Growing roots

by Ksfly180

Summary

Five years pass in the blink of an eye. Old faces reappear and new alliances are forged. The calm before the storm has passed, now the new waves of trouble shall rise

4th in the series, post chasing the tide
Five years pass in the blink of an eye. Each day bleeds into the next until seasons fade with little notice. Our animals breed up their numbers so we move them outside the orchard fence. Their new pens range along the larger land on the right side of the orchard.

We found a library that has come in extremely helpful. There were books on how to make goat cheese and butter from their milk. There were also books on homesteading and farming that have helped.

One thing that's been a huge help has been the water towers we've put up. Each animal pen has one or two towers with cubed barrels to hold the water. On top of each barrel are these upside down umbrella structures used to catch rainwater.

We put the umbrella structures on the house, orchard fence, and the greenhouses too. We also have some on the house connected to the pipes in the house to keep running water. It's allowed us to keep a steady water supply year round.

The back portion between the orchard fence and the concrete wall is where we planted fields of corn, squash, and beans. We even planted rows of corn and wheat in the field across from our land. This has given us a larger harvest as well as more food for our animals.

A few changes have occurred with our home itself. Carol and Merle now share her room. I moved into the room with Daryl while all the kids moved into the room downstairs. There is even an attic that we closed in to make a bedroom for Aaron and Eric.

The dining room is set up a bit like a classroom. Carol has been giving the kids basic lessons in reading, writing, math, and history. It helps that they're only there for a few hours after lunch otherwise I doubt they would sit for the lessons.

Thorin, Tiny, and Evelyn take turns joining Daryl and Merle hunting. They each get assigned an area of traps to monitor. At twelve and eight years old those three are quite the wilderness experts.

The first time Thorin took down a doe he was strutting around proudly for a week. All three kids
worked together to skin and prep the meat. Some we cooked while other we smoked.

They've also started a trend of braids for our family. My kids all have hair halfway down their back, each refusing to cut it. The top of their head is split into three braids that meet at the crown to join into one. Then there's a braid behind their right ear that has a matching bead to represent our family.

Daryl carved the beads from deer antlers. Each bead appears as a six sided cube with a hollow center. Each flat area around the outside has a single letter carved thickly into it; D, H, T, T, G, and E.

They have other braids as they like them, some with ribbons, strings, or other beads. Evelyn has one braid in front of her left ear with bright yellow cloth that was one of Gamba's shirts. Thorin and Tiny both have beads made to signify their first kills, one a doe and the other a pig.

My own hair is down past my shoulders now on the right side, the left side is shaved short. Like my kids I too have our family bead with our initials. It's on the same braid that they proudly display.

We tried to get Daryl to do the same but he won't. Instead he wears his bead on a leather cord around his neck. He does still carve beads from wood, bone, or antler for the kids though so they don't complain.

Carl, Dean, and Knat often take runs with Michonne, Aaron, Sirius and Carol. All three carry multiple knives and their bows, talented at hunting and killing walkers. They've been going further out, taking short patrols to insure our area stays clear.

They tend to wear their hair short, shaving their heads every month. The girls are more womanly now, strong fighters. I think shaving their heads is their way of honoring the lost boys since that was something they all did together.
I kneel down next to the raised garden bed behind the house. Purple and yellow potatoes are growing well here, a few ready to harvest. So I'm taking enough for us to have with supper tonight. This with the chicken Carol plucked this morning and some snap peas from last harvest should make a fine supper.

The light clink clack of beads identifies Evelyn long before she gets close enough to touch. She keeps anywhere from three to five beads in each braid and nearly all of her hair is braided back.

She drapes herself over my back, careful not to inhibit my movements. Her soft cheek rubs against my scruffy one as her fingers find my braid, curling it around her fingers. She only really does that when she's worried or upset. Otherwise she'll flick my braid and cuddle close for attention.

"What's wrong, little one?" I ask.

She huffs with all the melodrama of the young, "Maggie's mad at me."

"Why do you say that?" I ask, careful to mask my amusement.

"Cause I gave Hershel a knife," she grumbles guiltily.

"Why'd you give him a knife?"

She shrugs, leaning her chin on my shoulder, "Cause he doesn't have a knife like us. He needs one."

"He needs one?"

"Yeah," she answered as if it's obvious, "Aurora has a knife and she's only a little older than Hershel. He needs a knife in case something bad comes."
Of course she would worry about that. She still hasn't gotten over loosing Gamba. And just as Thorin and Tiny watch after her she watches over the two little ones. It's not surprising she would want him to be safe.

I stand up, stretching my back until it pops. Evelyn tugs at the tail of her blue shirt. It's cut up the sides, the same as all of their shirts, so it doesn't block their weapons. Her holsters hold her knife and gun which she, like all of us, carry at all times.

Thorin carries seven blades. Tiny carries two plus her gun and bow. Daryl and I each carry a dozen blades in various sheath and of various lengths. It's best to always be prepared.

In fact, we made a game of accuracy with knife throwing, targets line the road from the fence to the wall. That way training can be fun and if it's ever needed they can defend themselves against threats. Of the kids, Carl and Evelyn are the best at accuracy. Daryl beats us all by a mile but Sirius and I are good enough seconds.

"I'll talk to her," I offer.

I understand why Maggie wants to protect her son. I felt the same way about my kids once upon a time. But the world isn't a safe place, especially for kids. Keeping them safe is one thing but they still need to be trained.

I pass the bowl of purple potatoes to Evelyn. She carries them back, following beside me as we head back to the house. I wave her to the table where Carol is shelling the snap peas.

"You seen Maggie?" I ask as Evelyn climbs up on the seat across from her.

She nods towards the front of the house, "She took Hershel out front a little while ago."

I nod my thanks and slip through the house. The front porch hasn't changed much besides a porch swing being added to one end and a few tables here and there. It gives a clear line of sight down the road between the front greenhouses. And in the former parking lot is several raised garden beds growing peppers, onions, celery, and melons.
Maggie sits out on the front porch with Hershel in her lap. She frowns when I take the seat next to her. She probably already knows what I'm going to say.

"Should we talk about it?" I ask her, letting my gaze drift over the greenhouses lining the main drive.

"Hes only five," she huffs defensively.

"Gamba was younger," I offer softly.

She gasps in a breath. I don't often talk about Gam, mostly because it still hurts to have lost him. Seeing her cling tighter to her son makes me feel a little guilty.

"She wasn't trying to upset you," I add softly. "She's just worried about Hershel. She wants him to be safe."

"You think I dont?" She snaps back angrily.

Hershel wiggled down with a frown. She lets him go but it's clear she isn't happy about it. He moves to the end of the porch where the side steps are and a few kids toys.

"How could you hand them a gun and not hate yourself?" She asks.

"You want him to be a kid, I get it," I answer. "But the world isn't safe. We have to teach them to be strong. That doesn't mean we're not letting them be kids."

"I don't know if I can," she confesses.

"Can you try?" I ask.

She scoffs, "I don't have a choice, do I?"
"You're his mother, you're the only one who can chose."

She lets out a sigh, a weary sound. But then she nods her agreement. She doesn't like it but she'll agree. Because keeping her son safe means training him. Even if seeing a weapon in his hand hurts her heart. I know it still hurts mine but I know my kids will survive and that's enough for me. With time, it'll be enough for her too.
The downstairs bedroom was full of storage when we first came here. It now has a thick rug down, covering nearly wall to wall. Most of the stuff that was packed inside has either been repurposed or thrown out in a house a few streets over that we've been using as our trash dump.

The walls are still mostly cream colored although Daryl and the kids have added to it. There's a silhouette of a castle and a dragon in one corner. Various hills in green, gray, and black roll outward from there with small notations for scenes from their favorite stories. There's even a few maps of fantasy lands painted high with stylized compasses.

There are three beds now against three walls. Each bed has a dresser, small with three drawers. There's also a small shelf with books and a cushioned chair without legs tucked between two beds.

The one next to the door belongs to Thorin while the one on the next wall belongs to Tiny and Evelyn. The chair and bookshelf rests between the two. The other one is where Dean and Knat sleep. Carl had moved upstairs.

The older girls don't always sleep in this room even though they used to. Sometimes they stay out in the old RV parked on the driveway between the fence and the wall. Other times they will sleep upstairs in Carl's room or even in one of the tents along the back wall that we rarely use.

Tonight it's just my kids settling into bed. The three older teens have gone off with Michonne and Aaron to patrol the area. They usually check the three towns nearest us, including the interstate rest stop where we found information about this place. The signs for this orchard have long since been removed for our safety but it's still a concern.

The kids climb into their beds quickly after putting their weapons in the top drawer of their dressers. They still have a blade in a holster on the headboard. Another blade is stuck between the mattress and boxspring should they need it.

I press a kiss to each of their foreheads, tucking the covers close but not too tightly against them. They each still have their favorite stuffy but they're often kept hidden beneath the covers. I wonder at times when they will get too old for this but so far they still seem to appreciate the coddling.
It's already dark enough that the flickering candle is the only light source. It's just a small tealight within a mirrored lantern. It's enough for them to get ready for bed but it won't burn for more than a half hour before flickering out.

Sometimes either Daryl or I will sit and read to them. Usually we do that during the winter when they're kept inside longer. As it's still summer time they stay busy enough during the day that it doesn't take long for them to fall asleep.

Tonight I have the night watch along the front wall. Daryl had the afternoon watch so I'll replace him soon. At least it's a clear night. Rainy nights are always trouble, especially when it storms.

When we first put up the wall we still used the RV but within the first year we had built up a ledge for us to use instead. The ledge lines the entire wall, four feet from the top so we can use the wall as cover should we need to. Ladders are placed every twenty or thirty feet which step down onto the roadway.

Daryl waits in a green and yellow stripped lawn chair near the wall gate. A pile of arrows with fresh fetching lay in a basket by his feet. A small cooler holding bottled water and soda sits against the wall.

"Having fun?" I ask, nodding to the basket of arrows.

He shrugs, "Gotta do somethin to pass time. Might as well do somethin useful."

At a closer look at the arrows I notice they're shorter than the ones he normally uses so I ask, "For Thorin and Tiny?"

He nods, fiddling with something small in his hand. I motion to what he's holding, silently asking what it is. He opens his fist to show a long cylindrical bead. It has sprawling curls carved into it with a few random impressions of birds in flight.

"Evelyn?"

He nods, "Yeah, she's good at hitting them mid flight so I thought she'd like it."
"You know she'll love it," I grin back at him teasingly. "She loves all the beads you carve for her."

He huffs amused but doesn't argue. Standing he stretches, his back popping loudly. Then he scoops up the basket, presses a kiss to my cheek, and heads down the ladder.

I watch him go with a tired sigh. That's the worse thing about guard shifts. There's so few of us that every day is the same. Even with the older teens taking a shift it's still not enough. But it can't be helped either, it's just the way it is.
Chapter 4

The sun is only barely rising and soon Maggie and Carol will come out for their turn at guard shift. Which will be good because then I can head inside for breakfast and bed while Daryl leaves with Tiny to hunt. The night was quiet as it often is, rarely do we see anything either walker or survivor. So when I hear a rumbling approach, one clearly mechanical, I tense up worried.

It's been five years since we saw another person, three since the last herd of walkers passed us by. The world is too quiet, too empty, that any sound seems amplified. Even knowing that the vehicle, and it is a large one, is still several miles out I go ahead and raise the alarm.

Our alarm system is a series of strings attached to poles at six points along the wall. The strings from each individual point is then stretched back to the main house, held up by poles along the fence and on top of the greenhouses. Each ends on the front porch, attached to bells along the underside of the overhang where the wind won't hit them too much.

We had tried walkies once but they only worked in pairs and not very well. We could send a patronous for help but only Sirius and I have that power so the others would still struggle to call for help. The bells were the simplest solution and the easiest to install.

I pull the sting, careful not to yank too hard. It doesn't need much and the bells on the end are easily set to ring. My ears twitch, hearing the sound of the bells at the house as well as the large vehicle moving steadily closer at a fairly quick speed.

Daryl and Merle make it to my side first, the others only a few steps behind. I explain about the vehicle and that it's still a few miles out but heading this way. Merle starts barking orders to the others. They each have their guns in hand and hurriedly climb the ladder.

Merle stands on the opposite side of the wall gate from me. Daryl stands further down from him, closer to the corner, where he can keep a sharp eye on whoever approaches. After the wall curves with the road and a few more feet down stands Maggie. Past her is Carol. Our kids stand along the front wall past Sirius who stands past me.

Eric is still along the back wall which means Hershel and Aurora are hiding at the house. They'll be in a crawlspace in the wall, reachable through the closet in Maggie's room. It's the plan we had
in case something like this should happen. Of course that plan also had the older teens here to help but we'll just have to make due.

Nervous energy buzzes through the group as the vehicle is finally close enough for them to hear. The rush of air from the breaks and the rumble of the engine accelerating kills the last hope that they would pass us by. The only reason to turn at the end of the road, a mile down, is to come here.

The bright yellow bus is dirty with smears of blood and mud on the front and sides. It's a school bus, the kind with the flat front. It also seems to be driving far too quickly to be anything but purposeful.

Our rifles are up and aimed, loaded handguns within easy reach should we need them next. Merle fires once, hitting a tree across the way and blowing wood chips and a thin branch loose. It was a warning shot, just to catch their attention. It worked because the bus screeches to a halt.

The door opens, a tall dark form rushes out. Michonne is shouting even before her feet hit the pavement. Merle jumps down from the landing while Michonne turns back to help the people coming down.

I order the kids to keep watch. Sirius shouts for Maggie and Carol to get to the house, grab out the medical supplies, and boil water. Daryl keeps his position on guard, nodding to me as I climb down the ladder to help.

The gate opens as Michonne and Aaron hurry through carrying a bleeding man in their arms. It's only as he passes that I recognize his face. Glenn... It's Glenn!

Carl is helping a limping woman with long auburn brown hair over while two young teen boys hover nearby. The next person is carrying a small child with a bloody face. I gasp as I recognize Jesus under that thick beard and wild mane.

How... how are they alive? Glenn and Jesus... how did they survive? And who are these people?

They must've been away from the firehouse when the herds hit. Something must've kept them away for days or they would've found us. I wonder briefly on the what ifs but more people rush past.
An older teen girl with blood smeared on her cheek and red tearful eyes clings to an older woman with steel grey hair. Then Dean and Knat follow at the back past two men. One is older, white haired with a thick white beard and strong arms. The other has a similar face and equally strong arms but reddish blonde hair and a long beard.

Thinking back over their faces I realize they are all a bit similar. They must be a family. Although I have no idea how Glenn and Jesus found them or what happened to them. Because there are bullet holes in the yellow bus and none of them look bitten.
Chapter 5

Its all a madhouse of action. Merle snaps at people, sending some to help others and ordering the new people back. I join Sirius, carrying a gym bag of medical supplies. Michonne is quick to update the rest of us.

"We were out past the old town, thirty miles northwest of here, when we heard gunfire. Carl and Knat ran ahead so we followed. These people were camped out at a football field. Another group came at them with guns. They killed half of them, tried to snatch a couple of the girls. We couldn't walk away."

Jesus joins her still looking back at us all with an awed expression, "We wouldn't have made it without their help."

Sirius and Carol work on Glenn who's laying on the dining room table. I pass over a prepackaged suture kit as well as packaged players kit to remove the bullets. Maggie hovers crying at his head, pressing kisses to his forehead and praising a God she hasn't spoken of in years.

He has bullet wounds on his left shoulder as well as at least two on his abdomen, just below his ribs. Carol grabs the first kit, hurrying to remove the bullet from his shoulder. Sirius holds pressure on his abdomen, muttering a summoning spell under his breath. I pass over another suture kit for him to use.

Glenn keeps looking up at Maggie, grinning dazed and whispering, "I found you."

"He needs fluids," Sirius mutters with a nod in my direction.

I grab out the transfusion tubing and a bag of saline fluid. A quick call to Dean has her running for the medicine bag in the pantry. There's some rolls of rubber tourniquets in bright orange so I grab one out.

Carol is blocking one arm so I move around Sirius with my supplies to get to the other arm. Glenn doesn't even notice when I pull up his sleeve and tie on the tourniquet. I go back to grab the IV needle. Then it just takes a moment to find a weak vein and slide the needle into his arm.
Dean runs back with the medicine bag so I ask her for some antibiotics and morphine. She settles down under the table, sorting through the bags and vials until she comes up with one of each. I attach the saline bag to the tubing and press until it starts to flow.

Carol starts stitching the shoulder wound after dropping the bullet and plyer things down on the table. Sirius has already started stitching the other wounds. Carl rushes forward with a wire hanger. I loop the saline bag over the handle of the hanger, turning it upside down and hanging it from the thin black chandelier.

It stretches the tubing a little but not enough to cause problems. I take up the bag of antibiotics, looping the bag on the hanger and attaching the tubing to it. It drips into the line with the saline going down into his arm. Dean passes me a needle and syringe which I use on the vial of morphine. There's a small spout near the bottom of the tubing where it goes into the arm so I inject it there.

A quick glance around shows Aaron and Carl working on the kid. The kid is a girl with wide blue eyes. A graze along her head has her hair matted down but thankfully it's not deep enough to need stitches. The broken arm will need to be reset but I'll let Sirius do that.

