one of the
bag's straps and attempted to pull it back.

"Bob, let it go." Michonne ordered, not liking the situation.

"Let it go, man." Daryl grunted, keeping ahold of Bob. The black man didn't loosen his grip,
desperately trying to tug the bag back up.

"Just let it go." Tyreese just about ordered, getting fed up with this tug-of-war. If anyone else was
getting irritated, it was Merle. He fumed as he bent down to Bob's level and hissed at him.

"I swear, horse gums. If you don't release that bag, I'm gonna give you a hand that matches my
own." Merle threatened, holding up his knife and edging it towards Bob's wrist. Bob's eyes
widened in fear, but he didn't let go.

"Let go of the bag, man." Daryl asked, again, knowing Merle was serious about his threat. Finally,
with one last tug, Bob lurched back up with his bag. He stumbled back from the snarling and
growling walkers below and pressed himself against the wall. Daryl stepped over and snatched up
the bag. He grimaced as he pulled out the bags only contents.

Liquor.

"You got no meds in your bag? Just this? You should have kept walking that day." Daryl spat,
giving a disgusted look to Bob. He held back his arm, prepared to chuck the glass bottle.

"Don't." Bob quickly cut in, averting his gaze to the ground.

"Yer a real shit, ya know that?" Merle grabbed Bob by the collar, before Daryl could confront the
men, bad men, heroes, scholars, druggies, hermits, but you... Yer a coward, the worse I've met."

"Merle..." Michonne warned.

"I used to know this shrimp of a scientist who hid in the shadows and allowed himself to get
pushed around. He was a coward, but he did it to stay alive." Merle spat on the ground, as he tightened his grip on the collar. "I wasn't there when he died, but I heard he went out standin' up to what he feared. You? Yer gonna die because of your fear."

"Merle, let the man go. He's made his choice." Tyreese spoke stiffly, giving his own glare towards Bob. "Nothing you can do about it. Just let it go."

Merle grunted, before finally releasing Bob. The spear chucker wasn't worth his time.

"I didn't want to hurt nobody. It was just for when it gets quiet." Bob explained, though no one cared. No reason could fix the things he caused to happen in the past.

"Take one sip." Daryl shoved the bottle of liquor into Bob's hands, growling under his breath. "Before those meds get in our people, I will beat your ass into the ground. You hear me?"

Bob didn't answer, giving a slight nod. Daryl turned and pushed ahead of the others, leading them down the pathway and making their path back to the car. Michonne and Tyreese quickly followed. Merle sent a warning glance at Bob, before following after them. Bob sighed and reluctantly followed from behind.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

Hershel struggled, but all you could do was stand and watch. You tried pulling the cell door open, but it was locked shut. Only someone with a key could let you out. Hershel, on his own, managed to kill some more walkers and receive an airbag to help revive Glenn with. Having heard the gunshots, Maggie busted into the cell block and began to take out walkers, coming to her father's side to help her husband.

They carried Glenn to an emptied cell and began to revive him. You watched them aid Glenn and after thirty minutes, they both visibly relaxed. Glenn was going to be okay. Your own shoulders relaxed as you stepped back and sat on the mattress. If Glenn could push through it, you could, too.

Maggie came up the stairs five minutes later and offered you a smile.

"Hey, how're you doin'?" She asked, grabbing one of the bars to your cell.

"I think the symptoms are getting worse, but not as bad as Glenn's got..." You wet your lips and gave Maggie a sincere look. "He's gonna be okay?"

"Fer now... Daddy's keepin' an eye on him, but unless the others get back with the medicine..." Maggie sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I pray they're back before sundown. People are droppin' left and right."

"I don't want to be one of those people..." You admitted. You stood to go stand with Maggie, but suddenly your whole vision spun. You stumbled and dropped to your knees, leaning against the bars of the cell.

"___!"

Your head drummed and a pounding headache arced through your skull. You couldn't see, but you could hear. You could feel, feeling your lungs constrain. It felt like something was sliced open inside of you, because next thing you know, your throwing up metallic, hot liquid. Blood.

