Reality Bites

by MotoXAngels

Summary

When the dead begin walking, Rayne Lyall sets out to locate the rest of her family. On her way she meets a rag tag bunch of survivors, including a redneck hunter with an itchy trigger finger and a cop with serious mental issues. Rayne has proven she can survive the dead, but can she survive the living?

Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Hey everyone, if you are reading this story then let me first start out by saying, thank you. I have been writing original stories and FanFiction for the better part of my life. This is the second story I have chosen to share with the world. This first chapter is sort of a test to see if you guys like my character and my interpretation of The Walking Dead series. This story starts during the 1st episode of Season 1. Please give me any advice or suggestions to help make my writing better. But please no nasty reviews, I will warn you now, I can be very bitchy when attacked. With that being said, I hope you enjoy.
Guts

The end of the world had always been somewhat of a joke to the race of humans, only few actually believed it was possible and tried to prepare for it. Of course, there was only so much you could prepare for. So certain people did what they could; built shelters, gathered supplies, stocked up on food, etc.

But nothing could prepare the world for the day when the dead walked.

A lone figure kneeled on the edge of the roof high above, watching the scene unfolding on the building below with interest. The group consisting of a male cop from out of town, the young Asian man who had saved him from a horde of walkers, a trigger happy redneck, an African-American man with the stature of a football player, a Hispanic man, a tall thin African-American woman and a tall blonde woman.

The redneck was currently proving his incredibly low intelligence by shooting walkers from the top of the building with his high powered rifle. It would be no surprise to the stranger if the man was on drugs as well. Not only was he wasting what little ammo the stranger figured they had, but he was also attracting every walker in the city of Atlanta to their position.

By now a scuffle had broke out between the redneck and the African man. The redneck smacked him in the mouth with the stock of his rifle. The cop tried to intervene and paid the price with a punch to the mouth, knocking him down. The redneck turned back kicking the African in the stomach, who then fell on top of a pipe smacking his face. The redneck knelt over his body punching him repeatedly in the face.

The stranger took this act of aggression as a sign that the redneck didn't care for people whose skin color wasn't white. That alone was something the stranger couldn't stand, especially in these times, race should be the least of anyone's worries.

As he continued to beat the man, the other four stood by yelling at the redneck, none of them wanting to get in the middle of the brawl, fearful of what the man was capable of should they interfere. The redneck pulled out a hand-gun pointing it down in the man's face.

The cop stood up touching the blood on his lip as he eyed the situation with mild hesitation.

The redneck stood up, barking about having a pow wow, about who was in charge now, meaning himself. He voted himself, of course, then asked them to give a show of hands who was with him. None of them objected, of course not being stupid to oppose the crazy redneck with the gun. They each held up a hand, except the African woman who held up her middle finger.

That made a bold statement, the stranger smiled, the woman still had fire in her.

The redneck looked around asking if anybody else wanted to be in charge, a voice was heard behind him and like an idiot, he turned, only to be hit with the stock of his own rifle by the cop.
The redneck hit the ground and the cop knelt his knee on the side of the man's face pinning him down. The cop pulled out his cuffs and shackled the man's right wrist to a piece of steel. He grabbed the man's hand-gun, ejecting the cartridge out of the chamber.

"Officer Friendly."

The cops reply to the redneck about his name made the stranger grin. The cop that earlier looked to be out of his element, scared, now seemed to be stepping up into a leadership role.

"There are no niggers anymore. No dumb-as-shit, inbred white-trash fools either. Only dark meat and white meat. There's us and the dead. We survive this by pulling together, not apart."

The stranger smiled, this cop thought exactly as they did. This was a new world and it required a completely different state of mind and thinking.

"Screw you, man." Apparently the redneck did not share their way of thinking.

"I can see you make a habit of missing the point."

"Yeah, well screw you twice."

"Ought to be polite to a man with a gun." The cop says using the mans earlier words against him as he presses the gun to his head. "Only common sense."

"You wouldn't. You're a cop."

The cop lowers the gun, "All I am anymore is a man looking for his wife and son. Anybody gets in the way of that's gonna lose. I'll give you a moment to think about that."

He searches the man's pockets and finds a vile of drugs, amid protests of the man he throws it off the top of the building. So now they all understood why he was acting the way he did. The group gets acquainted while trying to find a way back to their camp on the outskirts of the city.

The majority of the group takes off back inside the building, leaving the African man and the redneck on the roof.

The stranger stayed in place, just in case something went down that required their assistance.

Shortly after the group rejoins on the roof, obviously whatever they had planned didn't pan out. Again after some conversing, the group disappears minus the redneck. A while later they reappear minus the cop and Asian.

The stranger sees the two men down on the street, walking amongst the dead. Surprisingly they're not being attacked. Then realization hits, they had covered themselves in walker's blood and guts. Clever.

Then as if to remind everyone, they are not in control, the skies open up, the rain begins pelting down. The others watch helplessly as the blood washes off the two men as they are surrounded by walkers.

By now the stranger had disappeared from the roof above.

Suddenly the walkers start moaning, turning they give chase to the two men. They take off running knowing their game is up. They run for the fence in front of them, the walkers gaining on them with every step. They push forward, taking down every walker in their path. They had just reached
the fence and started to scale it when the Asian's ankle is grabbed by a walker. The cop hesitates, then starts to climb back down to help, when the walker is slammed to the ground by a bullet piercing through its right eye.

"Hurry up! Run!" A lone voice yells.

The two of them look up to see a figure dressed in black, holding a rifle, on top of the very box van they were trying to reach. They hit the pavement, shrugging off their blood jackets and running as fast as they can for the van. The Asian heads for the keys while the cop takes down walkers trying to climb the fence, with the aid of the stranger.

The younger guy gets the keys and tosses them to the cop. They both turn, running for the van while the stranger covers them, then jumps down off the roof, opens the back door and climbs in as the two men get in the front.

The cop speeds the van backwards as the hoard breaks down the fence, scrambling towards them. They turn and plow through another fence speeding away from the walkers.

"Who are you?" The cop says looking back at the figure in black, a hood over their head and a black bandana covering everything but their Cerulean blue eyes.

"Introductions later. Right now let's go git yer friends." Their voice is muffled but the cop is sure it's female, with a distinct southern accent.

The Asian panics, "How? They're all over that place."

"You need to draw them away." The cop says. "Those roll-up doors at the front of the store—that area? —that's what I need cleared."

The Asian man whines, the cop silences him, "Raise your friends. Tell them to get down there and be ready."

"And I'm drawing the geeks away how? I—I missed that part."

"Noise." The cop replies.

The stranger speaks up, "I've got an idea. Head down that street."

They pull up next to a big black truck, sitting next to it is a 2011 red Dodge Challenger. The cop smiles catching onto the strangers train of thought. He grabs a crowbar and shatters the window, the car alarm instantly begins blaring. The Asian covers his ears at the loud invasive noise, as the cop reaches in and unlocks the door.

"Move outta the way." The stranger says pulling out a screwdriver and sliding into the drivers seat. A minute later and the car roars to life.

The Asian named Glenn, gets in the car and heads off down the street followed by the stranger in the black truck. The two vehicles follow the van down the street, the blaring of the car alarm and the loud stereo of the truck drawing the walkers towards them. They race past the van and reverse down the street in front of the store, side-by-side. They sit there drawing the walkers to them, away from the doors.

The two of them back up slowly as the hoard of walkers gets bigger, they're urging the swarm further back away from the store. Then quickly, they flip the two vehicles 180 degrees and take off, the swarm of walkers following them.
As soon as they take off, the cop Rick, speeds in and backs up to the doors, gathering up the others and then taking off just as the walkers reach the van door.

"Who was that person helping you?" The Hispanic man asks.

Rick shakes his head, "No time for introductions. Guess we'll find out back at camp."

"Whoever they are, they got my trust." The African woman says sighing in relief.

The group looks around knowing they're missing someone, the African man looks up and grimaces. "I dropped the damn key."

None of them say anything, too relieved to be rid of the crazy redneck.

The blonde woman looks around, "Where's Glenn?"

On the deserted interstate headed out of town, the red Challenger and the black Ford truck fly down the road side-by-side.
The Challenger and the Ford speed past the van, the Ford following. Glenn is whooping and laughing as he passes them.

They pull up to the camp, high in the mountains. The entire camp approaches the Challenger, watching warily as the stranger gets out of the truck, approaching Glenn.

"Holy crap. Turn that damn thing off!" An older guy yells from the top of an RV referring to the loud as hell alarm that is still going off.

Glenn throws his arms up, "I don't know how!"

Another man and a young blonde woman asking about her sister, start yelling at Glenn, both at the same time, bombarding the kid. The stranger sighs, pushes past Glenn and the other man, "Pop the hood Glenn!"

The boy does as instructed, the stranger lifts the hood and pulls out a fuse, the alarm ceases.

Glenn finally gets tired of the girl barking questions at him, "Yes! She's fine! Yeah, fine. Everybody is. Well Merle, not so much."

The stranger tosses it to the man standing at their right, "Sorry bout that. Didn't have time to disconnect it before we left town."

"And just who the hell are you?" He snaps.

"Why don't we wait till the rest git back to do introductions?"

"How bout you tell me who you are right now or I'll beat it out of you!" The man threatens holding a rifle towards the strangers face.

In a split second the stranger has a Glock 9mm pointed straight between the man's eyes, he freezes, he never saw the person move.

"You should control that temper better. Now like I said, let's wait. Hmm."

The man nods backing up as the stranger lowers the gun. Trying to shake off the slight intimidation he turns his anger to Glenn. "Are you crazy, driving this wailing bastard up here? Are you trying to draw every walker for miles?"

"I think we're okay." The older man says, he must of come down from the RV while they were all talking.
The man scoffs, "You call being stupid okay?"

"Well, the alarm was echoing all over these hills. Hard to pinpoint the source." The man gives him a look that makes him backpedal, "I'm not arguing, I'm just saying." His attention turns to Glenn. "It wouldn't hurt you to think things through a little more carefully next time, would it?"

"Sorry." Glenn says. "Got a cool car."

Everyone turns as the van pulls up, the Hispanic man gets out first, his family embracing him.

The blonde woman gets out of the back, "Amy!" The small blonde who was interrogating Glenn starts crying, "Andrea!" The two sisters run forward and embrace one another.

The stranger notices the cheerful family reunions seem to be too much for a tall brunette woman and her young son. They turn walking away from the group, the woman kneels down in front of the boy, both of them shedding tears as they speak in whispers.

The rest of the group embraces the Hispanic man, the man standing next to the stranger speaks up. "How'd you get out of there anyway?"

"New guy—he got us out." Glenn says, then points to the person standing by the Challenger. "And the stranger over there."

"New guy?" The man asks.

"Yeah, crazy Vato just got into town." The Hispanic man says turning back to the van, "Hey, helicopter boy! Come say hello." He turns back to the man, "He's a cop like you."

The man's face is one of shock as he sees the other cop approach from the van. The kid and the mom both turn their heads. The cop sees them, he points at them in disbelief, "Oh my God," before he starts towards them not sure if they are real or a figment of his imagination.

The boy runs towards the cop, "Dad! Dad!" The woman follows, as the three embrace one another, the tears begin running freely. The entire camp watches the unbelievable reunion, everyone sharing in the momentous moment.

The two cops share a smile as they lock eyes, not believing they found one another.

Only the stranger notices the solemn look that crosses the curly haired man's face as he watches Rick with his family. It passes as his eyes move to the stranger, "So, bout those introductions."

The stranger nods, pulling the bandana down from their mouth, it settles around their neck. The hood follows and the group collectively gasps as the long dark brown hair falls down from inside the hood.

Rick gives a genuine smile as he approaches the woman, he holds out his hand. "Thank you. You saved our asses."

"Yer welcome." The woman says, a southern drawl accompanying her words. She turns to the group, "I'm Rayne Lyall, but I prefer Phoenix or Nix for short."

A loud bark echoes from inside the truck, she smiles before whistling, and a big gunmetal gray Pit Bull jumps out of the open door and trots to her side, sitting down beside her. "And this is Titan."

The group introduces themselves; Glenn and Rick who she already met, the Hispanic man Morales
and his family, the old man Dale, the mechanic Jim, the two sisters Andrea and Amy, Rick's wife Lori and son Carl, the African man T-Dog, the African woman Jacqui, an older woman Carol, her daughter Sophie and her husband Ed (the man gave Phoenix a bad vibe) and the one who thought he was the boss, Shane (another who gave Phoenix a bad feeling).

Later that night while the others sat around the fire, Phoenix moved her truck to the far side of camp, adjacent to another older truck and motorcycle, she was told they belonged to the Dixon Brothers, Merle and Daryl.

She put up her specially made tent that sat in the bed of her truck, aired up her mattress and sat on her tailgate cleaning her weapons. She looked back towards the group, Titan was still where he had been since earlier that day, curled up next to Carl and Sophia. She remembered her earlier conversation with Lori about Titan.

"Is he okay with kids?" Lori says motioning to Titan who had an intimidating muzzle on.

"Oh, yeah. The muzzle is just a precaution against walkers. See, I altered it so he can still bark, but he can't bite, and the shield is to protect his eyes."

"Okay, I'm sorry to jump to conclusions."

"It's alright. Times like these, you can never be too cautious Lori."

Phoenix smiled at the memory, Lori was a good woman and her husband was one that she instantly trusted, and she trusted very few. She pulled out her rifle and set about cleaning it, then her two Glock's and finally cleaned then sharpened her two Kukris and two hunting knives.

Shortly after she had finished the group turned in for the night, they all knew that tomorrow was gonna be a rough one when Daryl found out his brother was left behind.

The next morning Phoenix woke up a little before dawn. She set about stretching and then getting dressed, and brushing out her long hair. She jumped down from the truck and lifted Titan out setting him on the ground. Everyone had woken up by now and he immediately ran to the kids side. It made her smile, knowing they were under his protection and he wouldn't let anything happen to them.

She walked over and stood next to Glenn, his face was grim and she swore she saw tears in his eyes as he watched the men tear into his precious Challenger. "Look at 'em." He said to her. "Vultures. Yeah, go on, strip it clean."

"Generators need every drop of fuel they can get." Dale said as he walked by carrying a gas can. "Got no power without it. Sorry, Glenn." The old man chuckled as he patted the sullen kid's shoulder.

Rick walked up to the two, Glenn turned to him, "Thought I'd get to drive it at least a few more
"Maybe we'll get to steal another one someday." Rick tells him smiling, he pats the kid on the back, nodding at Phoenix which she returns before he walks away.

Within several minutes the group hears the two kids scream and Titan's barking. Phoenix grabs her bow immediately taking off through the woods, Shane, Glenn, Jim and Rick hot on her heels. The two kids run out of the woods towards their mothers, the others push forward past them coming into a small clearing to find a walker tearing into a fresh deer, three arrows already in it.

The walker stands up as it notices their presence, it growls advancing on Rick who smacks it in the head with a stick. Shane and Glenn knock it to the ground and the men converge on it, each pummeling it in turn. Phoenix stands back, her bow at the ready incase more show up. Dale strikes the fatal blow, decapitating the walker with his axe.

"It's the first one we've had up here. They never come this far up the mountain." Dale says breathing heavily.

"Well, they're running out of food in the city, that's what." Jim says.

A branch breaks behind Jim, he turns holding up his pitchfork, the others readying their weapons. A man steps out from behind a rock outcropping, carrying a crossbow.

Daryl Dixon.

Everyone calms down, lowering their weapons, but now agitated at the coming confrontation.

"Son of a bitch!" He says as he approaches the deer, its throat now missing from the walker. "That's my deer!" He looks up at Phoenix, then quickly looks away. But to her it felt like he memorized everything about her in that split second.

"Look at it. All gnawed on by this… filthy (kick) disease-bearing (kick) motherless (kick) poxy bastard."

"Calm down, son. That's not helping." Dale says gently.

Daryl immediately steps towards him, "What do you know bout it, old man?" Shane raises the length of his rifle placing it between the two men, but Daryl ignores it. "Why don't you take that stupid hat and go back to "On Golden Pond"?" He turns back to the deer pulling out his arrows. "I've been trackin' this deer for miles. Gonna drag it back to camp, cook us up some venison." He pulls out his large Bowie knife from his right hip sheath. "What do you think? Do you think we can cut around this chewed up part right here?" He motions to the open neck.

"I would not risk that." Shane says.

Daryl sighs, "That's a damn shame. I got some squirrel—bout a dozen or so. That'll have to do."

A snapping sound is heard, they all look down at the walkers severed head that still moves on the ground, its gnashing teeth still biting at the air. Andrea and Amy stand behind the group, they get skittish at the sight of the head, turning back to camp.

Daryl steps forward, "Come on, people. What the hell?"

Phoenix steps up taking the shot before he can, hitting the walker straight through the right eye. "It's gotta be the brain," she says as Daryl lowers his crossbow, giving her a raised eyebrow, he was
slightly impressed with the new girl, not that he'd say that out loud. She grabs her arrow and without hesitation pulls it out of the head, then walks back to camp.

"Don't y'all know nothing?" Daryl states, clearing his throat uncomfortably as he heads towards the camp as well.

Everyone else is crowded around the RV as Daryl walks back to camp yelling for his brother. He notices their wary glances towards him as he walks into the camp which is nothing new, they have always looked at him that way. He stops by the fire, "Merle! Merle! Git yer ugly ass out here! I got us some squirrel! Let's stew 'em up."

Shane approaches setting his gun down in the back of his Jeep, "Daryl, just slow up a bit. I need to talk to you."

Phoenix leans against the front of the RV as Daryl turns to face Shane. "About what?" Daryl asks.

"About Merle…" Shane says walking past him, then turning around. "There was a—there was a problem in Atlanta."

Daryl looks around at the group surrounding him a strange look filling his face as he bites the inside of his cheek, "He dead?"

"We're not sure." Shane says.

Daryl whirs around putting his back to Phoenix, "He either is or he ain't!"

"No easy way to say this, so I'll just say it." Rick says stepping up to Daryl.

"Who are you?" Daryl snaps.

"Rick Grimes."

"Rick Grimes." Daryl scoffs condescendingly mocking the man, "You got somethin' you wanna tell me?"

"Your brother was a danger to us all, so I handcuffed him on a roof, hooked him to a piece of metal. He's still there."

Phoenix feels bad at the sight of the man's face, she then notices T-Dog has just entered the camp carrying firewood, he notices the confrontation going on. He looks to her and she shakes her head advising him not to get involved.

Daryl turns away from Rick, rubbing his hand over his eyes, "Hold on. Let me process this." He turns back around, "Yer sayin' you handcuffed my brother to a roof and you left him there?!"

Phoenix was sure the veins in Daryl's neck were about to burst, she couldn't blame him though, she'd react the same for her family. Merle may have been a loose cannon, but he's family and family is all Daryl has left in this world.

"Yeah." Rick says sighing.

Phoenix sees Daryl's jaw clench as he breathes heavily, she knows he's gonna swing at Rick, hell it's what she would do herself. Sure enough Daryl tosses the string of squirrels at Rick, but before he can charge him, Shane slams his shoulder into Daryl knocking him down.

T-dog drops the wood rushing over as he sees Daryl reaching to his side, "Hey! Watch the knife."
Daryl pulls his hunting knife from its sheath, standing up he faces Rick. He swings at Rick, missing. Then again but Rick grabs his arm wielding the knife holding him still. Phoenix takes her opening and immediately locks Daryl in a choke hold.

"Okay. Okay, Daryl. Calm." She says softly into his ear.

Daryl struggles against her, but it's no use she won't budge. If it had been anyone but him, he'd have been impressed that a girl could hold a man like that. But since it is him, he's even more pissed that a woman is holding him back.

Rick takes Daryl's knife, putting it in his waistband.

"You'd best let me go!"

"Nah, I think it's better if I don't." She says as she wrestles him to the ground, sitting him down she kneels behind him.

"Choke hold's illegal." He grunts out.

"You can file a complaint," Shane quips from his position by the motorhome. The sight of this woman taking Daryl down is amusing to him, and slightly arousing. Maybe he'd have a go at her now that Lori was off limits to him.

"Come on, man. We can keep this up all day," Phoenix tells the struggling hunter.

Rick kneels down in front of the two, "I'd like to have a calm discussion on this topic. Do you think we can manage that?" Daryl doesn't answer, Rick presses, "Do you think we can manage that?"

Rick nods to Phoenix who lets Daryl go and backs up a few feet. The man's eyes meet hers as he glares a hole through her, she returns it icily.

"What I did was not on a whim. Your brother does not work and play well with others." Rick tells him.

"It's not Rick's fault." T-dog says stepping up. "I had the key. I dropped it."

"You couldn't pick it up?" Daryl snaps.

"Well, I dropped it in a drain."

Daryl's head drops, he grunts as he pushes himself up to his feet. He walks past T-dog tossing a handful of dirt at his feet. "If it's supposed to make me feel better, it don't."

"Well, maybe this will." T-dog says causing Daryl to pause. "Look, I chained the door to the roof —so the geeks couldn't get at him—with a padlock."

"It's gotta count for something." Rick says making Daryl turn to him.

Daryl sniffs, wiping his face trying to hide the tears, "Hell with all y'all!" Pain and despair lace his voice. "Just tell me where he is so's I can go get him."

"He'll show you." Lori's voice chimes in from the door of the motorhome. "Isn't that right?" Her tone is accusatory as she looks to her husband.

Rick nods looking around, "I'm going back."
Lori shakes her head going into the RV, Daryl walks off to his tent, Phoenix nods as Rick looks to her silently asking for her help. Rick then heads to his tent, putting his uniform back on.

Phoenix is standing by the back of her truck getting her things ready. She can feel eyes burning into her back, she doesn't have to turn around to know it's Daryl. She can't blame him, it's certainly a masculinity crusher to have a woman lock you in a choke hold that you couldn't get out of. She knows the two of them won't be able to work together until the score is settled, she realizes there is only one thing to do. She walks over to the tent where Daryl disappeared into, stepping inside.

"What the hell do you want?!" He growls as he turns to find her standing there, almost like she knew he was thinking about her.

"Take yer shot." She says calmly, placing her hands behind her back.

Daryl knew what she was doing, trying to wipe the slate clean. Without thinking he clocked her in the left eye sending her to the ground. He stepped forward holding out his hand, she didn't hesitate to take it and he hauled her up.

"Now we're even." She stated.

Daryl nodded curtly turning back to his bow, her voice caught him as she stepped out of the tent.

"For whatever it's worth, I tried to go back for him, alone. I knew the others wouldn't understand."

"You stupid?" He scoffed not looking up.

"No. Just knew it was the right thang to do."

Daryl heard her walk away, he had to admit, she impressed him in several ways. She could shoot, take a hit like a man, she had a hell of a choke hold, and she was a country girl. That in itself was enough for Daryl. The look she had gave him earlier when she saw him cry wasn't one of pity, but of pride and admiration, for his loyalty to his brother.

He stepped out of his tent, spotting her at the back of her truck, he took a longer look. She wasn't short, maybe around 5'4". He'd guess around 120 lbs., fit, toned muscles. To him she looked like one of them models, but her personality was more like the girl-next-door. Her dark brown hair shimmered in the sun, giving off hints of red. It was long, hanging all the way down, just brushing the top of her ass. It was the kind of hair you imagine yourself wrapping your hand in while you fucked her senseless from behind. She had it pulled back into a braid and it was hanging over her right shoulder. Her eyes, he'd noticed when she was standing in front of him were a bright shade of Cerulean blue, reminded him of the ocean. They were currently hid behind a pair of black sunglasses.

Her outfit which was solid black, left no curve to the imagination, it was skintight from her neck to her feet. She had on a long sleeved shirt with a small scoop neck just barely reaching the bottom of her long neck. Her pants were like a second skin, hell he could put a quarter in her back pocket and tell if it was heads or tails. They had pockets like a pair of jeans. The entire expanse of the outfit was encased in quarter inch thick plates, he'd have to ask her about those.

Her boots made him laugh at first, wondering how she did anything in them. They were leather, reached to just below her knees and had a thick 4” heel on them. But damn did they make her ass
and legs look good. Hell her whole outfit complimented her.

Then she put on her gun holsters, strapped like a belt around her waist and around each thigh, her Glocks resting comfortably at her sides. On the back of the holster were four extra clips placed so all she had to do was slide the guns right back onto them. On her back were two custom made Kukris, the blades made out of a black metal. A sniper rifle sat in her hands, he knew by looking it was military issue, and would be quiet as a snowfall. She tossed the strap of it over her head and let it rest between the two blades on her back. She grabbed two 7” long hunting knives and slid them into two holsters inside her boots on the outer rim. Finally she grabbed her Infinity Pro-comp compound bow, with a housing for 6 extra arrows. He noticed all of her weapons were black, blades and all. It was smart, no glare or reflection to give away a position.

When she turned towards him heading to the van Daryl damn near came in his pants. She looked like pure sex walking to him. That outfit and those weapons, this woman was gonna be a hell of a lot of trouble for him. He felt like he'd just jumped into the deep end of the pool and drowning was not an option.

Daryl didn't have a lot of experience with women, sure he had plenty of practice in the kissing department, but further than that, zip. Not that it was by choice. Every girl he brought around and even considered wanting to have sex with, for some reason or another, would always gravitate to his brother. He couldn't understand why, Merle treated women like shit, and yet they kept coming back for more. He always told Daryl, "Women are only good for one thing. You use 'em and you dump 'em."

Merle would use 'em, abuse 'em and trash 'em, but they always came back. "You treat a girl good little brother and she'll walk all over ya, you treat her like shit and she'll worship ya." And as stupid as that sounded to Daryl, it really was true, at least as far as he saw in Merle's case.

His family problems didn't help his case neither. Everyone in town knew his father was a drunk and beat him, so most of the girls in town pitied him and that was not what he needed. He didn't need sympathy, or to be judged, he simply wanted someone who understood.

Looking at Phoenix he knew she'd sooner beat Merle's ass, which she probably could, than even consider hooking up with him. But what did that matter? A beautiful woman like her, no matter how much like him she was, would never give Daryl Dixon a second glance.

Phoenix came up to Rick by the fire as Shane was spouting off about Merle. "Why would you risk your life for a douche bag like Merle Dixon?"

Daryl stood up from his place next to the fire, "Hey, choose yer words more carefully."

"Ah, no, I did. Douche bag's what I meant." Shane says eyeing Daryl. "Merle Dixon—the guy wouldn't give you a glass of water if you were dying of thirst."

"Shane, shut up. Your opinion of him doesn't matter. He's a human being just like us, and he doesn't deserve to die like a wounded animal. He deserves to die on his terms, not ours. To die how he chooses, not how we left him."

Again Daryl was impressed, this woman didn't even know his brother, and here she was going toe-to-toe with Shane defending him.

Rick stepped in between them before it got out of hand, "What he would or wouldn't do doesn't interest me. I can't let a man die of thirst—me. Thirst and exposure. We left him like an animal caught in a trap. That's no way for anything to die, let alone a human being."
"So you and Daryl, that's your big plan?" Lori asks from beside the fire pit.

"And Phoenix." He looks to the woman hopeful, she nods confirming she's in, then Rick looks over to Glenn, who sighs, "Oh, come on."

"You know the way. You've been there before—in and out, no problem. You said so yourself."

Glenn takes off his hat, running a hand over his hair as Rick continues. "It's not fair of me to ask—I know that—but I'd feel a lot better with you and Phoenix along. I know she would too."

Shane sighs, "That's just great. Now you're gonna risk four people, huh?"

Phoenix could understand Shane's hesitation, but he was far-sighted to the big picture.

"Five." T-Dog says.

Daryl huffs, "My day just gets better and better, don't it?"

"You see anybody else here stepping up to save your brother's cracker ass?" T-Dog scoffs.

"Why you?" Daryl asks.

"You wouldn't even begin to understand. You don't speak my language."

"That's five." Dale says.

"It's not just five." Shane says irritated. "You're putting every single one of us at risk. Just know that, Rick. Come on, you saw that walker. It was here. It was in camp. They're moving out of the cities. They come back, we need every able body we've got. We need 'em here. We need 'em to protect camp."

"It seems to me what you really need most here are more guns." Rick says.

"Right, the guns." Glenn says catching on.

"Wait. What guns?" Shane asks.

"Six shotguns, two high-powered rifles, over a dozen handguns. I cleaned out the cage back at the station before I left. I dropped the bag in Atlanta when I got swarmed. It's just sitting there on the street, waiting to be picked up."

"Ammo?" Shane wonders.

"700 rounds, assorted."

"You went through hell to find us." Lori tells him with wide eyes. "You just got here and you're gonna turn around and leave?"

"Dad, I-I don't want you to go." Carl says looking up at his father.

Rick turns around to face his family, a look of irritation on his face. His wife pleads with him, "To hell with the guns. Shane is right. Merle Dixon. He's not worth one of your lives even with guns thrown in." She stands up as Rick walks over in front of her. "Tell me. Make me understand."

"I owe a debt to a man I met and his little boy. Lori, if they hadn't taken me in, I'd have died. It's because of them that I made it back to you at all. They said they'd follow me to Atlanta. They'll
walk into the same trap I did if I don't warn him."

"What's stopping you?"

Rick sighs, "The walkie-talkie, the one in the bag I dropped. He's got the other one. Our plan was to connect when they got closer."

"These are our walkies?" Shane asks sitting on a log.

"Yeah."

"So use the CB. What's wrong with that?" Andrea asks him.

"The CB's fine. It's the walkies that suck to crap—date back to the '70's, don't match any other bandwidth—not even the scanners in our cars." Shane educates everyone.

Rick looks desperately at his wife, "I need that bag." He steps around her kneeling down to his son, "Okay?"

The boy nods, Rick smiles, "Alright." He ruffles Carl's hair and then stands up.

The five of them set about getting ready, Phoenix sets her bow and rifle in the back of the van, turning back when she hears her name. She finds Lori motioning her over to the side.

"Listen I… Rick trusts you so… I am too… And I…"

Phoenix gives a small smile to the woman stumbling over her words. "I'll bring him back to you Lori. I'll bring all of them back."

Lori smiles, she watches the other younger woman kneel down next to Carl, who is playing with Titan. "Hey Carl, I need you to do me a favor, okay. Can you take care of Titan for me till I get back? He really likes you."

The boy smiles widely, nodding his head quickly.

"Alright, I'm trusting you." Phoenix ruffles the boy's hair before she heads back to the van.

"Phoenix."

The woman turns back to the mother and son, "You bring yourself back too, you hear."

She gives a smile, "Of course."

While Rick and T-Dog are bargaining with Dale to use his bolt cutters, Glenn is in the drivers seat of the van ready to go. Daryl is in the back pacing, he stops, holding out a hand to Phoenix as she approaches the back. She grasps it and he helps her into the back of the van. They share a mutual courteous nod.

Daryl gets impatient, which no one could blame him right now. He steps his foot over Glenn and stomps on the horn. "Come on. Let's go."

Rick and T-Dog load up and Daryl shuts the back door as Glenn starts down the road. Phoenix sits in the back next to T-Dog, Daryl across from the two.

"He better be okay. It's my only word on the matter." Daryl says staring at T-Dog.
"I told you the geeks can't get at him. The only thing that's gonna get through that door is us."

Daryl's attention turns to Phoenix, he decides to ask her about the outfit. She smiles, "Reinforced Kevlar plates." Her answer surprises him, why and how were his next two questions. "For when the walkers decide to take a bite. They'll sooner break their teeth before piercing my skin. And because my brother is in the military and spoils me."

The men nod, now understanding a little more about the mysterious woman before them.

Glenn puts the van in park, turning to the others, "We walk from here."

The five pile out of the van, Phoenix bringing up the rear with her bow loaded and drawn. The make their way from the train tracks into the city. They climb through an opening in the fence, stopping under an overpass.

Rick abruptly stops Phoenix yanking off her sunglasses, "What the hell happened to your eye?" He glanced to Daryl giving him a murderous glare.

Phoenix calmly steps in front of Daryl redirecting Rick's glare, "A mutual understanding."

Rick sighs and with a nod he hands her glasses back which she places on. He then turns back to the others, "Merle first or guns?"

"Merle!" Daryl snaps, "We ain't even havin' this conversation."

"We are." Rick says emphatically, turning to Glenn. "You know the geography. It's your call."

"Merle's closest. The guns would mean doubling back. Merle first." Glenn says as the five jog forward to their destination.

They enter the lobby of the building where Merle was left, Rick taking point. He stops motioning back to Daryl as he hears shuffling footsteps ahead. A female walker comes into view a second later and Daryl moves forward stopping in front of the walker.

"Damn. You are one ugly skank." He says raising his bow and nailing it between the eyes with a bolt. He steps over, pulling out the arrow and wiping it off on his pant leg.

They run up the stairs to the roof, the door is still chained. T-Dog steps up with the bolt cutters and snaps the lock off. Daryl kicks the door open and rushes out first, "Merle! Merle!"

The five of them rush out over the catwalk and find nothing. Merle is nowhere to be seen. But what they do find makes them cringe in disgust.

"No! No!" Daryl screams as he looks up at T-Dog and the rest. "No!" He looks down at the bloody saw on the roof, then Merle's severed hand and the bloody cuff still latched and hanging from the piece of steel. "No! No!"
Rick lifts his gun to Daryl's head at the same moment. "I won't hesitate. I don't care if every walker in the city hears it." Rick tells him calmly.

Daryl's mouth twitches and he closes his eyes for a moment before he lowers the bow. Rick uncocks the gun and lowers it as well.

"You, got a do-rag or somethin'?" Daryl asks T-Dog softly, his rage subsiding for the moment.

"Here Dixon, use mine." Phoenix says from behind him as she unties her black bandana from around her neck and hands it to him.

He takes it giving her a small nod of thanks as he sets his crossbow down and kneels on the roof. He sighs as he lays the bandana down and picks up Merle's hand, "I guess the saw blade was too dull for the handcuffs." He studies the hand, "Ain't that a bitch." Then he sets it down and wraps it in the cloth. He motions Glenn over and unzips his backpack, placing the severed hand inside earning a sickening grimace from the young kid.

"He must of used a tourniquet—maybe his belt." He picks up his crossbow, "Be much more blood if he didn't."

Phoenix follows behind Daryl as he tracks the blood drops across the roof. Rick and Glenn follow as T-Dog rounds up Dale's tools.

Daryl, Phoenix and Rick have their weapons up as they move inside another door and down a flight of stairs. "Merle? You in here?" Daryl yells as they descend the staircase.

A whistle is heard as Phoenix embeds a bolt in the head of a walker. She steps over pulling it out and nodding to Daryl who turns back to the hallway, she following his lead. They come into a receptionist area to find two dead walkers lying on the floor.

"Had enough in him to take out these two sumbitches… One handed." Daryl says, pride filling his voice. He notices a wrench on the floor near one walker, that must have been Merle's weapon of choice. He sets his crossbow down, "Toughest asshole I ever met, my brother." He resets the draw, "Feed him a hammer, he'd crap out nails." He says with admiration as he reloads the bow.

"Any man can pass out from blood loss, no matter how tough he is." Rick says following behind Phoenix who has taken point, following the blood tracks. She tracks it into a kitchen, Daryl right behind her yelling, "Merle!"
"We're not alone here." Rick reminds him. "Remember?"

"Screw that." Daryl says defiantly. "He could be bleeding out. You said so yourself."

"I don't think so," Phoenix tells them moving forward, she notices 4 emergency Sterno burners on, the flames flickering. There's blood on the side of the stove, along with a belt and an iron steak plate for grilling hamburgers sitting next to them. The bottom is covered with pieces of charred flesh.

Phoenix picks up the plate, Glenn asks her, "What's that burned stuff?"

"Skin. He cauterized the stump." She says with mild admiration.

Daryl catches her eye, "Told you he was tough. Nobody can kill Merle, but Merle."

"Don't take that on faith. He's lost a lot of blood." Rick says.

"Yeah?" Daryl quips moving forward. "Didn't stop him from busting out of this death trap."

They follow him over to a busted out window. "He left the building?" Glenn asks. "Why the hell would he do that?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Daryl says looking out the window. "He's out there alone as far as he knows, doing what he's got to do. Surviving."

Rick looks out of the window, seeing a bloody rag on the sill below.

"You call that surviving?" T-Dog asks. "Just wandering out in the streets, maybe passing out? What are his odds out there?"

"No worse than being handcuffed and left to rot by you sorry pricks." Daryl eyes Rick, "You couldn't kill him. Ain't so worried about some dumb dead bastard."

"What about 1,000 dumb dead bastards?" Rick retorts. "Different story?"

"Why don't you take a tally? Do what you want. I'ma go git him." Daryl says heading for the window.

"Daryl, wait." Rick says placing his hand on the redneck's chest and pushing him back.

"Git yer hands off me! You can't stop me."

"I don't blame you. He's family, I get that. I went through hell to find mine. I know exactly how you feel. He can't get far with that injury. We could help you check a few blocks around but only if we keep a level head."

Daryl pauses a moment, "I could do that."

Rick looks to the rest of them, T-Dog shakes his head, "Only if we get those guns first. I'm not strolling the streets of Atlanta with just my good intentions, okay?"

They move into one of the offices, Glenn has a plan he's trying to show them using a few supplies from a desk.

"You're not doing this alone." Rick tells the kid.
"Even I think it's a bad idea and I don't even like you much." Daryl snarks before looking over at Phoenix. She has her glasses sitting on top of her head. Her left eye is black and blue, all the way to her cheekbone, and he can see a couple popped blood vessels in the white of her eye. He didn't think he'd hit her that hard. He knew it was a mutual agreement, but he still felt a little bad... But only a little.

"It's a good idea, okay, if you just hear me out." Rick kneels down next to the diagram Glenn set up. "If we go out there in a group, we're slow, drawing attention. If I'm alone, I can move fast. Look."

They all look down at the diagram of the streets Glenn has drawn on the floor with a marker. "That's the tank, five blocks from where we are now. That's the bag of guns. Here's the alley I dragged you into when we first met. That's where Daryl, Phoenix and I will go."

"Why us?" Daryl asks looking over at the woman sitting on the desk across from him.

"Your bows are quieter than his gun." Glenn says, "While Daryl and Phoenix wait here in the alley, I run up the street, grab the bag."

"But you got us elsewhere?" Rick asks of him and T-Dog.

"You and T-Dog, right. You'll be in this alley here."

"Two blocks away? Why?" Rick asks.

"I may not be able to come back the same way. Walkers might cut me off. If that happens, I won't go back to Daryl and Phoenix. I'll go forward instead, all the way around to that alley where you guys are. Whichever direction I go, I got you in both places to cover me. Afterwards we'll all meet back here."

"Hey, kid, what'd you do before all this?" Daryl wonders.

"Delivered pizzas. Why?" Glenn asks.

They all nod, so that's how he knew all the best routes, delivery guys know every side road and alley in town.

The five split up, Phoenix, Glenn and Daryl climbing down the fire escape into the alley. Rick and T-Dog moving to the alley up the street.

Daryl cocks his bow along with Phoenix, smirking at the kid as he takes off his jacket. "You got some balls for a Chinaman."

"I'm Korean."

"Whatever." Daryl says loading his bow as the kid takes off out into the street. He's behind a dumpster closest to the wall, Phoenix is crouched in front of him close enough that he can smell the almond mint coming off her hair. He couldn't fathom how she stayed so clean and smelled so good in these times. He looked down at his dirty self, he couldn't imagine how he looked to her, not that he cared in the least.
Things were quiet as they waited for Glenn to come back, till she broke the silence whispering, "They would you know."

"Would what?" He whispered back.

"Have came back. If it was you up there on the roof. They'd have came back for you."

"How do you know?" Daryl scoffs.

"Cause they know they need you. Without you they'd all starve." Daryl thought about her words. He had been wondering that earlier in camp when everyone was adamant about not going after Merle, he was curious what they'd do if it was him instead.

"Besides, every group needs a crazy redneck." Phoenix said grinning, earning a small grin from him.

"Yeah, now they got two." He quipped nudging her with his knee.

They fell into a silence again. "How did you know? That I was thinkin' that."

She smiled, "I saw yer face earlier at camp. I'm good at readin' people."

He nodded then bit out a short, "Thanks."

"Welcome." She bit back.

Suddenly they heard footsteps from behind them. They both step out from behind the dumpster Phoenix guarding Daryl's back, bows up aiming at a young Hispanic kid.

"Whoa, don't shoot me!" The kid yells. "What do you want?"

"I'm lookin' for my brother. He's hurt real bad. You seen him?" Daryl asks the kid.

"Ayudame!" The kid yells.

"Shut up!" Daryl snaps. "Yer gonna bring the geeks down on us. Answer me." The kid refuses to answer, Phoenix snaps yelling over her shoulder, "Answer him!"

"Ayudame! Ayudame! Ayudame!"

Daryl smacks the kid in the mouth with the butt of his crossbow, knocking him down. The kid is still screaming so Daryl covers his mouth with his hand. "Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

Phoenix turns her back to the street for a split second to check on Daryl, which proves to be a fatal mistake. Two Vatos come up behind her, slamming her over the head with a metal pipe. She starts to stand back up when one of them co-cocks her in the mouth.

"Dixon!"

Daryl starts to turn at her scream when someone kicks him in the back, knocking him to the ground. The two Vatos take turns kicking Daryl over and over.

Glenn runs in to find the two guys kicking Daryl, they turn running towards him. "That's it. That's the bag, Vato. Take it! Take it!"

They attack Glenn, punching him in the face and knocking him to the ground, and pelting him with
a pipe.

Daryl sits up aiming his bow and shoots a bolt into one of the men's ass cheeks. The man grabs his ass howling in pain.

Phoenix sits up clutching her head, she hears a car approach, she shakes her head as she hears Glenn screaming, "Get off me! Get off me! Daryl! Nix! Daryl!" She focuses her vision as best she can and sees Glenn being drug out of the alley and into a car by two men.

Daryl jumps up on the gate, "Come back here! You sumbitches!"

Walkers converge on them as Daryl pulls the gate shut, locking it. He grabs Phoenix's arm hauling her to her feet. "You aight?!"

She nods, still dizzy and feeling nauseous. "Oh, I so have a concussion."

Daryl leaves her, quickly grabbing the kid as he gets up to run, Rick and T-Dog come running down the back of the alley towards them. Daryl shoves the kid up against the wall, then charges him ready to beat the kid to a pulp.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop it." Rick yells standing between the two, shoving Daryl back.

"I'm gonna kick yer nuts up in yer throat!" Daryl screams.

"Let me go." The kid says.

"Chill out." T-Dog tells him shoving him against the wall.

"They took Glenn. That little bastard and his little bastard homie friends. I'm gonna stomp yer ass!" Daryl says pointing his finger at the kid, fighting to get past Rick.

"Guys! Guys! We're cut off!" T-Dog says motioning to the gate covered in walkers.

"Get to the lab. Go." Rick hollers.

T-Dog takes off running, dragging the kid behind him. Rick grabs the bag of guns and his hat that Glenn retrieved.

"Come on. Damn, let's go." Daryl says putting Phoenix's arm around his shoulders, despite her protests not to touch her.

They get back up to the lab where they left from, Daryl sits her down on the top of a desk. He stays close despite her murderous glare, she swaying and he's sure she may fall or pass out. She reaches up and touches a spot on her forehead over her right eye, her fingers come back bloody.

"Those men you were with, we need to know where they went." Rick asks the kid.

"I ain't telling you nothing."

"Jesus, man. What the hell happened back there?" T-Dog asks.
"I told you, this little turd and his douche bag friends came out of nowhere and jumped us."

"Man, you're the one who jumped me, putto." The kid smarts off. "Screaming about trying to find his brother like it's my damn fault."

"They took Glenn. Could have taken Merle too." Phoenix says softly, holding her head.

"Merle? What kind of hick name is that? I wouldn't name my dog Merle."

Daryl moves to kick the kid in the face but Rick holds him back. "Damn it, Daryl. Back off."

Phoenix snorts of a breath of air, "Enough of this shit." She stands up shakily, walking over to Glenn's backpack and pulling out her black bandana. "You want to see what happened to the last guy that pissed him off?" She unwraps Merle's hand and tosses it in the kid's lap.

He freaks out, standing up outta the chair, tossing it off him and scrambling away on the floor. Phoenix moves forward grabbing the kid by the front of his shirt, "Maybe he'll start with the feet this time!" She shoves him away from her and stands back up, stumbling backwards and leaning against the desk.

Daryl smirks impressed, that was clever, yeah she was a lot like him. His attention turned to the kid, sitting on the floor, cowering, he was clearly shaken now.

Rick leans down to the kid, "The men you were with took our friend. All we want to do is talk to them, see if we can work something out."

The kid takes them to abandoned warehouse area, Rick studies the front entrance. "You sure you're up for this?" Rick asks T-Dog and Phoenix, looking pointedly at the injured woman, who nods placing her sunglasses back over her eyes, the sunlight killing her head.

T-Dog grabs the bag and the two of them head to their post. Daryl looks at the kid as they pass, "One wrong move and you get an arrow in the ass. Just so you know."

"G's gonna take that arrow out of my ass and shove it up yours. Just so you know."

Phoenix shakes her head as she walks away, that boy is not bright at all, and if Daryl didn't beat him to death she'd be amazed. She watches from her spot next to T-Dog as the door opens and a man walks out.

"You okay man?"

"They gonna cut off my feet."

"Cops do that?" The man says eyeing Rick.

"Not him. This redneck putto here. He cut off some dude's hand, man. The crazy chica showed it to me."

Phoenix tunes out the conversation, focusing on clearing her head, waiting for the signal from Rick. She sees Rick turn his head towards them, the rest of the Vatos looking up to the top of the building where Phoenix and T-Dog stand, their rifles trained on the leader. The leader yells out and
from above them on the roof stands two men, Glenn tied up between them, his mouth duct-taped. The Vatos retreat back inside and the two meet up back on the ground with the others.

They head to a nearby building to sort things out. Rick sets the bag down on the desk, rifling through it.

"Them guns are worth more than gold. Gold won't protect yer family or put food on the table. You willing to give that up for that kid?" Daryl asks.

"If I knew we'd get Glenn back, I might agree." T-Dog says. "But you think that Vato across the way is just gonna hand him over?"

"You calling G a liar?" The kid smarts off.

"Are you a part of this? You want to hold on to yer teeth?" Daryl says slapping the kid in the head.

"Question is, do you trust that man's word?" T-Dog asks looking to Rick.

Daryl scoffs, "No, question is what are you willing to bet on it? Could be more than them guns. Could be yer life. Glenn worth that to you?"

"What life I have I owe to him. I was nobody to Glenn, just some idiot stuck in a tank. He could have walked away, but he didn't. Neither will I." Rick confesses.

"So yer gonna hand the guns over?" Daryl asks.

"I didn't say that." Rick tells him. "There's nothing keeping you three here. You should get out, head back to camp."

"And tell your family what?" T-Dog says rubbing his head.

"I promised Lori I'd bring you back, I'd bring you all back. I don't break my promises," Phoenix says standing up and grabbing her rifle. Daryl nods as well grabbing a shotgun, along with T-Dog.

The kid stands up, "Come on, this is nuts." Daryl shoves the kid back, the kid rubs his face, "Just do like G says."

They gag the kid and tie his hands behind his back. Daryl escorts him at the tip of his shotgun back to the Vatos hideout. The door opens and Daryl shoves the kid in first, Phoenix, Rick and T-Dog following behind.

After a lengthy discussion about whose guns they were and an interruption from one of the men's grandmothers, she escorts the group further inside. What greets their eyes is elderly people everywhere, the Vatos caring for them. They enter the auditorium and find Glenn standing untied and unharmed next to a man in a wheelchair.

After a long chat with the leader, the group finds out that the staff of the home ran out leaving all the elderly to fend for themselves. Rick comes to realize these men aren't the bad guys. He gives them a shotgun, a rifle and a few handguns with ammo. The group then takes their leave.
"Admit it, you only came back to Atlanta for the hat." Glenn tells Rick.

"Don't tell anybody."

"You've given away half our guns and ammo." Daryl says.

"Not nearly half."

"For what? Bunch of old farts who gonna die off momentarily anyhow? Seriously, how long you think they got?" Daryl quips.

"How long do any of us?" Phoenix mentions as they round a bus to find the van missing.

"Oh my God." Glenn utters.

Daryl is dumbfounded, "Where the hell's our van?"

"We left it right there. Who would take it?" Glenn wonders.

"Merle." Rick says with venom.

"He's gonna be takin' some vengeance back to camp." Daryl tells them all.

They hustle together, making their way back to camp. Daryl in front and Phoenix bringing up the rear, both with bows aimed and ready. Its well after dark when they come upon the camp, the first they hear is screaming, then the growling of walkers, a lot of them. The five take aim as they exit the woods, taking out every walker in their path. The rest of the group is huddled in front of the RV, where the walkers have them cornered. After several minutes the last walker is taken down. Rick embraces Lori and Carl, the others look around breathing heavily, adrenaline flowing through them. Phoenix kneels down, hugging Titan who is faithfully beside the kids.

Hysterical wailing breaks out, the group turns to Andrea, huddled over her sister's now dead body. Phoenix hears Jim speak softly his words making her shiver and incredibly nauseous, "Now I remember my dream. Why I dug all those holes."
The next morning is a solemn one for the entire camp. But none more so than Andrea, who hasn’t left her sisters side since she fell to walkers during the night. It was setting everyone on edge, knowing she had been bitten and it was only a matter of time before she turned.

Phoenix was up before dawn as usual, mostly because with her concussion she wasn’t supposed to sleep for 12 hours, and by then it was morning so she decided to forego sleep.

She snuck quietly into the RV grabbing what she was looking for and stepping back outside. She knelt next to the woman, taking her free hand and placing her hand-gun in it. Andrea slowly looks up at the woman, they don’t know one another but somehow Phoenix knew what Andrea was doing and was willing to help.

The two shared a small grim smile before Phoenix headed back to her truck. No one else in the camp was awake except for Daryl and he was already out hunting. Phoenix grabbed a towel, soap, razor and conditioner, then headed down to the quarry with her bow.

Daryl had been out hunting since an hour before dawn, he was making his way around the top ridge of the quarry when an interesting sight caught his eye. Phoenix, by herself, standing below at the waters edge. He knew she hadn’t slept at all, he was restless and couldn’t sleep himself, so he set about cleaning his bow and making some new arrows. He would glance up every now and again, watching her read a book.

He watched as she kicked off her boots, then peeled off her skintight shirt and pants. He was welcomed by the sight of a Mossy Oak camo bikini top and matching shorts that just covered her ass. The top was a bandeau halter that tied at the neck and clipped at the back, the shorts hung low on her hips, and fit like a second skin.

If that wasn’t hot enough, he could now see she had several tattoos, including a full sleeve on her left arm, a half sleeve on her right and her entire back. He could see a few small ones on her right arm, abdomen, left side of her chest, both ribcages, right hip, both ankles and the tops of her feet, but he couldn’t make out what they were.

He observed her as she washed her clothes and set them out on a flat rock to dry. From there she
washed her hair, her body and shaved her legs and arm pits. He liked that she had no problem getting down and dirty, but still took care of herself, even in these shitty times. He was a firm believer that the better you felt, the more likely you were to fight for your life. If you didn’t feel like living, chances are you wouldn’t.

She gets out toweling off and then slipping her feet into a pair of worn black flip flops. She gathered her clothes and her bow, making her way back up to the camp. Halfway up the road he saw her grin, “Mornin’ Dixon.”

He shook his head as he made his way back to camp, he should’ve known she’d know he was there. Everyone in camp was saying she was the female version of him, and little by little he was starting to agree. He arrived a few minutes before her and set out helping the rest of the guys move bodies.

Phoenix walked into camp, stopping behind everyone she listened to them fighting over the fact that Andrea wouldn’t let anyone come near her sister’s body. She had also pulled a gun on Rick, but none of them knew how she got it out of the RV since she had been there all night.

“Y’all can’t be serious. Let that girl hamstring us? The dead girl’s a time bomb.” Daryl tells the group.

“What do you suggest?” Rick asks him.

“Take the shot. Clean, in the brain from here. Hell, I can hit a turkey ‘tween the eyes from this distance.”

“No. For God’s sakes, let her be.” Lori says looking to the woman.

“Well who the hell gave her the gun in the first place?” Rick asks.

“I did.” Phoenix states. “She knows what she’s doin’, leave her the hell alone.” She sighs walking past the group to her truck. She could feel the groups eyes on her, not sure if it was for what she said, the fact she was in a bikini or all her tattoos.

Daryl scoffs walking away from the group, he glares as he steps past Phoenix shoving her with his shoulder. She sighs, shaking her head, that man had mood swings worse than a woman. Her clothes weren’t dry just yet, so she pulled on a tight pair of dark blue jeans, a white tank top and worn brown cowboy boots. She brushed out her hair letting it dry naturally in waves.

Daryl goes over to help Morales with a body, upsetting Glenn as they try to set it on the fire. He snaps, clearly upset, saying walkers go on the fire, our people go over there by the RV.

“You reap what you sow.” Daryl tells them. “Y’all left my brother for dead. You had this comin’.”

Suddenly Jacqui begins yelling, shouting that Jim had been bitten. Daryl comes up demanding that Jim show them he hadn’t. Jim grabbed a shovel and turned to defend himself, T-Dog sneaks up and grabs him from behind. Daryl lifts up his shirt revealing the bite wound, Jim is pleading that he’s okay. They sit him down by the back of the RV and have a group meeting a few feet away.

“I say we put a pickaxe in his head and the dead girl’s and be done with it.” Daryl says.
“Is that what you’d want if it were you?” Shane asks looking sideways at Daryl.

“Yeah, and I’d thank you while you did it.”

Dale sighs, “I hate to say it—I never thought I would—but maybe Daryl’s right.”

“Jim’s not a monster, Dale, or some rabid dog.” Rick tells him.

“I’m not suggesting—“ Dale starts but Rick interrupts him, his voice full of anger, “He’s sick. A sick man. We start down that road, where do we draw the line?”

“The line’s pretty clear. Zero tolerance for walkers, or them to be.” Daryl tells them.

“I’m with Dixon on this Rick,” Phoenix says, “If it were me I’d hope y’all would put me out of my misery.”

“What if we can get him help?” Rick asks looking around the circle. “I heard the CDC was working on a cure.”

“I heard that too. Heard a lot of things before the world went to hell.” Shane sighs.

“What if the CDC is still up and running?” Rick asks them again.

Phoenix tunes out the conversation between Rick and Shane, to her the CDC was a pipe dream, nothing to rely on. She came back as she hears Daryl yell advancing on Jim with his pickaxe, “You go lookin’ for aspirin, do what you need to do. Someone needs to have some balls to take care of this damn problem!”

Rick pulls out his gun aiming it at Daryl’s head, “Hey, hey, hey! We don’t kill the living.”

Daryl lowers the pickaxe turning to face the cop, “That’s funny comin’ from a man who just put a gun to my head.”

Daryl drops the weapon and stalks off, Phoenix follows him, stopping at her truck. She watches as Dale shares some words with Andrea, handing her the necklace she had got for her sister for her birthday, which coincidently was today. She smiles unwrapping it and placing it around Amy’s neck.

Daryl stalks by her going over to the front of the RV, he picks up another pickaxe preparing to make sure Ed doesn’t come back as a walker.

Carol walks up to him, “I’ll do it. He’s my husband.”

Daryl hands her the axe and steps back. She grips the handle, crying as she looks down at him. She swings the axe down, five times in total, seeming more relieved with each swing.

Phoenix watches Carol take out her frustrations on her husband’s corpse. Years of pent up anger for the way he treated her were released with every swing. Phoenix only wished Carol could have done that while he was still alive. But at least her and Sophie were free from his wrath now, they didn’t have to live in constant fear.

Her eyes drifted over to Andrea, she noticed Amy beginning to move and waited, hoping Andrea had the will do what was needed. If she didn’t Phoenix’s gun was at the ready. She watched as Andrea spoke to her sister, knowing she didn’t understand anymore, but it was simply to make Andrea’s letting go easier. She watched Andrea say her final goodbye, saw her pull out her gun and
in a single gunshot, she put her sister to peace.

Phoenix saw the rest of the group look from Andrea to her, she gave them a sad smile, “Told you so.”

The entire group heads up to the ridge to bury their friends and say a prayer, then they head back down to the camp. After a meeting with everyone, they decide that Rick’s right, the group is gonna make for the CDC in the morning.

---

Around the fire that night, Dale asks Phoenix a question he’s been itching to ask. “Why do you drive such a big truck? Isn’t it hard to find gas for?”

She smiles, “I grew up in the country, we drove nothin’ but trucks all my life. Plus if you notice when you stand next to it, yer head barely touches the hood. That means walkers can’t reach me inside the cab or bed and if I hit ‘em, it doesn’t damage my radiator or engine. I can run them suckers over all day long.”

The group chuckles. “And how do you keep it running?” Dale wonders.

“Solar panels on the roof, wired to 12 batteries inside the box in the bed of my truck. It runs off diesel which is hard to find, but easier nowadays than regular gas. I have a 40 gallon tank, I only use the gas if I absolutely need too, otherwise the whole truck runs off the sun.”

The men look around, impressed to say the least. “What did you do before all this?” Glenn asks her as they had done a day earlier to him.

“I was a survivalist trainer. I taught people how to survive for cases like this. Although I will admit, walkers never even crossed my top ten when I thought about how the world would end.”

“Could you teach us some stuff, to help us out?” Glenn asks eager to learn something new.

“Sure Glenn, I’d be happy too. Although the way you handled yourself in the city, I think I should be learnin’ from you.” Glenn’s cheeks beamed red making Phoenix smile.

“How did you end up alone out here?”

Phoenix glances over at the small boy, she had to admit, he’d grown on her in the short time she’d been around him.

“Uh, well Carl, that’s not really a story for kids. Maybe some other time, aight bud?”

The child smiles and nods, satisfied with her answer but now more curious than ever, as were a lot of the others.

---

The next morning the group packs up to leave, minus Morales and his family who declined to go with them. So the caravan pulls out, Dale leading the way in the RV, then Rick and his family in
the van, the Suburban, Daryl in his truck, Phoenix in her truck, then Shane in his Jeep bringing up the rear.

Shortly after they had to pull over, the hose on the RV busted yet again. Shane and T-Dog head up the road to see if they can find another hose or something to jury-rig it. They return shortly and Dale fixes the hose with Phoenix’s help. Just before they leave, Jim decides he wants to be left behind, so they honor his wishes and leave him sitting under a nice big tree.

They pull up outside of the CDC building, the entire grounds around the building are covered with rotting corpses covered in flies. The stench is almost unbearable as they head up to the building. They reach the front doors, Rick and Shane try to open them but they are locked. There doesn’t seem to be anyone there. It seems they have doomed themselves by coming here. The sky is slowly fading to black as they stand around.

Suddenly walkers start coming towards them, Daryl yells alerting everyone, “Walkers!” He pierces one through the head with a bolt, he turns back to Rick, “You lead us into a graveyard!”

“He made a call.” Phoenix says backing up the cop.

“It was the wrong damn call!” Daryl snaps back at her.

“Just shut up. You hear me? Shut up. Shut up!” Shane yells pushing Daryl backwards.

The group starts to head back to the vehicles when Rick stops them by hollering that the camera moved. Shane tells him its automatic, but Rick doesn’t listen. He pleads to the camera as everyone tries to pull him away. Suddenly a sound stops them all, they turn back to the building as a bright light engulfs them from an opened doorway.
Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Thank you to all of you who have read this story, I hope you are enjoying reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

"Daryl, Phoenix, cover the back." Shane ordered, the two hunters nodded taking the rear flanks, bows at the ready. "Close those doors," Shane said again as everyone entered the building. The two complied closing the glass doors as they came through.

A gun cocking catches everyone's attention, they turn towards the stairs to find a man holding an automatic machine gun. "Anybody infected?" He yelled, not making a move to leave his position.

"One of our group was." Rick's voice is shaking. "He didn't make it."

The man steps forward two steps, "Why are you here? What do you want?"

"A chance," Rick admits.

"That's asking an awful lot these days."

"I know."

The man looks around at their group, each one in turn. "You all submit to a blood test. That's the price of admission."

"We can do that."

"You got stuff to bring in, you do it now. Once this door closes, it stays closed."

Four of them run out to grab packs from the vehicles, when they are safely back inside, the man turns to a panel on the wall. "Vi, seal the main entrance. Kill the power up here."

Phoenix watches the door slide shut, hissing as it locks them inside. Daryl notices she's fidgety, a worried look on her face. That alone bothers him, he's never seen her look worried, but the look on her face now is… scared? That can't be, not her.

"Hey Rayne, you aight?" He nudges her shoulder with his.

"I don't like this. I got a bad feelin' bout this place, Dixon."
The group piles into the elevator, it's a tight squeeze with them all, Phoenix's back is up against Daryl's left arm, she can feel his body heat warming her.

"Doctors always go around packing heat like that?" Daryl wonders to Dr. Jenner.

"There were plenty left lying around, I familiarized myself." He looks back over his shoulder at the group, "But you look harmless enough." He glances down at Carl, clutching Titan's leash. "Except you two, I'll have to keep my eye on you."

Carl gives a small smile, that in turn makes Phoenix smile.

The elevator takes them underground, Jenner leads the way down a ramp into a large room.

"Vi, bring up the lights in the big room."

The lights come on to reveal a giant room full of computers. But there is no one around but them. Jenner explained that the rest of the staff either fled or "opted out" which was the polite way of saying they committed suicide. The person he was speaking with turns out to be Virtual Intelligence, it controls the entire facility.

They head into what looks like a lecture room, there he takes a vile of blood from them all. He notices several of the women are shaky, "Are you ladies okay?"

"They haven't eaten in days, none of us have," Phoenix explains.

Jenner looks thoughtful for a moment before he instructs them to follow him.

Soon after they're all sitting around a table, eating their fill, drinking alcohol and laughing like they don't have a care in the world.

"You know in Italy, children have a little bit of wine with dinner." Dale laughs handing Lori a glass of wine he had poured for her. "And in France."

"Well, when Carl is in Italy or France, he can have some then." Lori covers Carl's glass, taking a sip of her own.

"What's it gonna hurt? Come on." Rick receives raised eyebrows from his wife. "Come on. What?" He laughs at the incredulous look she gives him, but she acquiesces, uncovering Carl's glass.

The table cheers as Lori seemingly agrees, even Daryl cracks a smile from his position behind T-Dog. He and Phoenix opted to sit on the counter behind the table, passing a bottle of Southern Comfort back and forth between them.

Dale pours a small amount into Carl's glass and hands it to him, "There you are young lad."

Carl takes a sip, immediately his face puckers up, "Eww."

All the adults laugh as Lori takes the glass from him, "That's my boy. That's my boy." She pours the wine from his glass into hers. "Good boy."
"That tastes nasty." Carl admits still shaking his head trying to get rid of the taste.

"You just stick to soda pop, huh bud." Shane laughs looking to Carl.

"Not you, Glenn." Daryl says. "Keep drinkin' little man. I want to see how red yer face can get."

The males at the table laugh, as Glenn shakes his head from his position on the counter across from Daryl.

Rick notices Jenner's concerned face, he stands up, clicking his glass with a knife. "It seems to me we haven't thanked our host properly."

A round of cheers go up to the Doctor, along with a "Booyah" from Daryl.

"So when you gonna tell us what the hell happened here, Doc?" Shane growls out.

After the explanation from Jenner, the group is solemn and quiet.

"Dude, you are such a buzzkill, man." Glenn tells Shane.

After that Jenner leads the way down a hall explaining everything. "Most of the facility is powered down including housing, so you'll have to make due here. The couches are comfortable, but there are cots in storage if you like. There's a rec room down the hall that you kids might enjoy. Just don't plug in the video games, okay?" He turns back giving the two kids a smile.

"Or anything that draws power. The same applies—" He looks up at the adults. "If you shower, go easy on the hot water."

Glenn turns around with a big smile, "Hot water?"

T-Dog smiles along, "That's what the man said."

The two of them laugh as the group splits up to choose their rooms. Of course the first thing everyone did was take showers, relishing in the feel of the warm water scrubbing away the filth and grime.

Phoenix doesn't worry about a shower just yet, she's still clean from her bath at the quarry. What she does want however, is something to kill this nagging feeling she has that they aren't safe here. She heads back to the cafeteria, going behind the bar she rummages around in the cabinets till she finds what she's seeking. The trusty bottle with the black and white label.

Grabbing a shot glass she sits down at the table, stretching her feet onto a chair next to her. She cracks open the bottle and ignoring the glass, takes a long pull feeling the liquid burning her throat on the way down. She tilts her head back on the chair and closes her eyes.

She hears someone enter the room, the chair legs squeak as it's slid across the floor and the person
sits down on the other side of the table.

"Figured you'd be gettin' some rest."

Phoenix opened her eyes tilting her head back up and looking at the redneck across the table from her. He looked freshly out of the shower, with his messy hair damp and his facial hair slightly trimmed up. He had on another flannel shirt, and she started to wonder if any of his shirts had sleeves. His now empty bottle of So Co sat in front of him.

"What's the point? I'll sleep when I'm dead, which with the way things are goin' could be real soon."

He frowns as she takes a long pull from the bottle. Her sudden change in attitude catches him off guard. "There's obviously somethin' botherin' you besides yer feelin' bout this place. Want to talk bout it?"

"With you? No thanks Dixon."

"Why not?"

"Why do you care?"

"I don't." Daryl says quickly backpedaling, he didn't need her knowing she was growing on him. "Just figured if you got what was on yer mind off, then you'd be less emotional than the others females around here."

"I'm nothin' like the other females around here." She snaps taking another pull from the bottle.

"Got that right." He mutters standing up to retrieve another bottle from the cabinet, and to his luck he finds another bottle of So Co.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Daryl shivers from the icy glare she throws his way. "I just mean that yer stronger than any a them, smarter, you can take care of yerself, of anybody. But now that I see you like this, all givin' up and shit, I'm startin' to wonder if I was wrong bout you."

"You don't know shit bout me Dixon."

He sighs, running a hand over his face, yeah she was a lot like him. He decided to change the conversation, "Why do you call me that?"

"It's yer name." She says slowly with a pointed look.

"It's my last name, I ain't never heard ya call me Daryl."

"And ya never will."

"You call the rest of 'em by their first names."

Phoenix sighs, "Look, I try not to git close to people. In the end they either screw ya, or they hurt ya. I don't wanna take the chance of either."

"So if you don't trust people, then why are you here? Why not head out on yer own?"

"I could ask you the same question. It's no secret, you don't like any of them, you don't trust any of
'em. So why do ya stay?"

Daryl sat silent, in all honesty he didn't have an answer. She had a point, he didn't know why he stayed. But he knew why he was staying now, because of her. This woman had a hold on him he didn't understand. She ignored him most of the time, pissed him off the other and was rarely nice or spoke to him. But Daryl couldn't get enough. Even sitting here now, having her angry and snapping at him, he relished in it.

The two of them finished their bottles in silence, Daryl was the first to stand up, he rounded the table, leaning down to her ear. "Trust is the only way to survive."

Phoenix watched him walk out of the room, her head now officially hurt. Damn him. Why did he have to pick her as the one person to bond with. Granted the two of them were a hell of a lot alike. But Phoenix couldn't, wouldn't take the chance of letting another person, especially a man get close to her again. But she couldn't stop the pull of her towards Daryl.

She got up heading back towards her room, whether she wanted to admit it, Daryl was right, she needed her rest. However that was momentarily halted when she came upon Shane trying to force himself on Lori in the rec room. Phoenix saw red, visions of her past filling her head. She ran up grabbing Shane around the neck with the same choke hold she used on Daryl. When he calmed down slightly she shoved him away from her catching his neck on her nails and scratching four deep marks into his skin.

"If I ever see you force yerself on her or any other woman in my presence, I'll kill you."

She shoved Shane out the door and embraced the crying woman behind her. Maybe Daryl was right, you couldn't be around them and not care. So did that mean Daryl cared for them too?

The next morning Phoenix awoke feeling better than she had in several days. She dressed in a pair of black jeans, a red spaghetti strap tank top (they were the only ones she ever wore) and a long sleeved red, black and white plaid western shirt. She put on her black belt making sure her pin was still attached, tucked her necklace in her top and pulled on her brown cowboy boots. She brushed out her unruly locks and headed down to get some breakfast. She sits down next to Glenn on his right, giving the kid a small smile at his grim face.

Carl looks up as his dad with a smirk, "Are you hung over?" Lori looks at her son with wide eyes. "Mom said you'd be."

"Mom is right." Rick says with a smile.

"Mom has that annoying habit," Lori says around a piece of bacon.

"Eggs. powdered, but—but I do 'em good." T-Dog says setting some eggs in front of Phoenix and Rick. "I bet you can't tell. Protein helps the hangover."
Glenn moans, grabbing his head. "Don't ever, ever, ever let me drink again."

Shane enters, Rick turns to him, "You feel as bad as I do?"

"Worse," Shane says looking from Lori to Phoenix, the latter giving him an icy glare.

"What the hell happened to you? Your neck?" T-Dog asks referring to the four deep scratches Shane's sporting.

"I must have done it in my sleep." He says glaring at Phoenix who smirks.

"Never seen you do that before," Rick tells him taking a drink of his coffee.

Shane shakes his head, "Me neither. Not like me at all." He glances to Lori who turns away from him.

Jenner walks in and after a small conversation he takes the group to the big room once again.

He punches something up on the computer, "Give me playback of TS-19."

The computerized voice responds, "Playback of TS-19."

The screen shows an MRI internal view of a human brain, an "extraordinary one" according to Jenner.

"Few people ever had the chance to see this. Very few." Jenner explained as we watched the screen with wide eyes. "Not that it matters in the end. Take us in EIV."

"Enhanced internal view." The computer responds before it goes to the enhanced internal view, on the virtual camera.

"What are those lights?" Shane asks from the back.

Jenner turned to us as he pointed back to the video. "That's a person's life. Experience, memories, it's everything. Somewhere in all that organic wiring, all those ripples of light, is you. The thing that makes you unique and human."

Daryl crosses his arms. "You ever make sense? Ever?"

"Those are synapses. Electro impulses in the brain that carry all the messages, they determine everything a person says, does, or thinks from the moment of birth…" Jenner pauses as he scanned our faces. "To death."

Rick steps up, "Death? Is that what this is? A visual?"

Andrea took a few steps forward as she watched the screen. "This person died… who?"

"Test subject 19." Jenner's shoulders sagged a bit in sadness. "Someone bitten and infected, volunteered to have us record the process. Vi, scan forward to the first event."

"Scanning to first event."

They watch as the infection, a blackness, invades the brain.

"What is that?" Rayne asks shifting side to side on her feet.
"It invades the brain like meningitis: the adrenal glands hemorrhage, the brain goes into shutdown, then the major organs…” The person on screen started to shake, then stops abruptly as the lights in the brain brunt out. "Then death. Everything you were or ever will be – gone."

"Is that what happened to Jim?” Sophia asked her mother innocently.

Carol nodded. "Yes."

Andrea looks beaten as she takes a deep breath and turns away, Jenner notices and gives her a questioning look.

"She lost someone 2 days ago." Lori explained. "Her sister."

Jenner walks over to Andrea. "I lost somebody too, I know how devastating it is."

Then it scans forward to the second event. "The resurrection time varies, between three minutes and 8 hours. In this patient it was two hours, one minute, seven seconds."

They watch as the infection restarts the brain stem. The parts that make a person who they once were doesn't come back, just a shell driven by mindless instinct. A white light streaks across the picture, searing a hole down into the skull.

"God, what was that?" Carol asks.

"A bullet." Phoenix says. "He shot his patient in the head. Didn't you Dr. Jenner?"

The screen and workstations power down, Jenner explains to them that he's not sure what causes it. He's been in the dark for a month, so he has no idea about any other facility. They finally realize what he's saying is that there isn't anything or anyone left in the world. The realization hits them like a freight train, each of them expressing their sorrow in a different way. Some with silence, some with one word, "Jesus", and some with three, "oh my God."

Of course Daryl had his own way with words, "Man, I'm gonna get shit-faced drunk—again." He wipes his hands over his face, turning to Phoenix, "You comin'?"

She simply nods, still trying to process this information, "Oh, yeah."

Dale walks over standing beside Phoenix, he glances to something behind her. "Dr. Jenner, I know this has been taxing for you and I hate to ask one more question, but… that clock—it's counting down. What happens at zero?"

All eyes turn to Jenner, "The basement generators—they run out of fuel."

"And then?" Rick asks with wide eyes as Jenner simply walks away.

"Vi, what happens when the power runs out?" Phoenix asks.

"When the power runs out, facility-wide decontamination will occur."

Rick, Shane, Glenn and T-Dog head down to the basement looking for the generators.
Back upstairs the lights have dimmed and the air conditioning have shut off. Phoenix steps out of her room in search of Dr. Jenner. She bumps into Daryl on the way.

"What the hell's goin' on?"

"You member that feelin' I told you I had bout this place?"

Daryl gets what she's saying and turns to follow her. Jenner walks past them as everything is shutting off, he snatches the bottle of So Co from Daryl's hand as he passes. He tells everyone that the building is shutting itself down.

"Hey! Hey, what the hells that mean?" Daryl asks as the group follows Jenner to the big room. "Hey, man, I'm talking to you. What do you mean it's shottin' itself down? How can a building do anything?"

"You'd be surprised," is the only answer Jenner gives as they enter the big room. He hands Daryl back his bottle, the redneck snatching it from the man's hand.

Rick finally has had enough of Jenner's crap, he tells everyone to go grab their things, they're getting out of here. Suddenly a loud alarm starts blaring, stopping everyone in their tracks.

"30 minutes to decontamination," Vi says.

"Doc, what's going on here damn it!" Daryl yells.

"Everybody, y'all heard Rick. Get your stuff and let's go! Go now! Go!" Shane yells urging the group on.

Suddenly the door behind Rick that leads to the elevator closes, Jenner has locked them in.

"You son-of-a-bitch! You locked us in here!" Daryl charges Jenner, but he's cut off by Shane and T-Dog, "You locked us in here!"

"Jenner, you open that door right now." Rick tells him as he stomps over.

"No point, everything topside is locked down. I told you once that front door closed, it wouldn't open again. You heard me say that. It's better this way."

"What is?" Rick asks. "What happens in 28 minutes?"

"Do you know what this place is?" Jenner yells standing up. "We protected the public from very nasty stuff! Weaponized smallpox! Ebola strains that could wipe out half the country! Stuff you don't want getting out! Ever!" He ceases his rant and sits back down in his chair. "In the event of a catastrophic power failure—in a terrorist attack, for example—HITs are deployed to prevent any organism from getting out."

"HITs?" Rick asks Jenner, but before he can answer Phoenix speaks, her voice shaking. "Uh, High-impulse Thermobaric fuel-air explosives." Everyone turns to face her. "They consist of a two-stage aerosol ignition that produces a blast wave of significantly greater power and duration than any other known explosive except nuclear. The vacuum-pressure effect ignites the oxygen between 5000 and 6000 degrees and is useful when the greatest loss of life and damage to structures is desired." She stops, then softly adds, "It sets the air on fire."

"No pain." Everyone is stunned at Jenner's words, some are crying. "An end to sorrow, grief… Regret. Everything."
Shane and Daryl grab axes, swinging at the door, but neither are making even a dent.

"You should have let well enough alone. It would have been easier for everyone."

"Easier for who?" Lori spats at Jenner.

"All of you. You know what's out there—a short, brutal life and an agonizing death." He turns to Andrea, "Your—your—sister—what was her name?"

"Amy."

"Amy. You know what this does. You've seen it?" He turns to Rick, "Is that really what you want for your wife and son?"

"I don't want this," Rick stresses emphatically.

"Those doors are designed to withstand a rocket launcher."

"Well, yer head ain't!" Daryl cries swinging the axe at Jenner, Phoenix stands in front of him with her hand on his chest, Rick and Dale grab his arms.

"Dixon! Calm down!" She yells. "Back up! Just back up!"

He backs off, T-Dog pushing him back, they rest turn back to Jenner, "You do want this. Last night you said you knew it was just a matter of time before everybody you loved was dead."

Rick looks around, he didn't expect everyone to find that out. "I had to keep hope alive, didn't I?"

"There is no hope. There never was."

"There's always hope. Maybe it won't be you, or here, but somebody somewhere—"

"What part of "everything is gone" do you not understand?" Andrea snaps up at Rick.

"Listen to your friend. She gets it. This is what takes us down. This is our extinction event."

"This isn't right. You can't just keep us here." Carol says her voice coated in tears as she holds Sophie close.

"One tiny moment—a millisecond. No pain."

"My daughter doesn't deserve to die like this." Carol says standing up, as Sophie goes to Dale.

"Wouldn't it be kinder, more compassionate to just hold your loved ones and wait for the clock to run down?"

Shane has lost it, he points a shotgun in Jenner's face telling him to open the door. Rick is trying to talk him down, but it's not working. Shane yells firing at one of the computers, shattering the screen and sending sparks flying everywhere. Rick finally pries the gun from Shane's hands, smacking him in the head with the stock, sending him to the floor.

Rick looks around at everyone, he's lost to what to do now.

Phoenix meanwhile has been studying Jenner's face, she steps forward leaning against the computers next to him. "I think yer lyin' Doc."
"What?"

"Yer lyin'." She says slowly stressing each word. "About no hope. If that were true, you'd have bolted with the rest or taken the easy way out. You didn't. You chose the hard path. Why?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does matter. It always matters. You stayed when others ran. Why?"

"Not because I wanted to. I made a promise… to her. My wife."

"Test subject 19 was your wife?" Lori asks him, in the background Daryl is pounding away at the door with the axe.

"She begged me to keep going as long as I could. How could I say no? She was dying. It should've been me on that table. I wouldn't have mattered to anybody. She was a loss to the world. Hell, she ran this place. I just worked here. In our field, she was an Einstein. Me? I'm just… Edwin Jenner. She could've done something about this. Not me."

"Yer wife didn't have a choice. You do. That's—that's all we want—a choice, a chance. Let us keep tryin' as long as we can." Phoenix says motioning to her group.

Jenner doesn't say anything, simply sits back down.

Phoenix sighs, "Fine, we'll do this the hard way." She grabs Jenner's hand twisting it back till it almost snaps, she uses her other hand to grab the ID card from his pocket. She shoves him back and walks down the stairs to the control pad on the lower desk. She slides the card and keys in his code, the door slides open.

"Come on. Let's go!" Daryl yells running through the doors.

Phoenix walks back up tossing the card on the desk in front of Jenner, he's wondering how she got his code. "Next time you enter a code, make sure no one's lookin' over yer shoulder." She heads for the door with everyone else.

"There's your chance. Take it." Jenner tells Rick bitterly.

"I'm grateful."

"The day will come when you won't be." The two shake hands and Jenner whispers something in Rick's ear. He seems immobilized, like he can't move so Lori runs down grabbing his hand and dragging him out with her.

Jacqui and Andrea decide they're staying. Dale won't leave without Andrea so he sits down deciding to stay with her.

Up top the guys take axes to the window and doors trying to get them open, but they won't even make a dent.

"God, I wish my brother was here with his explosives." Phoenix yells kicking the window.
"Phoenix, I have something that might help." Carol says as she rummages in her bag. "Rick's first morning at camp, when I washed his uniform I found this in his pocket."

She holds out a grenade, Phoenix sighs taking it, she kisses the woman's cheek. She runs over to the window, "Everybody get the hell down!" She carefully pulls out the pin and propping it directly against the window, let's the lever go. She jumps down from the sill and runs towards the others, the explosion knocks her down the stairs. The window shatters as she hits the floor, she gets up quickly grabbing her bag and bow and dashing out the window.

They run across the lawn towards the vehicles taking out walkers as they go. They pile inside the vehicles, Phoenix looks around, she spots Titan with Carl and lets out a breath. She sees Dale and Andrea jump out of the window and run towards them.

"Everybody get down!" Phoenix yells ducking, as the flames roll out of the open window. Within seconds all that is left of the building is a pile of rubber and a raging fire. They all catch their breath and fire up the vehicles, heading out of Atlanta.

The group decides it's too dangerous to travel in the fading light, so with a unanimous decision they head for the Elder Home where they encountered the Vatos. Daryl and Phoenix lead Rick and Shane inside the building, bows at the ready as they move silently down the halls. The four clear every room finding no sign of life anywhere. As they enter the auditorium they are shocked to find the floor littered with the bodies of the elderly patients and the Vatos as well.

After a quick glance around for walkers, of which they find none, odd given the amount of bodies and blood. Rick brings the rest of the group inside, they agree to spend the night in a few of the upstairs rooms. The group stands around taking in the grisly sight before them, only Daryl and Phoenix noticing and understanding the gravity of this situation.

Rick turns addressing the group, "Upstairs is our best bet, we've cleared a few rooms, we can barricade those if we have to. We'll be alright."

"You mean it this time?" Carol asks from a chair nearby, Sophia sitting on her lap. "Or are you lying to us like all the times before?"

"That's unfair and no help at all." Lori tells her sticking up for her husband.

Glenn's wavering voice breaks the tension as he glances around at the bodies of the people he had spent time with. "What the hell happened?"

"What do you think happened? They got overrun."

"Pfft."

Andrea turns to Daryl, a scowl on her face, "Something to say?"

"Yeah. How bout observant?"

"Observant. Big word from a guy like you. Three whole syllables."

Phoenix takes a step towards the blonde not liking her speaking to Daryl like that, the hunter is
quick to grab the huntress by the arm shaking his head. Phoenix's eyes shift from Daryl to Andrea before she sighs nodding her understanding, he was telling her, 'she's not worth it.'

"Walkers didn't do this. Geeks didn't show up till all this went down. Somebody attacked this place. Killed all these people, took whatever they want."

Rick furrows his brows as he looks around at the bodies taking in Daryl's words. He kneels down to one of the corpses observing the single gunshot wound to the head.

"They're all shot in the head, execution style. Y'all worried about walkers? I'd be much more worried about the people that came and did all this." The hunter shoulders his crossbow looking pointedly at Andrea. "Get a dictionary. Look it up." He points a finger at his forehead, "Observant."
What Lies Ahead

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Thank you to all of you who have read this story, I hope you are enjoying reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

The next morning the group heads out, making a stop in a small town to search for supplies and gather gas. They made the decision to condense vehicles, losing Shane’s Jeep, the van and Daryl’s truck, as he opted to ride Merle’s bike instead.

So they set out for Fort Benning, 125 miles away, which by now seemed like an eternity.

They headed down the road, Daryl leading the way on his bike, followed by the RV, the Cherokee and Phoenix’s truck heading up the rear.

Shortly after they left they encountered a big problem, a long line of abandoned cars and a semi trailer flipped on its side covered both sides of the highway. Daryl rides back through the cars to them, he nods as Dale asks if there’s a way through, motioning with his head to follow him. Slowly they follow Daryl through the maze of cars until they hit a spot where they can go no further.

The RV springs another leak, Dale gets out and looks at the problem, as everyone makes their way to him.

“Something wrong Dale?” Shane asks earning an eye roll from Phoenix for his stupid question.

“Just the small matter of being stuck in the middle of nowhere with no hope of—“ He watches Daryl and Phoenix rifling through the backs of two cars. “—okay, that was dumb.”

“If you can’t find a radiator hose here…” Phoenix trails off stating the obvious.

“There’s a whole bunch of stuff we can find.” Daryl says going through a few backpacks.

T-Dog steps past them, “I can siphon more fuel from these cars for a start.”

“Maybe some water.” Carol suggests.

“Or food.” Glenn adds.

“This is a graveyard.” Lori says looking around. “I don’t know how I feel about this.”

Phoenix steps forward, “Lori, these people are gone. They’re in a better place. They won’t miss these material things, but, I’ll bet they’d be happy to find out that their things, helped others survive.”
Everybody takes in the woman’s words, she was right. Everybody split up to gather what they could. There are only a few corpses littered in the cars, but everyone is still on guard.

“Yo Dixon, give me a hand will ya.”

Daryl heads over to a semi truck, it has a locking fuel cap, so together they pry it off then begin siphoning the fuel for Phoenix’s truck. Suddenly he grabs her arm hauling her behind a truck, his hand over her mouth. She gives him a wide eyed stare wondering what he’s up to, he points to the heard of walkers that are approaching them. She looks and nods, he removes his hand, nodding to her to follow him.

They make their way to where T-Dog is crouched, Phoenix can smell fresh blood in the air. She runs over, crouching down beside T-Dog, he’s cut his right forearm open bad. She takes out one of her bandanas wrapping it around the wound and holding it tightly. His eyes dart to something behind her, she turns to see a walker moving towards them.

Then a welcome sight greets her eyes, Daryl comes in behind the walker and slams his screwdriver up through the back of the walker’s skull, then quickly lays it down. He motions to them with his finger over his mouth, “Shh.”

He lays T-dog on the ground, Phoenix next to him still keeping pressure on his arm. He covers them with the walker’s body, then turns to the car beside them. He grabs the dead body in the drivers seat and pulls it out laying it on top of him on the ground.

After the herd passes Daryl helps Phoenix get T-Dog back to the others. She sets him down on the asphalt next to the RV. “Dixon, can you get the small black bag from under the right front seat in my truck.”

Daryl nods running back to the truck and retrieving the bag. When he gets back Phoenix is unwrapping the bandana from T-Dog’s arm. The group stands behind her watching as she cleans around the wound and inside the best she can.

“T, I’ma have to stich it up.”

The man nods, he’s drifting in and out of consciousness from blood loss, Phoenix knows she needs to do something now or he’s going to bleed out. She pulls out a surgical needle and thread, pulling out her lighter she sterilizes the needle, then threads it.

She turns to Daryl, “I need you to hold him.”

Daryl nods taking T-Dog’s left arm and putting all his weight against the man. Phoenix takes a breath and then makes the first stitch. T-dog jerks and groans but not enough to make a difference to Phoenix. Within five minutes she has his arm stitched and bandaged up. She puts everything away and turns back to the men. “Good as new T.”

“Thank you.” He says softly.

“Where’d you learn that? Part of your survival course?” Glenn asks smiling.

Phoenix shakes her head returning the smile, “I’m a licensed EMT, but yes it is part of my course.”

“What else can you do?” Dale asks impressed by this young lady.

“Well, I’m also a licensed Massage Therapist, Certified Mechanic and Scuba Diving Instructor.”
The men all smile, this woman was something else. They were lucky to have her dropped into their lives.

Shortly thereafter Rick returned from out of the woods. He told everyone that two walkers had chased Sophie into the woods, he had followed and killed them but lost track of the little girl. Phoenix, and Daryl went back with him, Glenn and Shane. The hunters were the only ones who knew anything about tracking, so Rick felt better having them with him. Phoenix brought Titan along hoping her would pick up the girls scent.

“Sure this is the spot?” Daryl asks checking out the outcropping where Rick said he left Sophie.

“I left her right here. I drew the walkers way off in that direction up the creek.”

“Without a paddle—seems where we’ve landed.” Daryl quips.

“She was gone by the time I got back here. I figured she just took off and ran back to the group. I told her go that way and keep the sun on her left shoulder.

Daryl walks over to the embankment, looking up at Glenn. "Hey, Short Round, why don’t you step off to one side? Yer mucking up the trail.”

“Assuming she knows her left from her right.”

“Shane, stop being a dick.” Phoenix snaps earning a glare from the curly haired cop.

“She understood me just fine.” Rick says defending Sophie.

“Kid’s tired and scared, man. She had her close call with two walkers. Got to wonder how much of what you said stuck.”

“Got clear prints right here.” Phoenix motions Rick over as Daryl looks over her shoulder.

Daryl nods, “She did like you said and headed back to the highway. Let’s spread out, make our way back.”

“She couldn’t have gotten far.” Shane says helping them out of the creek. “Hey, we gonna find her. She’ll be tuckered out hiding in a bush somewhere.”

They walk back towards the highway, Phoenix and Daryl on point. “She was doing just fine till right here. All she had to do was keep going.” Daryl says kneeling down.

Phoenix leans over his left shoulder pointing to the right, “Ya, she veered off that way.”

“Why would she do that?” Glenn asks from beside Phoenix.

“Maybe she saw something that spooked her, made her run off.” Shane wonders looking back at them.

“A walker?” Glenn asks.

“I don’t see any other footprints. Just hers.” Daryl points out, Phoenix agreeing as she scans the
ground around them.

“So what do we do? All of us press on?” Shane asks.

Rick shakes his head, “No, better if you and Glenn get back up to the highway. People are gonna start panicking. Let ‘em know we’re on her trail doing everything we can. But most of all, keep everybody calm.”

“I’ll keep ‘em busy scavenging cars. Think up a few other chores. I’ll keep ‘em occupied. Come on.”

“Shane, wait.” He stops, surprised she’s speaking to him, more surprised when she hands him the keys to her truck. “You’re gonna need to move some cars, use the winch on the front of my truck. Control’s in the glove box. One scratch, and I’ll beat ya to death.”

He smiles taking the keys, before turning and walking away with Glenn. Phoenix turns moving behind Daryl through the trees.

“Tracks are gone.” Rick says looking at the ground.

“No, they’re faint, but they ain’t gone.” Phoenix tells him pointing to the ground. “She came through here.”

“How can you tell? I don’t see anything. Dirt, grass.”

“You want a lesson in trackin’ or you want to find that girl and get our ass off that interstate?” Daryl asks him as they push through the woods.

A few minutes later they stop, all three dropping into a crouch as they hear leaves rustling ahead of them. They move forward slowly staying low, below them is a walker. Daryl motions to Rick to go around to the front of it with Phoenix and he’ll come from behind.

The three of them split up, Rick and Phoenix run down a small hill in front of the walker. Phoenix whistles to get it’s attention, and Daryl fires a bolt through the back of it’s head, the tip piercing out right above it’s right eye. The three of them come to stand over the fallen walker, Daryl yanks his arrow out of it’s head, he looks around, “Sophia!”

Rick kneels down, putting on his gloves he looks over the walkers.

“What are you lookin’ for?” Daryl asks as he watches Rick.

“Skin under the fingernails.” The two hunters lean down as Rick rolls the walker over and looks in it’s mouth. “It’s fed recently.”

He digs his fingers into the walkers mouth, “There’s flesh caught in it’s teeth.”

“Yeah, what kind of flesh?” Daryl wonders.

The three of them exchange glances, before Phoenix grabs one of her hunting knives. “Only one way to know for sure.”

Daryl moves her out of the way, “Here I’ll do it. Don’t want you smellin’ like death.”

“Oh gee, my hero.” Phoenix scoffs condescendingly.

“Wait. I’ll do it.” Rick says.
Daryl shakes his head, “How many kills you skin and gut in yer life anyway?” He pulls out his hunting knife, “Anyway, mine is sharper.”

He stands over the walker, plunging the knife down into the corpse’s chest and slicing down to the hips. The smell is overwhelming, it’s like rotting flesh on a 150 degree day in a room with no windows. Phoenix watches Rick, he looks like he might hurl any minute.

It takes three times to get through the bone and flesh, but Daryl’s knife cut through it like butter. He stops a moment catching his breath, “Now comes the bad part.”

Daryl digs his hands into the body searching for the stomach. He pulls out a few unnecessary parts that are in the way tossing them to the side. Rick’s squinting his eyes as the putrid smell makes them water and assaults their nasal cavity.

“Yeah, hoss had a big meal not long ago.” Daryl says as he feels around inside the walker. “I feel it in there.” He tosses a bag on the ground in front of Rick, “Here’s the gut bag.”

“I got this,” Rick says taking out his knife and cutting into the bag.

Daryl picks up a skull with the end of his knife, holding it up for them to see. “This gross bastard had himself a woodchuck for lunch.” He flings it down to the ground as they all stand up.

“At least we know,” Phoenix says.

“At least we know,” Daryl agrees.

The three of them walk back up to the interstate, Carol is standing by the guardrail, her heart drops as she sees them without Sophia. “You didn’t find her?”

“Her trail went cold. We’ll pick it up again at first light.” Rick tells her trying to calm her fears.

“You can’t leave my daughter out there on her own to spend the night alone in the woods.”

“Out in the dark’s no good. We’d just be tripping over ourselves. More peopled get lost.” Daryl explains, his voice taking on a deep tone reminding Phoenix of velvet.

“But she’s 12. She can’t be out there on her own. You didn’t find anything?”

“I know this is hard. But I’m asking you not to panic. We know she was out there.” Rick says trying to calm the woman.

“And we tracked her for awhile,” Phoenix adds.

“We have to make this an organized effort.” Rick looks around at everyone. “Daryl and Phoenix know the woods better than anybody. I’ve asked them to oversee this.”

Carol looks down at Daryl’s pants, “Is—is that blood?” She starts breathing heavily, panicking.

“We took down a walker.” Rick tells her.

“Walker? Oh, my God.”

“There was no sign it was ever anywhere near Sophia.” Phoenix says steadying the woman with a hand.

“How can you know that?” Andrea asks from behind Carol.
“We cut the sumbitch open, made sure.” Phoenix says, earning a few interesting glances.

Carol breaths heavily sitting down on the guardrail, she looks up at Rick, “How could you just leave her out there to begin with? How could you just leave her?”

‘Here we go’ Phoenix thought to herself, she knew this would happen eventually. The look on Rick’s face was one of pain and anguish.

“They two walkers were on us. I had to draw them off. It was her best chance.”

“Sounds like he didn’t have a choice, Carol.” Shane says stepping up beside Phoenix.

“Carol.” Phoenix steps over the railing, kneeling down in front of the mom. “Rick did what needed to be done. Believe me, if he could switch places with Sophia he would. I would too.”

Carol sighs, “How was she supposed to find her way back on her own? She’s just a child. She’s just a child.”

Rick kneels down, looking up at Carol, “It was my only option. The only choice I could make.”

“I’m sure nobody doubts that,” Shane tells him.

Rick looks around, Phoenix can tell he’s close to tears. He’s trying to protect these people and now one of them was missing, because of his actions.

“My little girl got left in the woods.”

Rick stands up, he walks off through the maze of cars. Phoenix follows him, when she catches up he’s sitting on the ground against a car, the tears flowing freely. She kneels down in front of him.

“I failed. I failed Carol. I failed Sophia.”

“Rick you didn’t fail. We will find her.”

“I was supposed to protect her, and now she’s lost, out there alone and that’s my fault.”

“Rick you did what you thought was right. She got scared, ran, what kid wouldn’t? If you put everythin’ that goes wrong on you, yer gonna bury yourself and yer gonna drown. We are all responsible for this group, all a us. So it’s just as much my fault, and everyone else’s that Sophia is missin’.”

Rick shakes his head, looking away from her. She grabs his chin roughly turning him back to her.

“I trust you Rick. I don’t trust anyone, not since this started. But I trust you. So I know we will find this girl.” She lets him go and sits back on her heels, smiling. “You know, you remind me of my daddy. He always tried to protect everyone, felt it was his duty. But he came to realize that we had to learn to look out for ourselves too, cause he couldn’t be everywhere at once. You are one man Rick, tryin’ to carry 11 people. That’s too much of a burden for anyone. We all can look out for ourselves, you need to lighten yer load, or it’s gonna crush ya.”

She gave him a small smile and stood up, turning she found Lori behind her. ‘Thank you,’ the woman mouthed to her as she moved toward her husband. Phoenix nodded then headed back to the RV.

“That is one smart girl.” Lori says watching the younger woman leave.

“Yeah.” Rick nods. “I’m glad she’s with us.”
The next morning Rick unrolls a black Gerber bag containing weapons Carl found the day before. Phoenix looks them over axes, knives, machetes, she nudges the boy, “Nice job, Carl.”

The boy smiles, his eyes lighting up, he was glad someone was proud of him for what he found.

“Everyone takes a weapon,” Rick announces to the group.

“These aren’t the kind of weapons we need.” Andrea spouts off. “What about the guns?”

“We’ve been over that.” Shane says not looking up, “Daryl, Phoenix, Rick and I are carrying. We can’t have people popping off rounds every time a tree rustles.”

“It’s not the trees I’m worried about.” Andrea quips.

“Say somebody fires at the wrong moment, a herd happens to be passing by. See, then it’s game over for all of us. So you need to get over it.” Shane says setting the rules plain and clear.

“The idea is to take the creek up about five miles, turn around and come back down the other side.” Daryl says looking around at everyone. “Chances are she’ll be by the creek. It’s her only landmark.”

Rick nods, “Stay quiet and stay sharp. Keep space between you but always stay within sight of each other.”

“Everybody assemble your packs.” Shane says handing out water bottles.

Rick steps over to Dale sitting in the doorway of the RV. “Dale, keep on those repairs. We’ve got to get this RV ready to move.”

Dale stands up, “We won’t stay here a minute longer than we have to. Good luck out there. Bring Sophia back.”

“Keep an eye on Carl while we’re gone.” Rick says laying his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“I’m going with you.” Carl states adamantly. “You need people, right? To cover as much ground as possible.”

Rick groans looking over at his wife, she sighs in return, “Your call. I can’t always be the bad guy.”

“Well, he has all of us to look after him.” Phoenix offers making Carl smile, thanking her for being on his side. “I’ll stay by his side.” The dog barks from Carl’s side, “Titan too.”

“I’d say he’s in good hands,” Dale agrees.

“Okay.” Rick says giving in. “Okay. But always within our sight, no exceptions.”

Phoenix winks at Carl, both of them smiling.
Andrea walks up to Dale, slightly shoving the other woman out of the way.

Dale sighs, “Andrea, I’m begging you. Don’t put me in this position.”

“I’m not going out there without my gun. I’ll even say please.”

“I’m doing this for you.”

“No, Dale, you’re doing it for you. You need to stop. What do you think’s gonna happen? I’m gonna stick it in my mouth and pull the trigger the moment you hand it to me?”

“I know you’re angry with me. That much is clear. But if I hadn’t done what I did, you’d be dead now.”

“Jenner gave us an option. I chose to stay.”

“You chose suicide.”

“So what’s that to you? You barely know me.”

“I know Amy’s death devastated you.”

“Keep her out of this. This is not about Amy. This is about us. And if I decided that I had nothing left to live for, who the hell are you to tell me otherwise? To force my hand like that?”

“I saved your life.”

“No, Dale. I saved yours. You forced that on me. I didn’t want your blood on my hands and that is the only reason I left that building. What did you expect? What, I’d have some kind of epiphany? Some life-affirming catharsis?”

“Maybe just a little gratitude.”

“Gratitude? I wanted to die my way, not torn apart by drooling freaks. That was my choice. You took that away from me, Dale.”

“But—”

“But you know better? All I wanted after my sister died was to get out of this endless horrific nightmare we live every day. I wasn’t hurting anyone else. You took my choice away, Dale. And you expect gratitude?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m not your little girl. I’m not your wife. And I am sure as hell not your problem. That’s all there is to say.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Phoenix yells, garnering everyone’s attention, they had never heard her yell like that. “Give her the God damn gun, or better yet—” Phoenix pulls one of her guns from its holster and shoves it in Andrea’s hands, “Take mine.”

She turns to Dale, “If she wants to die Dale, let her. Let her put the gun in her mouth and pull the trigger. All it’s goin’ to prove is that she wasn’t strong enough to survive. If she wants to take the cowards way out, so be it.” She gives Andrea a hard look, “You have to realize when someone is a lost cause.”
Phoenix pats Dale on the shoulder and walks away, leaving Andrea speechless and staring at the gun in her hands. She hands it to Rick as she walks past him. They walk single file through the woods, Daryl and Phoenix up front. Rick comes up next to her and hands her Glock back, she takes it with a nod and puts it back in the holster.

They come upon a campsite in the woods, Daryl points it out crouching down, the others follow his lead.

“She could be in there.” Shane says.

“Could be a whole bunch of things in there.” Daryl says moving forward, the two hunters halt the others behind them. Daryl pulls out his knife, with Phoenix covering him they move towards the tent. He sets down his crossbow, peeking through the door, then moving over to peek through the window. He moves back to the door, tossing his hands up at Rick.

“Carol.” Rick motions to her to come forward. “Call out softly. If she’s in there, yours is the first voice she should hear.”

“Sophia, sweetie, are you in there? Sophia, it’s Mommy. Sophia. We’re all here, baby. It’s Mommy.”

After no answer, and assuring Phoenix’s got his back, Daryl quietly unzips the door. There is someone sitting in a chair with their back to them. They all cough as the odor inside assaults them. Daryl steps inside, slowly and quietly.

“Daryl? Daryl?” Carol calls out softly.

Inside Daryl takes a revolver out of the hand of what once was a man. He puts in his waist band at his back. Stepping out he looks to Carol, “It ain’t her.”

“What’s in there?” Andrea asks.