The woman that was limping only has a twisted ankle. Merle grumbles that it needs wrapping, passing a bandage to the two boys hovering around her. The older of the two takes the wrapping, careful as he wraps the ankle.

Dean and Knat pass out bottles of water to the group huddled together in our living room. They watch us warily but seem too startled and grateful to comment. The older man eyes Merle worriedly but also seems relieved. At least he doesn't watch him the way Hershel used to.

I catch Knat, pulling her close and whisper, "Go get the little ones from the crawlspace."

She nods, turning and rushing up the stairs. I wave Carl over and ask him, "Go relieve Eric on the back wall."

Then I catch Dean and ask her, "Go join my kids on the front wall."

Merle eyes them worriedly before staring off out the window for a moment. He asks aloud, "Y'all get the shooters?"
Michonne nods, "There were ten of them but we got them all. It wouldn't have been so bad if these people had more than knifes."

He glares around at them. Not angrily or even judgemental, mind you. He glares in concern, probably wondering how they've managed with only knives. It couldn't have been easy but perhaps they were lucky to only deal with walkers before this.

The two men stand in front of their huddled group as if to shield the others from sight. It doesn't seem to be a conscious move, more habit. Neither so much a shifts under his glare which seems to be enough for him to relax.

He motions to Jesus, "You gonna vouch for em?"

Jesus nods, pushing his wild hair back into some kind of bun at the back of his head. He answers aloud at Merles prompting, "They took us in not long after we lost the firehouse. They're good people, the whole group was, I'll stake my word on it."

That seems to be enough. Eric steps inside so Merle snaps for him to start warm up some breakfast and coffee. There are biscuits and gravy still warm on the stove so he only has to scramble up some more eggs and potatoes for the new people.

Eric freezes for a moment when he sees Jesus. His eyes quickly take in the others, stopping incredulously at Glenn being stitched up and relaxing as he spots Aaron. Then he heads back to the kitchen, casting several glances back at the group in concern.

Knat comes back with Hershel and Aurora following close. Both look around wide eyed at the strangers. Neither have seen other people before so I imagine this might be scary for them but I didn't want to leave them hidden while there's so much noise inside. They might've panicked, thinking others broke in and I'd rather they not be afraid.

Aurora runs to the kitchen where her daddy Eric is cracking eggs in a bowl. He passes the bowl and whisk to her while he dumps potatoes into an oiled skillet. She glances repeatedly at her dad Aaron but she seems content to be near one parent. Aaron does shoot her a proud smile which seems to reassure her that it's safe.

Hershel clings to Knat's hand as she leads him over to me. Maggie is curled against Glenns head,
pressing kisses against his cheek as they whisper to each other. Sirius is stitching up the second abdomen wound while Carol bandages the first.

The wounds themselves aren't bad but he did loose a lot of blood. Hopefully the saline will help replace what he lost. We can't exactly give him a blood transfusion, not when we don't know if it would hurt him or not. There's just too much to consider when giving blood, especially since most people don't know their blood types or if they may have a reaction. It's not worth the risk if we can help it.

Michonne lifts Hershel up, cuddling him close and turning so he can't see his parents. She whispers to him that his father is here but he's hurt. She edges closer to the table, keeping Hershel turned from the worst of the blood.

One thing about our kids, they're not afraid of blood. Perhaps it's the world we live in now that's desensitized them to death. Hershel twists in Michonne's arms, glances curiously at the wounds being treated, then leans down calling for his mom.

Maggie jumps as if startled. Her wide eyes meet Hershel's and she quickly tries to wipe away her tears. He calls her again, gaining a sleepy Glenn's attention. Maggie gives a watery chuckle and introduces them. I turn away to give them privacy.

The clicking of beads sounds before the door opens. Evelyn with her head full of braids, each with multiple beads, is the first one through. Thorin follows last as Tiny slips past him. All three look first to me then to Merle, probably waiting for orders.

Jesus looks them over with a sad smile, "We didn't know who survived, if anyone did. I'm glad you all made it."

I pat his shoulder, "We're grateful you two made it as well."

Thorin and Tiny offer smiles and greetings. Both then slip over to say hello to an exhausted Glenn. Neither look the least bit perturbed by the blood he's losing. Hershel wiggled down so Tiny pulls him over to the short bookshelf against the wall. Those two will keep an eye on him no doubt.

Merle has stepped up to the two men, speaking lowly to not disturb the others. He warns them that if they stay, they obey our rules. They're simple enough; don't kill, don't hurt, and each person pulls their weight.
It's going to be difficult finding a place for everyone. We'll just have to rearrange again, double up where we can. Our kids can move back into our room and the other groups kids can take their place in the downstairs room.

Our kids will miss the paintings but Daryl can just decorate our room for them. The bookshelf will be easy to move but I think we'll leave the dressers for the new group. We may even find some more beds nearby.

I rub my tired eyes. There's far too much to do. At least if we get a plan sorted quickly we can get them settled and calm. I head over to Merle and the two men to try to work something out. That is if they're staying, of course.
Chapter 6

I wake late in the evening. Most of the morning was spent tending to injuries and sorting out sleeping arrangements. The new people didn't want to be seperated so we put them all together in the downstairs room until we can figure out what else to do.

We'll probably have to build a new building or find some more RVs. There is room on the roads along the wall that we could put something up but it will take a while. Merle and Daryl may have already though of something.

It'll be good to have more hands. We've been stretched so thin lately that it seems we never rest. So while it may take a while for our groups to find our balance, I will be grateful for the extra bodies on guard shift.

A strong hand strokes up my back. Grinning I roll over to see Daryl sitting on the edge of the bed. He smirks back, tugging the blanket further down and sliding his legs up onto the mattress.

An hour later we both head downstairs relaxed and smiling. Supper is already underway although everyone is eating in the living room. Glenn is still resting on the table with another bag of fluids and antibiotics running into his arm.

Carol passes over two plates with a knowing smile. Supper tonight is roast vegetables with smoked pork and brown gravy. Dinner rolls are pilled warm in a bowl on the small coffee table near the couch.

The kids are all clustered around the coffee table, whispering mischeviously to each other. I doubt they'll cause any trouble but I make a mental note to keep an eye on them for a while. Maggie is sitting on one of the kitchen chairs they moved from the dining room but her gaze is nearly constantly on Glenns slumbering form.

The new people are quiet, still subdued from their rough morning. They watch us some but not cruelly. It's probably just because they don't know us and strangers in this world are dangerous. But between Glenn and Jesus vouching for them and us it should make the merger easier.
Supper passes quickly as the sun sets. There are a few lanterns turned on for the moment. Daryl calls our kids to follow him to bed. Aaron sweeps Aurora up with a squeal. Eric stays long enough to help herd the new people back into the downstairs room, passing them a lantern. Then he tugs Hershel up the stairs. Maggie spares them a glance before focusing again on Glenn with a look of disbelief.

I leave the house with a small handheld lantern. Jesus waits at the main gate when I arrive. He must've taken the afternoon shift. An empty plate at his feet shows that someone brought him supper at least.

He pulls me into a hug, whispering, "I'm so damn glad you all survived."

I cling to him a moment, overwhelmed with memories. Faces burn through my vision, glimpses of those lost. My chest aches with that familiar pain when Gambas laugh echoes like a phantom in my ears.

"I'm sorry," Jesus mutters against my shoulder, "I'm so sorry."

"How did..." The words catch in my throat, unwilling to escape.

He leans back with pained eyes. He takes a breath and answers the question I couldn't get out, "We wanted to have another supply run so Glenn and I went out. We saw the herd moving and got penned down on the roof of a house for three days."

He swallows nervously, adding, "By the time we got to the firehouse there wasn't anything left but a few walkers. We didn't think anyone survived until we had a chance to look around. Then we noticed how much stuff was missing. We just couldn't figure out which way the survivors went so we wondered around."

I nod, accepting the explanation. It's what I figured happened when we saw them. The only way for them to survive was if they hadn't been close.

"How'd you meet these people?" I ask.

He shrugs, "We were scavenging and spotted them. They were settled in a house well off the path but we caught the teens looting a store."
"You know how Glenn is," he adds with a pointed look, "he gave them some of our supplies and asked if they saw Maggie or anyone. They let us follow them back."

"They're good people," I offer as an observation.

He nods his agreement. They helped strangers when the world is such a horrible place. It's not something most would do. It's not something we're likely to do. The world just isn't safe enough to trust strangers.

I pat his shoulder as he slips past. It's a quiet night, no more than normal insect sounds. I walk along the ledge, past the curve and halfway down the side. Then I double back to the gate. I don't bother hurrying because the walk itself is peaceful. Not to mention I'll have to walk the area several times throughout my shift.
Daryl comes up just as the sky is glowing pink with predawn. Tiny trots along at his side with her bow and a quiver full of arrows on her back. Her hair is braided back in a French braid, all except for the five smaller beaded braids she normally favors.

I slip down the ladder at their approach. Tiny rushes forward for a quick hug and an eager grin. I press a kiss to her for head, whispering a quick, "Good hunting, love."

Daryl leans in for a quick kiss, grinning smugly as they slip out of the gate. I pull it closed and climb back up to the ledge. There's a heavy mist clinging to the tops of the trees and the soft sound of birds waking with the light. Even with the mist and low light it's easy to watch them both move further out.

Aaron replaces me not long after the sun has brightened the sky. I step down from the ledge, nodding to him as he takes over. I pass Carl, Dean, and Knat who are showing the two new teen boys how to go about feeding the animals. Each one carries a tin pail of food for the troughs.

Merle has the two new men out on the front porch. He nods as I pass but doesn't stop in what sounds like an explanation of the orchards layout and our patrols. No doubt he's assigning them duties on the rosters so they can begin helping out.

Glenn is no longer on the table. In fact it still smells of cleaner. Carol stands at the sink washing dishes. When I move through she nods to the plates of biscuit, gravy, and hash sitting on the counter.

It was a long night, boring too. So as soon as I finish eating I pass her my plate and head upstairs for bed. A glance out the window shows Thorin and Evelyn leading Hershel and Aurora out of the berry greenhouse with woven baskets on their arms.

I sleep deeply. It's not until the sugary smell of fruit and pastry wakes me in the early afternoon that I even move from where I laid down. There's voices inside, laughter and loud giggling.

I head down to find the house full of relaxed and smiling faces. Carol and Maggie have the kids in
the kitchen, each wearing a small apron. They all look eager and proud, completely free of the normal daily fear.

The counters as well as the tables hold racks of cooling cookies and pastries filled with jam. Three bowls are filled with pecans or walnuts, warm and sprinkled with sugar while more are baking in the oven. There's also a dozen loaves of bread cooling. It has the whole house smelling like a bakery in the best ways.

I missed lunch but dinner will be in a few hours, I can easily wait. I settle on the couch where Jesus is regaling the others with his and Glenns adventures. It throws a lot of praise on the new people which is probably his intention.

"A bear!" He exclaims, "An honest to God bear. And ol' Jonah here didn't even hesitate to rush it. No gun, just a hunting knife, and he tackled it like a linebacker!"

The older man, Jonah, ducks his head with a pleased smile. His son claps his shoulder while the young boys look over proudly at the mention of his bravery. He doesn't dismiss the praise, only adding that his family was well worth the risk.

Jesus also tells us about their home. "They had solar panels on the roof of their cabin and a well just out in the yard," he describes. "But no animals and only a small garden."

"How hard is it to put up solar panels?" Carol asks.

Jonah answers, "Not hard at all. There's a place not far that we used, a big company so there still should be supplies there."

Sirius jumps in, eager to plan a run. Jacob, Jonah's son, offers to go along since he remembers what all was used but not necessarily what each item was called. His wife Melissa, while still shaken, whispers for him to stay.

He curls his arm around her shoulder, answering her gently, "These people have taken us in but it's not for us to hide away. We all work for the benefit of the group. This way, we go and the kids don't have to."

She eyes Thorin and Evelyn where they've crawled up to sit in my lap. Both have their gun and
knife holstered on their hips, the same as all of us. I tense, waiting for her to admonish us for letting them have a weapon but she doesn't. Instead she seems to slump closer to her husband, nodding her agreement to some look he casts her.

The last batches of nuts are set aside to cool. Thorin and Evelyn both hurry to help, grinning as they sneak bites of the various treats. Maggie and Carol then direct the kids into packing away the cooled cookies into a few labeled jars. The pastries are individually wrapped in parchment paper before being stacked in several square tins.

The cooled nuts are put in small bags, cheesecloth or teabags perhaps. Those are then tied and tucked away in large pottery jars. The loaves of bread are wrapped in clean towels, probably to pull away any moisture so they don't mold. Then they are all shelved in the pantry except for a single plate of cookies and a tray of unwrapped pastries.

The kids, all hyper from the sugar, are then ordered out back to play. Maggie heads upstairs where Glenn is tucked up in her room. Melissa joins Carol, helping prepare supper.

Conversations continue, some softer than others. These people are still strangers to us but it's clear they're trying. It will take time for everyone to be more naturally comfortable but were working on it.

It's only when Carol calls everyone to the table that I notice how late it is. The sun is low, it will be dark soon. And I haven't seen Daryl or Tiny since this morning. They're usually back by now.

I wave off Sirius's concerns as I head outside. I just need to know if they've gotten back yet. Merle is on guard at the front of the wall. Cigarette smoke curls out with each exhale as he frowns almost angrily at the forest.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He doesn't look back at me but he does answer, "They ain't back yet."

"No one's heard or seen anything?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

He shakes his head, still glaring at the far tree line. It doesn't make any sense. Daryl is always back with the kids before dark. It's just too unsafe to travel without light and flashlights or lanterns
are more likely to attract trouble. In the five years we've been here, he's never kept a child out past dark. Something must've gone wrong.
Chapter 8

There has been a few changes in my transformation over the years. There's no explanation for it, not that Sirius can explain at least. For some reason, my transformation has become more and more of a physical thing. Honestly, it reminds me of watching professor Lupin transform back in third year. Only I have more fur and look more wolf like and less starved than him.

The first time I tore my clothes. Shreds of fabric scattered around me and when I pulled myself back to human form it left me nude. I learned to strip before transforming otherwise I lose too many clothes.

I strip at the gate, far too accustomed to the lack of privacy in this world. I fold them onto a shelf under the guards ledge put there mainly for that purpose. Then I let the transformation begin.

It starts with a tension of my muscles. Joints twist as muscles shift bones into a different position. Fur grows outward like a shadow moving over churning flesh.

I drop to all fours. My palms thicken, webbing grows between my fingers until they are solid paws. My feet stretch and lock so that the weight rests on the balls of my foot. My spine clicks as it lengthens, growing outward through split flesh before skin, muscle, and fur cover it.

I shake off the effects, shivering as the transformation ends. My family bead clicks against my jaw. The braid is looser since I transformed but it still holds.

Merle opens the gate, calling a quiet warning for me to be careful. Sirius is pacing the ledge unhappily as I trot out. It's our one rule, either Sirius or I must remain behind for the safety of the others. Even if it upsets him to be the one left behind this time.

The world is a vast array of grey. The only pops of color are the wiping tendrils of scent. Some
clinging to the ground where each footsteps stood. Others shiver like mist on the breeze, faded with nothing solid to hold to. Some overlap each other like childish streaks of fingerpaint until the whole mess is an indistinguishable blob.

Daryl and Tiny's scents are as familiar as my own. Both are a blend of each of our pack members, twirled and shaded together in patterns around their own with some stronger than others. Daryl's scent trails back and forth, new overlapping older trails and each easy to follow.

I sniff along the ground where their footsteps left the strongest trail to follow. They walked side by side with steady measured steps. I follow them into the tree line where the forest grows large and wild.

It's dark now, barely any moon since the clouds block it out. But wolf eyes can reflect the light enough to see well even if it was darker out. So I move as quickly as I can, focusing on the scent trails while keeping an ear out for dangers. The first mile passes easily beneath my paws.

They stopped at one of the traps first thing. It smells of rabbit but was clearly repositioned after they collected their catch. I don't waste more than a moment before following their scent trail again.

The scent of deer is strong, urine sprayed on nearby bushes show where they passed. I could see Daryl and Tiny following the herd a ways but they still should've been back. I continue on for the next two miles with their trail only shifting with the ground. The trees grow closer together, their canopies overlapping to block out the sky.

A coppery tinge is carried on the breeze. It brings to mind the color red, pounding hearts, and flesh in my teeth. My stomach churns nervously as I follow the trail closer to the scent of blood.

The ground dips and rises. Fallen logs overlayed with moss and vines offer many small burrows for wild animals to hide. There's a few traps further off to the left, one of which has a squealing dog caught in the string. The scent of blood is strong enough to burn my nose.

Their scent turns off to the right. Their steps are slow and measured, more cautious than before. Their scents are scraped over tree trunks and along bushes. They moved in such a way to keep hidden.

There is no rotten reek of walkers so that's not what they spotted. All I can smell is the burn of
cold blood. Maybe Daryl caught the scent of blood and moved to investigate. Hopefully, at least.

The trees grow close together with kudzu vines draped throughout. It's a dark and shadowy area with many places to hide. There are numerous footprints on the ground, several smeared or overlapping each other. A dozen scents are heavy here, along with the smell of blood.

A body is crumbled against a tree with an arrow protruding from its eye. A second one is down with two arrows in its chest and a knife in its temple. Both are dirty, starved, and smell horrible with no hygiene.

