From Whence we Came
by AtlasNerd

Summary

The day his hometown was evacuated, Carl Grimes waited at school for a mother that would never come. Surviving by the skin of his teeth, he was eventually found by a group called the Saviors. And years later, when the Saviors come across a town called Alexandria, Carl sees a man he thought died when he was twelve years old.

There, kneeling in the dust, with Lucille lingering a few feet above his head, is Carl's father.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

- Inspired by take the long way around by RogerRabbit
There, kneeling in the dust, with Lucille lingering a few feet above his head, is Carl's father.

At first, he thinks he's imagining things. The last time Carl has seen his father, he was in a coma, slowly bleeding out from a gunshot wound. The idea that Rick Grimes had somehow survived under such circumstances, when the end of the world had taken down so many stronger, healthier people, had never even occurred to Carl. Yet there he was. Bearded, grimy, with unkempt hair and nearly feral eyes, but clearly recognizable. It was him. It was Dad.

Yet, if Rick recognizes Carl, he doesn't show it. The man is far too focused on Negan, who's wearing his usual shit-eating grin. Carl's hold on his weapon wavers, but he doesn't allow anyone to see. Calling attention to their relationship in front of a crowd, dealing with this now will only make matters worse, and will only give Negan leverage. Carl has seen this go down enough times to know that Negan revels in belittling the leaders of the towns he takes over. Negan won't kill Rick unless he has to.

That's what Carl tells himself, at least, but he still eyes the way blood drips off Lucille after she's chosen her first victim. His mind is going a mile a minute, and he's trying to figure a way out of this. A way not only for his Dad to survive, but to stay safe. For them to be together again. He can't think of one.

So he stays quiet. When the others aren't looking, he even takes off his trademark hat, tucking it into his pack as nonchalantly as he can. Nobody seems to notice. Even as one of his father's men steps out of line, even as another one of their group has their head bashed in, he stays quiet. Even as Negan drags Rick off for their 'talk', he stays quiet. He holds his breath as he waits. The quiet is driving him mad.

There's a chance that Rick will survive whatever Negan has planned for him. As disappointed as Carl is by the fact that his father doesn't seem to notice him, or possibly even recognize him, he knows that waiting for this to blow over is the best chance they have. If his father survived this far, he has to survive another few days. He has to. And Carl has to stay quiet.

"What crawled up your ass, lil deputy?" Dwight snickers at Carl's nervousness. Carl freezes, forcing himself to shrug. He can't allow his anxiety to get the best of him, but he's cursing the old nickname. Most of his father's people are too devastated to notice, too emotionally exhausted to pick up on it, but Carl catches the hunter eyeing him with hatred in his eyes. That hatred fades, replaced by something else entirely as he examines Carl more closely.
"Usin' child soldiers, now?" The hunter mocks, but his voice is weak. His asian friend still lies dead merely feet in front of them, his brains leaching from the hole in his eyesocket. The asian's pregnant widow is sobbing. Carl sets his jaw.

"Ain't no kid." He spits, shuffling to the side. Some of Negan's men chuckle at this, but Dwight nods in appreciation.

"Trust me, if you'd seen the things he's done, you wouldn't think he was just a kid, either."

They're quiet after that. His father's group is too traumatized to say anything else, and if the hunter wants to say anything else, he thinks better of it as he stares at the two friends still lying dead on the ground.

Every minute stretches into an hour, but Carl lets go of the breath he's holding as he hears a familiar rumble. Negan's back. He waits, and finds a bloodier version of his father being shoved back into the execution circle. Carl is conflicted. He knows his father is the man that's been the thorn in Negan's side, and any man that could take out an entire outpost is a worthy opponent. But Negan has done what he does best, and the man in front of Carl isn't the fierce warrior they had encountered in the woods, nor is he the affectionate, protective father-figure Carl remembers as a child. This man is trembling, sobbing, and broken.

And so, Carl leaves his father the way he found him. Kneeling in the dust, his friends reeling as they sit in the execution circle, several among them dead. But Carl lets out a sigh of relief. Even if his father didn't recognize him, even if his father is in danger, for the time being, Lucille is being carried away from him. And for now, that's enough.

A week later, Carl accompanies Negan to gather the tribute.

Carl doesn't know exactly why Negan relishes in having him on the collection team. Something about Carl's appearance, about the stark contrast of his youth and the numerous scars he's accumulated seems to shock the communities they encounter. Carl doesn't understand why. There are people missing limbs left and right from walker bites, a kid with a missing eye isn't anything to go calling home about, but it's effective. As long as Carl keeps quiet, as long as they see that even the children in Negan's group are warriors, his presence accomplishes whatever it is that Negan's after.

But now that Alexandria isn't distracted by having their friends lying dead in front of them, their stares are more evaluating, and he finds himself ducking away from their gaze. Especially the hunter's.

He is still baiting his breath, still praying to anyone that might be listening that Negan doesn't remember Carl's last name. He's just been 'Patches' or 'Lil Deputy' for so long, most of Sanctuary doesn't even know his first name. So far it works. So far, nobody has made the connection, not even Rick. And Carl uses that to his advantage.

While he's perusing the perimeter, he sees a girl scurry hurriedly into a house. Some of the Saviors are sprawled out, but the majority are in the collection area, and nobody else seems to notice her. When Carl finally finds where she's run off to, he finds what she's hiding. Inside the house is a nursery, and inside the nursery, the teenage girl is shushing a toddler. When she realizes she's been followed, her eyes widen, and for a moment, she reminds Carl of a deer looking down the barrel of a gun.

"I'm not going to hurt you unless you try something." Carl grunts, keeping his voice low. "What's
your name?"

The girl stares blankly for a moment, still wide-eyed, before answering.

"Sophia." Sophia is pretty, and Carl's face reddens. It's been a while since he's seen someone his own age. What's more than that, she looks familiar. But he doesn't have time to figure out why. He knows why she rushed in, he knows what she was trying to hide, and it wasn't guns.

"Negan doesn't hurt babies." He murmurs, shaking his head as he walks away. As he makes to leave, he realizes that the hunter has followed him, fury and alarm in his eyes. He's defending the girl, Carl realizes, and wonders idly whether she's his daughter. But it's clear from the man's confusion that he's heard Carl's last words. He doesn't say anything, instead moving to put himself between Carl and the girl. He doesn't need to, because Carl recognizes the utility belt tossed in the corner. Its insignia matches the one stitched into the hat that's tucked in his pack.

This is his father's house. This is his father's baby.

His eyes widen, now mimicking Sophia's.

"Shit." He grits his teeth, looking out the window. Negan is still goading Rick about something or another, but Carl knows how Negan works. He's going to want to go to his Dad's house at some point, to make his father feel violated, like nowhere's safe.

"He's going to come here. Can you hide the crib?" He asks, and Sophia stares dumbly in response. He huffs in irritation. Daryl blinks at him, but is quicker on the draw.

"I'll grab it, put it in the attic. Say it was the previous owner's, if he sees." Carl nods curtly at the redneck before turning back to Sophia.

"He doesn't hurt babies, but he'll use her against him. You better pretend she's yours." For a split second, he idly wonders whether she is the mother, before thinking better of it. Even in the apocalypse, he can't imagine his father being that kind of man.

"Where's the mother?" He asks, trying to shove down the hope in his voice, but neither one of them respond, still uncertain what to make of the young savior.

"Dead." Daryl retorts gruffly, and Carl finds his heart sinking. He doesn't know if the mother is Lori or some other woman his father has screwed somewhere along the way, but the truth of it all hurts, all the same. His father replaced him, just like Carl had replaced Rick. Carl served Negan now. Who was to say Rick even wanted him, anymore? Especially if he knew everything Carl had done? Everything that Carl had become?

Carl nods curtly, catching a glance at his reflection in the house's mirror as he does. It's been ages since he's seen what he looks like, but he realizes why his father doesn't recognize him. With his long hair, lengthened jawline, and the patch and scars sprawled over half of his face, he looks nothing like the version of himself in the crumpled school photo he still has tucked in his pocket. He convinces himself that it's for the best, and leaves before the two Alexandrians can see the tears that are beginning to well in his eyes. He walks out in time to hear gunshots, and races towards the scene, unsurprised that the commotion appears to be happening at the armory. The situation is over before he even gets there, but his arrival doesn't go unnoticed.

While Negan is illustrating some point or another to a horrified crowd, he grabs Carl around the neck, ruffling his hair as he jokingly keeps him in a fatherly hold. In front of him, some teenagers his own age stare at them, their eyes wide and jaws slacked as they take in Carl's appearance. The
teens look sheltered, like something out of a magazine you would see of what life was like before the apocalypse.

"And then this fucker strolls in, his balls not even dropped yet, and manages to kill four of my men before we managed to calm him down, WHILE half of his face is blown off. See, we recruit people like him. People like Patches here are useful. If he can manage to be one of my best shots with only one fuckin' eye, I think your boys can handle a few measly rations, hmm?"

He's out of Negan's grasp now, and the leader has moved on, but he still can't breathe. Because Rick is blinking at him like he's noticed him for the first time, and given the circumstances, it's very possible that he has. But if he recognizes who Carl is, he doesn't say it, and instead sports a somber, horrified look on his face. Carl's heart sinks. The very reason Negan makes a point to bring him to these things is now working on his own father. To remind people how dangerous Negan is, how dangerous even the weakest people at Sanctuary can be.

Carl keeps his eyebrows scrunched, hoping to conceal his features underneath his bangs and long hair. He prays Negan continues to use 'Patches', 'lil Deputy' had always been more of Simon's nickname, anyways. As he predicted, Negan escorts Rick to his house, and Carl watches from afar, shuffling his feet as he does. He had seen Sophia take the toddler out of the house, so he's not afraid of her being discovered there, but it's still possible that Negan might notice baby items, bottles, or something else that the frightened girl had left behind. There's a reason Negan's been their leader for this long. He's as smart as he is strong.

As Carl waits, he hears something he never thought he'd hear again and stops in his tracks, wondering if he's imagined it. But there it is again. A whinny. Beyond the walls, a horse is nickering. He isn't the only one that's noticed. The other men begin to get upset, thinking that the Alexandrians are hiding livestock now, but Carl hops up the walls, seeing the roaming animal beyond. It's feral, unbrushed, and thin. Their story checks out, it's just a wild horse they've been trying to tame. A nervous, clean-cut man tries to keep his voice calm as he explains. Aaron, he said his name was.

"She always runs away. I call her Buttons, but I've never been able to catch her. You can try, if you'd like. I think she's afraid that if she gets too close to us, we'll get her killed."

Carl knows the feeling.

A few adventurous saviors try it, but fail miserably. Carl doesn't know how they thought it would work. They would have to lure the horse like Negan had lured Carl, with promises of safety and food. Running blindly after the animal had just startled it away, and Carl hopes that the saviors' stupidity hasn't forced the horse into a horde.

"Too bad," Dwight grins, unzipping Carl's pack as they make to leave. Rick is elsewhere, looking after his people, but the hunter is back, eyeing their interaction with interest. In fact, it seems like ever since his encounter with Sophia, the hunter won't stop watching him. Dwight pulls out Carl's hat, playfully stuffing it on top of the teen's head. "Would have been cool to see the lil deputy riding a horse."

Carl freezes, grabbing the hat and stuffing it back into his pack. Dwight rolls his eyes, spitting chewing tobacco from the side of his mouth.

"Shit, no reason to get your panties in a twist about it. Thought you loved that thing?"

"Just gets in the way."
"You look like a girl without it. Ought to cut your hair soon, boy, or ya gonna die a virgin." Carl scowls at Dwight as they leave, thinking that the other long haired man is one to talk, before turning around to take one last look at the town his father is trying to protect. Is this place really worth it? For any of them? His father is walking up, but doesn't appear to have heard their conversation, a dazed look in his eyes as he watches the other saviors load into their vehicles. But the hunter's eyes pierce into Carl like he's seeing right through him, and Carl shifts from side to side under his stare.

"What are you lookin' at, asshole?" He growls as deep as his voice will allow. The hunter doesn't respond, and Carl piles into the jeep, knocking the door twice to let the driver know they're loaded up, that they're ready to go home. But suddenly, Sanctuary doesn't feel like home. Carl's not sure anywhere does, anymore.

Negan doesn't accompany them to the next pickup, instead dealing with some sort of issue at Hilltop. Despite the drama, Hilltop has been scared into submission for a while now, so Negan has Carl assigned to Alexandria's pickup, instead. But before he leaves, Negan orders Carl to take off his eyepatch for the job, to really drive the point home.

Carl hates leaving his eyepatch off, but tries not to let it show. His face feels naked without it. He's not afraid of looking ugly, he gave up on his looks a long time ago, but displaying the wound openly has always drawn stares. He's been able to hide beneath his hat's rim, behind his hair, and behind the bandages for so long, he feels bare without them even in Sanctuary, nevertheless in Alexandria.

The pickup goes smoothly, which is surprising given that Simon's leading it. Simon's always been rougher around the edges than Negan, and not nearly as smart about it. The pickup, like the last one, isn't done at the expected time, so Carl isn't surprised when he sees Sophia scurrying off, no doubt off to hide the toddler again. If his father was smart, he would make the baby live with someone else until this tides over, but the older man doesn't seem willing to part from his new family quite yet. Carl hopes it doesn't get him killed.

As predicted, his appearance draws stares, but the effect on the Alexandrians is more profound than it's ever been anywhere else. Outside of Rick's immediate circle, it's obvious the other people here are weak and sheltered. If they looked at him in horror before, holding an AK-47 while Negan was ruffling his hair, they're absolutely terrified of him now. Carl notices one of the teens from before putting himself in front of a teenage girl he doesn't recognize, who rolls her eyes at his attempt to protect her. Carl doesn't mind, he respects the other boy's need to protect the people he cares about, even if it's a stupid attempt. It's not until the boy clumsily goes for something bulging in the front pocket of his pant leg that Carl treats him like a threat.

Carl has shoved a knife at the other boy's neck before he even knows what hit him, and the gun the boy had been reaching for clatters to the ground. A single gunshot goes off in the scuffle, and now that the boy is snugly in his hold, Carl glances around to make sure it hasn't strayed and hit any civilians. It hasn't.

The men come running, both Saviors and Rick's group. Carl angrily kicks the offending gun underneath a nearby porch, shoving the boy's face against the wall several times before releasing his hold.

"That's how you get people killed, asshole." He growls in the boy's ear, striding back towards Simon with his hands clenched. Simon hasn't arrived in time to notice the stray gun, and Carl realizes that the only people that had a good look at the altercation was himself and the two teenagers.
"What the hell is goin' on?" Simon demands, scowling. Carl shakes his head.

"Idiot tried to jump me, didn't like me gettin' too close to his girl. Had to scare 'em to keep 'im in line." He turns to Rick, making sure to speak as loudly as he can so the teens behind him can hear the story. "Whatever you think about Negan, he doesn't allow us to get handsy with the women. Keep your fuckin' people in line, or the next bullet will go through his head."

The adrenaline from the situation, of the cover story, is beginning to wear off, replaced by the fear that Rick will somehow recognize him without the bandages. His fear isn't too misplaced. Rick can't stop staring at him, but whether it's because he's figuring him out or he's figured him out, Carl can't tell.

Damn it all to hell, for his Dad's sake, this pickup has to go smoothly. Negan has to turn his attentions elsewhere, rather than getting obsessed with Rick as his new toy to dominate. If Alexandria is going to stand a chance, Negan has to think they aren't a liability. He has to lose interest. Rick glances towards the Alexandrian boy nervously, suspiciously even, before turning back to Carl. He doesn't say anything, and Carl manages to assuage Simon's temper, who seems amused that the teens are policing themselves.

The rest of the pickup goes without a hitch, but Carl still can't help but feel guilty at how little food Simon has left behind in the pantry. He wonders if Sophia will eat tonight.

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For whatever reason, Negan puts him on Hillside for their next pickup. Supposedly, Dwight and Simon are impressed by Carl, and are even recommending to make him a full-fledged Savior soon. This would involve having his back branded with an N, something Carl isn't particularly looking forward to. He had hoped to stay out of sight and out of mind, but he keeps having to interject himself into situations in order to save the Alexandrians' sorry asses, and he's miraculously come out looking like the perfect little soldier each time.

Like when he finds the asian's widow hiding in a Hilltop closet. The same widow his Dad said was dead and buried.

He'll never forget the look on her face the night her husband's face was bashed in, or the sound of her screams. They mirror the faces and screams he's heard so many times before, but the fact that she's a friend of his father rubs salt in the wound. A black woman hiding with her, another Alexandrian, shoves him back before he has time to think, and there's a struggle that they don't have time for. He can hear one of the other Saviors, Willie, coming to see what the commotion is about, and he manages to shove them back inside the closet and slam the door before Willie walks in.

"Everythin' ok? Heard a bang." His guns are out, his eyes wild. Willie isn't particularly smart, but he likes shooting things, something Carl very much did not want him to do right now.

Carl leans against the closet door, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. He's never been a fantastic liar, but playing the part of a stupid teenage boy seems to work every time. He picks at his edge of his gloves anxiously.

"There….uh….was a mop."

"A mop?" Carl is beginning to think that 'Willie isn't very smart' was an understatement. Because as confused as the other man is, he doesn't look suspicious at all, merely amused.

"They had shit piled in there a mile high. Tripped over a crap ton of it. I'll let them clean up the
damn mess themselves, dumbasses."

He walks into the hallway just as Simon, Gregory, and Jesus approach. He can see the fear in Jesus’s eyes, and Carl narrows his eyes at the Hilltop men. Gregory has been a stooge, little more than a puppet, for some time. But instead of Negan calling all of the shots, Carl is beginning to think Jesus is. And with a nickname like Jesus, is it really that surprising?

"Kid’s just a damn klutz, boss. Nothin’ over here." Willie says dejectedly, looking rather bored.

"Never took you for a klutz, lil’ deputy." Simon chuckles, cocking his head to the side. "What did you do with yer damn hat?"

Carl shrugs, staring Jesus down. The two have met before, but this is the first time the other man has seen his face without his eyepatch. The older man doesn’t seem to even flinch.

"Gets in the way." Carl murmurs, refraining a wince as he hears the slightest of noises in the closet behind him. Nobody seems to notice. Nobody but damn Jesus, whose lip gives the slightest of quivers at the movement.

"Damn shame. What are we gonna call ya, then? Can’t call you 'Deputy' or 'Patches', anymore. Don’t got no hat, don’t got no eyepatch. Hell, what even is your name?" Simon chortles, and Willie lets out a big belly laugh.

"Shit, boss, even I know that. Charlie, right?" Willie guesses.

"Nah, that ain’t it. Starts with a K, don’t it?"

"If you can guess it 'fore we get back, I’ll give you one of my protein bars." Carl offers breezily, hoping the conversation will blow over before anyone hears. They make it to the gates before Simon gets it right.

"Damn. I still think I like 'Deputy' better, 'Carl' makes ya sound like an old man. Need to start wearin’ that hat again, kid, don’t look right without it."

Jesus watches him as they load up. If Carl didn’t know better, he would have thought that the man was giving him an appreciative nod in the rearview mirror as they leave. The road ahead seems to visibly narrow before his very eyes, and he wonders just exactly what he has gotten himself into.
Chapter 2

Author's Note: This is a particularly long chapter, and this story doesn't have a beta, so please let me know in the comments what you think and whether there are any mistakes that need correcting! As I've mentioned before, due to the butterfly effect of Carl never reuniting with Rick, events differ and will happen in a different order than what is shown in the show.

Also, WARNING, there are allusions to child abuse and neglect in this chapter. There is also quite a bit of foul language. While I'm not a fan of swearing, I feel it's necessary in places in the story for people to stay in character. If anyone feels that I need to increase the rating, just let me know and I will.

Chapter 2

The next pickup to Alexandria doesn't go as smoothly. In fact, the pickup was a failure before they even arrived to the community's gates.

Carl doesn't particularly remember how his car found itself upside down, but he's relieved to discover that it's not something the Alexandrians have done. One of the biters is lodged underneath the car hood, and it becomes clear that their own man Martinez's lazy method of running over the biters has somehow landed them in a car wreck. When Carl comes to, Martinez is desperately trying to crawl out of the driver's side door. The other man, Jacobs, is clearly dead, his blood spattered across the passenger side seat, and the gore is drawing more biters. Out of all the jeeps that could have wrecked, did it really have to be the one in the very back of the convoy? The one least likely to be noticed?

"Martinez. Help." Carl croaks. His words don't fall on deaf ears. Martinez turns. Martinez hears him. But Martinez doesn't help the pinned teen, instead grabbing his gun and fleeing. Carl can hear biters approaching as he hangs upside down. He can hear his own radio go off, Martinez's voice asking for backup.

"Casualties?" The other voice questions.

"I'm the only one that made it out. Jacobs and Patches are gone. Need immediate evac, now Dwight!"
That lying son of a bitch.

Carl is still confused, his head rattled by whatever has happened, but as he's coming to, he realizes the real reason he's been unable to escape. His seatbelt is stuck, and no matter how forcibly he pushes it, his clumsy attempts at forcing the release button are failing.

*Mom doesn't like pocket knives.* He hears his ten year old self saying.

*Mom doesn't have to know.* His father had replied.

And that's how, in a world where Rick Grimes doesn't recognize his own son, he manages to save his son's life yet again. Carl grabs at his pocket, and finding the knife within, clumsily tears at the belt. It's an older knife, and while it initially struggles against the belt's tight binding, it makes it through, sending Carl collapsing into the glass ridden ground. He doesn't have time to dwell on the dozens of shards burying into his skin, instead using his knife on a biter that's plunged its head through the window. Carl hears voices on the radio, but in the mad dash away from the biters' ever reaching hands, is unable to grab it before he leaves.

Carl doesn't remember exactly how he managed to get out of the car without getting bitten, he only knows that he does it.

Carl doesn't know how long he's been running before he sees the horse, he only knows that he sees it.

Carl doesn't know how he manages to coax the horse into letting him on its back, or how he manages to hold on for miles without falling off, he only knows that he *freaking rides it.*

"...would have been cool to see the lil deputy riding a horse."

Dwight's words echo in his ears, and he shudders as he arrives at Alexandria's gates, chilled even through Virginia's dampening heat. He knows that it isn't a good sign, that it means he's lost a lot of blood, but he doesn't care. The gates are still open from Negan's arrival, and his approach has caused both the Alexandrians and the Saviors to turn to face him. Rick is nowhere to be seen, but the remaining Alexandrians are twitchy, expecting a trap. A black woman with dreadlocks fingers her sheath, expecting trouble. The Saviors are just confused, furrowing their eyebrows and grasping their weapons as the horse trots forward.

When Carl's eyes meets Martinez's, the other man's eyes are as wide as Sophia's had been the day he had found her with the baby. For a moment, Carl just stares Martinez down. His ears are ringing. Negan is saying something that Carl doesn't hear, and even Dwight is talking to him now, a question in his tone. But Carl can't hear what they're saying. He doesn't even try. He just raises his rifle at Martinez and fires. Button rears up, wild and unused to the gunfire. Carl does hear the gurgling thud Martinez makes when he collapses into the dust. He hears it and smiles.

Carl doesn't know how he manages to prevent himself from falling as Button bucks. Yet he ends up falling all the same, and soon he's kneeling in the dust, too.

When Carl wakes, he smells the lingering scent of honeysuckles outside and instantly knows that he's not in Sanctuary. For a moment, he thinks he's back at his middle school, back in the basement he had been holed up in for the first few months of the apocalypse. It had been miserable. His sneezing had nearly alerted looters to their hiding spot, and it's an allergy he certainly hasn't grown out of. He sneezes, cursing as the sudden movement causes his head to pound.
"Easy does it, you have a pretty nasty concussion." A woman's voice soothes. He opens his eyes and finds that whoever was talking wasn't lying. The lights cause a sharp pain to come over his eyes, both of his eyes thanks to the phantom pain he gets from time to time. He winces, blocking as much of the light as he can with his hands. He's in an infirmary. Or rather, a mansion that's been converted into one.

Despite the woman's gentle words, he feels large hands slapping his cheeks, hands he recognizes. The movement causes his world to tilt, and he opens his eye through the pain to find Negan's face meeting him on the other side.

"Hey, Chaaaamp." The man drawls, a shit-eating grin spreading across his face. Carl gulps. Negan is happy about his injury. Which means either Carl's injuries somehow play into a bigger plan, or Negan is going to get to kill someone. Possibly both. Possibly him. And given that Carl's pretty sure Martinez's brains are leaking out in front of Alexandria's entrance, he's willing to bet the latter.

"I knew I liked you for a reason." Negan grins, clasping a hand on Carl's shoulder. Huh. Good thing Carl doesn't gamble. He can't help but moan, which somehow tickles Negan's fancy even more. Negan chuckles, pointing towards Carl like he just told the world's best joke. Carl blinks, and when his vision clears, he finds that a small crowd is watching, curious. A pudgy woman, the black woman with dreadlocks, Dwight, and a younger Alexandrian man that Carl had spotted at the gates.

"The men found your jeep, it was fuckin' flipped from Martinez's handiwork. And what do you do, but stroll in those gates like fuckin' John Wayne, bleedin' out and riding a random ass horse, and you still wake up in ten minutes flat. I knew you were tough, kid, but this? Not only have your balls dropped, they're absolutely swingin'." Negan grins, but Carl's vision is too blurry to determine if the grin is predatory or genuine.

Carl had killed Martinez. Even in Sanctuary, Saviors weren't just allowed to kill one another willy nilly without Negan's approval. Negan has every right to put Carl down for shooting one of his men, especially since he did it in front of another community. It undermined Negan's authority, made it look like he couldn't control his own men. Carl knew better than to risk it, but he didn't care. It had been worth it.

"I thought Martinez's story was fuckin' fishy. Got a big whiff of his breath, he must have been brushin' his teeth with booze this morning. Left you to die, I take it?"

Carl swallows roughly, giving a small nod. Even that motion sets his head on fire, and he finds himself spitting his breakfast onto the floor. Carl's ears are ringing, but Negan's laughter overshadows it all. Negan says something else that Carl can't hear, and cocks his head to the side, waving his hands in front of Carl's face.

"Did you hear that, kid? Too injured to move. Guess you get to stay here. Bet that will be a surprise for pricky Ricky when gets back from this scavenging run of his."

Carl can't imagine why Negan looks so pleased with himself, because Carl is utterly terrified, and for once doesn't bother hiding it. His plan was to help the Alexandrians on the sly, in secret, not to be left as some sort of whipping boy for them to take their revenge out on. The fact that his father isn't here only makes that fate more likely. He's flailing now, each movement causing his world to spin, but gentle hands hold him down. Negan's hands.

Wait. Negan's being gentle?

Carl really did hit his head. As Negan speaks to him, explaining something that is overshadowed
by the ringing in his ears, the man looks almost fatherly. Loving. Negan has a soft spot for kids and injured women, Carl knows, it was probably the only reason Negan hadn't killed him when he first found him. But for the other man to leave him here as some sort of bait, to be ripped apart by the wolves of Alexandria all while sounding so protective was jarring.

But it's the look on Dwight's marred face that has Carl even more worried. Fear. Dwight looks uncertain, even a bit scared for him. When Negan leaves, Dwight puts a comforting hand on Carl's shoulder, whispering words that he's sure are more eloquent than anything Negan had said moments before. The ringing fades just enough to make out a few of them.

"We'll come back for you in a few weeks, kid. When you're good enough to travel, we'll get you out of here. They don't......they don't kill kids, here." Dwight says. But even as Dwight says the words, Carl can tell he doesn't believe them. Carl glares at the young Alexandrian man, and then the woman with dreadlocks, before looking back at Dwight.

"That's the problem, Dwight. Ain't a kid. Not no more." He grunts, struggling to hold back tears. The pain is overwhelming, and Alexandria is out of pain meds, he knows. This must be his punishment for killing Martinez. Negan's setting the Alexandrians up to fail, and using his own misbehaving teenager to do it. Especially since Rick wasn't at the pickup. And Rick was absolutely supposed to be at each pickup.

The younger man who is looking after the community in Rick's stead is named Spencer, Carl overhears, and the conniving little bitch is calling for Negan as he leaves the infirmary, offering to make some sort of deal. Wanting to be the new leader of Alexandria, their own personal Gregory. He's already spilling the beans about who's in a relationship with who, who Negan can use against each other, yada yada. A gunshot rings out, and Carl takes that to mean that Negan has declined the deal. The sound of it alone causes Carl's head to spin, and his vision goes dark once more.

When Carl comes to, he hopes it was all some sort of terrible dream.

Spoiler alert: It wasn't.

It feels like he's lost his eye all over again, and the more lucid he becomes, the more he realizes why. The injury is on the same side of his head as the eye he'd lost. Maybe that's why Negan left him here. Maybe he's brain damaged now, and Negan decided to dump him on Alexandria rather than bother with him, this time around. Carl doesn't particularly like Negan, but he feels strangely abandoned all the same. And even worse, the longer he stays in Alexandria, the more likely his dad will recognize him. Which could cause all sorts of complications that Carl isn't ready to face yet.

Carl widens his eye as he comes to, and even realizing he's alone doesn't make him feel better as he comes to a horrible realization. His hat. His hat was still in his pack. And someone had been considerate enough to toss his pack in the infirmary's corner before leaving him here to die. Carl tries to jump up, but his body revolts at his attempt, instead causing him to clatter to the floor. He groans from the effort, crawling until he makes it to the corner. To his relief, his stuff looks untouched, and he marvels at these people's stupidity. But eventually, someone is going to search through it, when he's knocked out on drugs or who knows what, and he can't let them find it. He isn't ready to answer those questions yet.

He searches desperately for somewhere to hide it, and finds a linen cabinet in the same corner as the pack. Still sprawled out on the floor, he opens it, and is relieved that the items seem rather whimsical and not something that would be regularly used. Dental floss, really? Why would they
even store that here? He stuffs the hat inside, careful to leave it at an angle where it won't be crumpled. It stands out inside the cabinet, blood and grime rubbing off from the hat and onto the cabinet's clean white paint. He closes the cabinet door just as the infirmary door opens. He's still on the floor when the newcomers find him.

"Shit, did he turn?" It's a man's voice, the accent so thick it's practically slurred. The hunter, Carl realizes. And from the sound of the other footsteps, he isn't alone. Carl turns around, groaning from the action, and finds himself at the end of the black woman's blade.

The dreadlock woman, the hunter, and his father meet his gaze, their eyes as wide as he feels his remaining one must be. He feels practically ready to piss his pants, and it occurs to him that the need to relieve himself is a very real and embarrassing need right now.

"Bathroom?" He grunts more than asks, his head reeling from the motion. Another head pokes through the doorway, and the pudgy woman from before watches the scene unfolding in front of her warily. The vague scent of honeysuckles invades his senses, and Carl sneezes violently, the motion sending nausea running over him in waves. He throws up again, and while the pudgy woman starts to help him, she tentatively decides to remain by the door. The woman with dreadlocks lowers her sword.

If Carl didn't know better, he would almost think they feel sorry for him.

"Err, over there. Denise can help you, or Rick or Daryl, if you'd prefer a man." The black woman mutters, blinking at him.

Crap. Crap crap crap crap...

"Denise is fine." He mutters, unable to meet their eyes. He's not particularly happy with the idea of a woman helping him go to the bathroom, but he didn't trust the hunter, and he sure as hell didn't want to give his Dad any more chances to recognize him.

The woman with dreadlocks nods, slowly sheathing her blade. The group is reduced to carrying melee weapons, the majority of guns having been stripped from the place. Some of them by Carl, himself. He wonders idly whether the gun he helped them hide would be the one they used to put a bullet between his eyes. The pudgy woman, the one they called Denise, steps forward, offering a sheepish smile. Carl gets the impression that she's a self-taught medic rather than having any sort of practical medical experience, and suddenly feels even more insulted that Negan has left him behind.

"Careful." The hunter roughly warns the woman, who seems altogether too much at ease as she helps him stand. "His buddy Dwight is the one that shot you a few months ago."

The woman falters at this, loosening her grip in surprise. Carl is sent clattering back to the floor, where he lands face first into the pile of vomit.

"Crap, sorry! I'm so sorry. Are you ok? Is your head-"

Carl grunts in response, and finds himself dry heaving from the sheer motion of his fall, the stomach acid he has landed in sticking to his hair. To his embarrassment, he finds that a puddle of urine is spreading beneath him and onto the linoleum floor.

"No need for the bathroom, now." The woman with dreadlocks murmurs, and Carl winces as they observe him. If they were Saviors, they would be rubbing his nose in his own sick by now, but instead they just watch him. Somehow, that's even worse. Rick's voice breaks the silence.
"Denise, help him get a shower. Daryl, stay outside, make sure he doesn't try anything. If you'd rather have a man help you, just holler."

*If you need any help with that homework, just holler-
*If you need anything, bud, just holler-
*If you have any bad dreams, just holler-

"Denise is fine." Carl grunts, looking away.

He doesn't remember how he stands long enough to get a shower, even with Denise's help, he just remembers how relieved he is to lay back in his cot when it's finally over.

Later, when he comes to, the Alexandrians are huddled outside the infirmary, unaware that their voices are carrying through the wall. It can't have been too long since the shower he doesn't remember taking, because it sounds like the same group of people as before.

"I can't tell if this is some sort of power play or if he *wants* the kid to die-"

"Both? I mean, think about it. If we kill the kid, we've killed a *kid*, and we're the monsters. If we let him stay, then we're openly accepting a Savior sleeping beside our own people, spying on us. Negan's making a show of keeping our tails tucked between our legs. He's *baiting* us and seeing how we'll react, and either way? He wins."

"Just be glad it happened to be him." A voice murmurs gruffly. The hunter. "Out of all of the bastards we could have been stuck with, it's the kid that helped us hide lil asskicker. Could be worse."

"And he stopped Ron from getting himself killed, if Enid's to be believed." The black woman agrees. Her voice turns hesitant. "What Daryl said about child soldiers......I'm not sure he's far from the truth. Negan threatened to take one of us hostage...what if that kid is some other community's Ron? Or Sam?"

"He's still old enough to kill one of us." Rick growls, and Carl can hear him pacing. "If he lays a hand on one of our people, we deal with it. Otherwise, we keep an eye on him. I want a guard on him, 24/7."

"Can we afford to do that and still make tribute?"

"We can't afford not to."

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that the black woman was the one chosen to be his guard. Carl doesn't think there's a time he wakes up that she isn't there, staring at him with that steady, ever calculating look in her eyes. The next time Carl wakes up, the same woman prevents him from going back to sleep.

"Denise says we shouldn't have let you sleep in the first place with that concussion. You're not out of the woodwork yet, but if you had a brain bleed, we'd probably know it by now." The woman
states, leaning back in her chair. That's reassuring.

Denise. The pudgy woman. Daryl. The hunter. Carl is learning their names one by one. He blinks at the woman.

"Who are you?" He asks bluntly. The woman offers a smirk.

"Michonne. Who are you?" Somehow, Carl isn't prepared for the question to rebound on him. Nobody ever cared what his name was before, even at Sanctuary. His points were assigned to a designated number, so even the cafeteria people and armory guys had never bothered to learn it. That's part of how he earned his nickname. All anyone had to do was refer to "Patches" and everyone in Sanctuary knew who they were talking about, no number or proper name needed.

"Patch." He says plainly, which earns another smirk. Michonne waves him off, and he's put off by her easy manner. She still thinks of him as a kid, somehow, and it's getting under his skin.

"Your actual name. The one your mama gave you." She jokes, but the question lands hard, and he scowls in return.

"Never needed much more of a name than that." He spits, and the smile disappears from Michonne's face. He regrets the venom in his voice, but keeps scowling. She nods slowly.

"Alright, Patch. I'd say it's nice to meet you, but...." She raises her hands at their surroundings, and he nods slightly.

"Same." He murmurs, still scowling. He tries to get up, but his attempts only win him another bout of nausea, and he freezes, swallowing what's trying to come up, and nearly gags again from the sheer taste of it. Michonne raises an eyebrow.

"Surprised you made it that long on that horse. Looked like some sort of walker cowboy, comin' in on that thing, barely holdin' on."

He blinks at her. "Walker?"

"That's what we call the undead. Rick's name for 'em, just sort of stuck for the rest of us, I guess. What do you call them?"

"Biters. Negan jus' calls 'em corpses." He says simply, looking out the window. He remembers the honeysuckle bush lingering there too late, and sneezes for his effort, groaning at the pain that follows.

"Got a chest cold, too?" Michonne asks slowly, eyeing the door. She's looking for Denise, like a cold would require a freaking medic or something. Carl shakes his head slowly, just earning a bout of vertigo for his trouble.

"Honeysuckles. Fuckin' hate them." He grumbles. He crosses his arms, leaning his head back against the cot. He finds himself thankful that out of all the mattresses that Negan had burned during their first trip, they had at least left the infirmary alone.

Michonne barks a laugh, an incredulous look on her face. "Honeysuckles? You're allergic to honeysuckles?" She practically giggles at the thought, and Carl realizes it must sound ludicrous, like Negan being allergic to daisies or something. He can't help the smile that slips to his own face, and he hrmphs in agreement. But he freezes, realizing his error all too late. She wouldn't mention it to Rick, would she? If his Dad hadn't figured it out already, surely those stupid flowers wouldn't be the nail in his coffin? If Michonne notices Carl's discomfort she doesn't say anything, instead
leaning back in her own chair.

"How old are you?" She asks bluntly, and he raises an eyebrow.

"How old are you?" He retorts.

"I asked first."

"And my people have been killing more of yours lately, so I kinda think that gives me dibs." Carl huffs, grimacing as Michonne stiffens at his reply. He forgot. Sanctuary's sense of morbid humor probably wasn't appreciated here.

"Thirty-seven." She answers coldly, cocking her head to the side. "You?"

Carl shrugs.

"Don't know." Michonne scowls at his lack of reply.

"We had an agreement, and you insult our dead friends without even bothering to answer the question?" Her words are spoken through grimaced teeth. He crosses his arms.

"I said I don't know. I-I don't know how many years it's been." He looks off to the side, finding the cabinet door rather interesting. Through the door's faux frosted glass coating, he can barely make out the brown tinge of his father's hat. Michonne's face softens, her words less stilted.

"How old were you when the outbreak happened?" She asks.

"Twelve." He murmurs, struggling to remember what his school looked like.

"You're sixteen or seventeen, then." She says decidedly, and he frowns at the pity in her voice. He rolls his eyes, finding anywhere but her to look at.

"S' not like age matters anymore, anyways. I'm a hell of a lot older than that moron that tried to shoot me." He shifts uncomfortably. For a woman that initially seemed so cold, Michonne manages to change her expression at every little thing he says, and he's not sure what to make of it.

"Enid told us you covered for him." She says. He shrugs.

"Simon wouldn't have killed him for it. He would have killed the girl, just to make a point."

His words seem to echo in the room, and he realizes that the nonchalant way he's said it unsettles the woman even more. She swallows, nodding grimly.

"Then thank you. For Judith, too."

"Judith?"

"The baby." Michonne explains, and Carl feels uncomfortable with how quickly the Alexandrians' appreciation of him is spreading. If Negan put a spy here, or if someone wants food in exchange for juicy gossip, it's all over. Carl has seen how quickly things can go south in communities, especially the new ones.

"Don't go repeatin' that." He growls.

"Why not?" Michonne asks, somewhat surprised.
"Because then Negan will decorate Sanctuary with my head." He spits, shaking his head like it should be obvious. Michonne doesn't respond for a while, instead eyeing him as the two sit, each deep in their own thoughts. It's at that moment that Carl realizes the piece of information that just flew over his head.

Judith. His sister's name is Judith.

"Did you ever meet the mother?" He asks tentatively, knowing how tightly Daryl had guarded that piece of information, before. Michonne sighs, shaking her head.

"She passed away just before I met Rick. She died giving birth to her." Michonne explains softly, and Carl swallows hard, ready to ask a question he's confident Michonne isn't going to answer. Part of him hopes she doesn't.

"What was her name?" Surprise flickers across Michonne's face, followed by suspicion.

"Lori." The woman says slowly, and Carl feels an overwhelming bout of nausea overcome him, one not related to the concussion in the slightest. But the woman continues. "And if you ever say her name around him, or repeat any of that to Negan, I'll personally rip out your throat."

If Carl wasn't reeling from what she had just told him, he would have respected the woman's protectiveness over his father. Instead, he only feels numb. He isn't sure what's worse, the fact that his mother is dead, or the fact that she had died nearly a year after she had left him at school.

The logical part of Carl knows that a million different things could have happened that day. The streets were practically stopped from traffic, and biters had been wandering the street openly for the first time, even if they hadn't quite developed into hordes yet. This wasn't proof that she knowingly abandoned him. She might have even looked for him. But he had spent years mourning her, feeling certain that she must have died before she had the chance to pick him up. The idea of anything else was hard to swallow.

She never died trying to save you. She left you for dead and replaced you with a new baby."

"Your folks dead?" Michonne inquires, and realization laces her voice, like she's suddenly discovered the reason behind Carl's invasive questions. She sees an orphan mourning his family, he knows, it's not that she knows who he is. But she's still not entirely wrong. He nods, swallowing back the bile that tries to rise.

"Yeah." He murmurs, eyeing the corner cabinet's frosted glass. His father's hat is still waiting for him there, and his head feels exposed without it. "They both are."

Several days pass before he's able to walk again. His legs work fine, it's his ability to remain standing without his head exploding that's the problem.

In the meantime, Michonne has seen more of him than anyone else has in ages, and he's not sure what he feels about that. She's an attractive woman, but she's also old. It's really just embarrassing, like having an estranged aunt seeing him piss or something. He's not as well built as the other Saviors, or even the other Alexandrians. While he's tall with slightly broadened shoulders, he's still lanky and doesn't have the muscle to back it up, which is made even more apparent now that he's missing the layers of shirts and jackets he normally wears. The fact that he's more torso than leg only serves to make him feel more gangly and less like the hardened Savior he's trying to portray.
"They don't feed you at this 'Sanctuary'?' The woman jokes, acting like she's going to poke a rib. He jumps back, yelping at the pain the motion causes. She blinks. His shirt had risen when he startled, and Michonne nosily raises it back up, taking in the cascade of purple and blue adorning his side.

"Denise didn't mention bruised ribs." She murmurs. Carl snorts.

"Denise didn't ask. Too scared of me, I think." He smiles, oddly proud of this fact. "Can't do nothin' but wrap 'em, anyways, and I can do that myself when my head stops killing me."

Michonne grimaces, once again proving her ability to change facial expressions at every little word. "You get a lot of bruised ribs?"

He shrugs, offering a grin.

"Better bruised ribs and a full belly than dish duty and dog food." He jokes, but once again, Sanctuary's morbid sense of humor doesn't seem to work on the woman. Carl is suddenly aware of the fact that he's been saying way too much to her. Hell, Negan might as well have given Alexandria a spy instead of the way around. Damn it. He should be out in the town, chatting people up and playing the stupid little boy card. Instead, he's telling them everything they want to know without anything to show for it.

"I take it you ate a lot of dog food, growing up?" She raises an eyebrow, letting his shirt fall back down. He knows better than to answer her this time, merely responding with another shrug.

"Good to know Negan distributes our food appropriately." She remarks bitterly, shaking her head. Carl doesn't know what to say to this, instead limping to the bathroom by himself for the first time in days. The Saviors have always had dibs on the best food over the regular workers, it was just the way things worked. The upper echelon of Sanctuary might be soldiering dicks, but they had to stay strong to enforce the tributes on the other communities. It's never bothered him before, and it certainly doesn't now. Hell, right now, he's just relieved to be somewhat mobile again. Finally able to go to the bathroom unassisted, he nearly groans in relief as he relieves himself, carefully flushing the commode as not to jostle his head in the process.

"Man…” He begins, opening the bathroom door back up and giving Michonne a grin. "...I have never been so happy to take a piss on my own in my-"

But Michonne isn't alone. Sophia is with her, looking once again like a deer in headlights. He turns beet red, cursing and turning around in order to finish zipping up his fly. When he turns back around, Michonne has the audacity to look amused, and even….pleased? What the hell?

"Hi." Sophia waves, unable to meet his eyes. She's carrying a basket, but Carl can't see what's in it from where he's standing. He's not sure he wants to come any closer, he's sure he'll just frighten her even more, but he's having trouble staying in one spot, so he holds onto the wall to keep from swaying.

"Hi." He mumbles back, glaring at the still amused Michonne.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to-I was just bringing your food by, and I wanted to-you know, say thank you. For Judith." Her voice is soft and sweet, and Carl finds that he still can't shake off the burning sensation in his face. What the hell is up with him? He's seen Negan's wives giving the leader lap dances before. Hell, Negan even had Sherry to give him one, one time, just to mess with Dwight. And while that had certainly been an uncomfortable turn on, none of it affected him as much as a single look from this very clothed girl was.
"Didn't mean nothin'. He grumbles. "Why he have ya lookin' after her, anyways? Ya related or somethin'?" He knows the answer to that. She's not. Or at least, he hopes they're not. It would be awkward to have a crush on your long lost cousin in the apocalypse. Of course, that would be admitting that he had a crush, which he absolutely did not-

"Oh, no. We're all just kind of a family, here. Me and my mom, we've known Rick since practically the beginning of all of this. He's the reason I'm alive." She offers sweetly, and somehow this just twists the knife deeper into Carl's heart. He tries not to feel jealous, and fails.

"Yer lucky, then." He says, and she nods in agreement.

"I take it you don't have anyone like that, back at Sanctuary?" She asks innocently, and he snorts at the thought of it.

"Negan's wives were nice enough when I was younger, I guess." As one of the first kids among the Saviors, Carl had become the unofficial mascot of Sanctuary for a time, especially when Negan first found him. The wives tended to dote on him, the only 'child' in the compound that they ever had a chance to interact with, since they were stuck in Negan's quarters most of the time. Which was part of why the lap dance from Sherry had been so uncomfortable. It would have been like getting a lap dance from Michonne or his mother. Not to mention that Dwight had been watching, which was exactly as awkward as Negan intended.

"Wives?" The girl's eyes bug out, and Michonne stiffens. Carl realizes that once again, he's said too much, and crosses his arms. Shit, he should have realized. Send in the pretty girl to get the prisoner talking. It's the oldest trick in the book.

"Yeah." He affirms, peering over the basket's edge. It isn't anything fancy, just some bread and a starkist tuna packet. Given how much the Saviors have taken from the town, he knows he should be grateful for even that.

"Hope you like tuna." Sophia winces apologetically, handing it to him. He shuffles indecisively before nodding his thanks and taking the basket. He shrugs, which seems to be the only thing he's able to do around the girl.

"Food's food." He says. Tuna out of a packet, even one that's clearly expired, still tastes better than a lot of the things he's been forced to eat over the years.

"Yeah." She agrees. "I used to hate the stuff, but before Alexandria, we were so hungry, I think I could've eaten mud pies and have been happy about it." He knows the feeling. He remembers the days after living in the school, of traveling with various groups before hiding away in an old bunker he had found. The canned goods and MREs in the bunker only lasted for so long, and he had resorted to eating worms by the end of it. That's when he finally dared to go out beyond his hiding spot to scavenge. That's when he had run into the Claimers.

"Your eye..." Sophia starts tentatively, and Carl's spine stiffens at the mention of it. "Did..... did Negan do that to you?"

He wants to snap at her, to snarl at her, but the trembling in her voice somehow eases his temper. Instead, self-consciousness sweeps over him, and he reaches up to cover it with his hand, cursing as he remembers it's exposed.

"Shit, forgot he made me leave the patch behind. Damn bastard....." His cursing fades into mere grumbling, because he finds himself getting lost in her big, frightened, doe-like eyes. He sighs, shaking his head.
"Nah, wasn't Negan. Parades me around like a show pony to make people wary of 'im, though." He chuckles, and he can practically hear the unspoken question lingering on the edge of her lips, the ones that she's too shy to say. Michonne is watching the two, practically at the edge of her seat as she pretends not to be interested. The question lingers in the air.

If Negan didn't do it, then who did?

He hates remembering the Claimers. He prefers to buy into the story Negan has spun, that the leader had stumbled across a nearly feral child who took out several of his own men all while sporting a gunshot wound to the face. That Carl had run into their lives a tough little warrior, who had fought a group of bandits tooth and limb and come out a Savior for it. The story Negan had spun was better than what really happened. Better than remembering that somewhere, out there, some of the Claimers were still alive. He wonders if they would recognize him, now. They probably just think he's dead.

"Negan doesn't like to hurt kids." He reminds Sophia again, ripping open the tuna packet. The Alexandrians had intended for him to make a sandwich with it, he knows, but hunger lines his belly from having thrown up his last few meals, and he squeezes the fish forward, sucked the tuna out of the packet like he's eating a gogurt. Michonne and Sophia don't seem too enthralled with his table manners, but he doesn't care. It's not like he's trying to impress them, or that he has a crush on one of them or anything. Because that would just lead to complications, and the whole point of hiding in plain sight was to avoid complications. "Long as you keep that baby away from Rick, Negan won't hurt her." He reminds them.

"And if Negan figures out she's Rick's child?" Michonne challenges. Carl shrugs, sucking on his tuna. The sharp smell churns his stomach, but he forces himself to hold it down.

"He'll probably threaten to bash her head in, and take her back to Sanctuary to mess with Rick's head. Nothin' like a good old fashioned hostage." The tuna is stuck in his throat now, and it's hard to talk. "Plus, Candy's been wantin' a baby."

"Candy?" Sophia asks, that tremor back in her voice. Carl nods.

"Yeah. Another one of Negan's wives. And if you tell Negan I mentioned any of their names, I'll tear your throat out." He says to woman in dreadlocks, but his threat is empty. He knows it. Michonne knows it. Sophia doesn't know it, and just stares at him, horrified. He tries not to let her stare get to him. She shouldn't like him, anyways. Because if she likes him, and he likes her, then these people might just have leverage on him, too.

Sophia shakes the conversation off, still disturbed as she motions to a bag on the floor.

"I brought you some clean clothes. I wasn't sure what size you are, so I brought a variety." He doesn't know what his size is, either. She smiles at him, making up some sort of excuse why she needs to be going. He knows he's scared her off. He tries to convince himself it's a good thing. His heart still clenches a little when she leaves.

The look on Michonne's face drives him up the wall.

"What?" He demands as roughly as he can manage. He's sounding more and more like a petulant teenager, and he hates it. Simon would have slapped that tone out of his voice by now. Now it's Michonne's turn to shrug, and she leans back down into her chair.

He digs through the bag, and quickly finds that when Sophia said a 'variety', she absolutely meant it. Everything from dress shirts to football jerseys. The last time he's worn a dress shirt was before
the world ended, when his mother had made him wear one to get his picture taken in. He scowls at it, instead eyeing a t-shirt with a batman on it.

He loved comics, once. Before the world went to crap, Marvel and DC merchandise had taken the Grimes household by storm. He had grown up with the likes of Spiderman and Batman movies, and the idea of other characters coming to life had blown his mind as a kid. Just before the outbreak started, the second Iron Man movie was about to be released, with Thor set to come out the following year. Carl had always wondered if the films would have been any good, and whether their actors were still alive. Like most things, he had never found any answers.

He tells himself that he chooses the Batman shirt because it'll make him look younger, and that being the friendly kid is his key to keeping the Alexandrians from killing him. In reality, it's because as much as he'd always been a Superman fan as a kid, he suddenly feels more inclined towards Batman. He wonders if his voice has broken in enough to do the voice. Dad had always been able to do it….

He shakes himself out of his thoughts, casting an exasperated look towards Michonne as he picks out a pair of jeans.

"You gonna watch me change, too?"

Michonne shrugs her shoulders, her white teeth practically shining as she bares her teeth into a facetious smile. "I can get Denise instead, if you'd like?"

He grumbles but ignores her. It's become clear that ever since Daryl's offhand comment about Dwight that the medic is scared stiff of him, only coming into the room for as long as she needs to. He supposes it's a good thing. Nobody's found his hat yet, after all.

"You know, if I were any of the other Saviors, I'd be callin' y'all out on your bullshit right now. Negan would roll heads if I told him you were treatin' me like a prisoner."

"But you're not them, and I don't think you will." The woman says simply. He can't tell if her tone is approving or not, but he sneers at it, nonetheless. His need to come off as friendly is countered by the need to not appear weak. He growls, snatching the clothes from the bag, but realizes to his dismay that some of the grime from his gloves has rubbed off on them.

Swearing under his breath, he wrenches the gloves off, throwing them in a nearby sink. He moves hurriedly, hoping that if he's fast enough, the woman won't notice that anything's amiss. But she's faster, and he can see her eyebrows coming together as she tries to get a better look at the scars encircling his wrists. There's a reason he wears his leather gloves, and it isn't just to ward off biters' teeth.

"Handcuffs?" The woman guesses nosily, and he practically snarls in response. However, she's given him the perfect cover story.

"That's why they call me the 'lil Deputy', sometimes." He lies bitterly, making it clear he doesn't plan on answering any more questions about it.

Carl had spent months at his school before he found another group to tag along with. Most people weren't willing to pick up strays, but he had offered them a unique piece of information. He didn't have the keys to the sheriff's station, but he knew where their armory was, knew what his father's code was, and knew he might be able to help them get supplies in return for some food. They had taken him up on the offer, but the place had been stripped clean by the time they had gotten there. For Carl, it didn't matter. One of his father's uniforms had been left behind, complete with a hat
and a set of handcuffs.

They were the same handcuffs the Claimers used to keep him tied to a bed nearly a year later.

The look in his eyes must be murderous, because Michonne finally sees enough sense to leave the matter alone. He dresses as quickly as he can, but leaning causes his head to pound in protest, and his ribs aren't happy with his balancing act, either. He pretends he doesn't see the way Michonne's gaze sweeps over the cigarette burns the Claimers left on his chest, or the gnarled indentions Lucille had left on his arm the time he tried to run away. He doesn't mind when she sees the healed bullet hole in his shoulder, because at least that makes him look more like a soldier and less like a beaten kid.

Negan must really want to punish him. These people have seen him in the fetal position, in a pile of his own vomit and piss, and now they're seeing every inch of how weak he really is. He would almost prefer being thrown into the Pit to this. Almost.

Once he's done, he wears his leather jacket on top of it all, not caring how the dried sweat and blood on its collar sticks to his neck. He's thankful the jacket and gloves are a dark brown, making the gradual staining of mud and blood less obvious. Especially since the only thing the infirmary has to wash it off is dish soap. He blinks as he reads the soap's label. It's the same brand his mother always used to buy from the grocery store. Strawberry scented. He finds this amusing, somehow. The gloves that have sported the blood of dozens of men are now strawberry scented.

Something clicks in him when he slides the gloves back on. Even after wringing them out, they're still damp, but he doesn't care. He doesn't feel as exposed now, even with his eyepatch gone and his head exposed to the Virginian sun. He feels like him again. Whoever he is, anyways. Patch? Lil Deputy? Carl? He doesn't know anymore.

Michonne speaks first.

"Ready to brave the outside?"

He said he was ready, but he most assuredly was not.

If being able to walk to the bathroom on his own felt like a victory, being able to walk around without looking like a beaten dog would have been even better. But he doesn't manage it, instead clutching his side as he stumbles outside. Michonne offers a hand that he refuses. He doesn't think Michonne, Daryl, or his father will attack him, but he knows there are plenty of others in the town that would be inclined to, and he's not sure he trusts his father's weak control over the town to keep them in line. Especially since he's part of the group that murdered their own.

The cold look his father gives him causes a shudder to run down his spine, a shudder he suppresses. He can't look weak. Not in front of Dad, not in front of anyone. That doesn't stop him from wanting to turn tail and hide the rest of the week in the infirmary, or hide anywhere just so his father will stop looking at him like that.

And now his father is approaching him. Crap.

"Glad to see you're feeling better." His dad says emptily, his voice making it very clear that he wishes Carl were anywhere but here. Carl grunts in response, noticing the looks he's getting from those walking by. The entire town is on edge, and his presence is only making it worse.
"The sooner I recover, the sooner I can get out of here." Carl murmurs, trying to keep his voice low. He wonders for a moment if he sounds silly, if he's embraced his Batman shirt a little too much. He knows his father hasn't heard him speak since before his voice changed, so there's no way his normal tone would give him away. But the slightly deepened voice makes him feel safer, nonetheless.

Rick nods in agreement, but winces.

"Negan said for you to stay until the next pickup. Didn't want you getting any ideas about riding back home on the horse." Carl blinks in surprise, not letting the leader out of his line of sight as he turns. There, in the distance, a carport had been turned into a makeshift stable, and he sees Buttons munching on the remains of some mowed grass. He tries to keep his expression hard, to not let it soften as he spots the animal. He's not sure if it works or not.

"Didn't think you guys would keep her."

"It's not a permanent thing. Negan says she's yours." Carl shakes his head at this, knowing it's just another part of Negan's power play.

"I've only ridden once or twice in my life. Don't know where he gets off on me being Sanctuary's new cowboy, now."

"From what I hear, Patch sounds like another idiot I know." Daryl approaches, a teasing tone to his voice as he addresses the leader. "Somethin' about an idiot riding into the dead center of Atlanta on horseback? And a tank? Member that guy?" It's some sort of inside joke between them, and for a moment, Carl incredulously wonders if the idiot they're referring to is actually his Dad. Rick chuckles, but his shoulders remain rigid. Somehow, seeing the man smile hurts more than his mistrust does. The smile reminds him of the man he remembers.

"Yeah." His dad says. "Guess we all better start learnin' to get used to it, though. We can only siphon so many vehicles over the next few years before we all start runnin' out of gas."

Carl nods in agreement, aware that the adults are running out of small talk, each of them trying to buy more time to size him up. He's weary of it, and even worse, his head is beginning to spin again from having to stand so long.

"I think I'm gonna go say hello to Buttons, if that's alright. She did save my ass back there." He turns to Rick for approval, who seems surprised by his deference, but takes it in stride. He nods, his shoulders still stiff. Michonne turns to face him.

"I think I'm going to hang back with Rick. Daryl, you're done hunting, right? Mind hanging out with the kid?" She asks, and Carl rolls his eyes.

"Ain't no kid." He spits, limping off towards the stable on his own. He knows how stupid his actions are, that he's leaving his back exposed to multiple people that want him dead, but he gets lucky. He never feels a bullet come from behind, or any sort of harsh blow, although he does hear the hunter's heavy footsteps following his.

"Nah, that there proves yer a kid." Daryl croons. "Looked just like Enid, rollin' yer eyes like that. Negan put up with that?"

"Nope." Carl says, putting false cheer into his tone. " Tried it with him once, got Lucille rolled on my arm for it. But your Rick can't do shit about it." He leers. He intends to goad the hunter, to get under his skin, but the man seems more amused by his attempts than anything.
"Thought ya said Negan don't hurt babies?" The other man heckles, keeping the same stupid, teasing tone that he had used only moments before. Carl huffs, eyeing Buttons carefully as they approach the makeshift stable.

"Babies don't shoot cowards in the street." He growls, smiling in satisfaction as he remembers how Martinez had gurgled in the end. Served him right.

"Heard abou' that." Daryl says carefully, and Carl looks at him from the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. You were out on that scavenging run of Rick's when it happened, right?"

"That's right." The redneck defends. Carl rolls his eyes at the obvious lie, and ignoring the other man, slowly approaches Buttons.

The mare rears her head as he approaches, taken aback by the newcomers. Carl shushes her. He isn't surprised that she's skittish, it's likely the only reason she's survived the biters this long. It's a miracle that he was able to approach her, nevertheless, ride her. But Carl knows better. Miracles don't exist, not anymore. Just coincidences.

The mare makes it clear that she doesn't want Carl touching her, so he shrugs, plopping down at the foot of the makeshift trough. If he sits here long enough, she'll get used to him eventually, and it isn't like he has anything else to do. But the decision to 'plop down' is a poor one, and it takes everything in him not to scream as his ribs and head flare up at the same time. He groans, leaning his head against the metal frame.

"That was smart." Daryl grins.

"An' you're a smartass." Carl retorts, growing tired of the redneck's never ending sarcasm.

"Better a smartass than a dumbass." Daryl says decidedly, and Carl doesn't have an answer for that, because he's too busy trying not to throw up. And then he smells it. Of course he smells it. Its sickeningly sweet scent never bodes well. He swears, sneezing irritably.

"Goddamn honeysuckles." He grumbles. Buttons seems none too happy about his grumpiness, nickering as she tosses her head.

"You're just upsettin' her." Daryl grunts. "Can't believe she let you ride her, the way you're actin' 'round her."

"You're just jealous you didn't get to ride her first. And she can shove it. Probably better she don't like me, anyways. If she goes back to Sanctuary, she'll get a bullet to her head the first time I screw somethin' up." He grumbles, scrunching his eyebrows furtively. He looks back up at the horse, who blows air at him, along with some drool. He blows air back up at her and grins.

Daryl's good mood is fading, however, the redneck frowning as he looks at the two of them.

"That's what he does to everyone, huh? Finds somethin' you care about and uses it against ya?"

"Took ya this long to realize that? Maybe you're not smart enough to be a smartass, afterall." Carl chides, blowing more air back at the horse, who seems less anxious about the boy's presence than before. He swallows, clearing his throat.

"I could let her loose. She's survived the corpses this long, she could do it some more. I could say she was too wild or somethin'. Probably true, anyway."
"You know Negan better than us. Think he'd buy it?" Daryl asks, leaning against the other side of the carport. Carl sighs, shaking his head.

"Nah. Someone's always snitches, always. Safer just to leave it the way it is. Let Negan play his game till he gets bored, and keep yer head down in the meantime. Good advice for you guys, too."

"Yeah? Sounds to me, Buttons is screwed, either way." The redneck points out. Carl shrugs, but finds it hard to swallow.

"Yeah. Well, Negan always wins, so." He can't find anything more to say than that, so instead of thinking about their conversation, he watches to townspeople as they walk about.

Even stripped of their belongings and shaken up, it's obvious that these people are sheltered. Their clothes are still clean, like they're still bothering to spend time laundering things when they should be scavenging. Outside of Rick's immediate circle, who are annoyingly treating him like a dumb kid, the rest of the town keeps throwing scared glances his way, like he's going to jump out and shoot them all any second. Alexandria's fighters are fierce, but there are far too few of them, and far too many civilians. These people don't stand a chance. Rick's people don't stand a chance.

"That's the difference between comics and the real world." Carl says solemnly, fidgeting with his shirt collar as he does. "In the real world, the boogieman always wins."

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**Final Note:** Please keep in mind that this is from Carl's point of view, so any unsavory descriptions are a product of his upbringing. Please let me know your thoughts in the comments! It'll be a while before we can explore the differences in this universe, as Rick's group aren't going to be entirely talkative about their pasts or what they've gone through.

Also, phew! No worries, other chapters won't be as long. While I normally average 3k a chapter, this story seems to stretch out a bit.
Updates are not normally going to be this quick, but I've had a lot of this written out beforehand and got a little overly eager about seeing people's reactions before I continue on. So please be sure to review and let me know your thoughts! Also a reminder------due to the butterfly effect, things are not happening in the same order in this universe. As you'll shortly find out, the Wolves are still in play. This isn't an oversight or mistake, but if it does bother you for story reasons, please let me know! Comments help keep me motivated and help me stay aware of any complaints/points of confusion.

He spends the next few days sitting restlessly by Buttons' stall, watching people and drawing in the dust. He knows his stay is halfway over, that he only has about a week left until Negan's next pickup, but he can't wait for it to be over. At the same time, he's nervous for it to end.