You heard footsteps scurrying outside your cell and Maggie shouting something down below, probably to her father. The floor was cold and hard against your legs and hands that you leaned on,
as you heaved again. Your throat burned from the acid-laced blood and the metallic taste was left in your mouth, only making you feel more sick. The smell of your blood, mixed with the smell of dead bodies mixed in the air and made you nauseous. At this rate, you were going to end up making yourself even more sick from your own symptoms.

Voice's and footsteps neared you, again, and you heard metal clanging against metal. The bars you leaned against were suddenly pulled away and you would've hit the ground, if an arm hadn't stopped your fall. Two pairs of arms came under your own and tugged you up, bringing you up and over to your mattress. You were turned on your side, as the horrible smell lessened. Your sickness faded slightly, but you still felt awful.

Your vision returned a little, as you saw blurs hovering above you in the dark area. They spoke softly to each other as a wave of exhaustion hit you. You closed your eyes and lied back into the mattress, letting sleep capture you.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

"That's where I was traveling, Highway." Tyreese pointed out on the map to Michonne.

"Then it will take about four hours to get there." Michonne sighed as she rolled up the map. "We're gonna need more gas."

"But we'll get there." Tyreese smiled a little for the first time that day, as he and Michonne stepped back into the car. They climbed into the back with Bob, since they were the least outraged with the man. Merle sat in the passenger seat, tapping his knife against the door as Daryl glanced back from the driver's seat.

"Taking Highway." Michonne said to Daryl, who rolled his eyes a little.

"I heard." He revved up the engine, as Michonne buckled herself in.

"You were right, what you said before. About the trail going cold." She spoke softly and directly to Daryl. "I don't need to go out anymore."

"Good." Daryl smiled a little.

Merle raised an eyebrow at this, catching Daryl's attention. The younger Dixon waved it off, but Merle didn't let it go so easily. Daryl could have his little secrets, but Merle always caught on. But Merle's objective at the moment was getting back to the prison and pumping some meds into the girl. He would feel better after he did so.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

When you came to, it was from the feeling of something against your head and ears. It took a moment to focus on the thrumming sound, but you began to hear words more clearly. Instruments played as you realized music was playing. You must be listening to a pair of headphones.

"It's a place of trust, will you meet me there? There's no time to spare. Come on show me you care..."

You heard the male singer softly sing, as you heard the beats back him up. You cracked open your eyes, finding the room was still dark. The coughing and groans had quieted. You wondered how many were gone.

"Here we can make anything become real..."
The awful metallic taste still remained in your mouth and you pulled yourself to the edge of the bed, spitting onto the ground, hoping to get rid of the taste a little. The smell of the dead faded slightly and you wondered if the bodies were taken out already. How long were you out? You pushed yourself up on the thin bed.

"All of my dreams, are all I see. Try not to wake me, can't you see. All of my dreams, are all I wanna see..."

You noticed the MP3 seated beside you and you slipped the pod into your pocket, as you stood to your feet. Your vision spun and you immediately sat down, again. You weren't going to be able to stand and walk around.

"Try not to wake me, try not to wake me!"

You looked over to the ground at your cell door, not missing the dark red stain on the ground by the bars. You remembered throwing up the blood and you grimaced, lying on your back. Your back was sore and even though the pain your lungs had lessened, your throat was still sore. You turned onto your side, falling into a fit of coughs.

"Try not to wake me!"

Your vision darkened, again, and you couldn't see. You just wanted this pain to be over with. Tears pricked your eyes from the pain and you wrapped an arm around your stomach. You were done waiting for the others, couldn't death take you quick instead of this slow painful process?

"Cause' of you, my tries to not think of you they just end up in one million thoughts. It's way too much to mention..."

You heard the cellblock doors open and several pairs of footsteps entered into the facility. Your focus was on the pain coursing through you and you didn't notice someone enter your cell, until an arm came around your waist. You were hefted and helped out of your bed, stepping out of your cell with the figure. The person said something to you, but their voice was muffled.

"See what I mean when you see my creation..."

Suddenly, you felt yourself being lied back on another mattress. Something pricked your skin, but your movements were sluggish. You tried to pull out whatever was stuck in your arm, but a thick arm kept your dominant arm down.

"It's a place of trust, I can meet you there. There's no time to spare, come on show me you care..."