“Some guy. Did what Jenner said. Opted out. Ain’t that what he called it?” Daryl says shouldering his crossbow.

Suddenly they all hear church bells ringing, they take off in the direction it’s coming from. They come upon a white church, in the middle of a graveyard. But it couldn’t be the right one, it has no steeple or bells.

They run around to the front doors, Rick and Daryl going in first, followed by Phoenix, Shane and Glenn. Three walkers sit in the pews, they turn at the sound of the door opening. The three stand up, snarling at the living. The guys ready their weapons but before they can blink, all three are taken down with an arrow to the eye.

The men turn their heads slowly towards Phoenix who furrows her eyebrows at the looks. “What?”

“You really are good with that thang,” Daryl says giving her a grin.

“A little.” She smiles before walking over and retrieving her arrows from the walkers.

Daryl follows her up to the front, he looks at the statue of the lord, “Yo, JC, you takin’ requests?”
Suddenly the bells are heard again, Daryl and Phoenix push their way through the crowd, running outside to the left side of the building. There’s a loud speaker on the top of the building, Glenn opens the box on the side of the wall and the ringing stops.

“A timer. It’s on a timer.” Daryl says.

After awhile of rest they all gather under a tree outside, Shane and Rick converse, then Shane approaches them. “Y’all gonna follow the creek bed back. Okay, Daryl, you’re in charge. Me and Rick, we’re just gonna hang back, search this area another hour or so just to be thorough.”

“You’re splitting us up. You sure?”

“Yeah, we’ll catch up to you.” Shane says.

Carl steps up, “I want to stay, too. I’m her friend.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Lori says stepping up to him.

“I will.”

“I’ll be right with him Lori, he won’t leave my sight.” Phoenix assures the woman.

She smiles turning to her son, “When did you start growing up?” She hugs him, giving him a kiss on the head. After saying bye to Rick the two groups split up.

“Hey Rayne.”

Phoenix turns around finding Daryl behind her, “Yeah?”

“Be careful, would ya.”

“You too Dixon.”

The two hunters smile before the groups part ways. The foursome plus the dog make their way through the woods. Around a corner they find a buck, standing no more than ten feet in front of them. Shane holds up his gun to shoot, but Rick motions him off. Phoenix crouches down, motioning for Carl to stay quiet. Together the two of them move slowly towards the deer, the two men behind them smiling. They stop for a moment, Phoenix kneeling down next to Carl.

All at once a gunshot is heard, Phoenix doesn’t hesitate throwing herself in front of Carl, trying to protect him. As if in slow motion, she feels the bullet rip into the right side of her back below her shoulder blade, and exit out of her chest just a few inches below her collarbone. She feels Carl being ripped from her embrace, as she drops to the ground.
Bloodletting

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Thank you to all of you who have read this story, I hope you are enjoying reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

This is a short chapter, but I will be posting another in the next few days.

Rick runs across the field with Carl cradled in his arms, Titan following on his heels. Behind him Shane is carrying Phoenix bridal style, she’s slipping in and out of consciousness.

Bringing up the rear is the hunter that carelessly shot the buck, hitting Carl and Phoenix.

Rick turns back screaming, “How far? How far?!”

“Another half mile that way.” The hunter says pointing in front of them. “Hershel. Talk to Hershel. He’ll help your boy. And the girl.”

A woman on the porch sees the group approaching, she turns to the front door, “Dad!”

They take the boy inside and place him in on a bed, immediately beginning to work on him.

Shane comes into the house carrying Phoenix, “Please someone help, she’s losing blood, fast.”

The woman who was on the porch is baffled, “Another one?”

Shane struggles to catch his breath, “She was protecting the boy, kneeled in front of him, bullet hit her first, went straight through.”

They escort Shane to a bedroom upstairs, he follows laying her down on the bed. He heads back outside hoping they’ll both be alright.

Back in the woods Lori is being plagued by the lone gunshot they heard. Andrea and Carol are talking about Sophia, Andrea tells her that everyone is praying with Carol that she’s okay, for what
it’s worth.

Daryl steps in, snapping at them, “I’ll tell you what it’s worth—not a damn thang. It’s a waste of time all this hopin’ and prayin’. Cause we’re gonna locate that little girl, and she’s gonna be just fine. Am I the only one Zen around here? Good Lord.”

Daryl walks back up front of the group, Lori smiles as he walks past, Daryl sure had a way with words.

The group heads back towards the highway, on the way Andrea is attacked by a walker. It knocks her to the ground, but before it can attack her, a woman on a horse rides up and wallops the walker with a bat. She calls out to Lori, says Rick sent her, Carl’s been shot and she needs to come with her right now. Lori doesn’t hesitate climbing up onto the horse.

The rest of the group gets back up to the highway and starts packing up to head to the farm like the woman said.

Back at the farm, Lori goes in and lays down on the bed next to Carl, Rick kneels down next to the bed taking Lori’s hand. The two parents lie there hoping and praying that their son will pull through, they didn’t come this far to lose him now.

On the highway everyone is debating on who goes and who stays. Dale tells Glenn he needs to get T-Dog to that farm. Phoenix stitched his cut but without antibiotics, he’s getting a blood infection and will die if he doesn’t get treated.

Daryl shakes his head walking over to the bike’s saddle bags he pulls out a bag of prescription bottles. He picks up a rag off the motorcycle, tossing it at Dale. “Keep yer oily rags off my brother’s motorcycle.” He sets the bag down on the Cherokee’s hood, “Why’d you wait till now to say anythin’? Got my brother’s stash. Crystal, X. Don’t need that. Got some kick ass painkillers.”

He tosses the bottle to Glenn, then goes back to the bag. “Doxycycline.” He tosses that bottle to Dale. “Not the generic stuff neither. It’s first class. Merle got the clap on occasion.”
Daryl lays on the floor of the RV, his hands behind his head. He lifts his head up looking at Carol sobbing in one of the back beds. He looks behind him, at the table Andrea is fooling around putting bullets in a clip.

He realizes he's not getting any sleep tonight, so he gets up, grabbing his crossbow and putting the strap over his head. "I need my clip now."

She hands him the clip, he slaps it in his gun. "I'm gonna walk the road, look for the girl."

Carol hears him and looks up, he nods to her before walking outside with his flashlight.

"I'm coming, too." Andrea says stepping out behind him.

Daryl nods to Dale on top of the RV, "I'm going for a walk. Shine some light in the forest. If she's out there, give her somethin' to look at."

"Do you think that's a good idea right now?" Dale asks honestly.

"Dale," Andrea says shortly, before she walks off.

Daryl gives him a face that says 'sorry she's being a bitch'.

Outside the farm house Glenn and T-Dog pull up in the Cherokee. They get out walking up to the door, the woman from earlier on the horse startles them from the side of the porch. "Did you close the gate when you came in?"

Glenn stutters, "Uh, hi. Yes, we closed it. Did the latch and everything." She sits forward smiling, Glenn starts rambling, "Hello. Nice to see you again. We met before briefly."

"Look, we came to help. There anything we can do?" T-Dog asks looking worse for the wear.
She stands up, eyeing the bandage on his arm, he notices and quickly dispels her fears. "It's not a bite. I uh, I cut myself pretty bad though. Phoenix stitched it up, but I don't feel very good."

"We'll get you looked at. I'll tell them you're here."

"We have some painkillers and antibiotics. I already gave him some. If Carl needs any."

"He may and the girl too."


"Come on inside. Your friend can explain."

The two walk inside checking on Carl, then they head to the kitchen with Maggie, the woman who was on the horse.

Out in the woods Daryl is walking with Andrea, his mind keeps drifting to Phoenix. It's been different not having her out there tracking with him. Most of the others are okay, they only irritate him a little, but Andrea, drives him crazy and now he's stuck walking with her in the woods. He was impressed with what Phoenix said earlier that day to Dale about Andrea. She basically hit the nail on the head. She speaks her mind, and stands up for the people that need her too. If he had to pick someone to be stuck with, he'd rather have her.

"You really think we're gonna find Sophia?" Andrea's voice breaks into his thoughts.

He shines the light on her face for a moment, "You got that look on your face same as everybody else. What the hell's wrong with you people? We just started lookin'."

Damn, were he and Phoenix the only two with any faith?

"Well, do you?"

"It ain't the mountains of Tibet. It's Georgia. She could be holed up in a farmhouse somewhere. People get lost, they survive. It happens all the time."

"She's only 12."

"Hell, I was younger than her and I got lost. Nine days in the woods eatin' berries, wipin' my ass with poison oak."

"They found you?"

"My old man was off on a bender with some waitress. Merle was doing another stint in juvie. Didn't even know I was gone. I made my way back though. Went straight into the kitchen and made myself a sandwich. No worse for wear. Except my ass itched somethin' awful."

Andrea laughs, Daryl gives her a look, "I'm sorry," she says covering her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry, that is a terrible story."

They both laugh, before Daryl shakes his head, "Only difference is Sophia's got people looking for her. I call that an advantage."
The two of them continue walking until they hear a rustling in the leaves to their right. Daryl whips his crossbow up, Andrea ducking behind him. They move towards the sound and find a campsite. There's a loud rustling in the tree above their heads, Daryl moves towards it slowly, shining his light up into the leaves.

"What the hell?"

Daryl can't believe what he's seeing—A walker is hanging from a noose in the tree. He wished Phoenix was here, she'd get a kick out of this, just like he is. His eyes move to a note stuck to the tree trunk by a knife.

"Got bit. Fever hit. World gone to shit. Might as well quit. Dumbass didn't know enough to shoot himself in the head. Turned himself into a big swinging piece of bait. And a mess."

Andrea groans, Daryl looks back at her, "You all right?"

"Trying not to puke."

"Go ahead if you gotta."

"No, I'm fine. Let's just talk about something else for a moment. How'd you learn to shoot?"

"Gotta eat. That's one thing these walkers and us have in common. I guess it's the closest he's been to food since he turned. Look at him, hanging up there like a big piñata. The other geeks came and ate all the flesh off his legs."

If Daryl was trying to make Andrea puke, it worked. She vomited, then coughed, "I thought we were changing the subject."

"Call that payback for laughing about my itchy ass." He shook his head smirking, Phoenix wouldn't have puked. Dang why did he have to keep thinking about her.

"There wasn't a lot that came up."

"Huh." Daryl turns, "Let's head back."

Andrea glances at him, "Aren't you gonna…"

Daryl looks up at the walker, "No. He ain't hurting nobody. Ain't gonna waste an arrow either. He made his choice. Opted out. Let him hang."

She moves over beneath the walker, it starts clawing at the air, desperately trying to reach her. She just stands there staring up at it.

Daryl steps towards her, "You want to live now or not?" She whips around looking at him, he matches her stare, "It's just a question."

"An answer for an arrow. Fair?"

He nods, "Mm-hmm."

"I don't know if I want to live or if I have to or if it's just a habit."

Daryl raises his crossbow, "That's not much of an answer." He shoots the arrow into the walkers head instantly silencing it. "Waste of an arrow."
Back at the farm house, T-Dog was having his arm looked over. "The stitches are good, she did a good job closing it. But you do have an infection, but it has nothing to do with the stitch job. All you need is some antibiotics and rest."

Shane arrives back with the equipment needed to save Carl, and that's exactly what Hershel does. Rick and Lori are relieved to hear that Carl is going to be fine.
The next morning the rest of the group arrive at the farm, Rick and Lori go out to meet them.

"How is he?" Dale asks.

"He'll pull through, thanks to Hershel and his people." Lori says.

"And Shane," Rick adds. "We'd have lost Carl if not for him. And Phoenix."

"How did it happen?" Dale asks.

"Hunting accident. That's all—just a stupid accident." Rick tells them.

He notices Daryl looking around the farm before Daryl's eyes come back to settle on him, he knows what he's going to ask and dreads the explanation. "Where's Rayne?"

Rick stutters slightly, "She's in the house, uh, she was shot too."

"I thought you just said it was an accident." Daryl snaps.

"It was. When the gunshot sounded, Phoenix put herself in front of Carl, trying to protect him. She took the brunt of the impact."

Maggie steps up seeing that this man cared for the woman, "Uh, Daryl?" His glance turned to the girl. "She's okay. The bullet went straight through her shoulder, not much damage. I'll take you to her if you want."

Daryl nods, ignoring the looks he's getting from the group at his sudden concern for someone who wasn't his brother. He follows Maggie into the house and to the upstairs bedroom.

Maggie smiles at him, "Just holler if you need anything."

Daryl nods, biting the inside of his cheek as she leaves, shutting the door behind her. He sits down in the chair next to the bed, his eyes roaming over the woman in the bed.

Her skin is very pale and covered in sweat, Maggie mentioned her fever had just broke that morning. Her hair was still in the braid it was in when he last saw her two days ago, only it was messier with strands falling out here and there.
The sheets were pulled up to just above her chest, her arms resting over them. It was clear she wasn't wearing a shirt. Daryl shook his head, now was not the time for him to be thinking like that about her. He could see the top of the bandage on her right shoulder, it was lightly faded pink from the blood. She was hooked to an IV since she had been unconscious since the accident.

He watched her eyes flutter and sat back, wondering what reaction he was gonna get when she saw him sitting by her bedside.

The first thing Phoenix saw when she woke up made her wonder if she was still asleep, that or dreaming. Daryl Dixon. Sitting in the chair next to her bed. Wait. Why was she in bed? She started to sit up only to be met with an excruciating pain in her right shoulder. She laid back down gently touching the bandage with her fingers.

Suddenly it all came back to her and she started to panic. Daryl noticed and leaned over towards her, "Hey, hey, calm down."

"C-Carl. Is he okay?" She all but whispered, her mouth feeling like it was full of cotton.

Daryl nodded, "He's gonna be fine."

She smiled laying her head back and closing her eyes. She was about to ask Daryl why he was here when the door opened. A beautiful woman with short brown hair came in.

"Oh great, you're awake. How do you feel?"

"Better."

"Good. I'm Maggie. Let me get you some water and my dad will be up here shortly to check on you, okay?"

Phoenix nodded, the woman smiled as she left the room, returning a moment later with a glass of water. She left the two alone, Daryl watching Phoenix closely as she sipped her water. She tried to set the glass down but every time she rolled to her left, the stitches pulled in her shoulder.

Daryl watched her with mild amusement, knowing she was stubborn and refused to ask for help. He figured one of two things was going to happen. Either she would keep being stubborn and tear her stitches open, or she would ask him for help. He was surprised when she looked to him, a pleading look in her eyes. He smiled, she wasn't going to come right out and say she needed help, but her eyes said everything. He leaned forward taking the glass and setting it on the table next to him.

"Thanks."

He nodded, "You are stupid, you know that."

She nodded not speaking, knowing he had more to say.

"What the hell were you thinkin' taking that bullet?"

"I was tryin' to save Carl." She said in a whisper, then lowering her head and biting her lip, picking at her fingers. She couldn't understand why Daryl scolding her made her feel like what she had
done was wrong. She felt the need to apologize for getting herself shot. Why did he have this effect on her?

"I'm sorry." She said softly worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Please don't bite yer lip like that."

She looked up at his strained voice, catching his eyes, she saw something in them she hadn't seen before. He was looking at her like HE had, the one before, the one who was responsible for the way she was now.

She looked away not being able to hold his gaze. "Why are you here?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm checkin' on my friend. We are friends aren't we?"

"To be perfectly honest, I don't know what we are."

"I do. We're a team." He sighs, "None of them understand me like you do. Nobody has ever stood up for me, or my brother ever. You didn't know either of us and you stood up for us, you took my side on things. You're the only one I can stand to be around and not want to kill. You make the day enjoyable, I'd be miserable if you weren't here."

Phoenix didn't know what to say, here he was basically pouring his heart out to her, telling her he cared for her, in his own way of course. Who would've thought, Daryl Dixon, caring about someone who wasn't his brother.

Before she could say anything the door opened and an older man walked in. He glanced between the two of them, "I'm sorry. Did I interrupt something?"

"Na Doc, yer good." Daryl said standing up. "I'll check on you later." He leaned down and kissed her forehead, making her smile.

After he left the man turned to her with a knowing smile. "I'm Hershel."

"Phoenix. Thank you, for everything."

"You're welcome. I can see you're itching to get out of this room but I'd like you to rest for a few more days. Get some fluids and solid food in you, make sure you don't get an infection."

"Okay, that sounds fine. I guess more rest couldn't hurt."

"No it couldn't. I'll have one of the girls bring you some food." He said standing up and walking to the door.

"Thank you again."

"You're very welcome young lady. By the way, where did you learn to stitch like that?"

"I was an EMT before this all started."

"Very good job. I'll check on you later sweet pea."

Phoenix smiled as the elder man left, he reminded her of her grandfather.

Hershel's youngest daughter Beth came in with a plate of food.
Afterwards Phoenix decided to take Hershel's advice and let her eyes drift closed.

Outside Rick is standing by the porch when Daryl walks by headed for the woods.  

"Daryl. You okay on your own?"

"I'm better on my own. Don't worry, I'll be back before dark."

"Hey. We got a base. We can get this search properly organized now."

"You got a point or are we just chattin'?"

"My point is it lets you off the hook. You don't owe us anything."

"My other plans fell through." Daryl says walking off. He wasn't about to tell Rick that he didn't want to leave. And the main reason for that was a beautiful blue-eyed woman.

Out in the woods Daryl comes across a clearing, a farm house in the center. He kicks open the front doors, making his way room to room checking for walkers. Inside what appears to be a kitchen he finds an empty can of sardines in the trash, He picks it up smelling it, testing its staleness. He drops it back into the trash as he notices a cabinet ahead of him, the door slightly ajar. He raises his crossbow, slowly moving towards it. He reaches out with one hand and yanks the door open. On the floor is an empty make-shift bed.

He walks out the back door, "Sophia! Sophia!" Something in the field catches his attention, he walks over finding a bush with two white flowers on it.

Daryl goes back to the house, he heads into the RV noticing quickly how clean it is inside. He's chewing on a piece of straw as he walks back to the rear bedroom finding Carol sitting on the bed sewing.

"I cleaned up. Wanted it to be nice for her."

He looks around, "For a second I thought I was in the wrong place." He sets a beer bottle down on the counter behind him, in it is the white flower from the house.

"A flower?" Carol asks.

Daryl takes the piece of straw from his mouth. "It's a Cherokee rose." He waits to see if she knows what it means, when she doesn't speak he steps forward. "The story is that when American soldiers were moving Indians off their land on the Trail of Tears the Cherokee mothers were grieving and crying so much cause they were losing their little ones along the way from exposure and disease and starvation. A lot of them just disappeared. So the elders, they uh, said a prayer; asked for a sign to uplift the mother's spirits, give 'em strength and hope. The next day this rose started to grow right where the mothers' tears fell. I'm not fool enough to think there's any flowers blooming for my brother. But I believe this one bloomed for your little girl."
Carol gives a small laugh, wiping the tears from her eyes. Daryl walks back to the front door, "She's gonna really like it in here."

Daryl heads into the house to check on Phoenix, he knew he was foolish for thinking she was ever gonna look at him like Lori looked at Rick. But at this point he just wanted her in his life any way he could have her.

As he opened the door he noticed she was asleep, so he crept in as quietly as he could and sat down in the chair by the bed. She was wearing a long sleeved blue, black and white plaid western shirt. He figured it was easier to get on and off with her shoulder. She had also taken the braid out of her hair and it now tumbled freely across the pillow and her shoulders.

He watched her eyes flutter and open, blinking away the sleep. When her eyes found him she smiled, it was times like this, when knowing that seeing him made her smile, it made every day worth it to Daryl. He never thought such a small thing could mean so much.

"Hey. Did ya find Sophia yet?"

"Not yet. But I found some clues today." He proceeded to tell her about the house and the rose, after which she smiled.

"I'll bet that meant a lot to Carol. Who knew Daryl Dixon had a heart."

Daryl did have a heart and it jumped as he heard her say his first name for the first time. He wanted to say something to her about that but was afraid she'd take saying it back, so he stayed quiet. Then he remembered something and stood up rummaging around in his pockets. He pulled out two things handing them to her. "I thought you might want these. They took 'em off when they were patchin' you up."

She looked down at the Navy Cross on the silver chain and the silver Navy Seals Trident pin. She smiled at him, her eyes saying everything for her again.

"You gonna tell me bout those." Daryl asked. He didn't want to push her, but he wanted to know something about her. Something that might help him understand why she kept him at a distance.

"My brother Nico. He's Navy Seal. He received this Navy Cross on his last deployment. He said it was a shame to let it sit in a box, he was proud of it and I was proud of him. So he made it into a necklace and he gave it to me. He was always my hero and now I could prove it and show it off to the world. The pin is an exact replica of his gold trident he received when he graduated Sear Training. He wanted me to be able to take care of myself when he wasn't around. So he taught me everythin' he had ever learned and put me through his own Sear Training camp. By the end he said I had everythin' it took to become a Seal. So he had this pin made especially for me, to remind myself that I was worthy."

Daryl watched as she stared at the cross and pin, rubbing her fingers over them lovingly. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know. I was on my way to Florida to meet his ship when it came in, when this all happened. I don't know if he made it. If any of my family did. He was always my partner in crime. Where he went, I went. Even though he was older than me, he always included me in everythin' he
did. He taught me everythin' he ever knew. He looked out for me, cared for me, I was his little sister, I came before everyone else."

Her voice broke at the end and she couldn't stop the tears. Seeing her crying and in pain broke Daryl's heart. He made a quick decision and got up moving over to the bed, he sat down beside her.

She flinched lightly until she realized what he was doing. Almost immediately she laid her head on his chest and curled into his side, ignoring the protest her shoulder was giving her.

Daryl held her tight, running his hand through her hair.

"I just want to know they're all okay. That they made it. I need to know."

Daryl held her until she had cried herself back to sleep, but instead of moving, he stayed put. He turned off the light and for the first time in a while he drifted to sleep quickly and slept soundly all night long.
The next morning Daryl woke up, and for a moment he forgot where he was. When his hand brushed a lock of silky hair he looked down. Everything about last night came back to him and he couldn't help but smile. Phoenix was snuggled against his right side, her right arm and leg were draped over him pinning him in place. He knew if he moved she would wake up, and no part of him wanted to move, but he knew he had to go out and find Sophia.

So as gently as he could he eased himself out of the bed, propping her injured arm up with a pillow so it wouldn't become stiff. He kissed her forehead and snuck quietly out of the room. As he reached the bottom of the stairs Maggie smiled at him, he gave a small smile back.

"She'll be fine. I'll take good care of her."

Daryl nodded to the young woman as he walked out of the front door and over to his tent to change clothes. He walked back over to the group as they gathered to discuss the search plans for the day.

"All right, everyone's getting new search grids today." Rick address the group as they look over the map. "If she made it as far as the farmhouse Daryl found, she might have gone further east than we've been so far."

Shane shakes his head as he opens the door of the car and sits down on the seat.

"I'd like to help." The group turns to find Jimmy, Hershel's son standing before them. "I know the area pretty well and stuff."

"Hershel's okay with this?" Rick asks not wanting to disrespect their host.

"Yeah, yeah. He said I should ask you."

"All right then. Thanks." Rick tells the boy.

"Nothing about what Daryl found screams Sophia to me." Shane scoffs interjecting his two cents. "Anyone could have been holed up in the farmhouse."
"Anybody includes her, right?" Andrea tells him.

"Whoever slept in that cupboard was no bigger than yay-high." Daryl motions with his hand showing about Sophia's height.

"It's a good lead," Andrea tells him.

"Maybe we'll pick up her trail again." Rick says looking to Daryl.

"No maybe about it." Daryl says pointing to the map. "I'm gonna borrow a horse, head up this ridge right here, take a birds-eye view of the whole grid. If she's up there, I'll spot her."

"Good idea." T-Dog says smirking. "Maybe you'll see your Chupacabra up there, too."

"Chupacabra?" Rick says with furrowed eyebrows.

"You never heard this?" Dale says opening the bag of guns. "Our first night in camp, Daryl tells us that the whole thing reminds him of a time when he went squirrel hunting and he saw a Chupacabra."

The kid laughs and Daryl snaps at him, "What are you brayin' at, jackass?"

"So you believe in a blood-sucking dog?" The kid scoffs.

Daryl shakes his head scratching under his eye, "Do you believe dead people walkin' 'round?"

The kid reaches for the shotgun Dale set on the hood, Rick takes it from him, "Whoa, you ever fire one before?"

The kid shakes his head, "Well, if I'm going out I want one."

Daryl shoulders his crossbow walking away, "Yeah, and people in hell want Slurpee's."

Shane tells the kid that if he wants to learn, Shane will teach him as he's a Certified Instructor. Andrea says for now he can come with them, as she checks her hand-gun.

Daryl makes a quick detour inside to see Phoenix before he heads out. She's awake when he walks in, Titan laying on the bed next to her.

Again she smiles as she sees him and his heart thumps loudly. "Hey, I'm goin' out to look for Sophia and I just wanted to check on you first."

"I'm glad you did. Wish I was comin' with ya." She groans staring up at the ceiling, "I'm so bored."

He grins, "Well maybe when I get back I'll get ya outta here for awhile. Go for a walk or somethin'. Sound good?"

She nods smiling, "Sounds good. You be careful out there okay?"

"Always. I'm takin' a horse and goin' to check out that ridge we were talkin' bout. I'll be back by nightfall."
She nods as he turns and heads out the door. She turns to Titan, "Watch his back, would ya bud?"

Titan licks her face before he bounds out of the room and out the front door. He catches up to Daryl and walks at his side.

Daryl glances down at the dog, "Guess she sent you to keep an eye on me?"

Titan barks back and Daryl grins, "Alright then. You better keep up."

An hour later Daryl has reached the ridge on horseback. He sees Titan chase a squirrel up a nearby tree and pegs it with an arrow. He maneuvers the horse over to the tree and pulls out the arrow. He yanks the squirrel off the end putting it in the bag behind him. Titan looks up at him with what Daryl figures is a smile, he grins down at the dog. "Nice job."

"Whoa." Daryl slows the horse to a stop, looking down to the bottom of the ravine on his left he spies what looks like a doll at the bottom by a log. He jumps down off the horse, tying the lead-rope to a tree. He pulls his crossbow off his back and gently makes his way down the hill, the Pit Bull right at his side.

At the bottom he crosses the creek bed and picks up the doll, it's the one Morales' daughter gave to Sophia the day they all split.

"Sophia!"

He makes his way back up the hill and mounts the horse, making his way further down the top of the ravine. Birds fly up in front of the horse startling it, "Whoa. Easy, easy. Come on." He purses his lips, making sounds close to a kiss which urge the horse forward.

Suddenly a snake hisses in front of the horse, slithering towards it. The horse gets spooked, rearing up it knocks Daryl off its back. He tumbles down the steep embankment, which halfway down turns to rock with water running down it to the bottom. He slams into the rocks and finally lands on the hard ground at the bottom of the cliff in the river.

"Son-of-a-bitch."

He tips his head up trying to find out why his left side hurts like a bitch. His answer, is one of his arrows has pierced through his side. His forehead is bleeding from a gash on the right side by his hairline.

He crawls out of the river on his hands and knees, careful not to jerk the arrow around. When he reaches the sandy shore, he pulls out his knife and cuts his sleeves off his shirt. He ties them together, putting it around his waist he wraps the fabric around the arrow to immobilize it. He knows if he pulls it out now, he may bleed to death.

He looks up at the cliff to his left, climbing that is gonna be a bitch but he's gonna have to do it to survive. He looks around not seeing Titan anywhere, he scoffs, "So much for watchin' my back, stupid dog."

What Daryl didn't know was that stupid dog was running as fast as he could back to the farm to get help.
Daryl stands up, grabbing a stick off the ground to lean on he looks up the cliff. He hears a rustling and branches cracking to his right. He looks around not seeing his crossbow anywhere. He realizes it must be in the water somewhere near where he fell. He wades back out into the water, feeling around with the stick he locates the crossbow, lifting it out of the water.

He gets out of the water again, moving on the other side of a fallen tree, he starts up the cliff. It's extremely steep and every move he makes is agonizingly painful. Almost halfway up he hits a spot where every place he steps or tries to get a hold with the stick slides off, like a mud slide. He tosses the stick down, and sighs tryin' to catch his breath.

"Oh, come on. You've done half. Stop being such a pussy. Come on."

He steels himself taking a big breath and shoving his weight forward. But he still can't find a place to grab that doesn't immediately slip away. He moves back to his position between two small trees, but he loses his balance and plummets backwards down the hill. He hits the ground below with a sickening thud.

Back at the house Phoenix has had enough of being bedridden. She stands up, gingerly pulling on her jeans and boots. As she makes her way downstairs Hershel frowns at her, "Well took you longer than I expected. Take it easy. Nothing strenuous."

She smiles sheepishly as she heads out onto the porch. Maggie happens to be out there with Glenn. The Asian smiles as he sees her, "Hey. How you doing?"

"I'm good thanks to Hershel and his family." She smiles at Maggie, who returns it warmly.

Phoenix stretches out on the porch steps, chatting amiably with the couple. They take off shortly after and Phoenix decides to have a small chat with Hershel. She grabs her two Glocks, rifle and the bag of ammo, returning into the house to find him at the kitchen table.

"Back so soon sweet pea?" Hershel smiles noticing the bag over her left shoulder.

Phoenix sets the bag, hand-guns and rifle on the table before Hershel. "Rick told me you'd feel better if no one was carryin' on your property, so I'm turnin' these in to you."

Hershel smiled, he hadn't expected her to be so willing, but judging by the knives he saw she owned, he would bet she was just as deadly with those as the guns. He picked up the two Glocks placing them in the bag of ammo, and standing he shouldered it. He slid the rifle back over to her with a smile, "I'd feel better if you kept this."

She smiled back giving a small nod she slung the rifle onto her back. As she opened the door to leave Hershel addressed her, "Phoenix I trust you and that is not something I do lightly. When and if you need these, all you have to do is ask."

Phoenix nodded taking her leave, after placing the rifle in her truck she decided to take a small
walk. She ended up down on the far side of the barn when abruptly something catches her attention, she stops quickly looking for the source.

Titan bursts out of the trees heading straight for her. He stops at her feet barking and jumping.

She suddenly realizes what's wrong, looking into the woods, "Daryl." She looks down to the dog, "Take me to him."

Daryl opens his eyes, he makes out a blurry figure standing over him. As the face come into focus he recognizes the man, his brother Merle.

"Why don't you pull that arrow out, dummy? You could bind your wound better."

Daryl smiles giving a small laugh, Merle smiles as well, "What's going on here? You taking a siesta or something?"

"A shitty day bro."

"Like me to get you a pillow? Maybe rub your feet?"

"Screw you."

"Huh-uh. You're the one screwed from the looks of it. All them years I spent trying to make a man of you, this what I get? Look at ya. Lying in the dirt like a used rubber. You're gonna die out here, little brother. And for what?"

"A girl. They lost a little girl." His face contorts in pain.

"So you gotta thing for little girls now?"

"Shut up." Daryl says his voice nothing but a whisper.

"No, I think you gotta thing for long brown hair and blue eyes."

Rayne's face flashes in Daryl's mind.

"Not that I blame ya, she is a prize piece of ass if I've ever seen one."

"Don't you fuckin' talk bout her like that." Daryl growls out, making Merle laugh.

"Well, well, little brother got a crush? You don't honestly think you stand a chance with her do you? You think she'd want a damaged, backwards ass redneck like you? Ha. Boy, you couldn't handle her, or know what to do with her if you did have her."

Daryl looked around wondering if she was worried about him, if she'd come looking for him.

"What, you think she's gonna come lookin' for ya? She's probably banging one of 'em other boys by now, forgot all about you. Just like you forgot about me. I noticed you ain't out looking for old Merle no more."

"Tried like hell to find you, bro."
"Like hell you did. You split, man. Lit out first chance you got."

"You lit out. All you had to do was wait. We went back for you. Rick, Rayne and I, we did right by ya."

"This is the same Rick that cuffed me to the rooftop in the first place? Forced me to cut off my own hand? This him we're talking bout now?" Daryl looks down noticing that Merle's hand is still attached. "You his bitch now?"

"I ain't nobody's bitch."

"You're a joke is what you are, playing errand boy to a bunch of pansy-asses, niggers and democrats." Merle chuckles, "You're nothing but a freak to them. Redneck trash. That's all you are. They're laughing at you behind your back. You know that, don't you? I got a little news for you, son. One of these days, they're gonna scrape you off their heels like you was dog-shit. They don't give a damn about you. Not even your little country girl. She don't care about you, she pities you, feels sorry for ya."

Daryl's eyes start to close, Merle smacks his chest. "Hey. They ain't your kin, your blood. Hell, you had any damn nuts in that sack of yours, you'd go back there and shoot your pal Rick in the face for me. Now you listen to me. Ain't nobody ever gonna care about you except me, little brother. Ain't nobody ever will. Come on, get up on your feet before I have to kick your teeth in."

He kicks Daryl, "Let's go." Jerks his legs, "Come on."

Daryl finally comes to and realizes it's not Merle jerking his legs, but a walker. Daryl pushes himself backwards, kicking the walker in the face. It gets back up, crawling over the top of him. He tries to reach his crossbow but can't get close enough, so he grabs a sharp piece of wood and stabs the walker in the side.

Then he hits him in the side of the head, rolling them over so Daryl's on top, the walker grabs a hold of Daryl's hair. The hunter rolls them over tossing the walker away from him. Daryl grabs a stick smacking the walker in the face with it and knocking him down. He puts the stick across the walker's chest than brings it down smashing the walker in the face twice, sinking its skull in. Daryl then turns the stick vertical and drives the end down into the walker's head killing it.

By now the noise has attracted another walker from out of the bushes. Daryl screams as he pulls the arrow out of his side. He puts it in his mouth as he cocks the bow. By the time he sets it and loads the arrow the walker is over the top of him. Daryl lays down on his back and fires up embedding the arrow in the walker forehead. It falls forward onto the ground, the arrow squishing further through it's head as it is pushed against the ground.

He lays there trying to catch his breath and passes out. When he wakes he notices it's getting later, the sun is starting to sink. He pushes himself up sitting on a rock nearby, he takes off his over-shirt wadding it up and putting it over the wound tightening the fabric around it.

"Son-of-a-bitch was right."

He sits down on a log by the water, gutting the squirrel he had shot earlier and eating the raw meat earning him a face covered in blood. After which he took one of the walker's shoelaces and after cutting off their ears, he made himself a necklace, putting it on he looks up at the cliff.

He starts up the cliff again, getting halfway up he reaches the spot he got stuck at before. He sees birds overhead cawing at him, and hears his brother's voice. "Please, don't feed the birds."
He looks up to the top of the cliff and sees Merle's face looking down at him laughing. "What's the matter, Darylina? That all you got in you? Throw away that purse and climb."

"I liked it better when you was missin'." Daryl retorts as he struggles up the hill.

A little ways away Phoenix is moving through the woods, Titan took her to the spot where Daryl was thrown. They only sign of him were two dead walkers at the bottom of the ravine. She stops, listening intently, she could swear she hears a voice. She moves slowly, holding her shoulder. She wasn't in any condition to be out here, but she knew he was in trouble and she wouldn't forgive herself if she didn't find him. It didn't matter what happened to her, there were only a few she would die for and he was one of them.

Merle laughs, "Now come on, don't be like that. I'm on your side."

"Yeah? Since when?"

"Hell, since the day you were born, baby brother. Somebody had to look after your worthless ass."

"You never took care of me. You talk a big game, but you was never there. Hell, you ain't here now. Some things never change."

"Well, I'll tell you what—I'm as real as your Chupacabra."

"I know what I saw."

"And I'm sure them shrooms you ate had nothing to do with it, right?"

"You'd best shut the hell up!"

"Or what?" Merle antagonizes, "You gonna come up here and shut my mouth for me? Well, come on and do it then, if you think you're man enough." Merle laughs, "Hey, kick off them damn high heels and climb, son."

Merle laughs as Daryl becomes more angry, pushing himself up the hill. "You know what?" Merle tells him. "If I were you, I'd take a pause for the cause, brother. Cause I just don't think you're gonna make it to the top. Come on. Come on, little brother. Grab your friend Rick's hand."

With one last effort, Daryl grasps the top of the cliff. He pushes himself up, getting his footing and grabbing onto a tree next to him he pulls himself back over the top.

Panting he looks around, "Yeah, you better run."

"Daryl?!"

He looks to his right following the voice, and finds Phoenix, with Titan at her side. Sure the first time she says his name and it had to be under these circumstances. He couldn't believe she was out
here. Her clothes were dirty, her face and body covered in sweat. He could see blood seeping through her shirt at her shoulder.

"What are you doin' out here?" He asks walking up to her.

"Lookin' for you." She said giving him a onceover.

"How did you know where I was?"

"Titan." Motioning down to the Pit Bull at her side. "He ran back to the farm and found me, lead me back here."

Daryl realized he was wrong about the dog, he reached down ruffling the dogs ears. "Thanks mutt." Titan licked his hand and barked.

"What the hell happened to you?" She asked touching his forehead, which made him flinch and his side he had wrapped in the tourniquet.

"Damn horse threw me, fell down the cliff and stabbed myself through the side with an arrow. Two walkers came at me, I killed 'em."

Phoenix walked over looking down the cliff side, then back to Daryl. "You climbed up that? Injured?" The look she gave him was full of admiration and pride.

"No biggie." He said shrugging.

She rolled her eyes, "Cocky much Dixon? Come on, let's get you back." She placed his right arm around her neck and put her left arm on his back, he tensed slightly so she moved her hand to the back of his neck.

Together they slowly made their way back to the farm. As they neared the edge of the woods Phoenix slowed down, "Daryl, I don't think this is a good idea."

"What?"

"The suns going down, if anyone is on watch... If they're lookin' through a scope, all they're gonna see is glare from the sun. They might not know it's us."

"Your point?"

"Look at us. If I didn't know better I'd say we were walkers ourselves. Especially you."

Daryl growled shoving her away from him, "Then stay here. I'm goin'."

Phoenix growled, stomping her feet. Damn that man for being so stubborn and not thinking things through.

"Daryl, wait!"

By the time she caught up with him, he was stumbling along, dragging his crossbow behind him and from behind he looked just like a walker. She saw four people running across the field towards them and hoped they would realize it was her and Daryl before they took a shot.

By the time the four of them had gotten close enough, Rick had his gun drawn. From where they stood they swore Daryl was a walker.
"Is that Daryl?" Glenn asks.

"Wait! Don't shoot!" Phoenix says coming up beside the hunter.

"That's the third time you've pointed that thang at my head." Daryl snaps referring to Rick's gun. "You gonna pull the trigger or what?"

Rick lowers the weapon as they realize walkers don't talk. Suddenly a gunshot sounds and Daryl drops to the ground.

"No!" Rick screams. "No! Stop!"

"Daryl!" Phoenix screams falling to his side. She searches for the wound, and breathes a sigh of relief when she realizes the bullet just grazed the left side of his forehead. "Oh my God."

Rick and Shane help Daryl up, he breathes out, "I was kidding."

Andrea and Dale run across the field towards them. "Oh, my God." Andrea screams as they get closer. "Oh, my God is he dead?"

"Unconscious. You just grazed him." Rick tells her.

"Yeah, unconscious. Like yer gonna be in two seconds!" Phoenix says lunging for Andrea, only to be caught by Dale. "Let me go! You could've killed him, you bitch! If I get my hands on you I swear to God Andrea, I'll put you out of yer misery myself!"

"What the hell happened to him?" Glenn asks. "He's wearing ears."

"Their called trophies Glenn. Hunters take trophies from things they kill. Especially when what they killed, tried to kill them. He killed two walkers." Phoenix says vehemently, still trying to calm down, her adrenaline raging.

Rick rips the necklace from Daryl's neck putting it in his pocket, "Let's keep that to ourselves."

"Guys, isn't this Sophia's?" T-Dog holds up the doll Daryl found.

They take Daryl in the house, as Phoenix is making her way up the steps, and amid protests from everyone, Andrea tries to talk to her. Everyone stays within distance to intervene knowing Phoenix could probably kill Andrea.

"Phoenix, I'm so sorry, I thought he was a walker."

The huntress stopped on the first step, dropping her head and turning around. "You don't know anythin' bout guns do you?"

Andrea shakes her head no.

"I didn't think so, because if you did, you'd know that you never fire when you have a glare in your scope. You have no idea what you're shootin' at." She points to Dale and Shane, "These guys know better, they should've never let you take that shot."
"They told me not to. But I didn't listen."

Phoenix smirks holding up a finger, "Wait a minute. Let me process this. You're tellin' me that not only was there a glare on your scope and you couldn't see clearly, but you were told not to take that shot and you still took it?!"

Phoenix was in Andrea's face by the end of her rant. She was breathing heavily as she glared at the stupid woman, she lifted her fist but stopped, "You know what, yer not even worth it."

Andrea sighed thinking she had dodged a bullet, but before she knew what had happened she was on the ground. Phoenix had turned around and nailed Andrea in the mouth with a right cross, sending the other woman sprawling on her back.

She stood over the woman, "But that did make me feel better."

Phoenix smirked before heading back in the house, she stopped in the hallway touching her shoulder. She pulled her hand away to find blood on her fingers. She shook her head for being so foolish, but damn did that make her feel good.

She knocked on the door to the room she was in, hearing Hershel tell her to enter. She stepped in and over to the far side of the bed standing in the corner. Rick stood next to the bed and Shane sits in the chair next to him as Hershel patches Daryl's side up. She rolls her eyes at the cold stare she gets from Daryl, she had no idea what was wrong with him, he was suddenly acting like she was the plague.

"I found it washed up on the creek bed right there," Daryl tells them about where he found the doll. "She must have dropped it crossin' there somewhere."

"Cuts the grid almost in half," Rick says looking to Shane.

"Yeah, you're welcome," Daryl snaps looking down at his side.

"How's he looking?" Rick asks Hershel.

"I had no idea we'd be going through the antibiotics so quickly. Any idea what happened to my horse?" Hershel says washing his hands in a basin of water.

"Yeah, the one who almost killed me? If it's smart, it left the country."

"We call that one Nelly, as in nervous Nelly. I could've told you she'd throw you if you'd bothered to ask. It's a wonder you people have survived this long."

Rick and Shane leave the room, after which Hershel turns to Phoenix. "Let me see."

She sighs unbuttoning her shirt and shrugging it off her right shoulder. The man really was like her grandfather. He peeled off the bandage that was now soaked in fresh blood, revealing the popped stitches sticking out of the now inflamed skin.

He shook his head, "Sweet pea, what did you do?"

"Punched the bitch who shot him." She said shrugging like it was no big deal. But Daryl was
surprised she did that for him.

Hershel sighed, "I'll be right back with the needle and thread." With that he left the two alone.

"Stop lookin' at me like that." She snaps looking over at the hunter.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm somethin' lower than the dirt you walk on. Like I'm the reason you're hurt. Don't forget I'm the one who came after you. I even knocked that bitch in the mouth for shootin' you."

"Just to clear your conscious I'm sure." He snarked.

"Fuck you Dixon. I should've left you out there." She turned her back to him staring out the window.

"I could've got back on my own, it wasn't like you were much help. It's not like you did anythin'. I did all the hard work, you just walked with me back."

Phoenix was furious at herself, for caring about someone else when she knew it would be a mistake and for the tears gathering in her eyes and the way her lip was beginning to quiver.

They stayed there in silence, she didn't turn around until Hershel came back into the room.

"Sweet pea, why don't you come sit over here." He motioned to the chair next to the bed.

"No. I prefer to stay over here."

The two men heard the hitch in her voice but neither said anything. Hershel simply nodded grabbing the chair and bringing it over to her in the corner. She sat down and waited for Hershel to begin. Luckily she was wearing a strapless bra so Hershel didn't have anything in the way, nor did she bother to cover her chest up.

Daryl couldn't help his eyes drifting over to her, mainly to her well developed chest, only hidden to him by a black piece of fabric. He didn't mean to be so cold to her but his brother's words were echoing in his head and he couldn't shake them. It was better for them both to simply let whatever was going on, go, stop it now.

He watched as she stared stoically straight ahead, unshed tears in her eyes that he knew were not because of the pain in her shoulder. She looked different to him now, it was as if she became a completely different person. Her eyes were dull, not bright like they had been that morning when he had said goodbye to her. He felt a change in the air immediately after what he had said to her.

After Hershel had finished stitching the wound closed again, he cleaned the blood from around it and laid a fresh bandage over the top.

"Now please sweet pea, take it easy this time." Hershel softly kissed her forehead and cleaned up his mess. "I'll leave you two alone."

"That's okay Hershel, I'm not stayin'." Phoenix walked out of the room without a backwards glance at Daryl.

Hershel turned to the young man in the bed, "Son, I don't what you've been through in your life, but a woman like that is one of a kind." Hershel walked out after that, leaving Daryl to his thoughts.

He's lying on his side facing away from the door, his head wrapped in a white bandage. He hears
the door open, part of him hopes its Phoenix, but those are dashed when he looks over at the door and sees Carol carrying a tray of food. He grabs the sheet lying around his waist immediately pulling it up to his neck, trying to hide his body.

"How are you feeling?" Carol sets the tray down on the nightstand next to the bed.

"Bout as good as I look." He says rolling back over.

"I brought you some dinner. You must be starving." She leans down to him, Daryl flinches as she kisses his forehead.

"Watch out, I got stitches." He says not knowing how to act so he resorts back to being a dick.

"You need to know something." She waited for him to look at her. "You did more for my little girl today than her own daddy ever did in his whole life."

Daryl got uncomfortable with the comment, rolling over, "I didn't do anything Rick or Shane wouldn't have done."

"I know. You're every bit as good as them. Every bit." Carol smiled before leaving the room.

Daryl laid there now plagued by new thoughts, ones that made the things his brother said, almost seem untrue.
The next morning Phoenix woke up after a night of fit full sleep. Everything hurt, her head, her shoulder, her heart. She couldn't believe she had been stupid enough to consider letting Daryl close to her. She should've learned her lesson from HIM, but obviously she didn't.

She got dressed in a pair of light blue jeans, her brown boots and a green, black and white western shirt. She pulled her hair into a braid and tucked her knives into her boots. As she jumped down out of her truck she saw Andrea hesitantly approaching Daryl's tent, her eyes locked on the woman who had busted her lip. Phoenix simply rolled her eyes and turned away, leaving Andrea confused as to why she suddenly didn't care.

Andrea stepped into the tent, Daryl was lying on the cot poking holes in the screen by his head with an arrow. "Hey."

He looked to the door to see Andrea, her lip was split on the left side, top and bottom, and it was black and blue around the corner of her mouth. Phoenix really had done a number on her.

She steps inside handing him a book, "This is not that great, but…"

Daryl takes it flipping through the pages, "What, no pictures?"

They both smile, "I'm so sorry. I feel like shit."

"Yeah, you and me both." Daryl says adjusting his pillow.

"I don't expect you to forgive me, and Phoenix certainly never will, but if there's anything I can do…"

"You were trying to protect the group. We're good."

Andrea smiles before walking back out the door. "But, hey…" She stops at his voice. "Shoot me again, you'd best pray I'm dead."

Outside Phoenix has decided to go hunt, the group is running low on food. Truthfully she just can't
stand to be at the camp fending off Daryl's icy glares. He has yet to even tell her why the sudden change in his attitude, but Phoenix doesn't care. It's better for them to be at odds, then she can fight these feelings she has for him. As long as he keeps pushing her away, she can deny her feelings for him.

Since she knows she can't shoot her bow yet, she straps on her Kukris and grabs her rifle knowing it's silent so she's not worried about attracting walkers. She makes her way out into the woods Titan by her side just as silent as she is, she scours the ground until she finds what she has been looking for. Following the trail she finds herself down by a small creek, guessing it was the same one Daryl climbed out of only smaller at this end. Moving silently through the trees, she crouches behind a set of bushes, she spies her game on the opposite side of the creek. Is head is down relishing in the cool water, she takes aim with the rifle and in seconds the deer is down.

She sloshes across the creek to the deer, it's still alive but barely, Phoenix kneels down next to it unsheathing her knife. She says a small prayer before stabbing the deer and putting it down quickly. She takes the rope from her belt loop, securing it around the deer's stomach underneath the back legs. The other end she ties to Titan's harness she had put on him that morning, and together the woman and the dog take their prize back to the farm.

Everyone's eyes are on the deer as the two walk back into camp, but none more so than Daryl who is awestricken at the fact she caught a deer. He watches as she converses with Hershel about cleaning it, then cooking it for dinner. Hershel directs her to the right side of the house, he brings her a deep metal pan that she can put the meat into when she is done and a plastic bag to put the skin and entrails into.

Phoenix kneels down releasing Titan from his harness, the dog then heads straight for the house to see Carl. The woman turns back to the job at hand, rolling up her sleeves and unsheathing her knife. Just as she is about to cut into the deer, she hears a throat clear above her.

"I can skin that for you, gut it too."

She glances up into the unsure blue eyes that watch her every move with curious hesitation. She shakes her head not wanting to deal with him now, "No thanks, Dixon. I got it."

Phoenix turns back and slices the deer open, reaching inside she pulls the guts and entrails out placing them into the plastic bag.

Daryl shakes his head, he was hoping to kinda fix things with her, he knew he was wrong listening to his brother's words. He should've known just offering to help her wasn't going to be enough, no, Daryl Dixon was going to have to do something he had never done. Apologize.

He sat at his tent watching Phoenix with rapt attention as she expertly gutted and skinned the deer. He became more enthralled as she began removing the meat from the carcass, she didn't leave one piece of meat behind. She would carefully take the meat from the bone, not leaving any, wash it off and toss it in the pan. By the time she was done, all that was left of the deer was the skeleton.

Phoenix took the heavy pan of meat inside, she had to cut the meat up small in order to get it to all fit, but she didn't think anyone would mind. Maggie and Beth were more than happy to cook the meat for her, both excited not remembering the last time they had venison. Phoenix returned outside to dispose of the guts and carcass, but she found them gone already. She wondered who had picked it up. Thinking it may have been Daryl she shrugged not reading much into it as she went back inside to clean up.

Dinner that night was relaxing, everyone eating till they were stuffed. Phoenix was happy to see
that none of the deer meat remained, even more happy that she finally felt useful to the group.
Another day goes by and Phoenix is getting restless without her bow, she decides to try shooting today. Her shoulder is still sore, but the wound is basically healed, just waiting for the stitches to fall out. She sits around the fire pit with everyone else, it's silent, all of them lost in their own thoughts.

Carol offers her some breakfast but she declines, she hasn't been hungry the last few days, not since her blow out with Daryl. Just as she is ready to take off to the woods, Glenn stands up and addresses everyone with some disturbing news.

"Um, guys." No one really looks up at him except Dale, Shane and Phoenix. "So..." He stops trying to find the words, and then just blurts out, "...the barn is full of walkers."

That garners everyone's attention, all eyes are on him. They all take a trip down to the barn to confirm Glenn is right. Which he is.

"You cannot tell me you are alright with this?" Shane tells Rick after looking inside to see the walkers for himself.

"No, I'm not, but we're guests here. This isn't our land."

"God, this is our lives!" Shane yells.

"Lower your voice." Glenn tells him.

"We can't just sweep this under the rug." Andrea adds in.

"It ain't right, not remotely." T-Dog tells them eyeing the barn.

"We've either got to go in there, we've got to make things right or we've just got to go." Shane says tossing his hat on. "Now we have been talking about Fort Benning for a long time."

"We can't go." Rick stresses to his best friend.

"Why, Rick? Why?"

"Because my daughter's still out there." Carol says stating the obvious.

"Okay." Shane places his hands over his mouth, breathing deep. "Okay, I think it's time we all start to just consider the other possibility."

"Shane, we're not leaving Sophia behind." Rick tells him firmly.
Daryl steps in, "I'm close to finding this girl. I just found her damn doll two days ago."

Shane laughs, "You found her doll, Daryl. That's what you did. You found a doll."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about." Daryl says advancing on Shane, Phoenix steps in between them, not looking to Daryl, just holding them apart.

"I'm just saying what needs to be said. You get a good lead, it's in the first 48 hours."

"Shane, stop." Rick says.

But Shane keeps going, "Let me tell you something else, man. If she was alive out there and saw you coming all methed out with your buck knife and geek ears around your neck, she would run in the other direction."

"Shut your mouth!" Daryl says pushing against Phoenix as she held him back.

"Wait!" Rick yells to the both of them.

The entire group gets involved trying to keep the two of them apart.

"Now just let me talk to Hershel. Let me figure it out." Rick says pointing to Shane.

"What are you gonna figure out?!" Shane screams coming at Rick, only to have Lori step in between them, "Enough!"

"If we're gonna stay, if we're gonna clear this barn, I have to talk him into it. This is his land."

Dale steps between the two, "Hershel sees those things in there as people—sick people—his wife, his stepson."

"You knew?" Rick asks him.

"Yesterday I talked to Hershel."

"And you waited the night?" Shane snaps.

"I thought we could survive one more night. We did. I was waiting till this morning to say something. But Glenn wanted to be the one."

"The man is crazy, Rick." Shane growls out. "If Hershel thinks those things are alive or not."

Suddenly the barn door starts shaking, the chain holding it together rattling. The walkers inside can hear their shouting and are trying to bust the door down to get to them.

Phoenix takes a walk to the stables, when she was a kid, just being around her horses made her feel better. She's inside the stall brushing down one of the mares when she hears someone come in. She glances out to see Daryl carrying a saddle, she knows he's going out again to search for Sophia.

He sets the saddle down on a rack, breathing heavily as the pain in his side aches.

"You can't." Carol's voice says as she enters the barn.
"I'm fine."

"Hershel said you need to heal."

He grabs a bridal off the wall, "Yeah, I don't care."

"Well, I do. And I know Phoenix does too."

The woman's head perks up at that statement. Sure she cared, but she didn't think anyone else noticed, apparently she was wrong.

"Rick's going out later to follow the trail."

"Yeah, well, I ain't gonna sit around and do nothing." He says strapping the bridal on the horse.

"No, you're gonna go out there and get yourself hurt even worse. We don't know if we're gonna find her Daryl. We don't. I don't."

Both of the hunters are shocked to hear her say that. It pisses Daryl off. He steps away from the horse, moving towards Carol. "What?"

Carol shrugs, "Can't lose you, too."

Daryl drops the bridal at her feet, he steps over by the saddle biting his lip. He picks up the saddle throwing it then groans and doubles over in pain. Carol runs to him, "Are you all right?"

"Just leave me be." He says slapping her hand away. "Stupid bitch."

Shortly after Daryl takes Carol down by the pond. "You see it?"

"See what?" Carol asks not seeing anything in particular.

He walks her around to the backside of the pond, pointing at a group of flowers. Cherokee roses.

"I'll find her." He states. "Hell, I'm sorry bout what happened this mornin'."

"You wanted to look for her. Why? This whole time I've just wanted to ask you."

"Cause I think she's still out there. Truth is, what else I got to do?"

Carol glances at him several times, then she leans down touching the petal of one of the roses. "We'll find her. We will. I see it."

Phoenix is sitting on the porch when Andrea and T-Dog walk up. Glenn asks them, "You haven't seen Rick?"

"He went off with Hershel." Andrea says. "We were supposed to leave a couple hours ago."
Daryl walks up with Carol behind him. "Yeah, you were. What the hell?"

Carol chimes in, "Rick told us he was going out."

Daryl snaps, "Damn it. Isn't anybody takin' this seriously? We got us a damn trail." He sees Shane walk up with the bag of guns. "Oh, here we go."

"What's all this?" Daryl asks.

Shane hands him a shotgun, "You with me man?"

"Yeah." Daryl says taking it.

"Time to grow up."

"You already got yours?" He asks Andrea.

"Yeah. Where's Dale?" She asks.

"He's on his way," Shane says handing out guns, the group takes them albeit with some hesitation.

"Thought we couldn't carry." T-Dog asks as Shane hands him a hand-gun.

"Yeah, well, we can and we have to. Look, it was one thing sitting around here picking daisies when we thought this place was supposed to be safe. But now we know it ain't." Shane turns to Glenn, "How bout you, man? You gonna protect yours?"

Glenn takes the shotgun, Shane turns to Maggie, "Can you shoot?"

"Can you stop? You do this, you hand out these guns, my dad will make you leave tonight."

"We have to stay, Shane." Carl says coming down from the porch.

"What is this?" Lori asks coming out of the house.

"We ain't going anywhere, okay?" Shane assures Carl. "Now look, Hershel, he's just gotta understand. Okay? He—well, he's gonna have to. Now we need to find Sophia. Am I right?" Shane says to Carl kneeling down in front of him. "Huh? Now I want you to take this." Shane holds out a hand-gun to Carl. "You take it, Carl, and you keep your mother safe. You do whatever it takes. You know how. Go on, take the gun and do it."

Lori puts her hand on Carl's chest pushing him behind her. "Rick said no guns. This is not your call. This is not your decision to make."

"Oh, shit." Everyone turns to where T-Dog is standing. There before their eyes are Rick and Hershel barging out of the woods and down the hill by the barn, guiding two walkers on catch poles like they were dogs being taken on a Sunday stroll through the park. Now that, Phoenix knew even for Rick, was a whole mountain of stupid that words couldn't even begin to describe. The entire group of survivors quickly made their way to the barn where Shane made a giant scene for all to see.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Shane, just back off."

"Why do your people have guns?" Hershel asks Rick.
"Are you kidding me?" Shane yells watching them hauling the two walkers like stray dogs. "You see? You see what they're holding onto?"

"I see who I'm holding onto." Hershel tells him.

"No, man, you don't."

"Shane, just let us do this and then we can talk." Rick pleads with him.

"What you wanna talk about, Rick?" Shane yells, behind him Daryl and Phoenix have their guns trained on the two walkers.

Phoenix knew how Hershel felt, how his family felt. But damn it these weren't people anymore, just mindless shells wanting to rip them apart. This group was her family now and she would do whatever to protect them.

"These things ain't sick. They're not people. They're dead. Ain't got to feel nothing for them cause all they do, they kill! These things right here, they're the things that killed the Amy. They killed Otis. They're gonna kill all of us, if we do not..."

"Shane, shut up!" Rick yells.

"Hey, Hershel, man, let me ask you something. Could a living breathing person, could they walk away from this?" Shane pulls his hand-gun from his waistband. "Could a living breathing person, could they walk away from this?" He fires three shots into the walker.

"No!" Rick yells. "Stop it!"

"That's three rounds in the chest. Could someone who's alive, could they just take that?! Why is it still coming?" Two more shots. "That's its heart, its lungs. Why is it still coming?" Three more shots.

"Shane, enough." Rick screams.

"Yeah, you're right, man. That is enough." Shane walks up shooting the walker point blank in the head. "Enough risking our lives for a little girl who's gone! Enough living next to a barn full of things that are trying to kill us. Enough. Rick, it ain't like it was before! Now if y'all want to live, if you want to survive, you got to fight for it! I'm talking about fighting right here, right now."

Shane runs over to the barn door, snapping the lock off and releasing the walkers from inside. Shane backs up and takes aim, Andrea and Phoenix run up beside him taking aim as well. One by one they take out the walkers. Daryl sides up next to Phoenix, as T-Dog runs up too. Glenn looks at Maggie with uncertainty until she nods at him to go help, which he reluctantly does.

The six of them fire until every walker is on the ground. Shane looks back at Rick with a look that said 'now that's how it's done.' Abruptly their silence is short lived, as another growl is heard from inside the barn. They wait for the walker to appear, but no one is ready for the shock they receive.

Sophia.

Carol's voice was the first to break the silence as she hysterically cried out her daughter's name and blindly ran towards her, but Daryl was quick to throw down his weapon and grab ahold of her. The two fell to the ground, where Daryl kept his firm grip on her as Carol sobbed endlessly. Everything that Daryl had worked so hard for...Gone. And now he was left to feel like the world's biggest douchebag for having gotten so pissed at Carol, when she had been right all along. Daryl had made
such a fuss over everyone's lack of faith, only to have been shitted on as the reality of Sophia's death now settled itself right before their very eyes.

The entire group is shaken, no one is without tears or a solemn face.

Phoenix can see the pain and grief on Rick's face, he blames himself for this. Her breath caught in her chest. It was her. Sophia. Her bright blue eyes narrowed a moment as she lowered her rifle, unable to set her hunter's sites on such a precious child; the very one they'd broken the back of love to find.

Sophia...

Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away; immediately snapping to attention when she heard Carol's hysterical scream. She winced, watching Daryl take her to the ground and watch in horror from the zombified girl's presence. Sophia had been dead this whole time. "Christ!" She hissed to herself, mortified from the lack of truth, from the danger the whole group had been put in and from her own stupidity in not snooping around the farm itself when they had first arrived. She could have done so much more... so much more to help protect these people and she had let them down.

The little girl picks her way through the maze of bodies moving forward towards the humans in front of her, growling and snarling.

"Don't watch." Lori tells her son as she covers his face, cradling him on the ground in her arms.

No one moves, none of them want to take this shot. Not even Shane, who wanted this so bad, to kill all the walkers. He doesn't make a move. Shane, though big and macho as he claimed, couldn't even bring himself to do what needed to be done.

Rick walks forward reluctantly, he pulls out his gun approaching Sophia. He raises the gun, cocking it, the grief and apprehension at this moment is almost more than he can bear, closing his eyes, he pulls the trigger.
After the shot no one moved, everyone was frozen in place. Phoenix turned around and gave Rick a mournful glance knowing what he was feeling. She watched as Titan trotted over to the girl's body and laid down placing his head on her back. She turned away and walked up to Shane who surprisingly didn't look as all mighty and confident as he had been five minutes earlier.

"That go how you planned it? Or did it sound better in yer head?"

The stare she gave him made Shane shiver. He had done the right thing, he knew he had. He had no idea Sophia was in there, he was right to kill them all to protect the group. But now as he heard Carol's mournful sobs, he wished he hadn't opened that door.

"Come on. Don't look. Don't look." Daryl told Carol as he drug her away from the scene, but the woman's gaze couldn't be broken. He got her to her feet and she broke free of Daryl's hold and quickly fled the scene, being unable to bear with it. Sophia was all she'd had before and now she was gone. If it hadn't been for the soft connection made to Daryl, she wouldn't have made it this long without her little girl.

The scowl deepened on the Redneck's face as Carol left the safety of his arms to be alone. He turned his glaring eyes upon Hershel and Maggie as he nibbled at the inside of his bottom lip while he brought himself slowly to his feet. The frustration and anger that was coiled inside of him was starting to unravel. His walls were threatening to come crashing down. That little dam in the back of his mind that held back all of his emotions was cracking, but he had to be strong...

He gritted his teeth, his brows pulled together in anger as he quietly turned his back to the lot of them and stalked off after Carol. Daryl had no words for the woman. What could he say to her, after all? He couldn't even begin to apologize for all the times he had gotten her hopes up. Or how upset he had been with her for losing faith, when it was the most logical reasoning. All Daryl could offer was his presence. Go to Carol and sit with her in silence to show her that he was there for her and that he was sorry. That if she needed him, all she had to do was turn and he would be there. So that's what he did. Daryl stationed himself on the counter inside the RV as he sat in silence. Carol acknowledged his presence by looking at him as he came in, but she seemed indifferent as she quickly gazed elsewhere, staring out of the window to the scenery outside. Her cheeks were stained with the tears that had been shed, but she had seemed to silence herself of sobbing by now...

Beth was sobbing as well as she looked over the fallen bodies of her loved ones. Beth shoved her way past Rick and Shane over to a woman's body pinned under another's. Pulling the body on top off, she rolled the woman's body over. "Ma."

Suddenly the walker reached out grabbing Beth's hair, snarling as it tried to tear her apart. The rest
of the group runs to her aid, Rick and Shane pull her away while T-Dog and Phoenix fight to hold the walker down. Andrea grabs a scythe from beside the barn and swings it sending the blade through the back of the head and the tip sticking out the front.

Hershel and his family head back towards the house trying to put this behind them.

But Shane just can't let it go, "We've been out. We've been combing these woods looking for her and she was in there all along? You knew."

"Leave us alone." Maggie warns him.

Rick grabs Shane to stop him but he throws Rick off, "Get your hands off me. You knew and you kept it from us."

"I didn't know," Hershel assures him as they reach the house.

"That's bullshit. I think y'all knew."

"We didn't know!" Maggie screams at him.

"Why was she there?!" Shane badgers.

"Your—" Hershel stutters. "Otis put those people in the barn. Maybe he found her and put her in there before he was killed."

"You expect me to believe that? I look like an idiot?" Shane asks him.

"Shane, hey, hey, hey." Rick says stepping in between the two men.

"I don't care what you believe!" Hershel yells his arms open wide.

"Everybody just calm down." Rick tells them.

"Get him off my land!"

"Please no," Rick says.

"Let me tell you something." Shane says advancing on the old man.

"Hey. Don't touch him!" Maggie yells slapping Shane across the face. "Haven't you done enough." The family heads inside the front door, Hershel turns back to them, "I mean it—off my land."

Glenn sighs following his girlfriend inside, as Rick and Phoenix give Shane a look.

"What are you doing?" Rick asks his friend. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Daryl almost died looking for her, Rick."

"Yeah, like you give a flyin' fuck bout Daryl." Phoenix scoffs eyeing the man, she stands back letting the two sort this out.

Shane ignores her, "Any one of us could have. I'm gonna tell you right now—that son-of-a-bitch,
"He knew."
"He didn't know. He's not like that. He opened his home to us."
"Put us all in danger, man. He kept a barn full of walkers."
"So you just start an insurrection, hand out guns and massacre his family?"
"His family is dead, Rick."
"Well, he doesn't believe that. He thinks you just murdered them in cold blood."
"No, man, I don't care what he thinks. Why would I care…"
"I was handling it, brother. I was handling it and you just—"
"You had us out in those woods looking for a little girl that every single one of us knew was dead! That's what you did. Rick, you're just as delusional as that guy." Shane snorts. "You were handling it, huh?"

Down at the barn Andrea lays a blanket over Sophia's body. She stands up to find Phoenix behind her, the woman holds up her hands, "I'm not here for a fight Andrea. I'm here to apologize, for—"
Phoenix motions to the woman's lip. "I was out of line. I shouldn't have hit you."
Andrea shakes her head, "You care about him I get it. I would've to if it was—"
"Shane?"
Andrea looks up with a shocked look, "How did you?"
Phoenix shrugs, "Women's intuition. Besides I don't care about Daryl like that. He's part of the group, I would've done it for anyone."
The two women nod, "Just, be careful around Shane, he's a lil bit of a loose cannon and there's somethin' about him that's off. Just lookin' out for ya."
"Okay, thanks."
Phoenix nods before she heads back up to the campsite. She sees Daryl going inside the RV to check on Carol.
Daryl worries his lip and cheek as he sets down on the counter next to the door. Carol looks up at him with a grim smile then stares back out of the window.
Phoenix puts her rifle in her truck, leaving her Kukris on her back. She heads down towards the barn saying hi to Dale and Carl who are on their way towards the house. She stops next to Lori as they survey the bodies.
"You want us to start burying Rick?" T-Dog asks their leader.
"We need a service. Carol would want that." Andrea says earning a nod from Phoenix, the two
women now held an understanding for the other.

"Yeah, we all want that." T-Dog agrees.

Rick seems at a loss for words as does everyone else, so Lori speaks up. "Let's, um—let's dig a grave for Sophia, and Annette and Shawn..." She surveys the view. "Uh, over by those trees." She points over towards the left side of the barn.

"And we'll need a truck to move the bodies." Phoenix adds matching Lori's look.

Jimmy starts for the house, "I'll get the keys."

Shane stops him, "No, no. I got the truck."

"And the others?" Jimmy says looking around. "That's a lot of digging."

"We bury the ones we love and burn the rest." Andrea tells him.

"Let's get to work," Phoenix says stepping over to the bodies.

Shane, Andrea, Phoenix, T-Dog and Jimmy busy themselves digging the three graves, while Lori collects rocks for the headstones.

"Phoenix will you..." Lori motions to the Rv. The woman nods walking back up to the motorhome. She knocks on the door noticing Daryl in sitting on the counter.

He glances at the door and instantly turns away when he sees it's her. She rolls her eyes, stepping inside addressing Carol. "They're ready." Phoenix had said, but Carol acted as if she had not heard a word.

Carol shakes her head no, Phoenix encourages her, "Come on."

Carol shook her head before asking, "Why?"

Daryl spoke softly as he answered for Phoenix, "Cause that's your lil girl."

She looks up, "That's not my little girl." She paused as she struggled to add, "That's some other thing." Daryl seemed taken back by these words, but remained silent as she averted her eyes from him to gaze out the window again. "My Sophia was alone in the woods..." Her voice quivered slightly as she stated this, and Daryl's heart sank. He lowered his head, his brows pulling together slightly as that horrible feeling of guilt started to twist itself in knots in his stomach again. "All this time, I thought—She didn't cry herself to sleep. She didn't go hungry. She didn't try to find her way back..."

Daryl's head lifted, his eyes peering over at Carol as he clenched his jaw shut tight. His brows arched upward ever so slightly as the pain he felt deep inside revealed itself for half a moment upon his features, before quickly vanishing. All of the pain, the loss...the suffering. Every single night. Every single day. Every waking moment Daryl had spent searching for this child. This innocent little girl that had had so much life ahead of her. And even though it was not even Daryl's fault in the slightest, he still felt completely responsible. Despite having already been mentally kicking himself in the teeth over this, Carol had to add in one last statement that was the final straw.

"Sophia died a long time ago."
Daryl's dam had broken. All of which he had worked so hard to build up came crashing down in a powerful tsunami. All the time and effort he had spent in proving to be a greater man and reaching out to someone had been shot to shit. Wasteful. Pointless. Daryl stared after Carol intensely, his expression stiff as it took everything in him not to completely pop off on her. To thrash and hurl things about. To scream at her and tell her how much of a worthless mother she was! How pathetic and weak she had been!

Instead all Daryl did was turn his head from her, his eyes avoiding any contact from anyone because he did not want them to see the pain that they bore. He quickly slid himself off of the counter and moved towards the door, his head turning to get one last glance of the grieving mother, before bitterly turning his back to her, with no intentions of ever looking upon her face again. He strolled past Phoenix, his pace quick as he made his way back to the barn, where he fully intended on being at the funeral that would be given. Phoenix nodded stepping out of the doorway and walking back over to the graves.

The funeral was... grueling, to say the least. Phoenix's own emotions and inner turmoil was welling to the surface, though she did her best not to let anybody see. This whole scenario reminded her painfully of her family, whom she missed so very much. She stood apart from the group, keeping as much distance between herself and Daryl for the time. But much to her annoyance, she could hardly peel her eyes from him for a second.

Even with what little time she had known and acknowledged Daryl's existence, she had come to recognize those little... quirks of emotion he tried so hard to ignore. There was an innocence about him that seemed to tug her in... a mysterious "other side" that she had an overwhelming urge to see more of. Perhaps just to know that someone else who seemed so much like her was... just as human as her.

After the service everyone went their separate ways. After the funeral had finished, Daryl reverted back to his old ways. He quickly disassembled his tent and moved his lone-wolf ass as far away from the Greene's home as possible, finding himself a nice quiet spot off in the fields. Once his own private camp had been set up, the Redneck made it an interest of his to start making new bolts for his crossbow. The last time he had used it he had one left and that wasn't going to do anybody any good. In order to start working on such a tedious task, Daryl had to find himself sticks that were suitable enough to serve as an arrow. So, off he went to gather wood for his bow and for his campfire later.

Phoenix finally headed into the woods carrying her bow, within ten minutes of pain and realizing she couldn't pull the string back, she gave up and headed back to the house.

When she arrived she found Rick and Glenn by the Cherokee loading their guns. Rick turned when he noticed her walking up, "Oh, great Phoenix. We're going to town to find Hershel he took off. Since you seem to have a good rapport with him, would you come along? Please. Plus you got the quiet weapon."
She nodded, "Sure, let me grab a few more arrows." She wanted to ask why he didn't ask Daryl to come along since he had a bow, but she realized after looking around that he was nowhere to be found.

She grabbed 6 extra arrows and put them in her quiver, like Daryl's crossbow her quiver was attached to her bow. She headed back over and got into the back seat, studying Rick's face as he watched Glenn say goodbye to Maggie.

The ride into the town was a silent one, until all of a sudden Glenn blurts out, "Maggie said she loves me." The two other give him a glance, to which he smiles and laughs. "She doesn't mean it. I mean, she can't. I mean, why… She's upset or confused. She's probably feeling, like-"

"I think she's smart enough to know what she's feeling." Rick tells the young kid.

"No. No."

Rick laughs and Phoenix smirks in the back, poor Glenn, he has no idea how much Maggie cares for him.

"You know, she wants to be in love, so she needs something to, to, like, hold onto."

Phoenix peeks up between the seats, "Glenn, it's pretty obvious to everyone Maggie loves you, and not just because you're one of the last men standing. So what's the problem?"

"I didn't say it back. Huh, I've never had a woman say that to me before, you know, except my mom, of course and my sisters. But with Maggie, it's different. I mean, we barely know each other. What does she really know about me? Nothing. We're practically strangers. But I didn't know what to do with it. I just stood there like a jerk."

"Hey. Hey, this is a good thing. Something we don't get enough of these days. Enjoy it. And when we get back, return the favor. It's not like she's going anywhere."

They pull up outside of the saloon, Glenn turns to the older man, "Rick. I know about Lori, her being pregnant. I got her those pills."

"I figured."

They each get out moving to the left side of the car, "Hey, I'm sorry I kept it from you."

"Don't be. You did what you thought was right. It just so happens it wasn't."

Back on the farm Lori is getting worried about Beth's condition, they need Hershel, so Lori goes in search of someone to help.

Well away from the house, Daryl had begun prepping the sticks and smoothing them out with his hunting knife.
"Moving to the suburbs?" She asks as she approaches him. "Listen, Beth's in some kind of catatonic shock. We need Hershel."

Daryl doesn't even look up from his carving, "Yeah. So what?"

"So I need you to run into town real quick and bring him and Rick back."

The hunter says nothing, just keeps making his new arrows. "Daryl?"

He glances over at her, he can't believe she had the nerve of coming to him, disturbing his serenity-setup, "Yer bitch went window-shopping. You want him? Fetch him yourself. I got better things to do."

"What's the matter with you? Why would you be so selfish?"

Daryl's head jerks up, he gives her a hard look as he stands up. This was the absolute worst thing she could have said to him. Selfish? HIM? Daryl resisted from his desire to slit the dumb bitch's throat there as he jumped to his feet and waved his hunting knife at her as he yelled at her, as if this would further make his point. "Selfish? Listen to me, Olive Oyl. I was out there looking for that lil girl every single day. I took a bullet and an arrow in the process. Don't you tell me about me gettin' my hands dirty! You want those two idiots? Have a nice ride. I'm done looking for people."

He sits back down and goes back to work. Lori sighs, "Well, Phoenix went with them, I thought you'd care about her. My mistake." She turns and storms back to the house.

Behind her Daryl stops his carving and looks up watching her go. He didn't care about Phoenix … at all.

Rick, Glenn and Phoenix enter the bar, they find Hershel sitting at the bar farthest from them, his back to the door.

"Hershel." Rick says trying to get his attention.

"Who's with you?"

"Glenn and Phoenix."

Hershel chuckles, "Maggie send him?"

"He volunteered. They both did. They're good like that." Rick walks over to his left side, while Phoenix jumps up on the counter on his right eyeing the elder man. "How many have you had?"

"Not enough."

"Let's finish this up back at home." Rick suggests. "Beth collapsed, is in some sort of state. Must be in shock. I think you are, too."

"Phoenix could've taken care of her, she's an EMT. Maggie's with her?"

"Yes, I could've, but Beth needs you, Hershel." Phoenix smiles.
"What could I do? She needs her mother. Or rather to mourn… like she should've done weeks ago. I robbed her of that. I see that now."

"You thought there was a cure." Rick tells him. "Can't blame yourself for holding out for hope."

"Hope?" Hershel smiles looking up at Rick. "When I first saw you running across my field with your boy in your arms, I had little hope he would survive."

"But he did."

"He did. Even though we lost Otis. Your man Shane made it back and we saved your boy. And this beautiful woman right here." He smiled rubbing Phoenix's knee, she smiled back. "That was the miracle that proved to me miracles do exist. Only it was a sham, a bait and switch. I was fool Rick. And you people saw that. My daughters deserve better than that." He takes the last drink from his glass and grabs the bottle, filling it up again.

The two men stand by the doors, seeing it getting dark outside, Glenn turns to Rick. "So what do we do? Just wait for him to pass out?"

"Just go." Hershel tells them. "Just go!"

"I promised Maggie I'd bring you home safe." Rick says.

Hershel chuckles, "Like you promised that little girl?"

Phoenix watches Rick's face fall, knowing that struck a nerve. But instead of letting it get to him Rick turns his anger on Hershel. "So what's your plan? Finish that bottle? Drink yourself to death and leave your girls alone?"

That struck a nerve as Hershel stood up and faced Rick. "Stop telling me how to care for my family, my farm. You people are like a plague! I do the Christian thing, give you shelter, and you destroy it all!"

"The world was already in bad shape when we met."

"And you take no responsibility! You're supposed to be their leader!"

"Well, I'm here now, aren't I?"

The two men stand toe-to-toe, both breathing heavily. Hershel sighs, "Yes. Yes. Yes, you are." The elder man goes and sits back down on his stool.

Rick approaches him again, "Come on. Your girls need you now more than ever." He tries to grab Hershel's arm but the elder man yanks it from his grasp.

"I didn't want to believe you. You told me there was no cure, that these people were dead, not sick. I chose not to believe that. But when Shane shot Lou in the chest and she just kept coming, that's when I knew what an ass I'd been, that Annette had been dead long ago and I was feeding her rotting corpse! That's when I knew there was no hope. And when that little girl came out of the barn, the look on your face—I knew you knew it, too. Right? There is no hope. And you know it now, like I do. Don't you?"

Rick looks away as Hershel tells him, "There is no hope for any of us."

"Look, I'm done. I'm not doing this anymore, cleaning up after you. You know what the truth is?
Nothing has changed. Death is death. It's always been there, whether it's from a heart attack, cancer, or a walker. What's the difference? You didn't think it was hopeless before, did you? And now there are people back at home trying to hang on and they need us, even if it's just to give them a reason to go on, even if we don't believe it ourselves. You know what? This isn't about what we believe anymore. It's about them."

Phoenix could see that what Rick had said, had gotten through to Hershel. The elder man drank what was left in his glass, set it down and turned to leave when the door opened. The four of them froze seeing two men walk into the bar both holding guns.

"Son-of-a-bitch. They're alive."

The four of them stayed where they were, Rick stood in front of the bar, Glenn behind it, Hershel sat in the corner next to Phoenix who was sitting on top of it, her bow loaded in her hands.

The smaller fellow sat down at the table in front of them, Rick poured him a shot. "I'm Dave. That scrawny-looking douche bag there is Tony." He motioned to the extremely fat man sitting at the bar behind Hershel.

The man chuckles, "Eat me, Dave."

"Hey, maybe someday I will. We met on I-95 coming out of Philly. Damn shit-show that was."

"I'm Glenn. It's nice to meet some new people."

"Rick Grimes." The cop says as he sets the bottle back on the bar and hands a shot to the fat man.

"How bout you, pal? Have one?" Dave motions to Hershel.

"I just quit."

"You've got a unique sense of timing, my friend. How bout you gorgeous? Don't see many women these days, especially not one looking like you."

Phoenix glared at the man, knowing exactly what he was thinking as he looked her over, her hand tightened on her bow and Rick chose that moment to step in.

"His name's Hershel. He lost people today, a lot of them. That's Phoenix, my daughter." The young woman glanced at him with a smile, she knew he was making a point of saying she was off limits.

"I'm truly sorry to hear that." Dave said glancing at Hershel. "To better days and new friends. And to our dead—may they be in a better place." He held up his glass downing the shot along with Tony and Glenn. He set the glass down and turned back to the group, he pulled a hand-gun from the back of his waistband. "Not bad huh? I got it off a cop."

"I'm a cop."

"This one was already dead."

"You fellas are a long way from Philadelphia." Rick says sitting down on the stool, securing Phoenix between he and Hershel.
"It feels like we're a long way from anywhere."

"What drove you south?"

"Well, I can tell you it wasn't the weather. I must've dropped 30 pounds in sweat alone down here."

"I wish." Tony quips.

"No, first it was DC. I heard there might be some kind of refugee camp, but the roads were so jammed, we never even got close. We decided to get off the highways, into the sticks, keep hauling ass. Every group we came across had a new rumor about a way out of this thing."

"One guy told us there was a Coast Guard center in the Gulf, sending ferries to the islands." Tony tells them.

"The latest was a rail yard in Montgomery running trains to the middle of the country—Kansas, Nebraska."

"Nebraska?" Glenn scoffs.

"Low population, lots of guns." Tony replies.

"Kinda makes sense." Glenn retorts.

"You ever been to Nebraska, kid?" Dave asks him. "The reason they call 'em flyover states."

They all share a laugh, Rick takes another sip off his shot. Phoenix sees the way the two men glance at one another, before they again address Rick, it sets her on edge even more.

"How about you guys?"

"Fort Benning, eventually."

"I hate to piss in your cornflakes, officer, but um… we ran across a grunt who was stationed at Benning. He said the place was overrun by lamebrains."

"Wait, Fort Benning is gone? Are you for real?" Glenn asks not believing it.

"Sadly, I am. Ugly truth is there is no way out of this mess. Just keep going from one pipe dream to the next, praying one of these mindless freaks doesn't grab ahold of you when you sleep."

"If you sleep," Tony adds.

"Yeah, it doesn't look like you guys are hanging your hats here. You, you hold up somewhere else?"

"I fuckin' knew it," Phoenix muttered as she glanced to Hershel.

Rick doesn't answer right away, "Not really."

"Those your cars out front?"

"Yeah, why?" Glenn asks.

"We're living in ours. Those look kinda empty, clean. Where's all your gear?"

"We're with a larger group." Hershel says. "Out scouting, thought we could use a drink."
"A drink? Hershel, I thought you quit. Well, we're thinking of setting up around here. Is it safe?"

"It can be." Glenn says. "Although I have killed a couple of walkers around here."

"Walkers? That what you call them?"

"Yeah," Glenn chuckles.

"That's good. I like that. I like that better than lamebrains."

"More succinct," Tony adds.

"Okay, Tony went to college." Dave says of the man's words.

"Two years."

The room gets silent for a moment before Dave speaks again. "So what—so what, you guys set up on the outskirts or something? That new development?"

"Trailer park or something?" Tony gets up walking over to the wall past Glenn.

"A farm?" Dave adds before singing the nursery rhyme. "You on a farm?"

"E-I-E-I-O." Tony sings as he pisses in the corner. "Is it safe? It's gotta be?"

"You got food, water?" Dave asks.

"You got cooze?" Tony says with a smile looking Phoenix up and down. "Ain't had a piece of ass in weeks."

"I will shoot you in yer fuckin' dick if you look at me again." She snarls tightening her grip on her bow.

"Listen, pardon my friend." Dave says looking to Phoenix. "City kids—they got no tact. No disrespect. So listen, Glenn—"

"We've said enough." Rick intervenes.

"Well, hang on a second. This farm, it sounds pretty sweet. Don't it sound sweet, Tony?"

"Yeah, real sweet."

"How about a little southern hospitality? We got some buddies back at camp, been having a real hard time. I don't see why you can't make room for a few more. We could pool our resources, our manpower."

"Look, I'm sorry. That's not an option." Rick states.

"Doesn't sound like it'd be a problem."

"I'm sorry. We can't." Hershel adds.

"We can't take in any more."

Dave chuckles, "You guys are something else. I thought—I thought we were friends."

"You thought wrong," Phoenix states vehemently.
Dave stares at her, "We got people we gotta look out for, too."

"We don't know anything about you." Rick reminds them.

"No, that's true. You don't know anything about us. You don't know what we've had to go through out there. The things we've had to do." Dave glances over at Phoenix and she knows what he's meaning. The look she gives him is icy and says 'Try it, I dare you.' He sighs, "I bet you've had to do some of those same things yourself. Am I right?" No one says anything, so he continues. "Cause ain't nobody's hands clean in what's left of this world. We're all the same. So come on, let's—let's take a nice friendly hayride to this farm and we'll get to know each other."

Rick tosses up his hand, "That's not gonna happen."

"Rick—" Dave starts but he's interrupted by Tony, "This is bullshit."

"Calm down." Rick tells him.

Tony gets pissed, "Don't tell me to calm down. Don't ever tell me to calm down."

"Whoa." Dave tells his buddy, but Tony keeps going, "I'll shoot you three assholes in the head, take your girl and take your damn farm!"

Rick stands up prepared to fight, but Dave stands up too, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Relax. Take it easy. Nobody's killing anybody. Nobody's shooting anybody. Right, Rick?" He climbs over to the other side of the bar to his right. He looks at Rick laying his gun on the bar. "We're just friends having a drink. That's all. Now, where's the good stuff, huh?" He slaps his hands together, "Good stuff, good stuff, good stuff. Let's see."

He leans down to look under the bar and Rick grabs his gun in the holster, but doesn't remove it. He looks over at Phoenix, she taps her finger on the bow shifting her eyes to Tony. Rick nods knowing she's onto his plan, should it come down to it.

"Look at that. That'll work." He stands up holding a bottle of whiskey. He sighs opening it and pouring a shot. "You gotta understand—we can't stay out there. You know what it's like."

"Yeah I do." Rick tells him. "But the farm is too crowded as is. I'm sorry. You'll have to keep looking."

"Keep looking." Dave glances down. "Where do you suggest we do that?"

"I don't know. I hear Nebraska's nice."

Dave laughs, "Nebraska. This guy."

In the split second it takes Dave to reach for his gun, Rick pulls his gun shooting him in the head. As soon as Phoenix sees Rick's hand twitch she holds up her bow firing an arrow into Tony's eye-socket. Glenn and Hershel eye the two as Phoenix collects her bolt and Rick holsters his gun.
"Holy shit," Glenn says looking at the arrow sticking out of Tony's head.

"You all right?" Rick asks him as Phoenix pulls her arrow out wiping it on the man's chest.

"Yeah."

"Hershel?"

The old man simply nods not knowing what to say at the moment, he nods again knowing the two did what they had to, to keep the farm safe. "Let's head back."

Phoenix grabs her shoulder gently, she didn't even notice the pain in it until now. She hadn't even thought before she let that arrow fly, her friends were in trouble so she did what needed to be done. But now the pain was setting in and her shoulder was on fire.

By now night has fallen, as Rick bends down picking up the shotgun and checking Tony's pockets where he finds a few shotgun shells. Glenn walks past the other body picking up the hand-gun. Suddenly lights are seen outside, Rick whispers to them, "Car, car. Get down."

The three of them move to the front wall, Phoenix and Rick kneeling by the left side of the doors, Glenn next to the right side and Hershel on the other side of the window next to Glenn. The car pulls up out right outside of the bar, the doors open and close. They can hear men outside talking, looking for their two friends, saying they heard shots come from over here. They sit there for what seems like eternity, there's no sound from the men outside, but the car is still there. Rick stands up looking out the window, he sees nothing out there. He kneels shuffling low on the floor over to the other two, Phoenix behind him.

"Why won't they leave?" Glenn whispers.

"Would you?" Hershel asks.

"We can't sit here any longer," Phoenix tells them.

"Let's head out the back and make a run to the car." Rick suggests.

They all stand up to go but hear gunshots outside and quickly sit back down. The guys come back around the front of the bar and head for the front doors. Rick cocks his gun and Phoenix grabs both of hers doing the same, she went and grabbed them from Hershel's room when Rick asked her to come to town. Glenn jumps in front of the doors as the men try to open them. Rick gives him a look as the men outside get suspicious that there is someone in there. Rick fights with himself for a
moment deciding what to do, he realizes he has no choice cause them guys are coming in one way or another.

"They drew on us!"

Hershel sighs looking at Rick with a wide-eyed gaze and Phoenix smacks her head back against the wall whispering, "Damn it, Rick!"

The footsteps get closer to the door, "Dave and Tony in there? They alive?"

Rick shakes his head wondering how to say it without getting them killed. "No."

"They killed Dave and Tony," the first one says.

"Let's go," another tells him.

"No, I'm not going back and telling Jane that Dave and Tony got shot by some assholes in a bar."

"Your friends drew on us! They gave us no choice!" Rick yells. "I'm sure we've all lost enough people, done things we wish we didn't have to, but it's like that now. You know that! So let's just chalk this up to what it was—wrong place, wrong—"

Suddenly bullets rip through the glass in the doors and windows. Rick stands up yelling to the rest as he fires out the window, "Get out of here! Go!"

The three of them stay low heading for the back of the bar. Glenn makes it halfway, taking cover behind the piano. Hershel slides him a shotgun, he takes it hesitantly.

Back at the farm, everyone is looking for Lori who disappeared that afternoon. Carol runs out to where Daryl is camping to ask for his help. "We can't find Lori. And the others aren't back yet either."

"That dumb bitch must've gone off lookin' for 'em."

"What?"

"Yeah, she asked me to go. I told her I was done being an errand boy."

"And you didn't say anything?"

He doesn't answer, so Carol starts to walk away, but then pauses and walks back to the fire where he sits. "Don't do this. Please. I've already lost my girl."

Daryl stands up, "Yeah, that wasn't my problem neither." He walks off and Carol heads back to the others to tell them where Lori went.
Back in the bar Rick is reloading his gun trying to reason with the men outside. "Hey! We all know this is not gonna end well! There's nothing in it for any of us! You guys just—just back off, no one else gets hurt!"

They hear garbage cans rattle from out back, Rick nods his head for Glenn to go check it out. He gets up running quickly to the rear door, he opens it slowly peeking into the storage room. He sees and hears nothing except the creak of the stairs as he walks down them. He hears someone cuss outside the back door, sees their silhouette and then the doorknob turns. He does the only thing he can think of and fires through the glass window.

"Glenn! Glenn!" Rick yells as they all head to the back.

"I—I 'm all right. I'm all right." Glenn tells them.

"I'll hold 'em here. You two cover Glenn. See if he can make it to your car. Tell him—tell him to pull up back. We'll run for it, get the hell out of here."

"You want me to cover Glenn?" Hershel asks him.

"You missed all that gun training. It could've come in handy now." Rick tells him.

"No, I can shoot. I just don't like to."

The two of them head back to cover Glenn, who points his gun at them as they approach. The two hold their hands up, he exhales lowering the weapon, "Sorry. Sorry."

"Rick wants you to try for the car." Hershel tells him, his face falls. "Try?"

"You'll try and succeed." Phoenix says. "We'll cover you."

"That's a great plan." He purses his lips before he moves to the door. He opens both of the doors, looking out the left then right sides. He eases out the doors and moves down the right side of the alley. Phoenix sees a man coming up from the left, "Glenn get down!" The man fires, Phoenix pegs one round into his chest knocking him down, he lays on the ground moaning in pain.

Rick runs up behind them, "What happened?"

"He fired," Hershel tells him. "He must have hit Glenn. He's behind the dumpster. Doesn't look like he's moving."

The man Phoenix shot is on the ground calling for help. Rick moves down the alley towards Glenn whispering, "You hit? Are you hit?"

The kid is huddled behind the dumpster looking scared to death. "No. No."

Rick moves over beside him, "It's all right. The car's right there. We're almost home. You good?"

Glenn nods, "I'm good."

The two of them move towards the car, only to be pushed back by gunshots. Over on the roof of the Pharmacy is a kid with a rifle. A truck pulls up below him, the driver screaming that roamers are all over they needed to leave now. The kid jumps down to the roof next to him and falls down into the alley, screaming.

"Dude didn't make it." Glenn says as the truck speeds off without the kid.
"Get Hershel." Rick tells Glenn as he heads over to the screaming kid, Phoenix behind him.

The old man makes it over to Glenn, "The gunfire must've attracted the walkers. Where's Rick and Phoenix?"

"They ran across."

"Well, hell we can't go without them. Rick! Phoenix!"

They come over to find the kid from the roof sitting on top of a dumpster, the wrought iron tip of the fence pierced through his shin. The four of them spend the next minute arguing about saving the kid.

"Rick he just shot at us, tried to kill us. Leave the lil bastard here to die." Phoenix says, Glenn and Hershel backing her up.

"The fence went clean through, there's no way to get the leg off in one piece." Hershel explains.

The kid won't stop screaming, "Shut up! Shut up or I will shoot you!" Rick tells him.

Hershel pulls him away, "That may be the answer. We're not gonna get that leg off without tearing the muscle to shreds. He certainly can't run. He may bleed out."

"Maybe we should put him down." Rick looked at Phoenix like she was crazy.

Hershel shakes his head, "I don't want to see any more killing, but this is cruel."

"Can't we just take the leg off?" Glenn asks, which gets the kid to shut up.

"Sure," Phoenix says with a smile reaching over her head for her Kukris but finding nothing. "Fuck!" She says as she remembers she left them at the farm in her truck.

"That hatchet still in the car?" Rick asks Glenn amid the kid's protests. Rick pulls out his knife, "Will this sever the bone?"

"No." Phoenix growls snatching one of her hunting knives from her boot handing it to Hershel. "Here use mine. They'll cut through the bone like butter."

Hershel takes it, "I'll have to sever the ligaments below the kneecap, cut above the tibia. He's going to lose his lower leg. When we get clear of here, we're gonna have to find some tinder, cauterize the wound so he doesn't bleed out."

"All right, no choice. Hurry up." Rick says.

Rick tries to keep the kid quiet while Hershel cuts off the circulation in his leg so he doesn't bleed out. Walkers start coming from every direction, Glenn, Rick and Phoenix try to hold them back. Hershel tells him there isn't enough time and heads back towards the car with Glenn. Rick is still trying to keep the walkers from reaching the kid.

Phoenix sees that he's not gonna leave without this damn kid. "Oh, fuck! Rick I'ma kill you if we get outta this alive." She grabs the kid's leg and jerks it up off the iron post ignoring the kid's
Back at the farm, Carol approaches Daryl's camp again. She surveys the squirrels he has hung on a string between two trees as well as the necklace of ears.

"What are you doin'?" He asks coming up behind her startling her.

"God. Keeping an eye on you."

"Ain't you a peach?" He comments condescendingly.

"I'm not gonna let you pull away. You've earned your place."

"If you spent half your time minding your daughter's business instead of sticking your nose in everybody else's, she'd still be alive!"

Carol doesn't falter, "Go ahead."

"Go ahead and what? Man, just go! I don't want you here! You're a real piece of work, lady. What, are you gonna make this about my daddy or some crap like that? Pfft! Man, you don't know jack. You're afraid. You're afraid cause you're all alone. You got no husband, no daughter. You don't know what to do with yourself. You ain't my problem! Sophia wasn't mine! All you had to do was keep an eye on her!"

Carol tilts her head as he lifts his hand up, he notices and backs up.

"Yeah." That was all Carol could say. Once he had finished the two came to an awkward silenced, which caused Daryl to turn his back to the woman once again, as he silently stalked off to disappear somewhere else.

The next day Daryl, Shane, T-Dog and Andrea are loading up to go look for the other three. They hear a car coming down the dirt road and look up to see Hershel's Suburban. They pull up to a stop in front of the house, everybody running out to greet them. Rick hugs Carl and Lori, Maggie runs out bypassing her dad to hug Glenn. Hershel heads towards the house, "Patricia, prepare the shed for surgery."

Phoenix gets out of the truck coming to face, surprisingly Daryl, "You aight?"

She nods, "Fine." She smirks as she glances back to the truck, "Can't say much for him."

"Who the hell is that?!” T-Dog asks.

"Randall." Glenn says.

Everyone looks in the truck at the kid, Shane gives a look to Rick.
Everyone meets inside to have a meeting. Phoenix is standing by the door listening when Daryl walks in standing next to her. Carol looks over at him and smiles before looking away. Phoenix nudges his shoulder, raising her eyebrows and looking between he and Carol with a smile, he rolls his eyes at her, but there is a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Just gonna let him go? He knows where we are." Shane says bringing them back to the conversation.

"He was blindfolded the whole way here. He's not a threat." Rick says.

"Not a threat. How many of them were there? You killed three of their men, you took one of them hostage, but they just ain't gonna come looking for him?"

"I'm sorry Rick, but I'm with Shane. They're gonna come lookin' for him." Phoenix chimes in.

"They left him for dead. No one is looking." Rick tells them both.

"We should still post a guard." T-Dog offers.

"He's out cold right now, will be for hours." Hershel adds.

"You know I'm gonna go get him some flowers and candy." Shane scoffs heading for the door. "Look at this, folks—we back in fantasyland."

Hershel follows him, "You know, we haven't even dealt with what you did at my barn yet. Let me make this perfectly clear, once and for all—this is my farm. Now I wanted you gone. Rick talked me out of it, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. So do us both a favor—keep your mouth shut."

Shane shakes his head before storming out the door. Rick walks over to Hershel, "Look, we're not gonna do anything about it today. Let's just cool off."

Everybody takes off to do their own things.
So after a week of healing they decide it's time to take the kid out and turn him loose.

Phoenix gets up putting on a pair of black Wrangler jeans, her brown boots, a green tank top and a three-quarter sleeve white western shirt. She's just finishing braiding her hair when Rick approaches her.

"Hey."

"Hey boss." She says with a smile.

"Look, I know we didn't see eye-to-eye on saving the kid and bringing him here. But thank you for still standing behind me."

"You're welcome. Rick, my problem wasn't with savin' the kid. I would save anybody I came across if I could. My problem is his group. I have a really bad feelin' about all of this."

The two of the them meet up with Shane, they toss the kid in the back of Shane's car, blindfolded and wearing headphones attached to Phoenix's iPod blasting loud rock music. They head towards town, the agreement is to take him 18 miles out and turn him loose.

At a four way stop, Rick stops the car and gets out, Shane follows him. Phoenix opens her door and stands outside leaning against the back of the car enjoying the fresh air. The two men walk out a little ways ahead of the car, their close enough for her to still hear them, so she stays on alert, her gun ready to back up Rick if needed.

"I thought we were going further." Shane asks.

"We are. 18 miles out."

"So why are we stopping?"

"I wanted to talk. Been waiting a week till we were gonna do this. I just want to talk."

"We don't need to."

"We do."

"No, man, we don't. We're doing this. I get it. He was passed out when y'all brought him back, doesn't know where the farm is."

"That isn't what I need to talk to you about." There's a long pregnant pause before Rick speaks
again. "I heard what really happened at the school." Rick sighs. "Was it to survive?"

Shane doesn't speak for a while, he licks his lips thinking. "Yeah. One of us wasn't gonna make it out. It had to be him. One shot to the leg, Carl lives. Reality is... he had no business being here. Or there. Whatever."

"You don't think I would've done it?"

"No, man, I know you wouldn't have."

"You don't think I can keep Lori or Carl safe?"

"I didn't say that."

"Or my baby? Is it gonna have to be me, too?"

"Rick, you can't just be the good guy and expect to live. Okay? Not anymore."

"I'm not the good guy anymore. To save Carl's life, I would've done anything. Anything. Now Lori says you're dangerous, but you're not gonna be dangerous. Not to us, not to me, not anymore."

Shane stares at the ground, Rick sighs, "How about you look at me?" Shane looks up meeting Rick's eyes. "You and Lori—I get what happened. When I figured it out—and I figured it out pretty quickly—I wanted to break your jaw, let you choke on your teeth. But I didn't. That wasn't weakness. It took everything. That is my wife. That is my son. That is my unborn child. I will stay alive to keep them alive. You don't love her. You think you do, but you don't. Now the only way you and me keep on... is that you accept everything I just said right here, right now, and we move forward with that understanding."

The two of them nod, Rick heads back towards the car, stopping when Shane starts to talk. "When it started, it was just—it was a couple of weird stories on the news. Then it was so quick. Everything—it just happened. Two weeks later I'm in the hospital and there were soldiers shooting people in the halls. They were shooting people, man, not walkers. Then the walkers came through. You know, I tried to get you out. I tried, but we weren't gonna make it. Man, there was no way and I knew it. But I couldn't live with it. I couldn't live, knowing—but I had to. I didn't keep Lori and Carl alive, man. They kept me alive. I want you to know that I didn't look at her before that. Brother, if I could take it all back, I would."

"I wanna check the ropes." Rick says before going over to the back hatch with Phoenix.

Randall grunts as the bag is ripped off his head. He stares up at the three of them as they check to see the ropes are still tight. "It's all good." Rick says putting the bag back on.

They start out again, Shane staring out the passenger window.