He's recovering more slowly than he would like, and in Sanctuary he would have gone hungry for it. Residents only eat with points, and they only earn points if they work, no exceptions. But here, he's fallen into a routine. Michonne follows him around, Sophia shows up with food, and until he's less wobbly, he isolates himself to the infirmary and the carport. It's not so bad, he reasons. The carport is located in a good central spot, where he can watch both the armory and the pantry at the same time. It's a fact that obviously makes Rick uncomfortable, although he doesn't say anything to Carl about it.

Thankfully, his father seems to be avoiding Carl as much as Carl is avoiding Rick. He isn't sure why, the other man hasn't shown any signs of recognizing him. But the man acts like even
glancing Patch is painful, a grimace stitched to his face each time. Perhaps Negan's plan has worked. Negan's making Rick live beside someone who was present at his friends’ executions, reminding him of his failure each time he sees the teen. Carl knows that Michonne and Daryl are only nice to him because they're picking his brain for information, and possibly because they're just like everyone else…… they don't want to believe that this ‘child soldier’ is a monster. Carl knows they're wrong, and one day, he gets the chance to prove it.

Rick's story about going on a scavenging run soon unravels. It turns out that all of Alexandria has failed to mention that they're not just fighting one boogiemen, but two. The Wolves.

Carl is absolutely livid when he finds out. Mostly because he only finds out when they're already within Alexandria's walls, attacking and looting everything they see. He doesn't even know their names at that point, only that they smell like crap and have W's carved on their foreheads. But it doesn't take a genius to figure out why they're there.

The one, the one advantage to Negan knocking on your door was that in exchange for tributes, he promised safety. It's a loose promise, Carl knows. Negan could kill, maim, and torture whoever he pleased. But Negan didn't share. The people the Wolves were killing were Negan's. The food and equipment they were taking were Negan's. If his Dad had told Negan what was going on, Negan would have flushed the looters out long before it ever got to this point. But he hadn't, and now Carl is waking up in the middle of the night, fires burning around him and people screaming, all while sporting a concussion.

He's livid.

But he's also pure motion.

He grabs his rifle, and finds himself followed by Michonne, her blades drawn. It's pure irony, he knows, that these looters have come in the dead of the night, the same way his father had come for the Saviors' outpost. But he doesn't dwell on it, instead watching as the town's watchtower falls, listening as a truck horn blares, and realizing exactly what that means. The looters have breached the wall by ramming a vehicle into that tower...and they are deliberately leading a herd towards the town as they're doing it. The looters don't intend to merely pillage the town, they mean to destroy it.

Carl is thankful the Saviors have left his weapons behind, but is absolutely gobsmacked that the Alexandrians haven't tampered with them. He doesn't dwell on their stupidity, instead shooting the first two looters he comes across, headshots causing them to crumple into heaps before they can lunge at him. They're only wielding melee weapons, he realizes. It's the one advantage Alexandria has, since the town has been nearly stripped of its guns. It puts them on equal playing fields, but it's also makes Carl suspect that these bandits have been watching them long enough to figure that out. These people knew that Alexandria had outgunned them before, and had waited until the town was weak before attacking.

Michonne is a flurry of blades, and while he notices her hesitating to leave his side, he motions her on and she complies. He has a stupid idea, anyways. A really, really stupid idea.

He hears Buttons whinnying in the distance and grins.

He runs towards her as fast as he can manage, his limp less noticeable than it had been a few days ago. She's startled, rearing up from the noise and din, her hooves nearly missing Carl's head as she flails them in the air. But he shushes her as best as he can, and while her eyes are still wild, it's clear that she recognizes him. He shoots another looter that approaches, this time hitting center mass, and Buttons nearly rears up again before he stops her.
He doesn't know how he's going to do this, because even if she's been broken in by someone before, he sure as hell doesn't have a halter or reigns. She'll be leading him. He prays to anyone that's listening that his days of sitting next to her stall have paid off, and uses her mane to climb on her back, struggling to ease himself over the ridge of her spine. His ribs scream in agony as he gets into position, and as best as he can, he angles her neck so that the path straight ahead will lead to the fallen watchtower. He unties the lead rope and smacks her rear.

She's not a battle horse, but she'll have to do.

She shoots out from the carport, and he wonders how the hell he managed to do this after the car wreck. He realizes quickly that if he's going to keep his arms free for shooting, he's going to need to hold on with his legs for everything he's worth. Buttons gets into a rhythm as she gallops, and while he misses the first few times he shoots, he learns to time his aim with the rise and fall of her stride.

He realizes that this would be far more effective if he was using Michonne's swords instead of his rifle, but he also knows that he doesn't have time to reconsider his decision. He lets out something he can only describe as a war cry, and is suddenly reminded of his days playing cops and robbers. As a kid, he had always wanted to be like his dad, to be the cop. To be the cowboy.

Right now, he feels like both the cop and the robber, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

It doesn't take long to realize that Buttons is absolutely not a warhorse. He manages to keep her calm enough to not buck, but she's a fan of rearing up at inconvenient times due to the gunfire, and Carl struggles to keep his aim and balance steady as she stalls. He has to keep her moving forward, because as quickly as he's working through the bandits, he needs to make it to the blaring horn before it draws more biters, and as the fastest person in town, he has the best chance of pulling that off. He smacks Buttons' rear with the butt of his rifle, and nearly falls off for his effort. But then she's moving forward, the watchtower coming closer and closer into view, and he knows it was worth it.

He thinks he recognizes faces as he speeds by, and he definitely recognizes shock running across those faces. While the looters had initially seemed like grimy, monstrous berserkers, now that people have started fighting back, the attackers' morale are starting to crumble. As useless as the civilians are, once Carl passes through the center of the town, he finds the more trained men and women forming a makeshift shieldwall around some of the elderly and unarmed civilians. He spots his father among them. Carl notices that the majority of the opposing looters have banded together right in his path, and he grins.

Buttons might not be a warhorse, but she's frightened enough to stampede straight through them, sending them yowling and hopefully killing a few of the bastards in the process. He shamelessly lets out another yip, smiling in satisfaction as he hears a crunch beneath Buttons' hooves.

"Is that….?" Carl doesn't hear the rest of the question before he's already flown past, the watchtower nearly within his reach. He realizes with a gulp that as wild as Buttons has become, that without reigns, he has no way of stopping her. Thankful that the majority of enemies are far behind him, he swallows and commences the second most stupid action for the evening.

Swinging one of his legs over to the other side of Buttons' neck, he jumps off.

The movies that Carl watched growing up made this sort of thing look easy. Whenever there was a big explosion, a car race, or anything of the sort, the good guys just jumped off and rolled onto the ground, covering their heads, and kept moving. Carl guesses that's what he would have done, had he not still been recovering from bruised ribs and a concussion.
But after he jumps, time skips forward, and he finds himself kneeling in the dust and dry heaving. Buttons is long gone, and he's lucky none of the looters were around, because there's no telling how long he's been vulnerable on the ground. The carhorn is still blaring, and his ears ring in protest and his knees wobble as he stands. A walker is there to greet him, and he bashes its head in with the butt of his rifle. It buys him enough time to take aim once more, taking out each walker in his path, although with less precision than he'd like. He groans, reloading as he sees the next obstacle ahead of him.

If his head wasn't already pounding and it wasn't already so hard to breathe, he still would have hated the idea of climbing the mangled pile of wood and steel in front of him. But walkers are managing to get through, and he can see a bigger horde on its way in the distance. He knows that he doesn't have a choice, that someone has to shut off the car horn and do it quickly, so he moves forward.

The biters aren't overwhelming yet, he's able to beat them back enough to get through the rubble, but part of the wall's steel frame nicks his side and he screams from the pain. He rips through, stumbling onto the otherside, and barely manages to fend off a biter that was reaching for his neck. He manages, though, and finding that the kamikaze driver is dead, pulls its corpse out of the van before taking its place in the driver's seat. The car horn was caused by the trapped body's weight and blissfully comes to a stop, leaving only the distant sounds of screaming and gunfire to contend with.

Carl still needs to lead the coming horde away from the breached gate, away from the town, and he knows the best way to do that is to use the same bait that lured them there in the first place. He's seen it done before. The key is still in the vehicle's ignition, and it doesn't take long for him to figure out how to turn on the CD the orignal owner had left behind and blast it to the highest volume.

But there's a problem with this plan.

Carl doesn't exactly know how to drive stick-shift.

He's driven before. Once….or twice. Sanctuary doesn't exactly have a driver's ed program, but Simon had thought the sight of a preteen attempting to drive a mustang had been hilarious, so Carl has driven an automatic a handful of times over the past few years, at least. But never by himself, nothing the size of this van, and never in a moment where he needed to know what he was doing.

And Carl absolutely needs to know what he's doing.

To his annoyance, the kamikaze driver has turned, and since the car door is still open, it takes the opportunity to start gnawing on Carl's boot. He pushes it off, reminding himself that this is why he sleeps with his shoes on, and swings the door shut, bashing the biters' head in the process.

He can do this, he can do this. Please say this van works, please say this van works-

It works! Only, instead of driving in reverse, he manages to accelerate a few feet forward before slamming on the brakes. A biter launches itself at the broken window, and Carl struggles to keep it off of him, all while trying to adjust the stupid gears. Shit. Shit shit shit shit-

"What the hell you doin', Patch?!!" A familiar voice approaches, one he recognizes is on his side. A bullet strikes the offending biter in the head, and as the biter crumples, a pistol-wielding Daryl is on the other side. Carl grins as he recognizes the glock in the hunter's hands. It's the same one Ron had tried to shoot him with a few weeks ago.
"I don't know how to drive shift! We gotta lead 'em away from the breach!" He yells over the music, and Daryl throws his hands up in exasperation.

"What the-?! Move over!" he yells, and Carl complies, scooching over to the passenger's side. Carl is running low on ammunition, but reloads and keeps covering fire as best as he can, allowing Daryl to adjust the settings. It becomes obvious that the other man is rather clumsy with a stick shift, himself, but he manages to make more progress than Carl had. Music blares overhead and the van lurches into reverse, and Carl briefly wonders if it's the last song he'll ever hear.

RENEGADE! NEVER BEEN AFRAID TO SAY!

WHAT'S ON MY MIIIIINNNNDD

"You gotta be kidding me." He hears Daryl mutter. "Fuckin' Styx?" Daryl blares the horn as he drives, and they plow through a few biters as they plunge back away from the torn wall. Carl nearly freezes, eerily reminded of Martinez's driving.

ANY GIVEN TIME OF DAY

'CAUSE I'M A RENEGADE! NEVER BEEN AFRAID TO HOLLER

"Never heard of them." Carl groans, closing his eyes from the motion. Daryl seems offended by the notion, and Carl's suddenly very glad that Daryl is the one driving the van. He's harshly reminded that this is the first time he's even been in a vehicle since the car wreck and finds it difficult to breathe. He blames the ribs. It's totally the ribs.

"Ya alright, man? Get bit?" Daryl asks, and Carl opens his eyes to see that they're in the clear. The gunfire in the distance had died down, leaving only the groans from the biters that are following them. But even with the damage the vehicle has sustained, they're faster than the biters now, and none of them are getting through the windows, anymore.

"Mmm' fine. Not bit. Jus....." He's slurring now, and as his adrenaline begins to fade, feels the urge to vomit what's left of his last tuna sandwich out the window. "...just damn honeysuckles, is all."

He lies, looking out the window as the sound of rock n' roll drifts into the wind.

They lead the biters at least an hour's drive out, and leave the beaten up van out to dry. It's at that point that Carl learns the name of the deranged bandits. The Wolves. Carl's side is protesting with a vengeance, so for once he doesn't complain as the redneck does most of the work, and even watches with interest as Daryl hotwires a car. Carl's seen it done before, but he hopes that if he watches enough times, he can pick up the trick, too. Days like today have proven how handy the skill can be.

Carl practically collapses into the Honda's passenger-side seat as Daryl starts it, and is grateful that the ride back is smoother than the nearly totaled Toyota they've left behind. The two of them are exhausted, and a brief radio call back to Alexandria confirms that despite the wreckage they've left in their wake, the Wolves were effectively repelled with fewer casualties than they would have expected. Most of the dead were from the first wave of the attack, the civilians who were caught in their sleep without anyone to defend them. Between Rick's people and Carl's cavalry charge, they've counted at least twenty-eight dead Wolves and only six of their own. Rick's captured one alive, and thinks that they've otherwise effectively wiped the entire group out.

But Carl winces as the radio flickers out. The next step is to get the breach repaired, he knows, but
Rick has a bigger problem than that on his hands.

"You realize Negan just heard every bit of that, right?" That's it. He's done for. He's officially the worst spy ever. Daryl looks at Carl incredulously before realization dawns on his features.

"Crap. He's listening to the radios."

"He's listening to the radios." Carl confirms, leaning his head back against the seat. He wishes he had his hat. Something about sleeping with it on top of his head had always been calming, like a safety blanket he never knew he needed. "And he's going to flip his shit over it. Probably even make a surprise visit tomorrow."

"What's it matter to him?" Daryl asks grumpily, scowling. It's Carl's turn to glare.

"Dude. It's like, the one thing Saviors are good for. Saving people. We take out the smaller bandits. The fact that D-Rick hid this from him isn't going to go over well. Negan gets possessive over the people he's extorting. And to be fair, he has a point. Two people died because Negan got pissy, and everyone's traumatized. Six people died because you weren't prepared for this, and that's somehow a win?"

If Daryl catches his slip-up, he's too distracted being spitfire mad to care. Carl tunes his bitching out, looking out the window as the road passes by. He doesn't have to listen to know what Daryl's saying. That's different, blah blah. Those were people he knew, had been with since the beginning, blah blah. The people today were just harmless, stupid civilians that Rick and company didn't value as much, blah blah blah. Today wasn't done execution style, blah blah blah.

"Hey, you listenin' to me, kid?" Daryl's waving his hands in front of him now, Carl realizes. He jumps back at the motion and groans. How had the redneck gotten the jump on him? Woah, were they already almost back in Alexandria? How long had Carl been zoning out?

"Crap. You could've told me you were hurt." Carl blinks, and looks down to what Daryl is talking about. The side the steel frame had dug into is now soaked, and when Carl lifts up his shirt, he realizes that what he thought was a small snag is a larger wound than he thought it had been.

"Huh." He blinks.

"'Huh', he says. You rode on horseback bleedin' like that?" Daryl mocks.

"Nah, didn't get this until I tried to get through where the tower fell. At least it's not the same side as my bad ribs, now that would've sucked." Carl chuckles, wincing at the action. His wince is followed by a sneeze, which causes another bout of swearing. Yup, they were definitely getting close to Alexandria. He taps his fingers haphazardly against the dash.

"You nervous or somethin'?" Daryl asks, noticing Carl's fidgeting.

"Your leader hates me and I'm nearly outta bullets, course I'm freakin' nervous." He grumbles. It's partially true. While he and Rick have been able to avoid each other over the last few days, whatever lingering cleanup needs to be done from the attack is sure to cause them to run into one another. And the leader is definitely going to want a status update.

"He doesn't hate you. He hates Negan." Daryl mutters, a strange look running across his face. "He just doesn't know what to do with you, is all. None of us do. Old enough to kill us in our sleep, young enough to remind him of his son. Which is exactly why Negan left you here."

Carl freezes at the redneck's words, his world lurching for reasons that have nothing to do with his
lingering injuries. He tries to think of something to say, a way to probe for more information without drawing attention to himself, but all he manages at first is a completely conspicuous squeak.

"Didn't know he had a son." Carl tries to play it cool, tries to seem nonchalant. He's not sure if it's worked. Probably not, if the narrowing of Daryl's eyes indicates anything.

"Yeah. Rick...... Rick was in a coma when all this started. Found his wife, but never did find his kid. That's why he can barely look at ya." Daryl mutters. "Most kids your age didn't make it past the first few months of the outbreak. So every time we run into someone that's the right age? It fucks him up."

"Well," Carl begins, his mouth dry. "Negan's good at that. Fucking people up."

"Yeah, he is." The hunter says hesitantly, shooting Carl a glance that carries more weight to it than the teen understands. "Look, you--- you did good back there, Patch. We owe you one. Ron, Enid.....none of 'em were able to do half of what you did. Pretty sure you and Buttons took out a third of them by your lonesome."

"Easy enough when you're one of the only people in the fight with a gun. An' Negan would put my head on the wall if I let y'all get yerselves killed on my watch." He counters, uneasy with the compliment. Daryl raises an eyebrow.

"The wall?"

"Our perimeter fence. He puts the turned bodies of people that tick him off on spikes, wives that run away, stuff like that. Some of the guys he rescued me from are still out there, too. Rotted to hell by now, though."

Daryl isn't sure what to do with this information, and Carl is once again reminded of just how much Alexandria is learning about Sanctuary and how little he's learned about Alexandria. "Didn't know he rescued you. Thought he said he found ya when ya attacked his men? Killed some of his guys doin' it?"

Carl snorts, uncomfortable with where the conversation is heading.

"Negan likes to exaggerate. I was runnin' away from a group called the Claimers, and when I ran into Negan, I thought he was one of them. I went a little ballistic trying to get away from him. But when Negan figured out what was goin' on, he killed the men that were chasin' me instead of tannin' my hide for killin' his own guys. So say what ya want, Negan's a softie for women and kids." He shrugs, looking out the window. When he turns back to the redneck, he realizes that the man looks absolutely stunned.

A tidal wave of anxiety comes over Carl. He's said something that disturbed the redneck, and he isn't sure what.

"Claimers?" Daryl asks, and Carl swears there's a waver in his voice. So that's it. Carl gives a small nod, not wanting to follow this line of questioning any longer.

"Yeah. That's what they called themselves, anyways. Some of 'em are still out there, and I'd take Negan over them any day."

"They ain't. Out there, I mean." Daryl barely manages to choke out, and Carl notices that the man is having difficulty driving. Carl cocks his head, narrowing his eyes.
"You run into them?" Carl asks slowly, not sure what to make of the man's reaction.

"Yeah. Ain't none of 'em left, not no more. We made sure of that." Daryl says in a whisper. Carl nods, swallowing hard.

"Good. People like them? People like these Wolves? They don't get to live." Carl hisses, fidgeting at his gloves, at where his handcuff marks reside. Daryl snorts.

"You sound like Rick, now. And what about people like the Saviors, Patch? Do they 'get to live'?" Carl doesn't immediately have an answer to that.

"That's the thing about us Saviors, Daryl," He finally says, not meeting the hunter's eyes. "---we're already dead."

Daryl takes in his words for a moment, a troubled look coming across his face.

"Ya know the toughest part about you stayin' with us? When you first came along, I was all ready to strangle ya in yer sleep. Seein' someone who stood by, was a guard while our friends were executed in cold blood, see him eat our food and sleep in our town? It weren't easy. But it's not even that, man. Nah, it's the fact that you ain't that bad." Daryl mutters gruffly, like he hates admitting it even to himself.

"Fuck, if things had been different, you coulda been one of us. But instead, you're watchin' your boss bash innocent people's heads in like it don't mean nothin'. You ain't gotta be one of 'em, Patch. You're better than them. What's he got on ya? A stupid horse? You think you owe 'im because he saved your life once, is that it?" Carl doesn't have an answer, his mouth entirely dry. He stares straight ahead, finding that Alexandria is in front of them and that a man manning the wall is motioning to someone. The gates slide open and his Dad is there to greet them, a grim look on his face.

Once upon a time, Carl stayed with Negan out of fear. After he recovered enough, he had tried to run away a few times and had only gotten the sharp end of Lucille in return. But with the Saviors, he had food in his belly, a place to sleep, a set of rules, and the assurance that nobody would touch him the way the Claimers had ever again. And for a while, that had been enough. But the moment he spotted his father in that execution circle, Carl's answer had changed, even if Negan himself wasn't aware of it. Now Carl stays for the man with a grimace and a 5 o'clock shadow staring back at him.

He has to get his Dad out of this alive, somehow. He just has to.

But first, Carl has to get out of Alexandria alive. Carl waits, making sure that Daryl gets out first. He doesn't remember his father ever hitting him, but Rick doesn't know who Carl actually is, and he's expecting a beating from someone before this is all over. Whether it's from Negan or Rick remains to be seen. It doesn't help that his father looks absolutely exhausted, his eyes red and puffy despite his no-nonsense stance. Maybe Carl was too quick to judge the leader's reaction to the death count, it's obvious that he's lost someone that he cared about today. Which also means he must be in a bad mood...

But as emotionally exhausted as Rick appears, he's obviously relieved to see the hunter step out of the truck. Rick strides forward, embracing Daryl with a brotherly half-hug that communicates both affection and business. Carl blinks, not having realized that the two were so close, but Sophia's words echo in his distant memory. She and her mother had been with Rick since the beginning, and Daryl was obviously close to Sophia. Daryl's probably been there since the beginning, too. Carl vaguely remembers his father's brotherly relationship with Shane, but the idea that his father has
formed such a close bond with this hunter of all people still surprises him.

But Carl isn't in a position to question it, and feels like a stray dog with its tail tucked between its legs as he approaches. He shuffles from side to side uncomfortably, waiting for the other shoe to drop. His Dad releases Daryl from his embrace, and when he turns to face the teen, Carl is aware that he's being sized up. He suddenly feels sorry for every person his father ever arrested.

"Can't say I'm glad Negan's here, but I'm glad you were."

Carl blinks, not sure that he's heard the man right. But Rick continues, sounding a bit .......abashed? Almost like he's apologizing? What?

"I saw what you did. Flashes of it, anyways. That breach could have been a lot worse without you. A lot more people could have died today without your help. We owe you for that."

Carl blinks some more, not sure how to respond. He clears his throat nervously, casting a glance back at Daryl (For what, reassurance? Totally not reassurance) before he speaks.

"Yeah, well, like I told him. Negan'd have my hide if I let you kill yerselves." He murmurs roughly. For a moment, it almost looks like his Dad is going to shake his hand, but at Carl's words, he backs off, nodding.

"Still. We appreciate it all the same. Not sure what I was expecting, but it sure wasn't you and Buttons leading the light brigade."

Carl scrunches his nose in confusion, looking between the two men and wondering if this was another inside joke.

"Light brigade?" He questions, unfamiliar with the term.

"Negan don't got no schools, Rick. No driver's ed, either, apparently. You just flew right over his head."

"Oh, and you know what he's talkin' about? Smartass?" Carl retorts, crossing his arms. He realizes that this isn't the best thing to do, because he's beginning to sway again.

"Just cuz I'm a redneck don't mean I'm no fool. And better a smartass than a dumbass, dumbass." Daryl heckles back with a smile, soon frowning as he sees Carl's wavering stance. His Dad's eyebrows are rising straight up into his hairline, surprised by their easy rapport.

"That's why you went off together? You...don't know how to drive?" Rick asks slowly, cautiously chewing over this information.

"I can drive!" Carl insists, but sways at the motion. "Just not stick shift." He mutters, bracing himself against the car.

"Shit, done forgot." Daryl swears. "Kid's banged up his side real good, an' all that calvary stuff just jostled his head some more. Better get 'im back to the infirmary."

"Daryl.....there's a problem with that." Rick winces, his rigid stance finally revealing some of the exhaustion of the night. Carl realizes it without Rick even telling him. So does Daryl, whose face falls.

"Shit. Denise?" Daryl asks, and the leader nods in return.
"Yeah. Denise, Holly, Bob and Natalie Miller, Sam and…… and Jessie." His Dad nearly stutters at the last name, and Carl suspects that she's the reason for his red rimmed eyes. Daryl's reaction cements his suspicion.

"Shit, man, that...... I'm sorry." The redneck offers, shaking his head. Rick seems eager to move on from the subject, his eyes flickering between Daryl and Carl as he struggles to speak.

"Yeah….yeah, me, too. But that...... uh...... that puts us down a doctor with plenty of wounded. Carol and Sophia are manning the infirmary right now, but they only know what Hershel showed them, back in the day. And without antibiotics......" Rick's glance returns to Carl, his gaze now accusing. Carl scowls.

"Wouldn't need 'em if you told Negan about these guys. Now he's gonna come early, in a bad mood, and spittin' hellfire at everyone, me included." Carl says bitterly, closing his eye as he clenches his fists.

Rick instantly stiffens at the mention of Negan, and Carl suddenly feels like he's nine years old and it's the night he snuck into his father's gun cabinet. He swears his father's shoulders broaden, the muscles in his forearms visibly tensing.

"And how's Negan going to know about it?" Rick spits, his eyes harsh.

"Ain't on Patch, Rick. Negan's listenin' to the radios. We shoulda realized it long 'fore now." Daryl interjects, stepping forward between the two. Understanding registers across the other man's face, and Rick shakes his head angrily as he wraps his head around this new information.

Carl wants more than anything to find a corner to collapse in. Preferably the corner where he's left his father's hat. It hurts to breathe, it hurts to exist, and dealing with the mixed emotions that are rattling around in his chest is becoming unbearable. But if he's going to find a way out of this and save the Alexandrians' asses yet again, it's going to need to be done tonight.

"He's going to be pissed, and he'll probably demand an early tribute when he comes......" Carl begins, biting his lip. He looks back up at the two men. "......so we'll give him one."

"And how do you propose we do that?" Rick says exasperatedly, throwing his arms up at the smoldering town.

"They're looters, but they were watching you long enough to wait until you were unarmed. That means they weren't desperate, so they're bound to have a stockpile somewhere. You said you had a prisoner? Let me talk to him. We find out where it is, take it, give it to Negan as a gift." Carl says simply, taking a deep breath at the thought. It's a good plan, Carl knows. It's also a plan that could result in him leading a raid in the woods, and right now he barely feels like hobbling to the infirmary. Rick's blinking at him now, shifting around like he's actually contemplating the idea.

"Talk to him, huh?" Rick asks grimly, his hands on his belt.

"Yeah. With a knife or two, maybe get some gasoline and matches involved." Carl cocks his head to the side, grinning in a way the other two men seem to find unsettling. He rolls his eyes at their uneasiness with the idea.

"Look, this is what I'm here for. Negan can either stroll up to town tomorrow and find his town pillaged and smoking, or he can stroll up and find our enemies' heads on stakes and their crap in a tribute pile. Which one do you think will get you out of this alive? Negan only keeps useful people. Right now, you're useful because Alexandria isn't rioting against you. But if he thinks you can't
protect this town? He'll appoint a stooge or one of his own men. And if it's the latter, it'll be Simon. You really don't want Simon." He mutters, clutching his side.

"And you're doing this why exactly? Out of the goodness of your heart? Because you like me?" Rick demands sarcastically, suspicion evident in the snarl on his lip. Carl finds himself suddenly struggling for words, and rolls his eyes again in order to avoid his father's gaze.

"Maybe I just feel like torturing someone today, I dunno. Or I'm pissed about them waking me up in the middle of the goddamn night. Tell me where you're keepin' him, and I'll talk to him after I get bandaged up."

Rick considers this for a moment, suspicion and tension practically rippling across the man's skin in a sweat. Carl can see why his father has survived this long. Even beaten down by Negan's control, even upset over this 'Jessie' woman's death, his father is measuring every move, every angle any of his opponents make, and his practically primal distrust of everyone he comes across serves him well in the new world.

There is no logical reason for Patch to want to help Rick. Patch is a one-eyed monster who gets a kick out of feeling men's heads crunch beneath a mare's hooves. Who does what he needs to do to eat his fill for the day. If Rick were any other man, if it were Gregory and Hilltop's people that were about to be put on the execution line, Patch would merely sit back and enjoy the show, keeping his head down all the while. But Carl wants to help Rick. Rick's son wants to help his dad, to the point of sticking his neck out for the man and his people.

Daryl's words weigh on him, and for a moment, Carl considers telling Rick the truth. He had intended to, even from the beginning, hadn't he? He had only kept quiet to keep Rick alive, to keep Negan from realizing exactly what kind of leverage he had on his hands. And in the infirmary, Carl had only kept up the ruse because he was injured and didn't want to deal with the emotional fallout that was bound to follow. But what is holding him back from telling Rick now? From saying those few simple words, from finding out how his father had survived and came to be here? Daryl has hugged Rick more today than Carl's been able to in years. And truth be told, Carl craves to be able to do the same. He can't remember the last time anyone's touch had been comforting. Where an embrace or a display of affection didn't mean the other party wanted something from him.

But Carl knows why. He tells himself it's the same reason he didn't set Buttons free, that there will always be a snitch, and that if the Alexandrians find out who he really is, so will Negan. But the truth of the matter is that he can bare his father thinking that Patch is a monster. He can't bare his father thinking that Carl is a monster. And if he's going to be torturing someone tonight? He's absolutely going to have to show his true colors and embrace everything Sanctuary has built him to be. And it's not someone Rick Grimes is going to like.

"Fine." Rick grunts at last, turning to Daryl. "Either you or Michonne stay with him. I don't want a dead prisoner on our hands, is that clear?" The command is technically aimed towards Daryl, but Rick's eyes are set on Carl. The teen grins mischievously in response.

"Not gonna be a problem." And it's true. He doesn't intend on the lone wolf dying. At least, not yet.

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**Final Notes:** So what do you guys think, is it possible for Rick to not have recognized Carl for this long? And after spending the last few years with the Saviors, is Carl too helpful? We'll see more of his dark side in the upcoming chapters, but when I ran the story by my husband, he thought Carl sticking his head out for the Alexandrians as much as he has was a little out of character, given the
circumstances. Please let me know what you think!
Chapter 4

The infirmary had been nearly barren when Carl first arrived. The townspeople of Alexandria had given him a wide berth, nobody wanting to linger near the one-eyed Savior if they could help it. But now? Now, it's absolutely packed, with Sophia and an older woman he assumes to be Carol running around trying to keep order of it all.

The first thing he notices is how different Sophia is acting. Every time he's seen her before, she's acted like a frightened doe, wide-eyed and timid. Yet now she's anything but. The same girl that had been smiling shyly at him each day as she handed him food has a bloodied axe strapped to her back and her hands plunged in someone's side as she digs for an artery. She doesn't flinch. Her expression isn't frightened, or confused, or hesitant in the slightest. It's like he's watching a different person.

It's at that moment that Carl absolutely knows he's been played for a fool.
He had suspected, in the back of his mind, that they had specifically chosen Sophia to bring his food because she was a pretty girl his own age. Carl has guarded enough prisoners to know the routine. If you're playing the 'good cop' routine, you find someone who can build rapport, and with Michonne acting as a handler, Sophia was the perfect candidate for that. What he hadn't anticipated was Sophia herself being part of the facade. That her wide-eyed, innocent look could have been a ruse to make him underestimate her. He doesn't know if he feels betrayed or impressed by this, but he watches in interest as she scurries from place to place, efficient as she is capable, a hatchet strapped to her hip. He wonders if he had tried to hurt Judith in their first meeting, if Sophia might have been a formidable threat.

The other woman managing things, Carol, is a similar contradiction. While dressed in a floral blouse, the ease in which she deals with the traumatized civilians and handles her weapons implies that she's anything but a simple den mother. Although after studying her for a few more moments, he does begin to suspect that she's Sophia's mother. There's a tilt to Carol's lips that mirrors Sophia's, and the two work as an established team, dancing around each other as if merely juggling a Thanksgiving dinner.

Carl doesn't want to bother the two women, because even though the majority of major injuries seem to have been tended to, the infirmary is filled with people who look like they've never had a broken bone before in their lives. Carl has learned from experience how to look out for himself. Seeing Sanctuary's doctor meant using points, and in his earlier days, he never had any to spare. He's no medic, but he knows how to stitch himself up, and he knows how to clean and bandage a wound.

So rather than disturbing them, he heads for the last place he saw bandages. The medicine cabinet.

The room he had been sleeping in has been turned into a waiting room, and he's relieved that he only recognizes one of the many people waiting there. It's the teenage girl Ron had been so protective of. Enid, he thinks he heard Daryl say? While the others send nervous glances his way, Enid stares at him unflinchingly, watching him like a hawk. He bristles, but continues on. For all Carl knows, nobody here even knows that Rick had been a deputy. Even if Enid or someone else gets a glimpse of the hat, nobody would think anything of it, right?

But as Carl opens the cabinet door, he's struck dumb.

His father's hat is gone.

At first, he thinks he's imagining things. He checks his pack. He checks under the table. He crawls over people to check other cabinets in the room. Enid continues to watch him, raising an eyebrow higher and higher the more nervous he becomes.

"Looking for something?" She finally asks, sarcasm clear in her tone. He begins to understand just why Simon always slapped him around for getting too mouthy with him. He wants to slap that look right off of the girl's face, and scowls at her.

"No." He denies roughly, settling on grabbing what he had originally come for. He's rattled to realize that the cabinet not only just contains knick knacks like he originally thought, but also needles and dental floss that look suspiciously perfect for stitches. Essentially, he's hidden the hat in one of the worst places in the entire infirmary. He nearly swears at the realization, but thinks better of it, ducking beneath Enid's judging gaze.

Recalling his painful mistake from only a few days before, he slowly eases himself to the floor rather than plopping down, and begins threading the needle with the overly thick floss. He tries to focus, but his hands are shaking, and he's not sure if it's from blood loss or fear.
His father's hat is gone.

His father's hat is gone, and someone else has found it.

"You're going to do that here?" Enid asks incredulously, her eyes popping. He realizes that she's cradling her elbow, her shoulder settled at a weird angle. Dislocated shoulder? Really? He could fix that for her in a few seconds if they let him. He shrugs.

"They're busy, and I know how to do it." He concludes, finally managing to thread it correctly. He's thankful that he left a can of beer in his pack, and bites his lip as he pours some over the wound. It doesn't have that high of an alcohol content, but it'll have to do.

He takes a deep breath before beginning the hard part, but now that Enid has drawn attention to him, every set of eyes in the room watches him as he works. Most seem horrified. A few seem impressed. He tells himself he doesn't care, either way. He grimaces, struggling to keep from moaning as he pushes the needle through, but the occasional grunt and hiss escape his lips, and he doesn't even notice when Michonne comes in.

"You could do that without traumatizing everyone else in the room." She states in a rather amused voice. He shrugs, gritting his teeth as he sits Indian-style on the floor.

"Didn't feel like walking outside to do it. A little light-headed right now." He admits.

"You're a little light headed, and you're stitching up your own side?" She cocks her head in an all-knowing, condescending way only Michonne could manage. He scowls, wincing as he goes through another layer.

"Ain't like I'm makin' a quilt or nothin'." He choke out, struggling to keep his breathing steady. "Besides, Sophia might just poison me and solve all yer problems for you. She seems more capable than she lets on." He says, trying not to sound as betrayed as he feels.

"You're not wrong about that." Michonne begins slowly, watching as he dives in again. "But your stitches would hold better if you let her do it, you're making them too tight."

"I'm fine." He spits, nearly done. "I'll just redo them if I gotta."

Michonne seems to be a fan of raising eyebrows and microexpressions. "Sounds like you're already counting on it." She states. He rolls his eyes, and grabbing the end of the floss with his teeth, uses his pocket knife to cut off the end before tying it. He flexes his shoulder, testing what movements would jostle the injury. Michonne offers him a hand that he declines, instead using the wall to crawl back to his feet.

"What are y'all starin' at?" He growls at the others, who quickly avert their gaze. All except one.

"Most of us have only recently been baptized into this new world." A dark complected man offers. Besides a bloody gash on his chest, he's dressed cleanly, with a shaven head and well spoken manners. "To see a child be capable of the things you are…. it is difficult. You should be playing video games, not killing men on horseback and stitching up your own wounds with dental floss and beer."

Carl snorts at this, but the others seem to quietly agree with the older man. "I ain't a kid. And if I were, I wouldn't have survived this long playin' video games."

"No...I....I suppose you wouldn't have." The man answers sadly, his features forlorn. Carl takes another look at how the man holds himself, at his clothes.
"You a priest or somethin'? With that 'baptizin' stuff?" He asks curiously. The man visibly perks up, nodding.

"I was. I mean, I am. My name is Father Gabriel. I led a Episcopalian church, before this all began. Not that denominations matter much, anymore. Our faith in God, in Christ, in each other, that's what matters, now."

Carl snorts at the thought, the corners of his mouth twisting undecidedly at the man's words. He vaguely remembers his mother dragging them all to Sunday School, handshakes after sermons, and spending summers at Bible Camps. He remembers people flocking to churches when the epidemic first began. Nobody flocks to them anymore.

"Don't seem like he listens to prayers much, if he exists at all." Carl points out bitterly. The man doesn't seem phased, and it's obviously not the first time the man has been countered on the subject.

"We've been praying together. Praying that God will save our town, and he did. God gave us the courage to save it, ourselves. And put Saul on our doorsteps to help keep the walkers at bay, a Roman among the Jews." Carl is seriously wishing his own Sunday school teachers spent less time making them sing silly songs and more time teaching them what the hell the priest is talking about. He wonders for a moment if the words are a veiled insult, but the others in the room seem comforted by his strange analogy.

"Sounds like gibberish, to me." He mutters, shaking his head. To his surprise, Michonne agrees with him, a dark look coming over her features.

"If God does exist?" She begins quietly, "And he made a world where both the dead and living alike eat one another? Let us make this new world the way it is, now? He isn't a God worth serving."

"Free will can be a terrible thing." Father Gabriel acquiesces, seeming impossibly sad. "But he has given it to us, nonetheless."

Carl feels irritation crawling up his spine at the man, at his insistence to cling to outdated morals. Carl has met people like him, shortly before they've met their end by Negan's bat. They're men who would rather cling to the old world and its ways than embrace the way things need to be. They're men who get others killed.

But the man continues, and Carl is unpleasantly aware that the conversation has allowed the priest to turn their discussion into a public platform. He's speaking to the entire room, now, most of whom are nodding as he speaks.

"Even God's chosen people were once enslaved by the Egyptians. God does not promise us an easy life, or a good world, for it is the world we have made. But he can be a comfort in our time of tribulation, a lion among the lambs. 'Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from Christ Jesus our Lord.' Romans 8:35."

Carl rolls his eyes at the priest, suddenly feeling overcrowded by the small room and its ever watching eyes. He needs to find his hat, not argue with mindless bible-thumping drivel.

"Just seem like lambs bein' led to the slaughter, if ya ask me." Carl spits, brushing past Michonne as he exits the room. Michonne follows. Great. His prison guard is back. He appreciated her more
when she was a flurry of blades behind him and not a judgemental babysitter.

Any relief he felt at leaving the priest behind is gone as soon as he meets Sophia's gaze. Her arms are bloodied up to her elbows, her forehead wrinkled from concentration. She smiles wearily when she sees him, giving him a nod, and he has to swallow a knot in his throat as he nods back. Damn it. He wants to be angry with her, he does. But what for? 'Oh, I thought you were like one of Negan's wives, a fragile flower in heels that needed protecting?' 'Oh, you hurt my feelings because you batted your eyelashes at me and I fell for it?' He still doesn't trust her smile to be genuine, but he still finds himself relieved to see it, all the same.

"Speaking of lambs being led to the slaughter." Michonne murmurs, both amusement and concern lacing her voice. "She's got you wrapped around her little finger." The woman chuckles. Carl blinks, shaking his head with a scowl.

"No she doesn't. I just like her 'cause she brings me food, is all. Which is exactly how you people planned it, by the way. Don't think I didn't notice that." He grumbles chidingly, ducking his head and moving towards the door.

"Hmm. Well, it better be nothin' more than 'liking', because if you two turn into Romeo and Juliet? Carol will split you sideways before Rick or Daryl ever get the chance to."

"Who the hell is Romeo?" He asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Guess Daryl was right." Michonne chuckles, amused. "Negan's educational curriculum leaves something to be desired." She's trying to get a rise out of him, he knows, but it's working. He hates being left in the dark, but from the context, he understands the gist of what the woman is saying. Sophia is off limits. Got it.

Before he gets the chance to argue with her, to tell her they have nothing to worry about and he barely even knows Sophia, he's stopped in his tracks. Michonne nearly runs into the back of him, but he doesn't falter, instead staring at a countertop in the corner of the makeshift operating room.

On the countertop is his father's hat, its golden ties glinting in the sunlight as it sits in plain sight.

"Everything ok?" Michonne asks, searching the room for whatever has Carl so preoccupied. For a split second, he's torn, unsure of what to do. Should he charge angrily forward, make a big deal about it, and adamantly deny anything they might realize? Should he sneak in, grab it, attempt to hide it again, and hope they don't see? Should he leave it behind? Pretend he doesn't know anything about it?

He knows what the smart thing to do is. The smart thing is to leave it behind. And yet, in that split second, he wants nothing more than to grab it and bury his nose in its familiar scent. His head feels impossibly vulnerable, and he nearly whimpers at the thought of leaving it behind. He's made it this far without losing it. He can't lose it now.

But that's exactly what he does. He leaves it behind.

"Everything's fine. Just a stitch in my side." He murmurs gruffly, pushing the infirmary door open with more force than is necessary. It's funny, he thinks. He pretends to be tougher than he feels, while Sophia Pretends to be weaker than she is. He knows why they both do it. He hates that it's necessary. But he means what he said to the priest. Playing video games? Sentimental attachments to hats? That's what gets people killed. That's why people like the priest are sheep.

And it's time to be a lion.
Carl knows a predator when he sees one. He lives among them. He sleeps among them. He eats and drinks beside them. There are people who have survived this far by cowering down, by finding protection within someone else's walls or by someone else's gun. People like the cafeteria workers, the cleaners, the general workforce of Negan's compound. The sheep of Alexandria seemed much the same. But no matter the community, they all served the people who gave them these things. And the people who provided for them nowadays were soldiers. Warriors. Murderers. Thieves. People who were willing to do what needed to be done, to do the dirty work that nobody else would. People who were capable of doing the dirty work.

There were a few men, a very few men, that did the dirty work without complaint. That through sweat and toil, took the brunt of the new world's burden for the people beneath them. People like Carl's Dad. But the majority of men? The majority of the leaders Carl had seen? They knew they were the top dogs. They knew how sharp their teeth were. They evaluated each person they met and only saw what they could take.

Once upon a time, Carl was on the bottom of the food chain. He was a helpless little boy huddled, starving, in a bunker. When a group of predators saw him scavenging in the grocery store, they saw how easily he could be overpowered, and knew exactly how easy it would be to take what they wanted from him. Carl had survived by sheer willpower and luck, and had sworn to never be that helpless again. To grow up to be a wolf, a lion, or whatever he needed to be if it meant never being dependent on a mother that would never come for him.

Carl knows what a predator looks like. He knows how a predator thinks. He knows this, because he's become one, himself. It doesn't take long for him to measure up the grinning psychopath huddled in the corner. Carl doesn't say anything as he enters, not at first. He merely measures the man, just as the other man is measuring him. Behind him, Michonne watches the situation carefully as she clutches the hilt of her blade.

Carl can't help but think that the tension is rather ironic. After all, the wolf's makeshift cell is in the basement of a mansion. The home was once occupied by an elderly couple, as evidenced by two bodies upstairs and the abundance of ladybug decorations. A homemade, embroidered calendar had been hung on the basement door, the couple's surname intricately stitched to the top. The Millers. Something about that only makes Carl hate the man in front of him even more.

"You have any last words?" He asks, and he can hear Michonne shifting uneasily behind him. The Wolf doesn't even flinch, practically sneering at Carl as the two stare each other down. He isn't afraid to die. Carl figured as much. The looters he shot down had fought like berserkers, yelling wildly and never backing off. He had wondered briefly during the fight if they were on some sort of drug, but this man's pupils seem normal, even if the gleam in his eyes and the rotting of his teeth are unsettling.

"You wouldn't keep me here if you planned to kill me." The man states, still smiling. Blood has dripped down his head, disrupting the crimson W he has carved into his skin.

"Nah." Carl grins back. "Killing you would be a mercy." The Wolf cocks its head to the side, unperturbed as his eyes glitter.
"The merciful thing is exactly what you'll do. Your people are weak. This life? With its white walls open spaces? It makes them weak. It makes them *victims.* " The wolf's grin only grows as his gaze flickers to Michonne. "She's watching every step you take. She's won't let you hurt me, I can see it in her eyes."

"Nah." Carl drawls, eyeing the man's restraints. Handcuffs bind his hands behind his back, and someone has somehow managed to find chains to tie him to a pipe. The biggest threats are his legs, which aren't bound by anything at all. "She just won't let me *kill* you. So there's two things you should know before we begin." Carl murmurs, drawing his knife.

"They're not my people, and I can do whatever the hell I want."

He lunges forward and plunges the knife in the man's shin, aiming for the muscle rather than the bone. It sinks in like butter, giving no more resistance than if Carl were skinning a rabbit. He withdraws the knife as quickly as he had flashed it, drawing back as the man expectedly flails. The flailing only intensifies the bleed, and Carl feels satisfaction sweep over him as the psychotic grin slips off the man's face.

But as quickly as it disappeared, it's back, the man now laughing giddily. Carl doesn't let this bother him. He knows the man's game. Carl leans back against a wall away from the prisoner, flittering the knife across his fingertips in boredom as he waits for the man to finish his manic laughter.

"You do see my eye, right? Or the lack of one? There are plenty of ways to make you talk without killing you, and I'm an expert at it. And unlike these guys? I don't care what I need to do to get what I want from you. You and me? We're the same. And right now, I'm the one with the knife, you're the one who's tied up, and I'm the one that's bored. I could starve you. I could withhold water until your lips are peeling and you can barely talk. But that takes time, and I'd rather get this over quickly, wouldn't you? So let me spell it out for you. Where's---your---camp?" The man is laughing manically now, which only serves to tick Carl off.

"You think this is funny? Being stabbed by a kid? Maybe it is. It's kind of pathetic, really. But here's the thing, dumbass. I've got a boss that wants your stuff. And if I don't get your stuff? Hell, I might just lose another eye. So I've got no qualms in taking yours, instead." He murmurs, leaning down to trace the edge of his knife along the soft flesh of the man's eye socket.

The man squirms, but continues to giggle, his teeth flashing as he looks up at the teen. Carl grabs the man by his scalp, slowly scraping the edge of the man's tear duct. Carl's are still shaky from his own blood loss, so he misses a little, slightly scraping against the white of the man's eye. Carl shrugs. The Wolf is still screaming, so what does he care? All he cares about is that the man has stopped his smiling, and he's now screaming like the madman he is.

Carl doesn't have to look to know that Michonne has stiffened behind him. He wonders how far his father's people have had to go for information, before. They've probably beaten people up, but mutilation? Even as they're willing to watch him do it, he gets the feeling that they're not comfortable with it, if Michonne's reaction is any indication. Or maybe they're just not comfortable with *Patch* doing it.

Carl doesn't remove the eye. Not yet. Instead, he leans back onto his haunches, watching as the eyeball seeps red. He looks into it, meeting the man's bloody gaze, and this time *he's* the one grinning. Because he can see the way the man's expression is faltering, how he can't look away from Carl's open eye socket.

"Here's what I'm going to do. Your eyeball? It's mine. Call it a personal trademark. There's
something nice about knowing exactly what kind of pain you're inflictin', you know? But your balls? That's up to you." He smiles, letting the meaning of his words pass over the man. The Wolf spits up at him, sending blood spatter along with saliva. Carl just rolls his eyes and shrugs.

"Whatever, man." He plunges his knife in and digs.

The man is flailing and shuddering now, but Carl presses down on the man's legs, nearly straddling him to keep him steady. He doesn't want to kill the Wolf, not yet, and he needs to make sure he doesn't use too much force and push through the eyesocket and into the skull on accident. But with the man's flailing, it takes longer than it should, and he's digging around for at least ten seconds or so before the eye finally pops out.

The man's shrieks sound animalistic now, and the man nearly resembles a walker as he gnashes his teeth towards Carl. The chains are holding steady, and Carl is thankful that someone had taken the time to find them rather than merely bind the guy in rope. Carl gets up, walking over to where the eyeball has rolled.

"Huh. It's intact. As much as I was digging around in there, I would have expected it to pop, by now. I'm just a kid, so I should be dissecting frogs and sheep eyes in school right about now, yeah? But who needs sheep eyes when I have wolf eyes?" He grins and steps on it. He can feel the eyeball splatter beneath his feet, and suppresses a shudder. It reminds him of stepping on snails in the rain.

Michonne has her blades out now, her eyes wide as saucers. Carl makes sure she isn't flanking him, but otherwise ignores her. As long as she doesn't try to intervene, her obvious fear will only help break this guy down. Carl steps forward once more, leaning towards the guy and grabbing him by his scalp.

"I don't like people who kill old folks in their sleep. Especially little old ladies that take the time to decorate their houses in freaking lady bugs. What does your camp look like, huh? A shitstain in the middle of the forest with some guns piled in a rotted corner?"

"We freed them from their suffering. The weak don't belong in this world. I did what I had to do to keep myself alive. They didn't."

"Yeah? Well right now, you're the one that's looking real weak." Carl murmurs, plunging his knife into the other leg.

The man howls, and between the loss of his eye and his new leg injury, Carl can hear people scurrying around outside, no doubt coming to investigate the shrieks. Carl nearly rolls his eyes. His father had clearly known what Carl had indicated when he said he would talk to the man. Rick had even set a limit, just making sure that Carl didn't kill the guy. Why allow for torture, and then get concerned by the type of torture?

"I've got to admit, that felt a little satisfying. I'm starting to get why my boss enjoys this kind of thing, now. And you get it, too, right? I mean, I don't know shit about you, but I know about the women we've been finding in the woods the last few months. Naked women, tied to tree trunks and left to die, W's carved into their foreheads? Sound familiar? Were you freeing them, too? Yeah. Figured that was your handiwork. So like I said, the eye? It was mine to begin with. But your balls? That depends on you. So I'm going to ask again. Where's---your---camp?"

The man is too busy screaming and gnashing his teeth to give Carl an answer. Carl sighs, hearing footsteps above him as others enter the house. For a mansion, the walls are awfully thin.
"Look, I can do this all night long. You have ten fingers, ten toes, I'm just starting with the stuff you care about because I'm on a time crunch, alright? I'm sure these people have something I can cauterize the wounds with, so we'll make sure you won't bleed out. But I can give you a quick death, or mortifyingly drawn out one, and for what? A stash you're never going to see again? What does it even matter to you at this point, man?" He waits again, and feels a sense of satisfaction wash over him as the Wolf groans. The man is considering it, he can tell, breathing heavily as what's left of his eye socket gushes blood. But disappointingly, the man merely scowls.

"They wouldn't let you. You wouldn't fucking dare." The man spits, groaning.

He isn't wrong. Carl can sense Michonne rippling with tension behind him, her eyes darting between him, the footsteps above them, and what's left of the eyeball on the floor. If whoever is coming to investigate decides to intervene, Carl might have to get his gun out to drive the point home. Because he's not going to let them stop it. Not after all of this. He has to do this, to prove to himself that he's doing something to help his dad. And this? This is what Carl is good at, now. Dealing with scumballs like this guy.

Carl looks forward to this part the least. Seeing someone else's nakedness only reminds him of his time with the Claimers, even if he's the one sitting pretty with a knife. Hell, the sound of unbuckling belts still sends shivers down his spine. So he doesn't unbuckle the belt at all. The man is wearing cargo pants, with material his knife easily slices through. He's glad he sharpened his knife before he came to Alexandria for the tribute, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to do what he's about to do as fast as he does it.

Swallowing hard, Carl pulls the knife to the bottom of the man's ballsack. The man initially flails his legs but stops, freezing as he realizes that the action has only caused the knife to scrape against his foreskin.

"Last chance. Where's-your-camp?" Carl growls. The Wolf is wide eyed, looking towards the stairwell behind Carl. Carl can hear the basement door opening, Michonne calling out for whoever is coming, but he doesn't care.

Nobody rescued him from the Claimers. And nobody is going to rescue this man from the fate he deserves.

"Fuck you." The wolf groans, his voice high. "You're bluffing, they won't-"

Carl swings upwards.

The man screams.

Carl laughs.

Michonne pulls Carl back, but the damage is already done.

"Too late." Carl spits at the Wolf, grinning. If the man had been howling before, now he's wakening the dead from their graves. The man's loins are stained in crimson, but Carl can still make out one of the man's balls laying limply on the concrete, while the other dangles limply by its lonesome, barely attached to its owner's body. Carl's own loins clench in empathy, but the satisfaction of the man's pain overrides any disgust or empathy he might have felt for him.

The others in the room don't feel the same way. Michonne has pushed him back further, putting herself between him and the prisoner, and as Rick and Daryl are barreling down the staircase, armed with machetes of their own, their eyes widen as they take in the scene. Rick's teeth flash
sharply as he speaks.

"What the hell did you do? I said---"

"You said no dead prisoners. He sounds pretty alive to me." Carl points out, pushing Michonne out of his way. She could stop him if she really wanted to, but she seems almost in a daze, looking to Rick for a final decision. Carl takes advantage of their shock and crouches down next to the Wolf, making sure to face the staircase. "And I intend to keep my word on that. We're going to take this niiiice and sloooow. Do you really want to lose the second one, too? I mean, can you even get a hard on after that?"

Carl flashes his knife, moving towards the Wolf, who shakes his head furiously. His screams still echo in the room, overshadowing the others' protests.

"I-I'll fuckin' tell you! Just-I'll fuckin' tell you!" The man is sobbing from the pain, but Carl doesn't feel guilty. He doesn't feel pity. He feels every bit as much of a tool as the knife in his hand. He doesn't know for sure what type of predator that makes him. Right now, he's one that's won this fight, and that's enough.

"We're waiting." He reminds the man, nodding towards his bleeding loins.

Across from the pair, Rick grits his teeth, his hand clutched tightly around his own knife. The leader would have probably protested. He probably would have shut the interrogation down. But before he gets the chance, the man blubbers out directions, and Rick's grip on his knife lessens, his jaw setting as he reluctantly accepts what is happening. Relief sweeps over Carl like a breeze on a summer day, relieving some of the tension in his shoulders. He did what he had to do. And now? His father might live one more day than he would have, otherwise. And that's enough.

The rest goes as Carl expects it to. Carl threatens to slowly gut the Wolf and leave his entrails for the birds if it's a trap, and Rick makes plans to assemble a scavenging team together. But now that Carl has gotten what he wanted, he finds his focus fading in and out. But even as he distances himself from the situation, even as his own exhaustion from the day threatens to overtake him, one thing has become very clear.

"Trust me, if you'd seen the things he's done, you wouldn't think he was just a kid, either."

And they don't. Michonne, Rick, and Daryl aren't looking at him the same way, anymore. Outside of Rick's initial hot-tempered reprimands, the three barely speak to him at all, occasionally sending glances his way that remind Carl of the same looks they had given him after the execution circle. Cold looks. Measuring looks. And maybe even...fear? Carl tries to shove down the hurt that's rattling inside his bruised ribs, and rolls his eyes at the trio.

"Still think I'm better than the rest of them, Daryl?" Carl quotes back. The hunter doesn't say anything at all, setting his jaw as his eyes flit back to the appendages strewn throughout the floor. Out of the three, Daryl seems most like the type of person to approve, but his lack of answer speaks for itself. Carl narrows his eyes, clenching his fists. There's nothing more that Carl can say here. What's done is done. He's gotten the information he needs, and even if these people hate him, they might live another day for it. But right now? Right now he just wants to sleep.

"Where you goin'?" Daryl calls, and Michonne breaks off from her conversation with Rick to follow him.

"Bed." He retorts gruffly. "I'd go with you if I could, but I'll just get someone killed in this condition. If it is a trap? Or you can't find the place? Wake me up and I'll finish the job."
Carl shakes his head, and casts one last look at the groaning Wolf before he leaves. The ladybug calendar falls from its hanger as he slams the basement door behind him.

END OF TORTURE SCENE: Carl has tortured the Wolf into telling him their camp's location. The Wolf is left without an eye and partially castrated. Michonne, Rick, and Daryl are repelled by Patch's darker side. Since Carl is too injured to join the scavenging party, he leaves to finally get some sleep.

There's a problem with Carl's plan.

The infirmary is still full of people, some of which would very much like him dead. So sleeping there? Probably not a good idea. Shifting his pack over his back, Carl decides to limp to the carport, instead. It wouldn't be the first time he's slept outside, and it certainly won't be the last. Behind the mare's water trough is an ideal spot that can't be easily seen from the road. It's a perfectly good nook to sleep, and Carl's insistence on sleeping there has absolutely nothing to do with wanting to avoid the Alexandrians' judgemental gazes or the fact that the smell of hay and manure is strangely comforting. Nothing at all.

But to Carl's surprise, the carport isn't empty. Buttons has returned to the makeshift stall and is munching on an apple out of a resident's hand. It's the clean-cut man that had first told the Saviors about her to begin with, he recalls. Aaron.

"Michonne! And Patch. Never thought I would say it, but it's good to see you." The man offers a cautious smile. Carl cocks his head to side. He's sure that others have heard the distant screaming, that they had some vague idea of what was going on in the cell, and he's surprised to be treated so amicably after it. Then again, they didn't actually see what happened.

"Hi, Aaron." Michonne greets lowly. Carl stays quiet, watching Buttons with a twist in his mouth. She's been injured, he notices for the first time. The gashes on her side and hindquarters are shallow and barely visible against her sable coat, but they look nasty all the same.

"I didn't realize some of them managed to hit her." He murmurs softly, offering his hand to the mare. She sniffs him slightly, but obviously having expected another apple, chooses to blow more air at him in protest. He chuckles, carefully stroking her behind her ears. She accepts the gesture, which is more than she would have done during their first few days together.

"Nothing too deep, thankfully. She's much friendlier now, with all the time you've been spending with her. Someone must have owned her, before. She just forgot who she was, is all." Aaron offers with a smile, watching as Buttons accepted the petting.

"Who we were before doesn't matter." Carl insists. "She's still wild, now. Kept rearing up throughout the whole fight. Coulda gotten to that tower a lot faster if one of us knew what we were doin'."

"You seemed to handle it pretty well. Did you ride before all of this?" The man inquires politely, but Carl bristles under his stare. He shakes his head, avoiding the man's gaze as he continues to stroke Buttons.

"Nah. Couple of times during a summer camp, that's all. After the wreck, she just knew to follow the road. Must have been a trail horse, once upon a time. And during the battle, she just kept going the same direction she started in."
"Sounds like who she was before did matter, then." Aaron offers, holding out an apple to the teen. "Do you want to feed her? We can't spare very much, but I figured we at least owed her a few apples, if not our lives."

"Sure. We were just lucky there weren't too many biters nearby, otherwise I wouldn't have gotten through in time, even with her help. Must not have been very populated around here."

Aaron stiffens at this, before smiling politely once more. "Yeah. I guess it wasn't." Carl furrows his eyebrows at the man, trying to figure out what to make of the reaction before taking the apple.

"Flatten out your palm before you feed her, otherwise she might bite you." Aaron chuckles warmly. "I figured that one out the hard way."

Carl sticks out his hand. With his palm flat, Buttons is all too happy to take the snack, drool and juice covering the teen's hand as she crunches it into pieces. She snorts happily, and for a moment, Carl feels something sticking in his throat.

"Sounds to me, Buttons is screwed, either way."

"Yeah, well, Negan always wins, so."

There's still blood on Carl's hands, he realizes. Buttons doesn't seem to care, but Aaron is staring at them in horror as the red runs from the apple juice. The other man doesn't say anything, seeming to understand what Carl had been doing only minutes before, but looks uncomfortable.

"She should have just stayed in the wild. She should never have come here." Carl murmurs at last, his chest constricting as she finishes off the last bits of the apple. Aaron seems a bit alarmed at this, but to Carl's surprise, it's Michonne who speaks.

"If she hadn't, then this town might not be still standing." There's a double meaning to Michonne's words, Carl knows, and it seems the parallels of their situations aren't lost on her. Carl gives her a disgruntled look, and shakes his head.

"But what about her? You can't take just the wild outta somebody. It's the only reason she made it this long. You can't make them change. And if you try? Give them hope and apples and shit? Try to make them remember the comfy home they had before? You just get them killed." He says bitterly, feeling as sad as Buttons is content. "There's no goin' back. We can't be the people we were before. Just gotta keep moving forward, and being wild is the only way to do that."

Aaron is looking uncomfortably between the two of them now, his smile faltering.

"Uh...we're not just talking about Buttons, anymore, are we?" He asks hesitantly. Michonne swivels her head in a nearly comical matter, silently communicating, Nah, you think? to which Aaron nods nervously.

"For what it's worth," he begins slowly, "if helping us, staying here, if that's what gets her killed? She seems happier now than she ever seemed out there." The man points out. Carl starts to argue, feeling like the two Alexandrians are ganging up on him, but Aaron continues, seeming to be talking to himself more than he is Carl or Michonne.

"People...people need each other, now more than ever. And maybe...maybe Rick is right. Maybe we to do things we aren't comfortable with in order to survive. Stay a little wild. But everyone draws a line a dust, a line they won't cross. Everyone fights for something. For me, it's my people. My family. And I think...I think Buttons would say the same. I mean, if she could talk. Not that she's Mr. Ed or anything...." the man digresses nervously, joking about something that Carl isn't
familiar with. He clears his throat.

"I just think….I just think she'd rather die here, where she's happy and with the people she loves, rather than live a little longer just to eventually be caught out in the wilderness out there. At least here, her death would mean something, you know?"

Carl's head is pounding, and he closes his eye wearily as he shakes his head.

"Dead is dead." He says simply, not in the mood for a debate.

"Just because the walkers are, doesn't mean we have to be." Michonne counters, her eyes flickering back to the Miller house. In the distance, Carl thinks he can still hear the Wolf's moans.

"I….I heard this story, once." Carl clears his throat, uncertain if he wants to repeat it. What if his Dad had told these people about it, before? What if someone recognized it? But his head is pounding and he's feeling more exhausted than he ever has in his life, so he decides to, anyways.

"It's about a war veteran from one of the wars from before the outbreak. The way he got through it? The way he survived? He just accepted it. He just accepted the fact that he was going to die and that there was nothing he could do about. He went to war every day, not expecting to come home, doing things he didn't like doing. But one day, they won. And then he got to live." Carl is whispering now, and he suppresses the fear intertwining with the words as he watches their reactions. He hates how hard Michonne is to read, but if she recognizes the story, she doesn't show it, coolly meeting his gaze.

Aaron actually seems to like the tale, smiling sadly and nodding. "That's my line in the dust, then. That one day? When this is all over? Everything we've been suffering for will have been worth it. Maybe Buttons won't see that day, but the other horses? All of the apples and carrots they could ever dream of." He pats the horse fondly.

Carl sleeps beside Buttons that night. He prays to a God he doesn't believe in that Rick's group will come back from the Wolves' camp with enough goods to make this hellish day worth it. Michonne doesn't sleep, and despite his protests, insists on sitting alongside him, ever the watchful guard. She doesn't ask why he doesn't go back to the infirmary. She simply accepts it, spending the night staring at the gate or staring at him. He pretends to not be perturbed.

Does he want them to figure it out? Does he want her to recognize the story, or for someone in the infirmary to question the hat? If they figure it out, how does he want it to happen? How does he do this and get everyone out alive? He thinks these questions so loudly in his head, he's almost sure the world can hear them rattling in his skull, but the night is quiet. Only crickets respond, chirping as if the world didn't end, as if walkers weren't clawing at Alexandria's hastily repaired walls, and as if Carl Grimes didn't work for a man enslaving his father's people.

