Metamorphosis

by Guynemer53

Summary

So what happens after Clementine recovers fully from losing her leg and life goes back to normal? At least what goes for normal in a school of troubled youth in a Zombie Apocalypse.

Notes

I haven't tried my writing for well over ten years since I tried writing a zombie novel of my own back in my college days. I succeeded in writing about forty or so pages before I gave up on the effort. But after having read several of these FanFics I decided to give this a shot. Granted, I have NO prior writing experience but since my version is based off of an already established story the ground work has already been laid down. I just like to read and would say that I'm somewhat of a stickler for movies staying try to the book but In this case the roles have been reversed with the STORY being true to the MOVIE (or in this case, the game). With this in mind the groundwork for my narrative has already been established by using my preferred game play-through for as a starter so I take those building blocks, this lump of clay, and add on to it.

When I first decided to tackle this project I had Four main goals in mind:
1. No returning characters from previous seasons. We've already been fortunate enough to
be reunited with both Kenny and Lilly from Season 1 in 203 and 402, respectively. By adding another returning character such as Christa (as many fans hoped and have included in their story) it would be pushing the Laws of Probability and turn the Walking Dead franchise into a video game version of the Disney song “It's A Small World After All”.

2. I wanted my narrative to mimic my own game play-through. This being done merely to add slight nuances which I myself prefer based on my own opinion on what makes for a better story. For instance, Abel having both arms, Louis is romanced but captured, Violet loses her pinky, AJ kills Lilly, James refuses to help the school once inside the cave and storms off and finally Tenn is shot by AJ on the bridge and then shoots the reanimated Tenn at the fishing shack.

3. More dialogue and interactions between certain characters. Omar had so few lines in the Final Season that people could memorize them verbatim after only one play-through.

4. Meeting and learning about the Delta's personnel and their Table of Organization and Equipment. Something many fans (I include myself) were hoping for while we awaited the release of 403 and 404. Also what was it about the about the community to the North which Abel alluded to in 403 that made him look like the 'Virgin Mary' as he described it.
Five months have passed since the raid on the SS STEWARTS FITZGERALD which led to its destruction and the death of her crew and the rescue of Aasim, Omar and Louis. The kids of Ericson's Boarding School For Troubled Youth have yet to see any signs of the Delta but are still fearful of reprisals by its remaining members. We find Aasim, Omar and Willy making their way to the fishing shack in search of fish.

“Would someone care to explain to me why I'm out here fishing instead of cooking? What the hell do I know about fishing?”

Omar, or as Louis was want to call him, 'Chef' Omar wasn't one to swear. Not a sentence with “fuck” or “shit” sprinkled in with every other word like Violet was oh so fond of doing but when he did indeed swear everyone knew that the chef was not at all pleased. Omar, along with Willy and Aasim were making their way to the old fishing shack in their latest attempt to spear some fish and check their traps.

Aasim sighed, he knew no answer he gave would ever pacify the cantankerous cook when he was in this mood.

“Because Clem thought it would be a good idea to break up the monotony and have everyone try doing something else for a change.”

At this all he got from Omar was a mild grunt.

Willy turned and said, “Yeah. Besides, its good exercise for your leg.”

“My leg is fine.”

“Yeah its not.” Willy said with a gap toothed grin. This comment earned Willy a glare from the chef.
“Zip it, both of you.” The moment they had left the confines of the school Aasim felt a headache begin to grow in the back of his skull which only got worse as Omar began his grousing over his sudden change in occupation.

At the beginning of the Delta's raid on the school Omar had taken a bullet through his upper thigh. Luckily it didn't strike any bone or severe any major arteries, it just hurt like a bitch. But unfortunately, Omar; along with Louis and Aasim became unwilling guests of the Delta aboard the supply ship the SS STEWARTS FITZGERALD until Clementine led a successful rescue party with the remainder of the crew of Ericson's. During their internment the Delta hadn't offered much in the line of medical care for his leg with the exception of the odd bandage. Aasim did what he could but without Ruby's medical expertise all he knew to do was to keep Omar's leg from developing an infection which occurred despite his best efforts. With Aasim's limited medical knowledge and being imprisoned inside of a cell no bigger than a studio apartment's kitchen and bathroom with no exercise and little food it was surprising Omar didn't lose his leg or even his life. Once they made it back to the school Ruby was able to get the infection under control but ever since the chef still walked with a pronounced limp.

Now as Omar was mulling over in his mind who he had pissed off to be made to work outside the walls he couldn't help but wonder aloud, “What does Louis even know about gardening anyway? I should be the one helping Ruby. Not him. What he knows about gardening wouldn't be enough to fill a thimble.”

At this Willy laughed and even Aasim had to agree, mainly because it wasn't at all far from the truth. Louis had always been more interested in cracking jokes which at times did wonders at lifting the kid's spirits during rough times while at other times his jibs were as enjoyed as the sound like fingernails upon a chalk board. When he wasn't having fun at someone's expense, Violet in particular, he could be found playing his prized piano playing much the same songs over and over again ad nauseum.

Since their raid of the FITZGERALD there had been no signs of the remaining members of the Delta but even with that they had no interest in pushing their luck by wandering too far past the “safe zone” which Marlon had first implemented when he was in charge. In an attempt to help break up the boredom Clementine struck upon the idea of people taking turns at doing different chores in and around the school. This week would see Ruby and Louis in the greenhouse, Willy; Aasim and Omar fishing, while Violet pulled guard duty. Clem and AJ were in the music room where she was helping AJ with his reading after he came across a bunch of kid's books that had been shoved against a wall in the music room. Next week would find Violet and Aasim hunting with Willy and Ruby in the greenhouse leaving Omar with watch duty so Omar's mood would not be improving anytime in the foreseeable future.

Since the arrival of our dynamic duo they had done much for the school but they also had suffered much. It was thanks to Clem they had found out about Brody and Marlon's secret negotiations with the Delta whereby they traded Tenn's twin sisters to the Delta for protection. They then covered their tracks by telling the rest that Sophie and Minerva had been killed by walkers whilst hunting.
Once Clementine had confronted Marlon and after Brody confessed Marlon accidentally killed Brody with a blow to the head with a flashlight and locked Clem inside the basement with Brody, who had since reanimated. Not long after AJ then shot Marlon. When the raiders, led by Clem’s former acquaintance Lilly; Mitch was kill along with one of the raiders while Aasim, Louis and the wounded Omar were led away in captivity during which Louis, as punishment for his refusal to be a model prisoner had his tongue cut out. After blowing up the FITZGERALD Clem, along with AJ, Violet and Tenn came across Tenn's sole remaining sister, Minerva and during the ensuing battle Clem was wounded in the leg by Minerva's ax who in turn shot her assailant who fell victim to a pack of walkers. Tenn froze, transfixed by the sight of his sister's death, seemingly oblivious to Violet's attempts to get Tenn to safety. AJ had made the tough call and decided the life of Violet was more important so he shot Tenn so Vi could make good her escape.

Minutes later Clementine was bitten while trying to escape the walkers herself. She and AJ made their last stand at James’ barn which seemed to spell their doom but it didn't. More of that later.

Clementine had ultimately led the kids to victory but it was a Pyrrhic victory. The final tally since their arrival: Marlon, Brody, Mitch, and Tenn; dead. Omar with an infected gunshot wound to the leg, Louis without his tongue and Clem without a leg. Granted they had destroyed the Delta's supply ship, decapitated their leadership and the death of her crew but they sustained a loss of different type. They lost the support of their friend and former Whisperer, James.

After spending years as a soldier himself he had seen the errors of his ways and began living the life a nomadic hermit, peacefully coexisting among walkers and never killing them. His philosophy about walkers was a bit too much to ask the average survivor who had seen too many friends, acquaintances and loved one to believe as James and did. That there is still something dwelling within a walker of that walker's former self. He had warned Clementine that the boy would grow too fond of killing after he learned that AJ had gunned down Marlon even though he felt remorse. These warnings was brushed off by Clem but while aboard the FITZGERALD James had witnessed AJ pointing a gun at Lilly, look to Clementine guidance and to his horror watched as she told AJ to pull the trigger. When they met up with him again he refused to ever help them after witnessing AJ become like so many people he had known before and even tried to take AJ away from her. This venture failed and he stormed off never and had not been seen since.

But back let us return to the present.

It wasn't much further to the shack but Omar's mood nor Aasim's headache for that matter, had improved since we last saw them.

Willy tried to cheer Omar up by saying, “Look. It's easy. All you have to do is just check the traps for fish and reset the 'em and bring back whatever you find. Easy!”
“Hmph! That's not the point!” Omar said testily.

Aasim just rubbed his temple in a vain attempt to alleviate his aching head as Omar took his leave, bucket in hand; to check the traps upriver. “He took that better than I expected.”

Aasim sighed and replied, “I don't give a shits. I don't care if he likes it or not. No one else is thrilled but its getting colder out and food is getting harder to come by and now there's even fewer of us left. We still don't know if the Delta are still roaming around here and Clem's right, we can't chance it.”

“Think we can make it?”

“We've survived all this time without any adults and Clem has yet to us down.”

“But her leg...” Willy said quietly.

Aasim exploded. “So fucking what?! If it wasn't for Clem we wouldn't even be alive! We would be stone fucking dead or be in the Delta so shut the fuck up and let's go!”

“Sorry...”

Aasim quickened his pace while Willy remained a respectable distance away, not daring to make things worse continuing to talk. They continued on their way to the shack where they stored their spears and other fishing supplies. Fishing was one job Willy never relished. It wasn't that he hated the act of fishing, that he enjoyed, it's just that it brought back bittersweet memories for him. The spears, made from the sharpened bones of deer or even walkers, had been whittled and shaped by the school's resident anarchist and Willy's best friend, Mitch. Apart from the spears and a fair share of the graffiti that festooned the walls of Ericson's very little remained of Mitch apart from his grave.

When Willy arrived at the school just about all of the kids ignored him for the first few years, he was never picked on himself, something he seen plenty of times. People just seem to let him be. But once he met Mitch they became friends for on reason or another. Something which Willy had never had growing up. But now Mitch was dead. He was just one of the latest kids to die since the outbreak began. While many met their fate due to walkers some also fell victim to freak accidents such as Sheila and Tyrone. Both of whom drowned when they went swimming and strayed too far and were swept downstream. One teenager fell to his death when he lost his balance and feel forty
feet trying to climb up the school's bell tower. Simple childhood illnesses claimed lives. Another boy developed tonsillitis and suffered for weeks before his airways finally closed and he succumbed. These types of deaths were always the worst because then someone put the student down before they reanimated.

Ms. Martin, as the only remaining adult remaining after the outbreak took it upon herself to do this most disturbing but necessary chore until she fell victim to walkers in the greenhouse about 2 years after the outbreak.

One day Ms. Martin, Ruby and along with several others were ambushed walkers while they were getting herbs from the greenhouse. Ms. Martin managed to kill the walker with a pair of hedge cutters but was bitten in the process and ordered the kids to run back to her office and fetch her medical bag. Recognizing that this was the end of the road she blocked off the main entrance to the greenhouse, propped up a filing cabinet next to the disused chemistry lab so that when she slammed the door the cabinet would fall the remainder of the way thereby sealing off the chemistry lab and herself. She then climbed onto the garden and tied her arm to the trellis next to the hanging ivies Mrs. Mallik, the Chem teacher, was always so fond of. It was there that Ms. Martin, hero to the end, expired.

“Still, we haven't seen nothin' of those fuckers in months. They're probably still licking there wounds and shit. Hell, maybe we're lucky and they're all dead so we should-”

Willy, having stayed mum for the last twenty minutes, decided to say what was on his mind when he noticed that something had caught Aasim's attention which caused Willy to stop in his tracks.

“Aasim? Watcha see?”

He received no reply but once he saw Aasim reach for an arrow he did the same as he drew alongside the Indian-American to see what it was that caught Aasim's attention.

Scarcely 100 feet from them, not far from the shack; was a man stripped to the waist, bathing himself at the river's edge. Willy could feel his blood begin to boil. He was sure that Aasim felt the same way, if not more so. Aasim motioned for him to follow him. They hid behind a large oak tree where they conversed in hushed tones. This was bad. Real bad. Aasim thought to himself. If the use of the shack and their traps were denied them their only way of getting food would be hunting. But now that the Delta seemed to be on their very doorstep they couldn't afford to hunt either. This guy had to go.

Just as life was getting back to normal. Dammit...
“Gotta be a Raider.”

“Looks that way. I didn't see any weapons. I think he's alone. You see anyone?”

“No,” Willy looked at the branches above and had an idea. “Lift me up. I'll take a look around.” Aasim nodded and lifted him onto his shoulders where Willy climbed up as far as he dared and looked around the shack and the surrounding area. Seeing nothing he climbed back down and jumped back to the earth.

He picked up his bow and said, “Looks clear. C'mon I say we take the fucker here and now.”

Aasim thought about this for a moment before replying, “Okay, but we need to get closer. Keep an eye out. If he bolts, shoot.”

The pair crouched and made their way as quickly but silently as they dared. Aasim was methodical with the placement of each footfall so as to make the bare minimum of sound with each step until they had narrowed the distance between them and their adversary to 30 feet.

Since the beginning it was Marlon, Aasim, and Mitch who did the majority of the hunting which made the three of them excellent shots with the bow. Louis would occasionally help out with the hunt but it was rare that he actually shot an arrow and even more so that he actually shot anything. Once, when he wasn't paying attention to where he was aiming and nearly shot Mitch in the calf. After being unceremoniously kicked off of the hunting party for good he was relegated to making traps for rabbits and walkers alike. Something which he actually showed an impressive acumen for. Over time Mitch had shown Willy how to shoot so he filled in Louis' slot when it came time for hunting. Marlon was top shot at the bow with Mitch not far behind but with both of them now dead and Clementine without a leg Aasim now enjoyed top shot status.

Aasim stood, took careful aim-

SNAP.

“Fuck...”
Thousands of acres of virgin woodlands surrounded them and the school and Willy had just stepped on a stick. Hell, if Willy was in the desert he'd probably step in dog shit too.

The stranger's head snapped around, seeking the source of the sound and when his eyes fell upon a pair of sharp pointy things pointed in his direction and behind those pointy things were two pissed off looking kids. He pondered his situation and came to a logical conclusion which any sane person in his place would do: he bolted. Or at least tried to. Aasim released his arrow without his aiming which went wide left of target. Just as Aasim was reached for another arrow he saw Willy's shot streak past under the man's armpit. The near miss caused him to lose his balance and crash to the ground. Both Willy and Aasim rapidly closed the remaining distance as he struggled to his feet.

“Don't move or the next one won't miss!” Aasim hissed drawing a bead right in the space between the eyes of the man. A pair of arms instantaneously shot in the air in surrender.

“D-d-d-d-d-don't sh-sh-sh-shoot!”

“Let 'em run. That would make my fucking day.”

“Can it, Willy. You! On your face! Willy, tie him up.

Willy reached into his back pocket and grabbed a a pair of zip ties.

He had found them among a raft of supplies he and Tenn had gone after during their attack on the FITZGERALD. As Willy prepped the raft Tenn went off to unhitch the raft's mooring lines attaching it to the pier. Once completed he then tried to jump onto the raft but by then the current had begun to carry Willy and the raft down stream. When Tenn jumped he misjudged the distance and missed the raft by mere inches, falling into the walker infested waters. Willy ran back to the stern to try to help his friend but by then Tenn had already begun treading water back to shore. Not only was Willy unable to help his friend but one of the Raiders, Michael, had spotted them and fired a few shots in Willy's direction. Ducking behind Willy could feel the rounds of 7.62 millimeter impacting the sheets plywood right at his back. When the firing had stopped he peeked over and saw Michael roughly yanking Tenn out of the water then dragging him to shore by the back of his neck. Willy stared helplessly as Tenn was marched back to the FITZGERALD.

Feeling helpless and dreading the fate of Tenn and that of the rest of his friends he continued downstream for several miles until he reached a bend in the river that he recognized as an area where Mitch liked to hunt until Marlon declared the area to be outside his 'safe zone'. With no small amount of effort after several unsuccessful attempts he was finally able to beach the raft on the shore then made his way back to the school.
Willy approached and cinched down the first zip tie onto the man's wrist. By looping the second under the first and cinching it down it effectively made a pair of handcuffs.

“Fucker. I should just gut ya and be done with it.”

“NO!”

“On your feet and get moving.”

“B-b-b-b-but my c-clothes!”

“Sucks for you. Git.”

As the stranger got to his feet they got their first real good look at the stranger. He appeared to be in his mid to late thirties, muscular, a full red beard with a quarter sized patch of white hair on his left cheek. His height was difficult to ascertain due to the fact that he had a severely hunched back. His posture was worse than that of Violet's. Not that either Aasim or Willy would dare say that to her face without her decking either of them. Upon closer inspection Aasim realized why the guy was so easy to capture, the toes of his right foot faced inwards. He thought perhaps the foot was deformed or he had a clubbed foot or something along those lines but he couldn't care less. But what really caught his eye was the man's back. From the shoulder blades down to the small of his back there were numerous small, thin, keloid scars running diagonally across his back. He tried counting but gave up at 25.

There was barely anything holding together his shoes and the man's jeans had been repaired multiple time and we held up with a piece of nylon rope laced through what few belt loops that remained.

“Willy, go back upstream and bring Omar here.”

“Got it.” With that he turned on his heel and raced off.

“P-p-p-please don't h-h-hurt m-me...” Aasim turned at the man and glared.
“Sit your ass down and shut the fuck up.”

Fifteen minutes later Willy arrived back with Chef Omar trailing behind.

“Willy said we got ourselves a Raider. That true?”

With a smile Willy said, “You bet your sweet ass we do.” Aasim nodded.

“Gotta be. No else but us comes this way.”

“Uh, so we have a plan? You're not going to kill him are you, Aasim?”

“The thought had crossed my mind actually.”

At this, the man tried and failed to get onto his feet, “NO! I'm b-b-b-begging you!

“I said to shut the fuck up asshole! Now sit down,” looking back at Omar, “I don't know. Let's bring him back the school and let Clem make the call.”

Both Willy and the chef stared at Aasim as if his nose suddenly sprouted a third nostril. Omar recovered first.

“Surely you're joking.”

“You shittin' me? No way we can do that. There could be more of those motherfuckers around and we'd be leading those dickheads straight back to the school.”

Aasim hadn't ruled out that possibility but he always had a thirst for knowledge and information and now wanted to know more than anything about their prisoner.
“I know. I know. It's possible but while we have the upper hand let's see what we can find out from him. As long as he's breathing he can talk. C'mon, Willy. Move it. I don't want to be waiting outside the walls any longer than we have to in case there are any more lurking around.”

“Whatever, dude.” The twelve year old turned and ran off as fast as he could back to Ericson's.
Larva

Chapter Summary

I'm Bart Simpson. Who the hell are you?

Chapter Notes

Coming up with dialogue is much harder than I anticipated. My words per chapter are growing and growing way faster than I expected which is cool.

Back at Ericson's, Clementine was sitting on the steps leading up to the former Administration building to the school, failing to notice Louis' approach. He took one look at Clem and after he sat down beside her with a sigh asked,

“Do you always have to do that?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Kind of habit by now.”

Louis had caught her absentmindedly twirling the stump of her left leg clockwise. No rhyme or reason why she did this but with half of your leg gone there isn't really much else you can do. Becoming a sixteen year old amputee was a massive transition for someone who had sent most of the last 8 years of her life being self-reliant and always moving. Now she had to wander around the grounds with the aid of an old pair of crutches that had been found in Ms. Martin's office. Whilst losing one's limb was the absolute pits it was better than spending the rest of your days being bedridden she imagined. AJ had vowed to find what he dubbed a 'foot book' but even Clem wasn't foolish enough to fall for such delusions of grandeur. No one had the carpentry skills for fashioning such as thing as a prosthetic limb. Besides, the crutches were easier and as long as she limited the time she was on them they were tolerable. While AJ had suggested the “foot boot' Louis countered with the idea of a peg leg. This earned Louis a savage punch to his shoulder, courtesy of Violet, which left a bruise which lasted over a week. Clem resigned herself to resemble Robert Louis Stevenson's character Long John Silver.

Suddenly her eyes narrowed as she noticed Louis was here and not where he was supposed to be.
“Wait a minute. Is there some reason you're not in the greenhouse with Ruby?” He, in turn, replied by giving a sheepish grin and signed,

“Oh, well she kicked me out.”

“AGAIN?!”

Louis nodded. At this point beginning to feel more and more like a microbe with each passing second, he looked down at his feet and pondered how deep the hole was that he just dug himself into.

After losing his tongue as a punishment for refusing to be a model prisoner of Delta once back at the school, Louis had great difficulty adjusting to life without the ability to speak, joke and most importantly to him, annoy. Only the loss of his hands could have been worse than losing one's voice. After several days of moping he began to develop the means of communicating via a series of whistles, clicks, pointing and at times; writing messages onto paper. Everyone preferred to play charades when talking to Louis not so much because of his braggadocio of being one of the best players of charades of the known world but more so because few could read his hand writing. A thousand years from now explorers from the future would uncover a series of mysterious hieroglyphs and believe they belonged to some previously unknown civilization only to find out it's just chicken scratch belonging to an eighteen year old with shitty handwriting.

Fortunately for all one day, when AJ became bored, he fond himself rooting through cardboard boxes in the music room full of books when he came across a book loaded with pictures and diagrams of fingers and series of bizarre hand gestures. He couldn't find Clem at the time so he took the book to Violet who immediately recognized it as a book about ASL. American Sign Language. This was just what the proverbial doctor ordered.

When Louis received said book he could have cried. He had in his hands the means with which to break his silence and once more have a voice. And to his credit he tore into the book like a man processed. Every waking moment when he was not busy working he could be seen sitting, book propped upon his knees; practicing the alphabet, then forming words and finally, full sentences. The kids marveled at their mute friend's new found calling. Never had any of them seen him so engrossed and dedicated to something. Not even his piano which he barely touched since starting sign language. He threw himself so headlong into it that it was in a rare occasion that he even touched the piano and that was only because he overheard Willy talking about chopping it up for firewood since it wasn't being used anymore. To this end Louis threatened great bodily harm upon anyone who so much as mentioned the word “firewood” in his presence. After a few weeks a chalkboard was scrounged up and was placed in the music room where he went from being a music
teacher to an ASL teacher with the kids being his pupils. The idea of Louis teaching anyone anything came with mixed reviews.

Clementine and AJ, especially AJ, picked up on it rather quickly. The five year old was always wanting and willing to learn. A veritable sponge always willing to soak up all the information he could. They were at a school after all so what better place to educate oneself. The rest of the kids tried their best, the exception being Violet. The blonde was as well known for her patience as Louis was known for his efficiency as an educator. Try as she might eventually gave up, relying on the others to translate for her. With the English language containing over 400,000 words, numbers and a dizzying array of punctuation marks, Louis was by no means flawless but with the use of context clues and his personal hand gestures he able to hold his own in a conversation. And of course no time was wasted in regaining his wit and sense of humor enjoyed almost exclusively by himself.

“I am an artiste. My fingers are for tickling the ivories, not the pulling of weeds.”

Clem chuckled and bent over to her boyfriend. For as much as she loved him at times she was convinced Louis couldn't pour water out of a boot with instructions on the heel.

“Idiot.” Then a scolding look came over her face, “Now answer the question: Why did Ruby kick you out?”

Out of all of the kids of Ericson's Boarding School for Troubled Youth, Ruby was undoubtedly the most mature. Since the death of the only remaining adult in the school, Ms. Martin Ruby took the role upon herself. Thanks to Ms. Martin's tutelage Ruby had become a first rate resident nurse. From time to time she would even play the role of therapist but most of all, for the younger kids at least; she was the closest thing many of them ever had to a mother. But even with all the maturity and the multitude of hats Ruby wore at the school Louis was the sole individual who could try her patience or knew just what nerve to touch to send the redhead once known for her violent outbursts against students and faculty alike, over the edge. Yet again he had been given what was thought the idiot proof task of pulling weeds while leaving the herbs unmolested under threat of a severe beating. Louis proceeded to forget how to tell the difference between dill and weeds and as a consequence of having too much pride to ask this led to doing what he does best in this type of situation: he improvised. Much to his detriment. Fortunately Louis was able to run out of range just as a pair of garden shears impacted scant feet where he stood only moments before. He dared not look behind him as he sought the safety of the Admin building where he found Clementine sitting.

With Clem in her condition she wasn't able to help as much as the others. Another harsh reality which Clem knew she would never be able to tolerate. Ruby had absolutely forbidden her to go beyond the confines of the school and with good reason. As much as Clem chaffed at that she couldn't argue with Ruby's position. It was by the thinnest of margins that she had survived not only being bitten and but also surviving the subsequent amputation of her leg. But let us back track
After Clem's fight on the bridge with Minerva and the subsequent death of both Minerva and her brother Tenn, Violet had become separated from AJ and a wounded Clementine by a herd of walkers. As the two of them attempted to climb a sheer rock face the Clem's worst fear was realized. She was bitten. After several hours of walking they arrived at James' barn where he had been "collecting" walkers. Once there, Clem and AJ prepared for what they both knew would be their last stand. They fought valiantly against the onslaught brought on by the herd until they ran out of both ammunition and seemingly, options. Clem had previously made AJ swear that he would do what she couldn't bring herself to do to Lee. Kill her if she was bitten. But this would prove to be one order AJ could not bring himself to follow. Instead of putting the woman who had moved heaven and earth to protect, lost and found again he instead took up Minerva's ax and severed the infected limb. Clementine had mercilessly passed out from the pain. Acting quickly AJ started a small fire with which he heated up the head of the ax and used the now heated ax head to cauterize the wound. The smell of burnt flesh was a smell he knew would never be forgotten as long as he lived. He took off his shirt and cutting off a section not covered in walker guts, wrapped it around the exposed stump. He then seemed at a loss as to how to get them both out of the barn and past the herd when he spied the wheelbarrow he had used earlier to close one of the horse pens. Now came his next hurdle: how to get a now unconscious Clementine into said wheelbarrow. Well, it wasn't easy but by first placing an arm, then other, followed by her good leg and finally then by summoning what remained of his strength he was able to thrust her inside. After applying both of them with a fresh coat of guts they made their way outside the barn.