"We've gotta start using our knives more." Rick says, "If there's one walker, we use our knives. We keep things quiet. We save ammunition. We need dry goods ahead of the winter—warm clothes, fuel. Maybe we get a break. You gotta think the cold effects them. If it doesn't kill 'em, its gotta slow 'em down. The second week of January last year, we got all that snow and ice. My cousin got stuck on 85 for 24 hours. Sitting in his car with a birthday cake for his girlfriend at Georgia Tech. He just sat and ate the birthday cake and listened to the "Lord of the Rings" book on tape. We get lucky, we get the same winter as last year. By December, it's a different world. Safer. Maybe we find some snowmobiles to make runs."

"Yeah, sounds good." Shane replies but his voice his hollow. He looks over at the mileage gauge
noticing its at 18.7 and climbing. "It's more than 18."

"Yeah, I'm looking for a place."

"A place for what?"

"Give him a fair shake. A shot."

Phoenix can see the irritation on Shane's face, she rolls her eyes at his childish nature.

"There." Rick says pulling into the parking lot of the Mert County Department of Public Works. The three get out of the car surveying the landscape. The two men walk over to the fence. "This'll do. We'll leave the boy here, scavenge some supplies. Psst. Over there."

From around the backside of a bus comes a walker towards them, growling. Shane pulls out his hand-gun, cocking it.

"Wait," Rick tells him grabbing his knife. "Like I said." Rick cuts his finger, sliding the blood over the fence.

The walker drops to his knees licking the blood from the fence, Rick takes his knife plunging it through the walker's forehead.

"Gun's quick, easy, but other ways to do this. One more. Your turn."

Shane turns to see another walker coming up to the fence. He pulls out his knife, killing the walker. Afterwards they cut the lock on the fence, opening the gate up, the two head inside to check out the area while Phoenix stays with the prisoner.

They find the burned bodies of walkers, as well as two guards who became walkers, but not from a bite. They appear to have been turned from a scratch. After they return, Rick opens the gate and Shane drives the car inside the perimeter. They open the back and pull the kid out. They take him over to an open spot between a bus and a fire truck, putting him on his knees they yank the bag from his head. Then the tape from his mouth and from his ears that are holding the headphones in, as Phoenix pockets her iPod.

"What the hell is this?" The kid asks when he can see.

The three say nothing but head back to the car. "Oh, come on, don't be stupid." He calls after them. "I owe you guys. I can help protect what you've got. Why would you save my life just to kill me by leaving me here? One guy—one guy can't make it alone. That's why I was with those dudes—I was alone." Rick pulls out a spare knife, tossing it to the ground for the kid to retrieve and cut himself loose. "Don't be stupid! I'm not like them! I'm just some guy! I used to watch football and screw around on the internet. I lived with my mom! I lost her like you lost people. I went to school with Maggie, for God's sake!"

That made the three stop in their tracks, sharing a similar look of 'oh shit!' They turn around to stare at the boy as he pleads his case, which everything he's saying isn't helping him at this moment.

"I went to church. I rode the bench on varsity baseball."

They stride back over to the boy. "You went to school with Maggie?" Rick asks.

"Did you go to school with Maggie?" Shane reiterates before the kid can answer Rick.
"Answer the question!" Phoenix screams angrily. "Did you go to school with Maggie?!

The kid backpedals realizing he said the wrong thing. "I—it—she didn't know me. Didn't know I existed. I mean, I knew her. I knew who her dad was."

The three of them walk away from the kid again, as he continues to plead. "I would never do anything to hurt her or her family."

"Jesus," Shane says rubbing his hands over his head in frustration.

"Or you! Or your people! I'm not like the guys I was with!"

Shane whispers to the two of them, "He knows where the farm is, Rick. Where we are. He knows. Say he finds his way back to his people…"

Shane pulls out his gun and turns firing a shot, but it's deflected by Rick who grabs Shane's hands. "Shane, no!" The bullet hits just to the left of the kid, Rick tosses Shane to the ground. "Not now. Just not now."

Shane sits up his back resting against the car behind him as he breaths deeply, "Well, when, Rick? When?"

Rick kicks Shane's gun away from him, "When I've had a chance to think about it."

"Don't let him kill me. Please, don't."

"Shut up!" Rick yells, angry evident in his voice.

Phoenix walks over to him, stopping his pacing. He looks up at her, confusion filling his face. "What do we do boss?"

"We're going back. It's a man's life. I need a night to think it through."

"You're gonna bring this piece of garbage—this piece of garbage who—he shot at you, Rick. He ran with men who tried to kill you. You gonna bring him back to where Lori sleeps? To where Carl sleeps?" Shane yells, his voice rising in volume with every word.

"He'll be locked up in the barn. Unless you bust it open." Rick says reminding him of the earlier incident.

Phoenix steps back letting these two figure this out, or duke it out if that's what it takes.

"Oh, don't start that shit."

"I'm taking the night."

"Man, you take that—you think on it, Rick. Keep—keep struggling with it. It ain't that hard, man. The right choice is the one that keeps us alive. It's always the same with you. It's like the first moment—it's whenever you're put to the test."

"Stop acting like you know the way ahead, like you know the rules. There are no rules, man. We're lost."

"No, no, no, man. I know exactly where I am."

"You don't know shit anymore."
"I don't think you can do it, Rick."

"It's my call."

"I don't think you can keep them safe."

Sure enough, the blows start. Rick swings at Shane but he grabs Rick's arm trapping it against his body. He punches Rick in the face and shoves him to the ground grabbing Rick's gun from it's holster. Rick knocks the gun from his hands, punching him across the face twice, before Shane grabs him close and slams him onto the truck lid of the car behind them. The two continue trading blows back and forth for a good five minutes.

Phoenix meanwhile is watching the kid crawl towards the knife on the ground. She contemplates letting him reach it, if only to teach these two grown men a lesson. They needed to quit their bitching and fighting like a couple of schoolgirls and focus on the problem at hand.

Shane grabs hold of the gun he dropped earlier, he raises it aiming at the kid. Rick tackles him at the last moment, which was a good thing as Phoenix had her gun drawn and ready to shoot Shane. The two of them fall to the ground still trading blows, until Rick gets the upper hand, hammering Shane with three hard blows to the face.

Rick stumbles to his feet, "You are not doing this! You don't get to make these calls anymore. I won't let you."

Shane picks up a large pipe wrench, used by firemen to open fire hydrants. He yells before throwing it at Rick, just barely missing him and smashing through the window behind Rick who drops to the ground on a pile of junk.

The three of them freeze as they hear the telltale sign of a walker growling. It breaks what's left of the window and falls out immediately going for Rick. He grabs it by the neck and wrestles it down into the pile, then stabs it in the head until it's dead. More walkers start growling tumbling out of the window. Rick pulls the dead walker's body on top of him masking his scent, it works as the walkers head straight for Shane.

Phoenix runs for the car but just as she gets the back door open, she feels something tearing at her hair. She turns to find a walker behind her, her braid wrapped around its long yellow nails. She knows it's too close for her rifle so she tosses it in the back seat and reaches for her knife in her boot, she didn't want to attract anymore. But every time she reached down towards her boot the walker got closer to her, she couldn't reach the knife without letting the living corpse close.

She kicked out her right leg, the satisfying sound of snapping bones greeted her ears as the walker fell to its knees, its left leg bent at an unnatural angle beneath it. Phoenix yelped as the grip on her hair intensified, the walker pulling her to the ground. She fell on top of the walker, its snapping teeth just next to her ear. She rolled off the body, clawing at the pavement trying to get away enough for some leverage. The walker grasps her left boot, it's too thick for the teeth to penetrate and too slick for it to really hold onto. Phoenix manages to knock the walker back enough for her to grab the knife in her right boot.

The walker throws its body weight down onto her, Phoenix braces the knife in her hands directly in front of her face. She closes her eyes as the sound of her knife piercing the skull of the walker
assaults her ears. Then she feels the blood and brain matter spattering onto her face, she turns her head to the side to avoid it running into her nose or mouth. Using all her strength she rolls the walker's prone body off of her, she opens her eyes greeted by the sight of her knife hilt deep in the walkers eye socket like it was a sheath. She pulls out her bandana wiping some of the disgusting liquid from her face, then after pulling her knife from the skull she searches to find the others.

Shane meanwhile runs into an abandoned bus slamming the door shut behind him, the walker's crawling over one another to get to him.

Phoenix picks off as many as she can but they just seem to keep coming.

Rick finds himself trapped under the body of a walker he shot, now he has two more walkers trying to reach him and the only thing between them is a dead body. He shoots the second one in the head, it fall son top of him as well. The third Rick finds he can't shoot due to the fact that he can't get a shot of the walkers head and try to keep it from clawing him. Finally realizing his opening, he shoves his gun into the mouth of the walker on top of him and pulls the trigger three times, hitting the third walker in the head, it drops to the pile.

He rolls the three of them off of him and stands up looking for the other two.

Shane is fighting with all his strength to keep the door to the bus shut. He pulls out his knife, slicing the palm of his hand open he rubs the blood on the doorframe by the opening. "You want some of that?!" He slams his knife down in the head of a walker, killing it, the body thuds to the ground and Shane laughs. "Oh, shit."

Rick stands up coming to face the kid as he tries to run past him. "Stop!"

"Holy shit." The kid tries to run away but Rick is faster, grabbing him by the jacket collar, he wrestles him to the ground. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"What did you expect me to do? Please, just let me go, man. That's what you came here for. I'm not gonna tell anyone anything."

"Shut up." Rick grabs Shane's gun off the ground.

"You want to stay here? Help the guy that just tried to bash your head in?"

Rick looks to the bus, the thought of leaving Shane to die was tempting considering the circumstances.

"There's 10 roamers there. You think you can take that on?" The kid asks him. "They don't see us. We can get out of here." He sees Rick isn't gonna leave without Shane. "Fine. Fine! But let me have a gun. I'll help you. I'll show you."

"Let's go." Rick says moving towards the car. "He did this. We're going."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you."

Shane watches from inside as Rick takes off with the kid. He realizes that his best friend just left him there to die.
Phoenix is by the car as she sees Rick approach, "I tried to take them all out but I was attacked. I'm low on ammo and they just keep comin'." She sighs.

Rick nods understanding, "Are you okay? Were you bit?"

"No I'm fine, just covered in walker brain matter, no biggie."

Rick smirks at the grossed out look on her face as she wipes off more of the walkers liquid. He shoves the kid away from him, "Stay there." He looks down at the two bodies he and Shane were looking at earlier. He kneels down taking their guns and what ammo he can find on them. Suddenly a thought comes to his mind as he stares down at the bodies. His gaze turns to Phoenix and her eyes shift back between the dead cops, it suddenly comes to her what Rick is thinking. She nods to him letting him know she's on board.

Shane kills another walker but as it falls, his knife gets stuck in the walkers skull and he loses it. Suddenly he hears someone yell his name, he looks out the windshield to see Rick and Phoenix leaning out the car windows as the kid drives the car. The two of them open fire on the walkers, Rick yelling out, "Shane! Go for the back door!"

Shane gives a smile and runs for the back door of the bus, he kicks it open and jumps through the open window of the car into the backseat with Phoenix. The kid backs up smashing a walker's head, then floors it breaking out of the locked gate and speeding down the road.

"Whoo. Yeah. Hell yeah. You see that? You see what we did?" The kid shrieks in joy as he drives.

"Just keep driving," Rick says his gun in his hand ready to use.

They stop down the road a ways, Phoenix places the iPod back in the kid's ears, Shane gags him and Rick drags him to the back of the car. He shoves him inside the back and bags his head once again, not taking chances. The three of them stand at the back of the car panting.

Rick turns to his friend, "If you want to kill me, you're gonna have to do better than a wrench. Probably gonna have to kill that boy. But I am gonna think about it a night. It can't be that easy, killing someone, killing anyone. You know that." There's a pregnant pause before Rick speaks again. "That is my wife. That is my son. That is my child. If you're gonna be with us, you gotta follow my lead, you gotta trust me." Another long pause, "It's time for you to come back." Rick hands Shane is gun as a show of trust. The three of them get back in the car heading back for the farm.

Phoenix wishes now she had been sitting on the right side of the car, maybe then she'd have seen what Shane saw. Maybe then she could have said something, instead of Shane keeping silent. Maybe she could've prevented the horror that was headed their way.
Phoenix stands in the back corner of the small shed on Hershel's property. They decided it was time to get some information out of the kid before they could fully decide what to do with him. So of course they sent Daryl in, and Phoenix to stand watch, make sure the hunter didn't kill the kid. Phoenix laughed as she thought about being asked to make sure he didn't kill the kid, when in reality she was the one they should have been worried about. This kid being here put everyone in danger and she knew if his crew came looking for him, it would be very bad for their group.

But she trusted Rick, so for the time being she stood in the corner by the door watching Daryl beat the kid to a pulp, which internally made her smile.

Right off the bat Daryl didn't like Randall. Something in his gut told him that this kid was no good and that not much better could be said about the group he came from. His intuition, he found, was dead on as he was given the task of interrogating the little bastard. Daryl was out in the shed with Phoenix for several hours as he worked to pry and dig for answers. For a majority of the duration, Randall had done nothing but waste Daryl's time, causing the redneck to grow agitated. His patience was running out.

This time when Daryl hit the kid he knocked the kid right off the chair sending him to the ground. He continued to hammer him with right crosses, the kid trying to catch his breath in between spiting out his teeth, figuratively of course.

"I told you—"

"You ain't told me shit!" He grabbed the kid setting him upright against the wall.

"I barely knew those guys. I met 'em on the road."

"How many in yer group?"

The kid shakes his head like he doesn't know the answer, that is until Daryl pulls his buck knife from its sheath at his waist.

"Uh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Come on, man."

Daryl slams the knife down in the wood between the kids legs, leaning in he growls at the kid. "How many?"

The boy was frightful of the redneck's wrath, and squirmed beneath his grip. He was nervous as hell as he finally broke down and gave in to the Redneck. "Uh, 30. 30. 30 guys."
"Where?"

"Uh…" Daryl rips the bandage off the healing wound on the kid's leg, it sticks to the wound causing immense pain as it's ripped off. The kid screams, "I don't know. I swear. We were never anyplace more than a night."

Daryl sticks the tip of the blade inside the healing wound, "Scoutin'? Plannin' on stayin' local?"

"I don't know. They left me behind."

"Did you ever pick off a scab?"

Phoenix must have a profoundly sick sense of humor because she can't hide the smirk that stretches across her face while watching Daryl torture this kid. A part of her can't help it, Daryl is in his element, it's hot.

"Come on, man! I'm trying to cooperate."

"Start real slow at first. Sooner or later, you just gotta rip it off."

"Okay. Okay." The kid stammers, "They have weapons—heavy stuff, automatics." He stammers again as Daryl moves the blade in the wound. "But I didn't do anything."

"Yer boys shot at my boys, threatened my girl, tried to take this farm. You just went along for the ride. You're tryin' to tell me yer innocent?"

Phoenix wasn't sure she caught that right out of Daryl's mouth, she heard it but wasn't sure she heard it correctly so she just dismissed it. Daryl hated her.

"Yes!" The kid sighs exasperatedly. "These—these people took me in. Not just guys—a whole group of 'em." Daryl stands up staring down at the kid as he rambles on. "Men and women, kids, too—just like you people. Thought I'd have a better chance with them, you know? But, we got out, scavenge—just the men. One night we—we found this little campsite. A man and his two daughters—"

Phoenix's heart dropped to her stomach, she didn't have to hear to know what was coming next. She could feel the bile rising, taste it at the back of her throat just threatening to release itself. She sank to the floor sitting on her heels, her back against the wall as she breathed deeply suddenly very lightheaded. The more the kid said, the more she could picture what had been done to her over three months ago.

"Teenagers, you know? Real young. Real cute." Daryl had his back to the kid but after hearing that he turned to face the kid. "Their daddy had to watch while these guys, they—And they didn't even kill him afterwards. They just—they made him watch as his daughter—They just—just left him there." The kid realizes the look on Daryl's face, he hears the woman whisper, "Son, you should've kept yer mouth shut."

He glances from her up to the angry man in front of him. "No, but—but—but I didn't touch those girls. No, I swear I didn't to—"

It was heavily hinted that they men in his party often slaughtered the men of survivors they came across, while leaving the women alive to rape and abuse. This angered Daryl more than anything. He stood stiff, his brows narrowed as his eyes pierced into Randall while he silently listened to the boy go on. Phoenix immediately came to his mind first. The thought of some scum pig bastard laying their fingers upon her... Daryl had heard enough and kicked the kid as hard as he can. The
kid pleads with him, "Please. You gotta believe me man. I'm not like that. I ain't like that. Please. Please, you gotta believe me."

Daryl chances a glance over at Phoenix, which he shouldn't have done. Seeing her sitting on the floor, the look on her face and the visions started flashing in his head of those men doing the same things to her. All he sees now is red. Daryl lashes out kicking the kid in his injured leg, he quickly clenched his hands and brought his right fist firmly across the boy's face. He pulled back and swung again. Over and over as the thoughts played through his mind. He could not get his hands upon the entire group of men that were responsible for such monstrous acts and so he took it out on the next best thing; Randall.

After several long minutes of beating the teen until he was unconscious, Daryl takes Phoenix's hand, helping her up off the floor and they exited the shed. He notices she has gained back some of her color and her emotionless mask is back on. His eyes met with hers, his features a bit rough. His hands were bloodied, his knuckles having been made raw from all of the punching he had done. He averted his eyes from her, his right hand moving to rest upon the strap of his crossbow, which was slung over his back. "I shouldn't have went that far." He stated with the raise of a brow. The unsaid question hung in the air almost as if he was hesitant about her seeing him like he had been. As if she would judge him for being so cruel in his beatings to the boy. Which was unusual to him, as he generally never cared what others thought of him.

The entire time listening to the kid speak, rage boiled in Phoenix's blood, she looked up as she heard Daryl fall silent. Was he going to stop? Storm out? She certainly hoped not. He had taken on the ability to beat the kid into oblivion if he wanted to and at that point... Phoenix almost wished she could've been given such a gift.

Phoenix relished the sound of the boy's whimpers and pleas. As if they were the most exotic aphrodisiac, she closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the wall behind her for a few moments as she clutched one of her bandanas in her hand, along with a large bottle of water. She never thought she'd love such a brutal sound so much.

After a short time, the noise stopped. She could hear Daryl collecting his things and turned her head as he approached her and held out a hand to her. Phoenix glanced over at Randall, limp on the floor, bloodied and broken. Good. She took his hand as he lead her outside.

Phoenix's head perked up at his words, she turned to her hunter, she heard the unasked question he was inquiring about. At first, Phoenix didn't pay heed to the question, merely observing his aversion from her piercing blue eyes. She leaned over slightly, catching his line of sight and forcing him to meet her gaze. She froze a moment, noticing his inner turmoil. Her own gaze told him not to be ashamed.

She looked down a moment, opening the bottle of water and pouring some on the bandana. She squished the excess out of it before motioning to him.

"Give me your hands a moment, D." She said, her tone much more calm and soothing than intended.
Daryl leaned back a little as she leaned towards him to get a look at his face, a little uncomfortable at how she had forced him to look at her that way. Though by doing so it allowed the hunter to see her curious eyes as they searched his. He lowered his head a moment, his eyes moving to stare at the dirt beneath his feet as he waited to hear whatever opinion she had. To willingly take whatever lecture she threw at him. But Daryl was surprised, for no words of scolding came from her. Instead the woman gently asked for him to show her his hands, as she dampened the cloth in her grasp.

He raised his head quickly, as he stared at her in confusion for a split second. As if he had never been asked such a thing before in his life. He glanced down at his hand, which was still firmly wrapped around the strap of his crossbow, before returning his hues to meet hers. This was nothing he had happen before. Growing up with his childhood, he never had anyone to take care of him or nurture him. Daryl seemed hesitant, but slowly lowered his hand from its place around the strap and extended towards her. He moved almost as if he was cautious, his right brow was slightly raised and his eyes were narrowed as he watched intently and curiously as she began to clean off his hands. All the while occasionally removing his sights from her working hands to stare at her when she wouldn't notice.

He looked like a deer trapped in headlights for a moment. Phoenix's brave gaze never faltered, letting him know she could be trusted with such a simple task. She reached out as he extended his hand to her; nimble, soft digits curling around his own calloused ones as she began to dab away the blood. She took her pouty bottom lip between her teeth as she concentrated solely on the wounds that formed in the wake of his rage. Now and then, her silken thumb would accidentally stroke against the hardened, stiff flesh of his palm and her eyes would falter.

"My Dad told me somethin' a while back. Before the breakout." She murmured in a tone that was hardly above a whisper. Her eyes were more focused now, as though talking about her father was a totally foreign concept to her. "He told me that the innocent were to be protected at all costs... cause we never knew when they wouldn't be around anymore." Her voice trembled somewhat as she remembered those words; trying hard not to let her emotions rise to the surface.

She proceeded to pour a bit more water over his wounds before she did her final dabbing. Phoenix met his eyes bravely when she finished and ran her bubblegum tongue over her parched bottom lip before speaking one last time.

"Randall is not an innocent. He is a liability." It took her a moment to realize she was still holding onto the hunter's hand. She pulled it back; as though burned from his touch. "You have every right to be proud of the mess you made of him."

Daryl watched in silence as she began to dab at his bloodied knuckles. The feeling of her gentle and smooth fingers of the hand that held his felt unusual to him. He had never held hands with anyone before and this had to be the closest he probably ever would get to doing such a thing. His crystalline hues were focused intently upon the hand that washed away the blood, watching as they
worked delicately around his open wounds. His eyes quickly moved to her face when her voice broke the surprisingly soothing silence that had surrounded them. He listened quietly as she shared with him what her father had once told her and could hear the struggle in her voice. It was evident, even to him, that this man had been an extremely important figure in her life. He squinted his eyes, his expression smoothing as she finished, realizing exactly what she was doing by telling him this. This was her way of letting him know that she backed him up on what he had done.

She lifted her head to meet his gaze as she stated that Randal was a liability. He searched her eyes thoughtfully for a moment before she suddenly jerked her hand from his. This caused him to slowly pull back, his head lowering to look at his cleaned knuckles, examining them, before returning his hand to the strap of his crossbow. "We better go tell Rick what we found out."

Phoenix nodded following him up towards the camp. They had only taken a few steps before Daryl stopped, turning to her. "As long as he's here, I want you to stay with me, don't leave my sight."

"Sure Dixon." She said with a laugh while rolling her eyes.

He quickly reached out grabbing her elbow in his vice like grip, spinning her to face him she saw his eyes, cloudy with emotions, some she had never seen in him before. Anger, nothing new there, but now she saw fear. He was scared about what would happen to her.

"I mean it! You heard what he said in there. Until he's gone and I know we're safe, I want you in my sight at all times!"

"Okay—okay, Daryl." She makes sure she has his eyes locked on her. "I promise. I won't leave yer side."

He nods letting her go as he starts up towards the camp, behind him Phoenix follows rubbing her elbow, she can feel the bruise forming on her arm under her long sleeve shirt already.

The others are having a meeting about what is going to be done about the kid. Rick looks up to see Daryl and Phoenix walking up to the camp. "We'll know soon enough."

Daryl's carrying his crossbow on his back, his right hand holding the strap, his knuckles broken open and bleeding. "Boy there's got a gang, 30 men. They got heavy artillery and they ain't looking to make friends. They roll through here, our boys are dead. And our women, they're gonna— they're gonna wish they were."

"What did you do," Carol asks glancing at his torn up hand.

"Had a lil chat."

Carol turns and walks away, Phoenix rolls her eyes at the woman, didn't anyone understand the severity of what he just said.
"No one goes near this guy." Rick tells the group.

"Rick, what are you gonna do?"

He turns to his wife, "We have no choice. He's a threat. We have to eliminate the threat."

Of course, Mister Moral Dale has to add in his two cents. "You're just gonna kill him?"

"It's settled. We'll do it today."

Rick turns to leave and Dale follows him, still pleading the kid's case. He wanders up the hill to where Daryl is camped by the edge of the woods by the broken stone hearth. He glances at Phoenix who is laying on the ground watching Daryl make his new bolts.

He looks up to see Dale coming and scoffs, "Oh! The whole point of me comin' up here is to get away from you people."

"Gonna take more than that." He glances at the woman. "Look's like you don't want to get away from everyone."

"I'm his prisoner," Phoenix smirks. "I have no choice."

"Carol send you?" Daryl asks already knowing the answer.

"Carol's not the only one that's concerned about you, your new role in the group."

"Oh, man, I don't need my head shrunk. This group's broken. I'm better off fendin' for myself." He reaches for his jacket and vest off the hearth.

"You act like you don't care."

"Yeah, it's cause I don't."

"So live or die, you don't care what happens to Randall?"

"Nope."

"Then why not stand with me, try to save the kid's life, if it really doesn't matter one way or the other?"

"Didn't peg you for a desperate sumbitch."

"Your opinion makes a difference."

"Man, ain't nobody lookin' to me for nothin'." He helps Phoenix off the ground, she grabs her bow as they head towards the woods.

"Carol is, and I am. Right now. And you obviously—you have Rick's ear."

"Rick just looks to Shane. Let him." Daryl turns back, Phoenix stays where she is having nothing to say on the Randall matter.
"You cared about what happened to Sophia… cared what it meant to the group. Torturing people? That isn't you. You're a decent man. So is Rick. Shane is different."

"Why's that? Cause he killed Otis?"

Dale's face drops, "He tell you that?"

"He told some story—How Otis covered him, saved his ass. He showed up with the dead guy's gun. Rick ain't stupid. If he didn't figure that out, it's cause he didn't wanna. It's like I said—group's broken."

Dale watches the two hunters take off into the woods, before he heads back down to the house.

The two of them walk deep into the woods, side by side, each covering their own side.

"Dale's right you know."

Daryl gives her a sideways glance.

"You are a decent man. Every bit as good as Rick and Shane, sometimes yer better. Neither of them fought as hard as you to find Sophia. That tells me everythin' I need to know about you. And Rick does look to you, he listens to you, more than you realize."

After a while of silence Phoenix notices out of the corner of her right eye Daryl keeps biting the inside of his cheek, a tell that he's thinking hard about something. After several minutes of watching him do it, she decides to ask what's bugging him, but he beats her to it.

"What happened to you before you met up with us?"

That was the last thing Phoenix expected him to say, so naturally it caught her off guard. She searched for the right words, trying to make it sound less worse than it was. She couldn't fight the fact that she liked Daryl and the last thing she wanted was to lose him. But she knew the only result of telling him what was done to her, was him walking away from her, she knew he would and now there was no way to avoid it.

"I was by myself, on the way to Atlanta and I was ambushed by a group of men. They took their time, using me for whatever got them off and then they left me for dead. I healed, found them and killed each and every one, slowly and painfully. Nothin' more to say."

Daryl grabbed her arm halting her, "That ain't all. I know you well enough to know that what they did to you wasn't enough to break you. Yer too strong for that to defeat you. So somethin' else happened that made you react the way you did to the kid's words earlier. Now what happened?"

"Nothin'. Now let it go Dixon. " She yanked her arm out of his grasp and turned to walk away. Daryl wasn't having that, he dropped his bow, grabbed her wrist this time, knocking the bow from her hand. She turned to swing at him, but he grabbed her free hand before she could and turned her around slamming her up against a tree, her arms pinned above her head. She was calm, pissed off but calm. Until she felt Daryl's fingers brush against the small of her back.

"Daryl! No, please don't! Please, I'm beggin' you, don't. Please, Daryl!"
The hunter ignored her pleas determined to find out what she was hiding. He grasped the bottom of her shirt pulling it up to her neck exposing her entire back. What he found was an intricate Phoenix tattoo covering her back. The wings spread across her shoulder blades, and the long tail stretched down her spine to just above her pants. It was detailed with orange, red and white, it was beautiful. He felt her go lax in his hands, her head dropping and her shoulders sagging.

He looked closely at the tattoo, it was broken in certain spots by light pink colored lines that crisscrossed over her entire back. He followed one long scar around her right side to her stomach. It was then Daryl realized what else had been done to her and he felt sick about what he had done to find it out. He now knew why like him, she didn't show off her back much, especially when people were close, that's when you could really see the scars.

He released her hands, she stayed where she was letting them fall to her sides. "Happy now?" Her tone made him feel worse, he watched her carefully pull the shirt back down. "They whipped me. When I cried, when I screamed, when I fought back. Anythin' they didn't like, I was punished for it."

"Rayne. I'm-"

"Save it Dixon." She leaned down picking up her bow and heading into the woods. He sighed running a hand over his head knowing he had fucked up anything that was starting between them, he picked up his bow and followed after her.

When the sun started to go down they headed back to the house, everyone gathered inside for a meeting about the kid's fate. Daryl stands against the wall next to the door, Phoenix leans opposite him on the wall to his left. She can see him out of the corner of her eye glancing over to her, she hasn't said a word to him since what happened in the woods. And she doesn't plan on speaking to him anytime soon.

"So how do we do this?" Glenn asks looking over at Rick. "Just take a vote?"

"Does it have to be unanimous?" Andrea wonders.

"How bout majority rules?" Lori offers.

Rick steps forward, "Well, let's just see where everybody stands then we can talk through the options."

"Hell the way I see it, there's only one way to move forward." Shane tells the group.

"Killing him, right?" Dale snaps eyeing Shane. He can't believe the people he's with, how could they do something like this. "I mean, why even bother to take a vote? It's clear which way the wind's blowing."

"Well, if people believe we should spare him, I want to know."

"Well, I can tell you it's a small group—maybe just me and Glenn."

The kid glances up at Dale, his face saying it all. "Look, I think you're pretty much right about everything. All the time, but this—"
"They've got you scared."

"He's not one of us. And we've—we've lost too many people already."

Dale glances over at Maggie and Hershel, "How about you? Do you agree with this?"

"Couldn't we continue to keep him prisoner?" Maggie asks Rick.

"Just another mouth to feed." Daryl tells her.

"It may be a lean winter." Hershel explains.

"We could ration better." Lori offers.

"Well he could be an asset. Give him a chance to prove himself."

"Put him to work?" Glenn suggests.

"No, we're not letting him walk around." Rick tells them.

"We could put an escort on him." Maggie says.

Shane scoffs, "Who wants to volunteer for that duty?"

"I will." Dale pipes up, of course he would.

"I don't think any of us should be walking around with this guy."

"He's right. I wouldn't feel safe unless he was tied up." Lori says backing up her husband.

"We can't exactly put chains around his ankles, sentence him to hard labor." Andrea chimes in.

"Look, say we let him join us, right?" Shane tells them all. "Maybe he's helpful, maybe he's nice. We let our guard down and maybe he runs off, brings back his 30 men."

Both Daryl and Phoenix nod agreeing with Shane.

"So the answer is to kill him to prevent a crime that he may never even attempt? If we do this, we're saying there's no hope. Rule of law is dead. There is no civilization."

"Oh, my God," Shane spouts off.

"Could you drive him further out?" Hershel asks. "Leave him like you planned?"

"You barely came back this time." Lori tells them. "There are walkers. You could break down. You could get lost."

"Or get ambushed." Daryl throws in.

"They're right. We should not put our own people at risk." Glenn says.

Patricia speaks up, "If you go through with it, how would you do it? Would he suffer?"

"We could hang him, right? Just snap his neck." Shane says.

"I thought about that." Rick replies. "Shooting may be more humane."
"And what about the body? Do we bury him?" T-Dog asks speaking for the first time.

"Hold on, hold on." Dale says. "You're talking about this like it's already decided."

"You've been talking all day, going around in circles. You just wanna go around in circles again." Daryl tells him.

Dale looks to Phoenix who hasn't said a word, pleading with his eyes. She shakes her head, "I'm sorry Dale. You know where I stand. If it was up to me, I'd have shot him as soon as we found him. I know what men like the ones he's with are capable of." She glances sideways at Daryl. "I won't let that happen to anyone here."

"This is a young man's life and it is worth more than a five-minute conversation. Is this what it's come to? We kill someone because we can't decide what else to do with him? You saved him and now look at us. He's been tortured. He's gonna be executed. How are we any better than those people that we're so afraid of?"

"We all know what needs to be done." Shane says softly.

"No, Dale is right." Rick says. "We can't leave any stone unturned here. We have a responsibility —"

"So what's the other solution?" Andrea asks.

"Let Rick finish." Lori says with a look to Andrea.

"We haven't come up with a single viable option yet. I wish we could." Andrea continues.

"So let's work on it!" Dale yells.

"We are." Rick tells him.

"Stop it. Just stop it." Carol speaks quietly. "I'm sick of everybody arguing and fighting. I didn't ask for this. You can't ask us to decide something like this. Please, decide—either of you, both of you—but leave me out."

"Not speaking out or killing him yourself—there's no difference." Dale tells her.

"All right, that's enough. Anybody who wants the floor before we make a final decision has the chance." Rick says stepping back and looking to the group.

No one says anything which leaves Dale to speak up again. "You once said that we don't kill the living."

"Well, that was before the living tried to kill us." Rick tells him matter-of-factly.

"But don't you see? If we do this, the people that we were—the world that we knew is dead. And this new world is ugly. It's… harsh. It's a survival of the fittest. And that's a world I don't wanna live in and I don't believe that any of you do. I can't. Please. Let's just do what's right." He's almost near tears as he looks around. "Isn't there anybody else who's gonna stand with me?"

"He's right." Andrea says earning everyone's attention. "We should try to find another way."

"Anybody else?" Rick asks, but there are no other objections.

Dale looks around at them, tears shining in his eyes. "Are y'all gonna watch, too? No, you'll go
hide your heads in your tents and try to forget that we're slaughtering a human being. Whoa. I won't be a party to it." He makes his way to the door, as he passes by Daryl he stops. "This group is broken."

Phoenix heads outside to her truck to grab a few things, she hears someone behind her and assumes it's Daryl, pissed cause she left his sight.

"I can't believe you're okay with this."

The huntress rolls her eyes her head dropping backwards. "Dale, we've been over this. You know where I stand and that view is not goin' to change."

"Why not? What has this kid done to you that makes you so eager to kill him."

"I know his kind, if he gets free, he's runnin' straight back to them. And when they return, you don't want to know what will happen to us all. I have seen it first hand and I don't want that for anyone here."

"And what proof do you have?"

Phoenix sighs then takes off her shirt. Dale takes in every mark and scar covering her chest and stomach, then she turns around and he see the ones on her back.

"I took in a stray. He told me I could trust him. Next thing I know, he leads me back to his group. I went through hell for a week before they left me for dead. Now I will not take the chance of what happened to me, happenin' to any a these women. I couldn't live with it on my conscious, could you Dale?"

Like most people who saw scars like that, Dale was speechless. Phoenix pulled her shirt back on as he walked away. Shortly after she heard footsteps again, "Oh, don't tell me you're gonna try again."

"Why didn't ya tell me the truth?"

Phoenix turns to find Daryl behind her, she sighs, "I can't do this."

"Do what?" He says looking at the ground.

"Pretend to hate you. Cause I don't and I probably never will. Daryl you are honestly the only friend I have in this world anymore. You understand me better than anyone. And I like you."

His head snapped up at that, he stared at her waiting for her to finish.

"But I knew that as soon as you saw those scars, I would lose you. No man wants to be with a woman covered in scars. I'm beyond damaged, physically and emotionally. No man wants to be with a damaged woman. You deserve better. The things that I went through, they changed me. I may never be like I used to before. I'll always bare those scars. I push you away because I'm afraid. Afraid of history repeatin' itself, and it's not just what that group did to me. That was just physical. It's what happened before, how I ended up on my own."

He jumped up onto the tailgate of her truck, patting the seat beside him. "I got all night. Why don't ya explain it to me."
She pulled herself up next to him, she sat for a moment biting her lip.

"Please don't bit yer lip like that." She heard the strained voice, it was the same as he used in the room when she was recovering.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It's just—I like it when you do it. But I don't think now's the right time to be jumpin' ya in the back of yer truck."

They both smiled, sharing a laugh. That eased Phoenix's mind, so she went on with her story. "When this whole thing started, I was with my fiancé John. Us and six of our good friends, three couples. Randy & Tanya, Nick & Cassie and Tony & Janet. We were makin' our way towards Atlanta, in the middle of the night Cassie disappeared. I went to find her but there was no trail or anythin'. A few more days passed then Tanya disappeared the same way. Then Janet after that. I knew somethin' was wrong but by the time I figured out what had happened it was too late.

There was a group of walkers followin' us the entire time. And the guys had been leavin' the girls behind as bait while they escaped. I was the last one left. We were almost to Atlanta, when the walkers caught us again. I don't remember what happened, but I woke up with my leg in a bear trap. I realized my fiancé had done as the others had and left me behind to save themselves. But he forgot I was different than the other girls. I killed the first walker that came at me, stabbed it in the head with my knife. Then I pulled it over me and hoped it masked my smell from the others. It worked. After it wa clear I released my leg from the trap and pulled myself up into a high tree. My leg was bleedin' profusely and my tibia and fibula were fractured. I knew I wouldn't get far, so I splint them as best I could and spent the next month livin' in the tree, survivin' on whatever came my way which wasn't much.

After I was sure I healed, I headed for Atlanta. The guys were never very smart as they left behind my bow and my backpack. I followed the GPS tracker straight to my truck inside an abandoned warehouse. I found them all inside laughin' about how they had got away, how it was a good idea to sacrifice the girls cause they couldn't have made it alone. Did they have a shock when I showed up. I quickly shot three bolts into Nick, Randy and Tony's heads. John pleaded with me sayin' it was nothin' personal, the other guys told him he had to do it. I let him ramble himself to tears and then I shot a bolt through his skull.

I decided from then on, I couldn't trust anybody. If my own fiancé could do that to me, what would someone else do. I don't mean to make you pay for what he did to me, I just can't take the chance of bein' hurt like that again. I'm sorry Daryl."

She hung her head, twisting her fingers in her lap. He sighed before lightly hugging her to his side, shocked when she didn't flinch at the contact.

"I would never do that to anyone, let alone someone I cared about. You're not the only one with scars and a past they'd like to forget. But what happened to us then, makes us stronger now. I don't expect you to trust me right now, I haven't earned that, but I hope someday I can. You're about the only reason I'm still here. You and I, we're two of a kind. I will not let anyone hurt you again. You watch my back, I got yours."

Phoenix lifts her head smiling at this new sweet side to the moody redneck.

"Hey you two, it's time." They both turn to find Rick watching them from the porch.

"Guess that's our cue. Come on Dixon."
"Is there anyway I can get ya to call me Daryl all the time?"

"Maybe, we'll have to see."

He smirks, shaking his head as they head for the shed with Rick and Shane. Daryl grabs the kid and together they shove him towards the barn.

"It's all gonna be over soon," Shane tells the kid as he wraps a blindfold around his eyes.

"What's gonna be over soon?" He asks.

"Relax."

"Would you like to stand or kneel?" Rick asks him as he pulls out his gun holding it at his side. It was only fair to give the kid a choice in something.

Daryl kicks the kid in the back of the leg dropping him down to his knees.

Rick to the three of them, they share the same nod. "Do you have any final words?"

The kid sobs, pleading for his life as Rick raises the gun to his forehead. But before he can pull the trigger, Carl walks in through the open barn door. Rick is so preoccupied he doesn't see him until he hears, "Do it, Dad. Do it."

Shane walks over to Carl, "Are you kidding me? What'd I say to you? What did I say to you?" He drags Carl outside by his arm, Rick lowers the gun, "Take him away. Take him away."

Daryl grabs Randall by his shirt, "Get up." He drags him back to the shed followed by Phoenix, but not before she notices the deer skeleton sitting in the corner of one of the stalls. She whispers to herself, "So that's where the skin and entrails went."

Rick turns to look at his son, as Shane storms out the barn door. Rick goes back to the group telling them that their keeping him in custody for now. Andrea says she's gonna find Dale and let him know. Lori meanwhile tells Carl to go inside, she gives Rick a look of why and he tells her that Carl followed them and wanted to watch.

Phoenix and Daryl are sitting on the tailgate of her truck, she's showing him the case of spare arrows she has and where she keeps it so he can use them and not have to make anymore.

Abruptly they hear screaming, the two look at one another and jump down with their bows in hand running towards the sound in the pasture. They come across a walker tearing Dale's stomach open. Daryl tackles the walker off of him, stabbing it in the head. Phoenix comes to Dale's side looking down at his open stomach. He meets her eyes knowing there is nothing she can do.

"Help! Over here!" Daryl screams as he kneels next to Dale's body. "Help run!"

"Hang in there, buddy." Daryl tells him.

The rest of the group runs up, Rick kneels down on the other side from Phoenix, she shakes her head when he gives her a pleading look, there's nothing she can do for him. Hershel reaches them, he explains there is nothing they can do.

Andrea and Lori are at his sides with Phoenix, he looks up meeting each of their eyes. "Dale." He looks to Phoenix, "I'm sorry bout what I said earlier. Can you forgive me?"

He gives her a small smile and a nod. His moans get louder, Andrea watches him, "He's suffering.
Rick pulls out his gun as Shane softly tells him, "Come on." Even Shane doesn't want this to happen but it has too.

The group struggled. Tears and fear welled in their eyes as they held each other and turned their faces from the horrific sight. Rick's hand moved to his pistol as he slowly removed it from its holster, his eyes bearing a pain that no one could even begin to imagine comparing to. Daryl glanced over at their leader and he knew all too well that, even Rick could only handle so much. The weight on his shoulders was crushing him and if he did this it would only add to the burden he carried. In silence, Daryl slowly extended his hand, his fingers moving to curl around the upper portion of the gun, as his eyes met with Rick's. The two stared at one another in a mutual understanding, before Rick willingly stepped back and allowed the Redneck to take his gun from him.

Daryl swallowed, his face blank as he lowered himself to his knee, being sure to be as respectful and delicate as well as the situation allowed him. His eyes traveled to rest upon Dale's face, his expression turning to a sorrowful one as he cocked the gun and aimed it at his head. Dale's eyes meet Phoenix's as she stayed by his side holding his hand, he nods lifting his head and pressing it against the barrel of the gun. Daryl's voice was soft as he spoke, "Sorry, brother." BANG.
Shane and Andrea sit in the cab of the truck, flying down the back roads. Phoenix sits in the back in between Daryl and T-Dog. She still has on her clothes from last night, she glances down at the drops of Dale's blood that spatter her clothing. She kept hearing Rick's words from the ceremony today running through her head.

"Dale, could get under your skin. He sure got under mine, cause he wasn't afraid to say exactly what he thought, how he felt. That kind of honesty is rare and brave."

The truck stops, they get out to repair parts of the perimeter fence. Daryl and Phoenix providing coverage with their bows.

"Whenever I'd make a decision, I'd look at Dale. He'd be looking back at me with that look he had. We've all seen it one time or another. I couldn't always read him, but he could read us."

They moved to the woods, Daryl and Phoenix leading the way. Daryl whistled as he found a trail heading up a small incline.

"He saw people for who they were. He knew things about us—the truth, who we really are. In the end, he was talking about losing our humanity. He said this group was broken."

They ride up in the truck finding several walkers ahead of them, they jump out.

"The best way to honor him is to un-break it. Set aside our differences and pull together, stop feeling sorry for ourselves and take control of our lives..."

Daryl and Phoenix drop two walkers with a bolt to the head. T-Dog smashes one in the head with a hammer.

"...our safety..."

Andrea drives a pitch fork through the throat and up into the head of another.

"...our future. We're not broken. We're gonna prove him wrong."

Shane smashes one with a shovel, as Daryl takes out another with a bolt, Phoenix following his lead, she draws her Kukris from her back slicing one of the walker's heads in half from ear-to-ear.

"From now on we're gonna do it his way. That is how we honor Dale."

They take out the remaining two walkers, Andrea stabs one in the head with the pitchfork and then they take turns kicking the other one, releasing their aggressions, until Shane splits the walker's
head open by smashing it with a shovel.

Daryl had stationed his tent back with the others a few days prior and was on his way to it when they had returned. His crossbow was strapped over his back and he was thankful for that night that he had spent making a dozen of new arrows, and the case of extras Phoenix had shown him, because they would definitely be needing them. His hand was at its usual place around the strap as he strolled across the lawn, passing by the members of their group as they gathered around the camp in various spots to prepare for lunch. His eyes moved in different directions as he silently observed each of them, only to stop as they rested upon Phoenix, who was seen at the back of her truck. She seemed preoccupied as she tried to deal with something that seemed to be wrong with her hand. Daryl half paused in his step as he noticed this before quietly making his way over to her out of curiosity.

Upon approaching her, he quickly noted the blood that had stained the palm of her hand and could clearly see a gash positioned diagonally across it. She was trying to take care of it herself and Daryl felt compelled to return the favor that she had done for him last night. He squinted his eyes as he silently reached over, intruding but without a care, as he grabbed at her hand. Though he did it surprisingly gentle as he examined her wound more closely. "Ya ain't supposed to be clumsy like the rest of 'em." He quipped, though it was evident he was only joking with her. He released her hand from his hold and dug into his back pocket, where he removed a red bandana.

Ignoring the stares she would most likely be giving him, Daryl returned his hand to hers, lifting it up higher and closer towards him as he began to clean at her wound, much like she had done for him, only with much less grace.

Phoenix watched as Daryl put an end to Dale's suffering. Brother. Dale's shocked face could barely comprehend all that was going on. The innocence splayed on his face only furthered Phoenix's memories of her discussion with him about Randall. Naivety was not a good trait to have around these parts. Dale was an idiot and went out on his own. As much as the young huntress wanted to call him an idiot for doing something so stupid, she couldn't. All she could do was bow her head as she felt those painfully familiar tears sting her eyes. One actually managed to trek from the corner and trickle along the alabaster flesh of her cheek, only to fall from her chin and become forgotten in the sea of blood and gore on the ground.

"Son of a bitch." Phoenix mumbled to herself as she bit into the short fabric, attempting to tie it around her hand. Sure, she was a skilled fighter. She'd even gained kudos from T-Dog, Shane and Andrea herself on her skills after she had finished off a walker who was coming up behind the trigger-happy blonde. Though she barely cared for the last, she was proud enough to have made a bit of a name for herself.

But even the strongest warriors had their wounds. Phoenix's came from a stray nail in one of the boards of the wooden fence when she hopped it to attack a walker. Of course, she had done her best to hide it from the group. It was a decent-sized gash, but it was nothing she couldn't handle on her own.
She glanced over when the hunter approached her; a bit of the fabric still clench between her teeth as she tried to tighten it around the wound.

"Hi." She muffled out against the cloth, grunting slightly as she proceeded with the garment.

But it was when Daryl had bravely reached out to grasp her hand that her eyes had gone slightly wide in shock. She stared at him as he revealed the gash and began tending to it properly, murmuring something about her clumsiness. A breath of a laugh escaped her and a hint of a smile played upon her lips.

"Ya. But every superhero has an off day, right?" She replied, studying his movements and noting his poor attempt to be as graceful as she. "Ouch!" She hissed when his fingers brushed over a tender spot near the wound, almost tempted to jerk her hand back from him.

The Redneck made no effort to respond to her superhero comment, but instead silently continued to clean her wound, only to stop half a moment when she had hissed at him as he accidentally brushed a calloused finger across a portion of her cut. He mumbled out an apology, "Sorry..." before he finished wiping the blood off. His eyes shifted to meet hers as she studied him, his hands moving to wrap the red rag around her hand, before his eyes returned to watch what he was doing. He tied the red material snug to her palm before lifting his hues to rest upon her again, where he noticed that she was still gawking at him curiously. But that wasn't just it. There was more to it. There was more behind her gaze that he couldn't quite put his finger on, because he had never had anyone look at him in such a way before.

Hearing his apology startled her, having never heard such a phrase exit his lips before. Phoenix's eyes traveled to the work he was doing now and then, but those cerulean orbs couldn't seem to pry away from the concentration riddling his features. That little twitch he got in the corner of his mouth when he was faltering and the look in his eyes when he finally clashed their hues together. Her mind was off the pain by now; only settled firmly upon the heat behind his touch and the way he displayed his soul in the surface of his gaze for her to search.

She wanted to open her mouth; to say her thanks... but no words formed upon her lips. Instead, she was caught up in the moment of realization. He was... handsome. Something she had never bothered to outright acknowledge before.

Her tongue drew along her bottom lip somewhat, then nibbled it slightly as she ignored her urges to lean in just a little further.

It was new to him and he didn't exactly fancy it. It made him uncomfortable, but for reasons he didn't understand why. The Redneck awkwardly removed his hand from hers, as if he was shying
away from her as he ripped his sights from her to look at her wrapped hand that he gestured to. "You should be more careful next time." He bravely returned his blue orbs to hers for a second, before he quickly took a few steps back from her before turning his backside to her completely as he stalked off to escape the unbearable feeling of being suffocated.

Phoenix had opened her mouth to reply, but he had left before she'd had the chance. So, she merely sat; stumped and speechless for the first time in her life. While she watched his back retreat, she gulped hard; eyes wide, chest now heaving as though she'd run a marathon and her heart beating so hard against the marrow bars of her ribcage that she was almost positive it would burst through and plop into her hands.

"I'll try." She murmured before she forced herself up and got back to work.

Rick sighs, "It'll be tight, 15 people in one house."

Hershel waves his hand, "Don't worry about that. With the swamp hardening, the creek drying up…"

"With 50 head of cattle on the property, we might as well be ringing a damn dinner bell." Maggie finishes her father's thoughts.

"She's right. We should've moved you in a while ago."

Shane looks away at Hershel's words. Rick gives out the orders, "All right, let's move the vehicles near each of the doors facing out toward the road. We'll build a lookout in the windmill, another in the barn loft. That should give us sightlines on both sides of the property. T-Dog, you take the perimeter around the house. Keep track of everyone coming and going."

"What about standing guard?"

"I need you, Daryl and Phoenix on triple duty."

"Gotcha."

"I'll stock the basement with food and water, enough that we can all survive there a few days if need be." Hershel says walking past with an armful of supplies.

"What about patrols?" Andrea asks.

"Let's get this area locked down first. After that, Shane will assign shifts while me, Phoenix and Daryl take Randall offsite and cut him loose."

"We're back to that now?" Shane asks giving Rick a hard look.

"It was the right plan first time around. Poor execution."
"That's a slight understatement."

"You don't agree, but this is happening. Swallow it. Move on."

"You know that Dale's death and the prisoner—that's two separate things, right? You wanna take Daryl and Phoenix as your wingmen, be my guest."

"Thank you." Rick says walking away.

"You got it." Shane leans on the truck, biting his thumb, he looks over to catch Lori's eyes from the other side of the truck.

They all head up towards the house once things are packed into the vehicles. Hershel walks alongside Rick, "I see why you're not taking Shane with you. Just know I've got no more patience where he's concerned."

"He's turning over a new leaf. Andrea. The woman in front of them stops. "When I'm out with Daryl and Phoenix, help Hershel keep an eye on things around here."

"Me?"

"Shane's got a way of letting things get out of hand, especially when he's all torqued up."

"I think we're all a bit torqued up at this point."

"If you're staying here permanently, he's got to understand that's it's what Rick and I say, not whatever he wants." Hershel tells her.

"You've become close." Rick says as to why he's asking.

"We talk."

"Then you know he's not a bad guy. He's just his own worst enemy."

"You want me to babysit Shane?"

"I need to make sure every time I leave the farm all hell doesn't break loose."

She tilts her head, "Then maybe you should stop leaving."

"Will you keep an eye on things?"

"Of course."

The group gets working on unloading their things into the house. Shane heads out to start on the lookout spot on the windmill. Daryl is patching up a hole in the side wall of the shed, on top of the eve, where Randall is being kept.
Phoenix meets up with Rick and Daryl on the porch, a map in front of them on the railing. "Take him out to Senoia—hour there, hour back, give or take. We may lose the light, but we'll be halfway home by then."

"This lil pain in the ass will be a distant memory. Good riddance." The two hunters smile at Daryl's quip.

"Carol's putting together some provisions for him, enough to last a few days." Phoenix lets them both know.

Rick looks up as Shane drives up the road, he turns to Daryl. "That thing you did last night—"

"Ain't no reason you should do all the heavy lifting." Daryl says squinting in the light.

Rick holds up the map asking the two hunters, "So are you good with all this?"

"I don't see any of us trading haymakers on the side of the road. Nobody'd win that fight." He turns to see Shane walking up, "I'm gonna take a piss." Phoenix takes her leave as well to see how Carol's coming along.

Daryl and Phoenix are loading up the truck when T-Dog comes down. "Only got so many arrows." He hands the hunter a gun which he takes looking it over, "Is that Dale's gun?"

"Yeah."

"Wish I knew where the hell mine is." He says putting the gun in the back of his waistband.

Rick walks up, "Ready?"

"Yeah," the two answer.

"I'll get the package." T-Dog heads to the shed to retrieve Randall, only to find the kid missing, his unopened cuffs laying on the floor. He runs back up grabbing the others and bringing them back down. They all look around wondering how the hell the lil fucker got loose.

Suddenly from out of the woods runs Shane, his nose is broken and he's covered in blood from his nose to his chest. He says the kid's armed with his gun, snuck up in him and clocked him in the face.

Rick steps up, "Alright Hershel, T-Dog, get everybody back in the house. Glenn, Daryl, Phoenix come with us."
Shane calls out, "T, I'm gonna need that gun."

"Just let him go," Carol tells them. "Just let him go. That was the plan, wasn't it, to just let him go?"

"The plan was to cut him loose far away from here, not on our front step with a gun." Rick tells her.

"Don't go out there. Y'all know what can happen." Carol calls out after him.

"Get everybody back in the house. Lock all the doors and stay put!" Rick yells.

The five of them head into the trees together, Shane directing them. "I saw him head up through the trees that way before I blacked out. I'm not sure how long."

"He couldn't have gotten far. He's hobbled, exhausted."

"And armed." Glenn reminds Rick.

"So are we." Rick retorts.

"Can you track him?" Rick turns to the two hunters.

"No, I don't see nothin'." Daryl tells him.

Phoenix shakes her head, "Me either."

"Hey, look, there ain't no use in tracking him, okay? He went that way. We just need to divide up." Shane tells them forcefully. "We spread out, we just chase him down. That's it."

"Kid weighs a buck-25 soaking wet. You tryin' to tell us he got the jump on you?" Daryl says looking skeptically at Shane.

"I'd say a rock pretty much evens those odds, wouldn't you?"

"Hey alright, knock it off. You and Glenn start heading up the right flank. Me and Shane'll take the left. Phoenix you take the middle. Come here for a second." Rick pulls her off to the side out of Shane's hearing, "I hope you're as fast and silent as you say you are."

Phoenix nods, she knows what he means, she looks to all of them. "Pay attention all a you, if I get shot I'ma be pissed, and you don't wanna see that side a me."

The five of them split up, Phoenix staying as close to Rick as she can without Shane noticing. It gets dark quickly and soon it's hard to see more than a few feet in front of you.

Daryl stops in his tracks, "This is pointless. Give me a light." Glenn hands him a flashlight, he
takes it pointing it to the ground in front of them. Daryl groans, "Come on."

At the other side of the woods Phoenix is following a good twenty yards behind Rick and Shane, lucky for her, the slight wind is pushing their voices back to her. Rick is following behind Shane carefully watching his every move.

Back with Daryl, Glenn notices something as he follows the hunter, "We're just back to square one."

"If you're gonna do a thing you might as well do it right."

"There's two sets of tracks right here." Daryl tells Glenn motioning with the flashlight. Shane must've followed him a lot longer than he said."

Something nearby catches Daryl's attention, "There's fresh blood on this tree."

He moves the flashlight to the ground, "There's more tracks. Looks like they're walking in tandem."

They follow the tracks forward, "Yeah, there was a lil dust up right here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, something went down."

"This is getting weird."

"Had a lil trouble." Daryl reaches down grabbing the tie from Randall's eyes.

They hear a rustling behind them and they both duck behind a couple of trees. Glenn peaks out from behind the tree seeing a walker a couple yards from them. Daryl whistles to get the young man's attention, he tosses him a flashlight. They both glance out from behind the trees, the walker starts heading their way. Glenn hesitates and the walker knocks Glenn to the ground. Daryl shoots and misses, the walker attacking him, knocking Daryl down, the only thing between the two is the crossbow.

Glenn stands up rushing the walker, he grabs him around the chest. Daryl pops the walker in the mouth, knocking him back on top of Glenn. The young kid rolls the walker off of him and stabs him in the head. Daryl shines the flashlight down at the corpse, it's Randall.

"Nice," Daryl says patting Glenn on the stomach.

He picks up his crossbow as Glenn pulls the blade from the walker's skull, a nice squelching sound is heard as it comes out.
"Does this way feel right?" Rick asks Shane as they head up a small hill.

"As right as any."

"Snatched your gun, huh?"

"Yeah. It's my favorite piece, too. Gonna wish he'd—wish he killed me when I find his sorry ass."

"Go on," Shane says letting Rick take the lead.

"Got his neck broke," Daryl says as he looks over Randall's body. He rolls the body over searching for bite wounds. "He's got no bites."

"Yeah, none you can see."

"No, I'm tellin' you he died from this."

"How's that possible?"

The two of them share a look before Daryl stands up and pulls his arrow from the tree, he leaves, Glenn following behind.

The two men finally reach the edge of the woods, they walk out into an open field. Phoenix pauses at the edge of the woods behind a large tree, she notices the farm house just off to their left.

"You say he got you with a rock?" Rick asks.

"That's what I said."

"Inside the shed?" Shane doesn't answer so Rick keeps going. "Cause the door was shut when T-Dog rolled up."

"I saw that, too. Must've slipped through the rafters in the roof."

Rick stays with his back to Shane, he holsters his weapon and that's when Phoenix raises her bow. Just barely hidden by the tree, she trains on Shane, one twitch and she'll put an arrow in his head.

"So this is where you plan to do it?"

"It's as good a place as any."

"At least have the balls to call this what it is—murder. You really believe if you walk back onto that farm alone—no me, no Randall—"
"I want you to hush up."

"You really believe they're gonna buy whatever bullshit story you cook up?"

"That's just it. It ain't no story."

The two of them have traded positions now, so Phoenix fades further into the shadows so Shane cannot see her.

"I saw that prisoner shoot you down. I ran after him. I snapped his neck. It ain't gonna be easy, but Lori and Carl—they'll get over you. They done it before. They just gonna have to."

Shane exhales deeply, raising the gun on Rick.

"Why?" Rick's voice is strangled with emotion. "Why now? I thought we worked this all out."

Shane laughs, "We tried to kill each other man. What you think? We was just gonna forget about it? We gonna ride off into the sunset together?"

"You're gonna kill me in cold blood? Screw my wife." He spats vehemently. "Have my children—my children—call you daddy? Is that what you want? That life won't be worth a damn. I know you. You won't be able to live with this."

By now Rick had maneuvered Shane with his back again to the woods.

"What you know about what I can live with? You got no idea what I can live with, what I live with! You wanna talk about what I can do, Rick? How about what you can do?" Shane places his gun in the front of his waistband, holding his arms out to his sides. "Here I am. Come on, man. Raise your gun."

"No. No, I will not."

"What happened, Rick? I thought you weren't the good guy anymore. Ain't that what you said. Even right here, right now, you ain't gonna fight for 'em? I'm a better father than you, Rick. I'm better for Lori than you, man. It's cause I'm a better man than you, Rick. Cause I can be here and I'll fight for it. But you come back here and you just destroy everything! You got a broken woman. You got a weak boy. You ain't got the first clue on how to fix it."

Shane draws his gun again, "Raise your gun."

"You're gonna have to kill an unarmed man." Rick raises his hands out to his sides. "Watch my hand. Nice and easy." With his left hand Rick reaches down and pulls out his gun, "Easy does it." Rick holds the gun out to his left, "Now listen to me, Shane. There is still a way back from this. Nothing has happened here. We're gonna lay down our guns and we're gonna walk back to the farm together. Back to Lori. Back to Carl. Put this all behind us."

With every word Rick moves closer to Shane until they're face-to-face. Just as Shane grabs the gun Rick pulls out his knife stabbing it into Shane's heart, he grunts firing his gun in reaction to being stabbed.

"Shh." Rick says as he lays his best friend down in the field, Shane gurgling on his own blood. "Damn you for making me do this, Shane. This was you, not me! You did this to us! This was you, not me! Not me! Not me!" Rick pulls the knife out, "Not me!" The tears fall as Shane reaches for Rick, he holds his once best friend until his last breath.

He stays there kneeled next to his friend's body, wailing and crying. "Son of..." As Rick stands over his friend's body, Phoenix steps from her place behind the trees, slowly approaching Rick.
Rick looks up slowly, seeing Carl standing a few yards to his right, his face shocked. Rick stands up approaching his son, "Carl. You know... you should be back home with Mom." Carl's eyes don't falter from Shane's body, until he raises his gun towards his father. Rick can't believe his son is pointing a gun at him. "Just—just put the—put the gun down. It's not what it seems. Please."

Carl raises his gun to shoot but before he can fire, an arrow whistles through the air and embeds itself into Shane's head. Somehow Shane had become a walker and was coming to attack Rick and Carl. Rick takes his son into his arms as Phoenix walks over yanking her bolt from Shane's head. She smiles to herself whispering, "Been waitin' forever to do that."

She looks at the house just in the distance, not believing they were this close to it, so that's how Carl had found them. What they didn't know is that gunshot had attracted a hoard of walkers to their position.
Beside the Dying Fire

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Rick, Carl and Phoenix head back towards the house. What they don't see is the massive hoard of walkers coming across the field after them.

Inside the house Daryl and Glenn enter, the hunter looks around. "Rick and Shane ain't back? Phoenix?"

"No. None of them," Lori says worried.

"We heard a shot," Daryl says.

"Maybe they found Randall," Lori replies.

He shakes his head, "We found him."

Maggie steps up, "Is he back in the shed?"

"He's a walker," Daryl tells them.

"Did you find the walker that bit him?" Hershel asks.

"No, the weird thing is he wasn't bit," Glenn says.

"His neck was broke," Daryl confirms.

"So he fought back." Patricia says.

"The thing is, Shane and Randall's tracks were right on top of each other. And Shane ain't no tracker, so he didn't come up behind him. They were together."

"Would you please get back out there and find Rick and Shane and Phoenix, and find out what on earth is going on?" Lori asks as she approaches Daryl.

"You got it," he nods heading for the door.

"Thank you."
Outside the three are walking through the field to the house, Phoenix hangs back a few yards letting the father and son talk. Carl looks up at the blood covering his father, "You bit, too?"

"No."

"Shane was."

"That wasn't Shane. You know that."

"Used to be." There was a pregnant pause. "What happened? You guys attacked? I mean, I—I heard a gunshot, but I didn't see any walkers nearby. How did Shane die?"

The two of them stop facing one another, Phoenix stops as well wanting to stay back, but something gives her the chills, a sound, like a low moan. She turns around and is horrified by what she sees. She runs up to the two, "We have to go, now!" They look around and see that a herd of walkers is closing on them, they turn running for the house.

On the porch of the house Daryl, Andrea and Glenn stare at the herd coming towards them.

"We got to get to the house, tell the others." Carl says quietly.

"We'll never make it Rick." Phoenix tells them.

"Can't go around. Carl, stay close. Go!" Rick says leading the way, Carl in between the two adults. Phoenix pulls out her Kukris tossing her bow over her back, she slices the head off any walker that comes close to them.

The others have joined the three on the porch. "Patricia, kill the lights." Hershel orders.

"I'll get the guns." Andrea says taking off inside.

"Maybe they'll just pass, like the herd on the highway. Should we just go inside?"

Daryl looks over at Glenn, "Not unless there's a tunnel downstairs I don't know about. A herd that size will rip the house down."

The three of them reach the barn, shutting the doors behind them and wedging a wooden bar through it. They back up as the walkers pound and push on the door desperately trying to get in.
Up on the porch everyone is outfitting themselves with guns. Maggie hands one to Glenn to hold for her. "Maggie?"

"You grow up country, you pick up a thing or two."

"They got the numbers. It's no use." Daryl says looking out at the herd circling the barn.

"You can go if you want," Hershel tells him loading a shotgun.

"You gonna take 'em all on?" Daryl asks the old man.

"We have guns. We have cars." Hershel says racking the shotgun.

"Kill as many as we can, then we use the cars to lead the rest of them off the farm." Andrea tells them all.

"Are you serious?" Daryl asks looking at them like they've lost their minds.

"This is my farm. I'll die here."

"All right. It's as good a night as any." Daryl says dropping down over the railing onto the ground.

"All right, here we go. Get behind me." Rick tells the two as they pour gas over the barn floor. He looks over at the walkers trying to come through the walls. "Oh, shit. All right. Okay. Up there. Hurry."

He points up a ladder to the hayloft. "What about you?" Carl asks.

"I'll be right there. Drop the lighter when I say. We'll stop some of them from reaching the house and distract the others, so at least we'll have a chance. Hey, hey, hey look at me. You can do this. Carl… I love you."

"Come on Carl, he'll be right behind us I promise." Phoenix urges the youngster up the ladder.

Rick runs over yelling loudly to get the walkers attention, before he slides the bar out and opens the doors. He runs to the ladder, still yelling for them as he climbs up to the top. "Carl, now!" The boy lights the lighter and drops it into the frenzy of walkers. The floor explodes in flames, the walkers still trying to reach them up top.

Outside Daryl leads the way for the vehicles on his bike, he rides down to the fence by the barn shooting walkers with his hand-gun. T-Dog is driving the truck as Andrea shoots from the
passenger seat. Maggie is driving Shane's car as Glenn shoots from the passenger seat.

The walkers inside the barn are burning, all the while still trying to reach the three. They back out onto the ledge on the side of the barn.

The group keeps firing on the walkers killing all they can. Daryl rides over to Jimmy in the motorhome. "Must've been Rick, Shane or Phoenix that set that fire. Maybe they're tryin' to get out back. Why don't you circle around?"

They see the RV coming towards them, Rick yells for Jimmy to pull it in front of them. The three of them jump to the adjacent roof and onto the top of the RV. The walkers break through the door tearing Jimmy to pieces, as the three climb down the back ladder. Phoenix hits the ground her blades drawn as she slices two walker's heads in half across the ears. Rick jumps down beside her shooting three in rapid succession. They wait for Carl to climb down the ladder then run for the front of the RV, they can hear Jimmy inside screaming.

The three of them head around the back and for the woods as fast as they can.

Lori leads the women to the cars but Patricia gets ripped from Beth's hands by the walkers. Lori has to pull Beth away because of the grip Patricia has on her hand. T-Dog pulls up, Andrea ushers the two women inside then goes to find Carol.

Hershel is almost attacked by a walker from behind but Rick arrives shooting it just in time. The four of them run towards the suburban, Phoenix stops hearing a scream, "Get them out of here Rick."

He knows there is no arguing with her so he doesn't bother when she takes off, slicing her way through the walkers. Phoenix takes out every walker that heads after her, by now she's covered in blood head-to-toe. She hears a scream by the fence line and runs over finding Carol surrounded by walkers. She pushes the woman behind her as she decapitates the walkers coming near them.

Daryl who was sitting watching the barn burn hears Carol's screams and rides over on his bike. "Come on. I ain't got all day." Carol gets on, he turns to Phoenix, "I'ma drop her off up there and come back for you."

"No! Get her out of here." She stabs a walker in the head and decapitates another. "Go, Daryl!"

The look in his eyes is borderline heartbreak, "You better find me Rayne."

"I promise. Now go!"
She turns her back fighting off the walkers as they try to reach the bike. She turns running up the road following the bike. Fatigue is slowly setting in and her arms are pulsing with pain. She looks to the house making sure everyone is gone and is rewarded with the sight of her truck. She knows it's a long shot but she heads for it cutting across the field. She jumps over the fence towards the house, but as she lands her knee gives out beneath her.

She rolls over to find a walker bearing down on her and stabs him through the head at the last minute. The body falls on top of her, his blood soaking through her clothes, over her face and hair. She hears more coming and silently prays they won't find her.

An hour passes and the remaining walkers have spread out, mostly down by the barn. Phoenix sees a straight shot to her truck, only two walkers between her and it. She slowly rolls the dead walker off her and gets up, hobbling as quick as she can towards her truck. She takes out the first walker, slices half its head off and then takes out the second with a bullet to the face.

She pulls herself up inside, finding the keys in the ignition where she told everyone to leave them incase they needed to get away. Firing the truck up she pulls onto the drive heading for the highway, she knows they'll all meet there.

Rick, Carl and Hershel are the first to arrive at the spot on the highway. They wait for awhile and just as they are about to leave they hear a motorcycle coming. They look up to find Daryl and Carol on his bike, Lori, Beth and T-Dog jump out of the truck and Maggie and Glenn in the other car.

Rick shakes Daryl's hand, "Where did you find the rest of them?"

"Well, this guy's taillights zigzagging all over the road—figured he had to be Asian, driving like that."

Glenn smirks at Daryl, "Good one."

They find out who's here and who's not.

"Where's Rayne?" Daryl asks.

Andrea and Phoenix had yet to show up. A few people mentioned that the two had had their hands full with the infected the last time they had seen them. They felt that the two had surely died.

"We don't know, she was the last one to leave, if she left." Rick says.

"I'm going back." Daryl says getting on his bike amid protests. "We can't just leave her."

"We don't even know if she's there." Lori tells him.

"I'm not leaving without her," Daryl grinds out his jaw set.
Daryl seemed hesitant to obey this indirect order, but remained where he was as the others began to throw up ideas of where to go and what to do. As they talk about where to go, they hear a walker coming towards them, Daryl pulls out his crossbow. "Stay off the main roads. The bigger the road, the more walkers, more assholes like this one. I got him." Daryl lodges an arrow in his head, then pulls it out wiping it on the walker's shirt.

Once everything had been decided Daryl paused as he made his way back to the motorcycle, his eyes trailing off in the direction where Hershel's property would be. It didn't seem right to be leaving, but he knew that Rick was probably right. There was no point in Daryl making another Sophia journey out of this. All that did was lead to a long road of failures and disappointment. "Daryl…?" Carol's voice broke his train of thought. The Redneck turned his sights upon her and noticed that she was looking at him concerned. Daryl quickly wiped any worries he may have had on his expression and swiftly hopped upon his motorcycle before starting it up.

Just as they are ready to leave, a diesel engine is heard in the distance, everyone sighs in relief as Phoenix pulls her truck up next to them. She jumps down out of the cab looking like she bathed in walker blood. She exchanges hugs with everyone before she comes to face Daryl.

"I was startin' to think you'd broken yer promise." 

"Never gonna happen Redneck." She smirks and he returns it, shocking her as he pulls her in for a hug.

The reunion is short but sweet as they pile back in the vehicles heading towards the next challenge. A ways away from the spot on the highway they stop the cars, everyone getting out to discuss where to go from here.

Phoenix grabbed her camo hunting jacket, the liner inside was fleece keeping her nice and warm. Rick walks up to Daryl at the front of the line, the hunter eyes him, "You out?"

"Running on fumes."

"We can't stay here." Maggie says scanning the perimeter with her shotgun.

"We can't all fit in two cars." Glenn says stating the obvious.

"Sure we can," Phoenix tells them, "I can fit 6 of us in my truck includin' me, 5 people can fit in the car and Daryl has his bike. There's eleven of us not countin' Titan and he can ride in the back of my truck."

"We'll still have to make a run for some gas in the morning for the other car." Rick tells them as he looks around.

"Spend the night here?" Carol asks curling her thin sweater around herself.
"I'm freezing." Carl stutters out, Rick takes off his jacket giving it to his son.

"We'll build a fire, yeah?" Lori looks to her husband who nods in response.

"You go out looking for firewood, stay close. Only got so many arrows." Daryl tells them, "How you doin' on ammo?"

"Not enough." Rick tells him.

Phoenix steps up. "I've got more arrows for Daryl and me so don't worry bout that. And what I have for my guns is it for me."

Maggie sighs, "We can't just sit here with our asses hanging out."

"Watch your mouth." Maggie glares at her father, this is a fine time to be scolding her for cursing. "Everyone stop panicking and listen to Rick."

"All right, we'll set up a perimeter. In the morning, we'll find gas and some supplies. We'll keep pushing on."

"Glenn and I can go make a run now, try and scrounge up some gas." Maggie offers.

"No, we stay together. God forbid something happens and people get stranded without a car."

"Rick, we're stranded now." Glenn says.

"Oh for God's sake, we are not stranded, do y'all forget I have a big truck that runs off solar power. So long as there is sun in the sky I have a full tank. So will y'all please calm down." Phoenix looks around trying to calm them all.

"I know it looks bad, we've all been through hell and worse, but at least we found each other. I wasn't sure—I really wasn't—but we did. We're together. We keep it that way. We'll find shelter somewhere. There's gotta be a place." Things are taking a toll on Rick, he's starting to break and everyone isn't helping the situation by bitching.

"Rick, look around. Okay? There's walkers everywhere. They're migrating or something." Glenn says getting frustrated.

"There's gotta be a place not just where we hole up, but that we fortify, hunker down, pull ourselves together, build a life for each other. I know it's out there. We just have to find it."

"Even if we do find a place and we think it's safe, we can never be sure. For how long? Look what happened with the farm. We fooled ourselves into thinking that that was safe." Maggie looks around as she speaks.

"We won't make that mistake again," her father tells her.

Rick eyes the perimeter, "We'll make camp tonight over there." He points to a brick structure to their left next to the river. "Get on the road at the break of day."

"Does this feel right to you?" Carol asks Daryl as Phoenix shakes her head, she's sick of everyone questioning Rick.

"What if walkers come through, or another group like Randall's?" Beth asks Rick.

"You know I found Randall, right?" Daryl tells Rick, "He had turned, but he wasn't bit."
Phoenix locks eyes with Rick shaking her head, this was not going to be pretty.

"How's that possible?" Beth asks.

"Rick, what the hell happened?" Lori asks her husband.

"Shane killed Randall. Just like he always wanted to." Daryl tells her.

"And then the herd got him?" Lori questions trying to process what happened.

Rick pauses looking around at the entire group, "We're all infected." The looks around the group were all disbeliefing, every pair of eyes turned towards Rick. "At the CDC, Jenner told me. Whatever it is, we all carry it."

"And you never said anything?" Carol asks approaching him.

"Would it have made a difference?"

"You knew this whole time?" Glenn says.

"We both did." Phoenix interjects, she couldn't let Rick bear the brunt of this himself. "I heard Jenner when he said it."

"How could we have known for sure? You saw how crazy that mo—" Rick started only for Glenn to interrupt him, "That is not your call. Okay, when I found out about the walkers in the barn, I told, for the good of everyone."

"Well, I thought it best if people didn't know."

"Enough. All of you." Phoenix looks around at the group not believing their childish attitudes. "Rick didn't say anythin' and neither did I. What difference would it have made? Would y'all have fought so hard to stay alive if you knew there was no hope anyway? No matter how we die, we turn. How many of you would've chosen to end it right there? We have seen enough people die, so excuse the fuck out of me or Rick, if we didn't want the people we have come to care about and call a family to give up. After all he has done for you, you still don't trust him? Everythin' he has done has been to keep us all alive. He would give his life for any of you without a second thought, would you give yours for him? Before y'all jump down his fuckin' throat, why don't you put yourselves in his shoes for awhile."

Phoenix walked off towards the river, disgusted with everyone, while Rick walked a ways up the road. The rest of the group stood there taking in everything Phoenix said. After awhile Daryl went in search of Phoenix, he found her up the road standing on the river bank looking over the water.

"You come to yell at me? Tell me you hate me?" She didn't bother to turn around, she knew he was standing behind her.

"No. Rayne, I understand why Rick kept it from us, and why you did too. I'm not mad. You were right, they wouldn't have fought so hard to live if they had known." He could see the stiffness in her shoulders subside, so he stepped up beside her waiting until she looked at him.

She had attempted to wash all the blood off of her face but he could see she had missed a few spots. He grabbed his bandana out of his back pocket and leaned down dipping the tip in the water. She watched him carefully as he rose in front of her, raising the cloth to her face he was pleased when she didn't flinch at his touch. He proceeded to wash the left over spots of blood from her face, the entire time her eyes never strayed from him.
"You scared me you know." He looked up from her neck to see the surprised look in her eyes, he knew she didn't believe him, not that he blamed her. "When I got to the highway to meet up with everyone, and I noticed you weren't there… I—I was scared. I thought I had lost ya. I knew if somethin' happened to ya I was gonna blame myself."

She smiled before gently taking his hand in hers pulling it away from her face. "Daryl, I chose to stay back. Carol needed you more than I did at that time. I made a promise to ya, and I don't break my promises Daryl. You can't blame yourself for my choices, no matter how much ya think you're at fault." Her smile grew into a smirk as she eyed him, "You were really worried about me?"

He caught the glint in her eye and scoffed, "Shut up."

The two laughed as they walked back towards the group, the sun had set by the time they returned. Nix joined T-Dog on the top of the stone walls looking out into the woods, while Daryl collected firewood. The group sat on the ground huddled together trying to stay warm, as Daryl stoked the fire.

Carol turned to him whispering, "We're not safe with him—or her—keeping something like that from us. Why do you need them? They're just gonna pull you down."

"No. Rick's done alright by me. And Rayne—" He glances up at her with a soft smile. "She and I are a lot alike."

"You're his henchman and I'm a burden. We deserve better."

"What do you want?"

"A man of honor."

"Rick has honor."

Maggie turns to Glenn, "I think we should take our chances."

"Don't be a fool. There's no food, no fuel, no ammo." Hershel tells them before they hear a rustling of leaves, they all ask what it could be.

"Could be anythin'." Daryl says standing up pulling his crossbow off his back, he glanced up to see Nix already had her bow drawn and aimed. "Could be a raccoon, could be a possum."

"A walker." Glenn says as Rick steps back into the area cocking his gun.

"We need to leave. I mean, what are we waiting for?" Carol asks standing up with the rest.

"Which way?" Glenn said aiming his gun.

"It came from over there." Maggie tells him raising her gun as well.

"Back from where we came," Beth says.

"The last thing we need is for everyone to be running off in the dark." Rick tells them. "We don't have the vehicles. No one's traveling on foot."
"Don't panic." Hershel reminds his daughters.

"I'm not— I'm not sitting here, waiting for another herd to blow through. We need to move, now." Maggie says looking at Rick.

"No one is going anywhere."

"Do something." Carol snaps at Rick.

"I am doing something! I'm keeping this group together, alive. I've been doing that all along, no matter what. I didn't ask for this. I killed my best friend for you people, for Christ's sake!" The looks around the fire were unbelieving as Rick continued. "You saw what he was like, how he pushed me, how he compromised us, how he threatened us." Rick made a point to look down at Lori, Nix realized she had gotten pissed at Rick for killing Shane, the thought made her sick. "He staged the whole Randall thing, led me out to put a bullet in my back. He gave me no choice. He was my friend, but he came after me."

Lori hugged a crying Carl to her chest, the only eyes that weren't accusing towards Rick were Phoenix's and that's because she was there, heard what was said and knew Rick had no choice.

"My hands are clean." Rick takes a look at the people around him. "Maybe you people are better off without me. Go ahead. I say there's a place for us, but maybe—maybe it's just another pipe dream. Maybe—maybe I'm fooling myself again. Why don't you—why don't you go and find out yourself? Send me a postcard. Go on, there's the door. You can do better? Let's see how far you get."

Throughout Rick's entire speech, Phoenix noticed that not one person took the invitation to leave.

"No takers? Fine. But get one thing straight—you're staying, this isn't a democracy anymore."

Again no one made a move to leave, Rick walked away after that, leaving a speechless group behind them. Phoenix took this moment to address the group, "He's tellin' the truth. The group looks up to her. "Shane gave him no choice."

"How do you know?" Lori asks her, sarcasm and anger in her voice.

"Cause I was there. Rick knew what Shane had planned for him and asked me to follow them that night. I heard everythin' Shane had to say and if you'd like me to tell you all the disgusting details and put all your shit on blast Lori I'll be happy too." The woman dropped the glare she had Phoenix pegged with not needing everyone to know. "Shane drew on Rick, holdin' his gun right to Rick's face, even when Rick pulled out his gun and laid it down tryin' to work things out for the better. Shane gave Rick no choice, it was one or the other, only one a them was comin' back." She let them all process that information. "And if you want the person who finally put Shane down… it was me. I drove an arrow through his eye… and I smiled as I did it."

Phoenix could've cared less about the looks they gave her, or what they had to say. All that mattered was that Rick wanted her here and the second he didn't, she would be gone. She dropped down from the wall, "I'm gonna walk the perimeter." She wasn't talking to anyone in particular, just a general statement to the group. She found Rick just outside the brick enclosure, he gave her a small smile, "Thanks for that."

"You're welcome." She glanced back. "Don't worry, they'll come around."

He nodded as she walked off into the darkness, he knew he was lucky to have her on his side, at least someone understood everything he did.
If the group only knew what was on the other side of the river off in the distance on the other side of the woods, cloaked in darkness sat the sanctuary they had been searching for all along.
The majority of the winter was spent moving from house to house, staying only as long as they were allowed before the walkers came looking for them. It had been 8 months since the farm was overrun and things hadn't gotten any better with the group's moral. They had laid off of Rick though, mostly because none of them wanted to go toe-to-toe with Phoenix, and they knew if they started on him they would end with her.

Phoenix and Daryl had not separated much during the winter, in fact they became that much closer, finding more things to rely on one another for. Daryl was also getting closer to Carol as well. The two women were so different and yet both intrigued him in different ways. Only time would tell who his heart would trust to give itself too.

Lori was having a hard time, being 8 months pregnant was hard on her body, coupled with constantly moving around and she felt like she was going to drop dead. Surprising to her, Phoenix had began to take special care of her, always making sure she had enough to eat and drink. She had even given up her bed in her truck to Lori when it was warm enough to sleep outside, an air mattress was better than a hard floor.

Phoenix had given up in trying to keep the group at a distance, these people were now her family and she would fight to the death for them. It was only a few months into winter she insisted they call her Rayne, she said they had earned it. That came as a surprise to Daryl, knowing she didn't let anyone call her by her first name for fear of her getting attached to them. He was glad she had let down those walls, but proud that he was the first to earn that honor, not that he had given her a choice of course.

The back door to a house was kicked in, Rick, T-Dog and Daryl going in first and taking out the two walkers in the entrance. Rayne and Carl follow them in, everyone splitting up to clear the house. The young boy takes off behind his father, the Sheriff hat snugged tight on his head. Rayne took flank behind Daryl, clearing the rooms to the right of the door. Daryl reached for the door knob of a small door in front of him only for it to be opened from the other side. Rick stood behind it gun drawn as he looked at the two hunters before him, bows at the ready. The three of them nod at one another before they part ways, the two hunters making their way upstairs to clear the rooms, T-Dog following behind.

The others make their way in from outside, settling in the living room. The three come down from upstairs having found nothing useful, Daryl however was plucking the feathers from an owl he had
shot. Rayne sat on the floor beside him shaking her head lightly at the redneck as he quickly plucked the owl desperate for the meat inside.

Carl came into the room holding two cans of dog food which were promptly snatched from his hands by his father and thrown away. Rick knew they were all hungry, but he knew they weren't desperate enough to let his son start eating dog food.

Suddenly T-Dog got their attention from the window where we was posted, walkers were coming their way. They gathered up their things and headed out the back door Daryl leading the way to the cars and Rayne bringing up the rear. They loaded all their things up again, pausing for Maggie to grab a nearby axe and then taking off for somewhere else. During the winter they had come across a silver Dodge pickup truck, so they now had two trucks, the suburban, the car and the motorcycle.

They drove out of the congested neighborhood, stopping a ways down the road to look over the map. Beth was at the rear and Carl stood on point of the caravan keeping watch, Titan sat by the open door of the suburban where Lori was sitting in the front seat. Rayne had made him stay by the woman's side all winter and now he never left her side unless he was called by his owner.

"We got no place left to go." T-Dog observes the map carefully.

"When this herd meets up with this one, we'll be cut off." Maggie points out the circles they had drawn on the map of different herds they had come across as Rayne looked over her shoulder. "We'll never make it south."

"What would you say? That was about 150 head?" Daryl leans on the car next to T-Dog addressing Glenn on the opposite side.

"That was last week. It could be twice that by now."

"This river could have delayed them." Hershel pointed out. "If we move fast, we might have a shot to tear right through there."

"Yeah, but if this group joins with that one, they could spill out this way." T-Dog reminds them.

"So we're blocked?" Rayne says eyeing the map.

Rick steps forward, "Only thing to do is double back at 27 and swing toward Greenville."

T-Dog sighs straightening up, "Yeah, we picked through that already. It's like we spent the winter going in circles."

Rick nods, "Yeah, I know. I know. At Newnan we'll push west. Haven't been through there yet. We can't keep going house to house. Need to find someplace to hole up for a few weeks." He glances up at Lori sitting in the Suburban, they all know what he's thinking about.

"All right. Is it cool if we get to the creek before we head out? Won't take long. We got to fill up on water. We can boil it later."

"Knock yourself out." Rick tells T-Dog as the bigger man moves for the canteens.

Hershel explains to Rick that Lori can't take much more moving about, Rick knows that, but he's at
a loss of what to do about it.

Daryl steps up to him flanked by Rayne, "Hey, while the others wash their panties, let's go hunt. That owl didn't exactly hit the spot."

The three of them make their way into the woods, following a set of train tracks. They happen upon an open area to their right, the site before them stopping the trio in their tracks. Rayne blinks a few times, hoping to God she's not seeing things she hollers to the men. "Please tell me you two see what I see?"

"That's a shame," she hears Daryl say but she notices Rick has paused and is looking just like she is. Across the river below them is a prison, 30 or so walkers in the enclosed field, easily could be taken out.

"Are you thinkin' what I am boss?" As she sees the smile spread across Rick's face she knows he's right on her train of thought.

They go back up to the cars and grabs the others, the sighs of relief and joy are a welcome sound to them all. As they near the fence Rick pulls out a set of bolt cutters and clips the outside fence open, while Glenn and Rayne take care of the walkers that get too close. Once open Rick ushers the others inside the fence line, and Glenn closes the gap threading wire through it to hold it shut.

They make their way through the catwalk between the two fences, walkers from inside and outside slam the fences trying to get to them. Once they reach the front entrance gate they pause waiting for Rick to give out orders.

"It's perfect. If we can shut that gate, prevent more from filling the yard, we can pick off these walkers. We'll take the field by tonight." Rick points to a gate some 150 feet away by the guard tower that separates the yard and the courtyard.

"So how do we shut the gate?" Hershel questions.

"I'll do it. You guys cover me." Of course Glenn is the first to volunteer, he always is.

"No. It's a suicide run." Maggie tells him, not willing to have her boyfriend put in harms way.

"I'm the fastest." He argues, even though he knows he'll lose.

"No, you, Maggie and Beth draw as many as you can over there." He points to the right towards the prison. "Pop 'em through the fence. Daryl, go back to the other tower. Carol, you've become a pretty good shot. Take your time. We don't have a lot of ammo to waste. Hershel you and Carl take this tower. I'll run for the gate."

"Don't sound so depressed boss. I'm right behind ya." Rayne gives him a grin as she twirls her Kukris in her hands, her rifle and bow secured to her back.
Lori grabs the gate in front of them ready to open it on their mark, they have a bit of coverage right in front of them from a prison bus on its side. They make their way inside, Rick holding his gun out in front of him popping anything that gets close and Rayne is right on his heels slicing walkers heads in half. Daryl pegs a walker in the head from the far tower as it comes up behind Rayne earning a nod of thanks from her. Rick and Rayne slam to a halt as a shot hits the ground in front of them, they both look up at Carol as she yells out, "Sorry."

Rick runs for the gate, kicking a walker back inside he slams it shut securing it with the chain Glenn gave to him. Rayne covers his back taking off two walker's heads then smashing the skulls with her boots. She opens the door beside them to the tower, from behind her Rick shoots the walker inside as they make their way to the top. As they reach the top they hear Daryl yell, "Light it up!"

Rayne pulls her rifle off her back and together they all start taking out the walkers in the field. She turns to Rick, they both laugh as they realize that this crazy ass plan just worked.

They all meet up in the field everyone rejoicing how good all this room feels to them. Rayne tumbles to the ground relishing in the feel of the grass, she feels someone block her sun and looks up into the amused face of Daryl.

"Care to join me?" She smiles and he laughs laying down beside her feeling so relaxed.

After checking to make sure every walker was dead, Daryl, Rayne, T-Dog, Maggie and Glenn went back up to retrieve the cars pulling them inside the fence between the two gates facing out for a quick getaway they hoped they wouldn't need.

As night fell the group built a fire off the gravel path in towards the middle of the field. Rayne was in the tower by the main gate, sitting on the edge of the walkway her legs dangling over the side watching the woods. Below her Daryl stood on the overturned bus pacing back and forth watching the woods same as she was. Rayne watched as Rick circled the perimeter of the fence up by the prison for the third time, if there was a breach he would've found it by now.

Movement below caught Rayne's attention and she glanced down as she saw Daryl hang his crossbow over his back and help Carol up onto the bus, she held a plate of food for him in one hand. He gladly takes it from her as she hands it to him.
"It's not much, but if I don't bring you something, you won't eat at all. Rayne already gave her share to Lori, I swear that girl hasn't eaten in eight months everything she gets goes to momma and baby."

A concerned look passes Daryl's face, he hadn't noticed that, which was odd because he paid attention to everything Rayne did. "Yeah, I guess little Shane over there has got quite the appetite."

Carol chuckles, "Don't be mean. Rick's gotten us a lot farther than I ever thought he would, I'll give him that."

"Mm-hmm." Daryl nods as he finishes off the food.

"Shane could never have done that." She rolls her shoulders earning a look from Daryl.

"What's wrong?"

"It's that rifle. The kickback." She rubs her right shoulder and back trying to ease some pain. "I'm just not used to it."

"Hold on." He sets down his plate and after licking his fingers he motions her over and rubs her shoulder working out the muscles.

Rayne can see the smirk on Carol's face from above, the huntress could say so many smart assed things right now but restrains herself. Daryl finishes, clears his throat and tells her they should get back.

And it turns out Carol was on Rayne's wave length cause just then the huntress heard, "It's pretty romantic. Want to screw around?"

Rayne covers her mouth holding in the laugh she has, the look on Daryl's face is priceless as he looks at Carol. "Pfft," he scoffs leaning down, "I'll go down first."

"Even better."

Rayne is now rolling with laughter, biting her tongue so hard she can feel blood. Carol has really surprised her, but more so she surprised Daryl and Rayne found that funnier than anything.

Ten minutes later Rayne is still rocked with small giggles thinking about Daryl's face. She's so caught up in laughter she doesn't hear Daryl until he sits down beside her. She turns giving him a raised eyebrow and he returns her look with a glare.

"What?"

"That was so cute. I can't believe you passed up that offer." Rayne laughed out loud as Daryl shoved her angrily, but he had a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Jealous?" He taunted hoping it would get under her skin.

"In your dreams redneck."

"You are in my dreams."
That murmured comment brought Rayne to a sudden halt, she turned her head hoping she would see a smile on his face that told her he was joking. There wasn't one. She cleared her throat suddenly feeling as though she had cotton mouth. "Daryl, we've been over this. I'm no good for you, I'm damaged beyond repair. You deserve someone who can give you all of them, and that's not me. Carol's a good woman, she can give you everythin' you want."

She reaches her hand up to rub her neck and work out the kinks but freezes when she feels Daryl's hand touch the back of her neck. Her breath catches and she starts to breath heavily, her body shaking as she feels Daryl slide behind her, his legs coming to rest against the outside of her thighs. She feels his breath on her neck as he pulls her long hair over her left shoulder, "Relax Rayne. I will never hurt you."

She nods closing her eyes and slowing her breathing, she focuses on Daryl's hands as they massage her shoulders and neck releasing all the knots and tension that has been building up over the last eight months. She feels her eyes getting heavy as she relaxes more and more, she hadn't felt this good in so long.

She felt him shift behind her as his chest came to rest against her back. She turned her head wondering what he was up to when his left hand touched her cheek and his lips locked onto hers. Shockingly to Rayne her first instinct was not to pull away but move closer, that was not her usual reaction and it scared her. She pushed herself closer to him, liking the way his strong right arm wrapped around her shoulders effectively pinning her in place. His tongue slid across her bottom lip and she opened her mouth in reaction allowing his tongue to slip into her mouth. He explored every inch of her mouth as he ravaged her lips, his scruff rubbing against her skin was a pleasurable torment to Rayne.

She was baffled, she knew from her talks with him that he was a virgin, but obviously he wasn't in every sense of the word. He had learned to use his mouth and use it well, it made her wonder just how well he could use it and where. She stopped those thoughts right in their tracks, that was not something to be thinking about right now. 'Think more with your head and less with your kitty' she told herself referring to her intimate parts.

Several long minutes later, Daryl pulled back from her, he sat staring into her eyes, rubbing her cheek with his thumb. They were both breathing hard and trying to retrieve some of the precious oxygen they had deprived themselves. She realized as she looked into those deep blue eyes that with that kiss he was telling her she was the one he wanted.

"You're only beyond repair if ya choose to be. When you decide ya want a good man, ya know where to find me."

With that Daryl stood up and after kissing the top of Rayne's head he went back down the tower and inside the gates to the group. Rayne watched him go, touching her lips with her fingertips she groaned and fell backwards onto the walkway with a loud sigh, things had just gotten more complicated.

The next morning the group stood by the gate into the courtyard, Rick, Daryl, Rayne, Maggie, Glenn and T-Dog stood by with their weapons ready to clear it out. Rick grabbed the fence unhooking the chain, after nodding to Hershel the elder man yanked it open and the group of 6 moved inside in a circle their backs together. The other tried to distract and kill some of the walkers
from outside of the fence. The group moved deeper inside the courtyard taking out every walker that came close to them but never breaking rank, that was until T-Dog broke rank to retrieve a riot shield. They reached the door they were heading for but as Rick looked around the corner, a slew of walkers were inside another small area, they needed to shut the gate and lock them in.

Just as Rick was going for it a couple of walkers in riot gear came out from behind a dumpster in front of them, then two more out of the fenced area in front of them, and finally one in a gas mask out of the door next to them. Daryl fired an arrow at one but it simply bounced off the shield. Rick, Rayne and T charged the walkers ahead of them, while Daryl pulled his knife to take care of the one next to them, but Maggie tried slicing her machete down it its face and the blade just bounced off.

"Daryl!" The hunter moved over stabbing a female walker in the head, he grabbed the fence and helped Rick pull it shut securing it with a chain.

The guys turned to Maggie and Rayne fighting side by side having no luck with the walkers until Rayne grabbed the helmet pulling the mask up and Maggie jammed her knife into its neck. Maggie stared at the group wide-eyed, "Ya see that?!" The guys realized how to kill them and quickly Glenn and T-Dog dispatched the one they had, Daryl stabbed one in the back of the head and Rick knocked one down peeling the gas mask off along with the walkers flesh and stabbing his knife down through its face. Maggie dispatched the last one with a knife up through its chin.

They stood for a moment taking in the scene, making sure no walkers were still moving about. Rick tells the group they have to push inside, make sure there are no blind spots they haven't covered yet. The walk into the fenced in catwalk and up to the door, Rick pushes it open and moves inside, Daryl following crossbow at the ready. They move in pushing open the steel door in front of them, it protests with a squeak, while Glenn shuts the door behind them. Inside is an empty room with a couple tables and a guard tower with what looks like a walker inside.

The group spreads out covering the room and checking the doors, while Rick and Rayne venture up the stairs to the tower. The guard in the tower is long since dead and pleasantly Rick finds keys to the building clipped to his belt. He holds up the keys, down below Daryl nods, Rick makes his way down and over to the door leading into the cell block. The door is rusty and the metal aged as Rick unlocks it opening the steel door with a squeal. Daryl and Rayne move forward checking all the cells on the lower level, while Rick checks the door behind the stairs to make sure it's secure, the two hunters move up the stairs clearing the cells on the top level.

Rick runs up the other side of the stairs coming to back up the two, they find two walkers locked inside two adjacent cells, they claw at the air trying to reach them. The men dispatch of the walkers and unlock the cells tossing them down to the floor below where T-Dog happily takes them outside. He passes the rest of the group as they enter the cell block as they enter everyone looking around at their new surroundings. Everyone moves into a cell except for Daryl and Rayne, neither one of them are gonna sleep in a cage.

Most of them take cells on the lower level, minus Carol and Lori who take one of the uppers in the far left corner. Daryl takes the perch at the top of the two stairs, Rayne takes the corner to his right by the cell doors, while Rick sits down against the wall on the ground.

The next morning Rick, Rayne, T-Dog, Glenn and Daryl look through the weapons and goodies
they picked off the guards. There's a few bright flashlights, Flashbangs, CS Triple-Chasers.

"Not sure how they'd work on walkers, but we'll take 'em." Rick says setting them on the table.

Daryl picks up one of the riot helmets, Rayne smirks as walker goop from inside drips out onto him causing him to grimace. "I ain't wearin' this shit."

"We could boil 'em," T-Dog suggest as he holds up a particularly dripping boot.

"Ain't enough firewood in the forest. No. Besides, we made it this far without 'em, right?"

Rayne nods her head picking up her Kukris, "I'm with Daryl, we'll be fine."

Daryl pauses, a part of him wishes that statement were true in another way. He couldn't believe himself two nights ago, he had never been so bold with a woman before. But in reality no woman had ever meant a damn thing to him, not until he met Rayne. He knew she was heavily guarded, hell he was too, but he was determined, a hunter who always got his prey. He wanted Rayne and what Daryl Dixon wanted, he got.

He turns to hand her a flashlight but she declines. "How you gonna see?"

She smirks popping on her Oakley's that have now become clear lenses in the dark, she touches a small button on the right arm and Daryl sees two led lights turn on from the arms of the glasses.

"The military has such cool stuff. Transitioning lenses and built on flashlights."

He shakes his head at her smirk, yeah she was definitely intriguing to him.

Rick hands Carl the keys putting him in charge while their gone. Hershel, T-Dog, Maggie and Glenn fit themselves with the riot gear chest and back pads. Carl locks the cell door behind them as the head further into the prison. They move swiftly and silently down the corridors, Rick and Daryl on point and Rayne bringing up the rear with Maggie. Glenn marks an arrow on the wall with a spray can they found pointing them back in the direction of the cells.

Without warning the next corner they turn they are greeted by a group of walkers, the group backpedals heading back the way they came. But as Maggie and Glenn turn the corner back to the cells, more walkers appear in front of them. They run through the corridors blindly searching for a safe place. The group huddles inside a room, they find Glenn and Maggie have been separated from them. They head back out searching for the couple, Hershel hears his daughters voice and turns back the way they came. He steps over a body only for it to reach out and grabs his ankle tearing into the flesh of his leg. The rest come back around, Rick shoots the walker in the head and they grab Hershel heading wherever they can. Glenn and Maggie find them, they move to a door secured by handcuffs, T-Dog breaks them open and the group moves inside.

Daryl and T-Dog secure the doors while the others lay Hershel on the floor. "Rayne! Get over
here!" Rick points to Hershel and she knows what needs to be done. "Rick take off your belt, wrap it around his upper thigh." Rick does as he's told, she leans back grabbing one of her Kukris off the floor. She eyes the man who has become like a grandfather to her, "Only one way to keep you alive. Please forgive me, Hershel." She brings the blade down instantly severing the flesh and bone in one swipe. Hershel's screams reach a crescendo as his leg is cut from his body. "He's bleedin' out." Rayne yells. "I need somethin' to cauterize the wound."

"Duck." She looks up at Daryl doing as he says, he quickly stands up pointing his bow at the cage behind her, she looks over seeing human inmates looking back at them.

One short blonde inmate looks to them unbelievingly, "Holy shit."
"Who the hell are you?" Daryl asks approaching the inmates behind the cage.

"He's bleedin' out. We gotta go back. Come around here Mags, put pressure on the knee. Hard, hard! Push, push." Rayne shows the frightened woman what to do as she eyes the inmates in the cage.

"Why don't you come on outta there. Slow and steady." Daryl orders.

The inmates obey walking out looking down at Hershel's body on the ground. They don't seem to understand when they're told he was bit. The Mexican man in front pulls out a gun pointing it at Daryl, that's when T-Dog and Rayne step up both with guns drawn at the inmates. Glenn walks right past the men looking for medical supplies, the walkers outside are banging on the doors. Glenn brings out a rolling table, helping Rick lift Hershel onto it. T opens the door dispatching the walker outside and together the group pushes Hershel back down the corridors to the cell block.