Chapter End Notes

Final Notes: Phew. Another really long chapter. I could have split this into parts, but I really didn't want the torture section by itself without some lighter Buttons fluff mixed in. Please comment and let me know your thoughts!

(Also, please forgive my poor attempts at graphic art at the beginning of these chapters. I'm a shallow human being who likes having pictures, but as someone with
no Photoshop experience, I'm relying on Pixlr which is barely a step above using Paint. ^_^ )
Chapter 5

To Carl's surprise, the Wolf wasn't lying. There's no trap, no other shoe waiting to fall. The scavenging group comes back with a huge haul, one that is unloaded at the far edge of town, away from Carl's nest in the carport. It's by design, Carl knows. The Alexandrians want to keep some of the goods for themselves, or at least as much as they think is safe without drawing Negan's ire. Carl pretends not to notice, even though he has full view of both the armory and the pantry's entrances, and even though it's obvious that the Alexandrians are staying clear of each one.

"Can I kill him, now?" Carl asks Rick sleepily when he finally sees him.

Buttons nickers behind him. The sun is rising, the sky as crimson as the dried blood that's still on his hands. Rick looks at him guardedly. While Carl's conversation with Michonne the night before seems to have put her at ease, the same can't be said for his father. Then again, the last time Carl saw Rick and Daryl, he had just ripped someone's nuts off, so there's that. It's becoming more and more obvious that it wasn't how Rick had intended on handling the situation.

"You said you owe me, right?" Carl teases, but the joke lands flat, his father seeming to take the request seriously. Carl rolls his eyes.

"Look, I'm not that bloodthirsty. I don't really care either way who does it, but it should still be done before he sneaks out or somethin'. And I have a feeling you're not up for puttin' his head on a pike. You look like you haven't slept in days."

Rick blinks at this, sighing deeply as he grunts in acknowledgement. The man's usual protective
stance has faltered, his shoulders slumped. If the man is actually letting his guard down around Carl, he must be exhausted. Daryl has arrived as well, intending to change babysitting shifts with Michonne, but looks just as tired despite not having been on the scavenging team.

"I'll do it." Rick grunts, much to Carl's surprise. The man actually looks...guilty? Carl shrugs.

"If you ask me, you should still take his other ball off before we kill him. His people were rapists. Worse than the Claimers, actually, at least they didn't mutilate their victims. The Wolves probably intended on doing the same thing to your women once they were finished pillaging the town." Rick suddenly seems very awake at this, doing a double take between Daryl and Carl as his eyes widen. But it's not the Wolves' intentions that have surprised the leader.

"Didn't get the chance to tell ya, Rick." Daryl mutters, not pleased at the subject. "Kid's had a run in with the Claimers, before."

"Daryl said you finished them off. Good riddance." Carl says bitterly, yawning as he stretches out beneath the makeshift hay. Alexandria had apparently once cared enough about the town's appearance to the point of wasting as on lawn mowers. It had come in handy, at least, when it came time to cut grass for Buttons to munch on. It wasn't the softest of mattresses, but between that and his jacket, Carl had slept in worse places. Like the Claimers' bed. Why had he brought up the subject, again?

"Wasn't just me. Daryl was there, too." Rick manages to stutter, looking like he's sucked on a lemon.

"None of us woulda lived through that day if it weren't for you, Rick, you know that. Especially Sophia..."

It's Carl's turn to wake up. He stiffens, straight as a rod as he looks between the two men, his mouth agawk. "They didn't...Sophia...did they?" He can't even ask the question. But the two men shake their heads.

"Nah. We stopped 'em. And now they ain't gonna touch anyone ever again." Daryl growls. Carl nods, his shoulders easing as he finally stands, stepping out of the carport's shadow. Buttons whinnies at his movement, nuzzling Carl's hands in search of a snack. He playfully bats her nose away.

"And now you've stopped the Wolves. Did you ever come across those corpses? The women they tied up?" Carl questions, and Daryl gives the smallest of nods. "Then you know why he's gotta die. Even if Negan wasn't in the picture, I mean. People like that? They don't change. He'll just do it again."

"I'll take care of it." Rick repeats grimly, beginning to unsheathe a machete as he does. But suddenly, Carl swears the man's nose twitches, his father looking utterly baffled as he stares at something beyond Carl's right shoulder.

Carl has a distant memory of the first time he ever heard the word 'fuck'.

He was eight or nine, and his father and Shane Walsh were trading war stories about one arrest or another in the kitchen. Carl was going through a phase where he would sneak up on unsuspecting victims, cover their eyes, and demand that they guess who he was. To his annoyance, they guessed right each time, but his efforts had resulted in him becoming rather sneaky in his attempts. Shane had his back turned towards where Carl was standing, but Rick had been facing Carl, trying not to laugh as Carl was ready to pounce. But before Carl ever had the opportunity, Shane had let out
some foul language about a particularly frustrating criminal, including something about 'that motherfucker', and Rick's face just blanched.

Carl has never forgotten the look on his dad's face that day, or the sheepish embarrassment on Shane's when he turned to find the child hidden behind him.

And right now, his father is sporting that same stunned, bewildered expression.

Carl stiffens, and has a vague feeling he knows why. He can't see it, but he can sense someone moving ever so slightly in his blind spot where the missing eye would be. He spins around and reaches for his holster, but whoever it is circles behind him, and he finds himself doing a 180', causing him to stumble back to the ground as he loses his balance. From the ground, he still manages to get his weapon out, cocking his revolver before he realizes just who he's pointing it at.

The figure in front of him has the utter gall to smile as he leans away from the barrel of Carl's gun.

"Jesus? What the hell?" Sprawled out on the ground, his stitches bursting at their seams, Carl feels every bit the stupid kid these people had believed him to be. Yet Rick seems absolutely horrified, like he's about to witness a wolf murder a mischievous kitten.

"Hey there, Patch." Jesus beams down at him, offering a hand as he crouches down. The other man is treating him like an old friend, which sends a scowl to Carl's face. "You need to stay aware of your surroundings. I had my pinky finger wiggling in your blind spot for a few good seconds before Grimes gave me aw-"

As Jesus chatters, realization is dawning on Carl, and he is not happy. Not happy at all.

Jesus is here in Alexandria. The Hilltop man is acting like he knows Carl's dad, which Carl knows is something Negan sure as hell wouldn't approve of. Carl points his finger at the bemused man threateningly, or at least, as threateningly as he can manage while still sprawled on the ground.

"We're not doing this. I'm not your friend, and I'm not covering up whatever the hell you're doing here with the Alexandrians. A mop, really? That was your cover story?" Jesus cocks his head from one side to the other, examining Carl like he's found a new prize. Carl stiffens, and looks around to make sure nobody else has overheard them before getting in Jesus's face.

Throughout it all, Rick is the very definition of tongue-tied, clearing his throat as he steps forward. He looks almost diplomatic, approaching Jesus as one would a child. He's no doubt trying to quietly explain that, hey, Patch is a Savior, and hey, maybe Jesus shouldn't openly flaunt whatever mutiny they're planning together. But before he can get the chance, Jesus cocks his head to the side like he finds Carl's temper amusing.

"You helped hide Maggie and Sasha, didn't you? I'd say that makes us friends."

Carl freezes. Rick freezes. Beside them, Daryl freezes. Jesus is the only one not freezing in this situation.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Carl finally growls, but Rick and Daryl are looking at him like they're seeing him for the first time.

"Sasha said you practically shoved her back in that closet. A mop, really? That was your cover story?" Jesus cocks his head from one side to the other, examining Carl like he's found a new prize. Carl stiffens, and looks around to make sure nobody else has overheard them before getting in Jesus's face.
"I said, I don't know what you're talking about. 'Cause if I did know what you were talking about? And I didn't tell Negan about it? I'd be dead. All of us would. So scram," Carl seethes.

But Jesus doesn't seem even remotely intimidated, instead turning back to Rick. "I saw the smoke and came to see if I could help, but it looks like you folks already have it under control. I'm assuming there's a reason why Patch is here?" Jesus is acting like whatever the hell he's doing here doesn't matter. Like he knows Carl isn't going to do anything about it.

"Patch is right here. Listen, Negan's coming any minute, and when he does? You can't be here, got it?" Carl snarls as best as he can manage. Jesus rolls his eyes in amusement and merely waits for a bewildered Rick to answer his questions. He isn't moving. He isn't leaving.

Letting out a string of curses, Carl decides to walk away first. He can't be seen with the other man. This is a bad idea. A really, really bad idea. He waves his hand dismissively at Jesus as he stomps off, grumbling to himself all the while.

"You realize he just cut someone's balls off a few hours ago, right?" He hears Daryl pointing out behind him, stunned. Only one of them, Carl thinks, but it's semantics, at this point.

"Wait, what?"

"How about you explain the part where he knows Maggie's alive." He hears Rick demand in a harsh whisper. Carl sticks a finger his ear as he stomps away from the men, using his other hand to flip the bird at them as he pretends not to hear anything they're saying.

It's childish, Carl knows. But right now, despite the few hours of sleep he's gotten, he's still utterly exhausted and tired of pretending to be otherwise. He doesn't want to think about how exposed he is right now, or how the group of men are comparing notes and one of them might get the idea of blackmailing him with his own attempts to help. He just wants to find a quiet corner, find his hat, and pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist. And maybe, just maybe, wash the blood off his hands.

Ron is about to get shot in the face.

Ron is about to be shot in the face two or three times in a row. And maybe that's what the other teen is wanting. In fact, the fact that Ron is acting like he wants a fight is the only reason Carl is holding back.

The problem with walking away from Jesus is that Carl didn't really have anywhere else to go. Having been chased out of his own nest by a freaking biblical ninja of all people, he didn't really want to go back to the infirmary yet, either. He thought that staying at the edge of the community would be the smarter option, that he'd run into less people who wanted to kill him, that way. But this plan backfired rather dramatically when he walked smack dab into Ron pushing Enid around in a graveyard.

The girl scowls, rubbing her arms as she struggles to maintain her balance. And when Ron goes to shove her again, this time sending her to the ground, Carl suddenly doubts that the dislocated shoulder the girl had sported before was actually from the Wolves.

Now, Carl isn't a hero. Saviors are the very opposite of heroes. But Negan keeps the Saviors bound by strict rules, and one of those rules is not raping or unnecessarily hurting women. Negan promotes the heck out of Sanctuary's prostitution ring to prevent his men from acting out, but the
murderous psychopath was strangely passionate about making sure everything was *consensual*. Manipulating women into unwanted marriages didn't count, apparently, but that was a moral dilemma for Carl to ponder over another time. Right now, he has the situation unfolding in front of him to worry about.

Carl has known people like Ron. Sanctuary is filled with people like him, albeit more competent. Insecure, always needing to prove themselves by puffing out and beating on their chests. They sulk to themselves, but as soon as they have an audience, they'll do anything to make sure everyone watching knows how much of a man or woman they are. Ron is less predictable than the Saviors Carl has grown up with, because as someone who's obviously been sheltered from the new world, he's all the more bitter and all the more eager to prove himself, especially in front of his girlfriend. It would be stupid for Carl to make a scene right now. He doesn't have Simon at his back and the entire town is just waiting for Rick's signal to string him up on a rope.

But even before Carl's time with Negan, he has vague memories of the men he looked up to, growing up. Superman, Batman, Captain America, the works. But the biggest hero of all? The one no superhero could ever hope to hold a candle to? Rick Grimes.

When Carl was young, every political conversation, every joke with Shane Walsh, every tall tale his father jokingly told him…. his father was always right. He could do no wrong in Carl's eyes. Rick Grimes was the kind of man to take the time after night shifts to go fishing with his son on Saturday mornings. Rick Grimes was the kind of man to sit down and calmly talk to his son about a fight he had with bullies at school. To show him how to change their car's oil, even if all Carl could do at the time was hand him tools. To teach Carl how to be a better person. Both Negan and Rick held tightly to their own moral codes, but now both codes are finally agreeing on something, and they're enkindling a righteous fury within him.

So despite the scene this is going to make, Carl pulls Ron off of Enid. And now that Ron knows that he has an audience, he only becomes more riled up than before. It takes a moment of the two teens shoving each other, of him hearing Enid begging for them to stop, before Carl realizes part of the reason for Ron's attitude.

Behind Enid and Ron are six freshly dug graves. A teddy bear and a gold necklace lay on top of two of them, a necklace that eerily resembles the one he had seen Ron wearing during their scuffle a few days prior. A wooden cross bearing a marker reveals their names.

*Jessie Anderson*

*Sam Anderson*

Carl finds his anger deflating, looking at the graves in realization. He backs off, choosing to dodge Ron's swings rather than countering them. The woman his father cared about, this 'Jessie'…was she Ron's mother? That makes this all kinds of awkward, even if Ron doesn't realize it. It's like fighting with his apocalyptic step-brother or something.

He swivels his gaze, narrowing his eyes at the other boy. "So you lost your mommy? Boo freakin' hoo. Most of us have, nowadays. It's not your girl's fault, you moron." Ron doesn't answer him, instead bellowing as he takes another wide swing in Carl's direction. Carl easily sidesteps it.

"No, it's *Rick's.*" The other boy growls, panting as he takes another swing. Carl is so dumbfounded by this that he almost takes a hit to the head for the distraction. Rick? Ron blamed his father for all of this? Not the Saviors, not the looters?

"Everything was fine before he came along. We were happy. No walkers, no bandits, just *living.*"
Then he marches in, kills my Dad, makes a move on my Mom, and lets you and those bandits boss us around. The only reason we brought him into this town was to fight people like you, and all he's done so far is tuck his tail between his legs! They're all dead because of him!"

"Your Dad was hurting your Mom, Ron." Enid insists. "He murdered Deanna. Rick's done his best, and he's been showing us what we have to do to survive, now. Those things were going to happen with or without Rick's peop-" But Enid's protests remain unfinished, with a punch that had initially been rearing towards Carl now aimed in her direction.

Carl lunges forward, but he's too late, and the hit lands squarely across the girl's face, sending her stumbling. Carl's side screams in protest as he pushes all of his weight into Ron's hip, tackling the other boy to the ground as he takes out his feet from under him. Normally, Carl could have held him there with ease. In fact, it's only been a few weeks since Carl has done exactly that. But Carl's exhaustion and numerous injuries slow him down, and he's struggling. To his frustration, the other boy is smart enough to reach for Carl's holster, and Carl rails against him with every ounce of strength he has left to make sure Ron can't reach his gun.

For the briefest of moments, an instinct as natural as the one to breathe comes over young Savior, and he reaches for his knife. Its hilt is still bloody from the looter's blood, having been hastily cleaned with a few swipes to Carl's jeans. He grabs it. He could stab Ron as easily as he had stabbed the Wolf, he knows. And even as he struggles to keep Ron still, he knows exactly which arteries to aim for. He could slice him right now and end this fight.

"Don't make me kill you, man." Carl grits out, groaning in his attempt to keep Ron's hand away from his holster. The other teen is breathing hard, his eyes looking nearly glazed as he snarls.

"Do it." Ron dares him, grappling for Carl's gun. "Just do it."

It's in that moment that Carl realizes that his gut instinct had been right. Ron wanted this fight. He wanted to fight Enid, he wanted to fight Carl, and more than any of that, Ron wanted to die.

Carl knows the smart thing to do. The smart thing was to leave his hat behind. To torture the prisoner of war and find out what they needed. To keep his head down, to not let anyone know who he is. To not get attached to a stupid horse. To not trust a girl with big blue eyes. He should kill Ron right now and be done with it, before Ron has a chance to hurt anyone else in his stupid testosterone-filled tantrum. Carl is reminded of Negan's story of the rabid dog that killed the other rescue dogs his mother had taken in, and Carl has seen that very story play out time and time again. He's seen stupid, selfish, and cowardly people get others killed. The smart thing to do is to put Ron down like the rabid dog he is.

But something clicks within Carl. Something about the way that, nursing her bruised eye, Enid is pleading for them to stop. Something about the care Ron has put into placing a teddy bear on his brother's grave. Carl is tired of wanting to kill people. He's tired of always looking for the next fight, of always licking his most recent wounds. He's tired of being a monster killing other monsters. He's just plain tired.

In the most stupid decision since he jumped off a horse mid-battle, Carl drops his knife, using his free hand instead to reach for his holster. But instead of pointing the freed pistol towards the struggling teen, he tosses it where neither of them can reach it.

Ron howls in aggravation, and swings back his arm to wail on Carl. His muscles caving in, Carl winces, pulling his face back into the meat of his shoulder as he anticipates the hit. But the blows never come. Someone has pulled Ron off of him. Carl instinctively scuffles backwards, away towards the howling teen and the newcomer. It's his Dad. Rick has Ron in a chokehold. Rick is
As quickly as Rick came to Ron's side, Daryl and Jesus are at Carl's, their shoulders tense as they take in the situation.

"Christ, almighty. We leave you by yourself for what, half an hour, and you get into a brawl?" Daryl asks, his eyebrows furrowed.

"It's not his fault." Enid chokes out, crossing her arms. She doesn't meet anyone's eyes, trying to compose herself. But try as she might, her haughty glare falters under the sound of her boyfriend's yelling. "Ron was getting pushy, Patch was just trying to help." She admits reluctantly.

Ron's yelling finally fades as he sinks into Rick's hold, and the man eases the unconscious teen to the ground. Carl struggles to breathe, himself, still panting from the exertion of the scuffle. His father's eyes flicker up at the remaining teens, his eyes sharpening as he takes in Enid's face. His expression darkens as he sees the swelling beneath her eye, and he shakes his head in aggravation as he turns back to the downed Ron.

"I hoped…." He begins, hesitant. He seems almost defeated for a moment, before shaking off the exhaustion settling in his shoulders and lifting the boy up. "I hoped he wouldn't end up like his dad." Rick finally says, grunting as he puts him in a fireman's carry.

Rick's words wash over Carl, the whole thing starting to make more sense. Carl's father swooping in on a married woman, killing her husband and trying to take her for himself? That was something Negan would do. But defending a battered wife, taking out her abusive husband, and falling in love with the victim in the process? That was absolutely a Rick Grimes thing to do.

For a moment, Carl wants to blurt it out. He wants to gloat over Ron about how much better of a man Rick ever was than his own father, how he was a better man than Ron could ever hope to be. But instead he stays quiet, shoving his shaking hands in his pockets. His father notices his shuffling, sighing as he takes Carl's appearance in.

"No more avoiding the infirmary, Patch. You need it more than he does, by the look of that shirt." Rick finally says. Carl looks down at himself, and winces as he realizes his stitches have torn. Batman looks nearly unrecognizable, his face smeared in dirt and blood. Carl nods wearily. Fetching his tossed gun, he tucks it back into his holster before following the others along. He glances at the sunrise, its scarlet hues nearly faded from the sky.

"If Negan decides to pay us a visit, it won't be long now. He likes getting an early start." Carl murmurs, deliberately looking at Jesus as he says it. Rick nods slightly, sighing.

"The kid has a point, Paul. We appreciate the help, but you should leave before things get ugly."

"Alright. We'll meet up about the quarry later, yeah?" Rick freezes for a moment, his eyes flickering over to Carl in alarm, but he finally grunts in response before heaving Ron forward and plodding down the trail.

Carl is getting the feeling that Jesus is very openly blabbing about things that Alexandria does not want him to know about, because not only does his father seem exasperated with the man, Daryl grabs him by the shirt as they begin to talk in hushed voices. Carl pretends not to notice, letting the two men duke it out as he follows his father. Whatever the deal with this 'quarry' is, he doesn't want to know about it.

As he passes the graves, he notices that the teddy bear has fallen over, its face pressed into the
mud. Maybe Carl has made a mistake in sparing Ron. But the matter is done, and at the very least, the Alexandrians seem grateful for his actions, or more grateful than they would have been if he had killed the teen. Carl is proud to be Rick's son. He just hopes that one day, his father can say the same thing about him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Please let me know your thoughts, or if there's anything I might have overlooked! Reviews definitely help keep me motivated.
Chapter 6

The infirmary is decidedly less busy than it had been before, most of the minor injuries from the battle having since been stitched up and tended to. Only a few patients remain, one of which is the blond, long haired man that Sophia had been trying to save the last time Carl had seen her. He's relieved that her efforts weren't in vain, as the man appears to be very much alive and is snoring rather loudly as they enter.

But Sophia and her mother are not relieved to see them, Carol's eyebrows raised in an exasperated manner as she takes in a sheepish Rick hauling Ron into the room. She places her hands on her hips and waves the leader over, seeming unsurprised by the situation as Rick places Ron onto a sofa. But the woman stills as Enid emerges, the swelling beneath her eye beginning to turn a nasty shade of blue.

"What happened?" Sophia's mother asks firmly, seeming like she already knows the answer. Carl and Enid shrug in sync, looking to Rick to supply the explanation. Carl is puzzled that Rick is acting so embarrassed about the ordeal, but the more this day goes on, the more it's becoming clear
that this isn't the first time Rick's had problems with the other teen.

"Best I can tell, Ron was pushing Enid around and Patch put a stop to it." Rick admits reluctantly, like the truth of it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. He circles around, glancing at them expectantly to confirm the story, and Carl suddenly feels like a student being stared down by a principal. Carl huffs, crossing his arms in irritation.

"He's lucky 'the stop to it' wasn't a knife to his chest." Carl growls, meeting his father's gaze with a glare. Rick doesn't seem the least bit surprised or even affronted, instead merely swiveling his head back to Carol with a shrug, who gives him a knowing look. Some sort of silent exchange seems to occur between the two before Rick clears his throat.

"Ron should wake up in a few minutes, I didn't hold him under for long. Patch and Enid are more banged up than he is, in fact, I'm pretty sure Patch's gonna need new stitches." Rick reports, sighing as he starts to leave.

Carl rolls his eyes, sticking out his tongue at the man. "Snitch." He spits, without any malice to his tone. Rick almost seems amused, shaking his head as he turns back towards Carol.

"I'm going to head on. You might want to keep them separated, it'll make things easier when Ron wakes up. Somethin' tells me he's going to need a guard more than Patch does."

"We'll watch him." Carol agrees coldly, glaring at Ron's innate form as she motions Sophia to the next room over. Sophia nods, and guides Enid and Carl to the room he had stayed in before.

Carl feels oddly proud of this, of the thought that the Alexandrians are treating one of their own as a bigger threat than him. But he doesn't get the chance to think on it long, however, as soon they've cut the corner and the three teens are left to themselves. For the past few years, Carl's barely ever seen people his own age before. He's used to dealing with the rough and tumble men and women at Sanctuary. But now he's in a room alone with two girls, having fought off another teenage boy. It's bewildering to think about.

"I don't really need to be here." Enid says suddenly, as Sophia pulls up chairs. "Ron just got one swing at me, it's no big deal. It's Patch he was fighting with."

"I'm not the one with the black eye." Carl snorts smugly.

"Yeah, and I'm also not the who's been bleeding two days in a row." Enid sneers, rolling her eyes as she looks away. Sophia blinks as she watches the two of them, her hands landing on her hips at Enid's words. She looks at Carl expectantly, her stance nearly identical to the one her mother had taken with Rick.

"I stitched it up yesterday." He defends. "The stitches have just….torn again…… since then."

Sophia hesitantly reaches out for his shirt, and despite her gentle touch, Carl flinches as she raises it up to his side. He hisses at the movement, and it's clear that the gash has become inflamed. The girl purses her lips, her eyes narrowing.

"You made the stitches too tight." She scolds. "You have to give them more room to stretch when it's a curved surface like that."

"Yeah, that's what Michonne said." He swallows harshly. He can't think of anything more to say than that, so he sits compliantly as Sophia examines him.

Sophia bites her lip as she works, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You're right, Enid, Patch
is worse off than you are. But from experience? Let me put some witch's hazel and gauze over your swelling. There's some frozen peas in the pantry, if you keep that on top of it for the next hour or so, it won't look so bad."

Enid shuffles awkwardly from the attention, glancing at Carl's stitching. "Thanks, but...just...just tell me where that witch stuff is, and I'll do it, myself." She murmurs. For a moment, Carl thinks Enid actually looks worried for him, which is bizarre.

Sophia doesn't argue, and there appears to be an odd understanding between the two girls. From the pauses in their sentences, and how they awkwardly shuffle around each other, he gets the feeling that the two don't normally get along, and that this is some sort of awkward, new friendship. But eventually, Enid gives up and asks for Sophia's help in applying the gauze, and Carl shakes his head at their futile attempts to keep the bandage stuck on.

"You need another long piece to wrap around the side of your head to hold it steady. You remember how my patch looked, right?" He adds helpfully, motioning in a circle around his head. For a moment, the two girls stare at him incredulously, and then Enid nods, giggling. He blinks in confusion.

"What?" He asks, looking between the two of them.

"It's just....the first time we met, I never thought it would turn out like this." Enid laughs, covering her mouth with her hands. "You looked like a serial killer out of a terminator movie or something. And now-this is like-this is like some twisted version of High School, and you're just sitting there covered in blood giving me friendly advice on how to wrap my head like we're talking about football, or makeup or something."

Carl is a bit taken aback. "Er....definitely not makeup." He defends awkwardly. "Just because I have long hair-"

"Oh geez, you're one of those. Have you ever thought about cutting it? Because I can totally give a good haircut." Enid offers, and Carl is taken aback by her sudden friendliness. While she talks, Sophia is taking his advice, holding Enid's makeshift bandage steady and wrapping a longer piece around her head.

"Uh....I'll pass, thanks." The last person he'd let cut his hair had been his mother. Something about letting anyone else do it feels wrong. And without his patch, his hair is the only thing helping cover his features.

"Well, if you ever change your mind, I'm still here. Ron's mom was showing me how to do it, before she died. And I used to do my Dad's hair all the time, before he died. Your folks dead, too?" She asks bluntly, and Carl recoils at the boldness of the question.

"Yeah." He lies. "For a while."

"Daryl's a better man than my daddy ever was." Sophia says quietly, snipping off the excess gauze. "And Judith lost her mother. Maybe the orphan club would be a better name?"

"Daryl's your stepdad?" Carl questions, the idea of it reaffirming his suspicions from before, of how protective the redneck had been over her. Sophia blushes from the question, shaking her head.

"No. And yes. They're a thing, but not a thing? I don't know, they've always been weird like that.
But he's always looked out for us, and he's always been close to my mom. I think he took our situation personally, you know? I don't think his dad was so great, either."

She bites her lip, deep in thought. "But Rick? He's always been kind of like a dad, too. There was one time...... right after we first met, when I was separated from the others on a highway. And Rick, he made it his utter mission to not let me out of his sight after he found me. He had just lost his son, so I don't think he could bear the thought of losing another kid, you know? Even one that wasn't his. With our group...I've never really felt like an orphan. Because at the end of it all, I still had a family, even if they weren't blood."

Enid nods, a bit more solemn. "Yeah. Maggie is kind of like that, for me. Was, I mean." She murmurs, casting an uneasy look towards Carl. He swallows, shifting uneasily in his cot as he tries to pretend not to notice her slip. Besides, it's Sophia's words that he can't stop thinking about. They settle uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. But Sophia sighs, tossing her hands up at Enid.

"Alright, I need you to shoo. I need to take his shirt off, and I doubt he wants an audience." Sophia says with a smirk.

Carl blanches, sputtering. Enid wolf whistles, smiling knowingly as she raises her eyebrows.

"My---my----shirt?----I can just lift it up----" He protests.

"It's just going to get in the way. And it does need changing. You've been wearing the same one since the battle, right? It's nasty, it's probably why that gash is infected in the first place." Sophia says pointedly, looking a bit sympathetic. "I still have that bag of clothes, if you want to pick something else out." She compromises. For a second, Carl swears she's batting her eyelashes.

"Aww. You made him turn red, Soph." Enid teases, sitting up. "So frozen peas for the eye, right? I thought it was supposed to be frozen steak, or something?"

"Anything cold will work. But the Saviors left more peas and corn than anything else."

"Ah. Yeah. Right. Well, I'll be off, then. Have fun stripping him." Enid winks, opening the door to leave. Sophia rolls her eyes.

"Lord, don't say that too loudly. You'll give Mom a heart attack."

If Carl was beet red before, he's absolutely crimson now. As much as the girls seem amused by the situation, he's finding it hard to keep his breathing steady. Quickly dressing and undressing in front of Michonne was one thing, but this? His scars will be on display for Sophia to see. It shouldn't embarrass him. It shouldn't embarrass him, because he shouldn't have a crush, and he shouldn't care what Sophia thinks. And it's not like being shirtless will be that much worse than showing the world his missing eye, yet he feels mortified all the same.

As the door shuts behind Enid, it takes a moment and a deep breath for him to work up to taking the shirt off. It gets tangled around his elbows for a moment before falling unapologetically on the floor, Batman's eyes bloodied as they look up at him from the linoleum. He shifts under Sophia's gaze, feeling far more vulnerable than he has any right to. Why is he panicking so much about this? After everything he's done? It's not even the fact that Sophia is seeing him shirtless that has him bristling, it's the fact that anyone is seeing him like this at all.

But despite her initial teasing, Sophia stays professional, slipping into the efficient movements he had seen her use the night before. She doesn't say anything about his scars, doesn't ask how he got them or where they're from, and is instead entirely consumed by his injury. He grits his teeth as she
cleans the wound, but is thankful that it's her cleaning it up and not one of Sanctuary's people. Despite her inexperience, her touch is more gentle, and it's weirdly nice to feel like the person looking after him is actually worried about him. He tries not to squirm, but can't help but feel self-conscious at the lack of definition in his chest, at how vulnerable and how much of a gangly boy he looks without his layers of jackets.

"You remind me of someone, you know." She says suddenly, biting her lip.

"Yeah?" He asks uncomfortably, grimacing. She nods, and moving to the medicine cabinet where his hat had been stored, grabs some dental floss. Well, crap. If he had his suspicions on who had found the hat before, he definitely has them now.

He wants to run. He wants his gloves, he wants his jacket, he wants his hat, he wants his patch, and he wants to run far away from here and never come back. But instead he's half naked and utterly vulnerable with a girl he barely knows plunging a needle in his side. She talks as she works, her voice as soft as her hands.

"I was a crybaby when I was younger. A complete pushover. There were these kids in middle school that would always pick on me at recess. I was quiet, weird, and always dressed in shabby clothes, you know? Mom did the best she could, but she wasn't able to stand up to my Dad, and he always drank away our money. And I guess, I just mimicked her? If I was quiet and didn't draw attention to myself, people would leave me alone, for the most part. But when they didn't, I just stood there and took it."

Her story makes sense, and explains how Sophia had come to perfect that wide-eyed, innocent look that had made him underestimate her. But Carl isn't sure why she's telling him any of this. She continues.

"There was another kid in the same grade as me. I didn't even know him, we didn't even have any classes together, but he saw what was going on and stood up for me. Even got into a fight with the other boys over it. He didn't know me, he just did it because it was the right thing to do. Later…. when the virus hit, our parents were all trying to pick us up when they were evacuating the city, and I saw him. He was still waiting at the school when we left. We ran into his mother later, in a traffic jam near Atlanta, and found out that he was gone by the time she got there. She never found him. She was devastated about it."

Carl's world is tilting, and he's not sure what to do. Because he remembers a fight on the playground. He remembers a group of boys picking on a little girl. He thought she had looked familiar, but he had disregarded it, hadn't even thought about it since he had first seen her in his father's house with Judith… but he remembers getting in a fight, remembers the long talk that followed with his father after he explained why he had gotten into that fight. But he hadn't remembered the girl's name. He hadn't even really remembered what she looked like. All this time, it had been her. It was Sophia.

And most importantly of all, his mother had looked for him.

But that doesn't make sense. He had stayed at the school. He hadn't gone with the teachers. He had stayed, waiting for her, so sure that she would come, but he never heard her. Never saw her. He had hidden in the basement, at one point...was it possible she had come then? That they had just barely crossed paths? Or had his mother lied to everyone about even trying?

Doubt besets him, but he can't give himself time to panic. Because Sophia is acting like she suspects something. Like she knows something. Carl struggles to swallow, struggles to even breathe. Yet Sophia's fingers are steady as she ties off the last stitch, and she looks him in the eye.
"I think about him, a lot. And sticking up for Enid? Helping hide Judith? That's *exactly* the sort of thing he would-"

Before she can finish, the door swings open, revealing a disgruntled looking Daryl on the other side. Carl is suddenly very aware that he's very shirtless and that the man who just opened the door is very much Sophia's stepfather.

Well, shit.

Carl jumps back from her, his face burning as he nearly tumbles out of his chair in his haste. He suppresses a scowl, trying to act like nothing is going on, but the scowl that's mirrored on Daryl's face makes it clear that he knows something is.

"What the hell---"

"Don't give him that look, Daryl, I was bandaging him up," Sophia says, her stubborn streak shining through as she scolds the older man. But Daryl doesn't buy it, raising an eyebrow.

"And you had to shut the door to do that? You couldn'ta just raised his shirt up or somethin'?" He asks gruffly, stiffening.

"That's what I said..." Carl grumbles fruitlessly.

Sophia rolls her eyes at them both. "It's easier this way. And Enid was teasing him about it, I was just trying to give him some privacy. Or would you rather him be shirtless in front of everyone? Did you need something?"

Daryl clears his throat, and if Carl didn't feel ready to crawl out of his skin from the man's gaze, before, he definitely does when he sees what's in the redneck's hand.

It's his hat.

It's *his* hat.

Oh, no. Oh, *hell* no.

"I need to talk to him. Alone." Daryl mutters, and Sophia visibly balks.

"Daryl, he didn't do any---"

"It ain't about that. It's abou' somethin' else. Jus' give me a minute alone with him, alright?" Carl can't help but notice the way the redneck's voice softens as he talks to her, and the man presses a kiss to the girl's hair as she defeatedly walks past. The entire time, Daryl's eyes don't leave Carl's, and he finds himself sinking into his seat. So this is it. Sophia found the hat, and she gave it to Daryl. And now they're both calling him out on it, simple as that.

He can do this. He's burned down towns, before. He's tortured people. If he can keep his calm against Simon, against *Negan*, he can certainly manage to do the same against the hunter. Carl tells himself this, but as Daryl glowers at him, his father's hat in hand, he's not sure he believes it.

Sophia closes the door, the doorknob clicking with a tone of finality as it shuts.

"You got somethin' you want to tell me, *Patch*?" Daryl says, holding out the hat.

Carl's heart is beating against his chest so loudly he's sure the other man can hear it, but he shrugs, furrowing his eyebrows as he gives Daryl his best impression of a strange look.
"Look, Sophia's off limits. I get it--"

"That's not what this is about, and you know it." Daryl mutters, throwing the hat towards Carl. He catches it, trying not to look relieved that it's back in his hands again. "Read the tag, inside."

"Wha--"

"Jus' read it." Daryl growls. But as solemn as the redneck is, his voice is almost….soft? Carl rolls his eyes, and flipping the hat upside down, squints in order to read the tiny print.

"Dry clean only....."

"Below that. The department name."

Carl swallows hard, complying. "Property of King County Sheriff's Department, Georgia. You happy? Now what's this about?"

Daryl stares back at Carl, and the teen tries not to back down from the man's all-seeing gaze. The redneck's eyes are flickering over his chest, over his scars, and he shakes his head as he lets out a breath.

"You don't gotta lie and say it's not yours. I saw ya wearin' it. Both the day of the execution circle and once after, when Dwight stuck it on ya. Didn't think much about it, not until Sophia found it in that there cabinet. Reminded her of one Rick used to wear all the time. And lo' and behold', turns out it's from the same department he worked at. Imagine that."

Carl shrugs, looking away. He's trying to think of a way out of this. Trying desperately to find away to deflect the hunter's attention, to make the situation go away. He can't think of any. He's tempted to just spill it all out, to do anything but try to come up with another web of lies, but instead the web starts spinning. And once it starts spinning, it doesn't stop.

"Found it on some dead guy. Think the badge said Walsh? It was a cool hat, so I kept it. What's the big deal?"

Whatever Daryl was expecting, this is not it. The man visibly recoils, his face blanching before he scrunches his nose like he's smelled something foul. He shakes his head.

"And when exactly did you 'find' this dead guy?"

"Just a month or two after the outbreak, in Atlanta." Carl lies smoothly, meeting his gaze. He knows as soon as the words leave his mouth that he's made up too much detail, too many things for the other man to snag him on, and he's right. Daryl snarls.

"Funny. Because I knew Shane Walsh. And if he's dead? It weren't until at least a year later, near Woodbury. Why the hell are you lyin' about this? About any of this?"

Carl blinks at that. While Shane had been like an uncle to him, he had never expected to see the man again, nevertheless meet someone who knew him. Shane and his father…. had they found each other? Had they been reunited, too? They must have, from Daryl's reaction. He nearly growls at himself for the mistake, but seriously, what were the odds?

"I don't know what you mean." Carl says evenly.

"What I mean is that I still wasn't gonna say nothin', at first. Just a hunch, no proof, ya know? But when I was talkin' to Jesus, earlier? I was gettin' on to him for blabbin' his mouth around you, but
when we were talkin', he didn't just call ya *Patch*. He called ya *Carl.*" Daryl says, looking at him expectantly.

Carl wants to lie. He does. He's scared shitless and shirtless in a room with one of the most dangerous people in town, and Daryl has just found all the carefully built walls and torn them all down. There's no way out of this. He can deny it until his grave, but if there's anything he's learned about Daryl, it's that he's a hunter by nature. He isn't going to just let this go. And even if he does? It sounds like Sophia is starting to figure it out, too.

For a moment, Carl doesn't say anything. He doesn't say anything at all. He hopes Daryl will crumble and talk first, but he doesn't. So at last, Carl lets out a sigh.

"Does Dad know?" His voice is so quiet, it's nearly a whisper. He's not even certain Daryl has heard it at first, until the redneck gives the smallest of head shakes.

"Naw. Naw, he don't." Daryl says, his voice nearly as quiet, as if he's amazed that his accusations hold true. He's sizing up Carl again now, looking at him like he's a different person. "But he suspects."

Carl's head whips up so fast his neck cracks, and it takes a second for him to catch his breath.

"It's been killin' him. He's been thinkin' he's been imaginin' the resemblance, 'projectin' or some shit. But the odds of you bein' here, in *Virginia*. The odds you survived at all…..why the hell haven't you said nothin'?" Daryl demands suddenly, his signature temper beginning to flair.

If Carl wasn't so frightened, so utterly scared out of his mind, he would almost admire the man's defensiveness over his father. Instead, Carl's grasping for straws under his glare, words he's barely been able to even say to himself tumbling out of him.

"Because it don't matter." Carl says decisively, but it doesn't change the tears that are welling in his eyes. Daryl responds as if he's been punched in the face, reeling back before stepping towards the teen.

"What the hell do you mean, 'it don't matter'? Rick's been lookin' for you this entire time. While freakin' Olive Oil was boo hooin', puttin' up a *gravemarker* for ya at the Prison, he was showin' everyone he met your photo, askin' 'em if they'd seen ya. Hell, he was gonna leave yer mama to go lookin' for you, till he heard from his radio buddy that yer school burned down. Her gettin' knocked up didn't help none, neither."

Carl feels himself sinking lower and lower into the ground, until his fear boils into a fiery pit of rage.

"He's lookin' for someone who doesn't exist." Carl spits, clenching his fists. "I haven't been 'Carl' for a long time. What do you think it would do to him if he knew who I was? You think he'd be happy about it?" Carl's voice is rising, and he struggles to keep calm, to make sure no one else can overhear. "I'm a *Savior*. I'm a *monster*. Knowing who I am? The things I've done? It would just destroy him."

Daryl's shaking his head, now, pacing. "Naw. You're wrong. You're no monster, you're just yella'. Tough enough to tear off someone's balls, but too much of a coward to tell yer daddy who you really are." Carl snarls at the accusation, jumping to his feet and getting in the man's face.

"You think that Wolf fucker is the first person I've tortured? You think your friends were the first execution circle I've been a part of? I don't even feel *guilty* about any of it. People like me? People
like those looters? The Saviors? We don't change. We do what we have to do to survive. Who I was before this doesn't matter, anymore. And Dad…. Dad deserves better than that."

"And those scars on your chest? The way you flinch every time people even barely touch ya? That's just in the past, too, right?" Daryl rebukes, scowling. Carl opens his mouth, but doesn't get a chance to talk as Daryl continues on.

"Cigarette burns, right? And those other marks, they from belt buckles? I got 'em, too. I wasn't lucky enough to have a daddy like yours. My daddy was like the fuckers that did that to you. And when I got away from him? I stayed with my brother and dealt with his crap, because even though he was an abusive asshole, he loved me, and at least he didn't beat me or knock me around or nothin'. Kind of like you an' Negan, right? I didn't think that I deserved better, that I was nothin' but a washed up ol' redneck. But then I became a part of this, and your old man-"

Whatever Daryl had planned to say is interrupted, the door swinging open to reveal an armed and alarmed Michonne. Her eyes are large, her face stiffened into the same expression she had worn during the battle against the Wolves. She raises an eyebrow at the tension in the room, but doesn't remark on it. She says one word.

"Negan."

Behind her, with the door open, Carl can now make out the sound of a distant bell. It's a sound he knows from when he was on the other side of those gates, when he was the one in a jeep on his way to a pickup. Alexandria has sounded the alarm. "He's here." She confirms.

"Shit." Daryl starts. "Kid, you have to-"

"I don't have to do anything. Do you think telling him right now is going to help anything? And have him freaking out right before Negan comes strolling in?" Carl growls, turning to a confused Michonne. This entire thing is spinning out of control, unraveling and unraveling until he can't see straight. Michonne's expression hardens.

"He's got a point. Whatever this is about, is it worth keeping Negan waiting?" Michonne questions, her eyes sharp.

"It might be!" Daryl grits out, releasing a string of curses. "Dammit, this is shit timing. Look, this isn't the end of this, alright? Rick's gotta know. Maybe you're right, maybe we get through this pickup first. But if you don't tell 'im, I will. Got it?"

"Got it." Carl grumbles, moving forward as he evades their gaze.

"You forgetting something?" Michonne cocks her head, nodding towards the bag of clothes Sophia had left behind. He doesn't have time to be embarrassed, instead merely lunging for its contents and grabbing the first shirt he can find. He struggles with its buttons and realizes his hands are shaking.

"And Daryl, about Sophia...... don't worry about it. I won't try nothin'. We're not Rufio and Julietta or anything, ok? I barely know her."

"Rufio? Who the hell is 'Rufio'?" Daryl cocks his head to the side, looking at Carl like he's stupid. Michonne is already headed out the door, her dreadlocks swaying as she shakes her head.

"He means Romeo and Juliet, Daryl." She says, amusement apparent even through her trepidation. Her eyes are still furrowed, though, as if she's trying to discern exactly what the two had been talking about.
"Whatever." Carl rolls his eyes, grabbing his pack and slipping past the disgruntled redneck. He doesn't bother grabbing the hat, making a point to leave it behind. He can barely look at it, feeling oddly betrayed by the inanimate object. He should have burned it, tossed it over the walls, something other than this. Leaving it in the cabinet had been a mistake, but the same thing might have happened if he had left it in his pack. He should have tossed it a long time ago.

If his father dies today, it'll be Carl's fault.

Towards the infirmary's exit, Ron is sitting upright on the couch as Carol stands guard, his eyes narrowing as he spots the other teen. For a moment, Carl thinks the other boy is going to lunge across the floor and continue their brawl, but instead he keeps to his spot on the couch, glowering.

"Go on home to Daddy, you one-eyed freak." Ron hisses, and it takes longer than it should for Carl to realize that the boy is referring to Negan. Carl looks around and notices that Sophia is nowhere to be seen. She's likely dashed off to his father's house to grab Judith.

"At least I have someone to go home to, you son of a-"

But Carl doesn't have time to finish his goading. In the distance, the distant echo of banging steel overshadows his words, followed by the eerie sound of barbed wire scraping metal. Alexandria's gate is off in the distance, far away from the open infirmary door, but Negan's booming voice carries through the streets regardless, silencing everyone in the room.

"Little pigs, little pigs! Let me in."

The boogieman has come for Alexandria.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: A lot of big stuff happened in this chapter, so please let me know what you think!

Also, for anyone confused about how Jesus knew Carl's name, the other Saviors guessed it in front of him back in Chapter One.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WARNING: This chapter is pretty trauma-heavy. This is a Walking Dead fanfiction and I don’t feel that this is anything worse than what’s happened in canon, but I understand that not everyone might be at a good mental place to read that kind of thing. But Negan is here, and major things are about to go down. So be aware.

There are also a few lines and references to past child sexual abuse in this chapter. This has been tagged in this story from the beginning, but please be advised.

Chapter 7

There, standing in the dust with a trademark shit-eating grin on his face, is Negan.

Carl has never decided exactly what he feels about the man. Negan excels at bouncing between the role of someone people want to please and someone they’re also terrified to piss off. Carl knows this better than anyone, because he's been with the man since nearly the beginning, before Hilltop was ever even conquered. It was nothing like the full-scale operation it is today, with its multiple outposts and hundreds upon hundreds of people buzzing around Sanctuary. It was smaller, more intimate, which is why he had managed to see the man up close more than anyone, possibly even more than Simon.

The same man that ruthlessly tortured and murdered the Claimers is also the man that took a
crying boy into his chest and comforted him afterwards. The same man that saved women from being raped on the road is also the man that forced them to marry him to save their loved ones from executions. Negan is the embodiment of his favorite weapon, a baseball bat that promised peanuts and cracker jacks all while wrapped in the sharp sting of barbed wire.

Even now, even years after living with the man, Carl can't decide what to do with himself upon seeing him, simultaneously wanting to stand at attention and flee. Instead, he joins Rick's side in front of the tribute pile they've assembled, leaning back on one foot like it's just another day at work. He's lost Michonne and Daryl in the crowd, and while Alexandria is mostly silent, holding their breaths at their new arrivals, he can't help but think about what the redneck might be telling the warrior woman now.

But he can't let himself worry about it. What's done is done. He needs to focus, he needs to stay sharp. And he absolutely needs to keep his father alive.

His father doesn't seem to share the same sentiment about Patch, which Carl knows he can't blame him for. As Carl approaches, Rick's entire body heaves a sigh as he turns to face the gate. He's trying to look docile, Carl knows, but the tension ripples across his shoulders as Negan strolls in, leisurely tossing Lucille over his shoulder.

But despite Negan's grin, something is wrong. Just as Rick's body betrays him, Carl can tell after years of living with the Savior that he's absolutely pissed about something.

"Now, is that a way to greet the rescue party? I don't see a single smile out there. And to think, we came here to offer our aid." Negan drawls, scowling as he takes in the damage, the ash and rubble that the battle has left behind. The air smells of rotting flesh and burnt pork, and Carl realizes that the Alexandrians must have burned the looters' bodies. He almost wishes they had left them out, as proof of how many people they had fought against.

"Good to see you." Rick offers emptily. "We had a problem, but it's been taken care of."

"Yeesh. Look at Nero over here, playing his fiddle while Rome burns. Not a problem, Rick? Looks to me that you've gotten your asses whupped. Which is funny, because last time I checked, I was the only one around here doing any ass whuppin'." Negan strolls forward, men falling in behind him. All of the important people are here, which worries Carl. Negan only brings his fighters in full force if he's anticipating serious trouble or if he aims to make a point. Carl's not sure which one this is, but he's painfully aware of Dwight's stare.

Rick swallows harshly, his adam's apple bobbing as he nods diplomatically. "Some bandits rammed a vehicle into our gates, tried to take us out, but we took care of it. In fact, we owe your boy our lives. He was a huge part of holding them back." Rick says, motioning towards Carl. Carl shifts uncomfortably under their stares, trying to act like none of this is a big deal.

Carl isn't sure what to make of his father's praise until he sees the glimmer in Negan's eyes. It isn't Carl that Rick is complimenting, it's Negan. Trying to assuage Negan that the Saviors are so powerful, that even their teenaged, injured soldier is better than them. It's a smart stance to take. But something in Negan's attitude leads Carl to believe that the other man isn't quite buying it.

"Oh do you, now? Do tell." Negan cocks his head to the side like he's amused at the thought, turning towards Carl as he looks for an explanation.

"Killed a bunch of 'em, led the walkers away. Not much to it, boss. Left you a present I think you'll like." Carl offers, motioning towards the tribute pile. The looters mostly had a series of melee weapons and antibiotics, but their stockpile of MREs (where did the looters even get those?) sit
prettily in a pile.

"Patch is being generous." Rick states carefully, watching Negan as he approaches the pile. Negan brushes his fingers across the MREs as he scans over the goods. "He mowed right through them on that horse, like something out of a Western. And if he hadn't gotten to the breach in time, the entire place could have been overrun with walkers. We owe him. We owe you."

Negan swivels at the sound of it, the flattery falling flat as he clings to Rick's last words.

"You're damn right you do." The man says, his eyes narrowing. For a moment, he looks ready to punch Rick, and Carl can't figure out why. But as quickly as the moment comes, it's gone, the charismatic smile slipping back on his face. He turns to Carl.

"Good to see you're healin' up, champ. Nearly thought we lost you last week, and here you are, the fuckin' hero of Alexandria. Has a nice ring to it. So tell me, lil deputy, has pricky Ricky been on his best behavior with you here?"

Carl almost flinches as the old nickname comes back up, and he tries not to look at his father as he shrugs. He doesn't have to find Daryl in the crowd to picture what his expression must be, right now.

"I had to do a little torturin' for 'em, but they've been behaving. After that raid, I think Rick's comin' to understand just why they need us here." Carl says, hoping Negan will take the bait. He does.

"Torturin'? Well hot diggity dog, they have been keeping you busy! Tell me more about this torturing business." Negan grins, walking over to Carl and clasping him around the shoulder. Carl tries not to flinch, to keep his expression steady rather than turning his face away.

"We captured one of the bandits alive. Took him losing one of his balls to get him to tell us where their camp was, but now we have their loot." Carl smirks at how Negan's eyes light up, at how his gaze glimmers over the crowd.

To Carl's surprise, the Wolf from before is kneeling a few feet behind Rick, looking nearly feral as he's mentioned. Someone has even given him a new pair of pants, although the new ones are still stained in dark crimson around the groin. Rick must not have had time to finish him off, or perhaps has left him for Negan on purpose? The priest from before, Father Gabriel, stands beside the prisoner, looking rather solemn at the proceedings. Is he actually...is he actually sad that this murderer is about to be executed?

"Holy shit! Would you look at that! Who would have thought that I raised such a little serial killer. I mean, we were training you to be a full-fledged savior before, but this? Hell, I should have put you in charge of Alexandria." Negan jokes, and Carl tries not to notice how Rick flinches at the man's words.

Negan kneels down beside the looter, ignoring how the man gnashes his teeth as he brushes back greasy bangs. The carved W emerges from beneath the strands of hair, and Negan stills, caught off guard.

"Those bodies we've been finding in the woods? They're because of these guys. The W's on the heads stand for Wolves." Carl says, watching as his words hit home.

He hadn't lied to the Alexandrians. This isn't the first time the Saviors have come across the Wolves, even if they hadn't known who they were at the time. Negan had even made his men bury the naked bodies they had been finding in the woods.
"Wolves, huh? What's the point in carvin' up your foreheads?" Negan seethes, all teasing absent from his tone. Carl shudders at the sound of it. The Wolf doesn't seem to comprehend exactly what kind of danger he's in, practically growling at the Savior as they stare each other down. The Wolf is refusing the answer, a crazy glint in his eye. Carl can't help but pitch in.

"Hey, moron. Remember that boss I told you about? That's him." Carl says, rolling his eyes. His words wash over the Wolf like a monsoon, the man freezing in fear as he looks up at Negan in a new light. Negan whistles lowly, forcing the man's chin up so he can get a better look at his face. Negan turns back to Carl, a twist in his smile.

"You took his eye out, too, Patch?" Negan asks, laughing boisterously as Carl nods. "Well hot damn. That's just cold. That's fuucccked up. When I said I had raised a little serial killer before, I was joking. But this-damn." He drawls, shaking his head as he smirks. He cocks his head the side, holding Lucille to the Wolf's face as he holds the man's chin steady.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of my boy. You see, he understands one very important thing. Do you want to know what that is?" Negan asks, twirling Lucille inches from the prisoner's nose, the barbed edges glinting in the sunlight. "There's only one big bad wolf in this town. And that's me." Negan murmurs.

For a moment, just a moment, Carl thinks that Negan is going to swing. He's learned Negan's tells, knows by the way he braces his feet and holds his elbows out that he's thinking about it. But at the last minute, the leader decides otherwise, twisting around and facing the Saviors, instead.

"I think we just found a new little pig to add to our walls, boys! And this one? He's going to be alive when we put him on those spikes. Because those women you've been tying up? Something tells me you didn't kill them before you left them there to rot, did you? Arat! Load 'em up." Negan whistles, and the woman steps forward.

Negan proceeds like business is going as usual, as if the bound Wolf isn't groaning in pain as the Savior pulls him to his feet. He's checking over the tribute pile, his lips twisted as he continues to examine its contents.

"Boy, I sure do hope Olivia has gotten better at her job. Because these Wolves? Looks like they had some preeeettddy goooodd shit. I'd be tempted to keep quite a bit of it for myself. Hope you've done a solid inventory count, because log books? Records? We learned just how important those were last time, didn't we?" Negan bellows, a glimmer in his eye. Rick nods deeply, as if he's expected this, but something about Negan's expression unsettles Carl. While Carl suspects Rick has covered his tracks in hiding whatever goods they've kept for themselves, Negan is posturing like he's ready to put on a show. Even more than usual.

"We wouldn't have gotten any of it without Patch's help. What's ours is yours." Rick murmurs.

"You're damn right it is." Negan grins, shaking his head as he runs his tongue over his teeth. He's pondering over something, Carl knows, but what?

"Speaking of which, it's time to talk about this promotion of yours, Patch." It's then that Negan circles around, wrapping an arm around Carl's shoulder as he pulls him away from the town's leader. But he's speaking loudly, addressing the crowd more than he is Carl.

"You see, Patch has just been a 'worker' for a while now, he hasn't quite earned his stripes to become full 'Savior' material, yet. Always thought he was too young for it, you know? But I've come to realize that finding Patch is one of the best things I ever did." Negan drawls loudly, pulling the teen closer. "I mean, he's really somethin' else, ain't he? In fact, if I ever had a kid, I
would have wanted them to be just like him."

Carl isn't the only one baffled by the sudden change in topic. Rick furrows his brow as he glances between the two of them, nodding slowly.

"And he's come a loooong way since I first found him." Negan continues. "I mean, I've already told the story of how the sucker was fightin' off bandits and all, but I left out a few key details, some things that really make it hit home. Just hurts your heart to think about, in fact."

Carl stills within the man's hold, not sure where this is going. But Negan barely gives him the chance to wonder, emphasizing and giving slight pauses at all the right moments for dramatic flair.

"When I first met Patches, he couldn't have been older than what, twelve or thirteen? He just comes plowing through where we were stayin' like a demon outta hell. He pitched an absolute fit, even killed some of my own guys. I didn't like that. But then I took a closer look. Not only was he fuckin' shot in the head and still fightin' like mad, he was bleedin' outta his ass. Hell, he still had those monsters' fuckin' jizz on his pants. So when those bandits finally caught up to him? We made them pay."

Carl feels horrified and confused all at once, and his face burns. He can't bare the series of eyes staring him down, the crowd's pity and confusion. Dwight and Simon are listening. Michonne, Daryl, and Sophia are listening. His Dad is right in front of him, his expression solemn as he cautiously takes in the man's words.

"We saved him. Because that's what we fucking do. Tough cookie, though. Starved half to death, bleedin' from damn' handcuff marks, and with a fuckin' bullet hole through the noggin, he still pulled through. He's been with me longer than most, and has been the absolute handiest little serial killer you'd ever meet. I forget what regular kids are like, sometimes. He doesn't talk back, doesn't complain. He just gets shit done. And I like that."

Negan pulls Carl closer, now, ruffling his hair in a manner that feels a little too rough. Negan is pulling him further and further away from the Alexandrians, and Carl is uncomfortably aware that the Saviors are tightening their grips on their weapons.

"And after all of that, I thought to myself. What kinda parent lets their kid go through that? What kinda parent could live with themselves, knowing they couldn't protect their son?"

Carl knows that tone.

Negan is goading Rick. He's taunting him….but why? It couldn't be….it couldn't….

"And that's when I got to thinkin'. Well, shucks, what kinda fuckin' parental figure am I? I don't even know the kid's real name! Always 'Patches this or lil Deputy that. This kid I care so much about, this kid that my wives bake cookies for, and I don't even know his name. I figured, hell, if I'm gonna promote the little fucker to a full fledged Savior, I gotta change him on our roster, might as well look him up now. So I found the log book for our list of residents-I told you just how important good records are-and did just that." Negan smiles, and Carl's heart plummets to the pit of his stomach, a cold shudder slowly shivering its way through his system. Dark spots line his vision.

It couldn't be.

But it is.

Negan knows.
Negan tightens his hold around Carl's neck, the grasp no longer friendly. It never was.

"And whaddya know! There, in chicken scratch, in a fuckin' thirteen-year-old's handwritin', is CARL. FUCKING. GRIMES. Now what are the odds of that, Rick?"

There it is.

The other shoe has officially dropped.

Carl has failed. It's all over. Everything that he's done up until this moment, all of his efforts to hide who he is, it's all been for nothing. As Negan's hold tightens, Carl's one good eye feels like it's popping out of his skull, but he can still make out the sheer confusion, the sheer horror, the sheer disbelief flickering across his father's face. Daryl had been right, and Carl had been so totally and utterly wrong.

There was absolutely nothing that Carl could have done to prevent Negan from finding out who he was. Nothing. He could have enjoyed the time he had left with his father. He could have had a proper reunion. But he wouldn't get the chance to do any of that, now. If his Dad wasn't broken before, this would break him, and it would all be Carl's fault. Maybe his mother was right to leave him at school. Maybe he should have died there.

Once the sheer shock of Negan's words passes across the onlookers, horrified recognition sparks across his father's face.

"Now, the same last name? That could be a coincidence. But do you remember what Rick the Prick used to do for a living? Because I do." Negan seethes. Try as he might, Carl's words are caught in his throat.

"He didn't….he didn't know…..I swear…." Carl manages to choke out, but Negan closes his grasp, making it even harder for Carl to breathe.

"All this time, lil Deputy. All this fuckin time you were lying to us."

"I..I swear…he didn't recognize..."

"ALL THIS FUCKING TIME." Carl's vision swims, and he claws at Negan's chokehold desperately, doing anything to allow for a little more blood flow, for a little more air.

"Carl?" He hears his father's voice break, but he can't meet his eyes. It wouldn't matter if he did, his one good eye is blurry from the tears and the dark spots crowding his vision, making it so he can hardly see anything.

In one sweeping motion, Negan releases his hold, leaving Carl gasping for air in the dust. But he barely gets a moment's respite before Negan is clawing at his hair, holding him up by his scalp as Lucille lingers uncomfortably near his head. He realizes now where he's gone wrong. The Saviors have formed a half-circle around him, and this time Carl is at its epicenter, his father looking on from the outside. How long had it been since Carl had found his father like this, at death's door, and done nothing? Just stayed quiet?

Dad never abandoned him. Dad never left him at school. In fact, if Daryl was right, Dad had never even stopped looking for him. Carl was the one that abandoned Rick. He had left him to die in that hospital, and then he had left him to die in that execution ring. And now justice is being served.

"Look at him." Negan commands, his voice dark. Carl swallows. "LOOK AT HIM."
Carl does as he's told.

Through his spotty vision, he still can't see his father clearly, but he can hear him. The noises his father makes mimic the sounds of agony he'd made when his friends were lying dead on the ground, their brains still caught in Lucille's wire. His father is kneeling now, not in any purposeful act of submission, but in pure shock, disbelief, and agony.

Negan's hold has forced his hair back, allowing his Dad and anyone watching to get a clearer look at his face. If Carl wasn't scared before, being held exposed, no patch or bandages, with Lucille at his neck and his father's blue eyes staring into his is the most terrifying thing he's ever felt. He can't hide behind a gruff demeanor. He can't hide behind a batman voice or a stoic facade. He can't hide at all. Everyone knows that someone is going to die today, and they'll all know it's because Carl Grimes was weak.

Negan has won. He has absolutely won.

But Carl can't let his father go down with him.

"I didn't tell you before-" He begins, his voice raspy from Negan's grasp, "-because it doesn't fuckin' matter. He's not my Dad. He left me. He abandoned me. You are. The Saviors are. I didn't want him to know who I was because I hate him." The lie tastes like iron in his mouth. His words have made a slight impact, he can tell, because Negan loosens his grasp, if only slightly. He has to do this. He can't give Negan any more leverage. He has to make his Dad hate him, he has to make Negan believe that he can't use them against each other.

But even through the tears, the look his father is giving him nearly breaks his own resolve.

Negan pauses for a moment, deep in thought, before slowly moving forward, his teeth practically against Carl's ears. "Who are you?" Negan growls, slowly, that shit-eating grin returning to his face.

"Negan." Carl says.

"Who fuckin' ARE YOU?" Negan says, lifting Carl up forcibly by the nape of his neck. He screams from the pain, and Negan is turning him in a circle now, making sure each and every one of the Saviors are getting a good look at him.

"I'm Negan." Carl says, this time more force behind it. He glares at the onlookers, daring them to doubt him. There's a tense silence on both sides, each person holding their breath as the crowd stares at the two of them, as Negan strokes his chin.

"Bullshit! He's lying." A voice calls out, breaking the tension like a crack through ice. The voice hasn't come from any of the Saviors. Through his spotty vision, Carl can still make out just how quickly his father whips around, turning in shock to the form that's emerged from the crowd.

Someone's always snitches, always.

Ron Anderson. Of course it's Ron Anderson.

"He's been helping us. He hid his sister from you. If he's really related to that asshole, there's no way he's loyal to you."

Carl sees red. In this moment, wants nothing more than to shoot Ron down the same way he shot Martinez down, to see the other boy's blood soaking in front of the Alexandrian gates. He wants to put him down like the rabid dog he is. But he had tried to be the man his father would have wanted
him to be, he had *spared* Ron, and now he's lost the chance.

"Sister? Funny. I don't remember hearing about a *sister.*" Negan's growl echoes between the buildings, and Carl wheezes as he struggles to breathe. He tries to turn, to look up at Negan, but finds a steel-toed boot smashing back down into his neck, his head protesting the movement.

"He told them to hide her, that you'd use her against Rick if you knew she was his daughter." Ron seethes, preening. The Alexandrians are disturbed, now, shuffling uneasily like a herd of startled cattle. Carl's father stares numbly ahead at his son, his mouth agape as sweat drips from his brow. For once, the normally confident man seems at a complete loss, his fists clenching even as his jaw wobbles.

Negan stops for a moment, swinging Lucille contemplatively in the air as he does. Carl waits for it. He waits for the blow. But instead, Negan deals a harsher one.

"Where is she?" He asks, his voice low. A blurry form Carl recognizes to be Daryl is stepping forward, trying to throttle Ron, but a Savior steps forward between them.

Things are happening faster than Carl can process them. Ron is pointing out a figure in the distance, and Carl can hear Sophia screaming as Judith cries. They're taking Judith away from her. They're putting Judith on the execution line. Negan is tutting now, Lucille back at Carl's neck.

"And here I thought we were *family,* Carl, that I was like a *father* to you. Thought that after all we've been through together, I could trust you with something like this."