Something was pumped into your blood stream as your vision began to clear a little. Two people were talking to each other above you and their voices became clearer, too. You heard the familiar southern drawl and caught a glimpse of the man's familiar face. Relief flooded down your body and you managed a small smile.

"What you believe, it will here become real..."

"Merle..." You spoke up, your voice dry and raspy from the lack of water and the dried blood in your mouth. You noticed Daryl standing above you, too, hanging up an IV bag that was hooked up to your arm.

"All of my dreams are all I see. Try not to wake me, can't you see? All of my dreams are all I wanna see..."
"Hey, darlin'. We got some drugs pumpin' into ya. Y'all will be better in no time." Merle released his hand that held yours down, bringing it up to rub your shoulder. "Just don't die on me, girl."

"Try not to wake me, try not to wake me!"

You smiled a little more, before leaning your head to the side and closing your eyes. They made it back on time. You were going to be alright. You could rest easier now. You allowed yourself to drift off to sleep, peacefully this time.
You peeked your eyes open, still filled with drowsy sleep, as you heard the sound of metal tapping against metal. You turned your head and looked over to Merle standing at the entrance to your cell, a plate of food in his one hand and a bag slung over his shoulder. He smirked at you and stepped into your cell, as you sat up on the mattress. You looked down, noticing it wasn't your mattress despite being in your cell.

"They chucked it." Merle answered your silent question as he pulled up his chair, using his bayonet arm. "They didn't want to risk carryin' the disease through the mattress. Took all the infected's mattresses into the back 'n burned them."

"Probably the right move..." You rubbed the mattress under you.

"We'll find you another mattress, sugah." Merle chuckled as he offered you the food. "Heard ya didn't get much to eat yesterday. Throwin' up blood mostly."

"Yesterday wasn't good." You admitted, taking the plate of food.

"Wasn't for either of us." Merle muttered. You noted your dry throat and looked to Merle, a bit sheepish.

"Would you happen to have any water?" You asked, as Merle's smirk became slightly cruel. He brought up his bag and extracted two plastic cups, followed by a familiar bottle of wine.

"This will definitely clear up your throat." Merle kissed the wine bottle, the familiar word Scarecrow bolded on the bottles print.

"I'm recovering from being sick, Merle. Alcohol seems like a really dumb way to go about this." You rubbed your head, though smiled from his weird way of thinking.

"We're celebratin', sweet cheeks. Yer livin' another day, so let's have a drink to recognize it." Merle popped open the wine bottle and already began to fill a cup, despite your protests. It was amusing, seeing him set each cup on your bedside table and pouring into them with his left hand holding the bottle, his bladed hand bracing the table. "I've kept it in the tombs to keep cool. After a drink of this, you'll never go back, girl."

"Fine, but only because your so insistent." You raised an eyebrow, taking the offered drink from Merle's hand. Merle took his own cup and cliche-liked tapped it against yours. "We making a toast?"

"Sure, why the hell not?"

"Okay, to health to everyone who suffered through the illness. I hope that everyone who went out and got our medicines are blessed and rewarded for their hard work." You thought up, raising your glass.
"Thanks, big man." Merle looked up to the ceiling of the cell, raising his own glass. "Sometimes yer a real pain in the ass and this time was pushin' it, but you came through. I wanted to get one person through and ya delivered."

"Is that person me?" You asked, feeling slightly flattered.

"Well, it ain't any of the other pricks. Now, don't think too hard about it, darlin'. Let's drink." Merle gulped down his share of the wine and you brought the wine cup to your lips. You took a hesitant sip and was greeted by a thick, sparking flavor. The drink tasted like plums, if not a bit tart. There was another concentrated flavor and you knew it must be the alcohol. You decided to go slow with the drink and to not have anymore than you received.

"So, you really went out with the others and got all that medicine?" You asked, setting your cup aside and beginning to dig into your food. There was no fresh meat, considering the main hunters were busy on a run all day yesterday. But you were provided with some fresh rolls, some green peas freshly grown from the prison's garden, and a protein bar. You grabbed one of the fresh rolls, biting into it with a hum.

"There wasn't anything helpful I could do here." Merle shrugged slightly. "Though it looked like Officer Rick had some trouble with the walkers at the fence. Whole thing collapsed from pressure."