There seemed to be hundreds of walkers surrounding the barn. An unceasing tide of death with it's accompanying wall of moaning and groaning of all of those walkers surrounded them from all sides. AJ struggled to keep his cool knowing that it only took one false move, one single cry; would kill them both. Making slow progress was no problem as he was pushing such a heavy burden but by now his energy was nearly spent. It had, by now, been nearly twelve hours since they had first started off and even longer since he had eaten or had so much as a drop of water. He had made it a scant 100 yards when a miracle happened.

Aasim and Louis found them.

Louis grabbed AJ just as he was about to collapse from exhaustion.

The two took turns, one carrying AJ while the other pushed Clem's inert form inside the wheelbarrow. They hoped and prayed they wouldn't run into any walkers on their way back but they did. Most of the time they were able to outrun them but there were some instances where they had to go toe to toe with the odd walker. After what felt like an eternity they arrived back at the school. Once inside the safety of the school Ruby examined her friend and instantly knew she had her work cut out for her. The prospects were not looking good for their friend and savior.

Clem's leg had been traumatically amputated roughly 5 inches below her left knee. By cauterizing the wound AJ had been able to check the worst of the bleeding but that was still no guarantee that
infection wouldn't set in. Further, when it came to burns it wasn't the burn itself that could prove to be fatal but the infection, leading to sepsis; that kills. After debriding and cleaning the wound as best as she could Ruby placed a fresher bandage on the stump. There was sense in beating around the bush to the rest as to what Clementine's chances of survival were. Only time would tell and with the exception of an inconsolable AJ, each would person would have take their turn sitting at to Clem's bedside. Each hoped to be the one on duty when Clem opened her eyes for the first time. But in the back of everyone's mind, there was little doubt that their friend would most likely turn. Something none of them dared to speak aloud. None of them wanted to have to be the one to put their friend down. Some of them had had to do that in the past but it never got easier with time, more so with everything they had been through with Clementine at the helm.

Then, on the sixth day after surgery, while Louis was on guard, he saw Clem begin to stir. After a few anxious moments with his heart racing and knife at the ready, he gazed at his love with tears in his eyes and was greeted by a pair of brown eyes.

Clem had survived.

“You know you still owe me a dance.” Louis signed as he gave his beau a slight nudge with his elbow. Clem responded by rolling her eyes.

“Still wanna dance with a one-legged girl?”

“So easy to twirl.” With that Clem gave a hearty laugh just before they exchanged another kiss.

“You really are a Grade A weirdo. Seriously though, you need to start paying more attention. Unless you want us to go back to bland soup. It's getting colder out and the fish are about gone 'til spring and the rabbits aren't around like they used to be there's gonna be a shortage of meat.

“I shudder to think.”

Clementine gave Louis a stern look much like a displeased mother would give to her child, “Stuff it. We have to make that greenhouse work for us as much as possible. Plus with the Delta-

Louis interrupted with a snort, “Fuck the Delta. They're gone. We won, Clem.”

Clem continued, ignoring the interruption, “-with the Delta still out there somewhere we-NOW
what?!”

The interruption this time took the form of a series of high pitched whistles emanating from Violet who was currently taking her turn on watch duty. By the time Louis stood and helped Clem up and onto her crutches Vi had descended from the tower and was running towards them, hell bent for leather.

By the look on the blonde's face they knew some shit was stirring.

“Willy's coming back in one helluva hurry.

“Aasim? Omar?

“Don't know. Just Willy far as I can tell.”

“Shit. Lou, get the gate open.” Louis ran to the gate and opened it just as Willy reached it and sped past him and ran straight to Clem. Neither had to ask what happened before Willy started rattling off his report.

“Wefoundaguy...Downbythefisingshack...Raider...Aasimwantsbringhim..here...”

Violet and Clem both found themselves greatly annoyed by now. Willy always did have the tendency to get worked up but now was not the time. They needed answers and needed to know what the hell was going on.

Violet spoke first, “Willy, Calm. The fuck. Down. What the fuck happened? Where's Omar and Aasim? Did you say Raider?” To this Willy nodded. Willy paused for a few more seconds to collect his thoughts, as well as his breath.

“We....found...someone...by the shack. Me and Aasim got him tied up.” Clem looked first at Violet and Louis then back to Willy.

“Are they still with the guy now?” Willy nodded in the affirmative.
“Yeah. Aasim wants to bring him....here...”

“*Here*?! Like fuck you are! Clem, no way we're bringing him back here!”

“Did you see anyone else?”

Louis mimicked having a rifle. To both of these questions Willy shook his head in the negative.

“I climbed a tree and scouting for others. Just the one.” He had recovered his breath by now. “That Raider fuck was taking a bath in *our* river.

Louis tried to ask Willy how he knew it was a Raider but couldn't make himself understood. Willy was another student who gave up early on learning sign language. Clem answered his question for him,

“Who else would it be? When was the last time we've seen anyone else come this way besides me and AJ? Haven't seen James in months.” Louis just shrugged as if to say 'Just asking.'

Clem stayed silent for a minute while she digested all she had heard from Will's report. All these months of peace and tranquility all gone to shit now. This was easily their worse case scenario. After the attack on the school and the raid on the *FITZGERALD* there was no way they could fight off another assault.

“Bring him back here.” Vi's head snapped towards her friend, an incredulous look on her face.

“What?! Are you bat shit fucking crazy?! No fucking way can he come here!” Even Louis was taken aback.

“*Surely you jest*?”

By now Clem had her game face on as she looked at VI and said, “Look, at this point we have no other choice. He's already seen the guys plus he's tied up. We might as well see what he knows and
what their plans are since it seems they're back in town. If the Delta come here they won't attack if they know we have one of their people."

“They sure as shit didn't care when we had Abel. What makes you think they'll give a fuck about this sack of shit?” This came from Willy.

Clem turned towards Willy, an annoyed look crossing her face again in as many minutes. “And what do you propose to do? Kill him or just let him go? No, we're not killing him!”

As she asked Willy what he wanted to do she noticed a smile spread across his face which told her the answer. As quick and easy, hell; even as preferable that would be, she'd be damned if she wasn't curious and wanted to question the guy.

“Clem, think about it: This. Is. Fucking. Retarded. We'd be leading 'em right back to the school. Everyone who knew how to find this place are dead. We might as well roll out the red friggin' carpet!”

Clem had to agree that her friend did have valid point about the Delta finding their way to the school but she still couldn't come up with a reasonable compromise. Not like anyone else was helping. God, why did I have to be in charge? She thought to herself before giving her ruling.

“Willy, go get AJ and Ruby and let them know what's up. Lou, go get Aasim and Omar and bring the guy here.”

Willy looked up replied, “Aasim figured you'd say that. They should be close by now.”

“Good.”

Violet simply replied with a grumbled, “Whatever...” Sounding not at all happy which Clem didn't give one iota of care at this point. Meanwhile, Louis simply nodded and ran back inside the dorms. He returned moments latter with his weapon of choice, a former chair leg with nails sprouting from its head which he had dubbed “Chairles”. He then took off and raced down the path they used to get the shack. Clem wasn't sure if Louis was onboard with her plan or not since he took off so quickly. She really hoped she did. As it stood she and perhaps Aasim were the only one's who didn't want to kill their intruder on the spot. This was going to be a hard sell to the rest of the kids and the more Clem thought about it the more she hated the fact she was the one in charge.

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.
Aasim and Chef Omar, with their visitor in tow, were by now only a mile way from the school. Aasim had anticipated Clem's answer so they started marching their charge back towards the school. He was just glad that the prick had finally decide d to just shut up and hadn't spoken a single syllable. It had not been a smooth nor a speedy trip. It wasn't just the fact that the man was walking through the West Virginia woods in his bare feet but they had discovered that he had a jacked up foot. For whatever reason the man's right foot faced inwards slightly which gave him a noticeable limp. Add onto the the fact how stooped his posture was and with his arms pinioned behind him it was only a matter of time before he would fall. Omar carried the man's shoes and his shirt in his bucket. They had mulled over the idea of giving him back his things but decided that neither of them wanted him with shoes in case he tried to head but one of them in an attempt to escape. That and they didn't give a shit as to the well being of a member of the Delta. They didn't receive four star treatment themselves so they sure as hell weren't going to.

They had closed to within half a mile when they encountered Louis. He first looked to the man, then to Omar since Omar was better at his version of sign language than Aasim was. Not that Aasim didn't try to learn but part of him did find Louis a little bit more tolerable when he didn't know what he was saying all of the time. He felt like a douche thinking it but he couldn't lie.

Lou signaled Clem's desire to bring the newcomer back.

Omar nodded, “We figured as much.”

Louis looked back at the guy and asked, “What happened to him?”

Aasim just glared at the guy, “He fell.”

“Oh, how many times exactly?” When the man made eye contact with him Lou observed a face that was covered in a multitude of red scratches and scrapes and a slight trickle of dried blood on his right temple which stained his rust colored beard. He had a look in his eyes that just perhaps this new kid in dreads, bearing one gnarly looking chair leg might show him some sympathy. Unbeknownst to him is out of all of the kids he was surrounded by the three who were the least likely to show him any cordiality and kindness, Louis in particular. Louis allowed the question to go unanswered as they turned and continued their trek back. It was getting close to sunset. Plus, Aasim and Omar had been outside the walls all day, were famished and in need of some shut eye. Not that they thought either was possible today.
As the quartet drew closer to the gate the man suddenly stopped when he spied Ericson's Boarding School For Troubled Youth's macabre choice of lawn decoration, namely the reanimated corpse of Abel.

Abel had been taking prisoner after Lily's semi-successful raid on the school which had left both sides bloodied. After his capture and subsequent interrogation Clementine had promised to end his misery if he guaranteed to answer her questions truthfully but the days of playing by the rules and fair play were a thing of the past. The kid gloves had come off and as Violet had put it they had quit handing out participation trophies when the dead started eating people. There were now only two groups of homo sapiens in the world now, the undead and the living. The living were themselves divided into the haves and the have-nots. It was now a time of one thing and one thing only. Survival.

Once Clem obtained the answers she wanted she allowed Abel to succumb to his internal injuries sustained from their fall atop the headmaster's balcony. There Walker Abel remained; tied to a school desk, sitting in darkness. As Clem was lying in her bed unconscious few weeks later Willy struck upon the idea of what to do with Abel. First order of business was figuring a safest way to get Abel out without endangering the others. Moving a walker would be a first for all of them. Had Clem been around she could have told them a trick she had seen Jane do years before but she was in no condition to help. Eventually they devised an exhaustive sequence to do the deed. First, while Abel was still tied to the desk they placed a rag in his mouth to prevent him from biting then wrapped his head in an old scrap of blanket. After which they coaxed Abel up the steps leading to the school's central courtyard. Just getting out of the basement took four of them most of the morning to accomplish. Once there they endeavored to move him out past the gates and out into the area where they had set their traps years before, this taking them until late evening to finish. They then tied him to a massive oak tree next to a large sign with the words “DON'T FUCK WITH US” printed on it as a warning to any who dare trespass on their domain.

Having spent over five months exposed to the elements Abel had seen better days as his body had by now entered the more advanced stages of decomposition. What little exposed skin that remained was grayish green in color. You were still able to see his heterochromia but eyes that were once brown and green had changed, one to gray and the other, a pale yellow since his reanimation. He had also had since being chained up, a constant stream of companions in the forms of ants, spiders and god only knows what other types of insects crawling over the corpse, some nibbling on his flesh as they scurried past.

If his appearance wasn't enough to turn your stomach the kid's had to endure the other unenviable side effect of putting rotting cadaver on display. The stench.

With the wind blowing in just the right direction the smell of putrefaction wafted it's way towards the school making whomever had lookout duty at that moment most intolerable. Fortunately for those not on watch the smell didn't reach into the courtyard itself. From the tower the stink was strong enough to kill the appetite of even the strongest of stomachs. As a means to remedy this the decreased the length of watch duty from two hours to one so as to give the person some fresh air.
Had the smell filtered it's way onto the grounds Omar would be forced to prepare their meals outside, knowing he would be forced to work with the smell of death in the air, then have everyone eat indoors. They were all grateful that they didn't have to resort to those measures. They had all that space to move about but because of Abel they would have to remain indoors if they wanted fresh air. After a week they began using every word in the book to describe Willy and his brain child and had even gone so far as to threaten him with permanent guard duty since it was his idea in the first place.

“Recognize someone you know?” Omar said to the man, startling him.

Aasim stared and replied, “Goddamn right he does. We're almost home. You, keep moving.” With that Aasim kicked the man squarely in the back, knocking him to the ground. The man tried fruitlessly to get back up under his own power and after a few seconds Aasim snapped, royally. What followed was a flurry of punches aimed at the man's head, not caring where his fists hit just as long as the hit flesh and caused as much pain as Aasim himself felt while they were all prisoners. Once the man curled into the fetal position and began covering his head Aasim switched tactics and began delivering savage kicks to the kidneys and any other part of the man's body he was unable to protect. The beating eventually sucked all the energy out of the prostrate man and just laid there limply as several more kicks were delivered before Omar and Louis combined to pull Aasim off. Aasim, still seething with rage and breathing heavily, glowered down at the near unconscious form at his feet and spit on it. Wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his flannel shirt he stormed off towards the school leaving Omar and Louis where they stood, dumbstruck. Granted they lived years among kids with violent tendencies and had seen their fair share of educational beat downs and had even been involved in a few themselves but this one was different.

They both looked down at the bruised and blooded man who laid where he fell, curled in the fetal position, body quacking from his pitiable sobbing. Louis met Omar's gaze with a look that said, “Did that just happen?” After a grief moment a hardened look came over Omar's face, 'Feel sorry for him? He deserved every bit of it. Let's leave 'im.' Louis gave Chef Omar an sympathetic look, turned back towards the form of the man and placed his hand on the man. The man instantly recoiled to the touch, followed by a shriek of protest. Louis tried again by using his most gentle of touch since he was unable to utter any words to let the man know he meant know harm and was there to help him. Somehow he seemed to realize this and allowed Louis to bring him to his feet. Louis placed a arm around the man's neck since his arms were still bound and walked the man towards the gate. Omar was beside himself in wonderment. He just couldn't fathom why Louis of all people seemed be showing any type of sympathy for someone who's group was the source of so much pain, destruction and death.

“Whatever,” he said to no one in particular as he picked up his bucket with the man's belongings and walked passed Louis without a glance back until he opened the gate and entered the school.
Pupa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time they all arrived back at the school the rest of the kids of Ericson's had assembled in preparation for their first glimpse of their most unexpected and unwanted visitor. Aasim had walked passed everyone and didn't even acknowledge any of them as they asked him a bevy of questions. He just continued towards the Admin building where he retrieved his journal from his room and returned back to the courtyard where he sat down to his desk and began to chronicle the days events.

After failing to get any answers from Aasim they made their way towards Louis, who was still helping the man walk. Once they all got close and got their first glimpse of the man's face a series of gasps and expletives were uttered.

“Who's this sorry piece of shit?”

“Clem, a Raider?”

Clem first looked at Vi, then looking down at AJ replied, “Think so, kiddo.” Louis looked towards his girlfriend and shook his head in the negative.

“I don't think so.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Seriously, Lou? Who the fuck else would be out here besides us? Besides Clem and AJ the only people we've seen here were those Delta fucks.”

A stern looked came over AJ's face as he looked at Violet, “What about James?”

At the mention of James' name she felt a huge pang of remorse. She had never told the rest of the group what occurred with James back in that cave that night. She told them they had gotten separated as they desperately tried to find a tunnel that led them to safety, trailed by dozens of walkers. Neither were they told of the argument about how AJ shot Lilly, on Clem's orders, in the head then proceeded to pump round after round into her corpse in blind fury. To James' horror, the very thing he had feared for AJ and had warned Clementine of, had come to fruition. AJ confessed it felt good to kill Lilly, that anything that threatened them deserved to die. James tried to take AJ away from her but after AJ fought back James realized it was a hopeless venture and left them alone in the cave as he made his own way, not realizing he had left his mask behind him. He had not been seen since. Since the only other witness to the fight, Tenn, would meet his end at the hands of AJ a short time later, all that had to been done was to have AJ swear to secrecy which he required little convincing.

Ruby was the last of the group to arrive on seen. They all saw her pace quicken as she saw the blood covering most of the man's face.

“Oh lord, What on earth happened to 'im?!” When her question garnered no response her next sentence went up many decibel levels.

Ya'll answer me this damned instant!” The stranger looked up at the enraged ginger and in a barely audible voice spoke.

“B-b-beaten...Tortured.” He raised a finger at the kid sitting at the desk as he wrote. Oblivious to
the glare, strong could melt ice, directed squarely at him. Ruby flew off in Aasim's direction in a fury the original residents of the school hadn't seen since Ruby's turbulent days when Ericson's was still functioning school. They all knew better than to get anywhere within throwing distance when she got like this. AJ, not knowing any better tried to make his way towards them until he felt Louis grasp his arm in a vise like grip and rapidly shook his head indicating it was a bad idea. Clem didn't had heard what Ruby used to be like but had never witnessed it. All she knew is that shit was most certainly about to go down.

Aasim saw the shadow that cast over himself and his journal but didn't look up. Had he done so he would have seen the freckled hand which slapped him across the face, it would then be known as the "Slap Heard 'Round the World'. It obviously wasn't heard past anyone in the courtyard but it did nearly succeeded in knocking him out of his seat and sending journal flying.

"Jus' what in the hell d'ya think ya doin' you stupid shit?! Aasim ignored her and went to pick up his journal from the ground while Ruby continued to rip him a new one. "So now we just torture people?! You done fucked up good bringin' 'im here and expectin' me ta fix 'im up! Mebbe I should beat the tar outta you and see how ya like it! We ain't like the adults! We better than them! Than that!" He still refused to make eye contact but just sat back down and continued to writing where he left off. Ruby, still livid, huffed and turned on her heal and returned to the rest of the group.

"Sit 'im down on the picnic table an' ah'll grab mah things and ah'll see what I can do. That asshole Aasim sure did a numba on the guy."

"I wouldn't even bother. Let's just feed him to Abel and be done with him."

"Violet!"

"Vi!"

"I'm game."

"Shut up, Willy!"

Once everyone responded Clem spoke up, "VI, we gotta find out what we can now that he's here. He could be a scout and the rest are out there waiting for him."

AJ looked up with his eyes as big as saucers, "You mean they might be coming back?"

Clem shrugged. Temporarily forgetting she was standing with the aid of crutches she almost fell before Omar caught her. That made her look and feel stupid and caused her face to flush.

"Thanks, Omar. I don't know, AJ. It's possible and we've always thought it was possible if not inevitable."

"In-ev-it..."

"Forget it. I want to know what the Delta are up to. Until we find out what we want to know everyone, and I mean everyone stays inside these walls."

Violet had stood in place with her arms crossed and now rolled her eyes and said, "Great. So we ll just stay her and fucking starve. Great plan, Clem. Clem could just feel her blood truly begin to boil at her friend's comments.

"Vi, fucking zip it."
“Whatever, don't expect me to kiss his fucking ass.” With that she turned and walked away, oblivious to the glare Clementine threw in her direction. Whenever the Delta first became a threat to them no one, with the exception of Mitch, questioned her decisions but now that life had seemingly settled down. Now this peckerhead showing up succeeded in tossing all the confidence, faith and trust the kids had in her into the wind. AJ could sense how deeply troubled Clementine was feeling inside.

“Clem, what are we gonna do?” She tried her best to give the boy she had raised since birth a smile of reassurance but knew she failed mightily.

“We'll let Ruby do her thing and then I'm going to have a little chat with our 'guest'. That's what.” As she said the last sentence she looked over at the man, seated at the table still doubled over in pain.

Maybe we would be better off feeding him to Abel.

Ruby did her magic and ministered the man's injuries as best as she could. She was still fuming over Aasim's brutality and nearly exploded on the rest when no one stepped forward to help her get the man dressed when asked. Luckily Louis stepped forward and volunteered his services. They couldn't decide the safest way to go about getting the man dressed without having him do it himself. He seemed docile enough but Lou was the only even willing to go near him. In the end they had to concede it was the safest way to get it over with so they untied his arms and let him dress himself. Once he was dressed they made him lay on his stomach and retied his arms. They gave him some water and let him rest on one of the couches near their campfire for a little while before Clementine began her interrogation.

When all was ready she had a chair moved across from their detainee. Willy, Omar, Ruby, AJ, and Louis stood by expectantly and when Willy went to sit down on one of the other couches Clem spoke.

“No. Piss off. All of you.”

What followed was a chorus of protestations split equally between those worried about her well being and those who wanted to hear the conversation itself. But Clem would have none of it. She had no desire to have anyone interrupt. Plus, she was already in a foul mood now that she had dissension in their ranks for the first time in a long time. She had now qualms about using torture on Abel but she had a feeling this interrogation would require a different type of tact to get the answers required. They both sat staring, wondering what to make of one another. The newcomer seemed to recognize that while Clem was in charge which meant she was the one to talk to if he wanted to survive.

The interrogator began by leaning forward and placing her elbows on her knees and began, “I want answers. Everyone wants you dead. Change my mind.”

“N-n-n-NO!”

“Where's the rest of you?

“I'm b-b-b-b-by myself!”

Clem knew this wasn't going to go well. Vi and Willy might get their way after all.

“Bullshit. We've killed you and your friends before and we'll do it again. I know there's more of you just waiting out there waiting. Hell, they're probably waiting for you to come back so they can
sneak in and slit our throats while we sleep.”

“No! I'm n-n-not from the Delta! Pennsylvania. B-b-b-born and raised.”

“City?”

“Wuh-wuh-wuh-Wampum.”

She didn't recall that name as being one of the list of cities used by the Delta in the past. Being from Georgia herself she had no idea if this Wampum was even a real place. Maybe, maybe not. It mattered not.

“So you've been walking, all this time by yourself, when you just happened to find us? That's one helluva coincidence. Funny, I don't buy it.” The memory of Marlon saying something very similar flashed in her mind. The night when Clem found first learned of the deal between the Delta and Marlon and how he tried to pin Brody's death on her. The thought of Marlon's betrayal caused the bile to rise in her throat.

“So. What happened to your group then? If you were even part of one?”

He then began to tell his story of his of moving westward with a group of twenty-two in an attempt to get to the Ohio River, then finding a boat and making their way South. The idea of finding a boat made Clem's heart sink as it made her think about Kenny, who; being a former fisherman, desired to find a boat to take them to safety which, they eventually found one only to have it stolen from them by members of Geriatric Park.

Stanley's group was able to find a boat but a fight broke out as to who was going aboard and who wasn't. The stranger was one of those who weren't allowed on the boat partially because of his foot but primarily because no one could stand that damned stutter. Not that Clem blamed them. Words were exchanged and shots were fired which left three survivors dead while two more were wounded and had to be left behind. Those left standing after the firefight with still holding guns then chose who went with them and who stayed behind. The group of twenty-two had now shrunk to seventeen, nine of them left embarked on a boat designed to handle no more than five. The stranger, along with the other seven made their way down river. Dejected, fearing for their lives and with only a few knives, a machete and two hatchets between them as defense against the walkers. Picking up whatever gear was left they tried their best to ignore the jeers and taunts coming from those on the boat until they were out of earshot.

They continued southward and several hours later as if to rub a healthy amount of salt in their already fresh wounds then rubbing in some lemon juice, the boat passed them. Only this time those on the boat said nothing. Those on land also said nothing. Both parties just stared at one another in complete silence until they lost sight of each other around a bend in the mighty river. Two days later the smell of smoke reached them and further down river they found it's source. The boat had beached itself, it's fiberglass body melted and charred. A fire had broken out at some time after they last crossed paths. There appeared to be no survivors. None present were sorry. They had gotten their revenge and revenge is a dish best served ice cold. It would have been nice to have the weapons though. They continued forth until they began to encounter more and more walkers. Day by day the group was killed off until only the invalid and one other remained.

Because of Stanley's stutter the interrogation lasted for the better part of an hour. A sudden wave of exhaustion swept over her. Since the loss her leg she just didn't have the energy she once enjoyed. The more she listened to the guy the more convinced she became that he was telling the truth about not being with part the Delta. There was no way someone as evil as Lilly would let someone like this to be part of her precious Delta. What could this guy possibly contribute to a group of any size.
Hell, if she hadn't had the kid's support in the first place and her organizational skills they would have kicked her out if they knew what was good for them now that she was lame. He was weak. Weakness. That word prompted another memory, this one dark if not darker. This one of another amputee she once knew briefly, thrown off of a roof because he screwed up. Because he was weak. Carver. A name she hadn't thought of in years. Even to this day the thought of the man sent a shiver up her spine. Pure evil and she was forever grateful she watched Kenny annihilate his skull with a crowbar, he was correct that weakness can bring down a group.

Tenn, oh god, Tenn...

It pained her to consider it but when Tenn came out of hiding, tricked into believing that Lilly would tell him what happened to his sisters and would show them to him that was stupid. This led to Mitch being killed at the hands of Lilly. Fast forward a few weeks and Tenn had the golden opportunity to kill Lilly but didn't have it in him. Only the AJ's timely intervention saved Tenn from taking a head shot. AJ saved Tenn's life and as a reward Tenn would nearly get Violet killed when he froze yet again when the trio met up with Tenn's sole surviving sister, Minerva and a swarm of walkers on the bridge. Clementine had reluctantly allowed AJ to make his own decisions when it came to deciding when to protect them but she never could have imagined the first decision he would make would be to shoot Tenn to save Violet.