"No…." Rick is sobbing now, crying out in a way that doesn't even sound human. He's reaching for Judith fruitlessly, and the entire audience is on edge. "Please, Negan, please-"

"Choose!" Negan demands suddenly. The very air itself trembles.

"No, please, Negan, she's just a baby-"

"One of them is *mine,* Rick, dead or alive, to do with whatever I like. But you get the fucking choice. Which one? Which fucking one gets to die, Rick?"

Rick is sobbing incoherently now, and for once in the past five minutes, Carl finds his own resolve returning, an eerie calm coming over him. He can't see his father anymore. Carl's nose is pressed into the ground, forcing him further into the grime. But he speaks as loudly as his voice will allow him to, trying to use the same comforting tone his father had used on him all those years ago. The tone he used to soothe Carl out of nightmares.

"It's ok, Dad. It's ok." His voice breaks at the last word, irritably reminding him that no matter how hard he tries, he's still not a man. Just a scared, stupid little boy trying to comfort his father.

"I'm sorry, Dad, I'm so sorry-it's ok-" But there was no coming out of this nightmare.

"What a fuckin' reunion! I gotta admit, I didn't think I bought the story before, that the *lil Deputy* here was so roughed up, that his own damn *father* didn't recognize him, but the more I see the more I'm starting to buy in. When's the last time you saw each other, huh champ?" Negan is pushing down now, the steel heel of his boot beginning to draw blood.

"He was in a coma before the virus hit. I thought-I thought he was dead. And when Mom didn't pick me up from school-I thought-" Carl's words are stopped as he finds his mouth pressed against the gravel once more, muffling his attempts.
"Holy shitballs! Ain't that a soap opera for the ages!" Negan swivels Lucille over to Rick. "So, Patches here gets left at school to fend for himself and gets royally butt-fucked. And Deputy Do-Right over there goes and makes a replacement baby and lives happily ever after in damn Mayberry, does that sound about right? And with a blonde piece of ass on the side, to boot." Ron bristles at the mention of his mother, but doesn't move. He isn't standing among the Alexandrians, anymore, but with the Saviors.

"Carl, no, it wasn't like that-" His father sounds desperate now, and even as much as Carl wants to believe him, he can't stop the stupid tears that keep falling down his face.

"So here it is, Rick. Here's your choice. The darling of Alexandria, the replacement baby that is absolutely cute as a button-ooooooorr the boy you forgot, left to get raped and beaten at his damn middle school, who's looking a liiiiiittle worse for the wear these days. What's it gonna be?"

"Dad, it's ok-"

"Make your fucking choice, Rick!"

"Carl, no-"

"You know it's an easy one!"

"I love you, Dad. I'm so sorry-"

"CHOOSE, or you lose them both! Or haven't you learned from that redheaded asshole and your asian friend? One-

"Carl, I never stopped looking-"

"It's ok, Dad, it's ok-

"TWO-"

"Carl!" His father's voice finally breaks through. Carl can barely make out what his father is saying over his blubbering sobs, but there it is. "Take Carl." His Dad confirms, his head hung low.

He said it. He actually said it.

Negan grins, and for a split second, Carl wonders if this was all a ploy. If this was all a show to grind his Dad further into the dust, if an angel is going to come at the last second to hold Lucille back from her bloodlust. But he knows better. His father isn't Abraham and he isn't Isaac. And in the apocalypse, the boogieman always wins.

"Hey Dwight?" Negan swings back suddenly, as if something has just occurred to him.

"Yeah, boss?" Carl doesn't have to look to hear the uneasiness in the other man's voice.

"Shoot the damn horse on your way out." Negan grins, and Dwight gives a small nod.

In another life, Carl would have written letters. He would have written a letter to his father explaining why he hid who he was. Assuring his Dad that he didn't hate him, that he never hated him, but that he was so desperately afraid that his father would hate him, that he couldn't work up the nerve to tell him the truth. He would have written a letter to Negan begging for peace, trade agreements, a never ending supply of pudding, rainbows, the whole shebang. He would have written a letter to Michonne, to Daryl, to Jesus, and to Dwight, all thanking them for the slightest
bit of friendship they had offered him. And he would have written a letter to Judith, telling her that he hoped she could grow up in a better world than he did, and that even though he didn't know her, she was absolutely worth it.

He might have even written a letter to Sophia.

But this isn't another life. This is the one he lives in. And before the crowd has time to process what's happening, Negan takes Lucille and swings upward, catching Carl's face in a sickening crunch as his whole world turns white. He hears a gunshot in the distance, followed by a high pitched squeal that practically sounds like a scream. He's not sure if the scream is his own or Buttons', but he hears it all the same.

And then Carl knows no more.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The good news: There are more chapters to come. The bad news: I have less written in advance, now, so updates might be slower, now.

So...umm...don't murder me, and let me know what you think? Honestly, this is the showdown I've envisioned since starting this entire story. What is going to follow is hard for me to muddle through, as I have to build my way back up to the next major arc. So please, review, comment, anything! It all absolutely helps.
Chapter 8

He's dead. He has to be dead.

He doesn't remember much. Scratch that, he doesn't really remember anything at all, but he's pretty sure he at least remembers Lucille being swung at his face. Remembers being drug around in the dust. And while he could have been imagining those things, his face feels like that's definitely something that could have happened.


He shouldn't be alive. This isn't an action movie, this isn't a comic book, this is the real world. And in the real world, he's seen perfectly healthy people die from mere cuts after infection has set in. Or from toothaches, for crying out loud. Yet he's survived a gunshot to the face. That only happens once, if it happens at all. People don't survive a gunshot to the face and a head smashing from Lucille.

And yet, Carl is aware. He's thinking these things, he's worrying about these things. He's somehow alive, although still struggling to muddle through what's happened. Maybe he was right about the brain damage. His head has been rattled enough in the last few weeks to make a boxer jealous. But as Carl comes to, there is one thing he realizes isn't there. No honeysuckles.

He isn't in Alexandria anymore. Which means he must be back in Sanctuary. He groans, encountering the familiar feeling of a bandage covering half of his face. Only, it's covering the wrong half of his face. His hand swings upwards, and he winces as fingers brush against gauze. He blinks, but the gauze is still there. It's still there, it's still on the wrong side of his face, and it still hurts.

Carl blinks, remembering the crunch Lucille had made when it hit him. Negan is right-handed, so it makes sense that the left side of his face would have been hit. His good side. His left eye is still
intact, which he supposes he should be thankful for, but he's not sure how much of a face he has left without a mirror. He can feel that his teeth are slightly exposed, and as he winces from the pain, he finds that the wince itself causes pain to ripple across his lips. Lucille must have caught him in the mouth. He wonders if he's lost any teeth. His gums are unusually dry, making it difficult to tell by merely moving his tongue across his mouth.

Whatever his injuries are, it's clear that they've been cleaned and bandaged. But it's also clear that he's in a cell and not the infirmary. And having lived in Sanctuary for the past few years, it's a cell he's very familiar with, as he's often been the one guarding it.

WE'RE ON EASY STREET
AND IT FEELS SO SWEET
CAUSE THE WORLD IS 'BOUT A TREAT
WHEN YOU'RE ON EASY STREET

Oh, this is so not good. This can't be happening. He hated that song even when he was the guard, when he could walk outside from time to time to get some relief. But now? Here? When it's pounding in his ears so loudly he can't think? He wonders whether the music blaring overhead is what woke him up in the first place, and wishes that he could listen to the Styx song that had been blaring when they led the biters away from Alexandria. That song made him feel powerful. That song made him feel grateful to be alive.

This song? This song makes him wish that he had never been born.

AND WE'RE BREAKING OUT THE GOOD CHAMPAGNE
WE'RE SITTING PRETTY ON THE GRAVY TRAIN
AND WHEN WE SING EVERY SWEET REFRAIN REPEATS
RIGHT HERE ON EASY STREET

But the fact that he's here, in a cell, writhing in thirst and agony is a good sign, he knows. If Negan had meant to kill him in Alexandria, he would have finished the job with another swing. And while Carl can't get a good look at his injuries, he imagines that in order for him to be alive, Negan wasn't giving it his all. Negan had wanted to hurt him, to hurt Rick, but most importantly, Negan still wanted to use Carl as a hostage.

Carl can't decide if this is a good thing or a bad thing.

On one hand, the fact that he's being used as a hostage means that his father is still alive. On the other hand, it means that Rick isn't going to find a way out of this any time soon, and he's going to be the center of Negan's attention for quite some time. Which leaves Carl spending the rest of his days trapped in this cell, shitting in the corner, never to see his father again.

He regrets it all, now. He regrets not working up the nerve to tell his father the truth. Because while nothing he could have done would change Negan holding him hostage, at least he would have gotten the chance to say something. All of the questions he had never asked, all of the embraces and reminiscing he had craved, all of it was gone. Instead, some of his last words in front of his father had been 'I hate him', 'he abandoned me', and worst of all, 'I'm Negan'.

He should have died at that school. Or in the Claimers' bed. He should have died trying to run
away from the compound. He should have died like all the other children that perished in the first few months of the outbreak. He should never have lived long enough to disappoint his father. So why had he?

Carl has never felt despair overwhelm him like this before. He's seen it happen to others, and they usually don't last long if they can't shake it. Being able to survive in the new world means you have to be willing to fight to live. And before, that had been Carl's objective. To survive. To not let people like the Claimers ever touch him again. To not get attached to people at all. But he had betrayed that last objective. The moment he had begun to live for his father, his own happiness depended on Rick's, and now he has utterly failed his father.

He still can't forget the horrified look in his father's eyes. The agony. The shock. The betrayal.

IT'S OUR MOMENT IN THE SUN
AND IT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN
IT'S TIME TO HAVE A LITTLE FUN
WE'RE INVITING YOU TO COME AND SEE WHY YOU SHOULD BE

That thing about the song making him wish he had never been born? Yeah. It was really good at it.

ON EASY STREET
YEAAHHH, WE GOT A FRONT ROW SEAT
OH, TO A LIFE THAT CAN'T BE BEAT
RIGHT HERE ON EASY STREET

Reaaaaalllllly good at it.

IT'S OUR MOMENT IN THE SUN
AND IT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN
IT'S TIME TO HAVE A LITTLE FUN
AND WE'RE INVITING YOU TO COME AND SEE WHY YOU SHOULD BE

Reeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaallllllllllyyyy good at it.

ON EASY STREET.

Carl's injuries are slowly beginning to heal, much to his displeasure. For once, he's absolutely ok with dying, but Negan is the one who is surprisingly bound and determined to keep him alive. He even orders Dwight to bring him something more than just dog food to eat. Carl still doesn't eat it. An empty stomach results in him throwing up the antibiotic pills they've forced down his throat, which causes the infection on his face to get worse, and his entire being burns. Carl thinks this is rather appropriate. He's in hell, after all. This is his punishment day.

But when Dwight starts to force-feed him both bread and antibiotics, Carl is too apathetic to bother sabotaging himself. Eventually the fire on Carl's face is quenched, the stitches in his side are taken out, and the dizziness he felt when he turned his face too fast has gone away. He doesn't know how
much time has passed, but it's long enough that the only reminder of his time in Alexandria is the
tenderness of his ribs and the bandage still sprawled across his face. Weeks? Maybe even months?

The problem with his newest injury is that, given that at least the corner of his mouth has been
sliced apart, it keeps reopening each time he eats. The force feedings only aggravate it further. And
as much as Dwight is trying to keep him alive, whatever food Carl eats has to be slowly sucked on
rather than chewed. He doesn't have much of an appetite anyways, which only serves to aggravate
the guard even more.

At first, Carl is amused by Dwight's frustration. He and Dwight are now two sides of the same
coin, with Dwight's burned side matching Carl's newly mangled one. But the longer Carl stays in
his cell, the more he realizes that Dwight isn't merely frustrated because he was doing his job, but
also because he feels….guilty? If Carl wasn't so apathetic about the whole thing, he would be
touched. But Carl wants the other man to feel guilty, because as selfish as that is, it means that the
Savior actually cares about him. That the two are actually friends, or as much as people can be in
Sanctuary, anyways.

Which is exactly why Negan had made Dwight be the one to put the bullet in Buttons' head. And
why Negan had chosen Dwight as his prison guard. If the older man ever had to choose between
Carl and his ex-wife, he would always choose Sherry. It was a ploy to break their friendship apart,
to make them resent one another for the situation they had both been forced into. And it's working.
Even knowing that this is likely part of a bigger ruse, Carl can barely manage to look at the other
man, who seems increasingly irritated with Carl's behavior.

Which brings up another interesting point. Negan has made himself scarce during Carl's stay,
which only serves to unsettle the teen. Is he planning something? Is he just bored with Carl, now?
While Negan left the torturing and guarding to Dwight, his sadistic nature usually meant that he
spent some one-on-one time with his prisoners at some point, playing off of Dwight in a twisted
version of bad and badder cop. But there's none of that. In fact, outside of the blaring music and
force feedings, there isn't any torture at all. Which isn't like Negan.

If Carl didn't know better, he would say that Negan feels guilty, too. But he does know better. Carl
had been nothing more than a pet to the Savior, a one-eyed monkey that amused him, kept his
wives happy, and unsettled his enemies. He never actually cared for Carl like a son. He couldn't
have.

Carl vaguely remembers his early days with the Saviors, when Negan only had one 'wife', Frankie.
Carl had been one of the few people allowed in and out of Negan's quarters at a whim, working as
an errand boy. Whatever Frankie wanted, Frankie got. One day, Frankie wanted spaghetti. A
couple of raids later, and Sanctuary had a slaughtered cow, obtained a slew of tomatoes, and even
snagged a pasta maker. Negan had been so giddy about it, he even made the spaghetti himself,
whistling as he insisted that Carl stay to sample some.

For a moment, just a moment, Carl had been happy again. For the first time since the end of the
world, he felt like he was with his mom and dad, joking around as he slurped pasta and ate garlic
bread. Even as Lucille leaned against the kitchen counter, even as Negan whistled the same tune he
whistled at executions, Carl had been the happiest he had been in a long time. Because, as fake as it
was, he felt like he belonged to a family. Negan wanted that feeling, too, Carl knew. But a day
later, the easy-going man who had tutted over tomato sauce and basil was gone, replaced by the
cold-hearted monster that Sanctuary knew and loved.

Yet true to his word, no matter what mask Negan had on for the day, he never beat his wives or
forced them to do anything they didn't want to do. Oh, he would manipulate them, threaten to hurt
other people if he didn't get his way. But he wouldn't physically force them. And for a while, in a world where rapists and murderers scavenged the streets alongside the dead, that had made Negan the good guy.

But even as the good guy, Negan kept a tight leash on his wives. They were mostly restricted to their quarters, any extended conversations with the male Saviors looked at with suspicion. Which is why when Carl hears a familiar voice one day, he nearly thinks he's imagined it.

"Patch. Patch!" But there it is again. The whispers grow louder, and as Carl crawls towards the cell's entrance, he can make out the face through the flap. It's Sherry. Her voice is soft, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Sherry......are you....are you ok?" Carl's voice breaks as he speaks, rusty from lack of use. Over the years, being Sanctuary's errand boy had endeared him to the wives. He had passed messages for them, joked with them, even convinced Sherry to let him bum a cigarette one time. He had gagged from the smoke back then, but given the stress from recent events, he's tempted to try to take it up again.

"Am I ok? Jesus, Patch, what has he done to you?" Carl blinks at her words, confused. While weak, his injuries have mostly healed, so he's not sure exactly why she's so horrified. He remembers a second too late that he's still missing half of his face.

"Sorry, don't have a mirror, or I'd clean myself up a bit." He jokes, offering the woman a smile. "I haven't even seen what I look like, yet."

This seems to break her even more, and she's shaking her head rapidly.

"Sherry...I....I can't tell you how happy I am to see you, but I don't want you to get in trouble for me. Enough people have gotten hurt because of what I did. You should probably go." He whispers, resting his head against the door's cool frame.

"Because of what you did? Patch, you......you were just trying to save your family. None of this is your fault, you hear me? It's Neg-"

"Don't say that out loud." Carl interrupts, not sure who might be listening. Her silent tears finally succumb to an audible sob, and her tone wavers. Anger peaks through.

"Well, he's regretting it, now. Sanctuary is in an uproar over it. And the only one of us upstairs that's puttin' out for him is Candy." She mutters with distaste.

Carl blinks at this new piece of information, baffled. She reaches as far as she can through the flap, her fingers grasping his hand.

"You've been here since the beginning, Patch. Most of us still see you as that hyper little boy with an eyepatch, delivering packages and scurrying everywhere you went. Hell, some of us even remember you talkin' about your daddy, back when that hat of yours was too big for your head."

"You're not...people aren't mad at me? I betrayed Negan, Sherry. Dad, he....he's the one that killed those people at the outpost."

"Yeah. Yeah he is. But that outpost? They were all soldiers, there to enforce the tributes. What Negan did, threatening to bash in a baby's head....the only time we've killed kids was at Hallowbrandt, and Negan nearly killed Simon for doing it. Even if Negan was just bluffing, people are upset. Especially when one of the kids being threatened is our own."
Carl chews over this piece of information, but he still can't help but be surprised. Sanctuary's opinion of Negan ranged anywhere from outright fear to reverent awe. Punishments like the iron or the pit are a way of life, because as harsh as they might be, they instill the sense of order that Sanctuary's residents crave. There's a reason for punishments. Dwight had gotten the iron for stealing medicine and running away. So what's so different about Negan punishing Carl for lying?

As if sensing his doubt, Sherry leans as far as she can, her fingers stretching fruitlessly as she tries to comfort him.

"You know why I think he did it?" She asks softly. Carl doesn't have a response, his jaw wavering. "He gets off on controlling people, on gaslighting them into thinking it's their decision in the first place. And with you? Whenever he starts to miss the old world, or how things could have been, you're the son he never had. The idea that he can't control you? Or one of us wives? That sets him off more than anything. He's jealous of Rick."

Carl shakes his head adamantly at this, his tongue heavy in his mouth. "Nah, Sherry. I don't mean nothin' to him."

"You do, Carl. You haven't seen how disgusted he is with that Alexandrian boy. It's been making him realize that he didn't know how good he had it with you. " She presses, her lips nearly touching the door.

Carl swivels back at that. "Wait, Ron? Ron is here?"

Sherry nods. "He's the one that ratted you out, right? He's joined. Guess he thought the town would lynch him if he stayed in Alexandria. But he's not...uh...he's not assimilating well."

Carl snorts at this, smiling wearily. "Yeah. I coulda told Negan that."

There's a sound of a door slamming in the distance, and Sherry startles, jumping up. "Look, I gotta go. Just know...you're not alone, alright? We'll find a way to get you out of here, Patch. I promise." She's rushing off, now, and before Carl gets a chance to tell her not to do anything stupid, to not risk herself over him, she's gone.

He never does see who came into the prison block. He hears their footsteps shuffling in the distance, sees a flashlight roam down the halls. But whoever it is doesn't even bother checking individual cells, returning back to where they came from. He wonders idly if it's Dwight. But soon the figure is gone, shutting the door behind them and plunging him into shadow once more.

Carl can feel himself growing weaker.

He's being fed. It might be scraps, but he's being fed, nonetheless. He's being given water. His injuries are mostly healed. But kept in this cage, what little muscle he had before is wasting away, making Carl feel weak. And he absolutely despises feeling weak. He tries doing push-ups. He tries doing crunches. But exercise requires him to move his hands away from his ears, which results in Easy Street's lyrics assaulting his ears even louder than before. So instead, he stays curled up in the corner of his cell. He curls up and waits.

When Dwight comes and takes pictures of him, Carl doesn't bother asking what they're for. He already knows. Assuming Rick doesn't hate Carl by this point, he's going to want proof that his son is alive to stay compliant. It nearly tempts Carl into restarting his hunger strike. If Carl died, his father wouldn't have to hold back. He could fight back against Sanctuary, he might even win. It would be the best for everyone, really. But maybe that's another reason Negan assigned Dwight as
Carl's guard. During the force feedings, a small part of Carl actually feels guilty for inconveniencing the other man, for forcing him into this position. If Carl acts out, if he does something wrong, Dwight is the one who's going to be punished for it. So instead, Carl waits, his hands covering his ears, pretending hour after hour that none of this exists.

But Sherry isn't the only unauthorized visitor. Someone dims the music before opening his cell door. Carl has remained in darkness for so long, his eye sears in pain as light pours into the room. The figure stares down at him, and as his vision adjusts, he can finally make out who it is.

Someone's always snitches, always.

Sherry wasn't exaggerating. Life at Sanctuary has not been kind to Ron Anderson. His skin has tanned from whatever work they have him doing, but his form is thinner, his face gaunter. A myriad of bruises decorate his skin, far greater than anything he had accumulated during their brawl in the graveyard. His leather jacket is too big for him, the sleeves comically long.

Carl can't help it. He laughs. His throat is dry, so it comes out as a mirthless croak, but he keeps laughing, nonetheless. He knows it's a stupid thing to do. From what little Carl knows about Ron, he likes to lash out, and right now he's found the one person in the entire factory that he can beat senseless without repercussions.

"You only pick on people who can't fight back, is that it?" Carl croaks, grinning. He understands the Wolf's manic laughter, now. It isn't just that he's going to be tortured by a kid, it was the sheer ridiculousness that out of all the hellish things he's survived, this might be the thing that ends him.

Ron doesn't answer, surprisingly quiet. His hands are clenched, but despite the sneer on his lips, there's uncertainty in his expression.

"What makes you better than me?" He asks suddenly. Carl can't make out if there's anger to his tone or vulnerability. The two seem to be on two sides of the same coin with the other teen. Carl doesn't have a response to this, watching the other boy pace at the doorway. It's strange for Ron to say this now, while Carl is curled up in a cell wearing only rags and Ron is standing tall in a leather jacket.

"Everyone here? They hate me. They say I can't handle a candle to you. I wasn't supposed to be your replacement. I'm the person who helped break Rick Grimes, who outed a traitor. But they still look at me like I'm scum of the earth." Ron says bitterly, wringing his hands as his pacing grows more feverish. Carl watches him carefully, like a cat watching a stray dog.

"We're all scum, here." Carl says, leaning against the wall. Its cool surface only sends another shiver up his spine, but it feels good against his temple.

"Yeah, but the way I hear everyone carry on about it, you're like the little scummy prince. They're all whining about you being pent up in here, knit picking anything I do, goin' on about how Patch could have done it better. So what makes you so great, huh? What makes you and Rick so great?"

Carl raises an eyebrow. "That's why you're here? To ask me 'what makes me so great'? Shit, man, if I was great, you'd be dead and my sister would be safe. But now Lucille's hangin' over her head, and it's because of me, and it's because of you. I ain't worth shit, and I accept that. But you? I think it drives you nuts."

Ron glowers over Carl's words, his continuous pacing only proving his point. Carl sighs.

"Look, I could have told you that you'd never make it here. Maybe in the future, but right now,
you've spent the entire outbreak inside cozy walls with electricity and running water, and had a
mommy to coddle you for a while. But instead of taking the time to talk to me about it, to see what
Sanctuary was like, first, you blew your fuse and ran off without thinking things through. Your
focus here? It's not on revenge. It's not on the people you love. It's about staying alive, getting shit
done, and making sure you don't piss off the wrong people. And so far, you don't have a good track
record for any of that."

Ron growls at his words, pursing his lips like a petulant child. For a moment, he looks ready to hit
Carl, but instead crosses his arms. "You're just like your dad." Ron spits.

Carl finds himself baffled by this. He's the opposite of Rick. But Ron continues.

"Everyone thinks you're so great, that you're some big shot that knows what you're doing. But
you've screwed up every step of the way. Rick? He couldn't keep you safe. He couldn't keep my
mom safe, or my brother safe. And now, he can't even keep Judith safe. So why do people still side
with you two? After all the crap you guys pull, why do you get away with it, while I'm treated like
the shithead?"

Carl grins. For a moment, he feels the same way he did when he was riding Buttons, staring down
the barrel of his gun towards Martinez. He's about to do something stupid that could get him killed
or beaten for the sheer satisfaction it might bring. And he's okay with that.

Maybe he isn't a lion. Maybe he is just another Wolf, after all.

"Because you're just like your dad, too." He says. "Insecure and lookin' to take it out on someone
weaker than you. But come across someone tougher, and you're nothin' but a little bitch."

Ron launches forward at Carl's words, a flurry of uncoordinated fists. But even though Carl is
weaker than him, the other boy still hasn't learned his lesson. He dodges Ron's first wide swing,
and as Anderson stumbles into the cell wall, Carl circles around him and kicks at the back of his
knee, sending the other boy stumbling. Before long, Carl is holding him against the corner of the
cell, grinning madly as he shoves Ron's head into the floor.

It's the same corner of the cell that Carl uses as a lavatory.

For a moment, Carl wants nothing more than to smash Ron's head against the shitstained concrete
until he's dead. It would be even easier to kill him now than it would have been during their last
scuffle. He wants to. God, he wants to. Enid isn't crying, there's no looming father figure in the
background that he wants to please. He could kill Ron right here and right now, and it would for
him.

Mercy isn't what causes him to let go. It's Buttons.

*She'll get a bullet to her head the first time I screw somethin' up.*

It's the same reason Carl hasn't tried to escape. Negan has his father, and Negan has Judith. If Carl
screws up badly enough? He might take Rick's hand. Or Judith's leg. Or he might just get fed up
enough that he kills them both. And even though Ron is a piss poor excuse of a Savior, he's still
one of Negan's people now, and the leader won't be happy if Carl kills one of his men. So Carl
ceases the head bashing, instead yelling bloody murder.

It takes Dwight a few minutes to hear him. Carl wonders about the delay, about how Ron had
snuck past him in the first place. Carl even wonders if Dwight had let Ron slip by on purpose, if
the older Savior was *that* fed up with Carl's behavior. But Dwight looks surprised and furious as he
spots Ron, and drags the boy out.

A few hours later, Dwight and Ron return, only for Ron to be pushed into a cell of his own. He slams the door behind him, until all Carl can see of the other teen are his eyes through the door flap. They didn't even bother letting Ron clean up. Carl's crap is still smeared across the other teen's face.

Carl doesn't bother suppressing the malicious delight that bubbles up within him. He just sits in a corner and laughs. He laughs until he cries.

And then the damn music is turned back on.

Ron is a terrible roommate.

Ron spends the first three days yelling and banging on doors. Occasionally his yelling is interrupted by Dwight barging in and giving him a beating. But as Ron points out, it's nothing he hasn't already gotten from his dad, and he's back to being an utter nuisance again.

The plus side of having a roommate is that Carl looks like an absolute angel in comparison. Carl's advice about not pissing people off hasn't seemed to have made an impression on Ron, who starts a feud with their mutual guard. Carl is convinced that the protein bar he now gets with his food is Dwight's doing and not the cook's, and he highly doubts Ron is getting the same treatment. Then again, Carl is merely here as a hostage, and Ron is here to be broken, to be taught a lesson. Because breaking into the cellblock with the intent to kill a valuable hostage is bad enough, but doing that and coming out the loser? With literal shit on your face? Carl has no doubt that the veins on Negan's forehead were popping when he found out.

Carl doesn't know how much time passes since Ron's arrival, because without a window, it's impossible to tell how many days have gone by. But eventually, Ron gives up, resigned to only being nasty when he sees Dwight. Carl shakes his head at the other boy's stupidity. He knows the routine. Dwight is going to wait until Ron is absolutely compliant, until the boy kneels silently upon receiving food rather than spitting out insults. If Ron wants to get out of here, all he has to do is reign in his temper and shut up.

But the other teen doesn't, and so they remain reluctant roommates for the time being.

Given how 'well behaved' Carl has been in comparison to Ron, he's surprised when he's the next one to receive 'special treatment'. Especially since, outside of being stuck inside this god forsaken cell with only rags to wear, nothing has really happened to him so far. But it's as if the incident with Ron has reminded Negan of Carl's existence.

Dwight doesn't say a word as he walks in, scissors and razors in hand. He motions for Carl to turn and put his hands against the wall, a hard expression on his face.

"You try anything, I will kill you, you got that?" Dwight finally growls, his voice strangely disconnected. It's the same odd, emotionless persona Dwight has been maintaining this entire time, a forced attempt at pretending that Carl is just another prisoner and not anyone special. Carl grins back at the other man.

"What if I want you to kill me?" He asks, raising an eyebrow. Dwight shakes his head, forcing Carl to turn back around.

"You have people worth living for." Dwight mutters lowly. Carl begins to protest, but is surprised when photos are thrown at his feet. Polaroids, ones of Alexandria. One of Rick, his beard thicker...
and his eyes full of grief and hate. One of Judith, being held by a smiling Negan in a rocking chair, her curls longer than before. And even one of….

He stills. He had nearly forgotten what his mother looked like. Lori's photo isn't a fresh polaroid like the others, instead a smaller, crumpled photo that looks like it's been stuck in Rick's pocket for all these years. He never appreciated how beautiful she was. As a child, he had only seen her as the loving person he snuggled up to when he was scared, the woman who kissed his wounds and scolded him about his room. But now that he's older, he realizes that in this photo, she's barely even a decade older than him. He wonders how old she would have been when she died. He realizes that he doesn't know. In fact, he doesn't even remember when her birthday was.

"You want to die? Negan will just take your sister, instead. What do you think that would do to your dad, huh?" Dwight spits, his words not his own. But the message comes across all the same.

"I'm eating." Carl responds dully. "What else do you want from me?"

" Barely. And I've seen those scratches on your wrists and arms. They ain't from no handcuff scars. You've been pullin' your hair out, too. You sure as hell won't be doing that, anymore." Dwight grabs Carl by his shoulders roughly, holding him steady as he begins snipping away at Carl's hair. Carl freezes.

"You belong to Negan, now. You hurt yourself? Then you're damaging Negan's property. You get sick in here, and just let yourself die? Just stare at the walls and rip your own skin off day by day? They pay for it." Dwight growls. Carl blinks dumbly, his world tilting as head begins to feel lighter. Dark strands of hair rain down upon the photos, his mother's eyes looking up at him through the strands.

Carl feels a pain in his chest, one so sharp that he nearly falters. He remembers the times that Negan has treated him like a son in the past. The spaghetti dinners, the moments they've joked around upstairs with the wives. He remembers confiding to him about how much he missed his mother, in the early days. He remembers telling him how his mother always used to cut his hair, how she always used to sing a certain song to put him to sleep. How much he never appreciated her until she was gone. He remembers being a homesick, frightened little boy, and Negan being protective of him as he listened.

At the time, it had been a touching moment between the two of them. Negan had even talked about his first wife, from before the outbreak. How he had never appreciated her, never treated her right. It had been a heartfelt conversation, where they were both at their most vulnerable, and it was one that had stuck with Carl for all these years. After being alone for so long, it made him feel like someone else understood him, like he had a place in Negan's group. And just like the rest of Negan's converts, it caused Carl to idolize the man as much as he feared him, all because Negan gave him the attention and approval he had craved for so long. For being a father that could stand in the place of the one he thought dead.

But Negan has done what he does best. He must have remembered the conversation, too, and now he's twisted it. Easy Street no longer blares overhead. Instead, a different song plays. A woman sings overhead, her voice more trained but less affectionate than his mother's had been.

YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE, MY ONLY SUNSHINE

Judith shares his mother's eyes, Carl realizes. He wonders if Rick ever sung this to her, before.

YOU MAKE ME HAPPY, WHEN SKIES ARE GRAY
Carl's gasping for breaths, now, but he forces himself to quiet so Dwight won't hear his sobs. But tears still fall, landing on his father's face and distorting the shape of his jawline. He stays quiet as Dwight finishes shaving his head. He stays quiet as Dwight leaves. He tries to stay quiet as the song blares out overhead, its soft tone contrasting against the annoyingly loud volume.

*YOU'LL NEVER KNOW, DEAR, HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU*

But he finally breaks down, sobbing as loudly as his body wills him to, relieved that the singer's voice overshadows it. He's not sure if Ron can hear him crying or not, but in this moment, he doesn't care. He snatchers the photos and holds them to his chest.

He wishes he had gotten the chance to tell his mother he loved her. He wishes he had gotten the chance to tell his father the same. He wants to die. He wants to convince himself that what's left of his family would be better off without him. But he can't. Because damn it all, Negan is right. He failed his father once. He won't do it again.

*PLEASE, DON'T TAKE MY SUNSHINE AWAY.....*

Carl never appreciated how much his hair helped keep him warm. His newly shaved scalp feels bare against the stale air, and he shivers as he draws his arms into himself. The only good thing about the haircut is that his hair's growth lets him guess at how much time has passed. He guesses another week or two goes by before Ron is released. His head has been shaved, too, Carl notices. He's not sure what all Dwight has done to the other teen, but from his shuffling limp and downcast expression, it's easy to tell that he's received worse treatment than Carl has.

Out of nowhere, Carl's mouth becomes inflamed again. He reluctantly mumbles something about it to Dwight, and a short time later, a bag is being placed over his head and he's being escorted to Sanctuary's infirmary.

He can't see anything, but he knows the layout of Sanctuary by heart. He can hear whispers as he passes, the bag failing at its attempts to hide exactly who Dwight is transporting.

"Hey, Patch." He hears someone greet sadly.

"Traitor." He hears another spit.

"We're rooting for ya, kid." Someone pipes up. Dwight barks at anyone who approaches, but it only seems to ward them off for a short amount of time, or at best drive them off into their own gossiping circles. Carl can't remember the last time a prisoner has been treated with anything other than disdain, and the fact that he's drawing such a mixed, divisive reaction is surprising.

But as soon as they've made it to their destination, Dwight stops in his tracks, nearly causing Carl to stumble at the abruptness of the change in their pace. But even without his sight, Carl knows why the other man has stopped so suddenly. The doctor's office isn't empty, a voice that sounds very much like Sherry's talking softly to the man. Dwight roughly takes Carl's hood off, and by the time he looks up, both the doctor and Sherry look like deer caught in headlights.

"I'm in the middle of an appointment-"

"If he dies, a lot of other people do, too. I think your appointment can wait." Dwight growls, without any real malice to his voice. The doctor looks terrified, nonetheless. Sherry shoves an object in the trash, gathering her things to leave, but stops as her eyes meet Carl's.

"Christ, Dwight. What are you doing to him?"
"Keeping him alive, believe it or not." Dwight seethes, swallowing hard. From the distance, Carl can barely make out what Sherry has thrown in the trash. He knows that if he's seen it, Dwight has, too. A pregnancy test.

Well, shit.

Carl had idly wondered whether the relationship between Dwight and Sherry had continued to sour after his imprisonment, and this interaction seems only to prove that it had. It isn't safe for the two exes to be seen together, and without Carl to exchange messages, he imagines they haven't had the chance lately to communicate at all.

Still, the utter dismay and grief is apparent on Dwight's face for the entire room to see, and Sherry soon flees the room, tears streaming down her face as she does. It doesn't take a genius to figure out who the father is.

The rest of the visit is rather uneventful, but as the doctor stitches his lips up once more, Carl misses Sophia's more gentle approach. Was she even sad that he was gone? Did he even care, if she wasn't?

"Are you listening, Mr. Grimes?" Carl's head swivels at the surname, eyes wide as he looks up at the doctor. He shouldn't be surprised that the man knows his full name, now, since his story is apparently part of the community gossip. But it still startles him out of his daze. The doctor shakes his head, repeating himself.

"I said, it may be more comfortable, long-term, to keep the corner of your mouth stitched up permanently. Your skin hasn't healed back together like I had hoped. If you leave it the way it is, at best, you'll deal with unwanted drooling and the issues that come with dry mouth for the rest of your life. But it'll be prone to tearing and constant infection, as well. Suturing it might help prevent further damage."

Carl nods wearily, and grimacing, speaks.

"Do what you need to do, Doc."

There will be no pain medication for this, Carl knows, and he suspects that Doc Harlan's suturing will be more painful than Sophia's stitches. But he's more preoccupied by the bitter irony that in a world where Carl Grimes wanted to become Batman, he's about to look like the Joker.

Sherry's pregnancy test becomes clearer as he sits down in the patient's chair, a plus sign vaguely visible within the trash can's shadow. Dwight doesn't look away from it, staring at it continuously throughout the entire procedure, lost in his own thoughts. And even though Carl is the one having been imprisoned, living off of dog food and protein bars for the last few months of his life, he's the one feeling sorry for Dwight.

Sherry apologizes for not coming sooner, she didn't trust Ron to keep quiet during his stay. Carl's inclined to agree, but he doesn't see the point of her coming now, and he tells her as much. She seems flightier than before, more weepy. Like even looking at Carl pains her. He tells himself that the pregnancy hormones must be affecting her, but maybe with his head shaved, his eye socket and mangled jaw exposed for everyone to see, he really is a scary sight.

But that's when she reveals why she's really here. Sherry is escaping, and she wants Carl to come with her.
It's a really, really dumb idea. He tells her as much.

"I can't, Sherry. He'll kill my sister, my Dad. I want to, but…." 

"I gave up everything to protect Dwight. And you know what happened? He's more miserable now than he's ever been before, and he's become…..I don't even know what exactly he's become. Don't you see? Nobody wins by submitting to Negan. He tricks you into believing that it's your choice, that if the people he holds against you get hurt, it's your fault. But it's not. We have to run, we have to fight back. I'd rather die than watch Dwight or you waste away another day in this place. I'd rather be eaten by walkers than let my child be raised by Negan."

He churns over her words, fingering the marks on his wrists as he bites his lip.

"Sounds to me, Buttons is screwed, either way."

"Everyone fights for something. For me, it's my people. My family. I think she'd rather die here, where she's happy and with the people she loves......at least here, her death would mean something, you know?"

There was absolutely nothing that Carl could have done to prevent Negan from finding out....he could have enjoyed the time he had left with his father......but he wouldn't get the chance to do any of that, now.

"You have people worth living for."

"Patch?" Sherry reaches her fingers in between the bars, her hands trembling as they reach for his. Is he really willing to do this? To risk the ones he loves, the ones he's only just gotten back? "Are you okay?" She asks, worried.

He's not okay. He hasn't been okay for a long time. He hasn't been okay since he waited for a mother he would never see again. A mother whose face he had nearly forgotten. But something Daryl said rings in his ears, about how quickly Lori had given up on him, how she had made an empty grave. His mother had lost the will to fight against all of the bad things that had happened to her. But Dad hadn't given up. Dad had fought this new world. And now Carl's mother is dead, his father is alive, and he's stuck as something in between.

"I'll do it." He decides at last, meeting Sherry's gaze. "I'll do it."

He prays he won't regret it.

The plan is a risky one, but it's simple enough. Sherry barely leaves the wives' living quarters, but within those quarters, she has access to Negan's maps, plans, town roster, guard schedules, and practically everything an opposing army would need to know about the outposts. For a man that thrives off muscle and charisma, Negan is surprisingly meticulous, keeping records on supply lines and tributes like a well versed accountant. He's organized, which is likely why he's so efficient. But now, it's to the other man's detriment.

Over the next few weeks, Sherry copies down much as she can, in as small of print as she can, sewing it into the lining of her bras and the lace trim of her underwear. While Carl is initially embarrassed by the idea, she puts him in his place when she reminds him of another method. If she wasn't having sex with the man, she says, it would be safer to wrap the maps in condoms and stuff them in an even more embarrassing hiding spot. Struck speechless, Carl decides to keep his mouth shut as she lines out the rest of her plan.
The Western side of compound is the least guarded, and the perimeter fence is filled with less biters, as well. It's an intimidating path for Sherry, and a bold plan considering how little experience she has with evading the dead. She'll be openly relying on Carl for this plan to work, and if Carl wasn't worried about the practicality of it, he'd be honored by her trust in him. Still, his attempts to convince her to bring Dwight into the plan fail miserably. She's vehemently against it. Dwight might hate Negan, but he's still Negan's dog, now. They can't trust him not to tell.

The rest of the plan is more practical. She's chosen a night where the laziest guards are scheduled to be on duty, during another wife's 'night' with the leader. She knows where Dwight keeps the spare prison key. One of the other wives uses sleeping pills. She'll dose Dwight with it beforehand, and sneak into the prison block to let Carl out. The western side of the compound has several dumpsters they can use to climb over the fence, and Sherry will be sure to bring clothes with her. A jacket to put on top of the barbed wire, and a set for Carl to change into, for him to be less recognizable. If they can make it through the perimeter fence alive and unnoticed, then they can make it.

"They'll send Dwight after us." Carl points out.

"I know." she replies. "But he'll look for me first, not you."

"I have to warn Dad, give him a chance to get my sister to someplace safe."

"Alexandria is the first place they're going to look for you. Let me do it. If they catch me, they won't kill me, not while I'm carrying Negan's child. I'll warn them, and you take the plans to someplace else. Someplace safe."

"Safe? Where's safe, anymore?"

"The Kingdom."

It's a plan so brilliant and yet utterly terrifying, Carl's surprised he hadn't thought of it, himself.

He's never been to The Kingdom. It's more remote than any of their other territories, somewhere close to DC. But out of all of the communities, The Kingdom has the most peaceful arrangement with the Saviors, the community's king willingly giving over their goods in exchange for keeping the deal quiet. None of the Kingdom's populace are even aware of the exchange, and in order to keep it that way, the Saviors don't go inside the Kingdom's walls. For a micromanager, Negan had been surprisingly approving of the deal, and outside of some tense words, Carl's never heard of any altercations.

Plus, King Ezekiel had a tiger. Even Negan didn't want to poke a man with a tiger.

"The Kingdom has never resisted Negan. They won't risk everything for someone they don't even know, they'll just turn me in." He says.

"They might. But they might not. From what I hear, their King has a reputation for being chivalrous, taking in orphans, that sort of thing. It's not much of a chance, but it's our only one. Hilltop will squeal the moment they see you, Alexandria is going to be watched too closely, and none of the small farming groups are big enough to hide you, even if they were willing to."

"So you go to Alexandria, I go to the Kingdom. What about after?"

"After, we never see each other again. I'm not a fighter, Patch, not like you. Asking a community to hide a hostage is one thing, but do you think they would hide me if they knew whose child I was carrying? That I was Negan's whore?"
"You're not—"

"It's settled, Patch. I'm going my own way. I might die in the process, but at least I'll die free. And I'll be damn sure to do everything I can to stop Negan in the process." She says, her hand straying absent-mindedly to her still flat belly.

It's hard to imagine Negan as a father, Carl thinks. But then again, as he remembers the way Daryl pressed a kiss to Sophia's hair, maybe family really is something more than just blood.

Carl waits. He's used to waiting. He's used to being quiet, to ducking his head. But he's been waiting for so long, now. Has it been a year? It feels like it's been at least a year. But time passes differently when there's no sun to go by. Maybe it's just been a few months. Or maybe even just a few weeks.

He waits so long, he almost wonders if Sherry's been caught. For their plan to work, they have to go soon, while she doesn't have a baby bump slowing her down.

He still waits. If Dwight can sense Carl's anxiety, he doesn't say anything about it, delivering his dog food and protein bar with the same blank expression he always has.

When Sherry finally unlocks his cell door, his waiting comes to a stop.

The rest of the night flies by so fast it makes his head spin. He works automatically, the plan almost going down without a hitch. But as fresh air meets Carl's face for the first time in—well, who knows how long—they're spotted. But before the guard can shout, Carl makes a last minute decision.

With his heartbeat roaring in his ears, Carl grapples the guard, using all of his strength to hold the figure still as he covers the other person's mouth and nose. He struggles to not cry out when the figure bites his hand, cold and accusing eyes staring into his. The other figure is putting up a fight, desperately clawing at Carl's hands, but Carl holds the guard's neck the same way Negan had held his, tightly, blocking the air from his brain. Only unlike Negan, Carl doesn't let up.

It takes longer to strangle someone than Carl had thought. The guard is unconscious in under a minute, but it takes a few minutes more before the figure is put down permanently. Every second he waits for the guard to draw his last breath, he waits for another person to appear, for them to be heard or caught. But the moment never comes. The body flails, eyes reddening as blood vessels burst, but at last he draws his last breath, leaving Carl panting for his own.

He wasn't supposed to be on guard tonight. Carl had memorized the work schedule from top to bottom, and his name had never been on it. Carl stares at the body for a moment, staring at the bite mark the guard has left on his hand. He's tempted to let the body turn, but instead bashes the head into the ground until he can barely recognize the face anymore, until he's satisfied that the brain is too damaged to be a threat.

He takes off running. Sherry is struggling through the perimeter fence, barefoot without anything but heels to travel in. Carl nearly stops in shock as he recognizes one of the walkers reaching for her, a W still carved on its forehead. But he keeps running, grabbing her by the crook of her arm, and they make it past the final stretch without raising a single alarm.

As he collapses on the ground, gasping for breath, he takes one final look back at the perimeter
fence, at the factory that looms overhead. An unrecognizable, severely decayed biter growls at him from within the fence line, its body long separated from its head. Carl only knows him by the clothes he still wears. It's one of the Claimers. He stares at it for a long moment before looking back at the bite wound the guard had left on his palm.

"Patch, we have to go! Patch, please!" In a turn of events, Sherry is the one keeping her cool while Carl is nearly hyperventilating. But he nods, standing up, and turns away from the factory. He doesn't look back. He just keeps running.

But the harder he runs, the harder Ron Anderson's bite mark throbs in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Please be sure to comment and let me know your thoughts, both good and bad! This is the part of the show I'm least familiar with, and while we are in a AU universe, if anyone notices something significantly out of wack, or if something was confusing, please be sure to let me know.

And holy cow, guys. This just broke 50k. I promise this was originally just meant to be a really long one-shot. 0_0
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

If anyone is interested, here is a link to the playlist I usually listen to when I'm working on this. It's mostly TWD soundtrack, a few trailer-ish songs, and Appalachian/country music. https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0S9H1LNoZzWCWncZg3djxx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carl has killed people before. Ron's death shouldn't bother him.

So then why does it?

Maybe it's because it was so up close and personal. It's easy for Carl to get in a trance when he's behind the scope of a rifle, shooting targets from afar, but close encounters often leave him reeling when it's all said and done. But he doesn't feel guilty about torturing the Wolf. He doesn't feel guilty about killing any of the Wolves, or even Martinez, in fact. He shouldn't feel guilty about Ron, with everything the other teen had done. So what's so different, now?

Carl doesn't know the answer. But the guilt wells up within him all the same, unchurning other unpleasant reminders in its wake.

"Carl. Carl!" Sherry's voice snaps him back into reality, and he slides to a stop as she pulls on his arm. They're both gasping for breath, and he doesn't know how long they've been running.

"We can't stop." He pants. "They—"

"I know. But we need shoes. We need weapons. We can't keep dodging every biter we come across." She points out, gasping for breath. He blinks, staring at her feet, and then his own. They're
both bloodied from running through the rocky terrain. In the adrenaline rush, in his daze, he had nearly forgotten. It's beginning to dawn on him how truly risky this plan really is.

She digs through her bag, grabbing a bundle of clothes and tossing it at him. "Here. You need to change out of those rags. I couldn't take any boots without him noticing—it's the best I could do, sorry."

Glancing back from where he came from, he barely gives the clothes a second glance before beginning to strip. Shame sweeps over him the same way it always does, but his fear overrides any embarrassment he might have. Sherry makes a point to look away, nervously looking for any sign that they're being followed. The shirt is slightly too large, and the pants comically so, especially without a belt to hold them up. It isn't until he pulls on the jacket that he freezes, recognizing the fit, the scent.

"Are these….are these Negan's clothes?" He asks, stunned. Sherry shrugs.

"Dwight's would have fit better, but Negan had enough in his drawers that he wouldn't notice a few missing. Please, Patch, hurry." She whispers, still looking over her shoulder.

He complies, slipping on the jacket. Carl's torso is longer than Negan's, but the piece of clothing still nearly swallows him whole. He wishes that Sherry had thought to grab gloves, but he knows he should be thankful for what he has. She reaches down her blouse, tearing at something underneath and handing a series of letters and schematics to him. He takes them hesitantly, the paper still warm from being pressed against her bosom.

"Take these, but don't give them to The Kingdom until you're sure they'll help us."

"You're leaving now? But——"

"The longer we stay together, the more obvious of a trail we'll leave behind. You need to head North, you don't have time to babysit me. I can make it on my own, same as you." She says, sounding like she's convincing herself as much as she is Carl.

"If you're sure. Then this…… this is it, then." Carl murmurs, eyeing the sky. Every fiber in his being is suddenly thankful for the year his mother made him join cub scouts. He finds the North Star in the sky, the big dipper. When it isn't safe to follow the roads anymore, the stars will have to guide his way.

"Yeah. It is." Sherry bites her lip, and before Carl knows what's happening, the woman is pulling him into a hug. "Patch, I just wanted you to know…. whatever happens? I'm glad we met."

She's sniffling now, and he awkwardly pats her back, gently pulling into the hug, himself. She shakes her head, tears falling against his shoulder.

"Sorry. Damn hormones. I just always thought……I always thought I'd go through this with Dwight, you know? He'd come home with beer and pretzels, massage my feet. And now..... he can't even look at me."

"He still loves you, Sherry." Carl murmurs. "You two were one of the few couples in Sanctuary that meant more to each other than just sex. You were like….Romeo and Juliet, you know?"

"Romeo and Juliet died, Patch. Not helpful." She teases, sniffling back more tears.

"They died?" Carl asks, scrunching his eyebrows. "Well that's a screwed up love story."
"The best ones usually are." She laughs, finally pulling away. "Take care, Patch."

"You too, Sher." He replies.

He wonders if he'll ever see her again.

---

He runs.

He finds some basic supplies at what used to be a Dollar General. A bandage for his hand, a pocket knife, and most importantly, some shoes that are just barely too tight for him. They hurt, pressing against his new sores in a way that he's sure is drawing blood, but they're better than going without shoes at all. Without much of a selection to choose from, he even unashamedly grabs a children's dinosaur backpack, stuffing anything that looks useful inside. He's fortunate that the store has been picked clean before. There's only one walker to kill, one that he manages even with the dull knife.

As soon as he's in, he's out. He doesn't know how long he has before the Saviors realize he's gone. He wishes he had watched Daryl a little more closely when he had hotwired that car. Instead, he runs. He runs, he runs, and he just keeps running.

He starts by following the roads. He means to put the greatest amount of distance between him and Sanctuary as he can before dawn, and then take to the woods. It's too dark for anything but the main road, now. If something is out there, wanting to eat him, he needs to be able to see it. It soon becomes apparent just how much weaker he is than before, too. After spending so much time sitting in a cell, his side is splitting from the simple exercise, and he gasps for breath as he treks on. But he can't allow himself to slow down. He has to make the most of this, of the few hours the Saviors still think he's theirs.

The drive to The Kingdom normally takes Saviors a few hours, so Carl guesses he has two or three days of hiking, at best. He thinks he can manage without food, but he needs to find water. He needs water, he needs to run, and he needs to stay out of sight.

He wonders if he's doing the right thing. His heart pounds in his chest as he runs. He knows that The Kingdom has a reputation for being stupidly optimistic, like a neighbor that's trying too hard to be friendly, but they were also the quickest to submit to Negan. Would they be willing to hide him? Should he even tell them who he is at all, or should he just claim he's a wandering orphan, and ask for a place to stay?

The latter would be the smarter plan. But after spending so long living a lie, Carl isn't eager to start living another one. And while he doubts their King will be easily swayed to Alexandria's side, any chance they have at all will be dashed if their relationship is founded on lies, assuming they're willing to help at all. Carl could be running for nothing. He could be running from one captor to the next, but that's a risk he's going to have to take. But for the time being? He keeps following that star, and he keeps running.

When the sun rises enough for Carl to see his path, he veers off the main roads and strays into the woods. It's been hours, but there's no sign of water. Or life. He runs into a few walkers, but no more than two or three at a time, and his pocket knife makes short work of them. He's gotten lucky. He needs to find better gear, better weapons, and water. But there's no time, not when he doesn't know exactly where he's going or what he's even doing. But he knows one thing. He can't just rely on being lucky.

From the treeline, he notices a sign for a museum, and decides to give it a shot. Carl hasn't had to
fend for himself in some time, but his trips with the Saviors have taught him that visitor centers and the like still occasionally have untouched vending machines. And who knows? Maybe he could find a sword like Michonne's. It is a museum, after all.

He realizes his mistake as soon as he feels a bullet whizzing by his head.

For a split second, he thinks the Saviors have found him. That he didn't cover his tracks well enough, that Dwight has followed him, and that the gig is up. But when he runs, the voice that calls for him to freeze doesn't sound like a Savior at all, nor does it sound like anyone he even knows.

"I don't want any trouble!" Carl shouts, ducking behind a retaining wall. Suspiciously man made hills block his vision, making it hard to see exactly where his assailant is located. He can see the museum's main office in the distance, a plantation-style home that stands in contrast to its odd surroundings. The majority of the area seems to focus on the outdoor space, and at first glance, the 'museum' doesn't appear to be anything more than a historical landmark. A tourist attraction.

"What's your name, kid?" The distant voice growls. It's a man's, an older man's by the sound of it. Carl swallows, closing his eyes and saying a quick prayer.

"They call me Patch. I'm just passing through, I swear. I saw the sign, was hoping the museum might have a vending machine or something. Didn't realize this place was someone else's territory, I'm sorry."

The other voice halts, the man appearing to be thinking.

"Come out of where you're hiding. Slowly. I won't shoot unless you try something."

"With all due respect, I'm not sure I can trust your word on that."

"My word's all you got right now, son. But you were right about that vending machine. Show your face, show your weapons, and I'll give you a Mountain Dew for the road."

Carl freezes at the other man's promise. It's too good to be true, which means it's a trap. But the unfortunate truth is that the strange layout of the museum has him pinned. The moment he flees the retaining wall, he'll be back in the stranger's line of sight, and he doubts the crumbling stone will do much in the way of blocking bullets. Like it or not, he's at this man's mercy.

He raises his hands first, slowly peeking above the wall. He was right about the stranger's age. An older gentleman with a graying beard and a cowboy hat stares back at him in the distance, looking down at him from the barrel of a shotgun. He's most definitely not a Savior, resembling more of a mountain man than a biker. Albeit, a mountain man in kevlar.

"Are you….are you a ranger, or something?" He asks, eyeing the stranger's outfit in confusion. The older man shifts uneasily as they make eye contact, unsettled by Carl's appearance.

"Somethin' like that. You sure you're not one of them dead'ns, kid?"

Carl blinks for a moment before it dawns on him what the other man means. Biters. The man had thought he was a biter. Carl looks down at himself. Despite a smaller, wasted frame, he feels like he's looking better than he has in some time. Compared to before, he's relatively injury-free. And he's cleaner than he's been in months. No bloodstains, no muddy—oh yeah. He's missing an eye. And possibly another quarter of his face. He always forgets about that. He winces, the movement causing Doc Harlan's sutures to tug uncomfortably along his cheek.

"They call me Patch, or Patches. Used to just be for my eyepatch, but now, well, I really need more
than just the one." Carl offers, smiling sheepishly. He makes sure to keep his hands raised as the other man assesses him. The ranger's demeanor resembles a dangerous grandfather more than the bandit Carl had initially feared him to be. And since nobody else is running out of the woodwork to assist him, Carl's guessing the other man is alone.

But when Carl finally notices what the man is standing next to, he realizes that the man doesn't need any additional manpower.

It's a canon. The man is standing next to a canon.

In fact, as Carl glances over his surroundings, he realizes exactly why the historical landmark has so much space dedicated to its outside area. The man-made hills are lined with a series of retaining walls, with at least a dozen canons peaking through at various points. The strange layout is starting to make more sense. This isn't just a museum, it's a fort.

"Holy shit." Carl manages, wide-eyed. "Are those...uh...are those operational?"

His question only serves to make the other man tighten the grip on his gun. "They sure are. This place was built to keep the confederate army from marching on DC. If General Lee didn't manage it, I don't think you and your little biker gang's going to, anytime soon." Of course. Of course Carl would stumble across a manned Civil War fort while looking for a vending machine, all within a day of escaping Sanctuary. He feels a hysterical giggle begin to rise in his throat, but he quickly squashes it down, shaking his head, instead.

"Look, I meant it when I said I don't want any trouble. You mean those guys wearing jackets like this one, right? I'm running from them. They're the ones that did this to me. Have you heard of Alexandria? My Dad and little sister are there, and they're in trouble. I have to go help them. So please, just let me go, and you'll never see me again, I swear."

The man cocks his head at this, furrowing his eyebrows. "We're already in Alexandria. Fort Ward's inside the city limits, kid."

"I—what? I don't know, it's a community, they call it Alexandria, it's like this place with a bunch of mansions and solar panels—"

"---you mean that ritzy neighborhood development they built right before the outbreak. The one with all the walls." The man says, realization lighting his eyes.

"Yeah, sure, that's the one."

The man nods. "Alexandria was a lot larger than one little development project. Had over a hundred thousand people. Washington used to frequent this town, hell, it was Robert E. Lee's boyhood home."

"Sure." Carl acquiesces, confused. "I'm sure it was. I guess, well, this development, they probably think they're the only ones left of the town, after the outbreak. So they call themselves that. I don't think they mean anything by it. In fact, I don't even think they know you're here...."

"I've seen their people once or twice. They make a racket, but they've never bothered me, so I've never bothered them. They're too soft to be a threat."

"They are. Soft, I mean." Carl agrees. "And now they're paying for it. The Saviors, that biker gang you mentioned, they're moving in, killing people, taking tributes. My Dad was trying to help them, but now he's in trouble, and I've got to help him. So please. Just...just let me go. I didn't think anyone was here, I swear."
Carl keeps his hands raised, and the other man seems to be pondering over this, his lips twisting as he thinks. Suddenly, he pulls something out of his pack and an object flies towards Carl before he even sees the other man throw it. Carl dives for the other side of the retaining wall, covering his head, and waits for a moment before scrambling backwards. He sees the object in the distance and blinks dumbly at it.

"Jesus, son, it's a Mountain Dew, not a grenade." The other man lowers his shotgun slightly, still gripping tightly to the stock.

"Oh." Carl gulps. The man isn't lying. Carl dives for the soda, ignoring how liquid spills everywhere when he cracks the can. He sucks the drink down greedily, the syrup sickeningly sweet as it slides down his throat. The ranger eyes him incredulously, almost amused.

"Thank you." Carl utters, closing his eyes. "I can't...I don't remember the last time I had one of these. I wasn't lyin'. I'll be on my way. Just...uh...don't blow me to smithereens on my way out, please."

The man nods slightly, his hat dipping forward as he watches Carl suspiciously. Carl should get the hell out of dodge, but he pauses for a moment, something odd possessing him. "What....what's your name?" He asks cautiously, the now empty can still in his hand.

"Wheelock." The man says after a long moment. "John Wheelock."

"Then thank you, Mr. Wheelock."

The other man doesn't respond, and Carl wonders how long the other man's been living by himself. Whatever the case, Carl doesn't have time to make friends, and he's just fortunate that the ranger is letting him go. He isn't sure that he would do the same.

To be honest, Carl hadn't realized just how close he was to Alexandria. For a brief moment, he contemplates turning west, of going to his father's gates to say one last goodbye, but thinks better of it. Sherry was right. Alexandria is the first place the Saviors would look for him, and by now, they're more than aware that he's missing. If his father is still alive, risking a visit would also risk getting him killed. So Carl heads the opposite direction, his heart still pounding wildly against his chest. He isn't sure if the strange encounter with the ranger is a fortunate or unfortunate one, but he feels lucky all the same. But he can't rely on being lucky. So he runs.

He runs, and runs, and runs.

Carl is still running when he finds The Kingdom. Or at least, when they find him.

"Halt! Who dare trespasses onto the King's land?" For a moment, Carl wonders if he's hallucinating. It's been at least a day since his encounter with the ranger at Fort Ward, and he hasn't come across anything else to eat or drink. Which Carl is fine with, because he hasn't come across any Saviors, either.

He wavers as he stops, once again raising his hands in the air. Two men with horses and spears have come out of nowhere, their spears raised aggressively as their leader starts barking out questions. They're talking in a strange, medieval-like manner, like something out of a fantasy movie. Carl stares at them dumbly. This is it. This is what he's come so far for. But now that he's here, he's barely even able to understand what they're asking him, nonetheless how he should respond.

"You bit?" Carl freezes. He understands that question. The bandage on his hand has loosened,
revealing a bit of Ron's bite mark underneath. He shakes his head rapidly.

"Not by biters. I was in a fight, but the guy that did this was alive at the time."

The two men don't seem to like this answer, either. They circle around him on their horses, and Carl is suddenly aware of just how much more muscular and well cared for their mounts are than Buttons had ever been. The horses trot around him in a practiced ease, not startling in the slightest.

"I haven't eaten in a few days. Or had much to drink. I've come to speak with the King. I have some information he might be interested in, information about the Saviors." He says cautiously, nearly stumbling as he turns his head to face the ever circling men. While they're moving too fast for him to keep up with, from what he can tell, the only long range weapons they have are the bows strapped to the side of their saddles. Bows and spears. It makes sense. Hilltop and Alexandria aren't the only towns stripped of their guns.

The leader of the two, the one barking out the majority of questions, reacts visibly to this. At mention of the Saviors, he shares a glance with his partner, slowing his horse and instead shoving his spear in Carl's direction. Carl ungracefully falls flat on his rear end, and while he tries to scramble back, away from the spear's sharp edge, he's surrounded. Any further back and the other guard's horse could trod right over him. Without any proper weapons or gear, Carl curls up and covers his head, trying to make himself a smaller target and less likely to be caught by a flying hoof. The guard's expression softens, eyeing the backpack Carl still wears.

In a million years, Carl never thought that a dinosaur backpack would be the thing to save him, but it is. The backpack's googly eyes wobble from the movement, as if aware of the guards' gaze.

"How old are you?" The man suddenly asks, eyeing Carl from head to toe. Carl swallows.

"Uh, sixteen or seventeen? I'm not really sure, anymore. Look, this was the first pack I was able to find, ok? It was either this or Dora the Explorer." The second guard guffaws at this, a sharp look from his superior causing him clear his throat. Still, the strange conversation seems to have broken the ice, and the guard withdraws his spear, if only slightly.

"And how does a 'sixteen' or 'seventeen'-year-old have information on the Saviors that would interest us?" The guard demands skeptically.

"Because I've been their prisoner. I've lived there. My Dad's community is just like yours. But things aren't as peaceful with the Saviors as they are here. I know this is a risk for you, to even be talking to me. But it's a risk for me, too. So if there's any chance you're going to turn me in, just tell me now, because there are people whose lives depend on me. My Dad. My little sister. I just….I don't know where else to go." His voice finally breaks, the exhaustion of the last few days pressing down upon him. He wipes his nose on his sleeve.

The two guards exchange long looks, but while still suspicious, they both seem to be softening in their approach. After a moment, the first guards speaks.

"What's your name?"

Carl closes his eye, struggling to breathe. He isn't sure why anxiety is bubbling within his chest, why it's hard to stand, or why it's so hard to answer such a simple question. Patch? Kid? Lil Deputy? Champ? Wolf? Which one is he now? But for the first time in a long time, he knows the answer. He clears his throat.

"Grimes. My name is Carl Grimes."
The guards don't blindfold him, much to Carl's surprise. And the further they travel, the more it becomes apparent that The Kingdom doesn't try to hide their territory in the slightest. They pass a series of signs, along with other men on horseback patrolling in pairs. He learns that the main guard escorting him is named Richard, and that his partner is Colton. They remain rather tight lipped throughout the journey, which suits Carl, as his own headache is making him a bit untalkative, himself. But what little they do say is said normally. Their strange way of speaking has passed, the men only keeping up the medieval ruse for the initial introduction.