"Really?" You asked with wide eyes. "Is everyone okay?"

"They put all the walkers down, only real damage was in that cellblock full of sick." Merle frowned a little. "Half of 'em died, can't say if everyone will recover even with the medicine."

"So, there's a chance I won't?" You slowed in your eating, as Merle laughed at the slight fear in your tone.

"We got to ya too quick. Old man says yer gonna make a full recovery. Same with the Chinese kid and that sharpshooter." Merle assured you, taking another large gulp of the wine. He glanced at the cup, looking slightly disappointed. "Wish we had some bourbon. This isn't bad fer wine, but it's not nearly the king of alcohol."

"What a shame." You remarked sarcastically with a roll of your eyes. "But thank you, Merle... For going through all that trouble for me."

"Hey, ya got stuck with me. Least I can do is make sure ya keep standin'." Merle nudged your leg with his knee. "Old man said ya should be able to get around on yer own, though you'll be slow. How about ya find us another book with your downtime today?"

"Sure, anything you want me to keep an eye out for?" You asked, smiling a little as you broke open the pod filled with peas.

"How about less psychological topics and more guns, explosions, and death?" Merle suggested and you should have known better.

"I'll keep an eye out for Jurassic Park."

"Ya really know me, sugah." Merle grinned, giving you a wink as he got to his feet. "I'm keepin' the wine here. But I'm comin' back for it later."

"Don't worry, I won't drink it all while your gone." You joked, as Merle pushed aside your sheets and stepped back out into the cellblock. You sighed, resting your side against the wall, continuing
It'd be nice to get up and stretch your legs. You glanced over to the picks that rested against your bedside table and smiled a little. You needed to get some fresh air.

~Merle's P.O.V.~

Merle stepped out into the prison yard and took a deep breathe. Today was a great day off after all the trouble from the day before. The redneck noticed his brother and Michonne loading lots of Walker bodies into the back of a truck, the old man speaking to them. Merle thought about joining them, when a smaller figure placed an arm around his waist and gained his attention.

"Heard you were a real hero yesterday." Emma smiled up at Merle, her other hand coming up to trace the front of his wife-beater. "The worst is over... I thought maybe tonight... You know..."

"Hm, yeah. That sounds damn nice right now." Merle quipped back as he smirked down at the woman. "All that weight is off my shoulders, wouldn't mind keepin' warm with you tonight."

"Good. Usual place after the sun sets?" Emma asked and Merle chuckled.

"Course, same place 'n time." Merle licked his lips slowly, causing Emma to grin and look to the ground.

"Alright, don't keep me waiting tonight." Emma released Merle and backed up, heading back towards the prison. Merle watched her go, his eyes trailing to her backside for a moment before he turned back to the truck full of walkers and made his way down.

"Mornin'." Daryl nodded to his brother at his approach, as Merle nodded to the truck full of bodies.

"Goin' out to burn them?" Merle asked, as Hershel smiled grimly and gave a slight nod.

"There's quite a few of them. It's best to burn them before they potentially ruin the grounds." Hershel explained. Michonne closed up the back of the truck and glanced at Merle, her katana hanging loosely on her back.

"We're going out now to burn them, want to join us? We could always use another guard on watch." Michonne offered. Merle blinked, surprised at the open offer. He's been getting it a lot more lately, people inviting him to their little trips out, but none from the mute. Ironically, she's become anything but mute.

"Drivin' out to kill some Walker bodies in the forest? Sounds like mah kind of shindig." Merle smirked a little. "Sure, got nothing better to do."

"We could use any extra hands." Hershel patted Merle on the shoulder, before moving past him to the passenger seat.

"Hey." Daryl placed a hand on Merle's shoulder, as Michonne moved to the driver's seat. Merle looked to his younger brother with a raised eyebrow, as Daryl visibly hesitated. "... Ya've done good. I wasn't sure ya'd warm up, but you've proven me wrong. Not everyone likes ya, but I think now they can at least trust ya."

"So, what are you tryin' to say, baby brother?" Merle asked, unconsciously pulling on a strap from his bayonet.