I make a circuit of the area again. Only barely do I see the boot amidst the grass. The nearby bush is half crushed and half covering his hip. The top half of his body is hidden in the underbrush.

I transform back even if my human eyes see less than my wolf. I heard the faint beat of a heart so I know he lives. I crawl over him, careful of the knife sticking out of his side. There's also wounds on his chest.

Daryl lives but where is Tiny? I'm only grateful that these five years have allowed me to cast spells without a wand. It takes a moment of concentration, a stronger desperation and a harsher push of my will and magic for it to work.

The white mist swirls into the familiar form of prongs. I command him to find Sirius while pushing all the urgency into the spell that I can. He bows his head briefly before rushing off through the trees, almost too quickly to see.

I turn back to Daryl who is still unconscious. A luminous spell brightens him. A large bruise is darkening on his chin while blood darkens his temple. I run hands over him, pushing my power into him.

There are five stab wounds on his chest, one has punctured a lung. I press magic into them, helping to stem the blood. He's already lost a lot, more than would be safe. Even if we get him back he will probably require a blood transfusion to survive and I don't know if we can do that.

I use my power to create bandages and tape to seal the wounds. Then I vanish his shirt and vest so I can reach the wounds. Taping each bandage down will help but if he isn't given blood and fluids soon he may...
But... where is Tiny? Where is my daughter?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warning: violence, death, nondescriptive threats of rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9

I don't wait for the others even if I should. There's nothing more I can do for Daryl and the others should reach him soon. They'll take care of him though so I try not to worry. Tiny is still in danger... I need to find my daughter!

By the coolness of the bodies near him it must've been a few hours since they were attacked. The scent trail is heavy in the air and all around. These people moved like a herd of stampeding elephants through the bush so it's easy for even a human to follow.

I move quickly, grateful for the easy trail. Less than a half mile away has another body with a knife wound in his thigh from groin to knee. Another stab wound to his throat has him covered in cool clotted blood. He's turned, groaning hungrily and trying to rise. I slam my paw into his head, feeling the crunch and continuing onward.

Tiny's scent was on him, on the wound. She split him open just like Daryl taught her. That's my girl! I race forward, careful in case she left any more to turn.

Barely a mile passes when my ears twitch. Walkers are near, at least one but more than likely it's two. Thankfully it doesn't seem to notice me.

I pay no attention to the ground I cover. I know I race over a deserted road that's cracked from age. I know I pass buildings, homes first then corner stores long since scavenged for anything of use. I know a few walkers turn as I pass, stumbling to chase movement even as I race away.

I move further into town as I follow the scents, another few miles at least. A large superstore is half burnt down with a dozen walkers liking around. They turn as I pass, moaning and stumbling to follow.
Sounds become noticable, human voices within a mile of wherever I am. As i get closer it's more clear that they're arguing but I don't really hear the words. I do hear Tiny shout, "My dads are gonna kill you all!"

I slow as I get closer. There's an old gas station with an even older pump. A neighborhood opens up behind and around it, equally as old. There are a few rotten bodies of walkers already put down but none still moving around.

"I told ya she's mine!" One voice snarls.

"The Bitch stabbed me!" Another argues back, "She's mine!"

I hurry forward, sticking to shadows as much as possible. The road curves around behind the gas station, intersects with another and both snake further amongst the homes. The houses are damaged, a few even burnt down.

"We only got the one so we'll share," an annoyed third voice cuts in only for the first two to snap back at each other.

Two low voices argue about the incompetence of their fellows. Another snaps that he's leader now so the girl is his. The third voice cuts through the resulting raised voices, "We can get more."

"After what them fuckers did to us!" The second voice snarls, "You wanna get an arrow in the eye then go ahead."

Damn right you'd get an arrow in the eye! We won't tolerate any of these assholes hurting our people. I move between a few houses, avoiding a fence that's been toppled and smeared with blood.

"Didn't think they'd be this much trouble," one voice grumbles.

"The others wasn't, it's this group that took em from us done this."
Others? Is this part of the group Michonne said they took out? How did they miss this many? We shouldn't have trusted when she said they got them all. We should've checked the area, searched for survivors. How could we be so stupid!?

"I say we kill them all and take all the women," one of the quieter voices pips up.

"Just one of them fuckers kills four of ours," the first voice answers. "Hell, this Bitch killed one!"

Daryl killed four? Only two bodies were near him so either the other two turned and walked off or they were dragged back here to die. Either way it's good, less of them to worry about.

A shadow stands at the side of the house. I shift on my paws, careful to make as little noise as possible. He's paying more attention to the group arguing so it's easy to sneak up on him. I edge closer until I can lunge forward and snap his neck. His body drops but the sound is lost under the arguing.

Tiny screams. I don't waste anymore time. I run full speed around the house, there isn't even a fence. I notice the three metal trashcans full of fire. There's empty folding chairs all around.

A few more than a dozen men stand around with several injured. Tiny is near the center, surrounded by the men who are now shouting cheers and encouragement. I can't see her but I can smell her fear.

I slam into the back of one man. He's as unwashed as the rest with a stained blue shirt and a dark shaven head. I snap my jaw on his head, feeling his skull burst like an overripe fruit. Then I look up.

Tiny is trapped on the ground with two men holding her bound arms down while a third pulls her clothes away. I don't give them time to look up before I leap, tackling the one pulling her clothes and digging my claws into his belly. Flesh and soft innards are torn free, scattered around as I dig through him until my claws scrape spine.

The other two start to move, both pulling back now that they've shaken off the shock. I catch one with my teeth, tearing out his throat in a warm wet spray. The other tries to turn and run but I slam him into the ground. My claws dig into his side's while my jaw snaps down on his spine.
A gun fires. Pain blooms in my hip. I have to choose to either cover Tiny or kill the men. Fury burns as a snarl rumbles through my chest. I leap.

It's all a haze of blood and screams. Flashes of silver from various blades slash out at me. I know I tore off an arm at the shoulder of one man. I know I crushed another skull beneath my paws, leaving the body to twitch on the grass.

More screams sound. Half the men are dead by my teeth and claws but now the rest must face walkers. Dozens of them now

Chapter End Notes

Just so y'all know, you're gonna hate me after the next chapter.
Chapter 10

It all fell to chaos then. Walkers stumbled in from every direction. The filthy starved men panicked. Some attempted to fight or run but the dead were overwhelming.

One of the men shoved another into a walkers arms. He tried to flee but hadn't noticed another coming behind him. Both die screaming.

I run back to Tiny. She had managed to curl herself small near one of the fire cans. Her arms are still bound with rough rope from wrist to elbow. I don't have time to release the rope, I would have to transform and that would leave us too vulnerable.

She doesn't hesitate to clamor up on my back. Her finger twist into my fur as she struggles to find a sturdy grip. Her knees press into my waist.

I rise, immediately running because the dead are crowding closer. Several I recognize as ones I've passed on the way here. I guess I brought them. Well, good! These monsters deserve to die screaming!

There's enough noise and confusion that neither the men or the walkers pay us much attention. It also helps that were both dark, and Tiny is small, so we can blend into the shadows better. Now I just have to get us out of here without gettin caught.

Thankfully my kids have ridden on my back before. We even made a game of it where I would try to buck them off while they struggled to hold on. It means Tiny knows how to keep her position while we flee.

The walkers mostly come from the direction I did so I have no choice but to move further away.
The neighborhood is dark but it's clear as I race the streets that these people have been here a while. There are several downed walkers just left to rot where they fell. Perhaps they hoped the scent of decay would keep other walkers away.

Shouts and cries fade behind us. I'll have to come back soon to be sure they're all dead. I won't take any more chances of further attacks.

Tiny huffs pained breaths and the scent of blood clings to us. She's injured! How badly is she hurt?

I stumble to a stop, glancing around quickly and choosing a house with the front door broken off its hinges. The carpet, some dark color, reeks of mold as the weather has been flooding in for years. There are stains everywhere, some blood, some urine, and others something more foul.

I don't hear anything beyond some small chittering animal hiding beneath the couch. It's probably just a raccoon. There's also a bird nest in the kitchen on top of the cabinets, near the smooth ceiling. But nothing larger seems to be inside.

I lay down and Tiny slips to the tile floor. A pained whimper escape her lips. I transform back to human so that I can help her.

First I hurry to remove the ropes. They're not knotted well, only crudely, but it still takes a tingle of power to have them slip away. Bruises and scrapes line her arms where she struggled against the ropes.

Next I check her over. She has a bump on her head and a bit of blood crusted around her nose, probably from when they took her. Her shirt is torn but otherwise her clothes are alright.

Finding no injuries on her front or even her arms or legs has me flip her over. Blood sits wet on the tile beneath her. I shove her bloody shirt up, exposing her back. Three small holes sit high on her back, two on the right side of her spine.

Damn! Someone shot her. It must've been a small gun or it would've gone through. With any luck I can get her back home.

I press my power against the wounds, willing them to seal and heal as much as my magic can do.
Then I transform again and nudge her to climb back onto my back. She's weak and shaky so it takes a moment but she manages it.

I leave back out the door. A shadow races another street over but I can't chase it now. I'll just have to come back and kill that one later.

I run while she clings. We head along the street for a while, then we dart between a pair of houses. Tall grass offers us some camouflage as we make it back to the gas station. Then it's just a matter of retracing my steps. Tiny moans painfully when she's jostled but doesn't complain. Her fingers just tighten their hold on my fur.

I pass the shops and houses which are thankfully free of walkers. The forest comes up ahead and I'm grateful for the security it offers. It's easy to find the bodies left behind, unfortunately there's a walker gnawing on them.

I rush past, unwilling to waste time by killing it. My daughter needs help now! She's so weak she's gone limp on my back. I can always come back this way when I hunt down the others responsible.

I run for a few miles more over forest ground that rises and dips. It's almost impossible to see what's ahead but I manage to only stumble once over a tree root. Reaching the familiar road brings me a great sense of relief.

The gate opens the moment Michonne spots us. I rush past her, my paws loud on the road as I push myself to go faster. The house comes up with Merle and Thorin on the porch. Both startle, hurrying down to meet me halfway.

"Fucking Hell!" Merle spits out.

Thorin reaches for Tiny only for Merle to snatch him back. I growl, a warning only. Still, my daughter needs help!

Something rotten burns my nose. A walker is near! We have to get the kids inside! How did it even get in?

"Oh my God!" Eric exclaims as he stumbles down the porch. Sirius follows looking us over with wide eyes.
Tiny twitches on my back. A moan slips from her chest. A sound that raises the hairs on my neck.

No!

Not her... not my daughter... please...

"Stay calm, Harry," Merle says softly, mournfully.

He steps closer with a knife in hand but I snarl, snapping my jaw and shuffling further away. I can't let him... She's not...

She moves stiffly. Her head turns and a shudder of revulsion worms through me. This can't be happening! This can't be happening!

"Daddy?" Thorin calls fearfully, tears rolling down his cheek.

No... please no... Not my children! I can't lose another one... I can't!

"Daddy, she's turning," Thorin calls again, his eyes locked onto her movement.

My magic is bubbling like a cauldron ready to explode. I know, I know without a doubt or second guess, that this is no longer my daughter. This thing isn't her...

Thorin steps closer with a knife in his hand. I roll away, knocking the walker from my back. It's a walker... just another walker.

Her braid clicks when she moves. The family bead swings over her shoulder as she crawls forward. Clouded eyes watch me as hands, her hands, touch my fur.

I can't! I can't kill my baby! Whines and mournful growls rumble through my chest. But I can't kill her and I can't leave her like this.
A soft pop of a gun sounds. Her body falls limp, red mists the ground around her head. Merle holsters his gun and kneels down beside her. He looks me in the eye and waits. I guess he's waiting for my reaction.

A howl rips itself from my throat. All the pain, all the anguish, is screamed to the sky. I shudder with the sound, howling long until my chest burns with the need for air. I gasp a breath only long enough to scream out another howl.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sending Harry to crazy town next, just so y'all know.
Chapter 11

Chapter 11

The thundering sound of paws on asphalt easily overshadow the man's ragged breaths. Dirty and exhausted, he isn't good prey, but that's not why I chase him. I chase him because her scent is on his hands. He's one of them.

He stumbles between abandoned cars, bumping into several. A walker trapped in one scratches at the windows causing him to fall back against another car. I slow my stride and slip around one of the cars. It's late evening now so I easily blend in with the shadows around.

He's a weasley looking thing with a thin hunched posture and too wide blue eyes. A shadow of light brown scruff grows unevenly across his cheeks and jaw which look more like he can't grow a beard than anything deliberate. His nose is a small round thing, recently broken although there's so much blood on him it's hard to tell what is his and what isn't.

I stalk quietly along the side of the cars, careful to stay out of sight. He flinches, looking around fearfully while gasping for breath. Terror overwhelms his scent.

Good! I want him afraid. I want him to feel as helpless as she felt. I want him to suffer. I want them all to suffer.

I couldn't stay at the orchard, not after loosing her. I needed to take out the threat. I had to be sure we will be safe. I won't risk anyone else.

The walkers took out most of them. I crushed the skulls of the ones that turned. A few had survived though. Three had survived the walkers... They won't survive me!

This one is the second. The first I caught sleeping in one of the houses. He was a starved black man with an angry face even while sleeping. The scent of Daryls blood stained him and I didn't even hesitate to attack.

I tore him apart. My claws dig deep in his belly, tearing his insides out. My teeth clamped on his arm, easily snapping the bone. I even manage to rip off one arm at the shoulder when he tries to crawl away. Unfortunately his screams alerted the others.
The third was a short older man. He reeked of urine and filth but no trace of Daryl or Tiny's scent was found on him. Still, he may not have hurt my family but I won't allow a threat to live.

He hid himself in the trunk of a car. It's an older model in a nearly fully rusted red. I doubt he can get back out without help so I'll go back for him later. Right now I want the one that has a trace of my daughter's scent.

He presses a hand to his chest, gasping for breaths while his heart races like a cornered rabbit. I lower myself more, keeping my steps careful as I stalk around him. The fool actually looks relieved as if he thinks he outranks me.

He slumps tiredly back against the car, sliding down until he sits tiredly on the ground. His hands tremble as he pats his chest and legs. He drops his head, eyes closed. He must think he's safe now.

I stalk around the car, rumbling a snarl as I approach. He jumps, yelps in terror and scrambles up to run. His chest heaves as he gasps for breath. He won't last much longer but that's okay.

Such a foolish little creature he is, so easy to herd. It's easy to nip at his back. It's easy to growl and snarl while he struggles to run. The idiot goes back the way we came with only a few nudges from me to direct him along.

I slow down, slipping around behind a store to hide within the shadows. He stumbles to a stop, gasping and crying. He collapses weakly to the ground. How utterly pathetic!

I move slow and steady, stalking around him. He won't last much longer, I'm sure. But I won't be merciful, oh no. His death will be long and slow. I only wish I could do the same to the others that hurt my family.

I pace closer without bothering to move silently. He looks up with a wet face. Begging words spew from his mouth as he tries to crawl away. Coward! Pathetic!

I jump forward, catching his head in my jaws and snapping down viciously. His scream stops short with a thunderous crunch. I release the worthless creature and leave it for the dead.
That thing wasn't worth the effort but at least he died weak and afraid. Now I just have to take out the third one. Then I'll search the area for any more. I'll destroy them all, every last one!
Chapter 12

Three days with little rest go by quickly. I've patrolled about ten miles in every direction. As long as I keep moving I don't have to think about what's been lost.

I found a man far out to the East. He walked along the highway with a heavy pack on his back and a tent tied to it. He didn't carry their scent or any trace of Daryl or Tiny's but I couldn't take the chance. At least he died quickly if not painlessly.

Further to the north, I found a pair of men bedded down. It was near a larger city somehow sprawling and empty with a good line of sight through most of it. There were only a few walkers further out but none near them.

The men had secured a small police station to hide in. It had little more than a counter near the door and two small desks pushed to the side. There was a restroom to the left, followed by a storage supply room then an office. The window on that office door was shattered and no personal item remain.

The men had two blanket nests in the office. As it was early morning when I caught their scents they were both still asleep. I had to transform to get inside the baracade they put up. A quick vanishing spell got rid of the door and let me in.

I transformed back as soon as I got inside. Human form hurts too much. Anytime I wear my skin I'm overwhelmed with pain and grief.

Wolf form is easier. Wolves grieve but not as deeply. Or maybe it's the guilt that's missing. Animals don't seem to feel guilt as humans do.

I kill them quickly. A snap of my jaws crushes the first ones skull. The second pops awake but I snap his neck before he can even realize what's happened.

I'm not a cruel creature I just can't take the risk. They have a small catch of food tucked away under the desk and in the filing cabinet in the corner. It's just a few canned items, mostly sauces, and several bags of dried beans, rice, potato, and pasta.
I transform back to human long enough to stuff the food into one of their packs. It has a single strap so I slip it on so the strap rests loose across my chest. Then I transform back to wolf form and continue exploring.

The gun cage is still locked up with weapons inside. Its only a few shotguns and six hand guns, blocky and black. I transform back with an annoyed huff. A quick spell has the gun cage door vanish. Then I stuff the weapons and ammo into the pack.

The storeroom has two jugs of water, three cases stacked beside it too, and one large box of toilet tissue. I shrink them down and stuff them in the pack. Our people need these supplies.

I transform back into wolf and search the rest of the city. There are tourist shops full of clothes and souviners that won't be much use to us. I do take what I can, what we will need.