Daryl, Rayne and T stay in the open room with their weapons trained on the door they came through waiting for the prisoners who followed them, while the others tend to Hershel. Rayne yells directions to Carol through the door, "Carol! Just keep his leg elevated, dress the wound as best as you can. He's gonna be fine, we just have to keep it clean."

Rayne and Daryl post up by one of the tables, bow's pointing at the door, waiting. The inmates step through the doorway moving cautiously into the room.

"That's far enough." Daryl tells them as they get just inside the door.

The cocky Mexican is bouncing on his toes, "Cell block C. Cell 4—that's mine, gringo. Let me in."

"Today's your lucky day, fellas. You've been pardoned by the state of Georgia. You're free to go." Daryl's bow never wavers from the men.

"What you got going on in there?"

"It ain't none of your concern." Rayne stands up moving towards the cell down blocking their view.

"Don't be telling me what's my concern," the Mexican pulls out his gun advancing on Rayne, Daryl stands up moving to intercept him.
"Chill man." The biggest one of them, a large black man steps up. "Dude's leg is messed up. Besides, we're free now. Why are we still in here?"

"The man's gotta point." Daryl quips.

"Yeah, and I gotta check on my old lady." The other tall black man says.

But Mr. Long Hair Mexican can't leave well enough alone. "A group of civilians breaking into a prison you got no business being in—got me thinking there ain't no place for us to go."

"Why don't you go found out?" Daryl growls just itching to shoot the man.

"Maybe we'll just be going now." The short blonde man says unsteady.

"Hey, we ain't leaving."

"You ain't coming in either." T says coming from underneath the staircase to their right his gun drawn.

"Hey, this is my house, my rules. I go where I damn well please."

Rick runs out of the cell block, Carl smartly locks the door behind him protecting the others.

"There ain't nothin' for you here. Why don't you go back to your own sandbox?" Daryl's voice is rising, he's getting tired of arguing with these men.

Rick runs around the corner, "Hey, everyone relax. There's no need for this."

"How many of you in there?" The Mexican obviously is the leader of this group.

"Too many for you to handle." Rick says vehemently.

"You guys rob a bank or something? Why don't you take him to a hospital?"

The four of them eye one another, they realize that these prisoners have no idea what is going on outside these walls.

"How long have you been locked in that cafeteria?" Rick asks.

"Going on like 10 months." The Mexican says clearly on edge.

They tell them what happened outside and the prisoners tell them what happened inside. They realize that everything they ever knew is now gone, friends, family, everything. The Mexican doesn't believe them, so the four take the prisoners out into the courtyard to show them with their own eyes. The prisoners then say the prison is theirs and they want the survivors out, which doesn't go over well with either party as weapons are drawn again. Rick makes a deal that the group will supply them with a few weapons, help them clear another cell block just for them and in return they'd give them half the food in the cafeteria.

The group's make their way back into the cafeteria the Mexican showing them where the food is.
"You never tried to break out of here?" T-Dog questions as he looks around.

"Yeah, we tried to take the doors off. But if you made one peep in here, then those freaks would be right outside the door, growling, trying to get in. Windows got bars on there that He-Man himself couldn't get through." The smaller black man named Oscar tells them.

"Bigger than a 5x8," the short blonde named Axel says.

"Won't find me complaining. Doing 15. My left leg can barely fit on one of those bunks." The bigger black man comically nicknamed Tiny tells them.

"Yeah, they don't call him Big Tiny for nothing," Oscar jokes.

"You done jerking each other off? Sick of waiting back here." The Mexican is standing by the opening to the pantry.

Rick's hand moves to his gun as he enters behind the prisoners, Daryl T and Rayne behind him. They look around at the racks of food all around them, Daryl shines his flashlight at the Mexican getting in his face, "This what you call a little bit of food?"

Rick opens a meat locker door, gagging at the stench inside of it, apparently it's what the men have been using for a bathroom. They grab some of the food and take it back to the group before returning to the inmates looking over the array of weapons scattered on the tables. They take their pick between axes, pick axes and pipes. The Mexican eyes the weapons pulling out his gun, "Why do I need this when I got this?"

"You don't fire guns, not unless your back's up against a wall. Noise attracts them. It really riles them up." Daryl tells them just wanting this to be over and rid of them.

"We'll go in two by two. Daryl will run point with T." Rick looks around making sure they got it, "I'll bring up the back with you." He points to the small black man with the big mouth. "Rayne bring up the rear, watch your back."

"You got it boss."

"Stay tight, hold formation no matter how close the walkers get. Anyone breaks ranks, we could all go down. Anyone runs off, they could get mistaken for a walker, end up with an axe to the head."

"And that's where you aim. These things only go down with a head shot." Daryl tells them.

"You ain't gotta tell us how to take out a man." Mexican man says.

Rayne scoffs, "They ain't men. They're somethin' else. Just remember to go for the brain."

They head off into the catacombs, holding ranks like they were told. Daryl is up front giving out orders, "You gotta hold the weapon out in front of you. You'll hear 'em before you see 'em." Daryl pauses them at a corner, they can hear several walkers ahead of them, he slowly counts to three but as he barely reaches two the inmates scream charging the walkers. The four others stand by watching as the inmates pummel the walkers but none of them hitting anywhere near the heads.
Rayne tilts her head turning it to the side, giving Rick a raised eyebrow, as they watch the prisoners. The huntress shakes her head pinching the bridge of her nose, muttering to the others. "Idiots."

The two hunters lead the group again, shooting two walkers in the head, then Daryl turns to the prisoners. "It's gotta be the brain. Not the stomach, not the heart—the brain."

The next two walkers are taken out by Axel and Oscar, to the head just as they were told, and the third one Rick dispatches with his knife to the brain. "Stay in tight formation. No more prison riot crap."

The walkers start filing through the door one by one and the prisoners take them out. No one notices Tiny has backed away from the group until they hear his scream as he is stabbed by a walker. Rick moves over to help him with the two walkers that are converging on him, instead shots ring out as the Mexican shoots the walkers with his gun. They stand there arguing about saving Tiny's life, none of the prisoners understanding that he can be saved and they need to end his life. As they are arguing the Mexican comes up stabbing Tiny in the head, ending the argument, then proceeding to bludgeon the man's head until there is nothing left but a puddle of blood and brain matter.

Daryl and Rayne eye one another as the Mexican stares them all down covered in blood. They continue down the hallway T on point, Rick, Daryl and Rayne bring up the rear watching the group cautiously.

Daryl leans into Rick, "You see the look on his face?"

"He makes one move…"

"Just give me a signal."

They enter the laundry room, T shuts the door behind them as they approach the double doors on the other side of the room. Daryl takes out his keys tossing them on the floor at the Mexican's feet.

"I ain't opening that." He eyeballs the keys and the door in turn.

"Yes, you are," Rick informs him. "If you want this cell block, you're gonna open that door. Just the one, not both of them. Because we need to control this."

He picks up the keys, the other readying themselves for the onslaught, "You bitches ready?" He tries to open the door but it won't budge, he yanks on it twice more, opening both doors at once.

"I said one door!" Rick yells moving to the left side of the doors.

"Shit happens."

They take out the walkers as they push into the room, Rayne sees the Mexican swing and barely miss Rick's face, then she sees the man grab a walker and push it on Rick.

"Rick!" She runs over grabbing the walker by the back of the shirt pulling it away from Rick's face.

"T, mind the gap." Daryl yells as he runs over stabbing the walker in the head with an arrow, then
helping Rick off the floor while Rayne tosses the body off to the side. Just as they stand up the last walker is killed.

The Mexican shrugs, "It was coming at me, bro."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I get it. Shit happens." The two stand there waiting for one to make a move, and the first one to is Rick, slamming his machete down into the top of the man's head. He shoves him off the blade with his foot and turns as the small black guy comes at him with a bat, then thinks better of it and takes off running, Rick takes off after him.

Daryl orders Oscar on his knees, the three of them holding the two prisoners at bay. Oscar doesn't bothering with pleading, hell, Axel was doing that enough for the both of them. Rick took pity on the two men left, telling them they could live but if they came near their group they would be killed no questions asked.

The four of them return back to their cell block, checking in on Hershel who had stopped breathing but Lori had brought him back. He opened his eyes, looking around at them all, it was a welcome sight. He smiled to Rayne, she nodded knowing he was thanking her for saving his life.
The next few days were relatively calm, no problems with the two prisoners. Hershel was doing better everyday, they could see he was getting restless being confined to the bed.

Rayne was outside with Carol moving the vehicles inside the fence line, lining them up incase they needed a quick getaway.

"We'll park them in the west entry of the yard." Rick tells them.

Daryl drops the chain he was holding, "Good. Our vehicles camped out there look like a giant "vacancy sign"."

"After that, we need to load up these corpses so we can burn 'em." Rick says motioning around the yard.

T sighs echoing each of their thoughts, "Gonna be a long day."

"Where's Glenn and Maggie? We could use some help."

Rayne smirks at Carol, so clueless sometimes, before she points to the guard tower by the courtyard, "Up in the guard tower."

"Guard tower?" Rick looks to the woman he now considers like his daughter, the amusement is apparent in his voice. "They were just up there last night."

"Glenn! Maggie!" Daryl hollers.

Glenn opens the door just edging out, he's shirtless but holding up his pants. "Hey, what's up, guys?"

The five of them smile, Daryl smirks, "You comin'?"

"What?" Glenn isn't sure he heard Daryl right as he fastens his belt.

"You comin'?" The hunter reiterates.

Glenn is quiet, he's not sure which coming Daryl is referring too.

"Come on Tarzan and Jane, we could use a hand." Rayne smirks as she catches Maggie flipping her off. "Love you too Mags!"

"We'll be right down." Glenn says as Maggie mutters, "So gross."
The five turn to walk away, Rayne sighs, "Well at least someone's gettin' some."

"Is that an offer Rayne?" His raised eyebrows and smirk make Rayne want to punch him in the face.

"You know Dixon, you're gettin' a lil too comfortable with me. I liked it better when you weren't so friendly."

The rest of them laugh at the two as they head for the cars, T stops them, looking up into the courtyard where Oscar and Axel are standing. The smiles drop from their faces as they march up the road behind Rick towards the men. They make their case, saying the fence on the far side of the building and more walkers are getting in every time they turn around. They state they are good men and all they want is a chance to prove it. Rick looks to Daryl for his opinion, the hunter shakes his head no. They end up locking the two men in the area between the front gates.

The six of them take a meeting behind the bus, Rick turns to T, "Are you serious? You want them living in a cell next to you? They'll just be waiting for a chance to grab our weapons. You want to go back to sleeping with one eye open?"

"I never stopped." T tells him honestly. "Bring them into the fold. If we send them off packing, we might as well execute them ourselves."

Glenn hesitates, "I don't know. Axel seems a little unstable."

"After all we've been through?" Carol asks. "We fought so hard for this, what if they decide to take it?"

"It's just been us for so long. They're strangers. I don't—it feels weird all of a sudden having other people around." Maggie offers her point of view.

"You brought us in." T reminds her.

"Yeah, but you turned up with a shot boy and woman in your arms. Didn't give us a choice."

"They can't even kill walkers," Glenn says.

"They're convicts, bottom line." Carol replies.

"Those two might actually have less blood on their hands than we do." T tells them.

Daryl jumps in, "I get guys like this. Hell, I grew up with 'em. They're degenerates, but they ain't psychos. I could have been in there with them just as easy as I'm out here with you guys."

"So are you with me?" T asks.

"Hell, no. Let 'em take their chances out on the road just like we did."
"What I'm saying, Daryl—"

Rick interrupts T, "When I was a rookie, I arrested this kid. 19 years old, wanted for stabbing his girlfriend. The kid blubbered like a baby during the interrogation, during the trial—suckered the jury. He was acquitted due to insufficient evidence and then, two weeks later, shot another girl. We've been through too much. Our deal with them stands."

They round up all the bodies stacking them into piles around the yard. "Move the cars to the upper yard. Point them facing out. They'll be out of the way but ready to go if we ever need to bail. We'll give the prisoners a weeks worth of supplies for the road."

"Might not last a week," T reminds Rick as they walk back.

"It's their choice."

"Did they really have one?"

"Hey, hey—whose blood would you rather have on your hands—Maggie's, Glenn's, or theirs?"

"Neither."

Maggie, T, Carol and Rayne drive the vehicles in, while Daryl grabs his bike taking them up to the upper yard. While the others park the cars, Rick, Glenn and Daryl head out to the opening in the fence line, Glenn spots a walker across the water. "Should I take her out?"

"No. If that armory hadn't been picked clean, we could spare the ammo."

"I'll start making runs with Rayne. The sooner the better." Rick nods at Daryl's suggestion, before he turns to Glenn, "We'll throw as much wood as we can in the dog run."

Daryl watches the woods while Rick and Glenn gather wood. As they come back into the dog run Daryl nods to the courtyard, "Looky here."

They all smile as they see Hershel on his crutches at the fence line. "He is one tough son of a bitch." Glenn chuckles, "Alright Hershel."

"Keep your cheers down." Glenn blushes as he is scolded by Daryl who points to the walkers coming out of the woods. The kid sighs, "Oh man, can't we just have one good day?"

Suddenly they all hear Carl's frantic scream, "Walkers! Look out!"

Rick and Daryl run for the gate as Glenn struggles to close the opening in the fence. Gunshots ring out as the group up top tries to fend off the hoard.

Rayne covers the others as they run for the gates, they make it inside safely, Maggie is with Carl and Lori, and Carol is with Hershel and Beth. "That gate is open." T yells to Rayne, she follows his lead as they make their way over picking off walkers. T grabs the gate shutting it again, using his belt to secure it while Rayne is shutting the door, neither of them see the walker behind T until it's too late. T's scream fills the air as the walker bites into his right shoulder tearing the flesh from his body.

"No!" Rayne grabs T dragging him inside the open door next to her as walkers converge on them.
Rick, Daryl and Glenn reach the yard, they find that the chains holding the gate shut had been cut. Then suddenly the alarms start blaring loudly drawing every walker out of the woods to them, Daryl looks around, "Oh—you gotta be kidding me!" He's distraught not knowing where Rayne is or if anyone's hurt.

They take out as many of the speakers outside that they can, but the alarm keeps going. Rick points a gun at the two prisoners asking how this could be happening, to which they reply it has to be the backup generators. Oscar says he knows where the generators are so he leads the others inside to shut them down.

Inside T is leading Rayne through the tombs, "There's a set of double doors that will lead to a corridor that'll get you to our cell block."

"T, you should stop, you're bleedin' out."

"I'm getting you there!"

"T, stop!"

"Why? Sit here and wait to die? Uh-uh."

"I'll do what I have to. You're not becomin' one of those things."

"I can't ask that."

"It's the pact, remember?"

"This is God's plan. He'll take care of me. Always has. He's gonna help me lead you out of these tombs."

The guys run back into the cell block, there is no sign of any of the group. They split up to look for the others, and whoever gets to the generators first they shut them down.

Rayne wraps T's arm around her shoulder as they head down the halls, the lights flickering on and off. T looks down the hall in front of them, "We're almost there." Two walkers turn the corner in front of them blocking their escape, Rayne holds up the gun but only a clicking sound resounds, it's empty. "Shit! Go back!" She yells tossing the gun to the ground, grabbing her Kukris. T shakes his head lowering her arms, "No, we're close. We're close! I got this." He charges the walkers shoving them against the wall behind them. "Go! Go! Go! Get out!" Rayne runs past looking back as the
walkers tear into her friends body ripping out his throat. "Go! I'm dead!" Against her better judgment she does as he says, pushing open the doors and running.

Rick, Daryl and Oscar run into the generator room, "Daryl, get the door!" Rick moves into the room looking at the engines, "How do you shut these down?"

The hunter nods, "Go help him. I got it."

Oscar shows him the levers to pull, just as Rick goes to shut the other one off Andrew, the small black guy he thought was dead comes at him with an axe. Rick and Andrew tussle ending up on the ground fighting to reach Rick's gun on the floor. Daryl finally can't hold the door shut anymore, he backs up letting the door swing open. Grabbing his bow he shoots the first walker in the head, then pulls out his knife stabbing the next in the eye, he gets a break on the door and is able to shut it fully closed.

Just as Andrew is poised to bring his axe down on Rick, he's hit with a barrel by Oscar, then the man picks up Rick's gun pointing it at Rick. The smaller man stands up, "Shoot him! We can take back this prison. What you waiting for? Do it! It's our house. Shoot him!" Oscar moves the gun from Rick and shoots Andrew in the head. Daryl stands next to Oscar's side, he's shaking with adrenaline, his knife up and ready to kill the man. Oscar hands the gun back to Rick, who then shuts the generators down and they head back down the corridors to find the others.

They make their way back, meeting up with Glenn and Axel along the way and killing two walkers feasting upon T's body. Looking to the ground Daryl picks up Rayne's bandana she had around her neck. They then run outside finding Hershel, Beth and Carol standing on the upper steps.

"You didn't find them?" Hershel asks, they shake their heads. "What about T? Rayne?"

"They didn't make it." Daryl growls out, not believing his own words where Rayne is concerned, she's alive he can feel it.

Rick whirls around, "That doesn't mean the others didn't. We're going back. Daryl and Glenn, you come with—"

An infant's cries break the silence, they turn to find Maggie and Carl coming out of the other door to their cell block, Maggie is cradling a baby. Both of their hands and Maggie's arms are covered in blood. Maggie tentatively approaches Rick not knowing what to say, her bottom lip is trembling as sobs wrack her body.

He approaches Carl and by the look in his son's eyes he knows what has happened, he breaks, falling to the ground sobbing uncontrollably. Maggie stumbles into Glenn's arms, she can barely keep herself from trembling as he holds her and the baby close. No one moves, none of them knowing what to do or say.
Rick hasn't said a word since he found out about Lori, he's been sitting on his knees staring off into space. Maggie hands the little girl to Carl, Hershel asks to see the baby so the boy walks over to the elder man.

Daryl comes over, "What are we gonna feed it? We got anythin' a baby can eat?"

Hershel gives her a once over, "The good news is she looks healthy. But she needs formula. And soon or she won't survive."

"Nope. No way. Not her." Daryl says firmly says putting his crossbow over his back. "We ain't losin' nobody else. I'm going for a run."

"I'll back you up," Maggie chokes out still reeling.

"I'll go, too." Glenn says.

"Okay, think where we're goin'. Beth." The girl turns to the hunter as he pulls her aside. "Kid just lost his mom. His dad ain't lookin' so hot."

"I'll look out for him."

"You two get the fence. Too many pile up, we got ourselves a problem. Glenn, Maggie, vamonos." Daryl directs traffic.

Rick stands up grabbing an axe and heading inside the building alone, the others watch him go not knowing what to do.

"Get the gate." Daryl tells the two prisoners, turning back he sees that no one is moving. "Come on, we're gonna lose the light."

Maggie and Glenn follow Daryl running over to the vehicles, Glenn remembers seeing someplace they could go, "There's a Piggly Wiggly on 85."

"No, the baby section's been cleared," Maggie tells him. "Lori asked me to keep an eye out. I haven't had much luck."

"Is there any place that hasn't been completely looted?" Daryl takes off his crossbow strapping it to the front of his bike.

"We saw signs for a shopping center just north of here."
"Yeah, but there's too much debris on the road. A car will never get through that." Maggie reminds them.

Daryl sighs putting on his vest, "I can take one a ya."

"I'll go."

"No, Maggie, after everything that you've been through, okay, I'll go."

"I want to go. For Lori, I have to."

"Okay." Glenn grabs her backpack and turns back holding her face, "I love you. Be safe."

"I will." She hops on the back of the bike as Daryl heads down the road towards town.

Truthfully Daryl did care about the baby, but he also needed some time to think. His mind kept flashing to images of Rayne being ripped apart, becoming one of those things and he'd end up having to kill her. He shook his head, 'No, she's strong. She's alive. She's somewhere in that prison waiting for him to find her. And when he got back, he was going to.'

What Daryl didn't know was that he was exactly right, Rayne was alive. After T had fallen she made her way towards the cell block, but as she neared the last corner a group of walkers cut her off, she tried to go back but another group cut her off. She drew her Kukris hacking away at every one that came near her, she wasn't even aiming for the heads just trying to keep them away from her. Her Kukris were knocked from her hands, she scrambled across the floor to get them back. Grabbing her hunting knives from her boots she stabbed one into a walkers neck but before she can pull it out the body is ripped from her along with her knife.

"Shit!" She pulls out her other one scrambling backwards towards her Kukris, she stabs for another walker but her arm is grabbed and jerked from its socket by a walker trying to take a bite out of her. Lucky for her, her Kevlar sleeves protected her arm, she kicks the walker off of her and looks down at her unhurt arm, "Not exactly the way I wanted to test these." She scoots back finding her Kukris and standing up she faces the remaining 7 walkers, she twirls the blades, "Come and get it." One by one they fall, each decapitated head still snapping at her from the floor. Once they are all down she stabs each one in the head making sure they stay down.

Exhaustion and fatigue start to set in, she grabs the wall as a wave of dizziness hits her. Thinking now is the time to move she starts back towards the cell block, only to be blocked again by a group of walkers, "Fuck! Where the hell are you comin' from?" There's no way she can take them on in her weakened state, so she backs herself into a room shutting the door behind her and praying someone is looking for her.
In town Daryl and Maggie find a day care center, they enter hoping to find everything they need. Maggie opens a cabinet finding bottles, diapers and burp rags, she stuffs them into the backpack. The two make their way down the hallway checking the rooms, they converge on a half door with the bottom closed as they hear a banging inside. Daryl sticks his flashlight in his mouth, in his left hand he holds a doll for the baby and his crossbow in the other. He opens the door moving inside, he nods to the pantry doors as he readies his crossbow. Maggie opens the door, a possum sitting on the shelf hisses at them, Daryl pegs it with a bolt.

"Hello, dinner."

Maggie turns away, "I'm not putting that in my bag." She opens a cabinet finding two cans of powdered baby formula.

It's nightfall by the time the two return to the prison, they can hear the baby crying as they come in the cell block. Maggie and Beth set out making a bottle while Daryl of all people takes the baby from Carl, cradling the infant in his arms. Beth hands Daryl the bottle as he tilts it gently to the baby's mouth. "Shh. Come on. Come on." The crying stops as she finds the bottle, the group standing around smiles, more so at the fact that big bad hunter Daryl is holding the tiny baby girl.

Daryl chuckles as he rocks the little one, he turns to Carl, "She got a name yet?"

"Mmm, not yet. But I was thinking maybe Sophia." Carol's face is grim but a small smile crosses her face at Carl's suggestion. "Then there's Rayne."

Daryl's heart clenches at the sound of her name, he felt like he had let her down. He said he'd protect her, she watched his back, he'd watch hers. He shook his head blinking his eyes rapidly, trying not to let the small tears show.


Daryl smiles down at the baby as she looks up at him, "Yeah… You like that? Huh? Little ass-kicker. Right? That's a good name, right?" He looks around at the group as they all laugh. "Little ass-kicker. You like that, huh? You like that, sweetheart?"

That night as the sun goes down Daryl walks out to the three new graves outside. He pulls a Cherokee rose from inside of his jacket and lays it down on top of the freshly dug grave marked with a stone R. He gently touches the cross before standing up and heading back inside.
Hounded

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

Sorry for the short chapter.

The group is sitting in the common room eating breakfast as Rick comes in. He looks no worse for the wear, actually he cleaned himself up a bit. He comes in to check on Carl, then leaves just as quickly as he came.

They all make plans for the day, Glenn and Maggie are gonna make a run into town for more formula and Daryl is gonna sweep the lower levels.

Daryl heads down to the lower levels with Oscar and Carl for backup, they come across a door that's pulsing, like something inside is pushing on it. "Check it out." Oscar says to Daryl, holding the flashlight for the hunter. "Must have missed it last night."

"It's probably just one or two of 'em. Don't look like they got much fight." He presses a finger to the door shutting it easily, "They ain't goin' nowhere. We'll take care of it on the way back."

Daryl eyes Carl standing against the wall, he whistles catching the kid's attention. "Come on." They split up Oscar going around the other way, and Carl with Daryl.

"You know, my mom, she liked her wine. She liked to smoke in bed. Virginia Slims." He checked the doors as they walked along. "I was playin' out with the kids in the neighborhood. I could do that with Merle gone. They had bikes, I didn't. We heard sirens gettin' louder. Ya, they jumped on their bikes, ran after it, you know, hopin' to see somethin' worth seein'. I ran after them but couldn't keep up. I ran around a corner and saw my friends lookin' at me. Hell, I saw everybody lookin' at me. Fire trucks everywhere. People from the neighborhood. It was my house they were there for. It was my mom in bed burnt down to nothing. That was the hard part. You know, she was just gone. Erased. Nothing left of her. People said it was better that way." Daryl chuckled. "Just made it seem like it wasn't real, you know?"

Carl sighs heavily, "I shot my mom. She was out. Hadn't turned yet. I ended it. It was real. Sorry about your mom."

"I'm sorry about yours. Come on."

They make their way down the corridor till something in a cell catches Oscar's attention. "Oh, yeah. That's what I'm talking about. Yeah, buddy." He leans down picking up a pair of plaid slippers.

"What the hell you need slippers for?"

"You know, end of the day, relaxing."
Daryl looks at him like he's crazy, he turns at the sound of growling behind him, in the doorway stands a walker, the three of them fire at it at once. Daryl nods, blowing out a few breaths of air as the adrenaline flows through him. "All right." Daryl approaches it, his flashlight beam lands on something sticking out of the walkers neck. He grabs the black handle sticking out of the flesh, pulling it out a rush of blood gushes out. It only takes a minute for him to recognize the hunting knife, "That's Rayne's knife." He wipes it off on the walkers clothes, holding it in his hand with the blade sticking out his face is one of fury.

After sending Carl and Oscar back to the cell block, Daryl sits down Indian style against the wall across from the door that he had passed earlier. He holds Rayne's knife in his right hand, his head bowed as he listens to the door pulse open and close. He slams the knife down against the floor, twice, the metallic sound echoing through the hall, lifting his head he leans back against the wall behind him. He slams the knife down hard enough to actually make a hole in the concrete floor, then he slams it against the wall behind him. Making his decision he stands up moving to the door he kicks it hard, then walks a few steps away breathing heavily.

He paces back and forth in front of the door twice before he places Rayne's knife in his mouth, grabbing the walker in front of the door he jerks it to the side. He swings open the door to find…

Nothing.

He looks puzzled until his gaze moves to the floor where he finds Rayne slumped against the wall. Her head rolls up, she looks up at him through half-lidded eyes, the smile that crosses her face makes Daryl's heart jump. He wastes no time, leaning down and scooping her up, her right arm around his shoulders. "Stay with me Rayne."
Daryl comes into the common area to find Rick kneeled over a black woman on the floor. "Who the hell is this?"

Rick asks if she wants to tell them her name, she does nothing but glare back at Rick.

"Y'all come on in here."

Rick stands up, "Everything alright?"

"You're gonna wanna see this."

Everyone follows Daryl into the cell block leaving the black woman on the floor, he locks the door behind them. He then leads them over to a cell by the stairs, Rick walks in first to find a smiling Rayne looking up at him. The look on Rick's face is disbelieving at first, like he's seeing his own daughter for the first time after thinking she was dead, then he smiles as she stands up and he embraces her.

"Thank God. Thank God. Thank God." He whispers each time kissing her cheek.

He passes her to Hershel, "How?"

"Solitary," Rayne says her voice horse as she hugs the man who is like her own grandpa.

"Poor thing fought her way into a cell. Must have passed out. Dehydrated." Daryl tells the others, as Rayne pulls away catching sight of the baby in Beth's arms.

She smiles looking back at Rick but it fades when she sees him slowly shaking his head, she realizes then that Lori didn't make it. She covers her mouth, the reality of it causing tears to fill her eyes as she takes Rick's face in her hands. "I'm so sorry." She steps forward gently taking the baby from Beth and cradling the little girl in her arms. Daryl smiles as he memorizes the scene before him, Rayne holding the baby girl, the smile on her face and the light in her eyes as she glances up at him.
Half an hour later she leans on Daryl as he helps her into the room where the new arrival is waiting. Her head snaps up when the woman says she found them when she witnessed two of their people getting abducted. She overheard them talking about the prison before they were taken. Rick grabs the side of her injured leg, she jumps up telling him not to touch her again.

"You'd better start talkin'. You're gonna have a much bigger problem than a gunshot wound."

Rayne steps up grabbing the front of Daryl's crossbow and pulling it down. She turns to Rick giving him a look, he nods stepping back letting her try. She sits down at the table in front of the woman, twirling her knives in her hands, Daryl had returned them to her earlier.

"You gonna threaten me?"

Rayne looks up giving the woman a raised eyebrow. "Should I? Cause I don't think it'd do any good." Rayne sets the knives on the table within reach of the woman. "I can tell just by lookin' at you, that we're very much alike, so if I were to threaten you it wouldn't get me anywhere. So I'm simply gonna ask. The two that were taken, Glenn and Maggie, they are my family. Now you don't care bout them, but I know you do care about the bastard that shot you. So it seems to me that we have the same problem. So if you help me get my friends back, I'll make sure you get your revenge."

The woman doesn't say anything clearly thinking over the words of the younger woman in front of her. "You came here for a reason."

The woman finally gives in, "There's a town. Woodbury. About 75 survivors. I think they were taken there. It's run by this guy who calls himself the Governor—pretty boy, charming, Jim Jones type."

"He got muscle?" Daryl asks.

"Paramilitary wannabes. They have armed sentries on every wall. The place is secure from walkers, but we could slip our way through."

"This is Hershel," Rick points to the elder man, "the father of the girl who was taken. He'll take care of that."

While Hershel tends to her wound the others have a small meeting, they decide to go after their friends. After arguing with her for several minutes Daryl realizes he's not going to talk Rayne out of going with them. He walks out loading the bags in the car, "I got the flash bangs and I got the tear gas. You never know what you're gonna need."

---

Rick, Oscar and the woman Michonne, she told Rayne her name several minutes before, piled in the car, while Daryl drove Rayne's truck with her sitting shotgun. They stopped on the side of the
road, getting out and strapping on their weapons. Daryl helped Rayne down out of the truck, she wasn't 100 percent and he was worried about her. She checked her knives in her boots, her Glocks on her thighs, strapped her Kukris to her back, slung her bow over her back settling it between the blades and holding her rifle in her hands.

Once again Daryl noticed how sexy she looked with a gun in her hands and weapons all over her body. He took in her tight black spaghetti strap tank top, tight black jeans and her black knee high boots. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail and she had managed to wash off most of the walker blood she had on her skin.

"They have patrols. We're better off on foot."

"How far? Night's coming." Rick says gathering supplies.

"It's a mile, maybe two."

They head into the woods coming across a group of walkers, they stand in a tight formation taking out each walker with silence. Suddenly they realize their surrounded, Rick directs them through a break in the trees, that leads to a cabin. They scramble inside shutting the door behind them as quietly as possible. A horrible smell greets their nostrils, Daryl investigates to find a dog, long past dead on the floor of the cabin.

There's a loud bang followed by growls as the walkers converge on the front of the cabin banging on the walls and door. Rick grabs the covers on the bed, a human man jumps up brandishing a shotgun, he's looking at the people in his house. Rick disarms the man but he continues to scream loudly, the sound antagonizing the walkers outside. He bites Rick and runs for the door, but before he can open it, two blades are plunged straight through his body.

The two women nod to one another as they pull their blades from the man's now dead body. The men aren't sure what to say, they eye the women in turn. Daryl peeks out the open slits in the boarded up door window, "Remember the Alamo?"

Michonne opens the door as Daryl and Rick toss the man's dead body out the front door, the walkers fighting to get a piece of the flesh as the group sneaks out the back door and around the front past the walkers.

As darkness falls they find themselves out in front of the town of Woodbury. They look at the guards on the walls and the spotlights watching for walkers. This was not going to be easy, but then again, nothing ever had been.
As they sit there outside the gates trying to formulate a plan, Michonne taps Rayne lightly on the shoulder motioning for her to follow. Rick sees the two of them leave and cusses, turning to the men, "All right, we need to downsize."

They set about taking what weapons they can, Daryl eyes the town, "Ain't no way we're gonna check in all them buildings, not with all them guards there."

A twig snaps behind them and they all turn pointing their guns at the two women who have came back, Rayne shakes her head, "God, y'all are jumpy. Come on, she found a way in."

The men follow the two women to a break in the wall where there are no guards, they hop in, ducking through the back door of a building. Daryl runs to look out the front window, outside he sees people walking down the streets. "I thought you said there was a curfew."

"The street is packed during the day. Those are stragglers."

"If anyone comes in here, we're sitting ducks. We gotta move." Rick looks out the window next to the door looking for an opening.

An argument ensues about where the two are being held and Michonne leading them into a trap. Rick says if things go south they cut her loose, Daryl suggests they all split up. Without warning a knock is heard at the door, they hear keys jangling as someone unlocks the front door. The door opens and a guard walks in, he looks around saying he knows someone is in there. Rick grabs the man shoving him against the wall, then forcing him to his knees. He questions him where their friends are, the man swears he doesn't know. They zip tie his hands and gag him before Daryl knock him out.

All at once they hear gunfire from outside, Rick opens the door as the group moves down the street slinking against the buildings. They move inside of the building at the end of the row towards the wall, that's where the gunfire resounded from. They pause next to a wall, glancing through a small dirty window they hear a man talking to two people, they know it's their people. Suddenly the men pick up the two moving towards the door where the group is sitting, thinking quickly they grab the Flashbangs.

Rick tosses one into the path of the men, it explodes blinding them, then covering the room in a
thick fog. The group files back into the room grabbing their two people and backing out amongst gunfire. The group runs up the street, they hear men coming their way so they duck inside of a building. Rayne looks around seeing that Michonne is not with them, she knows the woman has went after her prey.

"Ain't no way out back here." Daryl comes from the rear of the building.

"Rick, how did you find us?" Maggie's panicked voice comes from the floor where she's knelt beside Glenn.

Glenn tells them he's alright despite the fact that he's bleeding and his breath is raspy. They look for Michonne but Rayne tells them she went looking for the man who shot her, Rick tells them she's on her own.

Maggie helps Glenn put on a shirt, the younger man turns to the hunter, "Daryl, this was Merle. It was. He did this."

Daryl stops pacing his head whipping around to meet Glenn's face.

"You saw him?" Rick asks.

"Face to face. He threw a walker at me. He was gonna execute us."

Daryl steps up his voice stuttering, "S-so my brother's this Governor?"

"No, he's somebody else. Your brother's his Lieutenant or something." Maggie says.

"Does he know I'm still with you?"

"He does now. Rick, I'm sorry. We told him where the prison was. We couldn't hold out."

Rick kneels down to Glenn, "Don't. No need to apologize."

Rick looks out the window, they need to move and now. As they help Glenn stand up, Daryl starts panicking, "Hey, if Merle's around, I need to see him."

"Not now. We're in hostile territory." Rick tells him trying to make Daryl understand.

"He's my brother. He ain't gonna try—"

"Look what he did! Look, we gotta— we gotta get out of here now."

"Maybe I can talk to him. Maybe I can work somethin' out."

"No, no, no. You're not thinking straight. Look, no matter what they say, they're hurt. Glenn can barely walk. How are we gonna make it out if we get overrun by walkers and this governor catches up to us? I need you. Are you with me?"

"Yeah." Daryl nods, but Rayne can see the unsure look in his eyes, she pulls him off to the side, "Hey, it'll be okay, we'll find him." She lays a hand on his cheek lightly, impressed when he doesn't flinch, and lightly presses a kiss to his lips. "Is that offer for a good man still standin'?" He nods
Just as they did with Maggie and Glenn, they separate the two hunters. Rayne listens as the two brother's have a conversation, like it was the old days and they're sitting down having a beer at a bar.

"So, little brother, how ya been?"

"What the hell is goin' on here Merle? How'd ya get here?"

"Governor and his men found me after I cut off my hand and stole your van. I earned myself a spot by his side."

"Yeah, doin' all his dirty work."

"It's what I do best, you know that."

"Why couldn't you just stay there? We came back for you, me, Rick and Rayne."

"Oh yeah, your pretty little huntress in the other room. Got to admit, she is a prize if I've ever seen one. I didn't know you had it in ya."

Daryl notices the look on Merle's face, he knows what his brother is thinking and it makes him blind with rage. "Leave her alone Merle."
Merle smirks turning back to his sibling, so he did care for her. "Sure, little brother, I'll leave her alone. As long as you tell me all about ya new home and the people in it."

"I ain't tellin' ya shit."

"Suit yourself, let's go see if your girlfriend will be more accommodating."

Merle left the room amidst Daryl's yells, he chuckled to himself, boy always was a sucker for a pretty girl. Well Merle would just have to teach him a lesson right now. He opened the door, excusing the soldier inside, he circled the woman like she was a piece of meat.

Rayne could feel him running his fingers through her ponytail, brushing them over her neck and face. She wasn't about to make a sound, knowing Daryl was in the room beside her, that's exactly what Merle wanted and she would never give him the satisfaction.

"Well, my little brother did make a good choice. You are beautiful. But I sense that you're also deadly too, hence the reason why you're still tied up. Not for my safety a course, I'd have no problem taking you but you make the other men nervous."

"You positive you could take me? Wanna test your theory out?"

Merle smiled at the venom dripping from her voice, "Well, you are a feisty one aren't you?" He wrapped his hand in her hair jerking her head back, "I like 'em feisty." He licked her neck and Rayne closed her eyes wanting to gag, how this man was related to Daryl was beyond her mental comprehension.

"So why don't you tell me about your friends, all of 'em."

"I'm not tellin' you a damn thang."

She gasped slightly as he jerked her hair sharply, something that wasn't lost on Merle. He stood her up pushing her backwards, he slammed her against the metal walls separating the two hunters. "I'm gettin' the feelin' you like it rough don't ya?" He ran his fingers along the hem of her shirt, his fingers found the scar on her right side and he stroked it, his eyebrows raising. "Maybe, more rough than I thought." He spun her around slamming her face against the wall as he lifted her bound arms up in the air, her shoulders protesting, threatening to pop out of their sockets. Merle sliced her top up the back letting it hang open as he eyed her back.

Daryl heard her gasp as she was slammed against the wall for the second time. He heard his brother comment on her phoenix tattoo and knew he was holding her the same way Daryl had out in the woods. Merle commented on her scars saying that was the reason Daryl liked her, they were both damaged. If Daryl hadn't felt low that day in the woods, having Merle treat her the same way he had, he felt lower than dirt right now.
Rayne bit her lip so hard she drew blood, she wanted nothing more than to pummel this fucker into the ground but she knew that wouldn't help the situation.

"Has my brother tried you out yet?" Rayne said nothing as Merle spun her around. "I'll take your silence as a no. You do know he's still a virgin, right? And I'm judging you as pretty experienced. You gonna teach him everything you know?" Merle laughed, he was determined to get a rise outta this one but so far he was failing. He pinned her body against the wall rubbing against her, he trailed his hand from her shoulder to her hip then to the junction of her thighs, grabbing her tightly through her jeans. "Maybe I should give you a try first? Huh? Maybe you'll find you prefer the older more experienced brother."

"Fuck!" Merle stumbled back as she head butted him, breaking his nose again, he could feel the bones shift as the blood started to flow down his face. He straightened up and seeing her smirking face enraged him, "You stupid bitch!"

Daryl could only imagine what his brother was doing to her. He heard his brother scream and curse, then another sound filled the room, the sound of Rayne's piercing scream echoed through the building. Daryl struggled against his bindings, her voice was laced with pain and the sound made Daryl's heart skip a beat.

Rayne looked down at the blade from Merle's arm that was piercing through the flesh of the left side of her stomach. The wound was about an inch in from her side, it missed all her organs which Rayne was thankful for, she felt her warm blood streaming down her side to the waistband of her pants. She looked up into the cold eyes staring her down, she matched her cold gaze with an icy one of her own. Merle smirked as he watched her eyelids drop, she was weakening. She caught his smirk and spit straight into his face, then matched him with a smirk of her own.

Merle roared ripping the blade from her skin, relishing in her screams of pain. He punched her in the mouth dropping the huntress to the floor on her knees. He grabbed her by the ponytail wrapping it around his knife hand, wrenching her head up as he hit her again and again, over and over till her face was bloody and bruised. He watched her squirm and crawl across the floor trying to free her hands to hold her bloody side, he smirked as he kicked her in the ribs knocking her onto her back. He leaned down next to her grabbing her chin in his hand, forcing her to look at him, the defiant fire in her eyes making him laugh. "Boy, you are tough. But it don't matter, he'll never choose you over me sweetheart."

Daryl heard Rayne scream again, then he heard Merle punching her over and over again, he lost
track of how many times. He heard what Merle said about Daryl choosing, and the hardest part for Daryl to digest was that he honestly didn't know who he'd chose. Then everything went silent and a dreadful feeling overtook him. "Rayne?! Rayne, can you hear me?! Rayne?!"

Rayne laid on the floor feeling weaker than she had in a very long time. She heard the door open and someone grab her hauling her onto her feet and placing a bag over her head. She heard the men speak as they eyed her appreciatively before someone cut her tank the rest of the way off. "Come on sugar. You've got a date in the arena." Rayne struggled to walk as they lead her, she wondered where Daryl was and what they were doing to him. She heard the man she supposedly thought to be the Governor speaking.

"Want to destroy us! And worse… because one of those terrorists… is one of our own. Merle… the man I counted on, the man I trusted. He lead 'em here. And he let 'em in. It was you. You lied, betrayed us all."

Rayne felt herself being pushed forward, she struggled even though it didn't have much effect on her handlers with how weak she was.

"These are two of the terrorists."

Rayne realized that Daryl must be beside her, then light assaults her eyes as the hood is removed along with Daryl's.

"Merle's own brother."

Rayne locks stares with Daryl as he takes in what she now looks like, bruised and bloody from her face to her waist. He takes in her shirtless torso, nothing but the black lace bra covering her from their eyes. He watches her soft eyes grow hard as they move from him to his brother. Rayne's gaze moves back to him as she sees the cut on his right cheek, someone had obviously hit him. Both of their eyes go wide as they see Andrea standing amongst the crowd, hers doing the same as she sets eyes on them.

"So what should we do with them, huh?"

The crowd starts chanting "kill them" as the governor circles them. He steps up to Merle, "You wanted your brother. Now you got him."
Rayne watches Daryl as he fidgets back and forth on his feet, his breathing is rapid and shallow as his eyes dart between her, Merle and the Governor. 'He's scared.' The thought hits her like a rock, she's never seen him resemble anything close to fear.

Andrea shoves her way to the Governor, "Let them go. Philip. They're my friends." She grabbed and held back by a soldier, the Governor doesn't even look her way, "It's not up to me anymore. The people have spoken." He points to Merle as one of them cut Daryl's bindings. "I asked you where your loyalties lie. You said here. Well, prove it. Prove it to us all. Brother against brother. Winner goes free."

"No!" Rayne yelps as he grabs her hair pulling her back against him. "And gets her." He shoves her to one of the guards next to Andrea, "Fight to the death!"

The two friends eye one another before Andrea tries to reason with him, "Philip, please. Don't do this. Don't do this."

Merle gazes at his brother then tosses up his hand to the crowd, "Y'all know me. I'm gonna do whatever I got to do to prove..." Merle punches an unsuspecting Daryl in the stomach, he grunts falling to the ground, coughing. Rayne struggles against the guard holding her, she's gonna tear Merle apart if she gets loose.

"...that my loyalty..." He kicks Daryl in the stomach rolling him onto his back. "Is to this town!" He kneels over Daryl hammering him with blows.

Rayne and Andrea turn to see walkers being brought in on catch poles. Merle leans down to hit Daryl again and is rocked by a right cross from Daryl knocking him back enough for Daryl to get back up. Daryl gets up charging his brother but Merle knocks him onto his back kneeling over him. The walkers are being brought closer now, closing in a circle around the two.

Daryl has his hands around Merle's throat choking him, "You really think this asshole's gonna let you go?"

"Just follow my lead, little brother. We're getting out of this, right now." Merle picks Daryl up and together they stand back to back against the walkers.

"Philip, no. Stop this! Stop this!" Andrea can't bare to watch this any longer.
The two brothers beat the walkers back, but the soldiers keep moving them forwards. Daryl punches the walkers, then shoving them into the crowd causing the people to scream and run.

Suddenly shots ring out, the walkers falling to the ground, their heads pierced through with bullets and a few of the humans too. A smoker is tossed in the center of the circle, Rayne is set free by the man holding her when Daryl grabs the man from behind choking him out, he pulls her into the center of the smoke. The building erupts in gunfire, people are running, and screaming. Daryl grabs Rayne's arm, "Merle, come on!" Daryl grabs his crossbow back from one of the guards as he heads for the door.

Rick meets up with them at the door ushering them out of the arena into the center of town. Maggie meets up with them as they reach the buses guarding the wall.

"Will somebody please cut me loose!" Rayne sighs in frustration as Maggie pulls out her knife cutting her bindings. "Thanks Mags. Nice shootin'." The brunette smiles, "Nice rifle." She hands Rayne back all her weapons they had managed to find while scouring the building for her and Daryl.

"They're all at the arena. This way!" Merle heads in between the buses.

"You're not going anywhere with us."

"You really want to do this now?" Metallic sounds are heard as Merle opens a panel of the metal fence.

"Come on, man." Daryl yells back to his brother, looking back as Merle makes a hole in the fence. "Rick, come on. We've got to go."

Merle takes a walker coming for them, Daryl and Rayne take out two more with arrows, while Maggie and Rick shoot more. Merle yells for them to follow him, as he heads up the street.

It's daylight by the time they reach the edge of the woods, Rayne can see Glenn and Michonne sitting with the cars on the side of the road.

"Oh, thank God." Glenn runs up to them, "Jesus, Rayne. Are you alright?" She just nods not speaking at the moment due to the pain coursing through her body as she leans against a tree to Daryl's right.

Rick stand in front of Glenn, "Now we got a problem here. I need you to back up."

Glenn pulls out his gun as Michonne draws her sword as they see Merle, "What the hell is he doing here?!"

"Put it down! Put it down!" Daryl yells to the two of them.

"He tried to kill me!" Michonne says never wavering her sword, the two are backed up by Maggie
with her gun.

"He helped us get out of there." Daryl defends his brother.

"Yeah, right after he beat the shit out of you." Rick snaps holding his gun at Michonne.

"Hey, we both took our licks, man."

"Jackass." Daryl snorts replying to his brother.

Merle steps towards Daryl, "Hey, shut up."

"Enough!" Rick barks with authority as the group stands arguing.

"Hey, get that thing out of my face." Daryl swats Glenn's gun out of his face but Glenn doesn't waver.

Behind him Merle laughs, "Man, look like you've gone native, brother."

Daryl whirs around, "No more than you hangin' out with that psycho back there."

"Oh, yeah, man. He is a charmer, I got to tell you that. Been putting the wood to your girlfriend Andrea. Big time, baby." Merle moans wiggling his tongue, sending shivers through Rayne as he looks at Michonne.

"Andrea's in Woodbury?" Glenn asks.

"Right next to the Governor." Daryl replies.

Michonne moves towards Merle, but Rick stops her from advancing, "I told you to drop that! You know Andrea? Hey, do you know Andrea."

"Yep, she does. Her and Blondie spent all winter cuddling up in the forest. Mm-mmm-mmm. Yeah. My Nubian queen here had two pet walkers. No arms, cut off the jaws, kept them in chains. Kind of ironic now that I think about it."

"Shut up, bro!"

"Hey, man, we snagged them out of the woods. Andrea was close to dying."

"Is that why she's with him?" Maggie questions.

"Yeah. Snug as two little bugs. So, whatcha gonna do now, Sheriff? Surrounded by a bunch of liars, thugs, and cowards."

"Shut up!"

"Oh, man, look at this. Pathetic. All these guns and no bullets in them."

"Merle, shut up!"

"Shut up yourself! Bunch of pussies you roll—"

Merle is shut up by Rayne as she knocks him out with the butt of her rifle. "Asshole." Everyone gives her a look as she falls to the ground, leaning back against the tree. She's become very pale, Maggie sits down next to her eyeing the wound on her stomach. Glenn comes back from the car.
with a rag, Maggie tears it into strips, tying it together and binding Rayne's wounds the best she can. "How the hell did this happen, Ray?"

"That fucker on the ground. Everythin' ya see, is from him." Her voice is soft and her breath catches between words.

After a few moments they move to the middle of the road minus Michonne and Merle for a small meeting.

"It's not gonna work." Rick says.

"It's gotta."

"It'll stir things up."

"Look, the Governor is probably on the way to the prison right now. Merle knows how he thinks and we could use the muscle."

"I'm not having him at the prison." Maggie says, Glenn backing her up, "He had a gun to our heads. Do you really want him sleeping in the same cell block as Carol or Beth? Look what he did to Rayne, Daryl."

"He ain't a rapist." Daryl says earning a scoff from Rayne which angers him, "You got somethin' to say."

"Yeah, I do Dixon. I hate to break it to you, but I didn't end up shirtless for my health. Let me give you a play by play. Your dear brother pinned me to a wall, ground himself against me, cut my shirt up the back, then turned me around, ground himself against me again, rubbed his hand down the length of my body before grabbin' me 'tween the legs. He was goin' to rape me, Daryl. The only thang that stopped him was me breakin' his nose. Oh, and you know what he did after that, he stabbed a knife through my stomach. Oh, and the fun didn't end there, no, then he punched me in the face repeatedly, I can't even tell you how many times, but I think my face serves a good example, you take a guess, and I'm sure it won't even be close. Oh, and he kicked me in the ribcage a few times too."

The sarcasm and anger were flowing through her voice strongly, it was as if the more she talked about it, the stronger she became. By the end she was breathing heavily, her chest heaving as she stared a hole through Daryl. She saw him roll his eyes, of course he wouldn't believe her over his own flesh and blood. "Did I mention my hands were tied the entire time? I couldn't have fought back if I wanted to."

Daryl's eyes dropped from hers, he couldn't hold her gaze after hearing everything his brother did to her. He didn't believe her, she had to be lying, he wouldn't do that to a woman.

"There's no way that Merle's gonna live there without putting everyone at each other's throats." Rick tells them.

"So you're gonna cut Merle loose and bring the last samurai home with us? She's too unpredictable. But Merle, Merle's blood."
"No, Merle's your blood. My blood, my family is standing right here and waiting for us back at the prison." Glenn tells him.

Rick sighs, "And you're part of that family. But he's not. He's not."

"Man, y'all don't know. Fine. We'll fend for ourselves."

"That's not what I was saying." Glenn tells him.

"No him, no me." Daryl's words hit Rayne like a rock, she had been expecting them but it hurt to actually hear them out loud.

Maggie sees the look on Rayne's face, "Daryl, you don't have to that."

"It was always Merle and I before this."

"You serious?" Glenn glances between Daryl and Rayne, he can't believe he's gonna let Rayne go for his brother. "You're just gonna leave like that?"

"You'd do the same thing."

Glenn shakes his head, "What do you want us to tell Carol?"

"She'll understand." He looks around at the group, "Say goodbye to your pops for me."

They follow him not believing he's doing this, they try to talk him out of it but he's not listening. Rick looks back at the crestfallen look on Rayne's face, he runs up to the hunter. "There's got to be another way."

"Don't ask me to leave him. I already did that once."

"We started something last night. You realize that, huh?"

Daryl opens up the back of the car grabbing his bag, "No him, no me. That's all I can say. Take care of yourself. Take care of Lil Ass-Kicker. Carl. He's one tough kid."

He steps past Rick to the driver's side of Rayne's truck, she's sitting in the seat, her eyes glance down at him as he stands before her.

"Don't." She tells him weakly, as he starts to speak. "You don't have to say anythin'. He's family, I get it. But he's no good for you, you know that just as well as I do. Him being left on the roof wasn't your fault, you don't owe him a thang." She hands him her bandana. "Just a reminder."

She takes a slow shaky breath, "You know what hurts the most, he was right."

"About what?" He took the bandana folding it and placing it in his pocket.

"He said you'd never pick me over him." He could see the tears gathering in her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. She wouldn't cry, not for him. "You really didn't mean what you said that night on the tower."

"I meant everythin'."

"No ya didn't. You said you'd never hurt me."

Daryl didn't know what to say, his heart was in his throat, he couldn't speak even if he wanted to.
"Goodbye Daryl."

The finality in her emotionless voice killed him, she had put her walls back up, she was an empty shell like she was when they first met and this time it was all his fault. He felt as low as the man who had made her that way to begin with. He sighed as he walked off into the woods towards his brother, he knew he was doing what was right, but why did it make him feel like his heart was ripped from his chest.

Merle gladly wrapped his arm around his brother as they headed off into the woods together.

Maggie climbed into the truck with Rayne, someone needed to be with her right now. They drove back to the prison in silence, Rayne was trying to shut herself off again, but as Maggie took her hand holding it she felt her resolve slip and the tears flowed down her face. No words needed to be spoken, the girls simply knew they needed one another right now.

As they arrived at the prison Rick told Carol that Daryl was gone, as expected she took it about as well as the rest of them. After finding out they had guests, Rick makes them leave, he's not ready to take in any other people, especially ones they don't know?

Rayne retreats to the farthest tower in the dog run, Maggie finds her there trying to sew up her side but she's shaking too much. The brunette sits down beside her gently taking the needle and thread from her shaking hands. She sets out sewing up the entrance wound first, she pierces the needle through the first piece of skin noticing Rayne doesn't make a sound or move.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. I don't feel anythin'. I can't feel anythin' anymore."

Maggie frowns at the break in her friends voice, "I'm sorry Ray."

"Don't be. I knew I shouldn't have let him get close to me. History always repeats."
After Maggie had finished up the stitches and dressed her wounds, she helped Rayne into a plain black V-neck t-shirt, then helped her wash most of the blood off of her face. Afterwards Maggie kisses her cheek and heads back into the prison. Rayne looks at her reflection in a piece of broken glass, her right eye is black and her cheekbone is bruised and sporting a nice inch wide gash in the middle of the bruise. Her left cheekbone is bruised, her lips are split in three places and puffy, and her right jawbone is bruised from the corner of her mouth up to her ear.

She lifted her shirt up revealing the black and blue bruises covering her torso from Merle's steel-toed boots. At first she had thought he had broken a few of her ribs, but now she was glad he hadn't, she was in enough pain without adding broken bones to the list. Her eyes fell on the white bandages that stood out brightly against the dark damaged skin on her stomach and back. She knew beneath them were the angry red wounds with black thread holding them closed.

She lowered her shirt stretching her sore muscles, every inch of her body hurt, but none more so than her heart. What was she thinking letting Daryl in close to her, even after she had found out about his brother? She wasn't thinking rationally that was the problem. She was thinking with her heart and not with her head. Serves her right, and the constant ache in her heart will serve as her reminder of why she kept people at bay. Why you don't give people the power to hurt you, because ultimately they will.

Rayne kept her distance from the others, she wasn't ready to see their pitying looks towards her, or hear Carol's cries at Daryl's absence. So she stayed in the tower sitting watch, and it was well into the next morning before she saw anything new. The first thing she happened to see that day was Rick, he seemed to be touching someone's face as he stood on the small bridge below her tower. As Rayne observed him she realized that Rick was suffering from a break down, he thought he was seeing Lori's ghost and him being off his game was dangerous for them all. So it was then that Rayne took it upon herself to be better, more alert for the sake of the group.

Meanwhile in the forest, unlike Rayne who was trying to forget, Daryl couldn't help but remember. His mind had been on the group since he had left, wondering how they were fairing without him.
But mostly he couldn't get the image of Rayne's face out of his mind as she said goodbye to him, her tone was full of finality.

He glanced at his brother, Rayne's words echoing in his head, 'he was goin' to rape me, Daryl.' He shook his head, no, that couldn't be true, Merle wouldn't do something like that. And yet, Daryl knew what he had heard, he listened as Merle beat Rayne remorselessly and cruelly after which he stabbed her through with his knife. But Daryl couldn't hear what went on besides that other than the words the two said and no words indicated that his brother had tried to sexually assault Rayne.

Merle was his brother, family, flesh and blood. Rayne wasn't. So who was he to not defend his brother, to stick up for him, to take his brother's side. But despite his conviction that his brother was innocent, the overwhelming evidence staring him in the face couldn't be ignored. That and the fact that Rayne had looked directly in his eyes as she spoke and didn't once falter, had him thinking maybe he didn't know his brother that well anymore.

Daryl kept watch while Merle took a piss nearby behind him. "There ain't nothin' out here but mosquitos and ants."

"Patience, little brother. Sooner or later, a squirrel is bound to scurry across your path."

"Even so, that ain't much food."

"More than nothing."

"I'd have better luck going through one of them houses we passed back on the turn-off."

Merle chuckles as he finishes his piss, "Is that what your new friends taught you? Hmm?" He turned around as he zipped up his pants, "How to loot for booty?"

Daryl didn't look to Merle avoiding the lecture he'd get, "We've been out here for hours. Why don't we find a stream, try our luck with some fish?"

"I think you're just trying to lead me back to the road, man. Get me over to that prison."

"They got shelter." Daryl states leaning back against a tree crossing his ankles. "Food. Pot to piss in. Might not be a bad idea."

Merle glances up at him from his position kneeled down on the ground. "For you, maybe. Ain't gonna be no damn party for me."

"Everyone will get used to each other." Daryl straightened up raising his bow staring through the site.

Merle stands up dusting himself off, "They're all dead. Makes no difference."

Daryl lowers the bow at the sure tone in Merle's voice. "How can you be so sure?"

"Right about now he's probably hosting a housewarming party where he's gonna bury what's left of your pals." Merle spits as he passes by Daryl. "Let's hook some fish."

Daryl watches Merle walk away as he worries the inside of his cheek, he sighs spitting before he
follows Merle towards the river.

Rayne watches Glenn storm out into the courtyard, he spots her as she waves him over. He crosses the field stopping at the bottom of the tower as she climbs down to meet him. She notices the fury burning in his eyes as his stare matches hers.

"How long have you been out here?" He takes in the dark circles under her eyes that have nothing to do with the bruises on her face. She looks as though she hasn't slept in a week and he notices the paleness of her face.

"Since we got back." She shrugs it off like it's no big deal but Glenn can see straight through her.

"Rayne, you need to sleep and you sure as hell need to eat something."

Her eyes move over the prison and then to the woods outside the fences. "I can't. Rick is in no condition to lead, at least not right now. So someone has to take on that responsibility, and I knew that person would be you. You are a leader Glenn, and they'll all be lookin' to you until Rick comes out of this delusion he's caught up in. I figured I'd take the responsibility of watch and everythin' outside these gates and you can focus on what's goin' on inside. We both know that it's only a matter of time before the Governor comes to take his revenge and we need to be prepared for that. We cannot run, this is our home now and we must defend it at all costs."

Glenn smiled as she finished her speech, there was a reason the two of them got on so well, they thought very much alike. "Okay. Well as it stands right now, Carl and I are going down it the tombs to try and locate the breach where Tyreese and his group got in. If any company shows up before I come back out here, I want you to fire one shot in the air, we'll hear it and come out ready for a fight."

Rayne nodded as Glenn turned back heading across the field as Rayne climbed back up into her tower. Glenn was right, she did need to sleep and eat but at this moment the only thing on her mind was protecting this prison and her family, her health didn't matter.

The two brothers make their way through the woods, pretty soon they can both smell water up ahead of them. Merle takes a whiff of the air, "Smells to me like the Sawhatchee Creek."

"We didn't go west enough. There's a river down there, it's got to be the Yellow Jacket."

"You have a stroke, boy? We ain't never even come close to Yellow Jacket."

"We didn't go west. Just a little bit south. That's what I think."

Merle scoffs eyeing his brother, "Know what I think? I may have lost my hand, but you lost your sense of direction."

"Yeah, we'll see."
"What do you want to bet?"

"I don't want to bet nothin'. It's just a body a water. Why's everythin' got to be a competition with you?"

"Whoa, whoa. Take it easy, little brother. Just trying to have a little fun here. No need to get your panties all in a bundle."

Daryl stops as something grabs his attention, a sound floating on the wind. "You hear that?"

"Yeah, wild animals getting wild."

"No, it's a baby."

"Oh, come on. Why don't you just piss in my ear and tell me it's raining, too? That there's the sound of a couple a coons making love, sweet love. Know what I mean?" Merle laughs as he rolls his hips towards Daryl.

The younger brother rolls his eyes as he quickly moves towards the sound, finding himself down at the river, he looks up onto the stone bridge as two men yelling in Spanish catch his attention. There are two men standing on a flat bed truck near the edge of the bridge, their being over run by a group of walkers. Merle yells at the two to jump, laughing as he sees Daryl take off running towards the bridge. "Hey, man, I ain't wasting my bullets on a couple of strangers that ain't never cooked me a meal or felicitated my piece. That's my policy. You'd be wise to adopt it, brother."

Daryl ignores Merle's ranting as he quickly and quietly makes his way up the bank towards the bridge. The two men are shooting the walkers that are lumbering towards the truck, but they only have one six-shooter and they're almost out of bullets. The rest of the walkers are clawing at a red car that is housing a woman and her crying baby.

One of them men drops his gun onto the ground, he leans down for it but straightens up quickly as another walker comes at him, it grabs his leg it's teeth gnashing desperately for the flesh of is leg. Just as his friend helps pull him free, an arrow lodges itself in the walkers head. The two men look up at the man wielding a crossbow as he drops his backpack and fires another bolt into a female walkers head.

Daryl steps up quickly yanking the arrow from the corpse and stabbing it into another walkers head behind him. He looks up at the two men on the truck, "Come on, man. I'm tryin' to help you out. Cover me!"

Daryl reloads his bow as one of them jumps down from the truck and grabs the gun shooting a walker in the head as it comes up behind the hunter. Daryl fires taking out one of the walkers on the hood of the car, then he reloads and takes out another on the windshield. He runs forward smashing in the head of the walker by the drivers window with the stock of his crossbow. He drops the bow and runs to the back of the car grabbing the walker inside by the back of its shirt and dragging it out onto the ground away from the mother and child. He slams the truck lid closed on the walkers head, blood and brains flowing down the bumper and pooling onto the ground.

Daryl bends down picking up his crossbow, he turns finding a walker behind him. He hears Merle's laugh as he cocks his gun, "Daryl! I got ya!" Daryl ducks behind the car assuring his brother doesn't hit him by mistake. "Go!" Daryl moves back at his brothers shout, grabbing the bolt out of the walkers head on his way. The man with the gun is yelling at Daryl in Spanish. "Speak English," Daryl tells him as he reloads his bow. He fires taking out another walker coming towards him, then steps up on the hood of the car yanking a bolt out of the walkers head he had shot earlier.
He reloads noticing briefly that his brother is simply sitting on his ass on the bridge railing watching him do all the work. He lifts his bow nailing the bolt through the walkers head within inches of himself. He drops the bow and pulling out his knife runs over to assist the Mexican man. He stabs the knife into the walkers head then kicks it sending it over the side of the bridge and down into the water below.

Daryl leans on the side of the bridge looking down, the man next to him. They look at one another, a silent thank you between the two. Both of them turn as Merle opens the back door of the car, the man next to Daryl approaches him and Merle pulls out his gun. "Slow down, beaner. That ain't no way to say thank you."

Daryl slowly walks up on the other side of the car hearing the man speaking in Spanish neither him nor his brother understand. "Let 'em go." He stares at his brother cautiously, he knew this side of Merle, hell they used to do it together, but now it didn't feel right to Daryl.

"Relax." Merle glances at his brother, lowering his gun. "The least they can do is give us an enchilada or something, huh?" Merle leans into the car, "Easy does it, Senorita." The woman is sobbing as she watches the man rifle through her things. "Everything's gonna be fine."

The two Mexican men exchange words as Daryl matches stares with the man he was helping, Daryl nods before turning to his brother. He taps Merle on the back with the tip of his crossbow, "Get out of the car."

"I know you're not talking to me, brother."

Daryl turns to the man, "Get in your car and get the hell out of here. Go! Get in your car!"

The two men converse in Spanish a moment before they climb into the car and start it. Daryl keeps his crossbow trained on Merle as he stands up and shuts the door to the car. After the car backs up out of range Daryl raises the bow, holding it up on his bicep, he glares at Merle before he walks away picking up his backpack and heading across the bridge back the way they came. The thunder rumbles as Daryl snatches a bolt out of a walkers head and continues walking, he passes a sign on the bridge that reads 'Yellow Jacket Creek' that alone would have made him smile if he had been in a joking mood.

Merle catches up to Daryl back in the forest, his anger brimming just along the surface. "The shit you doing, pointing that thing at me?"

"They were scared, man."

"They were rude is what they were. Rude and they owed us a token of gratitude."

Daryl sighed, "They didn't owe us nothin'."

"You helping people out of the goodness of your heart? Even though you might die doing it? Is that something your Sheriff Rick taught you?"

Daryl stopped in his tracks whipping around to face his brother, "There was a baby!"

"Oh, otherwise you would have just left them to the biters, then?"
Daryl gets what Merle is trying to say, he scoffs not believing Merle is still holding shit over his head. "Man, I went back for ya. You weren't there. I didn't cut off your hand, neither. You did that. Way before they locked you up on that roof. You asked for it."

Merle looks back and forth, chuckling, "You know—you know what's funny to me? You and Sheriff Rick are like this now." Merle holds up his hand crossing two of his fingers tightly. "Right? I bet you a penny and fiddle of gold that you never told him that we were planning on robbing that camp blind."

"It didn't happen," Daryl stated knowing Merle was trying to make him feel bad for something they never did.

"Yeah, it didn't cause I wasn't there to help you."

Daryl stepped up into his brother's face, "What, like when we were kids, huh? Who left who then?"

"What? Huh? Is that why I lost my hand?"

"You lost your hand cause you're a simpleminded piece of shit." Daryl turned walking away from his brother but Merle was quick to chase after him, grabbing the back of Daryl's shirt he ripped it down the back revealing the scars littering Daryl's entire back. The younger brother grasped the tattered pieces of his shirt before dropping them and swinging his pack onto his back to cover up the shame.

"I—I didn't know he was—" Merle stammered not knowing what to say as he took in what had been done to Daryl.

"Yeah, he did." Daryl's voice wavered as he picked up his crossbow. "He did the same to you. That's why you left first."

"I had to, man. I would have killed him otherwise."

Merle watched Daryl walk away from him into the woods, "Where you going?"

"Back where I belong. 'Back to her.' Rayne's face flashed in his mind and Daryl now knew he was wrong for leaving, his family were the people back at that prison, and he was going back to them.

"I can't go with you. I tried to kill that black bitch. Damn near killed the Chinese kid."

"He's Korean." Daryl was proud of himself for remembering that tidbit about Glenn, maybe the kid was growing on Daryl. Suddenly a thought came to Daryl, one that had been nagging him since he parted ways with his huntress. "And Rayne?"

"What about her?" Merle said warily, he didn't want to answer the question he knew his brother was about to ask, Daryl would surely leave him when he answered.

"Were you gonna rape her?" Daryl choked on the words, they felt so foreign in his mouth. Merle didn't answer so Daryl pushed him, "Answer me! If she hadn't broken your nose, would you have raped her?"

Merle's silence was a kick to the gut for Daryl, one that nearly dropped him to his knees. He felt the bile rising up his throat as he pictured what his brother would have done to the woman he was surely falling for. He had called her a liar, when she had never lied to him. He didn't deserve her and he knew that now, but if she could forgive him, then he would spend the rest of his life making things right between them until he earned her back.
Merle's voice turned him back, "Doesn't matter, man. I just can't go with you."

Daryl raises his hand pointing the bolt in his hand towards his brother, "You know, I may be the one walking away… but you're the one that's leaving—again." Daryl took off again through the woods leaving his brother behind. Merle stood with his hands on his hips, the emotions of sadness and loss filling his face. He turned back to the way Daryl left and tossed his hands up following his lead. "Damn."

Back at the prison things were quiet, too quiet for Rayne's sake. She sat in the tower intently watching her surroundings, waiting for the cannons to signal the coming war. She wasn't disappointed as without warning a shot rang out. Rayne didn't see where it had originated from but she had a feeling the Governor or one of his men was behind the barrel. Her eyes moved down to Rick standing below her, he glanced up at her when gunshots hit the ground at his feet. "Rick!"

Rayne watched the cop run across the small bridge and drive into the bushes near the fence. She turned as she heard another yell below her inside the fence, looking down she found Hershel on the ground by the graves shielding himself from the gunfire. From everywhere along the perimeter of the fence gunfire resounded through the woods. It seemed like forever before the gunfire stopped, but just as quickly it started up once again.

The gunfire stops again as the group hears a distant engine roaring, the sound getting closer to the prison. A red and white van comes speeding down the road busting through the gates and into the middle of the field. Everyone sits in suspense wondering what the hell is going on when the back gate to the van drops down and a group of walkers is released into the field. The driver of the van gets out running back out of the gates firing at Michonne who is using the bus for cover. The gunfire starts again as everyone starts firing at whoever they can.

"Hershel. Get the hell out of there!"

Rick tries to cover the elder man as the walkers converge on him, he gets a reprieve when Rayne fires down from the tower taking out the walkers coming Hershel's way. Just then growling is heard behind Rick, he turns to find walkers converging on him, the gunfire attracting them like moths to a flame. He raises his gun only for it to give a resounding click signaling that he's empty.

Rayne quickly covers Hershel from her spot in the tower, she glances up and from across the field she sees Michonne with her Katana drawn slicing her way through the horde towards the elder man. Glenn roars up in the truck, jumping out he and Michonne help Hershel into the truck and the three of them take off back into the courtyard.

When she's sure they're safe inside, Rayne searches for Rick, she finds him pinned up against the fence by walkers. Just as she raises her rifle to take a shot, an arrow pierces the head of the walker in front of Rick narrowly stopping before Rick's forehead. She looks to the right to find none other than Daryl and Merle running up to protect Rick. She covers them as the three take out the walkers around them, and once they're dead, they stand and survey the remaining walkers inside and coming into their once secured compound.
They all make their way inside to the cell block, there is a huge discussion to be had now. Daryl stands up on the second level with Beth and Carol, watching over Lil Ass Kicker. His eyes move down below him where Rayne leans against the wall next to the staircase, she has yet to even look his way since he showed back up. He was greeted warmly by everyone else which made him realize he had made the right decision to come back, he truly belonged here. But he couldn't stop the ache in his chest as the one person he came back for, wanted nothing to do with him, and not that he could blame her. Boy, he had a lot of work to do.

Everyone offers their input on the situation, mostly the consensus is to leave, minus Rick, Daryl, Rayne and Glenn. Merle adds his two cents from behind the bars of the cell door as he's locked in the common area, of how they should've left last night when they had the chance.

"We ain't scared of that prick." Daryl eyes his brother, a silent look to keep his mouth shut.

"Y'all should be." Merle states, he knows things the others don't about the Governor. "That truck through the fence thing, that's just him ringing the doorbell. We might have some thick walls to hide behind, but he's got the guns and the numbers. And if he takes the high ground around this place, shoot, he could just starve us out if he wanted to."

"Let's put him in the other cell block," Maggie says eyeing Merle.

"No. He's got a point." Daryl defends his brother, which this time, Merle wasn't wrong.

Everything spiraled out from there, Maggie yelled at Merle about things being his fault, Beth shouted at her sister that it didn't matter whose fault it was, they needed to do something. Rick stated to them all that leaving was not an option before he headed towards the cell door. Hershel stood up shouting at Rick, his voice was full of rage and finality, a tone they had never heard him use before.

He proceeded to tell Rick that he was slipping, they had all seen it and they knew why. Lori's death
had hit them all hard. He had put his families lives in Rick's hand and now he needed to own up to his statement of this not being a democracy and do something. The group splits up, Maggie outside on watch with Rayne, while Glenn, Rick, Daryl and Hershel talk about what to do now. They can't clear out the walkers without burning through their ammo, so they can't move the bus over to block the open gates. Glenn tells them the ugly truth, they're trapped in there, with barely any food or ammo.

Glenn starts in about having a snake in the nest which sets Daryl off, the two men squaring off. It ends with Daryl giving his final words on Merle staying before he heads back up to his cell. Glenn tells Rick it's not fair to ask them to live with Merle after he tried to kill them, it would be like asking Rick to live with Shane after he tried to shoot him. Hershel tries to reason with him that Merle is an asset with his military experience, and Glenn tells them that they could kill two birds with one stone by turning him over to the Governor.

Daryl is sitting in his cell on the bottom bunk twirling an arrow in his hands. He looks up as Carol steps into the doorway leaning back against the doorframe. "Haven't had a chance to say I'm glad you came back."

"To what? All this?" Daryl eyes his small cell.

Carol sits down on the small stool by the bed, "This is our home."

Daryl bites the inside of his cheek, "This is a tomb."

"That's what Rayne said T-Dog called it. She thought he was right, till you found her."

The mention of Rayne makes Daryl's heart clench, she had still yet to speak to him, let alone look in his direction.

Carol sighs glancing down at the ground before raising her eyes to meet Daryl's, "He's your brother, but he's not good for you. Don't let him bring you down."

Again Rayne flashed into his mind, she had said almost the same thing to him before he left her in the forest. It killed him how everything he thought about reverted right back to her.

"After all, look how far you've come."

They both look around the small cell before cracking up into laughter. Carol stands up to leave but pauses in the doorway, "You should talk to her."

Daryl's head snaps up to meet hers, Carol gives him a knowing smile. "She hasn't been the same since they came back without you and I doubt it has anything to do with what happened to her at the hands of your brother."

The hunter scoffs, she obviously didn't know the truth. "Actually, it does. I don't blame her if she never speaks to me again and it doesn't seem like she will. She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you. She loves you." Daryl gave her a hard look, no woman ever fell in love with Daryl Dixon. He couldn't imagine how Carol knew, unless Rayne had told her, but no, she wouldn't have said that. He saw Carol's small smile, "She didn't say anything, actually she hasn't
said much of anything since being back. But I can see it in her eyes. The look in her eyes when she came back without you, that was the look of a broken woman. A woman who had just lost the love of her life. We can never take back the things we've said or done, but we can atone for them and start over. Talk to her Daryl. This life is short and unpredictable, take a chance before there isn't one to take."

Carol walked away leaving Daryl alone with his thoughts, something he didn't exactly like. Daryl wasn't used to having thoughts or emotions, and now he was having both. He growled shaking his head, he had no idea how to deal with this situation, he had never been in this position before. But he knew Carol was right, he was running out of chances to make things right. He needed to tell Rayne how he felt and he needed to do it now.

Rayne perked up in her tower as she saw Andrea coming out of the woods, a walker on a catch pole in front of her. She signaled to Mags, who relayed to Carl, then the boy ran inside alerting the others. Within moments Rick, Daryl, Merle and Michonne entered the courtyard with guns drawn, Carol and Glenn covered them from the walkway above. Rick opened the gate letting Andrea in, after frisking her, he dropped her to her knees taking all her weapons and her bag before glancing down at her. "Welcome back."

The group followed the two inside to the cell block minus Rayne who wasn't leaving the yard unattended, not to mention she wasn't in much of a social mood. She stayed out there long after Andrea left, long after the night sky rose and into the next sunrise.
The next morning Rick, Carl and Michonne took off in the car, headed back to the cops hometown in search of the weapons he had left behind.

By the time they returned that night, Michonne had proved herself to be one of them.

Daryl had been fighting with himself all day trying to decide how to mend things with Rayne. Not that she had given him the time of day since his return. She was cordial and civil, but Daryl would have much preferred her to hit him or yell at him, maybe toss some nasty words his way.

She spent the majority of her time out in the tower on the far side of the yard. Daryl had thought about going out there to speak to her alone, but he wasn't one hundred percent sure that Rayne wouldn't use him for target practice.

The huntress sat in her tower watching Daryl pace back and forth in the courtyard. She knew he wanted to talk to her, and perhaps she should let him explain, or apologize, if that's what he wanted to do. But she couldn't get his words out of her head. He had called her a liar, which is something Rayne never did. She didn't blame him for taking his brother's side, hell if it was her brother she would've chosen him over everyone too.

Rayne sighed leaning her head back against the wall, in her hand she clutched her brother's Navy cross. "Oh, Nico. I hope you're okay."
Several days later Daryl lead the way into town, surprisingly with Rayne on the back of his bike. She still had yet to give him anything but a cold shoulder, but just to have her sitting behind him, feeling her body heat through his jacket, that was enough for him right now.

They pull up next to a couple of silo’s, Rayne and Daryl hopping off the bike, both shouldering their bows. Rick stepped out of the car behind them after glancing at Hershel who sat in the driver's seat.

Daryl took point as they snuck in between the silo's and building's on the way over to the place this meeting was supposed to take place. Rayne brought up the rear, smiling to herself as she watched Daryl up ahead with his new black camo crossbow. Michonne had found it when she went on the run with Rick and the look on Daryl's face when they presented it to him was like a kid on Christmas morning.

As they approach the building Rick takes the inside while the two hunters check out the perimeter. Daryl hears talking coming from inside, he glances through a broken window, Rick stands before a table with the Governor on the other side. The two of them walk out to the front of the building where Hershel pulls the car up to meet them.

Daryl eyes the perimeter, "He's already in there. Just sat down with Rick."

"I don't see any cars."

"It don't feel right." Rayne nods agreeing with the hunter, she keeps her bow raised, alert, waiting for anything. "Keep it running." Daryl tells the elder man.

They hear a truck approaching through the fence across from them, Daryl taps on the hood of the car, "Heads up." Hershel gets out of the car as the two hunter's train their bows on the truck. It pulls to a stop in front of them, three people getting out of the vehicle, one being Andrea.

"What the hell? Why's your boy already in there?"

"He's here?" Andrea's shocked tone tells them that she wasn't informed of the Governor's comings and goings.

"Yep." Daryl says.
Andrea turns to the man who drove, he gives her a sarcastic smile like he knew before she did. She sighs before opening the door and barging inside.

Rayne hops up on the hood of the car her bow ready in her hands, Hershel stands to her left, and Daryl is pacing before her like a caged animal.

"Maybe I should go inside?"

The nerd in the glasses pipes up addressing Hershel, like he was someone important. "The Governor thought it best if he and Rick spoke privately."

Daryl looked sideways at the man, "Who the hell are you?"

"Milton Mamet."

"Great. He brought his butler."

Rayne dropped her head, snickering, her face hidden behind her curtain of hair. Leave it to Daryl to pop off with exactly what everyone was already thinking. The Mexican man chuckles as the nerd continues writing, "I'm his advisor."

Daryl presses, "What kind of advice?"

"Planning. Biters. Uh, you know, I'm sorry. I don't feel like I need to explain myself to the henchmen."

"You better watch your mouth, sunshine."

"D." Rayne's cautionary tone pulled the hunter back the two steps he took, that and he was taken aback by her speaking to him.

The Mexican, Martinez, decided to add his two cents in at that point. "Look, if you and I are gonna be out here pointing guns at each other all day, do me a favor, shut your mouth."

Of course that set Daryl off and he stalked up to the man, Hershel spoke hoping it would get to the two, "We don't need this. If all goes south in there, we'll be at each other's throats soon enough."

Daryl made no attempt to move, so Rayne sighed sliding off of the hood and grabbed the hunter by the arm, pulling him back towards the car. She hopped back up on the hood and pulled the hunter back between her legs, tilting her head up she brushed her lips across his ear. "Relax D, that asshole is not worth it. You'll get your chance to shoot him, of that I'm positive."

Daryl was shocked on two levels, one because not only was Rayne speaking to him, her soft lips brushing the shell of his ear, but second she had touched him. Standing between her legs, feeling the heat of her body against him was almost more than Daryl could take. He was having thoughts pass through his mind right now that could get them all in trouble, or killed.
Rayne could feel the tension radiating off of Daryl, she needed to get him to focus on something other than the asshole standing by the truck. She pulled him back tighter to her, snaking her right hand under his vest, jacket and shirt until her fingers found the soft flesh of his back. She felt him flinch slightly at her touch, but as she ran her fingers over one of his scars she felt him relax into her touch. He was allowing her to touch him, that in itself was a victory for Rayne.

Daryl felt Rayne pull him back closer to her, his legs hitting the bumper of the car. He flinched as he felt her fingertips brush the skin of his back. He wanted to kick himself for that, here was Rayne actually touching him and he had to do something stupid like that. He felt her finger trace over one of his scars, her soft skin coupled with the heat of her touch calmed Daryl, he felt himself instantly relax into her touch. Daryl had achieved three victories today, one Rayne had spoken to him, two she had touched him and three he was allowing her to touch him. Daryl's back was a part of his body he never allowed anyone to touch or see. Just him allowing her to brush her fingertips over it was a victory in itself.

The group sees Andrea walk outside, a look of defeat on her face as she sits down on a bench by the door. The longevity of the situation is taking its toll on Daryl as he again starts pacing in front of Rayne. Within a few minutes he had moved back to his place in between Rayne's legs which caused her to smile knowing he was looking for comfort, she again placed her hand under his shirt lightly stroking his skin.

Daryl couldn't stand the waiting game, he had stood up from his place between Rayne's legs and began pacing again. Within minutes he found himself craving her touch, she was the only thing keeping him calm. He stepped back to his previous spot, and gave a tiny smile as he felt her stroke his skin again. Even without a word, she knew what he needed at that moment.

The nerd took that moment to approach from the other side of the truck. "There's no reason not to use this time we have together to explore the issues ourselves."

"Boss said to sit tight and shut up."
'Don't you mean the Governor?’ Daryl quipped.

"It's a good thing they're sitting down, especially after what happened. They're gonna work it out. Nobody wants another battle."

"I wouldn't exactly call it a battle." Rayne stated glaring holes through the nerd.

"I would call it a battle and I did." He held up a paper pad, "I recorded it."

"For what?"

The nerd looks to the hunter like the answer is obvious. "Somebody's got to keep a record of what we've gone through. It'll be a part of our history."

Hershel eyes the man, "That makes sense—"

"I've got dozens of interviews—"

The nerd is interrupted by the sound of walkers growling, the two hunters, Martinez and Andrea take off towards the sound coming from the buildings behind the truck. They run over finding a few walkers between the silo's, Daryl turns to the Mexican motioning with his arm, "After you."

"No way, you first." The Mexican points with his baseball bat.

"Oh Christ, come on Drea." The huntress pushes past both of the men, the blonde right behind her. The two women take out the first two walkers with knives to the skulls.

The Mexican eyes the women then turns back to Daryl, "Pussy." He turns to the women's left smashing a walkers skull up against the silo with one swing, killing it.

Rayne watches the Mexican kill the walker then turn to Daryl with a look that says 'that's how it's done.' She watches Daryl roll his eyes at the man. "Oh give me a break." She mutters as she realizes this has turned into a pissing contest between the men.

The women watch as Daryl slams a bolt into a walkers head while Martinez smashes another's head in. Then Daryl fires another bolt through a female walkers eye, it goes straight through and lodges into the neck of another walker behind it. Martinez steps up to smash the walkers head but before he can, a hunting knife whips past his head, embedding in the skull of the walker. The two men share a mutual glance before Daryl steps over to raid the walkers pockets.

Rayne smiles as Daryl holds up a pack of cigarettes, "How lucky is that?"

Daryl takes one out placing it between his lips, a small thing that Rayne finds incredibly sexy. He holds out the pack to Martinez who waves him off, "Nah, I prefer menthols."

Daryl pockets the pack and pulls out his lighter, mumbling around the cigarette, "Douchebag." He lights the cig and pockets the lighter, turning to Martinez. "You army or somethin'?" Rayne leans against the silo in front of Daryl as the two men converse.

"Nah, I just—I just hate these things. After what they did to my wife, kids."

Daryl nods taking a drag from the cig, "Sucks."

Martinez nods, "Thanks." There's a pregnant pause. "You know this is a joke, right? They ain't gonna work anything out. Sure, they'll do their little dance and tomorrow, next day… they'll give the word."
"I know."

None of them are expecting anything good to come out of these talks, they know in the end, one group will destroy the other. Martinez nods to the pack, Daryl pulls it out handing one to the man.

The trio makes their way back to the cars, noticing first the Governor then Rick exiting the building. Everyone makes their way to their respective cars, Rayne hops back onto the bike with Daryl, her arms secured around his waist. As they fly down the road Rayne tilts her head back reveling in the wind, her long hair trailing behind her like a waterfall. It was times like this she wished she had met Daryl before this apocalypse happened. She relished the thought of riding down the roads, no destination in mind, just the two of them. Then her serenity is shattered by the growling of a passing walker and she reminds herself that those days are far off… If they ever happen at all.

But as she rests her head on Daryl's back she feels his left hand squeeze her own and she knows there is no place she'd rather be. This is the hand they were dealt, this is their life now and as long as she has Daryl and her family, she has all she will ever need.

They pull up to the gate of the prison, Carol pulling it open to let them inside. Daryl parks the bike on the side of the building and Rayne hops off stepping back to the car behind them. The group meets them out in the courtyard but Rick retreats them all back inside quickly. As they gather inside the cell block door, Rick reaches inside a cell picking up his rifle, he turns to face the group.

"So, I met this Governor. Sat with him for quite a while."

"Just the two of you?" Merle wonders, his curiosity peaking.

"Should have gone when we had the chance, bro." Merle gives a pointed look to Glenn as he steps past walking towards the common room.

"He wants the prison." Rick continues speaking making sure he takes in everyone's reactions. "He wants us gone. Dead. He wants us dead—for what we did to Woodbury." Rick takes a moment to let everyone take in that information. "We're going to war."
The next morning Rayne heads out to the far tower to stand watch while Rick takes post on the other next to the courtyard. A sound catches Rayne's ear, like the sound you make when someone surprises you from behind. She cocks her head, training her ears towards the forest.

From his tower Rick notices her concentration, "Everything okay Rayne?"

Rayne turns her head at Rick's yell, "Yeah, just though I heard somethin', from over there."

Rick picks up his rifle pointing the scope in the direction Rayne indicated, he had a better view of the front of the woods from his tower. He pans the rifle over the area, stopping when he thinks he sees something. He pulls his eyes back then looks through the scope again, still nothing. He lowers the rifle shaking his head to Rayne, "Nothing."

She nods back brushing it off as exhaustion, she really needed to get some more rest, still there was a nagging feeling in her gut that told her she had heard something.

If she only knew how right she was.
The next morning is judgment day for the prison, the day the Governor would decide their fate. Rick, Rayne, Daryl and Hershel stand in the courtyard in the early morning light.

"It's the only way. No one else knows."

Rayne shakes her head, she cannot believe she's standing here in the courtyard listening to Rick discuss giving up Michonne to save their asses.

Daryl nods glancing at the cop, "You gonna tell 'em?"

"Not till after. We have to do it today. It has to be quiet."

Daryl nods, but a part of him is not fully on board with this idea. Just as Rayne believed, he did has well, Michonne had earned her place with them. Nothing about this felt right at all. "You got a plan?"

Rick nods, "We tell her we need to talk. Away from the others."

Rayne has heard enough, "Give me a break Rick. Just tell her the truth. If you're gonna hand her over to her death, at least be a man about it." She bites her tongue a moment, but then realizes this is her only chance to say something. "This isn't right. She has earned her spot here, she is one of us. Do you honestly believe that if you hand her over, he's just gonna let us all go? Please. Look at everythin' he has done up until now, you can't tell me you think for one moment that he won't still kill us all." The look he gives her makes her laugh, a dry hollow laugh. "Wow. You really are a fool. Michonne was right. The Governor is a smooth talker. He's got you buffaload. He has you right where he wants you and you don't even realize it. What if it was one a us he wanted? What if it was me? Would you willin'ly hand me over, on the slim chance that it might save everyone else?"

Rick's silence is a slap to the face, Rayne could literally feel the red welt handprint on her cheek. "Wow. You really are a son-of-a-bitch. You do what you want, but just remember one thang. When everythin' I've said, comes out to be the truth, and it will, because I know it will. The blood will be on your hands, and ya won't be able to wash it away." She looks back and forth between the two men, one that has grown to be like a father to her and one that has stolen her heart. "I will not be a part a this."

Daryl watches Rayne walk away back inside the prison, he knows everything she has said is right. He turns back to Rick biting his cheek and shakes his head, "Just ain't us, man."

"No. No, it isn't." Hershel shakes his head as he grabs his crutches making his way back inside, he
cannot stand there and listen to the two men converse any longer.

Rick watches the elder man leave, then turns to the hunter. "We do this, we avoid a fight. No one else dies."

Daryl still doesn't believe it's what's right but he trusts Rick's call. He nods, "Okay."

"We need someone else."

Daryl reads Rick's mind, "I'll talk to him."

"I'll do it."

"I'll go with you."

"No. Just me."

Rick takes his leave to go find Merle, while Daryl moves towards Rayne's truck, he noticed her walking towards it during their conversation. He finds her sitting on the tailgate cleaning her bow, he hoists himself up setting down next to her. He took in her over concentrating gaze, she was trying hard to ignore him.

"You hate me?"

His question caught her off guard, but she simply shook her head as she continued with her work. She felt him tuck her hair behind her right ear, she tilted her head to find him gazing at her.

"I don't agree with Rick's plan, but—it's his call and I trust him."

Rayne nodded, she knew Daryl trusted Rick, she trusted them both, but this wasn't right. She could only hope that Rick figured that out before he went to far and there was no going back.

"Rayne, when this all over, I wanna talk, about everythin'."

She gives him a sideways smile, "Sounds good to me."

The two of them meet up with Glenn, Michonne and Hershel in the courtyard. While Maggie and Carl distract some of the walkers towards the front fence, Daryl and Glenn place a piece of wood covered in coils of barbed wire in the field, incase of another stunt by the Governor. Rayne and Michonne pull out their blades covering the men, then they jump back into the truck and Hershel drives them back into the courtyard.

The group converses for a moment, Rick finding out that the barbed wire was Michonne's idea. His gaze moves from Daryl's to Rayne's, nodding at them both, he ushers them all inside.
Daryl makes his way around the courtyard finding Glenn trying to repair the metal gates that were knocked down by the walkers thanks to Andrew.

"Hey you seen Merle around?"

Glenn merely gives Daryl an incredulous look before turning back to his task. Daryl steps over setting his crossbow down and helping Glenn reattach the chains to the doors.

"He say he was sorry yet?" Daryl glances over at the young man as they thread the chains through the bars. "Cause he is."

Glenn latches the padlock and grabs a crate filled with bottle taking them over to the picnic table where Daryl set down his bow.

"He's gonna make it right. I'ma make him. There's gotta be a way. Just needs to be a lil forgiveness is all."

Glenn stops what he's doing, he steps in front of Daryl licking his lips. "He tied me to a chair, beat me, and threw a walker in the room. Maybe I could call it even. But he—he took Maggie to a man who terrorized her, humiliated her. I care more about her than I care about me. And what about what he did to Rayne? Huh Daryl? I know you care for her, more than you'll ever admit. Can you forgive him so easily? Cause if you can, then you don't care for her and you don't deserve her."

Daryl watches Glenn walk back to the table, his mind thinking hard about what the young kid had to say. He steps forward snatching his bow from the table top then leaving. Daryl heads inside searching for his brother, he hears noise coming from the generator room. He makes his way down the hall, his crossbow trained in front of him. "Merle. You down here?"

Merle looks up as his brother comes through the door, "Hey, little brother."

"What the hell?"

"I was just about to holler back at ya."

"What you doin' down here?"

"Just looking for a little uh crystal, man."

Merle sighs at his brother's shaking head, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Shit will mess my life up when everything is going so sweet, right?" Merle chuckles at his own joke.

"You talk to Rick yet?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. I'm in. But, uh, he ain't got the stomach for it. He's gonna buckle. You know that, right?"

Daryl chews the inside of his cheek nodding, "Yeah. If he does, he does."
"You want him to?"

Daryl thinks for a moment, "Whatever he says goes."

Merle scoffs, "Man. Do you even possess a pair of balls, little brother? Are they even attached? I mean, if they are, do they belong to you? Or does your huntress have to give you permission to use them? You used to call people like that sheep. What happened to you?"

"What happened with you and Glenn and Maggie? And Rayne?"

"I've done worse. You need to grow up. Things are different now.\" Merle's face contorts in anger, his lower lip shaking. "Your people look at me like I'm the devil… grabbing up those lovebirds like that, huh? Now y'all want to do the same thing I did—snatch someone up and deliver them to the Governor, just like me. Yeah. People do what they got to do or they die."

Daryl shakes his head, "Can't do things without people anymore, man."

Again Merle scoffs, "Maybe these people need somebody like me around, huh? Do their dirty work. The bad guy. Yeah, maybe that's how it is now, huh? How does that hit you?"

Daryl reaches out laying his hand on his brother's shoulder, "I just want my brother back."

"Get out a here, man." Merle shoves Daryl's hand off, watching his younger sibling leave.

Daryl meets back up with Rayne in the courtyard, they're talking about what's about to go down when Rick runs up to them. "It's off. We'll take our chances." Rick notices the smirk on Rayne's face and rolls his eyes as she chuckles.

"I'm not saying it was the wrong call, but this is definitely the right one." Daryl is relived to hear that Rick changed his mind but he notices something is bothering the cop. "What's wrong?"

"I can't find Merle or Michonne. They've gone."

"Come on." Daryl leads the trio into the building and down to the generator room where he left his brother. "He was in here. Said he was looking for drugs."

Rayne scoffs, "No surprise there."

"Said a lot of things, actually."

"Like what?"

"Said that you were gonna change your mind. Here we go." The two men move behind the generators and find a pillowcase on the floor. "Yeah, he took her here. They mixed it up."

"Damn it! I'm going after him." Rick heads down the small hallway leading to the outside door.

"You can't track for shit."

"Then the both of us."
"No, just me. I said I'd go and I'll go."

"You're not goin' alone D." Rayne steps up next to him, he nods knowing two trackers are better than one.

Daryl turns to Rick, "Plus they're gonna come back here. You need to be ready. Your family, too."

The two hunter's take off out of the gates running fast, they find tracks quickly and decide Merle's about an hour ahead of them. They push forward through the neighborhoods, they come upon a severed head, still alive and gnashing its teeth at the two. Suddenly a blade pierces through its head, Michonne on the other end of the blade, but no Merle.

"Hey. Where's my brother?" The two approach her slowly. "You kill him?"

Michonne shakes her head, "He let me go."

The two eye one another before they reach a decision, Daryl turns to the warrior, "Don't let anyone come after us."

The two make their way towards the spot where they were supposed to meet up with the Governor. Bows at the ready they silently move from building to building passing walkers too busy tearing into a corpse to notice them. They move down the road Daryl leading the way, Rayne taking in the dead walkers and human corpses that were once the Governor's men.

Daryl takes out a walker tearing into a corpse in front of them with a bolt through the back of its head. He takes another arrow out of his quiver as he sees another to his right, just as he moves towards to stab it in the head he pauses. Something about this walker is familiar to him.

Rayne watches Daryl take another arrow from his quiver and approach the walker to their right kneeling over a corpse. She draws her bow as back up for the hunter as they slowly step towards it. The walker sensing their presence lifts its head, a mouth full of entrails hanging from its lips. Rayne's breath catches in her throat as her heart drops to her stomach…

Merle.

Daryl's face contorts in pain and anger as the walker raises its head to reveal the face of his brother,
his flesh and blood staring back at him. Daryl can't stop the tears as he stares at the last of his family, now one of the very things he has spent his last years killing. He vaguely hears Rayne behind him as she chokes out a sob and a whisper, he knows it was more for him than Merle, but he doesn't blame her.

Rayne can feel her eyes tearing up, the warm liquid trickling down her cheeks. She lowers her bow, she may be a killer of walkers but even she can't bear to take this shot. "Oh Daryl." Still she stands by, bow at the ready. If Daryl cannot do this himself she will take the shot and bear the burden of this death on her shoulders. She watches Merle's corpse stand, tripping over the carcass on the ground as he moves towards the two of them. She may not have given a damn about Merle after what he put them all through, no, her tears were for Daryl, but she couldn't help but feel sorry for the man. In the end Merle had tried to do the right thing and this was how he ended up.

Daryl watched as his brother's corpse stood up, tripping over the body at his feet in his haste to reach the living body before him. Sobs wracked his body as he shoved the walker away from him, his voice horse as he yelled out in despair. Then again he shoved him away, Daryl wasn't sure if he had it in him to kill his brother. The walker charged again, this time Daryl took out his hunting knife stabbing it into Merle's shoulder, shoving him backwards and to the ground. Daryl landed on top of his brother's body his knees on either side of Merle's torso, as he pulled the knife from his brother's shoulder and stabbed it down into his head.

Rayne watched as Daryl shoved Merle back twice before he pulled out his knife and drove it into the walker's shoulder. The two fell to the ground Daryl straddling his brother's body, he pulled the knife out and repeatedly brought it down stabbing into his brother's head. Rayne counted seven times before Daryl shoved himself backwards onto the grass at his brother's feet. Rayne moved forward slowly not wanting to alarm the hunter, she knelt down as she reached him laying her bow on the grass. Reaching out with tentative fingers she laid her hand gently on Daryl's shoulder waiting for his reaction.

Daryl pulled the knife out and jammed it back down again, and again, and again, before he threw himself backwards away from his brother's body. He cried heavily as he stared at his brother's corpse. He had just killed his brother. He was alone. He had no one anymore. Just as he had turned over on his side he felt a light touch on his shoulder. It was then he remembered that Rayne was here with him. He turned his head catching her eyes, where he expected to see pity he only saw understanding and comfort. The tears from her eyes were for them both, for his loss of his brother
and for her not knowing if her own was alive or dead.

Rayne was surprised when he didn't lash out at her like she had expected him to do. He only turned his head, Cobalt meeting Cerulean, his tear stained face matched her own. She knew he was surprised to see her crying for Merle and yes a small, tiny piece of her was grieving for the man. But the majority of her tears were for Daryl's loss and for her own being as she had no idea whether her own brother was alive or dead, as well as her entire family.

Daryl broke their gaze turning back to look upon his brother's corpse once again. He rested back on his elbows before he collapsed onto Rayne's lap. He turned to his right burying his face in Rayne's stomach as his arms curled around her right side clinging to the back of her shirt. He didn't care how pathetic he looked at this moment, he had just killed his brother and for once he just had to let things out. He knew nothing would go beyond he and Rayne unless he said otherwise, that was something he realized he was grateful to her for. Not once had she ever spoken to the group or an individual about anything that had gone on between them.

Rayne was shocked when Daryl collapsed back onto her knees sobbing, more so when he turned and buried his head into her stomach. Before she could make a move he wrapped his arms tightly around her right side, his hands fisting into her black long sleeved shirt. She knew any other time he would worry about looking pathetic, but there was no one around. After what he had just went through he was allowed time to grieve and she wouldn't say a word of this to anyone unless Daryl told her to. Rayne hadn't consoled someone in so long she wasn't sure she remembered how, but with Daryl it came back naturally. She whispered to him as she ran her fingers through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck.

Daryl could hear Rayne whispering comfort to him as she stroked her fingers through his hair and across his neck. He didn't know how long he laid there, but he did know that the longer he did the more relaxed he felt. By the time they parted he felt a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. He took a deep breath standing up then extending his hand down to Rayne. She took it with a small smile and he helped pull her to her feet. He picked up his crossbow and watched as Rayne bent down retrieving hers as well. A thought occurred to him and before she could walk away he lightly grabbed her elbow and spun her back to face him.
Again Rayne was shocked as they parted and stood up retrieving their bows, before she could take a step Daryl had gently grasped her elbow and turned her back towards him. He pulled her into his chest and after a long look into her eyes, he leaned down pressing his lips to hers. Rayne melted into him as their lips met, her free hand coming up to rest lightly on his cheek, her thumb stroking his stubble. She took a deep breath as they parted, Daryl lightly resting his forehead against hers. No words needed to be spoken, she knew what he was saying. Rayne smiled up at him as he kissed her forehead and took her hand entwining their fingers as they started back towards the prison.

Daryl shocked himself with his boldness as he pulled her flush against his body, then leaned down capturing her lips with his own, savoring the softness of hers against his rough chapped ones. He felt her relax, her right hand coming up to rest against his cheek sending tingles through his body as she ran her thumb along his stubble. He took a deep breath as they parted just as she did, he tilted his head down resting their foreheads together. He knew he didn't need to say what he was thinking, she just knew. He saw her smile up at him and just as every time before his heart leap to his throat. Who knew that such a simple thing could mean so much to him. He brushed his lips over her skin, kissing her forehead before taking her right hand in his own and starting back for the prison.
By the time the two got back to the prison, the group was in the courtyard packing their belongings into the vehicles. No one spoke a word about the hunter's entwined fingers, just smiled as the two walked up, truthfully they all thought it was about time.