"Thanks, fer tryin'." Daryl smiled a little, as he released Merle's shoulder. "Fer the record, I like the
Merle you are now, more than the one from before the apocalypse."

"That's the funny thing, little brother." It was Merle's turn to smirk now, as he pulled himself to sit onto the back of the truck. He gave a salute with his bladed arm to his brother. "I never changed. The world did."

Daryl laughed for the first time Merle had heard in years. Not a snort or a small snicker, a real genuine laugh. Merle's smirk relaxed into a smile, though he didn't let Daryl see it. The truck's engine roared as it pulled out and headed to the prison gates.

Merle looked at the big facility and for once was glad events fell the way they did. He couldn't imagine where he'd be right now if they didn't fall the way they did, right now.

~Reader's P.O.V.~

You patted Blizzard on the face, as you fed her some lettuce from the garden. She nuzzled her head against your hand and you smiled a little. You turned and made your way out of the stables, giving Harley a pat on the way out.

The fresh air was cool against your face and you smiled as you stepped across the prison field towards a weary man working with the growing plants. Rick stood up straight and offered you a small smile as you made your approach. Your picks shifted with the movements of your legs, their metal glinting in the sun. You had sharpened them this morning.

"Good to see you up and about, __." Rick wiped the dirt off his hands onto his jeans, as he regarded you with some curiosity. "Ya need something?"

"I wanted to know if it would be alright to go just right outside the fence over there." You pointed to a line of thick trees that were outside the fence. "You got all the walkers that were lingering outside last night, so since it will probably be clear for the rest of the day, I thought I'd get some exercise in."

"Exercise?" Rick raised an eyebrow.

"You'll know it when you see it."

"Alright, it wouldn't hurt. Take a gun with you though, too, just to be safe."

"Okay, I will." You smiled, stepping back towards the prison. You planned on grabbing your derringer. "Thanks, Rick. I won't be out for too long."

~Merle's P.O.V.~

The old man dumped some fuel onto the pile of bodies as Michonne readied some matches. Merle stood off to the side, glancing at them but mostly keeping his gaze trained on the forest.

The area was oddly quiet and still, which wasn't abnormal. Nature usually got scared off by people stepping in, but he couldn't even hear birds chirping or squirrels rustling through the trees. Merle didn't like it.

Michonne and Hershel chatted, laughing about something. That's when Merle heard it, the snapping of a stick. The snap was loud enough, it had to be a human step. Merle whirled around to the noise and almost froze. Almost.

The Governor, in all his one-eyed glory, stepped out of the woods. He held a gun in his hands that
he aimed at Merle, but his one eye was trained on the other two. Merle noticed this slight
distraction and lunged forward, knocking the gun out of the Governor's hands.

The other two jumped and looked over at the noise, their own expressions becoming shocked at
the encounter. Merle took this vulnerability to slam his one fist into the Governor's face, sending
him dropping to the ground. The redneck's fury after his many months under the Governor
exploded with his first swing. He dropped to the ground, holding the evil man down with his
bladed arm and began to wail on him with the other.

"Stupid! Son! Of! A! Bitch!" Merle cursed with every swing. The Governor's nose was definitely
broken and if he was given the time, he would definitely gain bruises and a pair of black eyes.
Merle pulled his bladed arm away and pulled the Governor up by the collar with his other. Merle
spat in the Governor's face, absolutely seething. "What was yer plan, huh? Ya thought ya could get
the drop on ol' Merle Dixon?"

"You want the truth...?" The Governor's familiar southern drawl escaped the bruised and bleeding
lips of the broken man. The sociopath laughed empty-heartedly, blood dripping out of his mouth
and onto his shirt. "I was gonna take you as hostages. Use you as leverage to get the prison. And
then, then I was gonna kill you. All of you."

"..." Merle stared coldly at the man. He'd truly lost everything if all he could do while staring at
death was laugh. But Merle wasn't going to give him a swift death. Merle brought up his bladed
hand and stabbed it into the Governor's leg. The man howled in pain, lurching forward. "That was
for treating me like shit."

"Merle..." Hershel started, but Michonne raised her hand stopping him from any further
intervention. Merle pulled out his blade and stabbed it into the other leg of the Governor, gaining
the same reaction.