Most of the day is spent walking around in human form as bare as a babe while shrinking supplies. I go through the shops quickly, they don't have much in them. Night falls while I make it around to the hotels and a small community hospital. They don't have much so it's a quick check in wolf form.

I loop past them to the supermarket. It has some camping supplies that I take. There isn't any food and the pharmacy is well picked over but there are some feminine products left so I grab those. Our pack is always in need of such supplies.

I take plenty of the clothes, stuffing them in bags and shrinking them down. I gather up cookware from the kitchen isles. Not so much the plates but a good cast iron skillet and a knife set are always welcome. There's also crockpots that I gather up to take back.

Sunrise comes when I find the neighborhoods. Little clusters of homes set behind brick or broken wood fences. The homes are large with high ceilings and marble countertops in the kitchens and bathrooms.

Some have a few dry foods still good. Most have blankets or toiletries that I gather. I pick up some baby furniture and kids toys that we may use.

I do have a panic attack in one house. One of the rooms belonged to a little girl. A girl with dark skin and braids down to her shoulders ending in red and pink beads. A girl still rotting in the
corner... A walker left trapped.

I run back outside, heaving violently even in wolf form. I transform back unintentionally. My human hands fist in the overgrown grass as I heave and scream.

I can't stomach leaving her there but I can't go in either. My vision blurs as I struggle to stand. I whisper the spell at first but it doesn't come. Then anger overwhelms me and I scream my rage to the sky.

Fiendfyre devours the house in a few seconds. Beasts of flame the spread, rushing to the buildings nearby. They stretch out like an overturned anthill, seeking anything to destroy.

I don't know how long I stand there before the smoke and ash makes me move. I walk the streets as a man while the inferno follows as my shadow. It leaps and devours building after building as we circle the town.

The spell continues once I leave the homes behind. I pass the superstore which falls to a massive bear like creature. A dragon takes out the hospital. Vultures of flames attack the tourist shops. A serpent like beast of fire takes out the police station where I killed those men.

I flinch at the drop of cold on my cheek. It happens again as a gentle drop that's followed by a steady fall. The rain grows in strength until it's a heavy downpour.

The spell flickers out. It's not the rain that stops it though. The rain somehow soothes me as nothing else has. My rage is washed away beneath the cool water and as it drowns so too does the fiendfyre.

I stay in my human skin as the water pours down. Black clouds flicker with lightening in the night sky. Thunder shakes the very ground as lightening stroke trees and poles still standing.

I stay out in the street for most of the night. It's only when the storm stops that I transform back into a wolf. The moon is full so there's plenty of light but I need a bit of a rest.

I dont bother to head back home yet, I'm not ready. Instead I lay down on the soaked road even if I cant seem to sleep. I spend the time howling in mourning. The sounds echo loud through the silence of the city. Not that its much of a city with all of the buildings burnt to ash.
At least there's nowhere for anyone to set up around here now. No more threats on our back step. I'll go back to the other towns and cities. I'll burn them all to Hell! That way no more dangers will get close. The burnt cities may even chase them away.
Chapter 13

I have a rhythm to how I work now. Two weeks is all it takes to have the nearby towns and cities reduced to ash. There were only a few survivors scattered around and they all died quickly. I just couldn't take the chance.

I did panic when I passed a trail of pack scent. Merle, Carl, Aaron, and two others I don't recognize all left our territory. It was while I was on the north east to north west sides of our territory during that first week.

They went mostly south. I followed their scent trail to some big warehouse like building. They had loaded and were starting a big rig truck when I arrived. Merle looked pained but he approached me without fear.

"Ya ever gonna come home?"

I look away, unwilling to transform back to answer. He lights a cigarette, giving us a quiet moment before telling me, "Your kids been asking for ya. So's Daryl, matter of fact."

A whine escapes my throat but I shake my head. He nods, accepting my answer even if he's upset about it. He tosses his cigarette away and walks back to the truck.

I checked the warehouse that they left. It held a lot of electrical wires and boards as well as solar panels. That must've been what they came for. I shrink what's left until the warehouse is nothing but bare shelves.

That town had three other warehouse that I scavenged. One was a cereal warehouse, crates full of cereal boxes stacked up to the roof. I gathered it all, shrunken down for easy transport.

The second was a drink manufacturing warehouse. Sodas already bottled as well as boxed cubes of the drink syrup. I shrunk down most of it but not all.
The third belonged to a major store chain. It was longer than a football field and twice as tall as most buildings. Thick metal shelves were bolted in to both the ceiling beams and concrete floor. I took nearly everything except for the electronics.

My pack was beyond bulging after that so I hurried back to the orchard gate. A quick drop off of the bag, not even stepping inside, then I raced off again. That's how I've done with everything I've gathered. Whoever is at the gate will pass it to Sirius to sort.

I luck out far to the west. There's a large portion of the interstate, looping through the city, that has tall concrete walls. I shrink them down and reposition them around our territory. They create a tall solid border about five to seven miles outside our current wall.

At least I get the cities and towns burnt down. The forests are still a problem but we can just have more patrols. The extended border will also offer us a lot of protection.

I'm still not ready to go home but I need to see my family. I approach the gate and wait. Michonne stands on the ledge. She doesn't comment, only opens the gate. I pad past her on nervous paws.

Thorin spots me first. He was helping feed the larger animals, mostly cows, so he was nearer to the wall gate. I half expect him to rage and curse me. I almost expect him to cry and cling to me. Instead he smiles.

"Welcome back, dad," he offers.

I stay frozen for a moment, unsure. But his scent isn't angry or betrayed. He's calm, accepting. There's grief and pain, joy and relief, but no blame.

He moves up beside me, his fingers burrowing through my fur at my neck. I move forward slowly while he walks at my side. At least he doesn't hate me for leaving.

We pass the fence together. Voices coming from the greenhouses on either side show that everyone is out helping right now. I slow my steps but Thorin doesn't falter so neither can I.

The greenhouse door on the right opens. Evelyn steps out with a woven basket on her arm. Aurora
and Hershel follow with their own haul.

I must've made a sound, a whine or a whimper. She must've heard me even if I didn't realize it. She gasps, eyes wide with surprise. Then she shouts, "Daddy!" while running at me.

I transform then. I wasn't sure if I could or even if I should but I do. She needs me to hold her. She needed me here. But like a selfish ass I was too busy running away to take care of her.

She's sobbing against my shoulder while I hold her tight. Thorin clings to my back, holding us both. I'm not even sure who's the one begging forgiveness at first before I realize it's me.

"Bout time ya came home," a wonderful voice drawls.

I look up at Daryl carrying a grown pig over his shoulder. Blood drills down his shirt but that's normal now. He must be culling the herds, prepping the meat for winter even if that's still a few months away.

"I'm sorry," is all I can offer.

"I get ya," he answers, "Just glad you're back."

Hershel and Aurora both come over to cuddle at Evelyn's back. Daryl continues on towards the house to prep his kill. I'm shaking and crying too much to move.

I missed my kids. I missed my pack and all of their scents. I nuzzle Evelyn's cheek, whispering apologies through the tears over and over. At least I'm home now and I won't leave them again.

Chapter End Notes

He's a bit better now but he's going to go all batshit with the next group they meet 😊
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

This is mostly a description of their home for those who want to know how it's set up.

Chapter 14

Harvest comes with gently cool weather. I walk along the ledge, overlooking the fields and pens. With the addition of the newest border we don't have to patrol the wall anymore but I like too. There's always the chance that something dangerous could slip through.

We've already cleared the fields and greenhouses of the fall harvest. We started by moving as a group through the wheat field to the right of the orchard fence. It stretches the length within the wall from one end to the other in neat orderly rows.

The corn field is next, meeting the wheat field and following halfway along the back of the fence. The squash meets the end of the corn field and goes just a bit past the end of the fence. The bean field comes last, tucked in the far corner behind the animal pens.

There are three animal pens that back up to the squash and bean fields.

The one closest to the fence, the smallest of all the pens, is the turkey pen. It currently houses ten turkey with three low sheds for them to take shelter in as needed and one water tower. We've been lucky to breed them up, only killing two last winter for food.

Beside the turkey pen is the rabbit pen which houses thirty bunnies of various breeds and sizes. There are four short buildings in each corner connected with long wire mesh tunnels that each have an opening halfway between. We'll have to build a new building or two since there's so many of them now but thankfully they breed well.

The third pen that stops just a few feet from the wall is the duck and geese pen. It's twice the length of the rabbit pen. Carl, Dean, and Knat had dug up a pond for the birds to enjoy. They've bred up to a couple dozen each already.
The next two pens stretch from the fence to the wall alongside the back three.

The one closest to the fence is the chicken pen. It holds three tall and long coops. Each has a walkway along the back to retrieve eggs. There's also a single water tower in the center.

The one closest to the wall is for the goats and deer who seem to do well together. There's several platforms and ramps for the goats to climb on which they love to do. There's also several little huts, tall but narrow, that they can tuck away in to escape the weather.

There has been some talk about releasing at least half of the deer into the area between the wall and the border. It's thickly forested in several places and both Dixons agree that the deer should breed up better numbers if left wild. We'll need to do a few more sweeps and we won't release them until the spring comes but it's a sound plan.

The two pens that border the wall nest are split into one for cows and pigs with a small one for the camel and ostrich. We have five ostrich now but still only the one camel. The cows and pigs have increased to the point they are a bit squashed in their pen. We'll have to build another pen to separate them soon.

There is a small area of land still open between the fence and wall that follows the short road. We've used it to park our vehicles when not in use. There are also two small sheds, one against the fence and the other against the wall, to hold supplies for the animals.

We haven't done anything between the wall and border so I don't bother looking too closely out there. I look for movement and I sniff the air for any foreign smells but there are none. I can't seem to stop patrolling even though there shouldn't be any threats nearby.

Daryl waits at the wall gate. He doesn't comment on my paranoia or scoff about it being unnecessary. He knows I push out my power along the wall to create a protective shield.

It's a bit flimsy and unsettled but it will work. I mostly just tried the same method that I used on the RVs before. It's weak but effective even if I have to reestablish it every morning.

I follow him down the ledge. There's only a short road between the wall and fence gates so we walk side by side. Once past the fence gate which is always open we pass the greenhouses.
Two long greenhouses follow the road to the front of the house. The right one holds apple trees while the left has the peach and orange trees. Thankfully both grow year round from staying within the greenhouses.

There are the four raised garden beds in front of the house where the old parking lot was. They did have peppers, onions, celery, and melons respectively but we've already harvested them so they sit barren now. There was some debate about rigging up some plastic and pvc pipes to make a modified greenhouse. For some reason it was deemed unnecessary.

Glenn and Maggie sit curled together on the porch swing. Hershel and Aurora are playing with the climb and slide set up on the ground where the porch ends. Maggie hasn't gone out of reach of Glenn since he returned. Not that I blame them for being clingy because I'm the same way at times.

The berry gardens along the left of the house have already been harvested. Behind them is the playground with a few picnic table that were here before we arrived. We use it more now that our numbers have doubled. It's nice to eat outside when the weather allows.

The grape greenhouse along the right of the house has been renovated. We still grow grapes in the front half but the back half now grows marijuana that somehow Merle had seeds for. We have strict rules about smoking it though. It's okay to relax but we must take precautions not to leave our people in danger.

Daryl leads me to the picnic area along the left where most of the others are gathered. Merle is manning the grill where three chickens are roasting. Carol has a tray full of grilled corn, beans, and potatoes. Thorin and Evelyn are setting the table.

Michonne comes around from the back of the house with a bowl of some creme pie in it. Knat and Dean follow each carrying a pie for dessert. Melissa and Debbie, Jonah's wife, follow with pitchers of tea and sangria.

I'm not sure who's idea it was to have this celebration. It's partly to celebrate Glenn and Jesus finding their way back to us and partly in honor of our new people and in memory of those we've lost.

I finger my new braid. It hangs beside my family braid, holding several of Tiny's hunter beads and tied with a piece of one of her shirts. Evelyn and Thorin also carry a new braid with a few of Tiny's beads and tied with a piece of her shirt as well. Daryl claimed her family bead the braid it was attached to that he wrapped with a bit of leather to make a necklace.
It's not easy having lost another child. My chest aches and I still look for her when I check my kids. It may ease as time passes but it will never fade nor will she be forgotten.
Chapter 15

Jesus went out with Merle and Aaron. All three came back quietly with Jesus and Aaron giving me some odd looks. Neither said a word but both looked almost fearful.

Merle pulls me aside, "We saw what ya did to all tha towns. We drove for hours tryin ta find somewhere nearby but all tha towns done been burnt to hell. Think it scared em a bit."

"What were yall looking for out there?" I ask instead of answering the unasked question.

He shrugs indifferently, "We was just going to loot whatever was there."

I look away to where Aaron and Jesus have joined the others on the front porch. Everyone has been more lax since I put up the new border, rarely leaving beyond the wall. No one has bothered with guard shifts anymore.

I almost want to shake them and tell them that we're still not safe. Instead I keep biting my tongue. My power is shielding us so we can relax even if I think they're being too lax.

"I looted as I burnt," I offer instead. "Sirius should know where all the bags are and I used a marker to try to label the bags."

I had dropped off dozens of bags during the time I cleared the towns. Some had plenty to take while other had barely anything left. The town with the warehouses took three days to clear so I know their are dozens of bags full of shrunken supplies.

He hums understanding but doesn't comment. He also doesn't leave my side. I know what he's asking even if he doesn't say a word.

He's asking why I burnt the towns. He's asking if I found other survivors. He's asking if I killed.
I keep silent. I don't want to answer. I don't know how to anyways.

Killing the ones that hurt Daryl and Tiny was justified, no one would argue that. The man walking the highway alone may or may not have been a threat. There was the possibility he would pass us by but it's just as likely that he would stumble upon someone from our group.

What if he had found the girls, Dean or Knat? This world has destroyed so many minds already, driven so many insane. What if he was crazy too? I couldn't take the chance.

The two men in that police station... they were too close. Granted, they had been holding up there for a while. It was clear they had systematically scavenged the area in an ever widening circle.

But could I risk them moving our way? Could I risk them finding our group scavenging the area? There was no signs of violence near them but could I take that risk?

Whether what I did was right or wrong doesn't matter. It's done and I wouldn't change it if I could. Burning the towns nearest us should scare away any survivors and keep the threats away which is all I want.

It's an odd feeling, taking a life without knowing if they were a threat. I wonder if Sirius felt this way. It also makes me wonder if he had a part in the death of the orchard people before we found the place. It just seems too much of a coincidence to me. Not that I'll say anything though because obviously I'm no better.

"Guess we'll haveta go further out ta find anything new," Merle offers indifferently.

I smile at him, a small grateful smile. He knows, he understands, and he wont judge me for it. I squeeze his arm gratefully.

He shrugs, moving off towards the others and calling over his shoulder, "Next time warn us when ya gonna clear the towns so we can check em out first."

I notice a few glances from Maggie, Glenn, and Eric. I'm too far away to see if they're looking fearful or not but I do see them look. Carl says something that seems to startle them all.
Arms wrap around my waist as a chin rests on my shoulder. I grin back at Daryl, leaning back against him. He's healed up amazingly from his wounds.

"Kids are showing them new folk how ta shoot," he whispers against my ear.

I chuckle, nodding my agreement to the unspoken request. He gives a tug, taking my wrist in hand and pulling me along with him.

The RV is parked beside the short road between the fence and wall. Daryl pulls me along inside, closing the door behind us. We can only take an hour or so alone in here but it's well worth it.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the comments and kudos

Also, I decided to let them meet a peaceful-ish group this time. Hope y'all enjoy😊

Chapter 16

There's still a bit of tension, a calm wariness that seem to linger within the group. They didn't like that I more or less destroyed everything around us. It means we'll have to go further for supplies.

I tried to argue that it was necessary to ward off others. I even pointed out that we're self sustaining, especially since they got the solar panels rigged to the generator. Now we don't have to search for fuel to keep our lights on.

I'm sure they'll come around. Even if they don't, we'll manage. We could always cast them out but honestly, especially with the expansion, we need the bodies. We can't hold such a large area without the help.

Daryl still hunts most days, even as fall is chilling the air. It's probably late November by now. The leaves are only just turning so we're hoping it will be a mild winter.

Sometimes Daryl takes the kids but now I insist on joining them. It's not that I don't trust them. I just don't trust this world. So when Daryl and Evelyn grabbed their hunting bags this morning I decided to join them. I won't lose another child!

I transform to hunt with them. It's not necessary but as my senses are heightened as a wolf it's safer. If we run into trouble my wolf form will aid us better than my human one.

Daryl wants to go northwest which will take us further up into the mountains. We should even reach an old interstate. Daryl thinks we may find more wild animals that way since there was a zoo. None of us think many animals survived but surely a few have.
We take the truck but only until we get to the interstate. I would've waited to transform if I had known we would be driving but it's not that big of an issue. The drive even goes well for the first twenty miles.

Once again, the threat is survivors. Someone left a string of spikes in the road. They were painted and covered partially in leaves just as most of the road is. It's not Daryls fault that he didn't see them. Thankfully he stopped our truck without crashing even with all four tires blown.

I leap down from the truck bed, snarling and sniffing out scents. Humans were here but it's been a few days. A twitch of my ear only catches the normal wild noises, no humans around.