As they enter the community, Carl finds that the Kingdom's tight knit organization isn't limited to just their patrols. At least fifteen armed men and women jog by in unison, undergoing some sort of training regimen. Within the main square, a small group of children chase one another, their laughter lighting up the air as civilians tend to crops. Some of them glance over at Carl curiously, but even as they stare at his haggard appearance, they don't seem frightened by him in the slightest. They trust the guards transporting Carl to not let anything happen to them. These people are more than just safe, more than just content. They're happy.

As the sight of it all takes Carl's breath away. He wonders if this was what Alexandria was like, before Negan's presence had smothered the town. He wonders if Sanctuary had ever been like this. Or if it ever could be like this.

But as quickly as he's enamored by the sight, he snaps himself out of it. He's heard enough about the Kingdom to know that this is a farce. The people are only happy because they're not aware of the threat lingering outside their door, of the secret toll their king has been paying to prevent bloodshed. This cheerful way of life is a lie, as much of a facade as the way the guards had introduced themselves.

But as he watches the sunlight reflect off of a giggling little girl's hair, Carl will be damned if he doesn't want to believe in that lie, too.

While the guards are suspicious, jerking him around as they guide him from place to place, they aren't unnecessarily cruel. In fact, they don't even put him any kind of holding cell. Colton waits beside him outside the throne room doors, nonplussed as Richard goes to speak with the King. And while Carl waits, he realizes why this place looks so familiar. It's because it resembles a school.

The doors are the same type of industrial-grade doors that used to lead to Carl's gym class. The covered walkways are nearly identical to the ones he had been accustomed to, just a different colored trim. For a second, Carl is twelve-years-old all over again and feels the cold, damp condensation of his school's basement against his brow. Feels the hunger that had crept upon him, leading him to discover the abandoned freezer's decaying contents. But the throne room opens, Richard stepping through from the other side, and Carl is shaken out of his daze.

"The King will see you now." He says, eyeing Carl's bite mark with suspicion. Carl nods, bowing his head as he follows the other man. He wonders idly why they're even letting him talk to the king, if they're so worried about his bite. If they value intel enough to risk bringing Carl in front of their leader, maybe he has a shot at this, after all.

As Carl walks into the room, his suspicions are confirmed. The throne room is a giant auditorium, resembling a community theater or a High School production. The Kingdom has even kept a painted background of mountains and castles, mimicking a fantasy realm. And as Carl finally sees the man sitting in front of it, a striped beast lying comfortably at his feet, Carl feels like he's been transported to that realm.

He had heard about the tiger, but to see it is another experience altogether.
Beside him, Richard snorts, smugly pleased with the intimidation tactic. King Ezekiel doesn't look like the fool that the Saviors have made him out to be, nearly as intimidating as the tiger itself. While a gentle smile laces the man's lips, his eyes are grim, his shoulders broad. The man is playing a role just as much as Negan is, but Carl still swallows nervously as he's struck dumb. Out of habit, he drops to his knees, kneeling in the same manner that would have been expected with Negan. The King raises an eyebrow at his behavior, but doesn't correct him. Instead, the King breaks the silence, his voice booming as he speaks.

"Welcome to 'the Kingdom', Carl Grimes. My guards tell me you were a prisoner of the Saviors, that you have come here seeking refuge in exchange for information. Do they speak true?" The tiger stretches lazily at its master's feet, barely even registering Carl's presence. For a people so quick to submit to Negan's rule, their leader seems to ooze power.

"They do. Uh…your majesty." Carl stutters, feeling like the real fool in the conversation. He's still struggling for words, his throat as sore as his tongue is parched. Before, he had been so desperate when the guards had come across him, that words had tumbled fruitlessly out of his mouth. But now, when it's most important, the exhaustion of the past few days is creeping over him again, and he's being the opposite of diplomatic.

King Ezekiel seems to sense this, choosing once again to speak first.

"Richard has conveyed your concern for your father. You fear that we will betray your trust, and that he will come to harm as a result. Yet as eager as we are to hear your tale, you must understand we have concerns of our own. You are dressed like a Savior. Who is to say that this is not some trial that Negan has put forth to test our loyalty?" The king leans back in his throne, his chin resting in his hands. The man isn't alone, another handful of guards and armed men stand at attention behind him, their faces masked by the stage curtain's shadows. From the distance, the only features Carl can make out is the one standing closest to the light, a teenage boy close to his own age, who watches Carl with interest.

The Kingdom values children, that much Carl can tell. He's seen more children and elderly folks during his trek to the throne room than Hilltop and Alexandria had put together. Maybe he can use that to his advantage. Maybe he has a chance.

"I was Negan's prisoner. I stole some clothes when I escaped, that's why….that's why I look like this." The King's eyes sharpen at his words, but Carl continues, afraid that if he doesn't keep going, he won't be able to do this at all.

"I…I want to be upfront with you, your, uh, majesty." He says at last, eyeing the tiger. He doesn't hide his fear, this time, doesn't try to seem tougher than he is. He needs to appear his age. He needs King Ezekiel's gaze to soften the same way the guards' had when they spotted his backpack. Carl's hands shake, and his voice wavers as he speaks.

"I'll admit that the whole story….it doesn't paint me in a good light. I'm not a--I'm not a good person. But my father is. And if I screw up? If Negan finds me again? It's my family that'll pay for it. Him, my little sister…. so if there's any chance you'll turn me over, or if you don't want to even talk to me, just tell me, and I'll disappear. You'll never have to see me again, I swear." Carl assures hurriedly.

Now that he's begun speaking, the words are clumsily tumbling out of his mouth again. He feels more vulnerable, more honest right now than he's been in years, and it's in front of complete strangers. But they listen attentively as he speaks, eyeing him with steady expressions. The guards are shuffling, the King practically at the edge of his seat. Carl wonders how much communication The Kingdom has had with other communities, if at all.
"To be honest…. I should never have risked coming here. You have a good relationship with Negan, there's no reason to think that you'd risk that for someone like me. I shoulda just holed up somewhere and laid low. But I haven't…. I haven't been a good son. And after everything I've done, my Dad….my Dad never gave up on me. So I can't give up on him, not now. And I feel like I could help him more from here more than I'd be able to in the middle of nowhere.” Carl breathes, his throat growing tighter.

"I'm not askin' you to fight against the Saviors. Just...if you're willing, to let me stay here. To not turn me in. And if you promise that, I'll tell you everything, the full story, the good and the bad. And if the day comes that the Saviors go too far? If they treat you like they've treated my father's people? Then you have someone who's been inside their facilities, that has maps, schematics. I have rosters, arsenal lists, schedules, code words, you name it. Some of it might be outdated soon, but with me? You'll still know how they operate. What kind of weaponry they really have."

Carl pants, out of breath from the rushed spiel. The King and his guards seem to be waiting, still taking in his words as Carl ceases his rambling. They're waiting for him to continue, but he's waiting for them to say something. Carl is exasperated, anxiety crawling through his chest. If they're going to feed them to the tiger, or worse, turn him into Negan, he needs them to do it now. If they're willing to help him, he needs them to say so now. Carl has spent the last few weeks, months, or however long it's been waiting, and now the tension of it all is driving him mad.

"You still haven't answered the question, kid. Why should any of us trust you? How do we know that this isn't some sort of trap?" One of the guards speaks up, the others nodding in agreement. Carl searches the shadows for the speaker, to address whoever is doubting him directly. He isn't prepared for the person that steps forward. He nearly falls over in his shock, gaping at the other man.

Compared to Carl's father, Shane Walsh has barely aged at all.

He's dressed in a Kingdom uniform, with a dark, well-trimmed beard and longer, curly hair that touches the tips of his ears, but it's still him. The same crooked nose from a fight with a drunk suspect. The same snarl on his lips when his temper was brooding. The same eyes that used to shimmer when they teased him as a child. And like Carl's father, the ex-deputy doesn't seem to recognize him the slightest.

"Shane?" Carl asks incredulously, his eye impossibly wide. "You're alive?"

Carl looks around at everyone in the room, looking for any sort of explanation for what's going on. He's so utterly confused, so utterly bewildered. Part of him wants to flee, wants to think that Shane's unexpected appearance must be some sort of trap, or some sort of sign that his stay in Sanctuary has rendered him mad, but the Kingdom residents seem as confused as he is. Shane cocks his head to the side, narrowing his eyes as a haughty smirk flickers across his lips.

"Do I know you?" The other man asks as he bobs his head, eyeing Carl in a way that makes him uncomfortable. Carl nods, struggling to speak.

He remembers playing hide and go seek with Shane and his father. He remembers 'Uncle Shane' babysitting him while his mother went to visit his father at the hospital. He remembers the teasings, the times the other man had ruffled his hair. Shane and his father had always complemented one another. Rick was straight laced where Shane was wild. Shane was risky where Rick was rigid. Rick had been even-keel where Shane would lose his temper. And so Carl finds himself adopting his father's steady tone, even as he struggles to stay calm.

"You….you used to be a sheriff's deputy in King County, Georgia, right? You were my dad's
partner, his best friend. The last time we saw each other, I was just a kid, and you promised me you'd teach me how to catch frogs. But you...uh...you never got the chance." Carl's voice breaks at the last sentence, and he fights to keep eye contact with the other man, instinctively wanting to look to the ground.

Shane steps forward now, further into the light. His expression transforms the same way Carl's father had. From suspicion and aggression to sheer disbelief.

"It's me." Carl whispers. "It's Carl Grimes."

"Carl?" The other man echoes, stumbling forward. King Ezekiel startles at the name as well, recognition flickering in his eyes. Before Carl has a chance to ponder over this, Shane is jumping down from the stage and heading straight towards Carl. Carl instinctively flinches back, shying away like a dog about to be hit, but Shane doesn't seem to notice and envelopes Carl into a bear hug regardless. It takes a moment for the teen to recover, to clasp the other man's shoulder in return.

"Don't feel bad. Dad didn't recognize me, either." Carl laughs bitterly.

"I thought...shit, Carl, we all thought you were dead. We looked for you." Shane growls, his voice thick with emotion. Suddenly, Shane has him by his chin, swiveling Carl's head around to get a better look at him. Carl shakes his head out of the man's grasp, but doesn't miss the way Shane is honed in on the empty eye socket and the tear across his cheek.

"What the hell is going on, Shane? Why aren't you with Dad? Why are you here, at all?" Carl asks. Shane's expression darkens, but he doesn't get a chance to speak, King Ezekiel's voice rumbling thoughtfully over the auditorium, instead.

"Grimes...he is the man you came here in search of, is he not?"

Shane nods rapidly.

"Yeah, yeah it is. This is....this is his son. He was missing when the outbreak began, before his father and I ever even traveled together. You found him? You found Rick? And Negan's controlling him?" Shane's mind is traveling a mile a minute, but Carl is left as confused as ever.

"Yeah... I ....look, I'll tell you everything. But I need you to promise, your majesty, that you won't turn me into the Saviors. Please." Carl turns to the King, hoping his expression conveys just how desperate he feels. After an impossibly long moment, exchanging glances with the other guards, Ezekiel nods slowly.

"You have my word, Carl Grimes. Should you abide by The Kingdom's rules, you will have a place here. However, our people do not know of our arrangement with the Saviors. Should they hear of it from you, or should you break any of these rules, you will be punished as I see fit. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir." Carl replies, watching the tiger warily.

"Do you so swear?" The King insists, the leader's eyes searching his.

"I so swear." Carl nods grimly, relief flooding over him in waves. But he ducks his head, fear still running through him. He's about to say the one thing that might cause these people to change their minds. But he says it, regardless. "I meant it when I said I wasn't a good person, Shane." He says regretfully, looking at the other man. "I wasn't just Negan's prisoner. I'm.....I'm....I'm a deserter."
The room seems to shift, and even Shane's shoulders seem to ripple in shock as he takes in Carl's words.

"Deserter….like...you're...."

"I was a Savior." Carl confirms, swallowing hard. He turns to the King. "They were training me to be, anyways. When I was a kid….when the outbreak first began, Dad was in the hospital, and Mom never picked me up from school. So when---"

"No, that's not true. We came for you. I was with Lori when she did, Carl." Shane interrupts.

"That's what Sophia said, too. Look, I don't know what happened---"

"Sophia is still alive?" Shane says incredulously. King Ezekiel raises his hand.

"There many answers to be had, Sir Walsh. It may be more fruitful to let the boy finish his tale before we assault him with questions." Shane nods apologetically, but his mouth is still open, a hundred unspoken queries ready to pour off his tongue.

"Look, I don't know what happened. All I know is that I waited, but Mom never came. I was on my own for a while, but Negan found me and saved me from gettin' killed by a gang. And after that…. I knew the Saviors were rough, that they did bad things. But they weren't as bad as everyone else was, you know? So I just....I got used to it." Carl says, swallowing hard. "Towards the end, I was even involved with pickups. Never here, but with other communities."

The room seems equally disturbed by his admission, but he continues on, afraid that if he stops speaking he won't get the chance to finish.

"I'll admit that I'm no better than the rest of them. I did whatever Negan told me to, as long as it kept me safe and kept me fed. I helped enforce tributes. I even helped Negan take over other communities. But as selfish as it is, that all changed when it was my Dad in the execution circle."

Carl admits, speaking more to the King than he is Shane, now.

"Dad's people came out of nowhere. They wiped out an entire outpost in the night without any casualties of their own, and just disappeared. It was more professional than anything Negan had encountered before, but Alexandria thought that there was only one outpost. They didn't know how big we really are. So Negan hunted them down. We killed some of them, bashed their brains in in front of the others. He made the survivors submit to the tributes. He made them kneel."

"Who?" Shane interrupts. "Who did they kill?" Carl shakes his head.

"I don't......I never learned their names. A red-headed, military-looking guy and an Asian dude. His wife was there, she was pregnant, screamin'...." He trails off, and as disturbed as the rest of the audience seems, Shane is particularly horrified.

"Was his name Glenn? Was the Asian guy named Glenn?" He demands.

"I don't know!" Carl insists, his face burning. "The wife's name was Maggie. Short hair, brunette."

The reaction is instantaneous. Shane looks grim, crest-fallen. Glenn, then. The man's name had been Glenn. Carl rolls the name in his mind, committing it to memory. He figures he owes the dead man that much. "It would have been him, then. Christ, he was with us since near the beginning. He was a good guy." Shane admits, swallowing hard. "They weren't married yet, when I knew him. You said she's pregnant?" Carl nods, remembering the look on the woman's face when he had opened the closet door.
"Yeah. She is. I've only met her a couple of times." Carl admits, not sure if he should confess that she survived or not. As far as he knows, Negan still thinks the Widow is dead, and he isn't sure how much he can trust these people, especially with secrets that aren't his own.

"They….they didn't know who I was. Dad didn't recognize me, and I didn't.....I didn't tell him. I thought if I kept it secret, I could help him from behind the scenes, you know? But it was more than that, I was…. well, it doesn't matter. Negan found out anyways, and it all went to hell, and it's all my fault." Carl clenches his fists, shaking.

He's reminded of how vulnerable he is, now. His hair is shorn, no eye patch, nothing hiding the gap in his cheek save for some hastily-made sutures. He hates it. He hates feeling like a child. And he's reminded of it all the more when he catches the teenage guard's sympathetic gaze. These people are pitying him. Which is what he was going for, and it's certainly better than them hating him, but something about it still gets under his skin.

"I meant what I said, I'm not asking you to fight him. But I've been with Negan for years, and these tributes? They will get worse. He'll ask for more and more, until one day, you can't give him what he needs and provide for yourself, too. And they'll do whatever it takes to get it from you, to control you. He plays mind games to make people submit, it's what he's good at. When Negan found out who I was, he didn't just beat me. He didn't just take me hostage. He made my father choose between me and my baby sister. He held a bat to her head, to my head, and made Dad choose which one of us the Saviors got to keep." Carl turns his head, emphasizing the scars he knew were there.

"Sister? What's her name?" There's a sense of urgency in Shane's voice that wasn't there before. Shane's grip on Carl's shoulder tightens, to the point that the teen winces. Carl is unpleasantly reminded of his showdown with Negan, the way the other man's friendly demeanor had quickly turned dark.

"Judith. Her name is Judith." He answers hurriedly, taken aback by the ex-deputy's dramatic reaction. Shane just gapes. His whole being seems to crumble, and for the first time in the entire conversation, the man looks nearly ready to cry.

"No. No, no, no….she...I saw her baby carrier. I saw it." Shane insists numbly. But there's a glimmer of hope in his eyes, even as his words indicate otherwise. He continues.

"The last time I saw Rick, we were fighting a man that was a lot like Negan. We thought we beat him, but this guy….this asshole just plowed through our gates with a freakin' tank and let the walkers in. We evacuated as fast as we could, but we all got split up, and when I found Judith's carrier ...there was so much blood....I thought the walkers had....I thought...." Shane is pacing now, as if he's forgotten their audience entirely. He turns to Carl, towering over him as emotions flicker across his face. "Are you sure? Are you sure she's alive?"

Carl blinks at the other man, nodding.

"As far as….I mean, as far as I know, she is, yeah. And Negan doesn't……he doesn't normally hurt kids, if he can help it. Not the little ones, anyways. From what I overheard at Sanctuary, he left her alone after he took me." He bites his lip, uncertain.

Fear besets him. It's the same fear that emerged in his cell in Sanctuary, the same fear that nearly prevented him from attempting an escape at all. Would Negan hurt Judith, now that Carl was gone? Did Sherry warn them in time? But as Carl is caught up in his anxiety, relief seems to pour over Shane, and the man stumbles into one of the auditorium chairs, rubbing his hands through his hair in disbelief. Shane had been happy to see Carl, but this news is sending him reeling. Was Carl
that much of an afterthought, that Judith's survival meant so much more to the other man? Carl
tries to reign in his doubts, his jealousy, but he isn't sure he manages.

"From what I overheard, Sanctuary isn't very happy with him right now, threatening a baby and all.
A lot of the people there...a lot of them are like me, they just do what they have to, they're
not...they're not bad people. A lot of them were my friends. In fact, it was another Savior that
helped me escape. She's the one that copied Negan's records, too." Carl says, turning to the room.

"Look, I'm not going to lie. Negan has the numbers. And more than anything else, he has the
weapons. He's good at keeping the communities under his control strong enough to produce what
he needs but weak enough that they're forced to depend on him. But things will get worse. And
what he's done to my father's community, to Alexandria? It's not an isolated case. Hilltop is just as
bad. And other communities have been slaughtered, Hallowbrant-- Simon, he---" Carl suddenly
finds his throat clenching, his vision blurring.

The guilt from before, over Ron, is churning within him over and over again until he can't breathe.
Suddenly, Carl feels like he's the one being strangled. A hand is on his shoulder, and someone is
lowering him to the floor. It's Shane. He's waving a hand in front of Carl's face, and it's only then
that Carl realizes that his ears are ringing.

"Was he lying? About the bite?" Someone asks.

"He said he hasn't eaten in a few days." He hears Richard answer cautiously. "He didn't look like
he was running a fever, but he was pretty shaky on his way in."

He feels Shane's hand against his forehead and flinches back. But Shane ignores him, gentle hands
pushing Carl's head between his legs, forcing blood back into his brain. The world stops spinning
around him, and the dark spots begin to clear. Carl realizes that he's lower than the tiger, now, who
has cocked its head in vague interest as Carl's own head remains tucked between his knees. The
others talk among themselves, and soon, the king rises.

"Come, Carl Grimes, let us sup. Regain your strength so you may continue your tale." Ezekiel isn't
looking at Carl anymore, lost in his own thoughts. The guards chatter distantly, and as Shane helps
Carl to his feet, the tiger rises with him.

Carl tunes out the chatter as the guards accompany Carl and King Ezekiel to a banquet hall.
Shane's presence is as constant as Michonne's, but where hers was a silent shadow, his is a looming
bear. Carl doesn't hear everything Shane is asking him, but he refuses the arm the deputy offers,
stumbling along the path on his own. Words are stenciled on many of the walls, inspirational
quotes that he initially ignores. But as they reach the banquet hall, the words inscribed near the
entryway make Carl stop in his tracks.

*Hope is the North Star. Let it guide you.*

-KE

He hears Shane asking him if something is wrong. He hears children laughing in the distance. He
hears a choir practicing, just slightly off key. He hears an elderly woman talk of her youth, and
workers bustling as they hastily try to prepare food for the sudden entourage. He hears all of this,
but he doesn't move, he doesn't answer. He just stares at the stenciled words.

And for a moment, just a moment, he dares to let himself hope.
Author's Note: So.....was the Shane reveal too lackluster? I really wanted to build it up a bit more and end with it as a cliff hanger, but the scene just didn't play out properly that way. I'm not particularly happy with this chapter, so this may be rewritten at some point. Please be sure to let me know your thoughts in the comments, if you were confused by anything, what you liked, etc. Every piece of feedback helps!

Also, Fort Ward is based on a real place in Alexandria, Virginia. Since the show and comics dodge around pinning locations down, I'm going with that what we know as Alexandria was a development property built on the edge of the real Alexandria, Virginia. The Kingdom is set in the school it's based on in the comics, Eastern High School in Washington DC. How DC isn't overrun by more walkers is beyond me, blame the creators of the comics/show. ;)
Chapter 10

Author's Note: Now that my posting time isn't as frequent, some readers mentioned that they would appreciate a quick recap of what we know so far about the timeline split and what has happened. I'll add more to this as more is revealed. Please let me know if this helps!

What we Know: AU Differences:

- Carl was never picked up from school before the evacuation to Atlanta. It is unclear why.
- Carl traveled with various groups, eventually ending up alone and targeted by the Claimers. He was physically and sexually abused.
- When escaping the Claimers, Carl ran into the Saviors. Negan saved Carl and killed his pursuers. Carl continued to serve the Saviors until the events of this fic, earning the nickname 'Patch'.
- Instead of telling Sophia to hide, Rick stayed with her after she ran from the highway due to his concern over another missing child. As a result, Sophia lived.
- Rick was adamant about Carl's survival, whereas Lori grieved and believed that he was dead. Rick thought about leaving the group to search for him, but ultimately stayed due to lack of leads and Lori's pregnancy.
- Rick and company have had their own run-in with the Claimers. Sophia was threatened, but ultimately unharmed. The remaining Claimers were killed by Rick's group.
- Events within Alexandria have unfolded differently, with the Wolves becoming a problem the same time as Negan. Deanna was killed by Peter Anderson.
- Shane is still alive. He was separated from Rick's group after Woodbury. Shane was under the impression that Judith was dead. He came to DC searching for Rick and joined The Kingdom.

Chapter 10

Carl is vaguely aware of someone shoving a bowl of soup in front of him. It takes him a second to realize that it's Shane, who is lingering around him like a mother hen. The scent of chicken broth snaps him out of his daze, and he practically inhales the liquid as he tips the bowl to drink its contents. Precious drops of soup are dripping down his chin, and he struggles to keep his hands steady as he gulps it down.
The others don't hide their stares, watching in grim fascination as he eats. At first, he thinks they're appalled by his lack of table manners, but when he slows down, he realizes that some of the soup has slipped through the sutures and is rolling down his cheek. He brushes away the offending liquid, too hungry to be embarrassed.

"You should take care, my young friend. Eat too much, too quickly, and you may fall ill."

The King is right. Carl knows he's right. But Carl doesn't care.

"When's the last time you ate something?" A voice Carl doesn't recognize asks him. He looks up, his head beginning to clear as he takes in his surroundings. It's the teenage guard from before. Carl thinks he heard someone call him 'Benjamin'. While the other boy is smiling at him from across the table, Carl still feels uneasy. Reminded of Ron, he clears his throat, choosing his words carefully.

"A couple of days? But it was just dog food and protein bars before that, so I didn't have a lot of fuel to begin with."

"Dog food?" The boy leans forward, his expression as bewildered as he glances between Carl and the king. The King looks uneasy, and Carl is getting the feeling that he's breaking the other boy's cherry on how the real world works. He takes another gulp from his bowl, until all that's left are some soft noodles. With another shake of the bowl, he consumes those as well.

"It's standard for prisoners." He mumbles after he swallows. "But Dwight liked me, so sometimes he'd sneak in protein bars or some bread. Making the dog food into sandwiches helped a lot. It's not like they starved me or nothin'. They didn't even torture me." The others don't seem comforted by this fact. Particularly the teenager. After furrowing his brow for a moment, the other teen nods awkwardly, offering a smile.

"Well, you definitely won't starve, here. One of our lead farmers has been with Ezekiel since nearly the start. He was an Ag class teacher, if you can believe it. He knew all these cool ways to fertilize the soil, and now that it's built up, we have a really good crop output, even with everything we're giving the Saviors."

Carl swallows the rest of the noodles in one big gulp, and scrunches his eyebrows as he thinks on the other kid's words.

"Ag class?" He asks slowly, wondering if his question is a dumb one. Benjamin prattles on, and if he's judging Carl, he doesn't make it known.

"Yeah, sorry, 'Agriculture' class. This place used to be a school, but our builders have done a lot of work to it, so you can't really tell. The buildings are like really, really old, so they had to demolish some of them, but it made room for more crops." Benjamin says, strangely giddy about the topic. "It's funny, Coach Lewis says that before the outbreak, the school wanted him more for their sports program than for his classes. Everyone thought it was stupid to offer Ag class in the middle of DC, you know? And now look at us."

Carl is learning very fast that his initial suspicions of Benjamin were completely out of line. Benjamin is the opposite of anything Carl has encountered with other people his age. He eagerly prattles on about The Kingdom, its history, how the community works, and Carl struggles to keep up with the conversation. While the other teen carries himself well, seeming more competent than the sheltered Alexandrians, he's innocently friendly even as the adults around him are wary.

Carl nods politely, trying to shake the fog clouding his brain and listen to what the other teen is
telling him. If Carl is going to live here, he's going to need to know how the place works, and while he isn't overly eager to make friends, listening to Benjamin seems like a good way to do that.

He watches the others eat. He isn't even sure what time of day it is, but given the unenthusiastic way they pick at their own food, he's guessing it's not a usual meal time, and that Benjamin was telling the truth. Despite the Saviors presence, they're not lacking food. Shane in particular seems far more muscular than Carl remembers. When Benjamin finally comes to a stopping point, Carl changes the subject.

"How did you end up here, Shane? You said that you and Dad got separated?" He asks. Shane snaps out of his stupor, and it's obvious that he wasn't listening to the conversation as intently as the others, who seem to be using the meal as a way to size Carl up.

"It is a noble tale." Ezekiel speaks for the other man, smiling. Shane seems abashed, smiling bitterly as he takes a swig of his drink.

"Nah. His 'majesty' over there is exageratin'. In fact, me and your Dad, we, uh…well, we didn't part on the best of terms. We disagreed on some things. We could usually work it out, but….there, towards the end, it was….it was pretty rough. I said some pretty nasty things. I did some pretty nasty things. And I never got a chance to apologize to him for it, after the attack."

The more Shane explains, the more confused Carl becomes. He doesn't remember his father and Shane ever fighting. People considered them an unstoppable duo at work, and Carl would have thought that the same teamwork would have applied to the new world.

"What kinds of things?" He asks tentatively. Shane rubs the back of his head, looking at everyone but Carl.

"Different….different things." He says hesitantly. "Your Dad-he's a good leader, but he always wanted to work things out by talking it out. I always wanted to fight. For example, there was a gang that had threatened us, the kind that would kill the men, rape the women, you know? We ended up capturing one of them, a kid named Randall, just outta High School. We couldn't just let him go, because he knew where our camp was, and we knew he'd lead the others back to us. But we couldn't trust him, couldn't afford to feed him. I wanted to execute him. Rick didn't agree." Shane says, eyeing King Ezekiel as he speaks. From the way the royal man is shifting, and from the way the other guards are exchanging glances, it seems like they're uncomfortable with the decision, themselves.

"So…..what happened?" Benjamin asks.

"We argued, but eventually, Rick shot him, and that gang never found us. Me? I was fine with it. I mean, killin' someone ain't always something you want to do, but Rick? It tore him up. And he was the same way with the Governor. Was willing to sit down with the man for 'peace talks', even after he tortured some of our own. Rick even tried to talk him down when he came strolling up to our gates in a tank. It bought time for our folks to evacuate, but we lost….we lost everything. Everyone. I wasn't even sure your Dad made it out alive." Shane remarks dourly.

King Ezekiel clears his throat, looking uncomfortable as he straightens in his seat. "It sounds like your father and I share much in common, Carl." The king says appreciatively, an odd tension to the air.

So this is it. This is why the guards were so willing to risk bringing Carl to their king, even with a Savior's jacket and a bite mark on his palm. They're fidgeting in their seats as Ezekiel talks, exchanging sharp glances with one another. Some of them obviously disagree with their king's
peaceful dealings with the Saviors, even if they aren't bold enough to audibly hint at it like Shane. "I don't think he's that way anymore." Carl says honestly, his stomach aching from the most food he's had in a long time. "I mean, the Alexandrians took out an entire outpost while the men were sleeping in their beds. And another biker group we sent out there completely disappeared. I think the only reason he's submitting to Negan now is to keep his people alive. If Dad had the weapons, the manpower? I don't think he'd bother talking."

The others seem troubled over this information, but Shane seems particularly baffled by it. "Naw, naw. You're talking about a different Grimes, then. Because the Rick I knew? Was all, 'we don't kill the living' and shit. Preferred farmer overalls over his gun."

"Well, I'm not exactly the Carl you knew either, am I?" Carl counters, leaning back in his chair. "He's still good. Everything he does, he does to keep his people safe. And he has lines he won't cross. He didn't like me castratin' a guy to get him to talk. I mean, it was a bastard that had just attacked the town, too, it's not like-" Carl stops as he realizes the looks he's receiving.

King Ezekiel somehow seems to grow taller in his chair, his eyes darkening protectively. The king slowly swivels his head to the side to address him. "May I remind you, Carl Grimes, that while we have offered you a place here, you will abide by our rules. That sort of behavior isn't tolerated here, is that clear?"

Carl nods slowly, the chicken broth daring to come back up out of sheer nerves. "Crystal." He croaks.

The table is silent for a moment, nobody exactly sure how to continue a conversation after that. But Shane eventually clears his throat, leaning his elbows against the table as he talks. "Anyways, after we all split up, I tried looking around, seeing if I could find anyone, you know? I never did, but there were signs up everywhere. They all led to this place called Terminus. I know how Rick thinks, if we were all separated, I figured he'd try to find a central landmark that people might follow. But by the time I got there…. whatever that place was, it wasn't good. The whole place was still smoldering. Couldn't find any proof that your Dad had actually been there at first, until I found this." Shane says, digging into his pocket.

He places a crumpled piece of paper on the table. While the paper refuses to lay flat, having been stuffed in a pocket for far too long, it's clearly a map of some sort. And as Shane holds it down, Carl can make out a circled spot, with large letters displaying boldly beside it.

\textit{SORRY I WAS AN ASSHOLE. COME TO DC. THE NEW WORLD IS GONNA NEED RICK GRIMES.}

Carl reaches out, fingering the block lettered ink in awe. Shane grins back at him. "Guess your old man has that effect on a lot of people."

"I guess so." Carl repeats, smiling softly. He wonders who wrote this, if it's anyone he's met in Alexandria. Beside him, the king nods in recognition, having obviously heard Shane's story before. "When I came to DC, I never found your Dad, but I did come across The Kingdom. After a while, I figured, this 'Ezekiel' guy ain't so bad. And if there was any chance of finding Rick, it would be in a big place like this, right? I had started giving up on the idea that he was even alive, to be honest. But your old man's pretty good at provin' me wrong on that one, too." Shane mutters fondly,
tucking the map back into his pocket.

Carl nods, a knot stuck in his throat. He told himself that he couldn't depend on luck, anymore. But the odds of Shane being here? The odds of Carl even surviving this far? It couldn't be anything else. The map alone is proof of that.

"The new world? I have the feelin' it's a lot smaller than any of us thought." Carl says quietly, his gaze flickering back to the writing just outside the banquet hall doors.

"I believe you may be right, Carl Grimes." King Ezekiel murmurs softly. "I believe you may be right."

The rest of the evening passes in a blur. The King went off to do whatever it is that a king does, leaving instructions for Shane to guide Carl to his new quarters. Carl is grateful, because after days of running, he can finally rest. It's not even sunset yet, but weariness seeps into his bones.

A bed. He has an actual bed. Not only does he have a bed, he has a pillow. And a room to himself, albeit one that's loosely guarded. Carl isn't sure if he should be worried or relieved over the Kingdom's relaxed behavior towards him, but chooses the latter as he plops down on the cotton sheets. Although he's in far better shape than he was this morning, his head still swims as he spreads out. Yet for some reason, he can't get comfortable. He tosses. He turns. But the pillow is too soft, the mattress too high, and the give in the box spring just too foreign for him to sleep properly. He strips the blanket and pillow off of the bed, making a nest on the floor in the corner of the room. It's still softer than he's used to, but it's similar enough to his cell in Sanctuary that his body finally begins to relax.

Everything that has happened feels too good to be true. Shane is alive. King Ezekiel is somehow sympathetic and competent. And while Carl has been wrong before, The Kingdom seems honest in its intentions to house him. Someone could always snitch, but so far, Carl hasn't met anyone who would really want to. The few people that know the Saviors exist all hate working under him, and none of them seem eager to curry favor with the man.

But they all adore Ezekiel. Carl needs to stay on the king's good side if this is going to work. His history with Shane is certainly a plus, as the king seems to respect Walsh, even if they are complete opposites in their personalities. But Carl still can't figure Ezekiel out. The strange facade that everyone just accepts, the stark contrast of the man's authority against how easily he caves into Negan's demands. But Ezekiel is no fool, and Carl found the king's eyes watching him more often than not.

This was particularly true after Carl learned that he would be attending classes and training sessions with Benjamin. Carl was been given strict instructions to not leave the city without getting implicit permission first, which meant that Ezekiel was rightly concerned that Carl could be a spy. Which brings up the same question as before. Why is the king even risking any of this? And not only that, why is he practically pairing an outsider with a teen that he treats like his own son?

Benjamin didn't seem concerned in the least when Ezekiel announced the decision, and in fact seemed exactly the opposite. Carl has noticed that while there are many children here, there aren't many teenagers, and Benjamin is likely just enthused to have someone his own age to talk to. Carl can't quite say the same, although he certainly enjoys Ben's company more than he ever did Ron's. Maybe he won't have to bash Ben's head by the end of this, at least.

Yet, even though this is everything Carl had hoped for when he had arrived at The Kingdom, he still keeps waiting for the other shoe to fall. For Simon to come pounding on his bedroom door, for
this all to be a trap. But the moment hasn't come. It doesn't stop him from keeping his back to the corner of his new room as he curls up to sleep, nor does it stop him from keeping his pocket knife handy as he dozes.

For the first time in a long time, Carl wakes to sunlight streaming in from his window. The feeling of the gentle heat against his skin amazed him during his journey to The Kingdom, but waking up to it in a bed of blankets and pillows is another wonder entirely.

He's clean, too. Along with clean clothes, he actually had a shower the night before, another luxury he had nearly forgotten. After months of living in a cell merely feet away from his own feces, he had grown noseblind to his own body odor, a fact that Shane quickly remedied. The showers were communal, some leftover feature of a school gym, but had been thankfully empty when he had gotten there. The Kingdom doesn't seem quite as advanced as Alexandria, with only certain buildings using electricity in order to spare the generator, but even a cold shower is an improvement on what he's been used to at Sanctuary.

The Kingdom is nothing if not innovative. In order to spare batteries, one of the guards is tasked to wake up at a certain time with a solitary alarm clock and rousing the others. But Carl is awake long before the first guard rises, the slightest bit of sunrise waking him from his uneasy sleep.

The clothes the Kingdom have given him are simple and handmade, as everything else in this place seems to be. If the Alexandrians were holding onto an Old World that didn't exist, the Kingdomers are embracing a new one of their own making. Carl is grateful for the clothes, but debates keeping the jacket on. While he wants to avoid the stigma that is sure to come with the Negan's clothing, the leather has its practical purposes, particularly when facing biters or melee weapons. In the end, he decides to put it away, stuffing it in between the unused mattress and box springs. He doesn't want to risk someone else going through his things and deciding to steal it or throw it away. There's something almost reverent about the jacket, and he's nearly as loathed to part from it as he had been his hat.

It isn't until he's freshly dressed that Carl notices a small mirror on the dresser in the corner. He doesn't have enough hair anymore to justify a hairbrush, but he figures he may need to smooth it down. When he steps forward, he's startled by the ghoulish reflection staring back at him. He can see why the ranger had mistaken him for a biter. Even now, clean and well rested, he looks like one. Without his longer hair and bandages to obscure his scars, all attention is drawn to his large forehead and the empty eye socket. And as he turns his head, the damage Lucille has ripped across his skin is painfully visible. Even sutured shut, he can tell where barb wire caught against the corner of his mouth and pulled downward, leaving an open tear in front of his bottom teeth and the resulting scarring resembling a permanent scowl. But the primary tear isn't the only one, additional scars draping across the surface of his cheek and jawline, leaving him looking like he's caught the foul side of a mountain lion. Or a tiger.

It's been years since he's had hair this short, and he's decidedly not a fan. He knows his mother would disapprove, he can imagine her tutting away like she always did before a haircut, but he can't bring himself to care what she would think, anymore. He immediately decides to grow it back out again, and eyes the stubble around his jaw in interest. Carl has always taken after his mother's side of the family in appearance, and he had begun to think that he had missed out on his father's genes entirely when it came to facial hair. But there it is, having grown sometime during his imprisonment. He wonders if he can grow enough to hide the tear across his mouth, or if the tear itself will just leave a patch in anything he tries to grow.

"You said Negan did that to you?" A voice snaps him out of his daze. He turns, irritated with
himself that he didn't hear the door opening. In Sanctuary, he had always slept with some sort of trap on his door, something to make noise and wake him if someone tried to steal from him in the night. It's only Shane, though, who is sporting a whirlwind of emotions in the same expression. Anger. Sadness. Amusement. Grief.

"Part of it, yeah." Carl admits, shrugging as he turns back to the mirror. "Just ain't ever seen the newest one, before. Was a bummer to heal up."

"You've never seen it?" Shane questions, confused. Carl nods.

"There weren't exactly mirrors, where he was keeping me. I'm gonna need to find some bandages or somethin' to cover 'em, otherwise people will shoot at me, thinkin' I'm a biter. It's already happened once."

Shane leans back on his haunches, the corner of his mouth twitching as he thinks. "You didn't happen to meet Daryl, did you? Redneck, racist, bad attitude?"

Carl blinks at this, cocking his head to the side. The hunter hadn't seemed racist, or at least not compared to some of the Saviors. He got along with Michonne, at least. But sensing that Daryl and Shane may have clashed in the past, Carl nods slowly, unsure where the ex-deputy is going with this.

"So he gets back from hunting, right? Was supposed to be a quick, one-and-done type of deal, but this moron is trying to get in one of the women's pants, so he goes above and beyond to try to find her daughter's lost doll for her. Sophia's, actually. So he goes off to find Sophia's dolly or some shit, and ends up getting injured along the way. Comes in absolutely bloody, staggering around an' all. And our lookout panics and pulls the trigger on 'im, and freakin' grazes his shoulder. He survived, but Jesus, he looked bad. But the kicker of it all? It worked. Sophia loved him after that, was followin' him around tryin' to learn how to skin rabbits and shit. And then her mama finally went all goo goo eyed for him, the lucky bastard."

Carl blinks, thinking that it's way too early in the morning to be filling in these kinds of gaps. He grins, nodding. "Yeah, I thought he actually was Sophia's Dad, at first. I didn't talk to Carol very much, though."

"So all three of 'em are alive? Geez, I can't believe it. Hell of a thing. What about Beth? Tyrese? Sasha? The two little girls from the prison, crap, I can't think of their names...."

"I didn't really know a lot of their names, myself. They thought I was a Savior at the time, weren't real keen on gettin' too friendly with me. I heard someone mention the name Sasha, though." Carl remarks, shuffling his feet, eager to change the subject. "So...uh...what are we doin' today?"

"You get to hit the books." Shane grins widely, his signature smirk back in place. "Good ol' Ezekiel is all about 'building a new world', and apparently algebra and world history is a part of that."

Carl grimaces, finding his feet altogether fascinating. He figured this was coming, but he doesn't understand the point of any of it. He can read, he knows basic math. What else really mattered, in a world where the dead eat the living? Shooting things, physical work, those were more in his comfort zone. But being back in school? Being forced to feel stupid about things that don't matter, anymore? It doesn't sound appealing at all.

But he does want to get on Ezekiel's good side. And if this is what it takes, then so be it. He sighs irritably, scowling. "Let me guess, Benjamin is going to be there?"
"Yup. The kid is practically peeing his pants with excitement. Pretty sure you're the only person here that's even remotely close to his age around here. So be on your best behavior, alright? He's a good kid."

"Yeah, well the last 'good kid' I ran into tried to beat me to death, so." Carl scowls, grabbing the dinosaur pack from where he's left it on the floor. He pauses, the pack's googly eyes jostling as they look up at him. "Do you guys...uh...do you have anything other than this that I can use? I'd rather not look like a dweeb."

"Kid, with a face like that? I'm pretty sure you could walk in wearing a freakin' tutu and nobody would say a word." Shane chuckles, even as Carl grimaces.

"Fine. Then maybe some bandages? Something to cover the eye up, at least. So I won't give the little kids nightmares."

"Now that I might be able to help you with."

"Are you a pirate?" A small voice asks nosily, and Carl scowls as he looks up from his textbook. A younger boy with golden hair is peeking back up at him in interest. Even with his newly made patch, the other children won't stop staring, their somewhat exasperated teachers desperately trying to keep their attention.

The 'school' is taught in a single classroom, with the original chalkboard still in place. While students have been segregated by age groups, only two teachers lead the classes, resulting in the majority of the attention being focused on children younger than ten.

Shane had guided him there an hour earlier than the other students, where one of the teachers tried to ascertain what he did know one-on-one. It's obvious that the teacher was only just now told about her new student, however, so by the time she had dug out some relevant textbooks, the other students had already shown up, causing Carl to be stuck in the back doing some assigned reading with Ben while the teachers tended to the younger students.

But the nosy, golden haired boy is in the back of his own age group, causing him to be seated next to Benjamin. The resemblance between the two is uncanny, and given Shane's earlier comments, it doesn't take long before Carl figures out that the two are brothers.

"Don't be rude, Henry. Pay attention to Mrs. Tidwell." Benjamin chides, a smile on his face even as he scolds his younger sibling. Despite Ben's comments, Henry continues to stare, and Carl offers a smirk in response. He raises his eyebrows and makes a face he hopes resembles a pirate. He supposes he pulls it off, as the younger boy beams in response.

As Henry finally turns his attention back to his teacher, Carl finds himself increasingly eager for a distraction of his own. He's convinced that once the teacher confirmed that he at least knew how to read, that she just grabbed the same books that were assigned to Ben without putting any further thought into the matter. One is titled 'Western Civilization II' and the second one is an even less interesting 'English Literature 202'. He had been interested by the Western Civ one at first, expecting cowboys and indians, but instead just finds long-winded paragraphs about Greece and Rome. And the English Literature book is practically incomprehensible, most of its stories written in old English. While they sound right up Ezekiel's alley, what little Carl can decipher doesn't seem like it would help him in the slightest.

Even more discouragingly, as he tries to look over the assigned reading, Ben finishes twenty pages in the time it takes Carl to look over one. The teacher had made a point for Ben to help Carl catch
up, but Carl finds himself gristling under the other boy's friendly smile.

"Is something wrong?" Ben whispers, cocking his head to the side.

"I just don't see how any of this helps." Carl mutters grumpily under his breath, casting a glance at the cover of one of the chapters. "Negan might have bashed my sister's head in by now. How does a made-up guy giving a speech to a skull even matter?"

Ben's smile slips off his face, and the boy casts a concerned glance towards his own brother as he bites his lip.

"Some of it might be more useful than you'd think. I mean, a lot of it is boring, and that's coming from someone who was desperate enough to read an HVAC manual cover to cover. But a lot of things….like this, see that quote there? 'One may smile, and smile, and be a villain.' Sounds kind of like Negan, doesn't it?" Carl starts to argue, but stops himself as the truth of Ben's words dawns on him.

"Have you ever met him? Negan, I mean?" Carl asks, and the other boy's face scrunches up uncomfortably at the thought.

"No. He was at our pickups in the beginning, but he's been sending others for a while, ever since I've become a guard, anyways. But I've heard about him. I guess he's a little less...uh...subtle about his real intentions than Claudius was, though. That quote, it's more about a political villain. Someone who looks like a gentleman up front, but backstabs people when they aren't looking."

"You'd be surprised. He's different back home. People at Sanctuary treat him like he's some sort of God." Carl admits, thinking back at the jacket hidden under his mattress. He shakes his head. "But I don't need a book to tell me what people are really like. First time someone like that gets someone else killed, you learn the lesson permanently."

"Doesn't help the guy that died, though, does it?" Ben offers with a sad smile, before turning back to his reading. Carl wants to argue, wants to protest, but the other boy isn't wrong. So he grits his teeth and returns to his own book. He doesn't finish by the end of class, but the teacher doesn't notice in the slightest, using the opportunity to recruit Ben's help as a teacher's aid after the younger boy finishes his own work. Carl stays in the back of the room, his attention wandering as he runs his fingers through dust that's accumulated on a nearby bookshelf.

The next few days prove to be equally boring and frustrating. To Carl's chagrin, both Henry and Benjamin are enthralled with Carl's company, and he's begrudgingly learning to be grateful for theirs. Ben takes their assigned partnership in stride, showing Carl around and pointing out what each person does, what their names are, and how they came to be at The Kingdom. While they receive a lot of stares, the civilians seem to trust Carl on the sheer fact that Benjamin does, and Carl finds himself wondering what good Hamlet quotes are if people don't heed their warnings. He's not even a wolf in sheep's clothing, he's just a plain wolf.

These people shouldn't trust Carl. In Alexandria, people were divided into two groups, those who were sheltered and weak, or those who were formidable opponents and rightly paranoid by Carl's presence. But in the Kingdom, people here are friendly despite being good at what they do, just as the King submits to Negan despite being strong in his own right. And Carl can't understand why. But the longer he stays, the more at ease the guards and King Ezekiel seem to be, which is cemented by the fact that he's scarcely seen without Ben at his side. So after a few days, they allow him to 'train' with Benjamin.

For the first time since Carl's stay, he's finally in his element. Richard gives them both sparring
sticks, with lengths shorter than a spear and dulled ends. Carl doesn't miss the fact that King Ezekiel just so happens to be traipsing by when the older guard begins his lesson. He isn't sure if the King is concerned that Carl might hurt the other teen, or if he's just curious to see how Carl will perform, but either way, Carl doesn't care. He's happy to be doing something, anything other than being stuck in a classroom with a wall of dull text and someone blabbering in his ear.

Carl has never really sparred with anyone before. Unlike The Kingdom, Sanctuary doesn't have any sort of formal training regiment, and at most, men mostly jokingly fight amongst themselves with fists and knives. Carl isn't accustomed to having such a long melee weapon, and he's out of shape, to boot, so he spends the first few minutes of his sparring session with Ben watching the other teen's steps and watching what Richard does in his own illustrations.

Carl very quickly learns not to watch Ben at all. While the other teen excels at book learning, his stance and grip on his weapon are both awkward, and the other boy doesn't think quickly on his feet. Carl watches Richard instead, and after he's grown confident enough, stops mimicking defensively and starts actually offensively going after whoever he's been paired with.

By the end of it all, he's sweaty and out of breath, but he's the happiest he's been in days. Even Richard seems pleased, although Carl swears he still hasn't caught the other man smiling.

"I thought you said you had never done this before?" Ben asks, panting himself. "You fight dirty. You keep going for my head."

Carl shrugs. "Thought this was training for fighting against biters? The dead don't care if you hit 'em in the ribs."

Which brings up the other conundrum Carl has learned about The Kingdom. Their training regiments, their fighting styles, it all revolves around fighting biters instead of other people, but there are still very large holes in how they go about doing that. Their armor is practical, thick layers of clothing to protect against biters, with braces on elbows and knees to protect joints in case of falls. But they all attack like they're play fighting, avoiding hitting anyone's heads or groins. And when Carl manages to get Ben into a chokehold, the other teen seems frustrated rather than desperate. Like it's just a simple game that he's losing. He doesn't understand why Carl seems so spooked by the affair, even though Carl is on the winning side of the altercation.

What's more, the spears don't make sense to Carl. He imagines that armed men on horseback, charging through hordes might be an effective way to break up a herd, but the guards patrol in pairs. While the spears allow guards to keep their distance from biters, they're practically useless when facing more than a few biters by themselves, forcing the guards to slowly spear one biter at a time. And while Carl is physically outmatched by Richard, he's still easily able to surprise the other man by tackling him along his lower thigh, forcing Richard to drop his longer weapon as they tumble. He manages to get his hidden knife to the guard's neck before Richard finally calls the match.

By the end of it, it's obvious that the Kingdom isn't particularly happy that he's playing dirty and breaking their sparring rules, but they do seem impressed by his ability, at least. And, for better or worse, Ben is more enamored with Carl than ever, acting like Carl is a long lost big brother, or something. Which is how, in the end, Ben is able to convince Richard and Shane to let his new friend accompany the group on a pig run.

A pig run is exactly what it sounds like. Somehow, enough wild hogs have bred and alluded biters that there's a decent sized population of them near The Kingdom's borders. Either pigs are more dangerous than Carl remembers them being, or the ones that have lived through the outbreak have been bred by circumstance to be particularly vicious. Carl quickly finds his place in the team,
however. While the more experienced men slowly herd the aggressive hogs where they want them to go, Carl circles the perimeter, taking out biters as he comes across them. It isn't until about thirty minutes into the pig run that he realizes that he's doing something impressive.

Outside of Richard and Shane, the rest of the guards are practically gaping as they side-eye Carl. When Carl finally turns his attention back to the others, he realizes that their own biter kills are sloppy and panicked, like they don't have much practice against the dead. Ben is the worst of them all, barely even able to take out one by himself.

It soon dawns on Carl why The Kingdom, despite being so weaponized and organized, is struggling. For one, Ezekiel is somewhat of a micromanager, accompanying them on the pig run personally. While Carl had initially assumed that the king was attending due to Carl's presence, the more they work the more clear it is that this is a normal affair. And secondly, Ezekiel plays missions extremely safe. The pig run is performed in a relatively biter-free area, but whenever Carl strays from the perimeter, hoping to corral an escaped hog back into the pack, the king is quick to tell him to back off and stay with the rest of the team.

King Ezekiel isn't a coward, that much is clear. He's every bit of a fierce presence as he had been in the throne room. He's brave and effective against walkers, and he doesn't shy away from doing the dirty work himself. But Ezekiel is absolutely terrified of doing anything to risk his people, even a new outsider like Carl. The problem is, as a result, outside of a select few men and women, his guards are inexperienced with fighting more than a few biters at a time and panic whenever anything interrupts the plan.

It's the exact opposite of Negan, who loses and executes people weekly, who works with a plan but often improvises on the fly. And it seems to be the opposite of Shane, who is just as impulsive as Carl remembers him being. But as much as Shane's impulsive nature should clash with the King, his sense of humor works to boost morale. Although Richard and Ezekiel taking the lead, Shane's easy banter among the group keeps everyone in a good mood as they work. It's funny, Carl doesn't remember Shane working well with others. It's partially why he was always assigned as Rick's partner. But now, in the new world, Shane works well within this team but not with Carl's own father. And Carl can't help but wonder why.

There's more to the story, he knows. There's more that Shane is omitting. But as strange as the ex-deputy's conversations about Rick may seem, he's instantly become loyal and protective over Carl, even when his temper flares. In fact, despite the man's banter, Shane doesn't seem to have anyone else in the Kingdom that he's close to, outside of one of the female guards. And from the wry grin and the way the older man bites his bottom lip as the woman goes by, Carl has a feeling that it's actually more of a fling and less of a more intimate relationship.

In the end, the pig run goes well, which is why he can't help but wonder why Richard is scowling so deeply when they corral the animals back at The Kingdom. To Carl's disgust, the group tempts the hogs into their final destination with biter entrails, and the hogs eventually chow down on a hanging corpse before Richard closes the barn doors with a click of finality. Carl blinks in confusion, trying to figure out the emotions flickering on the otherwise stoic man's face.

"How can you stand to eat 'em? Knowing what they've been feedin' on?" Carl asks, scrunching his nose. Shane shuffles uneasily, answering for the other guard.

"Ain't us that's eatin' 'em, kid."

Carl's stomach lurches at the realization, the meaning of Shane's words dawning on him. This place is so happy, so mundane, that the reality of the situation had nearly alluded him. But he's worked enough pickups at Sanctuary to know what community contributed what to their stores. And
Negan's entire pork supply? It all came from The Kingdom.

"It's to fill their bellies with rot." Richard confirms, scowling.

Carl swears to never eat bacon again.

As they leave, the exhilaration of the day's work and fought off biters fades away, leaving an uneasy pit in Carl's stomach. He feels nearly ready to wretch, to puke, but holds down the bile. And Richard's explanation doesn't ease Carl's sudden lack of appetite.

"We hoped it might make people sick, first time we did it. But nothing ever came of it. Still satisfying to think about, though." Richard smiles, eyeing Carl's revulsion in amusement. Carl swallows, shaking his head.

"That place is already rotted from the inside out. A few pigs won't matter none." He answers lowly. He refuses to meet anyone's eyes for the rest of the day, though, retreating to the barren corner of his room without eating any dinner. He doesn't feel like eating ever again, not just out of the sheer revulsion of what he's eaten in the past, but because he can't escape the uncanny feeling that the rotted meat is still lodged somewhere in his stomach. The more Carl thinks on it, the more he can feel the bile sitting there, decaying away, the same dark shade as the jacket hidden under his mattress.

The next week or so continues much the same, with Carl and Ben attending school on alternating days while working pig runs or cleaning out stables on other days. Ben jokes around with him, amazed that Carl enjoys cleaning out stalls more than he does Ms. Tidwell's class. And as strange as it sounds, Carl really does.

The first time they clean the stables, the familiar smell of hay and manure causes Carl's chest to tighten uncomfortably. The Kingdom has dozens of horses, all in better condition than Buttons had ever been, but the familiar nickers and headbutts all cause him to miss the other animal. But it's a welcome ache, and Carl soon comes to realize that Ezekiel's horses all have very different personalities in their own right.

For one, Ezekiel's stable master focuses on finding stallions and mares that haven't been fixed, meaning that a lot of the horses are pushier than what Carl is used to. The stallions are particularly annoying, and a lot of effort goes into making sure different horses are segregated into different pastures. The guards that patrol in pairs also make an effort to ride horses of the same gender, or otherwise risk having their mounts disobey and become rowdy in their attempts to breed. But certain stallions can get territorial with other stallions too, and by the time Carl listens to the stablemaster drone on which horse works well with who, he's convinced that managing horses is like managing squabbling children.

And yet, Carl loves it, and his enthusiasm leads to the stablemaster giving him other tasks, too. Carl learns how to tie different lead knots, and how to bridle and saddle horses properly. While it initially sounds simple enough, he finds out that since the bulk of the horses were obtained from a nearby boarding stable, different horses are accustomed to different riding styles and therefore need different gear.

"I've broken in two or three of 'em since I've been here. I told Ezekiel that moving forward, we need to teach them the western style, it's easier to maneuver with biters that way. But since so many of our horses were taught the English style, a lot of our guards learned to ride like that, and now they're complaining that they don't want to change. They'll prefer a saddle horn the first time they get into real trouble, that's for sure."
It's all very confusing, and not a lot of it makes sense to Carl, but he listens to the stable master as attentively as he's been listening to Ben, and soon Carl finds himself getting riding lessons. He tries to insists that he already has the gist of it, that he's had to ride bareback before, but as cumbersome as saddles and reins can be, he soon realizes how useful they really are.

"Man, I wish I had one of these at Alexandria. Woulda made it a lot easier to hold on while shootin'." Carl muses during one lesson, letting his fingers run over the saddle's leather.

"You've shot the dead on horseback?" Ben asks, his eyes wide as he grins. The other teen is a much better rider than he is a fighter, and has been unsurprisingly eager to ride with Carl as he learns.

"I've shot people on horseback." Carl clarifies, not realizing the impact of his words until they're out in the open. The civilians don't know a lot about Carl's past, which means the stablemaster is hearing this eerie piece of information for the first time. But the stablemaster isn't the only one wary of this new fact, Shane shifts his weight uneasily a few feet away.

"You've killed people?" Ben asks, although it's more of a statement than a question. It should have been pretty obvious to the others by now.

"Yeah." Carl affirms. "Those bastards deserved it, though. They tied women to trees and mutilated them, left them for the biters."

"And what about the other bastards? Did they deserve it, too?" Shane asks warily as he approaches, although he acts as if he already knows the answer to the question. Carl scowls, patting his mount as he trots forward. The horses are easier to deal with than people. They don't care about who he's killed, they only care that he had fed them for the past few mornings, that he talked to them when he cleaned out their stalls.

"Not all of them, no." Carl confirms irritably. He's reminded of the hogs devouring the walkers, of the rot that still feels like it's settled in the pit of his stomach. He meets Shane's gaze unflinchingly, raising his chin as he eases into his horse's stride. "What about the people you've killed? Did they all deserve it, too?"

Shane doesn't answer, rolling his eyes as he sends a smirk towards Carl's way. But the man seems rattled, caught up in his own thoughts, and Carl wonders if Shane is filled with rot, too.

Carl reckons he lasts nearly another week before he becomes listless, again.

While King's Ezekiel's increasing trust has allowed Carl to expand what he's allowed to do, no amount of guard shifts or pig runs can ease his worry over what's been happening in Alexandria during his absence. Carl knows what he promised the king in their first meeting. He knows that it's unfair to ask for anything more than a place to stay, a place to hide out. And it doesn't escape Carl's attention how much The Kingdom has already risked for a strange kid they've never met before. But he's listless nonetheless, and feels like he should be out there doing something.

But he isn't the only one growing listless. King Ezekiel has made it clear that he has no interest in seeing the maps or papers that Carl has brought with him, at the audible protests of the king's guards.

"We're not talking about instigating an attack, here, we're just gathering intel. We need to know what Negan is capable of, how he operates. Even if we stay friendly-"

"I said no, Sir Richard."
"Then everything we've risked for this kid is for nothing. Are you comfortable with that?"

Most of the conversations Carl overhears tend to follow the same pattern. Where King Ezekiel excels in managing his people, assigning the right person to the right job, he avoids conflict at all cost. Even when that cost is freedom.

Carl is initially kept in the dark as much as the civilians about The Kingdom's relations with the Saviors, but as the pickups continue having more and more snags, Shane finally asks for Carl's thoughts on the men they're meeting, reciting names and appearances and asking Carl what he knows about them.

They're all names Carl recognizes, but for the most part, they're names of men Carl hasn't worked with. Most people assigned to pickups were only assigned to a certain community at a time, to help 'foster relationships' with the townspeople. But when he hears two of the names, he winces, feeling like Negan is accomplishing exactly the opposite.

"Shit. He put Jared and Willie on the same team? It's a miracle none of your people have gotten shot yet. Willie's dumb as dirt, and he's got a trigger finger, he shoots anything that moves. And Jared is a dick. He gets off on putting people in their place, always starting shit for no good reason. And he-" Carl pauses, unable to finish the thought. He instead changes the conversation, concluding that Negan is likely assigning troublemakers to The Kingdom because he figures that's the place they're least likely to screw up, especially with the calmer Gavin as the lead.

Carl doesn't want to finish his original thought. He doesn't want to talk about just how many people Jared slaughtered at Hallowbrant, because if they do, they might ask Carl how many people he killed there. The dreams he used to have about that day are starting to come back, the bodies sometimes taking Ron's face, and they always end with Carl waking in a cold sweat.

His growing anxiety definitely doesn't help with the school situation, either. As the days pass by, Carl finds himself zoning out more and more during school days, and rather than doing the assigned reading, he flips through the textbooks at random, searching for pictures or anything of interest. It's shallow to prefer pictures, he knows, but if there's any skill that has paid off in Sanctuary, it's the ability to learn by watching something being done. His anxiety is making him too listless to bore through reading paragraphs of unimaginative text, but he finds that if he focuses on different illustrations of events, the material is more interesting than he imagined. Especially the Western Civilization book.

Most of the pictures are of busts or artifacts, with small italicized explaining what they are in the captions. But the things that jump out at him are the illustrations of the battles. Most are romanticized, with men in elaborate metal costumes charging on foot or on horseback. Some even had men riding on elephants, which Carl initially thinks is as crazy as riding Shiva into battle.

He doesn't know how accurate any of the paintings are, but he finds himself enraptured with the different weaponry and tactics littered throughout the pages. The soldiers had spears, but they were used alongside shields or against charging horses. And even more interestingly, some of the battle descriptions were paired with simplistic aerial illustrations, with blue blocks representing the enemy and red blocks representing the Roman soldiers. While the different tactics are a little overwhelming at first, Carl is intrigued by the elaborate formations used for different situations. One of the formations mentioned was specifically designed around the fact that most of the opposing force would be right-handed, attacking them from the side that would be the most difficult for right-handed men to parry.

For a moment, Carl is discouraged. As interesting as the illustrations are, they're outdated. Romans didn't fight against enemies with guns. The tactics would be perfect if they were fighting someone
like the Wolves, but attacking the Saviors in an open field would only result in both sides getting mowed down. But on the other hand, the passages do make Carl think more deeply on exactly how they're going to win the upcoming war.

The text mentions that most of the Romans' foes would simply attack in bulk back then, assuming whoever had the biggest numbers would win. But the Romans had formations for different terrains and positions, and used an array of shield tactics, weaponized chariots, and wooden artillery. So even when the Romans were outnumbered, they were better trained, better armed, and better strategists than their opponents. And Alexandria is definitely outnumbered.

"I think this is the first time you've actually seemed interested in something." Ben jokes, snapping Carl out of his daze. He looks up blearily, realizing that the class has actually ended, students roughhousing around while others ready to leave. Ben's little brother has swiveled around in his chair, fidgeting as he scribbles on a piece of paper.

"The first part was all about politics and junk. But this….I thought we could use some of this stuff about battles and weaponry. I mean, it says Rome conquered a lot of the world at one point, so they must have had the right idea, right?" Carl murmurs, flipping through the pages. He feels strangely embarrassed to have been caught with his nose in a book, and finds it difficult to meet Ben's gaze. When he does, he's surprised that the other teen seems sad, almost wistful.

"Is that….is that the way it is for you, all the time?" Ben questions softly, his eyebrows furrowed. Carl blinks dumbly in response.

"Er….what do you mean?"

"It's just….everything you do, it's like you're analyzing how to use it to fight, you know? Even at the stables. I mean, it makes sense. That's probably why you're so good at taking out the dead and stuff. I just don't know how you do it. I'd go crazy if I didn't just sit back and goof off sometimes. I mean, half the stuff I read? I just read it because I enjoy it. Like comics. They're not useful at all, I just like them."

Carl blinks at the other teen for a moment, pondering over his words. He's reminded of the first time he stepped into Alexandria, at how he had scoffed at them for their manicured lawns and clean-cut appearances. How baffled he had been when he first stepped into The Kingdom, watching children chase each other in circles. How bewildering the carefree attitude of its civilians seem. He swallows.