In addition to the wave of exhaustion Clem also realized she was starving. This was too much for her to ignore and cut the man off just as he was about to continue his tale. She was satisfied with the answers obtained already. Waiting for the movie to come out would take less time than waiting for Stuttering Stanley to finish his tale of woe.

Stuttering Stanley. I like that name. That's what we'll call 'im.

For the first time all day a smile came to her face. It was something Louis no doubt would have come up with. Shit, maybe Lou was beginning to rub off on her. Even though she was convinced he wasn't part of the Delta she was still in charge and had no desire to take any chances than were absolutely necessary in event she was wrong. She looked towards the Admin building and noticed Louis leaning against one of the building's Doric columns, staring off into space; arms akimbo. Clementine waved him over.

“So, what do you think?”

“I don't know. Doesn't seem like the kind of person Lilly want. Not with that walk and that stuttering. I can't even imagine how he 's survived this long by himself. Maybe he used walker guts to get around. Whether he's Delta or not let's take chance it. Tie him up downstairs until I come up with something better.”

“What about everyone else? What about Vi?” Louis recoiled under the glare he received from Clementine.

“I'm at the point of not fucking giving a shit! Apparently everyone feels like questioning my judgment now! How about you? Nothing stopped you guys from trusting me before so why now?! HUH?!”

The more she spoke louder her voice got. Lou raised his hands in submission and took a step back.

“I got your back, Clem. You know that. We're just scared is all. Including you.” Clem let out a sigh knowing he was correct that she was indeed scared, scared for them all. She had Omar and Aasim stand guard as Louis marched their captive down the steps leading down to the basement where he was left bound hand and foot to one of the ventilation shafts that went to the school's boiler. It was also brought up that it would be advisable to keep Rosie away. The former headmaster's pit bull had been napping during the interrogation and was the only one unaware of their newest addition.
Since some had appeared to be less than pleased about bringing the stranger back to the school in the first place democracy would determine their best course of action. Or so they hoped. And democracy failed. The final vote was three votes to just kill him, three for kicking him out after he healed. Omar abstained, much to everyone's annoyance. AJ was unable to decide. Willy was most keen on Vi's idea of giving Abel something to snack on. With the vote seemingly deadlocked they would just have to take Ruby's route: sitting on their hands, waiting for the man heal in a day or two at most then taking another vote. It wouldn't be surprising if some of them tried to sway one another to their side of the issue, Omar and AJ in particular.

Until the stranger healed, Clem proclaimed that all activity beyond the walls was to be restricted to within their trapping area. The fishing shack was deemed off limits due to the fact of it's isolated location. Being so far away from the school anything could happen an no one would be the wiser. It was also brought up that the hunting grounds were just as isolated but it this was countered by the argument that fishing in the last few weeks hadn't been fruitful enough to warrant the effort. Instead they would more effort on their trapping and hunting. While one team would hunt while the another team would build and set more traps. The each team were to be armed at all times while hunting team would have Rosie supplementing their security. One person inside the walls would have the responsibility of giving the man his daily meal. Food was already in short supply and this was of two concessions that Clem did make for Violet. Albeit, she only made the concession knowing the man wouldn't remain with them long enough to seriously impact their food supplies. It would be up to Ruby to make the decision as to when the man would be cleared for release. He would then be escorted to the ‘safe zone' and sent on his way just as Clementine and AJ had once been before they bumped into Abel a blast from Clem's past, Lilly.

This seemed to assuage the complaints from most of the kids. True, their movements were restricted, but they would be focusing their efforts on hunting and trapping instead of fishing, the man remained inside the school but remained chained, receiving just one meal a day. The team in charge of trapping would also construct new traps in addition to the ones that Louis had made years before. Trapping is most effective when you make a dozen or better yet, dozens of traps. This way the more traps set will increase the likelihood of catching dinner. Louis had ideas on some new traps in addition to spring traps he constructed before. He actually seemed quite excited about the idea of trying out his new designs and went so far as suggesting that he and Willy be the founders of Ericson's first ever Trap-Eeze Team. You can just imagine the groans, oaths and eye rolls this elicited, right?

On Day One of the new system's implementation roll call went as such: AJ, Aasim and Rosie out hunting, Willy and Louis or the 'Trap-Eeze Team' trapping, Ruby on watch, Clem busy in the headmaster's office fleshing out the work details and fine tuning further plans, while Omar and Violet set about working on removing the wreckage from the burned out west wing of the school. No work was needed in the greenhouse so it was decided that now would be as good a time as ever to fix up the school some what.

Since the western wing of the school had burned down years before Marlon had initially wanted to re-purpose the damaged section but gave up due to a lack of the necessary tools and building materials. However now that Willy had pinched the raft from the Delta they now had the materials needed. Now came the fun part: moving all those supplies off the beach and back to the school by hand. The raft was loaded down with a plethora of stuff including pieces of sheet metal, stacks of plywood, rolls of chicken wire, pallets and many other items the couldn't identify. The Delta had the use of horses while Ericson's had manual labor. Some thought it may have been more prudent to have taken the horses in lieu of the supplies instead. Ultimately they were only able to move a portion of the supplies but they did uncover a cache of saws, hammers, various hand tools, several hundred feet of rope and various other odds and ends including the zip ties Willy had used on the prisoner. They hauled as much of the materials as they could by hand via a relay system, carrying a
single sheet of plywood as far as they could before the next group would take over, so on and so forth. After one week this process had netted them a fifteen sheets of plywood, several pieces of sheet metal, what you do with sheet metal no one knew but they hoped to figure something out later. On their final trip to the raft they cam to discover the raft was gone and concluded that at last the river's current had carried it downriver. There were mixed feelings about the loss of supplies. It was better to have that to not have but then again the last week had left them all exhausted and left them with more splinters and blisters than they cared to count.

Back at the school, the second day of the Stanley's stay found it to be Violet's turn to bring him his daily meal consisting of a thin broth with an odd piece or two of rabbit in it. She descended the steps, cursing the mere existence of the man and to a lesser extent, Clementine; with each step downstairs into the bowels of the basement. As much as she detested the idea of helping this ass she duty bound to follow Clem and do as she was told. She just continued to reassure herself that fucker he gets well the better. Omar's stew was becoming more and more of a broth instead of stew of late now that their hunting and trapping successes had dwindled to near zero in the last few days. If their food supply didn't improve soon they would have to start rationing out food again or worse drawing lots to decide who goes hungry that day. Something that Clementine remembered all too well growing up.

This had happened once to the school during one of the first years after the adults fled. Vi thought back to the miserable winter that had dumped with over a foot of snow in the courtyard overnight. Another two feet fell over the next few days as well. Of course the younger kids loved the snow especially those who had never experienced snow before. The snow was fun and all until food began to get scare and some of the kids began to get sick. With that much snow no one could go out and nothing could come in, including firewood. They had resorted to burning any unused furniture found in the classrooms and offices. Desks, cabinets, dressers, bed frames, tables anything made of wood that wasn't bolted down fell victim to the flames. Louis, for his part, had to practically chain himself to the piano for a day and a night to ensure that his precious didn't become kindling. They lost six kids that winter. In each case from they had to put down and removed from the school, buried in the yard behind the dorms. Violet had no desire to have that happen again especially when it came to giving this prick some of their precious food.

As she descended the steps she thought to herself.

Figures. We barely have enough for OURSELVES and Clem wants to feed this piece of shit.

She had toyed with the idea of sneaking him outside the walls and feeding him to Abel like she had previously planned but would help. Clem had somehow swayed Willy over to her side so he was out. That left Aasim. But his ego was still recovering from getting bitch slapped by Ruby so he wouldn't care to risk being on the receiving end of another one so he was out. She thought even contemplated flying solo but quickly discarded the idea. Knowing her luck the guy would scream bloody murder and kick the whole time throwing any chance of stealth out the window. Even if she knocked him out first she would be faced with the prospect of carrying him up the fifteen steps of the basement, across the grounds to the gates then out to Abel. If she had several days she thought it was doable but then she recalled how long it took the four of them just to get Abel outside in the first place.

I could sick Rosie on him like Clem did to Abel. I'm sorry guys Rosie must have gotten lose somehow. Truly sad how Rosie fucked him all up. Serves him right.

The idea of utilizing Rosie's services brought a smile to her face which quickly vanished when unpleasant odor hit her. She knew immediately what the smell was but it took a few moments for her to realize that she was not hallucinating. It was the smell of urine. As she reached the landing
she turned and realized he had indeed pissed himself. The smell of piss and the sight of the wet stain on the man's crotch greeted her. She dropped the bowl, shattering it and spreading its contents all. Violet turned and stormed up the stairs and left in search of Clem who was at the moment helping Ruby outside the greenhouse clearing weeds away from the yard. Ruby spotted the irate blonde first and didn't even get the chance to warn Clem before Violet exploded.

“That useless mother fucker just fucking pissed all over himself!” Clem had her back turned and never saw Vi's approach. Only the pull of Earth's gravity kept Clem from jumping straight into the Stratosphere. As soon as she realized it was Violet and her heart returned to it's normal place in her rib cage she rolled her eyes knowing that this was not going to go well, whatever it was.

“Seriously? Damn. Did you feed him first before you stormed on over here?”

“Fuck no was I was going to!”

Ruby looked at Vi and with a conciliatory tone tried to diffuse what could be a situation that could rapidly get out of hand.

“Well shit Vi, the guy still gotta eat. A course he gone piss hisself since we got 'im trussed up lika hog. Clem, at least untie his arms and give 'im a pot to piss in. We's gotta have one we can spare.”

“Well count me out. You two can kiss that ass hat's fucking ass. What else would you like to do for His Royal Highness? Give him a perm? May I suggest a manicure?”

It was with colossal effort that Clementine did not blow her top at that moment but was close. She had spent a lot of time ruminating over what to do since she had first learned of the man showed himself. She also thought of all the shit she felt she received by some for letting him stay here, assigning people to certain duties each day, all the careful planning she came up with and how none of the kids gave her any help or any suggestions except killing the guy and wiping their hands of him. She had put up with a lot over the years, way more than anyone of them could possibly fathom, more than all of them combined, even. Since she was now handicapped and she often felt the need to validate her own presence at the school. If it wasn't for AJ she probably have given up right after waking up and realizing she was now a damned amputee. With what must have been her last reserves of patience she spoke slowly and succinctly, trying not to completely lose her shit which in the last 48 hours was getting harder and harder to do.

“Vi, you know I don't like having him here as much as you but he's not a threat to us. If you guys want him good and gone then you have to trust me. We'll give a bucket or something. Ruby tells me he only needs another day or two them he's history. Right?”

“That's right, Vi. If that moron Aasim hadn't beaten the livin' shit outta him he coulda been gone yesterday. So you's leave Clem alone and direct your 'tude at him not her!”

Violet then redirected her ire towards the redhead replying, “Fine! I will! But I'm not doing this fucking shit anymore, Clem! I'm not going to wait here for him to kill all of us in our sleep because you wanna play hostess to the Delta. If anything happens to anyone its on your fucking head! Got it?!"

Clem sighed, a wave of that familiar fatigue swept over her again. She shifted her weight onto one of her crutches and rubbed a spot between her eyes where yet another headache was brewing.

“Finished?,” she asked at last.

“Shit no. You feed your new best friend because I ain't. I want nothing to do with him at all unless
I get to slit his throat.” Clementine eyes narrowed at this latest challenge to her authority. “You'll do as you're told. Just like everyone else.”

“You really? Well fuck you, Clementine.”

“You're more than welcome to take over for me if you think you can do better. I could use the break. You've done nothing but piss and moan about anything I been trying to do since he showed up. You took over after Marlon died then kicked me and AJ out but you were more than willing to let me take over when I warned you about Lilly ad you were more than happy to have me take over. Nobody but Mitch had a problem with me then so why you all of a sudden? Huh? Am I less worthy of your trust because of my leg? Is that it?”

“Oh come the fuck on, Clem! You being a cripple has nothing to do-”. It was at that moment Violet realized she fucked up.

Clem stood rooted in place, mouth agape, as her mind digested the words that had reached her ears. It was a scene reminiscent pg the classic device in Hollywood where someone says something shocking and everyone and the universe comes to a screeching halt. The room gets so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The anger and rage Clementine had held down in the deepest recesses of her very being finally bubbled upwards, much like magma taking the path of least resistance as it makes it way up the magma chamber of a volcano that has laid dormant for millennia. The force withheld strong enough to wreck havoc upon everything in it's path.

“What...did you say?”
So it began.

“Clem, I....”

“You little bitch! You miserable fucking asshole! I'll-‖. With every syllable her voice grew in volume and fury. The eruption that one would ordinarily expect to destroy all plant and animal life instead ceased faster than it started. Clem took one step forward, ready to knock the living daylights out of the source of the insult when gravity made it's appearance known and reminded Clem that she had but one leg. Clem's eyes bugged out as she fell forward, unceremoniously flat on her face. Both Ruby and Vi, mortified and aghast, ran to assist Clem up. Ruby was quicker.

“Vi, just git out of here. I got 'er.”

“But I...”

“GO! NOW!” She looked down at her friend but turned and ran off, not wanting to see the look on Clementine's face if she were to even look her in the eye. She ran for all she was worth to her room, slamming the door shut and plopped onto her bed.

Ruby helped her to her feet and bent down to retrieve the crutches. She looked up at Clem and saw something she had never seen before: Clem was crying. Not just crying but borderline bawling. The tears were the culmination of the lack of trust she felt, the perceived betrayal by one of her closest friends, the frustration of having only one leg after the hundreds, if not thousands of miles she had traversed, desperately staying ahead of the walkers. But Vi's words did ring true, one in particular. Running on a constant loop in her mind. Cripple. She was right. She was a cripple. A cripple and now the icing on the cake was now she was crying, something she hadn't done for sometime. As much as she despised the idea of crying she took in solace in the fact that she was bawling in front of Ruby instead of AJ. She had always done her damnedest to put up a strong front for AJ no matter how dire the circumstances. If AJ were to remain strong and confidant she must
do the same if not more so. It would be hypocritical of her to tell AJ to be all of these things only for him to see her like this; weak, crying, a sniveling cripple not able to get back on her feet without aid. No, she could never let him see her like that. Would never. WILL NEVER. Still, the fact that this had been her first major row with Violet cut to the core.

It was Vi who defended AJ after he shot Marlon death when he came clean about his secret dealings with the Delta. It was Clem who opted to take the shot that prevented Vi from being taken by the Delta, resulting in being Louis being taken instead. It was Vi who, when she could have stayed at the school after aiding the others came back to look for Tenn, Clem and AJ. Hell, even AJ had chosen to save Violet's life over that of Tenn's, the first real friend he had ever made. The mere accusation that she would, even for an instant, compromise the well being; the very lives of any of the kids under her protection was an insult of the tallest order. They all had a symbiotic relationship between them all. Without them, AJ and Clem would surely be dead. Conversely, without her some of them would be dead, while the rest would become soldiers of the Delta to meet their end someday later perhaps in battle or at the hands of walkers. That is if Lilly didn't kill them first.

Ruby lifted Clem up and handed over the crutches. Just as she opened her mouth to speak Clem anticipated her intentions and with a wave of her hand, indicated that she only desired silence at the moment. After wiping away one last tear and wiping the last traces of snot on to the sleeve of her leather jacket and taking a few moments to collect herself, gazing up at Ruby and with a voice still a little unsteady said,

“Rube, whenever Lou and AJ get back take him downstairs with a bucket of water, untie Stanley's arms and let him clean himself up, would ya?”

Ruby smiled, nodded and replied, “Stanley, huh? So our guest has a name now or is that wat you callin ‘im?”

Clem chuckled, “Yeah, Stuttering Stanley. Thanks, I appreciate it”

“Sure thing hun. C'mere.” With that the burly teen reached over and put Clem in a bear hug capable of cracking a rib or two. They then turned and began walking back to the school where Clem went to her room to lay down for a much needed nap and attempted, ultimately in vain, to forget all that had transpired.

Louis arrived back an hour and a half later. Together they carried out Clem's instructions. Clem granted Violet's wish not to help Stanley. Not that they were on speaking terms nor was all forgiven and forgotten between them. Instead she employed Aasim as go between. He was to tell Vi that until further notice, anytime Vi was scheduled to be inside the walls she was to switch with someone working outside. Violet accepted this punishment without complaint. Vi, for her part, felt absolutely wretched at what she said but felt unable to muster up the courage to apologize, much less look into the eyes of her friend, or for all she knew former friend.

And Vi being Vi, dealt with the situation as she had always done before. She withdrew into herself as a means of coping. When it came to doing her chores outside the walls she kept a safe distance away from her work partner that day, speaking only when absolutely necessary, at meal times she would take her food into her room and eat alone. The only person she would really speak to was AJ which wasn't very often. When she spoke to AJ she felt that she was by extension, speaking to Clem. In a way it was easier speaking to him but the situation still felt totally fucked since she was sure by now he was aware of what happened. Which was true. It didn't take long for word of the day's events to spread like wildfire. Ruby told Omar, Omar told Willy, so on and so forth until word finally reached Louis. He was shocked and part of him was sort of relieved. Shocked at the blow
up between his two best friends and relief that he wasn't the person responsible for spilling the beans. Had he been the gossip monger and Vi found out he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the fiery blonde would introduce her meat cleaver to his testicles.

On the most part things very adjusted to this new arrangement. The odd walker or two had to be killed whilst they out hunting and trapping, Louis had finished his newest set of traps which worked fairly well, in particular his newly devised squirrel traps. Aasim in the meantime had seen the error of his ways and had gone so far as to approach Ruby as a means to apologize. She demanded that he apologize to Stanley, not to her, something which he flat out refused to do. Clementine told them both to let the matter pass and bury the hatchet before she threatened to bury the hatchet in Aasim's back just for the simple fact of being a douche. All seemed well apart with the exception of Violet's self induced exile when something unprecedented happened.

That goofy bastard locked up in the basement got sick.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave some feedback. Id like to see what you think of this so far.
Holding Patterns

Chapter Notes

I'm trying to keep at least two chapters ahead before I post the next chapter. Hope to finish up the first drafts of the next two chapters soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Never been sick a day in my life and yet here I am in this fetid sewer of a basement run by kids half my age.

The man's beaten and bruised body was suddenly racked with yet another vicious coughing fit which, leaving him seeing stars. He spat another gob of phlegm which landed near a faint blood stain on the floor in front of him which he had previously not seen before. He winced from pain the coughing caused which aggravated his ribs.

An aspirin. An aspirin. My kingdom for an aspirin...

That beat down received at the hands of that Indian kid, Aasim he heard them call him, had left him looking and feeling like death warmed over. He sighed and sat back onto his make shift seat on the school's long disused boiler. He had no idea what it was he was sitting on but it looked like a seat, it held his weight and got him off that accursed cold stone and concrete floor. There being no windows little light reached him where he which also deprived him of knowing what time of day it was or even guessing what how many days had elapsed since his incarceration. Assuming that they were feeding him once a day he estimated that he had been inside the school for roughly a week or so. He looked up and followed the path of the ventilation arms of the boiler above him which radiated outwards like an upside down spider, spreading heat and warmth through the school. Or at least it that was it's original purpose. He adjusted himself further so as not having part of the boiler digging into his back. He turned and by squinting could just make out the manufacturer's name on the access panel for the boiler's pilot light.

Hm. HERA. The wife and sister of all mighty Zeus himself. Hey Zeus 'ol boy, how's bout a little lightning right about now for some heat. On second thought, forget I said anything. This antique probably has copper and my luck I'd get zapped myself. Prometheus would be the better play.

In retrospect, it could have been worse for the man known as Stanley. The punches were easy to withstand, there being more blind rage than power behind them. It was those savage kicks to his ribs which could really have done the most damage. One cracked rib could easily shift, puncturing a lung; causing it to collapse, followed by a couple days of intense suffering followed by death. Fortunately, the one acting as nurse, Ruby, had said she didn't think he had any. But considering that he was now coming down with a bug of some sort without so much as a Kleenex it was debatable which would be worse. It was unlikely they had any sinus decongestant much less some NyQuil or some such.

Ruby and that silent kid with the dreads had initially trussed him up to one of the ventilation arms connected to the first floor. After having faced the disgrace of pissing himself for the first time since he was seven and that blonde's reaction, the other two had come down and at least had the decency to allow him to clean himself off and to wash his soiled pants. He was still bound but he
now had more mobility. His hands were now tied in front of him while his feet were tied lose enough that he could walk, or more accurately waddle, if he wanted to move. Not the smartest idea in Stanley's opinion but then again these were kids.

While he was still secured to the ventilation arm he had granted the added benefit of a six foot long leash. It made him feel more like a dog tied to a tree than a human being but his situation had improved so he wasn't going to complain. With this newest luxury his first order of business was moving that infernal chamber pot on the other side of the boiler as far away as possible. Not that he had used it much. He had urinated little which told him he was dehydrated which wasn't surprising. The amount of food he had so far received had also left a lot to be desired but that was expected. He made a mental note to ask for more water next time someone came by to give him his daily meal.

Having tired of sitting he stood up and waddled his way towards one of the nearest shelves and brought down the first cardboard file boxes he could reach. Each shelving unit could easily hold eight of boxes at a minimum. That got him thinking. From his vantage point there were well over twenty shelves.

Twenty units. Two boxes per shelf. Three rows of two. Six times twenty is one hundred and twenty plus looks like there another alcove back there in the corner so there probably another sixty or so so that would make one hundred—oh god I need something to do... Need input, Johnny 5. Input! Input!

He grabbed the box and waddled back to his seat and plopped the box before him, hoping it contained something of interest. What met his nose and his sight was a box chock full of invoices, bills, newsletters, school stationary, emails between faculty and staff members of the school, quotes, spreadsheets and other office detritus. He grabbed one piece and saw it was an email addressed to a school administrator. He let the sheet fall from his hand and thought how preferable it would have been to be held in the library instead. Then he realized he left his library card at home.

Oh damn....

Looking back at the contents of the box he realized he'd either go blind trying to read or at go cross eyed from boredom so he retrieved the piece of paper dropped earlier and folded it lengthwise. He then folded down the top right one corner. Then repeated the process on the opposite side. Before he realized it he had made a generic paper airplane. He gave a half-hearted throw and watched as the plane landed ten feet away. Knowing he could do better he picked up another sheet, this time an invoice, and folded another; this one a different design. This one flew further, the next one further still. A flood of paper airplanes designs he had made during his teenage years came back to him and within an hour twenty paper airplanes of differing sizes and designs were strewn about the floor. Having at last grown bored with diversion he sat back and in the near dark of his prison, closed his eyes and thought about all he had witnessed thus far. He couldn't deny it, he was most impressed.

His first sight of Ericson's Boarding School for Troubled Youth had been a pair of massive wrought iron gates the main gate which rose nearly eighteen foot in height, most likely for use for vehicles back when the school was functional while a smaller gate to its left, about dozen or so in height was the one in which they entered was used by the inmates. The pair of gates were the only access through a wall he estimated must be pushing fifteen feet in height and surrounded the school as far as he could see. With this formidable fortress it was no small wonder that they had remained protected against from walkers. On his way past Abel he had noticed the multitude of traps and snares that had been set up but was dubious effectiveness. Once on the grounds
themselves he looked up at the flagpole positioned just off center of the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by a driveway with weeds poking up through the concrete where flew instead of Old Glory was a large white banner with “FUCK RAIDERS” painted in green. An even larger banner hung just above the middle two columns of the Admin building stating “LEAVE OR DIE” in letters four feet tall.

Classy place. The inmates running the asylum.

It was those very inmates which truly captivated him. Once finished with his little ditty he pondered the inhabitants of this place, starting with those he first encountered on that first day, beginning starting with the one badly in dire need of an orthodontist. Back in normal life dentists around the world would have used that kid's smile as a Public Service Announcement to illustrate the importance of brushing and flossing. But with that being said for his age he was damned good with the bow. In this day in age, proficiency with a bow does more good when it comes to survival than a set of pearly whites. It was a miracle that the little bastard's arrow missed him. He also seemed quite keen to use violence as a means to an end and if left unsupervised he probably would have gut him 'like a pig'. Threat level assessment: seven.

Next was the black kid with the limp. He didn't strike him to be the outdoorsy type and from what he gathered this one was in charge of the cooking. He hadn't seen nor heard from him since his arrival. Threat level assessment: zero. That Indian kid, Aasim. Hoo-wee did this one have one helluva chip on his shoulder. The other two seemed to take orders from him for the most part which meant he was most likely older and enjoyed some level of authority in the ranks. Then again, he heard more than saw the kid get royally bitch slapped by that redhead which brought a barely concealable smile to his face, regardless of how much it pained him to do so. Aasim said nothing in his defense during the entirety of her tirade meaning he was a paper tiger when it came to a scrap. Threat level assessment four.

Then there was that redhead, Ruby. That angel of mercy. The mother hen. Mother Superior. Her amount of medical knowledge surpassed that of most people he had encountered in recent years. What was most impressive was her age which could not be that much older sixteen, barely old enough to drive. Under different circumstances she redoubtably would have gone into some occupation in the medical field, as a nurse or perhaps a physician's assistant. It also never ceased to bewilder him how he there always seemed at least one chunky survivor in any group you saw. That one survivor who looked like they never missed a meal no matter how scarce food was. Threat assessment level zero.

That silent kid with the dreads, Louis, was the only other kid to show him as much compassion and sympathy as Ruby. When he had felt Louis touch him he honestly did recoil in horror expecting him to hold him up while one of the others slit his throat from ear to ear. Something he had witnessed first hand not all that long ago. So when Lou instead but his arm around him and helped him to walk through the gates of the school he was genuinely taken aback. He never uttered a word but perhaps he was deaf. Anything seemed possible nowadays. Stanley recognized the basics of the sign language the kid used but the only sign language he knew was the gesture for 'sex' he learned from college. Threat assessment level one.