Daryl climbs down from the truck with his crossbow ready. Evelyn follows with both of their backpacks. Her own crossbow is over her shoulder and her belt holds seven small throwing knives.

I huff at Daryl to let him know we're alone. He hums, turning on the spot to look for himself out into the forest crowding the road. Evelyn waits patiently still tucked against the truck.

"Ya gonna change back or stay?" Daryl asks, shouldering his bow and taking his pack from Evelyn.

I huff, shaking my fur. I'm stronger like this, better defense. And hopefully if humans see us they'll think twice about attacking.

Daryl motions us to follow him. He moves first to the side of the road, then across the deep narrow ditch to slip between the trees. Foliage and bushes grow thickly together, nearly strangling each other, so it isn't easy to follow.

We follow the road for another ten miles at a slow steady pace. It takes us all day as both Daryl and Evelyn stop to catch animals. Daryl even wrangled a doe and two fawns alive for our herd. Assuming, of course, that we can safely transport them back.

Night falls and the forest grows ever darker around us. Evelyn notices the small wooden structure up in the tree. Its a shelter but more likely built for hunting than for children playing.

The aged wood is untreated, darkened from age and splintering in places. The base plateform is
wide enough to have supports in two separate trees even as three branches pierce through on their rise upward. The short boxy shaped building is mostly centered but leaning heavily against one of the trees. There is no railing and no ladder or steps to reach it. Still, it is a solid shelter for the night.

Evelyn nearly squeals in excitement. No doubt this is quite the adventure for a child that loves such stories. But there are far too many dangers in the world for us to be careless.

Daryl climbs the tree, using my back as a step up. It doesn't take him more than a moment. The crooked door squeaks on rusted hinges as he opens it to duck inside. At least I don't smell any scents around.

He comes back after a moment with an old frayed ladder rope in hand. There are two metal hooks which he presses into place on the edge of the platform before shoving it over to unravel. I transform back to human only because it will be easier to climb with hands. The deer that Daryl caught are tied to the tree with a few spells to ward off dangers. Hopefully they'll be alright.

Evelyn climbs quickly even as Daryl warns her to move carefully. Once I'm up he pulls the rope ladder back up, rolling it and tucking it to the side. I transform back because it's a bit too cold to stand around nude.

The little shak is dark and full of cobwebs. There is a clear line of ants following the tree truck upward and a few insects scatter as we enter but it's not terrible. We've slept in worse.

There is no blankets or furniture. There is a small cardboard box that looks half rotten in the corner with a lantern, two tin plates and a thermos. I transform back to human, tired now after going back and forth so much, to resize some sleeping bags for us. Still, I'll spend the night in my fur to keep them warm.

We'll stay the night in the tree shak and try to head home in the morning. We could arguably seek out the humans that set the trap earlier but there have been no more scents or traps since so I doubt we'll find them. Three deer are enough of a reward. Plus, Daryl and Evelyn caught a bunch of animals that are currently shrunken in this large plastic tub of a thing we brought so we wouldn't have to clean each kill right away.

Rest doesn't come easy for me or Daryl. We're both paranoid enough to be wary. After all, humans are the real monsters, far more dangerous than walkers.
Chapter 17

I have to hand it to them, they're good at this. Twelve people, four of them women, circle the tree while we slept. It's only as the wind blows that I catch a scent on the breeze.

The tree shak isn't far from the ground but it's enough of a fall that it'll hurt. I don't want to transform back when I'm more dangerous like this. So I take a leap and kick off of another tree to slow my momentum before landing on the ground. Surprisingly, none of them take the shot as I had expected.

Our deer are still where we left them, safe within my wards. So they didn't try to steal our animals either. But they do have us surrounded and I don't like that.

A man stands up, moving into sight while the others remain hidden. He's shorter than I Daryl by a few inches but broad shouldered and strong. His beard is braided with a bead halfway down while his head is shaved showing scrolling tattoos over his skull.

His clothes are old world leathers, the kind you only see in movies. There are small throwing axes and daggers along his belt as well as two axes on each leg. There's even a broadsword peaking over his shoulder.

He looks like an old world warrior, something from another time and place. But he's not stupid or brash. He holds up his hands, maintaining eye contact with me as he approaches slowly.

"Best you stop there," Evelyn speaks up from beside me. "He won't hesitate to tear out your throat if he thinks you're a threat."

The man looks surprised to see her. I snarl, my whole body vibrating with the threat loud and clear. It's enough to make him hesitate.

"Why y'all surrounding us like this?" Daryl snaps out coldly.
The man looks to Daryl and only briefly back to Evelyn before he returns to staring at me. His voice rumbles deep, throat dry but words clear, "The last survivors we saw were a threat."

"We can say tha same," Daryl snaps back.

"They killed my sister," Evelyn adds softly. Her hand pushes into my fur, nearly clinging as she adds, "Course, my dads killed em all so they can't hurt us any more."

The man looks to Daryl again, "Are y'all traveling through? You look too well fed to be roamers."

"We're hunting," he answers grudgingly.

"These are our lands," the man narrows his eyes but steps back when I snap my teeth at him. "Your wolf is a wild one but taking a child hunting is dangerous."

Daryl shrugs indifferently, "She's my kid an between Harry an me we'll keep her safe."

The man's mouth twitches, "Harry?"

I rumble another growl, more annoyed than threatening. We don't have to explain to these people. They have no say in our lives, our actions.

Daryl steps forward, crossbow steadily aimed. His voice is low and cold, "You an yours are gonna back off if ya know what's good for ya."

"You're on our land," the man responds calmly, almost fearlessly. "We'll escort you where you need to go but you leave alone. The animals of this land belong to our tribe."

"Tribe?" Daryl scoffs mockingly, "Your skin is whiter than my girls! Them natives got tribes an shit. What... y'all thinkin ya some chawktaw or somethin?"
The man raises an eyebrow, "More Viking than indigenous."

Daryl snorts again, "Well, ya ain't taking our animals. We caught em when our truck crashed cause some idiot left road spikes down. They ain't from you lands but twenty or so miles that a ways.

The man glances around, puffing up as he does, "Like you said, we have you surrounded. Do you really want this to get lethal?"

I step toward, puffing myself up as muscles tighten, preparing to fight. I'll kill them... I'll kill them all!

"Easy, Harry," Daryl says softly, pressing his leg against my back hip. Evelyn did the smart thing and tucked herself on the ground beneath me where she's least likely to be hurt.

"You've never seen Harry kill," Evelyn calls from beneath me. "He can destroy every last one of you before you can even hurt us."

The man hums thoughtfully before answering her in a soft tone, "It's not our way to hurt children but you are trespassers so we need you to leave."

"We'll leave but we're takin our deer with us," Daryl snaps back, not liking the man's attention on our daughter.

"We need the deer," the man shakes his head, "and you look well fed so I doubt you're starving."

"Neither are you," Daryl answers coldly, almost accusingly.

He nods, "We're managing but only just. Our tribe needs the meat."

"What, the dozen of ya can't hunt enough to keep your bellies full?"

"There are over three hundred of us," the man answers.
I stop growling in surprise. Even Daryl's crossbow wavers in shock. Over three hundred? Impossible! No where could have such numbers!

"Really?" Evelyn crawls out from under me even as I try to nudge her back into hiding, "Do you have kids too?"

His answer is as much of a surprise, "Every year in May we had a renaissance faire. Everything from jesters to blacksmiths, sword fighters to cooks and craftsmen. The whole place was fenced in but not well. When this all started we were far enough from the city that we had time to put up a wall. Not many can boast that."

He adds sadly, "We gathered as many as we could, took in survivors when we found them. We had some births and we lost nearly a hundred to sickness that first winter. We have some farms, some gardens, but all our livestock was lost to disease three years ago and our crops this year aren't enough. We just don't have the area to plant what we need."

"Tha fuck?" Daryl scoffs, "How in the Hell did y'all loose all your livestock? Why ain't your crops enough?"

The man shrugs, "We have our hunters and we go out every day but the humans are as bad as the walkers. Still, we have people back home going hungry. We need those deer."

"Why ya talking and not just taking?" Daryl asks suspiciously.

The man sighs tiredly, "Because I don't want to kill someone over a few deer."

"Why didn't ya take em while we slept?"

"Because we didn't know if you'd hunt us for it."

Daryl hums a moment, shooting me a questioning look. I huff my agreement. Even if he's lying, which I doubt because I can smell the truth on him, it's not like losing the deer will hurt us. We'll be able to move quicker without them.
"Fine," Daryl shifts his stance to a more relaxed pose, "y'all can have em but y'all are leaving first."

"Fair enough," the man agrees.

Chapter End Notes

This new group has taken the Viking theme and run with it. You all know there would be at least one group of Vikings and/or wildlings running around post apocalypse just because people love the lifestyles and aesthetics of it.
Chapter 18

It took two weeks for anyone to decide what to do. The weather is still only somewhat cold, a very mild winter. But the debate about the other group took a while to work through. It was also difficult to decide who should go.

Some of our more reserved members are against dealing with strangers. Far too often we've run into the bad ones. Do we really want to risk them turning on us? Especially if their group is as large as they say.

It's not even like we need it. We are self sufficient with our gardens and animals. Is it really worth the risk?

Others brought up why we should meet with them. Wouldn't it be nice to meet with our neighbors? Wouldn't it be nice to have a group to trade with? In this world don't we want as many good people to survive as we can get?

Not only that but it's good strategically too. If we run into any more bad groups it will help to have others that can join us in a fight. We may be good fighters but at times numbers could make a huge difference.

The world has essentially been reset. People will become more feral and it will be generations before we're back to anything like what we were before. So we need to make plans for the world were in now, not the one we left behind.

Daryl and Merle had whispered to each other in support of the meeting. It was only privately that Daryl told me what had been said. Apparently both brothers worried about how long our group could sustain itself.

You see, our group is self sustaining but for how long? It's not the fields, greenhouses, or the animals that worry us. It's the people.

When you look at our group what do you see? Daryl and I can't physically have children so we can't pass on our blood, or genetics as Daryl explained. For the same reason, neither could Aaron
or Eric.

Carol can't have any more children. Neither can Melissa or Debbie. Maggie and Glenn may try but with how ill she was with Hershel they may not want to try. Hershel and Aurora together would work but the older kids... not so much.

Of the kids we have Carl, Adam, and Elijah as the boys. Knat, Dean, Mary, and Hannah are the girls. But Adam, Eli, Mary, and Hannah all come from the same family so there's no diversity there.

Even then, how many kids can they have before they breed themselves out? Two generations? Maybe three?

We need new blood. It's why Daryl is always bringing in new animals. Without some diversity you run the risk of defects, deformities, and sterility. It's something we all need to be wary of and the new group could help.

Once it was explained, the others had already understood, it was only a matter of deciding who all should go. Daryl and Merle should go as our leaders. They are also both great judges of character and Merle promises to not be too offensive towards these play vikings.

We definitely won't take the kids or older teens. More for their safety than anything. Maggie and Carol will take lead while we're gone.

The problem was that both Dixons wanted me to come along while Sirius also wanted to go too. I'm still not comfortable with us both leaving our base vulnerable. It took three days of arguing for us to finally agree.

Eventually we decided that our orchard is safe enough for both me and Sirius to leave for a day. Michonne will join us with Jesus. That should be more than enough for our first official meeting.

Then we had to figure out where they were located. Jonah remembered taking his family a couple times so he remembered more or less the right area. The map he gave us should help us find them quick enough.

Our best guess is they were on the far East side of their territory when we found them. They
must've had to push out further and further to hunt. The one thing in their favor is the winter being so mild.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the comments and kudos, so glad you all like my story. Our new Viking friends will star in the next few chapters while they work out an alliance. Hope y'all enjoy 😊

Chapter 19

The drive was longer out because we had to go around a walker infested city. We saw some more evidence of traps left to catch survivors unaware. It put us all on guard but so far we haven't seen the ones to lay the traps. It's too far out to be the Viking group so there must be other survivors around, probably scavengers.

It took us most of the morning but since we left early and our truck has two extra gas cans in the back we should be okay. The trees were growing close along the roads for most of the drive until we reached the turn off. A large field, probably several acres worth, opens up on a hilly plain.

A large wooden fence surrounds most of it. There are towers built along the wall as well as a ditch of spikes surrounding it. It's impressively secure and rather old world like in appearance. Both Merle and Daryl whistle in appreciation.

There are shouts coming from the towers as soon as we come into sight. Merle does slow but he doesn't stop as we follow the road. More sounds come from beyond the wall, wood banging and guttural shouts.

"We should walk from here," Jesus offers. No doubt he's worried that they'll think we're challenging them if we drive up to the gate.

Merle stops the truck about a hundred feet from the gate. Rather closer than they probably want but there's still enough room for us to talk naturally between us. We climb out of the truck carefully, armed but not threatening.

The sounds from beyond the wall grow louder. It's like many pieces of wood and metal banging together and several throats growling out warnings. It's a clear warning, soldiers preparing for
Jesus steps forward, arms help out to show no weapon is in hand. His voice calls out even over the noise they're making, "Friends, we come peacefully."

The noise beyond the wall quiets some. There is clear movement along their wall and within their towers. Bodies move into positions, crowding at the gate. Bows are raised but none fire.

Jesus calls again, "We come peacefully, we come to treat and trade. Would you speak with us?"

The banging continues but at a quieter level. We keep back by the truck while Jesus stands out in the open. It's nervewracking, waiting for their move. Thankfully we don't have to wait long.

The front gate opens with a loud creak and groan. It doesn't open far though, only enough for a dozen men to slip out. They crowd together, keeping close while not blocking each other.

Each man has long hair peaking out from beneath a metal or leather helmet. They are all wearing variations of leather armor, some with chainmail too. Each one carries a large round wooden shield painted with various simple patterns. Each man has a sword in hand, most of them thick broadsword but a few are thin or curved.

Merle scoffs, turning to share an amused look at Daryl. At least he turns serious before they can see him. Jesus steps closer to the approaching group, talking constantly in a softer tone. It seems to put them at ease but they don't put away their weapons.

"Right, Harry?" Jesus calls out louder. I blink startled, having missed whatever he said. There's an almost pleading tone when he repeats, "We can let them see our gift, to know we come as friends?"

I look back to see the men have removed their helmets, watching us warily. There's the usual differences in appearances. Most are white even if their skin is darkened from life in the sun. They all have long hair in every shade from pale straw to the darkest ebony.

But then there is the sunken cheeks and dark circles beneath their eyes. There's a dullness to their gaze that speak of endless struggle and worry. There's a tension to how they hold themselves as if expecting pain. It's as if even with us being outnumbered they still feel threatened.
I look back to Jesus, nodding my agreement. We had discussed before coming whether or not we should bring food. If what the group we met before was any indication, some canned goods would go a long way with them. Considering how thin these men look, the ones sent out to face us, they definitely need the food.

I pass Sirius to climb into the back bed of the truck. I brought several shrunken bags of food with us. Partly in case we needed it and partly because it could be useful in negotiating.

The first two long gym bags have flour, sugar, oatmeal, and spices within. The next is a backpack full of ears of corn. The last is a backpack full of rice and dried potatoes.

Daryl takes two while I carry the others. They are heavy but not challengingly so. We have others, more shrunken bags if we need them. But to start with this should go far to creating goodwill.

Jesus is still talking softly to the men as we approach. Daryl passes him a bag which he opens to show them the food inside. I hand over one of the backpacks to the shocked man closest. He opens it, exclaiming over the ears of corn within.

Merle steps up with his normal swagger, "So, fellas, take us to your leader."
Chapter 20

They let us in after that even if they did still shoot us cautious looks. The wall looms over us, thick heavy logs make up most of it with thinner boards added to the top to rise it up over twelve feet high. The gate is equally heavy with thick ropes wound around some turntable like thing with a boat wheel on top.

The first thing I think is that it's crowded. Far too many people, all equally thin and starved, hover nearby. They all wear clothes that must've started in brighter colors but through wear and wash have dulled to shades of browns and greys.

They watch us pass with stunned hungry eyes. There's a constant movement like wind through tall grass but they seem too afraid to come any closer. It's unnerving, being surrounded by clearly desperate people.

The nearest buildings are a few lean-tos on either side of the gate. They have long slanted roofs that dip low made of bundles of old straw. The walls are weather aged planks nailed in such a way to leave gaps between each. Old wooden picnic tables sit underneath with people crowded within.

A dirt path winds from the gate, between the two lean-tos, then splits in either direction. Directly across is a wooden shack with various shields hanging on the outer walls. A glimpse of reflected light comes from within, racks of swords barely visible.

To the left are more buildings with similar thatched roofs. Several have dirty starved people hovering nearby. Further past them is a building that ends the road. It's twice the size of the others and better built with mud caked over the logs, probably to keep the wind out. It's also the only building nearby that reaches a second level although it too has a thickly thatched roof.

To the right are a few empty muddy pens. Between two of the pens is a deep pit with a large cauldron hanging from a metal structure made of three long metal poles meeting over the center. Even from here it reeks of boiled cabbage. Next to it is some domed clay structure and behind both is some metal rack laying over another deep pit. There's a standing wall unattached to anything else. It has several pots and pans as well as labels and cleaners attached at various points. There's even a small table built against it.
We stop for a moment at the crossways. Two women step forward, neither over fifty but each is heavily darkened from the sun. The bag with the rice and potatoes is handed to one while the corn is passed to the other. Both nearly buckle under the weight, clutching the packs close to their chests.