"That's for everyone at Woodbury you fooled." Merle pulled out the knife and jabbed it this time
into the Governor's right shoulder. The Governor cried from the pain, clenching his one eye shut.
"That was for every man you made me kill for no goddamn reason."

"Please! Just kill me!" The Governor shouted and pleaded.

"Ya don't get it, do ya?!" Merle growled, not pulling out the blade, yet. "Ya didn't just kill people,
'Gov'ner'. Ya broke them. So, I'm gonna break you."

So, Merle pulled out his blade and shoved it somewhere else not vital in the Governor's body for
everything he could've thought of.

"That's for pushin' around that square!"

"That's for touchin' the farmer's daughter that way!"

"That's for killin' that young doctor, just because she couldn't return yer goddamn feelin's!"

"That's for tryin' to make me kill my brother!"

"That's for the blondie!"

Merle pulled out the blade and allowed the Governor to fall limp, panting from the pain. His body
quivered from the destroyed skin and muscles. With the blood he was losing, he wouldn't make it
without help. Merle pressed the blade against the man's chest, his own breathe slowing from his
anger.
"Four months ago, ya found a cabin up in the woods." Merle began as the Governor looked confused, before his eye began to widened in recognition. "Ya found a man in that house alone. Ya thought he was alone, he told ya he was alone. But he lied 'n you thought wrong."

"How...? How do you know this?" The Governor gasped, surprised and a little scared that Merle knew so much. Merle could see those emotions rush across the man's features. The fear, that's what Merle wanted.

"I was there, asshole. I was there in the cellar under the house, holdin' onto the daughter of the man you killed. He was all she had left and ya took it away." Merle pressed the knife further, cutting through the fabric of the governor's shirt. "Killin' you won't fix what ya did... But I think it will help."

"Get it through your thick skull, Merle..." The Governor huffed, trying to smile, but he couldn't from the pain. "You don't want to kill me. All that time spent, all those lives taken. Killing me will be pointless. You'll still be a murderer, a monster. I'll just be dead."

"Ya think I'm doin' this for revenge?" Merle scoffed, as the Governor's eyes began to widened. "Ask me that five or six months ago 'n this would be about revenge. No, I'm killin' ya so one less person has to die."

"Didn't I... Didn't I hurt you?"

"Hell yeah, but so did my old man. Yer just a faded scar now, Gov'ner." Merle smirked a little, seeing he had caught the man off guard. The redneck drew back the knife a little. "Go on. Beg. Beg for your life."

"... Please... Don't..." The Governor closed his eye, surrendering. Merle didn't respond or give the man a chance to continue. Merle plunged his knife into the chest of the Governor, piercing several vital organs. The Governor coughed up blood, instantly dying. Merle pulled out the knife, allowing the body to drop to the ground.

Merle rose to his feet, his knife dripping with blood hung at his side. Hershel watched the ordeal in horror, but he understood. The man had hurt his daughter, he felt relieved to know he was put down. Michonne felt that same relief, though the vengeance in her heart faded slightly. The black woman stepped over to the redneck, gaining his attention as he looked up from the dead man on the ground.

"You did good, Dixon." Michonne offered a respectful nod. Merle looked back to her, his expression searching. He saw how she looked younger, more relaxed. She had been searching for the Governor for months. Now that constant worry was gone.

"Should we let 'im turn? Burn his body with the others? Bring 'im back?" Merle asked, glancing over the dead body.

"We'll bring him back, let him turn on his own." Michonne answered, causing Merle to look to her with a raised eyebrow. She gave him a curt shrug. "You got to kill him while he was alive, I want to be the one who kills him when he's dead."

"Fair enough." With some help from Michonne, Merle hefted the Governor into the back of the truck. Hershel remained silent as he got into the driver's seat, Merle joining him in the car. Michonne remained in the back, keeping an eye on the corpse in case it reanimated. She held her katana in a tight grip, as the truck's engine roared and took back to the prison. The burning bodies were left in the wake, along with the last cries of the Governor.
You examined the thick tree, jabbing a pick in it for good measure before you decided it would be suitable. A smile grew on your face as you drew your other pick up and stabbed it into the tree. You pulled yourself up with the other pick and braced your feet against the tree. You repeated the familiar pattern as you scaled the side of the tree. Something you hadn't done since your father was around.