There was a little kid he caught only the briefest glimpse of when he had first arrived. He'd be damned if this one was any older than six meaning he was born after the whole world had ended as they knew it. What a great time to grow up. Threat assessment level TBD.

Some of them were looked quite happy to feed him to Ericson's lawn gnome, the idea which came from that blonde. Granted, he was more of a redhead fan himself but when he saw those shimmering emerald green eyes he felt his heart skip a beat. Those eyes more than made up got
her piss poor posture. Nothing a few days on a medieval rack wouldn't fix. But one thing even he couldn't look past was that *mouth*. Over four hundred *thousand* words in the English language and it seemed impossible for her to form a single, solitary sentence without the use of the word 'fuck' once or twice, at a minimum. If a bar of soap were to magic appear out of thin air he'd truss her up like he had been and wash out that potty mouth. That day she brought down his food he observed she was absent her left pinky. Must be an interesting story behind that. She was the one hell bent on killing him via Abel. Willy wanted to gut him. The kids were rapidly turning into a set of poor hosts. Regardless of how much time he had left on this mortal coil he certainly wanted to get to know that blonde better. He wondered if she was single. *Hubba hubba!* Threat assessment level nine.

But it was the ringleader of this circus, the maestro of the band, the Commander in chief, the Big Cheese, the Chairman of the Board, Her Eminence, Clementine; who most piqued his interest. Into those pair of almond colored eyes he saw something never before seen in someone so young, something rarely seen in people even twice her age. They had a different look about them. They were eyes belonging to one who had both been neck deep and seen some serious shit in their time. The look seemed right on the cusp, right on the very precipice of that famous 'thousand yard stare' associated with those who experienced extended amount of combat or other traumatic experience. Yet there was a firmness, a determined look to her which meant that while she was only a kid but with serious backbone. It was no wonder why the others gravitated towards this peg-legged chick.

During his questioning each had more than adequate time to size one another up. This little *devotchka*, to use a term from the movie *A Clockwork Orange*, was just one curiosity after another.

He very much doubted any amputee could have survived this long without their limb, a leg in particular, indicative of her losing said limb sometime during the outbreak. The fact that she only had one leg meant it was lost sometime during the outbreak. In today's world, inconsequential seemingly innocuous injuries such as a spraining of an ankle could be a death sentence. He recalled the death of the remaining member of his original group. They survived together for three months after they found that boat and watched the others picked off one by one. He learned how to survive from that guy, his name lost to history. He was just your average Joe who just happened to love his survival shows and SHTF, Shit Hits The Fan, stuff. Even claimed to a stockpile going back to the days of the Y2K scare before but had been unable to get to his storage unit because of the roads becoming clogged by those fleeing from the dead. Well, Mr. Survivor met his end by unceremoniously falling out of a tree and breaking his neck. Stanley then put him out of his misery. The first of many. As Kurt Vonnegut said in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*,

So it goes...

Having survived amputation was in and of itself extraordinary. Testament no doubt, to Ruby's ability as nurse and the perks of a perimeter wall helped too. On the other side of the coin while that wall made the school virtual fortress it also turned it into a prison. Regardless, the loss of a limb, especially for someone that young, must drive her bonkers. Not only that but having crutches being your sole means of transport was abhorrent even to him. As one who had spent their fair share of time in both a wheelchair and on crutches growing up. Now all she had to do was find someone missing their right leg and they could go shoe shopping. The mental image this left led him to chuckle which he instantly regretted as it prompted his worst coughing fit to date. Once it subsided, yet again seeing stars and head swimming, he cleared his sinuses and spat on the concrete floor.

“Ah, Jiminy Christmas. That's not good.”
He had just coughed up blood.

From the cold, dark expanse of the basement at Ericson's Boarding School for Troubled Youth, the same basement where one student and one member of the Delta had both died and reanimated, singing could be heard. A baritone echoed off the cool brick walls and the concrete floor,

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus."

Clementine sat atop the high backed leather chair that had once sat those who had served as majordomo to the boarding school over the years. Originally served to cup the corpulent ass of the former headmaster and namesake of the school. After his inglorious departure the torch of leadership passed to Marlon until his death at the hands of AJ. After AJ and Clem's banishment from the school Violet became the de facto leader until she ceded power after Clem's run in with Lilly and AJ's wounding whereby Clem ascended to the throne.

She stood and limped her way to the balcony and peered out to look over her domain. It was over this very balcony where during the assault upon the school she and Abel had fallen over and Abel sustained the injuries which ultimately killed him. Her eyes wandered over the inner courtyard to the flagpole which still hung the banner, fluttering in the breeze, emblazoned with the words “FUCK RAIDERS”. It was Tenn who had made the banner even though he wasn't thrilled about using the word 'fuck'. Next, her gaze shifted to the gates stopping at the lookout tower where Aasim was taking his turn on watch. Finally she inspected the section of wall within her field of view and thought that it was that wall which had kept those kids safe from untold numbers of walkers for all these years. She looked at the length of barbed wire strung atop the wall, placed in an effort to repel Lilly's attack on the school, which some what succeeded. An island surrounded by a world of shit. Walls denote protection. Protection, safety and security. Then again, Richmond had walls and walkers still got in. They still got in even without Kate's help. Prescott had walls. Fucking Max and Badger. Glad their both dead. The Motor Inn. Fucking bandits. Glad they're dead too.

We all know our intrepid Clementine has never been one to balk before any trial or tribulation. Still, she was never able to forget all the times being 'volun-told' for any risky venture on account of her being so small. Like crawling through that duct work in that meat room at the St. John's Farm, or when she nicked a walkie talkie out of Howe's and gave it to Luke. Or squeezing through that window with Bonnie and Mike to unlock that door in order to fetch water jugs in that Civil War museum only to find the room occupied by a reanimated park ranger.

Luke. Poor Luke...the closest thing she ever had to a brother. Bonnie may have tricked her and the others and led Carver right to them but she had forgiven her. Mike, well, fuck that guy. The thought of those names caused her to picture the faces of the others from the cabin and their fate: Luke and Bonnie fell in that frozen lake and undoubtedly turned, Nick turned, Carlos was killed, as was his daughter Sarah, Rebecca turned, Alvin-

"NO! Enough of this!"

Clementine banished the thought from her mind. More important to worry about the living and not the dead. It was just the idea that AJ's parents were dead and he was denied the chance to meet his parents. Clem had seen her parents. Seen them as walkers, years ago in Savanna, outside the Marsh house. No, it was better for AJ this way. No child should see their mother turn, any loved one for that matter. Nick once said he had to shoot his mom. Kenny shot Duck, his son. Later, Clem would have to shoot Lee.

"Dammit. You're not going to let this go are you, Clem?" She asked out loud to herself. Her
subconscious answered.

*Nope and you know it to. You shot Rebecca after she turned. Alvin traded shots with that guard at Howe's so he's probably walking around the Virginia woods right now. By the way, someone's knocking. You might want to answer that.*

“Huh?”

Someone was tapping, tapping at her chamber door. The knocking woke Rosie who had been engaged in sleeping next to her chair.

“Told you guys you don't have to knock!”

A half muffled “Sorry,” was heard, the voice belonging to Ruby. The door opened and Ruby, followed by Louis, entered.

“Still rude not to. Anyways, we's got ourselves a situation a'brewin'.”

Clem sighed, a sad look in her eyes, “Christmas canceled again?”

Louis, smiling, pointed both index fingers towards her. His way of saying “Correctamundo!”. To this Clem merely rolled her eyes.

“Worse, Ah'm afraid. As much as ah miss Christmas. Stanley's gettin' sick. Sicker than a dog. Sorry, Rosie dear.”

“Great.” She had no interest in hearing more but like it or not it she knew if had to so. She braced herself for what came next.

“Agreed. Lou here went down to give the guy his food when he saw 'im curled up lika ball all a'shiverin' like. Plus he's been coughing up blood. He ain't bin eatin' much. Jus been askin' for more and more water. I wager he gonna be comin' down with pneumonia if we don't do something right quick.”

The brunette rested her head on her forefingers in fatigue and then looked up to the ceiling, hoping against hope that the answers to all her problems was somewhere on the ceiling. Finding nothing she first looked to Louis, who had yet to speak, then back to Ruby.

“Suggestions? I'm spent.”

“Move him to Ms. Martin's 'ol office. There's already a bed, no one uses it. Plus the locks still work. Ah can-” Clementine cut her off abruptly.

“Fine. Do it.” Louis blinked while Ruby was taken slightly aback. They had discussed earlier how nest to go about how to break the news as gently as possible. Initially they expected a push back so when Clem quickly agreed to Ruby's request without complaint it took them both for a bit of a whirl. What they failed to realize was just how much of a mental toll the last few days had taken. For her part Clem was just glad that someone else offered something useful for a change.

“That went better than expected,” Louis signed.

Clem looked at Lou with just a slight hint of irritation in her eyes, “One of you better inform what's her name since she'll blow her top. You know. Violet.”

“Uh, that's the other thing, Clem,” Clem rolled her eyes.
“I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Louis threw his hands up in the air then added,

“*Totally your words. Not mine.*”

“You two need to patch things up between ya.”

Clem felt her mood sour further still, “And why on *earth* should I do that?”

“Cause this been goin' on long enough. Sure, what she said was plum dumb and yeah she’s been against letin' 'im stay here since day one but everyone else is on board now. You convinced 'im, hun. It just ain't healthy when Vi gets like this. It ain't good for none of us. Not after all we've been through. What she's been through. We've all grown up together and we've seen her like this before. Take my word for it. Please?

Clementine agreed with one thing Rube had said, as far as anyone could tell Vi had been the only hold out in the week since Stanley arrived. She wanted, no, *needed* everyone to be on the same page right now. Damn if Ruby wasn't right. But there was one other thing: she genuinely missed her blonde friend. Reluctantly, she acquiesced.

“Fine then.” Even if her voice didn't sound it was refreshing letting Ruby have the ball and run with it. Now for Louis' turn.

“We have a plan for that? How do we know she wants to even talk? Lou?” She smiled, relishing at the idea of the look of abject horror on his face when he was presented with an opportunity to put his money where his mouth was. To her everlasting disappointment Louis responded with a smile from ear to ear.

“*Already got one.*”

“I hate you both.”

“*Love you too, Clemster!*”

“Imma beat you.”

Violet found herself sitting at a school desk. A school desk no less which struck her as strange. Not the fact that she was seated at a desk, this being a school after all. No, instead it was the mere presence of the desk itself which left her confused. There was no reason for it. No explanation she could think of. To the best of her knowledge they had all been one of the first items taken to the match after the last of the adults took to the hills.

As if that wasn't weird enough she had no inkling as to where she even was. She knew it was somewhere at the school. Of that she was sure. All there was besides the desk was a single beam of light, like a spotlight from a theater or opera house, illuminating only the desk and herself. Well-her hands more specifically. There was no doubt that the hands belonged to her. This she could tell by the missing digit. The missing pinky.

“What the shit?”

Sitting there, mind swimming, a myriad of questions she desperately wanted answered. Where am I? Where is that light coming from? Is this real? Am I...*dead*?

*Wait a minute. What's this?*
She saw rather than felt her hand reach down into the void that surrounded her and retrieved an object which laid hidden just to her right. In her hand was now a knife. Nothing special. Just your ordinary, run of the mill kitchen knife we all have at home. She looked at its steel blade, the cheap plastic handle. Just your typical, boring kitchen knife. Hell, it didn't even look sharp. She now realized that while the hands were, in fact her own, she had no control over them. Then came another realization. There was no sound, no smell, to this place. Wherever this was. It was as if she was on a movie set. Looking down upon what she knew to be her hands it was as if she was looking through the eyes of someone else, looking at her hands instead.

Now she started spinning the knife slowly in her hands.

For several minutes this continued, turning the knife over and over, running the fingers of 'her' hand over the smooth contours. Running a seemingly alien thumb over the blade of the knife to see if it was even sharp, yet feeling nothing, when suddenly a voice spoke.

"Play the game."

"Tenn?"

"Play the game." It was the voice of Tenn. Yet the sound of his voice elicited no emotion on her whatsoever. As if the voice belonged to someone still alive, not the voice of someone long since deceased. One who is no more. One who has joined the choir invisible.

The next thing Violet knew the knife was in her good hand, tip facing downwards.

"Play the game."

She looked at her left hand as it laid there, palm down on the desk. Not moving. Not so much as a twitch. Before her brain could comprehend it some invisible force picked up her arm to eye level, knife in hand, and brought it down onto the desk, splitting the difference between her middle and ring finger.

"Faster."

Doing as Tenn commanded the teen picked up the knife again, this time impacting between her ring finger and where her pinky used to be.

"Cheater."

Now she backpedaled, striking between her ring finger and middle fingers, then the middle and index finger, followed by the index and thumb; right to left, left to right. Back and forth she went for several passes, each pass faster than the last until she sliced her middle finger clean off. If the desk itself was weird this was a new level of bizarre.

It didn't bleed. It didn't hurt. Not so much as a tingle or the tiniest hint of a pressure. It was as if she were playing with a prop hand but the severed finger looked real enough.

"Faster."

Continuing on, now ring finger to index, index to thumb; left to right, right to left. Faster and faster. She played on, feeling nothing. The only thing she felt was the urge to do as instructed. To go “Faster.” The word repeated in her mind, over and over on a continuous loop. Stopping only once she severed her thumb. Just as with the loss of her middle finger. No pain, no sensation. Just... whoopsie!
“Faster.”

And faster went the knife as it traveled across the desk, spanning the remaining fingers. By now the desk was decorated by dozens of pits from the impacts of the knife. She continued to play, stopping once again when she cut off yet another finger, this time the ring finger. With only one finger remaining the knife was a virtual blur of motion as it traversed from one side of the sole surviving finger until it too met the same fate as the others and watched as it rolled off the desk to join the others.

“Switch hands.”

Without complaint Vi passed the knife from her right hand to what remained of her left knowing full well the futility of the venture. The knife touched her palm and promptly off, striking the desk with a clang and a clatter.

“One more time.”

Clang and clatter.

“Come on, Vi.”

Clang. And clatter.

“Once more.”

On the fourth time however, when the knife struck the desk, instead of the sounds Violet had since grown accustomed to, now a series of knocks. Knocks in some kind of sequence. Some rhythm. Something vaguely familiar. She was becoming more and more aware of her surroundings and still the knocking continued.

What is that? A song? Wait...Fucking Mario Brothers? Louis?

At the thought of his name her eyes snapped open and saw she was laying in bed. She sat up, looked around her room then down at her hand. Sure enough there was her hand with all four remaining fingers. She stared at the stump of her missing digit and poked it.

Ouch! Still tender...

“Fuck me,” She flopped back onto the bed only to realize that even though the game had been a dream the knocking was real and coming from her door. Since he was rendered mute whenever he wanted to announce his presence at a closed door he devised a signature knock. Heaven forbid he would just whistle or knock like a normal human being but then again we all know 'ol Lou has never been known to act 'normal'. Besides, he would be the one to tell you that normal is only a setting on your dryer. Louis told her the song was from some video game he played as a kid but Vi had no way of knowing. She was trailer trash whose parents could barely feed them, let alone have the money for such luxuries as video games. She decided it was best to get up and see what he wanted.

“Yeah, just a minute, Lou.”

Slowly she made her way top the door of her room, room 417 to be precise, home for the last eleven years since her arrival and where she had lately been spending nearly all of her free time since the blow up. She opened the door and instead of seeing Louis with his stupid smile it was Clementine at the door. Just behind her could be seen a blur of leather and dreads flapping in the
wind behind which flew down the hallway like a rocket. Clem whipped her head around and yelled,

“LOUIS, YOU ASSHOLE!”

Now that Louis had made a most non-triumphant escape thereby leaving Clem in a lurch; she felt exposed, now that she was on her own to confront her friend in the most unconformable of experiences between two friends. His plan went along flawlessly- for the most part. His idea was stated thusly: He would carry Clem on his back while carrying her crutches so as to convince Violet that it was just him who was there at the door. Once Vi was on her way that was his cue to let Clem down, get her situated with her crutches so once the door opened there would be no way for Vi to escape- at least that was the plan until he heard Vi's voice say, “Yeah, just a minute, Lou.” Once he heard her voice and her footsteps his instinct of self preservation kicked in and his courage failed him and he took flight. Never doubting that he would pay dearly for his transgression.

You are, I hope, aware of the expression “air so thick you could cut it with a knife”? No? Well, usually it's used to describe air which is humid or muggy. It's also commonly used in literature to describe the amount of tension in the air. In this instance, the phrase would be, 'awkwardness so thick you could cut it with a knife'. But I digress.

They stood there, each on their respective side of the door, avoiding eye contact; the door frame, an invisible barrier between two factions in conflict with each other. I bet if you listened carefully enough you could hear a mouse fart. Neither of them wanted to be the first one to break the silence. To be the the first to break, the first to show what could be perceived as a sign of weakness. Whomever spoke first would be the timid one.

This was infantile. This was not negotiations between two countries, each desiring to wipe the other out of existence. No, this was just falling out between two friends, neither of whom knew how to open up dialogue between them since they didn't even know what thoughts were going through each other's mind. What was their mood? What were they each feeling? Resentment? Betrayal? Clem obviously wanted to talk since she was at Vi's door but did that mean Vi would reciprocate? Vi had a theory as to Clem's motivations. Most likely telling her how useless she was and how dare she turn her back on the people she claimed were her friends. It certainly wouldn't be the first time someone had been demeaning to her. She grew with a lifetime of it. Her parents, teachers, even her classmates back when she was AJ's age all those times she came back to school after being sent home yet again because of head lice. Shit, even Minerva would talk down to her from time to time. Vi felt assured she deserved it, whatever was coming.

At last Clementine grew weary of this Mexican stand off, realizing that if they continued standing in place they would no doubt sprout roots. This must end here and now. She had to speak her piece. This would be no ordinary speech but one that would enter the majestic halls of the greatest speeches in history. Greater than Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I have a dream' speech, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Moses giving the Ten Commandments onto the Israelites, Vladimir Lenin's Power to the Soviets speech, or JFK's ‘Ask not what your country can do for you’. This would be the speech of speeches, the crème de la crème of oratory masterpieces, one speech to rule them all. Any and all who claim to possess even the slightest modicum of elocutionary prowess would bow before Clem from this day forwards. She opened her mouth and spoke forth,

“Hey.”

“Uh...hey.”
“Can we...uh...talk?”

“Uh, yeah, sure...I guess. Come on in.” Violet back stepped and indicated for Clem to sit on her bed since there was no chair to offer her. Hers having been put up as an offering to the flame. Vi opted to sit Indian style on the floor across from Clementine. And there they sat. And sat. And - well...sat. Finally Violet had had enough.

“This is fucking stupid! Look, Clem, I'm sorry for what I said but I still don't like that asshole being here. I don't even like breathing the same air as that fuck. Me not wanting him here isn't a reflection on you. I do trust you Clem but there's no way I trust that fucking guy. Not after all that's happened here. Not after...everything. Everyone...”.

She was surprised how easily her words and feelings came rushing out of her. Apparently the days of her self imposed exile and isolation had kept these thoughts and emotions bottled up, shaken and now with Clem's appearance that cap had been popped open. These thoughts and emotions she felt had rolled in her head without release for days, festering like an open wound, incapable of healing. Now that these had all be released, excised even, she felt the weight lifted of her. Weight pressing her down, making her stooped shoulders sag further. Now for the first time in days she felt capable of taking a lungful of free air. And it felt magical.

“I know that. But how can you still trust me when I told you he's not a threat? I spoke with him, Vi. Do you think Lilly would have let someone like him be part of her precious Delta? You've seen him. He couldn't win a foot race even if we chased him running backwards. You trust me but not my decisions? You can't have it both ways, Vi. None of us can. Not even me.” Having gotten past their awkward stages they had no difficulty making eye contact with each other.

“I don't know, Clem. That's what scares me: I don't know. You knew Lilly from before none of us did. Shit, they took Minnie and Soph and turned them into fucking soldiers in some war. Then they came back for the rest of us. That shows that they'll take anyone. He could be just feeding some bullshit story like where he got those scars on his back. From what? A car accident? No fucking way I'm buying that shit for a second.” She did have a point in regards to the scars. That part of his story hadn't jived with Clem when she first heard it either. Even if it was from a car accident as he said surely he would have scars on his face and elsewhere.

“Well, as to not wanting to breath the same air you might get your wish. Ruby and Lou just told me he's gotten sick and might have long for this earth. Just give a few more days and if he's no better then he's gone. Okay?”

VI nodded, “It's for the best, Clem.”

Clem sighed, a sad look in her eyes, “You're probably right.”

“And Clem?”

“Yeah?” Violet rubbed the back of her neck, something she habitually did whenever she didn't know what to say or how to put her thoughts into words. Getting to her feet she began pacing around the room. After a minute of silence Clem could feel the thickness of the air begin to rise but had no interest in its reappearance.

“Out with it, Vi.” Again with the rubbing of the back of her neck. Now Clem was getting irritated and it showed.

“Now, Violet.”
“Alright, alright. Fuck...shit.” At least now the pacing had ceased. She closed her eyes, took in a deep breath and released it aloud, and prayed her voice would hold.

“I've told you before I've never been exactly a people person, right?” A nod. “But well-ah shit sticks... I'm sorry I called you a cripple. I don't know why I said that. It was a fucked up thing to say.”

Finally a smile from Clem, “Maybe because I am.”

“Dude, don't say that.”

“What? Cripple? But I am, Vi. I'll never be able to walk without these.” Indicating the her crutches laying beside her. “It's just something I'll have to get used to. I'd much rather have my friend back.” At this Violet's got noticeably misty eyed and her voice began to crack. Her walls that had been built to protect her from others during a childhood full of abuse, neglect, and isolation which Clementine had successfully broken through all those months ago finally cam tumbling down like a game of Jenga.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Come here. Ruby would prescribe this.” The two friends embraced and held each other close. Within moments Clem could feel her friend's body quake in a series of violent but silent sobs. This in turn set Clem off. At least these tears were not tears of shame and humiliation unlike last time. Eventually they separated and each went about wiping snot from their respective noses and drying the last vestiges of tears from their eyes.

“God I missed you, Clem.”

“I missed you too, bud. Now help this cripple track down Louis so I can beat the shit outta him. To this Violet laughed, the first time in a week and they left her room.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment at tell me what you guys think so far!
Crysallis

Chapter Notes

Well I was originally going to publish this chapter after the New Year but a buddy of mine convinced me otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Imagine Violet's chagrin when, as the days went by, Ruby made it known that Stanley's health was indeed improving. No doubt a result of his convalescence in Ms. Martin's office. His tenure in the basement with little in the way of sustenance and exercise had sapped most of his strength. By the time they went to move him upstairs he was scarcely able to move under his own power. It took the combined efforts of Aasim and Louis just to get him up the steps from the basement into the upper hallway. Once out of the basement Stanley slumped onto the floor where he sat for the next half hour until he was able to stop coughing and catch his breath. The kids had no concept as to the effects of sensory deprivation has on the human body.

At least on it was a beautiful fall day with nary a cloud in the sky when they brought him upstairs even though most of the windows in this particular section of the hallway had long since been broken and boarded up. Seeing his Stanley in such a wretched state caused him to truly take pity on the man he beat the royal snot out of days before. Aasim then untied him, to which Stanley was thankful. Now untied he was better able to move about. He rediscovered muscles long sense forgotten and unused over the past week. He felt a thousand times better and felt like singing but he lacked the energy and the enthusiasm for song. For all he had been through his greatest concern was that he may have suffered permanent brain damage. If he started singing Jimmy Buffet he would beg for death.

It was with some difficulty that he accompanied Louis, Aasim bringing up the rear, towards the former nurse's office located at the very end of the hall, past the last of the student's dormitories where Ruby had just finished getting the room situated for its newest occupant.

Not that there was really much in the line of accommodations or commodities to be made or had. If one were to give a Michelin rating in its current state it would redoubtably receive a rating somewhere in the negative digits. Basically it served as a place for three hots and a cot with the idea of a guaranteed hot meal being rather optimistic.

The room that served their former nurse was a nineteen by sixteen foot rectangular room located on the extreme end hallway in the eastern section of the school. This wing was occupied by the boys were as the western wing was dedicated to the girls. The office exterior came to an end roughly ten feet from the southern edge of the perimeter wall. From the window one could look out and see the central courtyard and the storm cellar doors. The doors were still unlocked as they had been since Clementine busted open the lock the night she exposed Brody and Marlon's betrayal to the others.

Anywho, the office itself contained three royal blue leather beds each with a curtain suspended from a track mounted on the ceiling which served to isolate each bed from neighboring bed. Well, after years of disuse the curtains were gone and the leather of the beds had long since cracked and dry rotted but they were still relatively soft.
The only other thing long since torn down were posters that once adorned the walls and doors. Posters extolling the virtues of eating fruits and vegetables, drinking plenty of water, the importance of washing your hands, covering your mouth when you sneeze, the warning signs of a cold or the flu, a diagram of the human skeletal and muscular system and many others. Ms. Martin was always fastidious about locking her office and keeping the keys upon her person at all times since this was a school for troubled kids. The last thing she wanted was for some kid to get into the office and start swiping prescription medications belonging to the other kids. Until one day, a few months before her death in the greenhouse and long after the last of the faculty had flown the coup she had a brain fart and forgot to lock the door. When she returned she found to her horror all of her posters were gone. A student had found the room unlocked but was unable to get into her desk which held the key to get into the cabinets which the kid's prescriptions as well as all of her medical supplies. Having been thwarted in their attempt to open the cabinets the culprit took out their frustration by ripping down the posters and shredding them, leaving the remnants scattered upon the floor. When confronted none none claimed responsibility, unsurprisingly. Ruby suspected Mitch from the moment she heard what had happened but, as such, she had no evidence she remained silent and if Mitch was indeed the guilty party he took that knowledge to his grave.