Two of the warriors who greeted us break away, each carrying one of the heavier bags. They start herding the two women down the right path. One woman breaks into treats, leaning heavily on the warrior nearest her.

These people, frozen in fear and yet moving, watch the four continue on their path. Several have tearstains faces now. Hurried movement near the pits shows a group hurrying to light fires. The food won't last long but it will be well received.

"We didn't realize you were this troubled," Jesus comments softly.

A gusty sigh escapes one of the warriors. He's an older man with scars and wrinkles and dry cracked hands. His brown hair is heavily streaked with silver and his blue eyes are so pale they're nearly white. He's one of the few with heavy chainmail weighing him down but his sword is one of the smaller broadsword.

"We've struggled for a while," he offers sadly.

Merle steps forward, keeping his voice low, "I don't hear any animals. Don't see any crops neither."

"It's winter," the man answers defensively, "and our last crop was infested with worms. The animals were lost a few years ago."

"Why ain't y'all set traps?" Daryl buts in, "If ya bring back some wild animals y'all can clean em up and breed some more."

"How?" The man snaps back.

Daryl glares, shifting to face the man and no doubt start a brawl. I move between them, looking up
to both but addressing the man, "Perhaps we could help there."

The man shifts back, frowning down at me. Then he eyes each of us in turn. His tone is for some reason suspicious when he asks, "What are you here for again? Which of y'all is in charge?"

Merle shifts forward, puffing up some almost challengingly, "That'd be me, names Merle."

"And Harry," Sirius adds with a motion at me.

Merle nods, "We're somewhat democratic but me and Harry lead."

The man looks between us before settling on Merle, "And what are you here for?"

Merle gives a shit eating grin, "Just meetin the neighbors, saying hi and such."

If anything that made them more suspicious. Several of the guards are fingering their swords or bows. Nervous shuffling has the crowd moving closer without seeming to.

"We're here to trade," I speak up before the tension can grow worse. "You have a blacksmith, yes? We would like to commission some work, mostly arrowheads and some swords."

That settled them a little. There's still suspicion, I doubt it will go away soon. But the tension drains away and they no longer look ready to attack.

The man nods, "I'll take you to Jarl Odin. He's our leader."

Daryl snorts but thankfully doesn't comment. Even Merle looks amused so there must be something I'm missing. But when neither offer any explanation we move on.

"What's your name?" I ask the man.
He glances over but huffs out an answer, "Barry, my name's Barry."

"Pleased to meet you, Barry," I offer my hand which he takes after a moment of hesitation. Then I introduce the others. He frowns, clearly committing our names to memory and reluctantly offering a few of his men in turn.

Chapter End Notes

These people aren't bad, they just had some bad experiences and aren't ready to trust. This alliance will work but it's going to take some stumbling on both parts. Nothing really bad will hit for the next few chapters😊😊
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments and kudos y'all are awesome😊

To answer a couple questions; yes they went far with the aesthetic. It was more a way to take their minds off the hell that the world had become. They built the village to mimic a Viking village but obviously it was nicer when they built it. There will be other areas of their compound that's modeled after other things. It was a way for them to cope with the fear and horror those first couple years. They had a lot of bad events, especially in recent years and lost their most knowledgeable members along the way. Because there was so many people they didn't really teach others in their group as they should've. This left them struggling when they lost those who knew what to do. The next chapter explains this.

Hope y'all enjoy😊

Chapter 21

They lead us to the large building at the end of the left lane. It's somewhat like a log cabin but not exactly. As we move up the steps I notice a path twisting off to the right, further into their territory.

The building, twice as wide as the other huts, is also five or more times the length. It's a narrow lane down the center with what seems to be rooms off to either side following the length of the building. There are two low tables with cushions as seating that fill the center with a deep fire pit between where their ends meet.

There are several people here, mostly women and children. One woman, all knobby limbs, sunken cheeks, and bulging belly sits at the first table. Two more women sit on the other side holding equally thin children.

A dozen older children dart between two of the rooms to our right. They all wear similar clothes, faded hues in cotton or knit. Most of the women wear loose dresses with aprons over the tops. Although calling them aprons is odd because they're more like half dresses, backs missing while tying at the waist.

Past the second table is a short stage and a staircase leading to a loft that covers the back and sides but does not stretch over the narrow length of the buildings center. On the short stage sits a
throne... an honest to god throne. Probably a prop or something because it looks more King of England than Viking lord.

The man sitting on it is tall and strong. His thick blonde beard, only a few shades lighter than his shoulder length hair, does nothing to hide his harshly square features. His clothes are the same leathers and chainmail as most of the warriors wear but the clothes underneath look better kept.

"Jarl Odin!" Barry calls out in a booming voice, "Guests have come to trade. Their gifts of food are already cooking. Tonight we shall feast!"

There were cheers and excited murmuring from the women and children. A few of the braver kids, not a one over ten, come running up to us. Thin eager hands pull us forward past the first table and to the second.

I can't help but wonder, why are they like this? Why are they starved? Why has their leader let them fall so far?

The man's voice is a deep rumble, "Welcome guests! Why have you come before the great Odin?"

It hits me then. Odin... The King of the Norse gods. He named himself after a god? No wonder Merle and Daryl were so amused.

Merle moves forward, frowning at the man still seated on his throne, "We came to discuss trade."

"And how do you know of us?" The man calling himself Odin asks.

"My brother, Daryl, was hunting with his kid," Merle answers, motioning to Daryl as he does. "They ran into some of your hunters, gave them the deer he had caught. Figured we might introduce ourselves seeing how were kinda neighbors now."

The door behind us opens again with three men rushing forward. One I recognize as the man from the woods while the other two have familiar scents. His shaven head is covered in dark tattoos and his braided beard is still held with a single bead. All three look us over quickly as they move to kneel in front of their leader.
"Dane," the man called Odin booms out, "Do you know this hunter?"

The man from the woods, still in the same dirty clothes, looks back at Daryl. He hurries to answer, "I do know this hunter, Jarl Odin. He and his daughter we met beyond our borders."

"He claims that he gave you a deer?" Odin prompts.

"A doe and fawns," Dane answers.

Odin frowns almost accusingly but nods at the man. Odin ignores him to focus on Daryl, "And your beast? Dane said you hunt with a great black wolf."

"Didn't wanna risk y'all tryin to eat em," Daryl snaps out.

The leader blinks in surprise before erupting in laughter. It's a sound echoed nervously from others throughout the building.

"I would like to see such a beast," Odin says while still chuckling.

"He tends to go for the throat," Daryl bites out waringly.

"Are we going to talk trade or not," I step in, wanting to take his attention off my other form.

The man sniffs haughtily, "What is it you wish to trade? Have you anything of value?"

"Considering your people are starving?" I snap back angrily, "We plan to offer food."

"All the animals of these lands are mine," is his answer.

"Guess that's why they all scattered, ain't it?" Merle calmly takes the man's attention. "Seeing as there ain't even a dog running around I'm guessing y'all done ate them too."
Odin frowns, "We have many people but we keep them fed."

"Fed!" I snap back, shoving closer to the stage. "I can count their ribs! The pregnant woman over there is nothing but skin and bones! The children are brittle to the touch! How is that keeping them fed?"

"We don't need help from outsiders!" Odin snarls out.

What happens next is so sudden I have to think back on it to know. Odin made some motion to his men. They all pulled weapons, blades and bows, aiming at us. The children scrambled beneath the table and into the surrounding rooms. The women hurried back, ducking into doorways or huddling down.

Our group drew guns. Tension filled the air as both sides prepared to kill. All it would take is one move, one twitchy finger, and this would become a bloodbath.

Unfortunately, my temper isn't much better than what it was before. All I can think is how this arrogant fool is starving these people. I can smell the pained hunger on the women and children. Pure fury floods my veins.

The transformation is quick enough to toss shreds of cloth and jeans around. My gun and knives clatter beneath me as my jaws open in a ferocious snarl. My body tenses, muscles bunching in preparation of a fight.

" Fucking hell!"
"Gonna warn ya now," Daryl speaks calm and cold, "if a single one of ya bastards fires at my husband I'll kill every last one of ya!"

"Husband?" A confused voice pipes up from one of the guards.

"Arrows can't pierce his hide," Jesus offers soothingly at Daryls side. "Remember when Hannah's arrow went wide? They can't hurt him."

Daryl still snarls, more tense than ever. Merle holsters his gun then motions slowly to the Viking guards to settle down. It's clear they don't want to but they look too afraid to argue.

I stalk closer to their leader. The coward reeks of urine, frozen in fear at my approach. My claws scratch at the wood of the stage as I struggle not to attack.

"Love?" Daryl calls softly from much closer than he should be. My ear twitches, torn between keeping this enemy under guard and turning to my mate.

He tries again, "Harry, it's okay now. How about ya turn back for me? Think ya can do that?"

His people are starving while he sits here playing the fool! He's not as starved! He doesn't suffer as they do!

"Careful, love," Daryl calls again. His hand buries itself in the fur at the back of my neck. It's a struggle not to go boneless at his touch. I shouldn't deny my mate.

"Step back with me, love," he continues softly. "Change back and ya can interrogate him all ya want."

I do want answers. I want to know why he's letting his people starve. I want to know why he's
playing these stupid games. I want to know why they don't have food when they clearly have room. I want to know why they have no animals.

The transition back is difficult. It only worked at all because of Daryls hand on the back of my neck. My anger keeps trying to pull my other form forward but I fight it down even if it's not easy.

I ask my questions. I let the words hiss between sharp fangs as my jaw aches to lengthen. I ignore my nudity as fur ripples beneath my flesh, begging to break free.

At first he stays frozen in fear. That changes to something torn between awe and incredulous. He settles on a heavy tiredness that slumps his shoulders from their proud posturing.

"It's not what you think," he offers sadly.

"Well, explain then, we ain't stupid," Merle snarks.

The man quirks his lips at Merle, amused at the reprimand. I imagine the two of them could be good friends. Another sigh shifts his frame, leaving him looking quite worn.

"It stated years ago," he begins hesitantly. "In the begining, there was close to a thousand of us. Or at least by that first winter there was something like that."

Merle whistles at the number. The man nods, "We did good that first year. We had animals from nearby farms brought in and we had crops growing well. It was enough to keep us going and we thought it could only get better. We even had a council, twelve men and women who lead us."

With a weary sigh he adds, "Several got sick the second winter, it was a bad one. Three died from exposure that we're sure of. Five died of illness. And fifty three died of bites from the dead when they turned. We didn't know before that, that all who die turn. We though you had to be bitten first."

"It didn't help that we were sleeping nearly on top of each other at the time," he adds sadly. "This hall alone held fifty people when we first built it. We had a big group of tents but they didn't do enough against the cold. They were the worst hit."
He looks around meeting the mourning gazes of his people. His voice is a numb calm as he continues his tale, "When spring came we planted and put up more protections and hoped for the best. And for two years it worked. But that fifth year..."

He shares a pained look with several of the warriors as he adds, "There was a failed coup. About two hundred guys had tried to ignite a rebellion. We tried to keep it peaceful but it wasn't easy. The council was only five of us then. Mal who lead the traitors was a councilman before the coup. We had to banish them. They poisoned our animals, the ones they didn't steal when they ran in the night."

"They also left the gate open and the guards dead," he adds angrily. "Rotters got in and attacked. We lost so many then I honestly don't know how we survived."

"Without our animals- cow, goat, chicken- we had to lean more heavily on our crops," he explains. "It wasn't so bad at first because we had lost so many but it wasn't easy either. We just don't have the room for big crops, not enough to feed us all."

"A group approached us," he adds bitterly. "It was all men but they seemed nice. We thought they would help us. But they were monsters! We killed them but it wasn't without heavy losses of our own."

"Those we banished attacked several times. They killed three of our hunting parties as well as five of our scavenger groups. It left us hobbled badly. Our strongest, bravest, most knowledgeable were lost from all of this."

"Most of our farmers were lost between the traitors attacks and the monsters we let in. So when the crops the next year didn't grow as well we didn't know how to handle it. We tried again this past summer but the crops were even worse. And this whole time we've had to fight off attacks by the traitors that hover just beyond our borders."

"Are they still troubling y'all?" Merle asks.

Odin nods, "They set traps, mostly to the south of us. We avoid them as much as they can but the north and east are two big cities, both overrun with rotters. It doesn't leave us many options."

"And all this?" Merle asks waving his stump around the room.
Odin smiles, "Most of us worked these faires. We lived the history we loved. You should see the hobbit hills and fairy towers. You'll get a laugh out of those I think. Besides, the world has reset so why not live it to the fullest?"
A hesitant tap on my shoulder draws my attention. An older woman stands patiently. She has kind brown eyes and long grey hair twisted into dreads and pulled back with a scarf. Her long thick skirt drags the ground and her loose tunic is covered with a crochet shawl. Various necklaces and bracelets cling together as she moves.

"Thought you might need this," she says kindly, holding out a bundle of cloth.

It hits me then that I've been naked this whole time. My cheeks burn as I take the clothes, muttering a soft, "Thank you, ma'am."

She smiles, patting my arm and stepping away. The clothes consist of a sage green tunic and a pair of soft tan cotton pants. Both slip on easily even if the tunic is a bit loose.

My gun, knives, and shrunken supplies are scattered on the stage with the shredded remains of my clothes. I pick through it quickly. Unfortunately, my belts were torn when I transformed so I have no way to reattach the weapons. Neither do I have pockets to hold any of it.

The woman returns with a leather belt in hand. I smile my thanks. The belt is thick leather and will hold the weapon sheath well. Then I loop it around my waist and buckle it over the tunic.

"Where all have y'all hit for supplies?" Merle asks as he settles at the nearest table. The cushions are wide if mostly flat and there is room beneath the table to stretch your legs if you don't want to kneel.

The man, Odin, moves down from the stage, still eyeing me nervously as he settles across from Merle. His guards move around, a few taking a seat while others hover nearby. Daryl tugs me along, encouraging me to sit down by Merle.

Sirius, it seems, has wondered to the other table and is joking with the women there. They only look a little nervous. No doubt they'll warm to him soon, most do. In fact, several of the kids are already approaching that table now that the tension has died down.
"We only go as far as the turnoff," he answers. "It's dangerous to go further."

Merle frowns, digging a map from his back pocket, "The turnoff? So that gives y'all what? A gas station and a general store? Y'all don't push farther?"

"We can't," he grumbles angrily. "We've sent out groups and they never return."

Merle lays the map on the table between them. There is already a circle around their campgrounds, a bit lopsided but mostly accurate. There are notations of a few traps as well as the tree shack we found. It's hand drawn but accurate.

The second one he smooths out is a preprinted map. It shows a larger area, including the two cities. It gives enough information for a general overview but nowhere near the detail needed for a run.

"Show me where all y'all been," Merle demands, pushing the papers towards Odin.

He frowns, "Why do you want to know? Why all the questions? Y'all looking for a place to stay?"

The last was said gruffly if slightly hopeful. I'm not the only one to snort at the backhanded offer. As if we would leave our home for this! How foolish is he? How foolish does he think we are?

"We're being fucking neighborly, asshole! Now answer the damn question," Merle snaps back.

Odin shifts around, glaring at all of us. It's clear he's going to argue, drag his feet even. I let out a snarl, clawed hands dragging rivets into the wooden table.

He blinks startled as if he's forgotten I can transform. He turns to Merle cautiously, "Why are you here? What do you want from us?"

Jesus tries to reassure him, soft flattery words. A hand pats my arm drawing my attention away. I look over to a small girl kneeling on the cushion beside me. Her dark brown hair is pulled back in
several braids. Blue eyes watch me curiously as she shuffles, no doubt trying to draw courage.

"Yes, little pup?" I ask softly so as not to frighten her more than I already have.

She wiggles again, mostly in excitement and curiosity it seems. Her question is whispered at a volume too high to go unheard by others, "Are you really a werewolf?"

"Not quite," I explain, "You see, werewolves only turn at the full moon. Plus their bite and scratch is contagious. I transform but I can't infect others to be like me. I'm a shapeshifters, or skinchanger if you prefer."

Her mouth falls open in a little O of surprise. More children scramble towards us. Five little ones, all about six years old and all but one a boy. Each is thin and starved but all look up with bright eyes.

I still have my shrunken supplies tucked inside the leather pouch that should hold extra gun clips. I hum thoughtfully, wondering if I should dare. But they've already seen me transform. It can't hurt.

"Wanna see a magic trick?"

I only resized one bag, a small over the shoulder pack. It held pop tarts and breakfast bars. They're a bit stale, having sat so long in the warehouse before I found them. But in a pinch they'll do.

The kids fell on them. Wrappers were tossed about as they stuffed as much into their mouths as they could. More came, eager hands reaching for their own prize. I tried to warn them to be careful but it seems to fall on deaf ears.
Chapter 24

Merle, Jesus, and Michonne stayed in the long house to talk sense to Odin. He keeps refusing to risk the cities even when we assure him it's the best way to feed his people. He's too damn afraid!

Sirius wonders off. I doubt he'll transform here. They would probably mistake him for food. He'll be fine, he's good at making friends. Maybe he's going to find some people to take the run.

There's an almost party like atmosphere back the way we came. The smell of food cooking is growing on the air. Voices grow in volume as more people crowd down the lane. A few of the people darting in and out of the crowd even have normal modern clothes on which for some reason is surprising. I guess I thought they all went heavy with the Viking theme but obviously not.