The two parted after a small kiss which surprised Rayne as Daryl initiated it. She knew he wasn't one for public affection, nor was he one to start things, so it was a pleasant surprise. After loading her things she came back over to him, leaning on the tank of Merle's motorcycle, she saw Carol walk up behind Daryl and the two women shared a smile.

"You know, Merle never did nothin' like that his whole life."

"He gave us a chance." Carol held her hand out to Daryl, which he took as she helped him up off the ground. He took his things to Rayne's truck tossing them into the cab, he had decided to leave Merle's bike behind, too much of a painful reminder.

Suddenly Rayne remembered something she had left in the tower the night she was on watch. Daryl offered to go with her to get it but she assured him with a light kiss she'd be right back. She made her way down through the dog run to the base of the tower and inside of the door, jogging up the stairs to the top she finds her necklace with her brother's Navy Cross laying on the floor.

Before she knew what had happened she heard a loud explosion to her left. She turned and looked out of the windows finding the tower at the front gate on fire. Her eyes dropped to the ground where a convoy of military vehicles were speeding into the yard. A fifty caliber machine gun took out the tower to the right of the gate then fired upon the front of the prison and the courtyard. The walkers mulling around were cut in half by the powerful bullets piercing through their bodies.

Rayne followed the convoy as it came to a halt in the field, her eyes going wide as she sees Martinez pointing a rocket launcher at her tower. "Oh, shit!" Rayne jumps down into the stairwell as the tower explodes above her, the sound reverberating through the air. She lands in a heap at the bottom her head bouncing off of the floor blurring her vision. She looks up then quickly covers her head as the debris from above fall down on top of her.
Outside the people in the back of the rig open fire taking out the walkers surrounding the truck. Once the walkers have been dispatched the group jumps down out of the truck, the Governor steps up giving them an order as they move towards the prison courtyard following a Bronco that smashes the gate open. They find nothing in the courtyard, no sign of anyone ever being there. They hook a chain up to the outside door and using the Bronco, pull it from its hinges, then the group rushes inside. They file up to the steel door, sliding it open they head inside to the cell block. They find no trace of any living person inside the cell block.

The Governor spots a bible in one of the cells, open to a certain page. Curiosity gets him and he picks the book up, highlighted on the page is a passage. "And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

They make their way down into the tombs when an explosion rocks them, a blinding light causing them to cover their eyes. Flashbangs. Then without warning the alarms start blaring, the red lights flashing above them. Walkers start coming from every direction, they cut through them running back out into the courtyard where they are met with gunfire.

Glenn and Maggie open fire from the catwalk above them, while Rayne has made her way outside of the tower and opened fire from behind the tower. The Governor and his army quickly retreat to their vehicles and speed back down the road.

Rayne makes her way up to the courtyard meeting up with part of their group. Daryl immediately comes to her side eyeing her bleeding head, Rayne waves him off. "I'm fine. Just a chunk of concrete is all."

"Shouldn't have let you go."

Rayne smiled leaning up and planting a small kiss on his lips, "Don't worry so much."

"Can't help it with you." He kisses her again before turning back to the group.

Rick eyes the abandoned vehicles, "We did it. We drove them out."

"We should go after them."

"We should finish it." Daryl says agreeing with Michonne.

"It is finished. Didn't you see them high tail it out of here."

Michonne turns to Maggie, "They could regroup."

"We can't take the chance. He's not gonna stop." Glenn urges them.

Carol's breathless voice cuts in, "They're right. We can't keep living like this."

"So we take the fight back to Woodbury? We barely made it back last time." Maggie reminds them, no part of her wants to go back to that place.
"He don't care." Daryl reminds the young brunette.

Rick agrees as they move back inside, "Let's check on the others."

They move back inside as Beth, Hershel and Carl come in through the side doors. Rick kisses his daughter and hugs Carl while the others go out to unload the cars. After which the group meets up at the cars, Glenn informs them that he and Maggie are staying at the prison in case the Governor comes back.

"Just the four of us?" Daryl's eyes move from Glenn to Rick before he straps the rifle over his back. "Alright."

Rayne hops on the back of the bike with Daryl, while Rick drives the Dodge, Michonne sitting shotgun and they take off down the road. Halfway there they come upon the convoy of military vehicles that had broke into the prison. Daryl and Rayne lead the way their bows at the ready as they make their way towards the vehicles. Daryl shoots a walker in the head and Michonne slices one's head in half, while Rayne takes out the last two with arrows. Rick takes out the last one standing with a knife to the head.

Daryl is standing by the big rig's cab when someone slams on the window from the inside causing him to jump and turn around quickly. Rick raises his gun as Daryl opens the door helping the woman down from inside, and together the five of them make their way to Woodbury. It's nightfall as they approach the front gates crouching behind a car, they are soon fired upon from the top of the wall. The four of them fire back taking shelter behind the burned out car.

The woman with them, Karen stands up, "Tyreese! It's me! Don't—"

"Get down!" Rick pulls her down before she gets herself shot.

"Karen! Karen are you okay?!" A man's voice floats down from on top of the wall.

She jumps up, "I'm fine!"

"Where's the Governor?"

"He fired on everyone. He killed them all."

"Why are you with them?"

"They saved me."

Rick makes a decision, "We're coming out!" He stands up holstering his weapon, ignoring Daryl telling him no, and moves out from behind the car. "We're coming out."

Daryl moves out into the open, Rayne behind them, they both sigh and against their better judgment put their hands in the air letting their weapons hang from the straps.
The gate is opened and two people step out, a man obviously Tyreese and a woman, Rick recognizes them as two of the people he kicked out of the prison. The group puts their hands down as Tyreese addresses Rick. "What are you doing here?"

"We were coming to finish this until we saw what the Governor did."

"He—he killed them?"

Rick sighs nodding, "Karen told us Andrea hopped the wall going for the prison. She never made it. She might be here."

---

They move for the building where the Governor had kept Glenn, Maggie, Rayne and Daryl. Slowly they step inside watching out for any indication of Andrea. "This is where he had Glenn and Maggie."

"The Governor held people here?"

"He did more than hold them." Daryl glanced over at Rayne as he spoke, she gave him a grim smile letting him know she understood.

They come around the corner to a latched metal door, their eyes find a pool of blood spreading out from underneath the door. Michonne looks grimly at the door then to Rick, "Will you open it?"

Guns raised, Rick reaches for the latch, "One, two…” He pops the latch and the door springs open, a walker lies dead on the floor, it's Milton, the Governor's right hand man. Their eyes fall to the floor just to the left of the door, a pair of bare feet are sticking out in the open.

"Andrea!"

Michonne rushes to the woman's left side while Rayne kneels down by the door. Michonne lifts her head up, she smiles as she sees them. Rick kneels down before her while Daryl stands behind his huntress.

"I tried to stop them."

"You're burning up." Michonne feels her head, she knows what this means and it breaks her heart.

Andrea lifts her jacket away from her left shoulder revealing the deep bite wound on her neck. She sits up, "Judith, Carl, the rest of them…"

"Us." Rick leans forward looking her in the eye, she is still apart of them and he wants her to know it. "The rest of us."

"Are they alive?"

Rick's eyes move from Rayne up to Daryl and back down to Andrea. "Yeah, they're alive."

Andrea smiles as she looks around at her friends, before she locks eyes with Michonne. "It's good you found them. No one can make it alone now." Andrea looks pointedly at Daryl who nods telling her, "They never could."
Michonne's resolve has broken, she is crying freely, tears falling rapidly down her face. Rayne takes her hand as she lets her own tears fall, the warrior squeezes her hand letting the huntress know she appreciates it.

"I just didn't want anyone to die." Andrea takes a breath as she straightens up. "I can do it myself."

"No." Michonne refuses to let her friend take her own life.

"I have to. While I still can. Please." She looks pointedly at Rick. "I know how the safety works."

She earns a small sad laugh from Rayne, and as Rick reaches for his gun Rayne stops him shaking her head. She pulls out one of her Glocks from her holster, matching stares with Andrea she gives a light chuckle, "I willin' ly gave ya this before hopin' you'd pull the trigger." Andrea gives her a smile of understanding. "And now—" Rayne blows out a big breath. "Now I don't want to give it to ya." Rayne chokes on her words, her voice stuttering as it's wracked with sobs. She sets the gun down in Andrea's hand squeezing it with her own.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere." Michonne tells her with conviction as the tears continue to fall.

"Me neither." Rayne states. "Together till the end Drea."

Andrea looks between the two women, wondering how she was ever lucky to have these two women in her life. Even though she didn't always get along that well with Rayne, the two of them had an understanding. Her eyes pass over Daryl who gives her the tiniest of smiles before she meets Rick's gaze. "I tried."

"Yeah. You did. You did." Rick stands up walking out of the room with Daryl, leaving the women to their privacy.

The two women take their friend's hand, gripping it tightly between theirs. Surprisingly Andrea hasn't shed a tear, she knew what was coming. Plus, her friends were doing enough crying for them all.

Outside the room the three men waited, then the inevitable gunshot sounded signaling the end of their friend's suffering.

Rayne stood up holstering her gun, together she and Michonne wrapped Andrea's body in a brown blanket. 'She's going back with us, where she belongs.' That's what Rayne had told Rick and he didn't question her, he knew she was right.

The sun had rose signaling the start of a new day as the group headed back to the prison. Daryl and Rayne lead the way, then Michonne and Rick in the truck, then Tyreese and his sister Sasha in a school bus carrying the survivors of Woodbury. The four of them had decided to bring the lot back with them, it was the right thing to do in the end. Andrea's words rang in their heads, 'No one can make it alone now.' She was right.
They pulled into the courtyard, Glenn and Maggie opening and closing the gate. Carl, Beth, Carol and Hershel came out of the doors to greet them. The group greeted the new arrivals as they stepped off of the bus, ushering them inside to safety.

Rayne saw Rick staring up at the catwalk above him, she knew he was looking for Lori. When he didn't see her he knew that Rayne was right, Lori had been guiding him and he had done what was right, now she could rest. He smiled and turned towards Rayne nodding, she smiled back. She was the only one he had told about his visions of Lori, she was the one who had told him that perhaps Lori was trying to lead him in a direction and he just needed to follow.

That afternoon they buried Andrea next to the others where she belonged and got their friends settled into their new home. For the first time the cell block was filled with laughter and children playing, it gave them all hope.

Rayne smiled as she slipped out of the door into the courtyard, enjoying the last rays of sunlight filtering through the clouds in the sky. This was the first time she had stepped outside with only her Glocks on her thighs and knives in her boots, her other weapons were safely tucked away in her's and Daryl's room. That thought too making her smile even more. He decided when they had got back that she was no longer sleeping alone and if the only way for them to have privacy was in a cell, then that's where they would be. They decided even though they didn't like being caged, it was easier to accept together.

She crossed her arms over her chest, it was summer time but the nights were still a little chilly and she did only have on her black long sleeved shirt. She smirked as she felt hands grab her waist, hauling her back against a well defined chest. She knew by the hands who it was but decided to have a little fun.

"You better watch it, my hunter is very protective of men touchin' me."

"Is that so?" Daryl's velvet voice rumbled in her ear as she nodded. "I think I can handle him."

"I don't know, he's pretty tough."

"Well so am I." Daryl spun her around locking his arms around her lower back.

Her arms went around his neck, her hand pulling him closer, "Don't I know it."

Their lips met, the world around them dissolving leaving just the two of them. Neither wanted the moment to end, but they did have some things to talk about. Daryl pulled back first knowing that if he didn't say what he needed to, he was going to forget, kissing Rayne made him forget a lot of things.

"Rayne… I'm sorry for that day in the forest, I never meant to hurt you—"

She holds up her hand shushing him, "Forgiven. Next."

He smiles, "I'm sorry for leavin'—"

"Family comes first."
"You are my family now, my only family."

Rayne points to the prison. "No, everyone in there is your family too."

He shakes his head, leave it to her to bring things to his attention he hadn't noticed yet. His face becomes solemn as he meets her eyes, "I'm sorry I didn't believe you. I never thought Merle could do somethin' like that. I didn't want to believe it—"

"Daryl, enough. It's okay. I was hurt yes, but I understand why you chose him. He's family, and no one wants to believe somethin' like that about their blood. Next."

He sighs, somehow the more she forgives him the lighter his chest feels. "I'm sorry for pushing you away…"

"Daryl, we could be out here all night with you saying you're sorry about a lot of stuff." She smirks as he gives her a small glare. "My point is, no matter what you say, I'm gonna forgive you. Look 'round you, this is our life now. We're all that's left. So it doesn't matter how many times you screw up, how many times we fight and argue. I am not lettin' you go Daryl. You are stuck with me for however long I am blessed to have you."

Daryl couldn't speak, and it wasn't just because his heart was lodged in his throat. Rayne had rendered him unable to speak, he had no words. So he did the next best thing he could think of, he pulled her in close again and kissed her hard. This time was different though. It was harder, rougher, full of passion. Daryl's left hand gripped Rayne's hip squeezing lightly, while his right hand slid up her back, underneath her hair and tangled in the dark locks tugging her head back slightly.

Rayne felt him tug her hair and a small moan crept up her throat, but it was swallowed by Daryl's mouth ravaging hers. His kisses were intoxicating, she felt like she could kiss him for the rest of her life and never get enough. He was like air to her.

The two broke apart and after a long gaze at one another they headed back inside their home.

---

That night as they lie in bed together, Rayne smiling at Daryl's breath on the back of her neck as he spooned up behind her. She listened to the soft whispers of her family, now bigger with the addition of the new members. Rayne fingered the cross around her neck, she missed her family so much, it hurt her heart any time she thought of them. She knew they were alive, something inside of her told her they were. She would find them one day, she knew it. But even after she found them, this group was her family, and they were enough to keep her holding on. They kept her spirit and hope alive, she would fight and die for them.

Who ever would've thought that she would lose one family, only to find another. In this new world, good people were hard to come by. Rayne thanked the stars every night that she had found this group, just when things were growing thin. Rick always says even to this day, that Rayne had saved their lives that day in Atlanta. But the truth was, they had saved her.
Two months later found the inhabitants of the prison easing into a rhythm. Everyone pitched in where they could, lending a helping hand when needed.

With Hershel's guidance, the group had sectioned off a piece of the field for a crop in the far back corner and planted seeds of whatever they could come across. Rick had eased into the farming lifestyle and by now was enjoying the serenity that came with tending to the garden.

They had set up barrels around the fence perimeter as well as beside several hand built gazebos to catch rain run off. The water was then used for cooking as well as the showers they had inside the prison.

Next to the front gate they had built two pens, the smaller of the two housed a few pigs and the other a well taken care of chestnut mare. Rayne had come across a farm on one of hers and Daryl's scouting trips and found the animals. The look on Rick's face when she rode up on the horse was a cross between confused and amused. Only Rayne would go out looking for supplies and come back riding a horse. His amusement only increased when he saw Daryl unload the two hogs from the back of Rayne's truck.

Things progressed slowly over time but eventually they got into a rhythm. Rick, Hershel and Carl took care of the animals and the garden. Rick, and Rayne when she wasn't on runs, tended to the snares in the forest. Daryl and Rayne hunted whenever they could, occasionally bringing back a deer. They also went out every week scouting for more places with supplies and nine times out of ten they came back with more survivors. Nearly half of the new additions to the group had been saved and taken in by the two hunters.

Beth kept a great watch over Judith and the other young kids. Carol and the new addition Patrick, who had adhered himself to the woman's side took care of the cooking. Glenn and Maggie pitched in where they could when they weren't wrapped up in each other's embrace. The same went for Karen and Tyreese, they had become quite the pair in the recent weeks. Karen was normally found on the perimeter stabbing walkers through the heads in an attempt to keep them off the fence.
Michonne had been pacing like a caged animal since the Governor's last attack. She was frustrated that the man was still alive. So it wasn't any surprise to the group when she saddled up the horse and took off in search of the man who had nearly killed them all. No one attempted to stop her knowing it was a futile endeavor. They only hoped she would find her way back to them soon.

"Rayne."

The huntress looked up from her lap, her bow balanced on her knees as she tightened the strings. A smile slid across her face as she found the elder man standing beside her, but his face held a troubled look like he had something to ask but he almost didn't want to.

"What's up, Hershel?"

"Rick's going out to check the snares, I was hoping you'd go with him... again."

Rayne sighed, "He still refusin' to carry his gun?"

Hershel merely nodded drawing another sigh from the woman followed by a shake of her head. Damn that man for being so stubborn. They all agreed it was nice to have the peace and quiet they had been afforded as of lately, but that didn't mean that they had stopped arming themselves. It was one thing to enjoy not having to be armed to the hilt at all times, but it was quite another to leave yourself defenseless.

"I'll talk to him." She concluded as she finished her work and stood shouldering the bow.

"Thanks sweet pea." He leaned down kissing the top of her head.

Rayne smiled as she headed towards the front gate where she found Rick already waiting for her. As she stopped in front of him she could see the accusatory glare in his eyes, but he softened it with a small grin.

"You my babysitter today?"

She fixed him with a glare of her own. "If you'd stop being so damn stubborn, I wouldn't have to babysit ya." Rayne's glare disappeared replaced with a look of concern, the man was like her father. "We're not askin' ya to shoot everythin' ya see. There's a nifty thing called a choice, Rick. When the time comes, you can choose to kill whatever's comin' at ya, wound it so you can get away or let it kill ya. All the council wants, all I want, is for you to have that choice to make. Hell, I'm all for a non-gun lifestyle. I've seen enough killin' to last me the rest of my life, however long that may be."

She reaches down to the holster on her left thigh and pulls out one of her Glocks, grasping it by the barrel she holds it out to him, a pleading look in her eyes. "Please Rick, for my sanity. I don't wanna lose ya."

Tears welled in her eyes at just the mere thought of losing Rick, of losing anyone she had become
close too. Rick sighed, then with a shaky hand he took the gun and placed it in his holster. Even though he never carried his gun anymore he still wore his holster, old habits died hard.

"Thank you." She smiled.

He nodded his head. "You're welcome." He gave a breathy laugh and slung an arm around her neck as he saw the twinkle in her eyes, she had gotten her way.

The two headed off into the forest checking the snares and setting new ones again. Some had been tripped by passing walkers, some had half dead animals hanging from them from walkers that had taken a bite but couldn't get the snare released. Surprisingly they came back with six pretty fat bunnies and three squirrels that Rayne had shot with her bow.

They returned to the prison, Carl opening the new makeshift gate for them. Rick handed the animals to Rayne and slid the Glock back into her holster, placing a kiss on her cheek he went back to the garden with his son who was jammering on about a comic book Michonne had brought him back from her run.

Rayne was surprised to hear that her friend had returned so soon, as she headed up the small hill into the courtyard. But yet as she got closer to the gazebo where Carol was cooking, she found the dark skinned woman chatting with her hunter.

"Hey Carol, brought you some goodies. Not much but, it'll feed some." The huntress said as she handed the animals to Carol, who took them with a grateful look.

"They're great Rayne." The silver haired woman smiled as she set them down and began to skin them as the huntress had taught her. She looked up seeing the woman stepping away. "Hey, stick around, I'll fix some up for you."

"I'm fine, give it to the kids." Rayne smiled, but a voice over her left shoulder told her that was the wrong thing to say in his presence.

"Uh, I don't think so. You're gonna eat, woman." Daryl fixed her with a stern look as he stepped up in front of her winding his arms around her waist and clasping his hands behind the small of her back. He looked over his shoulder, "Carol fix her a plate, don't listen to anythin' she says."

This drew an incredulous look from Rayne, which quickly turned into a glare at Daryl's next words as he turned back to his girlfriend staring into her eyes. "I'll shove it down her throat if I have too."

Rayne crossed her arms over her chest, shoving Daryl back a few inches but his hold remained on her mid-section. "Exactly who do ya think you are?"

"The man that loves ya."

Daryl had never out right said the words "I love you", and he didn't have too. That was as close as he ever came to saying the words, but it was enough to send palpitations through her heart.

"So what, ya think you own me now, Dixon?" She smirked as she wound her arms up around his neck.
Ah, he loved it when she called him Dixon. It was amazing to him that she could say two different things and get two completely opposite reactions from him. For instance, when she called him Daryl, it sent a swell through his heart. But when she called him Dixon, something about it sent a rush straight to his groin.

"No." He gave her a smile. "You and I both know, ya can't tame somethin' wild. But you have been claimed, and I'm gonna hold on tight for as long as I can."

Rayne chuckled, he was always referring to her as a wild animal, something that couldn't be tamed and he was just waiting for the day when she grew restless with him and moved on to something better.

What Daryl didn't know was that there was nothing better to or for Rayne than him. Sure there were handsome men in the world still, she was sure of it. But looks had only ever got Rayne into trouble and caused her pain. Not that Daryl wasn't good looking, just a different type. Daryl was heaven to Rayne. He was her type of handsome; rugged, strong, brave. He was intelligent, but not in the book smart way. He was street smart, like her. He knew things about the outside world that some men could only hope to know. He was more than capable of taking care of himself and others, no matter the situation, he adapted and overcame.

Everything about Daryl sent Rayne's synapses firing on all cylinders. He appealed to her in every way a woman wants a man; his humor, sometimes dry but he made her laugh. His personality, his intelligence, even his smell. Which to Rayne was a combination of leather, musk and the spice of the outdoors.

Daryl was everything to Rayne, a thought that both thrilled her and terrified her at the same time. The last time a man had been everything to her it had ended very badly. Not that she believed Daryl was anything like John. She simply meant that if anything ever happened to Daryl, she wasn't sure what would happen to her. Her heart ached at the mere thought of not being with him.

She smiled tugging on the back of his neck and bringing his lips down to meet hers. She loved the feel of his rough lips against her soft ones. Before she could deepen the kiss Daryl pulled away from her leaving a pout on her pink lips.

"Why don't ya go take a shower, I'll bring up your food when it's ready."

"Okay." Normally she would've objected saying she had things that needed to be done, but after being out in the woods with Rick checking snares she felt like rinsing off at least. She stole one last kiss before she stepped around Daryl and moved for the door.

The warrior fell into step alongside her, bumping her shoulder against the huntress'. "Well, that was cute."

"Shut up." Rayne smirked shoving the woman who laughed in response.

"I'm glad to see you two worked everything out."

"Yeah, me too. It was real touch and go there for a while after M-" Rayne's voice caught in her throat as she started to say his brother's name. "-After what happened. But we got through it."

"Well, I'm glad. It's nice to see you two happy after all you have been through."

The huntress nodded as she ducked into hers and Daryl's cell gathering up her spare clothes. She poked just her head out of the cell smiling at Michonne. "Speaking of happy. What was that smile I caught earlier between you and Rick?"
"Nothing." Michonne drawled slowly like even she didn't believe her own words.

"Didn't look like nothin' to me." Rayne smirked as Michonne dropped her head. If the woman was fair skinned, she'd have bet her face would've been bright red at that moment.

"Oh, shut up and go take your shower." The warrior chuckled and shoved her friend as she headed past her down the stairs.

Rayne relished the feel of the cool water rinsing the dirt and grime from her skin. She ran her fingers over a small pink scar that resided on her left hip, a smile crossing her face as she remembered how she had obtained it.

"It had been two weeks since the Governor's attack on the prison. While they had relaxed some, Rick still insisted on watches. The majority of the time it was Glenn and Maggie, or Rayne and Daryl taking turns. The couples saw it as a chance for some much needed alone time. While the two younger ones spent their time fornicating like rabbits, the hunters simply sat together talking or just looking up at the stars holding one another.

But Rayne could tell something tonight was different with Daryl. From the moment they had climbed up on the tailgate of her truck it seemed like talking was the last thing Daryl wanted to do.

As she turned her head towards him to say something, which she never got to as his mouth quickly closed over hers silencing her words. Rayne's hands lifted taking Daryl's face between them, she returned his kiss with a raw passion. Grabbing her bow and setting it off to the side, Daryl eased Rayne down onto her back in the truck bed. She had taken her inflatable bed inside the prison for a few of the new members to use, and replaced it with a nice bearskin rug she had found inside of a house they had raided.

The two gazed deeply into each other's eyes and both recognized the burning desire within their depths, the cool soft fur of the bearskin rug caressing them as they lay there surrendering to the touch of each other. Daryl hears a sigh escape Rayne's lips as he glides his fingertips down the side of her neck sending shivers of need throughout her body. He grits his teeth, enduring the sweet ache of want building within. Wetting his lips his mind is crying to taste. Letting go to the pure need of knowing, Daryl's tongue gently strokes across his huntress' skin. Reveling in her scent, a cross between the outdoors and whatever sweet shampoo she has managed to find, he nibbles and strokes, overloading his senses. The smooth strokes of her fingers running through his hair, as she brings her lips to his. Gently parting, their lips meet, deepening the kiss.

Daryl continues stroking and petting until there is a deep dark need building. All that can be heard is the groans of the walkers as they force themselves against the outer fence. Until a soft low moan escapes from the quiet of the truck bed.

Rayne realizes that Daryl had brought it out of her. Simultaneously making her wetter with the knowledge of what he does to her. She feels Daryl lift her back up slightly, then her shoulders, stripping her tank top off of her. A moment later she feels his mouth wrap around her right nipple.
teasing it. Flicking his tongue over it then gently blowing on it, stimulating every nerve. Then the
brush of his hand as it slides down her body affecting every nerve ending. He sends electricity
across her skin with each tender stroke.

Their skin glistens in the moonlight as the rays catch the moisture from the effect of their love
making. Rayne sits up, slowly she reaches for Daryl’s leather vest, pausing as her fingers brush it
she looks into his eyes a silent request passing between them.

Daryl gives her a small nod, closing his eyes he feels her slide the leather down his arms and off,
he hears it land in the bed somewhere to his left. His throat tightens along with his body as he feels
her touch his shirt. He notices she waits for his approval before she moves on, which he gives her
by a slight nod of his head. He feels her work each of the buttons until a cool breeze touches his
exposed chest. Again she slides the shirt down his arms and tosses it into the truck bed. He keeps
his eyes closed as she scoots closer to him, he feels her gently running her fingers over the expanse
of his back. For once Daryl isn’t ashamed of his scars, he relaxes into her touch letting her explore
every part of him.

He does open his eyes however when he feels her lips press against his. He finds her beaming at
him, a smile he hadn’t yet seen on her face.

"Thank you." She says softly and Daryl couldn’t help but smile too. He knew how much this small
gesture meant to her and he couldn’t believe it had taken him this long to allow her to see and
touch him like this.

"You’re welcome."

He moves forward covering her lips with his once again as he lays her back down on the rug. But
she turns the tables on him and flips the two of them over, she lays astride him, her left leg
straddling his. Running her hand down the heated flesh of his chest, she traces the velvet path that
leads down and disappears under the waistband of his jeans. Tentatively she undoes his belt,
followed by the button and zipper, then she slides her hand inside wrapping around his thick shaft
of manhood. She greedily licks her lips knowing what is to come.

With Daryl’s assist she takes off his boots and pants, revealing him in all his glory to her hungry
eyes. She moves up kissing him on the lips giving him a small lick as a taste of what he is about to
get. Rayne intentionally slides down his body, allowing her breasts to graze against his skin
seductively. Caressingly licking the path that her hands already took. She takes a deep breath,
licking her lips she leans down to take the tip of his hard cock into her mouth; gradually flicking
her tongue over the tip. Circling it and gently sucking on it, as she begins to trace along the veins
with her nails making Daryl shudder, which in turn makes her sweet spot deliriously wet from the
pleasure that she can see on his face. As she takes him deeper letting him hit the back of her throat,
sucking harder while simultaneously working her tongue over it, stroking her hand playfully up
and down as she goes.

Rayne looks into his eyes as she withdraws his thick hard length from her succulent mouth;
nibbling and tracing her tongue along its length. The sensation of it pulsing under her tongue and
hands causes her to start to vibrate. Slowly she slides her free hand down her pants and begins
rubbing her clit as she nibbles on his cock. With her need mounting she starts to stroke his cock
faster, triggering a moan from Daryl as his manhood starts to throb.

No longer her gentle lover; his growing need is beyond control. Groaning, Daryl strips Rayne of
her pants and boy-shorts, then pulls her up and rolls her over on top of him. His rough hands move
down her body stroking and massaging the flesh in his hands. She arches up to meet his hand as it
presses against her mound. The feel of his fingers progressing further along her lips sends tingles
of joy through her body. He kisses her and strokes her hungrily.

Rayne begins to moan as he slips a finger inside, finding her wet and hot for his touch. The climax builds higher and higher as he slides more of his fingers into her. Slowly sliding them in and out, causing her to tighten around them with pleasure. She is so wet and slick as he moves her body up till she is kneeling over his head. He takes her by surprise as he replaces his fingers with his mouth, flicking his tongue furiously over her love button, causing a sweet aching as his tongue glides down slipping into her pussy. Eagerly devouring every last drop of juice as it drips out of her. Flicking his tongue over and over; till she is moaning and trembling with every stroke. His tongue sliding in and out of her wet pussy just as he would guide his cock in and out. Filling her with its wet slickness and soaking up all the sweet nectar that is dripping. The sweet torture she feels from every gentle caress of his tongue, slipping into her juicy wet honey pot as it reaches deeper, taking her to the edge of reason and driving her beyond.

Soon Daryl's own need overtakes to feel his thick hard cock inside of Rayne's sweet spot. Wrapping his arms around her, he gently lays her down beside him and covers her body with his own. Deeply kissing her as he plunges in quickly causing Rayne to cry out in surprise, Daryl fills that desire as he slides in and out. The taste of her on his lips as they come together, seduces a shudder of ecstasy from Rayne's already quivering body. Exploring each other as their hands glide across heated flesh the sounds of their lovemaking echoes in their ears. Rising up Rayne meets his thrusts, grinding hips to hips, with every drive. Daryl's excitement builds as she drags her nails across his back. Nibbling on his neck, moaning his name over and over, Rayne begs for his sweet torment to never stop, even though she is searching for that release that only Daryl can bring her.

He drives harder and harder with each stroke, filling her up full and stretching her more with every thrust. The heat of her wet pussy surrounds him like a wet hot cocoon. The heat seeping into his cock spiraling into a carnal need, it drives him over the edge.

As waves of lights dance before Rayne's eyes like the flickering of a dying flame, a growl escapes his lips. Rayne's eyes lock with his begging for her sweet release. As her climax assails her senses, she can feel his throbbing hard-on shudder in her love slick pussy. While her sweet honey pours all over him, she feels Daryl begin to cum.

"Rayne."

Hearing her name being moaned from Daryl's lips causes Rayne to unravel.

"Daryl." The hunter hears her moaning his name as her body descends from the heights of passion, never has his name sounded sweeter.

Tugging a blanket up and over the two of them, Daryl gently withdraws from her garnering a slight gasp from Rayne at the sudden loss of him. He leans on his elbow looking down at her, a smile on his face as he stares at her still coming down from her high.

Rayne opens her eyes to find her hunter smiling down at her. "Wow, Daryl Dixon smiles." She jokes.

"Only for you." He answers.

"Good to know. I'm just learning a whole bunch of stuff I never knew about you until tonight, huh?"

Daryl is confused as he knits his eyebrows together. "I told you that you were the only one who got my real smile. What else did you learn?"
"That you've been holding out on me."

"How so?"

"You are way too skilled to have never had sex."

Daryl smirked at his girlfriend. "I said I've never had sex, I never said I didn't have experience in everything else."

"I can tell." A playful glint enters her eyes. "Care to show me some more of those skills?"

Daryl chuckles as he covers her body with his own, but instead of caressing her body, Daryl gets a wicked thought and starts tickling her sides. Rayne thrashes around desperately trying to get away from Daryl's hands.

"Ah!"

Hearing his huntress scream, Daryl immediately stops and looks down at her with concern. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Surprisingly to him Rayne starts to laugh, she points down to her left hip where he can see a small cut.

"How did that happen?"

Still chuckling Rayne holds up one of her hunting knives that she keeps under the rug for emergencies, easily within her grasp. "Well, that's one hell of a memory for tonight."

Daryl laughs as he pulls Rayne into his arms kissing her deeply, the knife falls from her hand as she tangles her fingers in his hair.
It's The Little Things That Mean The Most

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

I am so sorry for the year long delay, I hadn't realized that I hadn't posted in that long. But, I'm back now and ready to jump into season 4.

As always reviews are appreciated.

Enjoy!

Rayne shakes her head chuckling as she shuts off the water and wrings out her long hair. Grabbing her towel she dries off her skin taking note of all the bruises and scars she had obtained over the last several years. As she towels off her hair, which by now reaches down past her butt she contemplates cutting it off. It seems useless to have such an attachment to something so trivial, just like her tattoos, but for Rayne, her hair and tattoos are the last things that remind her of the person she once was, and someday she hopes to be that woman again.

After pulling on her clean set of clothes, a black tank top and blue jeans she steps into a pair of black flat soled boots and heads back up to the cell block. Stepping into their room, she finds Daryl awaiting her, a plate of food sitting on the small table in the corner. Rayne gives him a thankful smile as she takes a bite of the rabbit meat, nodding her head at Carol’s cooking. She and Daryl had been teaching the older woman how to prepare and cook different types of wild game, she had caught on quickly and now wouldn’t allow anyone else to cook.

“So I’m gonna make a run into town, see what I can scrounge up. You wanna join me?” Daryl asked as he watched his girlfriend eat.

“Yeah, I could use a break.” She smiles as she finishes the food. “Let me grab my stuff, I’ll meet you outside.”

Daryl smiles, kissing her lightly he leaves the cell as Rayne grabs her things. Strapping her thigh holsters on she slides her Glocks into it, then slips her hunting knife into the sheath on her left hip. Deciding it was better to be overly prepared then not, she strapped her Kukris to her back and grabbed her bow.

Walking outside she found Daryl straddling his bike awaiting her, she smiled as she gave Rick a hug. “Be safe lil one.”

“Always boss.” Rayne smirked before she walked over and hopped on the back of the bike, looping her arms around Daryl’s waist.

The group waved as the couple rode out of the opened gates, Glenn and Maggie shutting them after the two had passed through.
Rayne leaned her head back letting the wind blow through her hair as Daryl rode them towards the town. These were the times when Rayne felt free, like the world hadn’t come to an end. No walkers, no death, no one trying to kill them. Just her and the man she loved.

But in the back of her mind was her family, had they survived the outbreak? Were any of them alive? She hoped and prayed that they were fine, and that one day she would be reunited with them once more. But until then, she had a surrogate family that she cared for just as much as her own.

When Daryl pulled into the parking lot of what looked to be a tiny mall, Rayne waited until he had stopped before she got off of the bike and drew her Kukris. The two walked into the building together, the doors wide open so they were cautious as they entered. After making some noise and determining there weren’t any walkers inside, the paused a moment to make a plan.

“Oh, look, they have a sportin’ goods store, maybe I can find us some more arrows.” Rayne suggested.

“Okay, I’m gonna see if I can find any food.” Daryl said with a nod towards the food court, surely there had to be some canned stuff that wasn’t spoiled.

“K, I’m gonna see if I can scrounge up some stuff for the kids too, give ‘em somethin’ to do.”

Daryl nodded as he kissed Rayne’s lips, “Be careful.”

“Always.” She smiled kissing him again. “Meet back here in twenty.”

“Aight.”

The two split up heading in their respective directions, Rayne going first to the sporting goods store, where much to her surprise she found a cache of arrows just waiting for her to take them. Looking around she found a duffle bag that wouldn’t be too bulky to take on the bike, shoving the arrows into it.

Meandering the aisles she picked up some cleaner, new strings and sights for hers and Daryl’s bows, and even some broad-head tips for the arrows.

Leaving that store she headed for what looked to be a game store. Inside she found board games, decks of cards and plenty of other things that the kids would love. Picking out some of her favorites, could never hurt to play with the kids sometimes, she stuck them in the duffel bag and shouldered it. Looking at her watch she had a few minutes to spare before meeting back up with Daryl, so she wandered around for a bit, picking up anything that caught her eye.

Daryl meanwhile had managed to find some cans of food that were still good, so he opened his backpack and placed them inside. As he was on his way back to meet up with Rayne he passed a jewelry store, it was silly to think of at a time like this, but he knew his girlfriend would appreciate the gesture.
Glancing into several of the cases he finally found something that caught his eye. A platinum chain that had a compound bow like Rayne’s on the end of it, and hanging from the bow was an arrow. Nodding to himself he went around the back of the counter and pried the lock off of the back. Sliding the case open he took out the necklace and pocketed it, smiling as he thought about Rayne’s face when he gave it to her.

As he was walking out the beam on his flashlight hit something, he turned toward the sparkling object, finding a case of engagement rings. Now, Daryl had never thought about getting married in his entire life, mostly because he hadn’t found the right woman. But since he had met Rayne, all of his theories about his future had been blown to hell.

The glass on the case was already broken, so minding the broken pieces Daryl reached in and picked up the ring. Smiling to himself as he watched it glimmer in the flashlight beam, he placed the ring into his vest pocket, close to his heart. He didn’t plan on giving it to her anytime soon, mostly for fear of what her reaction would be, but it couldn’t hurt to have it for when the right time arose.

The two met back up exactly twenty minutes later as planned, both toting their bags filled with stuff for the group.

Daryl smiled as he pulled the necklace out of his pocket, holding it up in the light where Rayne could see it. His heart swelled at the bright smile that graced her face when she saw it, and she gleefully turned around lifting up her hair so that Daryl could place it around her neck.

When he had it clasped she turned around giving him a passionate kiss that left his head spinning, her kisses always had that effect on him. Daryl took her hand and walked them out to the bike, Rayne climbing on behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

As they rode back to the prison Rayne fingered the necklace, a content and happiness filled smile on her face. Even in these dark times, the smallest thing could make your world so bright.

But their happiness would soon be shattered as lines were drawn and they were forced to battle for their lives once more.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

I am so sorry for the year long delay, I hadn't realized that I hadn't posted in that long. But, I'm back now and ready to jump into season 4.

Thank you to chelsnichole12 for choosing to follow and favorite this story.

As always reviews are appreciated.

Enjoy!

Rick woke up the next morning, after splashing his face with some water in a barrel they used to catch rain, he headed down towards the pens where they housed the pigs Daryl and Rayne had found.

He picked up a pair of gloves and slipped them onto his hands, picking up the hoe he was using the day before, Rick started digging at the ground. He was hoping to get the ground ready to plant more vegetables in the crop that was growing behind him.

Feeling the blade hit something hard, Rick kneeled down and began clearing the dirt away from the object. Pulling one of his earphones out he digs the item out of the mud, it’s a handgun. Looking at it he begins to hear the growling of the walkers surrounding the outer fence. He grips the item in his hand as he stares at the undead rattling the chain length fence.

But unlike before, Rick’s anger subsides quickly as he places his earphone back in. This was their life now, no reason to let the outside world ruin it. He ejects the clip out of the gun and tosses it into the wheelbarrow beside him, then tosses the gun into it as well as he goes back to his gardening.

An hour later Rick takes a break from digging at the ground, he walks towards the pig pen as Carl makes his way down to his father.

“You didn't wake me up.”

Rick smiles, “Cause I knew you were up all night reading comics with a flashlight.”

“What's up with Violet?” Carl asks looking down at one of the pigs, just lying unmoving in the mud.

“Carl, I told you not to name them. They're not piglets anymore. They're food.”

“I just thought, you know, until..” Carl sees the look his father gives him and sighs, “Okay.”
Rick shakes his head, “I don't know what's going on with her. Could be sick, could be nothing.” Rick clicks his tongue at her in a soothing gesture. “Feel better, Violet.” Rick smiles down at his son before clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Come on, let's get to it.”

Up in the courtyard Daryl and Rayne walk through the throng of new people sitting around the tables, greetings raise up from all around for the two hunter’s.

“Morning, Daryl.”

“Morning Rayne.”

“What's up, Dr. S?” The hunter replies to one of the men as they pass.

“Morning, Daryl. Rayne.”

“Morning, Daryl. Miss Rayne.”

“Hey, Daryl! Hey, Rayne!”

“Smells good.” Daryl says as the two walk up to Carol who stands by the fire cooking up breakfast.

“Just so you both know, I liked you first.”

“Stop.” Daryl says popping a piece of meat into his mouth. “You know, Rick brought in a lot of them, too.”

“Not recently.” Carol says looking pointedly at the two. “Give the stranger sanctuary, keeping people fed, you're gonna have to learn to live with the love.”

“Right.” Daryl said giving Rayne a bite of the meat.

“I need you to see something.” Carol tells the couple. “Patrick, you want to take over?”

A younger guy with glasses perks up hearing the older woman’s voice. “Yes, ma’am.” He steps over taking the tongs from Carol as he smiles ta the two hunter’s. “Um, Mr. Dixon, Ms. Rayne, I just wanted to thank you for bringing that deer back yesterday. It was a real treat, sir. And I'd be honored to shake your hands.”

Daryl pointedly licks his fingers off before grabbing the younger man’s hand in his own. The kid smiles not even bothered by the gesture in the least as he pulls his hand back and shakes Rayne’s next.

Rayne and Daryl pull on their leather jackets as they follow Carol through the courtyard. The two still sharing the bowl full of meat in Daryl’s hands.

“About today, I don't know if we're gonna be able to spare a lot of people for the run.”

“That place is good to go. We're gonna move on it.” Daryl says in response.

“Yeah. The thing is, we had a pretty big buildup overnight. Dozens more towards tower three. It's
getting as bad as last month. They don't spread out anymore.”

“With more of us in here, it’ll draw more of them out. You get enough of those damn fence-clingers, they start to herd up.” Rayne says looking pointedly at the crew of four that are stabbing the walkers through the fence trying to prevent them from pushing at the chain-link.

“Pushing against the fences again. It's manageable, but unless we get ahead of it, not for long. Sorry, Pookie.” Carol smirks as Daryl scoffs and nudges her with his shoulder before he and Rayne head off together.

Up in their room Glenn sits up in bed, dragging a hand down his face he glances over his shoulder at his girlfriend Maggie. “I don't think you should go today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“We have the suits.”

“Yeah, but you don't have to go. You shouldn't.”

Maggie sits up brushing Glenn’s hair back from his face. “You know everything's gonna work out, right? Right?”

Glenn gives in with a sigh, “Right. Right.” He kisses her lightly, “But you're staying, okay?”

“Fine.”

Down by the fences Karen stabs a walker through the fence when she hears someone speak behind her. “Hey, beautiful.”

She turns around with a smile to find Tyrone standing behind her. “Hey yourself.” She glances at his off-white shirt commenting, “You need an apron.”

“Yeah. Listen, can we talk?” He pulls her away from the fence line. “I was thinking of going on the run today.”

“Okay.”

“I don't like killing them on the fence. I hate it. I mean, when they're coming at you out there, it's different. You don't even think about it. When they're stacked up against the chain-link, you're just face-to-face. I-I just wanted to do something different to help out.”

“You always volunteered to do it.” Karen commented, not understanding why he always volunteered to help.
“That's because you were always doing it. Just thought I could get to know you.”

Karen laughs, wrapping her free arm around his neck she pulls him close and kisses him. “You did. You be careful out there.” She said lightly before walking back to her position on the fence-line.

Rayne and Daryl are loading up the Dodge with supplies for the run when Beth’s boyfriend comes walking up. He lays two shotguns down in the bed before turning around to greet Beth as she walks towards him. “Hey. I was just gonna come find you.”

“Hi.” She said kissing him chastely. “What's up?”

“Well, the council pulled back everyone on the coal crew from going on the run. They're shorthanded right now. I figured I'd step up to help, go with ’em. Just, you know, wanted to make sure that I saw you before.”

“Okay.” Beth said, her tone giving Rayne the impression that she didn’t really care much.

“I just-- 'cause, you know, it's dangerous going out there.” He tries to explain, wanting her to understand.

“I know.” She said quickly before kissing his cheek and walking off like it was nothing.

“Okay, are you gonna say good-bye?”

“Nope.” Beth said with a smile as she kept walking.

“It's like a damn romance novel.” Daryl snarked.

“I’m gonna puke.” Rayne said gagging a little bit at the young couple.

Down by the fence Sasha is loading up the back of her small car as Tyreese comes walking up holding a medical crate. They both load the stuff into the back of the car then move up front to get in. Sasha is stopped by one of the new members, Bob, that Daryl and Rayne had saved about a week ago.

“Hey. I'd like to start pulling my weight around here.”

“Bob, it's only been a week.”

“That's a week worth of meals, a roof over my head. Let me earn my keep.”

Sasha comes around the side of the driver’s door, leaning against it. “You were out on your own when Daryl and Rayne found you.”

“That's right.”
“I just want to make sure you know how to play on a team.”

“We ain't gonna do it unless it's easy.” Daryl comments as he walks past the two continuing up into the courtyard.

“You know he was a medic in the Army.” Glenn adds from the other side of the car.

Sasha gives them both a disinterested look, she not sure about a newbie coming with them on a run, it could mean trouble for them all.

“You’re hell of a tough sell. You know that?” Bob tells her.

“Okay.” Sasha sighs giving in.

Down by the crops Hershel is giving Rick some guidance on the best way to care for their growing food source. “These leaves are gonna be in the shade, so we won't get any good fruit from it. So we just pinch it off here. Things break, but they can still grow. These little bristles, they'll take root and we'll have a whole new plant.” He says planting the smaller branch in to the ground beside the other one.

Rick hears a whistle and looks up to see Michonne riding towards the front gate. “Let's go.” He says nodding to Carl, they both run down, Carl slides open the gate, while Rick tugs on the rope that opens the two steel doors out in front.

The two close the doors and rush over to see the woman as she hops down off of the horse.

“We're glad to see you.” Rick smiles.

“Glad to see you, too.” She smiles in return before pulling a stack of comic books out of her satchel. “Somebody hit the jackpot.”

“No way. Awesome! Thank you.” Carl says looking over the dusty covers.

“I get to read 'em when you're done.” Michonne smiles, then she hands something to Rick. “And I found this.” He glances down at the electric shaver and Michonne chuckles. “Your face is losing the war.”

“You gonna stay a little while?”

“Just a little while.”

The three look up as Daryl rides his motorcycle to a stop beside them, Rayne waves to her warrior friend from the back of the bike.

“Well, look who's back.” Daryl smirks.

“Didn't find him.”

“Glad to see you in one piece.” Rayne says giving Michonne a pointed look.

“I'm thinking of looking over near Macon.” She says getting looks from Rick, Rayne and Daryl.
“It’s worth a shot.” She argues.

“70 miles of walkers. You might run into a few un-neighborly types. Is it?” Daryl understands her motive for finding the Governor, but was finding him worth all of the trouble it might bring. He turns to Rick, “I’m gonna go check out the Big Spot. The one I was talking about, just seeing.”

“Yes, I got to go out and check the snares. I don’t want to lose whatever we catch to the walkers.” Rick says.

“I’ll go.” Michonne states before walking up to grab her things.

“You just got here.” Carl argues.

“And I’ll be back.” She says to the boy, giving him a bright smile.

Rick opens the gate and steel doors as the group makes their way out onto the road.

---

In town Daryl and Rayne are standing outside the chain-link fence surround the Big Spot store, several tents sat inside. “Army came in and put these fences up. Made it a place for the people to
go. Last week when we spotted this place, there was a bunch of walkers behind this chain-link keeping people out like a bunch of guard dogs.”

“So they all just left?” Bob asked.

“Give a listen.” Sasha says, the others then hear music playing over a loud speaker.

“You drew ’em out.” Michonne surmises.

“Put a boom box out there three days ago.” Sasha informs them.

“Hooked it up to two car batteries.” Glenn adds.

“All right, let's make a sweep. Make sure it's safe. Grab what you can. We'll come back tomorrow with more people.” Daryl says shouldering his bow. “Rayne with me.” She nods taking flank behind him, knocking an arrow into her compound bow.

The group spreads out checking each of the tents for supplies, then regrouping at the front of the store where Daryl pounds on the glass windows with his elbow before sitting down on the small ledge. “Just give it a second.”

Zack speaks from his position leaning up against the wall beside Daryl. “Okay, I think I got it.”

“Got what?” Michonne says walking up beside him.

“Oh, I've been trying to guess what Daryl did before the turn.”

Rayne laughs as she leans against the window beside her hunter. “He's been trying to guess for, like, six weeks.”

“Yeah, I'm pacing myself. One shot a day.”

“All right, shoot.” Daryl says giving in to the kid’s persistence.

“Well, the way you are at the prison, you being on the council, you're able to track, you're helping people, but you're still being kind of a…. surly. Big swing here. Homicide cop.”

Both Michonne and Rayne burst into laughter as if that was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

“What's so funny?” Daryl questions.

“Nothing.” Michonne says still chuckling. “It makes perfect sense.”

“Actually, the man's right.” Daryl nods. “Undercover.”

“Come on, really?” Zack asks thinking he'd actually figured it out.

“Yes. I don't like to talk about it 'cause it was a lot of heavy shit, you know?”

“Dude, come on, really? Okay. I'll just keep guessing, I guess.”

“Yeah, you keep doing that.” Daryl smirks as several walkers smack into the glass from the inside. Slowly the two hunters stand up, not at all surprised by the sudden appearance of the dead.

“We're gonna do this, Detective?” Michonne smirks.

“Let's do it.” Daryl answers heading for the door with Rayne and the other’s behind him.
“All right, we go in, stay in formation for the sweep. After that, you all know what you're supposed to look for. Any questions?” Sasha asks laying out the plan for all of them.

“Was there ever a time that you weren't the boss of me?” Ty wonders with a smile.

“You had a few years before I was born.” Sasha tosses back laughing.

Inside the store the group splits up, minus Daryl and Rayne, the hunter was adamant about his girlfriend sticking by him.

Michonne guides a cart around the store, she comes around a corner only to startle as something blocks her way. Thinking it is a walker she is relieved to find a cardboard standup of Frankenstein. She smirks before pulling out her katana and slicing the board down the middle.

Daryl and Rayne hear a crash of glass and wood, they come running to find Bob trapped under a fallen liquor shelf. Daryl grabs his flashlight and shines it under the shelf, Bob lies underneath of it staring back at him. “You all right? You cut or something?”

“No, man, but my foot is caught.”

“All right. He's just caught.” Daryl tells Zack and Ty. “Come on, help me get it up.”

“What happened?” Glenn hollers from across the store.

“Everyone's all right. We're over in wine and beer.” Zack yells back as the three men lift the first shelf out of the way.

Bob looks up as Ty kneels beside him, “I was moving fast, man. I drove right into the drinks.”

“Man, you lucked out. If this thing had come down on you the wrong way.”

Just then the roof collapses in, a walker falls through but before he can hit the floor, his intestines are caught up on the steel braces. He hangs in the air like a marionette, still growling and searching for their voices. Rayne notices that more of the roof is bowing down, there was no telling how many more walkers were up there.

“Yeah, uh, we should probably go now.” She states raising her bow towards the opening in the ceiling.


“We'll get the others.” Michonne says reaching for her katana just as more walkers begin to fall through patches in the ceiling.

“The roof’s gonna collapse, we gotta get out of here now!” Rayne yells spurring them all into motion.
The group takes out walkers at every turn, there must be at least 40 of them that have fallen through the roof and it appears like that it not their only problem. A crashed helicopter is now inching its way through the roof, right above Bob, the weakened roof not able to support its weight any longer.

Rayne sees Daryl standing on a stack of beer boxes, he’s surrounded by four walkers. She shoulders her bow and immediately draws her kukris slicing through the dead to reach him. “Daryl, go!”

Daryl shoves his arm up under the neck of a walker trying to bite him, before he can kill it, it is shot in the head by Zack. “Let’s get Bob!” The kid yells shooting two more walkers as he and Daryl rush over to Bob.

Rayne covers their six as Zack grabs the shelf and lifts it up, Daryl grabs the man and pulls him from underneath the shelf. “Come on, time to go.” Daryl yells.

But just as Rayne turns to leave she hears Zack scream, she spins back to find a walker sliding out from under the shelf, the bloody skin of Zack’s calf dangling from its mouth. The walker pulls Zack to the ground and claws its way up his back where it takes a nasty bite out of his neck.

Rayne pushes the sound of Zack’s screams from her mind as she urges the other’s towards the door. “Let’s go, now! Come on! Go! Let’s get out of here!” She manages to shove them all out of the way just in time as the wrecked carcass of the helicopter breaks through the roof and crashes down to the floor in a twisted metal heap.

The group returns back to the prison, their moods a little more solemn than they were earlier. It was never easy to lose one of their group. After putting away the supplies they had recovered Daryl offers to go tell Beth about Zack.

“You want me to come with you?” Rayne offers knowing it’s never easy to tell someone that another had died.

“Yeah.” Daryl nodded.

They walked inside to the cell block, Rayne waited around the corner out of sight as Daryl approached Beth’s cell. The young girl was lying on her stomach writing in her journal as she did a lot lately.

She looked up as she noticed the hunter standing in the doorway. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Daryl said uneasily, not sure how to break the news to her about her boyfriend.

“What is it?”

Daryl sighs, “Zack.”
“Is he dead?” Daryl just nods. Beth sighs, “Okay.” She states plainly as she sits up in her bed, before standing up and approaching a board that sits on her shelf.

The board reads “This workplace has gone 30 days without an accident.” She takes the piece of wood with the number 3 off of the board, turning she finds Daryl looking at her. “What? I don’t cry anymore, Daryl. I’m just glad I got to know him, you know?”

“You’re okay?” Beth questions seeing the look on his face.

“Just tired of losing people is all.”

Beth steps up and hugs Daryl, she has done it before but it still felt uncharacteristic to Daryl every time.

“I’m glad I didn’t say good-bye. I hate good-byes.”

“Me, too.” Daryl nods as she pulls back.

He says goodnight to her and heads up to his cell where Rayne was sitting on the bed. Holding out her hand she takes his and pulls him down next to her. She wraps her arms around his neck and lays her head on his shoulder.

After a moment Daryl turns his head towards her and says, “Promise me you’ll never say goodbye.”

Rayne stares into his eyes, lifting her right hand up to cup his cheek she lays a soft kiss on his lips. “I promise. We will never say goodbye.”

Down in the common room Rick is holding Judith in his arms, she is growing quickly and seems to be a perfectly healthy baby. Rick had told Hershel about the woman he had found out in the forest.

He had tried to help her, but he found out that her husband had been turned into a walker and she was keeping his severed head in a burlap sack. She tried to stab Rick with a knife saying that she couldn’t be without her husband, and that he needed a fresh meal to keep him going. Still Rick tried to help her, but in the end she stabbed herself with a knife so that she could always be with her husband.

“You tried to help her. You couldn't. No one could. Some people are too far gone. You're not. You tried to help her.”

“How that woman wound up, I got close to that. If I lost Carl and Judith, if I lost this place—”

“Not then, Rick. Not even then. You came back. Your boy came back. You get to come back. You do.”
Rayne wakes up the next morning wrapped in Daryl’s arms, she rolls over smiling as she sees he’s still asleep. She brings her hand up brushing back the tendril of hair that has fallen down onto his face. Kissing his lips lightly she gets up and quietly gets dressed before she leaves their room.

Walking outside she meets up with Michonne, who despite everyone’s insistence, has decided to go back out looking for the Governor. So, being the good friend that she is, Rayne saddled up the horse and brought him out to Michonne.

“Be careful, okay?” Rayne said.

“Always. See you soon.”

Just as Michonne rode out through the gates giant booms were heard from inside of the prison. Rayne ran alongside Rick into the courtyard where Glenn told them there were walkers in cell block D. Sasha, Daryl and Ty come running out of cell block C, Daryl tosses Rayne her bow before they all run for D block.

Quickly Rick, Daryl and Rayne start clearing out the people, Rick making sure to ask them if they are bit, they didn’t need anyone else turning on them.

Glenn joins Daryl and Rayne in taking out the walkers, as they hurdle the kids into a cell with Karen to keep them safe.

“Daryl!” The hunter turns to see his girlfriend heading up the steps to the top level. “Back me up.”

He nods running up behind her and covering her back as they check the upstairs cells for more infected. Glenn is already up there, he’s checking a cell when a walker comes at him, he can’t get his knife up to kill it as he’s trying to hold it back from him.

“Down!” Daryl yells before shooting it through the head with an arrow.

Rick helps Glenn to his feet, together they all look down at the walker to see who it is.
“It’s Patrick.” Daryl says, the kid who was enamored with the two hunters. “That's all of ’em.”

Daryl, Rayne and Glenn move cell to cell, making sure that the dead stay that way. Rick finds a walker still stuck in a cell locked, no way it could have gotten out or been bitten. He pulls it towards him and stabs it in the head. He looks up perplexed at Daryl and Rayne, Hershel walking up beside of them.

“No bites. No wounds. I think he just died.”

“Horribly, too. Pleurisy aspiration.” Their doc tells them.

“Choked to death on his own blood.” Hershel tells them. “Caused those trails down his face.”

Rick nods, “I've seen them before on a walker outside the fences.”

“I saw ‘em on Patrick, too.” Daryl says.

“They're from the internal lung pressure building up-- like if you shake a soda can and pop the top. Only imagine your eyes, ears, nose, and throat are the top.”

“It's a sickness from the walkers?” Bob asks, having walked up while they were all talking.

“No, these things happened before they were around. Could be pneumococcal. Most likely an aggressive flu strain.”

“Someone locked him in just in time.” Hershel surmises.

“No, man.” Daryl tells the elder man. “Charlie used to sleepwalk. Locked himself in. Hell, he was just eating barbecue yesterday. How could somebody die in a day just from a cold?”

“I had a sick pig, it died quick.” Rick told them. “Saw a sick boar in the woods.”

“Pigs and birds.” Hershel nods. “That's how these things spread in the past. We need to do something about those hogs.”

“Maybe we got lucky. Maybe these two cases are it.” The doc said.

“Haven't seen anybody be lucky in a long time.” Bob says. “Bugs like to run through close quarters. Doesn't get any closer than this.”

Hershel says what they were all thinking, but no one wanted to say. “All of us in here, we've all been exposed.”

The council convenes in the library to discuss what had happened and what they were gonna do now. Rayne grabbed a chair turning it around backwards as she sat down beside Daryl.

“Patrick was fine yesterday, and he died overnight. Two people died that quick?” Carol questions as they all sit down. “We’ll have to separate everyone that's been exposed.”

“We know that this sickness can be lethal.” Hershel adds. “We don’t know how easily it spreads. Is anyone else showing symptoms that we know of?”

“We can’t just wait and see. And there’s children. It isn’t just the illness. If people die, they become a threat.” Carol mentions.

Hershel nods, “We need a place for them to go. They can’t stay in D. We can’t risk going in there to clean it up.”

“We can use cell block A.” Rayne offers knowing it isn’t an ideal place, but it’s all they got to work with.

“Death row?” Glenn asks clearly not thrilled about the idea. “I’m not sure that’s much of an upgrade.”

“It’s clean. That’s an upgrade.” Daryl tells him. “Think that’ll work for Dr. S?”

Again Hershel nods, “I’ll help Caleb get it set up.”

The group hears coughing coming from out in the hallway, they all stand up and walk into the hallway where Karen and Ty are.

“K, you alright?” Rayne asks her friend.

Karen nods, covering her mouth with her hand. “I’m fine.”

“You sure? You don't sound so good.” Carol says eyeing the woman.

“We’re just taking her back to my cell so she can rest.”

“Tyreese, I don't think that's a good idea.” Hershel tells them both.

“Why? What's going on now?” Karen asks starting to get afraid.

“We think it's a flu or something. That's how Patrick died.” Glenn tells them as no one else speaks up.

“Judith was in that cell block. She's vulnerable.” Hershel says. “Anyone that may be sick or even exposed should stay away.”

“It killed Patrick?” Karen asks, her voice shaking.

“She's gonna be okay. Now that we know what Patrick died from we can treat it, right?” Ty questions.

“Don’t panic. We're going to figure this out. But we should keep you separated in the meantime. We'll have Caleb take a look at you. I'll see what we have in the way of medications.” Hershel says trying to make her feel better, he knows this is scary for her, for all of them.

Karen nods, “David from the Decatur group, he's been coughing, too.”

“I'll get him.” Glenn says starting down the hallway. “There's some empty clean cells in the tombs, right?”

“Yeah, we'll meet you there.” Sasha tells him as he leaves the hallway.
“Come on. Let's get you settled.” Sasha tells her brother and Karen, leading them down to the tombs where they would be away from the others.

“Have to call another meeting later.” Hershel tells Rayne and Daryl.

“All right. I'll get to burying the dead ones.” Daryl says.

“You wear gloves and a mask.” Hershel warns him.

“Uh-huh.” Daryl nods, turning to Rayne. “I'll see you outside, k, babe?”

“Yep, I'm gonna go talk to Hershel about what to do next.” She kisses his cheek before she walks back down the hallway following Hershel.

Daryl pauses, turning to Carol he sees the worried look on her face. “You all right?”

“I'm worried about Lizzie and Mica. They were around Patrick.”

“We all were. Karen and David are gonna be separated till they feel better.”

“You're right.” She nods. “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Got to be.”

Daryl is outside digging graves, Rayne’s bandana tied around his face. Despite his hatred of having to wear it, he couldn’t help but smile underneath of the fabric. Every time he breathed he could smell her on it.

“Glad you were in there.” Daryl says as he sees Rick walk up to him, standing on the edge of the hole he was digging.

“Wasn't much use without my gun.”

“No, you were.” Daryl admits, pulling the bandana down around his neck. “All this time you've been taking off, you earned it. We wouldn't be here without you.”

“It was all of us.”

“No, it was you first. You gonna help us figure this out?”

“I screwed up too many times. Those calls you got to make, I start down that road I almost lost my boy-- who he was. Whatever else this place needs, I'm here for it.”

“Like I said, you earned it. But for what it's worth, you see mistakes. I see when the shit hits, you're standing there with a shovel.”

“Rick! Daryl!” Maggie screams, they turn to see the walkers pushing on the fence and it’s slowly giving way.

“Oh, shit.” Rick says as he takes off running, Daryl grabs his crossbow and runs after him.

“The noise drew 'em out and now this part's starting to give.”

Rayne heard Maggie yelling, she quickly grabbed Sasha, Ty and Glenn. They ran down into the dog-run, grabbing a crowbar or anything sharp and started stabbing the walkers, trying to lessen the weight on the fence.
Maggie falls backwards, Glenn reaches out a hand to help her but she waves him off. “Don’t. We’re supposed to stay away from each other.”

“Are you seeing this?” Sasha yells, the group coming over to see several dead rats on the ground by the fence. “Is someone feeding these things?”

The weight of the walkers on the fence starts to bow the chain link. “Heads up.” Daryl calls the group coming over to help him.

“It’s gonna give! It’s gonna give! Everybody back! Come on, back, now.” Rick yells as the fence starts collapse back towards them.

“The fence keeps bending in like that, those walkers are coming over it.” Rayne states, they had to find someway to reinforce the fence before it collapses.

“Daryl, get the truck. I know what to do.” Rick says.

Daryl and Rayne run up to the vehicles, Rayne jumping in the back of the jeep as Daryl started it up and drove back down to the fence line. Rick loaded up the pigs he had left in the trailer, they weren’t of any use since they were probably infected like the other that had died.

Maggie opened the gate as they drove through and out into the field where the walkers were.

“Ready?” Daryl hollered back to Rick, Rayne taking aim with her bow in case things went south. Their plan starts to work as the noise of the jeep attracts the walkers their way.

“Let’s go.” Daryl says seeing Rick’s hesitation to what they were doing, but after all it was his plan.

Rick picks up one of the pigs, taking out his knife he cuts a fresh line on its hind quarters before setting it on the ground. “Go!” He yells to Daryl as Rayne stabs a walker that had gotten too close for her liking.

The walkers pounce on the injured animal immediately devouring it, the poor animal wailing as it is eaten alive.

Daryl drives them further away from the fence, right about 100 feet Rick yells for him to stop. “All right! Hold up!” Again he takes out another pig, repeating the same procedure as with the first.

“All right, go. Go.”

While Rick, Daryl and Rayne lead the walkers away from the perimeter, the others brace the inside of the fence with logs and pieces of wood. The three then return back to the courtyard, where Rick immediately leaves them, heading down to the pig pen that now sat empty. He was busy tearing it down when Rayne walked down to speak with him.

“You okay?” She asked as she leaned against the shed.

He looked up at her and sighed, “I’ve been against carrying my gun and now I find out that Carol has been teaching the kids to use weapons to protect themselves.”

“So what are you gonna do?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m gonna let her. If this has taught us anything, it’s that we need to be prepared at all times.”

Rayne nodded, “That’s good. So, in the spirit of practicing what you preach.” She pulled Rick’s gun out from her waistband and held it out to him. “I think you should take this back.”
Looking into her eyes Rick sighed, but he nodded knowing she was right as he took his gun from her and placed it into his holster.

“Thank you.” Rayne smiled, leaning up she kissed his cheek. “Glad I don’t have to worry about you so much now.”

“Worry about me? Who’s the older one of us?” He smiled.

“Me, most of the time.” She laughed before making her way back up to the courtyard. She finds Daryl waiting for her, he hugs her as she stops in front of him.

“You feelin’ okay?” He asks her, concerned for her safety.

“I’m fine. Are you okay?”

“Right as rain.” He smiles before he leans down and kisses her.
The next morning Glenn and Maggie were out in the field with three others, burying the bodies of their fallen members. It seemed like the sickness was spreading quickly, even after separating the infected from the rest of the group.

Inside Rayne was heading down to check on Karen and the others when Tyreese’s yelling caught her attention. She went running to the man, finding him outside of cell block A where the infected members were staying. Her eyes immediately found the massive blood trails on the ground leading from the cells to the area where she now stood. At her feet were two bodies, and her heart ached when she realized that one of them was Karen.

Rayne wasn’t sure who the other one was, but if she had to guess it was probably David from the Decator group, the other one that Karen said was coughing yesterday. Their bodies had been doused in gasoline and lit on fire, and Rayne prayed that they were already dead when the fire was lit.

“Ty, stay here, I’ll be right back, okay?” She said laying a hand on Ty’s shoulder, she could see the immense grief in his eyes, he had loved Karen.

Running inside Rayne found Rick, Daryl and Carol standing by a table talking. “Rick, you better come with me.”

The man didn’t question her as he immediately fell into step behind her, Daryl and Carol following behind them, as Rayne lead them out to where the bodies were.

“You found them like this?” Rick asked Tyreese, who had been the one to find them.

“I came to see Karen and I saw the blood on the floor. Then I smelled them. Somebody dragged
them out here and set them on fire. They killed them and set them on fire! You're a cop. You find out who did this and you bring 'em to me. You understand? You bring 'em to me!"

“We'll find out who—”

“I need to say it again?”

“No. No. I know what you're feeling. I've been there. You saw me there. It's dangerous.”

“Karen didn't deserve this.”

“No.”

“David didn't deserve it. Nobody does.”

“All right, man, let's—” Daryl tries to get Ty to back up out of Rick’s face and calm down, but Tyreese turns grabbing the hunter by the front of his vest and slamming him back up against the bars of the door.

“Man, I ain't going nowhere till I find out who did this!”

Rayne raises her gun to Ty, not wanting to hurt him, but she has to protect her hunter. Daryl holds up his hand, indicating for her to back off as he tries to talk to the man. “We're on the same side, man.”

Rick tries to reason with Tyreese, “Hey, look, I know what you're going through. We've all lost someone. We know what you're going through right now, but you've got to calm down.”

Ty turns slapping Rick’s hand off of his shoulder and shoving Rick away from him. “You need to step the hell back!”

“She wouldn't want you being like this.” Rick says trying to reason with the grief-stricken man.

But Ty is too enraged to listen, he levels a punch at Rick, followed quickly by another, as Carol stands off to the side screaming. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Daryl wraps his arms around Tyreese’s chest, pinning his arms to his side in an attempt to subdue him. “That's enough. That's enough.”

But before Ty can calm down, Rick is back on his feet, he nails Ty with a right cross that knocks him out of Daryl’s arms to the ground. He kicks Ty in the stomach, flipping him over onto his back. Rick then straddles his body and levels punch after punch to his face.

“Rick.” Daryl says trying to pull his friend off of the man. “Stop.”

“Let go of me! No. No. Let go of me! No.”

“Rick!” Rayne screams.

The man stops fighting Daryl and looks up at his surrogate daughter as she yells his name, his face conveying his own shock as he looks down at his bloody hand. He backs up towards the door as Rayne kneels down beside Tyreese, holding onto the man as he sobs for Karen.
Inside of Hershel’s cell, the elder man tends to the bloody knuckles of Rick’s hand. “This is gonna be sprained at least a week. Good news, none of these cuts need stitches. I wouldn't plan on much typing the next few days. You okay?”

“It hurts.”

“I wasn't talking about the hand. We just went through something terrible. Everything we've been working so hard to keep out, it found its way in.” Hershel says as he wraps Rick’s hand in gauze to keep it clean.

“No. It's always there.”

“Council meeting tomorrow morning. Thought you should know. We just lost 12 of our own. Two more we killed in cold blood. We could be facing an outbreak.”

“I think I've done enough damage for one day.” Rick admits, feeling as though he is failing everyone that he had once risked his life to save.

“I've fallen off the wagon before.”

“That's what this is?”

“Pretty close. When it happened, I didn't stand around feeling bad about it. I got back up. I had responsibilities. People to keep safe.”

Out in the field Tyreese is digging harshly into the ground, putting all of his anger into digging the graves for Karen and David. Bob approaches him trying to be helpful as he sees the man’s swollen left eye. “Let's get you cleaned up, man. You might even need a couple stitches.”

“Not until they're in the ground.”

“You should at least let Hershel or Dr. S. take a look at you, make sure nothing's broken.”

“When they're in the ground.”

Nodding, Bob picks up a shovel and starts digging the second grave.

After helping Tyreese bring Karen and David’s body down to the field, Rayne heads back inside for the council meeting, taking a seat on a filing cabinet. Beside her stands Michonne, while Daryl, Carol, Hershel and Glenn sit at the table in front of the two women.

“It's spread. Everyone who survived the attack in cell block D. Sasha, Caleb, and now others.” Hershel says informing them of what Dr. S had just told him.
“Oh, Jesus.” Daryl says shaking his head.

“So what do we do?” Carol questions.

“First things first. Cell block A is isolation. We keep the sick people there like we tried with Karen and David.”

“What the hell we gonna do about that?” Daryl asks, they couldn’t let a killer run loose inside of the prison, they had enough to worry about with the walkers already.

“Ask Rick to look into it.” Carol suggests. “Try to make a timeline—who was where when. But what are we gonna do to stop this?”

“There is no stopping it. You get it, you have to go through it.”

“But it just kills you.” Michonne states.

Hershel turns to look at her, “The illness doesn't. The symptoms do. We need antibiotics.”

“We've been through every pharmacy nearby. And then some.” Rayne says, knowing if there was something, she and Daryl would have found it on their runs.

“That veterinary college at West Peachtree Tech, that's one place people may not have thought to raid for medication. The drugs for animals there are the same we need.”

Daryl nods, glancing over to his girlfriend who nods her head in agreement. “That's 50 miles. Too big a risk before. Ain't now. I'm gonna take a group out. Best not waste any more time.”

“I'm in.” Michonne says stepping forward.

“You haven't been exposed. Daryl and Rayne have. You get in a car with him—”

“He's already given me fleas.” She says smiling, the others chuckling in response, even Daryl.

“I can lead the way. I know where everything's kept.” Hershel says as he stands up.

Daryl hesitates at the elder man, not wanting to upset him, “When we're out there, it's always the same. Sooner or later we run.”

Hershel nods, he knows that he can’t run with a bum leg. “I can draw you a map. There are other precautions I feel we should take.”

“Like what?” Carol questions.

“There's no telling how long it'll be before Daryl and his group return. Wouldn't it make sense for us to separate the most vulnerable? We can use the administration building. Separate office, separate room.”

“Who is the most vulnerable?” Glenn asks.

“The very young.”

“What about the old?” Glenn then questions.
Outside in the field Carol and Rick are trying to pump fresh water out of the small stream that flows outside of the fences, but the lines seem to have gotten clogged with mud. Telling her that it can wait until tomorrow, he suggests both of them paying their respects to Karen and David.

“I'll take this up first. Meet you.” Carol says quickly walking back towards the prison.

Behind her Rick furrows his brows at her sudden lack of sympathy and hesitation to be around Tyreese. Sighing, he walks over and stands just behind Tyreese, not wanting to intrude, after a moment the man looks up at Rick.

“I'm sorry about what happened. What I did to you. Everything.”

“It's on both of us. You got to find who did this.”

“I didn't know David much. Did you? Did anyone have a problem with him or Karen?”

“No. No way. I was with her all the time, every day. She got along with everybody. Same with David.”

“They were the only two who were sick. The person who did it might have trying to stop this thing from spreading.”

“They didn't.” Ty said his eyes tearing up, “Now Sasha has it.”

“Look, whoever it was who did this, they're not going anywhere. We'll find them.”

“Today? Right now? Because I'm not feeling the urgency. All I see you doing is pumping water. In fact, what I'm picking up is murder is okay in this place now.”

“No, it is not. But we have to save lives first. We have to keep this place going.”

“You worry about that. I'll worry about what's right.” With that said, Ty walks off towards the prison, seeing the infected members heading for the isolation area.

Out by the cars Rayne and Michonne load their things into the back seat, while Daryl looks under the hood and checks the oil.

“Son of a bitch is about a quart low.” He says pulling out the dipstick.

“You still keep it in the bottom of tower three?” Michonne asks.

“Yeah.”

“I'll go get one.”

“Hey.” Daryl calls to her, standing up from under the hood. “I'm glad you're here.”

“Where else would I be?”

“Running off.”
“You know I'm not running off.” She says trying to justify her actions, but she sighs at the knowing looks from Rayne and Daryl. “So it's just gonna be me, you and Rayne, like in the old days?”

“Yeah, and Bob. Still, feels like we could use another person.”

“Who else isn't sick?”

“We don't ask Rick. He wants to stay here with Carl and Little Ass-Kicker. Keep them safe. Plus there's plenty of stuff he could do here.”

“So who else we got?” Rayne says as they all think out loud.

Daryl realizes the only other person is Tyreese, so he heads into the prison to look for him. Finally after searching just about everywhere, he finds the man standing outside of the infected wing.

“Oh, there you are. Took me damn near forever to find you. Whatcha doing?”

“Somebody needs to stand watch.”

“Man, I want to find them, too. Put a bolt in them for what they did. These people are cut off. Ain't no way anyone's getting in and out without a whole bunch of people seeing 'em.”

“Sasha's in there. I ain't going nowhere.”

“Standing guard ain't gonna do no good unless we come back with them meds.” Daryl sighs as Tyreese just turns back to the window, staring in at his sister. “All right. We're gassing up by the front gate in case you change your mind.”

After grabbing the oil and filling the tank Daryl shuts the hood on the car. From the gate Bob comes walking up with two extra cans of gasoline, “Everything look all right?”

“Yeah. Zack kept this thing running pretty good.”

“This is Zack's car?”

“Yeah, fastest one we got. You all right?”

“You really want me coming along?”

Daryl pats his pockets until he finds the small piece of paper that Hershel had given him, a list of the antibiotics they needed. Pointing to the top word on the paper, Daryl looked over at Bob, “What's that word?”

“Zanamivir.”
“Yup, we need you.” Daryl states putting the paper back in his pocket, he looks up to see Ty coming out of the gate. “What's up?”

“Still got room for one more?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Good. Just got to get my gear.”

“All right.” Daryl nods grabbing his crossbow and putting it in the front seat.

As Ty comes back with his gear getting into the car with Bob and Michonne, Daryl tosses a wink to Rayne who sits in the driver’s seat of her truck.

Blowing him a kiss in return Rayne fires the diesel motor up and follows Daryl out of the front gates. It had become habit for them to take two vehicles when they were out on runs, in case one car failed. Rayne’s truck ran off of diesel, which was easier to come by then unleaded, plus it could run off of solar power if need be.

It didn’t bother her to ride alone, she enjoyed it, it gave her time to think. But today she just felt like listening to music. Pulling out her phone she connected the Bluetooth to her stereo, then opened the music player and hit shuffle, smiling as country music filled her truck. The best part about phones, is even when they had no service, the Bluetooth and music always worked and that was all she needed.

Inside of the car ahead of her Daryl was talking with Michonne. “Hey, I know you weren't running off. The thing is, that trail went cold. You know that, right? If it was any different, I'd be right out there with you.”

Daryl tries to tune the radio, but he gets nothing but static coming through. Nodding to the glovebox he asks Michonne, “Would you hand me one of them CDs right there?”

Suddenly something comes over the radio that sounds like a person’s voice. “…find sanctuary.”

“Was that a voice?” Bob asks.

“Shh.” Daryl tells him as he tries to adjust the radio dial.

“…determined to survive keep alive.”

They were all too focused on the radio to see what was ahead of them, but Rayne suddenly laying on her horn brought Daryl’s attention back to the road. He grimaced as he hit a walker, the body flying up over the car, gripping the steering wheel he tried to maneuver through the scattered walkers on the road.

Behind them Rayne slams on her brakes, her eyes widening at the sight before her. “Holy shit.” She could see the institute in the distance, but getting there would be a problem as a herd of walkers, maybe 1,000 or more stood between them and their destination.

She throws the truck in reverse as she sees the reverse lights on the car come on, quickly backing up to give Daryl some room. But there are too many walkers behind the car, Daryl running them
over until he ends up stuck on a pile of them.

Throwing the truck into first gear she drives up beside the car, yelling out the window. “Get in the truck! Now!”

“Make a run for the truck.” Daryl yells as he and Michonne jump out of the car and run over, climbing into the bed of the truck, followed closely by Bob.

But Tyreese is still sitting in the car, Bob screams at him, “Ty! Ty!”

The man shakes his head as he gets out of the car, pulling out his hammer, “Go! Come on! Come on and get me! Go! Go! Go! Come on and get me! Go!”

Daryl motions for Rayne to go, she nods pulling off of the road and heading down a trail into the woods. She knew the truck would be too big to make it the whole way, but she’d get them as close as she could. When they hit the point where she could go no further, they all grabbed their gear and got out heading towards the institute.

Daryl heard something from behind them and held up his hand, pausing them in their tracks. From the woods where they had come from, two walkers staggered out of the trees, before he could fire a bolt, Tyreese broke through the trees taking out one of them. Michonne took care of the other one, slicing his head off with her katana. Daryl ran over, helping Tyreese to his feet as they all moved quickly through the woods as the herd was now coming their way.

Back at the prison Rick had some theories about who killed Karen and David, and he didn’t want to believe it was the person he suspected.

“That was a stupid thing you did.” He said to Carol as she passed by him carrying two buckets of water.

She had gone outside of the fence on her own to clear the hose and had nearly gotten herself killed in the process, but Rick had shown up in the nick of time to help her out.

“Going out there like that.”

“Yes, it was.”

“You know, you do a lot for us, for the kids. You sacrifice a lot. Is there anything you wouldn’t do for the people here?”

“No.”

“Carol?” He called to her as she started to walk away, he didn’t want to know the answer to the question burning in his mind, but he had to ask, he had to know the truth. “Did you kill Karen and David?”

“Yes.” Was her answer before she turned and walked away like it was nothing.
The following day Rick asked Carol to go on a run with him, they needed to find food and anything else that might help. What he didn’t tell her was that he had made a decision, regarding what she had done to Karen and David.

Yes she had killed them doing what she thought was right, but in the end, she hadn’t spared anyone else form getting sick. Instead she had murdered two innocent people who may have had a chance at surviving.

She took that from them, and now Rick was going to take something from her.

Down by the river standing on a bridge Rayne and the others are planning their new route, Michonne indicating their position on the map she had. “This is Turner Creek, so Barnesville must be a few miles downstream.”

“Sounds like our best chance at finding a new ride.” Rayne said. “But I’m coming back for my truck.”

“Babe—” Daryl started to speak when she cut him off. “Don’t you babe me, Dixon. That truck is my baby, and I will be comin’ back for it, by myself if I have to.”

Daryl rolled his eyes, but he smiled as he shook his head at his girlfriend. “Stubborn.”

“Ya love it.” She smirked as she sharpened her Kukris.

“I love you.” He murmured to himself, scoffing at the fact that he couldn’t say it out loud or to her face.
“Yo, Ty.” Daryl called to the man who was down on the river bank, rinsing the walker blood from his shirts. “Come on, let's go. Vamonos.”

Rayne, Daryl and Michonne start walking towards the town, Bob notices that Tyreese hasn’t moved from his position. “Ty. Ty! There should be a town a few miles south.”

“Lost a whole night. My sister, everybody else-- they're probably dead.”

“Well, it helps to keep moving.”

“No, it doesn't.”

As they were walking down a trail Daryl happened to find something lying in the dirt, picking it up he licked his finger, rubbing the dirt off of it.

“Is that jasper?” Michonne asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“It's a good color. Brings out your eyes.”

Rayne chuckled as Michonne teased Daryl, it was nice to have their bantering back again, it had been far too long.

“When Miss Richards went into A block, we were leaving. Asked me to keep a lookout. I'm gonna use it for her old man's marker.” Daryl explained to her.

“You know all them back there?”

“You stay in one place more than a couple hours, you'd be surprised what you pick up.”

Out on their run Rick pulls into a neighborhood they hadn’t been too before, getting out of the car and grabbing his backpack. He sees a message written in the dust on the car windows in front of him, ‘Pardon our dust.’

“Think they're coming back?”

“Windshield’s clean, wiped down. Can't have been here more than a day, maybe two. You mean Daryl and the others. That's what this is, right? In case they don't?”

“Until they do. That's what this is.” Rick explains to Carol. “Medicine cabinets, first aid kits—anything that could help Hershel. We get in, we get out. And if we can eat it, we take it.”

As the group of Daryl, Rayne, Ty, Bob and Michonne are walking past a gas station, Bob sees the two hunters pause, staring at the massive vines that are growing over the top of something underneath.
“You see something?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

Sure enough inside of the vines is a car, so while Daryl and Rayne get inside to hot wire it, the other three remove the vines encasing it.

Daryl sighs tossing the wires down as he climbs out of the car, “We gotta find us a new battery.” He tries to look in the window of the station, spitting on his fingers to wipe away some of the dust. A walker slams into the glass from the inside as he touches his fingers to the glass. “Got some friends inside. Come on.”

The group follows Daryl around to the front, “Let's clear a path, see how many we got.”

The group all starts removing the branches of vines from the front of the store. Tyreese instead start whacking at the vines with his large blade, the rest of them looking at him in frustration, his actions were going to get them all killed if he kept it up.

“Hey, man, go easy. We don't know what we're dealing with.” Daryl cautions him.

The hook of his knife gets caught in something, he wrenches and pulls trying to dislodge it. When he finally frees it, there are stray wires attached to the end, Ty immediately rips them off and continues hacking away.

Suddenly an arm breaks out of the vines in front of Daryl, Rayne jerks him back as Michonne slices the arm off with her blade. Walkers shove themselves out of the vines in front of Bob and Tyreese, the one in front of Bob grabbing onto his jacket. Michonne shoves herself between the two and slices the walker’s head off freeing Bob from it’s grip as he tumbles backwards.

Ty however isn’t being held by the walker, he’s holding onto it despite protests from Daryl telling him to let it go. He pulls it hard enough to release it from the vines holding it captive, Tyreese falling onto his back, the walker on top of him snapping its nasty rotted teeth at his face.

Daryl grabs the walker by the back of the shirt and yanks it off of Tyreese, and Bob walks over shooting it in the head.

“Why the hell didn't you let go?” Michonne snaps at him knowing he could have gotten himself killed just then.

Daryl leads the way into the store with Rayne covering his back, making their way to the garage at the side to search for another battery.

“Come on.” Daryl spies the battery’s as they enter the garage. “Here we go.” He pulls one off the shelf and sets it down on a tool bench, taking out his knife and popping the cell cap off. “Hmm, cells look pretty dry. A little distilled water will clear that right up.”

Outside Tyreese and Michonne are clearing the rest of the vines away from the car while the others get the battery.

“You should have let him go.” Michonne tells Ty about his suicide wish.
“The hell you know about it, huh? You the damn expert?”

“No. I just don't want to see you die. Is that what you're trying to do? Do you even know what you're trying to do? I know you're pissed. And you have every reason to be. But anger makes you stupid. Stupid gets you killed.”

“Aren't you still angry about the Governor? What he did?”

“If he was here right now, I'd cut him in two. Cause that's how it needs to be. But I'm not angry. I was.”

“Then why are you still going out looking for him?”

Michonne shakes her head, she honestly doesn’t have an answer for that. “I don't know.”

As Daryl, Rayne and Bob made their way back out to the store, the hunter notices something on the floor, beside an empty bottle of antifreeze. “That's puke. Those douchebags in the vines took themselves out, holding hands-- kumbaya style.”

“They wanted to go out together same as they lived. That make them douchebags?” Bob questions, not understanding Daryl’s look on some people.

“It does if they could have gotten out.” Rayne said her opinion the same as Daryl’s, if you’re gonna fight, fight till the end. Don’t take a cowards way out.

“Everybody makes it, till they don't.” Bob tells the two hunter’s. “People nowadays are dominoes. What they did, maybe it's about not having to watch them fall.”

“Right. Come on.” Daryl says moving around a corner, his flashlight beam falling on an elderly walker lying on the floor, a shelf pinning him down. Daryl and Rayne walk off knowing it’s not going anywhere, so why bother with it.

Bob however sees the pictures of the family that were in there on the wall, feeling compassion for the walker, he grabbed a nearby screwdriver and stabbed it through the walker’s brain.

When they got back out to the car that Michonne and Ty had finally uncovered, Daryl popped the hood and set to work replacing the battery. Rayne pulled out two cigarettes from the pack she had taken from inside, lighting them both and handing one to Daryl. He gave her a wink of thanks in return and she turned to Bob holding out the pack, the man took one gratefully.

“You never told us about the group you were with before.” Daryl said to Bob.

“Which one?” Bob answered honestly. “You know, when you two found me out on that road, I almost kept walking.”

“Why is that?” Rayne wondered as she took a drag of her cig.
“Cause I was done being a witness. Two times, two different groups. I was the last one standing. Like I was supposed to see it happen over and over, like it's some kind of curse. But, when it's just you out there with the quiet… Used to be I'd drink a bottle of anything just so I could shut my eyes at night. Figured the prison, the people, thought it'd be easier. The run to the big spot, I did it for me.”

“You gotta keep busy.”

“No. I did it so I could get me a bottle. Of anything. I picked it up, I held it in my hand, but I put it down. I put it down so hard it took the whole damn shelf with it. That's what brought on the walkers, and that's what got Zack killed.”

“That's bullshit.” Daryl told him, whether it was true or not, shit happens, sometimes it can’t be helped. “Why don't you get in there and try the engine? It's a red and a green wire. Go on. It ain't rocket science. Give it some gas.”

The car fires right up and Daryl nods, clapping his hands, Rayne gives him a high-five as he whistles to Ty and Michonne. The two hear the car running and stand up, heading over and getting into the car.

Daryl turned to Bob who was still sitting in the driver’s seat, “Sasha, Rayne and me picked that spot. We took you with us. There ain’t no way anybody could’ve known. You ain't gonna be standing alone, not no more. Let's go.”

Bob drives the car up to the university campus, the group getting out and shouldering their weapons. Rayne locks her bow into the clips on her Kukris sheath, she probably won’t need to use it, but it’s better to be over prepared. She draws her Kukris as she follows Daryl through the dorm housing, smiling as she sees the rest of them squinting in the sunlight.

“I told y'all to get some sunglasses.” She commented as she pointed at the black Oakley’s that covered her eyes.

“You still haven’t lost those yet?” Michonne asked her.

“Hell no. I love these glasses. If it’s up to me I’ll die in them.” Rayne said as she shot her friend a smile.

“Looks like we're getting closer.” Daryl said as they turned a corner.

“The building we want is just up ahead.” Ty announced from behind the hunter’s.

The five of them reach the building and quickly make their way inside, immediately grabbing whatever bottles they can find lying around, wanting to get in and out as fast as they could.

The group splits up into two group, Daryl, Rayne and Ty going out to find any medical equipment they could find, while Bob and Michonne took care of the medicine.

“Anything ending with -cillin or -cin, C-I-N, grab it. We'll dissolve the pills in the IVs, put 'em right into the bloodstream. Dosage will be tricky but considering the time we lost.” He looks over at the door as the other three walk back inside the room. “How'd you do?”
“Bags, tubes, clamps, connectors. Everything on the list.” Ty says.

“What about y'all?” Daryl questions.

“Yeah, we got it all.”

“Yeah. We're good.” Michonne confirms as she does one last sweep of the medicine cabinet.

“All right, let's roll.” Rayne says as she shoulders her backpack and leads the way down the halls, Daryl on her six watching her back.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.” She pauses them glancing into a room to her left, seeing walkers inside heading their way she ushers them down the hall.

“Up ahead.” Michonne says pointing to a door at the end of the hall on the right.

As they enter the pitch dark room, Bob tries to shut the door behind him, but finds it won’t latch. “Hey! Door's busted.”

“Oh. Hold up.” Daryl tells the others as he goes back to try and fix it, he and Bob shoved a stack of cages up against the door to hold it shut.

“Here.” Michonne says pointing her flashlight at a sign for the stairwell, behind them they can hear the walkers growling outside of the door.

A lone walker comes at the group, but it receives a knife to the head from Tyreese. Michonne reaches for the lock on the door, recoiling as it’s pushed from the other side by walkers, their hands straining through the small opening to get to them.

“How many?” Daryl asks.

“I can't tell.” The warrior tells him trying to look through the opening.

“We can take 'em.” Ty says as the walkers finally push the cages away from the door and moves towards them.

“No!” Bob yells. “They're infected. Same as at the prison. We fire at 'em, get their blood on us, breathe it in. We didn't come all this way to get sick.”

“How do we know the ones in there aren't any different?” Ty argues.

“We don't.” Rayne snaps.

“Well, it's gotta change sometime.” Daryl says, handing his crossbow to Rayne, he kicks at a broken table, snapping one of the legs off. He wraps it through the chain and turns back to the group, “Ready?”

“Do it!” Ty yells.

Daryl snaps the lock off letting the walkers inside, Bob takes one down with a shot to the head, while Michonne slices the other two’s head’s off.

“Come on.” Daryl urges them through the door, taking his bow from Rayne and following behind her.

They make their way down the stairwell until they can’t go any farther, moving out into the
hallways they search for another stairwell. Finding one Michonne tries the door, it’s locked. “Don’t have an exit.”

“Then we make one.” Daryl shouts climbing up onto the window ledge and kicking at the glass.

“Get down!” Ty yells to Daryl as he throws a fire extinguisher through the glass, shattering it and providing them with an exit.

“Come on, move it!” Daryl shouts taking Rayne’s hand and helping her up first followed by Michonne. “Jump down to the walkway below.”

“They’re here!” Bob screams indicating the infected walkers.

“Let's go! Go, go. Move.” Daryl tells them as he follows the women out onto the walkway.

Ty jumps out next, followed by Bob who ends up tripping, his backpack falling over the edge. Below him walkers grab onto the bag, his hand still gripping one of the straps, but he won’t let it go.

“Bob, let it go.” Michonne tells him as Daryl and Ty try to hold him on the roof.

“Let it go, man.” Ty states. “Just let it go.”

“Let go of the bag, man.” Daryl growls as he fights to hang on to Bob.

At last Bob manages to wrestle the bag away from the walkers, swinging it up onto the walkway they all hear a bottle smack the roof.

Daryl kneels down pulling a bottle of alcohol out of the open flap. “You got no meds in your bag? Just this?” Daryl gives him a look of utter disappointment as he tells him, “You should have kept walking that day.”

Daryl moves to huck the bottle out into the walkers below, but Bob begs him not to, his hand immediately moving to his gun. “Don't.”

Daryl doesn’t back down at the sight, he bows up into Bob’s face, reaching down and taking the gun from the holster. He chest bumps Bob before grabbing him by the front of his jacket, Bob’s gaze stays trained down, he doesn’t have the guts to look Daryl in the eye.

“Just let it go, Daryl. The man's made his choice. Nothing you can do about it. Just gotta let it go.” Ty says.

Rayne steps up beside her boyfriend, reaching out she grabs his hand easing it off of Bob’s jacket. “Come on, D. Back off.” Daryl allows her to take his hand, backing away from Bob.

“I didn't want to hurt nobody. It was just for when it gets quiet.” Bob said trying to explain his actions which could’ve got them all killed.

Daryl shoves the bottle into Bob’s chest, holding it there as he speaks low. “You take one sip. When those meds get in our people, I will beat your ass into the ground. You hear me?”

Rayne and Daryl lead the way across the rooftops to a safe area where they’re no walkers roaming around. They quickly and quietly make their way down the side of the building to the ground, then head back to the van. Everyone is quiet as Daryl drives them back to the spot where they left Rayne’s truck, the two hunter’s getting out with their weapons.
“You drive them back, I’m riding with Rayne.” Daryl told Michonne, he couldn’t stand to be in the same vicinity as Bob right now.

Rick and Carol were loading their car back up with the supplies they found, Carol goes to open the passenger door, but finds that Rick locked it. She glances over to him standing at the rear of the car with a curious look.

“They might have lived. Karen and David, they might have lived, and now they're dead. That wasn't your decision to make. When Tyreese finds out... he'll kill you. He damn near killed me over nothing.”

“I can handle Tyreese.”

“When the others find out, they won't want you there. And if they don't make it back, if everybody dies of this thing and it's just the two of us, with Judith and Carl— with my children— I won't have you there.”

“Rick, it's me. No one else has to know. I thought you were done making decisions for everyone.”

“I'm making this decision for me.”

“I could have pretended that everything was gonna be fine.” She said wiping the tears away that were falling from her eyes. “But I didn't. I did something. I stepped up. I had to do something.”

“No, you didn't.”

“If you think I'm going anywhere without Lizzie and Mica—”

“If you want them to leave, to go out there with you? Lizzie's sick. Mica is 10 years old. We'll keep them safe. You're not that woman who was too scared to be alone, not anymore. You're gonna start over, find others, people who don't know, and you're gonna survive out here. You will.”

“Maybe.”

Rick pulls her backpack out, dropping it on the ground beside her before closing the back of the car.

Rayne and Daryl sit on the back tailgate of her truck, they had met up with the others back out on the road to plan their trip back home.

“That's where I was traveling, Highway 100.” Ty said as he looked at the map with Michonne.

“Then it will take about seven hours to get there. We're gonna need more gas.”

“We'll get there.” Ty says putting the map away. “Taking Highway 100.” He shouted to the two hunters.
“We heard.” Daryl says as he hops down from the tailgate, taking Rayne’s hand and steadying her as she jumped down as well.

“You were right, what you said before. About the trail going cold. I don't need to go out anymore.” Michonne says as she smiles at them.

“Good.” They hunters say in tandem smiling at their friend.

Rick manages to find another car and some more gas, so he splits their rations in half and moves his to the other car. Carol holds the nearly empty gas can out to him, he shakes his head, “Take it.”

As she moves to get into the car she pulls something out of her pocket, a small watch with one strap missing. “Ed gave this to me on our first anniversary. Please. I should have given it away a long time ago.” With that said she gets into the car and drives away without a look in the rearview.

Daryl drives Rayne’s truck back down the highway following Michonne, Ty and Bob. He smiles as he takes her hand in his, lifting it up and kissing the back of it. “Don’t ever leave me.”

Rayne smiles brightly, “Not until you tell me too.”
Things at the prison were only getting worse with more people falling ill and being moved to the quarantine zone. Glenn was making rounds with Hershel to check on the patients, finding several of them dead in their bunks. Knowing it was only a matter of time before they turned, Glenn pulls out his knife to take care of one of them, but Hershel lays a hand over his stopping him.

“No. Not here.” He whispers before he leaves to go retrieve a gurney. “Help me get him on this.”

“Okay, but in a couple of hours when Henry's dead—”

“How are we gonna get his body down the stairs, across the cell block and through those doors without anyone noticing?”

“If that happens—if—you're gonna help me.”

“And what if I'm gone?” Glenn says, he knows he’s growing sicker by the day and he may not have that much longer to live.

“Shut up and help me get him on this.”

They load him onto the gurney and roll him out of the cellblock towards the main door. “What are you doing?” They turn to find Lizzie standing at the doorway behind them, Glenn quickly pulls the white sheet covering the body up higher so that she can't see his face.

“We're taking Mr. Jacobson to a quieter place.” Hershel walks back to her placing a hand to her head, she’s burning up. “Go get my copy of “Tom Sawyer” from my room. I want you to read it by tonight. We all got jobs to do. That one's yours.”

“I won't finish it.” She protests amid violent coughs.

“Why?”
“It's gonna get too dark.”

“Well, give it your best try. And drink some tea.”

After she walks away they wheel the gurney out into the hallway and shut the door behind them. While Hershel looks in his book, Glenn pulls his knife out gripping it as he stares down at the body.

“You haven't had to do this yet, have you?”

“There was one late last night. Sasha did it. People don't need to see it. I don't want them to.”

The body starts to moan, beginning to rise up off of the gurney as it turns, Glenn shoves it back down with his hand and slams the knife into the forehead killing it.

Maggie’s outside stabbing walkers, trying to keep them off of the fence when she sees Rick’s car coming back down the road. She runs over and opens the gate for him allowing him through, shutting it quickly before the walkers can make their way in.

Rick gets out of the car alone which she finds very odd, but he doesn’t seem to notice her questioning gaze. “Carl, Judith, are they okay?”

“Yeah. Where's Carol?”

Rick avoids her question, “Glenn, Hershel, Sasha?”

“Yeah, it's bad, but they're fighting it. Daryl and Rayne aren’t back yet. Rick. Rick, where's Carol?”

Rick sighs knowing he had to tell her what he had done, he had made a decision and he would stand by it. “It was her. She killed Karen and David. She was trying to stop it from spreading. Tyreese is gonna be back here soon, so I didn't think she should be here. And I couldn't have her here. She has a car, supplies, she'll figure it out. I'll tell your dad. Don't tell anyone else yet.”

“Okay.”

“Would you have brought her back?” He asks, trying to get her opinion on what he’d done.

“She said she did it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you were right to send her away. I don't know if I could have.”

“You could have, Maggie. You've done harder things. Don't doubt yourself. We don't get to anymore.”

“Rick, the cluster's getting bigger than the one that took the fence down. We need to do something.”

“We will.”
Rick went to deliver the supplies and food he had found to Carl, then went back outside to help Maggie brace the fence with long poles. While they’re chopping them into smaller pieces they hear a gunshot from inside the prison. Maggie ignores it and continues to chop at the wood with her axe, she knows the fence is first priority. If the fence fell, then the infection would be the least of their worries.

“Go.” Rick tells her.

“The fence is more important. We need to keep it standing.”

“I got this.”

“You can't do this alone.”

“I know. Go.”

Maggie gives in and takes off into the prison, there she looks into the quarantine room to find that the sick patients were all turning, and the ones still alive were in serious danger. She hammers at the door with the axe trying to break the lock, but the axe blade gets stuck in the doorframe. As she tries to yank it out the wood handle snaps off, Maggie cusses as she runs out of the room.

Outside Rick returned to the fence after acquiring Carl to help him brace the weakening steel with the logs.

“Think they're okay?” Carl asks.

“If things were going bad, we would have heard more shots. Maggie would have gotten us. We have to do this.”

“Let's do it.”

“I got it.”

“Let me help.” Carl tells his dad as he lifts up the other end.

“All right, set it down. All right.”

Just as they get it into place they hear an ominous crack from behind them, both of them turn with wide eyes as the trunks they just put up start to crack like toothpicks, the walkers leaning on the fence threatening to come through.

“Run!” Rick screamed to his son as the trunks splinter and fall, the wall of walkers crashing into the dog run. Rick fights his way past them as he tries to reach the gate.

“Dad, come on! Come on!” Carl grabs his dad and together the two of them escape through the tower door and slam it shut behind them. “Dad, what do we do?”

“Maybe I could back the bus up against the fence.”

“Will it hold?”
At this point Rick isn’t sure but they had to try something before the hoard managed to break into the compound. The two of them grab a set of automatic rifles and several extra magazines, shoving them into their pockets. As they move back to the bus Rick gives Carl a crash course on how to load and fire the gun.

“Magazine goes in here. Release is here. Make sure it latches. Pull back the operating rod and rounds feed up. Keep squeezing the trigger for rapid fire, okay?”

“All right.”

“You shoot or you run. Don’t let ’em get close, okay?”