On the day of her death, inside the greenhouse, she ordered the kids who were with her to run back and fetch her medical bag. Since the office was locked she gave the key to her most trusted student, Ruby. From that day forth that key became her most prized possession and wore it around her neck, suspended from an old piece of shoelace twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the past five years. Removing it only once: the day they assailed the Fitzgerald. It was with a heavy heart that after her mentor's death that Ruby entered the office and began rummaging inside the the desk where she located the keys to the cabinets. She then took over the responsibility of ensuring that the medications were dispensed to the proper kids and as each of those student died or was killed Ruby made sure to dispose of the pills so no one would find them them. Those same cabinets were stocked with your typical first aid supplies which the late nurse had gone to great pains to make last as long as possible. Thanks to the combined efforts of Ms. Martin and now Ruby out of all of the rooms and offices in the school the office and the nurse's station were the only places left relatively unmolested.

Apart from the three beds and the remnants of the partitioning curtains little else remained in the room with the exception the cabinets, a sink; which hadn't seen a drop of water in years, the nurse's desk, and three orange backed aluminum chairs. Stanley was placed onto one of these green beds and was given a wool blanket which was the extent of what she was able to do for him, her supply of antibiotics having long since expired. All she could do now was to make him as comfortable as possible and hope his immune system was strong enough to fight whatever bug he had. Ruby was scarcely out of the room before she heard Stanley snoring softly. It brought a smile to her face to hear someone else snoring besides Violet, something which Vi had vehemently denied for as long as she could remember.

Life went on for one and all as they waited to see if their unwanted visitor would recover or if they would have to put him down, something Abel was denied. Every few hours Ruby would check on her patient, locking the door as she left. Now commenced that interminable waiting game which we all know so well. In some ways life had improved for all concerned. Everyone-well, for the most part everyone, had mellowed out about Stan's presence now that he was securely locked inside with Ruby in possession of the only key.

Unsurprisingly his health did improve. No doubt moving him out of that fetid sewer of a basement plus all that uninterrupted sleep. On the rare occasion he was awake of any length of time he racked his brain to remember when the last time he really slept was. After a few moments he gave up, rolled over to his other side and went back to his dream. In this one he was standing outside a building reading the Wall Street Journal and watched as he saw himself fall off the building in the
While as his health may have been on the up and up hunting was yielding next to nothing and the pit falls were more successful in catching the walkers instead of food. On the other hand, Louis' traps and snares were truly coming into their own and Louis was sure to remind everyone lest they forget. In the several acres of woods immediately surrounding the school Louis and company had set more than three dozen traps. They may not be catching as many rabbits as they would have wanted but each time a new team went out they were retrieving anywhere from three to five squirrels per trip. Giving the hit or miss instances when it comes to the art of trapping these numbers were quite exceptional given their circumstances and skill set. With so many snares and traps to check it easily took two people- excluding Rosie- to check them all, reset any that were sprung, and bring back the fruits of their labors.

On the other side of the wall, it took the combined efforts and threats of great bodily harm by Omar and Ruby were finally able to teach Louis differentiate what plants were edible and what were weeds. Pickings, of late, had been slim in the greenhouse as growing seasons had finished for the year until the return of Spring. Aasim and Ruby were once again on speaking terms with one another but this advancement was offset by Violet getting hurt while taking her turn on watch when one of the rungs on their ladder snapped, causing her to fall several feet, flat on her back. Fortunately all she suffered was getting the wind knocked out of her and bruising her ego. They got around this by moving a picnic table next to the ladder so whomever was going up merely stepped on the table thereby bypassing the broken rung. If it was Willy or AJ's turn they would need a boost from someone, something AJ hated with a passion and grumbled as such, much to everyone's amusement. It was just another reminder for AJ that he was still little like Clem had once said.

Clementine, in the meantime, had spent time in her office trying to teach Rosie some new tricks with lukewarm success. Rosie learned how to 'give me paw' but after several fruitless hours of trying Clem discovered that pit bulls just weren't physically adept to learning how to 'dance'. She tried teaching Rosie to play dead but that effort lasted a New York minute when she realized what she was doing. Louis had mentioned the paper airplanes that littered the floor which made her think to had him bring up one of those cardboard boxes so she had access to some paper to keep her occupied.

Willy gave it the old college try in his endeavor to teach AJ checkers since everyone else felt they were 'too old' for that kid game. AJ got the general idea of the game but they were unable to find anything similar in size to use for pieces. It was at times like these Willy really missed Mitch. He could carve something for him in no time flat.

"Fucking Raiders."

Since the nursing station was located just around the corner from Room 425, the one inhabited by Louis and Willy, Lou would occasionally stop by and visit Stanley in the off chance he was awake. They tried their best to 'converse' with one another during their first visit. One couldn't physically talk while the other wasn't really in the mood to so Lou proposed cards instead. It made for an intriguing sight. The stutterer sitting upright while the mute sitting bedside, another plastic chair to use for discarding. Stanley thought he was hallucinating when he asked if Lou knew how to play pinochle and indicated that he did. Stan hadn't played in eight years, not long before the world came crashing down. He thought he was the last man on earth who did. What Louis failed to mention was that he was familiar with the game, having played it a few times over the years, but after a few hands and some coaching he caught on. It refreshing to play a game other than Go Fish, War, or blackjack with the others. He used to play with Aasim but got fed up with what he claimed was Louis' inability to use consistent rules from day to day, an accusation with actual merit.
Regardless of how well things in general were going at the school in recent days there still remained the elephant in the room: Stanley was getting better and what to do with him when Ruby released him. Several times a day Ruby would check in on her patient and at the end of the day would give Clem the latest and the greatest. By now three days had passed since the move for a total of ten since his first appearance. Just earlier that day he had asked her permission to go for a walk which she allowed, albeit supervised. The walk down the corridor might well have been a marathon in his mind and by the time he two laps down the hall and back he came back to his quarters and promptly crashed.

The weather of late had turned colder over the last few days which led to a temporary decrease and, in some cases, full cessation of certain outdoor activities. One of the picnic tables was brought into the music room so they could eat indoors while Chef Omar continued to cook outside. Even lookout duty took a cut. Lookouts were posted only while the hunting and trapping parties were out in order to facilitate the opening of the gate once they returned. Once everyone returned watch duty ended for the day also. A more pleasant side effect of the temperature drop was Abel no longer smelled as bad.

Once the sun descended beneath the horizon there wasn't much to do for those inside until Louis suggested what they needed was a card time to brighten the mood. If he ever lost his cards he would most likely wander the school like a lost puppy. Since he had been playing cards with Stanley the last couple of days he had been on a pinochle kick of late he wanted to continue playing the game. An courtesy of Stan's coaching he couldn't be accused of screwing up the rules which meant he could try to get Aasim to come out of card retirement. Willy and AJ had no interest in playing while Ruby wanted to check on her patient before she joined. Clem recommended Euchre but as she began to explain the rules she realized in the intervening years since Gabe had taught her the game she had forgotten a lot of it. Just as they were about to call it quits Aasim asked if he could choose the game. The players retreated into the music room where they lit candles and lit a small fire in the fireplace beneath the portrait of the former headmaster and Rosie.

Aasim's game of choice: poker, no wild cards.

Louis had only one word about the game of poker devoid of the use of wild cards was to pantomime the word “lame” along with the rolling of his eyes. Each were familiar with the game to varying degrees with Aasim reigning supreme, where as Violet opted to sit out the first few hands and watch over Omar's shoulder thereby giving her time to get the hang of the game. Aasim dominated the opening three hands, nearly killing the group's enthusiasm for the game until Clemster broke his streak by beating Aasim's three of a kind with a straight. The next two hands went to Omar, and just prior to Ruby's return Violet won the first game she sat in on while Clem taking the following hand. These changes of fortune left Aasim miffed and Louis to declare shenanigans as he had been unable to facilitate even a single winning hand. He continued to grumbled even after he was reminded that playing cards was his idea in the first place.

It was Vi's turn to shuffle and as she did so she looked to Ruby and asked, “So what's the word?”

"The birds the word!"

“Dude, just quit talking.”

Ruby looked around at them all, knowing each were anxious to hear her answer, “Welp, he's gettin' better. Reckin' gettin' 'im outta that basement and some bed rest did the trick. I'd wager two, three more days tops he'll be rarin' to go.”

"He should stay.” Even Violet could figure that out.
“Absolutely not!”

Clem shook her head slowly, “Not happening, Lou. We decided this from day one.” Out from left field Omar spoke up,

“I think he should stay too.” With a speed like that of a bullwhip, five heads and five sets of eyes snapped towards his direction. Vi, with an incredulous look on her face. A common enough feature the last week and a half.

“Oh my fucking god.” Omar said nothing. Merely shrugged.

“Well, at first the food situation was a concern but with increasing our number of traps it's beginning to pay off. Granted, we're catching more squirrels, which; I might add, are not easy to prepare nor do they taste good. But they are making up for the lack of rabbits. As long as we keep having success trapping and keep getting a rabbit or two every so often I think we'll be good.”

Clem continued to shake her head, “No. In a month or two, shit...even in the next week or two we could be looking at snow. We won't be able to hunt because of the snow so how are we going to find our traps? How much snow do you guys even get here anyways? Back home the most we ever get was a light dusting. Here you guys probably get feet of snow.” Lou whistled to indicate he wanted Clem's attention.

“This isn't our first winter, Clem.”

Now was Ruby's turn to chime in, “That ain't the point, Lou. We had food and supplies after all them adults split. Yer right Clem, we've gotten plastered here in the past. Only reason we had enough to get through each winter was 'cause there were fewer and fewer of us each year...poor dears. What say you Aasim? You's been quiet as a church mouse.”

He was lost in contemplation for a few seconds, “I could get used to it.” With that Clem couldn't take it anymore. Just when she began to feel her blood pressure return to normal this had to happen. What shitbird came up with this card game idea anyway? LOUIS! Aasim saw Clem was about to blow a gasket when he held up his hand,

“Hear me out first Clem, please. I said I could get used to it, but I was going to point out, like you said, that we already discussed and settled the matter. We all questions, Clem got our answers and now we give him his walking papers.

Louis then played his trump card.

“AJ's down with it. We talked earlier.” Dammit, Louis...even without a tongue he still managed to talk himself into a world of shit. Remember earlier when the music came to an abrupt, screeching halt? Well it just happened again, only this time air raid sirens were sounding as well. It was high time to un-ass the area, meaning evacuate. NOW!

“Fuck what?!”

“Seriously Louis? You idiot!”

“Yo, not cool dude.”

“Why on earth would ya do that?”

Only Clementine remained silent. A single at her face was enough to tell you that what was on her mind. Her face was a shade of scarlet none present had ever seen before. There was no time for our
dear ‘ol boy Louis to find a hole to hide in before Clem picked up one of the crutches and began making violent stabbing motions at him. He was nearly out of the danger zone of his beloved who was clearly out for blood, namely his blood, when the crutch connected with the back of his hand causing him to cry out in pain. Clem found the sight of his pain much satisfying which calmed her down enough to address the rest.

“I can't believe you fucking people! Any of you! I practically had to beg and plead with each and every one of you to bring him here in the first place! What in the actual fuck?! NO,” looking to Ruby she continued, “Rube, once you say he's good enough to travel he's gone, ghost, history, taking a powder! Pick one! I don't care! Read my lips: Still. Not. Staying! Period! End of discussion.”

With that she stood and took her leave in search of AJ. As Clementine left the room Louis began gathering his cards while Violet applauded slowly with a sarcastic “way to go” look on her face. Louis promptly flipped her the bird.

Meanwhile, AJ was in his room, oblivious to the sparks that flew a scant hundred feet away in the music room. As he sat he thought how it had been weeks, if not months since he had put pen to paper, Tenn’s supply of paper having long since dried up. That was until Louis uncovered Stanley’s assortment of paper airplanes and AJ helped himself to a handful of sheets from Clem's office. Those planes found a new home decorating the top of their shared dresser. It made for a nice addition to Clem and AJ’s room since the flowers and Venus Fly Trap that once graced the room had long since died. He was fascinated by those simple folded pieces of paper. No two were alike. Some were similar in design with only minor alterations. Some were long and slender, while others were short and squat, some were rectangular. One even had a wingtip folded up the opposite wing folded downwards causing it to spiral in flight. This was his favorite. Once Stanley got better maybe he could show him how to make it.

Louis had approached AJ the day before to talk about Stan. He asked the little dude what his opinion was about the guy. AJ confessed he didn't really have one since he was expressly forbidden to see or talk to the man. As far as AJ was concerned he didn’t seem dangerous which made him OK in his book. No reason why he felt that way, it was just a gut feeling he had and the importance of going with your gut was something he had been taught to trust. Since Clem had talked to him it had only served to reinforce the opinion that Stan meant no harm to them. Besides, the guy sounded interesting. AJ liked the paper airplanes plus Lou had been telling him about all the time they had been spending together playing some card game called 'pee-knuckle', a name which AJ found truly funny. As much as Louis had suffered at the hands of the Delta he seemed to be most at ease around Stanley so that counted for something, right?

He was putting the finishing touches on his latest drawing, a self portrait depicting the day he caught a squirrel in a trap he built by himself. Just as he was adding color to his irises the sound of Clem's steps reached his ears. Her pace seemed quicker than usual which was strange. She opened the door and in a voice so loud that it startled him, scattering colored pencils onto the floor.

“Alvin Jr! What's this shit I hear about Louis and you talking about Stanley?”

AJ relaxed and waited for his body had return to its skin and as it did so he turned and gave Clem a disapproving look, “Swear.”

“Can it, AJ! What exactly did he tell you?” It had been sometime since she had been this mad at him for something. Her tone and the question itself left him puzzled for a few moments before recognizing what she meant.
“Oh. He asked how I felt about him being here. Said you thought he was cool and that you didn't mind him being here. Something about maybe you'd let him stay here. Why? Did I do a bad?”

The answer did nothing to please Clementine. If the crutches were bearing her weight she would undoubtedly be standing there, arms crossed as she spoke.

“No, AJ. I said nothing about letting him stay! I don't know how that idea got into his head but I'm royally pissed right now and he's on my shit list now. Letting him stay here with us permanently was never an option. I have no idea what magical world of make believe Lou is living in.” Walking into the room she sat down on her bed while AJ rose and sat next to her.

“I don't get it. You said he's not one of Lilly's people. That means we're safe, right?” There had to be a way to explaining the situation so AJ could understand it, but how? She hoped her answer would suffice.

“Just because I don't think he's one of Lilly's people doesn't mean I want to be responsible for another mouth to feed. We've been lucky these last few months, kiddo. Real lucky. We're safe with the system we have and with these walls protecting us. It was stupid of me to bring him here in the first place. I don't want to take and unnecessary chances and I shouldn't have, same reason I decided against contacting that caravan we saw. There's no way to know if they're good or bad until it's too late.”

“Well, Louis said Omar and Ruby and even Willy are cool with it. Why aren't you? That should mean something? What's the harm? Remember they let us stay. Even after I killed Marlon.” Clem's sighed. Becoming more pissed as time passed, trying to focus her anger at Louis instead of AJ. She had enough to worry about without Lou confusing AJ. He loved the man dearly but she was the one who raised AJ from birth. Not him.

“That was way different. You got shot and I had to warn the others about Lilly. Plus, last I checked I was in charge, not Louis. He needs to be reminded of that.”

AJ countered, “I thought we all get a vote?” Clem shook her head no.

“No, AJ. You're still too little.” AJ was hurt and clearly offended. He rose from the bed and stood before her, arms crossed.

“Wait a minute! Back at the cave you said I could make my own decisions and I chose to shoot Tenn to save Violet! Then you got bit, then there was the barn! I had the dookies for weeks! Ask anyone! Go ahead! They'll tell you!”

She had been told how AJ dealt with Tenn's death and her being laid up in bed, on the verge of death. It hadn't been pleasant. She shuddered to think what it must have been the others to witness AJ staying in their room, bawling his eyes out day and night, refusing to see anyone. He even exploded at Violet when she dared to enter the room. She anticipated that AJ would expound about the barn and tried to undermine his defense.

“Yes, and you didn't keep your promise but you saved my life at the barn but then you were looking out for both of us. Now I'm responsible for everyone, including you. Disagree all you want but Stan's gone and that's final. I don't like the idea of Lou talking to you about him behind my back. He has no right to do that.”

If AJ was mad before he was Grade A pissed now, “That makes no sense! What's a bigger decision than killing someone to save someone else? Tenn was my first real friend!” He suddenly got quiet and looked down at his little feet, “Do you ever think about James and what he said in the cave
about me? I do sometimes.” With this Clem had it. She rose from the bed, snatching her crutches as she did.

“No! All I care about is how he tried to take you from me! I'm done arguing with you Alvin, Jr. I promised everyone we'd send him packing and that's exactly what I plan on doing! Goodnight, AJ.” She turned and left before she heard a response or even a comeback from her adopted son knowing it would surely lead to more arguing. AJ broke his promise that he would shoot her if she got bitten but didn't and that was a one in a million chance that worked, maybe even one in a billion. She had no such luxury to take such risks. AJ took one helluva gamble in which everyone benefited from but now she was in charge of seven kids and in her experience one had to be cautious, as well as smart, if you wished to see your next sunrise.

It turned into yet another day she desired to spend time away from everyone. Up to the office she went, about the only place of refuge she had access to. The only place she could where she could hope to get away from the trappings and bullshit of being the boss. But who was she honestly kidding? They could still find her. Pester her. The only other place of solitude was up in the bell tower, a place she had only been to once, just before the attack. Spending time with Violet gazing up at the night sky. Since no one had offered as yet to build an elevator she was outta luck that would never happen again. Since that night Clementine always had a sneaking suspicion that Vi had a crush on her. Clem was unsure how she felt about it. The idea she had a crush on her was cute but she saw the blonde as one of her dearest friends. Additionally Clem had, by that time, fallen head over heels for Louis, not just because of his goofy sense of humor and his zany antics but also how he got along with AJ. If she ever got emotionally involved with anyone she and AJ were a package deal. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Once she was well enough to move around freely a bed had been placed there inside the office the event a nap was called for and her strength waned. Spending hours on crutches can really suck the strength out of you. Then Mr. Sandman comes a-knockin' and room and bed is still a thirty minute walk away but might as well be thirty miles. A bed was scrounged up and placed inside the office for Clem's sake so on days such as these she shared the room with Rosie who still had her own mattress for as long as Clementine knew her.

Ruby released Stan from his sojourn at the nursing station the following day. Granted, he was still very weak but his cough had largely subsided and he felt human once more. Unbeknownst to him Ruby had recommended two more days before he was escorted to the safe zone and went bye bye. Alas, as the quote goes: A man prepared is a man hurt by delay. Just when everyone thought life would finally be able to resume its normalcy walkers began to infiltrate their turf in numbers never before seen in recent memory. Eleven days spent arguing, cajoling, bargaining, convincing, even begging to convince the others to see things her way only to have walkers take a huge dump on her plans made Clem want to rip her hair out by the roots. It was enough to make you curse anything you suspected sought conspire against you whether that enemy was real or imagined. Just get rid of the guy and we can bring all things within these walls back into equilibrium, back into balance. All would will be grand. The birds will whistle in sweet harmony, happy unicorns will prance the fields and rainbows shall spring forth. Is that too much to ask? Yep...

Walkers were first discovered in the outer reaches of the trapping grounds, forcing Omar, AJ and Rosie to fall back to the school but not before dispatching six walkers, with many more not far off. If this sudden reemergence of walkers was bad enough then the disappearance of Willy was damn well catastrophic in comparison.

At nearly the same time that Omar, AJ and Rosie had their encounter with the dead Willy and Ruby had their work cut out for them when walkers were seen to encroach on the hunting grounds also,
in even larger numbers. As the pair made good their exodus Willy attempted to vault over a fallen tree like a track and field star over a hurdle. One foot found terra firma while the other found a rock the size of a fist, causing his ankle to go in one direction while the rest of his body went the other. By the time he was able to scramble to his feet Ruby was long out of earshot, unaware of his absence.

He now found himself alone, surrounded on three sides by walkers who just now took notice of him. Thinking quickly he hobbled as fast as one can with a bum ankle and scampered up the first tree he could climb that would also support his weight, in this case a Virginia pine. While it didn't act as perfect camouflage but it was better than trying to outrun a herd of this size. He couldn't even remember the last time he had climb so far up a tree. Looking down he estimated that he was a solid twenty five to thirty up but then looking around he discerned that no matter how high up he would never be high enough. They were everywhere. Dozens of them. Some walking in the same direction, others not. Unknown to him they were coming up from the South, not that it mattered to him from his vantage point. All he knew was that he was stuck up a tree the better part of a mile from home and something...or someone had set the the walkers on the move.

The more he considered it a thought crossed his mind. *James.*

His group used to move walkers around. Hell, it was James who used walkers on the beach to create a distraction so Clem and the others could climb aboard the *Fitzgerald.* But that didn't make sense. Why would James suddenly decide to move walkers in their area after all this time? That and they didn't seem to be moving in the direction of the school. What the hell was going on? What did this mean? As far as Willy cared, at the moment at least, was that this meant if his luck held out he could make a run for it. All he had to do was be patient and hope his ankle would hold out when he made his move. He kept his fingers crossed it wasn't broken, otherwise he was toast.

Hours later the herd appeared to have thinned out enough to warrant a breakout. Retrieving the bow he left on the ground he quickly dispatched the nearest walker and by taking a page out of Clementine's book he cut open the walker and smeared its guts onto himself, barely able to hold back the desire to throw up. The injured ankle worked in his favor by forcing him to keep a slow and steady pace with out having to worry about drawing undo attention. As he limped his way home he thought about his appearance and his limp made him look like a walker. Hopefully no one would mistake him for a walker. But he was. Luckily for him Louis spotted what he thought was a walker and let loose an arrow. Willy was relieved to see that Louis' skill with the bow hadn't improved during his absence as the arrow sailed passed him wide left. He surmised that this was karmic justice for having done the same to James when they had first met.

Ericson's was host to a level of jubilation no before witnessed since Clem had awakened from her surgery. Willy found himself inundated by a bevy of high fives, hugs, back slaps, and even a big wet kiss from Ruby. He was relieved to be home and secretly glad he was covered in walker muck so none would be the wiser about how embarrassed he was by the sudden outpouring of joy and affection. Never before had he been the recipient of so much outpouring of emotion in all his years. At the moment he was interested only in washing off the guts and hoping to rid himself of the tree sap in his hair. The idea of cutting off his hair held no appeal. But his ankle wasn't broken and the tree sap did come off so all was well.

Well, with walkers once again on the warpath this meant getting rid of Stanley once and for all was delayed yet again. Delightfully, with Willy's safe return Clem's rage against the fates or whatever was responsible for screwing with her plans had abated. Waiting out the horde wasn't anything new for any of them, least of all Clem. However for the original residents of Ericson's they lacked
Clem's level of experience and hadn't been stuck inside due to the horde in quite some time.

Meanwhile Stanley, still blissfully unaware of their plans as pertaining to himself, was as happy as a pig in shit to be up and moving around after his incarceration. He considered spending a thousand thanksgivings with his former in-laws was preferable to his experience thus far at the school. Having endured nearly two weeks bound, locked up or both he intended on taking full advantage of his new found freedom to explore the grounds. He had just walked into the Admin building and contemplated walking up the staircase to see where the stairs led but thought better of it. No point in pushing one's luck so soon after being paroled. Looking around and finding the coast clear he arched his back, cracking several kinked up vertebrae from his time spent hunched over. He let out a groan of satisfaction and relief.

“Ahhh...heaven...” He turned and began walking towards the door leading to the courtyard when something caught his eye. Squinting, he looked at a piece of graffiti that graced the wall beside the far left door scrawled in what looked like pink chalk was written the words,

SIMON'S DEAD
PIGGY'S DEAD
ralph's next

A chuckle, barely perceptible, was heard.

“Welly welly welly welly welly welly well. Appears someone read “Lord of the Flies”. Certainly a piece of required reading for this group of youngsters. No adults. Kids rule. Yes indeed dee do dah, the inmates running the asylum.”

He smiled and walked the rest of the way to the door which he opened, slamming his eyes shut in reflex to the sudden burst of sunlight that assaulted the rods and cones of his eyes. Blinking several times helped them to acclimatize and as his vision cleared his gaze fell upon the set of massive doors which made up the main gate at the end of the drive he saw something that made him truly smile. It was something worth celebrating. It was the sight of something familiar. Something most worthy of smiling about.

It was a bandanna. An olive and white paisley patterned bandanna to be precise, dangling there about eight up the main gate, tied around the wrought iron gate which constituted the coat of arms of their former headmaster and namesake of the school. He knew the person it belonged to but more importantly what its very being symbolized.

“They're here-ere.” With that he resumed the hunched back and inward facing foot of Stanley and stepped out into the world.

Chapter End Notes

As always leave a comment and let me know what you guys think! Thanks for reading! It may be some time before the next chapter gets released. I've been spending more and more time proof reading and rewriting as these chapters have gotten longer.
Chapter Notes

* A line from William Shakespeare's play As You Like It. Seemed fitting for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stepping out he was met by the drastic temperature change between the school and the great outdoors. A shiver ran down his spine causing him to pull his shirt tighter around him to ward off the cold. It was inexplicable how his clothes were even able to stay on his frame based on their threadbare and tattered condition. The sole of his left shoe had disintegrated to the point where the heel was now partially detached with the two halves of shoe slapping together with each step. Even his shirt had seen better days. While not in such deplorable state as his shoes several buttons were missing and in their stead were small knots of rope sewn onto the shirt. Be that as it may, little could be done to safeguard him from the cold. Thrusting his hands deep into what remained of his pocket he scanned his surroundings and spotted what appeared to be Willy atop the watch tower and preceded in his direction.