Barry leads me and Daryl down the side lane. It goes back behind the building as well as the one behind it. Then it curves back onto itself, making a wide muddy road with buildings on either side.

The first few are similar small huts, probably housing. Two wide buildings have long tables within, perhaps meeting places. A small empty pin sits on one side with the cooking area just past it. The cooking area connects the two roads.

Across from the cooking is a large field. It's barren now, what with winter being here, but there is clear evidence of crop growth. The field stretches along the rest of the road until it hits the wall.

Past the cooking area on this side is another empty pin. This one still has the chicken coop standing tall if abandoned.

Between the last building and the field is another small lane. Barry leads us down it as it snakes back again. This gives us a better view of the rest of their compound.

The small hills we spotted before are more visible now. They stretch from the back of the field all the way to the far side of the wall and along it. They stop where a series of wooden huts on tall stilts cluster together. The raised huts, each with a thatched roof, follow the length of the wall until
it meets what appears at a distance to be RVs. Another empty field sits in the central area.

"The hobbit burrows and elvish trees," Barry comments, half amused and half resigned.

Daryl snorts. I look again at the hills. A small dirt path winds between them. Some of the hills are rounded while others are more sloped. It takes me a while to spot the doors.

Some doors are round others are small and boxy. Each door is set into the hill, each with a slight overhang to shield it some. They're homes! Homes built into the ground and made to look like hills.

"Tiny would've loved this," I blurt out.

Daryl rubs at my back. Familiar pain blooms in my chest. She would've loved it here. She wouldn't like them starving or afraid. She would hate to hear their troubles even if she would listen. But she would love the world they tried to build.

"Tiny?" Barry asks cautiously.

"Our other daughter," Daryl answers, touching my braid that carries her memory. "She was killed by other survivors."

Barry nods solemnly, "I lost my son and granddaughter."

I sniff, struggling not to fall to the memories. My braids are loose. It happens every time I transform. I ignore the others as I pull the beads free. Daryl, as always, offers to hold them while I rebraid my hair. I don't relax until the beads are back in place and the braids are tied off.

"Lot of our groups use braids to remember those we lost," Barry offers softly.

I nod, still unwilling to talk. But standing here is useless. He must realize how restless I've grown because he waves us to follow. We take the path as it double back on itself. The field is on one side the other consists of three long buildings.
The first looks like a storeroom. It has various clothes, mostly of the Vikings style, hanging along the wall and folded on shelves filling the center. There isn't much room to move within but it doesn't look like they bother it often. Perhaps this is for the extras, or the clothes of those lost.

The second one is closed up. Whatever is inside isn't something we can see though I doubt it's anything dangerous. We pass it to stop at the third building.

It's twice the width of the smaller huts with double doors resting open. Racks on the doors have belts and swords hanging from them. Just inside is another rack that stands empty.

In the center of the building, against the back wall, is a long brick structure. It has a clay domed roof and several metal racks above. I almost mistake it for a grill but there is no pots or pans within, no racks for cooking meat. In front of it sits a large anvil and a rack of hammers in various sizes.

To the left is a long trough, half full of dark water. To the right is a door. It opens with a woman stepping out. There are dark smudges on her cheek and her dirty blonde hair is roughly tied back. Dark blue eyes regard us warily.

She steps closer and I realize that she's tall, at least six foot. Her arms are strong like Michonne's. Her steps are light, signs of a good fighter. Daryl hums beside me, he must see it too.

"Nimue," Barry addresses the woman, "these people have come to trade. The food they offered in exchange for arrowheads and swords."

"How many?" She asks, "Why wasn't I sent for?"

Barry shrugs, "It happened fast and we got distracted when the werewolf shredded his clothes."

She blinks, lifting an eyebrow incredulously, "Werewolf?"

Barry looks at me, silently asking for support. I almost crack up when she asks if he's smoking the elvish weed. He manages to look offended and pleading.
Daryl nudges my shoulder, grinning but nodding his encouragement. So I hold up my hand and focus. It's harder to transform a single part of your body than the whole thing. Especially once your accustomed to the transformation.

"Well, fuck me sideways, now I've seen everything," she exclaims.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the comments and kudos 😊
Hope you enjoy the next few chapters as Harry explores the compound so he can meet the different groups 😊😊

Chapter 25

We end up staying the night in the long house. Sirius is still missing but I'm sure he's alright. Maybe he found the hippy elvish huts and made friends.

They offered us rooms, what must've belonged to some of the women. Daryl and I took the first one. Michonne took the one next to us and Merle and Jesus took the next two.

It wasn't easy, falling asleep with so many strangers around. Voices whispered, echoing through the large building. But there were no animal sounds. Nothing familiar to us.

Breakfast was plain oatmeal but it was enough to fill each belly. The kids, all with the boundless energy of youth, nearly swarmed the tables when the bowls were passed around. You would've thought we had given them something amazing with how they carried on.

All were happy, except Odin who kept grumbling under his breath. Something about him just makes my hackles rise. It didn't help that they fed him first, a full bowl, followed by half bowls for the kids.

My claws scratch gouges into the table. Daryl squeezes the back of my neck, practically ordering me to calm down. I want to snarl and lash out. All I can think is that man is no leader.

"Can you not control your beast?" Odin snaps out angrily.

I snarl back, my vision fading back and forth from color to greyscale. Merle looks up sharply, snapping back at Odin, "Best not forget, it was his decision to come help y'all. Without his word we wouldn't've come and yall would still be eatin grass!"
"We don't need your charity!" He snaps back. "This is my kingdom!"

"You're no leader," I growl out. "If you were then these people wouldn't be starving."

"I told you all what happened!" He argues defensively.

Merle snorts, "Ya gave excuses that'd explain some but not everything. Ya still failed to lead, ya failed ya people. That's on you."

"I'm doing my best!"

"It's not good enough!" I snap out. "If you can't lead then let someone else better able take the reigns."

"You do want our compound!" He crows, "I knew you didn't come for some humanitarian shit!"

"We've been together from the begining," Michonne comments quietly. "We've build up safe havens and we've lost them. We've found people and lost others, to walkers or survivors. But never have we starved. Never have we feared for our future."

"We don't want your lands," Jesus comments quietly. "We have our own and they're well outside of your reach. We could sit back and wait for you all to starve. But we're not cruel, were human. And what makes us human is our compassion, our willingness to help others."

Odin scoffs, "There are no humans like that anymore, only scavengers and survivors. Which are you?"

For some reason that calms me. Yes, he's a coward. Yes, he uses these people, takes advantage of his position. There's a very unhealthy heirchy here that needs to be dismantled. But it doesn't have to be us. It should be them.

"What happened to the council?" I ask calmly, not even a trace of a growl in my words.
He frowns, "I told you."

"No," I stare him down, "You said when the traitors were banished there were five. Twelve members to start brought down to five. What happened to them?"

The older woman with the grey dreads answers, "There were seven but two lead the failed coup. Of the five left, one was killed since his brother lead the coup. One refused to lead since his daughter died when the gates were left open. Two lost their lives fighting the dead that came within our walls. And I was relieved of my duty for trying to barter peace before the banishment."

"Now I ain't the smartest but I damn sure know how to count," Merle comments dryly. "Five for five, which means your spoilt ass wasn't on the council."

Odin puffs up indignantly, "I have lead these people..."

"Right to the grave," I snap back. "They're starving. You saw an opportunity to wrest control and you took it. Everyone was too beaten to oppose you. You gained from their pain!"

A soft wrinkled hand touches my cheek. The older woman hovers at my shoulder, kindness in her eyes. Her voice soft, soothing, "I don't think he intended harm when he took control. I think he tried his best. But this world is a harsh one, child, and not many are suited to survive."

"He's a coward," I argue, "it's his fault you all are starving."

My vision fades between color and grey. My teeth ache to taste blood. The woman strokes my cheek, seeming amazed at the shifting beneath my skin and my wolf struggles for freedom.

"I think he tried his best," she comments softly. "He's made mistakes, many in fact, but I don't think they were maliciously made."

"Then why does he fight us?" I ask, struggling to understand.
"Fear, either of you, what you can do, or the loss of his power," is the only answer she gives.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the kudos and vomments

Hope y'all enjoy the story😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 26

After breakfast I left the long house. Merle had pulled rank, issuing orders to Odins men. It had no
doubt rankled the man but his men obeyed without hesitation. I guess the woman talking reminded
them that he wasn't actually their master.

"What's your name?" I ask, embarrassed it took me this long to ask.

She smiles, patting my arm and answers, "Willow, my name is Willow."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," I offer with a slight bow.

She chuckles, patting my shoulder amused before looping her arm with mine. She leads me down
the side path to the second road only instead of turning she leads us straight. There is a grassy
section, not really a path, along the building that lets out by the blacksmiths. I wonder why Barry
didn't take us this way.

To the far right, from the RVs to along the wall and back to us, sits a fairly level meadow. There
are racks with swords, various shields, and shooting targets placed in rows. That must be their
training grounds.

Willow drags me along with her, over the fence and into the barren field. The ground is still soft
from the recent rain and cold from the winter chill. I'm thankful for the boots she brought me or
this would be rather uncomfortable.

She leads us over the field until we reach the elvish huts. They are all between four and twelve
feet off the ground. A few of the stilts hold two huts, one above the other. Wooden staircases snake around and between the stilts. It seems to have several branching spots to the point that any staircase will lead to any hut even if you have to backtrack some.

The huts themselves are covered in treebark, nailed in place over what seems like plyboard. There is also dry mud of some kind caked all over it. The doors are simple cut rectangular boards hidden behind thick cloth drapes. The whole place, while built from imagination for sure, wasn't built with any real experience.

One towards the top is wide with open walls. The top is flat and covered in treebark rather than thatched. Several people sit together, probably at tables so it must be a common area. Another towards the bottom has a wide doorway that's open, revealing empty shelves within. It must be their storeroom.

"At first we had tents here," Willow says. "But they were no good for winter or against walkers. So those living here built these for their homes."

"The mud?" I can't help but ask.

She smiles, "It's called cob. It's clay, sand, straw, and water. Mix it together and you get something not too different from mortar mix. It's what the hobbit burrows are made from. Cob homes shaped by hand."

I look back at the little hills curiously. From here all I can see is the grass covering them. Although we're closer now so I can also see various windows as well as short pipes growing out of the tops.

I wonder if Daryl knows about cob. Surely if anyone would it would be him or his brother. He stayed behind to help Merle beat sense into Odin so I'll ask him later.

Willow tugs on my arm, prompting me to follow her into one of the lower huts without a hut above it. It's near the middle of the cluster but closer to the hobbit hills side. It sits four feet from the ground with a staircase leading from it to split on either side.

The cloth draped over the door is a heavy red drapery, dark burgundy perhaps. The door is thin so the draperies are probably necessary to keep the cold out. It opens on simple box hinges, not door hinges like you would expect. And there is no knob, only a rope with a knot on either side of the
The inside is small and cluttered but homey. There is a small twin sized mattress on the floor along the back. It must double as a seating area with how the mound of pillows are arranged.

A small side dresser, the kind with two drawers, sits near the foot. A shelf rests halfway up the wall above it from one wall to the other. It holds books, trinkets, and a few clothes.

Across from there is a black beanbag chair by the head of the bed. A small shelf sits beside that with empty bowls and containers. There is a bucket, a simple black one, covered with a rag tucked in the corner. A thick red and gold area rug covers the floor.

"It's brilliant," I offer with a smile.

She laughs, "It's not so much as all that, but it's home and that's enough."

"Why do you live out here?"

She shrugs, tugging my arm to follow her to the bed. It's only once she's comfortable against the pillows that she answers, "I needed away from the more blood thirsty ones. We all grouped up, not as badly at first but more pronounced over the years."

She shifts against the pillows, pulling a wine red one in her lap, "I know you think the worse of Odin but he's really not so bad. Incompetent maybe but not malicious."

I snort, unamused, "What's his real name?"

"John," she answers with a smile, "but don't tell him I told you."

I hum amused. Of course someone with a plain name would change it. Who would respect a Jarl named John? Odin is a powerful name even if the man wielding it isn't.

"Why'd y'all seperate like you did?"
She sighs, "Birds of a feather and all that. Us in the 'elvish' camp as well as those in the hills, we're the peaceful ones. We don't want to fight or kill. We just want to farm and eat and smoke and live."

I grin over at her, nodding my agreement. There's nothing wrong with such a life. It's a simple life to be sure but a peaceful one. Who could ask for more?

"Those in the RVs used to work at the fair too," she adds. "It wasn't so much for the lifestyle as it was for the money. They ran booths selling food and novelties. None of them are really fighters. They just want to live and be left alone."

"And the vikings?"

She huffs, "It used to be two groups, Vikings and knights. After the rebellion the two groups merged. Both like to quarrel and fight but there aren't really any leaders left there. It's why he's still in charge. They may talk a big game but they know they can't do any better."

"I still think someone else should be in charge," I grumble, "At least one person from each group."

She nods, not arguing. She does sit up, pulling a small wooden jewelry box off the shelf by the bed. Opening it gives out a familiar wet grass scent. Small rolled joints sit inside.

She pulls one out along with the lighter. I grin when she passes it over. I can't help but ask, "Should you all waste the field on these?"

"Field?" She asks mockingly. "We grow these in our huts. The hills grow them too, all over their roofs and walkways."

I laugh at that, startling her to laughter. The lighter clicks twice before it lights. I pull in a breath, hearing the sizzle as the tip catches light. Holding the breath in my lungs, I pass the joint to her.

Chapter End Notes
A few notes:

Harry has judged Odin harshly, believing that he's abusing his position over others. Also, seeing the kids so thin and hungry reminds him of his own childhood which in turn is making him compare Odin to the Dursleys. It's unfair but it's where his mind would leap. Especially when he only has the other groups he's been exposed to. So he equates Odin with the Dursleys, Govenor, and the other wild groups they've faced.

Odin really is trying but he doesn't have the knowledge to be successful. He trains with his people and when the traitors return to attack them he goes out to fight. He keeps the women and children, the sickest, near him where he hopes they'll be safer. He isn't trying to damage the children, he's just hoping that as they're small they can go on less. He's also giving more to those who fight as well as those who hunt in the hopes they will have the strength to keep everyone safe. He reasons that if he fed the kids more then the adults would be too weak to defend them. It's foolish but not malicious. But he's afraid. All of their strongest, their leaders, have been cut down. They invited people in only to be betrayed horribly. He's afraid that Harry’s group plans to use them or take what little they have. He worries that these people he wants to protect will suffer further because he trusts the wrong person.

Sirius is missing for a while because he wants to investigate the traitors. The traitors have been watching and killing any supply groups or hunting parties that they can. They want to kill enough that they can walk back in the gate and take over without any fight. They're vicious, sadistic even, and lean towards the cruelest ways of life since they know they won't be punished for it. Sirius scouts them, even distracts them when setting off their alarms. That's why when Merle and Daryl lead a group out they come back unharmed.
I'm not sure how much time we waste smoking in her hut. More people join us there, crawling up on the bed and sharing in the relaxed smoking air. Several joints are passed around the group until the very air is heavy with warm smoke.

The first to arrive are two willowy girls, older teens, in layers of flowing cloth. They crawl between us, kissing the white wisps of smoke from our lips. It is their addition that has Willow pulling another joint from her box. One's name is Serenity while the other introduces herself as Selena.

The next to come through is a group of five. One man, tall and hunched though not from age, with dark hair only just sparking with grey. Two young men, both of similar stature and features to the first, only have the barest whiskers on their chin but equally long hair braided down their spines. The two women with them, young and smiling, are one light while the other is dark. The names given are Mal, Porthos, Wayne, Jekayla, and Juniper although I'm not too sure who the names belong to.

I lose sight of the ones to come after. I know only by the time we've smoked over a dozen joints, the room is full of warmth, smoke, and relaxed forms. I don't know the woman wrapped around me nor the older teen boy resting his head on my stomach.

The low light beyond the door grows dimmer. It is this alone that tells me the passage of time. Though a surprise, none of us jump when the door opens to evening light. A cool breeze stirs the thick air.

"Thought you would like to know," Barry calls out softly over the limp forms, "but the group made it back with a truck full of canned foods."

That wakes people. Some groan in hunger, certain this is some cruel dream. Others struggle to climb free of the mass of bodies, wanting nothing more than to be given food.

Willow looks over the others surprised, "Food? They found food already?"
"Yes, quite a bit and the pots are already over flames."

"How many did we loose?" She asks, voice resigned.

"None," he answers somewhat in disbelief. "All who left returned unharmed."

That seems to wake those who believed this to be a dream. The open door lets in another chill breeze, circling the room and clearing out some of the thick smoke. Willow shifts from the mattress, coralling the others into shuffling out.

It's an odd experience. The group moves numbly through the field, following Willow and Barry as he tells her what he knows of the run. The smoke still addles them some, leaving them sleepy and compliant.

A heavy crowd stands at the cooking area. Several more people in modern clothes hover nearby, watching in something like awe. Willow whispers that they are the ones from the group of RVs. Most of them are older, only the rare young adult and no kids to be seen.

There are two large pots hanging over a large fire. The two women who took the food from us yesterday are there still, emptying cans into the pot. One holds chicken and rice soup while the other holds various canned vegetables.