They make it back to the corner of the compound just as the walkers push through the fence, spilling into the grounds. They take a stance and open fire, the rounds concentrated on the heads and upper body of the pack.

“Back off!” Rick yells as he and Carl take a few steps back and reload magazines. Rick looks on in awe as his now fearless son reloads the clip and moves forward once more, firing rapid shots taking the walkers out. Within minutes Rick and Carl have taken down every walker coming through the fence line, they grab a couple of poles and stab the still alive ones through the skull.

Carl looks up as he hears Rayne’s truck pulling up outside of the gate, “Dad everything’s gonna be okay.” He then runs down along with his dad to open the gate and allow the two cars back inside the compound.

Ty jumps out of the van quickly, “Sasha? How’s Sasha?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.” Rick tells him.

“Well, get in there. We got this.” Daryl tells him as he and Rayne jump down out of the truck and run down to help Carl deal with the fence.

The next morning Rick wakes up and walks out to the courtyard to find Michonne, Rayne and Daryl already out there cleaning up the walker’s bodies, loading them onto a flatbed.

“When did you guys wake up?” He says to Rayne.

She gives him a funny look, “Wake up? We haven’t been to sleep yet.”

Rick sighs, “Why didn’t you guys tell me? I’d have stayed up and helped you out.”

Rayne smiles as she gives Rick a hug and a kiss on his cheek, “Because you were exhausted and you needed to rest. Being as that Daryl and I are half of the council, we made an executive decision to leave you out of this.” She sees the downtrodden look on Rick’s face, he feels as though he’s let them down. “Rick, you run yourself ragged everyday worrying about everyone. We all live here, we all shoulder the responsibilities. Everything doesn’t have to land on you.”

Rick smiles kissing her forehead, “Thanks Ray.”

“Anytime.” She says before she heads off back down to the fence line with Daryl.
“You need some help with that?”

Michonne gives him a smile and shakes her head. “No. Do your thing.”

Rick heads off down towards the fence to talk to Daryl and Rayne, behind him Carl comes running out of the courtyard. “Hey. You didn't wake me up.”

“I thought I'd let you sleep in.”

“I should help.”

“Good.” Rick nods. “I've got to go talk to Daryl and Rayne.”

“Right now?” Carl asks hopefully, he wants to continue spending time with his dad.

“No. Soon. Soon.” Rick laughs smacking Carl with his gloves before they head down to finish tearing down the pen.

Up in the courtyard Rayne hops out of the back of the Dodge to round up some more supplies, she smiles at Hershel, kissing his cheek before she goes on her way.

Daryl hops out of the truck with Ty, the big man asking quickly how their friend is doing. “How's Glenn doing?”

“He made it through the night. He's breathing on his own now. Maggie and Bob are with him. He seems stable enough for me to get some air.”

“He's a tough son of a bitch.” Daryl says as Ty heads off inside.

“He is.”

Daryl points to Hershel, “You're a tough son of a bitch.”

“I am.”

“How about Carol? She up in A block with Lizzy?” He questions, he hadn’t seen her since he had gotten back. He was curious as to where she was.

“No. Talk to Rick about her. She's okay, just talk to him.” Hershel said before he headed off to talk to Michonne. “You heading out?”

She smiled, “You want to come?”

“Hell, yeah.” Hershel said before he climbed into the Jeep with her.

After all of the events of the last two days, the group was hoping that the worst was behind them. However if they had seen what was standing outside of the front gates, just inside the tree line, they might have been ready for the hell that was soon to be unleashed upon them.
Later that day inside the prison Maggie is sitting beside Glenn on the bed, she’s holding his hand as he wakes up. His color has come back and he’s not coughing or having trouble breathing.

“I could use a vacation. Get away. Just for a weekend.” He rasps, his throat dry.

Maggie laughs, “Yeah.”

“You know, our anniversary is coming up.”

“It is?”

“One of these days.”

She laughs again, “You ever been to Amicalola Falls? Tallest waterfall in Georgia. My dad took me there when I was little. When we were up there, all the way at the top looking down, I felt like I was flying.”

“I'll go load up the station wagon.” He says not even joking in the least.

She smiles, leaning down to kiss his collarbone, “I'm gonna get you some water.”

“I can get it.” Glenn tells her.

“I know. But I'm doing it.” She smiles down at him. “I'll be right back.”

Inside of cell block C Rayne is leaning against the wall at the top of the staircase, in front of her Daryl is pacing the floor, while Rick stands beside her against the wall. Daryl is pissed off, having found out that Rick sent Carol away and even more angry that Rayne had known about it and not
told him. The huntress was taken aback by the anger radiating off of her boyfriend, she’d never seen him so upset before.

“Man, you couldn't have waited till we got back?”

“Until Tyreese got back?” Rick said giving him a raised eyebrow.

“I could've handled that.” Daryl argued.

“Hey. Hey. She killed two of our own. She couldn't be here. She's gonna be all right. She has a car, supplies, weapons. She's a— she’s a survivor.”

“Stop saying that like you don't believe it.” Daryl snaps pointing a finger in Rick’s face.

“She did it. She said it was for us. That's how it was in her head. She wasn't sorry.”

“Man, that's her, but that ain't her. What are we supposed to do about those two girls?”

“I told her we'd look after them. I haven't told Tyreese yet. I don't know how he's gonna take it.”

“Let's go find out.” Daryl says, before he looks at Rayne. “We’ll meet you down there, I need to talk to Rayne.”

Despite his hesitation at leaving Rayne alone with Daryl’s anger, he nodded and left the two alone, walking down the stairs and leaving the cell block.

“You knew and you didn’t think to tell me?” Daryl snapped at her.

“Rick asked me not to, he wanted to be the one to tell you.” She said biting her lip. “I’m sorry, Daryl.”

“No you’re not!” He yelled, his anger actually making Rayne flinch. “If you gave a shit about me, you’d have told me regardless of what Rick said.”

“How can you say that to me? You know that I care about you, Daryl, more than anything.”

“Then how could you keep something like that from me? You know what she means to me!” He yelled, getting up into her face.

Rayne frowned looking into his eyes that were a storm of emotions. “No, I don’t know. What does she mean to you?” He looked away not meeting her eyes, and it finally dawned on Rayne what was happening. “You love her. That’s why you’re so angry, isn’t it?”

He still didn’t answer and Rayne couldn’t stop herself from asking another question, one that would be the end of her world. “What if it was me, Daryl? Would you be this angry if it was me out there, instead of her?” She asked softly, her insides twisting as she dreaded his answer.

Again nothing and Rayne shook her head, “Do you love me, Daryl? Do you even want to be with me?”

He didn’t say anything, wouldn’t even look at her and Rayne felt her heart break for the final time. His silence was all the answer she needed. “Wow. You bastard.” She scoffed, holding back her tears, she wasn’t going to cry for him again. “I’ll um, I’ll move my stuff out of the cell later.” She threw up her walls once more and let her icy exterior form again, “Let’s go take care of this.”
They head down into the tombs where Rayne had gotten trapped, Ty said he was heading down there to make his rounds. They met up with Rick just inside of the doors, the former cop calling out for their friend. “Tyreese. You down here?”

“Rick, that you? You guys got to see this.” He says coming out of one of the cells.

“Can we take a beat? There’s something we need to talk about.” Rick says.

Ty shakes his head cutting the man off, “It can wait. Come on.”

He leads them back into the room he had just left, “Look.” There on the bottom of the wall was a piece of metal with a dead rabbit stapled to it. The poor animal looked as if it had been cut open and dissected.

“The hell?” Daryl says as he kneels down to look at it.

“I was just looking for answers and I found this. Same person that killed Karen and David did this. Remember the rats at the fence? They showed up the same day she was killed. We got a psychopath living with us.”

“Tyreese.”

“We got to find him, Rick. And I'm not gonna sleep until we do.”

“Tyreese… whoever did this, I don't think that's who killed Karen.” Rick says with a sigh.

“Why?”

Suddenly a giant explosion rattles the entire building, the roof above them shaking, dust and debris raining down on their heads.

“Come on.” Rayne shouts as she runs for the door, leading the way up to the ground level and out into the courtyard.

“Get back!” Rick yells as everyone runs out at the same time and takes cover behind the small guard building. Outside of the bordering fence are 6 cars carrying roughly 30 people all armed with automatic rifles and something that makes Rayne’s eyes go wide. “You got to be kidding me! He’s got a fucking tank!”

And there on top of the tank stands none other than the Governor himself. “Rick! Come down here. We need to talk.”

“It's not up to me!” Rick hollers, not moving from his position. “There's a council now. They run this place.”

“Is Hershel on the council?” he says as his people take the old man out of the car. “What about Michonne?” He is followed by Michonne who is unloaded out of the other side. “She on the council, too?”

“I don't make decisions anymore.”

“You're making the decisions today, Rick. Come down here. Let's—Let's have that talk.”
Rick looks over at Daryl and Rayne who both give him a nod of support, Rick nods to his son before he opens the gate and walks down to the fence line.

“We can't take 'em all on.” Daryl tells Sasha and Ty. “We'll go through the admin building, through the woods like we planned. We ain't got the numbers no more. When’s the last time someone checked the stash on the bus?”

“Day before we hit the Big Spot. We were running low on rations then. We're lower now.” Sasha answers.

“Yeah, we'll manage. Things go south, everyone heads for that bus. Let everybody know.” Daryl tells them.

“What if everybody doesn't know when things go bad? How long do we wait?”

“As long as we can,” Rayne answers Ty, watching Rick carefully as he walks down and stops in front of the fence. Her rifle is at the ready in her hands, if the Governor makes one wrong move she’ll make sure he doesn’t take another breath.

“Let 'em go right now. I'll stay down here.” Rick says as he looks apologetically at Hershel and Michonne. “Talk as long as you want. But you let 'em go. You got a tank. You don't need hostages.”

“I do. This is just to show you I'm serious. Not to blast a hole in our new home.” He says motioning his head to the prison. “You and your people, you have till sundown to get out of here or they die.”

“Doesn't have to go down this way.”

“I got more people, more firepower. We need this prison. There it is. It's not about the past. It's about right now.”

“There are children here. Some of them are sick. They won't survive.” Rick says trying to reason with him, which was a mute point he knew that, but he had to at least try.

“I have a tank. And I'm letting you walk away from here. What else is there to talk about?”

Up in the courtyard Daryl is quickly and quietly passing out rifles to the rest of the group, they need to be ready to attack.

The Governor meanwhile is trying to reason with Rick, “I could shoot you all. You'd all shoot back. I know that. But we'll win and you'll be dead. All of you.”

“Doesn't have to be like that. Like I said, it's your choice.” He sees two walkers making their way across the field towards them, he pulls out his gun and fires three shots killing them. “Noise will only draw more of them over. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for you to get out of here.”

“We got to do something.” Carl says as he fidgets in his place beside Daryl, both of them aiming their guns through the fence.

“Your dad's got it.”

“They're talking. We could kill the Governor right now.”

“From 50 yards?”
Carl looks over to his left where his surrogate sister is standing, her snipe rifle aimed at the Governor. “Rayne’s a good shot. She could end this right now.”

“Yeah, or she could start something else.” Daryl says glaring over at his now ex-girlfriend. “You got to trust him.”

“You got maybe about an hour of sunlight left. I suggest you start packing.” The Governor says, no room for negotiation in his voice. “The longer you wait, the harder it’s gonna be for you to get out of here.”

“We can all-- we can all live together.” Rick says biting back his pride. “There's enough room for all of us.”

“More than enough. But I don't think my family would sleep well knowing that you were under the same roof.”

“We'd live in different cell blocks. We'd never have to see each other till we're all ready.”

“It could work. You know it could.” Hershel says backing Rick up on the idea.

“It could've. But it can't. Not after Woodbury. Not after Andrea.”

“Look, I'm not saying it's gonna be easy. Fact is, it's gonna be a hell of a lot harder than standing here shooting at each other. But I don't think we have a choice.”

“We don't. You do.”

“We're not leaving. You try and force us, we'll fight back. Like you said, the gunshots will just bring more of them out. They'll take down the fences. Without the fences, this place is worthless. Now, we can all live in the prison or none of us can.”

The Governor jumps down off of the tank in anger, grabbing Michonne’s sword from one of his men. “We'll fix the damn fences.” He grabs Hershel by the back of his shirt and lays the sword against his neck.

Rick starts to panic, he starts looking at the people surrounding the Governor. “You. You in the ponytails. Is this what you want? Is this what any of you want?”

“What we want is what you got. Period. Time for you to leave, asshole.” One of the guys in the tank says.

“Look, I fought him before. And after, we took in his old friends. They've become leaders in what we have here. Now you put down your weapons, walk through those gates you're one of us. We let go of all of it, and nobody dies. Everyone who's alive right now. Everyone who's made it this far. We've all done the worst kinds of things just to stay alive. But we can still come back. We're not too far gone. We get to come back. I know… we all can change.”

The Governor looks around and sees his people actually considering it. “Liar.” Before anyone can make a move, he swings the sword and slices into the side of Hershel’s neck.

“No!” Rick screams and raises his gun to fire at the man.

But the first shot doesn’t come from Rick, it comes from behind him where Rayne fires a round that lodges in the Governor’s shoulder. Gunfire breaks out from both side as everyone starts firing, all of them ducking for cover amid the barrage of bullets.
Rayne sees Rick take a round to his side as he scrambles behind the bus to safety. “Rick!” She drops her sniper rifle and picks up one of the automatic rifles, running down the gravel road to his aid. She concentrates her fire on the men standing in front of the cars, screaming out to her friend. “Michonne! Go!” The woman nods as she rolls across the ground to the side of one of the vehicles.

On the other side of the fence the Governor grabs Hershel who was still alive and trying to crawl away, and hacks the rest of his head off, pulling it from his body. “Go through the fence in your cars. Get your guns, we go in. Kill them all.”

“Roger that. Move in!”

Rayne looks around the side of the bus, she sees the tank pushing the fence down, the people taking flank behind it as it moved into the yard. “Oh, shit. We gotta go, Rick.”

In the courtyard Maggie runs inside to get Glenn, while Beth, Sasha and Bob get everyone they can find into the getaway bus. People are running out of the prison screaming as the tank blows holes into the sides of the concrete.

Rayne grabs Rick and gets ready to run for the courtyard, but he shrugs her off. “No, I’m ending him. You get up there, help Daryl and the others. Go through the dog run. Go!”

She cusses as he runs around the side of the bus tackling the Governor to the ground. She starts to move for the dog run, seeing Daryl through the fence taking out several people with a grenade. She ducks around the corner of the broken fence and slips into the courtyard, shooting a walker as it comes up on Daryl’s six.

The hunter turns around hearing the shot, he sees Rayne behind him, the dead walker less than a foot behind him. He gives her a mere nod before he turns his attention back to the intruders in front of him, still stewing at the fact that she had lied to him.

Rayne’s bottom lip trembles as she realizes that she’s lost Daryl for good this time, closing her eyes to hold back the tears she focuses on surviving, something she knows how to do. The prison has fallen, it’s no longer safe, she knows that she needs everything she can get to survive now. Seeing a hole in the wall from the tank shells she steels herself, then quickly runs for the hole. She screams out as she takes a bullet to her left thigh from one of the intruders that saw her running, she grits her teeth against the pain as she reaches the hole and hurtles herself through it.

She hits the floor on the inside of the prison, grunting as her body impacts the floor. She shoves herself to her feet and gingerly limps her way through the cell blocks to C. Wincing as she puts pressure on her leg, she quickly climbs the ladder and goes into the cell that she and Daryl had shared just mere hours before. Grabbing her backpack she shoves everything vital she can find into it, then slides it onto her back. Sliding her Kukris into the sheaths concealed on the back, then sliding her Glocks into the holsters on her thighs. She grabs her bow and locks it into the clips on the bottom of the backpack, grabbing her rifle once more and moving back down to the ground level.

As she nears the front doors she can see the Governor’s people heading her way, “Shit!” She swiftly takes off down into the tombs limping heavily, heading for the escape route Rick had her make just incase they ever needed it, and right now she did.
Out in the yard the Governor was beating the hell out of Rick, his face bloody and already starting to swell. The Governor had let his guard down thinking he had already won, which was a grave mistake as there was one thing he had forgotten about. He realized his fatal error as he was squeezing his hands around Rick’s throat, the man just short of losing consciousness when a blade pierced through his chest.

The Governor released Rick as his body convulsed around the blade, Rick rolling out of the way as Michonne withdrew the sword from the Governor’s body, he slumped to the ground gasping and choking on his own blood. Michonne grabbed Rick and started dragging him towards the courtyard, once there she left him and took off on her own.

Up in the courtyard Daryl picks his way through the walkers and jumps up shoving a grenade into the barrel of the tank exploding it from the inside out. The man inside jumped down and turned only to come face to face with Daryl, without hesitation, the hunter fired an arrow into his heart.

By the time dusk started to fall, the prison sat in ruins, flames licking into the sky amid black billowing smoke. The entire group had been split up and was spread out across the surrounding areas. Rick and Carl had escaped through the woods out front; Michonne had taken off on her own; Daryl had found Beth and the two of them took off into the woods off the side, while Maggie, Sasha and Bob fled out the backway. Ty had found the two little girls Lizzie and Mica, along with Judith and hurried them out through the back of the prison. The rest of the group that was able to get out, along with Glenn, was safely on the bus driving down the roads.

Rayne crawled through the small opening in the tomb wall, dragging her injured leg carefully. Leaning her back against the wall, she took off her belt and wrapped it around her thigh, gritting her teeth as she tightened it to stem the blood flow. Shoving herself to her feet, she hobbled her way down the back hill to the woods. Pausing in the tree line she took one last look at the place she had called home for nearly a year. Allowing the tears to fall from her eyes, she prayed that all of her family had made it out. As she set out through the woods she made a promise to herself that she would find them all again, no matter how long it took.
By the next morning the remains of the prison are overrun with walkers, Michonne picks her way through them, singling out two of the male ones. Allowing them to follow her and impale themselves on the wood spikes by the gate, she sighs as she cuts off their arms and lower jaws. Wrapping a rope around each of their necks she leads them through the walker filled field, their presence camouflaging her and keeping the walkers away.

She takes one last look at her home and turns back towards the woods, but she stops in her tracks as she finds Hershel’s severed head lying on the ground before her. She can see his once bright eyes, clouded over and white, even without his body he has turned, his dead teeth gnashing at her from the ground. With a heavy heart she stabs her sword down through his head ending his suffering.

Out in the woods Carl is walking down a dirt road, his face a mask of anger and despair. Behind him his father hobbles down the road, clutching his hand to the gunshot wound on his lower abdomen.

“Carl, slow down.” The boy doesn’t acknowledge he hears his father, no does he care. “Carl, stop!” The teen does as told and stops, allowing his father to catch up to him. “We need to stay together. We got to find a place with food, supplies. Hey.” Rick says lying his hand on his son’s shoulder. “We’re gonna be—” Rick can’t bring himself to finish his sentence, he couldn’t say that they were gonna be okay, mostly because he didn’t believe it himself. But also he can see the rage on his son’s face, even through the half swelled left eye he had.

They come upon a BBQ shack down the road, Carl draws his gun as Rick opens the front door. “Wait outside, okay? Keep watch.”

“You keep watch.” Carl argues. “You can barely stand. I'm not gonna let you go in there alone.”
“Excuse me?”

“We've done this before. I'm gonna help you clear it. You should just let me do it myself.”

Rick sighs before he gives, he knows Carl is right, “Let's go.” He opens the door and both of them enter the building. “Kitchen's clear.”

They hear snarling coming from the back room, a large walker slowly makes its way out to where they can see it, it can’t get to them due to the blockade of chairs in his path. “That might be all that's left.” Rick says indicating to the bottles of hot sauce on the shelves behind the walker.

“I can get it from here.” Carl says raising his gun.

Rick shakes his head, holstering his gun and picking up an axe off of the table. “No. No, it's weak. I'll draw it out. Stay back.”

Carl picks up a piece of paper that was underneath the axe, and seemed to be written by the man that the walker used to be. ‘Please do what I couldn't. Joe Jr.’ He shakes his head as his father grabs the blockade of chairs and yanks it down, releasing the walker.

“Damn it.” Rick says as the axe imbeds in the front of the walkers skull, but doesn’t kill him. “Don't.” He tells Carl as the boy raises his gun and takes the shot killing the walker. “I said not to.”

“You couldn't do it with the ax.”

“I had it. Every bullet counts. What if you needed that one later? See what you can find. Then let's move on.”

Carl heads for the shelves and pulls down what food he can find that’s left. Rick walks out of the kitchen with a half smile as he shoves stuff into a small bag. “Kitchen wasn't empty after all. My haul. You?”

“I win.” Carl tells him with a smirk as he adds his food to the bag.

They continue down the road, Carl walking a length ahead of his father. He pauses as his father calls to him, nodding to a house on their left. “Hey. Hey. Hey. That one's as good as any.” Rick kicks open the door and the both of them enter and clear the downstairs rooms.

“Carl.” Rick calls to his son.

“I got it. All the doors down here are open.”

“Just stop!” Rick snaps.

Carl starts pounding on the wall, “Hey, asshole! Hey, shitface! Hey—”

“Watch your mouth!” Rick yells to his son not liking his reckless behavior.

“Are you kidding me? If there's one of them down there, they would have come out.” Carl snaps as he heads off on his own once more to check upstairs, while Rick goes into the kitchen.

Carl finds himself in what seems to be a teenage boy’s room, filled with books, comics, and video games. Sighing wishing he add power and could play them, he yanks a cord from the TV and goes downstairs to tie the front door shut. As he finishes, he sees his father shoving the couch over to the door. “I tied the door shut.”
“We don't need to take any chances.” Rick tells him as he shoves the couch up against the door.

“You don't think it'll hold?”

“Carl.”

“It's a strong knot. Clove hitch. Shane taught me. Remember him?” Carl snarks.

“Yeah, I remember him. I remember him every day. There something else you want to say to me?”

Carl doesn’t say anything just helps his father move the couch in front of the door.

“This'll have to do for the night.” Rick says as he sits down on the couch beside Carl, holding out some food to him.

“You gonna have some?”

“You should eat.”

“We should save it.” Carl says ignoring the food his father holds out to him.

“Hey. Eat it.” Rick snaps before he goes upstairs to try and clean himself up a little bit.

About two miles away from the prison Rayne has managed to make it to an open portion of land. In the distance she can see a house and a barn, a smile finds its way onto her face as she sees a set of solar panels on the roof of the two-story home. Gingerly she limps her way across the field and through the gate, tossing the strap of her rifle over her shoulder and pulling out her Kukris, better to save what bullets she had left.

Checking the doorknob and finding it unlocked she pushes the door open and enters the back of the house. After clearing the lower level, she shuts the door and locks the deadbolt, then she hobbles up the stairs. Once the top level was clear she headed into the master bedroom, checking the cabinets for anything that could be useful to her.

Smiling as she pulled out a first aid kit, she sat down on the floor and opened the kit up to see what she had to work with. She found antibiotics, gauze, tape and some bandages. Knowing she needed to clean the wound out she stood up and turned the faucet on, the sound of running water greeted her ears. Remembering the solar panels on the roof she turned the hot water dial and giggled as warm water washed over her hand.

“God, I love country people.” She smiled as she grabbed a washcloth and ran it under the water.

After removing her pants, which caused several colorful words to come out of her mouth she sat down on the toilet and let out a deep breath to ready herself. Taking a pair of pliers that she had found in her backpack she dug the tip of them into the wound and searched for the bullet. Gritting her teeth against the immense pain filling her body, she found the object but couldn't seem to get a grip on it. As blackness started to swim in her vision she removed the tool from her wound, breathing deep to catch her breath. After another try that left her on the verge of passing out, she tossed the pliers down, irritated with herself that she couldn’t do what was needed to be done.

After binding the wound as best as she could she stripped herself of the rest of her clothes and
stepped into the shower. Once she was clean and relaxed she got out and dried herself off, then pulled on a tank top and a pair of sweats she had found in the closet.

Grabbing one of her Glocks she went down stairs and took two of the antibiotic pills, chasing it with a swig of whiskey from the bottle she found in the pantry. Laying down on the couch she polished off the bottle and let the alcohol lull her into a deep sleep.

Carl woke up the next morning, looking around he found his dad fast asleep on the couch. Walking into the kitchen he poured some cereal into two bowls, then taking his he went upstairs to the kid’s room and sat down to eat while reading a book. After a while he didn’t hear anything downstairs, so he went down to find his dad still asleep on the couch.

“Dad? Dad? Dad, wake up. Wake up. Come on. Dad, wake up. Wake up.” Carl starts to panic as he shoves his dad violently and nothing, he won’t open his eyes. “Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” He stops shaking Rick as he hears snarling and thudding against the front door. He gets up and grabs his hat and gun, going out the back door he quietly walks around to the front where he finds two walkers clawing at the front door.


He falls backwards onto the ground, pointing his gun up he shoots one of them in the head, the body falls on top of him, pinning him to the ground as the other two advance on him. He manages to shoot the other two, their bodies falling on top of the other one. Carl manages to pull himself out from under the pile of walkers, retching onto the ground afterwards.

“I win.” He starts walking back to the house, smiling at what he had done on his own. “Cool.”

When he gets back to the house he shakes his head as he finds his father still lying on the couch. “I killed three walkers. They were at the door. They were gonna get in, but I lured them away. I killed them. I saved you. I saved you. I didn't forget while you had us playing farmer. I still know how to survive. Lucky for us. I don't need you anymore. I don't need you to protect me anymore. I can take care of myself. You probably can't even protect me anyways. You couldn't protect Judith. You couldn't protect Hershel… or Glenn or Maggie. Michonne, Daryl, Rayne… or Mom. You just wanted to plant vegetables. You just wanted to hide. He knew where we were and you didn't care! You just hid behind those fences and waited for— They're all gone now. Because of you! They counted on you! You were their leader! But now you're nothing. I'd be fine if you died.” He sits down on the floor, sniffing as he holds back his tears.

After a few minutes he gets up and grabs one of the bags, going out to scavenge and find some supplies. He goes up to another house, pulling a stake out of the ground he walks up to the front
Getting a running start, he hurls his body at the door, he bounces off of the locked door and lands on his back on the porch. “Damn it.”

Getting up he pushes his weight against the door as he turns the handle and shoves it open enough to get through it. After clearing the bottom floor, he goes upstairs and looks through the rooms up there not finding anything. Opening another door he startles as a walker shoves the door open and comes after him. He fires one shot and misses, so he aims again and cusses when it clicks. He was out of ammo. “Oh, shit.”

He manages to get away from the walker, running into another room and fighting it off as it tries to bite his leg, pulling the door shut behind him and locking it in the room. Finding a piece of chalk he writes on the door, ‘walker inside. Got my shoe, but it didn’t get me.’

Grabbing a large can of chocolate pudding, he goes out and sits on the roof to eat it, smiling as the walker inside growls as it tries to reach him through the half-closed window.

He goes back to the house and sits down on the floor by the couch, he falls asleep shortly afterwards. When he wakes up it’s dark, his dad still sleeping on the couch. He hears his father’s raspy breathing and sees his arm twitch, he panics thinking his father is turning. He scoots away from the couch and grabs his father’s gun, watching as his dad slides off of the couch and hits the floor. He points the gun at his father as tears fill his eyes, he cries out as his father’s hand reaches out for him, but he can’t bring himself to pull the trigger.

As Rick’s hand grabs his foot, Carl drops the gun, crying, “I can't. I was wrong. Just do it.”


Carl relaxes as he realizes his father hasn’t turned, laying his dad’s head on his lap. “I'm scared. I'm scared.”

The next morning Rick finally wakes up, feeling a little better than he had before. Carl tells him what had transpired while he was indisposed and Rick shakes his head.

“You shouldn't have risked it, going out there like that. It's dangerous.”

“I was careful.”

“It's good that you found more food.”

“I found even more. But I ate it.”

“What was it?”

Carl chuckles, “112 ounces of pudding.”

Rick smiles, chuckling, “I know we'll never get things back to the way they used to be.”

“What?”

“I only clung to that for you. For Judith. Now she's gone. And you… you're a man, Carl. You're a man. I'm sorry.”
“You don't need to be.” Carl assures his dad.

The two are sitting on the floor eating when they hear a knock of all things at the front door. They immediately grab their guns and get up as Rick looks through the peephole. He starts laughing as he slides down to the floor, looking up at Carl who is thoroughly confused, “What?”

Rick smiles, “It's for you."

Rayne wakes up two days later feeling refreshed despite the pain in her leg. Getting up from the couch she looks through the cabinets until she finds something to eat. Limping her way back up the stairs she crawls out of the bedroom window and sits on the roof. She and her brother Nico had spent many nights of their childhood sitting on their parent’s roof together, oh how she missed him. She knew that if he was here, he would’ve went straight for the same house that she did, those solar panels meant electricity.

As she eats the preserved fruit that she had found, she looks around hoping to see any signs of life that’ll point her to her friends. She was positive that they had all ended up in the same area, all she had to do was be patient and find them.

Finishing her food she laid down on the roof and relished in the sunshine beaming down on her. Closing her eyes she started humming a tune to herself, a song that she and her brother had sang together many times. Soon the words the of the song started to come out of her mouth until she was singing loudly, her voice carrying across the field where someone heard it.

“What?”

She startled as she heard her name coming across the wind that was blowing. Sitting up she squinted her eyes against the sunshine as she looked out across the field.

“Rayne! Is that you?!”

There at the edge of the field she saw a person walking towards the house. She couldn’t see their face, but the stature told her it was a man.

“Daryl?!” Rayne hollered out, despite what had happened at the prison, she would still be happy to see him.

The person passed under the shade of a tree revealing his face to her, gasping in shock she quickly climbed back through the window. Fumbling down the stairs she reached the back door and threw the deadbolt, yanking the door open and stumbling out onto the porch. Ignoring the pain in her leg she ran across the field towards the man that she now recognized.

“Nico!” She screamed as the man dropped his stuff and caught her as she jumped into his arms. Clinging to him as if her life depended on it, Rayne cried heavily, thanking whatever deity was still left in the world. While she had lost her new family and friends, by some grace of God something good had come out of the tragedy that had happened at the prison.

Rayne had found her brother.
Inmates

Rayne pulled back from her brother to look him over, he was covered in dirt and grime, but he looked no worse for the wear. She took his arm as he helped her back into the house, relocking the door behind them.

Nico sat her down on the couch giving her a once over, she looked a little rough, but no more than he had seen her before.

“How did you get here?” Rayne asked her brother.

Nico sighed as he sat down beside her, “My ship docked in Florida just as the outbreak started. Me and a few of my friends managed to make it out before it got overrun with the dead.”

“Walkers.” She said softly. “That’s what we started calling them.”

Nico nodded, “That fits. So, after that we just tried to make our way somewhere safe. We ran out of bullets pretty quick, after that the guys just started dropping like flies. The walkers would pick us off one by one, usually when we were scouting an area. I watched them all die and for the first time in my life, I felt helpless, I couldn’t do anything to save them.”

“So, how did you end up in Georgia?”

“You sent me a text just before it all happened saying you were in Georgia, I just took a chance and hoped that I’d find you. What made you come this way?”

“I saw the solar panels on the roof and I remembered what dad always said, solar panels mean electricity. And country people are usually prepared for stuff like this, extra food, water, stuff like that.”

Nico smiled, “I saw the solar panels too, that’s why I headed this way. Then I heard that song, the one that we used to sing together and I knew it was you.”
Rayne smiled up at her brother, “I never thought I’d see you again.”

Nico hugged her close, he heard her start coughing violently and a frown took over his face. He lifted her up off of his chest and noticed that her complexion was very pale, beads of sweat rolling down her face. “Rayne? Rayne, look at me. Come on Babygirl, look at me.”

She lifted her head up looking at him through hazy eyes, immediately he knew what was wrong. He started looking her over for an open wound, her symptoms were indicating that she was suffering from an infection.

“Rayne, Babygirl, I can’t find where you’re hurt. You need to tell me what’s wrong so I can fix it, okay?”

She nodded before weakly pointing down at her leg, “Bullet. Can’t get it out.”

Nico nodded before gently tugging off her sweatpants, he sighed thanking the lord that she still wore boy-shorts, the last thing he needed was to see his little sister in a thong. Laying her long ways on the couch he unwrapped the bandage that she had secured around her thigh. He frowned deeply as his eyes found the wound, the edges angry red, the skin raised up due to the infection and puss starting to form inside.

“Babygirl, I’ve got to get this out of your leg or you’re gonna lose it. Do you have any supplies?”

“Upstairs. Bathroom.” She replied softly.

He nodded before quickly going up to the bathroom and gathering the supplies that he would need to extract the bullet. Kneeling on the floor beside the couch he opened the bottle of antiseptic and poured it over the wound seeing the bubbles fizz up immediately. Picking up the small tweezers he took a deep breath, laying his free hand on Rayne’s forehead.

“This is gonna hurt a lot. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Gathering himself Nico stuck the tweezers down in the wound trying to locate the bullet. He tried to block out the screams eliciting from his sister’s mouth as he dug around in her flesh. He felt the tweezers hit something solid, “I found it, Rayne. Hang on, I’ve almost got it.”

Rayne screamed as she felt Nico grasp the bullet and quickly pull it up out of her thigh. She breathed heavily as the pain started to subside now that the foreign object had been removed from her body. “Thanks, Nic.”

“Anytime sis.” Nico smiled as he cleaned up the wound, then pulled out a spool of black thread and a curved needle. He looked up to find her sleeping, he laid his hand on her forehead feeling her fever coming down slightly. It was a good thing that she was asleep as he stitched up the wound, if she had been awake she would've been in a horrible amount of pain. Finding a blanket he laid it over her, after kissing her forehead he grabbed her bow and headed outside to find them something to eat.

Miles away Daryl and Beth are running through the woods with a horde of walkers right behind
them. The only weapon they have is Daryl’s bow and he’s running low on arrows, not having a chance to retrieve them after they’re fired.

As night falls they’ve managed to put several miles between them and the walkers, they stop for the night to rest and Daryl builds them a fire.

“We should do something.” Beth says to the hunter as she stares into the flames. “We should do something. We aren’t the only survivors. We can’t be. Rick, Michonne, they could be out here. Maggie and Glenn could have made it out of A block. They could’ve. You’re a tracker. You can track.”

She notices Daryl’s far off gaze, she knows he’s thinking about his huntress. “I’m sure Rayne’s fine, Daryl. She’s strong and smart. I’m sure she made it out and she’s out there looking for us right now. Come on. The sun will be up soon. If we head out now, we can—” She sees that he has no intention of moving and she shakes her head, grabbing two of the knives from his pack. “Fine. If you won’t track, I will.” With that said she takes off into the woods to find her family.

Daryl sits there wallowing in self pity, back at the prison he was concerned with only one thing and that was Carol. Now thinking back, if he had known what was going to happen he never would have said what he had to Rayne. Yes he loved Carol, but it was more of a companion feeling, someone that he could sit and talk with. Rayne, she was strong, fierce, funny and smart. She was his equal in every way, and she was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on. He loved her.

Sighing he stood up and put out the fire, then grabbed his bow, he had to find his huntress.

By the time morning broke he had caught up with Beth and the two had made good time as they moved through the woods. He found some shoe prints on the ground in a patch of mud.

“Could be Luke's. Or Molly's. Whoever they are, it means they're alive.” Beth said as she saw what he was looking at.

“No. This means they were alive four or five hours ago.”

“They're alive.”

They continued down a narrow trail leading through small bushes, Daryl pointing at the tracks. “They picked up the pace right here. Got out in a hurry. Things went bad.”

“Wouldn't kill you to have a little faith.”

“Yeah, faith. Faith ain't done shit for us. Sure as hell didn't do nothing for your father.”

Beth sighed as she started gathering berries off of a nearby bush, “They'll be hungry when we find them.” Daryl handed her Rayne’s bandana to wrap them up in before they continued on their way.

They came across the bodies of two walkers, someone had been through there recently. Beth saw the look on Daryl’s face as he saw some blood on a bush by the bodies. “What?”

“That ain't walker blood.”
“The trail keeps going. They fought them off.”

“No. Got walker tracks all up and down here. At least a dozen of them.”

Suddenly a walker comes from behind Beth and grabs her, Daryl tries to get a shot off with his crossbow, but the trigger is jammed. He tosses the bow down and grabs the walker dragging it to the ground, Beth runs over and jabs her knife through its brain.

The two of them continue on their path, coming up a group of walkers eating the flesh of several freshly killed victims. Daryl takes them out with his bow before gathering his arrows up once more. He hears Beth crying behind him but he doesn’t turn back at first, allowing her time to grieve for the family she had lost and had yet to mourn.

When night fell they set up camp once more, Beth using pages out of her journal to feed the flames of the fire.

‘We're not gonna die. None of us. I believe now. I believe for Daddy. If this doesn't work, I don't know how I could keep going.’

In another part of the woods Tyreese is traveling with Judith, Lizzy and Mica who he managed to get out of the prison alive. A walker happens to attack Mica, but before Tyreese can do anything the walker is killed by Carol of all people. They then find a man who was bitten that tells them about a place at the end of the railroad tracks that is a safe haven.

Down by the river Maggie, Sasha and Bob take a rest as they tend to their wounds. While Sasha and Bob talk about who they thought had made it, Maggie tries to occupy her mind by sharpening her knife on a rock. Sasha talks to her about camping there for the night, Maggie agrees but tells them she won’t be staying with them, she’s going to find Glenn.

“Maggie. With any luck, the bus is gone.” Sasha cautions her.

“It was heading east down the main road. If I follow in that direction, I might be able to pick up its tracks.”

“Alone? With just that?” Sasha says nodding to her knife.

“I'm out of ammo, so, yeah. I couldn't find Beth. I know Glenn got out and I know which way he went. I'm gonna go get him and I'm gonna come back for you. We both are.”

“Maggie.”

“I'm going.” She says heading off into the woods.

“We cannot split up. Not now.”

“I'm going.”
Bob grabs his stuff and takes off after Maggie, looking back over his shoulder to Sasha. “You said it. We can't split up.”

They find the main road and start walking down it, Maggie a good five feet ahead of them. “You could have helped me stop her.” Sasha told Bob, glancing over as he pressed his shirt to the wound on his shoulder. “If you're trying to make me feel sorry for you, it's not working.”

“Damn, it means I let myself get shot up for nothing.” Bob jokes.

“The odds of us finding him— We should be out looking for food, shelter.”

“Yeah, why is that?”

“So we can live.”

“Then what?”

“What?”

“Maybe we didn't survive just to keep surviving.”

“Shit happens. Not everything has to mean something.”

“No, it doesn't have to, but it can. If you make it that way, and that's what it seems like we're doing. And I'm done with that.”

They come around a bend and Maggie stops in her tracks, her breath catching in her throat. Up ahead sits the bus in the middle of the road, there are no sighs that anyone is on board or alive.

“Maggie. Maggie!” Bob yells as she starts running for the bus, he and Sasha following behind her.

As they walk down the side of the bus walkers lean out of the open windows, snarling and growling as they reach for them. Maggie walks with purpose to the back door of the bus, “You should go.”

“Maggie, stop.” Bob states.

“I have to know if he's in there.” She says in a pleading tone, she has to know if Glenn is dead or alive.

“Fine, but we do it together. Smart. We'll let them out one at a time.” Bob says in agreement.

Sasha sighs as she takes off her gun, “Two of us should be at the door in case they stack up against it.”

Maggie steps back several feet from the door, her knife at the ready. “I have to be here. I need to see their faces.”

Sasha and Bob open the door trying to allow the walkers out one by one so that Maggie can get to them, but the weight of the walkers against the door is too much as they shove through. Sasha and Bob quickly help Maggie take out the walkers before they can get away.

Maggie heads for the back door and Sasha calls to her, “You should let me.” But Maggie doesn't hear her as she climbs up into the bus, her eyes finding the dried blood all over the inside. She finds a walker trapped under another body, still clawing at the floor. From the angle Maggie thinks it could be Glenn, so she leans over the seat and opens the front door then picks up the woman’s
body and tosses it outside.

The walker gets to its feet and turns towards her, she’s relieved when she sees that it’s not Glenn. But after stabbing it through the head she sits down and cries heavily, if Glenn wasn’t here, then where was he?

---

Glenn however was never on the bus, it had left the prison without him when he had went back to look for Maggie and Beth. He had been knocked unconscious by a falling piece of concrete, when he awoke he saw that the prison was decimated and the grounds were covered with bodies. As he made his way through the prison searching for anybody alive, he could hear the walkers outside snarling as they tried to gain access.

After clearing the nearby cells for walkers, he went back to his cell that he shared with Maggie. He pulled the riot gear out from under the bed, he was glad now that he had kept it. Feeling exhausted he laid down on the bed, his mind swirled with unanswered questions as he stared at a picture of Maggie. He had taken it with a Polaroid camera one day while she was sleeping, it was all he had left of her at this point.

He rose to his feet with a new determination, he was going to find his wife. He grabbed a bag and gathered everything he could find in the other cells as well as what food he found lying around. Putting the riot gear on he shouldered the backpack and ran out into the courtyard, forcing his body through the hoard of walkers that surrounded him. The gear protected his body thankfully so he didn’t waste any bullets, better to save them for a another time.

As he neared the front gates he found a young woman sitting alone in one of the walkways. She hadn’t been bitten, and he realized that he recognized her as one of the women that had been with the Governor. He started to leave her, but against his better judgment he went back for the girl. Entering the closed area he grabbed the gun out of her hand, ejecting the clip he scoffed.

“It's full. Did you even fire a shot?”

Realizing that she hadn’t chose to be apart of what the Governor had done eh chose to take her with him. “All right. Let's go. Let's go.” But the girl didn’t move, “Are you just gonna stay here, huh? You're just gonna die?”

“I was part of this.” She said softly.

“I know.”

“So what are you doing?” She questioned, wondering why he was helping her when she had helped to destroy his home and kill his family.

“I need your help. We're gonna run out of bullets. Take this and take this.”

He handed her back the gun and his knife, standing up he grabbed a bottle of alcohol and shoved a rag into the top. Lighting the towel he kicked open the gate and threw the bottle on top of a nearby car, the car burst into flames immediately drawing the attention of the walkers.

Glenn grabbed his stuff and turned to the girl, “All right. I need you to stay ahead of me, okay? All right. I'll cover you, but I can't do it alone. You ready? Let's go.” He opened the gate and the two
hurried out of the courtyard taking out the few walkers that were in their path.

They made it out to the road near a burned down car, where Maggie had been just a short time before. “Did you see if any of my people got out?”

The girl shook her head, “All I saw was my sister in that field. She wasn't supposed to be there. She had a gun, but they just swarmed her. She wasn't supposed to be there. I did it for him. I trusted him. And then he just killed that old man.”

“How was his name Hershel?”

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Brian, that man, told us you were bad people. I know it's not true. I can see it's not, so what we did, what I did—I mean, I'm a piece of shit. Why would you want my help?”

“I don't want it, I need it. I have to find Maggie.” Glenn stated.

“Who's Maggie?”

“She's my wife.”

“You guys got separated?”

“I was on the bus and then I got off to help and she didn't see me.”

“How do you know if she made it?”

“I don't know. But Hershel, Maggie's father, was a great man. And he told me all I had to do was believe, and that's what I'm gonna do. Neither one of us should be alive right now. She got out, so you're gonna help me find her. Things aren't over. They're not over.”

“I want to believe that. I want to.”

“You have to.” Glenn stated as he grabbed his knife from the pack and headed over towards the woods, the hoard of walkers from the prison was making their way up onto the road. Together the two of them took out the lone walkers that had made it up onto the road. Glenn collapsed onto the ground, his exhaustion was getting hard to fight. The girl leaned down over him shaking his shoulders, “Glenn. Glenn. Hey, Glenn.”

A walker came from behind and grabbed the girl, she shoved it off of her and grabbed Glenn’s rifle, slamming the stock of the gun into the walkers face. The walker fell to the ground where the girl continued to smash its face until it was a pile of blood and brain matter. She tossed the gun down as a large military vehicle pulled to a stop beside her.

“How you enjoyed the show, assholes.” She yelled as two men and a woman got out of the truck.

“You got a damn mouth on you, you know that? What else you got?”
The girl who had now identified herself as Tara sat in the back of the vehicle with Glenn, the young man was still unconscious. The truck pulled to a stop and Tara could see three walkers coming up to the back where she was. Knowing they couldn’t reach her she stood up and racked the slide on the rifle preparing to shoot them.

“Do not fire that weapon.” The red-haired man Abraham said as she jumped down out of the driver’s seat. “Shit. Look at what we got here.” He took out the two male walkers with a crowbar before the female walker made her way up to him. “Oh, honey, look at you. You're a damn mess.”

He hit her once in the face but it didn’t put her down, “Damn it.” So he hit her again and took the left side of her scalp off. “Shit.” Finally he jabbed the crowbar through her neck pinning her against the truck. Motioning to the rifle in Tara’s arms, her asked, “Can I borrow that a sec? Thanks.”

He used the stock of the rifle to crush to the walkers skull against the truck as well as the one on the ground that wasn’t dead yet. “Oh, I'm not leaving you out.” He then tossed the gun back to Tara, “There's some rags in the back.” He pulled the crowbar out of the walkers skull and let it fall to the ground, he noticed Tara staring at him, “What? What?”

“Never seen that before.” She said.

He motioned to the walker on the ground, “I've seen you do the same thing.”

Tara shook her head, smashing their heads in wasn’t what she was talking about. “You smiled. You were smiling.”

“Well, I'm the luckiest guy in the world. How about you help me with one of these cars? We got some miles to go.”
Rayne woke up a day later feeling better than she had prior, sitting up she tossed the blanket over her onto the back of the couch. Looking down at her leg she saw that it was re-bandaged, she stood up and put pressure on it, it still hurt, but not as much as before.

“Nico?” She called, but she received no answer. “Nic!?” She started to panic thinking maybe she had imagined finding him again. She turned her head as she heard footsteps coming down the stairs and let out a breath of relief as Nico came into view.

“Hey, you’re up.” He smiled as he finished toweling off his brown hair, it was clear that he had just taken a shower. He kissed her forehead then asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Thank you.”

“Hey, you’re my sister. I’ll always save you.”

Rayne smiled as she followed him into the kitchen taking a seat at the table. Nico wandered over to the electric stove and turned it on, warming up the food he had made yesterday. “I got a couple rabbits and a squirrel, not much but it’s something.”

“Better than nothing. Glad to see you still know how to use a bow.” She smirked.

When the food was warm he dished her up a plate and set it down on the table. Sitting down across from her he watched her eat, he took the time to notice the things that had changed about her. She still looked the same as when he had last seen her, just a few years older. She was stronger if that was possible, the fire inside of her was burning brighter than ever. But it was her eyes that drew his attention, they had lost the sparkle that they once held. They were no longer a bright vibrant Cerulean blue, but now a dark navy blue, nearly black.

“So, you gonna tell me how you ended up with a bullet in your leg?”

Rayne sighed as she looked up at her brother, she was wondering when he would get around to asking her. “When this all started I was in Atlanta, by myself, just trying to make it to you. Along my way I found this group of people, helped save their lives and they took me in.”

She recounted everything that happened from the day the outbreak happened, up until the day he found her. She could see the rage on his face when she told him about John and what he had done.

“I never did like that son of a bitch. I’m glad you killed him.” He shook his head, “I’m so sorry that you had to go through all that alone.”

Rayne smiled, “I wasn’t alone. They may not have been my blood, but they became my family. I didn’t know if our family was still alive, so I chose to stay with them and protect the people that I care about. They may have started out strangers, but they’re my family now. And I don’t know if any of them are still alive.”

She broke down into tears and Nico immediately stood up and rounded the table, sitting down beside her and enveloping her in his arms. He held her, rocking her softly until her tears had subsided. Sitting back he wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled, “Then let’s go find your family.”
Back at the house with Rick, Michonne is serving breakfast to Carl when she notices him laughing at her. More to the shirt she is wearing, that is not her usual style. “Do you have something to say about my extremely comfortable and attractive shirt?”

“No, no, no. It looks great.” He says still laughing at the white button up blouse, he notices though that she missed a bottom. “Oh, you missed a——”

She smiles in thanks as she does up the forgotten button, she then sits down and pours herself a bowl of cereal. “Wish we had some soy milk.”

“Seriously?” Carl comments with a disgusted look.

“Yes, seriously. Have you ever tried it?”

“My best friend in third grade, he was allergic to dairy. And every day he would bring this soy stuff to lunch. I tried it.”

“And?”

“I threw up.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Michonne laughs at his exaggerated answer.

“All right, all right. I almost threw up. But I was like, ugh. It was so gross. I mean, literally, I would rather have powdered milk than to have to drink that stuff again. I would rather have Judith’s formula——” He stops himself realizing what he had said, they had yet to discuss his sister being dead. And she was, as far as they knew. He quickly got up from the table, “I'm gonna go finish my book. I have a couple chapters left.”

Michonne headed into the kitchen where Rick is standing, “Thank you. I heard him laughing in there. Almost forgot what that sounded like. I can't be his father and his best friend. He needs you. I know that’s a lot to throw at you. So if you're ever feeling like you need a break——”

“I'm done taking breaks.” She stated making her intentions of staying very clear. “So what's the plan? This place, is it home or just a stop along the way?”

“Well, let's-- let's just stay here while we figure it out.”

“Well, we'll need more supplies. I'll go with Carl and get some.”

“I'll come, too.”

“You were unconscious yesterday.”

“I'm awake today.”

“We need you strong. Just rest. Just one more day.” She told him, they needed him to be healthy.

“How long you think you'll be?”

“Fill a couple bags, shouldn't be too long.”

“It's 8:15 now.”
“We'll be back by noon.”

“All right, you follow her lead.” Rick told his son as he handed him his gun. “You understand? Hey. Everything okay?”

Carl nodded, “Yeah, I'm just hungry.”

“All right. I'll see you in a couple hours.”

Michonne and Carl headed down the road stopping at a few houses along the way to see what they could find. “Find anything good? Candy bars? Comic books? Crazy Cheese?” Michonne asked as Carl came out of a house, she could tell he wasn’t feeling like himself.

“How?”

Michonne pulled the can of cheese whiz out of her bag, “Bam, Crazy Cheese. Found it still sealed and everything. Now I'll be nice and let you have the first pull.”

“No, thanks.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm fine.”

“You don't seem fine.”

“I'm just tired. Okay?”

She takes off the cap and sprays the cheese into her mouth, letting some of it hang out she runs up to Carl and starts snarling like a walker. Instead of him laughing he just stares at her and walks off as she swallows the cheese. “I'm sorry. I'm not very good at making boys your age laugh.”

“I was laughing. Inside.”

She walks up to the door of another house and bangs on the door, knowing if there are walkers inside it would draw them out. “Toddlers find me funny. Two, three-year-olds.”

“What do you mean— toddlers?”

“I had a three-year-old son and he happened to find me extremely funny.” They enter the house carefully, the two looking around. “We need food, batteries, water, in that order.”

“Why didn't you ever tell me you had a kid? What was his name? Did you have any others? Were you married?”

“Okay.” She said with a smile. “I'll answer one question at a time, one room at a time, and only after we've cleared it.”
Back at the house Rick is woken up by voices coming from downstairs, he immediately hits the floor and crawls under the bed. From his position he can see one man walking through the hall and into the room. Unlike the Rick everyone knew that would have grabbed whatever kind of weapon he could find and immediately killed the two men, the Rick that he had become after the prison just laid quietly under the bed, praying that they wouldn’t find him.

---

After Michonne and Carl had moved into another room the boy asked his first question. “What was your son's name?”

Michonne smiled as she stared at painting on the wall, “I said after.”

“Well, these are actually two separate rooms and we already cleared that one, so—”

“Andre. His name was Andre Anthony.” She pointed to the cabinet she was standing in front of. “Make sure there isn't a box of cookies hiding in there.”

“Did you have any other kids?”

“Rules of the game, my friend.” She said as she walked down the hallway.

“So? Did you?” Carl questioned again as he followed her down the hall.

“You know, you could be a spy. Or a cop.” She smiled when she realized that he wasn’t going to give up his questions. “No. One was enough for me. And Andre was a handful, like you.”

“Does this hallway count as a room?”

“If you can find something we can use.”

“This is the only thing I could find.” He relied as he walked back up to her with a painting wrapped in a piece of Styrofoam. “Does it count?”

“Technically, yes.”

“So? How long has it been?”

“It happened after-- you know, after everything happened.”

“Does my dad know?”

“Never told him. Never told anyone till just now.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Carl assured her.

“It's not really a secret.”

“It's still safe with me.” Carl went off to explore another room.

Michonne opened up the painting intending to hang it up like the other cute ones on the walls, but she stopped short when she looked at it. It was a woman’s face, disfigured as if she was turning
into a walker, it was covered in red paint to simulate blood. She set the painting down as she approached the closed door at the end of the hall, opening the door to find it lead to a kid’s bathroom.

She opened another door on the inside, it connected a child’s room, the toys inside covered in cobwebs and dust. She looked around at was once a pleasant place for a little kid. Opening a door in the corner she walked into another children’s room, this one clearly a girls as everything was pink. There on a set of twin beds she found two teen boys dead, and on the other were the bodies of two young girls. As she looked behind her she found the mother dead in a rocking chair, a gunshot wound to the head.

“Michonne? Everything okay?”

She quickly left the room and shut the door before Carl could see anything. “Yeah, it's fine.”

“There's a baby in there.” He said.

“It's a dog.” Michonne answered quickly.

“My dad let me name her. Maybe-- maybe her and Andre are together somewhere.” Carl said thinking about Judith.

Michonne smiled, it was all she could do at this point. “Come on. It's almost noon. Your dad will wonder where we are if we're late.”

___________________________

However Rick was still having trouble of his own as the man that had come up to the room and fallen asleep on the bed he was underneath. Rick tried to sneak out from under the bed but recoiled when another man came up the stairs into the room.

“Yo. Comfy?”

“You waking me up to see if I'm comfortable?”

“I want to lie down.”

“Two other bedrooms up here to choose.”

“Them's kids' beds. I want this one.”

“It's claimed.” The man in the bed stated.

“I didn't hear it. You gonna have to lay claim somewhere else.”

At that moment the two men started fighting with one another, Rick panicked as one of the men was slammed to the floor his eyes looking right at Rick. Luckily for Rick the man was choked out by his friend before he could say anything about Rick being under the bed.

“My bed now, jackoff.”

___________________________
In the truck bed Glenn woke up with a start, he realized they were moving, but he had no idea where they were or who they were with.

“Hey, don't move.” Tara told him as he tried to get up too quick. “Here's some water.”

“Where are we?”

“I don't know. We were fighting biters and you passed out right after we left the prison. I didn't know what to do. The back of the truck seemed safer than the side of the road.”

“Did we pass a bus? On the road, did we pass a bus?” Glenn asked as he shakily got to his knees.

“Yeah.”

“What did you see? What did you see?”

“They were all dead.”

“How long since we passed it?”

“Three hours.”

Glenn sighed before he started banging on the back window. “Hey. Hey, stop the truck.” The man driving just flipped him off.

“Hey, numb-nuts, stop the truck. Stop the truck!” Tara yelled.

“Stop the truck!” Glenn screamed before he slammed the butt of his rifle into the window cracking it. That finally got the man to stop the truck, allowing Glenn to climb out of it and head back down the road.

“Where the hell are you going? Where the hell is he going? I don't know what your lady friend's told you about the special nature of the mission we're on, but this shit is time-sensitive and we're already way behind schedule. So I need you to turn your ass around and get back in the truck.”

“I gotta go.” Glenn stated.

“It seems like neither one of you's been paying close enough attention to the hell on earth we've been living in. So let me tell you how to best avoid winding up just another dead-alive prick. You find some strong, like-minded comrades and you stay stuck together like wet on water. We need people. The more the better. We need each other, partner. Even with all that gear on your shoulder, you won't last a night. Not by yourself.”

“I'll take my chances.” Glenn said moving to walk around the man.

Abraham placed his hand on Glenn’s chest and held him in place. “I'm gonna have to insist that you hold the hell up. All right, believe it or not, the fate of the entire damn human race might depend on it.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Who is this guy?”

“I'm Sergeant Abraham Ford. And these are my companions Rosita Espinosa and Dr. Eugene Porter. We're on a mission to get Eugene to Washington, DC. Eugene's a scientist and he knows exactly what caused this mess.”
“All right. So what happened?”

“It's classified.” The man identified as Eugene said.

“He'd been talking to the muckety-mucks in Washington on his satellite phone. The past couple weeks, nobody's been picking up on the other end. We saw how you handled those corpses back there. We could use your help.”

“Sorry.” Glenn said before he started walking away.

Tara caught up with him as Abraham and Rosita followed the two. “I had to get us off that road. You were passed out, we were out of bullets. I know how to get back to that bus. I wrote down every turn. I will get you back if I can, okay?”

“That's where she'd go to find me. That's where I'm gonna go.”

“It's a waste of time. Tara told us what went down. There is zero chance you will ever find your wife again. Alive or dead. Mainly because, sorry to tell you, she's gone.” Abraham said as Glenn stopped walking. “No need for you to die, too. Now come on. Get back in the truck. Do something with your life. When the people we love kick— well, they disappear. Doesn't mean you've got to go out that way, too.”

Glenn drops his bag and slugs Abraham in the mouth, “She's alive and I'm gonna find her.”

“You son of a bitch!” Abraham yelled as he tackled Glenn to the ground.

Tara and Rosita ran over to separate the two men as they fought on the ground. None of them realized that their fighting and yelling was drawing walkers out from all sides of them. The only one that noticed was Eugene, who grabbed a rifle, but he had no idea on how to use it. When he finally got it to fire, that drew the attention of the others who ran over and grabbed their guns as well taking out the walkers as they emerged from the woods and field.

Once they were all dead Abraham kneeled down by the truck, Eugene’s incompetence with a weapon had blown holes through the truck and it was now leaking fuel. “Son of a dick.”

Rick couldn’t move from under the bed, the man on top of it had him pinned below. After a moment though he was able to get himself out from under the bed. He stood up and moved for the hallway as he heard someone else coming up the stairs, ducking into the room that Carl had claimed for himself.

He grabbed one of the kid’s trophies to use as a weapon, before remembering that one of the men had left his gun on the bed. He moved back to the bedroom but before he could grab it the man came back up the stairs. Rick quickly ducked into the bathroom and shut the door, turning around he found himself staring at a man sitting on the toilet. He immediately attacked the man preventing him from calling out to the others, choking him with a belt he found on the floor.

Picking up the man’s gun and a pair of scissors Rick cracked the door open and went out the window onto the roof. Pulling on his jacket he crept along the roof to the front porch, then slowly and as quietly as possible he lowered himself to the porch. Taking hold of the gun he made his way around to the front door and waited.
The others were standing around waiting as Abraham laid underneath the truck and inspected the damage. “We were running a convoy in one of these. Coming up a dune, there's this camel, looks like it's about to puke. Probably because shit-bird's packed about four pounds of C-4 up its ass. We were within 20 feet of that blast that sent that animal's hump half a klick into the desert. And we drove home. So you tell me how in the holy hell did you possibly kill this truck?”

Eugene shrugged, “A fully amped-up state and an ignorance of rapid-firing weapons.”

Rosita found a photo lying on the ground, picking it up she held it out to Glenn. “Is this yours?”

Glenn took it with a nod before he handed the gun back to Abraham. “Sorry about your ride. Hope you guys make it to Washington.” He grabbed his stuff and started walking down the road.

Tara handed her gun off to Rosita before hollering to Glenn, “Wait for me.”

With a deep sigh Rosita started following the two, “What the hell else are we gonna do?”

“Go to Washington. Fix the whole damn world!” Abraham yelled.

“That way's clear. Who knows what's north. We'll find another vehicle. We'll go with them until we do. Trust me. I'm smarter than you.” Eugene said as he grabbed his stuff and headed off after them with Abraham behind him.

Rick was hiding by the side of the porch, there was a man sitting on the railing above him eating something out of a can. Rick panicked as he saw Michonne and Carl coming up the road towards the house. He steeled himself for attack when yelling came from inside of the house, the man quickly got up and ran inside. Rick took off towards his companions, urging them back down the road to safety.

Glenn lead the five of them down the road, Rosita and Eugene following behind him. “Got to hand it to him. He’s a persistent some bitch.” Abraham said as he brought up the rear with Tara beside him. “I get why you're following him. You're loyal. You're a good person. I like it. But what we're doing-- I don't know how else to say it-- saving the world is just-- is just more important. I mean, even if he does find his wife, so what? How long do you think they'll live happily ever after if we don't get Eugene up to Washington?”

“You think because I'm following Glenn, that makes me a good person? I'm not.”

“You're good.”

“You don't know anything about me. Just like I don't know anything about why you're going to
Washington. I get why Eugene's going. He's the only one that knows how to end this. And Rosita, she loves you. She'd follow you anywhere. But why the hell you agreed to drive him halfway across the country—"

"Is that hard to believe, I want to save the world?"

"Because you're a good person? You don't have to tell me why. Just don't lie to me."

Michonne, Carl and Rick walked down the train tracks leading out of town. Carl pulled out the can of cheese from his bag, holding it out to Michonne. "Crazy Cheese?"

She shook her head with a smile, before she saw Rick looking at something taped to the side of a train car. She walked over to look at it, glancing over to Rick, "What do you think?"

Rick looked at the map and the sign above it reading, ‘SANCTUARY FOR ALL COMMUNITY FOR ALL THOSE WHO ARRIVE SURVIVE’ "Let's go. Let's go." He said with a nod before they walked off down the tracks.
Night has fallen as Daryl and Beth break out from the woods onto the road, an abandoned car being their only salvation from the herd of walkers following them. They climb into the trunk and Daryl quickly closes the lid, securing it with a piece of wire. They both fight to remain silent as they hear the herd growling and snarling at the back of the car.

When dawn arrives Beth unlatches the trunk as Daryl covers her, seeing no walkers anywhere they climb out and gather what supplies they can from the car before heading down the road. While Daryl goes off to hunt, Beth starts a fire using a piece of broken headlight and a mirror from the car.

When the hunter return he has a large skinned rattlesnake in his hands, which after he cooks over the fire Beth finds to be pretty good. Sitting there watching Daryl eat his portion of the snake Beth sighs, “I need a drink.”

Daryl tosses her a bottle of water and she shakes her head. “No, I mean a real drink. As in alcohol. I've never had one. Cause of my dad. But he's not exactly around anymore, so I thought we could go find some.”

Daryl doesn’t say anything, just continues eating his snake, so Beth sighs and stands up intending to go by herself. “Okay. Well, enjoy your snake jerky.”

She walks off through the woods, pausing she looks back towards the camp, “Jerk.” Suddenly she hears scuffling coming towards her, she ducks behind a tree as four walkers come out of the trees behind her. Reaching down she picks up a rock and tosses it off to her right hoping to deter them. Three of the walkers move off towards the sound, but one continues walking towards the tree where Beth is hiding. She pulls out her knife ready to kill it, but it too moves off towards the other walkers.

A twig snaps behind her and Beth turns expecting to see a walker behind her, but she sighs when
she finds it is just Daryl. She follows Daryl through the woods, “I think we made it a way. I'm pretty sure we got to go that way to find the booze.” She suddenly trips on the hubcaps that she had hung up, “What the hell? You brought me back. I'm not staying in this suck-ass camp.”

She flips him off and turns to go when he grabs her arm, “Hey! You had your fun.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Do you feel anything?” She snaps at him. “Yeah, you think everything’s screwed. I guess that’s a feeling. So you want to spend the rest of our lives staring into a fire and eating mud snakes? Screw that. We might as well do something. I can take care of myself and I'm gonna get a damn drink.”

Realizing that she’s right, he can’t just sit around and wish things were different, so, grabbing his bow he follows after her. A short walk later and they come out of the trees to find a country club in the distance, a golf cart lying on its side in front of them.

“Golfers like to booze it up, right? Come on.” Beth says as she starts walking up to the clubhouse. “Might be people inside.”

They see a group of walkers coming out of the trees behind them, quickly Daryl leads the way to the back of the club. Quietly opening the back door he enters first checking for walkers before he motions Beth inside. “Come on.”

While Beth is looking around for alcohol she sees Daryl shoving a bunch of cash and jewelry into a black satchel. “Why are you keeping all that stuff?”

Suddenly they hear growing and banging on the doors they came through, Daryl quickly stands up and motions Beth through a set of doors behind him, “Come on.” She runs in behind him and he slams the doors shut.

They head further into the clubhouse, Daryl clearing the rooms while Beth still searches for alcohol. She finds a bottle in one of the rooms, but as she backs out a walker comes from behind and grabs onto her. Not being able to hold it off and get her knife, she instead breaks the bottle over its head and stabs it with the sharp edges. She finally manages to shove it away from her long enough to grab her knife and stab it in the head, just as Daryl comes down the hallway.

“Thanks for the help.” She says sarcastically.

“You said you could take care of yourself. You did.” He stated as he lead the way down a set of stairs.

They end up down in the pro shop where Beth finds a new shirt and sweater to wear. When she finds Daryl he’s looking at a dead woman that was cut in half and shoved on top of a mannequin’s lower body. Her shirt is open showing her bra and a sign stapled to her chest that reads ‘rich bitch’.

Beth sighs as she tries to lower the woman’s body to the floor. “Help me take her down.”

“It don't matter. She's dead.” Daryl tells her.

“It does matter.” Sighing Daryl wraps a blanket over the woman hiding her from view.

As they continue through the building they find themselves surrounded by more walkers, Daryl quickly shoves Beth down an adjacent hallway. As she runs to the door on the other side Daryl stops, he’s filled with so much anger and he needs a release for it. He turns and focuses his anger on the walkers coming through the door, grabbing a golf club and whacking the hell out of the dead men.
As they turn a corner Beth sees a bar in front of her, she turns back to Daryl with a smile. “We made it. I know you think this is stupid. And it probably is. But I don’t care. All I wanted to do today was lay down and cry, but we don’t get to do that. So beat up on walkers if that makes you feel better. I need to do this.”

As she looks behind the bar for a drink she hears Daryl breaking the glass on a picture frame before he pulls it from the wall. “Did you have to break the glass?”

“No.” Daryl snarks as he folds up the map that was inside. “You have your drink yet?”

“No. But I found this. Peach schnapps. Is it good?”

“No.” He stated.

“Well, it’s the only thing left.” She picks up a coffee cup and tries to clean it out, but it doesn’t work, so she places it back down. “Who needs a glass?”

Daryl meanwhile is throwing darts at a board of pictures, he turns around to find Beth staring at the bottle, her face contorts in pain as she starts to cry. He walks over and grabs the bottle smashing it on the floor. “Ain’t gonna have your first drink be no damned peach schnapps. Come on.” He grabs his bow and opens the back door waiting for her to follow him.

As they continue through the woods Beth gives him her guess from the game her dead boyfriend had been playing with Daryl for months. “A motorcycle mechanic.”

“Huh?”

“That's my guess. For what you were doing before the turn. Did Zack ever guess that one?”

“It don't matter. Hasn't mattered for a long time.”

“It's just what people talk about, you know, to feel normal. Yeah, well, that never felt normal to me.” He leads the way to a small clearing where a cabin is situated. “Found this place with Rayne.” His voice cracked a little as he said her name out loud for the first time, he was hoping that Beth hadn’t noticed.

“I was expecting a liquor store.” She stated looking quizzically at the cabin before them.

“No, this is better.” Daryl leads her into the back of the cabin where he grabs a wooden crate full of glass bottles.

“What's that?”

“Moonshine.” Daryl smirks as he hands it to her. “Come on.”

They go into the cabin through the front door, Daryl clearing the rooms until he’s satisfied they’re no walkers around. He grabs a cup and one of the mason jars pouring some into it for Beth. “All right. That's a real first drink right there.”

“What's the matter?”

“Nothing. It's just my dad always said bad moonshine can make you go blind.”

“Ain't nothing worth seeing out there anymore anyway.”

Beth takes drink and cringes, “That's the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted.”
“Second round's better.” She says pouring another glass.

“Slow down.”

“This one's for you.”

“No, I'm good.”

“Why?”

“Someone's got to keep watch.” He says.

“So, what, you're like my chaperone now?”

“Just drink lots of water.”

“Yes, Mr. Dixon.” She replied sarcastically.

While Beth drank her fill of moonshine and looked around, Daryl started boarding up the windows for the night. During her exploration she found a giant pink plastic bra that was made into an ashtray. “Who'd go into a store and walk out with this?”

“My dad, that's who. Oh, he's a dumbass. He'd set those up on top of the TV set, use them as target practice.”

“He shot things inside your house?”

“It was just a bunch of junk anyway. That's how I knew what this place was. That shed out there, my dad had a place just like this. You got your Dumpster chair. That's for sitting in your drawers all summer drinking. Got your fancy buckets. That's for spitting chaw in after your old lady tells you to stop smoking. You got your internet.” He said picking up a newspaper and showing it to her, which brought a smile to her face.

They hear snarling outside and Daryl peeks out of the window, “It's just one of 'em.”

“Should we get it?”

“If he keeps making too much noise, yeah.”

Beth nodded as she picked up a mason jar of moonshine, “Well, if we're gonna be trapped again, we might as well make the best of it. Unless you're too busy chaperoning, Mr. Dixon.”

“Hell, might as well make the best of it.” He says sitting down in the chair and opening the bottle. “Home, sweet home.”

After a while they both moved to sit on the floor, bringing over a small table to sit between them
while Beth explained the rules of the drinking game they were playing. “So first I say something I've never done and if you have done it, you drink, and if you haven't, I drink. Then we switch. You really don't know this game?”

“I ain’t never needed a game to get lit before.” Daryl admitted.

“Wait, are we starting?”

“How do you know this game?”

“My friends played. I watched. Okay, I'll start. I've never shot a crossbow. So now you drink.”

“Ain't much of a game.”

“That was a warm-up. Now you go.”

“I don't know.” Daryl says, never having played a game that required personal answers, he wasn’t big on talking about himself unless it was to Rayne.

“Just say the first thing that pops into your head.”

“I've never been out of Georgia.”

“Really? Okay, good one. I've never been drunk and did something I regretted.”

Daryl took a drink, “I've done a lot of things.”

“Your turn.”

“I've never been on vacation.” He said.

“What about camping?”

“No, that was just something I had to learn to hunt.”

“Your dad teach you?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Okay. I've never been in jail. I mean, as a prisoner.”

Daryl seemed to take offense to that as he stared across at Beth. “Is that what you think of me?”

“I didn't mean anything serious. I just thought, you know, like the drunk tank. Even my dad got locked up for that back in the day.”

“Drink up.” He smirked.

“Wait. Prison guard. Were you a prison guard before?”

“No.”

“It's your turn again.”

Daryl stands up and walks over to the corner of the room, smashing the bottle in his hand and talking loud. “I'm gonna take a piss.”
“You have to be quiet.”

“Can't hear you! I'm taking a piss!”

“Daryl, don't talk so loud.”


“Daryl.” Beth cautioned as his voice got louder.

“Never sung out in front of a big group out in public like everything was fun. Like everything was a big game. I sure as hell never cut my wrists looking for attention. Never told the woman I love out loud that I love her!” He hears the walker snarling outside, “Oh, sounds like our friend out there is trying to call all of his buddies.”

“Daryl, just shut up.”

“Hey, you never shot a crossbow before? I'm gonna teach you right now. Come on. It's gonna be fun.”

“We should stay inside. Daryl, cut it out! Daryl!” She cried out as he drug her outside by her arm.

“Dumbass. Come here, dumbass.” Daryl said as he shot a bolt into the walkers right shoulder pinning him to the cabin.

“Daryl.”

“You want to shoot?” He says loading another arrow.

“I don't know how.”

“Oh, it's easy. Come here. Right corner.” He says letting another arrow fly into the walkers left shoulder.

“Let's practice later.”

“Come on, it's fun.” He says reloading.

“Just stop it. Daryl!”

He grabs her and wraps his arm around her neck holding her in place, “Come here. Eight ball.” He shoots it with an arrow in the chest this time.

“Just kill it!”

“Come here, Greene. Let's pull these out. Get a little more target practice.”

Beth is fed up with Daryl’s actions, so she grabs her knife and stabs the walker through the skull.

“What the hell you do that for? I was having fun.”

“No, you were being a jackass. If anyone found my dad—”
“Don't. That ain't even remotely the same.” Daryl snapped at her.

“Killing them is not supposed to be fun.”

“What do you want from me, girl, huh?”

“I want to you stop acting like you don't give a crap about anything. Like nothing we went through matters. Like none of the people we lost meant anything to you. Like losing Rayne isn’t eating a hole through your heart. It's bullshit!”

Hearing her talk about Rayne had the ache in his heart coming back full force once more, he had managed to subside it until now. “Is that what you think?”

“That's what I know.”

“You don't know nothing.”

“I know you look at me and you just see another dead girl. I’m not Rayne. I'm not Michonne. I'm not Carol. I'm not Maggie. I've survived and you don't get it 'cause I'm not like you or them. But I made it and you don't get to treat me like crap just because you're afraid.”

“I ain't afraid of nothing.”

“I remember. When that little girl came out of the barn after my mom. You were like me. And now God forbid you ever let anybody get too close. You won't even let Rayne get close and yet you claim to love her.”

“Too close, huh? You know all about that. You lost two boyfriends, you can't even shed a tear. Your whole family's gone, all you can do is just go out looking for hooch like some dumb college bitch.”

“Screw you. You don't get it.”

“No, you don't get it! Everyone we know is dead!”

“You don't know that!”

“Might as well be, 'cause you ain't never gonna see 'em again. Rick. You ain't never gonna see Maggie again.”

“Daryl, just stop.” Beth pleaded.

“No! The Governor rolled right up to our gates. Maybe if I wouldn't have stopped looking. Maybe 'cause I gave up. That's on me.”

“Daryl.”

“No— And your dad. Maybe— maybe I could have done something. And Rayne— I let her go without telling her—”

Beth hears his voice shaking and she does the only thing she can, she wraps her arms around his waist and hugs him. They stand there for awhile, Beth just hugging Daryl while he sobs in her arms, she knows he needs to get this out.
As night fell they sat on the porch just talking and drinking, listening to crickets in the woods around them.

“'I get why my dad stopped drinking.'”

“You feel sick?” Daryl asked.

“Nope. I wish I could feel like this all the time. That's bad.”

“Hmm. You're lucky you're a happy drunk.”

“Yeah, I'm lucky. Some people can be real jerks when they drink.” She said smiling over at him.

“Yeah, I'm a dick when I'm drunk.” He said smiling back at her. “Merle had this dealer. This janky little white guy. A tweaker. One day we were over at his house watching TV. Wasn't even noon yet and we were all wasted. Merle was high. We were watching this show and Merle was talking all this dumb stuff about it. And he wouldn't let up. Merle never could. Turns out it was the tweaker's kids' favorite show. And he never sees his kids, so he felt guilty about it or something. So he punches Merle in the face. So I started hitting the tweaker, like, hard. As hard as I can. Then he pulls a gun, sticks it right here.”

He points to his left temple, “He says, “I'm gonna kill you, bitch.” So Merle pulls his gun on him. Everyone's yelling. I'm yelling. I thought I was dead. Over a dumb cartoon about a talking dog.”

“How'd you get out of it?”

“The tweaker punched me in the gut. I puked. They both started laughing and forgot all about it.”

He said with a humorless chuckle. “You want to know what I was before all this? I was just drifting around with Merle doing whatever he said we were gonna be doing that day. I was nobody. Nothing. Some redneck asshole and an even bigger asshole for a brother.”

“You miss him, don't you? I miss Maggie. I miss her bossing me around. I miss my big brother Shawn. He was so annoying and overprotective. And my dad. I thought-- I hoped he'd just live the rest of his life in peace, you know? I thought Maggie and Glenn would have a baby. And he'd get to be a grandpa. And we’d have birthdays and holidays and summer picnics. And he’d get really old. And it'd happen, but it'd be quiet. It'd be okay. He'd be surrounded by people he loved. That's how unbelievably stupid I am.”

“That's how it was supposed to be.”

“I wish I could just— change.”

“You did.”

“Not enough. Not like you. It's like you were made for how things are now.” She admitted.

“I'm just used to it, things being ugly. Growing up in a place like this.”

“Well, you got away from it.”

“I didn't.”

“You did.”
“Maybe you got to keep on reminding me sometimes.”

“No. You can't depend on anybody for anything, right? I'll be gone someday.”

“Stop.”

“I will. You're gonna be the last man standing. You are. You're gonna miss me so bad when I'm gone, Daryl Dixon.”

“You ain't a happy drunk at all.”

“Yeah, I'm happy. I'm just not blind. You got to stay who you are, not who you were. Places like this, you have to put it away.”

“What if you can't?”

“You have to. Or it kills you.” She points to her chest over her heart. “Here.”

“We should go inside.” Daryl says.

“We should burn it down.” Beth suggests with a chuckle.

“We're gonna need more booze.” Daryl admits getting to his feet.

They go inside and grab the bottles of moonshine, opening them they douse the entire expanse of the house in the liquid. Daryl can hear Rayne in his head, she's singing a song she used to when they were lying in bed together.

There's bound to be a ghost at the back of your closet, no matter where you live, there'll always be a few things maybe several things that you're gonna find really difficult to forgive

“You wanna?” Daryl says handing her a box of matches.

“Hell, yeah.” She lights the stack of money Daryl’s holding and he throws it into the house.

The two stand there watching the cabin burn to ashes, both of them holding up their middle fingers to blaze of fire and smoke.

Rayne gathers her things up into her backpack while Nico packs up supplies for them. She straps on her thigh holsters, the thick band keeping pressure on her thigh and making it feel ten times better. She was just sliding her Kukris into their sheaths when her brother walks into the bedroom.

“We’re all set. You ready to go?”

She tosses the strap of her rifle over her head and grabs her bow, “More than ready.”

The two of them head out the front door and down the main road, while they’re walking Nico checks a few cars to see if they run, he’d rather they not have to walk too much due to the wound on Rayne’s leg. “Damn, we need a vehicle. Walking around isn’t gonna help your leg heal faster.”

A thought comes to Rayne and she pulls a set of keys out of her pocket, looking over at her brother
she grins. She knows it’s a long shot, but it’s a chance she’s willing to take right now. “I know where to find one.”
Alone

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

So I know a lot of people love Carol, but I honestly can't stand her, so she won't be playing as big of a role in my story as she did in the show. Most of her somewhat badass moments, will be done by Rayne. I'm sorry if this pisses anyone off, but it's Rayne's story and she's my hero in this.

Thank you to animehunter411 for the kudos.

As always reviews are appreciated.

Enjoy!

Rayne carefully leads the way back towards the prison, her bow up at the ready to fire as Nico covers their six behind her. She pauses at the edge of the tree line to survey the area, looking for the best entrance to the courtyard. Just over the top of the tank she can see the roof of her truck, it’s still parked on the far side of the prison so it shouldn’t have sustained any damage.

“Where’s it at?” Her brother asked as he stepped up beside her.

“Just over the top of the tank, to the left of the building.” She pointed in the direction she was talking.

“You think it’s still in good shape?”

“Yeah, the tank fire mostly impacted the right side, they were aiming for us not our cars.” She saw at least 60 walkers roaming the courtyard and who knows how many not in her line of sight.

“What do you think’s the best way in?” Nico asked as he looked at the demolished prison, he couldn’t believe the damage, it was like being back overseas during the war.

“Only one way.” Rayne said with a sigh, “Back through the tombs. The way I got out.”

Nico nodded as they started walking through the tree line to the back of the prison. He saw Rayne clip her bow to the backpack and pull out her Kukris as four walkers staggered their way. Before he could step in to help he watched her easily slice them to pieces in less than 10 seconds. He knew his sister had been strong before, but seeing her take out four walkers on her own and seeing the devastation she survived at the prison, he realized just how strong she was now. She wasn’t just his little sister anymore, she was a lethal hunter.
In one half of the woods Maggie, Sasha and Bob find themselves surrounded by a bank of thick fog that impedes their vision. They can hear walkers coming towards them, but they can’t locate the direction they are coming from. They form themselves into a tight group, standing back to back, weapons at the ready. When the first walker breaks through the mist Maggie stabs it down. Bob takes another down, but he’s bitten by another on his arm before he takes it down.

Once they clear the area of walkers Sasha frowns as she looks at Bob, she doesn’t have to want to put him down. He sees the devastated look on her face and gives her a smile, “It’s okay. He got me right on the bandage.” Sasha smiles as she wraps him in a hug. “Ow. Ow! Ow! Ow!” He yelps and Sasha quickly lets him go. “I didn't say stop. I just said ow. I just said ow.”

Maggie shakes her head at the two, their antics making her miss Glenn so much more.

In another part of the woods Daryl is teaching Beth how to track and use his crossbow. She walks ahead of him as he directs her forward.

“Are we close?”

“Almost done.”

“How do you know?”

“The signs are all there. Just got to know how to read ‘em.” Daryl tells her.

“What are we tracking?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who wanted to learn.”

She lowers the bow and looks down at the ground, “Well, something came through here. The pattern is all zig-zaggy. It’s a walker.”

“Maybe it’s a drunk.”

“I'm getting good at this. Pretty soon I won't need you at all.”

“Yeah, keep on tracking.”

They come into a clearing and Beth sees the walker on its knees in front of them and she notices something. “It’s got a gun.” She raises the crossbow and slowly approaches the walker. She’s within a few feet when a trap closes around the heel of her right boot. The walker turns around and advances on her, she shoots an arrow hitting it in the mouth, a nice shot, but not to put it down. She drops the bow and Daryl runs up, picking up his bow he slams it into the walkers head. He hurries over and unlatches the trap from her boot, “Can you move it?”

She rotates her ankle and nods, “Yeah.”
Back with the others Maggie is growing increasingly impatient, the longer they wait, the further Glenn gets from her. “You ready?”

“We should wait till the fog clears.” Sasha tells her.

“We've been waiting a while.”

“You see all this? We got lucky. We need visibility. We've got six bullets left.”

“She's right. We've been doing good following the plan. No need to get sloppy now.”

“What is it?” Sasha asks as Maggie tosses her the compass that was in her pocket.

“It's broken.”

“We don't need it.” Bob tells them. “Sun comes up in the east, sets in the west. We'll keep an eye on it in between. We'll be fine.”

Daryl wraps an arm around Beth and helps her limp through the woods. They come out into a cemetery, a funeral house sits about 100 yards away.

“Can we-- can we hold up a sec?” Beth asks as she rubs her ankle.

“You all right?”

“I just need to sit down.”

“All right. Hold up.” Daryl doesn’t want to wait much longer to get to shelter, so he puts the strap of his crossbow around his neck, letting it hang on his chest. He bends down in front of Beth, “Hop on.”

“Are you serious?” She questions not knowing if he was joking with her or not.

“Yeah. This is a serious piggyback. Jump up.”

She jumps onto his back and wraps her arms around his neck.

“You're heavier than you look.” He comments as he walks towards the house.

“Maybe there are people there.”

“Yeah, if there are, I'll handle them.”

“There are still good people, Daryl.”

“I don't think the good ones survive.” He admits. He starts walking again but stops short when he sees Beth staring at a headstone. Letting her down he grabs a handful of wildflowers and places it on top of the marker reading ‘beloved father’. They stand there together for a moment, Beth reaches down and laces her fingers with his.
Maggie and the others make it out of the woods, she sees something stapled to a wooden post beside the train tracks. “What's that?” They walk over to take a look at it, it's a map with a location.

“Terminus.” Bob says remembering hearing that name before. “When we were out on the run to the veterinary college, we heard a message about this on the radio.”

“They were broadcasting?” Maggie asked.

“What did it say?” Sasha questioned.

“Couldn't make it out. I only know because I'm seeing it now. “Those who arrive survive.”

“We should go.”

“I thought we were looking for Glenn.” Sasha scoffed.

“If he saw one of these, he would go looking for me looking for him. Look at this map. All these tracks from different directions leading to the same place.”

“It's far. And we don't know if there are other signs.”

“You don't think this is the only one.”

“This is the best lead we've had so far. It says sanctuary. That's just another reason to try. Others from the prison could be there. Tyreese.” Bob says.

Sasha shakes her head, “If it sounds too good to be true— Maybe— maybe if Glenn saw one of these, maybe he felt the same way.”

“He wouldn't. He'd believe, I know.” Maggie said, she knew what Glenn would do, he’d head for Terminus.

“What do you want to do, Sasha?” Bob questions. “Keep making these circles from the bus? Or are you talking about us starting to do something else? We're not splitting up. That can't happen. You want to take a vote or something?”

“We don't need to vote.” Sasha sighs as they set off towards Terminus.

Daryl puts Beth back up on his back and continues up to the house, letting her down on the porch he opens the front door, giving the doorframe a loud bang and whistling to attract any walkers around. “Give it a minute.”

As they walk inside Beth can help but notice the state of the house, so different from any other they’d been in. “It's so clean.”
“Yeah. Someone's been tending to it. May still be around.” He leads the way further into the house and down a flight of stairs to what seems to be the preparation chamber for getting the dead ready for their funeral. “Let's get that ankle wrapped.” Daryl says as he grabs a few supplies out of the cabinet.

Daryl notices Beth looking at the two bodies decaying on the tables in front of them. “Looks like somebody ran out of dolls to dress up.”

“It's beautiful.” She argued. “Whoever did this cared. They wanted these people to get a funeral. They remembered these things were people before all this. They didn't let it change them in the end. Don't you think that's beautiful?”

“Come on.” Was all he said as he tended to her ankle.

Bob is replacing the bandage on his shoulder, across from him Sasha is poking a stick into the fire. “Where's Maggie?” He asks not noticing that she had left.

“Getting more firewood.” She said before looking at his shoulder. “Still bleeding?”

“Barely. So tell me—”

“Tell you what?”

“You think we should stop.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me why.”

“To not die. You, Maggie, me.”

“Yeah, that's not it.”

“What?”

“I don't think you know why you want to stop.”

“Bob, what happened this morning, we get warnings.”

“We did fine.”

“We get warnings. And the next time it's on us. Odds are Glenn is dead. Odds are we will be, too. That's the reality. We got six bullets and you're still bleeding. Those tracks, they run through towns. The first one we see, we find a building, some higher ground to set up in. All of us. That's what we need to do. That's what we're gonna do. If we can talk her into it. Just think about it.”
Beth and Daryl go through the cupboards until they find one that is fully stocked with food and drinks. “Whoa.” Beth says as she sees it all.

“Peanut butter and jelly, diet soda, and pig's feet. That's a white trash brunch right there.”

“It all looks good to me.”

Daryl pauses for a moment thinking, “No, hold up. Ain't a speck of dust on this.”

“So?”

“That means somebody just put it here. This is someone's stash. Maybe they're still alive. All right, we'll take some of it and we'll leave the rest, all right?”

“I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“It's like I said. There are still good people.”

Daryl opens the jar of jelly and dips his fingers in before licking it off with his tongue. “Mm.”

“Gross.” Beth giggles as she sits down at the table.

“Hey, those pig's feet are mine.”

While Daryl goes outside to secure the house, Beth finds a piano and sits down to play. Daryl finds her singing a song, he waits for her to finish before he interrupts. “The place is nailed up tight. The only way in is through the front door.”

He sets his crossbow down and climbs up into the open coffin lying down.

“What are you doing?”

“This is the comfiest bed I've had in years.”

“Really?”

“I ain't kidding. Why don't you go ahead and play some more? Keep singing.” He said to her.

“I thought my singing annoyed you.”

“There ain't no jukebox, so…”

Beth smiles as she starts to play once more. ‘We'll buy a beer to shotgun we'll lay on the lawn and we'll be good now I'm laughing at my boredom and my string of failed attempts’
Sasha and Bob wake up the next morning to find Maggie gone along with all of her things and a note written in the dirt that reads, ‘don’t risk your lives 4 me good luck.’

“Come on. She's got to follow the tracks. We can still catch up to her.” He starts packing up the things, but notices that she’s not helping him. “Sasha, we can still catch up to her.”

Sasha begrudgingly starts to help him pack up their camp.

Out on the tracks Maggie finds another map for Terminus, pulling out her knife she moves to carve a message on the side of the metal box. She stops short when a walker comes up behind her, smiling she kills the walker then cuts open its stomach using the blood to write the message instead.

Bob and Sasha walk down the tracks together, Sasha notices the grin on his face and shakes her head. “You have been grinning since we left the prison in one piece. If you're so happy to be alive, then why are we walking into the heart of darkness?”

“It's not about me being alive.”

“Do you even know why you're smiling?”

“Oh, yeah. I'm not alone. That's how it happened when I lost my first group. And my second group. I broke that streak. You'd be smiling, too. Self-awareness is a beautiful thing. You should try it sometime.” He notices that Sasha doesn’t say anything, “Oh, you not gonna take the bait?”

“Nope.”

“You're just as bullheaded as she is sometimes. You know that?”

They find the walker that Maggie killed and the message she wrote to Glenn, telling him she was headed for Terminus. Sasha realizes that Bob is right, “Yeah.”

“Going as fast as I can.” Beth laughs.

“Forget that.” Daryl says as he picks her up and carries her through the door, sitting her down in a chair. “Here you go. Whew. All right. Let's eat.” He sits down but a noise at the front door draws his attention, he gets up and grabs his bow, “Stay.”

Running out he opens the front door and finds a stray white dog standing on the porch. It’s missing
an eye and its coat is covered in dirt and grime. “It's just a damn dog. Hi. Come here, boy.” Daryl tries to pet him but he runs off.

“He wouldn't come in?” Beth asks as she comes out of the kitchen.

“I told you to stay back.”

“Yeah, but, Daryl, you said there was a dog.”

“Maybe he'll come back around.”

At the end of the night Beth sits at the table with Daryl writing a small note. “I'm gonna leave a thank-you note.”

“Why?”

“For when they come back. If they come back. Even if they're not coming back, I still want to say thanks.”

“Maybe you don't have to leave that. Maybe we stick around here for a while. They come back, we'll just make it work. They may be nuts, but maybe it'll be all right.”

“So you do think there are still good people around. What changed your mind?”

“You know.”

“What?”

“I don't know.”

“Don't— What changed your mind?” Beth sees the looks he gives her and she nods, “Oh.”

Daryl hears the dog at the door again, he opens the jar of pigs feet and grabs one out of it. “I'm gonna give that mutt one more chance.”

He goes to the door and opens it finding several walkers right outside, he braces himself against eh door to hold it. “Beth! Beth!” She runs in and tosses Daryl his crossbow. “Run! Run! Beth, pry open a window. Get your shit.”

“I'm not gonna leave you.”

“Go out. Go up the road. I'll meet you there. Go!” He leads the walkers down the stairs to the preparation room, finding himself with no way out. Grabbing two knives off of the counter he pulls the table with the body in front of him as a block, just as the walkers enter the room. They push against eh table, fighting to reach Daryl as he stabs them from the other side. He manages to fight his way out of the room and back up the stairs, grabbing his discarded arrows as he goes.

He runs out of the house searching for Beth, he makes his way down to the road and finds the black satchel that she was carrying lying on the asphalt. He sees a car speeding away from him, running after it he calls out to the girl knowing she’s inside of it. “Beth! Beth! Beth!”
Bob and Sasha continue tracking Maggie down the tracks, seeing the notes written in walkers' blood that she’s leaving for Glenn. “She's keeping to the tracks. If we pick up the pace, we'll catch her.”

Daryl keeps running down the road, searching for the car that took Beth. He had already lost his family and the woman he loves, he couldn’t lose her too. He runs until his lungs are out of air, his body covered in sweat, finally he reaches a crossroad, not knowing which way the car might have went he collapses to the ground.

Bob and Sasha make it to the next town, Sasha finding a nice tall building that they can set up in. But Bob shakes his head in disagreement, “Sasha, I'm not stopping.”

“We are.”

“I'm not. She's out there alone.”

“She didn't want us to come. She made her choice for her.”

“I don't care. She's alone. When I got to the prison, I thought to myself, “How long? The clock's ticking. How long until everyone else is dead and I'm on my own?” Bad things happened 'cause I was scared. They didn't need to. I didn't need to be afraid. Now we get to Terminus and Tyreese isn't there, it doesn't mean he's dead. You don't need to be afraid.”

“I am not afraid.”

“So this is it?” Bob asks as he looks around, he knows she plans on staying in the town.

“It doesn't have to be.”

“That's right.”

Bob smiles, “I'm gonna try something here.” He leans forward and kisses Sasha, but as he pulls back he doesn’t see the reaction he wanted from her. “Well, okay.”

“You don't have to do it. You don't have to be alone again.”

“I won't be.” He says before walking alone down the tracks.

Sasha heads for the building she had seen from the distance, slowly making her way inside and up the stairs. As she looks out the window she receives a large shock when she sees not walkers, but the woman she and Bob had been looking for lying on the ground. “Maggie?” She leans against the
window and the entire thing falls out of its frame and drops to the ground. The woman in black sits up from the ground as the glass shatters. Sasha sees walkers coming around the trucks towards Maggie, “Oh, shit.”

She grabs her staff and runs down to help Maggie fight off the walkers, the two of them staying the circle of cars for protection as they fight back to back.

“Where's Bob?” Maggie asks after they take out the walkers surrounding them.

“Out looking for you. Why are you here?”

“I was looking for another walker. Found more than I wanted. You know, I was lying there and I remembered—I heard what you said back at the camp. I heard you say you thought we should be in a town.”

“What else did you hear me say?”

“That odds are Glenn is dead. And we should stop. But you're wrong.”

“So why are you here?”

“Cause I was waiting for you. I'm not giving up. But I need your help. Cause I can't do it by myself. And even if I catch up to Bob, we can't do it alone. I thought that I couldn't ask you to risk your life. But I can. Cause I know what you'd be risking it for. And it isn't just Glenn. I get that you're afraid.”

“I am. I am afraid.” Sasha admitted.

“We could get there.”

“I know. So let's go get Bob and let's get there.” Sasha said.

Out on the road Daryl finds himself suddenly surrounded by a group of six men, most of them dressed like him, looking like some zombie-apocalypse biker gang.

“Well, look it here.”

The one that spoke up leaned down to grab Daryl’s crossbow and ended up with a fist to the mouth. Daryl jumped to his feet pointing his bow at the man he had hit that was now sitting on the ground holding his bloody nose. “Damn it, hold up!” The man said calling off his men for the moment.

“I'm claiming the vest.” One of them holding a compound bow said grinning. “I like them wings.”

“Hold up.” The man said again as he started laughing and then got to his feet. “A bowman. I respect that. See, a man with a rifle, he could have been some kind of photographer or soccer coach back in the day. But a bowman's a bowman through and through. What you got there, 150 pound draw-weight? I'll be donkey-licked if that don't fire at least 300 feet per second. I've been looking for a weapon like that. Of course, I'd want one with a bit more ammo and minus the oblongata stains.”

“Get yourself in some trouble, partner?” The man wanting Daryl’s vest chuckled.
“You pull that trigger, these boys are gonna drop you several times over. That what you want? Come on, fella, suicide is stupid. Why hurt yourself when you can hurt other people? Name's Joe.”

The hunter lowered his bow knowing that for the time being, staying alive was his best option to finding Beth and maybe his family. “Daryl.”

Rayne and Nico quietly walk through the woods to the back of the prison where Rayne had escaped from. They had encountered eight more walkers on their way, easily taking them out without attracting anymore. When they got to the hole in the wall, Rayne took off her backpack and shoved it through first before crawling in after. Nico followed her lead doing the same with his bag, then together they swiftly made their way through the tombs and up to C block.

Knowing she had already cleared out the cells for supplies Rayne lead the way through the halls to the doors that lead into the courtyard. Looking out the window she spotted a few walkers milling about about ten yards from the doors, they wouldn’t be hard to take out. The problem was that she couldn’t see around the corner to her truck, so she had no idea how many walkers, if any, were over there.

Her eyes were drawn to something on the far left just barely visible through the door. One of the cars that was parked in the courtyard was smoking. Nico noticed what she was looking at and raised an eyebrow to her, “What is it?”

“That car’s smoking.”

“Yeah, they tend to do that when you blow them up.” He replied not seeing where she was going with this.

“No. That one wasn’t hit when I was here. That smoke is recent.” She said with a smile. “Someone was here, within the last day or two. Someone survived.”

“Well, let’s go get your truck and find ‘em.”

“I can’t see the truck, I don’t know if it’s a clear shot. We need a distraction.” She thought for a moment and then a thought came to her. “Follow me.”

Nico followed her through the halls and out onto the remnants that was once a catwalk between the cell blocks. She pointed down at two cars that had been driven into the field, maybe 50 yards away. “How good’s your aim, bro?”

Nico smirked as he caught on to what she wanted to do. “My aim’s fine. How’s yours? You getting a little rusty, little sis?”

Rayne flipped him off as they both leveled their rifles, each one aiming at the vehicles gas tank. Two shots rang out followed by a massive explosion that shook the ground as the two cars went up in flames.

“One shot, one kill.” Nico smirked as he knocked fists with his sister.

They watched as the walkers in the courtyard slowly started to head for the burning vehicles. Rayne nodded before they headed back down to the doors and carefully pushed them open. After
confirming they had a straight shot the two ran for the truck, Rayne pulling out her keys and firing the truck up with the remote starter. The loud diesel engine drew the attention of the walkers, but the truck was already speeding out of the yard.

“Man, I wish it was always that easy.” Nico said as they drove down the road.

Rayne laughed, “Ha. We may be Irish, but we ain’t that fuckin’ lucky.”

Bob is quite a ways down the tracks when he hears Sasha call his name, he pauses as a smile comes across his lips. He turns around to find her and Maggie walking up to him, both women smiling as they hug him.
Carol, Tyreese and the girls manage to find a small house and settle in for a few nights, it’s quite and peaceful. However their peace shatters, not by walkers but the little girl Lizzy. She has it in her head that walkers are still people and they just want to be her friend. Carol realizes this when she sees Lizzy playing what she calls a game of tag with a young female walker. Carol runs out of the house and stabs the walker, when she does Lizzy goes crazy screaming at Carol.

“No, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no. No! No! She was playing with me. She wanted a friend.”

“She wanted to kill you.” Carol tells the distraught young girl.

“I was gonna lead her away.”

“You could have died.”

“It's the same thing! You killed her! You killed her! It's the same thing!”

“Lizzie.”

“What if I killed you?! What if I killed you?! You don't understand. You don't understand. You don't understand. You don't understand! You didn't have to. You didn't have to. She didn't want to hurt any— She didn't want to hurt anybody! She was my friend and you killed her! You killed her! You killed her! She was my friend.”

Carol realizes that Lizzy is becoming a danger to them all, so she tries to teach Mica how to better protect herself. Not just from walkers, but from her sister as well.

She thinks that all is behind them when a group of walkers, black and charred as if they were in a large fire storm the property. They open fire on the walkers, even Lizzy, taking them out before they can reach the fence. Carol congratulates Lizzy on doing what needed to be done and protecting them.
But things had only begun to take a turn for the worst when Carol and Tyreese come back from foraging to make a startling discovery. Lizzy had killed her sister.

“Don't worry. She'll come back.” Lizzy said with a smile as if killing her sister wasn’t the most horrible thing in the world. “I didn't hurt her brain.”

Carol steps forward and Lizzy pulls her gun out pointing it at Carol. “No, no, no! We have to wait. I need to show you. You'll see. You'll finally get it. We have to wait.”

“Lizzie, put the gun down.” Ty says softly.

“I just want us to wait.”

“We can wait. We can wait. You just give me the gun. We can wait, I swear.” Carol says with tears in her eyes as Lizzy hands her the gun. “You and Tyreese should take Judith back. It's not safe for her.”

“But Judith can change, too. I was just about to—”

Carol gasps when she realizes that Lizzy had the intention of killing Judith, and if they hadn’t come back when they did, Rick’s baby would be dead. “She can't even walk yet.”

“Yeah, you're right.” Lizzy says smiling.

“So you two take Judith back to the house and we'll have lunch. And I'll just tie Mica up. You know, just so she won't go anywhere.”

“Promise that's what you'll do?”

“Mm-hmm. I promise. I'll use her shoelaces.”

“Let's-- let's go, Lizzie.” Ty says as he picks up Judith and takes the girls back to the house.

Behind them Carol breaks down into tears as she stares down at Mica’s dead body, this is what she had been afraid of would happen. She pulls out her knife and ends Mica’s suffering.

Inside the house Ty and Carol stand in the kitchen talking about what they should do about Lizzy. Tyreese realizes that Lizzy was the one that had been feeding the walkers rats at the prison, and she was the one that killed the rabbit. He was beginning to think that Lizzy was the one that had killed Karen and David, and despite what Carol knew, she just sat there silent and didn’t say a word to the contrary.