Having spent a fair amount of time with half of the school's occupants his objective now was to get to know the others. He had spent adequate time with Louis and Ruby during his convalescence and Clementine prior to that. That left chef Omar, Willy, that blonde – he felt his heart go pitter patter at the thought of her - and that little tike he had caught only the briefest glimpse of when he first showed up. On several occasions he had heard the barking of a dog, a big one at that. Most probably a pit, a revelation he found most disconcerting. Skipping introductions with that resident would be in his best interests.

Had to be a pitbull. Why not a tortoise or a killer goldfish?

A dog lover though he may be, there was no telling how friendly or unfriendly the dog was, especially around strangers such as himself. Lord knows how well or even what they were feeding that pooch.

On the brighter side, it wasn't a snake. He hated snakes.

Failing to see anyone else out and about he opted to begin by engaging Willy in a little chit chat and sauntered off in Willy's direction. As he neared the flagpole he stopped and kicked a loose piece of concrete from the drive and watched it skip across the broken and weed strewn driveway. Next, seeing a shard of brick he wound up and kicked it with all his worth - and promptly paid for it. His foot exploded into a whirlwind of pain as he realized, to the detriment of his big toe, that he lacked steel toed boots. Cursing his stupidity he hobbled over to a nearby clump of clover poking out of a crack. Easily pulling it from its home he searched in vain for a four leaf clover before allowing it fall to back to earth.

“That's fine. Luck's changing for the better even as we speak,” speaking to himself as he took another gander at the gate and the bandanna which still dangled in place. It would be curious to know if it had remained unnoticed but decided it best not draw the spotlight upon it. It seemed doubtful being that it was the smaller of the two gates these primitives used when entering or leaving. Now that walkers were shuffling about no one seemed eager to head out. Even from where
he stood a handful could be seen walking around aimlessly.

With the pain in his injured tootsie starting to fade he gingerly walked towards Willy's perch.

Willy had spotted Stanley's approach out of the corner of his eye, having missed Stan's run in with the brick, and groaned knowing he was moseying his way, most likely to chew the fat. Not that he didn't want to talk but he was still jacked that he had to pull watch duty even after all the shit he went through yesterday. But they couldn't afford not to. Even if the tiniest break in the walkers could be found and exploited it was worth the risk to sneak out and check traps or at the least grab firewood. By this point here weren't many walkers out and about just enough to make any full scale attempts to hunt and trap too hazardous and any movement outside would no doubt draw more.

“Hi there.” Willy gave Stan a sideways glance and a slight head bob,

“‘Sup.”

“Heard you had quite the adventure yesterday.”

“You could say that.”

“That's some serious shit.”

“Hey! Wait a sec! What happened to your stutter?” He suspected something was amiss, his bullshit detector beeping. Stanley anticipated this. Flashing a smile he replied,

“Oh that? Wuh-well I speak better when people don't wuhhh-wan't me dead. I see the dead are still moving.”

_Didn't hear the dead. Didn't hear the chattering._

_Well, no shit Captain Obvious._

“Well, no shit Captain Obvious.

“Yeah. They're still there. Probably for awhile too. Why? Want me to pop open the gate so you can shake hands with 'em?”

Just as this little repartee seemed dead in the water Stanley's eyes fell upon just the topic to rejuvenate their discourse: the broken step.

_Bingo._

“Wuh-what's with the table?” Willy looked down at the missing step,

“Oh, that? Vi broke it a few days back. What's it to ya?”

With a shrug Stanley replied, “I could fix it for ya. You g-guys got a hammer?” Willy pointed in the general vicinity of the school,

“Well, no shit Captain Obvious.

“Much obliged. Think I will.” Minutes later he returned with the needed elements: a fiberglass handled hammer and a two by four and returned. Laying the board on the ground he eyeballed the desired length and marked it off with his thumb nail.

“Should be a saw around there somewheres. You do construction?” Deep down, he hoped the guy did have some carpentry skills. Most of the purloined supplies either sat inside the hallway across from the music music hall, out of rain or burnt. If this prick could make something beneficial to the
school, so much the better.

“Yeah, I s-s-s-saw one,” chuckling, “Pardon the pun. I’ve done my fair share over the years.”

Hoisting the board over his shoulder off he went to the music room where he retrieved the saw and trimmed it to its desired length and made his way back. Looking at the broken step he contemplated how best to discreetly removing the nails: removing the old nails. The sound of squeaking nails can travel far and wide so to keep the noise to a minimum he removed his shirt and placed it over the broken board he worked slowly and methodically until able he was able to liberate all the old nails. He was even able to reuse the old nails. Now the real fun part began: replacing the step.

Holding a piece of lumber steady by oneself is bad enough, now imagine your back is bent. Now you can begin to fathom Stanley's plight as he sought to do just that. After enduring Stanley's endless stream of grunts, groans and curses reminiscent of someone fighting a losing battle with gravity. Willy grew weary of the noise and came down from his roost and helped hold the board as it was hammered into place. Since it was imperative to keep the noise to a minimum it took some time to install the replacement step but once finished they stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Bitchin'! What else can you do?”


They stood about for a few minutes continuing shooting the breeze when Willy saw to his dismay Violet coming to relieve him. Just by the way she walked he could divine that she was less than pleased to see Willy on the ground instead of where he was supposed to be.

“Fuck... Uh...hey, Vi,” embarrassed having been caught red handed. She stopped and crossed her arms, the glare upon her pale face never waveringing.

“What the shit, Willy? Can't see much when you're on the fucking ground. And what in the actual fuck was all that noise I heard earlier? Are you stupid or are you trying to draw walkers? Seriously.”

Willy felt a wave of heat wash over his face. It could be either from embarrassment or the heat generated from Vi's glare.

“Sorry...” his voice took a sudden upbeat tone, “But look! We fixed the ladder! Now we don't need the table,” indicating with a wave of his hand.

“Yeah and every walker for a mile probably heard you two morons,” Stanley meanwhile, was off in his own little world, once again transfixed by those glorious, glorious emeralds.

*Say something clever. Say something clever. Something clever.*

“Me Tarzan. You Jane.”

*Damn....*

It came as no surprise that the Tarzan reference clearly went over their heads. They were still kids after all. He had long since resigned himself to the sad fact that his brand of humor would be mostly be lost upon this motley crew of primitives, most of whom were half his age at best.

*Oh well. C'est la vie.*
“No one was talking to you, ass wipe.”

“Wuh-wuh-Willy helped with the ladder. It was only a few minutes.” Not that it made any difference to Vi how much time had elapsed.

“Seriously, just shut the fuck up you fucking creep!” Stanley put his hands in the air in surrender and took a tentative step back, half expecting her to lash out. Then did the unthinkable – he blew her a kiss. With that he turned and with a smile so broad it ached his still bruised face and luxuriated at the shocked expression Vi's pale face. It was a look similar to when you see your cat puking into a favorite pair of shoes or when a parent enters a room only to realize that the unsupervised toddler had discovered the many joys of a five pound bag of flour which now lays strewn across the living room.

With that he took his leave, the sound of Willy's in his ears. If ever there was an excuse to strut was now but since that was ill advised he instead began whistling It's A Long Way to Tipperary.

With Stan on his merry way Vi spun on her heel and with a scowl the intensity of which surely could melt ice, bore a hole straight through Willy, rendering him silent and wiping the smile from clean from his face.

“Fuck off, you! Go make yourself fucking useful before I knock you out! And take fucktard with you!” With there being no need to be told twice Willy took flight, feeling like a dog having been caught eating out of the trash. Stanley followed a few paces behind, feeling guilty for getting the kid in trouble. In an effort to cheer him up he quipped, "Think she'd go out with me?" A chuckle.

“Your funeral, pal. Probably cut your balls off instead of - ” A rock sailed through the air between them causing all talk to cease as they scrambled for safety, Vi's aim being better and thus deadlier than Ruby's.

The following day a sizable gap in walkers appeared, as if by magic. After a hurried powwow it was decided that a snatch and grab was worth taking, however brief. All would grab as much firewood whilst someone, Vi nominating Willy, went forth to check as many traps as possible before time ran out. This would be an all-hands-on-deck affair if they wanted to have even the slightest chance of being successful. There being no way of knowing if they would get a second chance. Only Stanley and Clementine were barred from going. Stan offered to chop what firewood they brought. However this offer left Clem with the short end of the stick, since she was the only one left with nothing to do but to watch. He told her that limbs would need cleared and broken down into tinder and kindling. Further, it would require large quantities of wood for both cooking and warmth so any help with wood processing was needed.

This did squat to make Clem feel better. Until they all came back she was still just an observer. Those feelings of inadequacy and insecurity returned as she was again left behind to twiddle her thumbs while everyone else worked. The only comfort she had was now in his last remaining days there was someone to accompany her on the sidelines. Even though Stan couldn't go with them he asked for a favor. He ignored Violet who reminded him that they weren't running 'some fucking restaurant'. He asked, if they would be so kind, to bring back some wrist sized saplings about seven or eight feet in length. When pressed what for he merely smiled and said it would be a surprise. If they didn't like it they were welcome to burn it. With a roll of Violet's eyes and her refusal of a kiss for good luck they were off.

On account of there only being enough time to check traps for any snared rabbits or squirrels only one person was required. Any more than that would risk walkers so Willy rushed out and checked
all he could and brought back his bounty: four squirrels and a rabbit from the eleven traps he reached. There would be food tonight!

As for the gatherers they found to their surprise nearly the entire southern quadrant of the hunting grounds devoid of walkers. Few walkers were around so they were able to make a decent haul before they too retreated. With any luck this opening might last long enough to send Stanley packing once and for all.

But they had pushed their luck too far. All that activity outside the wire produced a sizable amount of noise and walkers once again descended upon them. The older kids took up covering positions while the younger and slower ones ran back, dropped off their haul in front of the gates which Stanley dutifully dragged inside, and raced back to replace the older kids who would then take back a their own load back. Clem, meanwhile, was a nervous wreck, having since begun to pace back and forth in front of the double gates anxiously awaiting for any sign of AJ. Once he made his first delivery she demanded him back inside to which he adamantly refused and disappeared back into the woods before without another word. Clem cried out for him and nearly made her way outside opened gate before Stanley grabbed her and lifted her unceremoniously in the air, kicking and screaming. Ignoring her profanity-laced vows of death and great bodily harm he carried the irate amputee over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes before plopping her onto the nearest table and shouting at her to sit down, shut up and relax. If she thought he was going to retrieve her crutches she was sorely mistaken. Instead she flew into a renewed fury as he was seem chucking them onto the platform tower, leaving her no choice but to sit and hope that her precious little goofball would be alright.

They were by no means on the verge of being over run but the process of carrying wood to the school, dropping it off only to haul ass back and repeat was taking its toll. Getting tired leads to mistakes it was mistakes that get people killed. They needed a new plan. Stat. As the adage goes: adapt, adopt and improve. Aasim was reminded of the leap frog system they employed getting the supplies off the beach and back. They would now use the same technique.

Stanley began moving further and further out beyond the gates now that Clem was safely indoors. He knew the group was on the verge of collapse as the tell tale warning signs of fatigue was becoming evident more and more on each kid's face with each trip.

Still they pushed on. They pushed themselves further and harder than any of them thought possible. Just as it felt they had expended the last of their energy reserves they finished. By the time Aasim, the last one out, closed the gates he joined his friends where they all lay sprawled pout on the nearest piece of grass gasping for air, too exhausted to move. They had done it!

Nary a syllable of protest was uttered when Stan suggested they leave the wood where it lay until later once everyone had rested up. In the mean time he would get a head start for them. Even Vi was too tuckered out to say anything. At the moment Clem and AJ couldn't care less. They were too busy holding each other tight, oblivious to Stan talking.

Their gamble had exceeded their wildest expectations. “No bites,” as AJ put it. Now they had grub and enough firewood for the next few days and they managed to scrounge up Stanley's saplings. However, a riot nearly broke out as they had reassembled and were made aware of what crime Stanley had committed during their absence. They were half tempted to string him up the flagpole until he revealed Clem's impropriety which instantly caused the tide to turn in his favor. Ruby was the first to tear Clem a new one followed by the other. He assured all who gathered that he took no pride resorting to such drastic measures but she had left him no choice. Still, Clem stewed and raged.
She despised being scolded her like some stupid kid, how she was more important to the group alive than dead, true though it was. Even with one leg she still felt more than capable to fend for herself. She had survived all kinds of shit. More than anyone of her friends combined, probably more than him! She could do anything! The hell did this goddamned hunchbacked mother fucker piece of shit know anyway?

Well, it took Clem's friends to remind her that – uh...well – no she couldn't. there was no dismissing the logic behind his words and admonitions. Everyone else agreed with him, damn them – so she was forced to concede defeat. But all it took it took was one look at AJ's face remind her what she stood to lose if something happened to her. Gazing into those tear filled eyes was enough to cause to cast her hurt pride aside.

Now that Stanley had the desired saplings it was high time to set his plans into motion. First, he unraveled ten feet of manila rope into three strands then cut three saplings seven foot long, tying a timber hitch near the end of the first. To this he lashed the others together then wove the rope in and around the three arms. Having done that he trimmed off some of the excess cordage off and made a few cursory wraps around the top, allowing the remaining cord to dangle in the air. Taking the working end of the rope in hand tied a foot long piece of wood in the middle and with a flourish presented his creation:

A tripod.

And crickets chirped.

A tripod, but for what they had no clue. Even if they didn't grasp what lay before them they did appreciate the tripod’s structural integrity as demonstrated by Stan as he grasped the top of the tripod and lifted himself off of the ground and swung from it. He felt slighted that no one seemed to understand what he had labored over until finally Omar made the connection. It was not just a tripod but a cooking tripod. The piece of wood suspended from the end was a toggle which when placed through the handle of the pot would hold the weight of the pot. With the excess cordage the pot could then be raised or lowered to help regulate the heat. Omar was ecstatic.

This build would undoubtedly take him the rest of the day.

This project began with the construction of two wooden frames in the shape of the capital letter ‘A’, each ‘A’ starting as two saplings cut five feet long with a shallow angle cut at the tops and lashed together and at the base, several inches from the bottom, was cut a notch two inches square. A third, shorter piece had the corresponding notches cut into either end. All three pieces were then fitted and secured together. Once two ‘A’s were completed the first one was placed upright while the other was passed through, apex first, and secured. Looking at the unfinished contraption from the side it looked like a capital ‘L’ leaning at an angle. For extra support another stick was tied to the upright ‘A’ and stuck into the ground and at the wide end of the horizontal ‘A’ was placed a log split in two.

This project resulted in numerous instances where an hour's worth of work would be wasted as the project was reworked, tweaked and rebuilt only to be torn down once again. Looking down at his bruised and bloodied hands he vowed never again to tackle a project of this magnitude again, the result of many frustrations in making of his latest creation. A chair. If no one used it then he damn well was.

Having had done enough work for one day he got up and tried to strike up a conversation with Vi. While he managed in keeping the butterflies in his stomach at bay but Vi would rather have a tooth pulled without anesthesia let alone give him the time of day. Failing that he turned his attention to

Sadly, a walker had just eaten the last one so it was squirrel stew.

What Stan didn't know Omar was never much on company, particularly when he was in the middle of cooking. Cooking was not just schlepping a bunch of ingredients into a pot then boiling it for eighteen hours. No, instead it was a process which required deliberate and careful supervision to ensure that all flavors meshed correctly and each ingredient worked in perfect synchronicity and harmony with each other. Having another set of eyes only served to irk him. Having an audience was tantamount to being some scrutinized specimen under a microscope. Being watched served only to feed is feelings of paranoia that everyone he would conspire to poison them all by adding some unknown ingredient whose presence only he knew about. HAH! Like any of them knew the first thing about cooking. They would all starve if not for him. That people would dare second guess his culinary prowess. He had pondered many a time to let them all fend for themselves. That would teach them! Still, Stanley assured him that he had no intentions of questioning his skills. He just wanted to give his two cents.

And his two cents was enough to make the chef blanch.

Things such as including the organ meat into the stew. He spoke of the nutritional value of heart and the liver for their vitamin and mineral content. Roughly mashing up the bones and the skull would allow both the bone marrow and the brains to impart flavor and nutrients into the broth. Seeing that this little tidbit made Omar seem like he could puke Stan reassured him that the everything was still being cooked, killing any bacteria and other pathogens. The leftover bones can easily be discarded afterwards. More importantly, they weren't running some four star restaurant in Paris. This was survival. There was no guarantee when and if there would be another meal anytime soon so one must make the most of the food on hand. Nothing must go to waste. Each squirrel only yields a few ounces of meat which doesn't go very far when it's spread out between half a dozen people or more.

He also demonstrated was how to cook an animal whole. This is done by first gutting the animal then running a stick through it, just like a kabob. Next came two rocks, one to elevate the animal above the fire, the other held the stick in place leaving your food to be cooked hands free; keeping you from being a slave to the fire. By rotating every ten minutes or so until fully cooked you now can make better use of your time maintaining your fire, stirring your pot or what have you. When thoroughly cooked the squirrel or rabbit can have the meat picked right off the bone, the leftovers saved for future use.

There were still doubts as to whether these survival tricks were being considered or not but at least some color had returned to Omar's cheeks. He might very well have converted the chef into a vegetarian for all he knew. Well, if it was too good for the kids Stanley had no such qualms. It had served him well countless times. Hell, he had made impromptu tea from willow bark and pine needles, cooking the contents out of an old fruit cocktail can more times than he cared to count. The idea of fruit cocktail made his mouth water, without pineapple, that is. He left Omar to his devices figuring his wisdom, a swell as his time, was being wasted. Besides, there still remained much to explore.

AJ was bored. Really bored. Everyone else, at the moment, seemed engaged in some activity or another. He and Violet were scheduled to check traps but there was still some time until then. In the music room is where AJ had chosen to spend his time, pouring over the stacks of books which littered the floor. His original intention to practice his reading and pronunciation but just couldn't
focus. Not only that but he swore, not literally of course, that each book was more boring than the last.

Having long since given up any hope of finding the 'foot book', a book that would reveal the secret of how to construct a new foot for Clem. Since AJ had lopped off her original leg he owed her as much. Every book had been searched, perused, scoured and read for something, anything pertaining to feet. The others didn't have the heart to tell the little guy he was pursuing a pipe dream. Having concluded all was lost AJ felt it just wasn't fair. Willy found a book all about boats and discovered that the key to a boat is its boiler. With that knowledge they placed a bomb in the Fitzgerald's boiler and blew the bastard sky high. If Willy could find what he wanted why couldn't he?

Clementine appreciated his efforts but preferred that he focus his energies instead on his reading. AJ was very keen on the idea but after awhile even Clem had to concede that many of the books were just too advanced for AJ, try as he might. To be honest, many of the book's contents were even too advanced even for her. More than likely any books the school owned designed for kids AJ's age had long since been torched. The fact that any books still remained after all these years was itself miraculous. AJ was supremely bummed at not being able to pull through for Clem. He felt like he had let her down. However once he found that American Sign Language book for Louis and how his face lit up made all of those wasted days looking for that elusive 'foot book' worth it. AJ had succeeded in helping one person with a disability.

He felt himself getting smarter. Smarter all the time. As he once said to Clem, “'Cause I'm always thinking.” Which he was. Everybody said as much. As Ruby but it in her West Virgynna speak, AJ was, “Gettin' much too big fer yer britches.” Having no idea what 'britches' were Ruby explained it was a compliment, a good thing. That he was growing up too fast for his own good. AJ couldn't wait to grow up. In his way of thinking waiting sucks. Sitting around and waiting for something to happen making him...

*What was that word Clem said? Rest – rest – rest – LESS! Restless! That's that's it! See, thinking all the time! Getting smart!*”

Having grown weary of being...restless...he closed the book and rising to his feet, placing the book onto the stack, decided to go for a walk until Vi was ready.

His normal route would have taken him to the now closed greenhouse and back. Round trip would take half an hour. Once outside however, glancing to his right there stood Stanley in the cemetery, in front of the twins' graves. With Clem most likely napping he decided now would be the only chance he would get to talk with this most strange and elusive character. There was scarcely the opportunity to thank him for keeping Clem safe the previous day before she ordered AJ away. AJ wasn't quite sure why she was mad. She told him not to break that rule then why did she break it herself? She made no sense sometimes.

Maybe Stanley could teach him how to make one of those cool things out of paper or ask if he could help build something next time. With new found hope AJ walked to Stanley who at the moment seemed lost in thought and had no idea of AJ's presence until he spoke, startling him. This made good laugh for the little dude when he saw Stanley's spooked face. Strange how he seemed taller than before.'

Recovering from his shock Stanley let out a nervous laugh and patted his chest, “Oh, hey. AJ, right?” AJ nodded, “You s-s-s-scared the shit outta me.”
AJ crossed his arms and furrowed his brows, “Swear.” After a moment added, “You said a bad word.” It still took a second or two before Stanley caught on, an indignant look came over his face as he put his arms on his hips,

“Wuh – what about Violet? I'm an angel compared to her.”

Touché.

“I don't know what an angel is but Vi's different.”

I'll says she's different.

His expression softened into a smile and his demeanor changed, “I see. Favoritism. That's ok. B-b-bad habit anyway,” turning slightly he gestured with his hand at the collection of graves and asked, “Who's buried here?”

A wave of sadness washed over him as he thought of the names, faces and even the voices of those interned here. Some deaths he had personally witnessed. Some he had only heard about. Marlon's death which he was responsible for. He tried to make it a ritual to come by and say hello to everyone – well, almost everyone. Definitely not Minerva. Marlon he still had conflicting feelings about. Clem said he did bad things but he that didn't make him a monster. AJ wasn't sure what to feel. Marlon sold out Tenn's sisters, he killed Brody on accident but tried blaming it on Clem. He even took his gun and pointed it at everyone. How does that not make him a monster?

On the other hand, AJ felt guilty shooting him. The events of that night still left him torn and confused. He did his best to atone, not that it accomplished much. They still got kicked out. Maybe Marlon did what he did to protect the others. But if that's true then AJ was no different than Marlon. He shot Tenn to save Violet. Which was better? In the end, were they even different?

“Kids who used to live here. Friends we've lost. It's a long story.” Stanley looked into AJ's eyes with a look of sympathetic understanding, took a seat on the grass in front of Sophie's grave,

“I've got time.” So AJ proceeded to give the cliff notes version of events leading up to the present day. How Brody and Marlon traded the twins to raiders, Marlon's killing of Brody then Clem having to put her down, ending Marlon's death at AJ's hands. Next, was the telling of Mitch's death at the hands of Lilly and Aasim, Omar and Louis being taken. Mitch was originally buried where he fell but had been moved to be buried amongst his friends. Not surprisingly this call to action was started Mitch's biggest proponent, Willy, who gave an empowered speech where he noted that it was wrong to bury Marlon beside their friends after he betrayed and deceived them all while Mitch, a hero, gave his life defending his home and his friends, whose remains were allowed to lie alone. It was the worst chore any of them had ever had to do but it was the proper thing to do. Willy alone did not complain and sallied forth as one by one the others faltered because of the smell.

He told how Sophie had died, not defending the Delta like a hero as her twin had told them, but had in fact been murdered by Minerva when they tried to escape, thereby proving her loyalty to her new home. Once off the Fitzgerald they met up later at that bridge where she was killed by walkers after being shot by Clementine and AJ was compelled to shoot Tenn, Sophie and Minerva's baby brother when he froze, horrified at the sight of his long lost sister's death. He summed up his narrative by confessing to not knowing much about Ms. Martin except that she used to work there, Ruby and Clem burying her remains next to the greenhouse. Ruby had since made a cross bearing her name and placing it opposite Brody's grave. That being said AJ finished the telling of their adventures.
Well – what he felt like telling.

He omitted as much as he told. Most details being minor in nature, of little consequence while others were monumental. Harmless though Stanley may seem AJ wasn't about to spill the beans everything. The biggest facts he opted to keep close to his chest was gunning down Lilly on Clem's orders. No one lost sleep over that. She was evil and had to die if they were to remain safe. The other fact he withheld was harder to deal with and reconcile: putting down Tenn. He didn't tell a sole. Not even Clementine.

At first was confused why Violet was flipping out at him. He didn't want to but he had to, he did it for her. How else was she ever going to see Texas II? Besides, Tenn's actions already cost Mitch his life and this time would surely have cost Violet her life as well. Tenn was AJ's first real best friend but he was weak. A liability. Weeks later during a spearfishing excursion with Rosie a walker appeared. It was Tennessee. AJ silently pleaded with his reanimated friend not to turn around, to continue on its way, away from the place he once called home, away from the ones he once called friends. But it did see AJ and started towards AJ who had no choice but to put the former artist out of its misery. Everyone still grieved over the loss of Tenn. Everyone loved Tenn. The idea of someone seeing Tenn as a walker was too much. They kicked him out for killing Marlon so what would stop them from doing so again? But all thoughts of this faded when to his immense joy he found Clem awake and walking, with crutches that is.

No, it was best to keep what happened at the shack to himself. With everything that went occurred that night aboard the Fitzgerald, the bridge, at James' barn – all of it had been enough of an emotional roller coaster, enough to make them all go prematurely gray at the very least. Clem had once talked about trauma and the trauma AJ had. AJ didn't like his trauma. Not one bit. Maybe the others had trauma of their own. Maybe everyone has trauma. It would be curious to know if anyone ever got over their trauma. And if they did, how?

AJ was surprised how easy felt talking with Stanley. He wondered why Clem wouldn't let him talk to him earlier. Seemed alright. He had never spoken so much about Tenn's death to anyone since that wretched day. Talking about it did feel good. Maybe that was one way you get over your trauma, talking about it instead of punching in the mouth like Clem said to do when you feel fear taking over.