The truck sits just within the gate, crowded on all sides and only barely fitting. Case after case of canned goods are brought down by eager hands to much cheering. They carry them like a line of ants into one of the buildings across from the cooking area.

"What the hell you been doing?" Daryl calls from my side.

I laugh, pressing against his side, "Willow shared her stash. It was quite potent."

"That's a fact!" Merle chuckles nearby.

Willows voice carries softly from the crowd, "Have you sent for the hills yet?"
I don't hear the answer but I do hear her scathing retort. It's something to the effect of them deliberately leaving the hill people aside. Some grumbling answers her, accusing the hill people of hoarding food. She snaps back that they were promised their own personal gardens would be their own and not taken as Jarl Odin has done.

I move closer, mostly to better understand the argument. It seems that the people of the hobbit hills had personal gardens. When they tried to keep what they had grown, which they were promised would stay theirs from the beginning, Odin and several Viking guards took the supplies from them. Since then they've been kept til last whenever food is prepared.

Merle and Daryl frown but neither comment. Odin hovers nearby, glaring at everyone and standing with his chest puffed out angrily. He shrugs off Willows words when she tries to reason with him.

I follow the line of people going into what is clearly a food storage building. Various shelves are slowly filling with canned goods as people hurry to put away the food. The packs we originally brought are empty on one shelf. I hurry to fill two of them and rejoin Willow.

She takes one bag, looking back startled but a glance in my eyes seems to relieve her. She smiles, a silent thanks as I motion her to lead the way. Odin moves to argue, actually snapping his fingers at his men who turn at attention. Merle and Daryl both move towards him threateningly while Jesus hurries to calm tempers.
The hobbit hills, as they're called, are larger and more complex up close. They seem to be two story underground structures as best as I can see. Only a few of the hills appear to only hold one structure.

The lower structure has a deeper set door with steps leading down. Each lower structure is situated on the outersides of the hills. The upper structures have higher placed doors, still deep set in the ground.

The well worn path loops and intertwines the hills. Some hills are domed while others are sloped to one side but all have a thick greenery growth over the top. It might be for camouflauge or insulation but it's enough to plant some vegetables which seems the more likely reason when I notice the few bare patches here and there with obvious signs of gardening. The path rises and dips slowly. A bit off center, more to the back and far side, sits a small flat valley like area.

There is a fire pit with a tripod held pot long since gone cold. Near that is a slanted wooden structure, open on three sides with a solid roof, that has two plastic folding tables in the middle, possibly for food prep considering the pots, pans, and dishware. A brick oven sits to the right of the tables while a domed clay oven sits to the left.

The bag holding the vegetables rests heavy on my back. Willow passes her bag of soups to me and slips away, knocking softly on the doors and whispering to those within. I go ahead to the outdoor kitchen so I can start on the food.

Once inside their kitchen I notice the hanging bundles of herbs as well as the few baskets holding onions. It doesn't look like they've had anything else in here in a while. So I drop the bags on the table and get started. It's only a few minutes before people join me.

The first two to arrive are both men. Each one is thin and frail with sunken cheeks and brittle hair. Both are bundled in lawers of clothing to fight the chill as their bodies can't seem to. Each one looks both afraid and awed. Neither comment as they slink around the table. I nod hello to them, focusing on my task to give them a moment to relax.
Can after can is open and emptied into the pot. I chose the soups, vegetable and beef stews. There should be enough to feed these people although I may need two pots going, depending on how many people are here.

A woman comes next with three young teens trailing her. She introduces herself as Kiara but doesn't offer her children's names. I direct them to start the fires in the pit and the brick stove.

A few more trail around. Two couples, both young, as well as an older couple come through. Each person is equally bundled in layers of clothes to keep warm.

Some of the herbs hanging down are clipped to add flavor to the soup. I also add some salt and flour to thicken it into more of a stew. I doubt any of these people will be bothered by what's in it.

Three boys come running up excitedly with large rats in their hands. I blink stupidly for a moment, more startled by where they got the rats. But Daryl taught me how to prep animals so I take them. The meat won't be much but it will add something.

The boys get slaps on their backs by the other people but they seem stunned at the pots cooking. One asks hesitantly were it all came from. Willow offers a quiet answer while encouraging the boys to clean up.

It takes a while to cook soup. The meat added isn't much and I cook it in a skillet on the brick stove first. Then I add the cooked meat, grease and all, into the nearby soup pot. A bit more herbs, rosemary this time, should help cover the gamey taste.

There must be nearly thirty people in this one area. Most are adults but several are older teens with only the three young teens being the smallest. Blankets fill the flat valley area as everyone starts to relax, excited by the smells now prominent on the air.

Willow has already assured them that more food is coming. She's explained time and again that I've come with a group to help them. I doubt they really care about my intentions at this point. They're all far too starved.

The first two men I met introduce themselves as Fili and Kili. They're brothers, two years apart but similar enough to pass for twins. Both have the same dark hair and pale green eyes with a splattering of freckles across their cheeks. They're also young, only now nineteen and twenty one though I'm not sure which is the elder.
Another two men also introduce themselves as gay Fili and Kili. Not to be confused with brothers Fili and Kili. They're a couple and like the brothers they found the names suited them. They are also as different as night and day. One is pale with copper hair and light blue eyes while the other has darker skin, something Mediterranean, and dark brown eyes.

I also get introduced to a couple where the man's name is Thorin and the woman calls herself Bilbo. I told them about my own son Thorin and they thought at first that I changed his name like they did. I guess they were surprised he already had the name.

A female couple is there, both barely adults. The white girl with the braided brown hair calls herself Billa, though I'm not sure who she's named after. Her dark skinned partner with twisted dreads similar to Michonne's calls herself Dis.

There are many others. Most of them changed their name as if they felt a new name should let them live a new life. Only three kept their names from before. One is an older woman, near Willows age, named Sharon. The other two are a couple in their thirties, Emory and his wife Lily.

We pass out bowls of thick soup to much cheering. Several even cry, grateful to finally have full bellies. I reassure them again that more is coming, I wont let them starve!
Chapter 29

Sirius slinks in sometime just before dark. Willow guided me back to the long house where the others waited. The people here still celebrating the run while Merle and Jesus have a gathering at one table. It seems as I pass that they're discussing plans for another run.

It's too late to leave now but it's decided we will leave at dawn. Sleep comes easily and as is often the case, Daryl wakes before dawn. Then it's just a matter of rousing the others and heading out.

Most of the Vikings are still sleeping off the party. I guess finally having full bellies has tired them out. There are a few bleary eyed guards at the watch towers and the gate. Jarl Odin walks us out even while muttering about the early hour.

"We'll be back in three days," Merle reminds Odin again. "Make sure your people are ready for the run. Hopefully a few days of eating well will get em going right."

Odin hums his agreement, still glaring around tiredly. Merle catches his arm, "It won't be the lot of us. It'll be me and Daryl leading the run but we're gonna bring a couple of our people to have a looksie at your fields."

Odin glares, shrugging off Merles hand, "We can manage our fields just fine. Not to mention it's winter so there's noting growing anyways."

Merle shrugs indifferently, "Don't matter, Maggie'll know if something's wrong with the field or if y'all are just idiots."

At least the guards don't seem too offended. If anything, they look relieved by the offered help. At least they have their priorities straight. Odins posturing is getting old real fast.
"Wait!" Willows voice calls. I turn to see her rushing through a narrow gap between two buildings. A green bag is held to her chest with one strap crossing her shoulder.

Daryl frowns, stepping forward. Willow meets him with a relieved smile, "We figured since we're working together now, an exchange of personnel isn't a bad idea."

Four more people stumble out behind her. Each bundled in layers of clothes and clutching a bag tight in their arms. Two men, the Fili and Kili couple huddled close, eyeing us nervously. The two women from the Elvin huts, Serenity and Selena, come forward smiling.

Merle laughs, "I guess so, come on yall."

Willow gives a little excited skip, hurrying the others over to our truck. They clamor up, relieved and whispering soft thanks to each of us they pass. Daryl grumbles, more concerned than angry.

Odin grumbles again. Merle pulls him aside, whispering something near his shoulder. Whatever he says makes the man tense up.

The drive home takes most of the morning. A few minutes after we leave, Merle calls back to Daryl to cover our guests eyes. I guess he worries that they'll betray us if they know where we live. They don't seem offended though so that's good.

Maggie is the one to open our gate. Thorin and Evelyn come running up before the truck fully stops. Questions fire from both, burning curiosity mixed with relief in their voices.

We try to answer their questions. Jesus and Michonne take over guiding our guests. And once past the inner wall it's needed. All five of them look around in awe. Shocked, no doubt, by the greenhouses still in full bloom on either side of the road.

Daryl and I take border patrol so the others can hold a meeting. Thorin and Evelyn both follow me, demanding details over and over again. I answer all I can, describing the different areas and what I know of the buildings and people. Both look more and more excited.

Hannah, Elijah, and Melissa come out at night to take our place. Carol passes over a plate of
supper, burgers on soft roll buns with crisp lettuce and thick tomato with a side of sweet potato fries. Our guests are all tucked away in the attic while Aurora joins Maggie, Glenn, and Hershel.

"We decided who all's going," Merle comments in a forced idleness. "Figure it's a safe enough trip and these folks won't cross us. Maggie and Glenn are bringing their boy. Don't see no reason why Thorin and Evelyn can't tag along."

Carol snorts in amusement, shaking her head as Merle continues to look everywhere but at us. Daryl at my side has tensed but at the noise Carol makes he seems to settle back down.

"You want to take my kids out there?" I ask, a chilling growl rumbling beneath my voice.

Daryl rubs at my back as Merle answers, "It ain't like we're taking them on a run or nothing. We're just taking them to visit allies."

"And if those allies turn on us? If they hurt my kids?"

Merle meets my gaze then, his voice cold and hard, "Then we kill em all."

Chapter End Notes

Gonna give y'all a warning, the next two chapters are gonna make y'all hate me.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Major character death

Chapter 30

Three days pass far too quickly. I had Thorin and Evelyn both training repeatedly each day to the point even Daryl told me to stop. More than once my vision would shift to greyscale and I would struggle back to the human color spectrum.

Willow and the others settled in well enough. They got together with Jonah, Jacob, and Aaron to discuss extended housing. We were already bursting at the seams before adding more people.

Serenity suggests a place, nearly six hour drive with all the back roads. It used to sell wooden cabins and small homes, whatever that is. She says she's been there before and the buildings are nice and easy to setup. All we need is a trailer to haul them.

Sirius agreed to head that run. He can just shrink and resize the homes. Jesus, Michonne, and Aaron will go with him as backup. Carol will be in charge while we're gone. And Daryl and I climb back in the truck, this time with our kids and Hershel sitting with us. Maggie and Glenn ride inside with Merle and Debbie.

The drive back is a tranquil one. Or it would be if I wasn't worrying myself into a right state. Our kids were chatting excited for the first hour but after that they seemed to run out of steam. Instead, we all watch the trees passing us by.

The roads are nearly completely clear. Only the odd car or truck left abandoned is passed. No walkers, no people, no animals either. It peaceful, warm in the sunshine, especially for winter, with a gentle breeze.

That's why we all shout when the truck swerved dangerously to the side.

One moment were driving along with trees lining each side flicking shadows over us. Then there's
a loud pop, a tire bursts. The truck tilts to the right, metal scraps loudly against pavement. Then the truck is jerked to the left.

Another pop sounds. The front left drops forward. Metal scraps pavement and sparks flick up. The truck pulls harshly to the right.

There's a dip. The front right tire slips off the road and the mud of the embankment gives way. The back tire hits the mud, sinking deep and halting further movement. The ditch drops several feet below the road with the other side rising higher.

We come to a stop, mere seconds after the first tire blew.

Our truck is dangerously tilted over the embankment. Daryl leans over, cursing and shouting, "Arrows!"

People! People blew our tires! We're under attack!

Daryl jumps off the side of the truck, landing across the embankment to where it rises up beneath tree roots. I stand, snatching up Evelyn and tossing her to him as soon as he has his footing. He catches her in a spin, dropping her roughly beside the tree and nearly sliding down due to the mud.

The passenger doors open. Glenn falls out, sliding down in the knee deep mud and sludge. Maggie barely catches herself on the door. With a leap she makes the other side but slides down due to the mud.

I snatch up Hershel. Gunfire sounds from inside the truck so Merle is shooting at someone. More gunfire sounds from beside me. Thorin is shooting at something across the road.

I toss Hershel. Daryl catches him by his arm, twisting it accidentally as he has to lift his crossbow and fires. Maggie scrambles up the slope with Glenn struggling to follow.

I turn to reach for Thorin. He's kneeling down shooting while using the truck as cover. A glance shows me our attackers.
They look like the Vikings but none I recognize. Some have the same bows and arrows. Several have the same leather or chainmail armor. Some of the swords even look familiar. But there are differences too.

These people have bones braided into their hair or necklaces. They have black or blue markings over their face and armor. Several have bloody handprint on their chests or faces, red streaks over their cheeks.

I have that moment of confusion, a moment where I think we've been betrayed. Then I realize who they are. These are the defectors, the traitors that have attacked the Vikings and killed their people.

There are over thirty people rushing us now. More slip through the trees, firing arrows as they run and leap. They come with demented and cruel smiles, teeth bared in bloodlust. We don't have the manpower or the people to fight them all. They're coming to slaughter us. All of this only took me a second to realize.

I reach for Thorin, desperate to get him to safety. He turns to me, fear in his eyes.

Somethings there... something's wrong...

An arrow's fletching brushes against his cheek. The shaft moves through his left eye. A blood coated tip sticks out of the back of his head.

He falls...

He falls back...

He lays still...

He's dead...
Chapter 31

Told ya y'all would hate me😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 31

I hear screaming.

I think I'm screaming.

I try to hold him but it's too late.

He's dead...

Pain erupts from my shoulder. An arrowheads on a bloody shaft sticks out. After that, things become fuzzy.

My vision shifts to grey, my body transforming too fast to follow. More screams, now from those attacking us. I see a man with wild brown hair and beard like a mane around his sunburnt face. I pull away with his head crunching between my teeth.

A woman with a shaved head and red finger strokes over her cheeks and neck. I tear her thin arm away at the shoulder. My claws split the skin of her face. I leave her to bleed out.

A man with a sword... I tear out his throat.

Another with a bow releases an arrow. I bite his thigh, feeling the femur crunch and shake until the leg is torn away.
Someone slams into my side. I bite their leg at the knee. My fang scrapes between the joint bones, ripping the lower leg away. My paw slams once... twice down on their chest. Their ribcage shatters inward, piercing and crushing the organs within.

I stumble my steps. The road is slick with blood. Each step of my front right leg shoots agony across my chest.

I leap, claws catching the chest and tearing away the leather armor. My teeth clamp down on the man's head. My jaw tightens until it bursts like an overripe melon.

Someone slams my side. I stand up on my hind legs. The man, probably tall and strong for a man, stumbles back in fear. I throw myself on him, all teeth and claws.

My chest burns. It hurts to breath. For some reason my right back leg is shaking.

Voices are shouting...

"What is it?"

"Arrows won't pierce it's hide!"

"Fenrir will fall!"

"We are the warriors! We shall rule all!"

"Shields... use your shields!"

"Together! Stay together!"

"We'll bathe in their blood!"
More people spill from the tree line. More of the same. Some reek of drugs, something almost moldy in their scent. Some reek of rage or hatred or lust.

I attack the next, tearing out his throat. Another I crush his chest, feeling the bones cave in beneath my weight.

Several slam into me. I grab one by the arm, yanking her down. My claw buries itself in her stomach and digs it all hollow.

Another falls without me touching. The next two I crush beneath my paws. One I bite his stomach and pull, tearing away armor and flesh. He falls with an arrow in his eye.

Some fall without me touching them. They fall with arrows in their eyes or throat. Some fall with red holes oozing blood in their head or chest.

I stumble over bodies. Blood and flesh are everywhere.

My back leg buckles. Hitting the ground jars something painful, like lightning through my chest. It hurts to breathe.

My teeth clamp down on an arm at the shoulder. My fang slipping into the joint as I pull the limb away from the body. Something is pulled away from me too.

I struggle to my feet. Gasping breaths burn my lungs. My back right leg is numb.

Someone slams into me. My back left leg buckles. I snap back, missing the man's head by an inch. He still falls, an oozing circle between his eyes.

My claws scrap for purchase. I drag myself forward, even as my legs are too numb to obey. I bite and claw anything in reach. I have to kill them all!

Someone slams into my side. I snap back, tearing flesh away from her middle. She pulls back a bloody sword and slams against me again.
My teeth catch her knee and I rip away a chunk of her leg. She falls, pulling the bloody sword back with her. I slash my claws down her stomach, catching on her hip bone. I yank hard, hearing a snap louder than her screams.

Something slams into my other side. I try to turn but they slam again. Then the man falls heavy against me, limp and dead.

It must be getting late.

Everything's so dark.

Grey fades into black as the world fades away.

Daryl hovers over me. Tears pour down his cheeks. His lips move but I don't hear the words.

It doesn't even hurt...

Nothing hurts anymore...

Chapter End Notes

Yes I'm killing Harry. If walking dead can kill Carl the I can kill Harry. I think I've run his story as far as I want to. I might continue through someone else's perspective or have glimpses through different people, not sure yet.

It's been a wild and crazy ride. Thanks to all of you who've followed this story with me. Hope y'all enjoyed it😊

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!