They both make the heartbreaking decision that Lizzy can’t be around other people anymore, it’s not safe for any of them. So Carol takes her out later that day to pick some wildflowers for Mica, so that when she comes back she’ll have them.
While Lizzy is picking the flowers happily for her sister, Carol stands behind her and draws her gun quietly. “I love you, Lizzie. And everything works out the way it’s supposed to.”

“I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me. I'm sorry.” The little girl cries thinking that Carol is mad at her for pointing her gun at her.


She comes back to the house overcome with grief and knows that she has to tell Tyreese the truth about what she had done. Once they were finished digging the graves and burying the two little girls, Carol takes him back into the house.

She slides her gun across the table towards him and says, “I killed Karen and David. I had to stop the illness from breaking out. I had to stop other people from dying. It wasn't Lizzie. It wasn't a stranger. Tyreese, it was me. You do what you have to do.”

Tyreese grips the table in his hands, his body shaking as tears stream down his face. He can’t believe that the woman he thought he could trust, had killed the woman he loved. “Did she know what was happening? Was she scared?”

Carol shook her head and Tyreese nodded, “It was quick?”

“Yes.” She sees him lay his hand over the gun. ‘Do what you have to do.”

But he knows it is not what Karen would have wanted, so he releases the gun. “I forgive you. I'm never gonna forget. It happened. You did it. You feel it. I know you do. It's a part of you now. Me, too. But I forgive you.”

“Thank you.”

“We don't need to stay. We can't stay.”

The next morning Carol and Tyreese pack up Judith and their things, then set out on the road to another place.

On the road Rayne is lying in the passenger seat, her legs stretched out across Nico’s lap as she sleeps. Nico looks over at his sister, a smile forming on his face, she looks so peaceful, like she never had to endure the horrors of this world. The last time he had seen her in person was when he had joined the Seals at the age of 18, and now they were both at the still young age of 28. Ten years is a long time to go without seeing your family in person, sure they had still talked over Skype and the phone, but it wasn’t the same.

He had missed seeing the woman that she had grown into, in his mind she was still the goofy little 17 year old girl in a cheerleading outfit, cheering for him and the team as they won the state
championship for the fourth year in a row. Or the smiling 14 year old with grease paint on her face
that had just killed her first deer on a hunt with him and his father, ecstatic that she had food to
bring home to their family.

Despite what she had grown into, he would always see her as the captain of their high school
cheerleading team, the gymnast that loved to climb trees, ride dirt bikes and horses, go four-
wheeling in the mud. He would always see her as his little sister, his twin, the girl he shared an
unbreakable bond with.

He smiled as she groaned, opening her eyes and smiling up at him. “How’s it going sleeping
beauty?”

Rayne scoffed as she sat up against the door, “I’m hardly a beauty at this point, bro.”

“You’re always beautiful.” He said with a chuckle.

“You’re biased.”

“Of course, we’re twins. If I say you look horrible, then I’m saying it about myself as well and we
both know, I’m a handsome fuckin’ guy.”

Rayne laughed out loud, the sound like a melody to Nico’s ears. “You’re such a nerd, Nic.”

“Yeah, but you love me.”

“Yes, I do.”

Nico’s eyes shifted to the black collar hanging around the mirror, it had belonged to her dog Titan,
he knew that the dog was no longer with them, as they always hung the collar up in respect. “I wish
he would’ve made it through. I loved that dog.”

Rayne smiled, it had taken her awhile but now she could think about him and smile, instead of
breaking down into tears. “He did make it, for a long time. He made it all the way to the prison
with me.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was in the prison and we had a breakthrough down in the tombs. Daryl and I were clearing the
lower levels when I heard him barking. One of the walkers had gotten past us and made it to C
block, it was trying to attack Carl and the kids. Titan put himself in between them and took the
walker down, but it had managed to bite a large hole in his leg. I had to put him down.”

“I’m sorry, Ray. He was a great dog. He died a hero.”

“Yes he did.” She said nodding her head with a smile. “He never left Carl’s side. He loved that kid
so much.”

Only now did Nico see his sister’s eyes welling up with tears, not for Titan, but talking about Carl.
Those people meant the world to his sister, and that meant that they meant the world to him
because they had been there for his sister, when he couldn’t be. He laid his hand on her leg and
gave it a squeeze, “We’re gonna find ‘em. I promise.”

They hadn’t seen a sign of anyone living for days, but hope was the only thing that they had left
and they weren’t ready to give that up just yet.
Kudos and Reviews

As always reviews are appreciated.

Enjoy!

It had been a few days since Glenn and Tara had teamed up with Abraham, Rosita and Eugene. They had been following the tracks to Terminus, Glenn all the while hoping for a sign of Maggie or anyone else in his family.

Tara walked beside Eugene listening to him ramble on about whatever came into his mind, she had figured out early that man could talk, a lot.

“I’m well aware it sounds bananas. But looking at the fossil record, knowing what I know about this infection, you cannot say for certain it isn't what killed off the dinosaurs. Now, do I believe that’s what happened? No. But it's enjoyable as hell to think about an undead ankylosaur going after a diplodocus. That there is a video game worth a preorder.”

Tara pauses and picks up a penny that had been run over by a train wheel, it was smooth and flat and apparently it made Eugene very happy.

“Oh, hell, yeah. Score. A few more of those, a little aluminum foil and some bleach, you got yourself some volts, sister. Homemade battery.”

Tara smiled as she handed it to him. “Here.”

“For reals? You don't want it?”

“For reals.”

“Much obliged. Speaking of video games, what kind of gamer were you? RPGs, shmup, sim racing?”

Tara tuned him out after that, the man could talk the ear off of anyone and she was growing tired of his incessant rambling.
When they stopped for the night Tara was leaning against a tree when Abraham sat down beside her, she saw him yawn and she smiled a little. “Go to sleep. I got this.”

“No offense, but I'm not leaving Eugene's life in your hands.” He said pointedly.

“You came with us because you wanted help.”

“You're support, not point. We'll move north with you till I find the right vehicle just off the tracks. Then five becomes three.”

“Or two.”

“We each have our missions. You need to get some sleep. I haven't seen you do it yet. Thought it was because you were in love with him. A girl in love with a guy she's trying to help get to his girl. If that were the case closing your eyes would be just too damn tragic.”

“If that were the case.”

“Yeah.” He nodded knowing that his previous thoughts about her had been right. “I saw the way you were looking down Rosita's shirt while she was serving you dinner. Hey, the things are damn near hypnotic. Look, Eugene spends half the day staring at her ass. I'm not mad, it just means my theory's shot.”

“I'm awfully sorry about that.”

“Well, I'm right and I'm wrong. Something you did or something you didn't do?”

“Something I did. You were in the army. I get the whole gung ho, mission is your life bullshit.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“Yeah. So we both got our reasons. Both got our missions. What do you do when the mission's over?”

The next morning they resumed their trek down the tracks, Tara once again walking beside Eugene and the man once again rambling on in her ear.

“Been rubbing me wrong, is all. I'm an even-Steven type gentleman. You help me find the supplies, we'll share the battery and whatever juice we scare up, minimal as it may be. Deal?”

Tara doesn’t answer, her eyes have caught something up ahead, and Glenn sees it as well. On the map of Terminus is a message, ‘Glenn go to Terminus Maggie Sasha Bob.’

The others stand there as Glenn takes off into a full on sprint down the tracks, he’s going to get his wife.
Back out in the woods the apocalypse biker gang is sleeping when a walker stumbles into their camp, the cans on the ropes jingling as it gets caught on the barb-wire. One of them stands up, “I got it,” he pulls out his bayonet knife and stabs it down.

Another one looks around finding Daryl nowhere around. “Looks like that Robin Hood cat cut out on us after all. I didn't think he had the sack to go out on his own.”

“He don't.” The guy who wanted Daryl’s vest says. “Dude left his stuff here. Probably just stepped out to drop a morning deuce.”

On another part of the train tracks, Rick is leading while Michonne and Carl straggle behind him. “I think we got about a day's worth of water left. We're lucky it's cooled off a little bit, but—” He turns back to talk to them and sees the both of them balancing on the tracks, arms out for balance, slowly walking towards him. “What are you doing?” He asks with a smile.

“Winning a bet.” Carl laughs.

“In your dreams.” Michonne tells him.

“I'm still on.” Carl says, but he starts to falter, waving his arms to regain his balance.

“You spoke too soon, wise guy.”

“This might go on a while.” Rick says walking towards them. “Maybe we can speed this up.”

“Yeah, you're right. Shouldn't be fooling around. We should probably— Carl!” She yells hoping to throw the kid off his balance, but she in turn is the one to fall off the tracks.

“I win. Pay up.” Carl smirks holding out his hand. Michonne pulls out two candy bars from her bag so that Carl can choose one. “Is that really the last Big Cat?”

His hand hovers over the Big Cat and Michonne pouts, “Oh, come on.”

“Hey, but you said winner's choice.”

“Go ahead, take it. It's yours. You won it fair and square.” She mumbled as she tossed the other one back in the bag. She looked up to find Carl holding out a half of the candy bar to her.

“Come on, we always share.”

“Fork it over.” She smiled.

Out in the woods Daryl has his sight trained on a bunny, just as he lets the arrow fly, another one comes whizzing past his head impaling the rabbit just as his does.

“What the hell are you doing?” Daryl snaps to the man with the compound bow.
“Catching me some breakfast.”

“That's mine.” Daryl states walking over and shouldering his bow.

“My arrow's the one that hit first. Cottontail belongs to me.”

“Been out here since before the sun came up.” Daryl says as he pulls the arrows out of the rabbit, tossing the other man’s arrow away.

“You see, the rules of the hunt don't mean jack out here. Now, that rabbit you holding is claimed, boy. Claimed whether you like it or not. So I was you, I'd hand it over. Now, before you get to wishing you ain't never even got out of bed this morning.”

“It ain't yours.”

“You know, I'll bet this bitch got you all messed up, hmm? Am I right? Got you walking around here like a dead man who just lost himself a piece of tail. Must have been a good'un. Tell me something. Was it one of the little'uns? Cause they don't last too long out here.”

Daryl pulls his knife out ready to stab the man when Joe shows up, grabbing onto Daryl’s arm.

“Easy, fellas, easy. Let's just put our weapons down. See if we can't figure out what's really the problem here, huh? Did you claim it?”

“Hell, yeah.” The man says.

“Well, there you go. That critter belongs to Len.”

“So let's have it.”

“Looks like you may be wanting an explanation.” Joe says as Daryl makes no move to let go of the rabbit. “See, going it alone, that ain't an option nowadays. Still, it is survival of the fittest. That's a paradox right there. So I laid out some rules of the road to keep things from going Darwin every couple hours. Keep our merry band together and stress-free. All you got to do is claim. That's how you mark your territory, your prey, your bed at night. One word, claimed.”

“I ain't claiming nothing.”

“We're gonna teach him, right? The rules say we got to teach him.” Len says as he growls at Daryl.

“It wouldn't be fair to punish you for violating a rule you never even knew existed.”

“There ain't no rules no more.” Daryl states.

“Oh, there are. You know that. That's why I didn't kill you for the crossbow.” Joe takes the front half of the rabbit. “Hey. Easy there, partner.” He takes out his knife and slices the rabbit in half, handing the other half to Len. “Claimed. That's all you got to say. Hey, ass end is still an end.”

Glenn is walking quickly ahead of the rest when they pass a small building on the side, the others pause but Glenn keeps walking.

“Hold up!” Abraham yells out. “We're stopping here. Tired is slow. Slow is dead.”
“It's barely noon.” Glenn says.

“I don't give a monkey's left nut. None of us has slept more than a couple hours straight since we went all Casey Jones. This place looks safe. We need to rest. I get it. You have to find her. Well, Rosita and me, we got a mission, too. It's keeping that man alive, getting him to Washington, and saving the whole damn world. So we're going in that tower and we're going now.”

“Oh, crap.” Eugene says as he sees a walker up top heading for the edge.

“Hey, hey, hey, watch out!” Glenn yells as he runs back.

“Go, go! Go! Move! Move!” Abraham shouts as he moves, accidently knocking Tara down in the process.

“Are you okay?” Rosita asks her.

“I'm fine.” Tara grits out as she gets to her feet.

“We got to stay here. Who's gonna help me carry her up?” Rosita says.

Glenn comes over and takes Tara’s arm, “You okay? You wanna stop or you wanna keep going?”

“No, keep going. I'm good.” She says nodding.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” She says but she’s limping pretty bad as she tries to keep her balance.

“Look, if she can keep going, we can all keep going. Or you guys can stay here. You don't need us, we don't need you. It's okay.”

“Wow, you're an ass.” Rosita says looking at Glenn. “She will do whatever you say because she thinks she owes you. Man up. Stay here for a few hours.”

Glenn turns to Abraham, “You just care about keeping Eugene safe, right? It's the only reason you want to stop? We go until sundown, I give Eugene my riot gear right here, right now. Everybody wins.”

“Except her.” Rosita argues.

“You're not her mama.” Abraham tells her. “She says she can walk, she can walk. You got yourself a deal.”

“Okay.” Glenn says taking off his gear and giving it to Eugene, anything to get them to keep moving down the tracks.

“So what's the plan, Daryl?” Joe asks as he walks beside Daryl down the railroad.

“How so?”

“You're with us now, but you ain't soon?”
“Yep.”

“So what's the plan?”

“Just uh, looking for the right place is all.” He says, he won’t say too much about his plans to find Beth and his family. To find her once more.

“Oh, we ain't good enough for you, huh?”

“Some of you ain't exactly friendly.”

“You ain't so friendly yourself. You know you need a group out here.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

“No, you do. You should be with us. People don't got to be friendly. We don't have to be nice. We don't have to be brothers in arms. We just got to follow the rules. You claim. If you steal, you keel. I know that sounds a little funny, but nobody laughs when something goes missing. And you don't lie. Cause that's a slippery slope indeed.”

“What happens if you break 'em?”

“Oh, you catch a beatin'. The severity of which depends upon the offense and the general attitude of the day. But that don't happen much 'cause when men like us follow rules and cooperate a little bit, well, the world becomes ours.” He whistles to the rest of the group, pointing to a train station warehouse on their left. “Right there. It's our abode for the evening.”

“Hey. There ain't no us.” Daryl states.

“You leaving right now? No? Then it sure seems like there's an us.”

The group heads into the warehouse while Daryl and Joe continue to talk. “You a cat person, Daryl? I am. Loved 'em since I was three years old. Vicious creatures. Anyway, I'll tell you, and this is true, ain't nothing sadder than an outdoor cat that thinks he's an indoor cat.”

Once Eugene had the riot gear on they continued down the tracks for Terminus, Glenn leading the way while Abraham brought up their rear. They come up on a tunnel and Glenn sees another message written on the side of the wall, he runs up and touches the blood.

“We're gaining on 'em. Still wet.”

“We sure as Shinola can't go up and over.” Abraham says looking at the tunnel. “How about around?”

Glenn shakes his head staring into the pitch black tunnel. “No. That'll take a day, maybe more. If Maggie went through, I'm going through. We're close.”

“Shut up a second.” Abraham says as he peers into the tunnel. “You hear that? That there is a long, dark tunnel full of reanimated corpses. I don't have full-on certainty that I can get Eugene through there alive. My recommendation would be take the day, make the detour and play it safe, but I know you're not gonna do that. So this is where we've got to part ways. I'm sorry. You're on your
own.”

He sets his pack down and pulls some things out for Glenn, however Tara steps up beside the two men. “No, you're not.”

Abraham holds out a few cans of food and Glenn shakes his head in protest. “No, no, no. Those are yours. You guys will need them for your trip.”

“You will, too.”

Tara takes them with gratitude as Glenn thanks the man, “Thank you.” Abraham then hands him a flashlight and Glenn accepts it, “Sorry, I hit you in the face.”

“I'm not. I like to fight.”

Rosita comes over and gives Glenn and Tara a hug, “Good luck. Try not to be an ass.”

Eugene doesn’t move towards them, but he says his goodbyes anyway. “You're both good people. I have to say that you are seriously hot, Tara.”

“Yeah, I like girls.” She says glancing over to Rosita.

“I'm well aware of that.” He says not ashamed for what he said.

“Say you get into trouble in there. You turn around. We're doubling back to the first road we crossed. Maybe you find us before we find the right ride.” Abraham offers before they all part ways.

“Thanks.” Glenn says before he and Tara head into the tunnel. “Hey. I know what you're going through. After this all started, after I realized I'd never see my family, my friends again, I was numb. All day long, just numb. I'm just saying I get it.”

“When Brian told us he wanted to take over the prison, I knew it sounded bad. When I found my girlfriend, she was dead. My niece. My sister, she was surrounded, pounced on. I saw it happen. But still, it wasn't as bad as seeing what he did to Maggie's father. Because that's when I knew. That second the sword-- I wanted to scream “no,” but it just happened. Brian said we might have to kill people. I was the first to jump in. I was just hanging on the “might.”

Back at the train depot Daryl and the others enter the building, the group spreading out to look for walkers while Daryl shut the door behind them.

“They ain't here. Nobody's been here for a while. Whoever was, they got all the gas.”

“That don't matter. We're getting closer. I can feel it.” Joe said.

Daryl uncovered one of the cars, not knowing who they were talking about, not really caring anyway. All of the men then claimed all of the cars, Daryl just shook his head as he laid down on the floor, it wasn’t the first time he’d slept there. He felt something poking him in his pocket, reaching in he pulled out the ring that he had gotten for Rayne on their last scavenge together.

Regret filled him as the ache in his heart returned, being with Beth had taken that ache away,
giving him something else to focus on. Now that she was gone that ache returned, worse than it had been before. He had to find Beth, he had to save her. He’d failed Rayne, he wouldn’t fail other person he cared about.

Inside the tunnel Glenn and Tara find that it was partially blocked by a rock slide, the only way through was a narrow path with live walkers. The dead were trapped in the rocks, still snarling and reaching out for anyone who passed by.

“The blood is still wet. This had to have happened today.” Tara said as she looked at Glenn.

“Hold this.” Glenn said handing the rifle to Tara. He pulled out his knife and made his way through the walkers, stabbing each one as he passed them. Then he and Tara climbed up on top of the rockslide, their eyes widening as they saw at least 20 walkers in the tunnel below them.

“Glenn. What are you doing?” Tara sais as Glenn got closer to the edge, shinning his flashlight over the dead.

“She's not one of them.”

“What?”

“There's no bodies on the ground. That means Maggie made it through. She made it through. We have to get rid of them.”

“We don't have enough ammo.”

“Then we'll push through.”

“We have to find another way.” Tara pleaded.

Up on the road Abraham and the others have managed to find a few cars that were in okay condition. In one van a walker slams against the window trying to escape from her confines. Abraham looks over his shoulder at Rosita, “You got him?” She nods as she stands beside Eugene.

“I got her.” He pulls out his knife and opens the door slightly, the walker lunges out and he shuts the door pinning it in place as he drives his knife up through the jaw into the brain. He drags the corpse out and starts the car, immediately rolling down the windows. “Gonna need to air this baby out.”

“Good, it'll give us some time to figure out how to get back on track.” Rosita says as she pulls out the map. “Yo, no, no.” She says as Eugene tries to take the map from her.

“I'm the navigator.” He states.

“Then learn to navigate. Remember Thompson?”
“I'm formally requesting a straight up do-over on that one. I guided us here from Houston to northern Georgia without incident.”

“I wouldn't say without incident.” Abraham chimes in.

Eugene nods, “Minimal incident. Navigation-wise, at least. Please? I cannot abide a reality where you are the chosen navigator over a son of the South who has successfully negotiated the travails and vagaries of journeys both real and virtual.”

“All right.” She says handing him the map. “We're going north. Got it?”

In the tunnel Glenn and Tara back down the rockslide into the tunnel, using their flashlight to draw the walkers to one side, they quietly make their way over the opposite side and down the rocks. Suddenly the rock that Tara was standing on rolls causing her to fall and trapping her ankle in between it and the wall.

In the car Rosita is arguing with Eugene about the directions he is giving her on where they are going. Abraham who was resting in the backseat has now woken up do to their bickering.

“Stop the van.” Eugene says.

Rosita does as he says and stops, looking around she realizes why they had stopped right there. “Liar. Ugh, liar!”

“Nope.”

“This wasn't your plan? Why you insisted on navigating? Why you told him to go to sleep?”

“Nope and I never claimed otherwise. Now how about you apologize for the slander and we call it square?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“If Glenn and Tara were still alive and there were no significant delays and they continued traveling at approximately three miles per hour and I timed it correctly in my head, they might be somewhere around here.”

“Those two are not the priority. The only priority is getting you to Washington.”

“After I save the world, I still have to live with myself.” Eugene tells her. “I'm not leaving them behind.”

Abraham had fallen back asleep until Eugene laid his seat back and slammed it into his face, he woke up with start. “Oh! Son of a bitch! Why the hell are we stopped?”

“If they made it out of that tunnel, they'd be somewhere around here.”
“You're kidding me, right? What's your problem?” Abraham says looking over at Rosita.

“My problem?” She says incredulously.

“You're the one in the driver's seat. You're the one who put your damn foot on the brake.”

“He told me to stop.”

“You don’t stop! You never stop!”

“I know the rules.”

“If you know the rules, the rule is never stop! When you stop—”

Eugene interrupts their fighting when he sees something out the right side of the car. “Guys! Guys!”

Daryl is still lying on the floor of the warehouse sucking a cinnamon stick, he can hear Len bitching as he goes through his stuff.

“You've got to be kidding me. Christ. Give it here.” He says stepping up to Daryl.

The hunter sits up quickly, “You step back.”

“My half was in the bag. Now it's gone. Now ain't nobody around here interested in no half a damn cottontail except you. Ain't that right?”

Daryl jumps to his feet to defend himself, “You're the only one still thinking about that crap.”

“Empty your bag.”

“I said step back.” Daryl snaps grabbing his bag out of Len’s reach.

Joe comes over to deal with the situation, hoping that no one was breaking his rules. “Did you take his rabbit, Daryl? Just tell me the truth.”

“I didn't take nothing.”

Joe empties out the bag and sure enough the head of the rabbit falls out onto the floor. “What do we got here? Come on. Well, look at that.”

“You put that there, didn't you? When I went out to take a piss. Didn't ya?” Daryl said shoving Len back.

“You lied. You stole. We gonna teach this fool or what, Joe, huh?” Len asks, he’s just been looking for an excuse to beat the shit out of Daryl.

“Whoa, whoa.” Joe says getting in between the two men. “Now, Daryl says he didn't take your half of the rabbit. So we got a little conundrum here. Either he's lying, which is an actionable offense, or, or you didn't plant it on him like some pussy, punk-ass, cheating, coward cop, did you? Cause while that wouldn't be specifically breaking the rules, it'd be disappointing.”
“It would. I didn't.”

“Good.” Joe then slams his elbow into Len's face knocking him to the ground. “Well teach him a lesson, gents. He's a lying sack of shit. I'm sick of it. Teach him all the way.” He turned around to look at Daryl, “I saw him do it.”

“Why didn't you try to stop him?”

“He wanted to play that out. I let him. You told the truth. He lied. You understand the rules. He doesn't. Looks like you get the head, too.”

In the tunnel Glenn is still trying to get Tara's foot out from under the rock. “Go. Go. Find Maggie. Go find Maggie.”

Glenn shakes his head, he can't just leave her here to die. “No, no. No.”

“Glenn, you can't save me. Even if you got this off me, I can't run. And if you help me, they're gonna get both of us.”

“There's got to be a way. There's got to be a different way. Glenn, they're coming.”

“I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving you!”

“Get out of here! Go!”

“No.” Glenn stands up and pulls out his gun, he takes out as many as he can before his clip runs dry, but the rest of them continue coming. “Come on! Come on!”

Suddenly the tunnel is flooded with light as a car screeches to a halt, six people get out and take aim at the walkers. “Get down!” One of them yells.

Glenn and Tara do as their told as the group opens fire on the walkers, cutting them to shreds in seconds. Glenn gets to his feet shielding his eyes against the headlight of the car, his breath catches as he sees Maggie standing in front of him.

“Oh, my God.” He whispers as he pulls her into his arms holding her tight.

“Hi.” She says with a laugh.

“Hi.”

The group sets up in the tunnel as night falls, building a fire and warming themselves up. Glenn smiles at Maggie as she stands beside him, “God, you are so beautiful.” She laughs at him, his attention then turning to Rosita who had returned from securing the entrance. “How'd it go?”

“End of the tunnel's secure. If anything tries to come in, we'll hear in plenty of time.”
“We didn't get to officially meet.” Maggie says holding out her hand to Tara.

“Oh, I'm sorry.” Glenn says as he introduces the two women. “Tara, this is Maggie. Maggie, Tara.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.” Tara says softly, before nodding over to Glenn. “He's a big fan of yours.”

“I met Tara on the road.” Glenn tells her. “Couldn't have made it here without her.”

Tara is surprised as Maggie gives her a hug, “Thank you.”

Glenn smirks at the two women, “When she heard what I was doing, she said she had to help me. She's just that kind of person.”

Tara smiles in gratitude at him for not telling the truth, she heads back over to the fire with everyone else. Glenn notices the look on Sasha’s face as he and Maggie walk up to the group. “What's up?”

Sasha stands up pointing first at Abraham then Eugene. “He just said that he knows what caused the outbreak.”

“Yeah. He does.” Glenn says. “Let me guess. He asked you to go to DC with him?”

“I'm downright tickled y'all found each other. Should spend the rest of the night celebrating. Because tomorrow there's absolutely no reason why the eight of us don't stuff ourselves in that van and head up to Washington.” Abraham says, his only concern getting Eugene where he needed to go.

“He's right. I'm gonna go.” Tara says.

“No, he's wrong.” Eugene says suddenly drawing everyone’s attention. “We're 55% of the way from Houston to Washington. Up until now, we've had an armored military vehicle for transport and we lost eight people.”

“That wasn't our fault.” Rosita says.

“They're gone.” Abraham reminds them both.

“I can't imagine we'd have better luck with that grocery grabber we picked up. We're a day's walk from Terminus. Who knows what they've got there?”

“Look, it couldn't hurt to check. Load up on supplies, maybe even recruit some of them to come with.” Rosita says, it was a plan and up until now they didn’t really have one.

“I'll go with you guys, but after. I have to see Terminus. My brother could be there. I got to know.” Sasha tells them.

“Me, too. On both counts.” Bob agrees.

“He tells me I'm wrong I listen.” Abraham says looking over at Eugene. “Tomorrow we go to the end of the line. Then Washington.”
Glenn and Maggie sat together talking about how it must have been fate that Abraham and his group and found all of them. “I can't believe it.” Maggie says.

“I know.”

“We were right over there. A whole swarm of them came at us. And we didn't have enough bullets. I tried to think what you would do if you were here. So I just emptied my clip into the ceiling and I hoped for the best.”

“That's unreal.” Glenn chuckles.

“Kind of like asking those guys to hold off saving the world while you go look for your wife?” Maggie teases him.

Glenn smiles, “I'm a persuasive guy.”

He gently covers Maggie up with a blanket, something falls to the ground and she picks it up, it’s the picture of her that Glenn had been carrying. She smiles over at him before grabbing her lighter to burn it.

Glenn snatches it from her fingers, “Whoa, hey. What are you doing? This is the only picture I have of you.”

“You don't need a picture of me. You never will again.”

He nods and holds the picture over the flame, the two of them watching it burn together.

Daryl wakes up the next morning to the sound of the door being slid open. He groans as he sits up rubbing his eyes against the light, then he sees the pool of blood on the floor from Len.

The group gathers their things up and head outside, Daryl notices that one of the other men has Len’s bow now and Len is nowhere to be found. As he grabs his things and walks outside, he lights up the cigar in his mouth, inhaling the cloves which relax him slightly. As he stands on the edge he sees Len’s body lying on the ground below him, his own arrow through his eye. With a look over at the rest of the group Daryl picks up a sheet to drape over his body, but after a moment he thinks against it and drops the sheet before walking off.

As he walks across a field beside Joe, the man hands him a flask. “White Lightning. Easiest thing to make with the least amount of supplies. I'd start slow if I was you. Your stomach's probably emptier than you think.”

“Mmm. I ain't been lit at dawn since before everything fell apart.” Daryl says as he takes a drink and hands the flask back.

“Fell apart. I never looked at it like that. Seems to me like things are finally starting to fall together. At least for guys like us. Living like this, surviving. We've been doing this from the start, right?”

They catch up with the guys up on the train tracks, they’re looking at a sign. “Getting closer.” One
of them says as they start heading down the tracks.

“You seen this before?” Daryl says looking at the map for Terminus.

“Oh, yeah.” Joe nods. “I'll tell you what it is. It's a lie. Ain't no sanctuary for all. Ain't gonna welcome guys like you and me with open arms.”

“So is that where we're headed?”

“So now you're asking?”

“That's right.” Daryl says.

“We were in a house minding our own business and this walking piece of fecal matter was hiding in the home. Strangled our colleague Lou and left him to turn. Lou came at all of us. He lit out. We tracked him to these tracks, one of those signs, and thus we've got a destination in mind.”

“You see his face?”

“Only Tony. That's enough for a reckoning.” Joe says.

The man named Tony stopped ahead of them, looking down at something on the tracks. Daryl saw what he was looking at and smirked, “Claimed.” He walked over and picked up the bush containing the strawberries, stuffing it into his bag. Daryl didn’t notice it but below him on the ground, in between the planks was a candy bar wrapper, a Big Cat.

GLENN, MAGGIE AND THE OTHER终于 reach Terminus, all of them smiling as they started for the gates, opening them and walking inside of the compound. They continue up to another gate with a sigh that reads, 'lower your weapons, you will be met, welcome to Terminus.' The continue through the gate Glenn and Maggie leading them, until they are met by a older woman bearing a pleasant smile as she cooks food on a grill.

“Hi. I'm Mary. Looks like you've been on the road a while.”

“We have.” Maggie says.

“Let's get you settled and we'll make you a plate. Welcome to Terminus.”
Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

So I know a lot of people love Carol, but I honestly can't stand her, so she won't be playing as big of a role in my story as she did in the show. Most of her somewhat badass moments, will be done by Rayne. I'm sorry if this pisses anyone off, but it's Rayne's story and she's my hero in this.

Thank you to ImaginationGoneWild and Cayla Johnston for the kudos and great reviews.

As always reviews are appreciated.

Enjoy the final chapter of Season 4!

In the woods Rick, Carl and Michonne have set up a temporary camp for the day. Carl is tending to the fire when Rick kneels down, a forked stick in his hand and a can of soup in between the forks.

“How hungry are you, scale of one to 10?” He asks his son.

“15.”

Rick looks over at Michonne who smirks, “28.”

“Yeah. Well, it's been a while. I'm gonna go check the snares.” Rick says as he stands up.

“Can I go with you?” Carl asks.

“Well, how else are you gonna learn? Hey, you, too.” He tells Michonne as the three of them head out to check the traps. “We'll stay another day or two. Get some more rest.”

“Finish healing up?” Michonne questions.

“I'm almost there.” Rick argues.

“We're close now, right? To Terminus?” Carl questions as he walks in between them, his hands in his jacket pockets.

“Yeah. We are.”

“When we get there, are we gonna tell them?”

“Tell them what?” Michonne asks the young boy.
“Everything that's happened to us. All the stuff we've done. Are we gonna tell them the truth?” Rick nods, “We're gonna tell them who we are.”

“But how do you say that?” Carl wonders looking between the two adults. “I mean— who are we?”

Rick doesn’t answer as he see a walker come out of the woods ahead of them. Both he and Carl draw their guns, but Michonne takes the kill, slicing the walker’s head off with her sword. They continue through the woods until they come upon the first snare, Rick kneeling down to retrieve the small rabbit.

“There you go. It's a small one. It'll do. So, this is just a simple slipknot. Tie one on both ends, then you tighten one side to a branch. Now, you see how the ground here is sort of like a funnel shape?” He says pointing to the sticks lined up on either side of the snare.

“It's a trail?” Carl guesses.

“That's right. That's where you want to set the noose. So you hide it with leaves. Then you put sticks all around it so any animals going by have to run this way right into the trap.”

Suddenly they hear somebody calling for help, Carl immediately gets to his feet and starts running towards the screaming. “Carl. Carl, stop! Carl!”

They come into a clearing where a lone man is surrounded by a herd of walkers, there’s no way they can help him with just the three of them. Rick grabs Carl and pull shim back behind the trees as the walkers attack, feasting on the man’s flesh. “We can't help him. We've got to go.” Rick says hurrying them off as the walkers take notice of their presence.

The run out of the woods and out onto a road at the edge of a town, there before them are three walkers. They pull out their weapons and take their chances with the three rather than the herd following them. They continue their quick place down the road, the herd falling further behind them.

Inside of a house down the street Rayne and Nico are raiding the cupboards when Nico notices his sister’s attention out the window. “What’s up?”

“Come here.” She says motioning him over beside her. “Look down there, bout a quarter mile, towards the train tracks.”

Nico does as she asks and sees what looks like a flash of light. “It’s like a reflection.”

A slow smile spreads across Rayne’s face as something dawns on her. “A glint, like off of a long blade. Like a… sword.”

“Thought maybe there'd be some houses down this way. Maybe even a store.” Michonne says as
they walk down the road, the leaves crunching under their feet. “There’s got to be some food around here somewhere.”

“Hey, look.” Carl says seeing a truck on the road in front of them.

They go to check it out when they hear an engine coming down the road behind them, the three quickly duck in the back of the SUV. Rick hears the truck come to a stop beside the SUV and he momentarily panics not knowing if these were friends or foes. But his terror subsides when he hears a female voice call out his name, “Rick.”

He stands up and moves around the back of the SUV, his breath catching as laughter bubbles out of his chest. “Rayne.” He quickly envelops her into his arms, the two of them laughing together.

Rayne is then nearly knocked off her feet as Carl leaps onto her like spider monkey. “Haha, hey kid. I missed you.”

She lets go of him and smiles at Michonne before the two women hug, both of them giggling together like little kids.

Rayne steps back from them, she sees their stares going between her and the man standing on her right. “Rick, Carl, Michonne. This is Nico… My brother.”

By the time night fell the group had gotten to know Nico, they were amazed that he had found Rayne, but even more so that Rayne and he had found them. The only thing they could come up with, is that it was fate.

As it grew later in the night Carl lays down in the passenger seat to try and sleep, while Michonne and Rick sit out front by the small fire they had built. Rayne and Nico had volunteered to head into the woods to hunt, nighttime was the best for finding game.

“That was one small rabbit.”

“It was something. Got to hand it to the thing. It traveled well.” Michonne said with a smile.

“Have you noticed that's all we talk about anymore? Food. I forgot what this feels like.”

“Me, too. I hope we're able to forget again soon.”

“We're close. Just got to make it through another day. If folks there are taking people in, they have to be strong.” He says as he puts out the fire with the heel of his boot. “They have to have a system.”

“I wonder if the whole thing's legit.”

“We let people in.” Rick tells her.

“We did. So did the Governor.” She reminds him of how well that turned out.

“Yeah, it's always the same, isn't it? Don't get to know until we know. Maybe this place isn't even there anymore.”
Suddenly there was a gun placed against Rick’s temple, “Oh, dearie me. You screwed up, asshole. You hear me? You screwed up.”

Rick and Michonne find themselves surround by a group of men, the same men that had invaded the house Rick was staying in.

“Today is a day of reckoning, sir. Restitution. A balancing of the whole damn universe. Shit, and I was thinking of turning in for the night on New Year's Eve. Now who's gonna count down the ball dropper with me, huh? Ten Mississippi. Nine Mississippi. Eight Mississippi.

“Joe! Hold up.” Daryl says as he come around the back of the SUV, he had seen Rayne’s truck as they came out of the woods, but she wasn’t anywhere near it. He nearly cried when he saw Rick and Michonne kneeling on the ground in front of him.

“You're stopping me on eight, Daryl.”

“Just hold up.”

“This is the guy that killed Lou, so we got nothing to talk about.” One of the men said, referring to the man that Rick had strangled with a belt.

“The thing about nowadays is we got nothing but time.” Joe says. “Say your piece, Daryl.”

“These people, you're gonna let 'em go. These are good people.”

“Now, I think Lou would disagree with you on that. I'll, of course, have to speak for him and all 'cause your friend here strangled him in a bathroom.”

“You want blood, I get it.” Daryl says dropping his bow to the ground. “Take it from me, man. Come on.”

“This man killed our friend. You say he's good people. See, now that right there is, is, is a lie. It's a lie!”

“Come on.” The other two men grab Daryl and start beating the shit out of him.

“Teach him, fellas. Teach him all the way.”

One of the other man opens the door to the truck and grabs Carl, “Come here, boy.” He drags him out and puts a knife to his throat.

“You leave him be!” Rick snaps looking at his son.

“You'll get yours. You just wait your turn.” Tony says as Michonne starts to get up.

“Listen, it was me. It was just me.” Rick says trying to take all of the blame for killing their friend.

“See, now that's right. That's not some damn lie. Look, we can settle this. We're reasonable men.” Joe says as he watches his boys continue to beat down Daryl. “First, we're gonna beat Daryl to death. Then we'll have the girl. Then the boy. Then I'm gonna shoot you and then we'll be square.”

In a split second both of the men beating down Daryl drop to the ground, a bullet lodged in each of their skulls. Joe, Tony and the fat man look around not knowing where the shots came from, but then they see two people stepping out from the woods in front of them.

“Let the boy go.” Rayne growls as she points her gun at the fat man that has Carl on the ground,
his heavy body straddling him. She knows exactly what that man wants to do to Carl and her blood
boils with the thought. “I said, let… the boy… go. Or we’re gonna blow your hillbilly brains all
over the fuckin’ road.”

“Whoa, easy there sweetheart.” Joe says as he looks her over. “Well, aren’t you just the sweetest
looking piece of ass. Now, I don’t think you’re in a position to threaten us just now.”

“6 of us, 3 of you, I’d say the odds are in our favor.” Nico says his gun trained on Joe’s head.

“Well, now son, maybe you missed the guns pointed to your friend’s heads right now. I’d say we
have the advantage.”

“Advantage?” Rayne says. She’s locks her eyes with Rick who flicks his eyes to the two men
behind him and Michonne. She knows what he wants to do and she sends him a nod. “You have
two high-powered sniper rifles pointed at your heads, capable of firing a bullet at 1000 feet per
second, and we’re both very good at headshots. Does that sound like an advantage for you… or
us?”

The man Joe doesn’t make a sound, she can see his eyes flicking between his two other men.
“That’s right, us. So, let me tell you what’s gonna happen right now. My brother and I are gonna
put a bullet through both of your heads, and then my friend there, is gonna filet your fat fuck friend
like a piece of sushi.”

Less than a second later Joe and Tony drop to the ground, a bloody hole between their eyes. Rick
stands up and advances on the man holding Carl, the man shoves the boy to the side and grabs
Rick around his arms trying to subdue him. But Rick leans and bites off a chunk of the man’s
throat. The man gasps, blooding gurgling out of his throat as Rick pulls out his knife and jams it
into the man’s stomach, ripping the knife upwards and fileting the man open up to his neck just as
Rayne said.

Once the men were dead Rayne, Nico and Daryl loaded their bodies up in her truck and took them
away so that Carl didn’t have to see them. They took them down the road a ways and dropped them
off, let the walkers pick at their corpses, they deserved that and more.

When they got back to the truck it was near dawn, Rayne went to check on Carl, while Daryl and
Nico went through the men’s things.

“You know, I don’t know you, Daryl.” Nico said to the hunter. “All I know is what Rayne’s told
me.”

“What did she tell you?” Daryl asked wanting to know if he had to worry about Nico beating his
ass, or shooting him.

“Everything.” He could see Daryl flinch which made him smile internally. “That you’re a good
man, and she loves you.”

Daryl frowned as he glanced over his shoulder at Rayne, “She ain’t never said it.”

Nico chuckled, “Don’t take it to heart. My sister’s been let down a lot in her life, it takes a lot for
her to say those words, to anybody. But when she does say them, she doesn’t do so lightly. I don’t
know Carol personally, just what my sister’s told me, and she doesn’t have a bad word to say about the woman. Typical Rayne, never say a mean word about anybody no matter her thoughts on them. My sister is one of a kind, they’ll never be another like her. Carol may be a good woman, but she’ll never be half the woman my sister is.”

Oblivious to the brotherly talk Nico is having with Daryl, Rayne takes a bottle of water over to Rick, wetting down a rag and handing it to him.

“We should save it to drink.”

“We’ll survive.” She said with a smirk. “And if you could see yourself right now, you’d agree with me, boss.”

With a small smile he took the rag from her and started to clean the blood off of his face. While they were sitting there Daryl and Nico joined them, the group sitting on the ground around Rick.

“I didn't know what they were.” Daryl said feeling horrible, he had brought this down on his family.

“How'd you wind up with them?” Rick asked.

“I was with Beth. We got out together. I was with her for a while.”

“Is she dead?” Rayne questions seeing the pitfall look on Daryl’s face.

“She's just gone. After that, that's when they found me. I mean, I knew they were bad, but they had a code. It was simple. Stupid, but it was something. It was enough.”

“And you were alone.”

“They said they were looking for some guy. Last night they said they spotted him. I was hanging back. I was gonna leave. But I stayed. That's when I saw it was you three. Right when you saw me. I didn't know what they could do.”

“It's not on you, Daryl.” Rick tells him. “Hey. It's not on you. You being back with us here, now, that's everything. You're my brother.”

Daryl nodded, if felt good to have a brother again, one that he could count on. “Hey, what you did last night anybody would have done that.”

“No, not that.”

“Something happened. That ain't you.”

“Daryl, you saw what I did to Tyreese. It ain't all of it, but that's me. That's why I'm here now. That's why Carl is. I want to keep him safe. That's all that matters.”
After getting Rick cleaned up they loaded into Rayne’s truck, she was driving with Carl sitting in between her and Nico up front. Daryl and Rick sat in the back by the windows with Michonne in between them.

“You okay?” Rick asked Michonne as they drove.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“I'm okay.” He said with a smile.

“I know.”

“How?”

She smiled, “Cause I'm okay, too.”

“We're getting close. Be there before sundown.” Daryl said as they passed another sign for Terminus.

“Na, we park the truck, head through the woods.” Rayne says her eyes finding Rick’s in the mirror. “We don't know who they are.”

Rayne parked the truck a few miles away, the group getting out and making their way through the woods to the fence surrounding the property.

“All right. We all spread out, watch for a while, see what we see, and get ready. We all stay close. You want to stick with me?” Rick asks his son.

“It's all right.” Carl says before he walks off with Michonne, clearly what his father had done had traumatized him, even if he was protecting him.

“Nico and I are gonna stay out here on the perimeter, when you say it’s clear, then we’ll get the truck and come in.” Rayne says as she stands with the men.

“Why don’t we all go in together?” Rick questions.

“If… something goes wrong. If something happens. We can’t all be trapped in there, Rick.”

He nods, her reasoning made sense to him, even if he doesn’t like it. “Alright. You two be careful. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“Never gonna happen.” She smiled kissing his cheek before he walked off.

She turned to go with her brother when Daryl caught her arm, “Rayne. I’m sorry.” She turned back to him, she could see that he wanted to say something else, but he couldn’t find the words. She nodded giving him her best smile, which wasn’t much at that point. “It’s okay. Water under the bridge, Dixon.”

He watched her walk off, but her words didn’t make him feel any better. She’d called him Dixon, not Daryl, not D. It was clear that things weren’t just water under the bridge.
Daryl caught up with Rick as he was burying their bag full of weapons, the man looking up at him, “Just in case.”

They climbed over the back fence and went into one of the buildings. Inside they found a woman broadcasting their message over the radio, and other making more maps to hang up.

“Hello.” Rick says catching the people’s attention.

One of the men tosses down his paintbrush with a sigh, “Well, I bet Albert is on perimeter watch. You here to rob us?”

“No. We wanted to see you before you saw us.” Rick tells them as they put their weapons away.

“Makes sense. Usually we do this where the tracks meet. Ahem. Welcome to Terminus. I'm Gareth. Looks like you've been on the road for a good bit.”

“We have. Rick. That's Carl, Daryl, Michonne.”

“You're nervous. I get it. We were all the same way. We came here for sanctuary. That what you're here for?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You found it. Hey, Alex. This isn't as pretty as the front. We got nothing to hide, but welcome wagon is a whole lot nicer. Alex will take you, ask you a few questions. Uh, but first, we need to see everyone's weapons. If you could just lay them down in front of you.”

“All right.” Rick nods as they take out their weapons and set them on the ground.

“I'm sure you understand.”

“Yes, I do.” Rick says as they all hold up their arms for a pat down.

“I'd hate to see the other guy.” The guy patting down Daryl says after seeing his bruising face.

“You would.” Rick tells him.

“They deserve it?” He asks as he pats down Carl, the kid having a large scrape on his cheek.

“Yes.” Carl answers.

“Just so you know, we aren't those kind of people, but we aren't stupid either. And you shouldn't be stupid enough to try anything stupid. As long as everyone's clear on that, we shouldn't have any problems. Just solutions.” Gareth tells them. “Okay.”

“Follow me.” Alex says as he hands them back their weapons.

“So how long's this place been here?” Daryl asks as they follow Alex out of the building and into the courtyard.

“Since almost the start. When all the camps got overrun, people started finding this place. I think it
was instinct, you know? Follow a path. Some folks were heading to the coast, others out west or up north, but they all wound up here.”

“Hi. Heard you came in the back door. Smart. You'll fit right in here.” The woman standing behind the grill said.

“Hey, Mary, would you fix each of these new folks a plate for me?” Alex asks her.


“The more people become a part of us, we get stronger. That's why we put up the signs, invite people in. It's how we survive.” He hands a plate of food to Carl and Michonne.

Rick however is looking around the courtyard at the people there, he keeps seeing things that are familiar to him. Like the riot gear on one of the men, a poncho on another, a bag that looked like Glenn’s. He stepped up to Alex, eyeing a chain in his pocket, he grabbed the watch and placed his gun to the man’s head. “Where the hell did you get this watch?”

Daryl, Michonne and Carl all raised their weapons as well covering the people standing near them.

“Where the hell did you get this watch?” Rick reiterated once more.

“You want answers? You want anything else? You get 'em when you put down the gun.” Alex stuttered.

“I see your man on the roof with a sniper rifle. How good's his aim? Where'd you get the watch? Where'd you get the watch?!”

“Don't do anything! I have this!” Alex yelled to the man on the roof. “You just put it down. You put it down! You want to listen to me. There's a lot of us.”

“Where did you get the watch?”

“I got it off of a dead one. I didn't think he'd need it.”

“What about the riot gear? The poncho?”

“Got the riot gear off a dead cop. Found the poncho on a clothesline.” Gareth says as he walks up to them.

“Gareth, we can wait.”

“Shut up, Alex.”

“You talk to me.” Rick tells him.

“What's there left to say? You don't trust us anymore. It's okay. It's okay. Rick, what do you want?”

“Where are our people?”

“You didn't answer the question.” Gareth says before he closes his hand, his indication for them to open fire on the group.

“Carl! Get down, now! Go!” Rick shoves them towards one of the buildings, the group following Daryl as shots ring out from above.
“Shit!” Rayne curses as she watches the scene through her scope.

“Let’s go help.” Nico tells her as he picks up his things.

“No, wait.” She says grabbing his arm to stop him. “Look, they’re not shooting at them. They’re shooting around them.” She sees his confused face as he lifts his rifle and looks through the scope. “They’re not trying to kill them. They’re herding them, forcing them to go where they want.”

“And where’s that?”

“I don’t know, we gotta move. We need a new vantage point.” They quickly get up and run down the fence line.

Rick and the others enter a room covered in burning candles, they’re names written on the floor, like a shrine. “What the hell is this place?”

“These people, I don’t think they’re trying to kill us.” Michonne says.

“No, they were aiming at our feet.” Rick says pointing at another door across the room “There. There. Go!”

They run out of the building coming to an immediate halt by a train car as a line of men and women with guns appear outside of the fence line. “Drop your weapons! Now! Now!” Gareth calls from the top of the roof. “Ringleader, go to your left. The train car, go. You do what we say, the boy goes with you. Anything else, he dies and you end up in there anyway.”

Rick does what he’s told and walks over to the car.

“Now the archer. Now the samurai. Stand at the door, ringleader, archer, samurai, in that order.”

“My son!”

“Go, kid. Ringleader, open the door and go in.”

“I’ll go in with him.”

“Don't make us kill him now.”

Rick opens the door and walks into the car followed by the rest of them, then the door is shut behind them and locked. They turn when they hear footsteps behind them, they turn to find Glenn walking across the car.

“Rick?”

“You're here. You're here.” He says as Maggie, Sasha, Bob and the others walk up behind Glenn.
Maggie sees the look Rick gives to Tara in particular, he recognizes her as one from the Governors attack. “They’re our friends. They helped save us.”

“Yeah. Now they're friends of ours.” Daryl says in agreement.

“For however long that'll be,” Abraham states.

“No. They're gonna feel pretty stupid when they find out.” Rick says.

“Find out what?”

“They're screwing with the wrong people.” Rick starts to chuckle then, the rest of them looking at him as if he’s crazy.

“What’s so funny?” Glenn asks, there wasn’t anything funny about this situation.

Rick stops laughing but his face holds a vicious grin as he looks at his family, “We came here with 6 people… there’s two of us missing.”
The following day was a tense one as Rick and the group got prepared to go to war once again. There were a few conversations going on between some members as they fashioned weapons out of their belts, pieces of wood and anything they could find in and around the train car.

“They seemed nice enough, but I was ready to go. We just got here, but, damn, it was time to go. When I told them about DC, a wink and a nod from the head asshole in charge, they pulled their guns and it was right back to our regularly scheduled shit-storm.” Abraham was telling Michonne and Sasha how he came in contact with their group.

“Before they put you in here, you didn't see Tyreese?” Sasha asked.

Michonne shook her head as she rewrapped the spare hilt for her katana, “No.”

“Good.” Sasha was glad to know that her brother was still out there alive and well.

“Black car with a white cross painted on it. I tried to follow it. I tried.” Daryl told Maggie, trying to explain why Beth was not with them.

“But she's alive?” Maggie asked hopeful.

Daryl nodded, “She's alive.”
Daryl was standing by the door, peeking out of the crack, outside he could hear radio chatter and men talking. “All right, got four of them pricks coming our way.”

Rick stood up and took his place by the door beside Daryl. “Y’all know what to do. Go for their eyes first. Then their throats.”

“Put your backs to the walls on either end of the car now.” A man said, his voice muffled as he stood outside the train car door.

The group stayed where they were readying for a fight, when Glenn heard footsteps on the roof. He looked up as light flooded the car from an open hatch, then something metal hit the floor at their feet.

“Move!” Abraham yelled as the smoke bomb went off, blanketing the car in a hazy cloud that had them all coughing in seconds.

Several of them were drug out the door and slammed down onto the concrete by men wearing gas masks. Bob, Rick, Daryl and Glenn were brought into a large room, gagged with their hands and feet zip tied behind them. They were dropped to their knees with their upper bodies leaning over a large trough, alongside four other men that they didn’t recognize were at the far end to Glenn’s left.

Through their haze left by the smoke bomb they could hear the sound of an electric knife slicing through something soft and audibly wet from the sounds. As his head cleared up Rick could see two men slicing into the naked body of what was once a young man, the blood pooling onto the floor beneath the metal table the body was lying on, as they carved him up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Their attention then turned to two men walking up behind the group of men at the far end, one holding a metal bat and the other a large machete. Rick and the others felt panic set in as the first man on the end was bashed in the head by the one man and then had his throat slit by the other. His blood spilling out into the trough and running down through a drain in front of Rick and Bob. They continued onto the next man, Rick realized they only had precious minutes before the two worked their way down to Glenn.

Another man that they remembered meeting at the beginning of all of this walked in holding a pen and paper. “Hey, guys. What were your shot counts?”

“38.” The guy with the bat answered casually as he wacked the guy to Glenn’s left on the head with a resounding thud.

Glenn clenched his teeth as he awaited his fate, but as the guy was rearing back to deliver the blow, Gareth’s voice stopped him. “Hey! Your shot count?”

The other guy holding the machete tossed up his hands, “Crap, man, I'm sorry. It was my first roundup.”

“After you're done here, go back to your point and count the shells. Kaylee won't be gathering them until tomorrow.”

“Hey. Hey, let me talk to you.” Bob muffled through his gag.

“Four from A, four from D?” Gareth said as he wrote it down in his book.
“Hey, let me talk to you for a minute. Let me talk to you for a minute. Let me talk to you for a minute.” Bob again mumbled through the gag.

Gareth conceded and pulled the gag off, “What?”

“Don't do this. We can fix this.”

“No, you can't.”

“You don't have to do this. We told you there's a way out of all this. You just have to take a chance. We have a man who knows how to stop it. He has a cure. We just have to get him to Washington. You don't have to do this, man. We can put the world back to how it was.”

“Can't go back, Bob.”

“We can! You don't have to do this!” Bob hollered as Gareth put the gag back in his mouth.

Gareth leaned down in front of Rick, reaching across the trough he pulled the gag from Rick’s mouth, then wiped the spit off on Rick’s jacket. “We saw you go into the woods with a bag and come out without it. Had to pull my spotters back before we could go look for it. What was in it? You hid it, right? In case things went bad? Smart. Still, we'll find it. But it's too dangerous to go out there right now.”

Gareth pulls out his knife and grabs Bob by the neck forcing him to lean over and placing the tip of the knife at his throat. Then he calmly looked back up at Rick, “What was in it? I'm curious. And it was a big bag. You really gonna let me do this?”

“Well, let me take you out there. I'll show you.” Rick says nodding to the door.

“Not gonna happen. This might.” Gareth said pointing the tip of the knife at Bob’s eye.

Rick sighed, “There's guns in it. AK-47. .44 Magnum. Automatic weapons. Night-scope. There's a compound bow and a machete with a red— red handle. That's what I'm gonna use to kill you.”

Gareth chuckles not knowing what Rick and his friends were capable of as he re-sheathes his knife and places Rick’s gag back in his mouth. “Thanks. You have two hours to get them on the driers. I'm gonna go back to public face. Now's the time we can get messy, but we need to dial it all in by sundown.”

“Got it.” “Yes, sir.” Both of the men say nodding.

Gareth pauses for a moment as he hears what he thinks are gunshots, he pulls out his radio. “Hey, Chuck?” There’s no answer on the radio.

They all hear another gunshot and then the entire building is rocked by an explosion.

What Gareth didn’t know was that the bag containing the guns that Rick had buried was no longer in the ground. At that moment it was wrapped around Nico’s strong back as he and Rayne made their way around the fence-line. They had taken the night to formulate a plan for extracting their group safely, the only casualties being allowed would be the Terminus members that opposed them.
That morning they had seen Rick, Bob, Daryl and Glenn being taken into the building, the two of them guessing it wasn’t to welcome them back into the fold. Rayne set her sights on the only thing that was large enough for a distraction, a massive propane tank.

“Shit! Ray we gotta hurry.” Nico said gaining his twin’s attention and motioning to a very large herd of walkers heading for the front gates.

“Fuck!” Rayne said with a sigh. “There’s got to be at least 100, maybe more down the road. We gotta do this now. You ready?”

Nico nodded as he shouldered his rifle, “On your call sis.”

Before Rayne could level her bow she heard a branch snapping behind her, whipping around she nearly embedded an arrow into Carol’s eye as she scrambled up the embankment towards the siblings. Out of everyone that could have ran into Rayne at that moment, it had to be Carol, the one thing standing between Rayne and the man she loved.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Rayne asked seeing Carol covered in walker entrails, much like Rick and Glenn had been when she first met them.

“I was at a small cabin down the way with Tyreese and Judith when I heard all the gunshots and thought maybe it was someone from our group.”

“It is. They’ve got a lot of our people, but we’re gonna get them out.” Rayne said motioning to her brother.

“Who’s he?” Carol asked giving a disdainful look to the young man.

Rayne scoffed biting back her anger, “He’s my brother, Nico. That’s Carol.”

Nico gave the woman a nod, he knew who she was as his sister had told him about how Daryl had chosen her over his sister. Looking at her now Nico couldn’t help but wonder, what the fuck was Daryl thinking when he did that?

“So what are we gonna do?” Carol asked.

“We…” Rayne said pointing between her brother and herself. “Are going to create a distraction and then we’re gonna go in and get our people the hell out of there.”

“What kinda distraction?”

“A big one.” Nico said nodding to the tank.

Carol’s eyes widened at what they were suggesting, especially now that she saw the large herd bearing down on the gates. “You can’t do that. That’ll attract even more walkers. You’ll never get them out alive.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you Carol, our people could be dying right now and we are their only hope. So, stay the fuck out of my way or I’ll put you down without a second thought.” Rayne snapped before she took out her lighter and lit the rag on the end of her arrow.

Nodding to Nico, Rayne took aim with her bow carefully positioning the arrow through the chain-link fence. Nico nodded back and fired two shots with his high powered rifle piercing the side of the tank, the gas expelling quickly in a white cloud. Drawing the bow back Rayne let the arrow fly straight into the cloud, the flame quickly igniting the gas and rocking Terminus with a massive
Rayne and Nico smiled afterwards, not only had the explosion taken out several walkers, but it had drawn the herd towards the sound. Within a minute the herd was clamoring through the hole in the fence the explosion had made and trickling into the compound.

“Let’s go.” Rayne said as she stood up and clipped her bow to her backpack, opting for her kukris instead. She would take out the few walkers in their way, while Nico would take out the threats inside.

“What should I do?” Carol asked hesitantly.

Rayne turned around and looked at her as if she was stupid, she hadn’t expected the woman to be gung-ho to burst in and rescue their group, but she had at least expected her to try. “Just stay here and try not to get yourself killed. We got this.”

A man’s voice comes over the radio as Gareth is picking himself up off of the floor. “Hey, what the hell was that? Gareth, do you copy?”

“You stay here.” He says heading for the door.

“Gareth, these guys aren't going anywhere.”

“Stay here until I know what's happening.” Gareth snapped as he left the room.

“So we just sit here?”

“Got a job to do.” The one man said picking up his bat, not realizing that Rick had a piece of wood in his hand and was quickly sawing at the zip-tie holding his hands.

Outside Rayne and Nico waited a moment letting the walkers do their dirty work for them, before they ran for the now empty front gates and scaled them, dropping down inside of the compound. It was a good plan as the building where Rick and the others had been taken to was on the far left side, far enough away from the walkers to give them time to get out before the herd reached them.

Inside the room the two men are now arguing, which is giving Rick ample time to get loose.

“You there, Gareth?” The one with the machete calls over the radio.

“He's busy.”
“You smell the smoke? You hear the shots? He could be dead. The hell we doing here? The whole place could be going up.”

“You went on one roundup and you blew protocol. We don't deal with security. That ain't our job. This is. Hey, look at me.”

“What?” The guy with the machete turns in time to see Rick, now free, stab the piece of wood into the side of the guy’s neck. “No, no, no, no!” He yells as Rick advances on him and administers the same treatment to him, stabbing the wood into his jugular.

Outside in the train car the rest of the group is trying to peer out the door to find out what is happening. Abraham slams his fists on the door, “What the hell is going on?”

“Someone hit them.” Rosita said.

“Maybe our people got free.” Sasha said hoping.

“Excuse me.” Eugene says as he pushes past Maggie and Sasha, kneeling down to the bottom of the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” Rosita asks him.

“I might be able to use this shell to compromise the door. From the sound of things, there may not be anybody left to open it.”

“Eugene, I'm sorry, but shut up.” Tara snaps.

“Hey.” Carl says walking up and trying to diffuse the tension some. “My dad's gonna be back. They all are. Rayne and her brother are still out there, they’re gonna come for us.”

“They are.” Maggie agrees with the kid. “And we need to get ready to fight our way out with them when they do.”

Out in the yard Rayne and Nico make their way towards the building in the back, Nico picking off the Terminus people with his rifle and Rayne slicing the walkers up with her kukris.

In the building Rick sets Glenn, Daryl and Bob free from their bindings. “If they got problems, we got a chance.”

“It sounded like a bomb.” Glenn comments taking off his gag.
“Sounds like a damn war.” Daryl snarks getting up and taking off his restraints.

“Right there.” Rick says pointing to the table with knives and blades.

“What the hell are these people?” Bob asks as he sees the half cut up body of the young man on the table.

“They ain't people.” Daryl says picking up a large knife.

Rick sees Bob moving to stab the dead body in the head, “Don't. Let him turn.”

They make their way through the building towards the back, their stomachs churning as they see body parts, stripped of flesh hanging up on hooks like dead animals. “Cross any of these people, you kill them. Don't hesitate. They won't.”

Daryl drops the knife and opts to break off a piece of steel pipe, it felt better to him to handle than the small knife.

Rick and Glenn glance out the cracked back door, seeing four walkers crowded around the back of a container, they can hear people inside screaming for help.

“If we run, we can get by them. They're distracted.”

“We got to let those people out. That's still who we are. It's got to be.” Glenn says.

The other nod and burst out the back door, this draws the walkers attention to them instead of the container. The four of them take out the walkers and Glenn opens the door, a wild haired man with his face covered in tattoos runs out into Rick screaming.

“We're the same! We're them!”

“Back off!” Rick says shoving the man away from him.

The man laughs, clearing insane by now, until a walker slams into him from the side and bites a chuck out of his neck. Glenn realizing it was his fault, steps up and bashes the metal bat in his hand down onto the guy’s head. Daryl grabs him and pulls him back behind the container before the other walkers can see him.

As a group of walkers bears down on them, Rayne and Nico duck into a building on their right. Inside Rayne finds table of personal items, watches, stuffed animals, all belonging to people that Terminus had killed. She closes her eyes for a moment saying a small prayer for the innocents that had died, when she opens them she smiles as her eyes fall on something sitting on a table to her right.

Nico sees his sister walk over to a table and pick up a large black and green camo crossbow, he knows a compound was always her style, so that must belong to one of her people. “Whose is that?”

He sees the sad smile that crosses her face as she slips the sling over her head, settling the bow on her back. “Daryl’s.”
Outside by the container the four men suddenly hear rapid gunfire, the walkers blocking their way start to fall in rapid succession. Rick realizes he needs to know if the shooters are friends or foes, “Wait here.”

“Rick. Rick!” Daryl snaps as Rick runs forward and takes cover behind a car to the left.

Rick looks down at a the car mirror on the ground, in it he can see the reflection of the Terminus people coming his way. His head whips around as a walker stumbles up behind him, but before he can react, Daryl runs up and stabs the sharp end of the pipe down through the back of the walker’s head.

The two men nod at one another in understanding, they wait until the last man moves past them, then Rick runs up and stabs the man in the neck before taking his gun. Rick then opens fire on the four others ahead of him, before sweeping around and making sure there are no more coming. “We're going to have to double back.” He tells the others before they head back the way they came.

Rayne and Nico end up in a building lined with hundreds of candles, there is writing on the wall with the words, “NEVER AGAIN NEVER TRUST WE FIRST ALWAYS.” Looking down on the floor Rayne sees names written over the expanse of it as if the two of them were standing in a memorial.

“Drop your weapons and turn around.” They hear from behind them as a gun cocks. “I want to see your face. Now!”

Rayne and Nico both drop the weapons in their hands, before Rayne slides Daryl’s crossbow off her shoulders and places it down as well as her backpack with her bow attached. The person standing behind them wasn’t very smart it seemed though, being as they didn’t request that Rayne take off her thigh holsters that held her Beretta and Glock.

As Rayne turned to her left to face the woman behind her, she slid her Beretta out of the right holster, and quickly brought it up firing a round into the woman’s shoulder. The woman dropped the gun and fell to the floor with a yelp. Rayne walked over to her, kicking the gun away as Nico picked up their things.

The woman stumbled to her feet seeing Rayne with a gun pointed at her head and a venomous look on her face. This was Mary, the one who controlled the entirety of Terminus. Mary sighed before she tried to explain herself, not knowing that Rayne could care less about her reasons for killing people.

“The signs they were real. It was a sanctuary. People came and took this place.”

“Just tell me where—”

“And they raped and they killed and they laughed over weeks. But we got out and we fought and
we got it back. And we heard the message. You're the butcher or you're the cattle.”

Rayne heard what the woman was saying, she understood all too well, but that was no justification for taking advantage of people coming there thinking they’d be safe. “The men they pulled from that train car, where are they?”

The woman refused to answer so Rayne fired another shot, this time into the woman’s thigh dropping her to her back on the floor. “Where are they?!”

“Now point it at my head.” She said with a laugh. “You could have been one of us. You could have listened to what the world is telling you.”

“You lead people here and you take what they have and you kill them? Is that what this place is?” Nico asked.

“No, not at first. It's what it had to be. And we're still here.”

“You're not here. Neither am I.” Rayne stated before placing the gun back into her holster, then shouldering her backpack and Daryl’s bow, and picking up her kukris.

Nico followed her over to the door and hid to the side quietly as Rayne shoved it open and backed up beside him. Four walkers stumbled into the room, the woman’s screams bringing them to her allowing the twins to slip out the door quickly.

Inside the train car the others are still fashioning weapons, they can hear the walkers snarling just outside the doors. Michonne is tying a piece of wood to the spare hilt for her katana, across from her Sasha is sharpening a piece of metal against the floor when she looks up at Eugene.

“What's the cure, Eugene?” Sasha questions.

“It's classified.” He grumbles as he continues to mess with the shell in his hand at the bottom of the door.

“We don't know what's gonna happen.” Michonne says.

“You leave him be.” Abraham warns.

“We need to keep working.” Maggie says interjecting into the conversation.

“Yeah, but it's time to hear it. Cause we don't know what's coming next.” Sasha states.

“What's next is we get out of this.” Tara tells them all.

“Even if I told you all, even if I provided step-by-step instructions complete with illustrations and a well-composed FAQ and I went red-ring, the cure would still die with me.”

“I'm not gonna let that happen.” Abraham assures him.

Eugene nods to his comrade. “The best-case scenario, we step out into a hell storm of bullets, fire, and walkers. I'm not fleet of foot. I sure as hell can't take a dead one down with sharp buttons and hella confidence.”
“Yeah, but we can and we will.” Michonne says trying to make him feel better.

“You don't owe us anything. Not yet. But we just want to hear it.” Sasha says imploring the man, they needed to hear some piece of good news right now.

“You don't have to.” Rosita tells him.

“I was part of a 10-person team at the Human Genome Project to weaponize diseases to fight weaponized diseases. Pathogenic microorganisms with pathogenic microorganisms. Fire with fire. Interdepartmental drinks were had, relationships made, information shared. I am keenly aware of all the details behind fail-safe delivery systems to kill every living person on this planet. I believe with a little tweaking on the terminals in DC, we can flip the script. Take out every last dead one of them. Fire with fire. All things being equal, it does sound pretty badass.”

“So let's get back to work.” Maggie says.

Just then they hear banging on the door and a moment later is slides open revealing Rick, Daryl, Bob and Glenn surrounded by a shit ton of walkers. “Come on! Fight to the fence!”

The group files out of the car making their way towards the fence behind Rick, they move in a group keeping Eugene in the center of them, taking out the walkers impeding their forward progress. They make it to the fence, Rosita picks up a blanket left on the ground and tosses it over the barbwire on the top, “Come on. Let's go! Up and over.”

Once everyone was over the fence to safety, the group heads back to where Rick had buried the bag, not aware that it wasn’t there anymore. “The hell are we still around here for?” Abraham questions.

“Guns, some supplies. Go along the fences. Use the rifles. Take out the rest of 'em.”

“What?” Glenn says.

“They don't get to live.” Rick states plainly.

“Rick, we got out. It's over.” Glenn says trying to reason with him.

“It's not over till they're all dead.”

“The hell it isn't. That place is on fire.” Rosita mentions as if it wasn’t clear to them. Full of walkers.”

“I'm not dicking around with this crap. We just made it out.” Abraham says shaking his head.

“The fences are down. They'll run or die.” Maggie tells him.

At that moment Carol walks out of the woods, Daryl turns and sees her, a relieved smile crossing his face as he runs to her and wraps her in a hug picking her hug and swinging her around.

Unbeknownst to them all Rayne and Nico had come up behind them, the huntress watching the emotional exchange between Carol and her now ex who was damn near in tears at seeing the woman. Rayne bit her lip forcing back the tears in her eyes, it was clear who Daryl favored.
“Did you do that?” Rick laughs as he walks up to give her a hug, thinking she was the one that had gotten them out and Carol wasn’t disputing.

Rayne scoffed as she made hers and Nico’s presence known as she stepped up to her group, tossing the bag of guns and Daryl’s bow on the ground.

“You were in there too?” Daryl asked her as he saw his weapon.

“Yeah, we were.” Rayne said, her eyes locking on Carol. She wanted to tell them the truth, that it had been them, but seeing the way that Rick had welcomed Carol back and the loving expression on Daryl’s face, she couldn’t do it. “Carol, gave us an opening and we had to take it.”

Rick chuckled as he walked over and gave her a hug, before shaking Nico’s hand and shouldering the bag.

“You have to come with me.” Carol said once they had all grabbed their things, eager to get away from the icy cold stare that the huntress was giving her.

The group followed Carol to a cabin down the road, both Rick and Carl running up to Tyreese when they saw Judith in his arms, alive and well. Rick took his daughter into his arms, holding her and Carl to him, while Sasha gladly hugged her brother tight.

Carol noticed a few dead walkers around the cabin that weren’t there when she had left Tyreese and the man they had tied up inside. “What happened?”

“There were a bunch of walkers out here and he got his hands around Judith's neck.” Ty said. Carol started for the door to take care of the man when Tyreese stopped her. “No, he's dead. I-- I had to. So I did. I could.”

“I don't know if the fire is still burning.” Rick says looking over the tree tops towards Terminus.

“It is.” Nico said observing the thick black smoke filling the sky.

“Yeah. We need to go.”

“Yeah, but where?” Daryl asks shouldering his bow.

“Somewhere far away from there.” Rick says as he leads the way through the woods.

Behind them Rosita looks down at Abraham with a concerned gaze, he understands what she’s saying. “We'll talk to him. Not just yet.”

As they walk down the railroad tracks Rick finds one of the Terminus signs, picking up some mud he wipes it across the words until the only thing visible are the words, “NO SANCTUARY.”
The group followed the train tracks a few miles down before making a turn and trekking into the woods. Rayne and Nico had split off from them, the huntress heading back to pick up her truck before somebody stole it, that would be the final straw and Rayne would likely go postal. She promised Rick they would meet up a few miles down the road, the group heading for the next town and searching for a safe place to stay.

Rick and the group paused for awhile to rest, Carl taking the time to feed Judith, while everyone else got acquainted. Rick walked up beside Tara, he had been meaning to talk to her since they had ended up at Terminus.

“You didn't want to be there. That's why I tried to talk to you. Glenn told me you saved his life.”

“He saved mine.” Tara explained.

Rick chuckled, “That's how it works with us, right?”

“Right. Hey.” She chuckled as she held up her fist, Rick smiling before he knocked his own fist against hers.

“Get something to eat. We'll start back at sunup.” Rick told her.

Down by the stream Carol and Ty are kneeling on the bank filling up the groups water bottles. “Talked to Rick. Some of them know what you did at the prison. Daryl, Rayne, Maggie. They accept it. You wouldn't be here if they didn't. Gonna talk to the rest of them. Tell them to accept it, too.”
Carol shook her head, “They don't have to.”

“No, they do. They just do. We don't need to tell them about the girls. I don't want to.”

“Why?” Carol questioned.

“I just need to forget it.”

The next morning the group was back on the road, Rick was leading, although his mind was far away from the task at hand. He was beginning to worry about Rayne and Nico who had still yet to return to them. He was praying that no one from Terminus had survived and ambushed them as they returned for the truck, or worse… someone else.

A walker stumbled out of the trees by Michonne, she smiled before nodding to Glenn, “I got it.” She reached behind her for her katana, shaking her head with a tight-lipped smile as she remembered that it was gone. But she still had the two sticks on the ends of her spare hilt, so she stabbed one end into the walker’s brain putting it down.

Watching the warrior take down the walker Abraham leaned over to Rosita, “Right there is why we're waiting for our moment.”

“Yeah, fair enough.” She said as they continued walking.

They stopped as night fell, finding a spot off of the road in the woods, Daryl starting up a fire to keep them warm and cook some food. Rick pulled Carol off to the side, there was still some things that needed to be said between them. “I owe you everything.”

“You owe Tyreese. He was at the prison.”

“You got back there. I still don't know about what you did but, I know you knew some things I didn't. I sent you away to this—”

“You said I could survive. You were right.”

“I sent you away to this and now we're joining you. Will you have us?” Rick asked and Carol nodded. “Thank you.”

After that Carol went to go sit on watch with Daryl, the two of them taking the first shift while the others slept. Carol could feel Daryl staring at her, she knew he wanted her to talk about what she had went through when Rick banished her.

“I don't want to talk about it. I can't. I just need to forget it.”

“All right.”

Suddenly Daryl stands up hearing leaves rustling and the snapping of a twig, but not seeing
anything he waves off Carol who had stood up as well. “It's nothing.”

However Daryl couldn’t see the dark shadow that crossed his line of vision as he turned around.

In the morning the group starts out again, all of them shedding their jackets as the sweltering Georgia sun bears down through the trees. Rick hears a rustling in front of them and stops pointing his gun, along with Carl and four others. Daryl steps out from behind the trees carrying his bow and a string of rabbits, smirking he holds up his hands. “I surrender.”

Daryl and Rick take up the lead, the two speaking in low voices so that no one else could hear them, they didn't want to cause a panic. “No tracks. No nothing.” Daryl says.

“So whatever you heard last night—”

“It's more what I felt. If someone was watching us, there would have been something.”

Rick nods as he turns around to whistle at the rest of the group, “Keep close.”

“Ready to get some concrete under your feet?” Abraham asks as he catches up to the former cop.

Rick nods. “I think it's time.”

“That is sweet music to my ears, Officer. Take the next road we come to, try to get back to going north till we find a vehicle. Good?”

“Good.” Rick says falling back till he has the rear of the group covered.

In the middle of the group Sasha and Bob are having a weird conversation about things they hate, but a plus side to those things. “Uh, wet socks.” Sasha says.

“Cool feet.” Bob answers.

“Mosquito bites.”

“Itching reminds you you're alive.” Bob says pointing at her.

“Danger around every corner.”

“Never a dull moment.”

“The hot sun beating down on you.”

“Come on, a glorious tan.” Bob says with a laugh. “I said it and I meant it.”

“No privacy.”

“Captive audience.” He laughs before he leans down and kisses her lips. “One more.” She laughs
as she kisses him again. “One more.” She smiles denying his request as she shoves him ahead of her.

She falls fall in beside her brother who smiles at her, happy to see a smile on her face. “He's a damn expert at that.”

“What was it?” Ty asks.

“A little game. Good out of the bad.”

All at once they hear the terrified screams of somebody in distress, quickly they run through the woods until they come upon a man trapped up on a large boulder, five walkers clawing at the sides as they try to reach him.

Rick, Carl, Michonne and Carol swiftly take out four walkers, with Daryl shooting the fifth through the head with his arrow, before grabbing the bolt and yanking it back out.

“We're clear. Keep watch.” Rick says as he turns to look up at the man on the rock. “Come on down. You okay?”

The black man dressed in a black suit with a white collar, clearly a preacher, holds up a finger before promptly vomiting on the ground. The group all shake their heads, some of them make a face at the disgusting scene.

The man then stands back up and looks at Rick, “Sorry. Yes. Thank you. I'm Gabriel.”

“Do you have any weapons on you?” Rick questions.

Gabriel chuckles as he glances around at the group members, “Do I look like I would have any weapons?”

“We don't give two short and curlies what it looks like.” Abraham quips.

“I have no weapons of any kind. The word of God is the only protection I need.”

“Sure didn't look like it.” Daryl comments.

Gabriel smiled, “I called for help. Help came. Do you have-- have any food? Whatever I-- I had left, it just hit the ground.”

“We've got some pecans.” Carl says offering them to the priest who gladly takes them.

“Thank you.” Gabriel hears Judith cooing, “That's a beautiful child. Do you have a camp?”

“No. Do you?” Rick says quickly, that question always leaves Rick and the group on edge when it’s asked.

“I have a church.”

“Hold your hands above your head.” Rick says and the man uneasily acquiesces allowing Rick to pat him down as he asks the priest some questions. “How many walkers have you killed?”

“Not any, actually.”

“Turn around. How many people have you killed?”
“None.”

“What have you done?” Rick asks wondering how this man had gotten this far and not killed a single living or undead soul. “We’ve all done something.”

“I’m a sinner. I sin almost every day. But those sins, I confess them to God, not strangers.”

“You said you had a church?” Michonne asks.

Gabriel leads them through the woods back towards his church, while walking Rick talks to him a little more. You could never know too much about someone you were trusting. “Hey, earlier, were you watching us?”

“I keep to myself. Nowadays, people are just as dangerous as the dead, don’t you think?”

“No, people are worse.” Daryl says remembering what they all had been up against thus far.

“Well, I wasn’t watching you. I haven’t been beyond the stream near my church more than a few times since it all started. That was the furthest I’ve gone before today.” Gabriel then smiles, “Or maybe I’m lying. Maybe I’m lying about everything and there’s no church ahead at all. Maybe I’m leading you into a trap so I can steal all your squirrels.”

He turns back to find everyone watching him with a dark gaze, he realizes that they hadn’t gotten the joke as he meant it. “Members of my flock had often told me that my sense of humor leaves much to be desired.”

Daryl nods, “Yeah, it does.”

The group breaks out of the woods to a clearing that holds a small white church, the sign out front reads, “St. Sarah’s Church.”

“Hold up.” Rick says before the man can open the door. “Can we take a look around first? We just want to hold on to our squirrels.”

Gabriel holds out the keys in his hand allowing Rick to unlock the door and open it, the group entering quickly and fanning out to check the inside for other people. When they had finished their sweep everyone met back up outside where Rick handed the keys back to Gabriel.

“I spent months here without stepping out the front door. If you found someone inside, well, it would have been surprising.”

“Thanks for this.” Carl says giving the preacher a smile as he held his sleeping sister in his arms.

“We found a short bus out back.” Abraham tells Rick. “It don’t run, but I bet we could fix that in less than a day or two. Father here says he doesn’t want it. Looks like we found ourselves some transport. You understand what’s at stake here, right?”
“Yes, I do.” Rick nods.

“Now that we can take a breath—” Michonne interrupts.

“We take a breath, we slow down, shit inevitably goes down.” Abraham tells her.

“We need supplies no matter what we do next.”

“That’s right.” Rick says agreeing with her. “Water, food, ammunition.”

The group files into the church, Daryl stands by the door looking down at Abraham. “Short bus ain't going nowhere. We’ll bring you back some baked beans.”

Daryl walks inside and Glenn steps up in front of the red-haired soldier, “One way or another, we're doing what Rick does. We're not splitting up again.”

“What he said.” Tara commented as she walked inside as well.

Bob and Sasha paused in front of Abraham, “We want to roll with you, but what she said.”

The group settled into the pews, everyone relaxing now that they had a place to rest for awhile.

Rick was holding onto Judith when he noticed all of the empty cans of food lining the back wall. “How’d you survive here for so long? Where did your supplies come from?”

“Luck. Our annual canned food drive. Things fell apart right after we finished it. It was just me. The food lasted a long time. And then I started scavenging. I've cleaned out every place nearby. Except for one.”

“What kept you from it?” Rick questioned as he handed Judith back to Carl.

“It's overrun.”

“How many?”

“A dozen or so. Maybe more.”

“We can handle a dozen.”

“Bob and I will go with you.” Sasha said stepping up beside Rick. “Tyreese should stay here, help keep Judith safe.”

“That'll be okay?” Rick asked not wanting to inconvenience the big man.

“Sure. You ever need me to watch her, need anything for her, I'm right here.”

“I'm grateful for it. And everything else.”

“I'll draw you a map.” Gabriel says.

“You don't need to. You're coming with us.”

“I'm not gonna be of any help. You saw me. I'm no good around those things.”

“You're coming with us.” Rick states, his voice not leaving any room for discussion on the matter. He then walks over and kneels down beside the pew where Carl is sitting. “Listen, I don't trust this guy.”
“Why?”

Rick looks up at his son curiously, “Why do you trust him?”

“Everybody can't be bad.”

Rick chuckles, leave it to his son to still look for the good in people, despite what they had endured thus far since the outbreak started. “Well I don't trust this guy. And that's why I'm bringing him with me. But he could have friends. So I need you to stay alert and help Tyreese protect Judith.”

“Okay.” Carl answers.

“Now I need you to hear what I'm about to say.”

“Okay.” Carl says listening intently.

“You are not safe. No matter how many people are around or how clear the area looks, no matter what anyone says, no matter what you think, you are not safe. It only takes one second. One second and it's over. Never let your guard down, ever. I want you to promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” Rick nods as he stands up from the floor and turns to go.

“Dad.” Carl says catching his father’s attention as he stands up beside him. “You're right. I am strong. We both are. But we're strong enough that we can still help people. And we can handle ourselves if things go wrong. And we're strong enough that we don't have to be afraid and we don't have to hide.”

“Well, he's hiding something.” Rick says, something in his gut telling him that Gabriel isn’t what he says he is.

“I'll stay safe, Dad.”

Rick heads out to the front of the church where Gabriel, Bob, Sasha and Michonne are waiting to go. As they ready to leave Rick hears a loud diesel engine coming up the road and a relieved smile crosses his face as he sees Rayne’s truck come into view. “Thank God.” He whispers as he sees the two young siblings through the windshield.

Gabriel looks worried about the new arrivals, but everyone else has come out of the church to see the return of their comrades. The priest is even more uneasy as the two people jump down out of the truck and he sees their physical state.

“Nico!” Rayne screams as she jumps down out of her truck, walking around to the front of it. “Knock it off! Look at the inside of my truck ya ass!”

Nico’s response is to throw his head back and let out a deep laugh, as he picks a piece of flesh off of his shirt and throws it at her, hitting her in the chest. “Oh, quit yer bitchin’. It’ll wash.”

Rick shakes his head at the two as he looks them over, they’re both covered head to toe in fresh blood and walker pieces. A mini fight ensues as the two of them proceed to throw whatever is
stuck to their clothing at one another, the true epitome of a brother/sister war as they laugh loudly.

The first one to speak up on their state however is Daryl, as he runs up from behind the church with Carol behind him. “Jesus Rayne, are you okay?!” He shouts.

Rayne suddenly stops and turns to look at the hunter with furrowed eyebrows like she has no idea what he’s talking about. “Huh?” She sees him motion to the blood covering her and it clicks, she waves him off. “Oh! Naw, I’m cool, Dixon. We got a lil uh…..” Her head swivels to look at her brother, instant smiles crossing their faces as they lock eyes. “…sidetracked.”

The two burst out into laughter causing the rest of their group to chuckle and shake their heads, the Lyall twins were clearly something else.

Rick smiles glad that the two are okay, for the most part as he shakes his head at them. “I’m not even gonna ask. Glad to have you both back.”

“So, what’s goin’ on?” Rayne asks as she eyes the priest.

“This is Gabriel. That’s Rayne and Nico.” He says doing quick introductions. “We’re heading out to a spot for supplies, you two wanna tag along?”

“Sure.” Rayne says nodding to her brother. “Maybe we can find somethin’ to clean up with.” The two laugh again as they grab their weapons out of the truck, Nico checking the ammo for his rifle and Rayne wiping the excess blood and guts off of her kukris.

“Alright, let’s go.” Rick says as he and Gabriel take the lead.

“Glenn!” Rayne hollers before tossing her truck keys to the man. “Take care of my baby will ya.”

“You got it.” Glenn said with a smile and a nod as he pocketed the truck keys.

Rayne and Nico walked at the back of the group with Michonne as they followed the priest down the road. Up front Bob was having a talk with Rick about something he had said when they left Terminus.

“Hey. When you said they don't get to live, you weren't wrong. We push ourselves and let things go. Then we let some more go and some more. And pretty soon, there's things we can't get back. Things we couldn't hold on to even if we tried. Washington's gonna happen, Rick.”

“I haven't decided if we're going.” Rick says, knowing that was a long way to travel and would be very precarious.

“Yeah, I know, and that's cool. But you've seen Abraham in action. He's gonna get there and Eugene's gonna cure all this and you're gonna find yourself in a place where it's like how it used to be. And if you've let too much go along the way, that's not gonna work. Cause you gonna be back in the real world.”

“This is the real world, Bob.”

“Naw. This is a nightmare, and nightmares end. I'm sorry. I'm calling it. Washington's gonna happen. You're gonna say yes. Already too much momentum. You can't fight city hall. Maybe
that's just one of those parts of not letting go.”

Back out on the road by the church Daryl and Carol are walking back from the river, both carrying two milk jugs full of water. The hunter was trying to get Carol to open up to him, he needed to find out if he had been right choosing her over Rayne, and right now he was positive he had made the wrong decision.

“Hey, I get it. You don't want to talk about it. You okay?”

“Gotta be.”

“We get to start over. All of us with each other. You saved us all by yourself.”

Carol bit her lip, but she still didn’t dispute the fact that she hadn’t done anything but hide and wait for them to come out. She knew she wasn’t strong like Rayne, and seeing how Daryl and Rick had reacted when they thought it was her, was a good feeling, it made her feel strong and she didn’t want to lose it. Besides, Rayne hadn’t corrected them, she had went along with it, so who was Carol to tell them the truth?

“We got lucky. We all should be dead.” Carol said. They both saw a car up the road ahead of them, Carol nodded to it, “I'll check it.”

“All right.”

Carol got in the driver’s seat finding the keys in the ignition, she tried to start it but the engine merely clicked, dead battery most likely. She took the keys and opened up the trunk searching the inside for anything they could use.

“Hey.” Daryl said coming up behind her. “We ain't dead. And whatever happened, happened. Let's start over.”

“I want to.”

“Well, you can.”

Carol nodded as she found a battery charger in the trunk, flipping the switch the light came on, it still had power. “We should leave this here for backup in case things go south at the church.”

“Want me to carry one of those?” Daryl said lifting his hand to the jugs of water in her hands, which caused him to drop the one in his hand.

Carol chuckled, “No.”

In the town Tara and Maggie stood outside of an empty building, a cut out of a gun hanging from the roof. “You know, I didn't want to mention anything when we looked this place up in the phone book, but I just can't imagine a gun store having leftovers nowadays.”
“Don't look good, does it?” Maggie says eyeing the outside of the rundown building.

All of a sudden they heard a clattering inside and Glenn stumbled out the broken front door. “Was it a walker?” Tara asked.

“Uh, yeah. It was a walker.” Glenn stuttered as he tried to compose himself.

“Really?” Maggie asked, the two women hadn’t heard any indications that it had been one.

Glenn sighed, “It was a stack of boxes and a mop and I tripped.”

They all laughed together, it felt refreshing to have it been something normal like clumsiness.

“Still got what we came for.” Glenn said pulling something out of his back pocket.

“You actually found something?” Tara asked.

Glenn nodded as he placed the objects into her hands. “Three silencers stashed in a mini-fridge. Rule number one of scavenging-- there's nothing left in this world that isn't hidden.”

Back with Rick and his group Gabriel has lead them up to a white brick building. “We're here. This was the food bank. It served the whole county. All the cans at my church were gonna end up here.”

Rick and Michonne entered the building first followed by Rayne and Nico, then Bob and Sasha, Gabriel stayed behind watching the street. Rick heard something coming from a large hole in the floor, he held up his hand pausing the others at the door while he moved over to check it out.

Once he found the source of the growling, he motioned the rest of them over. There were at least five walkers down in the hole which was filled up to their chests with rank water, the smell alone making them all cringe and cover their noses.

“Damn, and I thought we smelled bad.” Nico snickered as he looked at his sister.

“If a sewer could puke, this is what it'd smell like.” Bob commented, the others nodding in agreement with him.

Michonne looked up to the ceiling which had several large holes in it. “The water's been coming down that hole for a while. Slimed this place up good.”

“We can use the shelves to block them.”

Rick looked up at the woman with a nod to her idea, “Yeah, that's it, Sasha. There's our way. Down those shelves.” He turns as the others get to their feet and round the hole, his eyes landing on Gabriel who hasn’t moved towards them. “Hey. I said you're coming with us.”

Rick took a glance over to Rayne, nodding for her to drop down first. She smiled, “Well, I did say I wanted to clean up. Nic, on me.”

Rayne dropped down into the water followed by her brother, both of them grabbing the two large metal shelves and pulling them to block off the walkers.
“Here they come.” Rick yelled as he dropped in beside the two. “You take right. I see three here.”

The group all pulled out their knives and stabbed the walkers, using the shelves for leverage between them and the undead. Rick notices Gabriel panic as he sees one of the walkers, what used to be a woman with glasses, a string of pearls holding them on her face. Gabriel panics as he trips and falls into the water, swimming his way over to a dilapidated staircase that collapses as soon as he puts weight on it. The priest then flattens himself against the wall behind him, pure terror written on his face.

“We have to get Gabriel.” Rick says.

“What happened?” Rayne yells as she braces the shelf against the last remaining walkers.

“I don't know.” Rick says moving up beside her. “All right, we'll push down the shelves on the ones in front of us. We'll fight through and I'll grab him.”

The group shoves the shelf over pinning the three walkers in front of them to the floor. “Rick, go!” Rayne shouts as she and the others take out the walkers coming towards them. There seem to be more than there was before, like they're manifesting from the water.

Rick reaches Gabriel just as the walker that has him petrified advances to within a foot of him. Rick grabs the walker and spins her around, slamming her face off of a shelf, disintegrating its face in one hit.

Once the walkers are dead Bob moves over towards a red plastic tote, not noticing the bubbles under the water as it moves towards him. Suddenly he is drug down under the water, but he reemerges a moment later with a rotting walker in his hands, trying to force its way towards his flesh. He slams it backwards down onto a piece of steel pipe that is sticking up out of the water, then Sasha smashes its head with another tote she found until it’s dead.

She catches her breath and turns to Bob panting. “You okay? Bob, you okay?”

“I'm fine now.”

The group gathers up all of the food they can find, loading it into totes and stacking it on a few carts they found. They start back for the church pushing their loads, Rayne’s nose wrinkling every time the wind blows and she catches a smell of herself. “I know I wanted cleaned off, but this smell is worse than the walker guts.” The others around her chuckle, they all smelled pretty bad right now.

Up front Gabriel walked beside Rick, his head down in shame, he could have gotten them all killed. “I'm sorry. I-- I panicked. I told you I--”

“You knew her when she was alive?” rick asked, but Gabriel refused to answer. “Yeah, I get it. You only tell your sins to God.”
As they walked down the road, Rick and Michonne lead, both pushing the cart together. “Do you miss the sword?” He asked her knowing she had it from the beginning.

“Wasn't really mine in the first place. Found it in the very beginning.”

“How'd you get so good?”

“It was just me and them out here all day, every day… a good long time. I don't know what that was, but it wasn't a life. Not like today.” She smiled. “Stumbling around in three feet of slime for some peas and carrots, that's living. I miss Andrea. I miss Hershel. I don't miss what was before. I don't miss that sword.”

They got back to the church and unloaded the food inside, Rayne and Nico then headed out to the truck to grab some fresh clothes. Not that it would help the smell, but they did have extras so why not use them.

Rick heads out to the back of the church to find Carl staring up at the windows. “Hey. Tyreese said you were out back. Come on in. We found food. A lot of it.”

“Good.” The young boy said, still staring at the side of the church.

“What is it?”

Carl steps forward pointing to some deep gouges in the wood beside the window. “Those scratches. They're deep. Like knives or something. Someone was trying to get in. I found something else. I don't know what happened, but whatever it is, we can handle it. Doesn't mean Gabriel is a bad guy for sure, but it means something.”

Rick takes a look at the side of the church where someone had carved words into the side of the building. “YOU’LL BURN FOR THIS.”

By nightfall everyone was gathered inside the church eating, laughter and chatter filling the inside as if there were no worries for any of them. Rayne was sitting on the floor in between Michonne and Nico, but both of them could see her eyes continually flicking across the room to Daryl, who sat in a pew beside Carol.

“Give it time. He’ll realize his mistake.” Michonne offered, nudging Rayne with her shoulder causing the huntress to smile and lay her head on the warrior’s shoulder.

Abraham stood up in the front of them all, getting their attention as he tapped his glass of wine. “I’d like to propose a toast. I look around this room and I see survivors. Each and every one of you has earned that title. To the survivors.”

“Survivors! Cheers!” Everyone echoed as they all raised their glasses.

But it was clear that Abraham wasn’t saying that just out of the kindness of his heart, he had an
ulterior motive. “Is that all you want to be? Wake up in the morning, fight the undead pricks, forage for food, go to sleep at night with two eyes open, rinse and repeat? Cause you can do that. I mean, you got the strength. You got the skill. Thing is, for you people, for what you can do, that's just surrender. Now, we get Eugene to Washington and he will make the dead die and the living will have this world again. And that is not a bad takeaway for a little road trip. Eugene, what's in DC?”

“Infrastructure constructed to withstand pandemics even of this fubar magnitude. That means food, fuel, refuge. Restart.”

Abraham nods, “However this plays out, however long it takes for the reset button to kick in, you can be safe there. Safer than you've been since this whole thing started. Come with us. Save the world for that little one. Save it for yourselves. Save it for the people out there who don't got nothing left to do except survive.”

Rick looks over at Michonne, Rayne and Nico, all of them smiling and giving him a nod. He chuckles as Judith coos in his arms, and he asks her, “What was that?”

They all laugh as she coos again, and Rick says, “I think she knows what I'm about to say. She's in. If she's in, I'm in. We're in.”

Everyone laughs and claps, their minds feeling a hope for the future for the first time in a long time.

Sasha leans over and kisses Bob then smiles, “Okay. I'm not letting my brother be the only one that gets to hold that baby.”

“Wait. One more.” Bob tells her before she can get up, leaning over and kissing her lightly. Sasha smiles as she gets up and heads over to Rick, picking Judith up in her arms.

Tara takes a seat on the floor beside Maggie, the older girl looking at her in concern, “You okay?”

Tara nods, ready to tell Maggie something that she didn’t know yet. “Yeah, yeah. I was at the prison. With the Governor. I didn't know who he was or what he could do. And I didn't know who all of you were. I-- I just didn't want it to be hidden. That I was there.”

“You're here with us now.” Maggie said easing her fears and bringing her in for a hug.

At the back of the room Rick sits down next to Gabriel, “Thanks for the hospitality. I'm surprised you let us drink your communion wine.”

“There isn't anyone left to take communion. The wine's just wine until it's blessed.” Gabriel states as he lifts the bottle in his hand and takes a drink.

“You're hiding something. And it's pretty obvious it's something you can't hide from. That's your
business. But these people, these people are my family. And if what you're hiding somehow hurts
them in any way, I'll kill you.”

Out on the road Carol has managed to get the car started with the battery charger, she’s just shut
the hood when she hears a walker snarling as it rustles through the leaves towards her. She takes
out her knife and puts it down, then startles at another sound from behind her. Turning around she
finds Daryl stepping out of the trees into the moonlight.

“What are you doing?” He asks.

“I don't know.”

“Come on.” He says nodding back towards the church.

All at once they hear a car approaching, they quickly duck behind the idling car as it goes speeding
past on the road. Daryl runs out onto the road behind it, seeing the white cross on the back
window. He runs over grabbing his bow and breaking out the taillights in the car.

“Whoa, whoa! What are you doing? What are you doing?” Carol yells.

“They got Beth. Come on. Come on, get in.” Daryl tells her as they get into the car and he takes off
after the car.

Outside of the church Bob is standing by a few of the gravestones out back smiling as he hears the
chatter coming from inside. He walks towards one of the large trees, leaning against it as his smile
turns to heavy sobs. Suddenly he is hit the back of the head with something heavy knocking him
out, a person dressed in black stands over him.

Bob opens his eyes seeing the blurry figures of several men surrounding him, he can hear a fire
crackling as he blinks his eyes, trying to bring his vision back into focus.

“You waking up? Ah, you're back with us, huh?” A voice says, and as his vision clears he can see
Gareth kneeling in front of him. This was not good. “Good news is you're not dead yet. That's a
relief, right? But try not to read too much into the word yet there. It'll just drive you crazy, Bob. I
want to explain myself a little. You see, we didn't want to hurt you before. We didn't want to pull
you away from your group or scare you. These aren't things that we wanted to do. They're things
we got to do. You and your people took away our home. That's fair play.”

Bob starts thinking of all of his friends back at the church, all thinking they’re safe and moving
onto Washington with hope in mind.
“Now we're out here like everybody else trying to survive. And in order to do that, we have to hunt. Didn't start that way, eating people. It evolved into that. We evolved. We had to. And now we've devolved into hunters. I told you. I said it. Can't go back, Bob. I just hope you understand that nothing happening to you now is personal. Yeah, you put us in this situation and it is almost kind of a cosmic justice for it to be you, but we would have done this to anybody. We will. But at the end of the day, no matter how much we hate all this ugly business… a man's got to eat.”

Bob’s breathing rapidly increases as he looks down and realizes that one of his legs has been cut off at the knee. He sees Gareth raise a hunk of meat to his mouth and take a large bite, his mind processing that it was a piece of his leg.

“If it makes you feel any better you taste much better than we thought you would.”
As the night wore on for Bob he had to listen to Gareth’s insane ramblings of why they were doing this to people. He droned on and on about how they survived and then he started talking about how they were going to kill Bob’s friends.

Gareth happens to be standing by a window leading into the building that is filled to the brim with walkers, all of them snarling at scratching at the glass.

“It's probably pretty stupid to be here. Dangerous. I don't know, maybe not. You can see the threat. That's something. Looking at them makes me feel better about things. My mom used to say that every day above ground was a win. Doesn't really apply anymore, but you can still get some perspective. The glass is gonna break sooner or later. Nothing lasts too long anymore. You know, we marked our way here so that we could find our way back after. So stupid, right? I mean back to what? It wasn't just a trap. It was gonna be a choice. You join us or feed us. You know bears when they start to starve, they eat their young. If the bear dies, the cub dies anyway. But if the bear lives, it can always have another cub. That was part of the pitch.

You know, Greg and Mike came this close to nabbing that brown-haired queen bitch with the bow who killed my mom. She drove away in a big black truck with the soldier. Greg saw the archer and grey-haired lady drive off too. Can't wait to try that huntress. I like women better. Most of us do. My brother Alex has-- also currently dead because of Rick-- he had a theory that it was because of the extra layer of fat that women have, you know, for childbearing. Even the skinny girls have it. Like that pretty one-- Sasha? I think pretty people taste better, too. We're going to get all of them. But for starters, you'll do just fine. We did a good job on your leg. We've had practice. When we started, it was about making it slow. I'm being a human being here. I'm talking to you. Perspective, Bob. You're above ground. At least you're better off than them.”

Bob suddenly starts laughing which sets all of them on edge, Gareth sighs, “Well, he lost it. Lasted longer than I thought he would.”

“Okay, keep it down.” Gareth says hearing the walkers pounding on the glass.

“I can shut him up.” One of the guy’s says.

Bob chuckles as he pulls down the collar of his shirt exposing his shoulder. “I've been bitten, you stupid pricks! I'm tainted meat.”

Bob continues laughing as they all spit out the food in their mouths, some of them even vomiting to get the food in their stomachs out. “Tainted meat!”

“Shut up.” Gareth snaps.

“You eating tainted meat!”

“I said shut up!” Gareth snaps again as he kicks Bob in the face knocking him out.

At the church Sasha is outside searching for Bob, he’s been gone for hours and she’s starting to worry. “Bob.” She sees a mark carved into the tree beside her followed by a twig snapping. She lifts her night-scope peering through it, sweeping to the left and finding nothing. As she sweeps back to the right she finds a walker dead in front of her. Sasha gasps shoving it into the tree, she lifts her gun and fires a silenced shot to another behind it, then she slams the stock of her rifle down onto the other, killing it.

A hand comes over her mouth and she panics until she hears her brother’s voice. “It's me. It's me.”

“Tyreese.” Sasha says panting as Rick and Rayne step up beside her brother. “He's getting away.”

“Who?” Rick asks holding up his flashlight.

“Somebody was watching us.”

“If we go in there now, some of us aren’t coming back.” Ty says.

“Bob is out there somewhere. Scared, alone.” Sasha argues.