During all this Stan sat spellbound.

*Jesus, poor kid. Denied a proper childhood. Growing up in a world like this. But great gobs of goose shit! A kid not old enough to be in first grade but already has a kill count!* 

“I'm sorry, AJ. The world sure isn't a fair place.”

“Yeah. Louis said the world wasn't that even before the monsters came.”

Stanley scoffed, “HAH! That's b-because he's been inside these walls. He's been institutionalized. All the kids have. They all grew up knowing almost nothing except these wuh-wuh-walls. The world is beautiful. It's people who suck. I've been all over this country. Even to other countries. Traveled by boat, train, kayak – y-y-y-you name, I've done it.”

“Have you ever flown? I mean, in a plane,” Stan smiled.

“Best way to travel. That and by train. There's just s-s-s-s-s so much to do and explore out in the world.”

“I hope I get to someday.”
“I hope you do, kiddo. I hope you do. Make sure you take Clementine along.” At the mention of Clem AJ realized that he'd been gone for awhile and Vi was probably looking for him,

“Well I gotta go Hey, you think you could teach me how to make a paper airplane?” Stan chuckled and reached into his pocket and extracting an origami crane.

“You got it. By the by, could you g-give this to Violet for me? Can't find her.”

Now it was AJ's turn to smile, “Cool! I know just where she's at! See ya,” he jogged off to locate Violet and give her the note. This time of day she was probably in her room so he entered the corridor and turned left down the hall to room 417 where Vi was talking with Ruby. The door was open but Clem said it was best to knock first before entering. It was just good manners.

“Hey little guy. You ready?”

“Hiya, AJ.”

“Hey, Ruby. Violet, I was asked to give this note to ya.”

“Oh,” taking the crane she unfolded the note and read its contents – and AJ and Ruby saw Vi turn beet red and storm out of the room without so much as a word. She continued down the hall ignoring AJ's repeated entreaties, eventually throwing down the note. AJ stopped once he reached the note and picked it off the floor and read,

*Can I have your number?*

*Xoxoxo*

– Stanley

AJ scratched his head, “I don't get it.”

Meanwhile by the Admin, Stanley was about to enter when he noticed Violet walking at a brisk pace, obviously pissed, and surmised she read his note and divined that she had zero intention of giving out her number. Bummer. The spectacle led to a bout of uncontrollable giggles,

“Oooohhh, mercy! Definitely gonna catch hell for that!

As AJ and Stan had been shooting the breeze Lou was toddling his way down to the music room to play his beloved Blackraven piano to help ease his mind while Omar was getting read. He was earlier taken aback when Violet flew past like a woman possessed unaware of the six year old struggling to catch up. He turned and watched and continued watch as the pair made their way to the gate and heard Vi barking orders at poor Willy as he stood watch. A brief exchange took place,

Vi's angered voice drowning out any protestations by Willy until he seemed to give up and opened then closed the gates, resuming his previous post once they had left.

Lou hadn't the foggiest idea what that was about but knew better than to put his nose where it didn't belong. He was already in hot water. Well – to be totally frank, he'd never really been out of hot water this past week.

First he had turned chicken and baled on Clem and Vi, the two people he cared about most. It appeared that things had worked out in the end but he should have been there for his friends, even just for moral support. Who could forget the fiasco of the card game where it turned out he committed the unforgivable sin of talking to AJ about Stanley behind Clem's back. It had seemed harmless enough at the time but then again Louis had the knack of fucking things up regardless of his intent. Shit – even without a voice he still managed to talk his way into trouble. The bruises from Clem's crutches fading so there was a silver lining. The bruising to their
relationship...well...let's be honest, for all he knew there might not even be a relationship left to heal. Since that night neither had so much as made eye contact with one another. Add to that all their woes and problems with Stanley, food shortages now let's throw hundreds of deadheads into the mix Louis was playing it safe and keeping his distance.

_Smooth move Ex-Lax, REAL smooth..._

Resigning himself to the fact that he would doubtless forever remain a fuck up he arrived at the music room seeking solace which only music could provide. Taking a seat having placed his fingers onto the keys he instantly felt better. Picking a song from memory and began to play and felt the worries and the pain in his chest begin to fade, until is memory failed him, a common occurrence, didn't matter if it's cards or music. Books as far and wide as the eye can see, but nary a piece of music to be.

Apart from Lou no piano player, nor musician, had graced these halls in years. Marlon never had a guitar and Minerva could sing but that was all. This tract he knew most of but there was that missing segment, those AWOL measures which eluded him which would connect the two disjointed parts together. He was about to call it a day when Stanley showed up. Leaning against the door frame and stood there, armed crossed, enjoying the sight and sound of Louis' playing.

“Can't remember the rest?” Louis grinned and placing one hand over his heart, the other in the air.

_I cannot tell a lie._

While not being able to remember the song sucked tuck it was good to have someone listen and not be critical about his playing. Pointing to Stan, then towards the piano, floating his fingers above the keys, indicated if Stanley knew how to play.

“Nope. Wuh-was always more of a bookworm. Looks like you've had some music critics living here.” Lou looked over at the graffiti etched into the wood of the rim, or side panel, of the piano which read:

_You _
_Suck at _
_Playing _

“Bloody Savages.” Limping his way over and behind Louis he traced the letters carved into the fallboard with his finger. “Hmmm. ‘L’ and ‘C’,” turning to Louis and cocking an eyebrow, “You and Clementine a thing? I mmm-mean an item.” The reply was a shrug and the twisting of his hand at the wrist indicting “sort of”. Louis and Clem had carved their initials that night, seemingly forever ago, when they confessed they had feelings for the other. It was a magical night for Louis having never felt that way for someone so completely. No woman had ever caused him to open up to them like Clem had, made him comfortable to lay bare his soul. It was the best day of his life at that point. Actually, it was the best day for a lot of them.

Within the hour Mitch would lay dead and Aasim, Omar and as well as Louis would be in a horse drawn cart, on their way to the _Fitzgerald_, as prisoners of Lilly and her Delta cohorts.

“Cute couple. Mmmm-might not my business but why don't you talk? Your voice can't be worse than my st-st-stutter,” he recoiled as Louis stuck out what remained of his tongue, grabbing the place in the air where the end of his tongue would had occupied and with the other hand made a single chopping motion. A look of anger and an audible exhale of breathe left Stanley and his voice took on a hardened edge,
“Dor –,” he expression softened and voice calmed, “Damn. I'm sorry Louis that happened to you. I really am...” Louis shrugged it off with a wave of his hand, just water under the bridge. Reflecting on his time in captivity accomplished nothing so he dwelt on it as little as possible so it came as a relief when Omar made an appearance.

“Louis, where the arrows at? Willy said you had 'em last.” Louis shook his head in the negative. “Fantastic. He said Vi and AJ left off in a hurry. Said she was pissed about something,” Stanley adjusted his halo. “What's better they left Rosie here too. You don't think Violet took them?” Again Lou shook his head.

_Doubt it. I'll get Chairles. Meet you outside._

“Mmmind if I stay here?”

_Sure._

So Stan remained while Louis ran off to his room via the now cleared hallway to the right of the grand staircase of the Admin building. Clearing the hallway of the disused furniture and other detritus that had accumulated had been the major occupation the troupe had labored over while fenced in the last few days. Aasim and Rube were clearing the crap out of the hall leading to the girl's dorms, the north wing. Then they could salvage or burn what they could and open up the school, giving it less claustrophobic feel.

The chef walked outside where he was met by Willy and both headed for the gate.

“Any luck?”

“Says he doesn't have 'em says.”

“Bullshit he doesn't! Had 'em just yesterday. I'd know. Me and him just went hunting. Even saw him put the quiver at the foot of his bed.”

Omar let out an irritated groan. “Well they gotta be somewhere. Unless they up and – wait.” They resumed walking until Omar heard the unmistakable sound of piano playing reached his ears. “ Seriously, Louis?”

“The fuck is he doing? Clem's gonna be jacked with Louis playing that loud,” Willy said grinning. Omar returned the grin with a scowl.

“That's not the point! We all have plenty of work to do and he's playing. Just once it would be nice if he'd grow up. What's your problem?”

Willy had stopped walking at stared off into the distance, mouth agape. Slowly raising an arm he pointed to the figure of Louis as he emerged from the dorms, Chairles in hand. Seeing them underneath the rusted streetlight which once illuminated the path leading to the Admin and jogged towards where the two lads stood rooted in place, dumbfounded. Going down the sidewalk and crossing the courtyard he made it halfway when his pace slackened, shocked look he was received. Feeling self conscious he wondered if perhaps an unseen booger was hanging from his nose. Just as he was about to ask the sounds of music reached his ears as well.

_What the –_

Willy looked at Omar, his eyes bugging out and spoke haltingly.

“That's – not – Louis playing...”
The realization hit all three simultaneously as they beat feet in the direction of the source of the music. Louis, being the tallest, easily overcame the slower two as Willy and the chef lagged behind. Entering the Admin they clearly heard singing as well. Reaching the music room there shock was complete as they saw to their collective horror where only minutes before where they left Stanley now a different man sat, playing and singing his heart out.

“– a little action in! Get about as oiled as a diesel train! Gonna set this dance alight! 'Cause Saturday night's the night I like! Saturday night's –“

The music stopped once the pianist realized he had an audience.

“Oh, halloa gentlemen,” rising from the bench,

“Can't begin to tell yinz the la-ooohhh! Great Caesar's ghost that hurt...” a kinked up muscle in his back failed to stretch, sending a sharp stab up pain coursing up his side. Standing gingerly from the bench he began stretching. First, by twisting at his waist several times and while conducting other calisthenics continued to speak, only now in a British accent, “I am glad to stretch myself, Watson. It is no joke when a tall man must take a foot off his stature for hours on end.” Once finished he stood to his full height. Facing them Stanley allowed the others to take their first glimpse of him. They knew it was him by the patch of white beard on the cheek but from the head down nothing was the same.

Gone was hunchbacked stutterer with the lame leg. In his stead was a man nearly six feet in height, evidently well spoken and straight backed. Every facet of his appearance from the neck down was different. Had it not been for the white patch in the beard they would have sworn it was someone else. No, it was Stanley alright. The rags that had passed for clothes lay in a pile just behind the piano bench. The threadbare shirt and jeans replaced now with a pair of worn blue work pants and matching long sleeved shirt over top of which was a tan cargo vest decorated with buttons and insignia, the zipper long since broken, the zipper now replaced by buttons made of small knots made out of rope. The tennis shoes were gone too. Replaced with a pair of steel toes boot, each steel toe being partially exposed. But most worrisome of all was the fact that Stanley was now armed.

Gracing his left thigh was one wicked looking knife. A V42 stiletto knife to be exact. Modeled after the very one used by the First Special Service Force, a joint US/Canadian commando unit that operated during the Second World War. At one end was a thin, seven and a quarter inch long blade and at the other end, a skull crushing pummel.

All this meant squat to the boys. All that mattered is Stanley was armed. He was straight up Delta. And they were well and truly fucked.

Having now limbered up Stan noticed that during his exercises the mood of the crowd made a one hundred eighty degree turn. Willy had drawn a knife while Louis now brandished 'Chairles'. Observing this change of atmosphere Stan frowned, and placing his hands on his hips and stated,

“Fine! Fine! I'll take requests!”

For several moments both parties stood silent, staring at each other. Without warning, in one fluid movement Stanley reached under his shirt and from a holster hidden inside his waistband, drew a Sig Sauer P226 and donned an isosceles shooting stance. His aim landed on each of them for only a split second before he flicked his sights to the next. While continuing to transition between his targets he continued, all pretext of jocularity having vanished,

“A nine millimeter travels at about twelve hundred feet per second. Who wants some? Drop ‘em.
Now!” Addressing Louis, “Drop – whatever the hell that is. Kick your weapons behind you.” Willy and Louis complied. Looking more confident that he felt against someone with a gun Willy spoke,

“And what the fuck are you supposed to be?” Studying Willy for a moment, obviously brainstorming how best to reply, lowering the gun slightly and using a slightly effeminate voice,

“Well, I'm a Scorpio. I enjoy traveling, anime and long walks along the beach. My ideal date is a two digit month, two digit day and four digit year.” The look of befuddlement that came over Willy's face obviously meant his wit flew over Willy's head, most likely the others also. Omar spoke next,

“What do you want?” Raising the gun and resuming his previous serious demeanor,

“That's enough questions for now. All shall be revealed in due course.” Pointing with his free hand to Willy and Louis, “You two, outside. Omar, if you would be so kind as to summon the boss lady, please. We'll be waiting at the fire pit.” The three lads about-faced and began going their respective ways before they were stopped, “Oh. By the by, Omar? Be a doll and be sure Rosie is locked up. If I hear so much as a sound belonging to a dog someone catches a bullet.” Omar nodded sullenly and made his way to the staircase leading towards Clem's office while Willy and Louis headed outside, trailed by Stan a respectable distance behind them. Once outdoors and indicating with his gun ordered Willy and Lou to carry a picnic table over as more guests would be arriving shortly. Both knew that Aasim and Ruby would their only hope of rescue now that Rosie is locked up and both AJ and Vi outside the wire, oblivious to what was happening inside. Each took up an end but Willy was only able to lift his end a few inches and only the strength to carry it a few feet before his strength failed. After several tries Stanley put an end to the endeavor. What he said next shattered their hopes and each felt like they had socked in the guts,

“Nevermind, nevermind. Willy, go fetch Aasim and Ruby and bring them to the party.”

“Fuck you! I ain't some dog!” This act of defiance had no effect except to raise the gun to chest level,

“Sticks and Stones, William. Sticks and stones. Now let's haul ass. We're burning daylight. And remember, no weapons.” Once Willy vanished inside the doors Stanley turned next to Louis and spoke in a softer tone, “Let's see if you and me can move this table. No dilly dallying. And don't give me that look. This needed to happen regardless what you all may think. I hope to convince you all. You guys hear me out and we all benefit. I assure you of that. And just between you and me, the gun is only to ensure compliance.”

They moved the table into place and awaited the arrival of Louis' cohorts. Once they arrived the ever growing crowd was addressed,

“Welcome one and all to our little shindig. Now, for you new arrivals, if you would be so good as to raise your arms.” No one moved. He sighed, “This – this – insolence, will get us nowhere. Now, raise. Your. Arms. NOW!” At this last word his voice boomed across the courtyard, his order how carried out with must gusto, “Excellent. Turn ninety degrees to your left. And again. Once more. Excellent. Now to await Omar and your head honcho. In the meantime, sit and try to relax.” Ruby up looked at him, barely able to contain her tears of rage,

“After all I did for ya. After all we did for ya. How could ya?” A look of genuine sadness crossed his face.
“I know. Truly, I do. I'm sorry for the deception, Ruby. You are truly a testament to the phrase 'angel of mercy' and to that I am eternally grateful and forever in your debt.”

“If you're 'in her debt' you could repay it by tossing the gun,” Aasim said. Willy spoke next,

“Told you he was one of those Delta fucks.”

“Listen up – all of you. If my intentions were evil I would have long since killed you all. Beginning with you, Aasim, after that beating you gave me.” Aasim took a defiant step forward, fixing him with a glare of pure hatred.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance.” Stanley ignored Aasim's stare and walked to the picnic table and sat himself down on top.

“And I'm sure you would have. And you would have been responsible for the deaths of yourself and your friends as well. Now, no more talk until Clementine gets here. We have much to discuss.” They would not have to wait long. Having observed Clem's comrades all looking in the same direction he looked to the Admin building and spied Clem emerging from the school with Omar a few paces in front. For the first time that day he smiled.

Holstering his sidearm and leaping to his feet,

“Ah,” clapping his hands together, “Wunderbar!**” Hands clasped behind his back, he closed the distance between them, the smile never wavering,

“Clementine, I presume.”

Chapter End Notes

** Wunderbar- German word for Wonderful
When I first was initially coming up with ideas or this FanFic I pretty much WROTE the story centering around the piano scene.
The next few chapters, including this one, will probably be shorter with more dialogue. On the other hand, I'll going to wind up having more chapters before I'm conclude my story. As always leave a comment to let me know what you think!

The strains of music floated up to Clem's office, waking her up from a much needed nap.

_Fucking dammit, Louis..._

Unrolling the leather jacket she had removed for use as a pillow she pulled a section of it up and over her head in an effort to drown out the noise. While the music sounded more professional than usual at the moment Clementine was far more interested in examining the back of her eyelids.

The day had already gone to hell in a hand basket when she had earlier been awakened and told that Vi had stormed off without taking Rosie with her and AJ. Walker activity had slackened enough that it was worth venturing out to check and reset what traps they could. Hunting was still a risky undertaking until Aasim made the discovery that by climbing a portion on the northeastern wall of the school thereby hooking around they were able to hunt the area encompassing the extreme northern edge of the grounds. Louis and Willy would be the first ones to take the first real crack at Aasim's discovery while Aasim would be working with Ruby clearing out more debris from the hallways, sorting through what could be repurposed and what could be burned.

Still, the fact that Vi left without Rosie burned Clem's ass to no end. Rosie added an extra layer of security in case something arose while they were out. She would deal with that dingbat when they returned.

Louis on the other hand – well, not only had he screwed with her nap, thereby putting her further into an already foul mood, but he was dicking around with that damnable piano instead of getting ready for the hunt as he was supposed to. She loved the man but damn it all if he wasn't the most immature person at the school sometimes.

_Next time there's a fuel shortage, bye bye piano._

A few minutes passed before the music blessedly stopped. Clem yawned, folded her jacket back into a pillow, and rolled onto her other side, promising herself another ten minutes.

She didn't get thirty seconds.

She heard someone, wearing concrete shoes, dashing down the halls in one helluva hurry, towards her inner sanctum. She prayed that maybe, just maybe, they'd rush past her office, forgetting where it is or better yet the intended target was one of the other rooms. Dread and trepidation came over her and she groaned as the foot falls were indeed headed directly towards the office. As the individual, who was on the verge of signing their own death warrant, got to the door and flung the door open, causing it to slam against the inside wall with a thunderous bang, startling both Clem and Rosie. It was Omar, his face ashen. “Clem! Clem! Clementine! Wake up,” and started shaking her by the shoulder.
Mental note: make sign saying, “Go Away.”

Clem continued to do her best log impersonation even as the shaking persisted. Seeing that shaking was getting him no where so now the chef switched to roughly tugging an arm.

“Come on, Clementine! You have to get up!”

Maybe a trapdoor...

“It's Stanley!”

...leading to a pit full of lions...

Finally relenting, she rolled over onto her side and out of one eye looked into the horror stricken face of the young teen, wondering what was so damned important. Probably lost his shit after dropping his favorite spoon into the pot or on the ground. Something stupid. But wait, why did he say Stanley? Many times during her time at the school she had been tempted to deck someone for one reason or another but this would be a first for Omar. Be that as it may, the sooner the chef was placated the sooner he could be sent his merry way and nap time could recommence.

“Hmm – yeah, yeah, he's here last I heard.”

“He's from the Delta!” At that word Clementine bolted upright, wide awake. Every thought of sleep gone, her brain fought through a thick wave of confusion as it tried to process what was just said.

“What did you say?!”

“He's from the Delta! Been playing us the whole time! That was him just now on the piano! Got new clothes! No stutter, no limp!”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! FUUUUUCK! How did this happen?! Give me my crutches! C'mon, Rosie girl!” Omar's fingers had just touched her crutches when he heard Rosie's name.

“No, no, no, no, no, no! Don't bring Rosie! Clem – he has a gun...”

Well wasn't that just fan-fucking-tastic! It was bad enough he was Delta but in addition from the Delta he was now armed. Things were rapidly spiraling out of control. She could just kick herself for allowing herself to be so completely hoodwinked. They had all fallen for his trip. Except Vi. She had been the only one to never trust the man from the get go. They should have listened and killed him right from the onset. Now they were all in mortal danger with their backs to the wall, the ambush complete. It had been mere happenstance that Clem had crossed paths with Lilly and had learned of her intentions to raid the school and ‘recruit' the others but this time they were not granted such a luxury.

All of a sudden a thought came to her that turned her blood to ice.

What if he intended to be found?

Found and brought to the school. Invading their home in broad daylight, right though the front door, no less. They had been duped into doing all the hard work while he played meek and feeble and with the patience of a Shaolin monk, waited until the right moment to strike. They had provided aid and comfort to a man from the very community that had sworn to destroy them and she had been the one to give the the go ahead to bring him here. True, Aasim started bringing him back before she had even made a decision but having divined her response. Nonetheless, it was
ultimately her fault and hers alone.

And she had dropped the ball. Royally.

Royally...

“And just how in the actual fuck did he get his hands on a gun?! Wait – it's not AJ's is it?” The chef raised his hands and in a voice bordering between irritation and downright panic.

“What?! No, no! The fuck if I know where it came from! Louis and Willy are at my cooking station with him! I think he knows just about us except Aasim, Rosie, Violet and AJ.”

Taking up her crutches Clem made her way over to her desk, opening the top drawer she reached in and retrieved her much used and abused Ka-Bar which had been a constant companion for the past five years. It had been some time since had last wielded the knife but as fingers touched leather she felt a surge of energy course through her, provided a much needed boost of confidence that would be needed when confronting Stanley.

Gazing at Omar and hoping to impart some courage onto Omar, and put on her game face.

“Well. Let's go see what he wants. Stay here, Rosie.” Rosie gave a dejected look, one which only a dog can muster, circled around on her mattress and curled back into a ball as Clem and Omar made their way outside.

Even from the doors of the Admin they recognized Stanley over by Omar's fire pit. He looked completely different from the hunchback they had housed these past two weeks but even from this distance that reddish beard was unmistakable. Clementine could sense all eyes converging on her as she walked. The man turned, smiling at the sight of the twosome. He watched for a few moments before walking towards them, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixated on her.

Cocky little shit.

They walked towards each other, halting once halfway between the columns of the Admin and the fire pit, a scant fifteen feet separating both parties. At last he spoke, smile never wavering, hands still behind his back.

“Clementine, I presume. I've waited a very – very long time for this.” Clem fixed him with a steely look at this newest of nemesis.

“Stanley.”

He seemed to ponder the greeting. “Yeah, about that. The name is actually Starbuck. I conjured p-p-poor st-st-stuttering Stanley. You're the one who provided my creation with a name. But, then again, who was I to correct you?”

“The coffee place?”

“Oiy.” rolling his eyes, “If I only had a dime every time I heard that. No. Star-BUCK. Singular. It's a character from the book Moby Dick. Ever read it?” Taking her silence as a 'no' he nodded in agreement. “I think you might like it. The bad guy only got one leg.” He wasn't surprised to find it failed to tickle her funny bone.

The three stood staring at one another, Omar standing behind and slightly to Clem's right. Neither Clem or Omar knowing what to say or what this guy wanted and since this man – Starbuck – was the one with a gun, the ball was in his court.
A curious look crossed his face and cocking his head to one side, he spoke to Omar while continuing to stare fixedly at the rabble's leader.

“Why don't you go and keep your amigos company, Omar?”

“Fuck you. I'm not going anywhere.” The gun was once again removed from its holster. With the gun's muzzle pointed at the ground the owner transferred it from one hand to the other as its owner's smile faded.

“That wasn't a request.” Omar looked to Clementine for guidance.

She gave the chef a reassuring nod. “It's alright. I'll be okay.” Omar, looking dejected, left and took a seat on the couch occupied by Ruby and Aasim. Once seated Starbuck turned his attention back to Clem and pointing a finger earthward, rotating it in a circular motion, indicating for her to turn and face her friends. Everyone held their breaths, dreading the worst. The woman who had led them to hell and back, their beacon off light in a world of darkness – was about to be summarily executed right before their eyes.

Clem closed her eyes and waited for the end. The end of all those years spent running, surviving. All the lives sacrificed to keep her alive all these years only to be shot like some unwanted dog. How anticlimactic after the life given she had led.

On the other hand, part of her was glad for death. Perhaps there is an afterlife. That might not be so bad. Growing up her family wasn't terribly religious but recalled her mom saying that in heaven you're reunited with loved ones, meaning she could see her parents again. Not as walkers but as humans! Before they went away to Savanna. Maybe you look for others while in heaven? She could look for Lee! Her parents could meet the man whose guidance, wisdom and protection had sustained her all these years after his own premature death.

Kenny would be there, with Duck and Katja by his side. Well, hopefully Kat and Sarita hit it off. She imagined seeing the smiling faces of departed friends she longed to see again. She would seek out as many as she could think of. There were people like Luke, Pete, Chuck, Jane – well maybe not her, but Ava and Omid. All the people who had helped her along the way. Maybe Christa was there too. The mystery remained what had happened to her after being ambushed in the North Carolinian woods and after Clem fell into that river only.

There were still more people than she could think of. It was astounding how many people it took to keep a kid alive this long in a world like this. As wonderful as these hopes and dreams they were just that. Hopes and dreams. Tears began to flow as her thoughts shifted to AJ.

I'm so – so sorry, AJ. I failed you. I failed you my precious little goofball...

A solitary tear hit the ground.

“Drop the crutches.”

Clem's eyes popped open and spun around in confusion. “What?!”

His expression clearly indicating he meant business. “NOW!” His voice echoing across the lawn, startling all present.

“I am not fucking around, Clementine! Arms out!” Everyone dared not utter a sound, afraid of the consequences if any protests were heard.

The kids of Ericson's gasped or cried out in protest as Clem, dropping both crutches and began
struggling to maintain her balance, arms outstretched. Starbuck advanced from behind and felt her blood turn to ice as a pair of hands lifted up the tail of her S.S.M.C. Jacket and began examining the waist. A bevy of oaths and invectives of all description were leveled in his direction, which were ignored as his hands continued their search. Clem felt her face flush with rage and embarrassment caused by the humiliation of someone's hands touching her body but being powerless to stop it. Before the injury she would have broken all twenty-seven bones in each one of his hands but now the act of just remaining standing demanded every ounce of concentration.