"It's what's kept me alive so far. It's just hard to turn it off, you know?" He shrugs, eager to change the topic. "Besides, I used to like comics, too. Just haven't seen any of 'em in a long while."

Ben perks up at this, but doesn't get a chance to speak up before his brother interrupts.

"Who's your favorite character?! Mine's Spiderman." Henry is fully turned around in his seat now, looking up at Carl with that same strange, awestruck look Ben gives him from time to time.

"Uh, used to be Superman. Now it's Batman, I think." Carl murmurs, wishing he still had the shirt Sophia had given him in Alexandria. Henry cocks his head to the side, even as he's nodding eagerly.

"What made you change your mind?" He asks innocently.

"I don't know. Superman just seems….naive, don't you think? It's stupid to rely on some random alien guy with powers to fight your battles for you. In the real world, it doesn't work like that." Carl
mutter, crossing his arms. "Batman, he wasn't always a perfect guy like Clark Kent was. He lost his parents, and lost himself, for a while. But he always stopped himself from stepping over the line and becoming the Joker. And he did it without powers. It's like in the Dark Knight. He did a lot of dark things to stop the bad guys so the good guys wouldn't have to."

"Your parents let you watch Dark Knight?" Ben asks incredulously. "Man, my parents told me I'd have to wait until I was older, and by that point...well..." He rubs the back of his head uneasily, smiling sheepishly even as he does so. Carl gives him a wry grin.

"I snuck and watched it at a friend's birthday party." Carl admits. He had been, what, eleven at the time? He had barely known the other kid, either, it was one of those birthday parties where a rich kid's mom invited the entire class. But his classmate had an air hockey machine, a large DVD collection, and an unlimited bed time. It had been glorious.

Henry watches their exchange with a scrunched up face, and it takes Carl a moment to realize why. Henry would have only been in Primary School when the outbreak began, he likely didn't remember much of the way things were, back then. Carl almost envies him. Thinking back on that birthday party is almost sad, now. The idea of sleeping at a stranger's house completely at ease, with a fully belly, a sugar headache, and electricity... it's depressing to know what kind of life he could have had, if things had been different. A life where he considered a strict bedtime as being unfair, instead of one where he justified Negan ripping a part of his face off.

But at the same time, if Henry won't know a world any better than this. How many children might grow up under Negan's reign, thinking executions and getting the iron are a normal way of life? Hell, it seems practically normal to Carl now, even though he does remember the world before the outbreak.

"I guess you're right, though." Ben interrupts Carl's train of thought. "I don't know about the 'moral gray area' thing, but we have to learn how to defend ourselves and stop depending on others. Or at least, learn how to take on more than one biter at a time." Ben admits sheepishly, his gaze focusing on a map posted on the wall. Carl tries to see if there's anything distinguishable about the map, but it just looks like a regular scope of the city, with a large red circle drawn around Eastern High School, with The Kingdom scribbled off to the side.

Henry nods, but looks rather downcast. He holds out the piece of paper he had been working on, revealing nearly illegible handwriting and hand-drawn illustrations of Superman.

"Father's Day is in a few days, but since most people's parents are dead, Ms. Tidwell is having us write appreciation letters for people we care about. I already did yours and 'Zeke's, but I was trying to find something to make Richard smile, because he's so grumpy all the time. Do you think Superman would still be ok? I mean, I know he's not as cool as Batman, but one day I'll be big enough to be a guard, and then I can-"

"I'm sure Richard will like it." Ben interrupts hurriedly, frowning slightly. "I'm sorry, Henry, that's not what we meant. One day, you will be big enough to be a guard, and then you can protect people you love, too. But when you're sick, or hurt? There's nothing wrong with depending on people or asking for help. That's what friends are for. It's like The Kingdom. We all have to work together to make this place run, right?" Ben assures him, and Henry seems a bit comforted by this.

The younger brother is quick to return to his drawing, which Carl gets a better glimpse of. A cartoon figure wears a bright red cape, a large R adorning his shirt in the same style as Superman's S. The drawing is surprisingly elaborate for someone Henry's age. Superman has been altered to resemble Richard, and with the figure's frown, if Carl squints, it even looks a little like the older man, large nose and all.
But while Henry is enraptured by his drawing, Ben is still focused on the map, a frown of his own adorning his face. "Hey, Carl?" The teen asks hesitantly, still peering over the wrinkled paper.

"Yeah?"

"I've been thinking of going on a run on my own. Is that something….is that something you'd be interested in?"

The change in conversation is abrupt, and Carl doesn't understand where this is coming from, all of the sudden. "I'm still not allowed out of the town. You think the King will be okay with that?" He replies hesitantly.

Ben's expression falls, but the teen uncharacteristically sets his jaw in determination. "What's he going to do, feed us to Shiva? Shane's not tailing you anymore, so they probably won't even notice as long as we're back before dark. We could do it after we clean the stables. The stablemaster loves you, he won't mind if we take two of the mares for a ride."

It's becoming apparent that this is something that Ben's been thinking about for some time. But as Carl idly wonders if Ezekiel ever has fed anyone to Shiva before, he raises an eyebrow at Ben. For a teen that's typically such a goody-two-shoes, this plan reeks of something that Benjamin has explicitly been told not to do before.

"Feed you, maybe. He'll just hand me over to Negan." Carl laughs uneasily, but his quiet remark hangs over the air, some weight to their words. "What kind of run?"

Ben leans towards the map, his finger landing pointedly not on the circled school, but on a spot less than a mile from it. Above, in small script, is labeled National Guard and Aviation Center.

"It's one of the few places we haven't scavenged. We're practically sitting right on top of a goldmine, it's bound to have some leftover weapons and ammo we could use against the Saviors. But King Ezekiel won't touch it. We tried once, a long time ago, and lost a lot of people, so he won't go back. It's still overrun. But between you and me? If we did a quick in and out? We might have better odds than a full assault group, you know?"

Carl's gut instinct is to accept Ben's offer. He's been on his best behavior during his first few weeks here, and he's legitimately grateful for how good the Kingdom has been to him. The idea of risking what he's accomplished here, of giving Ezekiel a reason to turn him out, is enough to make him dizzy, but at the same time, he's been here for weeks. And from how the seasons have changed, his showdown with Negan was likely around six months ago. He doesn't know if his father is alive or dead. He doesn't know what Negan's been doing since Carl's escape. The idea of going out, looking for weapons and ammo, the idea of doing something that feels more productive than sitting around talking about comics and reading quotes from a dead guy's play….that idea is appealing. And if what Ben is saying is true, and they're sitting on top of an unscavenged arsenal? That could be exactly the sort of thing Alexandria needs.

But the idea of never seeing his father again? That idea isn't appealing at all.

"I'll take the blame if Ezekiel gets mad, I swear. I'll threaten to leave, if I have to-" Ben starts, but Carl interjects before the teen can get too excited.

"I'm sorry, Ben, I can't. I want to, but I can't risk what I've got here. If I screw up? My family could wind up dead."

For once, Carl feels like the world has turned upside down, with him being the stereotypical good
kid and Ben being the rebel. Even with his light hair and clean cut appearance, there's something more going on here that Ben isn't telling him, something else determining his sudden enthusiasm about this 'sneaking out' plan. But Carl can't determine what. Ben is usually the easiest person in the world to read, but why a normally optimistic kid who can barely take down a biter by himself suddenly wants to raid an arsenal is beyond him. So instead, Carl pockets the idea for another time, for when he's earned the King's trust enough to do something about it. If he's honest with himself, the building has likely long been raided by other groups, but it's still a thought.

That's what Carl tells himself, at least. But the next morning, when Carl steps into Mrs. Tidwell's class, Ben's nowhere to be seen.

Ben is missing.

This is a fact that nobody seems to be concerned about. But after having spent so much time with the other teen annoyingly glued to his side, his absence is painstakingly obvious to Carl. Shane isn't worried, saying something about having heard that the teen is sick, but the timing of Ben's absence, followed by Henry's guilt-ridden look, lead Carl to believe that there's more to the story.

When class ends, all it takes is a brief interrogation to prove that Carl's right. He doesn't even have to break out a rubber hose, Henry blubbers out the truth with a few stern words and a mildly scary look.

Ben has gone to raid the armory by himself. Without telling anyone. Without any guns. When Carl finds out, he swears enough to make a Savior blush. He doesn't want to get Ben in trouble, but the other teen is going to get himself killed, if he hasn't already.

So that's how Carl finds himself pacing by King Ezekiel's quarters with a blubbering Henry by his side, glancing warily at the throng of arguing men before them. Ezekiel had spent the afternoon leading a scavenging trip, and by the time the king had returned, it was nearly dark. But despite the late hour, Ben still hasn't returned. This brings a whole new set of issues.

Ezekiel immediately wants to send out a search party, but Richard points out that a Savior pickup is scheduled tomorrow, and they can't risk drawing the Saviors' ire. The last few pickups have been tense enough as it is, and if Ezekiel doesn't show? If the Saviors suspect that anything is amiss? Who knows what could happen.

In the adjoining room, even Shiva is aggravated by the back and forth, pacing alongside Carl as she eyes the arguing men. While the striped beast usually intimidates Carl, he shares a strange bond with her as he waits. She must love Ezekiel tremendously, to suffer her cage and chain, to abide by rules that are not her own rather than roaming free. She's powerful, unconcerned with the lot of Negan and biters, unconcerned with anything other than her Ezekiel and her next meal. Carl envies her even as he feels sorry for her.

"Just shut up already! I'll go." Carl growls at last, stepping forward with a trembling Henry at his heels. The guards turn to face him, seeming offended at the unexpected interruption. But Ezekiel is predictably chivalrous, giving Carl a chance to speak even as he raises an eyebrow at the teen's disrespectful tone.

"Shane and Richard are right. If you send people now, in the dead of night, you're going to get someone killed. And if you've been having problems with the Saviors lately, you have to be at the pickup tomorrow. But me? You can risk me. I'm not even one of your people. And let's face it, keeping me here, bottled up? It ain't smart. I'm going to lash out at someone if I don't get to smash a few heads soon. This sort of thing is what I'm good at. It's a win-win for everybody."
The others exchange glances, and Ezekiel looks nearly as wild as Shiva as he shakes his head in aggravation. But at last, he nods, gritting his teeth even as he agrees with Carl.

So the plan is set. The others will start a search party of their own after the pickup, but Carl will go ahead and head out tonight. The King is solemn as he delegates, as his own version of the round table assembles to set the plan in motion. But Carl is still outside the circle, still an outsider to their plans.

He feels a small hand in his, and looks down to find a teary eyed Henry tugging on his arm. In Henry's other hand is a crumpled up piece of paper, one that the smaller boy offers to Carl. "I was gonna give this to you tomorrow, but I wanted....I wanted to make sure you had it. In case something happens." Henry whispers forlornly.

It's an illustration not unlike Richard's, but instead of a large nose and a frown, this figure has an eyepatch and a jagged tear in its mouth that matches Carl's sutures. Beside the cartoon version of Carl, another taller figure stands with a beard and a pegleg. Carl squints, unsure of who it's supposed to be. A crown sits on the bearded man's head, but it doesn't look anything like King Ezekiel.

"You're a pirate, and your Dad leads Alexandria, so that makes him a Pirate King, right?" Henry asks uncertainly, a waver of hope in his voice. "When I miss my Dad, I draw him so I won't forget what he looks like. I thought seeing your Dad might help you, too."

Carl is taken aback, a knot in his throat suddenly making it hard to swallow.

"Thanks, Henry. This is....this is great."

"Do you think....I mean, you can bring Ben back, right? I should have stopped him. I know I should have stopped him. I didn't mean for him to get in trouble! He'll be ok? I mean, if anyone can bring him back, you can."

Carl wishes he had an answer for Henry. He wishes that he could reassure the golden haired boy that everything will be alright, and watch him run off and play with the choir singing in the distance. He wishes that he could lie. But Carl's been lied to enough before to know better than that. He had been that boy once, with people making promises they couldn't keep. And he won't do the same to Henry.

He doesn't know what he ends up telling Henry, but the kid doesn't leave his side as Carl prepares to leave. Henry watches him quietly, for once not his usual chattering self. He watches Carl raid the armory, picking long machetes over spears. He watches Carl try on different sets of guards' armor. He watches Carl go through his room, not even asking about why there's a pile of blankets shoved haphazardly in the corner. He watches Carl lift the unused mattress up, watches him grab what the older teen had left hidden there. He doesn't understand the significance of the jacket, or exactly what it means for Carl to put it on again. But he watches him all the same.

As Carl mounts his horse, the jacket fits him like a glove. By itself it's comically oversized, but it slides over the extra layer of Kingdom armor like the two were designed to be worn together. Carl rides forward until Negan's jacket blends into the night, leaving only shadows in their wake. Henry's eyes glitter hopefully behind him, and Carl feels his heart clench. He can't promise Henry anything, but he'll be damned if won't do everything in his power to bring Ben home. Because he knows what it feels like to be a child left behind at school, with your family missing. And nobody deserves that fate, not even a Savior like Carl.
Author's Notes: I promise this filler is leading somewhere. I'm just as eager to cover what's been happening in Alexandria as Carl is.

Please let me know your thoughts, good and bad! Reviews and comments really do help. I haven't actually gone horseback riding in years, so if I'm grossly misstating anything in those sections, please let me know.
What we Know: AU Differences:

- Carl was never picked up from school before the evacuation to Atlanta. It is unclear why.
- Carl traveled with various groups, eventually ending up alone and targeted by the Claimers. He was physically and sexually abused.
- When escaping the Claimers, Carl ran into the Saviors. Negan saved Carl and killed his pursuers. Carl continued to serve the Saviors until the events of this fic, earning the nickname 'Patch'.
- Instead of telling Sophia to hide, Rick stayed with her after she ran from the highway due to his concern over another missing child. As a result, Sophia lived.
- Rick was adamant about Carl's survival, whereas Lori grieved and believed that he was dead. Rick thought about leaving the group to search for him, but ultimately stayed due to lack of leads and Lori's pregnancy.
- Rick and company have had their own run-in with the Claimers. Sophia was threatened, but ultimately unharmed. The remaining Claimers were killed by Rick's group.
- Events within Alexandria have unfolded differently, with the Wolves becoming a problem the same time as Negan. Deanna was killed by Peter Anderson.
- Shane is still alive. He was separated from Rick's group after Woodbury. Shane was under the impression that Judith was dead. He came to DC searching for Rick and joined The Kingdom. He had some sort of falling out with Rick, for reasons that aren't entirely clear to Carl.

Chapter 11

While finding a missing person in the apocalypse is like finding a needle in a haystack, Carl has the distinct advantage of knowing where Ben was headed. Before leaving, he made sure to mention the national guard center to a distracted Shane, who had nodded hurriedly. Something about these
pickups is distracting Shane, with both him and Richard anticipating something bad happening in this one, for whatever reason. Carl almost wonders if the guards are laying a trap for the Saviors, but doubts Richard would do something of the sort without Ezekiel's approval. Shane, though….

But Carl has never been good at politics. He follows orders, good or bad, and tries to keep his head down. It kept him alive in Sanctuary, and he hopes it will keep him alive in The Kingdom, too. So he turns his attention to the mission at hand, juggling the map he had snagged from the classroom as he tries to look for road markers. He fails. His mount is unamused, the horse snorting as they come to a stop at a crossroads. Carl knows most of the horses' names, but deliberately chose an older one he wasn't familiar with. He doesn't want to get attached, not when there's a very good chance that she might get eaten alive. And if this center is as overrun as Benjamin said it was, it's a definite possibility.

Then again, Ben's description of the 'overrun' building might mean merely a dozen or so biters, if Carl's lucky. Something less than a full-sized herd. He can hope, at least.

He swears grumpily as he takes a closer look at the map. Trying to discern which cracked, unmarked road represents what line on the crumpled piece of paper is more difficult than it should be, especially at night. And the more aggravated he becomes with his own sense of direction, the more aggravated he becomes with Benjamin. Maybe Ron and Ben weren't so different from each other after all. Both of them had done stupid things to try to prove themselves, risking others' lives in the process. Was this some sort of adolescent phase that Carl had skipped over? Something that Simon had beaten out of him? Carl doesn't know, but he mutters to himself as he wastes precious time deciding between the two roads. He can feel the birds judging his idleness as they watch from their branches, one of the few creatures free from the biters' grasps. Even his horse shifts its weight from one side to another, bored as it waits.

But something abruptly shatters the boredom. Carl hears a sound he hasn't heard in a long, long time.

He thinks he's imagining things, at first. Lowering the map, he darts his head around to find the source of the sound, eventually looking to the sky. Through the darkness, he doesn't see anything at first, save for a flock of crows. But he soon sees what the crows are fleeing from, and freezes as he gawks at the sight. There are distant lights in the sky, followed by the nostalgic buzz of blades circling overhead.

It's a helicopter. It's a freaking helicopter.

And it's flying in the same exact direction he needs to go.

"Shit. Shit shit shit shit." Carl urges his mount forward, who flicks her ears back towards the distant buzzing like they're merely escaping a large fly. The helicopter seems equally unconcerned with Carl, and if its occupants notice him, they disregard him, intent on whatever goal they're set on.

But they leave a trail of biters in their wake.

Carl still isn't sure why DC has so few biter herds. In Georgia, they seemed to be everywhere, and the larger the city, the larger the herds. But in Virginia, the state's evacuation program had been more successful than other states, leaving most biters wandering the highways and forests. But the hovering leviathan is obnoxiously loud, and the few biters Carl had avoided are now drawn to it like a moth to the flame. And while a few of them aren't an issue, as they begin to emerge, they are drawing together in a larger and larger horde.
This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

Carl makes a last minute decision, grunting hurried murmurs to his mount as he starts riding in the same direction the helicopter had flown in. Roads be damned. If he has to take some confining, potentially deadly alleys, so be it. He doesn't have time to loiter, not now, not when a herd he can barely see is slowly beginning to form. Because while the helicopter is still the loudest object around right now, when it fades away, all that will be left for the biters to be drawn to is Carl.

He urges his horse into a gallop. But they don't gallop long before he's pulling on the reigns, struck dumb once more. The helicopter's hum isn't fading away because it's \textit{not leaving}. Beyond a series of iron gates, a large concrete building looms in the distance, with tattered American flags still waving at its entrance. While most of the building's rooftop is curved, the entrance has a flattened roof, one that the helicopter is currently hovering over. And as it lands, Carl draws close enough to read the bright white letters marking the building's entrance.

\begin{center}
\textit{JOINT FORCE HEADQUARTERS}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textit{DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA NATIONAL GUARD CENTER}
\end{center}

Unscavenged goldmine, his ass.

This isn't Negan. This is \textit{way} too militarized to be Negan. For a brief, bewildering moment, Carl wonders if some semblance of the US government has managed to survive the outbreak after all. He takes cover underneath some sort of roofed roadblock that must have served as a government checkpoint in the past. Its walls can hide his horse, at least, and the iron gates at both ends will hopefully prevent biters from getting through. But as he peeks beyond the checkpoint, he takes a set of binoculars he had stuffed in his pack and takes a closer look.

Ben had been right. Below the building's rooftop, on the main grounds, every single figure has the distinct shuffle of a biter. They're severely decayed, with perfectly matching outfits that indicate that they were likely soldiers turned early in the outbreak. But that doesn't make sense. If this place has been occupied by someone militarized enough to fly a \textit{freaking helicopter}, why would they leave biters roaming freely on the grounds? Is this some sort of trap laid out for raiders?

But the more Carl watches the landing helicopter, the more he begins to think that this is some sort of twist of fate, a million and one chance that he would stumble across the building the same time these people did. Carl wonders for a moment if he should approach them. Someone this powerful might be able to blow Negan sky high. Then again, someone this powerful might be able to blow \textit{The Kingdom} sky high, too.

But as the helicopter's engine shuts down and the blades slow to a crawl, Carl draws just a little bit closer, and things begin to make a little more sense. Armed men step out of the helicopter, ropes in hand. Their armor isn't like anything Carl has ever seen before, like some sort of shock trooper from a video game. But even more importantly, they have guns and ammunition. They put down the biters below them with ease before using the ropes to shimmy down the building. But despite laying waste to the biters below, they don't seem interested in the center itself at all. Instead, they're focused on what's in front of it.

Another helicopter. One with a big sign in front of it, like it was set up on display before the outbreak. These men aren't scavenging for mere pistols and rifles like Carl. They're scavenging the \textit{helicopter}.

If Carl was trying to go into the center by himself, the plan would be obvious. Wait around the city long enough for the men to get what they're looking for, and pick up what they've left behind like a
vulture waiting to pick the bones of a lion's kill. But as Carl continues to survey the area, he's reminded of what he came here for.

On the back side of the center, a small group of biters circle a tree, a few of them even stupidly running into its trunk as they attempt to claw towards something hidden in the branches. With the help of his binoculars, Carl spots a familiar set of shoes sticking out from the leaves. He doesn't have to see the rest of the body to know exactly who it is. Benjamin had managed to reach the armory, alright. And then he had gotten surrounded and stuck in a tree like a damn *cat*. Carl has to cover his mouth. He's not sure what would come out of it, a series of swears or sheer unadulterated laughter, but he doesn't have time for either, not while trying to work around both biters and this strange military group without being seen.

He counts the biters beneath the tree, guessing that there's at least ten of them. But in the distance, more biters are shuffling their way, drawn by the sounds of the helicopter. While the scavengers are shooting biters that approach the entrance, if Ben stays at the back entrance for much longer, the biters approaching from the backside will settle for *him*, instead.

Which means if Carl is going to do something, he needs to do it now.

He tests the weight of his new machetes in his hand. The people on the roof are facing the opposite direction, and while it's a full moon, the darkness should provide adequate cover. If he runs for it, he might be able to make it to the back of the building without being spotted. The real question is whether he'll also be able to take on the dozen biters waiting for him without being noticed. He can try to lure them away, at least long enough for Ben to climb down from his tree. But he doesn't trust Ben to be able to take down the rest of the biters on his own. Carl needs to do the bulk of the work, himself, and fast.

He doesn't have a choice, and he doesn't have time to think. So he runs towards the back of the building as fast as he can, letting out a breath of relief when he doesn't hear any bullets flying his way. He reaches the courtyard that Ben is stuck in, the biters waiting for him severely decayed. But this is to his advantage. The older the corpse, the easier it is to spot their orbital bone and strike the skull where the bone is thinnest. He strafes to the side as some of the biters begin to notice him, hoping to keep them coming one at a time rather than all at once.

"Carl?" He doesn't have time to respond to Ben's confused call, because now two biters are lunging at him at the same time. He kicks at one's legs, sweeping the biter from under itself even as he slices the back of its partner's neck. But the one he had tripped crawls towards him, managing to gnaw on Carl's shoe before he stomps its head in.

When Carl looks up, the rest of the biters are all focused on him, at least eight, with more beyond the fenceline shuffling faster and faster in the distance, groaning excitedly at the sound of fighting and gore.

"I'm going to lead them away! When you get a chance, jump down and try to get to me!" Carl growls, backing up. It wouldn't normally be so hard to stagger them about, but he can't stray too far in one direction or another without risking putting himself back in the strangers' line of sight. But he can't take on all of them at one time, either, not without something else holding them at bay.

He works mechanically, and as out of shape as he still might be, he feels *alive* as he carefully chooses when to bash heads in and when to strafe away. Their hands are all reaching for him now, reminding him of the hands that had grasped for him along Sanctuary's perimeter wall. But his instincts have been preparing for a threat for days, for *weeks*, and this is a threat he knows how to deal with. In this moment there is no fear of Simon bashing in doors, or Negan's devastating words. There is only death. And Carl knows how to deal with death.
Carl hears a distant thud, followed by a grunt, and some of the biters that have been lunging for him begin to wander, having found a new target. Underneath the tree, Ben looks shaky as he stands, but determined. Unfortunately, he also looks *unarmed*. But what else should Carl have expected? It's not exactly as if Ben could have climbed and carried a spear at the same time.

"Ben, catch!" He prays he doesn't regret it, but he throws one of his machetes in Ben's direction, leaving his right side undefended. A biter manages to take advantage of the delay and grabs at him, its yellowed teeth gnashing into the sable leather of his jacket. But the resilient material does its job, and he shoves the biter off, backing away just enough to give him time to dig out another knife from his pocket. It's small and more likely to just get stuck in a skull than anything else, so he instinctively throws it at one biter, buying him enough time to kick another approaching one off.

Realizing he's about to step into the road again, where the rooftop men might spot him, he swears, stepping back off to the other side. This is a poor decision, however, as now he's cornered against the building's concrete wall. Although there aren't many biters left, they're all clawing for him at once, and he shoves and slices frantically, trying to keep from being pinned down. While he's wearing gloves and his jacket has proven its worth, his neck and wrists are still unprotected. All it would take would be a simple slip, one skin breaking wound, and it would over. All of this would all be for nothing.

But to his utter surprise, the one closest to him is struck down, rancid blood and sinew spraying onto Carl's face as it crumples into a stinking heap. The machete he had given Ben is still stuck in its skull, and with a bellowing cry filling the air, the remaining three biters all trip over themselves, a wooden pole sweeping all of them from under their feet.

Huh. Guess Ben had managed to find his spear, after all.

Carl releases a breath he didn't realize he was holding, and stomps the head of one of the fallen biters, using his weapon to take out a second fallen one. The last biter tries to stand, but falters as a spearhead plunges through its neck. Ben emerges victorious, panting, and pale. For a moment, Carl almost feels proud for the other teen. But then Ben promptly vomits, his spew revealing how little he's eaten in the past day, and Carl's annoyance returns.

Carl grabs the other teen by the shirt, yanking him away from the road and as close to the concrete wall as he can manage. He waits. He listens. Benjamin is staring at him in confusion and panic now, even as Carl puts a finger to his lips. He still hears nothing. No gunfire, not distant shouts. They must be far away enough that the sounds of the fighting hadn't carried.

"Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?!" He growls, shaking his head at the bewildered teen. Ben's eyes are wide.

"I was just----was that a *helicopter*? Are they with you?"

Carl blinks at the question for a moment before shaking his head. "Do you think we'd be hiding from them if I were? No, man. They pulled in the same time I did. Scared the crap out of me. We need to get out of here, all of the Kingdom was about to go looking for you, and if they run into this group---"

"I can't." Ben interrupts in a panic, some color returning to his cheeks even as he wipes bile from his lips. He won't look Carl in the eye anymore, instead stepping over dead biters and examining each one. He isn't looting them, isn't doing anything more than *looking*, really, but the sheer weirdness of it is unsettling.

"Excuse me?" Carl asks incredulously, his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline.
"I can't leave. Not yet." Ben insists once more, nodding towards the building. "I have to finish this."

"To hell you are." Carl growls, eyeing the rooftops nervously. "I don't think you appreciate the level of shit we're in, Ben. And this? Running off without telling anyone, stumbling into an infested building with some sort of military group sniffing at your borders? It's stupid. I don't care if you think you've got something to prove---"

"I don't. Have anything to prove, I mean." Ben interrupts, still looking among the dead. He's oddly respectful of them, turning them over one by one as he peers over their faces. Carl grabs the other teen by his shirt, pulling him back just in time to avoid a stray set of teeth. One of the walkers is still barely alive, and Carl kicks its head in to finish the job, spitting on it in aggravation.

"Hey! Show some respect. You don't have to be cruel about it."

Carl glares at the other teen, rolling his eyes. "Why the hell not, Ben? So we can loot their bodies nicely?"

"Because one of them is my dad!" Benjamin's voice breaks at this. Gone is the stubborn expression from before, gone is the easy-going kid he'd always been in The Kingdom. Instead, he can barely look Carl in the eye, clenching his fists as he continues to search among the dead. For both of their sakes, Carl pretends to not see the tears welling up in the other teen's eyes. He pretends and fails.

"This is….this is the place that started it all." Ben explains softly. "This is the place that made Ezekiel cower down to people like the Saviors. We lost sixteen men here, and he's never forgiven himself for it. If we go back now, he isn't going to give me another chance at this. So helicopter or not, I'm finding them and bringing their bodies home. I….I have to do this, Carl. It's….today is Father's day."

Carl's anger simmers away, replaced by a slow, sickening realization. The picture Henry had drawn of Carl's own father crinkles in his pocket, the boy's words ringing back in his ears. "When I miss my Dad, I draw him so I won't forget what he looks like…."

Ben continues. "I thought…..I thought that since you're good at this sort of thing, that I'd have a better chance with you along. That we were fr----it doesn't matter, you were right, I shouldn't have asked you. You couldn't risk sneaking out, it was selfish of me to even consider it. But this…..it isn't just about my dad. If we can find them and bury them? Maybe we can convince Zeke to start fighting, again. Convince him that it's ok to lose people, if it's for the right cause."

Ben is…..somehow insanely naive, and yet one of the smartest people Carl's ever met. He has a point. If Carl wants to sway the king, saving his adopted son and bringing home his dead friends would be a good way to do that. But with the distant clanging of the strange men in the distance and growls of the nearby biter herd, Carl doesn't see how they can do that.

"These aren't your friends." Carl says at last, pointing towards the faded clothing, at the National Guard insignia still apparent on the biters' chests. "And to be blunt, Ben, you're not going to recognize their faces, anymore. Not if they've been dead for two years. Did the Kingdom use the same armor then that they do now? Can you recognize them that way?"

Ben nods slowly, finally turning back to face Carl. "Yeah. Similar to what we wear now, at least. I didn't…I didn't think about that. That's so obvious, I should have---and according to Zeke, they were inside when it all went down, anyways. I just…"

"Yeah, I get it. Look, we don't have a lot of options, here. Assuming we even survive whatever's
waiting for us in there, we need something to transport the bodies, and we need to be quiet enough that those helicopter guys don't come looking. Got any ideas?"

Ben smiles wearily, nodding reluctantly towards where the scavengers are. "Ask for help?" He jokes. "Who knows, maybe they're in a good mood."

Carl rolls his eyes at the thought of it. If these scavengers were anything like Negan, he can imagine just as well as Ben how that would turn out. But he chews his lip in thought. "What if…what if we don't ask for their help? What if we trick them into it?"

"What do you mean?"

"If we stay, we're going to have trouble getting out with all the biters coming our way. But those guys have guns, and we don't, right? If we can find a way for them to take on the herd for us, we can get away while they're distracted. It's risky. We'd have to have an escape plan ready, there's no guarantee they'll take down enough of them for us to get out of here. And we'd still have to take on the biters inside the center, first. Quietly, too."

It's a suicidal plan. More than that, it's a stupid plan. But Ben is looking at him like he's a goddamn superhero, and it's the only plan he has.

So to hell with it. They do it.

Ben is about as good of a soldier as Buttons was a warhorse. Which is to say that he's not one, but having him along is better than nothing.

Carl instructs Ben to hold one of the back doors shut while he carefully inches opens the other one, funneling the biters and stabbing head after head as he strains to stay away from their ever reaching fingers. He's seen too many people die from forgetting that the scratches can be as deadly as the bites.

But they can only do this for so long. The distant herd is finally approaching the courtyard, banging at the gates and drawing attention. While he doubts the biters will get in, he doesn't want the scavengers to realize that they're not alone. So the two of them enter the building as soon as they're able, stepping over a pile of corpses as the metal doors swing shut behind them.

The building isn't exactly what he was expecting. Despite its rigid exterior, once inside, it seems more like a tourist attraction than it does a military center. And after the initial onslaught, the hallways are now strangely bare. He whispers harshly at Ben as the other teen nearly wanders off. They have to stick together in a tight formation, that's the only way this is going to work. Carl can't focus on the schematics of this place and be playing babysitter at the same time.

But after they go through a few hallways, they follow the signs that all point towards The Armory, and as they open its entrance, Carl realizes exactly what had overwhelmed the Kingdomers all those years ago. It's a roadshow from hell.

The view before them is almost surreal, with military humvee's sitting side by side with waxed, antique cars in a gymnasium, all while faded american flags hang overhead. But the space must have been used as a shelter at some point during the outbreak. Sleeping bags line every space that's not occupied by vehicles, backpacks and suitcases thrown haphazardly along the floor and among the aisle seats overhead.

Something bad must have happened here, long before the Kingdomers ever arrived. Carl isn't sure exactly what, but children biters shuffle side by side with the national guard personnel, rotted to the
point that their age is only distinguishable by their height. While the 'armory' room is large and airy, the decay has been confined to one room for so long that he can scarcely breathe, but the biters seem to have no problem scenting them. As they groan and sniff the air, Carl's attention is drawn to the far right corner of the room. Kingdom armor.

No wonder Ezekiel blamed himself. For such an infested place, the center is an absolute bust, the building more of a civilian attraction than an actual armory. All of Ezekiel's men died for a place not even worth clearing. Even Carl's heart sinks for a moment, having hoped they would have found more gear, a way to equip The Kingdom in something other than mere spears.

But right now, he has a bigger problem on his hands.

He grabs Ben's shirt and yanks the teen back to the series of hallways that had entered through, locking the door behind them.

"Carl, we can't give---"

"We're not giving up. We just need….we need more than spears and machetes for this. Check the soldier corpses, see if any of them have weapons with ammo left. We'll do the same thing we did before, draw the biters' attention to the door, shoot them and spear them through the glass windows up at the top. If that door gives way, we retreat down the hallway and rinse, repeat. But after that? All we have left is the courtyard. If we have to fall back to the courtyard, those scavengers will hear us. Which means we'll have to book it. And if we run out of time, we'll book it without your friends' bodies, got it?"

Ben is quiet for a moment, almost contemplative. But Carl pushes more, trying to force the teen's attention. "Think of it this way. If we die, tryin' to do this? King Ezekiel plays by Negan's rules because he feels guilty, 'cause he's afraid to lose anyone else. You dying because of somethin' like this will only convince him that he's right."

At this, he finally seems to have Ben's attention, who nods slowly in agreement as he tightens his grip on his spear. He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, and Carl soon realizes that Ben's trepidation with the plan isn't just limited to the possibility of leaving the bodies behind.

"Shit." Carl mutters. "You don't even know how to shoot, do you?"

"I'm….uh….I'm good with a spear, though."

Ben is mediocre with a spear. But that's ok, because one of the soldiers had a fully loaded M4, and the rifle fits like a glove in Carl's arms. With Negan's jacket and a proper gun in his hands, Carl feels more confident than before that this plan might actually work.

Which is to say, he at least thinks they have a chance of surviving, now.

He knows as soon as he starts shooting that they're working on a timer. There's no way the scavengers haven't heard the shots, but being in the back of the building, he hopes they have at least enough time to get to the corner of the room and collect the bodies before the others figure out what's going on. He knows he should be more concerned that he doesn't have enough bullets for all of the biters in the room even if he managed a headshot every time, but he can't help the sheer satisfaction of having a gun in his hands again. It beats machetes and spears by a long shot.

And he'll admit it. If Ben was looking at him like he was a superhero before, now he's acting like Carl's a goddamn god.
Between the funneling effect and Carl's new favorite rifle, he makes the decision to move ahead rather than fall back. It's risky, but they manage to clear enough room for them to dash through the aisles of cars and head towards the corner of the room. This might work. This might actually work. Except suddenly, he's fighting alone. He hadn't noticed Ben come to a halt, the other teen being in the peripheral vision of his missing eye, but Ben had been keeping enough of them off of him that the absence is noticeable. And it doesn't take Carl long to realize why.

While its face is unrecognizable, a biter with grimy, yet distinguishably blond hair waits for them at the end of the aisle, struggling to stand as one of its decayed feet is twisted at a disgusting angle. For a moment, it isn't the blond biter at all, but a bearded Rick, its clouded eyes staring fruitlessly back at him. Carl understands what Ben is going through more than the other teen will ever realize. He had spent years thinking his parents had to be dead, never knowing their true fates. But they don't have time to be traumatized. Not now.

"Ben, I have to---" Carl doesn't even get to finish his sentence. Ben snaps out of whatever daze he had fallen into, instead letting out something akin to a war cry as he charges forward, impaling the blond biter's head with his spear. It plunges through the eye socket and into the brain, but for some reason, with its twisted ankle and missing eye, the only thing Carl can think is now your father is a pirate king, too.

He doesn't think this would be a good sentiment to voice aloud. And now, Ben has a different problem. The teen had put too much force behind the attack, causing the spear to become stuck in the biter's body. If they survive this, Carl swears he's going to teach the other boy how to shoot.

Carl doesn't judge. He doesn't have time to judge, just like Ben doesn't have time to get his weapon back. Carl trudges forward, snapping the spear along its shaft closest to the crumpled biter's head, ruining the weapon but allowing the body to be moveable. He tosses the gore-stained pole to Ben, who stares at him with wide eyes. Ben opens his mouth to ask a question, but is interrupted by a sound that lets Carl know that their timer is up.

In the distance, they hear gunfire.

The scavengers are coming.

Carl glances around the armory room, looking for the nearest exit. Someone had to have gotten all of these vehicles in here somehow. True enough, he can see a roll-up door a few aisles down. While they've killed a path to the Kingdomers and have taken down the undead waiting there, the armory is still filled with slowly swarming biters. Carl eyes the closest vehicle. What he's about to do is either brilliant or stupid, and he can't decide which one.

"Ben, get the bodies in that humvee! Any rifles you can find that look like this one, too!"

"But how are we going to---"

"I'll fuckin' hotwire it if I have to, just do it!"

Carl has never actually successfully hotwired a vehicle before. He's seen it done, both by Saviors and by Daryl. But he's never actually done it himself. But Ben doesn't know this, so Ben doesn't argue with him, doing what he's told. Making haphazard getaways in vehicles is becoming a dangerously common trend for Carl, and he opens the nearest humvee door, he's just thankful it isn't locked.
Carl prays to any god that's listening that the vehicle works and is an automatic. Enough time has passed since the outbreak that a lot of vehicles have been ruined merely from lack of use, the gasoline having gone bad and ruined the tank. Carl doesn't know enough to know why some did and others didn't, but he's hoping that this vehicle is built to be sturdier than most. That is, assuming he even knows how to turn this vehicle on.

As he gets in the driver's seat, he realizes that the military setup before him barely resembles anything he's accustomed to. There's no ignition, no place to stick a set of keys. For a moment, he thinks that he's sentenced them both to their doom, that their best chance would be to wait out the herd in the armored vehicle and hope the scavengers come to interrogate them.

But then he sees it.

Can it be that simple?

There isn't an ignition, but there's a switch, with 'on' and 'off' labeled in small print above and below it. He flips it, and an orange light comes on.

For a moment, he holds his breath. For a moment, he wouldn't even be able to breathe if he wanted to. But as the orange light flickers off, the engine groans, and other things across the dashboard begin to light up, too. He experimentally presses a foot against the gas pedal, and it roars. It works. Not only does it work, it looks like it's an automatic.

"Holy shit. We're doing this. I can't believe we're doing this." Ben mutters. Carl agrees, but doesn't voice it aloud, leaping out of the seat to help Ben grab the rest of the bodies and whatever gear they can get their hands on. He's far less respectful of the dead than Ben is, with one of the corpses losing its head in the process, but in a split second decision, he grabs a large flag on display above them, tearing it off of its' display and tossing it in the backseat along with the bodies. The Kingdomers died like soldiers. They should be buried like soldiers.

He doesn't bother to explain to a confused Ben, grabbing the teen and shoving him in the seat. He closes the door just as a biter lunges for them.

Now to the next dilemma. There's not exactly a clear path to the roll-up door. Which is exactly why Carl went for the humvee rather than one of the antique cars.

Carl shifts gears, and tells Ben to hold on.

Holy shit, he can't believe this is working. He can't believe that this thing is driving, or that he's steering it, or that they're running over biters and suitcases. The aisle between the cars on display is narrow, causing them to scrape some of the cars as they drive by. And between the roar of the engine and Ben's screaming, they're drawing more biters than before.

But to Carl's horror, he doesn't even have to open the roll up door. It opens for them, revealing a group of scavengers in its wake. And despite their professional sweeping stances and shock armor, they look just as surprised to see him as he is to see them.

"MOVE!" He yells. He's not sure if they've heard him or not, but the scavengers comply, barely dodging out of the way in time for them to roar past, leaving a trail of biters in their wake.

It's sunrise, Carl realizes. He didn't realize that he had taken so long searching for the center, or that they had been inside the building for so long. But now the sky is blood red, allowing him to make out the sea of biters waiting for them outside the gates.

But whether it was what Carl intended or not, the plan has worked. The scavengers have cut a path
into the surrounding biters in their attempt to reach the roll up doors, effectively thinning the herd. And something else has, as well. The checkpoint gate has collapsed, and a small pile of biters linger where he had last left his horse, blood staining the pavement. He can't even make out that it ever was a horse now, bits of muscle and sinew strewn across the gate as the biters gorge on what little is left. He suddenly thinks that Buttons' death was merciful, and grimaces at the sight.

But with a pile of corpses in his backseat and Benjamin yelling bloody murder beside him, he doesn't have time to feel remorseful. Instead, he takes the opportunity to roar through the thinnest point, the humvee bouncing as they run over biters. He feels his stomach go to his throat, and at the worst possible moment, he's reminded of his wreck at Alexandria, of waking up upside down with a living corpse stuck underneath the hood.

But unlike Martinez, Carl isn't drunk. And unlike the jeep the Saviors had used, the humvee seems to be made of tougher stuff, plowing its way through the bodies like they're driving over mere roadkill. Bullets ricochet around them, and he realizes they're being shot at. He pushes Ben low, telling him to get down. He doesn't know just how armored this vehicle is, but neither of them have been hit, so he supposes it must be armored enough.

But as the seconds pass, they're running over fewer biters and the bullets slow to a halt. They're past most of the swarm, and the scavengers they've left behind haven't pursued them, electing instead to retreat away from the impending biters and back to their helicopter. In the distance, the sunlight allows Carl to read the black lettering adorning the chopper's side. *The Commonwealth.* He briefly wonders what it means before turning his attention back to the road.

For a moment, the two sit in silence, catching their breaths as adrenaline pumps through their veins. And then, Carl can't help it, he laughs. Then Ben laughs. Then they're both laughing hysterically, the sunrise lighting their way home.

Carl hopes they haven't started a war.

The drive back is surreal.

They're both still high off of the adrenaline rush, and Carl can still hear his own heart pounding in his ears as they drive. Ben is the same way, occasionally releasing bouts of nervous laughter as he chatters about things that don't really matter. But despite the elevated mood, both of them are still aware of the stench in the backseat of the vehicle, of the rotting bodies waiting for them there. Which makes their next discussion all the more awkward, in retrospect.

"You've got to be kidding me." Ben guffaws, pulling out something from the passenger seat drawer. As large and unwieldy as the humvee is, Carl hesitates to pull his eyes from the road.

"What is it?" He asks, tilting his head to the side.

"Um…." Ben murmurs, barely able to hold back his laughter. Curious, Carl quickly glances over, seeing the other teen carefully flipping through what appear to be pages of some sort of magazine. "What is it?" Carl repeats, dodging a biter as he forces his attention back to the road.

"Dirty magazines." Ben guffaws, barely able to hold back his embarrassed laughter. "Whoever drove this before….must have...um…." "Skin mags?" Carl shakes his head, whistling lowly. He's somewhat embarrassed by the subject matter, but isn't nearly awkward as Ben, who's turning different shades of red even as he continues to cautiously flip through the pages. "Those would be worth gold back in Sanctuary, dude.
Especially if they're recent."

"They probably would be in The Kingdom, too. People there just wouldn't openly admit to it." Ben laughs, closing the magazine and shoving it back where he found it. He fidgets awkwardly, looking out the window as he tries and fails to act nonchalant.

"Have you ever.....with the virus and all, have you ever had a girlfriend? There's never really been anyone in The Kingdom, most people our age didn't make it this far, you know?"

Carl shakes his head, using driving as a valid excuse not to look at his passenger in the eye. "Nah. I never really saw the point, anyways. Not like I'm gonna live long enough for it to matter."

He can practically hear the other teen's head whip around, and Benjamin blinks at him like he's speaking a foreign language. "You...you really think that?"

Carl shrugs, clutching the wheel even tighter. "You were in the same firefight I was just in, right? If we're goin' to war with Negan, we're goin' to lose more than just sixteen men doin' it. Ain't no sense in startin' somethin' with a girl and then goin' off and getting myself killed." He pauses for a moment, almost leaving it there. But for some ungodly reason, he actually trusts Ben, and concedes a little bit more. "There was a girl, back in Alexandria. She was.....nice. We weren't---I never---I mean, we just joked around and stuff. But there was no sense in starting anything. Not while I'm me and she's her."

"Dude, if girls don't go gaga for you, the rest of us are toast. You've got the whole, badass road warrior thing going on."

"Yeah, and you're an actual prince." Carl shoots back with a grin, shaking his head. "If you ever meet her, you should talk to her. She deserves a good guy."

"Adopted prince, which doesn't count. And you are a good guy, Carl."

"Trust me, I'm not." Carl shoots back. This is the most he's confided in the other teen, and he's not sure how he feels about it. It was easier when he didn't care what Ben thought about him, when he could just shrug the other kid off and glare occasionally. But the thought of Ben knowing exactly what went on in Sanctuary, hell, even what went on in Alexandria, makes him uncomfortable.

There's a reason Carl doesn't want to look at the dirty magazine, and it's definitely not that he isn't interested in looking. He is interested. His loins had twitched just from the short glance he had of it. But guilt stirs within him at the thought. He's seen women dressed like that before, in nothing but lacy bras and thongs, and none of them had enjoyed it. Negan's wives. The prostitution ring. Sherry.

Whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not, he had actually liked Sophia. He wouldn't want to hurt her. He wouldn't want to just use her like that.

"Whatever." Ben brushes him off, looking out the window, at the sun that's continuing to rise. But the other teen peeks back at Carl, a mischievous smile on his face.

"So this.....girl. She wouldn't happen to have any friends, would she?" In fact, she did. He tentatively admits what he knows about Enid to his friend, and the two swap stories about childhood crushes and continue to joke around as they draw closer to the Kingdom's gates. It isn't until a little further into their conversation that Carl realizes what he had readily accepted, only minutes before. That whether he likes it or not, he's found a friend in Benjamin Miller.
Their luck does have its limits.

It's not even an hour down the road that they're zooming past an armed man on a horse, with a familiar beard and eyebrows raised to the sky. Even though Carl hasn't broken any rules, even though he's hauling back a misbehaving Kingdom kid, he feels oddly guilty as he pulls up alongside Shane.

"What the---hell?" Shane speaks in broken sentences, struggling to keep his mount steady as he blinks at the two of them. Carl thinks this is one of the few times he's rendered Walsh speechless.

"Carl hotwired it!" Ben pipes up, and Carl scowls at the other kid, shaking his head.

"I didn't hotwire it." He mutters hotly, shifting his gaze. "I….uh...there was an off/on switch.....look, it doesn't matter. We've got another group sniffing at our borders, one that's not Negan. And we may have….uh….made them mad."

"I can see that." Shane blinks, and as Carl leans out of the window, he realizes that the ex-deputy is staring at dents the bullets have made in the side of the vehicle. But Shane's gaze flickers up, and the ex-deputy nods in relief as he spots Ben.

"See you found him, at least. Safe and sound, thank god." Shane lets out a heavy sigh, and Carl realizes that something is off about the man. The Shane he knows would be rolling on the floor laughing about the humvee by now, or angrily demanding details about the group they encountered, but instead he looks merely resigned, even…. a little pissed?

Carl nods curtly. "Yeah. Crisis averted here. Something happen?"

"You could say that." Shane mutters darkly, his gaze flickering over to Ben. "Richard is dead."

Ben's smile falls, and the drop in adrenaline finally rears its ugly head over the both of them, weariness settling in Carl's bones. He leans back in the driver's seat. He doesn't have to ask what happened, but he does anyways.

Jared had been the one to kill Richard, in the end. The pickup had been short by one cantaloupe. One mistake, one simple mistake, and tempers flared and the savior had shot the kingdomer for it. For most communities, it wouldn't be an uncommon story. But for the Kingdom, it was practically unheard of. Negan was going to pissed. Hell, the even-tempered Ezekiel might finally be pissed.

"Are we….are we going to war?" Ben asks tentatively. Shane shakes his head.

"I don't know, kid. We sure as hell better be. They're holding the memorial tomorrow. The Saviors are still wanting their missing cantaloupe, afterwards. Ezekiel has until then to decide what he wants to do. But it's hard to hold a fuckin' memorial when most of the town doesn't even know how the hell he died."

Ben nods morosely, swallowing hard as he points to the back seat. "We'll need to dig more graves than just his, then."

"More? Who---" Shane stops mid-speech, blinking in confusion as he urges his horse slightly forward. Shane hadn't been in The Kingdom long enough to have known any of them, Carl realizes. But the pile of bodies wearing Kingdom armor tell the story, all the same.

Ben offers a watery smile, trying to pretend like their cargo is just like any other haul. "It's time to bring them home."
To say that the humvee grabs the guards' attention is an understatement.

The patrols are sloppy and disorganized, like the men are in a daze, and it takes longer than it should for Carl to realize why. Richard had been the unofficial captain of the guard before, and without him, none of the men know what to do. This doesn't phase Shane in the slightest, who barks out a series of instructions and commands as they drive through. He leads the way, wanting Carl to park as close to the graveyard as possible. The Kingdom might not be as sheltered as Alexandria, but he doesn't want them dragging around the remains in front of the entire town if they can help it. They've apparently picked out a nice place beneath a willow tree. Carl can't help but frown a bit at the choice. Negan always chose the far side of the compound to burn or bury bodies, away from water lines to avoid contamination. While Carl doesn't remember spotting any creeks or riverbeds running through the town, he knows that willow trees like water.

"You smile about as much as he did, you know." Ben offers emptily from the passenger seat, a smirk that doesn't quite make it to his eyes crossing his lips. Carl shrugs, not saying anything in reply. Ben shakes his head.

"Maybe….maybe all of this was stupid. If I had been there, I could have stopped it---"

"Or maybe you would have been the one they shot, instead." Carl interrupts, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "Jared has a temper and likes to fuck with people. He always hated me. He'd probably hate you, too. Was always raggin' on about annoying kids were."

Ben blinks owlishly at him for a moment before averting his gaze. "I forget you actually know some of them, sometimes. That you had to live with those jerks. It's just….I don't get it. All those near misses back there, and we survived somehow. And this was just a pickup. Just an ordinary pickup. And Richard was like you, he was a good fighter! But one shot grazing an artery, and that was it. That's all it took."

"One shot is all it ever takes." Carl mutters, peering out the window. Shane has finally come to a stop, but it's in front of the throne room instead of the graveyard. Carl shifts the vehicle into park, even considering leaving it running. Something isn't right. While the guards were disorganized before, the ones in front of the theater are actively anxious, pacing around the throne room doors like something major is going down. Shane seems to sense the same, dismounting his horse and taking long strides towards the nearest guard. Carl hops out of the armored vehicle in pursuit, telling Ben to stay with the humvee. To his surprise, his friend doesn't protest.

"What's goin' on?" Shane demands, peering over the grounds and looking for some unseen threat. Carl grips his new rifle tightly, noticing the confused and nearly panicked looks some of the villagers are giving them.

"Don't know for sure. We've got visitors." Colton grits out, glancing back at the throne room doors. "They're talking with King Ezekiel, now."

Shane swears. "Shit. Saviors?"

"No. Hilltop."

Hilltop? Carl stops in his tracks, unsure of what to make of this. He knew how to handle the Saviors. He knew how to run, how to hide. But he's wary for all the same reasons he never fled to Hilltop in the first place. Hilltop's people were weaker than The Kingdom, possibly even weaker than Alexandria, and Gregory was a coward. He couldn't trust them not to tell the Saviors then, and he can't trust them now. But why now? Why arrive the same day that Richard was shot dead? Was it a coincidence? Carl didn't even know the two communities were in talks with one another, and
he casts a concerned look to Shane who looks equally baffled.

"And you just let them in the same day this shit goes down with the Saviors? How many guards do we even have in there with him?"

"Errrr….Jerry's with him. Look, we were just following the king's orders. He didn't want to intimidate them---"

"Oh I'll intimidate them, alright." Shane growls, pushing past Colton and pulling open the throne room doors. The man moves so quickly and without warning, that Carl doesn't have time to dodge to the side or jump out of sight. And once the doors are pulled open, his feet are frozen in place.

The aisles leading down to the stage are too long and too far away for Carl to make out exactly who is standing before the king, but he recognizes the voices echoing through those doors all the same time. And for a moment, he's a child all over again. He's standing beneath the walkways of his school, waiting in the cold rain. Only this time, someone's there.

His father's steady, authoritative drawl echoes within the theater walls, leaving Carl as speechless as the day he saw Lucille hanging over the man's head.

Author's Notes: Just for the record, the National Guard center is based on the real DC Armory in Washington, DC. I've never been there nor have I ever operated a humvee, so everything I've described is purely thanks to google, google maps, and my imagination. If you notice anything that's wrong, let me know, and I'll try to correct it, just please don't hurt me for screwing up the details. Not all of us can be Tom Clancy.

Or, you know, hurt me for that cliffhanger. ;) It only took 80k words for a reunion.... ^_^
Ok, sue me, I'm way prouder of the graphic art for this chapter than I have any right to be. For someone with absolutely no photoshop experience, Pixlr is a godsend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Recap: Timeline Differences:

- Carl was never picked up from school before the evacuation to Atlanta. It is unclear why.
- Carl traveled with various groups, eventually ending up alone and targeted by the Claimers. He was physically and sexually abused.
- When escaping the Claimers, Carl ran into the Saviors. Negan saved Carl and killed his pursuers. Carl continued to serve the Saviors until the events of this fic, earning the nickname ‘Patch’.
- Instead of telling Sophia to hide, Rick stayed with her after she ran from the highway due to his concern over another lost child. As a result, Sophia lived.
- Rick was adamant about Carl’s survival, whereas Lori grieved and accepted that he was dead. Rick thought about leaving the group to search for him, but ultimately stayed due to lack of leads and Lori’s pregnancy.
- Rick and company have had their own run-in with the Claimers. Sophia was threatened, but unharmed. The remaining Claimers were killed by Rick’s group.
- Events within Alexandria have unfolded differently, with the Wolves becoming a problem.
Chapter 12

This is it. This is the moment he's been waiting for. So why can't he move?

Carl rarely freezes in battle. In battle, fear keeps him alive, keeps him on the tips of his toes and scrambling to the next position. He could shoot people in cold blood, cut a man's balls off, and drive through a herd of biters in a humvee because each time, he had a goal that kept him focused. Defend the position. Find the location of the enemy's camp. Recover the bodies and escape the building. Keep Ben alive. He could deal with the guilt, the number of mistakes he had made, and the number of people that had died because of him later. He could deal with it all later as long as he had something to focus on. A goal. A mission.

But this isn't a battle. This isn't even a fight. This is something else entirely. Before him is the man he had spent his entire life looking up to, the man he had betrayed, and there is absolutely nothing telling Carl what to do. There are no instructions, no rules.

But Shane has never needed rules. He charges forward just beyond Carl's line of vision, yet the teen can still hear the voices and footsteps echoing beyond.

Rick doesn't notice the other man, at first. He's still addressing the king, speaking in an official manner. The tone in his voice reminds Carl of the man they had first encountered in the woods, before his friends were beaten and his people terrorized. He's a leader speaking to another leader, talking of alliances and a common enemy that needs to be stopped. It's a speech that King Ezekiel has heard before, Carl knows, but the king doesn't let on. In fact, from what little Carl overhears, Ezekiel hasn't told Rick anything at all, the two speaking like they've only just now heard of one another.

Rick's group must not have been here long, Carl realizes. But before he can learn more, the conversation comes to a faltering halt as Shane lets out an incredulous, "Rick?"

Carl wants to move forward. He wants to see what's happening, wants to gauge his father's reaction to the arrival of his estranged best friend. It might let him know how he would react to his own estranged son.

"Shane?" His father's authoritative stance stumbles, replaced with disbelief and wariness. But despite Rick's alarm, Carl can see Shane's long strides in the distance, and knows from personal experience that the ex-deputy is barrelling to hug the other man. And from what Carl can hear, it's an embrace that's returned. The two aren't the only ones in the audience before the king. Small whispers of disbelief reach his ears. In the distance, he can't ascertain exactly who is in the crowd, only that they are happy, if cautious, to see the other man.

"I thought---we thought you might be--- after the Governor--- what are you doin' here?" His father
asks shakily. Rick is trying to keep himself together, still very aware that he's a visitor in someone else's court, but Walsh doesn't bother holding back, all emotions out on display. And the ex-deputy hadn't listened to the conversation, hadn't put together exactly how little their guests knew.

"You didn't..... you didn't tell them?" Shane demands, confused. He's not addressing Rick anymore, Carl realizes, but the king, who sounds almost sheepish as he responds.

"You must forgive me, Rick Grimes, but I have not been---entirely forthcoming since your arrival. This is not the first time I have heard of this tale, or of you, for that matter. But I wanted to see for myself what kind of people you were, before you learned exactly what kind of people we are." Ezekiel responds, vague as ever. If Carl wasn't too busy shitting his pants right now, he'd be rolling his eyes at the theatrics of it all.

"......and what exactly haven't you told us?" Rick questions slowly. There's as much wariness to his tone as there is hope, and it suddenly dawns on the teen how suspicious all of this must look to the Alexandrians. This could be an ambush for all they know, given the Kingdom's relationship with the Saviors.

And with that, Carl has a goal. A small, made-up goal that allows him to step forward into the room and into the others' line of sight. *Keep things calm. Let them know we're on their side. Let him know you're here.*

*Stop. Being. Quiet.*

"Dad." He manages at last, his voice breaking as he stumbles forward. He can see more now, see the group of people gathered at the bottom of the stage, Ezekiel sitting proudly side by side with Shiva. Rick's hand is clasped on Walsh's shoulder, but as Carl speaks, Rick's head snaps up to assess the newcomer.

When his father's eyes meet his, the man freezes, his mouth agape. All traces of the composed, self-assured leader are gone. And for a moment, Carl is reminded of the expression on his father's face during their last confrontation with Negan. There's something utterly raw about the way his dad is staring at him, and Carl is every bit as vulnerable as he was in the infirmary room, with Daryl confronting him about things he'd rather keep quiet.

But then he sees it. He sees it, and another emotion overwhelms him entirely, causing tears to run and his jaw to wobble.

His father is wearing his hat.

"Carl?"

For a moment, it's like Rick is stuck in a loop. His free arm moves aimlessly between his hips and the air as he struggles to speak, like his brain is still stuck in its conversation with Shane. And in that moment, all of Carl's insecurities assault him at once. All of the accusatory glances his father had shot towards him in Alexandria, all of the loathing and begrudging looks.

His father should hate him for the position Carl put him in. He should hate him for putting Judith in the execution circle, for risking their lives again by escaping. He should hate him for blindsiding him this way, catching him off guard in a stranger's land. He should hate him for *everything* that he's done. So for a moment, Carl is utterly raw, too. And as overjoyed as he is to see his father here, that he's alive, he's still afraid. They remain like that for a moment, each stuck in a moment in time, his father with his mouth agape and Carl with his head ducked low.
"Rick." Michonne murmurs, softly touching the man's forearm. The normally unreadable woman is actually teary-eyed, a smile breaking out across her face.

And with her touch, it's as if a spell has been lifted. His father is striding towards him with Carl's name still caught in his throat, and he feels twelve years old all over again as he rushes forward. The sheer momentum of their impact nearly causes them both to stumble. Carl isn't sure where his blubbing begins and where his father's ends, but as he buries his nose into his father's shirt, he swears it carries the same scent from when he had left for work all those years ago.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry---" But his sentence is broken off, his father pulling away from the embrace and grasping the back of Carl's head with his hands. Carl nearly flinches, but forces himself to relax as he catches his father's gaze. This is entirely different than Negan. His father's hold is comforting. Not controlling, not threatening, but protective. Rick lowers his head, their foreheads touching.

"None of this is your fault. None of it. I should have known..... I should have realized..... God, I thought you were..... I thought he had..... how.....?" Rick turns, one hand still on Carl's shoulder as if to reassure himself the teen isn't going to disappear, and faces Ezekiel.

The king has the utter gall to look smug about the whole thing.

"Your boy came to us seeking refuge, with quite the tale to tell. At the time, we believed we were doing him the favor, but he has more than earned his place here in the Kingdom. And.....as much as it bereaves me to interrupt your reunion, I hope to have one of my own. Carl, what news do you have of Prince Benjamin?"

News of who? It takes a moment for Carl to snap out of his haze, but he nods slowly, clearing his throat. "Yeah, he's back at the...uh...car. I told him to wait. When the guards said you had visitors, I thought there might be trouble."

"Car, he says." Shane snorts in amusement, wiping his nose as he struggles to keep his breathing steady. The others look at him oddly, but Ezekiel doesn't miss a beat, nodding appreciatively and visibly relaxing.

"And yet you came to my aid, not knowing who you might find here. And you have brought Prince Benjamin home. For that alone, we are in your debt, Carl Grimes." Ezekiel says earnestly. Carl can practically feel the crowd shuffling in disbelief, and as he continues to try to snap himself out of that haze, he starts to recognize faces. Michonne. Carol. Father Gabriel. Sophia. Jesus. The Widow. There are several more, some he knows the names of, others he doesn't, but they all have one thing in common. They are absolutely flabbergasted to see him here.

It's not everyday that someone goes from a one-eyed traitor to being lauded by a king, to be fair.

The king rises to his feet, Shiva flicking her ears at her master's movement. He speaks louder, to the audience at large, even as he meets Rick's gaze. "Forgive me, but a decision of this magnitude, a decision of war should not be made in one day. Stay with us. Feast with us. Rest alongside us. By the morrow, I shall have your answer. But know that regardless of that answer, the Kingdom would be proud to call Alexandria and Hilltop her friends." Ezekiel booms, spreading his arms to address the overwhelmed crowd.

It would all be very grand and theatrical, if it weren't for Jerry giving them all an enthusiastic thumbs up from behind the throne.

For once, Carl doesn't bother holding back a grin.
"Is that......?"

"*That* is exactly what you think it is. And yes, they did *exactly* what you think they did." Shane says snarkily, grinning as both the King and their visitors stare at the gore-ridden humvee. Carl thinks he sees a biter hand lodged in one of the hubcaps, and grimaces as it twitches.

"Carl drove. It was awesome." Ben finally appears, looking questioningly towards the guests even as he smiles. Rick blinks, looking back towards his son.

"I thought you couldn't drive?" He draws questioningly, his eyebrows practically at his hairline.

"*Shift. I can't drive shift.*" The teen mutters back, feeling red-faced from all of the stares. "And that thing is......surprisingly an automatic."

"I don't know, it was a pretty rough ride. Although we were being shot at, at the time, so I guess you have an excuse..." Ben jokes, nodding towards the bullet-sized indentions littering the side of the vehicle. He's beaming, acting like this is something to *be proud of*, completely oblivious to the look on the Kingdom leader's face.

"Which is why you should never have gone at all." Ezekiel rumbles overhead, bringing the teasing atmosphere to a screeching halt. Carl winces, drawing his shoulders in tightly as Ezekiel looks down at his friend. It's at this moment that Benjamin must remember just how badly he's screwed up, his grin slipping from his face. But the king continues. "What were you *thinking*? There is a reason we go on raids together and patrol in pairs. You could have been killed. *Carl* could have been killed trying to find you!"