“Maybe not alone.” Rayne says looking over at the woman. “Daryl and Carol are missing, too.”

The four of them go back inside, Sasha walking up to the priest at the front of the room. “Stop. What are you doing? What are you doing? This is all connected. You show up, we're being watched, and now three of us are gone.”

“I-- I don't-- I don't have anything to do with this.” Gabriel stutters, honestly having no idea what she is talking about.

“Wait!” He gasps as Sasha pulls out her knife.
“Don’t!” Rosita snaps as she runs up, but Abraham pulls her back out of the way.

“Sasha, put it away.” Ty says trying to reason with his sister, but she’s beyond reasoning at this point.

“Who’s out there?”

“I-- I don't have anything - to do with this.”

“Where are our people?”

“I don't have anything to--”

“Where are our people?!”

“Please, I don't have anything to do with this. I--”

“Why'd you bring us here?” Rick asks him calmly.

“Please, I--”

“You working with someone?”

“I'm alone. I'm alone. I was always alone.”

“What about the woman in the food bank, Gabriel? What did you do to her? “You'll burn for this.” That was for you. Why? What are you gonna burn for, Gabriel? What? What did you do? What did you do?!"

Gabriel was overcome as he told them the story, “I lock the doors at night. I always lock the doors at night. I always-- They started coming, my congregation. Atlanta was bombed the night before and they were scared. They were-- they were looking for a safe place, a place where they felt safe. And it was so early. It was so early. And the doors were still locked. You see it was my choice. There were so many of them and they were trying to pry the shutters and banging on the sidings, screaming at me. And so the dead came for them. Women-- children. Entire families calling my name as they were torn apart, begging me for mercy.”

He broke down into sobs remembering their screams as the dead tore them apart right outside. “Begging me for mercy. Damning me to hell. I buried their bones. I buried it all. The Lord sent you here to finally punish me. I'm damned. I was damned before. I always lock the doors. I always lock the doors.”

Glenn hears whistling coming from outside, he rushes over to the window to look out. “There's something-- there's someone outside lying in the grass.”

Sasha runs out the door first with everyone following behind her, “Oh! Bob! Bob.” She kneels down next to him her eyes immediately finding his missing leg.

“His leg.” Maggie says flashing back to her father at the prison.

“Can you help me, please? Help me. Help me.” Sasha pleads to Tara as the two of them carry Bob inside the church, while the other take care of the walkers limping up to the church.

“Get inside! Go!” Rick yells as they all file back inside, not noticing the large “A” on the side of the building written in blood.
“I was in the graveyard,” Bob says as he lays down on the floor. “Somebody knocked me out. I woke up outside this place. It looked like a school. It was that guy, Gareth. And five other ones. They were eating my leg right in front of me. Like it was nothing. All proud like they had it all figured out.”

“Did they have Daryl and Carol?” Rick asks him.

Bob shook his head, “Gareth said they drove off.”

“He's in pain. Do we have anything?” Sasha asks looking up at Rosita.

The woman nods, “I think there are pill packets in the first aid kit.”

“Save 'em.” Bob tells her.

“No.” Sasha argue with him.

“Really.” He replies showing them all the bite wound on his shoulder. “It happened at the food bank.”

Sasha nods through her pain, “It's okay.” He collapses down onto the floor and she takes his hand. “Bob?”

“There's a sofa in my office.” Gabriel offers. “I know it's not much, but…”

“Thank you.” Sasha tells him sincerely.

Tyreese stands up moving to lift Bob off of the floor, “I got him.”

“Do you know the place Bob was talking about?” Rick questions the priest.

“The elementary school. It's close.”

“How close?” Rayne says, her voice low as she tries to curb her anger. “How close, Gabriel?”

“It's just a 10-minute walk through the woods from here, due south of the graveyard.”

Gabriel walks off and Rick turns to Maggie and Glenn, “Does he have a fever?”

“He's just warm.” Maggie tells him.

“Jim lasted almost two days before we left him.” Glenn says.

“Time for a reality check. We all need to leave for DC right now.” Abraham says as he and Rosita gather their things up.

“Daryl and Carol are gonna be back. We're not going anywhere without them.” Rick tells the man.

“I respect that, but there's a clear threat here to Eugene. I need to extract his ass before things get any uglier. So if y'all won't come, good luck to you. We'll go our separate ways.”

“You leaving on foot?” Rick questions as the group starts to walk for the doors.
“We fixed that damn bus ourselves.” Abraham growled as he turned back to Rick.

“There are a lot more of us.”

“You want to keep it that way?” The soldier growled. “You should come.”

“Carol saved your life. We saved your life.” Rick snapped.

“Well, I am trying to save yours. Save everyone's.” The soldier snapped back.

“We're not going anywhere without our people.”

“Your people took off.”

“They're coming back.”

“To what, picked-over bones?!”

“You're not taking--” Rick starts to say as he reaches out to grab the man’s arm, but Abraham slaps his hand away, “Do not lay hands!”

“Abraham!” Rosita yells trying to get his attention.

Glenn puts himself between the two men in an effort to diffuse the situation. “Hey, hey, stop! Now! Do you really think that you're gonna be any safer leaving right now in the middle of the night?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“What about tomorrow? We need each other for this. We need each other to get to DC. We can get through all of it together.”

“I have an idea.” Tara says putting herself into the conversation. “If you stay just one more day and help, I'll go with you to DC… no matter what. Okay?”

“Glenn and Maggie.” Abraham says, then he nods to the siblings. “Rayne and Nico, too.”

“No.” Rick protests.

“Good luck, then. I'm not interested in breaking up what you have here. Rosita, grab your gear.”

“Abraham--”


“I don't want to.”

“Now.”

“Okay.” Eugene says sulking like a child as he gets up and heads for the door.

“You're not taking the bus.” Rick states flatly.

“Try to stop me.”

Rick considers his options and starts advancing on Abraham, but once more Glenn gets in between the two. “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Hey, hey, hey! You stay-- you stay and help us, and we will go with you.” He says pointing between himself and Maggie.
“No.” Rick protests again.


“Half a day. Come high noon, we're taillights. I'm not waiting for the other damn shoe to drop.”

“And we will leave with you.” Maggie says.

“12 hours. Then we go.” Abraham agrees.

Once everything had calmed down, the group sat around refilling magazines, Rayne sat by her brother sharpening her kukris as Rick spoke to them all. “They think they're in control. We're in here and they could be anywhere. But we know exactly where they are.”

“Plan’s got stones, I'll give you that.” Abraham admits giving them credit for wanting to attack first.

“Make our move before they do.” Glenn says.

“That's right.” Rick says with a nod. “They're not counting on us thinking straight.

“Are we?” Rosita asks. “I'm just making sure. It's a big play.”

Rick stands up and looks down at her. “Remember what these people are capable of.” His attention turns to Ty, “Tyreese. You up for this?”

Tyreese nods as Sasha steps out of the office, “I'm going with you.”

“You should stay with Bob.” Ty tells her.

“No, I want to be out there. I want to be a part of this.”

As the group prepared to go out after Gareth and the others, Rayne pulled Rick off to the side. “We don’t need to go to ‘em. They’re gonna come to us.”

“What do you mean?” Rick questioned.

“Think about it, how did Bob get away from them on one leg?” She said raising her eyebrows. “You heard Gabriel, it’s a ten minute hike through the woods and that’s with two good legs.”

“You think they brought him here.”

“Yeah, I think they planned on us finding him and retaliating. They knew Bob would tell us where they were and that we’d go after ‘em. They’re trying to separate our group because we out number them, Rick. If they can take a few of us at a time, they have a better chance.”

“So what do we do?” Rick asks.
Rayne smirks, “We do exactly what they think we’ll do.”

Five minutes later Rick and Rayne lead half of the group down the trail towards the elementary school. Just as Rayne thought, just as they moved out of sight, Gareth and his group came from the opposite side of the woods, moving up to the front of the church.

One of the men draws his knife and steps up onto the porch, wedging the knife in between the doors and breaking the lock. The group moves inside, Gareth making their presence known.

“Well, I guess you know we're here. And we know you're here. And we're armed. So there's really no point in hiding anymore. We've been watching you. We know who's here. There's Bob, unless you've put him out of his misery already. And Eugene. Rosita. Martin's good friend Tyreese. Carl. Judith. Rick and the rest walked out… with a lot of your guns. Listen, we don't know where you all are, but this isn't a big place. So let's just stop this now before things get more painful than they need to be.”

Two men break off to the room on the left and one heads to the door on the right, both trying the doors and finding them locked. “Look, you're behind one of these two doors and we have more than enough firepower to take down both. Can't imagine that's what you all want. How about the priest? Father, you help us wrap this up, we'll let you walk away from this. Just open the door and you can go. You can take the baby with you. What do you say?”

Suddenly Judith starts crying loudly, giving away their position to Gareth who smirks as it’s coming from the door he’s standing in front of. “I don't know. Maybe we'll keep the kid. I'm starting to like this girl.”

He backs off from the door, “It's your last chance right now to tell us you're coming out.”

“Are we done?” One of the men asks him.

Gareth nods, “We'll hit the hinges.”

In a split second both men standing by the door are dropped by two silenced gunshots. Rayne and Nico step out of the shadows holding their rifles, Rick moves up between the two, “Put your guns on the floor.”

“Rick, we'll fire right into that office. So you lower your gun--” Gareth snaps but he’s interrupted by another silenced gunshot by Rayne that takes off two fingers of his left hand. “Ah!”

“Put your guns on the floor and kneel.”

“Do what he says.” Gareth gasps clutching his missing appendages as the rest of the group moves out of the shadows, guns at the ready to fire. “Martin, there's no choice here.”

“Yeah, there is.” Martin says standing his ground.

“Wanna bet?” Abraham growls as he steps out of the shadows to Martin’s right.

Gareth gasps in pain as Rayne stands in front of him, her gun to his head. “No point in begging, right?”
“No.” She states.

“Still, you could have killed us when you came in. There had to be a reason for that.”

Rayne smirks, “We didn't want to waste the bullets.”

“We used to help people. We saved people. Things changed. They came in and--” He groans again. “After that I know that you've been out there, but I can see it. You don't know what it is to be hungry. You don't have to do this. We can walk away. And we will never cross paths again. I promise you.”

“But you'll cross someone's path.” Rick says uncocking his gun and placing his hand on the red handled machete in his belt. “You'd do this to anyone, right? Besides, I already made you a promise.”

“No!” Gareth screams just before Rick pulls out the machete and takes off his head.

Sasha, Rayne, Michonne and Abraham then take out the others, Tyreese, Maggie and Glenn just watching with wide eyes as their friends kill these men and woman ruthlessly. Sasha stabs one guy repeatedly with her knife, while Michonne and Abraham beat their two to death with their guns. Rayne hands her rifle to her brother, then draws her kukris and slices the man kneeling before her to pieces, one body part at a time.

Michonne then notices something the woman she killed had been carrying, reaching down she grasps the hilt of her sword and draws it out of the woman’s belt.

“It could have been us.” Rick says justifying what they had done.

“This is the Lord's house.” Gabriel says as he walks out of the office to see the carnage.

“No. It's just four walls and a roof.” Maggie says.

“You'll always be with us. Part of us.” Maggie says as she sits on the side of the couch where Bob is laying, before kissing his hand. They knew he didn’t have much time and they were all saying their goodbyes.

They all start filing out of the room when Bob calls to one of them, “Rick.”

Rick goes to hand Judith to Carl, but Bob cracks a joke, “No, don't. Let her stay. I trust her. I just want to say thank you.”

“For what?”

“Before the prison, I didn't know if there were any good people left. I didn't know if anybody was left. You took me in. Cause you took people in. It was you, man. What I said yesterday, I ain't revising it. Even in light of current events. Nightmares end. They shouldn't end who you are. And that is just this dead man's opinion.”

“I'll take it.” Rick says chuckling.

“Just look at her and tell me the world isn't gonna change.”
After Rick walks out, Sasha comes in to sit beside Bob, holding his hand as he wakes up to see her sitting there and he smiles. “You were out.” She tells him.

“Hmm. Was I?”

“You were. Why are you smiling?”

“I think I was dreaming. And I think you were smiling back at me in the dream. Yeah, that's it.”

“So what is it? The good that comes out of this bad?” She says trying to smile, but she notices that he’s stopped breathing on her. “Bob? Bob?” Sasha sobs as she pulls out her knife from its sheath.

The door opens and Tyreese comes in seeing the knife in his sister’s hand. “Give it here. You step out. Okay?”

Sasha leaves and Ty walks over to the side of the bed, with shaky hands he stabs Sasha’s knife into Bob’s brain putting an end to his suffering.

They take Bob’s body outside to give him a proper burial like he deserves, Sasha winding rope around two sticks for a cross to put up at the head of it.

Behind her Abraham hands Rick a folded up map, “This is our route to DC. We'll stick to it as long as we're able. If not, well, you got our destination. Once Eugene gets to the big brains left up there, things are gonna bounce back. This group should be there for it. You should be there for it.”

“They will be.” Maggie says nodding.

“We will.” Michonne echoes.

“We will.” Rick reiterates with a smile at Maggie.

“Let's go.” Abraham says as they load up into the bus.

The rest of the group staying stands on the church porch, waving goodbye to Maggie, Glenn, Rosita and Eugene.

As night fell Michonne was sitting on the porch with Rayne, both women just staring up at the full moon overhead. Three blades between them just glinting in the moonlight as they held them. The door opened and Gabriel stepped out, taking a seat on the steps beside Rayne.

“I can't sleep. And now, sitting in there… quiet. It isn't just what happened last night. Saying what
happened before… out loud… I see it all again. I hear them.”

“Yeah. That won't stop.” Michonne says with a glance over at Rayne, both women knew exactly what he felt, they’d had both been through it as well. “But it won’t be all the time.”

The two women hear rustling to their right in the woods, Rayne nods her head to the door, which Gabriel promptly gets up and heads through. With blades in hand the warrior and huntress stand up and move towards the sound. But to their surprise it isn’t a walker or an enemy, but Daryl that comes out of the trees. They both smile as they see him, but their smiles give way to confusion when they see that he’s alone.

Michonne is the one who asks the question they both are thinking. “Where's Carol?”

Daryl looks upset as he turns to look over his shoulder, “Come on out.”
Consumed

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

So I know a lot of people love Carol, but I honestly can't stand her, so she won't be playing as big of a role in my story as she did in the show. Most of her somewhat badass moments, will be done by Rayne. I'm sorry if this pisses anyone off, but it's Rayne's story and she's my hero in this.

Thank you to LucifersAlleyCat for the kudos.

As always reviews are appreciated.

When Daryl and Carol had first left chasing after the car with the white cross, Carol took the time to chat with Daryl about what had happened with everyone after she had been kicked out by Rick. She was trying to find a way to bring up Rayne, wondering why there was such hostility between the two hunters now, that they both wanted to kill the other.

“So it was just you and Beth after?”

“Yeah.” Daryl nodded.

“You save her?”

“She's tough. She saved herself. We were out there for a while. We got cornered, she got out in front of me and I don't know, she was gone. I came out and a car's pulling out with a white cross on the window.”

“Just like that one?”

“Yep.”

Carol notices a walker lying on the road that was just hit by the car in front of them, she flinches as Daryl runs over its head, the skull crunching under the tires.

“Rick's gonna wonder where we went. Tank's runnin' low.”

“We can end this quick. Just run 'em off the road.” Carol offers.

“Nah, we're good for a bit.”

“If they're holding her somewhere, we can get it out of the driver.”

“Yeah, but if he don't talk, we're back to square one. Right now we got the advantage. We'll see who they are. If they're a group, see what they can do. And then we'll do what we gotta do to get
They find themselves heading back into downtown Atlanta, bringing up painful memories for Daryl. The last time he had been here was when he found Merle’s severed hand on a roof, and then again this was the place where Rayne had found her way to them, so there was an upside.

The car in front of them stops in the middle of an intersection, the car just idling as if it doesn’t know which way to go. “What the hell's he waiting for?” Daryl wonders.

The passenger side door opens and a man gets out dressed in a uniform, Daryl looks at him quizzically. “There's two of 'em. Is that a cop?”

“They might've seen us.” Carol says.

The two of them watch in silence as the cop walks behind a building disappearing from their line of sight. They both startle as something slams against Carol’s window, a walker snarling outside as it tries to bite the glass. They see the cop moving a few things out of the roadway, his attention falls on the walker still banging on the car door trying to get inside.

Daryl and Carol remain still trying not to draw attention to themselves, and after a moment the cop gets back into the car. The driver starts it up and turns down the street he had just cleared.

Daryl reaches down and tries to start the car, the engine sputters a moment then dies, Daryl cusses, “Aw, shit! Tank's tapped. They'd have taken the bypass and they didn't. They must be holed up in the city somewhere.”

The walker outside the car has attracted more to their position, they can see them lumbering towards the car. “We gotta move, find someplace to hole up till sunlight.”

“I know a place just a couple of blocks from here. We can make it.” Carol says, rolling down her window and stabbing the walker.

The two get out of the car and head down the road, Carol leading the way, both taking out a few walkers as they come across them. Daryl goes up to the boarded door, trying to pry the nails out as Carol watches his back.

“Two more.” She says seeing them coming around the corner.

“I almost got it.” With a grunt he rips the wooden plank from across the door and yanks it open. “Come on.”

They two move through the halls silently, knives at the ready for any unexpected guests they might encounter. Carol leads the way into a small office, the two using the desks inside to block the doors, before Carol leads the way through another door at the back of the office.

“You used to work here or something?”

“Something.” Carol says as they walk in, Daryl shutting the door behind them.
“What's this place?”

“It's temporary housing.” Carol answers.

“You came here?”

“We didn't stay.” She says taking off her gun and laying it on the top bed. “I'll take the top bunk. I think that one's more your style.”

Daryl chuckles seeing the stuffed animals on the top bed as he takes off his crossbow and jacket, lying them on the desk.

“You should sleep. I'll take first watch.”

“This is locked up pretty tight.” Daryl says looking around.

“I know.”

“Then we're good, then.”

“I'll keep first watch. I don't mind.”

“Suit yourself.” Daryl said as he sat down on the bottom bunk, leaning over so that he didn’t smack his head.

“You said we get to start over.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you?” Carol asked him.

“I'm tryin'.” He said, even though he seemed to be a poor job of it lately. “Why don't you say what's really on your mind?”

“I don't think we get to save people anymore.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I'm tryin'.” She said echoing his words as she walked over and laid down on the bed beside him.

“When we were out by the car… what if I didn't show up?”

“I still don't know.”

Daryl lies down next to her, but only for a moment as they hear a distant banging. They both get up and grab their weapons, moving down the hallways back towards the sound. They find the shadow on a woman walker on the other side of a glass door and sigh, but it’s the other walker shadow that comes up next to the woman that gets them both. The shadow of a little girl.

“You don't have to.” Daryl says as Carol makes a move for the door. “You don't.”

They head back down to the room and climb into the beds, trying to get some rest before morning.
The next morning Carol wakes up, turning her head she sees smoke coming from the roof just outside the window. Leaning over the bunk she sees that Daryl’s bed is empty, grabbing her knife and gun she walks over to the window. A sad smile crosses her face as she notices just what Daryl is burning, the woman’s body. A moment later she sees him walk up carrying the little girl, he’s wrapped her in a white sheet as he gently places her body over her mother’s on the fire.

Carol walks outside and stands beside him, “Thank you.”

After the fire had died down the two went inside and packed up their bags. Daryl was shoving his jacket into his bag, it was too hot for it right now, so he just shrugged on his leather vest over his sleeveless top. “That car was headed downtown. I say we get up in one of the tall ones, get ourselves a view, see what we see.”

“We can stay close to the buildings and keep quiet, but sooner or later, we're gonna be drawing 'em.”

They make their way out of the building onto the street, heading for a tall building in the middle of town. Pausing by the corner of a parking garage, Daryl glances around the corner seeing at least 15 walkers milling around the area, but he also sees a bridge that connects the parking garage to the building. “All right, we can get up there. There's a bridge.”

He pulls a pad of paper out of his bag and lights it with his Zippo, then tosses it as far to the other side of the street as he can. Then quickly they make their way into the parking garage, Daryl taking out the lone walker in their way.

As they enter the bridge to the building they find a makeshift campsite inside the area, complete with two tents that seem to have a few walkers stuck inside, as well as four walkers stuck inside of sleeping bags writhing on the ground. Both he and Carol stab the two walkers closest to them, and Daryl fires an arrow into the one just opposite him.

He hears the walkers in the tent snarling as they claw at the fabric trying to escape, and he shakes his head. “Some days, I don't know what the hell to think.”

Knowing the walkers can’t escape from the tents, the two carefully make their way past them to the door on the other side. The door is chained, but it’ll open enough for them to squeeze through. Carol takes off her bag and shoves it through the opening while Daryl holds the door ajar so she can get through, then he follows behind her.

“Good thing we skipped breakfast.” He quips as it was a tight squeeze to get through the chained doors.

They enter an office which seems to be untouched by anyone, except for the dust that had fallen on everything inside. “How did we get here?” Carol comments looking out the window at the destruction of the city outside.
“We just did.”

“You still haven't asked me what happened. After I met up with Tyreese, the girls.”

“Yeah, I know what happened. They ain't here.”

“It was worse than that.”

“The reason I said we get to start over is because we gotta. The way it was--”

“Yeah.”

Daryl steps forward pressing his eye up to the window. “You see something?” Carol asks him.

“I don't know. Hand me that rifle.” He says taking it from her and looking through the scope. Up on the highway he can see a white van with the same white crosses on the back windows. He hands the gun back to Carol, pointing in the direction. “Right there.”

Carol lifts the scope to her eye, looking where he is pointing. “It's been there a while. Definitely one of 'em.”

“It's definitely some kind of lead.”

“We should fill up.” Carol says grabbing her canteen out of her bag.

“All right.”

She turns to take a drink out of the canteen, seeing Daryl looking at a piece of art on the wall, just a brown streak on a white canvas. “Hmm. What?”

“I bet this cost some rich prick a lot of money. Looks like a dog sat in paint, wiped its ass all over the place.”

“Really? I kinda like it.”

Daryl laughs at her, “Stop.”

“I'm serious. You don't know me.” She comments as she gathers his gun and backpack.

“Yep, you keep tellin' yourself that.” Daryl quips as he leads the way to the door.

They head back to the bridge and Carol shoves her pack and gun through like before, then squeezes herself through. Daryl puts his bow through first, but as he moves to follow it he hears Carol call to him. “Daryl, don't.”

A kid probably in his teens had Carol’s rifle and is pointing it at the both of them. Daryl grits his teeth as he shoves himself through the door and stands up beside Carol.

“Get up. Hands up, both of you. Lay down your crossbow.”

“You got some sack on you.” Daryl tells the kid.
“Look, nobody has to get hurt. I just need weapons, that's it. So, please, lay down your crossbow.”

Daryl is pissed as he lays down the bow, the last thing he had that Rayne had given to him. He was even more ticked that it was being taken by some punk teenager.

“Back up.” The kid snaps as he slowly moves forward and picks up the bow, shouldering the strap. “Sorry about this. You look tough. You'll be all right.” He then pulls out a knife and slices through both of the tents, releasing the walkers inside on them.

Daryl quickly pulls out his knife and stabs the closest one to him. He sees Carol lift her handgun and shoot the other one before taking aim at the kid. He deflects her shot before they take off after the kid who runs out the door into the garage and chains it behind him, preventing them from following.

The two of them make their way up to another level through the offices to an open floor towards the roof. Carol checks her gun with a sigh, “Three bullets. We're in the middle of a city. He was stealing our weapons. Did you think I was gonna kill him? I was aiming for his leg. Could that have killed him? Maybe, I don't know. But he was stealing our weapons.”

“He's a damn kid.”

“Without weapons we could die. Beth could die.”

“We'll find more weapons.” Daryl says plainly as he takes out his knife and tries to jimmy open the door to the stairwell.

“I don't want you to die. I don't want Beth to die. I don't want anybody at the church to die, but I can't stand around and watch it happen either. I can't. That's why I left. I just had to be somewhere else.”

“Well, you ain't somewhere else; you're right here. Tryin'.”

“Look, you're not who you were and neither am I. I don't know if I believe in God anymore or heaven, but if I'm going to hell, I'm making damn sure I'm holding it off as long as I can.”

The door opens and Carol picks up Daryl’s bag, a few items inside clattering to the ground. She sees a book that Daryl quickly picks up and walks off with, the title of the book giving her cause to ponder. “Treating Survivors of Childhood Abuse.”

The two of them get out of the building and make it out onto the highway, heading for the van they saw, hoping something will help them find Beth. The van is hanging precariously off of the bridge, teeter-tottering on the edge as Daryl opens the back doors.

“All right, let's get this done.”

“It's not stable. I'm lighter.” She says as she sets down her bag, but Daryl stubbornly climbs up inside anyway. Sighing she shoves a tire over towards the back and uses it as leverage to climb up inside as well.

The van creaks and rocks as the two of them climb into the front seats and go through whatever
they can find hoping from some sort of clue. Carol notices more walkers making their way down the bridge towards them. “There's more coming. We're gonna have to fight through.”

“Yeah, I see 'em.”

“We have to go.”

Daryl pick sup the stretcher in the back and flips it on its side seeing something stamped on the bottom. “GMH, what's that? A hospital?”

“I don't know. Grady Memorial, maybe?”

“Grady, the white crosses-- it might be where they're holing up.”

The two of them jump out and try to fight their way through the crowd of walkers, but there’s too many for them to handle. They both jump back inside the van, Daryl shutting the back doors as the walkers claw at the back. The van rocks even more now with the walkers outside pounding on it, as the two occupants look around for something to help them.

“Anything we can use?” Carol yells over the growling and snarling of the dead.

“Nothin' but what we got.” Daryl says as he realizes their only escape is down. He climbs into the driver’s seat, motioning for Carol to do the same. “All right, buckle up.”

Carol is having a panic attack in the passenger seat as Daryl looks over to her, “You hold on.” She nods as she braces herself in the seat, her hand holding onto his on the dash. The van rocks as both of them close their eyes, they’re weightless for a moment before the van smashes violently into the ground below. Luckily for them it had enough inertia and weight to keep it level so that it landed on its wheels, and thankfully the airbags still worked which cushioned their painful crash landing.

“We're okay. We're okay.” Daryl groans as they catch their breath.

But their moment of peace is shattered as a body slams into the windshield. They both sit there just staring at one another as multiple bodies impact the roof of the van, blood streaming down the windshield until it’s covered in red. They both then climb out of the wreckage, wrapping an arm around each other as they limped back towards the city.

After finding a secure place to take a break Carol sits down, while they rest their pain-filled bodies. Daryl offers her the canteen and she takes a drink, still gingerly holding her right arm.

“How bad is it?” He asks.

“I've had worse.” She says showing him the burn on her skin from the seatbelt.

Daryl shakes his head as he sits down beside her, “Damn, that was stupid.”

“We made good time down.” She scoffed trying to make him feel better. “There's only three blocks between us and Grady.”

“We need to find a place nearby, scope it out, see what we can see.”
“You really think we're gonna find out what we need to know just by watching?”

“It's where we start. Come on.”

They both get up and grab their bags heading the three blocks to the hospital, then ducking into a building across the street. As they walk down one of the hallways Daryl sees a walker, obviously so weak it can’t stand up, lying on the floor. He smiles inwardly as he sees a machete lying on the floor by its head, he leans over and picks it up, then slams it down severing the walkers head in two.

“It's them.” Carol says as she looks out the window at the hospital, seeing the vans with the white crosses parked outside.

Daryl comes over, a bag of snacks he found in his hands. “All right. Let's see what we see.”

Daryl stands at the window munching on the bags of snacks as they watch the hospital. He looks over at Carol who is sitting on the windowsill beside him. “You said I ain't like how I was before?”

“Yeah.”

“How was I?”

“It's like you were a kid. Now you're a man.”

“What about you?” He asks wondering how she sees herself.

“Me and Sophia stayed at that shelter for a day and a half before I went running back to Ed. I went home, I got beat up, life went on, and I just kept praying for something to happen. But I didn’t do anything. Not a damn thing. Who I was with him she got burned away. And I was happy about that. I mean, not happy, but-- And at the prison I got to be who I always thought I should be, thought I should've been. And then she got burned away. Everything now just consumes you.”

“Well, hey… we ain't ashes.”

They hear a door closing down the hallway, both of them grabbing their bags to go check it out. They find a walker still alive with a familiar looking green arrow in its throat pinning it to the wall.

“Is that yours?” Carol asks.

“Yeah.” Daryl takes the machete and slams it into the walkers head, then he pulls the arrow out of its throat.

They hear automatic gunfire coming from down the adjacent hallway and move to check it out. They find the kid that took their weapons fighting off a walker, he manages to shove it towards Carol before he takes off running. With her arm in pain Carol is knocked to the ground, the walker snapping its jaws at her face from above. Daryl steps up slicing it through the head, then helping her up off the ground.

“I'm good. I'm good. You go.” She pants trying to catch her breath as Daryl takes off after the kid.
Daryl finds the kid in another room trying to shove a bookcase up against a door. With his back turns he doesn’t see Daryl as the hunter slams into his back, the kid hits the floor and Daryl rolls out of the way as the bookcase slams down on top of the kid pinning him underneath it.

“Plea-- please. I had to protect myself.” The kid cries from under the bookcase as a walker snarls trying to get through the cracked door behind the shelf.

“Why you followin’ us?” Daryl yells as he picks up his crossbow.

“I-I didn't, I swear! I thought you followed me.”

“Bullshit.” Daryl snaps as the walker continues snarling.

“Come on, man. Plea-- please! Please, please.”

Daryl picks up a carton of cigarettes off the floor and pulls the last pack out, taking a cig out of the pack and putting it in his mouth. “Nah, I already helped you once. It ain't happenin' again.” He lights the cigarette with his Zippo and takes a long drag. “Have fun with Hoss over there.”

“No. No, no, no. No. No, no, no! Please! Please! Please! I'm sorry, please! Please! Please, please!”

“Daryl. Daryl. Stop.” Carol says nodding down to the boy.

“You almost died 'cause of him!” Daryl snaps.

“But I didn't.”

“Nah, let him be.”

“I'm sorry. Please, I'm sorry!”

“Daryl!”

The walker pushes through the door and falls on top of the shelf, inches away from the kid’s face. Carol seeing that Daryl isn’t coming back reaches for her knife to save the kid, but an arrow wizzes past her and embeds in the walkers head.

Carol pulls the dead walker off of the shelf, then Daryl lifts it up and she pulls the kid out from under it, before Daryl lets the case slam to the floor.

“Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” The kid mumbles as he limps over to the window.

“You okay? You okay?” Daryl asks Carol as she picks up her things.

“I'm still here.”

The kid is still mumbling as he stares out the window, “I gotta go. I gotta go. They're gonna come. They probably heard the shot. If they find me--”

“Who?” Daryl asks.

“Them, people at the hospital.”
This gets the hunter’s attention and he stops the kid in his tracks. “Wait, wait, wait, just tell us— is there a blonde girl there? You see a blonde girl?”

“Beth? You know her?” The kid asks. “She helped me get out, but she's still there.”

“They're coming.” Carol says seeing one of the cars with the white cross driving past the window below.

“We gotta go now. We gotta go. We gotta go. The building next door has a basement. It's clear. We'll be safe.” The kid says as he leads the way across the ground level, until his ankle gives out on him and he falls to the floor. “Ah! Ah!”

“Go, I got him.” Daryl says as he leans over and grabs the kid. “Come on, get up. Get up.”

Carol goes out the front doors heading for the building across the way, when she’s hit by the car she saw, she bounces off of the windshield and lands hard on the ground.

Daryl moves to go help her, but the kid grabs him and pulls him back. “No, no, no! Wait, wait, wait!”

“Let go of me!”

“Wait! They can help her. They're the only ones who can. They have medicine, machines, a doctor. You go out there, you’ll have to kill them, okay? And then she can't get their help. Is that what you want? We can get her back. We can get Beth back.”

“What's it gonna take?”

“A lot. They got guns, people.”

“So do we.” Daryl snarls. He had lost all three women that meant something to him in this world, and he was going to get them back. All of them.
After arriving at the church with his new friend in tow, Daryl sat everyone down and told them about what had happened in Atlanta. They all agreed that they would go after Beth and Carol with everything they had.

The next morning Daryl was in the church with Tyreese, who was taking the pipes off of the organ to use as weapons. He turns to see Sasha swinging an axe, completely destroying one of the pews.

Ty gets down from the ladder and hands one of the pipes to Daryl, “It was-- it was good you weren't here for it.”

Daryl nods his head to Sasha, “She hanging in there?”

“No.”

Daryl takes the pipes outside and shoves them into the ground by the porch alongside the others, leaving them sticking up as a defense for the church.

“Are you gonna take the cross, too?” Gabriel comments as he watches them dismantle his church.

“If we need it.” Daryl states.

On the other side of the church Rick and Michonne are boarding up the windows alongside Carl,
Rayne and Nico. Rick nods over to his son, “He wants to go to Atlanta, but I can't have that.”

“Then you stay. I'll go.” Michonne offers.

“I owe it to Carol.”

“We all owe Carol.”

“I owe her more.” Rick says feeling horrible that he had exiled her in the first place.

Nico heard what Rick had told Michonne, leaning over to his sister he asked her, “Are you ever gonna tell ‘em who really rescued everyone from Terminus?”

Rayne shakes her head, “No.”

“Why not Ray?”

Rayne sighed as she turned to her brother, “I didn't do it for the accolades, Nic, I did it to rescue my family. Whether Daryl and I are together or not, Carol means somethin’ to him. And if lettin’ Rick believe that Carol saved everyone, keeps her around and makes Daryl happy, then I’ll gladly take this secret to my grave.”

Nico shakes his head as he hugs his sister tight, leaning down to whisper in her ear. “He will never know how much he doesn’t deserve you.”

Rayne laughs as she pulls back from her brother, “He’s a good man. There ain’t too many of ‘em left nowadays.” She sees Daryl looking at her and she gives him a wink, she can tell by his face that he’s confused, but he smiles all the same in return. She giggles as he walks away thoroughly confused, she glances up at Nico, “I think I’ll keep him.”

An hour later the group is preparing to go, Rayne, Daryl, Michonne and Nico loading up all of the supplies into her truck. Rick is inside saying goodbye to Judith and Carl, kissing his daughters head before handing her back to Carl.

“We'll be back soon.” He says hugging his son.

“I know.”

Daryl leads the way in the box van with Rick riding shotgun, Sasha and Tyreese in the back, while Rayne and Nico followed in her truck with the kid Daryl and Carol had rescued.
Out on the road down by the farm overrun with walkers, Glenn walks back up to Tara who is trying to get water out of the firetruck. “They got no clue we're here.” He tells her.

“That's great news for GREATM. In less great news for GREATM, we just scraped the bottom of the water barrel.”

Glenn furrows his brows, “What is-- what's GREATM?”

“Us. Group name. Solidarity. Band of brothers. GREATM.” She says pointing down at the water bottles with their first initial on the cap which spelled out the word. “Thinking about getting a tattoo on my knuckles. Sorry, I'm just trying to think of something else, you know?”

“Yeah.” Glenn says taking his water bottle and drinking a sip.

“Anything?” Tara questions Maggie as she walks up, she’s been tending to Eugene since Abraham knocked him out hours ago.

“No.”

“Should we get him to the church?” Glenn asks his girlfriend, she shakes her head, “Moving him could make him worse.”

“What will make him better?” Rosita asks.

“Waking up. If he doesn't—” Maggie let the sentence hang in the air, they all knew what she meant.

Rosita grabs the bottle of water with the A on top and walks over to Abraham, who is still kneeling on the ground. “Come on. You haven't had anything to drink all day. Take the bottle. Seriously, my six-year-old nephew didn't pull this shit.”

Abraham slaps the bottle out of her hand and she sighed, leaning over she looks down at him “Don't do this, Abraham. Look at me! Look at me!”

He jumps to his feet, rage etched across his face as he stared her down with malice. A gun cocks and he turns to see Maggie with her gun drawn, pointing at his head. “Sit down or I'll put you down.”

She uncocks it and puts it back into the holster as he kneels back down on the ground.

“Well, what's next on the agenda?” Rosita asks.

In Atlanta the group was gathered in the basement of the building that the kid Noah, had directed them to, which was just across from the hospital. “At sundown we fire a shot into the air. Get two of them out on patrol. Then once it's dark enough that the rooftop spotter won't see us, we go. We cut the locks on one of the stairways, take it to the fifth floor. I open the door, Daryl takes the
guard out.”

“How?” Ty asks Rick.

“He slits his throat. This is all about us doing this quiet, keeping the upper hand. They're not expecting us. From there, we fan out. Knives and silenced weapons. We need to be fast.” Rick shows them on the floor in the drawing he made of the building, Noah had told them what it looked like.

“Tyreese, Sasha, take them. Daryl, you take care of whoever is in the kitchen. I got Dawn. Rayne and Nico, anyone gets past us or comes up, you take ‘em out. If they’re smart, the rest of them will give up. Then it'll be seven on three. Eight on three once we get a weapon to Beth.”

“Fourteen on three.” Noah says. “The wards will help.”

“That's best case. What's worst case?” Ty asks. “All it takes is one of those cops going down the hall at the wrong time. Then it's not quiet. All hands on deck. We're talking about a lot of bullets flying around.”

“If that's what it takes.” Sasha says with a shrug.

“It's not.” Ty says shaking his head. “If we get a couple of her cops alive out here, we do an even trade. Theirs for ours. Everybody goes home.”

Rick stands up, “Yeah, I get it. And it might work. This will work.”

“Nah, that'll work, too.” Daryl says pointing to Noah. “You say this Dawn, she's just trying to keep it together, right?”

“Trying and doing are two different things.”

“You take two of her cops away, what choices does she have?” Daryl says his eyes locked on Rick. “Everybody goes home. Like he said.”

Back at the firetruck Glenn realizes they need to go scavenge, “We need more water.”

“There's a creek up the road a few miles southwest of here.” Tara says having looked at the map.

“Y'all go. I'll stay here.” Maggie says.

“You sure?” Glenn asks her concerned.

She nods, “I am.”

“Okay.”
Tara follows Glenn and Rosita down the road, turning off and walking through a field. They pass a downed telephone pole with about four walkers trapped underneath of it.

"Stay here, guys. Don't get up. There is nothing for you in Washington." Tara snarks.

"That's not funny." Rosita says.

"It's not not not not funny." Tara smirks as they continue walking.

"Hey, I get that we're all dealing with things in different ways--" Glenn starts to say, but Rosita interrupts him, "Listen, I don't know what to do without DC anymore, but I'm not dealing with it. I'm over it. I just want him to be okay."

"Eugene wasn't strong. He isn't fast. He doesn't know how to use a weapon. The truth hurts, but he's useless. He had one skill that kept him living. Are we supposed to be mad at him 'cause he used it?" Tara questioned.

"Damn right." Glenn grumbled.

Back at the truck Maggie pulls the ladder down off of the top of the truck, she takes it up front and leans it up against the truck over Eugene, before she takes a blanket out of the truck and drapes it over the ladder to cover the man. She walks back and snaps at Abraham, "Get over yourself. You're not the only one who lost something today. It's never gonna get any better than this."

At the stream Glenn dips his bottle into the water and pulls it up, frowning at the dirty color of the liquid. "Perfect."

"You think it's any clearer upstream?" Tara asks.

They both turn as they hear fabric ripping, Rosita tearing off a piece of her shirt. "Probably not. Doesn't matter. Let me see." She takes the bottle from Glenn and rigs a quick filter for the water.

"So, you just built a water filter in about two minutes, huh?" Tara says impressed.

"Eugene taught me. Takes a while, but it'll be clear. Then we can boil it."

"Were you with Abraham before it all happened? " Tara asks.

Rosita shakes her head, "No. No, I was with other people just trying to make it."

"How'd you wind up together?" Glenn wonders.

"We crossed paths in Dallas. Me and my group, we were fighting off some dead ones and he jumped in from out of nowhere with that big truck. Rest in peace. He had Eugene in the cab. And afterwards, he told me that he was trying to save the world. And that he saw what I could do. And he wanted my help. He was the first person to ask me for that since this all started. Maybe he was
lying, too.”

Glenn suddenly sees a splash in the water to their right, “You see that? Those ripples. Those are fish.”

“Okay, how?” Tara asks totally bewildered.

“Come on.” Glenn says picking up their guns.

As planned Noah sent a shot into the air drawing the woman Darcy and one other cop their way. He hobbled away from them as best he could as they got out of the car, drawing their guns on him. “Put it down, Noah. Put the gun down.” Darcy tells him.

Noah puts the gun down and raises his hands, as Darcy tells him, “Hands up. Turn around.”

The other officer comes up behind him with a set of zip ties and secures them around his wrists. “You let me know if it’s too tight, okay?”

“I thought you were smart, Noah. You think we wouldn’t hear you?” Darcy questions.

“Where are those roters you were shooting at?” The other cop asks him.

The two cops turn as they hear a whistle, finding themselves staring down the barrels of six guns. “Hands.” Rick tells them.

“What do you want?” Darcy asks.

“Whatever this is, we can help.” The other cop says.

“You do what we say, we don't hurt you.” Rick tells them flatly. Both cops hold up their hands in defense. “Good. Now turn around. Put your guns on the floor and kneel.”

The cops obey as Rayne walks up behind Noah and slices the ties on his hands. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She says giving him a smile.

“We need to talk. There's water if you need some and food.” Rick tells them as Daryl and Sasha secure their hands with ties.

Daryl yanks the male cop to his feet, the cop looks over at Rick, “Mind if I ask you something? The way you talk-- the way you carry yourself-- were you a cop? Believe it or not, I was, too.”

“That's Lamson.” Noah says. “He'll be down for this. He's one of the good ones.”

The group turns as they hear tires squealing coming their way, they all scatter to the sides as the car flies up and two cops start shooting out of the windows. Darcy and the other cop jump into the back as the driver guns the engine, the tires squealing as it pulls away. The group opens fire on the car, Sasha places a bullet into the rear tire causing the car to fishtail.

The group runs after the car finding it stalled at the side of a building, the doors open showing the cops jumped out in a hurry. Rick sees two of them running away towards the front of the building,
“Two, on me.”

As the group runs after the cops Daryl lags behind to check the car and a nearby trailer to make sure no one was hiding in them. The trailer was clear, but as Daryl shuts the door, the bald cop that was driving the car rushes him taking the hunter to the ground.

Daryl gets to his feet as the two throw punches, neither of them connecting. The cop then knocks Daryl to the ground, putting his hands around his throat and choking him, as the walkers stuck to the ground try to bite Daryl’s face. The hunter blindly reaches out for something to use as a weapon, his arm dangerously close to the walkers teeth beside him. Realizing his only choice is to use his surroundings, he jams his fingers into the eyes of the walker and rips the skull off of the body, the spine dangling in the air as Daryl bashes the man in the head with it.

A gunshot sounds as a bullet embeds into the skull of the living walker, the cop looks up finding a pissed off brunette with a rifle pointing at his head.


Rayne clenches her teeth as she positions her sight between the man’s eyes, her finger hovering over the trigger. “Rayne. Rayne!” Daryl says trying to get her attention, but her eyes don’t move from the cop. “Nix!” He hollers using her nickname which serves to gain her attention as she looks into his eyes. “Three is better than two.”

She lowers her weapon with a nod as Daryl relieves the man of his weapons and ties his hands. Daryl shoots her a wink as he leads the man inside, she follows with a smile on her face and a shake of her head. Her only thought at that moment was, ‘we have such a dysfunctional relationship.’

The group minus Rick takes the three cops into the warehouse, Darcy tries to plead their case with Daryl. “Your friend, what's his name? I need to talk to him. Your plan is going to get me and my friends killed.”

“We're gonna make it work.” Sasha says.

“It would work if you had different cops to trade.” Darcy says. “Dawn's running Grady into the ground. A bunch of us want her out and she knows it. Pretty sure she knows we want Lamson to replace her, too.”

“Dawn doesn't know that.” The bald cop says.

“She might. And she's smart. So there's a good chance you can't make this deal work and that'll leave us all dead. But if you let us go, we'll take care of Dawn ourselves and then we'll let your friends go and this is over.”

“No, we're not gonna do that.” Lamson says.

“Do you want to die?” The woman says looking at her partner.

“No. I just need you to shut up right now. You can make this work. But you've got to be able to talk to her.”
“Noah told us all about her.” Sasha informs him.

“I've known her for eight years, ma'am. I know this woman. And my only interest is peaceful resolution, not dying, and sleeping in my bed tonight. So, please, let me help you. Please.”

“Hey, Rick.” Daryl calls to him, “You're gonna want to hear this.”

After killing the walkers pinned underneath the telephone pole, Glenn and Rosita strip off their jackets, removing the inside liner which resembles a net, hoping to catch some fish with it.

Rosita chuckles as Glenn tosses her the lining from his jacket, she glances over her shoulder at Tara. “Hey, how are we doing over there, Tara?”

Tara gasps as she tugs something free from the ground, she stands up grinning as she holds up a muddy backpack. “Pretty damn good. How about you?”

The three head back down to the creek, Tara sits down on the bank and proceeds to go through the pack, hoping to find something they can use. “A screwdriver. Phillips head.”

Out in the water Rosita and Glenn hold their makeshift net under the water, patiently waiting for the fish to swim over it. “Almost. Almost. Now.” Glenn hollers as the two lift the fish out of the water, the creature twisting around in the net as they laugh.

“Hell, yes.” Rosita smiles.

“It worked. Nice. You know how to clean these things?”

Rosita chuckles, “I know how to clean these things.”

Glenn gives her a serious look as he hands her the net. “Good, we're gonna need that. Wherever we all wind up. You in?”

She chuckles again, “I'm in.”

“Good.”

“Guys.” Tara calls gaining their attention, they see her holding something in her hand. “You will never believe what's in this bag.”

At the hospital Beth had been entrusted by one of the cops to save Carol’s life, as the officers were ordered to take her off of her support machines. So after using the key for the drug locker she was
provided, she took the necessary medicine and injected it into Carol’s IV. Beth was hopeful, she knew that if Carol was there, then there was a chance that others were too, and that meant she just might get out of the hospital alive and back to her family.

Inside the warehouse Rayne, Nico and Daryl were keeping an eye on the bald cop and the female, Darcy. While Sasha and Tyreeese gathered some food and water from the cars outside. Across the warehouse floor from them, Rick was talking to Lamson, trying to decide if this plan that Daryl and Ty endorsed was going to work out.

“She'll tell you she won't make a deal. She'll tell you she won't compromise. But she will. She always does. Just-- just know who you're talking to.”

Rick nods as he looks down at his watch, “Probably heading out in the next 10 minutes or so. Anything you need before we leave?”

“Actually, water would be great.”

“Will do. Thanks, Sergeant Lamson.”

“My name's Bob.” He says which serves to catch Sasha’s attention as she grabs the waters.

“You're still a cop.” Rick tells him.

“No. No, the real ones are all gone.” After Rick walks away Lamson sighs, “Damn it.” He notices Sasha walk up beside him, a concerned look on her face. “I'm-- I'm okay. I'll be okay.”

“Me, too.” She said.

“The parking lot, when you were bringing us back up here I-- I saw a rotter. I saw one of the rotters and I knew him.” He said as Sasha took a seat beside him. “His name was Tyler. I met him at Grady. We were both sent there when shit started going down. It took two whole days to evacuate everyone. Didn't sleep. We didn't eat. But still, it was the two best days of my life. I was supposed to drive the last van of survivors to the zone and Dawn pulled me off. She wanted someone she could really trust and she put Tyler on it instead. These-- these people were gonna all be evacuated. I was really pissed. I saw him out there. Stuck out there, melted to the asphalt. And all I could think was, “That would have been me. It would have been me. He saved my life.” He's been out there the whole time. Like he's a part of the street. Some screwed up, endless joke. And there's nothing I can do about it.”

“So let me help you. Do you remember where he was?”

“Yeah, I-- I can take you right to him.”

“We're not going out there, but I'm a good shot. Show me.”

“Okay. South side of the building. You can see him from in there.”
Maggie sighs as she takes a drink of water, before she stands up and walks over holding it out to Abraham. “You're thirsty. Don't say you're not.” She kneels down beside him, “Did you want me to shoot you?”

“I thought I did. But I didn't.”

Maggie hears groaning and she gets up running over to Eugene who has finally come back to consciousness. “Hell-- hello?”

She kneels down beside him, “I'm coming. Stay right there. Don't try to move. You're gonna be okay.”

Glenn and the two women are walking back to the truck and he smiles looking over at Tara. “You know, the more I think about it, maybe it wasn't completely not not not funny.”

They head back up into the road and Glenn notices Tara glance over at the farm filled with walkers. “Hey. Don't even look at it.”

The women smile as they walk back towards the truck, Tara flipping the yo-yo she had found in the backpack making them all laugh.

Sasha takes Lamson to the other side of the building to find a close window to see his friend.

“You see him?”

“About 20 yards right of the sedan. There's a half wall. He's leaning against it.” He says backing up behind her.

Sasha steps up to the window, setting up her rifle on the sill and looks through the scope. “I see him. Are you sure that's him?” As she turns to look at him, Lamson rushes her slamming her head against the window and knocking her out. As Sasha hits the floor, Lamson runs out of the building as fast as his feet will carry him.
Coda

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

So I know a lot of people love Carol, but I honestly can't stand her, so she won't be playing as big of a role in my story as she did in the show. Most of her somewhat badass moments, will be done by Rayne. I'm sorry if this pisses anyone off, but it's Rayne's story and she's my hero in this.

Thank you to LucifersAlleyCat for the kudos.

As always reviews are appreciated.

Rick notices that Sasha has been gone quite a long time, so he goes looking for her and finds her unconscious on the floor. He yells for Tyreese to come take care of her as he chases down Lamson, while Rayne, Nico and Daryl keep an eye on the other two.

He sees Lamson running down the road in between the buildings, instead of chasing after him, he jumps into the patrol car and chases him down, mowing down walkers in his path. He doesn’t want to hurt the cop, or see him get attacked by walkers, so he gets on the bullhorn and tries to reason with the man.

“Stop. Stop right now. Stop. I won't ask again.” The cop doesn’t slow down, or make any attempt to stop running. So with a shrug, Rick tosses down the radio and slams on the gas accelerating towards the cop.

“Oh, shit.” Lamson cries just before the patrol car slams into his legs, sending him skidding face first onto the pavement. He can hear the walkers snarling as they follow the cop car, but he can’t move his body; he can taste blood in his mouth and his head is bleeding as Rick gets out of the car and approaches him. “Son of a bitch. You son of a bitch. Help me. Son of a bitch. Help me. You crazy-- You crazy son of a bitch. I think you I think you broke my back.”

“Didn't have to be like this. You just had to stop.” Rick says.

“I couldn't. I don't know you. But I think-- I think I'm getting the idea.”

“You just had to stop.”

“Take me back. Take me back to the hospital. I did it for your friend.”

Rick shakes his head, “Not after this, no. Can't go back, Bob.”

“I was gonna iron it over. She's under it. And you've been out here too long.” He panics as Rick pulls out his gun and points it at his head, “You'll die. You'll all——”
Rick puts a bullet into the man’s head, shaking his head at the stupid choice he made to run, then noticing the walkers heading for the dead body. “Shut up.”

Inside the church Carla and Michonne suddenly hear screams of panic coming from Gabriel, somehow he had gotten out and was now trapped on the porch by a herd of walkers. Michonne quickly takes an axe to the board securing the front door allowing Gabriel to run inside. But there is no way to secure the doors now, allowing the walkers to funnel inside.

“The rectory, come on. That's how I got out.” Gabriel says leading them to the office in the back, Carl quickly grabs Judith and jumps down into the hole Gabriel had made in the floor. “Crawl under to the back. Just go. Take the little one and go.”

Michonne follows Carl as he crawl under the building, careful not to hurt Judith as he carries her with him. Once they are free they run around and kill the walkers that are stuck onto the organ pipes, then they secure the front door from the outside, trapping the walkers inside of the church.

At the warehouse Sasha had roused herself and was sitting on a cement block with the others, when Rick came walking in they noticed he was minus one cop. After a nod from Rick, Daryl and Rayne moved away from the others to speak with him.

“He wouldn't stop.” Rick says with a sigh.

“This change things?” Daryl questions glancing over at the remaining two cops.

“It has to.”

“Maybe not.” Rayne offers.

“She said the plan won't work. The guy who did is dead. Maybe we gotta rethink this.”

Daryl nods, “They also said the cop in charge didn't have any love for him. Maybe you did her a favor.”

“I don't know if they'll play ball.” Rick says with a shake of his head.

Daryl shrugs his shoulders, “Let's find out.”

The three of them walk back to the cops, the female Darcy saying, “He was a good man. He was attacked by roters. Saw it go down.”

“Huh. You're a damn good liar.” Rick tells her.

“We're hanging by a thread here. He was attacked by roters. That's the story.”

“You said the trade was a bad idea.” Daryl tells her. “What changed?”
“Lamson was our shot. So it's this or you go in guns blazing, right? You don't want that.”

“If this is some bullshit you're spinning-- and things go south—” Daryl lets his threat hang in the air.

“I know. I know the good ones from the bad. Let us help you.”


“Dawn's afraid she'll look weak in front of us. Thinks it'll tip things against her. Hell, it will. She'll see this trade as a rip-off if she thinks you took out one of our guys. So it's a good thing Lamson got aced by rotters.”

Inside the hospital in Dawn’s room Beth stands by the desk cleaning up, Dawn is sitting on a bike machine working out, her radio in her hands as she tries to get a response from someone.


“Something wrong?” Beth asks with a smirk knowing the woman couldn’t see it with her back turned.

“They don't always radio back and it drives me crazy.” Dawn says. She sees Beth setting a photo down on the desk, “Wait, no, no, no. Beth, no, not there. Up by the badges. Thank you.”

Beth sits the frame up on the file cabinet behind three badges from fallen officers. “Is this Captain Hanson?”

“Did someone say something about him to you?”

“Just that he used to be in charge.”

“Well, you'll hear stories about him. About me. About what I did. He was my mentor. My friend. I miss him. That's the part the stories leave out.”

“What happened to him?”

Dawn gets off the bike and comes over to stand beside her, “They risk their lives every time they go out there. It has to be worth it. It has to matter. He lost sight of that. So he lost them. Beth, in this job you don't need their love-- But you have to have their respect. Otherwise, the day is gonna come when you need backup and you don't have it. And what comes next? Everybody goes down. Hanson lost his way. That's what happened.”

As they stand out side of the church Michonne questions Gabriel about where all of those walkers came from. “Where did you go?”
“The school. I had to see. I had to know.”

They all turn as they hear the boards on the front doors breaking, the walkers inside pushing against them. Sooner or later they were going to get free.

“Where do we go?” Carl asks.

Before they need to make a decision Abraham and the others drive up in the firetruck, the soldier driving through the porch and parking the truck up against the doors. Abraham along with Maggie and Glenn get out of the cab, while Tara and Rosita jump down off of the back.

“You okay?” Maggie asks as she hugs the warrior.

“Yeah.” She says before grasping arms with Glenn with a smile. “You're back.”

Glenn nods, “Eugene lied. He can't stop it. Washington isn't the end. Where is everybody?”

Michonne’s head turns to Maggie as she answers, “Beth's alive. She's in a hospital in Atlanta. Some people have her, but the others went to get her back.”

“Do we know which one?” Maggie says as tears of joy fill her eyes.

“Grady Memorial.”

“Oh, my God.” Maggie laughs as she hugs Glenn tight.

“Let's blow this joint, go save your sister.” Tara says making them all smile.

On the roof of a parking garage across the street from the hospital, Daryl, Nico and Sasha peer through their rifle scopes, watching as the cops leave the hospital and head out on the streets. Daryl snaps his fingers giving a signal to Tyreese, the man nods getting on his radio. “They're headed towards the vantage point.”

“Oh. Copy that.” Rick radios back as he stands on the concrete roof of the hospital parking structure with Rayne. The two holster their guns as the car containing two more of the officers rolls up and stops in front of them. They approach the car with their hands up as the cops take cover behind their doors with their guns drawn.

“Officer Franco. Officer McGinley. I'm Rick Grimes. I was a deputy in the King County Sheriff's Department. This is my daughter Rayne. We're here to make a proposal.”

“Lay your weapons on the ground.” The driver tells them.

“All right.” Rick says glancing over to Rayne and giving her a nod. She returns the nod as they take their guns and lie them on the ground in front of them. The two aren’t worried knowing that over their heads, Daryl, Nico and Sasha have them covered.
“What’s your proposal?”

“You have two of my people, I have two of yours. We want to make an exchange. Then we'll be on our way. No one gets hurt.”

“Who?”

“Officers Shepherd and Licari for Beth and Carol.” Rayne said earning her a confused look from the officers on the latter, so she elaborated. “You picked up a woman yesterday after your people hit her with a car.”

“Noah, he's with you? That's how you know?”

“Yes, he is.”

“What about Officer Lamson?”

“He was attacked by the dead before we got to him.” Rick says.

“Where are your people?” The driver asks a split second before a walker coming up behind the cops, gets a bullet to the brain.

Rayne smirks seeing the officers starting to sweat, “They're close.”

“Radio your lieutenant. I'll wait.” Rick says.

Ten minutes later Rick and Rayne have the two cops in front of them as they enter the hospital. Behind them Nico, Daryl, Noah, Sasha and Tyreese cover their backs as they all follow the other cops down the hallways. They come around a corner to find Dawn and three other cops standing at the end of a long hallway before them, a set of double doors separating them all; Beth behind them pushing Carol in a wheelchair alongside a doctor.

“Holster your weapons.” Dawn radios as she and her cops do as she says.

“You, too.” Rick tells his group, to which they all abide and slips their weapons back into the sheaths.

The two cops open the doors and walk down the hallway to Dawn’s side, Rick and Rayne moving behind the two restrained officers as they all enter the hallway, keeping a fair amount of distance between them.

“They haven't been harmed.” Rick says.


“Rotters got him.” Shepard tells her, and Licari corroborates, “We saw it go down.”

“Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. He was one of the good guys.” Dawn says sadly. “One of yours for one of mine.”

“All right.” Rick nods to Rayne who shoves Licari forward, “Move.” She takes him a few feet
forward swapping him for Carol and a black bag with her medication in it. She gives Carol a smile before pushing her back to their group and handing her off to Daryl. Then Rick trades Shepard for Beth, handing her off to Dawn.

“Glad we could work things out.” Dawn says.

“Yeah.” Rick scoffs before they all turn to leave.

“Now I just need Noah. And then you can leave.”

Rick turns around slowly eyeing the cop, “That wasn't part of the deal.”

“Noah was my ward. Beth took his place and I'm losing her, so I need him back.”

“Ma'am, please, it's not--” The female officer starts to say, but she’s cut off by Dawn, “Shepherd! My officers put their lives on the line to find him. One of them died.”

“No, he ain't staying.” Daryl says pushing Noah back beside Rayne.

“'E's one of mine. You have no claim on him.”

“The boy wants to go home, so you have no claim on him.” Rick tells her.

“Well, then we don't have a deal.”

“The deal is done.” Rick states.

“It's okay.” Noah says stepping up beside Rick, he doesn’t want to be the reason that Beth and Carol are kept from their family.

“No. No.” Rick states holding out his arm to stop the kid.

“I got to do it.” Noah says taking out his gun and handing it to Rick.

“It's not okay.” Beth says from behind them.

“It's settled.” Dawn states.

“Wait!” Beth says running up to Noah and hugging him tight. “It's okay.” Noah says holding her to him.

“I knew you'd be back.” Dawn says cockily as she looks at Beth.

Beth steps up in front of Dawn, staring her down. “I get it now.” She pulls a pair of scissors out of her cast and stabs them into Dawn’s chest.

A gunshot goes off and blood splatters over Rick, Rayne and Daryl, as Beth’s lifeless body collapses to the floor. Dawn looks up at them with a look of pure terror, she knows that she just signed her own death warrant. She tries to plead her case saying how she didn’t mean to, but her cries fall on deaf ears as a pissed off Daryl pulls out his gun and shoots her point blank in the forehead.

The other officers raise their guns to fire back when Shepard raises her arms to stop them. “No! Hold your fire! It's over. It was just about her. Stand down.” The other officers obey, lowering their weapons as she commanded.
“Daryl.” Rayne says softly as she places her hand on his gun and lowers it to his side. His eyes meet her and she can see the tears in them, they mirror the ones in her own. “It’s okay. D. Come on.” She says through her sobs as she backs him a few steps away from Beth’s body.

“You can stay.” Shepard says trying to reason with Rick, “We’re surviving here. It's better than out there.”

“No.” Rick utters, emotion clouding his voice as he holsters his gun. “And I'm taking anyone back there who wants to leave. If you want to come with us-- just step forward now.”

Out in the parking lot Abraham pulls up in the firetruck and the group gets out approaching the hospital. They see and the others walking out and a smile breaks onto their faces, but a shake of Rick’s head tells them that not everyone survived.

Rayne’s eyes lock with Maggie’s as she steps aside revealing Daryl carrying Beth’s limp body. The huntress’ ears are filled with the sound of Maggie’s devastated cries, the pure emotion from the woman dropping her to her knees in grief. Nico drops down beside her gathering her into his arms and holding her tight. He could imagine how Maggie felt right now, he would be dying inside if he lost Rayne. Tears fill his eyes as he thinks about what he would do if his sister was taken from him.

Nobody moves, just staring at Daryl as he cradles Beth in his arms.
What's Happening and What's Going On

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - I do not own The Walking Dead or any of its characters. I only own my original character Rayne and anything else that seems out of place.

So I know a lot of people love Carol, but I honestly can't stand her, so she won't be playing as big of a role in my story as she did in the show. Most of her somewhat badass moments, will be done by Rayne. I'm sorry if this pisses anyone off, but it's Rayne's story and she's my hero in this.

Thank you to LucifersAlleyCat for the kudos and Karen for the comment.

I apologize for the long time in between updates, my grandmother has been in the hospital for the last two months with terminal lung cancer, so I have been spending time with her.

As always reviews are appreciated!

That night after burying Beth’s body, Gabriel performed a small service as the group stood around the gravesite. None of them could hide their tears, even those that hadn’t known Beth cried, because you couldn’t look at Maggie without feeling your heart break as she grieved.

“We look not at what can be seen, but we look at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

That night Rick sat in the back of a van they had come across outside of the hospital, beside him Noah was talking about his hometown and his family. “She was gonna come with me.” He told Rick, referring to Beth.

“How far?”

“Outside Richmond, Virginia.”

The next morning after everyone had gotten up, Rick gathered them to talk about moving on and finding a safe place; and Noah may have found just that.
“It was secure. It has a wall, homes, 20 people. Beth wanted to go with him. She wanted to get him there. It's a long trip, but if it works out, it's the last long trip we have to make.”

“And what if it isn't around anymore?” Glenn asks.

“Then we keep going.”

“Then we find a new place.” Michonne offers.

---

The group loads up into the van and truck they found, Rick with Noah sitting shotgun leading the way. In their truck they had Tyreese, Michonne and Glenn who sat silently in the third seat at the back. Maggie had been distant with him since finding Beth, not that he could blame her, but he was starting to miss his girlfriend.

They had paused to switch drivers and Rick now sat in the back seat with Michonne while Tyreese drove. Rick took a look up front at Noah who sat staring stoically out the passenger window. “How far out?”

Noah glances over at the odometer before answering, “Five miles.”

“Hey, Carol. Rayne.”

“I'm here.” Carol says picking up her radio.

“Me too.” Rayne answered from her truck at the back of the pack.

“We're halfway there. Just wanted to check the range.” He says.

Carol voice is crackly coming through the speaker, but it’s audible. “Everybody's holding tight. We've made it 500 miles. Maybe this can be the easy part.”

“Got to think we're due. Give us 20 minutes to check in.”

“We don't hear from you, we'll come looking.” Rayne tells him.

“Copy that.” Rick answers.

Noah glances over at Tyreese, “I've been wanting to tell you something.”

“What's that?”

“The trade. It was the right play. It worked. It did work. Just something else happened after.”

Tyreese sighed but kept his eyes on the road, there was a hardness to him now after seeing Beth die. “It went the way it had to. The way it was always going to.”

“I never wanted to kill anybody before.”

“I've wanted that. But it just made it so I didn't see anything except what I wanted. I wasn't facing it.”

“Facing what?”
“What happened, what's going on. My dad always told Sasha and me that it was our duty as citizens of the world to keep up with the news. When I was little and I was in his car, there were always those stories on the radio. Something happens 1,000 miles away or down the block. Some kind of horror I couldn't even wrap my head around. But he didn't change the channel. He didn't turn it off. He just kept listening. To face it. Keeping your eyes open. My dad always called that--paying the high cost of living.”

“I lost my dad in Atlanta. I think he would have liked yours. Still got a mom and a couple of twin brothers.” Noah paused for a moment thinking, “I hope.”

“I hope so, too.” Tyreese said.

Noah leaned over and looked at the meter, “Two more miles.”

“All right.” Rick nodded. “Let's pull into the woods. We'll go on foot. Stay off the road.”

“We don't need to.” Noah argued.

“Just in case.” Rick said, he wasn’t taking any chances, not knowing how many people were there or what they were armed with. Tyreese pulled off the road, parking the truck by two others vehicles that had been abandoned, Rick got out nodding, “This is good. Through the trees, it might just look like part of the wreck.”

“It's this way.” Noah said leading the way through the woods.

They come upon a bunch of wire stretched between the trees surrounding the fence, Michonne looks over her shoulder to Noah. “Your people do this?”

“Wanted to. They must have.”

Noah yelps as he cuts his face on one of the wires. “Ah!”

“You all right?” Rick asks him as he examines the cut.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

As they neared the edge of the tree line Rick paused halting the others. “They have spotters? Snipers?”

“We built a perch on a truck. Sometimes it's out front.” Noah says.

“Not today.” Glenn says after scoping out the area.

The group draws their weapons and ducks low using the tall grass for cover as they cross the road and approach the front gates of the estates. Noah grabs the gates and jerks then, they clang loudly as he puts his ear up to the metal. “You hear that?”

“Just wait.” Rick says pausing the young man.

Glenn climbs up onto the fence and peers over into the area, his face telling all of them what he sees by the disheartened look that comes across it, as he shakes his head.

Noah panics grabbing the gate and jumping over the top of it, he lands and looks up, his brain trying to process what his eyes are seeing. Buildings half burned, bodies weeks old lying in the grass decaying. He takes off hobbling as fast as he can down the street towards his home, Rick and the others following behind him.
“Noah, hold up. Noah!” Rick yells to the kid as he collapses onto the ground in sobs.

Tyreese comes up and lays his hands on the boy’s shoulders, “Come on. It's all right. You're gonna be with us now.”

Michonne sees a lone walker straggling down the street towards them, she sighs as she draws her sword. “I'll get him.”

Noah is wracked with heavy sobs as Rick kneels down beside him, “I'm sorry, Noah. I truly am.” Rick stands up and looks around, “We should see if there's anything we can use and head back.”

“Then what?” Michonne says bitterly as more walkers head their way. “They see us.”

“We can make a quick sweep.” Glenn says.

Tyreese nods down to Noah, “I'll stay with him.”

Rick sighs pulling out his radio, “Carol, Rayne, you copy?”

“We're all here.” Rayne says coming on the radio.

“We made it. It's gone.”

As they move to sweep the houses Rick sees Michonne stomp on a glass case containing a shirt, he knows she’s upset as he lays a hand on her arm.

“Clean shirt.” She says.

“We'll figure it out.” He tells her.

She nods, “We will. There's some garbage bags in the garage.”

She disappears into the house and Rick turns to Glenn who’s looking around the garage. “You didn't think it would still be here?”

“Did you?” Glenn asks.

“After it happened, right after with Beth in the hospital, I saw that woman Dawn. She didn't mean to do it. I knew it. I saw it. But I wanted to kill her. I remember I just wondered if it even mattered one way or another. Didn't have a thing to do with Beth. I don't know if I thought it would still be here. But Beth wanted to get him here. She wanted to get him back home. This was for her. And it could have been for us, too.”

Noah is still sitting on the ground crying, Tyreese tries to make him feel better. “I wanted to die for what I lost. Who I had lost. I stepped out into a crowd of those things just trying-- to take it all out on them until they took me. Put them all in front of me so I didn't see anything. But I just kept going. And then later, I was there for Judith when she needed me. I saved her. I brought her back to her dad. And that wouldn't have happened if I had just given up-- if I hadn't chosen to live. Noah. Noah. This isn't the end.”

Noah gets up off of the ground and Ty grabs his shoulder, “There you go. That's right.”
The kid then takes off running down the street towards a house at the end, Tyreese follows him calling to the kid. “Hey, we should-- Noah. Noah. Noah!”

“I was thinking about that guy in the storage container. Back at Terminus. How I made us stop.” Glenn tells Rick. “After the prison, on my trip, I got Maggie back. Things went okay. Losing Washington-- losing-- losing Beth right after just finding out she's alive-- I hadn't caught up with you yet. If it were now, I wouldn't make us stop. We'd run right by. And I would have shot that woman dead. Right or wrong.”

“We need to stop.” Michonne says interjecting into the conversation. “You can be out here too long.”

Tyreese catches up with Noah as he reaches the front porch of the house and gently grabs his arm. “Hey, hey.”

“This is my house.” Noah says panting.

“You don't want to go in there.”

“Yes, I do. Let me see it.” He pleads.

“No. Me first.” Tyreese says pulling out his knife, before leading the way into the house.

On the living room floor they find a body, Noah walks over and leans down beside it, taking a blanket and gently laying it over the body. “I tried to come back sooner. I tried. But I did what you told me to.”

Tyreese hears snarling and scratching coming from a back room, the door is shut so he’s not worried about the walker inside. Instead he goes into the adjacent room finding the body of one of Noah’s brothers on the bed. He sees pictures of the two boys tacked up on the wall, he’s so focused looking at them that he doesn’t notice the walker coming up from behind until it bit his arm, tearing a chunk out of his flesh.

Tyreese dropped to the floor screaming in pain, Noah ran into the room, jumping up he tore one of the model airplanes that was hanging from the ceiling down and stabbed it through the walkers head. He dropped the airplane and turned to see Tyreese covered in blood, “You're okay. Just hold on. I'll get them. I'll get-- I'll get them.”

After Noah had ran out to get the others help, Tyreese sat on the floor, his mind imagining the people that he’d killed and helped kill sitting around him.
“I tried to tell you. I tried to tell you, man. It was gonna be you.” Martin says, the guy that Tyreese had killed in the cabin to protect Judith. “You're the kind of guy who saves babies. You think Gareth would have been able to follow you guys if you'd have just put a bullet in my brain? Cut me up like your sister did? Oh, whoa, whoa. Don't get up. If I hadn't told them that you were there, maybe Gareth wouldn't have gone after you. Maybe they wouldn't be dead. Maybe Bob wouldn't be dead. Maybe him being alive, maybe something about that would have changed things with Beth. Domino shit. Maybe not. Maybe you wouldn't be bit right now.”

“Man, that is bullshit.” Bob said sitting on the bed. “I got bit at the food bank. It went the way it had to, the way it was always going to. Just like this.”

“If you just did it, if you didn't lie like a bitch, it might have changed things.” Martin continued. “Maybe the bill would have been paid.”

“The bill has to be paid.” Tyreese looks up to see the Governor standing in the doorway. “You have to earn your keep. You told me you'd do whatever you had to do to earn your keep. That's what you said. Hmm? Remember that?”

“It's better now, Tyreese.” Lizzie says sitting on the floor across the room.

“It is. It's better now.” Mica says sitting beside her sister.

“It's not better now. You know damn well what--” Suddenly the Governor turns into a walker snarling as it descends on Tyreese. He tries to fight it off as they bounce off of furniture in the room, all the while the walker is snapping its teeth at Tyreese’s face. Using his already wounded arm to his advantage, Tyreese puts his arm in the walkers mouth to push it away from him, then grabs an object off of the shelf and beats the walker over the head with it.

“We could put some of the garage doors together against the break. Park a car against them until we can brick it back up.” Michonne offers as a solution for the damaged fence surrounding the property. “It can work.”

Rick shakes his head, “This place is surrounded by a forest. There's no sight lines. Whoever, whatever would be on top of us without us even knowing it. That's probably what happened.”

“That's what happened to us.” Glenn says.

“We could start taking down the trees. We use them to build the walls up.” She says as an alternative, but neither Rick nor Glenn look convinced. “Look.” She said pointing at the fence as she starts walking towards the break in it, she wants to make this place livable so they don’t have to keep moving around.

But as she walks outside the fence she sees bodies littering the ground, but that’s not the worst part. All that seems to be left of the bodies is severed arms and bottom halves from the waist down; the head and torsos were missing.

She turns around to avoid the sight and her eyes fall on the brick wall, which she can now see is cracked in multiple places all the way around. She sighs knowing that even if they fixed the hole, the fence would never hold up.
“It doesn't matter.” Glenn says.

“What?” Rick asked, his attention on the distraught Michonne staring at the brick wall.

“You said you wondered if it even mattered if you killed her or not. It doesn't matter if you had done it or if I had, or that Daryl did. It doesn't matter.”


“But he was lying.” Glenn reminded her.

“About the cure, but he did the math and realized that Washington was the place where there'd be a chance. We're close. What if there are people there? Huh? What if it's someplace that we can be safe? We're 100 miles away. It's a possibility. It's a chance. Instead of just being out here. Instead of just making it. Because right now, this is what making it looks like. Don't you want one more day with a chance?”

“We should go.” Rick says seeing walkers heading their way. “It's 100 miles away. We should go to Washington.”

As they start to walk back to the vehicle they hear Noah screaming for help. “Rick! Help, Rick! Glenn! Michonne! Help!”

The three take off running towards his voice, rounding a house they find him trapped on a porch with two walkers bearing down on him. The only thing keeping them at bay is a panel of lattice that he’s holding between himself and them.

“Noah, hold on! I got him.” Glenn yells as he jumps up on the porch and smacks one of the walkers with a baseball bat, then stabs it in the head.

Rick takes out the other one, but then his attention turns to Michonne who’s dealing with the last one. She tried to slice its head off with her sword, but the blade ricocheted off of a piece of rebar sticking out of the walkers shoulder. Michonne grabs the walker by the shirt as it tries to bite her, as Rick jumps off the porch, yanks the rebar out of the walker and slams it into the walkers head.

“It's Tyreese!” Noah says frantically.

“Where?” Glenn asks.

“My house. He's been bit.”

---

At the house Tyreese’s visions are running away with him again as he sees Beth sitting on a chair with her guitar singing to him. “Every man has a right to live. Love is all that we have to give. Together we struggle by our will to survive. And together we'll fight just to stay alive. Struggling man has got to move. Struggling man, no time to lose. I'm a struggling man. And I've got to move on.”

“It's okay, Tyreese. You gotta know that now.” Beth tells him.

“It's okay that you didn't want to be a part of it anymore, Ty.” Bob agrees.
“You don't have to be a part of it.” Beth says.

Martin starts laughing, “See, that's your problem right there.”

“What's my problem?” Tyreese asks.

“You didn't want to be part of it, but being part of it is being now. That's what it is. Open your eyes.”

“You don't have to. Not if you don't want to.” Lizzie says smiling at him.

Mica agrees with her sister, “You don't. It's better now.”

The Governor strolled his way back into the room, “You told me you'd earn your keep. You had no idea what you were talking about, did you? Did you?! Your eyes were open, but you didn't want to see. Even though I made you see it. I showed you. But did you adapt? Did you change? No. That you would sit there in front of a woman who killed someone you loved and you would forgive her.”

“That's all there is.” Bob says smiling.

“This is all there is.” The Governor echoes as Ty fights to get to his feet. “This is it.”

Tyreese grabs onto the desk, struggling to rise to his feet as he responds. “I didn't know who I was talking to. I said I would do what I had to to earn my keep, but I didn't know you. But I know-- I know who I am. I know what happened and what's going on. I know. You didn't show me shit. You, you're dead. Everything that you were is dead. And it's-- it's not over. I forgave her because it's not over. It's not over. It's-- it's not over. I didn't turn away. I kept listening to the news so I could do what I could to help! I'm not giving up. You hear me? I'm not giving up! People like me-- people like me, they can live. Ain't nobody got to die today.”

“You have to pay the bill.” The Governor snaps as he shoves Tyreese back against the wall, where he slides down to the floor.

He looks up to see Lizzie and Mica grabbing his arm and holding it up with smiles; but that disappears in a haze as he sees Rick holding his arm now, Glenn behind him holding his body and Michonne standing by with her sword.

“You hold him!” Rick shouts to Glenn.

“I got it!”

“Go! One hit, clean! Go!” Rick yells as he holds Tyreese’s arm tight.

In one motions Michonne’s sword severs Tyreese’s arm off at the elbow. Things then move fast, all of them knowing that he would die if they didn’t get him help quick. Rick wraps a blanket around the severed appendage as he and Glenn all but carry the big man towards the front gate.

They can see walkers outside pushing on the metal, the only thing keeping them out being the chain that was securing both sides of the gate together. “We've got to break the chain.” Rick yells.

“We can use the bat.” Glenn hollers back.

Rick hands Tyreese off to Noah as he steps ahead of them to deal with the undead. As Glenn breaks the chain the walkers spill inside, Rick, Glenn and Michonne taking them out as fast as they
can. Noah realizes that Tyreese’s weakened state has made him heavier and he has no choice but to drop the man to the ground. Noah puts his body in between the walkers and Tyreese to protect him, willing to die to keep the man safe. A walker manages to slip by Rick and Michonne heading straight for Noah, but at the last second, Rick puts a bullet through its head.

Rick and Glenn grab Tyreese and together they move him back through the woods to the truck, all begging him to hang on to life until they can get him help.

They get him into the backseat of the truck, Rick pulling out his radio to announce their impending arrival back. “Rayne, we're at the car. We need to cauterize the arm and wrap it. Get Sasha and Carl away. They don't need to see this.”

Rick fires up the truck and puts it in gear, gunning the engine, but the truck won’t move. The tires spin relentlessly in the mud underneath of it, Rick slams it into reverse getting the same result, then throws it back into drive. This time the truck lurches forward slamming into the rear of the truck in front of it causing the contents to spill out onto the hood of their truck.

Michonne gasps as she sees the heads and upper torsos of the bodies she saw in the grass, lying on the hood and snapping their teeth at the windshield. Rick manages to get the truck out of the area and back onto the road, the accelerator pinned as he drives them back to their camp.

Halfway there Rick pulls the truck to a stop as they realize that Tyreese’s body and mind has given up on him. They pull his body out of the truck, lying him on the road, Rick walks away his head in his hands. They had lost another member of their family, and he was the one that took them there in the first place; he was responsible for this.

They return Tyreese to the same place they had buried Beth, giving him a grave beside her. As they all said their final goodbyes, Gabriel gave a small prayer.

“We look not at what can be seen, but we look at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made from hands, eternal in the heavens. In the heavens.”
A day and a half later the group of exhausted and mentally drained companions are searching for water, each of them pairing off into a smaller group and combing the surrounding areas.

Rayne is out in the woods with Daryl, Maggie and Sasha, the four of them splitting up to cover more ground. She happens to come across Daryl sitting on the ground, his fingers muddy from digging into the earth hoping for a sign that water was nearby. She leans against a tree watching him pull something from the ground, placing it in his hand to inspect. She realizes it's a worm, which would be a good sign on a normal day, but not today as it looks barely alive. Daryl then lifts it to his mouth and eats it like a gourmet meal.

“That’s nasty, D.” She says as her top lip curls up in disgust.

He looks up giving her a muddy smile as he chomps down on the squishy insect, making her gag as she walks toward him.

“If ya think I’m kissin’ you after you ate that, yer insane.” She quips offhandedly as he stands up.

“You saying you would kiss me?” He asks curiously. “Even after all that happened?”

Rayne sighs as she steps up in front of him, “Yes, I would. You and I really need to talk about all this.”

“Yea, we do.” He agrees with a nod, as he picks up his stuff and together they meet up with Maggie and Sasha, neither of them having any luck finding water either.
As they get back out onto the road they notice the rest of the group all sitting on the ground at the back of the van and Rayne’s truck. They looked demoralized and downtrodden, leading the four to believe that they hadn’t any luck either.

“It's been a day and a half. They didn't find any either.”

“How do you know?” Sasha asks.

“I know.” Maggie says her breathing heavy as she walks. “How much longer we got?”

“60 miles.” Sasha answers with a sigh.

“I wasn't talking about that.”

The van sputters to a stop in the middle of the road, Abraham throws it in park, “We're out, just like the other one.”

“So we ride with Rayne.” Rick says as he hops out of the van along with the others, looking back to the black truck behind them. “How much you got, Rayne?”

The huntress sticks her head out of the driver’s window to answer, “Out of fuel. But with the sun bearing down, batteries should hold for a few more hours. Everybody in.”

Rayne drives down the road with Daryl in the passenger seat, Carl sitting between them. In the backseat Rick sits by the window holding Judith, with Michonne and Carol beside him. The others are lying in the bed of the truck, covered up with the blankets Rayne and Nico had found, trying to keep the heat of the sun off of them.

Daryl notices a group of walkers following them, more joining in as they go further down the road. Rick sees what he’s looking at, “We're not at our strongest. We'll get 'em when it's best. High ground, something like that. They're not going anywhere.” He sees the difference in Daryl, first losing Rayne and then losing Beth. “It's been three weeks since Atlanta. I know you lost something back there.”

Instead of answering Daryl nods to Judith who is fussing in Rick’s arms, “She's hungry.”

“She's okay. She's going to be okay.”

“We need to find water, food.” Daryl says.

“We'll hit something in the road.” Rick looks out the window up at the sky, “It's gonna rain sooner or later.”

“Hey Nix, pull over.” Daryl says, waiting till she stops the truck to open the door. “I'm gonna head
out. See what I can find.”

“Hey, don't be too long.” Rick says.

“I'll go with you.” Rayne tells him, but he shakes his head. “I got it.”

She scoffs as she puts the truck in park, “You gonna stop me?”

Daryl shakes his head as they get out of the truck, Rayne tossing the keys to Nico as she takes her bow from him and follows Daryl into the woods.

“Wait up, I’ll go too.” Carol says as she gets out of the truck bed to follow them.

As much as Rayne had told herself that she was okay with Daryl and Carol’s relationship, whatever it was, she was irritated that the woman just had to come with them. Rayne was hoping that this would give her and Daryl a chance to talk and maybe mend what was broken between them.

Carl sidles up beside Maggie, taking a small box out of his backpack and handing it to her. “Found this when we were looking for water.”

“What is it?”

“I think it used to play music. It's broken.”

“Thanks, Carl.” Maggie says with a smile.

“I thought you might like it.”

Maggie happens to look over at Gabriel seeing him tugging at the collar of his shirt. He sees her looking and scoffs, “I used to joke these things were leftovers from the days of hair shirts. The church actually made shirts out of hair. So if you wore it, you could atone just a little for your sins.”

“I know what a hair shirt is. My daddy was religious. I used to be.”

“If you ever want to talk about your father or about Beth--”

“Please, stop.”

“Whenever you're ready, I'm here.”

“You never even met them.”

“I know you're in pain.”

“You don't know shit.” Maggie snapped. “You had a job. You were there to save your flock, right? But you didn't. You hid. Don't act like that didn't happen.”
As Nico drives the truck slowly down the road, not wanting to get too far ahead of his sister and Daryl, Rick notices the herd of walkers behind them getting thicker as more come out onto the road.

“We can take 'em.” Sasha says looking out at the herd.

Michonne shakes her head, “Rick's right. We barely have anything left. No use in spending it all now.”

“I can take 'em.” Sasha argues.

“Your brother was pissed, too, after what he lost. It made him stupid.”

“We are not the same. We never were.”

“But it's still the same. It just is.”

“Anything?” Carol asks as she and Daryl check out the ground in the woods, Rayne a few yards ahead of them.

“No, it's too dry. There ain't nothing here.”

“Maybe we should start back.”

“You go.”

“I think she saved my life. She saved your life, too, right?” Carol said. She walked up beside Daryl and pulled a knife in a sheath out of her pocket and handed it to him. “It was hers. We're not dead. That's what you said. You're not dead. I know you. We're different. I can't let myself-- But you-- I know you. You have to let yourself feel it.”

She brushes some hair off of his forehead, nodding her head over to Rayne. “You love her. You have to forgive yourself.” She leans up and kisses his forehead. “You will.”

Rick realizes that the walkers are getting thicker, and with their partners still out in the woods they can’t just drive off. So he makes Nico stop the truck on the other side of a bridge, everyone getting out and taking their places according to Rick’s plan.

Rick, Glenn and Michonne standing in a line on one side of the road, Abraham, Maggie and Sasha standing on the other. The rest of the group was at the far side of the bridge with Nico, his rifle out to protect them if any walkers got through.

Their plan worked in the beginning, drawing the walkers towards them, then shoving them down the steep embankment on the sides of the bridge. Until Sasha decided to go rouge and start stabbing the walkers instead.
Rick sighs as he draws his machete, “Stay in line. Flank her. Keep it controlled.”

Abraham rolled his eyes as he pulled out his knife, “Plan just got dicked.”

Michonne can see Sasha just shoving her way into the thick of the walkers, the woman even trying to stab Michonne as she grabbed her arm. “Stop. Just get out of here.” The warrior told her, but Sasha ignored the command, ripping out of her grasp and going after the walkers again.

Three walkers descended on Rick, but thankfully Rayne and Daryl showed just as one was about to take a bite out of his arm. Daryl grabbing the walker by the head and stabbing it, Rayne slicing the other two up with her kukris.

Across from them Michonne grabbed Sasha and shoved her to the ground, before slicing the last walkers head off with her sword. “I told you to stop.”

The group loads back up into the truck and Nico drives them further down the road, but he stops a few miles later as they come across a slew of cars on the road.

“I'm gonna head into the woods, circle back.” Daryl says.

“May I come with?” Carol asks him.

“No. No, just me.” He says before he takes off into the woods to the right.

“Nico and I’ll take left.” Rayne says as she and her brother head off into the woods on the left, figuring they’d meet up with Daryl halfway around.

Maggie checks out one of the cars not finding anything inside worth using, so she takes the keys and opens the trunk. What she finds makes her stomach churn, a female walker lying inside still alive, its hands and feet were bound and it had a gag in its mouth. Maggie immediately slams the trunk lid closed and starts to walk away. But she pauses, it had already suffered by someone else’s hands, it didn’t deserve to suffer any longer.

She goes back and grabs the keys to pop it open again, but the lock won’t turn. She jangles and twists the keys but the lock refuses to open, her anger overcomes her as she pulls out her gun to blow the lock. But a light hand on her arm and someone calling her name softly stops her.

“Maggie.”

She turns her head to see Glenn standing beside her with a concerned look on his face. She lowers her gun, “There's one-- there's one in there. And I shut it and it's still in there.”

“Okay.” He nods as he grabs the keys and after a moment of tugging, the trunk pops open. Glenn’s face looks like Maggie’s did when he sees the poor woman inside, he takes out his knife and ends her suffering. As he moves to close the trunk he thinks better, instead leaving it open, that woman had been locked in there until she died, it wasn’t right to close it.

“Let's go.” He says laying his hand on her shoulder.
The group is sitting on the side of the road relaxing as they wait for Daryl, Rayne and Nico to return. Rick startles reaching for his gun when he hears branches snapping across the road and then behind him. But his fears are put to rest as the two hunters and Seal make their way out of the trees onto the road.

Tara notices Abraham taking a drink from a bottle of whiskey, she looks across from her where Rosita sits. “So all we found was booze?”

Rosita nods, “Yeah.”

“It's not gonna help.” Tara comments as the soldier takes another swing.

“He knows that.” Rosita says.

“It's gonna make it worse.”

“Yes, it is.”

“He's a grown man. And I truly do not know if things can get worse.” Eugene states as he sits beside them.

“They can.” Rosita nods.

Suddenly they all hear rustling from the trees, they turn to find three feral looking dogs staring them down, barking and growling. “They did.” Rayne says jumping to her feet as she stares down the dogs, her mind envisioning what Titan would have become if she hadn’t put him down.

The dogs reared back and then jumped to attack, everyone ducking as silenced gunshots rang out quickly. They could hear the dogs whine as their lives were ended, the group looking up at Sasha who stood with her rifle in hand. With a glance over at Sasha, Rick stood up, grabbing a few branches from the trees and snapping them in half.

Ten minutes later the group was gathered around a fire eating the kill, none of them caring it was dog meat, only thankful for the sustenance. Rayne sat beside Daryl cleaning the dog’s blood from her kukris, because she and Daryl were the experienced hunters, they took the lead in skinning the dogs and hacking them up.

Noah didn’t seem to want to eat, feeling bad as he stared down at the dog’s collars lying bloody on the ground. He looked up as Sasha came out of the woods carrying more wood for the fire.

“Your brother-- he tried to help me. I don't know if I'm gonna make it.”

“Then you won't. Don't think.” She told him, “Just eat.”
No one else seemed bothered as they ate their fill of the meat, not even Gabriel who merely took off his priest collar and threw it in the fire, before taking another bite.

Before they loaded back up in the truck Rayne took the collars and hung them on a branch by the road, they were someone’s pets at one time and deserved to be remembered as such.

Rayne drove her truck down the road continually glancing up at the sky, thick dark gray clouds were moving in and she knew the batteries wouldn’t last much longer once the sun disappeared.

In the bed Glenn noticed Maggie’s energy was fading, he pulled out his water bottle which had only a few sips left in it and held it out to her. “Maggie, take a drink.”

“No.”

She refuses and Glenn sighs, “Okay. Will you just talk to me?”

“I never thought she was alive. I just didn't. After Daddy, I don't know if I couldn't. And after what Daryl said, I hoped she was out there, alive. And then finding out that she was and then she wasn't in the same day-- Seeing her like that, it-- made it feel like none of it was ever really there. Before this was just the dark part and I don't know if I want to fight it anymore.”

“You do. You do. That's who you are. And maybe it's a curse nowadays, but I don't think so. We fought to be here. And we have to keep fighting. Drink.” He says handing her the bottle again, this time she opens it and takes a drink giving him a grateful smile.

Beside them Sasha turns to Abraham eyeing the whiskey bottle in his hand, he holds it out to her and she shakes her head. “It'll just make things worse.”

“The way you're going, you're what's gonna make things worse.” He says. “Hey, you're with friends.”

“We're not friends.” She says coldly.

As the clouds grow thicker Rayne can feel the truck slowing down, the batteries worn down from the constant usage and not having time to properly charge. She pulls the truck off to the side as the engine sputters, slamming her hands off of the steering wheel, “Damnit!”

“It’s okay.” Her brother tells her as he lays a hand on her shoulder. “The sun’ll come back out and they’ll charge, we’ll be back on the road soon.”

“It’s not okay, Nic!” Rayne shouted flinging his hand off of her shoulder, as she jumped down out of the cab. “This truck was supposed to survive anything, that’s what I built it for. And now it can’t even get my family to a safe place!” She grabs her bow and heads off into the woods.
Glenn jumps down out of the truck and holds his water bottle out to Daryl, “Daryl.”

“No, I'm all right.”

“Daryl.” Glenn protests knowing he had to be thirsty.

“Don't.” Daryl snaps.

“Hey, we can make it together. But we can only make it together.”

Glenn walks back over to Maggie and Daryl turns to Abraham, “Tell them I went looking for water.” He then takes off into the woods.

Rayne is walking through the woods when she comes upon a small barn nestled in the trees; no sign of a house anywhere nearby, nor are there any signs of life or dead anywhere inside. As she moves to approach the barn doors she sees Daryl sitting on the ground to her left, his back propped up against a tree and a lit cigarette in his mouth.

She walks over and he looks up at her, nodding his chin to the empty spot beside him; Rayne sits down beside him placing her bow on the ground to her left. As they sit there together she hears a sizzling sound, glancing over at Daryl her eyes go wide as she sees him putting the cigarette out on the flesh of his hand.

“Daryl! What the hell are you doing?” She cries out taking the now unlit cigarette and tossing it to the ground; she takes his hand into hers and brushes the ashes off of the wound.

“Why can't I feel anything anymore?”

Rayne looks up to his face, seeing the tears building in his eyes, his bottom lip trembling. Her expression softens as she envelops Daryl in her arms, holding him close to her as she runs her fingers through his hair.

Daryl would never allow anyone to see him cry, not for fear of ridicule, but because he was perceived as the strong one. But with Rayne it was different, he was different. He never had to hide around her, never had to worry about being the strong one, or the rock for everyone else to lean on. Rayne was his rock, the person he could let his guard down for and she would be the support that he needed.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, digging his face into her neck as sobs began wracking his body. Since he had lost her back at the prison, Daryl had been numb to everything; which was why he couldn’t even mourn Beth’s loss properly. Rayne was the one thing that made him feel, and with one touch she had broken the dam of emotions that Daryl had locked inside of him and now there was no stopping the flow. He cried for everything as he clutched her to him; losing his brother, losing Beth, and most of all for losing Rayne. He wanted her back, he needed her to be his once more, and he was going to do whatever it took to make sure that happened.
Once Daryl had calmed down, Rayne bandaged up his hand and the two made their way back to the road; where they found the rest of the group gathered around several bottles and jugs of water. Rick hands Daryl a piece of paper which reads, ‘from a friend.’

Daryl and Rayne immediately lifted their bows as they scanned the surrounding trees, looking for any sign of someone being nearby.

“What else are we gonna do?” Tara questions as she stares at the water.

“Not this. We don't know who left it.” Rick tells her.

“If that's a trap, we already happen to be in it. But I, for one, would like to think it is indeed from a friend.” Eugene says as he steps closer, he is willing to go by faith at this point.

“What if it isn't? They put something in it?” Carol asks.

Eugene makes his choice and steps forward picking up one of the bottles, opening it to the protests of the others as he puts it to his lips. Just before the liquid touches his lips, Abraham smacks the bottle out of his hand.

“We can't.” Rick states.

Suddenly they hear thunder rumbling, a large thunderclap booming overhead and shaking the ground. By some sick twist of fate the skies open up and sweet cool rain comes pattering down on them.

Rosita and Tara laugh as they lie down on the ground, allowing the drops of water to rain down on them. Rayne whoops in glee, laughing as she jumps into Nico’s arms, the Seal swinging her around with a smile.

Laughter and smiles break out in the group as everyone enjoys the moment; however Sasha, Maggie and Daryl remain stone-faced.

“Everybody get the bags. Anything you can find.” Rick says as the members pull out their bottles, placing them on the asphalt to fill.

The thunder however grows louder, the claps getting closer; in Carl’s arms Judith begins to cry due to the loud booms. In the distance Rayne can see flashes of lightning cutting through the sky. “We should go, Rick.”

The man nods, “Let's keep moving.”

Daryl shares a nod with Rayne as they both have the same thought. “There's a barn.”

Daryl and Rayne lead the group through the woods until they come to the barn; the hunters prying the doors open before they move inside, Rick taking point as they sweep the inside.

As the others clear the barn and hayloft, Maggie notices a Holy bible sitting to her left; she opens the door behind it and finds a walker trying to crawl across the floor towards her. It appeared to
have been an elderly woman when it was alive; Maggie pulls out her knife and puts it out of its misery.

Carol walks up beside her as Maggie notices the rifle propped up by a stack of books. “She had a gun. She could have shot herself.”

“Some people can't give up. Like us.”

While everyone else spreads out around the barn trying to get some sleep; Daryl, Rayne, Nico, Rick, Michonne, Carol and Glenn sit around the small fire they had managed to build. Daryl tries to add some sticks to the fire, but gives up as he sits back down by his huntress.

“I'll try.” Glenn says reaching for another one.

“No, too wet.” Daryl tells him.

Rick’s attention turns to his son who is passed out on the floor to his left; Carol notices his concerned gaze and smiles. “He's gonna be okay. He bounces back more than any of us do.”

“I used to feel sorry for kids that have to grow up now. In this. But I think I got it wrong. Growing up is getting used to the world. This is easier for them.”

“This isn't the world.” Michonne tells him quickly. “This isn't it.”

Glenn glances over his shoulder to Maggie who lays on the floor across the barn from him and sighs. “It might be. It might.”

“That's giving up.” Michonne states.

“It's reality.” Glenn argues.

Rick cuts in before they can get upset, “Until we see otherwise, this is what we have to live with. When I was a kid I asked my grandpa once if he ever killed any Germans in the war. He wouldn't answer. He said that was grown-up stuff, so... so I asked if the Germans ever tried to kill him. But he got real quiet. He said he was dead the minute he stepped into enemy territory. Every day he woke up and told himself, “Rest in peace. Now get up and go to war.” And then after a few years of pretending he was dead he made it out alive. That's the trick of it, I think. We do what we need to do and then we get to live. But no matter what we find in DC, I know we'll be okay. Because this is how we survive. We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead.”

“We ain't them.” Daryl says, kneeling up he grabs a stick and breaks it, tossing the halves onto the fire.

“We're not them.” Rick says as he sits up to look at Daryl. “Hey. We're not.”

“We ain't them.” Daryl states before he gets up and grabs his bow, walking off towards the front doors.
As the storm rages outside, Daryl paces back and forth in front of the doors; they are chained together but still have a foot gap in between, allowing a look outside. A noise catches his attention so he moves over peering through the gap; a flash of lightning illuminates a large herd of walkers lumbering towards the doors.

Daryl quickly shoves the doors shut and rewraps the chain, bracing his back against the wood as the walkers push against it from the outside. Rayne looks up from her place on the floor, now hearing the snarling of the dead over the claps of thunder. Her eyes widen before she jumps up and runs over bracing her body beside Daryl’s; Maggie, Sasha and Nico run up as well, soon followed by the others as they all force their weight against the doors.

Outside the barn the wind has picked up speed, the force of it threatening to shove the herd of walkers right through the doors. Rayne’s eyes widen when she realizes that this is no ordinary storm they are facing. “It’s a tornado! Everybody hang on!” She shouts. The barn starts to shake, the boards rattling around them as the wind pummels the wood; the worst of the storm would be on them in seconds.

“Please Lord, don’t take the barn.” Rayne says softly.

Outside the thunder booms as white streaks of lightning light up the night; the doors rattling as the snarling of the walkers is quickly drowned out by the wind howling past the barn.

The storm passed in minutes, only the cool night breeze blowing through the trees being the only sound outside. After readjusting the chain on the doors, the group spread out around the floor, keeping themselves in close proximity just incase.

Maggie opened her eyes as the barn began to fill with sunlight, her gaze finding Judith staring at her from Rick’s arms, bringing a smile to her face. She sat up noticing Daryl leaning against the far wall, his eyes trained on the doors. She approached him seeing the dark circles under his eyes, he didn’t seem to have gotten any sleep; even with Rayne sleeping beside him, her head resting on his shoulder.

Quietly so as not to disturb the huntress, Maggie sat down on his left side. “You should get some sleep.”

“Yeah.” He says with a nod.

“It's okay to rest now.”

“He was tough. He was. So was she. She didn't know it, but she was.” Daryl says referring to Hershel and Beth. He then picked up the music box and handed it to Maggie. “The gearbox had some grit in it.”
“Thank you.” She stands up and walks over to Sasha, gently shaking the woman awake. “Come on.”

The two women pull out their knives as they open the doors and slip out; both of their eyes widening at the destruction that was laid out before them. Walkers impaled on tree branches and crushed by huge logs, still snarling and growling at the living.

“Look at this. Should have torn us apart.” Sasha says as she follows Maggie through the debris.

“It didn't.”

Maggie leads her to a clearing at the edge of a field, the two women taking a seat on a downed tree trunk.

“Why are we here?” Sasha questions.

“For this.” Maggie says as the two of them watch the sunrise.

“I see it.” Sasha says as tears fill her eyes. “Noah, that kid he said he didn't know if he can make it. That's how I feel.”

Maggie’s eyes fill with tears as well, “You're gonna make it. Both of us, we will. That's the hard part.” She holds up the music box, opening the top, “Daryl fixed it.” She winds it up, but instead of music playing, the box just clicks. “You got to be kidding me.”

Both women laugh before they hear an unfamiliar voice to their right. “Hey. Hi. I didn't mean to interrupt.” He sees the women draw their guns pointing them at him and he holds his hands up to show them that he's unarmed. “Good morning. My name is Aaron. I know, this stranger, danger, but I'm a friend. I-I'd like to talk to the person in charge-- Rick, right?”

“How do you know?” Maggie questions at the same time that Sasha asks, “Why?”

“I have good news.” He says just as the music box begins to play a soft tune.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!