“Mother fucker...”

A triumphant “Eureka!” was heard upon finding what he was searching for.

Her Ka bar.

He looked bored and – well – rather disappointed. “We can't have this this ladies and gentlemen.” Raising the knife overhead, “I may be a idiot but I'm no fool. For one, shame on you, Omar! Honestly, what kind of man,” wagging a finger, “hides behind a woman? I've also watched you work so I know when someone is left handed such as myself. With your dominant hand hidden behind Clementine and given your school's reputation I knew something was up. The eyes are the gateway to the soul but the hands are the gateway to the intent. Remember that. So what was the plan, hero? Look me in the eye then stab me in the heart, saving the day?! Face it, kid. You're no killer.

Having spent this length of time on her remaining limb Clem felt like she was about to pass out. A bead of sweat had begun trickling down one temple as she began to wobble more and more the weaker she became from the exertion. Prior to today, the only time spent not on crutches was spent hopping short distances from one place to another. By now all the muscles in her leg was jelly and her arms felt like they each weighed a ton.

Now satisfied, Starbuck picked up one crutch and in a single, fluid movement, ducked under an outstretched arm, lifting her up slightly, and tucked it under the opposite armpit before softly setting her down. He relinquished the other crutch and indicated for her to be seated. After tasking two steps Louis could take it no more and leaping from his seat, bolted towards Clem and took her in his arms, kissing forehead and cheek alike before they shared a long, passionate kiss, her lips still tasting of tears.

Are you okay?

“I'm fine. Just need a seat.” Lou's eyes blazed as he looked back at Starbuck and mouthed “Fuck you”. A wave of relief overcame her once seated on the couch, Louis sat beside her and wrapping protective arms around his love and reassuring everyone she was fine.

Starbuck now addressed everyone. “This is not how I wanted this to go down. I stand here before you with peaceful in –” Willy broke the silence..

“By pulling a fucking gun?! Yeah, real peaceful, cocksucker!” Shifting his gaze to the interruption's source he continued, eyes glued on Willy.

“–intentions. Aasim! Front and center!”

When the order didn't facilitate the desired action, Starbuck looked straight at the Indian and gave the 'come hither' finger. Aasim rose and cautiously made his way until only a few feet separated them. The Sig Sauer once again made its presence known, causing Aasim to flinch as yet another series of shouts and protests pierced the air. So Aasim was the one to be made an example of.
What came next astounded everyone.

Without so much as a word Starbuck flipped the gun around grip first and presented it to Aasim insisting surrender. For several seconds the lad stared blankly at the gun before finally grasping the unique opportunity fate had just dealt him. Snatching up the gun, he placed it to the man's forehead and pulled the trigger, bent on blasting the man into oblivion.

CLICK.

Aasim's courage vanished like a fart in the wind and a look of terror and befuddlement overcame him as he continued to pull the trigger again and again.

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK. CLICK. CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

Starbuck, for his part, resumed his seat on the picnic table and placed Clem's knife, as well as his own, out of reach at the far end of the table. The cause for the gun's failure to fire was explained by reaching into a breast pocket and extracting a loaded magazine, which was raised to shoulder height.

"Said I was no fool. Rest assured, I'll be taking that back once we conclude business."

"And what 'business' would that be?" Clem asked.

"As I told Louis earlier, the gun was only to ensure compliance. After all the mischief you've caused I'll be damned if I let my guard down."

"Bled you Delta fucks good."

"Yes, Willy, you did. Which is what brings me here today. I've been engaged by my employer to act as emissary between —"

"A what?" Starbuck hung his head at this further disruption, forgetting he was dealing with a group of kids. Kids who undoubtedly have a limited grasp of the English language.

"Deputy, ambassador, envoy, go-between, delegate, representative. Pick your noun of choice, Ruby. My boss – wants a deal."

"And what kind of deal would that be?" Clem queried.

"One that benefits you and your people as well as mine. In fact, benefits you more than me. Allow me to back up, if I may. I'm aware there was disagreement about bringing me here in the first place. Don't let Clem's decision reflect poorly on her leadership ability. That was a first rate performance on my part, if I may be so bold. Didn't even break character even as Aasim kicked the living snout outta me." Rising from the table he began walking back and forth in front of the fire pit, looking at each person in turn.

"There were times where I nearly blew my cover, Omar being first. You were correct, I did recognize Abel. We wondered what became of him. You can imagine my surprise seeing him not only as a deadite but being utilized as a six foot lawn gnome to boot! That shit was great! Top notch! Bully!"

"Deadite?"

"Oiy..." resting his head in his hands, "Geeks, lame brains, biters, zombies, the undead, lurkers, deadheads. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera! A million and a half goofy names. Always found the
name 'walker' to be just lazy. That and I happen to be an Evil Dead fan. It was a franchise from back in the way. Way before your time, kiddies. But I digress.”

He chuckled. “Actually surprised you didn't catch me, Ruby. Been known to talk in my sleep from time to time. Then we have little AJ over at your cemetery. Had he looked down he would have noticed the very boots I'm wearing. I mean seriously – how often do you really look at a man's shoes?

“Damn near screwed the pooch by blurting out Dorian's name to Louis not half an hour ago.” Clem could feel Louis tense at the name. As punishment for his refusal to be quiet Armando held him down while Dorian lopped off his tongue and cast it overboard. Leaving one of Lilly's newest recruits a pitiable, bloody mess. Aasim and Omar sat helpless in their cell just yards away, forbidden to help or even offer words of encouragement, forced to endure the sounds of their friend's whimpering and crying as they waited their deliverance.

Starbuck anticipated this reaction from Louis, “Like I said, Louis. I'm sorry what they did to you. I never would have allowed that. Never would I kidnap people and force them to fight in the first place. I don't believe in kidnapping people then forcing them to be loyal. That had never been popular with many of us of the Delta. To take someone from their home, their friends – ” he paused briefly, “their loved ones. Then train them to fight, giving them weapons, trusting them to have your back in a fight! I think not. You all trust Clementine because she's earned your trust, never demanded it as Lilly did.”

He closed his eyes. “My real bone head move involved you, Clementine.”

“Me? How?”

Giving a lop sided smile, “Care to explain how a helpless cripple with a bent back is magically able to fireman carry all – what? Seventy – eighty pounds of you?” He paused, letting it sink in. “I wasn't acting then. I was genuinely pissed. To my credit, if I wanted you all dead why not just chuck you outside, lock the door and let the dead finish you all off? See, I wanted you alive.” He paused. “Correction, I need you alive. But not in the way you think.”

“Yes. I did say need. I didn't stutter,” smiling at the irony, “like I used to. The dead are just intolerable when it comes to conducting business. They're not much inclined on compromise. To them it's all just “Me-Me-Me-Me-Me-Me! Nom-Nom-Nom! Feed me! Feed me!”

Aasim spoke first, asking the question on everyone's mind, followed by Omar,

“What makes you think we'd bargain with you?”

“There's nothing we want from you.”

Leave it to Willy to put their collective opinion of the Delta into easy to understand form as Ericson's second most eloquent speaker besides Vi. “Yeah! We kicked yer fucking asses once and sure as shit we'll do it again!”

This outburst was met with mock surprise and astonishment. “Such braggadocio, however misplaced it may be. Pray, tell me what weapons you would use? Knives? Arrows? Maybe spitballs?! And since I hid those arrows I found in Louis' room they're of no use. Who will fight? Your warrior princess currently finds herself on the disabled list.
He waved a hand in front of his face, as if swatting away a fly. “Dammit! Quit getting me get off topic! No doubt you had the opportunity to question our mutual friend before he shuffled off this mortal coil. What did he tell you?”

“Some bullshit about a community up north. He gave me a list of code words you used. Name of cities you used to use. Died not long after that. Fell off of that balcony when you attacked us.”

Willy stood, balling his fists, “And killed my best friend.”

“It's no bull. Abel was a lot of things...most not complimentary. One thing he was not was a liar. It's true. We are at war with another community and if you think our greatest sin is Lilly's practice of kidnapping kids, training them to fight? Hah! We're Boy Scouts by comparison.

The Ericson's OGs may have reason to doubt his word but not so Clem. While the others remained isolated, cut off from the rest of the world, she had witnessed, first hand, countless instances of how the breakdown of morality, as well as lack of food, brought out the worst in people.

The first instance of evil were those of bandits who attacked the Motor Inn when they stopped receiving medical supplies. Then the St. John's, a pair of brothers along with their mother, owners of a former dairy farm who resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. Shuddering, she recalled the memory of everyone except Lee partaking in leg of Mark, a member of their group who had earlier been wounded by the same group of bandits. Instead of receiving medical care as they were told, Mark was instead relieved of both legs which were served as an entree to the others. Lee tried to warn the others of his gruesome discovery but had been too late and looked on in horror as Clem took a bite.

When the survivors of that group reached Savanna they learned of Crawford, a district within Savanna which practiced their own form of eugenics. This community strictly believed in to the idea of survival of the fittest. That meant kids, the elderly, people with preexisting medical conditions, women who were pregnant or became pregnant; were forbidden.

Lee and several others slipped into Crawford under cover of darkness seeking supplies but found that Crawford, even with its rules and high standards, it too collapsed like many mighty empires and civilizations throughout recorded history.

A splinter cell of the New Frontier had been carrying out secret raids on neighboring communities under the very noses of the majority of their leadership. Richmond had been run by four people but unbeknownst to the others, one of their number had gone rogue and had been the mastermind behind the raids. Clem had been witness, as well as combatant, when those same people carried out a retaliatory raid against Prescott, where the gate was toppled and walkers released within. Javi's brother learned the truth but his attempts to convince the rest had been in vain.

Had anyone else besides Clem been in charge this prick would have been dead where he stood, Kenny for sure. The late Floridian always had a penchant for having a 'Damn the Torpedoes! Full Speed Ahead!' approach when it came to problem solving. Unfortunately the school was in no way, shape or form capable of forming an effective defense. Starbuck was right, they lacked the weapons as well as the manpower. The situation was well and truly fucked and despite it going against everything Clem stood for – they were out of options. Negotiating might be their best.

“So what does your boss want us for then?”

Starbuck leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. At the same time the others gawked at the brunette, flabbergasted that she would even consider bargaining with the likes of the very people responsible for the kidnapping of the twins, the deaths of their friends and who tried to
This betrayal struck nearly as deep as the day they learned of Marlon's treachery the year before. Louis gripped Clem by both shoulders and stared into her eyes.

You can't be serious?! A sad nod in reply stated she was. Starbuck cleared his throat.

“A business arrangement. The head honcho had time to examine Lilly's leadership and how she ran her show and found it somewhat – lacking. And knew he could do better.”

“So why go through all this if all you wanted was to 'make a deal’?”

“How long before you'd sic your dog on me? Thirty seconds? Ten seconds? The new boss is better. He's smarter than Lilly ever was.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Starbuck nodded. “Lilly was an idiot. None of you realized it but you broke Lilly's precious rule. Never make her look foolish. She hates that. You see, when you killed Yonaton, wounded Dorian, then captured Abel, you caused her to lose face at the Delta. And what did Lilly get for her efforts? Three little Injins? She could've been smart but decided not to let that shit slide. We want scouts. Scouts are just as important, if not more so, than soldiers. You see, distance buys you time – time buys you options. As Willy earlier put it so delicately,” indicating the youth with his hand, “you bled us good by blowing up our boat and killing my people. We no longer have the manpower to defend our home like we once did and,” pointing to each member of his captive audience, “neither do you. We've all been bled by Lilly's useless war. I'm here to clean up her shit and mend fences.”

He stood, holding up his hands in supplication. “My offer is this: Let use this place as a OP, an observation post. You patrol your perimeter and keep an eye out for any evidence of that community encroaching in this area and letting me know. I'll run a patrol through here from time to time. Allow them to crash overnight in one of the school's outbuildings, if we may.”

“And in return?” Aasim asked.

Starbuck waved both arms towards the woods to either side. “No restrictions. Hunt, fish, trap, skip, jump, and hop as far and wide to your heart's content. I know how hard food has been to come by lately. The locals say this could be one of the worst winters in these parts in years. I'll give you a few minutes to talk it over. However, I must urge you in the strongest of terms to accept. Regardless of what you think of me and my people, we need to work together if we wish to continue existing.”

Grabbing both knives and rising from the table Starbuck went for a stroll, allowing the Ericson delegation space to discuss. The vote the result of which could make or break both the Delta and the school.

Ruby, Aasim, Willy and Omar stood and walked over where Louis and Clem sat. Clem reflected on the ramifications of the taking or the outright rejection of the proposal as she gazed into the eyes of the very people in whose trust they had placed in her.

Slowly, she let out her breath and held her head in her hands while Louis rubbed her back. “It's my fault we're in this shit in the first place. If I hadn't been so dumb and just listened none of this would've happened. I'll go with whatever you guys decide.”

Omar stepped forward, “Clem...he tricked all of us. We all share some blame.” Clem smiled at the
words but they rang hollow.

“Willy?”

“Fuck 'im and every one of those fucking pukes! We fight!”

“Aasim?”

“We need the food. Winter will be here before we know it.”

“Omar?”

Le Chef Omar looked down at his feet before answering. “Good offer but I can't trust him.”

Two against one.

“Ruby?”

“Ah agree. If all he really wanted a deal why all the runaround? Shoulda been honest from the get go. No.”

Three to one.

“Lou?”

Louis shook his head so viciously it caused his dreads to whip side to side. He stood to present his case, clearly impassioned. His speech poured forth like a burst dam, his mouth churning like a locomotive while his hands tried uselessly tried to articulate what he could not verbally. Instead of rational, coherent thought all that came forthwith were the sounds of a caveman. While his words may be lost their meaning was crystal clear.

*How the fuck can we even vote? Vi and AJ are still out there! He doesn't know that! We need to give them time!*

“He's gotta know they're not here or will sooner or later.” Aasim quipped. “Shit, they don't know what's going on here. Even if they did what could they do? He still has a gun. Let's face it, he's got us by the balls.”

Ruby looked to Clem, “It don't seem right votin' without 'em havin' a say-so. They gotta vote as well.” Omar stepped in, squashing further discussion.

“But they're not here to vote, Ruby! We gotta be realistic about this. Aasim's right, he's still armed and we gotta assume Vi and AJ have no idea what's going on. We're outta options and time. I change my vote to yes. Even if they were here what could they do? Vi'd have to get awfully close to get a shot off. The deal is our best bet.”

Three to two. Shit. Since taking over the leadership role she began to grasp the difficulty Lee faced when forced to make a decision having met up against some insurmountable problem and how best to dealt with it.

*All that while taking care of a little girl. I could use you now, Lee...*

No doubt Lee would accept the offer. He would have accepted any offer that would help the group, especially when it concerned Clem. She was in Lee's shoes now. As enticing as the offer was having been hoodwinked caused her to seriously reevaluate her decision making abilities and just couldn't bring herself to go against the group again. Omar was right, even in the best case
scenario AJ and Vi would be in no position to help.

Starbuck, meanwhile, remained a respectable distance away and seeing that a decision had been reached, began walking back. As he approached the look on each face hinted what each person's answer was. His eyes stopping on Clem, a sorrowful expression on his face.

“Should I bother?”

Willy included his two sense also. “Want us to spell it out for ya, shithead?”

Starbuck closed his eyes before speaking again, eyes still shut. “I beg you to reconsider.”

Clementine shook her head. “Not happening.”

“Pretty clear to me unless yer both retarded and fucking stupid! HAH!”

Crossing his arms and staring at the chronic masterbator. “Allow me to try a different angle with you, young sir. Ever wonder how a fresh clothes and weapons just materialized? How could that be? Were they planted here or did they arrive afterwards? Perhaps during Lilly's attack one of her minions stashed a duffel bag of goodies for a later date so another attack could be launched. This time from within.” The smile returned to that punchable face. “Calm down, that's not what happened.”

What came next knocked their socks off.

“No. I had inside help.” The smile grew at the look of shock and of jaws hitting the ground.

*I love showbiz.*

“My accomplice smuggled gear inside the walls which I brought indoors. I hid them inside of those boxes,” pointing to the Admin building, “behind the staircase for a rainy day. Pity you cleaned out the adjacent hallway instead of those boxes. Had you done so you would've thrown a monkey wrench in my plans. Thankfully for yours truly you didn't. Once alone I dressed but couldn't resist playing a little piano before properly introducing myself.”

Just when they thought this day couldn't get any worse – it did.

“Care to meet ‘im? He's right here.” As he raised an arm five sets of eyes followed the hand which would reveal the identity of the traitor, the one who sold them out.

Willy.

Omar and Ruby, sitting on either side of Willy, scooted away in horror. Each sickened to be even sitting next to this Benedict Arnold.

“How could you?!”

“The fuck?”

“Willy! You fucking snake!”

“Son of a bitch!”

To say that poor Willy was astonished, as well as a little confused would be an understatement. It was hard to tell if he was more confused than astonished or vice versa.
“The fuck?! I didn't help this fucking asshole! I didn't do nothin'!”

Aasim stood, livid, “Shut the fuck up! You're no better than fucking Marlon you miserable piece of shit!

If Willy was confused so was Starbuck, who hadn't expected this type of reaction. “Huh? What? Whoa! People! People, please! No, not Willy. The guy behind Willy.”

He whistled and from behind a pillar beside the dorm's vestibule out popped a short, oriental man in his mid thirties with jet black hair, wearing a filthy gray wool sweater, black pants and matching combat boots with an olive and white paisley bandanna draped around his neck. The very same bandanna Starbuck saw hanging from the gate days before, the Delta's predetermined signal announcing the arrival of reinforcements.

“Hiya, folks. The name's Ho-Jon. Your friendly neighborhood chink.” The voice belied his true age. In fact, it made him sound not that much older than any of them.

“Welcome to our shindig, Ho-Jon. How they hangin’?”

“Fine, thanks for asking,” Ho-Jon did a double take upon seeing Starbuck's face close up. “Holy fuck! How many rakes you step on while you've been away?” He asked at the sight of Starbuck's bruised and partially swollen face. Most of the swelling had receded except for one cheek but the remnants of a shiner was still in evidence.

The smile dropped and Starbuck grunted. “Hmph! Not your concern! How about instead you show Ms. Clem what you've been doing in your free time?”

Reaching into a jean pocket Ho-Jon pulled out a semi-crumbled up piece of paper and handed it off to Clementine. Looking at it it was apparent that someone had been a busy little beaver. It was a map of the school.

The map was similar to the one in Clem's office marking the various parts of the school like the Admin building, the dorms, the greenhouse, both gates, and the cemetery. This included landmarks outside the walls such as the much mentioned hunting and trapping grounds, the shack, and the train station where Clementine totaled her car. Frankly, the only feature absent from this map was Marlon's 'safe zone'.

This map, on the other hand, was more detailed. Much more.

The distances between the various buildings and points of interest of the school had been meticulously counted off in paces. The distance from the gate to the flagpole, flagpole to the Admin, Admin to the front gate, the greenhouse to the dorms, it was all there. All buildings, landmarks, and reference points had been drawn and properly annotated. The length of each side of the school's wall had been measured out as well. Even the graves, each labeled in their correct position and bearing the name of its occupant including Ms. Martin's memorial.

But most disturbing were the dorms, each rood had not only its room number labeled but the names of who slept there and where. It was one thing to discover someone was mapping out the grounds but the idea that someone was had been spying on you while you slept was enough to make the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

The construction of this map had been no small feat. The effort needed to explore the grounds, calculate the distances, illustrate and label everything would have been a herculean endeavor. The only way to obtain that amount of detail could only be attained by walking around the grounds.
But then how the hell did he get past Rosie?

Clem turned to the Asian, hoping to sound braver than she felt. “Looks like you've been busy.”

“Just a hobby. Drew by day, explored and measured by night. Starbuck helped label everything. Couldn’t find the keys so I had to tap on his window.”

Hearing this Starbuck stood, arms akimbo. “All this time waiting for my Romeo,” tilting back his head and placing the back of his hand upon his forehead, “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love. And I'll no longer be a Capulet.”

“Are you always this fucking annoying or is this some shit you do just for us?” Clem asked, having never known of Shakespeare's famous play.

“You think this is bad wait 'til he starts singing Christmas songs twenty-four-seven.”

A hurt expression came back Starbuck's face. “May Santa forever go to the reindeer stall to fill your stocking. Keep it up and I'll start singing *Barbie Girl*.”

Ho-Jon flashed a warning finger. “Don't you dare! I'll knock the shit out of you…”

Clem had long sense grown weary of this gay banter and narrowed her eyes at the smuggler. “So you're the one who brought the walkers.”

“Not me.” Now turning serious. “We enjoy these surprise visits from the dead just like you. They showed up something like two days after I did, from the northeast, we came from the South. That's why I hid up in the trees. Had to put on a blanket covered in guts so I could work outside the walls.”

“And inside?”

Shrugging his shoulders matter of factly, “Took off my boots. Spent most of my time in the bush in my bare feet. It makes me pay more attention to my environment. I see more, I have better focus. My feet and my spirit become one with the planet.” Clem gave him a dubious look and he again shrugged. “OK. Didn't want to bump into your dog.”

Starbuck now chimed in. “For future reference Aasim, if you use a rope to scale the wall make it a habit to stow it when done. Thus is one bad neighborhood. Don't want just anyone to find it. Not everyone is such a stand up citizen as Ho-Jon here.”

“Actually, I was hoping by the time I got here the red carpet would've been rolled out for me.”

“Pshht! Funny guy. Practically had to be carried into this dump.”

“Your mother always said you had a face for radio.” Starbuck again looked hurt until he smiled and flipped off Ho-John.

Clem rolled her eyes. “If you and your girlfriend want some private time together we can leave you two alone.

Looking back to everyone Starbuck continued, oblivious to Clem's jab. “Once finished he knocked on my window and I labeled everything. He's been watching this place for – what – five days? Placing that bandanna on the gate was his signal to let me know things were in motion which brings us here today. Sneaky little bastard ain't he?”
The Oriental bowed.

Willy stood and looked at his friends. “So fucking what? Just means there's two of these Delta assholes instead of one! Don't mean shit!”

Aasim agreed and looked to the newcomer. “Yeah, so you have a map. I'm not exactly shaking in my boots.” Ho-Jon was about to respond but was cut off.

“Just showing how completely I have the advantage. If you're stupid and continue to brush off my offer of peace we'll just lay siege to you and this school.” Clem faced Starbuck, having recovered her game face.

“I've survived a siege before.”

Starbuck shook his head. “I doubt that, honey. A siege means I post my people around your school. With a school this size, easy. It means no one goes out, nothing comes in. No food, no water, no wood. Nothing. We'll use that shed of yours as a staging area and if we were to catch someone sneaking out Abel gets fed.” A thought suddenly came to mind, forming his fingers into the shape of a church's steeple he cradled his chin on his thumbs in contemplation. “Scratch that. Anyone caught Abel takes a nibble, gets tied to a tree where you all watch your friend turn.”

Clem balled her fists and leveled a glare that would have cowered a lesser man, “Mother fucker. You wouldn't dare.”

Starbuck matched her glare for glare. “Try me. I've tried being diplomatic but the kid gloves have come off, Clementine. Take the deal – or else.”

Clem rose slowly, only using one crutch to stand, with fire in her eyes she gave her final answer. “Fuck you and that fucking horse you rode on.”

The others cheered and applauded Clem's audacity and her verbal slam dunk on Starbuck and his people. Three times now they had gone toe to toe with the Delta and had come out victorious. As long as Clem remained at the helm the Delta would find neither friend nor ally within the walls of Ericson's Boarding School For Troubled Youth. Clem relished the sight of Starbuck's jaw moving, grinding his teeth in irritation at her doggedness. Despite the events of the day and the danger they still were in, for the first time that day she found herself smiling.

The smile wouldn't last for long.

Starbuck closed his eyes to better compose himself and seek his happy place before speaking. “Very well then. One final move before checkmate. Three things you should consider: One, I hope AJ and Blondie are both okay.”

Shit! So he does know they're missing!

“Two, you guys need to lock your doors.” Raising a finger as if to say 'wait', he wordlessly excused himself as he jogged off a dozen or so yards and cried out. “Oh Boys!”

Nothing.

Louder now. “Hey GUYS!”

Again nothing. Clem and company stared in amusement at Starbuck as he stood, like someone with egg all over their face. He then looked skyward, muttered an oath only he heard, and roared.
The merriment came to an abrupt end as first one, then another loud bang could be heard across the yard emanating from the storm cellar. Upon the third bang the door flew open with a resounding crash and two men emerged from the depths of the basement, one black and the other white, running their way. As they approached Clem and company realized these men were armed not with mere handguns and knives but were packing some serious firepower. The black man, armed with an AK-47, while the other held an AK in one hand and carried an M1 Carbine in the other which he tossed to Ho-Jon who easily caught it one-handed. The three armed men took up semi-circular positions around Clem's couch, the couch's occupants recoiling in terror.

Taking a look back in Starbuck's direction Clem saw a pair of eyes radiant with pure malevolence and anger that seemed to bore a hole straight through her. While she may be no stranger to staring down evil this man was on a level all his own. One more devious, cunning and fundamentally more dangerous than even Lilly.

With hazel eyes blazing fire, his voice still bellowing, “I've got two more people bringing Violet and AJ here as we speak,” he trailed off, his voice becoming softer while still retaining its razor sharp edge. “Third,” he added with muted savagery, “I am the leader of the Delta.”

Clem felt her head swim. Her mind like a boxer who had taken nothing but head strikes for nine straight rounds and all that was needed for the coup de grace was a puff of breath.

Her voice came out, barely a whisper. “You?”

He spoke slowly, enunciating every word, every syllable, thereby avoiding any possible misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the next words to escape his lips.

“Little. 'Ol. Me.”

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