Oh, Carl sooo does not want to be in the middle of this. He shuffles awkwardly, not sure what he should be doing or who he should look at. He knows things are different in the Kingdom. He knows that Ezekiel is more lax on discipline than the Saviors could ever dream. But if Carl had done something like this to Negan? He'd be lucky if he got out of it without being branded in iron.

Ben, always the goody-two shoes, does have the sense to look ashamed. But even with an apologetic look in his eyes, he still glances at the other teen. "Carl wouldn't have been hurt. You should have seen him out there, Zeke. He took on a herd single-handedly---"

"So has Sir Richard. And now he is *dead.*" Ezekiel thunders grimly. He points to Carl, who freezes at the attention. "I stood in front of his father, wondering what I was going to tell him. Thinking that I was going to have to admit that I had *found* his son, only to lose him. Do you understand the effect that would have had between our communities? You have risked your friend's life, and for what? An adventure?"

Ben's eyes widen as he takes in their visitors, as he takes in Rick, realization dawning about exactly who they are. Shocked, he doesn't immediately have an answer for the king, only a guilty look that reminds Carl of a scolded dog. Carl knows he should stay out of it. Every fiber of his being is telling him to stay out of it, that this isn't his business, and that he shouldn't risk the king's wrath. But he finds himself walking to the humvee all the same, opening the back door and casually revealing the rotting bodies within. He takes his newly acquired rifle and lazily slings it over his shoulder, not quite meeting the king's gaze.

"I'm not the only one that got my dad back today." He says bluntly, leaning back on one foot and trying to look like he isn't nervous as all hell. It must work, because the silence that follows is overwhelming. But as he risks a glance towards Ezekiel's way, the king isn't offended, or angry. He's stunned.
"You went..... you went to the National Guard center." He realizes, his eyes softening as he reevaluates Ben. Ben nods, his head ducked low.

And then, to Carl's utter surprise, the king pulls the boy into a hug.

Carl swallows uncomfortably. He doesn't know what to make of the array of emotions floating in the air, of the confusion and the sympathy. But he doesn't have long to dwell on it, because he spots another head of bobbing blond hair in the distance.

It's Henry. And he's running straight for them.

A sudden chill runs through the teen. Henry doesn't need to see this. He doesn't need to remember the stench of his father's rotting corpse, or see the spear impaled through the man's face. Before Carl can even think about what he's doing, he's running towards the little boy, dashing over to the side and stretching out his arms to block Henry's path.

"Hey, hey hey, hold on a sec, kid." He's managed to hold him back, somehow, but Henry is squirming and scrunching his nose in annoyance. He's obnoxiously quick, his short arms scrambling to get out of Carl's hold. "You don't need to go over there, just yet. Benjamin is---uh---getting chewed out pretty good."

"I knew you could bring him back, I knew you could! Just like you promised! Let me see him-"

"Hey." Carl snaps suddenly, struggling to keep a grip on the little boy without hurting him. "I never promised anything. He's safe, alright? I found him, and he's safe, but he might not have been. Sometimes people die. Sometimes they get hurt, no matter how much we try, and I don't make promises I can't keep. Got it?"

Henry nods glumly, finally beginning to still. His eyes scrunch, peering into the distance, and he cocks his head to the side. "Who's that?"

Carl turns, realizing that they're still close enough to have an audience. Shane seems to have taken the hint, hopping in the driver's seat of the humvee and fiddling with controls for a moment before closing the driver's side door. When the door shuts, Carl sees his own dumbfounded father behind it, watching the two of them curiously.

"Folks from Hilltop and Alexandria. You see that guy with the beard? The one looking this way? That's my dad. Your drawing must have been a good luck charm or something, because I found him. Or I guess---I guess he found me."

Henry looks a little downcast at this, bowing his head guiltily. "I never got the chance to give Richard his. Maybe that's why---"

"Hey, no. Don't think like that, man. What did I just say?"

"Uh…that man's your dad?"

"No, before that. About promises."

"That you don't make ones you can't keep. And sometimes you can't stop people from dying."

"That's right." Carl nods. "It's nobody's fault except the guy that killed him. King Ezekiel's a good fighter, and he was with him, right? And all the other guards, they're good at their jobs, too. Everyone did the best they could. But it's not their fault, and it's not yours."
"Except Colton. He's not good at his job." Henry says suddenly, scrunching his nose again. Carl blinks at the boy.

"What?"

"He naps on wall duty. And he snores like a moose! I've seen him. He snorts really funny when he sleeps, too."

Lord, help. Carl's stuck with two Miller boys, and neither of them can focus on a single thing for more than a few seconds at a time. But for once this works to Carl's advantage, as Shane has driven off with Henry none the wiser about what's going on. A hesitant Ben and weary Ezekiel stand where the vehicle once was, the king motioning with his hand. A grateful smile adorns his lips.

"Mercies upon you for your quick thinking, Carl Grimes. He may pass."

Henry doesn't need to be told twice, tearing through Carl's arms and slinging himself full throttle at Benjamin. For a moment, Carl wonders idly to himself whether he could ever be like that with Judith. He had always wanted a sibling, growing up, had always asked his mom for a brother to romp around with. But as he watches the two brothers horse around, Ben apologizing even as he ruffles Henry's hair, Carl thinks that maybe a sister won't be so bad, either.

He still can't read the look on his father's face.

If there's anything King Ezekiel is good at, it's shoving food at newcomers and sending the cafeteria folks into a panic. Once Carl rejoins the group, Ezekiel leads them down the familiar trek to the cafeteria, passing the stenciled inspirational quotes as they go. But as they walk, Carl doesn't know what to do. What to say. How to act.

It's easier to be Patch than it is to be Carl.

He never realized just how much he relied on the savior persona, on the stoic, no-nonsense, gruff attitude. Those traits aren't entirely a lie, they're still a part of him, he knows. But there are times where he doesn't want to be gruff, where he wants to loosen up and just take part in the festivities around him. This is one of those times. He's not sure what stops him. Is it because he doesn't want to be vulnerable, in front of these people? Or is it because he doesn't even know how?

The cheerful atmosphere is a good thing, he knows. Kingdomers, Alexandrians, and Hilltop folk alike are tentatively intermingling, joking around as they each find seats in the dining hall. King Ezekiel has even summoned a flute player from the choir, who plays an upbeat tune to go along with the mood. But the disconnect Carl experiences with the crowd isn't specific to strangers. While Carl's father doesn't leave his side, he's facing everyone but Carl, talking to people around him even as he's careful to keep his son at his shoulder.

Now that the adrenaline rush from their reunion is fading, Carl's mouth feels like it's full of cotton, every step unsure and awkward. And what else did he expect? The Kingdomers might respect him, but the Alexandrians have seen him in his true state. They've seen him awkwardly sitting in a stall for days, with only a horse as company. They've seen him sobbing pathetically in the dust, with a baseball bat lingering near his head. And they've seen him smiling as he tortured a man, unperturbed by the blood and appendages strewn across the floor. The Alexandrians have good reason to be suspicious of him. He's a wild card, partially pitied, partially blamed for his involvement with Negan. Tolerated only because of who his father is.

He doesn't know what to say to them. He doesn't know what to say to his dad. Carl has so many
questions, so many years of lost opportunities, but now that Rick is finally at his side again, he
can't bring himself to ask them. The other Alexandrians occasionally glance at him warily, some
happier about his presence than others. Michonne looks pleased as punch, but Sophia looks like
someone punched her in the face, her lips settled into a scowl.

Carl had wondered before, in Negan's cells, whether she would have missed him. He guesses he
has his answer.

And while she doesn't look happy in the slightest to see him, she keeps staring at him, her gaze
leaving his tongue heavy in his mouth. He doesn't know what to say, doesn't know what to ask, so
as the others talk amongst themselves, he keeps his trap shut, awkwardly watching as the others
mingle around him.

It's now that Carl is seated opposite of Ben that he realizes how much he has come to depend on
the other teen's constant chatter. While he once found it annoying, it filled a void, and blocked any
expectation that Carl had to provide anything more than single word replies. But Carl's father
seems to be expecting more, wanting more from him, occasionally prompting small talk that Carl
politely but awkwardly shuts down. His father wants a proper reunion, but Carl can't give it to him.
He doesn't know how.

So instead, the flow of conversation mostly ebbs and flows between King Ezekiel, Shane, and
Rick, with others interjecting occasionally and holding their own conversations on the side. Ben
just listens, too emotionally exhausted from the events of the day to carry on his usual
conversation. But Henry, ignorant about the emotional toll of the day's events, is chatty as ever.

"I thought he'd have a peg leg." The boy pouts, practically glaring at Rick as if the leader has
somehow personally let him down. Carl rolls his eyes, picking at the food in his bowl. Stew. Why
did it have to be stew?

"I never said he'd have a peg leg. You came up with that." Carl grunts, watching a carrot bob as he
presses down on it with a spoon. While soup had been easier on his stomach during the first few
days of his stay, now that he can hold down solid foods again, it's infinitely more difficult to eat.
Carl could chew on the good side of his mouth without leaking through his sutures. But drinks?
Liquids? He practically needed a mop by the end of it.

But Rick doesn't seem the slightest bit perturbed by the choice in meal, taking a spoonful of it
himself while cocking his head to the side. An amused expression flickers across his face, an
expression Carl hasn't seen since he was young.

"Peg leg?" Rick questions, his eyebrows furrowed even as he smiles. On his other side, Michonne
seems equally invested, those microexpressions of hers flickering too fast for Carl to read.

"Show him the drawing, Carl! I made the beard a little too thick, though." Carl nearly drops his
spoon at Henry's suggestion, frowning slightly as he shakes his head.

"Nah, kid. Not now."

"Aww, Carl. C'mon---"

"---no. It's in my room, anyways." He lies, reddening from the attention. "And I didn't say anything
about him havin' no pegleg. You made that part up."

"But he's the pirate king! Of course he'd have a pegleg."

Rick blinks at the nickname for a moment, looking to Ezekiel for answers. But the royal man is
equally confused, having apparently not having heard of the matter before. Carl can't see how not. Henry doesn't ever shut up about it. He doesn't really shut up about anything, for that matter.

"...what made you think I was a pirate?" Rick begins slowly, his head still cocked to the side.

"Well, Carl's a pirate. And you're his dad, right?" Henry asks innocently, as if it was the most normal subject matter in the world.

Others don't find the matter so mundane. Stew goes flying in the air as Shane chokes out a laugh, which quickly develops into boisterous snickering. Carl scowls at the other man, eyeing the bits of broth that have overflowed onto the man's beard. "It's not *that* funny." Carl growls, but to his disappointment, he sees others suppressing laughter as well. Shane shakes his head lowly, holding tightly to his own thighs as he struggles to breathe.

"I just never put together---he's been on a pirate kick lately---I didn't realize that was---because of you!" The man gasps out, wiping tears from his eyes. Carl rolls his eyes, shaking his head.

"Bein' a pirate's better than *Patch*, isn't it? Or *Frankenstein Grimes*? Least the kids don't think I'm a biter, with the eye patch on."

"I didn't think you were a biter." Henry supplies helpfully, a bit confused about what others are finding so funny. "And what's a Frankenstein?"

Carl shrugs, leaning back in his chair. "It's a monster, kid."

"Actually, it was the scientist that created the monster. Not that you're a... and the themes in the book are about how he actually isn't the real monster." Benjamin contributes, only to be interrupted by his mentor.

"Have people called you that here?" Ezekiel's serious tone overshadows the amused chatter, and Carl is uncomfortably aware that the king almost seems angry. He blinks at the royal, not sure what he's done wrong.

'Uh...... no. Nah, it was back at Sanctuary, when I was in a cell. That was my letter, F. Didn't really matter, Dwight was usually the one on duty, and he still called me Patch." At this, Ezekiel's anger simmers down into concern, and Carl realizes that Ezekiel hadn't actually been angry at him, but the idea that his people would make fun of him for his scars.

"Letter?" Rick questions. Talk of the Saviors has wiped away the others' cheerful demeanors, and Carl suddenly wishes he hadn't said anything at all. His mouth feels full of cotton again, but he tries to ignore it, tries to play it off like none of this is a big deal. And it isn't. It shouldn't be. Right?

"It's part of the whole prisoner routine. They come up with an insulting name for you, and only call you by that until you're broken in. Only they weren't actually trying to break me or nothin', so they were kinda lax on it. F was just for *fucker* originally, until someone started the whole *Frankenstein* thing."

"I don't get it. Do they call you by the nickname or by the letter?" Shane asks, practically staring at him like he's an alien. Carl's reminded of his time in Alexandria, of the bewildered looks Michonne and Sophia would give him when he talked about Sanctuary. It all seems normal to him. He doesn't understand why Ezekiel seems almost offended on his behalf, or why the others are so alarmed.

"They call you by the nickname, and write the letter on your jumpsuit so the other guards know which one you are. Most prisoners are new recruits, so the guards don't want to bother with learnin'
names, especially since most people die on wall duty, anyways. But since they already knew me, they didn't really stick to the rules. No torture or nothin, just music and the cell. Hell, they even fed me."

"Music?"


"That's some Guantanamo shit, right there." Shane mutters lowly.

"And what about the 'actual' torture? What do they do to prisoners then?" For the first time since their arrival, Sophia speaks up, her expression sharp as she looks at Carl. The Alexandrians begin to shuffle uncomfortably, and Sophia's mother is equally attentive, leaning forward in her seat as she spares a glance at her daughter. Carl blinks in confusion, casting an uncertain look at Henry.

"Uh. Not sure I should go into it in front of the kid."

"Henry, go to your room. Bring a tray with you." King Ezekiel booms suddenly.

"Aww, but Zeke---"

"Now, Henry. It involves matters of state. You don't---"

"I already know about the Saviors. That's what it's about, isn't it? They're the ones that killed Richard. And they're the ones that hurt Carl, right?" Henry insists suddenly, sitting straight in his chair. The king throws an accusatory glance towards Ben, who holds his hands up innocently.

"Don't look at me, I haven't told him anything."

"I've heard you talking about it with Richard, before. I know you don't want anyone to know, so I haven't told nobody. Whatever is going on, I can handle it. I---"

"Enough!" Ezekiel breaks through, his eyes blazing. "Regardless of what you know, I've told you to do something, and I need you to do it. Go, Henry." The little prince nods glumly, sulkily grabbing his things and stomping off without bothering to grab himself a plate. King Ezekiel lets out a sigh.

"Sorry." Carl murmurs, wincing apologetically. Ezekiel waves his arm in the air.

"It is no matter. I should have known what we would be discussing. There is much to catch up on, for all of us. And not all of it suitable for a child's ears." The king is silent for a moment, the joking and mirth from before long gone. He turns his gaze from Carl to Rick, looking nearly apologetic himself. "We thought to contact Alexandria after Carl's arrival, Sir Walsh especially, but we did not wish to risk the Saviors' wrath. Carl tells me that things are-harder for you. The Saviors do not enter our walls, but they walk freely among yours. If they had found us visiting you......"

Rick nods heavily, but this time, it's Jesus who speaks up. Carl had nearly forgotten the biblical ninja was even there, but he is, looking like a kid in a candy store. The long haired man holds up a radio, smiling. "We tapped into their radios. We know enough of their codes to tell when they're coming and going."

"Carl gave us the idea, actually. Negan had been doing the same thing to us. Figured we should turn the tables on him, for a change." Rick says, leaning back in his chair.
"Now that's what I'm talking about. Shit, it was killing me, sitting here, twiddling my thumbs while I knew you were out there." Shane digs into his pocket, bringing out a familiar piece of paper and planting it in front of Rick's plate. It's the map of DC, with the block print writing scribbling out Rick's name. Carl's father blinks owlishly at the document for a moment, his eyes widening. Shane grins, shrugging.

"Don't know who the hell wrote it, but it led me here. Next thing I know, I'm in law enforcement again, working for a freaking king, and your boy is walking through those doors looking like the Governor and a walker had a baby. Didn't even recognize him."

"I didn't, either." Rick admits guiltily, pointedly not looking Carl in the eye. He lets his fingers pass over the writing and nods, handing the paper over to a young latina woman, who raises an unamused eyebrow at him before taking the document. But as she looks it over, her jaw slacks, her guarded expression falling.

"It's Abraham's handwriting." His father says to her softly. Many of the Alexandrians take sudden breaths, and Rick continues, explaining. "He's one of the people the Saviors killed. The first one they killed, actually."

"Well, shit." Shane says, shaking his head. He casts a tentative look towards Maggie, whose expression has been carefully still throughout the discussion. "He told me about Glenn. Damn shame." Maggie nods curtly in response, but in an attempt to lift the mood, Shane smiles. "He also told me you're pregnant?"

Maggie nods, her hands moving towards her belly. Carl is surprised she made the journey at all. He's not sure how much time has passed since his imprisonment, or even since the execution circle, but it's enough for her to be showing. But despite her smile and Shane's laid-back attitude, she's stiff as she responds. Carl doesn't know what the hell happened between Shane and the others before they were separated, but whatever it was, all of them seem to be keeping the ex-deputy at arm's length, not just Rick.

"Patch seems to know an awful lot for someone I've only met once or twice." Maggie jokes, a polite smile stitched to her face. "First time I saw him, his boss killed my husband. Next time I saw him, he shoved me in a closet and hid me from his friends. Have to admit, I was pretty confused there, for a while. Wasn't till Rick came knockin' at my door that it all started makin' sense."

"Patch?" Shane blinks, looking back and forth between the two of them. "You mentioned that before, but I didn't realize that people actually called you that."

Carl shifts uncomfortably beneath the stares, shrugging. "It's all anyone's ever really called me for the past few years. Told you, nobody really cares about your name in Sanctuary, unless you're one of the big dogs. Most people don't last long enough for it to matter."

"Years? Jesus, how old were you when you lost the eye?"

Carl shrugs again. "I dunno. 'bout a year after the outbreak, I guess. Might have been twelve, thirteen. Old enough to know that I should have dodged the bullet."

An awkward silence fills the hall for a moment, and it's like it's a repeat of his conversation with Sophia all over again. For once, her glare has simmered to knowing look, even as the Kingdomers are revolted at his words. "You tellin' me the Saviors tried to shoot you in the head? At that age? Christ, Ezekiel. Threatening to kill kids is one thing, but this---"

"Weren't the Saviors. They killed the bastards that did it, though." Carl defends, crossing his arms.
uncomfortably.

"But what about your mouth? They did that, right? What the hell did they even do it with?" Carl glares at the other man, irritated that he's bringing this up now of all times.

"A baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire." Rick answers for him softly, looking sick to his stomach.

If there was an awkward silence before, this one is breathtaking. It never occurred to Carl how little the Kingdomers knew about exactly how things went down. While the origins of Carl's scars were implied, nothing had ever been confirmed out loud. But everyone at this table is aware of who that infamous baseball bat belongs to, and Rick's words send the rest of the table flinching. The Kingdomers because they had never realized the gritty details of it all, and the Alexandrians because they actually remember what happened.

"Why are you defending them?" Sophia says suddenly, breaking the tension. Carl blinks at her, not sure how to respond. "You keep downplaying what they've done to you, what they've done to us. Sure, Negan killed some bandits that hurt you. But he's killed a lot of innocent people, too. We're sitting here pretending everything is good and happy because you're Rick's long lost son and you're safe, and we're in some fairytale land where a king and some princes think you're some big hero knight or something---"

"Sophia." Carol warns, her eyes darting to King Ezekiel, seeming concerned that they'll offend their hosts. But Sophia plows on, her gaze harsh and accusing.

"---and we're all just supposed to just ignore the fact that you're sitting in front of us wearing a Savior jacket? Would you ever have even helped us, if Rick wasn't your Dad? Or would you still be working for them?"

Her words cut Carl to the bone. He's nearly forgotten what this feels like, to be hated. To be reviled. He's been spoiled by the Kingdom's appreciative gazes for too long. And while he had been preparing for the eventual blowback, he's absolutely blindsided for it to be coming from Sophia, of all people. Everyone is looking at him expectantly, interested in his answer. And he isn't going to lie. Not anymore. He's so utterly tired of lying. So he swallows hard, pulling up his walls once more.

"I'd still be with them." He admits, shrugging. Rick stiffens beside him, but Carl continues. "Negan's a monster. But he's a monster that kills worse monsters. I had food, a roof over my head. I was safe. Sanctuary made sense to me. This?" He postures, pointing around them, gesturing towards the flute player. "This doesn't."

"You don't mean that." Ben interjects, his somber state dissipated. Carl rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, I do. People are studying Shakespeare here, Ben. In Alexandria, they're mowing their lawns. You did good today, but you got tree'd like a damn racoon by less than a dozen biters. You barely know how to shoot. Alexandria is stuck in the old world, and the Kingdom is trying to create some new, magical fantasy one. But when groups like the ones we saw this morning come for us? Spears aren't going to take helicopters down. HOA's and town meetin's aren't going to do shit about the wolves, or cannibals, or rapists."

"You call missing half of your face safe?" Sophia shoots back, glowering. "Daryl thought you were better than them. I did, too. But that was when I thought you were helping us because it was the right thing to do, not just because you were just lookin' out for your daddy."

"Wait a second. What's this about helicopters?" Rick drawls carefully, swallowing hard like he's
very aware he's treading on thin ice. A shard of guilt runs through Carl, and for a second, he wonders what kind of position he's forced Rick into. How Rick's managed to keep a hold on his people after they realized his son had been working for the men that killed his friends.

"We ran into some trouble at the National Guard Center." Benjamin admits on his behalf, looking a bit sheepish as he does. Shane sits upright in his chair.

"Now hold on, you mentioned running into a group, but you didn't say anything about a damn helicopter. Where was this, exactly? None of our patrols have seen anything---"

"I don't think they were from around here." Carl admits furtively. "They were scavenging one of the helicopters on display. Either gettin' parts or actually gettin' it up and running, never did see which." He turns back to King Ezekiel, realizing how badly this conversation could go. "I don't think they're interested in your territory. Just that chopper. But that's my point. Together, if all of the communities fight back, we can take down Negan. But could we take on someone that size? Would you be willing to do what it takes? Torture whoever needs to be tortured?"

Ezekiel looks both disgruntled and unsettled at mention of the other group, and Carl can only pray he hasn't dashed their chances at getting the Kingdom to join the war. "Look, I meant what I said when we first met. Negan will get worse, and he'll target who you love. If you want to be free, want to stop Jared from shooting Ben next time? Then they need to be stopped. But they're not going to stop just by asking them nicely."

He continues. "None of you have to be worried about me turnin' traitor or nothin'. Daryl was wrong about me, I'm just another monster, too. But I'm a monster that's on your side."

Carl would feel a lot more confident in this speech if he could meet his father's eyes. Meeting Sophia's eyes alone feels like it's ripping him in two. But somehow, being put back into a world where everyone is suspicious of him, where everyone hates him is comforting. It's a world he's familiar with.

But as Sophia continues to purse her lips at him, something occurs to Carl. He looks down the row of seats, at the many sets of eyes looking at him. All the important players are here. All except for one.

"Where is Daryl, anyways?" He asks, continuing to search the many faces. "He holdin' down the fort in Alexandria?"

His words have a ripple effect across the observers, Carol visibly flinching at mention of the redneck's name. The cool anger in Sophia's eyes flares, and she crosses her arms as she speaks.

"They took him. Because of you."

Her words echo in the room, sending a chill down Carl's spine. He looks at her in horror. But now that she's on a roll, she doesn't stop there.

"We had a plan to get you out. If you had just waited a little longer, we could have gotten you out and sieged Sanctuary the next day---"

"Sophia---" Her mother cuts in, and Rick casts a sharp glance towards the king. But Sophia doesn't falter, merely raising her voice.

"---we could have gotten you out and none of this would ever have happened. But instead, Negan came for us. He thought we were hiding you. He held agun to Rick's head, callin' out for you, counted to ten, and pulled the trigger. It was a bluff. Just like him threatening to take Judith
afterwards was a bluff. So guess what? Maybe you were right. Maybe he doesn't hurt babies, but that didn't stop him from insistin' on takin' a hostage to make up for the one he lost. If you thought you were lucky because they 'they didn't torture you or nothin', what the hell do you think they're doing to Daryl? Why do you get your dad back and I lose mine?!

She's crying now. Angry tears, but tears all the same. Carl's world feels like it's crashing down, and he can't breathe. He stares dumbly at her, at the others. Suddenly, the accusing looks make sense. The blame makes sense. He shakes his head. "I don't-I don't understand. He threatened Judith? Why was she even there? Didn't Sherry warn you?"

Sophia's anger falters for a moment, for one blissful moment, because she's confused. She looks at the others, but they don't seem to have whatever answer she's looking for, either. It's his father who answers at last, his voice deep and bewildered.

"Who's Sherry?"

The revelation that those two simple words bring sends him reeling. He should have realized it before. His father had been surprised to see him here. If Sherry had made it to Alexandria, if she had warned them..... Rick would have known where Carl was hiding. But he didn't.

"What do you..... what do you mean, 'who's Sherry'? She never made it? She never got there in time?!" He felt like he couldn't breathe before, but now his breaths are coming faster than ever. If she hadn't made it to Alexandria, then....

"Carl, what are you talking about?"

"She's..... she's the one who helped me escape. That was the plan. If they caught her, they wouldn't kill her, so she was going to go to Alexandria, and I was going to go to the Kingdom. That's what she said to do. That was..... she wouldn't lie, not about that. Shit, that means she's..... shit. Shit, shit, shit! I should have known she wouldn't make it out there on her own. I need to go. I need to find her---" He rises to his feet, only to have his father's grip send him back to the chair.

"Carl, Carl! Hold up. Slow down." As Rick attempts to keep him from leaving, Michonne's expression changes, her mouth parting as something occurs to her.

"He's talking about the woman Negan was looking for. His wife. She's the one that got you out?"

He nods, shoving his barely touched soup out of his way and holding his head in his hands.

"Why wouldn't Negan kill her?" Michonne asks carefully. "You've said before that he's killed wives that try to run away. Why not her?"

For a moment, Carl tosses around the idea of whether he should tell them. Telling them the truth could make Sherry a target. But if she's missing..... if she's in trouble..... as much time has passed, he's not going to find her on his own.

"She's pregnant. It's Negan's." He breathes, shaking his head. "She was trying to stick around before, for Dwight' sake, but she...... she couldn't stand the idea of raising a kid there." He hears mutters of breaths, sees Maggie instinctively curling a hand around her protruding belly.

"What does Dwight have to do with it?" Rick asks, choosing his words carefully. "Is he related to her? Is that why he works for Negan?"

Carl snorts, shaking his head. "Nah, the opposite. She was Dwight's wife, first. Last time they tried to run away, Negan was going to kill him, but Sherry offered herself up. So she married Negan and Dwight just got the iron, instead."
Rick blinks profusely. "That must have been when Daryl ran into him.....the iron.....that's what happened to Dwight's face? It was a punishment?"

He gives a small nod, and Maggie snorts, shaking her head in disgust. "And Negan claims he doesn't endorse rape. Are all his wives like that? Women that are forced into it?"

Carl shifts uncomfortably, briefly reminded of the lap dance Negan made Sherry give him in front of Dwight. Of all the times Negan took delight in groping them in front of his men. "Not all of 'em. Some of them do it for the benefits, extra food rations, and jewelry. One did it to get psych meds for her mom. I mean, it sucks, but they agree to it. Sherry said the wives were angry with him when he locked me up, wouldn't put out for him. He manipulates people, but he doesn't.....he doesn't force them, ya know?"

"Sounds like he does, to me." Sophia retorts sharply, crossing her arms.

"He never forced me to kill the people I have, either. But I did it anyways, for food and shit. Isn't that the same thing?" Carl shakes his head, swearing. "Fuck. I should've known. I should never have let her go off on her own. She was literally barefoot and pregnant, for cryin' out loud. An' even my jumpsuit woulda been better than that sequin dress of hers. All glittery and crap. Biters could hear her a mile away."

"She made a choice and you honored it. That's more than Negan ever did, from the sounds of it." Michonne states flatly, looking up at Rick. "We'll keep an eye out for her. But Carl, it's been too long since your escape to go looking for her. If she hasn't been caught by Negan already, she could be anywhere by now."

She doesn't state what Carl already knows. That Sherry is probably dead in a ditch, or shuffling about somewhere in a forest, chomping down on somebody. But an unpleasant possibility curls its way into his brain, one worse than her dying. She might have lied. She might have never intended to go to Alexandria at all, just saying that to convince him to move on. If Lori Grimes had never made it to pick up her own son from school, was it that far of a stretch to imagine that Sherry had chickened out of warning some strangers she had never met?

Carl growls in aggravation, backing up his chair and rising from the table. Rick reaches out to him in alarm.

"Carl....." he starts, but the teen doesn't let him finish.

"I'm not runnin' off to do somethin' stupid, alright? Sherry's long gone, I get it. And I...... I'm glad to see you, Dad, I really am, but I haven't slept in two days and if I stay here, I'm going to fuck all of this up. And this?" He says, gesturing towards the table. "This is what our communities need. Flutes and feastin' and horsin' around and other shit that doesn't make sense to me, not scowlin' and pretendin' like you're not sharing a table with a Savior. I helped kill your friends, I get it, biggest buzzkill ever. When you need me to torture somebody or go off on a suicidal rescue mission, just let me know. 'Till then, I'm going to bed and getting out of the way."

He pretends he doesn't hear the hurt in his father's voice as he leaves. He pretends.

"Let 'im go, Rick. That's practically the first time the kid's actually shown emotion since he got here. Good to see him acting his age, for once."

Shane's words echo behind him, mocking him as he walks away. His stomach growls in protest, reminding him of how little he's eaten, but he shoves it down. He can still feel the rot from before, twisting and twisting inside until he's practically ready to hurl. But he shoves down the hurt,
shoves down the bile, and walks away all the same.

Nobody has been in his room, which is a small relief. The paper he left between the door and the frame hasn't fallen, and the tin cans he's hung near the hinges haven't been disturbed, either. He isn't sure what else he expected. The guards did the occasional room check when he first arrived, but they haven't done one in weeks. Yet with Sophia's words still ringing in his ears, their trust in him feels undeserved.

Maybe he wouldn't be the worst spy in the world. If he wanted to take this place for what it's worth, he could. He really could.

But he doesn't. He rips off Negan's jacket, rips off the Kingdom armor, and shoves them both in the closet. They're still splattered in walker blood, but he doesn't want to send them off to the laundry collection. It's nothing the laundry folks haven't seen before, he knows, but as much as he resents the jacket, he still feels oddly protective of it. He can do it himself when he wakes up.

His shower can wait until later, too. He's bound to stink. But he feels like he deserves it, somehow. He deserves the hunger in his belly, deserves the ache in his bones. It's not like he doesn't have food. Above the discarded clothing are various cans of beans, and other various items that the cafeteria workers had discarded at the end of the day. He didn't think King Ezekiel would mind, since they were supposed to be thrown out, anyways, but he's still mildly afraid that one of the guards might take offense to his hoarding if they found it during a room search.

The hunger makes it difficult to fall asleep, so he finally compromises, grabbing a water bottle and sucking down the liquid greedily. He swears the sutures are becoming more elastic by the day, because by the time he's done with it, half of its contents have leaked everywhere, soaking the blankets.

He sleeps in them anyways, curled up with his knife under his pillow, so when he finally drifts off, it comes as no surprise that he dreams of rain. He dreams of rain, he dreams of a well, and he dreams of a little boy that looks like Henry looking up at him with big sad eyes. But soon the rain turns crimson, and the little boy is falling down that well, a bullet hole through his head.

Carl's still dreaming in red when the tin cans begin rattling.

For a moment, he doesn't know where he is. He could be in the bunker, with handcuffs encircling his wrists. He could be in his room in Sanctuary, with a savior sneaking in to steal his food. He could be in his cell in Sanctuary, with the music dimming and Ron's form hovering over him. He doesn't know where he is, but that rattling lets him know that someone is there and that someone is coming for him.

Which is how he finds himself shoving Shane into a wall, a blade at the ex-deputy's neck.

It takes him a moment to realize where he is and what's going on. Someone else is behind him, holding him back, with an arm snaked under Carl's left armpit and pulled upright across his chest. The stranger's other hand is gripped tightly around his, preventing the knife from moving any further.

"What the---Shane?" He drops the knife, blinking blearily as he comes to. The cornered ex-deputy lets out a sigh of relief, gulping.

"See? Told you it'd be enlightening. Just didn't know how enlightening." Shane remarks with an
uneasy laugh, rubbing where the knife had been. "Jesus, kid."

Carl is still gathering his senses, feeling trapped with the stranger's breath still on his neck, but relaxes the moment he hears the man speak. "Easy does it. Easy."

"Dad?" He asks, bleary-eyed. It is him. It's not some stranger, it's not even Shane. It's Rick. Carl relaxes, falling back into his father's hold.

"Yeah, it's me. Easy does it. There you go, it's me." Carl reddens as realization begins to dawn on him about what he's done, and as Rick slowly releases the hold, Carl stumbles back, dazed.

"Yeah, let's barge into a child soldier's room and wake him up from a dead sleep. What did you expect to happen, Shane?" He hears his father hiss, the calm tone in his voice fading as Carl finally comes to.

"How the hell was I supposed to know? He's always up at the buttercrack of dawn, never had him put a knife to my neck before. Sorry to scare ya, kid, they're preparin' dinner, and since I have it on good authority you haven't eaten in at least a day, figured I'd give you a wake up call. What, did you think we were gonna off you in your sleep or somethin'?"

"Wouldn't be the first time someone tried." Carl says grumpily, rubbing the back of his neck. "Hell, that's how Dad took out that outpost. Wouldn'a happened if they had alarm system rigged up in their rooms."

Guilt flashes across Rick's face as readily as disbelief slips across Shane's. "Yeah, I keep hearin' about that." Shane mutters, casting a glance at Rick. "Still not sure I believe it, though. Then again, if someone told me I'd almost get ganked by a teenager today, I'm not sure I'd believe that, either." Shane cocks his head to the side. "Jesus, how did you sleep like that? You're rank. Boots still on and everything."

Carl looks down, shrugging. "It's from bailin' the prince out of a tree. Too tired to bother with a shower or nothin'."

"Yeah, I've been hearin' about that, too. Benjamin's been fillin' us in on some of the details. Either he watched too much Die Hard growin' up or you earned that nap. You didn't tell us you were chased by the 'copter."

"We weren't." Carl groans, slapping his head with his hands as he bemoans his friend's tendency for tall tales. "The scavengers chased us a bit on foot, but that's only because I almost ran them over. The helicopter stayed on the roof the whole time."

Shane grins, clasping Carl's shoulder like he's ready to tell the world's greatest joke. "Guess you're officially a Grimes, then, gettin' in trouble with a chopper on horseback. Now you just gotta get stuck in a tank." The man says, wriggling his eyebrows pointedly.

Carl is unamused. "I'm lost. Was this at the prison? With that dictator guy?"

"Nah, nah. This was back when your Daddy was lookin' for you and your mama. Oh, c'mon. Tell me you've heard the story." Shane's grin can't get any bigger, and now it's his father's turn to reddens. Carl blinks, looking between both men. His dad still hasn't seemed to recover from the whole 'knife to Shane's throat' thing, although it doesn't seem to bother Shane nearly as much as it should.

"Wait..." Carl murmurs, looking back at Rick. "That thing Daryl was goin' on about back in Alexandria. You tellin' me that's true?"
Rick nods, glaring at Shane even as a reluctant smile forms on the edge of his lips. "And none of them'll ever let me forget it." But Rick's smile soon falls as he takes in his surroundings.

"The mattress do somethin' to you?" He jokes, gesturing towards the stripped bed and the blankets shoved in the corner.

Carl shrugs. "I'm used to sleeping on the floor, I guess. Just easier."

"Does Negan not give his own people beds? Is that why he burned ours?" Rick asks carefully, his eyebrows furrowed as he assesses Carl's setup. Shane does a double take at his father's words, but doesn't get a chance to butt in.

"Nah, most people got beds, now. Just not the prisoners. But I was with Negan before he found Sanctuary, back when we were on the road. We just slept wherever we could, back then." He admits. He shifts uncomfortably at the subject, not sure how to explain it. It's more than just a preference. A floor, a nook, or a cranny just feels safer. He fidgets at his gloves, his fingertips brushing across the scars around his wrists.

"Explains why you took to sleepin' in Buttons' stall. Took us a few weeks to get used to mattresses, too, when we first came to Alexandria." Rick says, scratching his scruff. He swallows hard, his eyes almost glazed as he's lost in thought. "So you've been with him since nearly the beginning of all of this. Before he ever took Hilltop?"

"Yeah. He was just antagonizing some nearby groups, farmers and the like, back then. He did mercenary work sometimes, taking out local bandits and stuff in exchange for food. It made him look like the good guy, and he was takin' out competition at the same ti---hey! What the hell?"

Shane, seeming bored with the conversation, has taken it upon himself to do a sweep of the room, opening drawers and digging through Carl's things. "Are you lookin' for somethin' in particular?"

Carl demands, annoyed.

"Those papers you brought with you. Rosters and shit? Whatever goes down tomorrow, whether the king's with us on this or not, Rick's people need to see it."

"You could have asked." Carl rolls his eyes, walking over to a nearby air vent. He untwists the knobs, loosening the metal frame from the wall, and digs around the bottom of the duct. He finds the papers where he left them, taped to its walls, out of sight. When he turns, he finds both men looking at him with gobsmacked looks on their faces. "What?" He asks indignantly, furrowing his brows.

"Like a damn drug addict or somethin'." Shane rolls his eyes, holding out his hands. Carl hesitates for a moment. He's copied some of the papers down, but not all of them. But he trusts Shane, and his father is standing right beside him.

"People died for these. Don't lose them." Carl warns. Shane rolls his eyes.

"What are they, the death star plans or somethin'? Jesus, kid. And here I was thinkin' you couldn't hide for shit. You didn't think we'd check under the mattress? And apparently you put a damn hat in a medicine cabinet?"

Carl swallows hard, looking over to his father, who rubs the back of his neck before speaking. "We caught up a bit while you were asleep. I've been..... I've been meaning to ask you. Where did you even find it?" Rick asks, taking off the hat and looking down at it.

"The armory. I managed to convince some people to let me join 'em if I told them how to get in."
Place was already stripped, but I found one of your old uniforms, and the hat came with it. Made the whole thing worth it, even if the group was mad at me afterwards.

Rick looks dumbfounded by this, then guilty, and then angry as he shakes his head. It takes him a moment to speak, but when he does, he sounds heartbroken. "I'm the one that stripped the place."

He doesn't have to say anything else. The significance of those words comes across painstakingly clear. Carl was still in town when Rick left for Atlanta. And if Rick is heartbroken at the idea of it, Shane is absolutely stunned, an unreadable expression flickering across the man's face.

But suddenly, Rick holds out the hat, offering it to the teen. "Daryl..... Daryl filled me in, after things went down. You kept it safe for this long. It's yours, if you still want it."

Carl's chest seizes at the sight of it. "I'm not..... I'm not sure I deserve it." He admits softly. There's an underlying meaning to his words, ones he's not sure his father catches. But Rick presses forward, clasping a steady hand on Carl's shoulder before nudging the hat into the teen's hands.

"It's yours." Carl swallows hard, and after a moment's hesitation, he takes it. He takes it, wears it, and for the first time since he spotted his father in that execution circle, he feels whole again.

Negan's jacket rots in the closet behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I'm not particularly satisfied with ending the chapter here, but this was already running into the 11k+ territory, so...

Be rest assured, I'm just as eager to get to the father-son moments as you guys are! But realistically, both Carl and Rick are going to be dealing with a lot of guilt and awkwardness while they get to know each other again. So there's that.

Please be sure to leave your thoughts in the comments! Everything helps, good and bad. : )
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

While I put together the graphic art for this chapter, the older version of Carl on the left is taken from an altered version of someone's else's drawing. Unfortunately, it was a random image I found on pinterest and I can't read the artist's name to source it. If anyone recognizes the image or has a source link where I can promote the fanartist, please let me know!

Warning: There are brief mentions of past sexual assault and a graphic description of a past suicide in this chapter. Please be advised.

Recap as Requested: AU Timeline Differences:

- Carl was never picked up from school before the evacuation to Atlanta. It is unclear why.
- Carl traveled with various groups, eventually ending up alone and targeted by the Claimers. He was physically and sexually abused.
- When escaping the Claimers, Carl ran into the Saviors. Negan saved Carl and killed his pursuers. Carl continued to serve the Saviors until the events of this fic, earning the nickname 'Patch'.
Instead of telling Sophia to hide, Rick stayed with her after she ran from the highway due to his concern over another lost child. As a result, Sophia lived. Rick was adamant about Carl's survival, whereas Lori grieved and accepted that he was dead. Rick thought about leaving the group to search for him, but ultimately stayed due to lack of leads and Lori's pregnancy. Rick and company have had their own run-in with the Claimers. Sophia was threatened, but unharmed. The remaining Claimers were killed by Rick's group. Events within Alexandria have unfolded differently, with the Wolves becoming a problem the same time as Negan. Deanna was killed by Peter Anderson. Shane is still alive. He was separated from Rick's group after Woodbury, and was under the impression that Judith was dead. Instead of Morgan, Shane found Abraham's note about the new world needing Rick Grimes, and came to DC searching for Rick. Unable to find Rick, he joined The Kingdom. Carl has run into Commonwealth soldiers scavenging a helicopter. Richard was killed by the Saviors instead of Benjamin. This happened before Rick's arrival instead of afterwards. Daryl was taken as a hostage by the Saviors well after he was taken in the show. Sherry is missing, but unlike the show, foul play is suspected. She is pregnant with Negan's child.

Chapter 13

The more Carl walks, the hungrier he becomes, and the better the distant aroma of cooking food smells. He hadn't intended to sleep for so long, hadn't intended to waste the precious few hours he had left with his father. But at least now that it's close to sunset, the cafeteria workers will have had time to prepare an actual meal rather than a quickly whipped together soup or chili. Hopefully something solid, something he can eat this time.

He's still half asleep and somewhat disoriented as he walks, letting Rick and Shane banter among themselves without pitching in. When they finally reach the showers, he raises an eyebrow at the two.

"You gonna follow me in there, too? Wanna compare dick sizes or somethin'?"

"Nah, I already know who'd win." Shane retorts breezily, waving him off. "We'll wait out here. Better hurry up, princess, or we'll be late."

Carl wants to let out a sigh of relief, but doesn't let on, instead heading inside on his own. He's always managed to shower at odd times, when nobody else was using the communal area. He never felt like being asked questions he didn't want to answer.

As he turns on the water, he embraces the cold water even as it makes it harder to wash off the biter gore. It startles him awake, urging him to snap out of whatever daze he's been in and get moving. It's also loud enough to make Shane and his father think he can't hear them beyond the gym room doors. But either the door is cracked open or the walls are just too thin, because he hears them all the same.

"I appreciate you lookin' after him, Shane."

"Ain't no problem. Least I could do. Judy….is she….she doin' ok?" There's an awkward silence before his father cautiously responds.

"She's walking. Managing a few words, here and there. Alexandria has been good for her. Was good for her, until….well….you know. Carl---is he---how is he doing, really? That back there, is
that him all the time?"

"Kind of. And kind of not. He's been mouthier since you got here, rougher 'round the edges. It's usually hard to get more than a few words out of the kid, but Ben's gotten him to relax some."

"Benjamin seems like a good kid. Never would have imagined them as friends, though."

"Don't think Ben gave him much of a choice. Just teamed up with that little brother of his and annoyed Carl until he caved in. He hates the school here, but he's a hard worker, and a better fighter than most of our guards. Someone I'd want on my six, if even half of Ben's story is true. He does whatever you want him to do the first time, no questions asked, no whining, nothin'. I think today's the first time I've seen his temper come out."

His father is quiet for a moment, before letting out a deep, wavering sigh. "That reaction at lunch? That's what he was like the entire time, back home. Gruff. Defensive. Michonne and Daryl could get him to let his guard down a bit, but the moment he got around me he would clam up. I didn't realize it was him, then, I just thought it was an authority figure thing...but now, I don't...I don't even know how to talk to him, Shane. I've spent...this has been everything. Everything. Everything I've done so far, it's all been for him. For Judith. For my people. I've spent years trying to find him, but now that he's here, now that he's safe...it's still like I never found him at all."

"That's not on you, not with everything that's happened. You kinda skipped straight into the angsty teenager phase. And he's got more reason than most to be broody, from the sounds of it." Shane says.

"You have no idea. Hell, I don't even think I know the half of it. The things Negan said...the things he implied...I should have been there to protect him. I should have---what the hell happened back then, Shane?"

"He says he was at that school, Rick, but I was there. There was no sign of him."

"No sign of him. Kind of like there was no way I was alive in that hospital room?"

A chill runs through the air, colder than the water streaming down Carl's face, colder than anything else in the room. He doesn't understand the underlying context, but it's easy to tell it's been a point of contention between the two men for some time.

"What are you implying, Rick?" There's a pause, but no reply. He can hear his father pacing, sense the two men squaring off. Shane is the first one to break the tension.

"Say it. Just say it. I'm tired of us dodging each other, pretendin' like everything since the farm didn't happen. If we gotta fight it out, let's fight it out. And then let's be done with it. I want a clean slate, Rick. You're...you're my brother, I've traveled states lookin' for you. And maybe I did some things, maybe I said some things I shouldn't have. But I would never, ever, knowingly abandon that boy, and you sure as hell know Lori wouldn't have. He wasn't there. Nobody was. The teachers were gone."

"You say you want a clean slate..." Rick begins, slowly, "...but the way I see it, you're the same that you've ever been, Shane. And I love you, man, I really do. But I know you. If you'd come all this way for me, you woulda been knockin' on Alexandria's gates the moment you heard I was there. Hell, you'd be knockin' those gates down when you realized Judith was alive. So why didn't you? Why did you wait for us to come to you?"

"Rick, you know the Saviors..."
"I'm not talkin' about the Saviors, Shane, I'm talkin' about you. The man that hauled Michonne off with Merle to face the governor by yourselves. The man that drug those walkers outta that barn. When you get it in your head to do somethin', you do it, regardless of who you piss off in the process. But you didn't. Why?"

There's another pause, and as water cascades down Carl's back, a shiver runs up his spine. It's a fair point. Shane had practically crumpled in that throne room when he found out Judith was alive. So why hadn't he insisted on reaching out? It wouldn't be the first time the ex-deputy had circumvented the king's wishes.

"I had something I had to follow through with, first. Richard and me, we had a plan. We had to convince Ezekiel to go to war. And when Carl said Negan was controlling you the same way he was us, and that he had threatened Judy…. we had to finish what we started. And now..."

"...and now Richard's dead, but my son might have done the job for you, so it worked out in the end. Is that it?"

Shane is quiet for a moment. "Clean slate. That's all I want. I want you alive, I want Judy alive. And when this is all over, if we both make it through this? I want us to be friends again. I'm not sayin' I'm not an idiot. But I'll protect Carl like he's my own, brother. You know that."

His father doesn't respond for a moment, but when he does, his voice wavers, the man sounding far older than his years. "Do I?"

Carl blinks rapidly, taken aback by the animosity in his father's tone. Carl has never had any reason to doubt Shane's intentions. Shane is impulsive with a bit of a temper, but he's always been straightforward. There are no tricks or ulterior motives to the man, or at least, none that Carl knew of. So why does his father think otherwise? Rick continues, his voice shaking.

"Negan made me choose between Carl and Judith, did he tell you that? I had to choose who they were going to kill. And Carl---the entire time he was on that ground, he was calm, telling me it was ok….like he knew who I was going to pick before I did. And he was right. I couldn't---Judith was innocent, I couldn't--- I chose her over Carl, Shane. If our situations were reversed, can you honestly say you'd do the same? That if you had to, you'd pick Carl over her?"

The argument sends Carl's head spinning. He knows Shane is attached to the little girl, but his father's point is lost on him. There's a story there, one he doesn't understand, and one that bothers him. But Dad doesn't stop, his voice lowering to nearly a growl.

"We don't get clean slates, not anymore. You told me once that I wasn't 'made for this world'. But you don't know what the fuck I've done to get my people this far, to get Judith this far. We are not the same men we were, before. And maybe that's a good thing, maybe we can be friends again despite it all. But that? That depends on you, Shane. I wasn't there to protect Carl, and with this war coming, and him hidin' here, I won't be here to protect him now. So if you keep lookin' after him the way you have been? Maybe we have a chance at that. But if you pull half the shit you pulled at the farm and the prison? And you drag Carl and Judith into it? I will put you down."

If the conversation continues much further, Carl's not sure it will be for the better. So he shuts the water off, making a point to cough loudly as he grabs a fresh set of Kingdomer clothes. He can hear the two men straightening up outside, and they're still avoiding meeting each other's eyes when Carl steps out. He raises an eyebrow, looking between the two of them.

"Y'all havin' that dick measurin' contest out here, instead?" Rick blinks profusely at this, swallowing hard and offering an unsteady smile. But he doesn't deny it, and neither does Shane.
They walk to the mess hall in terse silence.

Boisterous laughter echoes from the other side of the dining hall door. Carl braces himself for the the glares that are sure to be aimed his way, for the silence that's sure to fall when he enters, but as he opens the door, he encounters something else entirely. A dart flying at his face.

He almost dodges it, but still takes the hit with a flinch. He stands there for a moment, stunned, just staring dumbly down at the little object piercing his shoulder. An awkward silence follows, with several onlookers putting hands to their mouths to hold back their laughter.

"Oops." He hears, followed by uneasy chuckles. He looks up to see a rather guilty looking prince grinning at him sheepishly.

"See if I get ya down from a tree, again." He mutters to Benjamin, rolling his eyes and grimacing as he removes the offending object. His shoulder bleeds a little from the puncture wound, but the dart is lightweight and the pain only annoying, at best. He turns, spotting a makeshift dartboard the players have posted to the wall. Someone has drawn an outline of themselves on posterboard, with a crudely drawn outline of a bat appearing above their shoulder. While it looks nothing like the man, it doesn't take a huge leap of imagination to figure out who they had been attempting to draw.

"Sorry. My aim….er….needs some practice." Ben remarks. "Dinner isn't ready yet, so we're just killing time. Didn't mean to nearly kill you." Ben jokes, eyeing his friend in concern. Carl just shrugs, rubbing the sore spot in the meat of his shoulder.

"Nah, you're good. If we're playin' darts, I'm in." He says, much to the surprise of everyone else in the room. He almost takes the offer back, shifting uncomfortably under their befuddled expressions. But Ben's smile just widens.

"We're playin' Kingdom vs. Hilltop, right now. Me and Henry against Jesus and….uh….sorry, I'm not good with names."

"Maggie." The woman clarifies politely. There's a mischievous glint in the pregnant woman's eye, the game appearing to have brought out her competitive side. Rick and Shane move to take a seat, looking equally amused by the situation.

"Hey, if Kingdom gets another player, so do we." Jesus remarks, his tone light and teasing.

Shane shakes his head even as he smiles. "You sure that's fair, man? I mean, Carl might be a pirate an' all, but he's only got the one eye."

Wordlessly, Carl takes the bloody dart in his hand and aims. He hits the drawing of Negan square in the forehead, just slightly to the left of the bullseye. The others guffaw. He turns, offering them a lopsided smile of his own. "How'd you think I learned to aim a rifle? Don't have to waste bullets with darts. Just gotta aim to the right of what it looks like I'm goin' for."

"Crap. I've never thought about that, before. It screws with your depth perception, right? So when you aim, instead of aiming for his head---" Shane begins, scratching his chin.

"I'm aimin' for the wall to the right of him. The closer something is, the less I have to do it. I'm just used to figuring out how far off I am, I guess."

"Which proves Jesus's point. Anybody want to join our side?" Maggie asks, looking to the seated group. Most look away sheepishly, avoiding the game for one reason or another, so Carl is surprised when Sophia rises to her feet.
"I'll stand for Hilltop." She says, a smile tracing her lips. She looks more relaxed than she had before, although her eyes still don't hold the same warmth they had back in Alexandria. Maggie gives the girl a high five when Sophia joins them, a mischievous grin adorning both of their faces. Carl soon discovers why.


Which Carl should have known, really, since the two hatchets and assortment of knives strapped to the girl's hip are smaller than typical weapons. He had mistakenly assumed that she preferred smaller weapons because of her smaller hands, but the reality is that she prefers throwing knives, which must make darts a piece of cake for the other teen.

So while Benjamin's performance improves the longer the game goes on, their team is still slaughtered by the competition. Henry hits the poster at least once, much to his excitement. But between the biblical ninja, a tough-as-nails widow, and hatchet girl, they never had a chance. By the time the cooks bring the food, Carl almost thinks he needs another shower, sweating from the small effort. But something about the game has put doubts and awkwardness aside, and when Sophia meets his gaze, she's actually smiling. The sight of it makes his heart flip, especially after her accusing looks from earlier in the day.

But Carl's happiness completely disappears the moment he sees what's being served.

Spaghetti.

The meal is a delicacy now, he knows, and a cow must have been slaughtered especially for the occasion. He should be grateful, but his heart still sinks at the sight of it, at the meal that was Negan's specialty. He tries to tell himself that it's different enough to not matter. The chefs have mixed the ground meat in with the pasta, rather than cooking up meatballs like Negan had always preferred. And from the smell, Carl is sure that it will taste different, as well. The scent of basil is heavier and the tang of vinegar is missing altogether. But that doesn't stop his appetite from completely disappearing in a manner of seconds.

He had been happy back then, eating side by side with Negan and Frankie as a child. What had gone wrong? What had changed? While the others quickly take their spots at the table, fully invested in the array of food before them, Sophia notices his reluctance. She furrows her brow, but doesn't say anything, taking her own seat beside her mother. As plates are served, Carl merely picks at his meal.

But the morale of the others is instantly lifted, so he offers a smile as he listens to their stories. Rick talks lightheartedly about what a terrible cook Lori was, about how she would always burn pancakes. Shane talks about a steakhouse that offered discounts to anyone that showed up in a uniform. Ben talks about how he would do anything for a Whopper, again. Everyone talks about how long it's been since they've eaten beef.

But once again, Carl is stumped about what to say. All of his anecdotes are from Sanctuary, and are sure to kill the mood again. Does he talk about his meals with Negan? Or the days of dog food sandwiches? Or how excited he'd been, after his first pickup, to get actual chicken to eat? Does he talk about the bunker, and the plethora of food they had found inside? Every story leaves a bad taste in his mouth, and will lead to questions he doesn't want to answer.

But to his surprise, it isn't his comment that sours the mood. It's Michonne's when she mentions how much she misses cantaloupe.

It isn't her fault. In fact, once she brings it up, the visitors talk among themselves about their
favorite way to eat the fruit, some adding sugar on top with others preferring it plain. None of them notice the Kingdomers suddenly going silent, or are aware of the missing fruit's involvement in Richard's death. But thankfully, the topic moves on, the dour mood quickly replaced when everyone starts talking about what their favorite food is. Most of what's picked are things from the World that Was. Ice cream comes up often, as does steak.

Carl doesn't even really remember what his favorite food had been, back before the world ended. He's not even sure what it is now. But now they're all looking to him for his answer, so he shrugs, mentioning the first thing that comes to mind.

"Pudding." He says plainly, fidgeting with his gloves. He wants to do something to help move the conversation along, something to keep his hands busy, but the untouched spaghetti is practically congealing on his plate. If he made an attempt to eat it now, he's not sure the sauce would even stay in his mouth.


"Just plain. Vanilla, I guess. Best thing I ever tasted." Carl remembers, thinking back. "This group I was in, one of their people had family in North Carolina. They were big doomsdayers, had a huge plot of land with an underground bunker. Tons of food, water filters, weapons, you name it. We walked all the way from Georgia for that bunker. By the time we got there, it was just me and him, and neither one of us had eaten in a while. First thing I grabbed was a giant pudding mix. Ate the whole container by myself." He smiles, thinking back on the memory.

"So that's why you came north. I was wonderin' what made you leave Georgia." Rick murmurs, almost talking to himself as he does.

"What about you? What made you leave?" Carl asks. Rick looks almost guilty at the question, sighing deeply.

"I almost didn't. Convinced myself that leavin' Georgia would mean leavin' any chance of findin' you. But…." He trails off, searching for an explanation. Maggie fills in for him.

"We thought there was a chance for a cure." She says softly. "One of our members, Eugene? Not sure if you've met him or not. He claimed he was a scientist, that he needed to make it to DC. And all of us, we had just come out of a really bad place in Georgia. A really, really bad place. I think….we all wanted a chance at a new beginning. A cure offered that." 

"I didn't give up on the idea you were alive." Rick says guiltily, his eyes glazed. "But I….I thought that I might not ever find you. And a cure...wherever you were, it would've made the world a better place for you. And for Judith. But it was all a lie.... there was no cure, never was."

"The new world's gonna need Rick Grimes....that's what the map was about? Gettin' you to join them?" Shane asks. Rick nods lowly.

"The cure might have been a lie, but that map wasn't." Maggie insists, her eyes sharp. "We're here, where we're supposed to be. And this? Our communities? Together, we can build a new world, one our children can be safe in." As others nod and murmur in agreement with her words, Jesus smiles smugly. Maybe Carl was wrong. Maybe the biblical ninja isn't the one pulling the strings at Hilltop, after all. The woman before him is a far cry from the sobbing, sick mess he had first seen her in. Her speech is steady, her posture every bit as authoritative as Rick's. They toast her words, and the more the night goes on, the more at ease King Ezekiel seems with his new guests.

Maybe there is hope, after all.
Carl gets nearly an hour into the lengthy dinner before he screws it all up.

He manages to stay quiet for the most part, even with a more lively Ben and a strangely friendly Michonne both working to rope him into conversations. He doesn't bring up Negan, doesn't bring up Sanctuary, and for his own sake, doesn't bring up Lori, so the crowd nearly forgets his relation to all three. While some of the Alexandrians still seem wary of him, whatever transpired between the time he slept and their dart game has set them at ease. And once alcohol starts flowing, tongues and attitudes only loosen more.

It's around the third round of drinks that Shane begins to bring shit up.

"Wouldn'a thought a Savior would be afraid of a little liquor." He smirks, his hand slightly wavering as he tries to offer Carl some hard cider. Again.

"You haven't had to share a vehicle with Martinez." Carl says, crinkling his nose. It's homemade stuff, a gift brought from the Alexandrians and made from their own orchard. But he's been blackout drunk, before. And he never intends to be that drunk, again.

"Who's…..who's Martinez?" Shane asks, slurring just enough to be noticeable.

"I forgot you hadn't heard that story." Carl grumbles, fidgeting with his gloves.

"Wha….what story?" Shane repeats, blinking. Rick leans back in his chair, rubbing his scruff as he contemplates something.

"I've only heard it second-hand, myself." Rick admits. "One of the saviors' trucks got into a car accident on the way to our pickup, and one of the men claimed to be the only survivor. Turns out, he'd caused the accident after drinkin' and left the rest of them for dead."

"He always was an asshole." Carl mutters. "I tried to get him to let someone else drive, but he didn't want Negan to find out. So he fishtails the jeep and next thing I know, I'm waking up, stuck in my seatbelt, upside down, with windows busted and biters all crawlin' for us. Looked me dead in the eyes and left me behind so I wouldn't snitch on him. Jerk always did reek of booze."

"And then Jesse James here tamed a wild horse, and trots through our gates like nothing is wrong. Didn't say anything, didn't answer Negan's questions. Just shot Martinez square in the face." Michonne adds, shaking her head. "It's how he ended up in our infirmary for a while; He was pretty banged up from the accident. Negan left him with us until he could walk on his own again."

Ben's eyes widen, practically as big as the teen's gaping mouth. "That's what you meant about shooting people on horseback."

But Carl shakes his head. "Nah, I was talkin' about the wolves, then. Looters. It's….well, it's a long story. Never realized how tricky it is to do. Specially with a horse wantin' to rear up the entire time."

Shane whistles lowly. "Guess teenagers don't ever change, even in the apocalypse. Killin' men on horseback and taking humvees for joy rides, but still too self-conscious to eat damn spaghetti in front of other people." He shortles, taking back another swig of hard cider.

Carl glares.

The others are confused.
And then practically the entire table is staring at Carl's untouched plate. The ex-deputy's hovering nature is coming back to bite Carl now, the man somehow noticing what even Rick had overlooked during the feast.

"Self-conscious about...spaghetti?" Ezekiel inquires, his brow furrowed. Carl swallows hard, shaking his head in an effort to placate the king, but an inebriated Shane answers for him.

"Oh, he probably likes it. He just won't eat any of it. Or drink anything. Or do anything that might cause some of it to slip through his cheek and embarrass him in front of his friends. Especially in front of a pretty girl." He says, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively at a flustered Sophia.

"Fuck you." Carl growls, glowering warningly at the other man. But Shane doesn't know when to let up. He smirks, pointing jokingly towards the simmering Carl as he leans across the table.

"That reaction? That right there? That is 5% Negan, 5% Rick, and 90% all Lori Grimes. Down to the glare, I swear."

"Don't ever compare me to her." Carl scowls, clenching his fists. Shane's amused attitude has worn off, replaced by an offended one. Even Rick is taken aback, an eyebrow raised as he watches the two warily.

"Yeah? And why not?" Shane demands indignantly.

Carl doesn't want to go down this path. They're in a public place, and he shouldn't feed into whatever Shane's playing at. He should back off and keep to clipped, unemotional answers. That's what he would have done in Sanctuary. Doing anything else could've gotten him killed. But there aren't any repercussions, here. Princes ran away from home and barely got slaps on their wrists in return. And Carl is tired of holding back. If Shane is going to be gossiping about his attitude problems with other people and talking like he's a dog with behavioral issues, he might as well give the man good reason to.

"Do you know how long I waited at that school?" He seethes at last, glaring at the other man. Shane's eyes widen in response, but Carl doesn't give him a chance to butt in, continuing in a low voice.

"Everyone else's parents came and picked them up except for mine. And the entire time it was happening, I kept telling myself, 'I just have to wait here. Mom's never been late. She'd never leave me behind.' Even when the teachers decided to leave with the other students, I wouldn't go with them. I fought them, threw a tantrum in the middle of the street with biters roaming around, until they were forced to leave me behind. I was that sure that she would come. But she didn't. I spent years telling myself that she had to have died, or been bitten before she had a chance to find me. But one day I walk into Alexandria and realize that not only did she live, she was alive long enough to have a freaking baby. Dad didn't have a choice, he was laid up in a coma in a freaking hospital. But Mom? She gave up on me. She gave up on me, made a fake grave for me, and left me for dead, just like Martinez did. So yeah, excuse me if I don't want to be compared to that bitch."

Chairs rumble across the floor, with both Rick and Shane reacting immediately to his words. But while Rick seems stunned, almost as if he's been slapped, Shane simultaneously looks like he's ready to throw a punch and he's ready to cry. Carl finds himself fingering his pocketknife as he glares back at the other man. Maybe there were no repercussions for princes, but if he pushed enough, there might still repercussions for him.

"Don't you ever call her that. Ever. That---that ain't---that ain't what happened. Carl, your mom and I---" Shane starts, nearly stuttering in aggravation.
"You keep sayin' that, but sayin' it doesn't make it true. Everyone from Alexandria keeps giving you these looks, Shane. Like you're about to implode or somethin'. And you said so yourself, you parted in bad blood after that Governor guy. Why is that?" The Alexandrians look uncomfortable at the topic, but Shane shakes his head rapidly, wavering as he does. But then the shaking descends into a nod, and the man's shoulders slump as he visibly deflates.