Your muscles burned from not having climbed in a while, but you pushed through the pain, and scaled higher and higher. The wind pulled at your hair and your smile grew as you reached the highest branch that could hold you.

As you seated yourself on the branch, you heard the familiar sound of a truck and looked out to see some of the others pull in from an errand. You noticed Rick out in the field, looking up at you and you laughed a little to yourself. You sent him a wave to acknowledge him and he sent you a small one back. One of the others stepped out of the car and you recognized it as Merle, who made his way over to Rick.

You couldn't see their expressions from far away, but you saw the way Rick seemed to tense up before following Merle back to the truck. Hershel had long since exited the vehicle and he must have spotted you, because he began hobbling over to the fence nearest you. You heard him laugh as he stopped at the fence.

"Well, dare I say, yer like a little bird perched in a tree, ____." Hershel gave an easy smile as you sent him a slight wave.

"Feel like one, too." You agreed. "Wind against my skin, I can see for miles, I feel free and light, almost like I can fly."

"I hope you don't test out that feeling." Hershel warned and you gave your own little chuckle. "So, you do know how to use those picks of yers."

"There not for show." You looked back to the others at the truck. Michonne sat in the back and she spoke with Rick, who was looking into the bed of the truck. "What's up with the commotion over there?"

"Gov'nor." Hershel answered grimly as he glanced back at the truck. "The man came in with a gun. Was going to take us hostage, but Merle disarmed and killed him."

"The Governor..." Your muscles became stiff and your skin paled like the way it was the day before. This was the same man who came into your shelter and killed your father. The same man who had a knife to Merle's back at all times. A monster who had hurt these people. You didn't say another word, as you maneuvered off the branch and began to climb down.

"___?"

"I want to see him." You answered, as you carefully climbed down the tree. "I need to see the man who killed my father."

"Merle wasn't forgiving to him." Hershel warned. "Several stab wounds, blood everywhere. He won't be a nice sight to see."

"When has looking at a corpse ever been a 'nice sight'?” You asked Hershel, and you caught him there. "I need to see him at least once, Hershel, before we bury, burn, whatever we do with him..."
"Okay, I can't stop you, but do brace yerself." Hershel gave you a slight nod, before turning and heading back to the prison. You sighed and dropped to the ground when you were close enough. You hurried around the fence side, heading for the front gates. They were pulled open by Carl for you, as you hurried your way through. You sent him a small nod as you ran over to the truck.

"He was clean, healthy. Might've been with another group." You heard Merle say as you approached, slowing to a stop beside him. He looked to you and didn't say anything, nodding to the truck bed.

You looked in and your face twisted at the sight. A man lied in the back of the truck bed. He was tall and lean, and in better days he might've looked like the typical southern gentleman. The only thing that threw him off, aside from the multiple stab wounds across his body, was the black eyepatch across his face, covering his right eye. You wished he'd look less human, but you couldn't determine what the look of a killer could be.

Anyone can be a killer.

"That's really him?" You asked, not being able to look away.

"In the flesh." Merle answered. "Had a gun pointed tah our heads. He had this comin'."

"I'm glad I met you before him." You sighed, holding your arms. Merle looked at you with a raised brow and you gave him an earnest look. "I wouldn't lie to you, Merle, but if there was a fork in the road and you stood at one end and he stood at the other, my father probably would've trusted him first. I would've been dead if I hadn't found you."

"Yer father's still dead." Merle noted with a frown.

"And he's probably sighing in relief knowing this man's gone." You placed a hand on Merle's arm. "It's over. We never have to worry about him, again. That's the part I'm most relieved about."

"Wish we all didn't have to lose so much to get to this point..." Rick sighed out, lowering his head. Suddenly, the body in the truck gave a low growl and it didn't take you long to know what was happening. The Governor's one eye opened with a white film over it and the corpse began to sit up at the sight of you, Merle, and Rick. It didn't last long, as a katana slammed into the back of its head, its blade coming out through the one good eye. Michonne pulled out the blade and the body dropped back down.

"Let's burn him. I never want to see his face, again." Michonne hissed, hanging her blade out of the trunk bed.

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