"Because I screw up everythin' I touch, that's why. It was….it was my fault. Is that what you want to know, huh? Is that what you want to hear?! It wasn't Lori's fault. It was mine, because I screwed up with you just like I screwed up with your dad and Judith." Shane's voice breaks, and under the influence of alcohol, Carl swears the man is starting to weep. Carl stares at him in shock, but Rick rises to his feet, knuckles popping as he stands.

"What do you mean, it's 'your fault'?!" The other man asks lowly, clenching his jaw. Shane falters for a moment before bowing his head and shaking his head.

"We…went to the school, Carl, we did. We looked for you. But there wasn't anybody there, nobody at the pickup line. The place was a ghost town. The doors were locked, and somebody had posted a note on the door….your favorite teacher, you remember her? Mrs. Mueller? She left a note saying that they had taken the kids that were left to Atlanta."

The words echo in Carl's head, echoing again and again until he can hardly think straight. But Shane continues, desperately. "We called for you. And your mom, she wanted me to break into the school, wanted to make sure you weren't there---"

Carl feels the cold, damp condensation of his school's basement against his brow. Feels the hunger that had crept upon him, leading him to discover the abandoned freezer's decaying contents. He feels the loneliness, the fear.

"But it was the first time biters were just roamin' in the streets, and for all I knew, you were in Atlanta. My goal was to get your mom somewhere safe. I owed it to Rick, I---she was hysterical, kept drawin' more of them. And I had to get her out of there. She wanted to keep looking, she wanted to make sure, but neither of us saw you, and I…..I convinced her to move on. To head to Atlanta, see if she could find you there. So don't you blame her. It was never on her, never. You, your dad….I was the one that screwed up, ok? I. Screwed. Up."

The man is crying now, but Carl only feels numb. He should hate the man. Or hate his mother. Or hate himself. But he doesn't really hate any of them, or feel anything at all. He just feels a grim, dull acceptance.

"I was hungry." He murmurs, glaring at the uneaten spaghetti. "I kept telling myself that I needed to wait at the entrance, but I was hungry, so I went to the basement to get food from the cafeteria freezers. It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes. I never left. I was there." His voice cracks for the first time in ages, ever since his voice deepened.

"You should have seen her….when she saw the bombs fall over Atlanta? It broke her, Carl. It broke her. We never knew for sure. We thought you and the other students might have been on the road when it happened, or that you could have been in the city, already. We didn't know. But we never….I convinced her to leave. I convinced her we didn't have time to look through the whole damn school. So it wasn't on her. It was on me."

For a moment, a pin could drop and Carl would have heard it. The entire table is enraptured in the little drama playing out before them. But Carl is tired, so utterly tired, and his entire life has been turned upside down. So the only eyes he really notices are Henry's.
The golden-haired little boy is old enough to understand the gist of what they're talking about, even if he's never heard the full context behind it. He's old enough to know what it's like to lose the people you love. And he's looking at Carl expectantly, like anything Carl is about to say is right. He's looking up to Carl.

Carl isn't a little kid anymore. He hasn't been a kid for a while, regardless of what Shane or his father thinks. So it's time Carl stopped acting like the little boy that was left behind at school, and start acting like the person Henry and Benjamin think he is.

"Sometimes people die." He repeats dully, Henry's eyes still meeting his. "And sometimes bad things happen, no matter how much we try. It was just a screwed up situation. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't....it wasn't anybody's." He says dully.

But it is my fault. He thinks, the words at the tip of his tongue. It's my fault for not being smarter, for having gone into that basement at all. For having left the bunker in search for food. For having lied to Negan, for having hidden who I was from Dad. For leaving Sherry back in the forest.

But with Henry's eyes on his, he doesn't say any of that. He doesn't say any of it at all.

He still thinks it.

Running away from uncomfortable dinner conversations is getting rather repetitive. But to his credit, Shane had left the table first, and then his father after him, so at this point, Carl doesn't care what anyone else thinks. He tries to pretend none of this exists, and leans back on the rooftop, using his hat to shield his eye. The sun peeks just above the horizon, low enough to paint the sky in a multitude of hues, but just high enough to blind him. But even with a glare in his eye, the view from the top of the stable is stunning. Almost stunning enough to distract him from everything that just happened.

His hands are still shaking, much to his annoyance. He grabs a cigarette out of his pocket, grimacing at the coughing fit he's sure he's going to fall into.

"I didn't know you smoked." A soft voice sounds below, and he flicks his gaze downwards. He nearly rolls his eyes when he sees who it is.

Sophia. Great. Just who he needed to help calm his nerves.

"I don't. But I'm thinking of startin'." He growls, flicking the lighter. But he struggles to light it, his hand still shaking. Sophia is quicker than he gives her credit for, hoisting herself up on the same hay bales he'd used and climbing onto the stable's roof. At first, he expects her to scold him, but instead she reaches towards the lighter with an open palm. "Here, let me." She urges.

He lets her light it, and sure enough, as soon as he's taken his first puff, he's nearly coughing as much as he had when he had first tried Sherry's fag, once upon a time. Sophia cocks her head to the side.

"Where did you even get that from?" She questions. Carl shrugs, looking across the pastures rather than meeting the girl's gaze. He can hear nickering beneath them, the horses not too keen on the strange noises above their heads.

"They grow some tobacco around here, in places the king don't go lookin'. Just traded it for some magazines I found." It was actually the skin mag Ben had found in the humvee, but he doesn't tell her that part. She nods.

"Mom smokes, sometimes, when she doesn't think I'm looking. I don't know why she bothers to
hide it now, she never did back when Dad was alive." Carl offers her a side glance.

"Do you?" He questions. She shrugs. "Just never picked up the habit. Tried a homemade joint that Ron made, one time. Don't tell Rick that, though, I think he'd have a stroke if he realized there are still plants growin' inside the gates. Enid probably still smokes them. She used to get high with him a lot."

Sophia's sudden talkativeness unnerves Carl, so he takes another puff and looks the other way.

"Why are you here?" He asks bluntly, coughing as he does. "Did Dad send you or something?"

She examines him closely, like a cat watching a canary. But then she shrugs, shaking her head. "Nobody sent me. I don't think they've figured out where you disappeared to, yet. But I brought something for you." She says, digging through her knapsack. She tosses something at him and he barely catches it in time. He blinks at it, and she grins. It's a pudding cup.

"You don't have to eat it in front of me or anything. Shane explained the whole suture thing. Well, as best as he could while he was still out of it, anyways. I just figured….I haven't exactly…." She trails off suddenly, opening her own pudding cup and spooning at its contents nervously. Carl shakes his head, speaking first.

"You don't have to feel bad about hating me. Daryl's a good guy, and he's in trouble because of what I did. I get it." He says, contemplating the pudding. He marvels at where she got it, not remembering having seen it in the cafeteria before.

"That's why I was so angry, I think. I wanted to hate you. But I don't."

When he doesn't reply, she continues on, her voice nearly as soft and hesitant as it had been when he first met her.

"Michonne said you figured it out, that they were using me to get you to talk more? That part's true. But I….you really weren't bad to hang out with, Carl. Honestly? I enjoyed hanging out with you more than I ever did Ron and Enid. When I first came to Alexandria and they were talking about video games and school drama it just….it was all so stupid and petty, and Ron was such a jerk. But with you, it was two birds with one stone, you know? I felt like I was doing something useful again, being more than just a stupid babysitter, and you were fun to talk to. Mom….she kept getting worried about it, telling me to be careful or I'd end up like her and Dad. My bio dad, I mean. And I kept telling her off, telling her that I was smarter than that."

Carl blinks. The idea that he had been the source of any arguments between Sophia and her mother is complete news to him.

"And when Negan came, and we found out who you were, it was like everything fell into place, you know? All my gut instincts about you were right. You were a good guy. Mom was wrong, and you had just been trying to help us all along….I kept defending you, even when everyone was in an uproar about it. Told them how you had always been respectful with me. And everything was falling into place. You were Rick's son, we were going to rescue you, we were going to show Negan who was boss, and everything was going to be ok, you know?"

"But when it fell apart, when you disappeared and they took Daryl…..it was like a slap in the face. You didn't….I know it wasn't your fault, I know that, but it felt like….it was like the universe was laughing at me for letting myself care about you, like if I had been more standoffish, maybe Daryl
would be safe and none of this would have ever happened. And now…now, whenever we siege Sanctuary, there's a possibility that even if he survives that long, they'll kill him or he'll die in the attack. And I was just….I was so angry that it was all falling apart, and I needed someone to blame. So there you go. There's that." She says decisively, nodding as she dips into her pudding cup.

Carl is flabbergasted, trying to digest this slew of information all at once.

"There's….that?" He repeats dumbly. She rolls her eyes.

"Yeah. There's that. I messed up. It's a done deal, I can't take it back. What you said back there, about how sometimes bad things happen and it's nobody's fault? You were right. Daryl….he kept blaming himself for Glenn dying, but that wasn't on him. It was on Negan. So what happened to Daryl? That isn't on you, either. I shouldn't have lashed out at you. And now you're feeling bad, and I want you to feel better. So eat your pudding cup. Think of it as a peace offering."

He blinks blearily at it, nodding. "Thanks, Soph."

"And what Shane said earlier? Don't let it get under your skin. He's a loudmouth. A well-intended loudmouth, but a loudmouth. Everyone on Alexandria's side of things knows that."

Carl shrugs, taking another puff of the cigarette. His hands have stopped shaking, but whether it's from the nicotine or from Sophia's reassurance, he's not sure. "It's not his fault. I guess I was like you, I just wanted to blame somebody. Hell, I held a knife to his throat earlier today, so if anything, he should be mad at me."

"Did he deserve it?" Sophia asks, her head cocked to the side. He shrugs.

"No. He just woke me up out of a nightmare. I didn't know who he was, got spooked, was all."

"I have them, too." She says softly. "Nightmares, I mean."

He takes another puff of the cigarette. Even with the disgusting taste and the occasional coughing fit, he's beginning to understand the draw to it. He feels calmer now. Not just calmer than he had been after the disastrous dinner, but calmer than he normally does when talking to people, at all.

"Hadn't had 'em, in a while. But ever since I came to the Kingdom, they've been comin' back."

He admits, fidgeting with his gloves.

"Mine were like that, too." Sophia says, softly. "When I was just focused on surviving? It was just another crappy thing that happened. But in Alexandria, when I was someplace safer and I wasn't going hungry….that's when they decided to hit me." She says, her own eyes glazed. She looks off into the sunset, biting her lip. "And the stupid thing about it all? Out of all the horrible things we've seen, out of everything we've been through, it's about something small that happened at the beginning of all of this. Wouldn't even phase me if it happened now, but back then? I was just a stupid, scared little girl."

"I was stupid and scared, alright. But it wasn't….I was older, I should have handled it better. I should have known better." He says, watching smoke curl as he breathes out. "I'm sorry I don't remember you." He says suddenly, turning to her. "I remember the fight, that those boys were picking on somebody. But I don't even remember what you looked like."

"That's probably for the best. Ratty clothes. Short hair, freckles. I never got rid of those, but I was so awkward back then."

"I'm still awkward. So you win the puberty prize, I guess." Carl says, smiling. Sophia shakes her
"You're not awkward. You remind me of Daryl, sometimes, actually. Once you're done being puffed up and gruff, you're actually kind of sweet."

"Sweet. Lord, don't let Shane hear you say that, he'll never let me live it down." Carl guffaws, shaking his head. Sophia rolls her eyes.

"You've always stood up for other people, though, even back then. Me? I just watched Dad beat on Mom night after night, and didn't do a damn thing about it." She says darkly. She gets a strange look in her eye, and then reaches out towards Carl, her palm outstretched. "Mind if I take a puff?"

"Didn't you say you were trying to convince your mom that I'm not a bad influence?" Carl asks, his eyebrow raised.

"If you're the 'bad boy', that would make Prince Benjamin the 'golden boy'. And since you got him out of trouble, something tells me it's the other way around." Carl hands the cigarette to her, smirking as she coughs nearly as much as he did.

"Nah, he'll always be the golden boy. But he actually deserves the title. Pretty sure running away on that stupid ass mission is the first rebellious thing the kid's ever done in his life. And that was to get his Dad's body back, so I can't really fault him, on that."

"Huh. Guess he can join the dead dad club, too, then." Sophia retorts breezily, handing the cigarette back to him. Stupidly, foolishly, he feels a little giddy when it touches his lips again. Something about the fact that it touched her lips before his…crap. He's thinking with his dick. He has to stop thinking with his dick.

"Yeah, guess so." Carl agrees, trying to distract himself. He thinks of what fat Joey looks like naked. He thinks of what bitters look like naked. But then he's thinking….he's thinking about what other people look like naked, and he knows he shouldn't. So instead he tries to blink all of it away and think of nothing at all, shifting uncomfortably as he looks out over the pastures. The sun has finally dipped below the horizon, enough to where he can look at the sky without being blinded, at last. Sophia leans forward, resting her chin on her knees.

"Daryl calls me 'lil cherokee', sometimes. When we were on the road, I got shot in a hunting accident. It's how we met Maggie, actually. I was watching this deer, but one of the guys from his farm was hunting it and didn't know I was there." She says, pulling down her blouse's collar. She pulls it just a few inches below her collarbone, revealing an old scar.

"I dropped my doll when it happened. Another little girl had given it to me on the road, before her family left for Birmingham. She was nice to me, and I'd never had a friend before, so it meant a lot, you know? So when I woke up, I pitched an absolute, hysterical fit about it. And Daryl, bless his heart, he…." She trails off for a moment, fighting to keep her voice from breaking.

"He went tearin' through the woods lookin' for that stupid doll. But he got hurt really trying to find it, and I felt terrible about it. All of this commotion was over me getting hurt, me acting like a stupid, scared little girl and running from biters on the highway. So when I started to feel better, I went and picked some flowers for him, to thank him for getting my doll back. He said they were cherokee roses. They were a symbol of hope, meant to comfort Native American mothers who lost their children on the trail of tears. And so I….I gave Lori one. For you." She says softly, looking a little guilty as she side-eyes Carl. "I made her cry. Everyone thought it was sweet, but it was stupid of me, really. To put her on the spot like that."

"But the thing is, that's the day I keep having nightmares about. Because….the place we were staying, Maggie's dad thought walkers were just sick people. He was keeping them trapped in his
barn, but he wouldn't kill any of them. Shane went ballistic when he found out, so surprise surprise, he caused a scene and tore the barn open to put 'em all down. And there....inside.....it was the entire Morales family. They never....they never made it to Birmingham. And that little girl, the one that gave me the doll? She just stared at me, with those dull grey eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen a child biter, before. And it was someone I knew. Rick put her down. And then he put her parents down. But he couldn't....he couldn't put their little boy down. So Shane did it for him." She breathes deeply, taking a shuddering breath.

"It was just....it was a hard day. So when we buried them, I buried the doll with her. I promised myself that I would stop being that scared little girl. So I started beggin' Daryl to teach me how to use throwing knives, started learnin' how to use those hatchets. And when my hair grew out, I started wearing it in pigtails, so he started callin' me a 'lil cherokee'. I used to be annoyed by it, I thought it was insensitive, you know? I don't even have a drop of Indian blood in me. But now....now I miss it. And I can't....I could joke about the dead dad club before, because it was a good thing Daddy died, honestly. But Daryl? If he dies, I can't....I don't.....I'll just be that scared little girl again."

Carl doesn't know what to say to all of that, or how to respond. A hug would be too forward, and maybe even unsafe on the roof. So instead he just leans into her shoulder, hoping his actions will come across as comforting as he means them. To his relief, it seems to work, the girl able to swallow back the tears building in her eyes. Wordlessly, he offers her his cigarette once more, which she eagerly takes, sending smoke into the lilac sky.

They sit in silence for a moment, each keeping to their own thoughts. With neither of them sure of what to say, he finally grabs the pudding cup, opening it and taking the spoon she had given him.

"You don't have to eat it in front of me if you don't want to---" She starts to protest, but he waves his hand dismissively.

"Naw, that's....I mean, it's gross when I eat, so that's part of it, I guess. But....I'm just weird about food in general. Even before Negan screwed up my mouth."

"You seemed to handle tuna ok." She jokes, watching as he fidgets with the spoon.

"Tuna's crap food, though. I can handle that. Dogfood, beans, canned stuff. Give me any of that? And I'll gulf it down no problem. But anytime I eat good, bad things happen, or it's because of something bad I did. Just makes my stomach twist up." He lifts the spoon, watching as the vanilla jiggles.

"That guy I went to North Carolina with, who owned the bunker? When we got there, the place hadn't been touched. He had been so sure that his family would be there to meet us, that they all had this plan to go there if anything went wrong, but none of 'em made it. So when I was eating my pudding, he ate a bullet." He admits softly. This time, Sophia is the one that leans into him, but he feels dull as he recites the story.

"Only...he shot it in his mouth, right? So he missed the brain. Shot off a large part of his upper pallet, even blew off part of his nose. So he was still alive, bleedin' out, screaming in agony, and he kept beggin' for me to kill him. I don't even know if I was even thirteen yet, I might've still been twelve. But I did it. He was the first person that wasn't turned that I ever killed. I ate off his family's food for months, but eventually I still ran out. So I went scavenging, and who did I run into? The fucking claimers. If I had just figured out how to get more food, ate more worms, or just dealt with being hungry, I never would have run into them. And then, later, with the Saviors, whenever I ate good, it was because I made Negan happy or cause I was doin' pickups. And now, with Mom.....it's the same damn thing. If I hadn't gone into that basement, if I had just toughed it
out a little longer, then who knows? I might have met you on the road." He examines the pudding, his stomach still flipping as he contemplates sticking it in his mouth. He can't look Sophia in the eye, not over this. Not over something as whiny and stupid as this.

"It's stupid. People are starvin' left and right, and here I am whinin' over spaghetti an' soup. But eatin' good….even without the damn cheek, something just feels wrong about it. Like I don't deserve it, or that it's going to make everything fall apart. Makes me lose my appetite."

"It's not stupid." She says softly, looking into the sky. After a moment's pause, she continues. "I'm still afraid of men." She admits suddenly.

Carl looks at her cautiously, but she's quick to correct him. "Not of you. I mean….older men. The claimers, they---they didn't even get far, with me. Had me pinned on the ground, were startin' to pull my pants down. But your Dad, he just." She shakes her head, laughing nervously at the memory.

"Your Dad? Daryl? Our people? They're mine. They're family. I know they're safe. But when we first came to Alexandria? I kept flinchin' if any of the older guys so much as looked my way. Felt like I did when Daddy was still alive, like I was always expectin' a beatin' or for one of them to jump me out of nowhere."

_I know the feeling._ He thinks to himself, taking one last drag of the cigarette. He watches the embers dwindle as he puts the butt out, the sky nearly dark.

"I'm still waitin' for that beatin', too." He says.

"You losin' half your face don't count?" She teases. He shrugs.

"I expected that. Didn't expect it to happen when it did, but I knew I wasn't gettin' out of that situation without takin' a beatin' from somebody. But here? In the Kingdom? With a tiger and a magical well and knights and princes? With people looking up to me? None of it's gonna last. I don't...I don't miss Negan because I think he's a good guy. I miss him because, as fucked up as it is, for a while, he was safe, and I didn't have to make any hard decisions for myself, I just followed orders. I knew what to expect from him. He wasn't gonna leave me at a school, or put a bullet to his head and leave me alone in that bunker. If I screwed up or didn't follow orders, then yeah, I got a beating. But I knew it was coming. The rules made sense. This...this waiting? Just waiting for the dominoes to fall? Not knowing if screwin' up means being put in a time out or being fed to Shiva? That's what's making the dreams come back."

"What do you dream about?" She asks softly, curious as she is wary. He thinks about telling her. About how he dreams of dead little boys and their crying mothers. How he dreams of final warnings and bullets flying through the air. Or how the same things happen to Henry, to Benjamin, to Sophia, and that he's always the one behind the trigger.

But he doesn't say any of that. He doesn't answer her at all. He just takes the entire pudding cup, knocking it back like it's a shot of liquor.

"Ghosts." He says at last, ignoring how the pudding oozes through his sutures. "I dream about ghosts."

Author's Notes: So…writing conversation scenes isn't my strong suit, and this chapter was nothing but that, so please let me know your thoughts below, both good and bad! I hope this isn't coming across as too long-winded, but now that a lot of important players are coming together for
the first time, there's a lot for them to hash out. We haven't even had as many father/son bonding scenes as I wanted, yet. But no worries! We'll be back to your regularly scheduled plot movement in a bit.

Also, I'm not trying to push smoking as romantic or cool, just trying to depict realistic, unhealthy coping mechanisms teenagers in the apocalypse might have.

Also, holy crap. I think this update just made this story go past the 100k mark. I've never done that with a story, ever. So fingers crossed that I don't jinx this. I wouldn't have gotten this far without all of you! As usual, please leave feedback in the comments, it really does help! Both with motivation, and keeping tabs on making sure what's in my head is translating on paper correctly.
Recap as Requested: AU Timeline Differences:

- Due to a misunderstanding from a note left behind by evacuating teachers, Carl was never picked up from school at the beginning of the outbreak.
- Abandoned, he traveled with various groups at first, eventually ending up alone and targeted by the Claimers. He was physically and sexually abused.
- When escaping the Claimers, Carl ran into the Saviors. Negan saved Carl and killed his pursuers. Carl continued to serve the Saviors until the events of this story, earning the nickname 'Patch'.
- Instead of telling Sophia to hide, Rick stayed with her after she ran from the highway due to his concern over another lost child. As a result, Sophia lived.
The Morales family were the ones trapped in Hershel's barn, not Sophia. This event motivated her to learn how to defend herself.

Rick was adamant about Carl's survival, whereas Lori grieved and accepted that he was dead. Rick thought about leaving the group to search for him, but ultimately stayed due to lack of leads and Lori's pregnancy.

Rick and company have had their own run-in with the Claimers. Sophia was threatened, but unharmed. The remaining Claimers were killed by Rick's group.

Events within Alexandria have unfolded differently, with the Wolves becoming a problem the same time as Negans. Deanna was killed by Peter Anderson.

Shane is still alive. He was separated from Rick's group after Woodbury, and was under the impression that Judith was dead. He found Abraham's note about the new world needing Rick Grimes, not Morgan, and came to DC searching for Rick. Having not found Rick, he joined The Kingdom.

Carl has run into Commonwealth soldiers scavenging a helicopter. Richard was killed by the Saviors instead of Benjamin. This happened before Rick's arrival instead of afterwards.

Daryl was taken as a hostage by the Saviors well after he was taken in the show.

Sherry is missing, but unlike the show, foul play is suspected. She is pregnant with Negan's child.

Please let me know if you think this recap is too long, annoying, or if it's super helpful. It was requested by some readers and is a fantastic idea, but it will get lengthier the longer the story goes on due to timelines diverging.

Chapter 14

Today is the day of the memorial. It's the same day that King Ezekiel will announce whether the Kingdom will go to war.

It's also the day that a quarter of the town wakes up hungover.

The combination of those things makes for an interesting morning, especially for someone who hadn't been drinking. As an early riser, Carl makes a point of keeping an eye on the place, as the guards seem too hungover to do it, themselves. It's not that he suspects his father of anything, but he doesn't know his father's people very well. Who's to say one of them isn't actually a traitor? That one of them won't take advantage of the populace's inebriated state to stage an attack?

The grey tabby that roams the hallways seems unimpressed with his paranoia, flicking her tail as she rests comfortably on a windowsill. He doesn't know her name, only that she's unusually lazy today, her belly filled with scraps from the feast rather than rats from the storeroom. She stares at him, and he stares right back at her.

He's seated in a small recreational area outside of the bunk rooms, one that people occasionally use to scarf down breakfast or play boardgames. The visitors were put in the rooms beside Carl, likely for the same reason he'd been-----so they would be closer to the guards' quarters. But the arrangement is pointless, because right now, there isn't a guard in sight. So when Carl hears a door creaking, he looks up suddenly, his fingers lingering near his belt.

But there is no threat. There's only Michonne, uncharacteristically wearing a tank top and pajama shorts. No bra. She practically looks like a college student sneaking out of a dorm, a far cry from the stone-faced, sometimes teasing guardian he had become familiar with. He's surprised that she would let her guard down like this, while sleeping in a stranger's court. But then again, he's also paranoid enough to sleep in a corner with his boots on, so he supposes he might be overreacting.
He swears that the cat raises its eyebrow at him.

Do cats even have eyebrows?

For a moment, Michonne is startled to see him, but her expression completely changes the moment she lays eyes on the feline.

Ok, so this is the most feminine he's ever seen her. She practically ignores him as she approaches the tabby, cooing and outstretching her fingers to let the animal sniff her. And then, the same cat that has ignored and judged him the entire time he's been in the Kingdom has the gall to rub her ankle affectionately.

He swears it looks smug.

"Never took you for a cat person." He says, watching the two of them. Michonne grins back, practically glowing as she pets the animal.

"Most people don't. You a dog person, then?"

"Don't know. Never really had either."

"Thing about cats...... " She says slowly, rubbing the animal's chin, "... is they do things in their own time. Sometimes they're cuddly. Sometimes you cuddle them and it's too much, so they bite you back. But if you let them do their thing and don't get too worked up over things like that? They'll love you for life." She says softly, still cooing.

"Feeding them helps, I've heard." Carl says smugly, smirking, noticing how the cat is sniffing the air. "You gave her scraps last night, didn't you?"

Michonne shrugs. "Might have. Same thing worked on you, once upon a time, if I recall."

"Are you comparing me to a cat?"

"No, but I am comparing Shane to a cat." She says smartly, still petting the feline. As predicted, the cat has decided it has had enough, and with a flick of its ears, goes to swipe at her. Michonne shrugs, withdrawing her hand.

Carl isn't amused by the analogy. "If this is about yesterday, I'm not mad at him." He says flatly, crossing his arms. Michonne nods, giving him an approving look.

"Good, just make sure he knows that. I've seen that man as an angry drunk, before, but I've never seen him as a crying one. Rick had to put him to bed and everything. The man's afraid he's messed things up, with you."

Carl shrugs. "He's afraid he messed things up with Dad, you mean. Especially since Dad looked ready to pummel him last night. Shane only looks after me because I'm Rick's kid."

"Shane and I never liked each other from day one." Michonne says, taking a seat beside him. "He was suspicious of the lady with the swords. I didn't like his temper. He tied me up and took me to the Governor, and I gave him a pretty good beating when I escaped. We've never seen eye to eye. So when I say he thinks of you as a nephew he never had? I mean it."

Carl raises an eyebrow. "He tied you up? Really?"

"It's a long story. Your father's grief causes him to shut down. Shane's grief causes him to make
impulsive decisions. I was the dangerous newcomer, so delivering me to the Governor was one of those decisions. Probably the only time him and Merle agreed about anything."

"Merle?"

"Daryl's brother. Imagine Daryl, but where all the white trash stereotypes are actually true. Crackhead, racist, temper, potty mouth, issues with the law, you name it. But he loved Daryl, enough to work alongside Shane if it meant protecting his little brother."

Carl fidgets, chewing at his fingernails in thought. "I shut down too, I think. If I don't have somethin' to do, I just blank out for a while. In a fight? It's fine, don't have time to think about it. But after it's done? Like when I was in the cell, at Sanctuary? Havin' nothin' to do drives me nuts."

"Me, too." Michonne admits, looking at him knowingly. "After the outbreak, I lost myself for a long time. I was just walkin' with the walkers, survivin' day by day, but I wasn't anymore alive than they were. Took good people to bring me back. People like your father. You're a lot more like him than you realize."

Carl harrumphs, rolling his eyes and watching the cat. She's still judging him.

"He's trying, you know." Michonne says softly. "He's spent the last few years being a leader and a father to everyone else, trying to make up for a sin he never committed. He puts on a good face, but when it comes to uncomfortable conversations? He's just as awkward as you are." She smiles, leaning over and poking him in the ribs. Carl scowls, but can't help the smile that comes across his own face. He shakes her head at her antics.

"I just don't know what to say to him. Or anybody, really. Keep expectin' all of this blow back up in my face, for Sophia to poison me or somethin'. For one of y'all to turn and tattle to the Saviors."

"Because of what happened to Buttons? And anything you cared about with Negan?" Michonne asks knowingly, her chin bowed as she tries to make him meet her gaze.

"It's not just the damn horse. It's...... it always happens. Open up, talk about crap like this, and it always gets used against you somehow. It's easier just to keep it in."

"The only reason I made it this far? The only reason any of us have? Is because of the people we met along the way." She says firmly. "That doesn't mean there aren't bad people out there, or that the people we love won't hurt us. But we can't survive this on our own, not anymore. Living alone, not trusting anyone, not letting anyone in? Do that, and you're just another walker."

The cat has decided it has had enough of Michonne's dramatic speech, and instead struts over, rubbing at the woman's ankle again. The edges of Michonne's lips twitch in amusement.

It's at this moment another door creaks open, and Carl straightens in his chair, having been far too relaxed and distracted in his conversation with the woman. He hasn't been on his guard, hasn't been watching like he should have.

He doesn't know what he expected, but his father walking out of Michonne's room in only his boxers isn't it.

His father blinks sleepily at the two of them, but within seconds he's wide awake, his mouth agape and his ears flushing red. The man has a wadded up shirt in his hand, one that, flustered, he hastily struggles to pull over his head. Carl looks at Michonne. Then he looks at his dad. Then he looks back at Michonne.
He didn't see *that* one coming.

"Carl, I...... we weren't keeping it from you... I wasn't trying to… I kept meaning to talk to you---"

Carl has never had the desire to think about his father's sex life. But now he's pondering over the mornings his father had emerged in a similar state of undress from his parents' bedroom, over his father's reaction over Ron's mother, and over how utterly *weird* it is that Michonne has seen both Rick *and* Carl naked, from back when he was injured and couldn't even take a piss on his own. It's all bringing up mental images he's quick to be rid of. He wrinkles his nose.

"It's, uh, cool, Dad. It's cool." He mutters, surprised by the honesty in his words. Michonne elbows him.

"See what I mean?" Michonne smirks, rolling her eyes. "It's like I said. Bring up an uncomfortable topic? And he's *just* as awkward as you."

---

When Carl was a child, he always thought it was supposed to rain at funerals.

The apocalypse had been quick to correct him. As the crowd makes its way to the makeshift graveyard, the sun is still shining, horses are still nickering, and even that grey tabby they had left behind is nonplussed by the whole affair. When the epidemic started, there hadn't been a rapture; nothing had blotted out the sun from the sky. Even with a congregation of people gathered together, even with the series of bodies rotting in the ground, the world still spun on. The world hadn't stopped for death.

It isn't nearly as solemn of an affair as Carl had been expecting, either, but then again, it isn't under usual circumstances. For many of the Kingdomers gathering here, the fact that there are seventeen bodies to bury instead of one is actually a *good* thing. They can finally put their loved ones to rest. Having a body to bury rather than hastily leaving a loved one behind to a walker herd was a luxury, nowadays.

But there is still tension in the air. The large swaths of civilians are unclear about exactly *what* happened to Richard, and everyone that knows what happened is looking to King Ezekiel to see what the town is going to do about it. But the king's face doesn't give anything away, his expression as stony as Shiva's alongside him.

The good thing about the amicable weather is that it allows anyone that's hungover to look formidably solemn for the occasion. Shane has taken full advantage of this fact, wearing sunglasses to hide his bloodshot eyes. Carl can't tell if the other man is willing to make eye contact, but even with Michonne's words still ringing in his ear, he knows now isn't the time to broach the matter with the ex-deputy. So instead, Carl ignores the man, focusing on the people before him.

King Ezekiel and other important players gather to the front, Shane among them. The humvee hasn't been moved, and while the crowd seems startled by the sight of it, the king stands on its hood so he can easily be seen from afar. He motions to the town choir, who softly sing various hymns. It surprises Carl, as he has never known Ezekiel to be a religious man. But the crowd is moved by the music, especially when a violinist joins in.

For ten minutes or so, Ezekiel leads a moment of silence for the fallen. He stands silently on the hood of the humvee, and his people follow suit, some remaining family members moving to the front or talking quietly among themselves. But at last, he raises his hand, and what few people that have been talking fall quiet, waiting to hear their leader's words.
Carl has almost forgotten the sheer respect King Ezekiel can command without uttering a single word. These people are nearly as revenant in their love for the man as Sanctuary is for Negan, but while Negan's worship is founded on brute strength and fear, Ezekiel's is founded on their belief in the magical world he has created for them. But from the pained expression on Ezekiel's face, that belief is about to be shattered.

"Over three centuries ago, men and women came to these lands with a dream. A dream that they could create a city on a hill, a righteous land that their people could be safe and happy in. A place to raise their children in freedom. And since my arrival here, I have done my best to recreate that dream. *Drink from the well, replenish the well.* Give back as much as we take. A land without oppression, without violence, where people can begin to rebuild again."

"But that city on a hill was not perfect, in the beginning. Even in America, freedom often depended on the color of your skin. And people, good people who disagreed with slavery still stood by and let it happen for years, for fear of tearing their country apart. They feared war, and justly so. Seventeen men lay dead before us, and that is no small thing. Sixteen of these men were killed during the beginning of our settlement here, dying for a chance to help their loved ones and families. They were consumed by the dead. It was my call, my decision, and they died for it. I swore to myself to do all I could to prevent anyone from dying under my lead again. But in doing so…...I have become little different than those men who stood by and watched their fellow countrymen be enslaved."

There's a murmur in the crowd at this. Below Ezekiel, Shiva paces on her chain, although if it's because she's anxious or because she can sense the crowd's anxiety, Carl isn't sure. Ezekiel's attention is drawn by her movement, and he frowns sadly.

"Shiva is beautiful and proud, as we are. But she has been caged for too long to survive on her own. It is a fate I have almost bestowed upon my own people. For while these sixteen men were killed by the dead, Richard was killed by the living. He was killed by a group of people who call themselves the 'Saviors'."

Holy shit, Ezekiel is doing this. He's actually doing this. The guards exchange looks between one another, shifting uncomfortably, not knowing how the people will react.

"This is not the first time we have had dealings with the Saviors. They have threatened violence, they have threatened to rain fire down upon us, and they have the weapons to do it. They are….more powerful than us. If they wanted to kill our people, they could. Which is why for over a year, we have been providing them with excess food to stave off their anger. They have been holding us at ransom, and it is a ransom I have paid to avoid bloodshed. In exchange, they promised us freedom, that they would never step a foot inside our walls. They would not kill anyone as long as we cooperated... but that promise is a broken one."

"And it won't stop with Richard. Their treatment of Carl Grimes, of other communities...... it only proves they will not stop there. I withheld this from you, because I wished to prevent unrest, prevent someone from lashing out at the Saviors and threatening our tentative peace. But now I realize that I have simply bound you in a gilded cage, just as Shiva once was."

"These men and women, all seventeen of them, died so that we might live, so that we might build the Kingdom we envisioned. To ignore what the Saviors have done, to ignore the threat of them looming over our kingdom…. it is to ignore their sacrifice. And by that, I cannot abide. America once learned that a lone city on a hill was not attainable. It is not a dream we can accomplish by ourselves. We have lost friends this day, and in past days, but we have gained new ones, as well. Other communities that have been threatened by the Saviors, who have had more than one man
killed by their brutality. We cannot build our dream alone. But together, united, we can survive this. We can ensure that our loved ones' sacrifices don't go unheeded."

People are scared, that much is clear. But they aren't sad, they aren't angry. Their belief in King Ezekiel hasn't been shattered.

This might work. This might actually work.

Ezekiel turns his head, smiling fondly towards Benjamin. "I slept long and hard upon this decision. But I was reminded of what Tobias Miller, one of the men we are burying here today, always said. 'When someone asks you to be the hero: be the hero.' So that is exactly what we are going to do."

The choir continues to sing as King Ezekiel steps down from the humvee. He takes a fist full of the freshly unearthed soil, gently dropping it over one of the covered bodies. The flags Carl had grabbed from the armory are still visible from beneath the soil, and the king turns back to the crowd.

"They died as soldiers, and we will bury them as such. And I fear that we will bury many more, before the year is out. But we will celebrate the living, protect the living, and together, we will build a new world worth living for."

One by one, people step forward, taking a fist full of dirt and spreading the soil across the bodies. Some have brought flowers, tossing them in as well. But it's what Henry has brought, what the little boy has placed in the grave that draws Carl's attention.

It's Henry's drawing of Richard, complete with the superhero outfit and red cape.

Slowly, as more people move through, the drawing is covered in dust, the scowling caricature put to rest along with its namesake. And as Carl meets King Ezekiel's gaze, his jaw set and his eyes glazed, he thinks the king has finally put him to rest, too.

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During Carl's stay at the Kingdom, any mention of his involvement with the Saviors had been spoken about in hushed whispers, with guards carefully trying to glean information without directly disobeying their king's order not to do so. Which is why, now that they're seated in a makeshift war room, Carl is overwhelmed with the millions of questions suddenly flying his way.

How do they operate? Uh….can you be a bit more specific?

How many outposts do they have? Five, one for each community.

How are pickups scheduled? However Negan wants them scheduled, that's how.

What are the most common routes? Carl has only ever visited one or two of the outposts, so he doesn't know. They should check the papers and maps he brought with him.

What kind of weaponry do they have? Once again, they should check the papers he brought with him. You know, the one he had been trying to get them to look at since day one? The one that lists all of the Saviors' safehouses and weapons rosters?

This is what he's here for, it's what he's been hoping for. But with a barrage of questions being shot his way all at once, he becomes increasingly aggravated as the morning wears on, biting his lip to keep his mouth shut as people toss plans back and forth. It isn't until Jesus speaks up that he's snapped out of his daze.
"You said there were originally five outposts, right? One for each town. But there are three of us…..so who are the other two?"

Jesus's quick catch causes every head in the room to swivel in his direction, realization dawning in their eyes. And of course Jesus would notice that sort of detail. He's apparently the one who introduced the communities to each other, after all. But Carl bites his thumb as he thinks, quick to shake his head.

"It doesn't matter. They won't help you. The junkyard people will turn on you in a heartbeat. They're shady enough to creep Negan out. It's more of an outpost to watch over them; he doesn't even really control them like he does you three. They're more like….unwillingly trading partners."

"Junkyard people?" Rick questions, his eyes sharp as Carl nods. "Creepy or not, the enemy of our enemy might just be our friend."

But Carl is quick to shake his head. "I'm telling you, you can't trust them."

"Because they're weird?" Jesus questions, his brow furrowed.

"Because they could be freakin' cannibals for all I know, they're that kind of weird. They speak like cavemen, and they're always asking Negan to trade goods in exchange for people. The few people Negan's been willing to give them, prisoners and the like, we never see them again. And if that was it, and we just had to deal with some weird, possibly cannibalistic folks to take Negan down? That'd be one thing. But they cheat and never keep their end of the bargain unless you're forcing them at gunpoint. So unless we're willing to give them actual people, my bet is they're just going to go to Negan and see if he has a better offer. Which he will."

A contemplative silence comes across the room then, with Rick's jaw tensing as he exchanges glances with the other leaders. But it's Jesus, as usual, whose evaluating eyes see past the distraction Carl's given them.

"That's the fourth community. What about the fifth?"

_Hallowbrant._

"There is no fifth community." Carl says flatly, hoping to put the matter to rest quickly. "Not anymore."

But the matter is not put to rest. In fact, his answer only draws every eye in the room. A dark-haired woman with bright orange sunglasses snaps up in her chair, her mouth agape as she nervously looks around.

"Negan…. he killed them?" Jesus questions solemnly. "All of them?" Carl swallows hard, shaking his head.

"No. It was…..it was Simon's call. Which is why your assassination suggestion earlier? It won't work. Negan is the only thing stopping the rest of them from running rampant. When Simon did that? Negan tore him a new one, nearly killed him for it. Negan values people as a resource, that's why he hates dealing with the junkyard folks. Negan only kills to make a point. But Simon? When he doesn't get his way, he just shoots whoever is in his way. You can't just take Negan down, you can't even just take Negan and Simon down. Someone else will step up in the power vacuum. They'll still be a problem. You have to take them all down."

"Are you suggesting that we kill _everyone_ in Sanctuary?" The preacher asks in horror, looking around the room to see if anyone else is actually entertaining the thought. When Carl doesn't
immediately answer, Father Gabriel presses forward.

"We're talking about genocide here. People you've lived with, people like you. And what about the women who've been forced into marriages? Or people that have been taken against their will, like Daryl?"

Carl shrugs, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. "I'm not tellin' you what to do. But what I am tellin' you is that as long as people live in that factory? They'll be a thorn in your side. That place isn't self-sustaining. The ground's ruined from all the chemical spills over the years. Either you kill 'em, or you take the survivors in. Anythin' else will just be kicking the can down the road."

Rick looks like he swallowed something nasty, his nose crunched in disgust as he rubs his temple. He looks pleadingly across to the different leaders, to his own people. "If we relived Terminus again…. would we still spare them?"

It's a reference only Rick's people understand, but they're quick to avert their eyes at mention of the subject. Rick clears his throat, beginning again. "If we had killed them, Bob and Otis would still be alive. It's the same damn thing over and over. If Negan had finished off the Claimers, we never would have even run into them. And then the Wolves."

"We just condemned Simon for doing the same exact thing we're talking about." The preacher exclaims. He looks around desperately for an ally, and finds one in the last person Carl expected.

"Morality aside, Father Gabriel has a point." Michonne says lowly, setting her hands down upon the table, broadening her shoulders.

"There's a reason why conquerors have taken prisoners of war throughout history. If we back them into a corner? If we lay siege and they know there's no way they're getting out of this alive? They will fight us tooth and nail. Negan isn't just more powerful than us because he has more men. He's more powerful because he knows how to manipulate his men, and we need to do the same. If we kill without mercy? If we act like them? Not only will they unite against us, but our own people will lose faith in what we're doing. If we're doing this, we need Sanctuary to turn on itself. And we need to be willing to take prisoners alive, to offer them a way out."

Michonne's appeal sends the room silent for a moment, offering a logical, harsh middle ground to two largely opposing views of thought.

"Do cannibals deserve a way out?" Maggie challenges her, raising her chin. "Does Negan?"

"We can hold trials." Ezekiel suggests. "Form a council between our communities, and decide their fates according to their crimes." While the idea sounds reasonable, Maggie shakes her head, venom in her voice.

"Negan dies. If we form a council, that's Hilltop's contingency. He's not getting out of this alive."

"We need to be careful of revenge…." Father Gabriel begins, but doesn't get far before he's interrupted again.

"I don't want revenge, I want my goddamn husband back, but we don't always get what we want, do we?" Maggie spits, her eyes dark as they are foreboding. "Negan dies. Everyone else, we can hear witnesses or whatever the hell we want to do, but he doesn't get that chance."

Carl listens to their words numbly, drawing into himself. He agrees with Maggie. But memories of laughing with the man, of joking around and receiving appreciative looks…. something about it
unsettles him. Carl wonders, briefly, if he could even survive a war trial. If they knew exactly the full extent of what he had done with the Saviors, whether they would still be so willing to forgive him.

He knows the answer.

_They wouldn't._

After a long, boring interrogation, Carl finally gleans some information of his own.

Alexandria intends to _militarize_ walkers. They have a large herd trapped in a nearby quarry, one that they can unleash at any time of their own choosing.

You know. Because why not?

Suddenly, the lack of biters around Alexandria and Rick's mysterious scavenging trips out into the forest are starting to make a _lot_ more sense.

The general idea is to lead the herd straight into the heart of Sanctuary. They'll use nearby buildings to surround the factory with snipers, keep the facility pinned down with as few men as possible, and then launch a surprise attack against all of the outposts at once, with roadblocks set up in between to keep them from assisting each other or their headquarters.

The goal behind this approach is to eliminate the Saviors' biggest advantage: their numbers.

It's a brilliant, innovative plan, but it's also a risky one, one that could go wrong in a million different ways. Every single attack would need to be successful for it to work, especially the siege against Sanctuary. What fighting men they do have will be stretched thin, and losing against even one outpost could be devastating. It's also relying on the ability of Rick's people to safely lead an entire herd of _biters_. One wrong move, one _traitor_, and the herd could inadvertently be unleashed against their own people.

And that's not even mentioning the fact that according to the other Alexandrians, there's a very real possibility that the biters trapped in the quarry are very close to getting out on their own.

So when Rick asks for opinions about the plan, Carl tells him as much.

"It's _risky_. And if we're going to pull this off, we have to keep the plan to just this war room. Nobody talks about it. When we start implementing it, we only tell each squad what their role in it is. If someone turns traitor, or gets captured, we need to control how much they can tell the Saviors. Because Negan knowing about that quarry? Who's to say he won't just unleash it and let them surround _you_? He wouldn't even have to lead them, if it's as close as you're sayin', just open up the blockage."

Rick is confident that his people can be trusted, but everyone concedes that Carl has a point. And Carl knows he does. _Because someone always snitches._

But there's another reason Rick has been waiting to implement his plan. There's been a limited supply of ammo, which they've been making up for by having that _Eugene_ guy manufacture himself. The same guy who had lied to them about a cure. Go figure.

"What about weapons? You said you need ammo, but are we good on guns?" Carl asks, confused. Rick smirks at this, sharing a knowing look with some of the other Alexandrians.
"We have some leftover from when we were attacked by the Wolves. They didn't have ammo, but they must have raided a military group at some point. Plenty of MREs, rifles, that kind of thing. There might not be enough for all of the Kingdom's men, but it's definitely enough for Alexandria and Hilltop, at least."

"How long can we safely hide them, though?" Michonne points out, casting a wary glance in Rick's direction. "Ron was with Sophia when she found those tunnels. If they bring him along on a pickup, he might think to look there."

Tunnels? Alexandria had secret tunnels, now? Regardless, Carl shakes his head. "You don't gotta worry about Ron. If he hasn't told them before, he sure as hell isn't gonna tell them now." He reassures them, chewing on his thumb.

"And what makes you so sure of that?" Michonne cocks her head to the side, her brows furrowed. "Because his head's bashed in, that's why." Carl says nonchalantly, still deep in thought. "Dead don't tell no tales, an' all that shit." It takes a moment for him to realize that he's caught everyone's attention again, with several people giving him wide-eyed looks.

"Ron's dead?" Sophia asks, blinking rapidly.

Oops.

He nods slowly. "Yeah. He...uh...he was the guard when I got out." He says warily. The implications of his words weigh heavily in the room as the others try to process it all. Surprisingly, it's someone who didn't even know Ron that speaks first.

"Do you......" Ben asks slowly, wide-eyed. "...do you bash people's heads in...... a lot?"

Carl looks around the room. The room looks back at him.

"Not lately." He admits, feeling a bit defensive. Shane snickers even as some of the others seem horrified, and Carl resists the urge to glare at the man.

Michonne clears her throat, nodding deeply. "Well, then. That's one less thing to worry about, at least." She admits shakily, taking a deep breath as she tries to change the subject. "But according to these rosters, we're still outgunned. How reliable is that humvee? It'd be nice to have an armored vehicle for some of this."

"Not very. The kids beat it all to hell, and it's low on gas." Shane answers for him, leaning back in his chair. "Makes sense, since the Guard was just usin' it for display purposes. And I can't tell if the damn thing is gas or diesel. Put the wrong kind in and we'll ruin it, maybe even blow it up. What we really need is a tank. Do the same thing the Governor did, tear right through their fences and blast a hole in the side of the factory walls."

"Yeah." Rick nods wearily, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. "A tank would be nice right about now."

Carl shifts his weight, a dangerous idea beginning to form in his mind. He swallows hard, looking across the crowd and gauging their reaction.

"Maybe we don't have a tank... but what about a cannon?"

All sixteen heads swivel in his direction. Again. The amount of times he's been on the receiving end of baffled looks today is getting ridiculous.
"And…. you know where we can get this cannon?" Shane asks incredulously, his head bobbing in disbelief. But Carl nods slowly, grinning from ear to ear. It must look frightening to the others, he knows. He can feel his sutures pulling from the movement, but he doesn't care.

"I know where we can get a dozen of them. But first----we're going to need some Mountain Dew."

They think he's crazy.

They're probably not wrong.

But the fact is that there are at least a dozen civil war cannons within a mile or two of Alexandria's border, and for a town that's about to go to war, trying to convince a ranger with a shotgun to hand them over isn't the riskiest thing Carl's ever done in his life. The Alexandrians seem convinced that Carl dreamed the place up, that it's some hallucination he concocted after his escape. Shane even points out how out of it Carl had been when he first arrived.

But Carl saw those cannons just as clearly as he saw that helicopter. And if he's noticed anything about Alexandria, it's that its civilians were pretty incompetent before Rick's arrival. So if you ask him, it's more likely that their scouts just screwed up. Badly.

So the war council makes a plan. They'll divide up into different groups, each focusing on a certain goal. One team will work with Eugene on finishing ammo production. One team will focus on finding and reaching out to other communities, one team will obtain weapons for the Kingdom, and one team will investigate Fort Ward.

And so before Carl knows it, the day is nearly over, and the Alexandrians are planning to leave soon.

He knows his father will leave with them.

He doesn't know if he's devastated or relieved by this. It's such an odd line to straddle, but here he is, watching as his father speaks to the woman in sunglasses in a hushed voice, no doubt making plans for when he eventually has to go. It's not clear whether Rick will be caught up in leading Alexandria or if he'll be joining one of the teams, but either way? He's leaving. And there's a very good chance that Carl won't be seeing him again, for a while. If ever.

Carl understands what his father meant, back at the showers. After all this time, after everything that's happened, he finally has his father back. But now that his father is here….it doesn't feel like anything's changed. Like he's still Rick, leader of Alexandria, not Dad, leader of their little house in Georgia.

But if Rick is good at doing anything, it's at doing his rounds. And once he's communicated with his people and delegated orders, his gaze flickers back to Carl, and Carl finds himself struggling not to duck under his father's gaze.

"Let's take a walk." Rick says, his eyes softening. The affection in his father's eyes doesn't do anything to relieve Carl's nerves. Let's take a walk.

That usually means a serious conversation is about to go down. And Carl doesn't do serious conversations. Carl follows orders, adds his input, and shuts up. Serious conversations usually lead to people getting killed, or arguments, and right now Carl can't handle his father leaving and-----

"I'm stayin' an extra day. I'll leave with you in the morning, if you're ok with it, that is." Rick says, plodding along the trail. It's one of the old school walkways, the sidewalk so old that it's paved in
brick rather than concrete. Carl nearly stops in his tracks at his father's words.

"Uh…..sure. Yeah, whatever. The rest of your group, are they…..?"

"They're goin' ahead and headin' back to Alexandria." Rick confirms firmly, his eyes on the trail rather than meeting Carl's eyes. "I'll meet up with them after we take a look at Fort Ward, tomorrow. Even now that we can track Negan's movements, someone needs to be there, keep people calm, keep supplies comin' in for tributes. Michonne's good at that. I've relied on her a lot lately, long before they took Daryl….."

There it is. That's the tone of a man that's dancing around a subject he wants to talk about, who's gearing up for a 'come to Jesus' meeting. It's the same tone he used when Carl had fought off those bullies, all those years ago. And it's the same tone of voice he used when Granny Mae died.

It's strange, being older and hearing that tone. When Carl was younger, his father was invincible. And even now, while his people look up to him with the same kind of reverence people held for Negan and Ezekiel, the man looks nearly unstoppable. But Carl is old enough now to see the cracks in his father's expression, the slump in his usually rigid posture. To see that Michonne was right. His father is utterly human, and while his tone is firm and wise, he's dancing around the subject because he's just as nervous about this conversation as Carl is.

"I….I nearly didn't stay. I wanted to give you your space, I thought----I thought after what you said to Negan, you'd want it. That you blamed me."

Carl isn't sure what he was expecting his father to say, but that certainly wasn't it. He blinks at the man, eyes widening as his brain struggles to catch up with Rick's reasoning.

"I don't….what….."

His last words to his father during his confrontation with Negan come circling back. He abandoned me. He left me. I didn't want anyone to know who I was because I hate him.

Oh.

"Dad, I don't---I never---I just said that to try to get Negan to back down. I never….if anything, I gave up on you. I thought you were dead. After I saw how overrun the hospital was, I just assumed it. Until I saw you in that execution circle, I never even….."

Rick sucks in a breath, nodding shakily with a watery smile. "Yeah, I figured that. After….after what you said to Shane, about blamin' Lori an' not me. I just… if you did? I wouldn't blame you, Carl. You've been through a lot, and I wasn't there to protect you. But if you'll have me, I'm here now. I'm not leavin. Not….not for good. We gotta get through this war, first, and we can't let Negan find out where you are. But after that? If you want to live with me, in Alexandria, the door is wide open. Findin' you is everything I ever wanted. And whatever's happened the last few years, whatever you think you've done? It doesn't matter. What matters is what we do from now on."

Carl wants to fall into the trap that is his father's offer. He does.

For once, he doesn't doubt that Rick is being genuine. He can see it in every ounce of his father's body language, in how watery his eyes are even as his jaw is set. But his father's words are too good to be true. They're words parents tell their children to reassure them that they're special and good and that the boogieman under the bed isn't real.

But the boogieman is real. And Carl knows from firsthand experience that he's not special, and he sure as hell isn't good.
"Don't make promises you can't keep." Carl mutters numbly, walking on. He's taller than his father now, but Rick easily keeps up with his strides. Carl is out of breath, still weak and out of shape from his time in the Saviors' cell. He needs to do more pig runs, maybe work with the Kingdom's construction team for a bit. He needs to do something that would make him feel like he's not gasping for air when he needs it most.

"Hey. I'm not. I mean it, Carl. You're always welcom-----"

"And what happens the first time I tick someone off, huh?" Carl says suddenly, stopping in his tracks. His father is taken aback, but that doesn't stop the words from tumbling from his mouth.

"The only thing that was stoppin' people from lynchin' me in Alexandria a few months ago was because they were afraid of Negan. And now with Ron dead, do you really think they'll accept me with open arms? I'm not----I'm not what you think I am, Dad. I'm not the little kid you took walks with anymore, and I'm not some 'poor, brainwashed child soldier', either. I knew what I was doing, and I still do. I'm not someone you're ever gonna be proud of."

"Is that why you didn't say who you were? You thought I'd be disappointed?" Rick asks softly, his eyes searching. The words send a lump into Carl's throat, and for all of the frustration that's building up and tearing within the teen's chest, he doesn't know how to respond. He expects his father to prod on, to find the words that are caught in Carl's throat and tear them out, but he doesn't.

"I'm not someone you're going to be proud of, either." His father says, sadly.

Carl can only blink at this, his brow furrowed. Rick sighs deeply, taking in the scenery. "I remember those walks. But...do you know why we started takin' them?"

Carl shakes his head, trying to swallow that lump in his throat. Rick continues.

"Parenting didn't come with a guide. They just stuck you in your mama's arms, and left us to figure out how to take care of this tiny, vulnerable little baby by ourselves. When we first took you home, I remember being so...so terrified about what to do. And that feelin' never completely went away, even when you got older. I was always afraid of sayin' the wrong thing, doin' the wrong thing, of lettin' you down. But those walks? You'd get all your energy out, and whatever was on your mind, you'd just let it out. You were a little chatterbox. You'd toddle along, and look up at me with these big ol' eyes like I was invincible while you were babblin'. But I wasn't, I was clueless."

"But those walks....they'd help me work through things, too. And whatever was goin' on, whatever happened at school, we'd talk through it, and it'd always work out, in the end. And this? Dealin' with people, leadin' communities? It's the same thing. These people need someone to look up to, someone to make the hard decisions for them. And I don't always know the right thing to do, but I do it, anyways. And sometimes...sometimes I make the wrong choices. Sometimes I make mistakes. It's part of it. People have died because of me, just like those men we buried this mornin' died because of Ezekiel. And as a leader, as a father, I've had to live with that."

The man takes a long, nearly shuddering sigh before he speaks again.

"I should have realized it was you." Rick says at last, sounding at least a decade older than what he really is. Carl swallows hard, shaking his head.

"No...... Dad, that wasn't your fault. I didn't want you to know. I hid----"

"You reminded me of you." Rick interrupts, startling the teen. "When I thought you were Patch."

"You...... what?"
Rick smiles wearily, turning to the bewildered teen. "When I lost your mama...... I lost myself, for a while. I... I was seein' things, hearin' things that weren't there. Your mama was dead an' gone, but I was talkin' to her just like you and me are right now. And she wasn't the only one. I talked to people we had lost along the way. I...I even talked to you. Convinced myself that I had found you."

Carl blinks, vaguely remembering Michonne's words, about how grief causes his father to shut down. Maybe she was right. Maybe Rick and Carl are more alike than he had first thought. But for his father to completely lose it? To hallucinate things? He can't imagine it.

"If...if it weren't for our people, I'd be dead. Judith would be dead. But I worked through it, came to my senses. And my people held me together. But with everything that happened with Negan, after the executions...... I was so broken down, that when I saw you, I thought----I thought I was startin' to see things again."

Carl's heart feels like it's pounding in his ears. He suspects. Daryl had said. Thinks he's projectin' or some shit.

Carl doesn't know what to think about what his father is saying. The teen feels watery himself, and he doesn't know if it's because he's touched or angry or sad, or---

"You looked different enough that I convinced myself it couldn't be you. And I.... I had to come to terms that I might have to kill you, this kid that reminded me of my own son, if you threatened my people. So I distanced myself, and I shouldn't have. I should have realized it was you, but I didn't. And I'm sorry for that."

"Dad, I...... " Carl begins, the words stuck in his throat. "I'm sorry, too." He says at last.

"I meant what I said, before." Rick repeats gently, clapping Carl by his shoulder. He's doing the same thing Michonne did before, leaning down and trying to get Carl to make eye contact. "We're not too far gone. We've both done things we're not proud of, but we can come back from this. What matters is what we do now. And no matter what you do, no matter what we disagree on? I'll always love you. That's not changing."

For a few minutes, they continue to walk in silence, both emotional and unable to speak. But the awkward tension from before is gone. Carl isn't even sure when it had disappeared, only that relief had taken its place. Relief that his father doesn't hate him. And hope that this might actually work.

"I forgot about that, you know." Carl says at last, looking out over the fields, over the cattle grazing there. Rick cocks his head to the side, a question in his expression. The teen smiles, turning back to his dad. "About mom's cooking, I mean. Her pancakes sucked."

Rick chuckles at this, shaking his head through his laughter, before nodding in agreement. "Yeah. Yeah they did. But Lord help that woman, she never stopped tryin' to cook 'em."

"You put smiley faces on yours, didn't you?" Carl asks suddenly, the nearly forgotten memory suddenly flaring in his mind. His father nods.

"Yeah. Food coloring, too. You loved it. Drove your mama crazy. It was the one damn thing she couldn't cook right, and outside of grillin', it was the only thing I really knew how to make. Life's funny like that, sometimes. But she wanted to be able to do it all, herself."

"Guess she and I really are a lot alike." Carl concedes, looking over the Kingdom skyline. He grins, tossing a smirk his father's way. "But at least I'm gettin' your beard."

"I think someone's gettin' cocky, now." Rick laughs, ruffling Carl's hair. "That's a stubble, at best.
“You lookin’ to impress Sophia?”

As the teen turns beet red, for the first time that afternoon, he finds himself tongue tied for reasons that have nothing to do with the upcoming war.

And for once? He doesn't mind.

Considering how emotional the last day has been, the next few hours are the happiest Carl has been in a long time.

He doesn't know how long he and his father talked before they were roped into a game of horseshoes. He doesn't even know specifically what they talked about, only that, for once, it had nothing to do with the war and everything to do with funny memories and swapping tales about exactly how they wound up here. But soon they're tossing horseshoes at a wooden stake in the ground, and Henry has managed to get a piggy back ride out of Carl as they watch Ben attempt his first round.

There's no threat of a lingering baseball bat. No snarling tiger waiting to pounce. And for a moment, there's not even Negan. There's only laughter, music, and children running around with sunlight in their hair. People had died, a war was about to start, but the world kept going on. People were happy, here.

Maybe the magical world Ezekiel had created wasn't just magical, after all. Maybe his city on a hill was real. There wasn't a secret enemy hidden in the shadows. No need to wake up early just to guard the visitors' doors. With children's giggling lighting up the air, maybe Carl could just have fun, for once.

As people cheer for the game, Michonne and Rick are talking in quiet voices, wearing adoring smiles that Carl never remembers his own parents sharing with each other. He can't say that he knows exactly what's going on between the two of them, whether they're just a quick lay or not, but in this moment, Carl's in a good enough mood to let himself believe that the two of them might actually love one another. And he's glad. There's almost a visible burden lifted off his father's shoulders as he talks to the woman, and as Jerry is pitted against Shane in the final round, he thinks she's good for him. She's smiling. He's smiling. And watching the two of them with Henry yelling in his ear, Carl is smiling, too.

Until he sees what's in Michonne's hand. What she's offering a piece of to Rick.

It's a cantaloupe.

Carl had visited the stockroom just last night. There's not supposed to be any cantaloupe left, the last few being offered to the Saviors.

Carl pretends nothing is wrong as he saunters over to the two, a whining Henry still on his back. He doesn't let his smile fall as he asks her where she managed to find it. And he doesn't act surprised when he learns that Shane is the one that had given it to her, as a peace offering to make up for the days of being at each other's throats in the Prison.

Michonne has one cantaloupe.

Shane had one cantaloupe.

One cantaloupe had been missing from the pickup. One missing cantaloupe had been the entire reason they held the damn memorial this morning in the first place. One piece of missing fruit
could have been the deciding factor for King Ezekiel going to war.

Carl pretends nothing’s wrong, pretends he doesn't hear his father's questioning tone as he turns his attention back to the game. Jerry has lost, and Benjamin is cheering Shane on as the older man lifts clenched fists in the air in excitement. Shane's eyes aren't as red as they were this morning, his hangover having faded away.

Maybe there was more than one reason Shane had drunk himself silly last night.

And as quickly as that magical world had built itself up, it shatters around Carl, the real world coming into focus. This place is still a facade. King Ezekiel is still a retired zookeeper acting out a play from Shakespeare. And Shane is still possibly a murderer.

Now that the game is over, the Alexandrians pack up, ready to go home. His father stays behind. And Carl is glad for that, he really is. Because the harsh reality is that before this war is over, there's a good chance that one of them is going to die. In fact, a lot of good people are about to die.

And no amount of fatherly, heart-to-heart talks can change that.

Author's Note: I'm pretty unhappy with this chapter as a whole, but I've learned in the past that I need to bite the bullet and move on or I'll never make progress, ha ha. The good news is that everyone I know is still healthy and has their job after COVID. The bad news is that I normally write during lull periods at work, and right now we're scrambling to stay afloat. I apologize for the delay! Hope everyone stays safe and healthy out there.

Also, I promise I'm not trying to demean Father Gabriel, just trying to show the readers how he sounds from Carl's perspective. He's changed a LOT since he was first introduced in the show. As usual, feedback is appreciated! It helps me know anything that's confusing or what exactly readers like.

Lastly, do you guys normally read this on a computer or on your phones? I write this on Google Docs, and on a computer, the formatting looks better with longer paragraphs. But when you switch to mobile, those same paragraphs take up half the screen, ha ha. Just trying to get an idea of which direction is better to go. I appreciate it!

End Notes

Please leave comments, and let me know if anything is confusing!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!